Strengths and limitations of the Round Table for Responsible Soy – RTRS in Mato Grosso, Brazil

By Mateo Mier y Terán

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Introduction

The rapidly increasing production of soybean over the past four decades in the southern cone of Latin America, mainly in Brazil and Argentina, has demanded vast areas of land and predictions are that the global demand for this crop will continue pushing the increase in production. Most research or documents talking about this 'expansion of soybean' point out that the production of this crop has brought high economic growth but that it has also caused environmental impacts. However, the nature of and reasons for this expansion, as well as the impacts and opportunities that the soybean agri-food system brings, vary according to the location and are interpreted and understood from various contrasting perspectives.[1] Moreover, the complexity of the global soybean agri-food system and its economic, socio-political and environmental impacts are not grasped by any single study. Instead there are diverse visions of what the expansion of soybean has implied and what the future of the production of this crop is (Brandão et al. 2006; Steward 2007; Greco et al. 2009; Gudynas 2007). In this panorama an array of public, private and civil society initiatives, national and international, have sprouted to influence and govern the production of this crop as well as its economic, environmental and socio-political impacts.

The economic dynamism behind soybean has implied wide economic benefits such as high incomes for soybean producers, creation of employment all along the chain of production, improved national balance accounts, and higher levels of productivity for some (Pinazza 2007; APROSOJA 2009). For other groups the production of soybean is related to an unsustainable and unjust system that has created more environmental and socio-economic problems than the benefits it has given to the few. According to this group, the current system of soybean farming tends to concentrate land in the hands of large farmers, hence contributing to the marginalisation of smallholder agriculture (GRAIN 2006; Schlesinger 2008; Bickel 2005; Azevedo 2009). And yet others recognise the economic benefits but consider that the environmental and social negative impacts are undermining these apparent benefits with future costs (WWF-Brasil 2003; Greenpeace 2006).

The Round Table for Responsible Soy , RTRS, is an initiative promoted by NGOs and corporations as a solution to reconciling opposing viewpoints by creating a voluntary private certification that follows a set of principles and criteria (P&C) derived from a

[1] The term agri-food system is used to refer to the production, processing, trading and consumption of an agricultural product as well as political and socio-cultural components that encompass aspects beyond the sole economic-related activities. It calls for an understanding of the dynamism and complexity of global food production emphasizing the importance of the socio-economic and ecological context in which food production occurs (Thompson et al. 2007).

multi-stakeholder discussion. This initiative sets criteria of responsibilities aiming at offering stakeholders a standard of sustainability. However sustainability is a contested concept (Scoones et al. 2007) so any definition of it will bring disagreements. Processes of land concentration and large scale production are a focus of concern as incompatible aspects of sustainability of the soybean agri-food systems (GRAIN 2006). For the RTRS to live up to its commitment to sustainability, it ought to address these issues. However, land concentration and scale of production as sustainability problems are entirely absent from the RTRS' agenda. Moreover, groups championing peasants' rights and countering land concentration have not been involved with the RTRS. These raise the concern that the projected RTRS certification would give consumers, aware of the land concentration and soybean encroachment problems, the impression that RTRS-compliant companies are not engaging in such negatively perceived practices (ASEED Europe et al. 2008).

Four questions guide this paper:

1. What are the purposes of the RTRS generally, and in Mato Grosso in particular?
2. Are land investment and sustainability goals made compatible through it?
3. What are the underlying politics of the process?
4. And who wins and who loses with the certification initiative of the RTRS?

To answer these questions the state of Mato Grosso-MT, Brazil is taken as case study and references to more specific dynamics in the municipality of Querência, MT are used. Mato Grosso is selected because it is the largest soybean producing state in Brazil and because it is one of the states where the expansion of soybean into sensitive ecosystems, the *Cerrado* –Brazilian Savannah- and the Amazon rainforest, is felt most keenly (Kohlhepp & Blumenschein 2000; Fearnside 2001; Anderson et al. 2005; Hecht 2005; Pasquis & Vargas 2010)

This case study includes interviews with actors involved with the RTRS and soybean production in Brazil, a revision of documents accessed on the RTRS web page and other related internet sites, and a literature review of the few studies on the RTRS available. It is linked to the author's ongoing doctoral research.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first part situates different visions of economic, social and environmental effects of soybean expansion and these are characterized into narratives. The second is a general description of the RTRS and its Principles and Criteria. The third analyses the RTRS and the potential consequences and limitations of its implementation. In the fourth section, the analysis is expanded to the case of the state of Mato Grosso and the dynamics around sustainable soybean production in the municipality of Querência, MT. The article ends with comments on evaluating the RTRS and reflecting on who wins and who loses with the RTRS certification.

Stories (macro-narratives) of a sustainable soybean agri-food system

The RTRS is better understood when contextualized in the broader picture of narratives around the development of the soybean agri-food system and its multiple impacts.

Although actors adapt and change their narratives through time it is possible to track general trends of narratives. The discussions around the negative environmental and social impacts of the soybean agri-food system have intensified in the past two decades (Fearnside 2001; Bickel & Marteen Dros 2003; Cardoso 2008; Greco et al. 2009). To some extent the debates around sustainable soybean reflect the global debates on sustainable development. In this sense, the definition of sustainability as a guiding concept of practices within the soybean agri-food system is in dispute and is in constant contestation at different scales.

These debates reflect the increased exposure of the actions of the groups involved in the production, processing, selling, and financing of soybean. The perspectives that defend, criticise or call for a modification of the ways soybean is produced and integrated into the global agri-food system have multiplied to debate organic soybean, the use of genetically modified seeds, and diverse notions of sustainable production. However, certainly not all voices affected by or involved with the expansion of soybean production and trading have expressed their opinions in an organized way and using the various existing means of communication. Among the more organized and present in the media it is possible to find a heterogeneous display of views that express tensions and oppositions related to the ways soybean production has influenced societies and ecosystems. An analysis of narratives (Fischer 2003) is helpful to capture and study these diverse views.

Furthermore, the debates about the production of soybean have strong international aspects. The production of soybean in Latin America is strongly interlinked with the global markets. A defining feature of the soybean agri-food system is the presence of multinational companies trading and processing soybean around the world. Therefore it is not strange to find narratives that have an international bearing in contrast to narratives that are grounded in a national or local vision. Globalization has also strengthened the development of international networks in which these narratives are shaped.

Four Narratives around soybean sustainability

The debate about the expansion of soybean production and its implications can be divided into four main narratives. These narratives will be labelled as *Denial Narrative; Minimal Responsibility Narrative; Incompatible Alternatives Narrative;* and *Environmental Pragmatism Narrative.* The first two narratives, grouped as pro-agribusiness narratives, are embraced mainly by soybean producers, grain traders, processors and retailers. These share the notion of why soybean is expanding and the view that this expansion has brought various economic benefits, but the narratives can be differentiated in their take on the critics of negative environmental and social impacts of the soybean agri-food system. The two last narratives represent mainly civil society groups and environmental and family agriculture organizations, which share a critical position towards the expansion of soybean, although their approach and strategies to come up with a solution differ. The moderate *Minimal Responsibility and Environmental Pragmatism Narratives* are the main narratives reflected in the RTRS.

Among the actors involved directly with the production, processing and trade of soybean, both economic growth and technological modernization are dominant aspects

of their narratives. These aspects define the two pro-agribusiness narratives – *Denial and Minimal Responsibility Narratives*. For them the history of soybean expansion has brought economic growth through a process of technological modernization. Soybean arrived in Brazil at the end of the 19th century, but it was not until the 1960s in the south of Brazil that its production was related to the use of high yield seeds in a mechanised, high-input, capital intensive, export-oriented system. The success of this enterprise, along with an increasing demand, a series of policies and research and innovation allowed the expansion of soybean cultivation further north in the *Cerrado* in the Brazilian Midwest in the 1980s. Continuing this trend in the last decade the new soybean frontiers have also moved to the north-east. This process, that implied a 100% increase in production in two decades, has been possible with the modernization of agricultural production, and has made Brazil the second largest producer in the world (with 57 million tons of soybean production in 2009, Aprosoja, 2009). This 'modernization' is characterized by an increase in the scale of production, from farms of less than 500 ha in the south to farms with more than 500ha in the Midwest and north-east. Large scale farming with farms of more than 10,000 ha as a model, is considered an efficient mode of production that makes Brazilian soybean production competitive in the global market. These processes, as emphasised by these narratives, has brought dynamism to the economy, raised the quality of life of the people living in the soybean production regions, created employment, let villages develop into cities, helped to have a healthy economy through higher revenues for the government and a source of foreign currency, and has allowed a good use of available resources to make the land productive. The main concerns are then to keep Brazil as a country that can compete and profit more from the soybean economy. In order to make Brazil competitive, a top priority - mainly for producers far from the ports - is to reduce transport costs by consolidating and expanding the roadways and the train and waterways network.

Within the narrative that emphasizes economic growth and technological advancement there have been changes over the last decade in their approaches towards environmental issues, therefore it is possible to distinguish two narratives. While some actors deny the environmental and social negative impacts related to soybean production (Brandão et al. 2006) others have integrated environmental concerns in their discourses and recognize minor effects (APROSOJA 2009; Hofer 2010). The first position, called here *denial narrative,* sees the environmental concerns as an invention that is being used with colonising purposes or as a non-tariff barrier to stop Brazil from increasing its production and gain a better position in the global market. From this perspective there is no need to regulate soybean production as it is through the use of available technology and coming innovations that soybean production can be maintained. The second position, named here as *minimal responsibility narrative,* recognizes that there are aspects in the way soybean is produced that can be improved to adapt to the new demands of the market (APROSOJA 2009; ABIOVE 2010). In this narrative the national labour and environmental legislations and regulations are the parameters in which sustainability will be achieved. What producers have to do is to adjust to these recognized parameters. Furthermore, in order to increase production to cover global demand they conceive a series of technological innovations that are present today but that are not widely spread, as is the case of an integrated livestock-agriculture-forestry system that would renovate degraded pasture and increase productivity of both crops and cattle. This narrative highlights that Brazil is in a relatively better position than other countries when it comes to land and water

availability for agriculture. Moreover, the environmental impacts of soybean expansion are minimized by pointing out that this crop occupies a small area of the Brazilian territory (3% in 2007) comparing with the area occupied by parks and conservation units, indigenous reserves, and legal and other reserves (72.5% all together) (APROSOJA 2009). Furthermore, the deforestation caused by soybean considered as a threat to the Amazon Biome is denied by quoting that in 2007 of the total Amazon Biome 0.20% was occupied with soybean plantations (ABIOVE 2010).

A third narrative, the *incompatible alternatives narrative,* has a critical perspective and is framed in a logic of confrontation with the general functioning of the soybean agribusiness (Fórum Brasileiro et al. 2004; ASEED Europe et al. 2008; GM Freeze 2010). Related with organizations that defend family agriculture, its main criticisms are of monocrop production for its negative environmental impact, increase of the scale of production causing land concentration, dependence on increasing usage of agrochemicals and inputs sold and owned by few multinationals, highly capital intensive agriculture that constrains the participation of smallholders or family agriculture, and an export-oriented economy that hampers local food production. The position they raise is of opposition to the way soybean production has evolved and consider that it exploits people and natural resources in an unsustainable way. The *incompatible alternatives narrative* advocates for a counter proposals and alternatives that vary by group but have futures in common. These alternative ways of production, trade and consumption have family agriculture as the ideal type of farmer and agroecology as the model of production which are considered more just and environmentally sustainable. In this narrative the export agribusiness model and soybean expansion more specifically is seen as absolutely incompatible with the alternatives, and even more as a threat to the actual possibility of a sustainable and just agriculture. Within this narrative in their criticism to soybean production there are those that stress environmental aspects and those that stress socio-economic aspects more. In general they consider that the solutions are outside the dominant model and that sustainable development in the regions involved with soybean production will only take place with structural and radical changes.

A fourth narrative, the *environmental pragmatism narrative* - of a more recent appearance- has a stronger emphasis on the environmental impacts at the local as well as the global level (WWF 2005; Greenpeace 2006). This narrative is aligned with the *incompatible alternatives narrative* when it comes to the criticisms raised on the soybean expansion, in terms of the environmental and social negative impacts of deforestation and fire clearing related to biodiversity loss and climate change, high usage of agrochemicals with consequences for human health and water pollution, low levels of employment with land concentration influencing the viability of smallholders and creating conflict of land ownership with indigenous populations and others. However, within this narrative there is a recognition of the benefits of the soybean economic expansion that are argued within the *denial and minimal responsibility narratives,* such as its relevance on Brazil's GDP (6% in 2002) and surplus on the trade balance (WWF-Brazil 2003). Moreover, the *environmental pragmatism narrative* differs from the *incompatible alternatives narrative* and clashes with the *denial narrative* in their focus of concern and proposed solutions. The stress of the former is on tackling the negative environmental consequences, with deforestation as the main problem. This is clear with the Soybean Moratorium initiative by Greenpeace that aims at reducing

deforestation in the Amazon Forest. Furthermore, other solutions proposed within this narrative, such as the soybean certification of the RTRS, are centred on environmental conservation and natural resource management. In a pragmatic twist of strategies in the past years this narrative incorporated a discourse of promoting dialogue among stakeholders of the soybean agri-food system (Cardoso 2008; Greco et al. 2009). In this sense their solutions are of a reformist and a less confrontational nature.

As it is argued in this paper, the green alliance created around the RTRS was formed by people and groups that represent the *environmental pragmatism narrative* and the *minimal responsibility narrative.* The idea of a multistakeholder dialogue around the sustainability of world soybean production, more particularly in Latin America, was originated by groups that fall under the first narrative, as is the case of international non governmental organizations such as WWF and Solidaridad, joined later by Brazilian NGOs such as ICV and IPAM and others. The groups that fall under the *minimal responsibility narrative* moved from the *denial narrative* and decided to engage with the debate around sustainability recognising that there are aspects within the soybean agri-food system that can be changed. The participation in the RTRS of the groups under the *minimal responsibility narrative,* such as large soybean producers like Grupo Andre Maggie, from Mato Grosso, and multinational corporations, such as Bunge, Cargill and ADM, has increased in the past years to reach more than 100 members. Moreover, in parallel some of this members and other organization have created other green soybean initiatives similar to the RTRS (www.abiove.com.br; www.aliancadaterra.org.br).

As will be seen in the next section, the RTRS is framed as a solution to the 'soybean crisis', however the complexity of the phenomenon escapes the reach of this initiative. As is argued in this paper, the RTRS has to be situated in a wider context that is not restricted to the initiative alone, not only to understand its emergence, but to grasp further the possible impacts and implications of the RTRS certification and other outcomes of the RTRS association.

What is the RTRS?

The RTRS is an international multi-stakeholders initiative to promote 'responsible' production, processing and trade of soybean. It was initiated in 2004 in London and formally formed as an association in Switzerland in 2006. Its first objective was to promote a dialogue between actors grouped in three constituencies: producers; industry, trade and finance representatives; and civil society organizations. The main intention was to arrive to a legitimate consent on a set of principles and criteria aimed at improving the soy sector's social, environmental and economic sustainability. These P&C were finally approved in 2010 after three years of discussions and public consultations, and are the basis for a global standard to create a voluntary private certification. The international P&C are currently being adapted to each country by a National Technical Groups formed by members of the three constituencies to have a National Interpretation of Principles and Criteria for each country involved in the soybean value chain (so far Argentina, Brazil, India and Paraguay). Following field trials in 2009/2010 the first certified soybean traded under the RTRS standards is announced for the 2011 harvest.

The RTRS is organized in a general assembly and an executive board formed by members of three constituencies: producers, industry, trade and finance and civil society groups, and then a secretariat that coordinates the association. There are also Development Groups, not necessarily formed by the members of the three constituencies, who meet frequent ly to discuss particular subjects. The topics are set by the RTRS association and the conclusions are then discussed in the executive board and general assembly. Academics, government representatives or other groups can be observing members without the right to vote. The funding for the RTRS has come largely from governments with the participation of NGOs from these countries, such as the Swiss and Dutch governments, and from private sponsors and the members' fees.

The five principles of the standard are 1) legal compliance and good business practice; 2) responsible labour conditions; 3) responsible community relations; 4) environmental responsibility; and 5) good agricultural practices (RTRS, 2010). Each of these principles has a list of criteria that define the expected practice. It is not the purpose of this paper to analyse them in detail, but to give a general idea of these and analyse them in their relation with scale of production, land concentration and land investment. It is important to mention here, (discussed further below) that the principles and criteria are shaped for the producer's activities while a set of Codes of Conduct (CoC) are meant to guide the other involved actors in the chain. This is not stated in the P&C document but it was clearly decided during the discussions preceding its final approval (RTRS, Minutes No. 50, 2008). Furthermore, the P&C are thought to apply to all scales of soybean production, but there are criteria in which a note is included to specify that there is an exception on the application of it for small farms.

Principle one on legal compliance and good business practices is a recognition of the existence of and need for compliance with legislation and regulation in each country and locality. The principle is divided in three criteria with its respective sub-criteria. The first one asks for compliance with "applicable law" but it also indicates the need to demonstrate awareness of responsibilities. Second, related to land investments is that there has to be "documented evidence of the right to use the land". This criterion relates directly to the widespread problem of unclear and conflictive property rights in the Amazon (Barreto et al. 2008), but it is written in a general way to be adaptable to other contexts and situations. What's more, in this criterion there is no mention of scales of production or foreign land use as a possible aspect to regulate. The third criterion in this principle expects of producers "continual improvements with respect to the requirements of this standard". This criterion foresees steps that are programmed in the implementation of the certification in which producers would be able to transit from a low coverage of the P&C to a more complete fulfilment of the principles within a period of time.

Principle two on responsible labour conditions has five criteria and its respective sub-criteria. These are on child labour; forced labour and harassment; rights and duties of workers; safe and healthy workplace provision; freedom of association; and legal remuneration. This principle and its criteria are defined in accordance with the reality of large scale production. As suggested by Greco et. al. (2009) the high profile of labour issues, including cases classified as slave labour, in Brazil was crucial in the definition of the criteria of this principle. These criteria are key in highlighting the responsibility of

contractors over the quality of labour condition. However there is no direct reference in it to regulations that could define or affect the scale of production.

The third principle, responsible community relations, has four criteria with their respective sub-criteria. These are on channels of communication and dialogue with local communities; conflicting land usage in areas with traditional land users; mechanisms for resolving complaints and grievances of local communities and traditional land users; and fair opportunities for employment and provision of goods and services given to the local population. While the first three criteria deal with conflictive relations with affected communities, the last one is concerned with the economic impact that the activity might have through creation of employment and purchase of goods and services at the local level. This principle on responsible community relations is a recognition of negative social and environmental impacts outside the farm and the production process. However, the degree of generalization at which the principle is defined allows for multiple interpretations. It is not specified, for example, what circumstance will be considered 'conflicting land usage' and a 'grievance' and who will define these. Moreover, impacts over communities can be caused directly or indirectly so the actual vigilance of this principle raises multiple complications. Given the complexity of the relation between soybean production and expansion and possible negative impacts on communities, this principle may be the most conflictive to interpret into measurable and verifiable characteristics for the certification. It will depend on the national interpretations to define more clearly the responsibilities on community relations of the different actors involved in the soybean agri-food chain.

The fourth principle, on environmental responsibility, has five criteria and their respective sub criteria. These are on assessments of on- and off-farm social and environmental impacts of large or high risk new infrastructure; minimized pollution and waste management; reduction of emissions and increased sequestration of greenhouse gases; responsible expansion of soybean cultivation; and on-farm biodiversity preservation. Within this principle there is no direct reference to scale of production but it is considered that investment in large infrastructure has to be assessed to minimize the negative impacts. It was criterion 4.4. on responsible expansion of soybean that generated an open conflict between members of the initiative (RTRS minutes 61 and 62, May, 2009). The criterion calls for no clearance of new areas in native habitats and the use of environmental-economic zoning to delimit soybean expansion. The discussion and the procedure that took place led APROSOJA, the soybean producers' association of Mato Grosso, to resign its membership of the RTRS. Even to this day the criterion has a note indicating that it will be revised in 2012.

The fifth and last principle is on good agricultural practices and it includes eleven criteria with respective sub criteria. This principle is the most abundant in detail and intends to guide the maintenance and improvement of soil and water use and sources; the use of phytosanitary products to minimize negative environmental and health impacts; good practices in the application and handling of agrochemicals; the coexistence of different production systems; and the control of seed quality and origin. These criteria focus mainly on the environmental sustainability of soybean production, and will define directly the practice of producers that want to obtain the RTRS certification. Again, reference to large scale production and its possible negative socio-economic and environmental impacts do not appear.

Reflections on the RTRS process and its governing consequences for producers

There is an increasing literature that analyses initiatives like the RTRS as a new trend in the global market and builds theories to understand the initiatives in a broader picture. Some of these studies have centre around 'standards' as governance mechanisms within global value chains (Henson etal...) or have focused on the initiatives as strategies within social movements that engage with a dialogue with companies, which has led to 'green alliances' or stakeholder partnerships as part of Corporate Social Responsibility strategies (Arts 2002; van Huijstee & Glasbergen 2010). Two topics appear in this literature that give insights about the motivations of different actors to engage in initiatives such as the RTRS: image management and coordination and information management. Van Huijstee & Glasbergen (2008) argue that companies are motivated to engage with stakeholder dialogues and partnerships such as the RTRS certification as these initiatives serve as risk management mechanisms. The RTRS then can be seen as a way to reduce possible damages to the companies' reputation or their brand's image. This motivation does not necessarily imply that the practices under question will be changed.

Another way of understanding these initiatives, certificates and standards is looking at the motivation of different actors along the global value chains, particularly retailers, in relation to the coordination of their activities and management of information costs (Henson & Humphrey 2010). If coordination of activities or information management are the motivations of companies to engage in standard strategies this implies that there will be changes in the governance of the global value chain. The changes cause by a standards, as could be the case of the RTRS, range from impacts in the way soybean is farmed and food processed or to modification of the distribution of profit within the chain. In this sense, the RTRS can be more that a marketing strategy so it is relevant to understand the possible impacts beyond corporations' brand managment.

In the light of these theoretical discussions the RTRS can be classified as a voluntary NGO-private certificate. The actual use of the RTRS certification as a marketing mechanism to assure the consumer that soybean is produced in a responsible manner has not yet been used by traders and retailers. The first RTRS certified soybean is announced for the harvest of 2011 (March to May). Therefore the reference by companies to their participation in this initiative in the four past years as a way to show their commitment to environmental and social responsibility is a clear reflection of their interest to build in the public an idea that their business is responsible and engaged with sustainable practices. However, the actual result of the RTRS to reduce the negative environmental and social impacts are yet to be seen, meanwhile the companies are using their membership to change the public opinion without having engaged in a fundamental change of their practices. Instead the certification comes to set a sustainable standard with reference to producer's practices that are already in use and are in compliance with national legislation. However, the RTRS certification aims to promote continuous improvements within the standard set by the RTRS, therefore members that already qualify with minimum criteria should also modifying certain practices to improve further their production and adapt to a more responsible standard.

The content of the P&C of the RTRS can be related to the work that the involved organizations and members have done previously. These have their history of involvement with the expansion of soybean. They can range from promoting it, to criticising it to participating directly in the expansion. In a general way the groups representing the civil society in the RTRS have an international reach and an environmental focus, although not exclusively. On the side of producers, industry, trade and finance representatives the predominance of actors dealing with large scale production is clear. This composition is defining the characteristics of the RTRS. However, the degree to which the discussion around responsibility and sustainability defined the content of the P&C and modified the positions and vision of the actors involved or to which extent its content and implication are constrained by predefined positions of the participants requires an in depth deconstruction of the actors' views and practices in a historical span. This escapes the scope of this paper. However a reading of the RTRS minutes accessible through the initiative's web page www.responsiblesoy.org, interviews with people of the three constituencies involved in the RTRS, and a contrast of the P&C in relation to the multiple narratives exposed above, allows an initial evaluation of the exclusionary and inclusive impacts and implications of the RTRS.

The RTRS is part of a trend of initiatives that involve NGOs partnerships with business, which have been classified as "green alliances"(Arts 2002). In this sense, the RTRS is not a unique and isolated initiative, but it relies on an accumulation of knowledge on how to go about this type of initiative. This is not to say that the process, actors, and possible results are the same, but that the building of it involves coping and learning from other initiatives. The Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil – RSPO is the initiative that inspires the RTRS most directly. Both of these roundtables were initiated by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) so the sharing of information is strongly present in the process of the RTRS which came after the RSPO. Furthermore, the RTRS was facilitated by the UK-based organization ProForest, which had previously written the Basel Criteria for soybean production (ProForest 2004; ProForest 2005). This sustainability standard is used by European retailers that participate in the RTRS such as Coop Switzerland and was a starting point for the discussion of the Principles and Criteria of the RTRS. Therefore, the RTRS has not happened in isolation and the P&C are not result solely of the multi-stakeholder discussions but is an initiative that relies on previous experiences and starts with a predefined idea of the content for a 'responsibility' and 'sustainability' standard (ProForest 2005).

One of the main strengths of the RTRS has been to create a space of dialogue under a circumstance where different interest groups with polarized views are rarely willing to have a discussion. The RTRS brought to the same table groups that have different, often incompatible, views on what sustainable soybean production is. This is in itself an achievement. As is pointed out, the participation in the initiative implies recognition - by groups that usually deny - that soybean production has negative environmental and social consequences (Repórter Brasil 2010). Furthermore it is an initiative that engages stakeholders in bringing into practice their approximations of environmental and social sustainability.

However, by having a diversity of groups discussing the P&C for responsible soybean, the RTRS has not necessarily included in the dialogue the heterogeneity of soybean producers and other stakeholders of the global soybean agri-food system. What's more,

the recognition of a diversity of views was restricted in the process of creating the RTRS and discussing the P&C. From the start opposing groups, embracing the *Incompatible Alternatives Narrative*, such as Articulaçao Soja-Brasil, rejected a possible alliance with large corporations that promote monocultures. They advocate for a more restrictive approach to sustainable soybean production, including limits to the size of the plots of production to no more than 200ha and a prohibition of genetically modified soybean (Fórum Brasileiro et al. 2004). It is also the case of the soybean producers association from Mato Grosso, APROSOJA, that initially participated in the RTRS but left the table, declaring disagreement with the decision process around the restrictions to soybean expansion (RTRS minutes 61 and 62, May, 2009). The reasons of these groups to oppose the RTRS are different and occurred at different stages of the RTRS, however in both cases the groups opposing the initiative represent producers, the first case small holders from the south, the second case soybean producers from Mato Grosso.

The international nature of the RTRS is considered a strength but it can also become a governing mechanism that leaves soybean producers at a disadvantage to define sustainable production practices. The international character of the RTRS is clear. On the one hand the originators of the table are international NGOs based in Europe. On the other hand the scope of the initiative is openly international. This is considered a strength by the originators as they consider that this will allow the participation of a more diverse membership and the geographical reach could be larger. Furthermore, there is a belief that the sustainability of soybean production is dependent on actors all along the soybean global chain, therefore the initiative has included the participation of the main global companies that are driving the soybean production, trade, processing and financing. These high profile stakeholders and its international reach have implied that the RTRS appears as the main initiative for sustainable soybean production, while other initiatives are promoted in Brazil, e.g. Soja Plus by Abiove and the Cadastro de Compromisso Socioambiental – CCS (Socioenvironmental Commitment Record) by the producers NGO Alianca da Terra . However, the RTRS initiative is reaching a majority of soybean producers with a pre-defined set of principles and criteria. In addition, these P&C define sustainability of soybean production mainly at the farm level and have left vague parameters for the responsibility of actors at the other stages of the chain. There is for example no clear mechanism to distribute along the chain the cost to adapt to the P&C. In this sense, while the RTRS gives global players a means to coordinate production, it leaves limited scope for producers to negotiate the terms of this sustainability.

Although the RTRS initiative includes recognition that sustainable production is the responsibility of the various actors involved in the soybean global chain (RTRS, minutes) the P&C and CoC reflect a lack of depth in understanding the unequal power relations between the different stakeholders in the soybean agri-food system. For example, in the P&C or CoC there is no reference to the use and transaction of information in the promotion and selling of fertilizers, agrochemicals and other inputs. There can be a contradiction of interests, as Semino (2008) asks: how will producers reduce the use of agrochemicals as advocated in principle five when these inputs are fundamental to the soybean production system and the profit making of companies? Furthermore, the concentration of soybean trade in few multinational corporations, the Brazilian increasing dependency on imported fertilizers, and the monopoly on GM seeds, are aspects that are not considered in the RTRS standard. These aspects are highly criticised

and related to the unsustainability of soybean production by opponents of the RTRS, namely groups that have a *minimal responsibility narrative* or an *incompatibility narrative*. In the case of APROSOJA as an association of soybean producers it has created its own initiatives to engage with the environmental debate, including a program to adapt to environmental and social legislation, the promotion of conventional soybean production, planning of a producers' cooperative to gain bargaining power in the soybean chain, and lobbying for the production of national fertilizer production *(www.aprosoja.com.br).*

The abovementioned limitations - narrow producers' representation and P&C imposition - do not eliminate possible beneficial changes motivated by the RTRS in the way soybean production is expanding. Although it is too early to evaluate actual changes by members of the RTRS, it is possible to situate the initiative in the current context of uncertain paths of sustainable soybean production. There are soybean producers that have taken the P&C as a possible advantage for their activity. Besides, the RTRS certification sets minimum standards, largely based on criteria that are already practiced by soybean producers in Brazil, even if these are not the dominant practices. Moreover, with its commitment to legal compliance the RTRS reinforces the process in which various other policies are aiming to increase compliance with national and local legislation. In this sense, certainly the RTRS is not a call for a radical change but it is an initiative that sends producers a message that there are practices that can be considered by market actors as environmentally and socially sustainable. However, it is yet to be seen if this message will strengthen the current trends to move to a less extensive and socially and environmentally responsible production, or not.

Which producers will be able to take advantage of the potential opportunities offered by the RTRS and which producers will be marginalized by this initiative? The answer requires further understanding of the heterogeneity of soybean producers as well as the different context in which they operate. The RTRS is a minimum standard of sustainability in which there is agreement between the multiple stakeholders that participated in the RTRS. Moreover, there are soybean producers and companies that already contemplate these minimum P&C in their farm management practices. So far soybean production companies with mega large land holdings have been the keener to include the responsibility P&C of the RTRS into their managerial strategies, e.g. Grupo André Maggie. However these corporation have been targeted by civil society groups for their irresponsible and unsustainable practices, calling for fundamental changes in their practices (www.lasojamata.net). But the RTRS initiative is not restricted to larger players. There is scope for medium and small producers, as long as these have the will and capacity to engage and invest capital in the required changes (CMA 2010). Besides, for each producer there will be different limitations and advantages. The dissemination and extent of the influence of the RTRS is dependent on the amount of producers who engage with the initiative. If only few producers embrace the standard, the RTRS certification can easily remain restricted to a niche market, creating a governance mechanism of soybean production captured by the few multinational companies that already control soybean trade around the world.

Understanding the strengths and limitations of the RTRS with a case study:

(Insert map)

If there is a state that served as a reference for the discussion of the RTRS standard that is Mato Grosso. In fact, many of the RTRS association members have activities in this state. MT has municipalities in the Amazon Forest, the Pantanal, and the *Cerrado* ecosystems. It is the largest soybean producing state in Brazil, with 28% (18,7 million tons) of the national production (Repórter Brasil 2010). MT is a state with large agricultural frontiers where the economic, environmental and social effects of soybean expansion and production are a determinant of the development that occurs there. Moreover, deforestation of the Amazon Forest, a main concern of environmental NGOs, is linked to the development of the soybean agri-food system in this state (Greenpeace 2006). Furthermore, large foreign and national agriculture corporations (with more than 100,000 ha) are present in the state - approximately 15% of the soybean area is operated by these (APROSOJA 2009 p.38). The context of MT sets critical challenges to the RTRS initiative, but it also reveals the complex and dynamic process in which sustainable soybean productions is formed. The case helps to understand further the purposes of the RTRS, as well as to question how is the history of land investment in MT and its impacts present in the RTRS and who wins and who losses with this initiative at the municipal level.

To answer these questions, an ongoing research on the municipality of Querência is used as a reference case. This municipality became a expanding soybean frontier at the end of the 1990s. Situated in the northeast of Mato Grosso, it has 40% (726.378 ha) of its territory under Indigenous Territories, including part of the Xingu Indigenous Park and the land of the Kisêdjê; 9% (96.132,25 ha) of land reform settlements, around 1,050,000 ha of agricultural properties, 1,153 mapped springs, 345.961,23 hectares of Areas of Permanent Preservation, with 13,39% of this APP deforested (ISA 2010). It had more than 210 soybean producers with an area of approximately 190,000 ha of soybean in 2009 (Municipal Secretary of Agriculture personal communication, 2010). Different from other soybean production municipalities that are located in the *Cerrado*, Querência is situated in what is called transition area were the *Cerrado* intersects with the Amazon Forest.

A history of colonization and soybean large scale holding.

The expansion of soybean occurs in different ways according to the time in history and depending on the location where it takes place. Querência is an example of this. What is more, the economic, environmental, and social implications of soybean expansion and production also differ according to the time and space in which they happen. Firstly, as Querência is a more recent frontier than the already consolidated soybean production municipalities such as Sorriso and Lucas de Rio Verde, the replacement of native ecosystems with cattle and soybean production has not advanced to the same magnitude. Secondly, most soybean producers that colonized Querência at the end of the 1980s were able to invest at an early stage in technology that has a relatively fewer

negative environmental consequences. One case is the widespread use of no-till agriculture that includes investments to manage the soil and maintain it high productivity. Secondly, the transition area is considered in the legislation as Amazon Forest, which means that producers have to leave a larger percentage (80%) of their property as Legal Reserve than properties situated in the *Cerrado* that have to leave 35% when in MT. Currently the National Forest Code determines that 80% of the property situated in the Amazon Forest has to be left as Legal Reserve, in contrast to 35% of the property for those situated in the Legal Amazon, a more extensive demarcation, which includes all the *Cerrado* in MT (Hercowitz 2009).

The process of land grabbing that is currently happening in Mato Grosso - MT (Oliveira 2011) has to be understood in a historical perspective of land concentration and fragmentation (Tarsitano 1992; Kohlhepp & Blumenschein 2000; Jepson 2003; Castrillon Fernández 2007). With a relatively recent history of colonization, MT is considered a land abundant state. Furthermore, the colonization process that took place in Mato Grosso is not the same as the ones that have taken place in other states with soybean production (Brannstrom et al. 2008; Fearnside 2008). In the state of Mato Grosso a history of migration from the south of Brazil predominates (Kohlhepp & Blumenschein 2000). Starting in the 1980s the production of soybean has become more central to the economy and livelihoods. Therefore the colonization process that has taken place in Mato Grosso has determined a particular configuration of interest groups, modes of occupation, landscapes and land usage, and disputes over the paths of sustainable development.

A blunt account of the colonization process of MT - more specifically of the soybean production regions in MT - in the last decades can be traced back to the creation of indigenous parks (or territories) by the government in the 1960s and earlier. One case is the Xingu Park that is home to fourteen indigenous groups that lived dispersed over a wider territory than that of the park (ISA). In that decade, the government Superintendency for the Development of Amazonia- SUDAM had programs of land colonization and distributed large areas of land to national and international companies with the agreement that the new owners would invest and make the land productive (Abreu 2001; Barrozo 2009). In parallel and through out the 1970s a different occupation of land was promoted with private colonization projects that brought families mainly from the south of Brazil. Different from the large areas that were owned by businessmen and companies not involved in agriculture, this other private colonization was undertaken by families with agricultural backgrounds. This colonization process eased the tensions in the south over land and made possible the acquisition at a low price of areas bigger than the ones that were common in the south, going from plots of 25 ha in the south to 500 ha or more in MT. The large holdings in MT, mostly occupied with only a few heads of cattle to secure the property, were fragmented in this process. Furthermore, public colonization projects as part of the agrarian reform also took place in the 1960s and 1970s, but it was in the 1990s that more land reform settlements were formed. These four main forms of land occupation - indigenous territories, large-holding company ownership, private colonization with population

from the south, and land reform settlers - are still present and form the geopolitical landscape in soybean production regions of MT.[2]

The private colonization projects are directly related with the expansion of soybean. Today, most of these projects have given way to an economy based on soybean production and in a few cases including soybean processing. Furthermore, these projects have determined the creation of municipalities and the villages planned within these types of colonization are today small and medium-sized cities where a large number of soybean producers live (Jepson 2003; 2006). That said, soybean production in MT is not restricted to the private colonization projects. However, the economic growth in these small and medium cities is often cited as an economic benefit of the soybean economy (APROSOJA 2009). These cities have become the municipal heads from where important local decision on sustainable development are taken and contested. For example, municipalities have created Conselhos Municipaes de Desenvolvimento Rural Sustentável (Municipal Councils of Rural Sustainable Development) in which discussions of environmental policy take place; and the ministries of environment in some municipalities have gained political presence, as is the case in Lucas do Rio Verde where a program of adjustment to environmental legislation was initiated. In this sense, the power configuration involving the diverse interest groups of land occupants, users and owners and other actors that have more or less influence over the local authorities has to be considered to understand how each municipality has responded differently to socio-environmental and ecological pressures related to soybean production.

The so-called 'new land grabbing' sparked by the 2008 food price spike comes as another sort of land appropriation or purchase in the state of Mato Grosso (Gartlan 2010). However the concentration of land with mega large scale soybean production in MT preceded the new land grab and has to be understood, particularly the impacts, in a previous history of land concentration and creation of large land holdings. In the case of Querência, some of the transactions of large landholdings moving into the hands of soybean producers correspond to the areas that were distributed to companies before the 1970s. The companies did not develop major production activities nor infrastructure as it was treated more as land for speculation. In the past decade the prices of land have gone up and these areas have become more profitable for soybean production. Taking into account this process, the transaction of large areas of land for agricultural production has a history in the state, therefore the new pressure from international and national capitalized firms to purchase large areas of land follows the logic of previous practices.

Soybean production became the crop that gave opportunities to many of the farmers who came from the south to run a productive and lucrative agricultural activity in MT. This is reflected in the growth of the villages into towns and small cities of the soybean production municipalities. However this has not come without reproducing the inequality that characterises Brazil. These cities have an increasing contingent of

[2] This is a schematic account of the colonization process, so it has to be highlighted that the four forms of occupation mentioned here are the main ones but not the only ones in soybean regions of MT. There is for example indigenous population whose land was not demarcated; populations that settled long before the 1960s when the main economic activity was mining; and informal occupation of smallholdings by people from neighbouring states.

permanent and temporary workers that live in the small cities with a differentiated style and quality of life of that of the land owners that produce soybean. There is also rural and urban poverty in these municipalities that should not be ignored when talking about the economic development that soybean has brought to particular regions (Schwenk & Cruz 2008).

In the process of soybean expansion in Querência the formation of medium and large land holdings derives from different processes. In these processes, then, some producers have become large holders, others small holders, others are trying their luck with a medium-sized plot and others have failed and had to move out of the agricultural activity or elsewhere. For example the successful usage of resources lead some pioneer soybean producers accumulate capital to purchase more land. Moreover, there are also other producers that came later in the colonization process with more capital. These started as medium- and large holders. These producers settle in the village and become active members in the local economy and politics. It is among this constellation of soybean producers that pulls of investment arrive as a new strategy to create profitable arrangements on land use by buying or renting large areas of land. This trend of investment involves a small number of highly capitalized producers, investors or soybean companies that come from other regions in Brazil or other countries such as Argentina (Gartlan 2010). This type of investment arrangement includes larger scales of production and brings with it bargaining power with the input companies and soybean traders and responds to other advantages from the economy of scale that the investors may be aiming for.

Land investment related to soybean in Querência is taking place in a context of diversity of land use and investment trends, some of them respond to historical trends while others are more recent. The large possessions distributed to companies in the 1960s during military rule that still exist today or have been traded in the past years are now traded as a whole property, as is the case of the Tanguro Fazenda bought by one of the largest soybean producers in Brazil, Grupo AMaggie. However these properties are also sold in sections. This fragmentation of large holdings gives middle land holders the opportunity to increase their property, as is also done through the purchase of small holders' areas. Soybean production is considered a highly profitable agricultural activity so expansion of soybean has also occurred at a smaller scale. Medium and small producers have cleared new areas and regenerated degraded land. Soybean is even produced by land reform settlers and illicit users of land reform plots. The diversity of types of soybean occupation is part of the challenge for policies that are trying to regulate its expansion and environmental and socio-economic impacts.

Local political dynamics and sustainable development practices.

Soybean producers in Querência have reacted in diverse ways to the environmental and social pressures of the last decade, particularly in relation to environmental and labour legislation. In the case of the Forest Code most soybean producers agree on maintaining an Area of Permanent Preservation (APP in the code's terminology), namely the conservation of the riparian forest. For this soybean producers have regenerated the areas of APP that by law they should have and which they typically? don't. Some of them

have fenced the areas to allow the area to recuperate by itself; others have planted tree seedlings; and others are participating in an innovative procedure of mechanized forest recuperation promoted by a national environmental NGO, ISA (ISA 2010). This last technique involves planting large areas with a highly diverse mix of seeds using large scale farming seeders and relying on a regional network of seed producers and collectors among family farmers and indigenous people (www.sementesdoxingu.org.br). While the diverse approaches to riparian forest recuperation indicate different ways to deal with practices of sustainability, the examples also talk about the difficulties of recuperating forest which is a non an activity that many master and has not yet received the research attention and investment by the public and private sector that soybean production has.[3] This shows that producers can not turn their agricultural activity to a sustainable one without the involvement of other actors in and out of the soybean global chain finding and carrying out alternative practices. In this sense, soybean sustainable production goes beyond what the RTRS voluntary private certification can influence.

The recuperation of the APPs by producers takes place in the context of pressure from federal and state government agencies and policies, such as the Rural Properties Environmental Licensing System (SLARP in Portuguese) which involved registering rural properties using satellite imagery to define the boundaries and land use characteristics. The licensing includes making the landholders sign terms of adjustment to recuperate the APPs and for some time it was made a condition for accessing agricultural credit (Azevedo 2009). There has also been a regional campaign, Y Ikatu Xingu, launched by a group of NGOs through a process of multi stakeholder dialogue involving diverse groups from the municipalities that surround the Xingu Park (www.yikatuxingu.org.br). The focus of this campaign is to raise awareness of the need to protect the water springs and tributary rivers that feed the Xingu river but which lie outside the Xingu indigenous territory. Some of the NGOs involved in the Y Ikatu Xingu have other projects related to soybean sustainable production, as is the case of ICV that participates in the RTRS, or ISA and IPAM that work directly with the producers with initiatives to reduce the environmental impacts of soybean production (Iriani 2007). These two very different examples of initiatives, the SLARP policy and the Y Ikatu Xingu campaign, reflect the multiple activities that are been launched to regulate and reduce the environmental and social impacts of soybean production. Also these reveal the different levels at which the soybean agri-food system actors engage, be these farm, municipality, region, state, country, or international level. Moreover, the relation between these two initiatives tells us something about the complementarities of actions taken by different sectors of society. Therefore, the valuation of impacts of the RTRS have to be understood considering that this initiative may complement or contradict other initiatives as it is not implemented in isolation.

[3]Creating forest for preservation, as technicians of ISA mention, is not an established art or science: the knowledge is still at the experimental stage. Leaving the forest to grow by itself has little cost, but it takes a long time and the type of forest may not have optimal characteristics for environmental service delivery. Planting shoots may be in accordance to the common practices but the high costs and rate of tree growth might not be the most attractive and effective for producers. ISA's innovation aims to use the resources of the farmers, such as their tractor seeders, and produce forest with a diversity of native trees in order to increase the forest environmental services (ISA 2010).

The diversity of environmental and social practices carried out by producers, as is the recuperation of the APPs, the recycling of agrochemical containers, the management of soil fertility, and the upgrading of workers' infrastructure, are meant to ascertain that the producer complies with Brazilian legislation. However, in parallel to these practices soybean producers often participate politically in strategies to change the environmental legislation and regulation into ones less restrictive and in their view more adequate to the development of their activity This can be through the Rural Union, their political representatives, or other associations. This is the case with national discussions and mobilizations around the Forest Code[4] and at a state level the Socio-Economic Environmental Zoning for Mato Grosso. This process in which producers both adapt to the environmental and labour legislation while acting politically to ease what they consider to be restrictive regulations can be seen as a contradiction, but it reflects the dynamic process in which the uncertainties of sustainability are contested and defined. In this context producers act differently, some are more conservative, others are risk takers or pioneers in testing alternative practices offered. Some take the risk of being outside the law while waiting for the legislation to change to their benefit, others take risks investing in practices that bring costs with no secure economic return. It is in this context that the RTRS can be one strategy soybean producers and corporations pursue while also pursuing other pragmatic strategies that contradict the principles advocated by the RTRS.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, a quantitative evaluation of the RTRS is not within the scope of this paper. The RTRS has discussed an international standard for its certification of responsible soybean production for more than four years, but the actual implementation of the P&C is only just beginning. This implies that an evaluation of the implementation in Brazil and its consequences can not yet be done. However the process has already influence the actions of stakeholders of the soybean the agri-food system, as its shown in this paper for the case of the municipality of Quêrencia in Mato Grosso, Brazil. For some the initiative has achieved a dialogue between stakeholders that were previously locked in a polarized confrontation, and the dialogue has contributed to the inclusion of environmental issues in the agenda of main actors in the soybean chain (Nepstad et al. 2006; Abramovay 2010). For others the RTRS is allowing multinational and national soybean companies to disguise their public image as socially and environmentally responsible while maintaining their usual unsustainable soybean production system (ASEED Europe et al. 2008). There is a degree of truth in both evaluations. Involving multiple stakeholders in a debate on sustainable soybean production and arriving to a consensus on a sustainability standard which producers can use to guide their activities is a step forward in opening a space for changes in the soybean agri-food system. This in itself can be considered an achievement, but does not mean that the initiative has achieved a reduction of the negative environmental and social impacts. The RTRS certification has just been put into implementation. However,

[4] Contrasting visions on the discussion around the Forest Code and the current modifications can be followed in the web based news letter of the *Confederação Nacional de Agricultura* (CAN) and the *Instituto Socioambiental*.

as argued throughout this paper the complexity of the issue requires more that just a market driven initiative based on the goodwill of few influential actors.

As a voluntary market mechanism to promote responsible and sustainable practices in the agri-food system, the RTRS certification has a series of limitations. A concern raised by members of the RTRS is the possibility that the certification becomes reduced to a niche market therefore reducing the impact of the initiative. This will then benefit mainly large scale producers and companies that invest in the minimal changes required by the responsibility standard. The membership to the RTRS is voluntary and has administrative and implementation costs for producers which may become a barrier for certain producers, particularly small holders. There is an underlying belief by the originators of the RTRS that the involvement of large actors, such as the multinational crop traders that control majority of the market and national soybean production companies that own vast areas of land, will be an example for the rest of the producers. In this sense, the initiative is based on good wishes as well as the will of stakeholders to change their status quo.

The RTRS cannot be understood and should not be evaluated at this stage in isolation from the changing and dynamic context of which it is part. The Brazilian government has a diverse range of environmental and socio-political regulations and policies in place that are recognized as framework for the principles and criteria of the RTRS. Therefore the impacts of the RTRS will also depend on the course of the changes in the government regulation and policies and their implementation. How much forest producers have to leave as Legal Reserve and Area of Permanent Preservation-APP, e.g. if 80% or less of their property in the Amazon ecosystem, does not depend on the implementation of the RTRS but on the highly political resolutions of the Brazilian Forest Code. Currently environmental and social regulation around agricultural production in Brazil are changed and disputed frequently.

Furthermore, the results of the RTRS are also not isolated from other initiatives of the NGOs and other members of the RTRS. Their commitment to environmental and social improvements and reduction of negative impacts of soybean production is articulated in other initiatives that focus on the same problematic that is expressed in the RTRS. In Querência there are examples of initiatives dealing with the environmental and social impacts of soybean production that are implemented in other municipalities both in Mato Grosso and other states. This is the case of the work by ICV with other NGOs and producers to strengthen conservation practices as well as the viability of family farming (www.icv.org.br) and the multistakeholder Y Ikatu Xingu Campaign. With a less restrictive approach but nevertheless in line with the RTRS groups such as the producers' NGO Aliança da Terra, the Soybean Producers Association APROSOJA and the soybean company Grupo André Maggie have initiatives of their own. If the RTRS certification is going to cause a change of route of soybean production by its own is doubtful; however, it is important to evaluate its impacts considering the synergistic or contradictory relation with other initiatives that are also dealing with soybean sustainability and influence producers simultaneously.

The RTRS and its Principles and Criteria form part of the process to define what is considered sustainable production of soybean rather than been the only initiative defining the process in which sustainability is defined. The government policies and

legislation are fundamental, but also the multiple initiatives similar to the RTRS are key in the framing of sustainable soybean production. Moreover, the international reach of the RTRS has made the initiative appear in the global discussions of soybean sustainability but there is still no single dominant standard to guide the path to sustainability. Instead, the sustainability of the soybean agri-food system is contested at multiple levels and the form of sustainability will depend on initiatives at different scales, differentiated by the local and regional context, not only the national and international. The RTRS certification as it is now will not by itself generate a profound and structural change of the soybean agri-food system as is advocated by groups that promote alternative systems.

One of the main concerns around the sustainability of the soybean agri-food system for groups that advocate for alternative agricultural systems has been land concentration and large scale production (Fórum Brasileiro et al. 2004; ASEED Europe et al. 2008). As argued in this paper, these concerns are not reflected in the discussion of the RTRS and the content of its P&C. The RTRS includes a principle of responsible community relation but the criteria does not make clear what are the conflict this principle should regulate not who is to define the solutions when there are negative consequences. The P&C focus on regulating producers farming activity as independent of the dynamics within the soybean agri-food system. Indeed, the initiative has a multistakeholder approach that includes input suppliers, traders, retailers, processors and banks, but the responsibilities these actors have on the increasing scales of production and the possible negative effects this can have on rural development are not present in the RTRS initiative. These concerns, on the negative social consequences of land concentration and large scale production, imply questioning fundamental aspects of the soybean agri-food system. The RTRS has not managed to put this topic in the table of discussion. Instead the initiative aims at restricting the overall advance of soybean production into more native ecosystems, as well as encourage producers to engage with and strengthen existent but not wide spread practices of production that reduce negative environmental and social consequences.

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