

The issue of agrochemicals breaks the limits of the ethics of preservation of health and life

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THE SECTORS AND GROUPS CONSORTED IN THE ACCOMPLISHMENT of the institutional coup that, since 2016, commands Brazil, act with a celerity never seen in the dynamics of the National Congress for the approval of their proposals and bills of laws. In recent weeks, while the country was entertained with the World Cup atmosphere, the Congress ran over agendas to approve projects which, in past times, were presented and shelved because they meant losses or risks to the population.

That is the case of Bill (PL) 6.299/2002¹, which facilitates the release of pesticides, already approved in a Special Commission of the Chamber of Deputies and soon to be voted in its Plenary. The proposal under discussion, in addition to proposing the substitution of terminologies aimed at semantically attenuating the risks of those products (from pesticides to agricultural defensives), reduces the decision-making power of bodies destined to the analysis of environmental risks and human health, such as the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama) and the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa), linked to the Ministry of Health, giving the Ministry of Agriculture greater decision-making power over the approval of the commercialization of new pesticides in the Brazilian market.

The Ministry of Agriculture, whether in liberal or progressive governments, has always been contested and, most of the time, run by representatives of agribusiness, whose model of agricultural production is based on intensive use of the soil, monoculture for export and the use of agrochemicals (herbicides, pesticides, fungicides, among others) without any concern for the environment and the health.

The proposal in question concerns sectors of the Brazilian society, including health, as it further softens existing legislation by opening doors for the registration and commercialization of new chemical formulas without due study of their harmful effects.

The current Minister of Agriculture Blairo Maggi was, as senator, the author of Bill 6.299 presented in 2002. He is a representative of agribusiness, a major producer of soybeans, one of the crops that most consume agrochemicals in Brazil. Within the barbarism that dominates the People's House, the agrochemical industry celebrates the progress of the project that serves its interests, especially in relation to the shortening of the time to approve products for commercialization. According to that industry, the current legislation requires an excessive production of evidence on the safety and risks of the use of such products.

Despite the various petitions, public acts, responsible and indignant editorials, through which society rejected this project, it seems that Bill 6.299 will be approved without further problems. The interests involve a fraction of a class that occupies many seats in the Chamber

of Deputies, combining landowners and the agrochemical industry with enormous power accumulated in a national context in which a necessary and adequate agrarian reform has not yet been carried out and which has one of the largest concentrations of land in the world.

Simultaneously, Bill 4576/16 is being processed in the Chamber, which reaches the growing family farming, in which small organic producers are found, restricting the sale of their products in supermarkets and in government programs, such as school alimentation.

This explains the attempt to dominate agribusiness (extolled by the national media), which looks at organic production as another space for the accumulation of capital. The volume of resources involved in the trade of pesticides in Brazil in 2017 alone accounted for 8.8 billion dollars (data from the sector itself), placing us among the largest users of such products on the planet.

The dossier of the Brazilian Association of Collective Health (Abrasco) estimates that from 2000 to 2012, the agrochemicals market grew 288.41% in sales and 162.32% in amount of tons sold, with the support of state incentives. In addition, the volume of tax privileges allocated to the sector is well known, disproportionate to its real contribution to the volume of taxation^{2,3}.

The network of researchers working on the subject of pesticides has produced important information on the scale of abuse in relation to their use, as well as their environmental risks and their consequences for human health. This has been costly for some researchers, who are even threatened and persecuted by the industry⁴. That academic production has made it possible to disseminate knowledge to social movements and to society, contributing to the awareness of the severity of the problem and the need for urgent changes. However, none of this has moved the government and the representatives of the people in the National Congress, being a challenge for the next legislature.

Brazilian legislation is already acquiescent regarding agrochemicals. For example, in Brazil, the limit of the concentration of those products in drinking water is acceptable on the order of 5,000 times higher than that defined by the European Community. Not to mention that the products used here present greater risks and damages to health; many of them are not even used in their countries of origin anymore. In total, 30% of the 504 agrochemicals allowed in Brazil are banned in the European Union⁵.

The tax exemption guaranteed by the government for some decades is destined to inputs used in the production of food: pesticides, feed, machinery, medicines for animals, among others. The main beneficiaries, however, end up being the producers of commodities².

In the evaluation of Victor Pelaez^{3,6}, a researcher at the Federal University of Paraná, the new law will also favor China, the world leader in the agrochemicals sector, with 25% of the market, which has a great capacity for synthesis of patent-expired molecules. China is also the origin of clandestine chemicals who arrive in Brazil. The National Union of the Industry of Products for Plant Protection (Sindiveg) estimates that 20% of the national market is occupied by illegal agrochemicals, besides the possibility of Chinese companies selling unsold products in Europe to Brazil. With the flexibilization of legislation, quality control will be determined by China, not by Brazilian institutions⁷.

One of the pesticides banned in Europe is allowed here is the acephate, the fifth most sold in Brazil. Despite all indications of the Anvisa regarding its evident neurotoxic action, as well as possible effects on the endocrine system, this product is still allowed in the country. It is an insecticide and systemic acaricide of the organophosphorus chemical group, with action by contact and ingestion, indicated for the treatment of seeds and foliar application in pest control in cotton, apple and leafy vegetable crops, among others. Paraquat is another example: Anvisa warned of its danger, and even China, known as an environmentally permissive country, has already abolished it. However, its sale and its use still persist here⁵.

According to data published by the Laboratory of Agricultural Geography of the Faculty of Philosophy, Letters and Human Sciences (FFLCH) of the University of São Paulo (USP), which mapped the cases of intoxication, at least eight Brazilians are contaminated⁸. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg. It is estimated that, for each case of intoxication reported in Brazil, there are 50 others not reported.

However, more than acute, easily identifiable intoxications, the most problematic are chronic intoxications due to exposure to low dosages for long periods, such as cancer, Parkinson's disease, depression, suicide, congenital malformation, prematurity, precocious puberty, infertility, among others. There is a vast national and international literature proving the association between direct and indirect exposure to pesticides and the occurrence of such diseases².

This is a problem of the countryside and the city, since the populations of hundreds of municipalities surrounded by monocultures are exposed to the drifts of aerial sprays; and the whole population consumes poisons daily in the food that comes to our table.

A study coordinated by Pignati, at the Federal University of Mato Grosso, has identified the contamination of breast milk with pesticides from mothers living in urban areas of cities of agricultural economy. The same group demonstrated the existence of those products in rainwater and air².

The indisputable fact is that, from all points of view regarding human health and the environment, it is not possible to sustain any argument in defense of the current agrochemical policy in the country. The main question should be: why not bring the standard and the regulation of those products to the countries where they are produced? European standards are now considered relatively safe. Why not adopt them?

Some fronts should mobilize the work of the Brazilian Center for Health Studies (Cebes): combating the model of economic and social development that resulted in a deindustrialization and reprimarization of the economy, leaving Brazil more dependent on imports of industrialized products; the reduction of public subsidies to agribusiness and increased public funding for small organic producers; the strengthening of agroecology as a State policy, which can actually produce healthy food for the population, and the struggle to ban the aerial spraying of pesticides in order to reduce the indirect exposure of the rural and urban population.

Finally, the Cebes commitment also involves the struggle for more resources for research investigating this type of problem, generating information that contributes to the expansion of critical awareness and to mobilization for change; in addition to the commitment of the periodic 'Saúde em Debate' in the dissemination of results of studies that show the harms to the nature and health of this model of economic development based on the production of commodities.

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