

From the socioanthropology of development to public arenas: a study in rural settlement 72 (Ladário-MS)

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Summary

This article discusses contemporary approaches in the field of development studies that depart from traditionally adopted institutional and positivist interpretations. We begin with the Socioanthropology of Development approach, grounded in social anthropology, presenting its contributions and gaps in this debate. We then propose a pragmatic approach to the study of development dynamics, drawing on the contemporary debate in the field of the sociology of public problems and public action. This was evidenced by ethnographic fieldwork to examine the practices of families living in rural settlement 72 (Ladário, Mato Grosso do Sul) and the establishment of public arenas in this space. Recognizing this gap in the debate, we present two analytical assumptions that aim to help researchers analyze the interaction between structures and social life, highlighting the importance of reconnecting the study of development with the practices and experiences of actors who, through mobilization, face increasingly complex problematic situations in their local realities in the face of the challenges posed by the post-pandemic and climate crisis scenario.

Keywords: Socioanthropology of development. Pragmatism. Sociology of public problems. Public arenas. Rural settlements.

Da socioantropologia do desenvolvimento as arenas públicas: um estudo no assentamento rural 72 (Ladário-MS)

Resumo

Este artigo discute abordagens contemporâneas no campo de estudos sobre o desenvolvimento que se distanciam de leituras institucionais e positivistas tradicionalmente adotadas. Partimos da abordagem da Socioantropologia do Desenvolvimento,

fundamentada na antropologia social, apresentando suas contribuições e as lacunas desse debate para então propor um enfoque pragmatista para os estudos das dinâmicas de desenvolvimento, tomando por base o debate contemporâneo no campo da sociologia dos problemas públicos e da ação pública. Isso ficou evidenciado com a realização de um trabalho de campo etnográfico, para examinar as práticas promovidas por famílias que vivem no assentamento rural 72 (Ladário, Mato Grosso do Sul) e a constituição de arenas públicas nesse espaço. Reconhecendo a lacuna do debate, são apresentados dois pressupostos analíticos que visam auxiliar os pesquisadores a analisar a interação entre as estruturas e a vida social, destacando a importância de reconectar o estudo do desenvolvimento às práticas e experiência dos atores, que através da mobilização, enfrentam nas suas realidades locais situações problemáticas cada vez mais complexas diante dos desafios colocados no cenário pós-pandemia e de crise climática.

Palavras-chave: Socioantropologia do desenvolvimento. Pragmatismo. Sociologia dos problemas públicos. Arenas Públicas. Assentamentos rurais.

1 Introduction

The field of development studies is broad and multiparadigmatic, encompassing different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. It is widespread in common sense, acquiring the status of practices of social intervention. However, ways of understanding and interpreting development have been forged over time, through successive paradigms. Rather than surveying these paradigms, this article will focus on exploring contemporary approaches that re-discuss the phenomenon¹.

The second half of the 20th century marked the beginning of the era of development, a term coined by Sachs (1986), which sought to link economic growth to political and civic rights, particularly through employment. However, this period revealed a disconnect between Fordist ideals of progress and the widening of global inequalities, as well as environmental destruction (Chateauraynaud, 2011). This situation led to the denaturalization of the notion of development, historically associated with progress and positivist evolution (Azoulay, 2002).

In this context, the Socioanthropology of Development, proposed by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, stands out, questioning classical interpretations of development and research methods on the subject. According to Olivier de Sardan (2015a), from the 1950s onward, a mechanistic approach prevailed, in which researchers analyzed countries of the Global South from Eurocentric perspectives, imposing an unattainable model of modernization on them. When this development failed to materialize, categories such as "Third World" and "Underdeveloped" emerged, which remain a part of everyday life in the Global South.

In the 1970s, heterodox approaches prioritized ethnicity and collective identities, but were still influenced by positivists paradigms, whether liberal or Marxist. These perspectives defined measures of development a priori and

¹For reasons of focus and brevity, we will not delve into the different paradigms and theories of development, as this would be beyond the scope of this study. For more in-depth analysis, see Azoulay (2002), Andion (2007), and Santo (2021).

perpetuated stereotypes, linking development to modes of production or moral and ideological analyses. Despite their differences, both share a positivist episteme that ignores the real conditions and particularities of development processes.

Beginning in the 1980s, the emphasis on actors broke with this view, prioritizing qualitative and interdisciplinary analyses that investigated the actual functioning of societies. Socioanthropology emerged in this context, focusing on the interactions between development projects and target groups, illuminating conflicts and contradictions. It was recognized that popular reactions also promote social change.

This approach does not seek to defend or propose another model of development, but understands that “development exists by the simple fact that there are actors and institutions that take it as an object or purpose” (Olivier de Sardan, 1995, p. 10). In Brazil, socioanthropology is little explored. Local studies often distinguish between *anthropology of development* and *anthropology in development*, or adopt post-development approaches, such as those of Arturo Escobar and Wolfgang Sachs.

According to Carneiro (2012), one of the merits of socioanthropology is its strong opposition to the neoclassical school and its combination of holistic and interactionist views. However, the eclectic use of two concepts, 'field' and 'arena,' with quite opposing epistemes, is a true limitation of this approach. Even with the use of the concept of 'strategic groups' for less normative, more participatory collective investigations with greater stakeholder participation, and with the criticism made by the Wageningen group, (Arce; Long, 2007), which tries to fill this gap with the 'intertwining of social logics', Carneiro points out that the challenge of socioanthropology is to resolve the conceptual gap between 'structure' and 'social life' (macro and micro relationship).

In Brazil, few theoretical works delve deeper into Olivier de Sardan's approach. Ademir Cazella (2006) analyzed the contribution of socioanthropology to sustainable territorial development, adopting Bourdieu's notion of field. Marcelo Carneiro (2012) reviewed critical findings and concluded that socioanthropology advances by proposing new study processes within development studies. Researchers have increasingly moved away from the concept of field, favoring interactionist analyses.

Based on these insights, this article proposes to advance the debate by linking Olivier de Sardan's ideas to the Sociology of Public Problems, especially to socioanthropological analyses of public arenas. We seek to answer: what contributions does contemporary sociological pragmatism make to the socioanthropology of development?

To this end, we reviewed the main works of contemporary sociology of public problems, based on the pragmatism of John Dewey (1927; 1938), to begin a theoretical discussion. The notion of public inquiry is guided by capturing human practices in relation to the natural world, where actors face and attempt to reverse challenging situations. We contribute to this discussion by exploring two analytical assumptions for re-orienting development research. We then explored this approach in fieldwork conducted in rural settlement 72, in Ladário, Mato Grosso do Sul. This empirical incursion, through the articulation of socioanthropology and pragmatism,

allowed us to broaden our understanding of ongoing experiments conducted by multiple actors.

Methodologically, we present a qualitative and intrinsic case study because, according to Stake (2005), despite the specific interest in a particular case, we do not seek to generalize findings or applicable theories. On the contrary, we seek to advance theoretically the connection between developmental socioanthropology and pragmatism through the structuring and analysis of a case.

This was operationalized through a bibliographic survey (articles, books and theses), which allowed for in-depth studies in socioanthropology and pragmatism; documentary, in 180 pages of minutes from the Association of Small Rural Producers of the Settlement Project 72 (APPRPA72) and journalistic articles, which allowed for the systematization of the history of 72; and through meticulous ethnographic work with the families of 72, specifically in APPRPA72 and the Agroecological Farmers Welfare Group (Gaabe).

The ethnographic work lasted six months (August 2019 to February 2020), totaling 120 hours of observations and interactions, interrupted by the advance of the COVID-19 pandemic. The systematization of the work was based on prolonged, continuous observation, identifying and accompanying families and experts at association meetings, street markets, and the marketing of public purchases. Partial visits (back and forth) were also made to producers' properties, public agencies, and associations, allowing access to rich information narrated in public settings. Data analysis was conducted from the perspective of the theoretical construction presented in sections 2 and 3 of this article.

2 The contributions of socioanthropology to understanding development²

The social processes and phenomena related to development theories, or development policies, development devices, and development projects, as aptly outlined by Olivier de Sardan (1995), share an emphasis on development as an institutional and macrosocial dynamic. This concept is often understood separately from the various forms of social interaction, such as conflicts, coordination, collective learning, networks, and reciprocity.

Olivier de Sardan's (1984; 1995; 2001; 2008; 2015a; 2015b) analytical and methodological lens emphasizes actors, indicating a differentiated approach to understanding development and political ecology in this field. The author proposes deconstructing the development discourse, often reduced to a hegemonic model, to broaden the perspective on the practices and social consequences of development operators and institutions (the experts). In this sense, it is crucial to consider not only official policies and programs, but also the informal dynamics of actors, because, as Olivier de Sardan (1995, p. 6) states, "the analysis of development issues and popular reactions cannot be separated from the study of local dynamics or other processes of change."

²This section is largely inspired by the works of Olivier de Sardan, building on the gaps mentioned in the introduction.

Olivier de Sardan (1995) calls development configurations the universe of specialists made up of institutions, researchers, technicians, project managers, NGOs, bureaucrats, and others who make their living from the development of others. These specialists mobilize to create and manage considerable human, material, and symbolic resources. The author defines development as "the set of social processes induced by the voluntaristic transformations of a social environment, undertaken via institutions or external actors in a given environment" (Olivier de Sardan, 1995, p. 8). Thus, the presence of a development configuration defines the existence of development itself.

According to Cazella (2006), it is not enough to be aware of the deviations and normativities imposed by development theories. It is necessary to reconsider the social construction of the environment in which research is conducted, valuing the experience of the actors. Olivier de Sardan contributes by reintegrating development as an object of anthropological work, thoroughly exploring interactions in the world of development, including representations, practices, strategies, and structures. His methodological approach is a "specific approach to the complex social phenomena and issues linked to development actions, a non-normative approach, based on an empirical socioanthropology" (Olivier de Sardan, 2001, p. 730).

Socioanthropology distinguishes itself from robust quantitative studies by adopting multidimensional empirical work on social groups. It draws on the Chicago School tradition and field anthropology to conduct more complex research and analyses. This approach is not only an empirical research method but also a way to break with normative theories of development and consider reality as it manifests itself in local space. As Olivier de Sardan (1995, p. 8) argues, "what is most lacking is not good advice and new ideas, but an understanding of the actual mechanisms at work and the analysis of the social processes at play."

The author proposes three main aspects for understanding development. The first is development as a discourse and its deconstruction, resulting from the gap between development discourse and practice. Development professionals are not naive, and researchers must identify the hidden powers behind the discourse, seeking the causes that promote or hinder social change.

The second aspect is ideological populism. In development dynamics, two worlds collide: the recipients' meaning systems and development institutions. Popular knowledge is often ignored or seen as an obstacle to rational progress. Thus, ideological populism legitimizes rapid research, distorting the participation of stakeholders and imposing technical knowledge as the only possibility. Therefore, researchers must break with this perspective, recognizing the value of alternative knowledge, inspired by informal practices.

Finally, the third aspect is development as a social field, centered on the intertwining of social logics. This involves studying the relationships between local actors' systems of meaning and development institutions. For Olivier de Sardan (2001), "dialogue and cooperation between socio-professional categories, despite being conflicting and difficult, become necessary and mutually beneficial" (Cazella, 2006, p. 237).

The connection between Olivier de Sardan's approach and pragmatism, especially in studies on public problems, is a relevant contribution. The author recognizes the importance of new epistemological stances that escape functionalist

or structuralist determinations, emphasizing the capacity of actors as co-producers of development interventions. This dialogue between approaches is reinforced by the use of ethnographic methods in public spaces to capture forms of collective action and the tensions between public and private interests.

For example, Olivier de Sardan applies micropolitical analysis to understand macro-level development issues. During his research, by tracing relationships at the micro level, he identifies local forms of governance, social networks, reciprocity, and the state apparatus. This detailed empirical approach enables significant advances in understanding development, connecting local dynamics to global processes. This is what we will explore next.

Although the socioanthropology of development historically engages with development dynamics in general, the contributions of this approach also have the potential to advance studies on regional development, understood, today, both as a set of policies and strategies designed to mitigate regional inequalities and distributive asymmetries, and to generate competitiveness across the various federative units (Neto *et al.*, 2023). It is the result of global-local interactions, as regional development demands an understanding of the local political ecology and the institutional and sociocultural processes that influence territorial dynamics. This promotes a dialogue between global consequences and local experience, given that it is within the territory that regions or places are constructed and where life is experienced (lived), constantly appropriated by society.

The socioanthropological perspective proposed here enables a deeper understanding of territorial dynamics, which highlights the trajectories and interactions produced by actors in a given space. It is necessary to identify the economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental repercussions of these actors' actions (Cazella *et al.*, 2009). By incorporating the public arenas approach, discussed below, this study broadens the scope of regional studies by demonstrating how different arenas are constituted, compete for, and interact within a territory, creating networks of public action that directly affect regional development processes.

3 Going beyond the socioanthropology of development from a pragmatist lens of analysis

The methodological importance given to actors is one of the main contributions socioanthropology has made to the field of development studies. Thus, we engage with microhistory to examine actors' actions more closely. This microanalytic approach presents itself as an alternative experiment, enhancing object observation, giving voice to the smallest actors (Revel, 1998), valuing social experience and the formation of identities, and establishing continuous connections between local and global interactions (Latour, 2012). As Gumuchian put it, *et al.* (2003), local (micro) actions are used to interpret how a social, economic and cultural reflection is immersed in the space of the plurality of scales (micro/macro).

This justifies conducting a study with an emphasis on actors to capture the creativity and innovative actions carried out over time, identifying "their collective actions, controversies, conflicts, political discourse, and development institutions that influence the development dynamics of a given territory" (Olivier de Sardan, 1995, p. 8). It is in this justification that the pragmatist approach proves fruitful.

Pragmatism arises from pragmatic philosophy, developed in the United States (1878), through the works of Charles Peirce, William James, George Mead and John Dewey, resulting from the reflection/analysis of various urban problems of the time, especially the challenges of consolidating democracy.

For a long time, pragmatism, as an episteme and method, was abandoned, almost forgotten. Only in the 1980s did we witness a turning point in the social sciences, when certain Anglo-Saxon currents, such as pragmatic philosophy, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology, influenced a number of social scientists in France. They began to reformulate their objectives and the way they conducted science, prioritizing moments of dispute and agreement; encouraging an anthropology of science; fostering greater dialogue between sociology and anthropology; and reconnecting different dimensions of social life. Cefaï (2007) cites this turning point as having three fronts: Louis Queré's studies of situated action; Michel Callon and Bruno Latour 's actor-network theory; and Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot 's proof of justification.

Chateauraynaud (2017) calls this movement a pragmatic démarche, which emerged in a post- Bourdieusian epistemological scenario³, in which new researchers analyze public actions and the critical capacity of actors, dealing with transversal themes, such as sustainable development, transparency, violence, the networked world, democracy, among others.

This broader movement includes studies with specific approaches, such as the sociology of public problems, which, based on the work of John Dewey (1927; 1938), emphasizes experimentation to highlight how the deliberations and negotiations necessary for the collective construction of the public interest occur, through the identification and analysis of the configuration, stabilization, and institutionalization of public problems (Cefaï; Terzi, 2012). Therefore, and broadly speaking, the research seeks to capture the processes of confronting problematic situations; how the public is formed; understand the composition and practices of the communities involved; among others. This is a path of public inquiry that has allowed for a better understanding of the territorial dimension grounded in the practices of actors, identifying how they mobilize to redress the inequalities they face (Andion, 2007; 2023; Andion et al., 2017; Santo; Voks, 2021a; 2021b).

It is in light of these considerations that the three analytical assumptions emerge. More than proposing a model to explain the phenomenon, the assumptions aim to address the gaps mentioned above by indicating a set of research tools for fieldwork and a deeper understanding of development beyond the economic axis, also leveraging popular participation.

Assumption 1 - expanding the concept of actor to escape stereotypes

³It refers to researchers who, after the reformulation cited above by Cefaï (2007), seek a break with the great critical theories still in vogue (such as those of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, for example) and their correlative distancing from questions of power and domination, a static world trapped in the logic of reproduction, aiming to find new praxeological ways of studying collective action.

As Olivier de Sardan (1995) states, change processes are conceived and experienced by actors in the territory. Therefore, recognizing them is a precondition for understanding them. However, the author argues that resorting to any preexisting notion to designate actors (social categories) will prevent the researcher from perceiving the difference between planned behavior (idealized by institutional projects and development actors) and actual behavior (what actors actually do and how they perceive themselves). Escaping clichés and stereotypes will allow us to focus on the actors or groups of social actors (individual or collective), their strategies, and their stakes.

Advances in studies in the field of development were due, in part, to the return of the actor, when researchers began to prioritize the praxis of development, such as strategies, conflicts and the various interactions of actors.

To Touraine (1984)⁴, once hidden by various forces or ideologies in classical sociology and later crushed by economic determinism, the return of the actor aims to transform a given order based on an analysis of it. The actor is one who engages in some concrete relationship, collectives, and their expressions in social movements, political representations, social demands, and other currents. The actor emerges when our capacity for action increases, leading us into public life.

However, while preserving the importance of emphasizing the actor, development studies, in a way, underestimate the microsocial scale and, for the most part, prioritize analysis of the meso and macro scales. In this game of scale, the actor has gained a vague, polysemic, and distorted conception, if not a black box concept. Therefore, relating scales is an art to be performed in fieldwork, from an ethnographic perspective (Latour, 2012). The ethnographer must understand that nature and society are not two distinct poles and keep in mind that the macro-micro relationship is formed day to day, which requires understanding how the local and the global are established. After all, these tiny lives also participate "in the great story to which they give a different and complex version; the problem is not to contrast the large and the small, but to recognize that a social reality is not the same, depending on the level of analysis" (Revel, 1998, p. 12).

For Latour (2012), reality is understood as dynamic, complex, and non-linear (symmetrical), hence the need to follow actors to understand the meanings and uses they make of nature. "Actors know what they do, and what we have to learn from them is not only what they do, but how and why they do it" (Latour, 2012, p. 19). Latour does not dissociate materials and objects, granting them reciprocal capacity in their interactions with humans. He defends the non-dichotomy between humans and non-humans, for example, the beekeeper and the bees, technologies, organizations, reports, and others. The term "social" (in social actor) should be interpreted as "follow," a companion, an associate, and reality is always a society. Therefore, "follow the actors as they navigate through the things that have added to social skills to make perpetually changing interactions more durable" (Latour, 2012, p. 104).

⁴Touraine's vision of development is very much centered on modernity, that is, on a Eurocentric vision of socioeconomic development; in addition to all the dissociation the author makes between actors and the system, the technical and economic world, and subjectivities.

This exercise of following actors allows the researcher to understand how they express themselves, as well as to recognize the set of actors involved in the action. In this tracking process, various connections are reestablished, reconnecting micro and macro relationships. "The actor reveals all the ingredients of the world, which allows us to locate the actions of the (macro) world within these (micro) places" (Latour, 2012, p. 260).

Social change in the lives of actors is a process that doesn't occur solely among policymakers. Life is much more complex, and actors don't act in a vacuum. It is shaped by countless practices, and capturing this process is what will allow researchers to understand how development occurs among and for actors, as well as the main obstacles/difficulties in its idealization and/or operationalization.

So, to escape stereotypes, it is important for the researcher to track the actors, consider the history and the unfolding of the scales (macro-micro) of the phenomena studied, like using a *zoom lens*, which, according to Cefai (2019), through the recovery of public scenes, can help to reconstitute the narrative dimension that constitutes every social phenomenon.

Assumption 2 - observing the scenes in public arenas and their developments

Public scenes represent the set of dramatizations that permeate the practices and lives of actors. According to Cefai (2019), they are composed of configurations of actors (human and non-human), forms of representation (who speaks and acts on whose behalf), orders of relevance (what can be discussed, denounced, and demanded), modes of engagement (such as describing, criticizing, or complaining), scenes of intervention, languages used, and ways of engaging in conflict, in addition to the intended ends. Scenes reflect events that precede them and ultimately generate transformations of varying consequence, which, in one way or another, impact the lives of the public, beyond the political, administrative, legal, scientific, media, and everyday life of ordinary citizens.

For Cefai and Terzi (2012), recognizing such scenes is a starting point for analysis, as it allows us to understand the testing situations (anything that destabilizes life in the territory, for example, environmental disasters, famine, etc.) that become public, that is, a political activity around this unrest. The formation of a public involves associations (human and non-human) in the sense of connections (such as organizations, movements, and groups affected by these disruptions), which end up becoming involved in trying to resolve problematic situations. The public emerges when there is a disruptive yet cohesive imbalance in collective life; forms of life are broken, which leads to its formation (constitution of the public around the problem).

In public settings, justifications and actions are made public in the sense of becoming collectively visible. Thus, through their identification and analysis, one can perceive the treatment (or lack thereof) given to certain issues/causes and their legitimacy (or lack thereof) on the public agenda.

For Dewey (1927), the formation of the public will also depend on the actions of the state and public institutions, whether through guaranteeing conditions of freedom (democratic freedom to associate and form the public), or through the organization of public life through, for example, the creation of laws, public policies,

and development programs. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the policies and laws of a problematic situation, as it is through this apparatus that the state will attempt to organize public life. Many of these policies result from numerous collective actions.

Collective action, for Cefai (2007, p. 8), is "any attempt to form a collective, more or less formalized and institutionalized, by individuals seeking to achieve a shared objective in a locality; more or less rational; more or less voluntary." It is a joint or concerted action that can produce a common good, which, once created, is freely accessible to all. It represents a historical process of struggles and the achievement of rights. It arises from an intention on the part of the actors involved and can be long-lasting (e.g., action around the MST cause) or briefer (e.g., the collapse of a building and assistance to affected families). It is also organized under organizational forms, which can be spontaneous and fluid (social networks) or formal and hierarchical (such as companies). It has a focus, a vision that motivates it (shared objective). Therefore, "collective action is guided by a concern for a public good to promote, or an evil to avoid" (Cefai, 2007, p. 15). Once constituted, Cefai and Terzi (2012) point out that collective action is operationalized within different public arenas.

The public arena is a concept proposed by Cefai (2007) when the author sought ways to reconnect the study of social micro-problems, highlighting its importance for research on democracy. A public arena is co-produced as a forum for discussion, where actors meet and demand explanations, take positions, and respond to criticism. It manifests itself through various, more or less institutionalized, public scenes, through which actors perform dramatizations, arguments, seduction, and persuasion to expose a given fact and win over audiences, aiming to universalize discourses. This publicization can occur in the media, as well as in the judiciary, science, politics, and other spheres.

A public arena is not just a gathering of people of good faith and good will, aiming to solve problems. As it is a place of disputes, there may be bad faith, conflicts, and various games of interest. Its composition is never guaranteed and will depend on the constant process of understanding and evaluating the consequences. It is also configured temporally, without it being possible to assign it established boundaries (Cefai; Terzi, 2012). Table 1 summarizes this discussion.

Table 1. Summary of the discussion on arenas and public arenas

<p>Arenas: According to Olivier (1995), it was through Frederick Bailey 's analyses that the understanding of arena gained more significance. For Bailey (1969), an arena is the social space where actors confront each other around leaders and factions, whether at the national or local level. Olivier goes on to explain that the notion of arena can be dubiously associated with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of field; however, this concept is very macro and structural in nature, with different positions of agents in this space, susceptible to variations depending on their degree of autonomy (from the most autonomous, such as the scientific field, to the most heteronomous, such as the political field), and there is no unequivocal definition. It is a field of struggles, of a conflictual vision of the social world, in which domination and competition prevail over cooperation and disinterest (Bourdieu, 2013). Its hierarchy of positions and structure represents the <i>habitus</i>, systems of durable dispositions—an expressed domain of operations. "A field is primarily a configuration of objective relations between individuals, collectives, or institutions, defined by these relations" (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 197), which is by no means the order of interaction. On the other hand, arena is a more interactionist, and also more political, notion of order. It evokes a smaller</p>
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scale and "a clearer perception of the confrontations between the actors themselves. An arena, in the sense in which we understand it, is a place for concrete confrontations of actors interacting around common issues" (cf. Olivier de Sardan, 1995, p. 177-178).

Source: prepared by the authors, 2024.

According to Olivier de Sardan (1995, p. 173), "local development is a political arena in which conflict resolution processes and collective actions of various kinds emerge." The author, however, uses the term local arena to refer to a symbolic structure of interactions that produces intervention processes. Since development is clearly a phenomenon linked to political confrontation, its examination and investigation require the researcher to access it in public arenas. To illustrate this, we recall the following statement:

I am on another level, like a rural development operation, which directly or indirectly links a series of actors in various categories: peasants of various statuses, unemployed youth, women, rural notables, field development agents, local government representatives, NGO members, visiting experts, European technical assistants, etc. These actors develop personal and professional strategies around a given development project, carried out according to multiple criteria: to strengthen property inheritance for some, to obtain gasoline and a vehicle for others, and so on: to improve an institutional position, obtain a better contract, expand the client network, become indispensable, earn more money, keep an eye on the neighbor or rival, give pleasure to their relationships, stay in their corner and avoid all risks, etc. (Olivier de Sardan, 1995, p. 173).

In this sense, exemplified by Olivier de Sardan, we see that development processes are simultaneously in conflict, but can also generate processes of coordination and agreements, since the various groups found in a public arena will each have their own objectives. This occurs because public affairs ⁵are no longer a state monopoly and require the participation of different groups of actors in various public arenas, who engage to transform "a public problem into a political problem, when a mobilization achieves sufficient visibility, such that actors not initially involved in the issue take positions and argue for or against it" (Lascoumes; Le Galès, 2012, p. 160).

Speaking of confrontation, it's important to be aware of controversies and conflicts during fieldwork. Identifying both will be used as a means of photographing power relations, institutional positions, or social networks, which would otherwise be more difficult to perceive. By dramatizing them, public scenes will be revealed, shedding more detail on the behind-the-scenes aspects of the social life of the group studied. "Identifying conflicts is a way to go beyond the consensual façade and stage an outward-facing perspective that actors in a local society often propose to the speaker or external researcher" (Olivier de Sardan, 1995, p. 177).

This second premise makes it clear that any development project appears as a public matter in which everyone plays with different cards and rules and in different public arenas. This highlights the need for the third premise, presented below, which

⁵A public property is, for example, a rural Agrarian Reform settlement. Once created, settlements, even though conceived and regulated by the State, come to life and become the object of interest and intervention by multiple actors, such as researchers, politicians, society, and many others.

encourages a deeper investigation into the controversies and conflicts among actors. After all, actors are driven by more or less compatible interests (material or symbolic), endowed with more or less unequally distributed relational powers.

5 Investigating rural settlement 72 (Ladário-MS) from the perspective of a pragmatist socioanthropology

The analysis of the public scenes, described below, was guided by the two analytical premises presented above: the broadening of the concept of actor and the observation of public arenas as dynamic spaces of dispute and negotiation. Using a pragmatist ethnographic approach, we sought to identify the situations of trial, conflicts, and processes of social mobilization that occurred in the settlement, highlighting how these elements structured the public arenas.

According to Cefaï (2019), the recovery of public scenes highlights places and moments where issues of collective interest are exposed, argued, and enacted in public. For Cefaï, these specific spaces, public arenas, are places without physical boundaries and vary over time. They allow actors to interact, deliberate, and make their specific problems visible. Figure 1 summarizes the scenes identified during fieldwork, which are discussed below.

Figure 1. Public scenes of PA-72



Source: Prepared by the author.

Institutionally, Settlement Project 72 (PA-72) was created in 1999, and its main entrance is only 9 km from the urban area of Ladário, Mato Grosso do Sul. The former Primavera farm covered 2,343.41 hectares and was divided into 72 "invernadas" (wintering areas), or "72" spaces for cattle confinement (fattening), which influenced

the settlement's future name. When it was expropriated by INCRA, 85 families were settled on plots averaging 18.5 hectares.

Currently, around 60 families ⁶live in 72 and their economic activity revolves around work in the urban area, receiving Bolsa Família and other benefits. For those who dedicate themselves to agriculture, the main activities are the production of cassava, honey, milk and dairy products, raising cattle, poultry, pigs and vegetables in agroecological transition.

Besides the natural beauty, what immediately caught our attention during the fieldwork was the number of empty and closed farms, indicating possible abandonment due to the family working in the city or due to abandonment. Another issue that caught our attention from the first conversations with some families was the extremely high level of conflict between them and the lack of trust. These elements would later be understood as we recovered the various public spaces.

PA-72 is located in Ladário (MS), a municipality that borders Corumbá (MS) in all its dimensions. For this reason, it is popularly known as the Pearl of the Pantanal, a small piece of land nestled in the heart of the Pantanal, a Brazilian biome internationally recognized for having one of the largest continuous wetlands in the world, in addition to its rich biodiversity and unique ecosystem, but which, in recent years, has become known for devastating forest fires. According to MapBiomas (2024), from 1985 to 2023, 53% of the Pantanal was re-burned.

Within this historical scenario, the formation of PA-72 arises as a result of the convergence of three structural problems in Brazil: environmental degradation, invasion of lands of small rural producers and urban poverty.

The **public scene 1 depicts** that the mobilization of different families arises from **the discomfort of diverse individuals, with distinct origins, life stories, needs, and expectations**. Through the mobilization promoted by the Corumbá Rural Workers' Union, they come together to demand land rights. It's important to emphasize that, although they have a common cause (obtaining a plot of land), this doesn't mean that the desired outcome, or what is expected from it, is the same.

PA-72 was organized by families from rural areas, driven by the need for access to land for farming after having lost their land to the silting of the Taquari River (Pantanal) or due to land grabbing by large producers. Families from urban areas, driven by poverty and a lack of decent housing, many of whom lived in shacks made of wood and canvas, had different needs and profiles, and this will impact the development of this public experiment.

For some, land becomes a space for cultivation and work. For others, land is a response to the urgency of poverty and housing shortages in the city, and is then used in ways other than those provided for in the Agrarian Reform public policy. Therefore, not every lot owner here refers to the "family farmer" typified in the policy, which will create dilemmas and testing situations that must be managed by the stakeholders involved.

As a result, the lot abandonment rate is high, occurring from the moment families entered PA-72, leading many to consider this a failed settlement project. "PA-

⁶INCRA has not conducted inspections or controls in the Corumbá and Ladário settlements. Therefore, there is no official data on the number of families still living in each settlement. This estimate was provided by the association's president.

72 doesn't produce enough to supply the city, and these people don't even like farming or rural life" (Interviewee 5, Ladário City Hall employee). This statement is not an isolated one, as it was demonstrated that Ladário City Hall itself has difficulty taking over the settlement, consistently classifying it as "INCRA's responsibility," even though these families have been there for over 20 years and are therefore entitled to public services like any other resident, such as running water and quality roads.

We are witnessing a broad process of naturalizing poverty and environmental impact, common to thousands of Brazilians who find themselves at the mercy of their own fate. What can be inferred from this passage is that, from the moment an agrarian reform policy is used to solve urban problems, we see the marginalization of poverty, pushed to a place where no one can see it: the rural area.

The process of allocating a plot of land to people in desperate situations, as if this were a simple solution to emergencies, aims both to conceal urban problems and to suggest an expected effect—self-sufficiency, in the sense of a family being able to sustain itself, living off its earnings. By allocating land to a homeless family with no tradition in rural areas, the government ends up creating a second state of extreme deprivation linked to productivity. The assumption is that the family should produce to consume and sell to sustain itself. By selling the surplus, this family would also be supplying local markets. A second assignment/expectation (local commerce) falls on the shoulders of people who, often, have neither had the opportunity to choose, nor do they have the desire or profile of farmers.

Along these lines, we also have the families who fought for land to maintain their traditional rural life. The challenge for them is no less significant, due to the lack of infrastructure, the delay in releasing credit lines, and the lack of water—problems that have been evident since the beginning of the 72's trajectory. The problems are so numerous that yet another form of deprivation is added: access. The opportunity to plant, harvest, and live with dignity. Since then, this group, tied to the land or who learned to love it, has faced numerous challenges: enforcing agrarian reform, fighting for their rights, and finding ways to produce with little water and, in some cases, without knowledge of land management.

Imagine a dream come true: access to land and, with it, the promise of policies to encourage housing, water, and roads. This was the starting point for each family in PA-72, but it immediately required the formation of a collective struggle against neglect in the establishment of this settlement. This characterizes **public scene two, the complex process of becoming a settler**, because what seemed like an achievement (access to land) generated even more challenging situations (training and credit policies for planting, access to water, roads to transport produce, among others) important related to the dilemmas of associated life and the democratic exercise that occurs in a collective enterprise like this.

Initially, there were many meetings surrounding APPRPA72, with important deliberations on housing, access to water, and road construction. However, as in many stories of poorly implemented public policies in Brazil, neglect soon followed. Materials for housing construction were delayed or not delivered at all, roads were not built, and, worse, the first reports of embezzlement emerged, at which point the settled families were placed in the dock of public opinion, labeled opportunists, vagrants, and unwilling to work.

The issue of water, essential for life and farming, generated fierce conflicts, even though the state of Pará is located within the Pantanal, the largest wetland in the world. However, this natural resource was not available to the families of the 72nd.

To address this problem, wells were drilled, but found no water. Water supply networks were only half-built. The culmination of this neglect came with the mining company Vale ⁷, whose environmental crime, the drying up of the Urucum stream, which supplied part of the 72 and was also used to wash the minerals excavated by the mining company, caused the stream to dry up for the families of the 72. The financial compensation? The construction of some cisterns and the drilling of some wells, all of which cost no more than R\$500,000 ⁸.

Another point highlighted in the PA-72 trajectory is the relationship of settled families with agriculture; after all, many lacked any experience working the land. Although technical training was offered, the low participation and disinterest of some families are hard to ignore. This highlights a larger problem: in addition to the urban profile of some of the families in PA-72, there are tensions and a lack of dialogue between *experts* and producers. There's no point in transferring methods and success stories without considering the conditions and realities of those in the countryside. Communication and adaptation are essential, but they weren't common practices in this settlement.

Another crucial point is the internal conflict within the settlement. Successive elections for the association's presidency were marked by political campaigns filled with empty promises and heated disputes, even culminating in physical altercations and police intervention. This illustrates how a lack of unity undermines any attempt at progress. A cycle of unfulfilled promises emerged, both from politicians (municipal elections) and from the settlers themselves (elections for the association's presidency), which only perpetuated the feeling of abandonment.

In fact, here we must avoid another stereotype typical in politics: calling these families 'peasants,' as many *experts* end up doing. As Wanderley (2014) teaches us, the foundation of peasantry is mutual trust, networks of solidarity, and reciprocity—characteristics that contribute to the vitality of rural areas and the process of family farming, but which are not observed in this settlement. In the settlement experience, one must coexist with differences, deal with plurality, and truly exercise democracy, which is no easy task. This process is marked by conflicts between groups and families, generating distrust within and outside the settlement, which gives rise to rumors and gossip that spread and delegitimize the settlement, amplifying the stereotypes and prejudices already held about these individuals.

This began to be partially reversed in 2015, when **agroecology emerged as a potential source of social change (public scene three)**. During fieldwork, attending Gaabe meetings and fairs, it became clear how much the agroecological transition

⁷Current J&F Mineração, which purchased Vale's operations in Corumbá and Ladário.

⁸ Data confirmed via a report in the newspaper *Correio do Estado* (2019). According to the article, of the total agreement signed (R\$6,190,376.41), R\$2,390,454.33 was allocated to Dom Bosco Catholic University (in Campo Grande); R\$691,500 to the Security Council of Corumbá and Ladário ; R\$2,105,965.45 million to the Corumbá Municipal Environmental Fund; R\$902,556.62 to the Ladário Municipal Environmental Fund; and only R\$500,000 was invested in socio-environmental projects and initiatives in the affected area. To this day, the stream remains a trickle. See <https://bit.ly/3jQN39C>

enabled socio-productive inclusion, strengthened community ties, and restored dignity to producers. It is worth noting that, of the 85 settled families, 15 have already participated in the project, and 8 continue to participate.

However, this path was not easy. Families faced recurring challenges such as lack of water and technical assistance, as well as distrust from institutions (*experts*). This was reversed with new 'development projects,' as defined by Olivier de Sardan (1995), led by the Center for Studies in Agroecology and Organic Production of the Pantanal (NEAP), part of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, in partnership with the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation of the Pantanal (Embrapa Pantanal) and the Agency for Agrarian Development and Rural Extension (Agraer).

This reestablishment of institutional partnerships represented a significant social change, recounted with great emotion and gratitude by the participating families. The installation of artesian wells, a result of this project, solved a critical water access problem for the families involved, enabling the agroecological transition of production. As a result, producers began to see agroecological cultivation as an alternative to welfare payments.

This enabled the sale of vegetables, milk, and cheese at street markets and through public procurement, through the school meals program (National School Feeding Program - PNAE) and supply to the Army and Navy (Food Acquisition Program - PAA). The pandemic brought new obstacles, but also creative solutions, such as agroecological baskets, which increased sales per family/basket, highlighting the potential for growth of this initiative (Santo *et al.*, 2023).

Given this trajectory, captured in the three public scenes of PA-72, the existence of several public arenas becomes evident, each with its own focus, games, and rules: that of definitive titling, infrastructure (roads and water), agroecology, among others. In this study, for the sake of brevity and based on the accounts of settled families, we will refer to this arena as **the public arena for the implementation of Agrarian Reform**. After all, more than twenty years later, PA-72 still appears as a 'settlement project,' and, in the eyes of public opinion, a project that failed.

This arena is composed of several groups of organizations. In addition to the two associations most actively involved with the families of 72, APPRPA72 (an association for the entire 72) and Gaabe (an association of producers participating in the agroecological transition), the main socio-state organizations identified were INCRA, Agraer, Embrapa, UFMS, the media (always called upon to report problematic situations), the judiciary (called upon to intervene), the Ladário City Hall and its Foundation for the Environment and Rural Development, the Municipal Council for Sustainable Rural Development, J&F Mineração (which operates near 72), Banco do Brasil and Caixa Econômica (credit lines), the Municipal Department of Education (purchases through the PNAE), and the Brazilian Navy (purchases through the PAA).

These organizations work to address the main issues facing PA-72: land titling, access to water, strengthening agroecology, and public procurement. However, it's important to emphasize that the existence of a large network of stakeholders doesn't necessarily provide a solution to the problems faced. On the contrary, many of them are recurrent. What they have in common is that all of these issues should be addressed through the implementation of agrarian reform and related policies, when they extend to settled families.

This associative life is not easy to experience, much less investigate. The interaction of these actors manifests itself as a network of "formal and informal interactions among a plurality of individuals, groups, or associations" (Cefaï, 2019, p. 19). This network is multicentric, multi-actor, and multifaceted, guided by different worldviews and implemented through diverse (more or less coordinated) collective actions promoted by various sectors, which meet and confront each other in public arenas. Since each organization has its own particularities, this can generate opportunities for coordination among them (as in the case of agroecology), as well as conflict (dialogue with INCRA and the city government).

As Olivier de Sardan (1995) aptly put it, conflicts relate to differences in social positions and are culturally structured. Identifying them is a way to go beyond the consensual facade, the image the discourse seeks to convey, and to stage an external perspective that actors in a local society often propose to the speaker or researcher. Thus, the crucial problem with PA-72 stems from its origins, as access to land, without adequate support and intended for an urban population, becomes a burden, not a right. The stories of these families demonstrate that public policies should not only bring about change; first and foremost, they must work.

The trajectory of 72 confirms that the settlement is a 'laboratory of intersecting experiments,' some generating desirable and others undesirable effects, but undoubtedly, in all cases, producing essential lessons about the real challenges of achieving rural development and co-producing new ruralities in practice. Therefore, conducting ethnography in public arenas allowed us to zoom in on the network and visualize the public experience in its complexity.

This is clearly evident in the experimentation carried out in the project, the result of several institutional partnerships, led by Neap -UFMS. The project, which stems from extensive collaboration involving the University, culminates in the agroecological conversion of nine families' properties. This process also generates a process of participatory social control, the practice of which has expanded considerably with the pandemic. Thus, agroecology is not only a viable alternative but also a powerful instrument of social change, provided there is adequate support and family participation. This practice has strengthened community ties and restored dignity to some of the settled families through family participation and stronger partnerships between institutions and local stakeholders. All of this opens up new possibilities for the future of the settlement, which continues to exist and produces consequences for those who live there, for Ladário, and for rural Mato Grosso do Sul.

6 Conclusion

In this work, we present the contributions of the socioanthropology of development idealized by Olivier de Sardan, exploring the conceptual gap found (micro and macro relationship and eclectic use of distinct concepts, such as field and arena) through the sociology of public problems, with a pragmatist basis, which emerges in this work as a tool to analyze the interaction between structure and social life, focusing on development issues through public action. After all, development processes transcend institutional actions and must consider the hybrid dynamics in

which local practices emanate in the face of ineffective public policies and various problematic situations that affect society in contemporary times.

In this study, as advocated by Olivier, we seek to escape the eternal debate between economic growth and development and the relentless pursuit of a modern desire. Here, the point is that development exists for someone, for an actor, an associate (provider or recipient of the action); therefore, it is neither an ideal nor a catastrophe; it is an object of study. To this end, an investigation conducted in rural settlement 72 highlighted the challenges and opportunities of agrarian reform policies.

By adopting a socio-anthropological and pragmatic approach, the study identified the political ecology surrounding this PA, highlighting environmental and social issues with attention to local dynamics, the actors involved, and the historical and cultural context of PA-72. With rich detail, it became clear that agrarian reform is **not** limited to the implementation of institutional policies; that is, it depends not only on land distribution, but on the complex interaction of actors in different public arenas.-mobilize to face recurring problems such as lack of water, internal conflicts and precarious institutional support.

These findings also reinforce the value of a pragmatic socioanthropological approach to regional development. By recovering and systematizing the trajectory of the public problem, territorial dynamics, collective mobilizations, and conflicts and agreements in a peripheral rural area, the study contributes to broadening our understanding of how multiscalar (global-local) interactions enable the identification of diverse public arenas and how these shape development processes in these areas.

In addition, the need to recover and understand the public controversies surrounding this political ecology became evident, as disputes are constant over the exploitation and conservation of this territory's natural resources (several non-human resources: land, water, the Pantanal, and others). In this experience, collective actions occur in specific situations, where actors interpret and respond to the public problems they face, sometimes to access land, sometimes to seek rights and enforce agrarian reform, and sometimes to seek new horizons, based on agroecology.

Therefore, this study reaffirms the importance of the pragmatist perspective for socioanthropology, as it considers public arenas as dynamic spaces of dispute and cooperation, in which multiple interests meet and contend over the paths of development.

The *approach* presented here seeks both to fill the gaps in Olivier de Sardan's approach and to provide powerful analytical tools for understanding realities as complex as that of PA-72. Both premises contribute to socioanthropology by proposing that new microcivic activities be examined through the lens of public arenas. These premises allow researchers to identify, describe, and interpret reality as it appears, through the praxis of actors, which is circumscribed in reality, in the materialization of an event, also permeated by subjectivities, such as symbolic and imaginary representations that enable the actor to reflect on a given cause.

It is worth noting that this theoretical contribution, applied to a specific case, does not seek to transform this research into a generic case study. Inspired by microhistory, we seek to connect the particular to the general, demonstrating how social microcosms act and connect to broader contexts. In this sense, the PA-72 case

prompts reflection on the challenges of rural development and the structural flaws of agrarian reform in Brazil. Overcoming these challenges depends on the ability to transform conflicts into social inclusion and local governance mechanisms by identifying and strengthening local practices stemming from collaborative networks⁹ that unite diverse actors around common goals.

This study focused on a single case, with an emphasis on the local dynamics of a specific rural settlement. However, we encourage future research to conduct comparative studies and replicate the approach in other rural territories, aiming to deepen the understanding of the different configurations of public arenas in the field of regional development.

We recognize that the assumptions presented generate advances in the study of socioanthropology, but they are not rules. Other paths are possible. The proposal presented here does not exhaust the possibilities for entering the field and analysis. Nor does it aim to explain the process to better control it from a functional perspective. It represents an epistemological break with *mainstream* development studies, which proposes studying the configuration of development from public arenas (through participatory research, participant observation, and long-term ethnography) to better understand the dynamics by which audiences redefine possible horizons, from the perspective of territoriality and sustainability.

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⁹Which in other works we explore as the third assumption: “social innovations in rural areas”. Cf. Santo and Andion (2024).

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