

How to overcome the taboo regarding fire use and control? Participatory methodologies to reveal farmer motivations and discuss fire policies in an advanced frontier of the Brazilian Amazon

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An increasing number of fires are threatening the benefits of avoided deforestation and the livelihoods of local populations in the Brazilian Amazon. Fires have a wide range of causes, but they are often related to the slash-and-burn practices upon which most smallholders strongly depend. Since the 1990's, different policies have been implemented to limit fire use in the region, but with limited success as they have framed fire negatively, leading to many taboos regarding fire use. The focus on fire-free agriculture, as an individual adoption, has led to disconsider fire control and the importance of cooperation for successful risk mitigation. Building on several studies we carried out these past years in Paragominas, a municipality which has promoted the « Green Municipality Program» and banned the use of fire, we discuss the motivations of family farmers regarding fire use and control. Through long term involvement and trust building, and by mobilizing inventive methodologies, such as theater-forum, Q-methodology, informal interviews, and games, we were able to discuss this taboo issue with the farmers. Our results bring refreshing points of view on fire use and control, not usually addressed in conventional literature. Farmers recognize fire control as a social dilemma and often ask for more state intervention, to encourage collective control. Such insights can serve as a basis for reformulating fire policies. Rather than fire prohibition, which is at odds with farmers' motivations and almost impossible to enforce, fire policies should consider mechanisms allowing to mitigate fire risk by empowering local control groups.