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## ‘We go back to the land’: processes of re-peasantisation in Araponga, Brazil

Leonardo van den Berg, Paul Hebinck and Dirk Roep

This contribution draws on original data relating to a land settlement case in Araponga, an administrative area in Minas Gerais, Brazil. The settlement of the land and subsequent building of robust, more self-dependent, land-based livelihoods have followed a joint experimentation trajectory in which the agro-ecologicalisation of agrarian production practices to regenerate and enrich the resource base has been coupled with effective institutional reform and the creation of a favourable institutional setting. Key to this grassroots transformation process has been the enrolment of various strategic actors in a collaborative support network by a mediating change agent. The paper argues that the Araponga case represents a particular expression of re-peasantisation. The Araponga project has evolved without the involvement of landless peoples’ social movements such as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST). This has been crucial to its character and impact.

**Keywords:** repeasantisation; agro-ecology; land reform; self-mobilisation

### Introduction: political and theoretical significance of the Araponga settlement case

This paper explores a case of settlement on the land in Brazil that has taken place outside the social mobilisation of the landless peoples’ movements and land struggles of which the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST, Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers’ Movement) is the most prominently profiled in the scholarly literature. It draws on original data collected over the years and provides a detailed account of the difficulties and the opportunities entailed in land (re)settlement and the (re)construction of a rural livelihood. The significance of the analysis of the process of settlement lies in its specificities. Rather than being based on land occupations promoted by landless peoples’ social movements, a group of actors got together to purchase land, which is a unique phenomenon in rural Brazil. The settlement involves diverse people in terms of experience, life history, age, gender and class. Some people have lived and worked for a long time in *favelas*, while others have worked on the land as farm workers for land owners. The lives and livelihoods of both groups hinge on their labour. This is their most important means of survival. They all share a desire to own land, work for themselves and become more independent. They have achieved this by designing farming practices that have allowed them to reposition themselves vis-à-vis the dominant markets in such a way that they have escaped restrictive prevailing forces and global structural processes. Putting their shared ideals into practice and settling on the land has unfolded as a gradual transformation process, driven and shaped by their collective agency. The settlers have been able to exploit a web of newly

created relationships in a context of effective institutional reform (Roep et al. 2003), creating a relatively autonomous or protected space enabling them to pursue their own project according to their own set of principles. This paper provides a detailed account of this grassroots transformation process and its theoretical implications.

We will begin by discussing the political and theoretical significance of the Araçuaia case for land and agrarian reform in Brazil. We ask whether it can be seen as an expression of re-peasantisation and be considered as a showcase for the co-evolution of grassroots innovation (Smith, Fressoli, and Thomas 2014) and institutional reform in the transformation of agro-food systems.

The settlement itself occurred within a specific political and institutional setting. The Araçuaia case involved a blend of strategies through which land was accessed. By contrast, in most of the literature, land resettlement or agrarian reform in Brazil is described within the framework of social struggles promoted by landless peoples' social movements such as the MST.<sup>1</sup> Land occupation and subsequent integration within the state-managed agrarian reform programme is a key tactic in most of these struggles. In Araçuaia, pieces of land were acquired by pooling the settlers' savings. These were later complemented with loans and gifts from a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) The Center of Alternative Technologies of the Zona da Mata (CTA-ZM) and the Federal (*Fundação Banco do Brasil*) and international philanthropic organisations (Ford Foundation). CTA-ZM and the Federal University of Viçosa provided post-settlement support in the form of advice and additional resources. The return to the land referred to as the *Conquista de Terras em Conjunto* (Joint Land Acquisition Movement) was shaped ideologically by the principles of the *Comunidades Eclesiásticas de Base* (Base Ecclesial Communities, CEB) as well as by those of the agroecology movement, both of which, in contrast to the perspective of most social movements, attribute relatively more agency to their members than to the movement. The non-involvement of MST, and state land reform programmes and institutions like the National Institution for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), enabled the 'Araçuaia' settlers to better negotiate the terms of their engagement in the settlement process. They were able to design their farm and livelihoods according to their own ideals of self-dependency and develop land-use practices that resonated with their aim of becoming food sovereign. The mode of settlement allowed the Araçuaia settlers to bypass the procedures for the selection of beneficiaries by state officials, associated agricultural expert institutions and the MST leadership.

Wolford (2010a) has argued convincingly that the collaboration of the government with the MST is not the result of intentional participatory democracy but of the pressures exerted on the state due to a lack of resources and technical capacity to implement the agrarian reform programme. Those who do not identify with the political mission of the MST continue to rely on Brazil's system of representative democracy. This hinges on relations of clientelism and therefore reproduces the inequalities that existed before the agrarian reforms were initiated.

Several scholars have pointed to the discrepancy that exists in the MST between those 'in the movement' and settlers 'on the ground' (Wittman 2009). Caldeira (2008) has

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<sup>1</sup>Next to the MST, a large number of landless peoples' movements are dealing with the land question. There is a growing and substantial body of literature on land-related social movements in Brazil. The *Journal of Peasant Studies* recently published a special issue on rural social movements and resistance (vol. 42, no. 6, 2 November 2015). Specifically, the paper by Welch and Sauer (2015) on rural unions and the struggle for land in Brazil provides a detailed overview of the landless peoples' movements in the country. See also works by Mészáros (2013), Vergara-Camus (2009, 2012) and Wolford (2010a, 2010b).

identified competing views about how land and community are framed and interpreted. While land is a means to secure food, livelihood and social status for settlers, leaders have a 'mythologized idea of rural community and land' (Caldeira 2008, 154). In a similar vein, Delgado (2008) has identified tensions between expert and lay knowledge. She argues that the adoption of agroecology by the MST has created distinctions between coordinators and technicians on the one hand and farmers on the other. Farmers' knowledge is often dismissed by technicians. Loera (2010) shows how settler involvement in the land occupation movement, or *encampment time*, can lead to competition and conflict with movement leaders since it offers opportunities for social mobility and recognition. In contrast to this, there is no clear distinction between the movement, leaders and settlers in the Araponga Joint Land Acquisition Movement. The collective struggle for agrarian reform has not only entailed opposition to agri-business and capitalism but has raised farmers' individual and collective capacity to create the proper conditions in which their way of life can flourish. In contrast to the MST, the settlement process was initiated by the settlers themselves. They also decided to enlist the support and mediating role of an engaged academic expert in the field who was well acquainted with political and institutional dynamics. This proved crucial in the search for land. Gradually, different governmental and non-governmental agencies, organisations and mediators were enrolled as allies, resulting in a political and ideological orientation that accorded with the practical, everyday life issues of the settlers. The joint reflexive process was oriented towards everyday struggles. It continued after the settlement was realised as the focus shifted to developing novel ways of farming and obtaining appropriate markets for the farmers' produce. The Araponga case has essentially involved a self-selective process that exemplifies the sort of land reform 'from below' that Rosset (2006, 2013) and Borras (2008) have called for. The purpose of our analysis is to show that the settlers themselves have maintained control over their destiny through engaging with field experimentations and novel agro-ecological production practices, resulting in turn in gradual processes of regrounding, repositioning and self-regulation (Van der Ploeg 2006, 2008). In this way we will document how 'from below' agrarian reform has unfolded in Araponga, and discuss the theoretical and political implications of this. We will show how transformative agency (Westley et al. 2013) has been built by a collective of land settlers and a supportive network of NGOs and church-based agencies over the years. This contrasts with the recent paper by Pahnke (2015) that attributes agency chiefly to the MST in the land resettlement and agro-ecologicalisation process in Brazil.

The Araponga case is also significant theoretically, we will argue, because it exemplifies the phenomenon of re-peasantisation, a process that many observers have dismissed as impossible or as an anomaly, given the prevailing structural processes of global de-agrarianisation (Bryceson 1996, 2002; Sender and Johnston 2004; Peemans 2013; Li 2009, 2011). They also consider it undesirable. Many scholars are sceptical about the role of peasants in global food provisioning (e.g. Bernstein, 2014), arguing that the peasant way of life is doomed to disappear (see also Vanhaute 2012; McMichael 2008, 2012; Araghi 1995; Wallerstein 1974). Bernstein (2002, 2007, 2014) has gone so far as to suggest that the agrarian question be shifted from capital to labour. He maintains that the agrarian question in relation to capital has been resolved. He argues that rural people have been reduced by a long process of dispossession, capitalist accumulation and competition to a labouring class struggling to survive on the margins of global capitalism. This is problematic in our view and does not accord with our understanding of development processes. While the scenario outlined by Bernstein and others applies to people alienated from the land and facing 'a jobless non-agrarian future' (Du Toit and Neves 2014, 834), it denies the

agency of peasants, family farmers and smallholders who reproduce and sustain their livelihoods through adding value to their own labour and own resources. Bernstein's proposed analytical shift from capital to labour has been contested from a number of other angles as well. Van der Ploeg (2008, 2010) and Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2009) challenge his assertion that the agrarian question of capital has been resolved or that it can be separated from the question of labour in the first place. They suggest instead that the agrarian question has assumed new relevance in an era of neoliberal globalisation, with the market as the coordinating institution and the continuing commoditisation of resources. Agricultural or agrarian production, in the context of its position within the global circuits of accumulation, has become a source of growing concern to capital (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009, 332). They note that peasant forms of production and reproduction have undergone a process of repositioning in the course of which they have achieved a degree of independence from the structural forces governing global circuits of commodities (Long and Van der Ploeg 1994; Van der Ploeg 2008) and have also created new, nested markets (Hebinck, Van Der Ploeg, and Schneider 2015).

Our contention is that the continuous processes of peasant production across the world constitute a process of re-peasantisation<sup>2</sup> and that this should be treated as empirically and theoretically relevant and significant. This assertion challenges the dominant view of development as a linear process driven by structural (global) forces that will lead inexorably to the disappearance of peasants. The very reclamation of the notion of peasant represents a critical engagement as it challenges images of drudgery and the 'efficient-but-poor' discourses of thinkers like Schultz (1964) during the 1950s (Van der Ploeg 2010, 2013, 2014). We are convinced that re-peasantisation as an integral part of rural development processes will ultimately manifest as re-agrarianisation, particularly in development situations where the size of the agrarian economy and the number of agrarian-related activities increase gradually but significantly. Re-peasantisation brings to mind the interrelated process of people 'returning' to rural and land-based activities, through inheriting land from kin, purchasing privately owned land or accessing land through planned and unplanned (e.g. squatting) land reform programmes; this return to the land goes hand in hand with the (re)construction of a social-material infrastructure that allows rural producers to farm and construct livelihoods that are more self-dependent. As Van der Ploeg (2010, 2013) has argued, the conversion of human capital into agro-ecological capital is key. It is not simply a question of the availability of financial capital to purchase assets and advice. The increase of agro-ecological capital is embedded in a labour and production process that hinges primarily on employing the labour of one's own family. Over time this can secure the livelihood enhancement of the family. The family is the social unit that strives to add value to own(ed) resources through the use of their own labour. Altieri and Toledo's (2011) description of the 'agro-ecological revolution' fits the mode of resource use exhibited in the process of re-peasantisation; resources are chiefly retrieved from the ecological environment rather than acquired by market transactions, and production is largely based on, and sustained by, ecological processes.<sup>3</sup> Such an

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<sup>2</sup>See, for an analysis of the importance of re-peasantisation in Kansas in the US, Nelson and Stock (2016). A forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* will deal with the various analytical and empirical aspects of processes of re-peasantisation in detail.

<sup>3</sup>This means that the degree of commoditisation is rather low. See Van der Ploeg (1990) for an analysis of the relevance of such measurement and quantification against the background of the commoditisation debate (Bernstein 1978, 1988; Long 1986). Van der Ploeg (2013) provides a detailed analysis of a Chayanovian perspective on farming to analyse the flow of resources in and during the agricultural production process.

agro-ecological mode of production guarantees or supports a more autonomous, place-based livelihood that is well tuned to its immediate social and natural environment. Crucially, it enriches the available resources and makes their sustained use possible.<sup>4</sup> On the more generic, abstract level, re-peasantisation manifests in terms of various expressions of multi-functionality (Van der Ploeg and Roep 2003). Land use is not a simple homogeneous process. Forms of livelihood such as migratory labour or off-farm work are often intertwined with agricultural production. This means that key resources need to be used in a coordinated and coherent way. The building of a social-material infrastructure is an essential dimension of re-peasantisation processes. This entails the time- and place-specific configuration or assemblage of material and non-material elements that can enable rural producers to farm the way they want and as autonomously as possible. This place-specific social-material infrastructure is the materialisation of the social struggle for land, autonomy and livelihood. It encompasses the development of the knowledge and experience to produce and reproduce ecological capital and to make use of own resources; the development of a self-ruled resource base is a dynamic but robust process of joint learning and experimentation in which novel practices or novelties are developed, nurtured and flourish. These become the seeds of transition (Wiskerke and van der Ploeg 2004). Part and parcel of the social-material infrastructure is the creation of 'nested' markets (Schneider and Niederle, 2010; Van der Ploeg et al. 2012; Hebinck, Van Der Ploeg, and Schneider 2015), markets governed by a different, more appropriate set of rules that allow the reproduction of the autonomy of the rural producers. Re-peasantisation is not just a collective act of resistance to dominant, squeezing structures; it is a pro-active form of place-based development that results in the building of collective agency (Roep, Wellbrock, and Horlings 2015). With this comes the capacity to change 'the rules of the game' (Gertler 2010), to renegotiate the conditions of engagement (in markets, for example), to set new rules and to effectuate institutional reform (Roep et al. 2003). This results in robust rural development and enhanced resilience.

Effective institutional reform is complementary to the creation of a resourceful socio-material assemblage by means of innovative, place-based agro-ecological farm practices. The two go together. A change in the rules of the game is needed to provide a 'protected' space or niche for the development of novel place-based, agro-ecological farm practices and the enrichment of the socio-material resource base. This makes farmers less dependent on global structural forces and enables them not only to reconsider but also to renegotiate their engagement in society at large, resulting in tailor-made, inclusive institutional arrangements that further sustain their collective activities. These newly created institutional arrangements can be seen as interfaces (Long 2001), mediating between the collective actions of the farm community and society at large. Evolving place-specific, tailored institutional arrangements, which create a more favourable institutional setting, are key to regional, place-based development, as Rodríguez-Pose (2013) has so eloquently argued.

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<sup>4</sup>Sevilla Guzmán and Woodgate (2012), in their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, position agro-ecology both as a science and as a social movement. Altieri and Toledo (2011) pursue a similar analysis. Altieri (2002) specifically understands agro-ecology as the science of natural resource management for poor. In contrast, Jansen (2015) characterises agro-ecology as being devoid of modern sciences, and seems to dismiss agro-ecology on these grounds. In this paper, we prefer to understand agro-ecology as a socially and ecologically embedded practice characterised by a low degree of commoditisation that unfolds as flows of natural and social resources in and through which production is continuously enriched.

This account of the mode and dynamics of land resettlement in Araponga brings these three elements together and offers a new perspective on opportunities for a kind of land reform process ‘from below’ that is based on self-mobilisation. This is not insignificant, politically or theoretically, given the dismal track record globally of the land reform programmes that have been captured by elites and technocrats.

A detailed account of the Araponga case will be given in the next three sections. First, the experience and ideological background of what people in Araponga refer to as the ‘Land Acquisition Movement’ is documented. The life histories of certain key settlers provide detailed insights into their negotiations to purchase land. The role and support of liberation theology emerges as an essential ingredient. The paper goes on to provide an account of how the quest for autonomy takes shape by creating new sets of relations, and describes how and why particular kinds of social material infrastructure emerge. The analysis will conclude with a consideration of the ideas that the rich food sovereignty debate has generated.

### **The quest for land**

The beginning of agricultural modernisation and neoliberal restructuring in Brazil in the twentieth century was marked by the establishment of absolute private property rights and the commoditisation of land. The concentration of land in the hands of the few, the generalisation of wage labour, the consolidation of a large capitalist sector and a crisis in peasant agriculture were among the outcomes (Vergara-Camus 2009). Small-scale family farmers, often lacking land titles, had to make way for expanding agribusiness enterprises and landlords. In 1996 properties of less than 100 ha accounted for 20.4 percent of the land; in 1972 this figure was 16.4 percent and in 1978 it was 13.5 percent (Meszaros 2000). This resulted in rural labour migrating to urban centres and agrarian nuclei in search of jobs and social security. Many marginalised peasants and rural workers migrated to urban areas in the 1950s. Many sought work in the informal sector and became slum dwellers because the cities were unable to absorb the large inflow of rural migrants (Martins 2002). The conditions of both the rural and urban poor worsened due to political repression and violence during Brazil’s military rule between 1964 and 1985. The highly interventionist military regime pushed for modernisation and export-led growth, especially through the mechanisation and agro-industrialisation of rural estates (Houtzager 1998; Houtzager and Kurtz 2000). This led to the further displacement of peasants and rural wage labourers (Meszaros 2000). In this context, rural organisations and movements for agrarian reform developed. The oldest peasant organisation in Brazil is the National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture (CONTAG) founded in 1963. CONTAG’s base is made up of local rural workers’ unions (Sindicatos dos Trabalhadores Rurais, STR) and state-level federations. CONTAG has always been committed to agrarian reform. However, subservient to state patronage, CONTAG has only addressed those peasants whose needs are acknowledged by the state (Welch and Sauer 2015; Fernandes, Welch, and Gonçalves 2012).

Another important actor has been the part of the Catholic Church that was inspired by liberation theology.<sup>5</sup> During the dictatorship, only Church organisations were allowed to organise the poor. This enabled them to support social and land movements (Wright and Wolford 2003; Stédile and Fernandes 1999; Boff and Boff 1986). The Church supported CONTAG’s efforts, but also saw the need to support peasants and rural workers who

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<sup>5</sup>Bandeira (2000), Gutierrez (2000), Boff (1996), and Boff and Boff (1986) provide elaborate descriptions of liberation theology in Brazil.

had no place in the regime's plans (Fernandes, Welch, and Gonçalves 2012; CPT 1997). In this context, the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) was founded in 1975.

One of the principles of the CPT was that rural movements should be autonomous and run by representatives of the rural community. The CPT sought to support these movements in whatever way possible. Its activities ranged from providing lawyers in land disputes between peasants and landowners to giving peasants advice on nutrition (Wright and Wolford 2003). The CPT also created places where priests, ministers and laymen could gather on the question of land access and control. This would provide fertile ground for the development of new land movements, including that of the MST in 1984 (Stédile & Fernandes 1999; Fernandes 2000).

Next to the MST, many other land occupation movements emerged after the dictatorship, including those of indigenous peoples, runaway slaves and people displaced by hydro-electric dams (Fernandes, Welch, and Gonçalves 2012). These movements occupy land and demand its redistribution on the basis that the land is not meeting its social function as required by constitutional law. When successful, land is expropriated by the state institute INCRA which transfers control to a state-level land-use agency. Social movements, usually CONTAG or the MST, are often represented in these agencies (Fernandes, Welch, and Gonçalves 2012).

The developments in Araponga are also strongly associated with liberation theology. They have particular roots in the CEB. Like the CPT, the CEB emerged out of a set of policies and plans drafted at the *Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil* (Brazilian National Bishop Conference) in 1965. The *Movimento da Boa Nova* (Movement of Good News) was founded in this context. It trained evangelical lay leaders to organise small, dynamic Christian communities into what became known as CEB.

The CEB are self-led, autonomous and self-organised groups that engage in politically oriented readings of biblical texts and that seek to improve their own social conditions (Betto 1985). Each CEB is coordinated by a single clergy member or a trained lay member. Services are organised in a small chapel or an individual's home. The CEB played an important role in the political mobilisation of farmers and rural workers. It strongly inspired the *new unionist movement* in the 1980s, a wave of new rural workers' unions that sought to be free from state patronage (Comeford 2003). CEB members were also active in, and inspired, the establishment of other rural movements such as the MST (Stédile and Fernandes 1999).

In addition to challenging authoritarian regimes and transforming *political structures*, CEB have sought to transform *political cultures* by imparting democratic values and practices (Cavendish 1994). Gramson (1991) argues that, in contrast to many other movements, equitable relations within the CEB are as important as transforming society. Hierarchical relationships within the movement itself are regarded as suspect. The idea of agency, not only of the movement, but also of its members, is made explicit, and emphasis is placed on exploring and transforming the everyday reality of people by *living with* them rather than *thinking for* them (Gramson 1991; Huizer 1979). Action is oriented to building collective agency at the grassroots level. These features can also be found in the movement in Araponga, where the recognition of the agency of its members and the building up of collective agency played a central role in both the acquisition of land and the establishment of robust farming.

*De-peasantisation* and *de-agrarianisation* have been prominent features of the Zona da Mata, a meso-region in the south-eastern part of the state of Minas Gerais. In the 1950s to 1960s especially, large numbers of family farmers moved to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. In Araponga, a small, predominantly rural municipality of 8029 inhabitants in the Zona da Mata (IBGE 2007), farm workers, sharecroppers (*meeiros*) and small-scale family

farmers<sup>6</sup> make up the poorest societal segment in the region. Most of the land is owned by plantation holders and a newly emerging class of agro-industrial corporations.<sup>7</sup> CEB were established in Araponga in 1979. Inequality between *poor* and the *rich* landowners has been a prominent issue ever since.

### *The Comunidades Ecclessias de Base (CEB) in Araponga*

The CEB in Araponga were established by lay leaders from the community who had been trained by a Catholic priest. There are still several CEB groups in the municipality; each consists of five to 20 neighbouring families. The groups generally include farm workers, sharecroppers and small-scale family farmers. The CEB have expanded and strengthened social networks, as neighbours have more intensive contact than before with one another and with members of other CEB groups. The meetings are self-organised. The venue is rotated amongst the homes of the members. Services with priests are organised once a month or every two months. Groups also meet to pray, sing, and discuss the implications of the bible and liberation theology for everyday life.

The juxtaposition of liberation theology and everyday life has led to a critical attitude towards existing power relations and the embrace of notions of *equality, unity and solidarity* between families and their neighbours. The problems sharecroppers and rural workers encounter with landlords is a recurring point of discussion in the meetings. Grievances include the extra chores or extra time that are demanded of workers when these are not part of a prior agreement. People also complain about delayed payments or payments that are below the agreed amount. In the past such treatment was considered normal, something which a *good Christian* should simply accept. Now it is perceived as a form of injustice. The reworking of liberation theology into an everyday discourse of social injustice has helped define a new sense of agency (Long 2001) and driven social action.

From the moment that we started to become knowledgeable [of injustice] we started to demand a little more from landlords . . . . This would bring us to the obligation to join hands and have an organisation where more people would fight with the same objective: to defend the rights of the working class. (Afonso Lopes, first president of the Arapongan Farmers Union)

CEB members became acquainted with the idea of a union from the priest when he visited to hold services, but they did not know exactly what a union was and how it worked. Convinced, nevertheless, that a union would help their cause, they approached a teachers' union in Viçosa for advice. They were directed to the federation of workers unions of the state of Minas Gerais or FETAEMG,. This body, though, served too broad a group to be able to address their concerns. They turned instead to the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (CPT, Pastoral Commission for Land), an organisation that, like the CEB stemmed from the Brazilian Bishop Conference, and which sought to protect the political rights of rural labourers and community leaders. At the time the CPT was running a

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<sup>6</sup>These categories are not mutually exclusive. Peasants with a small piece of land often also sharecrop, and sharecroppers may also engage in work on rural estates. The sharecropping arrangement in Araponga, known as *meeiros*, entails renting land in return for part of the harvest, usually half. Costs of inputs are also shared. For rural workers, the most common arrangement is that of *diario* or day labourer. Labour is hired for one day for a specific task, such as harvesting, weeding or pruning.

<sup>7</sup>A census conducted in 1996 shows that small and medium farms in Araponga make up 85 percent of the farmers and control 37 percent of the land (IBGE 1996).

programme that supported the foundation of local unions. The Arapongans had by then concluded that in order to have a union that would fight for their cause they would have to found one themselves.

Setting up a union proved to be a learning process that involved becoming familiar with legal and administrative procedures and formalising the functions, tasks and structure of the organisation. The prospect of a union in Araponga provoked opposition from the landlords. Meetings were sabotaged, key persons were pressured to step out of the founding process and the union office was vandalised. The farmers tried to assure the landlords that the union did not intend to cause conflict. It was also decided to hold meetings in secret locations. In 1989 the Araongan *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais* (STR, Rural Workers Union) was founded.

The union helped draft contractual agreements between landlords and sharecroppers and offered legal support to sharecroppers and rural workers when in dispute with landlords. It also played a role in securing farmers' land rights by helping them to acquire legal property documents for their land. However, several CEB members realised very early on in the process that they would not attain the autonomy they desired even with a union in place.

### ***The joint land acquisition movement***

Even after the union was established, landless farmers continued to experience major problems as a result of their dependence on landlords. People still had to work while receiving only half of the harvest or had no say over what crops they grew, for example. Unlike in the past, these abuses began to be perceived as unfair and inherent to their position as sharecroppers. They concluded that the only way to be autonomous from the landlords was to own their own land. This marked the beginning of the *quest for land*, which immediately encountered two major obstacles. First, only very large tracts of land were for sale. Second, the land belonged to landlords who had exhausted it by coffee cultivation (Cardoso 2002).

CEB members drew inspiration from a collective land purchase by three brothers. Aibes Lopes, a sharecropper, had been continuously abused by his landlord. His two brothers, Alfires and Niuton, helped him escape his situation by pooling their savings and purchasing a piece of land with him. The land was divided among the three brothers. A group of CEB members was convinced that this spontaneous type of group purchase could be reproduced and organised on a larger scale. Soon, the first purchase by what was coined the *Conquista de Terras em Conjunto* (Joint Land Acquisition Movement) took place. Although such purchases by the movement were legal, land acquisition was referred to as a re-conquest. This was based on the conception that poor sharecroppers and rural workers were taking back land from rich landowners.

Many sharecroppers and rural workers were not able to save enough money to purchase land even through collective purchase. Lending arrangements based on existing social relations were created. In the beginning this mainly encompassed families. Later, though, it became common to borrow from other CEB members and from members within the land purchasing groups. To avoid raising a landlord's suspicions, a CEB member who owned a large area of land and a small car posed as the buyer. By the time the landlords discovered that this had been happening, the movement had already built up a reputation as a trustworthy buyer. The Land Acquisition Movement also facilitated the exchange of land between members with the objective of combining small, scattered pieces of land into single properties.

Table 1 The ‘Ten Commandments’ of the joint land acquisition movement.

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(1)	<b>Be interested in the land</b> – love the land and be committed
(2)	<b>Behaviour in the group</b> – be honest; do not lie; do not take individualist decisions, and participate in the meetings
(3)	<b>Environment</b> – have environmental awareness
(4)	<b>Division</b> – form a responsible group and do not take rash decisions
(5)	<b>Land acquisition</b> – save money to buy land; keep in mind that this is possible; live in harmony with the community
(6)	<b>Ways to interact</b> – enter into dialogue with and show understanding towards others; deal with issues that concern the family; participate and take part in religious reflection in groups; be independent of sects
(7)	<b>Women’s participation and contribution</b> – struggle and encourage your partner; insist your name appears in documents; do not feel ashamed to be a peasant; participate in land sharing and in group decisions
(8)	<b>Agricultural participation</b> – participate in labour exchange and ‘bee arrangements’; recover and preserve the soil; visit your neighbour’s farm; use leguminous species
(9)	<b>The way to use resources</b> – use animal draft power for group work; use animals with skilled people who have experience working with them; acknowledge the greatest demands on labour; take care of the animals
(10)	<b>The way to use the farm resources:</b> conserve and expand roads; keep the trails; use and offer resources like water mills, sugar cane mills, pottery, etc.; keep water taps closed when water is scarce; control small animals so they do not damage neighbouring areas

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Source: Miranda (2002, 15).

Through the Joint Land Acquisition Movement, landless sharecroppers and rural workers acquired over 700 ha of land between 1989 and 2010. A survey by Campos (2006) shows that between 1989 and 2005, 130 purchases took place, mostly from large landholdings and with an average purchase size of 6 ha per farmer. The study shows that often parents later also bought land for their children or encouraged them do so themselves, thereby allowing for the reproduction of peasant farms and counteracting the tendency for land to fragment due to inheritance.

In the beginning, the collective purchase groups mainly consisted of close relatives such as siblings and nephews. When the movement expanded, more distant relatives, in-laws, neighbours and CEB colleagues also joined the purchase groups. Many people who had migrated to urban areas, often to make a living in the slums, returned to purchase land and make a living in the countryside. The growing interest in the movement led the core group to establish a set of principles to guard against opportunism. These were referred to as the ‘Ten Commandments’. These resemble a set of ethical principles rather than strict rules (see Table 1). The influence of liberation theology is evident. Commandments 2, 4, 5 and 6 illustrate the importance of trust. The principles reflect the more-or-less shared ethical values that were established over time from the discussions held in the CEB groups and from the experiences of the Joint Land Acquisition Movement. Some of the commandments refer to farming practices and have clearly been influenced by the discourse on agroecology that will be discussed in the next section.

The movement gained increasingly widespread recognition. It received an award from the *Fundação Banco do Brasil* and funding from the Ford Foundation.<sup>8</sup> Members used this

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<sup>8</sup>The sum was officially handed to the CTA-ZM, a local NGO operating in the area through whom the Ford Foundation came to know of the experience.

to found the 'Fundo de credito rotativo' in 1998, a rotating credit fund which lends money to people who do not possess land but want to buy it.

Although farmers gained control over land they continued to face obstacles, some of which threatened their survival as peasant family farmers. Many of these difficulties stemmed from the traditional reliance in the Araponga region on external knowledge and green revolution technologies. This resulted in the degradation of resources, the depletion of soils and the exploitation of family farms by dominant market players. The settlers were confronted with what Marsden (1998) and Van der Ploeg (2008) refer to as the 'squeeze on agriculture'. Rather than accepting this as an inevitable or structural situation, Arapongans began to explore ways to redesign their farms and reconfigure their relationships with markets.

### **The quest for production sovereignty**

Investments in industrial and export-led agriculture aimed at large rural estates, which started during the military coup in 1964, continued after the restoration of democracy in 1985. From 1995 onwards, smallholder family farms were recognised as a special category and began to receive official support. This created a policy division between smallholder family farms on the one hand and large agro-industry on the other. This distinction was institutionalised with the establishment of two agricultural ministries in 2003, the *Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário* (Ministry of Agrarian Development), which supported the former, and the *Ministério da Agricultura, da Pesca e da Alimentação* (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), supporting the latter. Family farms, however, only received 15 to 20 percent of the funding granted to agribusinesses. Moreover, the Ministry of Agrarian Development failed to acknowledge the diversity that existed amongst family farmers, favouring a one-sided, green revolution model for smallholder farmers (Sabourin 2007).

The agroecology movement emerged in response, and as an alternative, to industrial agriculture and the green revolution. Scientists, the CEB, the CPT and *new unionist* peasant organisations formed active parts of the movement (Cardoso and Mendes 2015). Another important actor was a new generation of Brazilian NGOs. These NGOs were disillusioned by the state. They concentrated on strengthening people and communities at the grassroots level rather than on overt political opposition. Many of them collaborated closely with peasant organisations and local researchers and were part of the Project of Alternative Technologies network (PTA). The PTA was superseded by the National Articulation of Agroecology (ANA) in 1999, when its network was broadened to include not only NGOs but also scientists and social movements.

In Minas Gerais, rural extension services were established between the 1940s and the 1960s. The Association of Credit and Rural Assistance (ACAR), a joint programme by the state of Minas Gerais and the Rockefeller foundation, came into existence in these years. A somewhat modified package of 'green revolution technologies' was promoted from the 1970s onwards by the Organisation of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension Services (EMATER), which emanated from ACAR. Both ACAR and EMATER sought to transform farms into modern, commercial enterprises. Farmers were encouraged to mechanise, plant monocrops and use chemical fertilisers, agro-toxins and commercial seeds. They were also encouraged to specialise in coffee and produce for global commodity markets. Although neither package was fully adopted, as mechanisation was simply impossible on some of the slopes that characterise the region, this modern, entrepreneurial mode of farming became the norm in Araponga, even among smallholders.

In the past, many small-scale family farmers and sharecroppers cultivated *lavoura branca* or food crops, most notably maize, rice, cassava and beans, for both home consumption and the market. The promise that wealth could be created through the exclusive production of *lavoura* or cash crops changed this. *Lavoura branca* came to be associated with a traditional, backward type of farming among both smallholders and landlords in the region. Food, it was said, could be bought from the earnings generated by growing coffee instead of growing it oneself. Most of the coffee in Araponga is sold to large intermediaries in municipalities, which peel, sort and roast the coffee. Intensive coffee production involves the heavy use of inputs. Reliance on external inputs increases the risk of peasant indebtedness. Dependence on a single crop increases vulnerability to environmental and market fluctuations. Productivity in the Zona da Mata has actually declined, as these farming methods are poorly adapted to local environmental conditions (Cardoso 2002).

In Minas Gerais, the PTA operated in alliance with the FETAEMG. The FETAEMG created and maintained linkages with local farmer unions. These formed the social base of the PTA and were referred to as the *rede*-MG (Minas Gerais network). The PTA reached farmers and organised courses on alternative agriculture through this network. In 1986, *Grupo de Agricultura Alternativa de Viçosa* (GAAV, Alternative Agriculture Group of Viçosa) joined *rede*-MG and took over the role of organising courses in Minas Gerais.

### ***Agroecology, the CTA-ZM and the Federal University of Viçosa***

The GAAV was founded in 1975 by a group of students from the Federal University of Viçosa (UFV) who were interested in alternative agriculture, later known as agroecology. Agroecology in this context is the strategic use and development of place-based, social and ecological resources for rural development. The group purchased a small parcel of land in 1979. This became an experimental garden on which trials using alternative farming practices were conducted. Later, a restaurant was started and crops were grown for it.

In the beginning, the group consisted of university students and professors. Gradually, the group acquired a new sort of political and social consciousness when its members participated in congresses on alternative agriculture. It made contact with the PTA, which asked the group to organise courses on alternative agriculture through *rede*-MG in 1985. GAAV, however, grew dissatisfied with the courses as they seemed to reach few farmers and had little impact. GAAV came up with the idea of becoming a small, locally situated and practically oriented research centre. This became the Centre of Alternative Technologies of the Zona da Mata (CTA-ZM) which was founded together with several rural workers' unions in the region in 1987. The locations of these unions demarcate the boundaries within which the CTA-ZM operates, covering 30 municipalities in the Zona da Mata area. The first employees were four recently graduated GAAV members. The GAAV compound became the CTA-ZM office.

In Araponga, two students from the GAAV appeared in a meeting of the CEB and made a proposal to work with the farmers. The approach was made to the CEB because no farmers' union existed in Araponga at the time. The students' proposal was received sympathetically. Farmers realised that forming alliances with the CTA-ZM would enable them to address problems with land degradation they were facing.

The work of the CTA-ZM is directed towards building agency at the grassroots level. A difference between the CTA and other social movements is that it was articulated and grew as a partnership between the CTA, researchers from the UFV and 13 rural workers' unions

of the Zona da Mata (Cardoso 2002). Both the advisory commission and the board of directors of the CTA-ZM are made up of representatives from these groups. Each group is part of national network organisations. The partnership and the networks in which they are situated proved important for the development of agroecology in the region in terms of acquiring support, fostering experimentation and joint learning and innovation, and obtaining formal legitimacy (Cardoso and Mendes 2015). The PTA network served as an important intermediary to acquire funds.

Another difference is that the partnership attributed relatively more agency to the farmers themselves than to the views of movement leaders. Genuine efforts were made to ensure that farmers' problems, experiences and aspirations played the leading role in agenda setting and in developing new practices. This proved to be a learning process in itself. General ecological farming guidelines were first met with scepticism or indifference by farmers. To these and other difficulties the NGO responded by engaging with criticism and suggestions of farmers and reorienting the programme (Cardoso and Mendes 2015; Cardoso 2002). The discourse on agroecology that was promoted by the partnership also attributed an important role to farmers' own experiences, interpretation and creativity. As a result, many farmers also began to experiment with agroecology outside of formal projects.

### *Securing the soil*

A major concern for the new Arapongan farmers was the degradation of one of their key resources, the soil. Some of the land had been degraded to such an extent that coffee and high-value crops could not be planted on it. Landlords sold areas once they were no longer productive. Their way of farming was responsible for the depletion of the soil in the first place. They cleared the land and produced coffee until yields declined. Then they converted the land to pasture. Once the productivity of the pasture also reached unviable levels they moved on to a new area (Cardoso 2002). Farmers now realised how their own farming practices were degrading the land and threatening the continuation of their farming activities. Smallholder farmers in the region who had not been part of the Land Acquisition Movement faced the same problems.

Engagements took place between farmers and the CTA-ZM to discuss how to reverse the cycle of resource degradation and begin to regenerate the soil. A survey was conducted to inventory existing indigenous farming practices in the Zona da Mata region in 1989. Many different practices were found scattered throughout the region. In 1993, the *Terra Forte* (strong earth) committee was set up by the CTA-ZM, the Arapongan farmers' union and the Federal University of Viçosa (Cardoso et al. 2001; CTA-ZM 2005). On-field experiments were carried out with the farmers to test the practices identified by the survey. In 1994, the participatory agroforestry systems (SAF) programme was started by the CTA-ZM with the soils department of the UFV and some local farmer unions in the Zona da Mata (STR), including the Arapongan Farmer Union. This programme promoted the planting of trees in the coffee fields. The idea was that the trees would conserve and recuperate the soil (CTA-ZM 2005; Gjorup et al. 2004; Souza et al. 2010). The CTA-ZM distributed tree saplings.

In the end, selective weeding, green manuring and the planting of trees between the coffee plants became common practices among farmers in Araponga. The idea is to keep the soil covered in order to prevent soil erosion, and to improve soil quality. The effectiveness of these practices has been confirmed by scientific studies in the Zona da Mata. Souza (2006) found that there was a twelvefold reduction in soil erosion. Losses of nutrients and

organic matter were greatly reduced as a result of these practices.<sup>9</sup> Mendonça and Stott (2003) found that the trees planted between the coffee bushes produced multiple benefits: the organic matter content of the soil increased, leaching was reduced, more nutrients could be stored, and a more stable provision of nutrients to the crop was maintained.<sup>10</sup> Farmers were ultimately able to produce a wider range of crops and increase yields.

Inspired by these promising, novel agro-ecological practices, some farmers started their own experiments and thus got enrolled in a joint learning an innovation network supported by students, university staff and NGOs, often with some success. The planting of trees and other vegetation on the border of small streams was one of the novel practices (Ferrari et al. 2010). This increased the water flow of the streams. The roots from the vegetation created pores in which water could be stored. The increased organic matter also increased the water-holding and infiltration capacity of the soil (CTA-ZM 2005). Through these practices the peasants could store more water for plants, humans and animals for the dry season. Another experiment involved the transfer of forest litter to agricultural fields to stimulate the presence of the microorganisms in the soil that are responsible for the cycling and synchronisation of nutrient availability and crop uptake.

Farmers also began to challenge the mono-cropping of coffee in this period. Planting any type of vegetation in between the coffee bushes was considered inefficient in terms of the discourses governing mainstream agriculture. Other plants were said to compete with the coffee for shade, nutrients and water. Harvesting and maintaining coffee, it was said, would be inefficient and labour would be wasted on maintaining less profitable crops. The farmers thought otherwise. Soil management became an important element of their newly emerging farming strategy (Klingen et al. 2012). They began to refer to themselves as *agro-ecological farmers*.

### ***Producing own nutrients and food***

Ways were found to combat and reverse land degradation, but peasants faced another threat. They were vulnerable to price fluctuations in the coffee, chemical fertiliser and food markets. Farmers had to earn enough money to purchase inputs and food for the season to come. Less revenue as a result of drought, for example, or an increase in the price of inputs or food meant fewer inputs could be bought for the next production cycle, with lower yields as a result. Fertiliser and food prices increased steadily over the years. There was little expectation that this trend could be reversed. The farmers' fears that they were entering a negative spiral grew. They responded by applying lower inputs, purchasing cheaper food and intensifying the use of their own labour in activities such as weeding, in the hope this would partly offset the effect of negative yields. Farmers knew these efforts could not be sustained. As the pressure of having to invest more and more

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<sup>9</sup>Nutrient losses with the presence and absence of selective weeding, green manuring and the planting of trees were compared by Souza (2006). Results for different components in kg/ha/year (present/absent) are: soil (217.3/2611.9), carbon compounds (CO, 4.9/65.1), phosphorus (P, 1.6/46.5), potassium (K, 8.0/328.3), calcium (Ca, 92.1/1865.5) and magnesium (Mg, 17.9/ 625.3).

<sup>10</sup>The authors found that leaf residues from trees have a high C:N ratio, lignin and C:P ratio, and therefore have a good potential against soil erosion and to rebuild the C content in the soil. Also, an increase in forms of organic matter that are responsible for the cycling of nutrients was found. The authors moreover found that organic matter reduced the amount of exchangeable aluminium (Al) in the soil, thereby reducing the need for farmers to apply lime and increasing the capacity of the soil to retain Ca, Mg, P and N.

time in tasks such as weeding increased at the expense of doing other things, farmers began to see their dependence on external inputs as the source of the problem.

To consolidate the efforts and progress made, the *Associação dos Agricultores Familiares de Araponga* (AFA, Arapongan Farmer Association) was established. It sold chemical fertilisers at lower prices to the farmers. Although this provided some relief, farmers continued to face the same risks. They began to see that chemical fertilisers degraded the soil. These concerns were taken to the agroforestry programme. Experiments were conducted with trees that could take up the nutrients which could not be reached by the coffee plants. These nutrients became available to the coffee plants after the leaves, branches and roots of the companion trees decomposed. Different species of trees that captured nutrients in different ways were introduced. Leguminous trees that fixed nitrogen from the air were planted first. Trees that fostered mycorrhizal fungi were next in line. These could absorb phosphorus that was too strongly bound to the soil for the roots to absorb directly. Finally, deep-rooting trees were planted in order to take up the nutrients that could not be reached by the coffee plants.

Over 70 species of trees were experimented with. Not all were successful. Some were found to have negative effects on the coffee bushes. Some farmers were allergic to the pollen of certain trees, such as the *capoeira branca*. The management of the trees also required a lot of labour as they had to be pruned before the nutrients and organic matter could enter the soil. The tree canopy could not be allowed to shade the coffee. Nevertheless, planting trees such as *mucuna*, *calopogônio*, *fedegoso*, *ingá de metro*, *feijão guandu* and *crotalaria* between the coffee bushes for the purpose of nutrient input became common practice and the subject of active management and continuous experimentation. Some farmers began to retain specific trees that came up on their own. They also began to obtain trees from nearby forests, CEB colleagues and family as well as from the CTA-ZM (Martins 2007).

Scientific studies in the Zona da Mata confirmed the potential of trees to capture nutrients. Cardoso (2002) found higher fractions of organic phosphorus in agroforestry systems than in conventional systems.<sup>11</sup> Mendonça and Stott (2003) studied the residues of several tree species under a shaded coffee system in Araponga and found that most residues had the potential to supply the nutrient needs of a crop of maize.

The livestock kept by the project *Vacas para o café: fechando o ciclo de produção orgânica de café* (Cattle for coffee: closing the cycle of organic coffee production) was another source of nutrients that was investigated. This project was initiated by the AFA, funded by the Dutch NGO *Wilde Ganzen* and provided with technical support by the CTA-ZM and the soil, zoo-technology and veterinary departments of the UFV.

Farmers began to acquire cattle and goats as a source of manure for coffee cultivation. Some acquired their animals with the support of the *Vacas para o café* project, while others had to get them on their own. Different ways to make this system effective were experimented with. Stables, for instance, were constructed where the cattle could be kept part of the day in order to facilitate the collection of manure and to allow pastures to rest. Long-growing varieties of grass and sugarcane were grown as feed. The *picadeira*, a shredder, was used to shred grass and cane into pulp so as to prevent cows pulling grass and cane

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<sup>11</sup>These differences are attributed to the higher biological activity in agroforestry systems. It is hypothesised that mycorrhiza absorbs inorganic sources of P which are exchanged for carbon compounds from the trees. Mycorrhizal fungi are, moreover, able to cover larger volumes of soil than roots and thus are better able to take up and cycle nutrients.

into the stables and trampling on them. A smaller proportion of feed was lost as a result. This also made the collection of larger quantities of manure possible (Passos 2008; Freitas et al. 2009).

Farmers also began to cultivate their own food. First they had to challenge the negative image that came to be associated with *lavoura branca* or arable food crops:

Many of the people say that no results can be booked with *lavoura branca*. *Lavoura branca* is maize, beans, rice, it is what we need. And that other crops should be grown, which in our case would be coffee, for any results to be booked. But this is a proposition with which we now totally disagree. (Afonso Lopes, farmer and first president of the Arapongan Farmers' Union)

Farmers began to plant (more) maize, beans, potatoes, cassava and sugarcane, often on their own initiative. Farmers participating in the agroforestry programme also expressed their desire to have fruit trees. Avocado, banana and papaya are now commonly found growing between the coffee bushes. Some farmers have also experimented with more exotic trees, such as plums, peaches and citrus. Trees are often used for multiple purposes: 14 nitrogen-fixing varieties are also used for food, seven for construction, eight for firewood, five for fencing, four for the construction of ox-drawn wagons, six for medicinal purposes and six for bees. Most of the products derived from these trees are used within the household (Martins 2007).

Farmers have also established vegetable gardens, or expanded existing ones. Various vegetables are grown for household consumption. Farmers have also begun to work with spontaneous vegetation.<sup>12</sup> *Solidago chilensis*, and *Ageratum conyzoides* are cultivated for medicinal purposes while *Portulaca oleracea*, *Amaranthus deflexus*, and *Emilia sonchifolia* are cultivated as food crops (Souza 2006). Animals are also farmed. These include chickens for meat and eggs, pigs for meat and fat (used as oil), and cattle for milk.

Another novel practice was the creation of new products. Many farmers started to experiment with the processing of food; they created novel processing techniques and new ways to market their produce. A group of farmers, for example, have constructed a mill to process sugarcane into *açucar mascavo* (brown sugar) or *rappadura* (raw sugar). Maize and cassava are milled to produce flour. Fruit is processed into sweets and avocado into soap or used as animal feed. Milk is turned into *queijo mineiro* (fresh cheese), or *requeijão* (cream cheese). These products are consumed by the household, sold or given away as gifts. Many farmers argue that their diets have improved as they are no longer forced to purchase cheap food from the supermarket. Healthy food such as fruit is expensive. Farmers claim that illnesses are less frequent now that they have access to better food. Although planting, pruning and caring for the trees requires more labour, farmers argue that it is worthwhile.

### *Diversifying sales and creating new nested markets*

The way in which markets are organised has been questioned (Schneider and Niederle 2010). Farmers are unhappy that they can sell only their coffee and not their surpluses of other food crops. They complain about the low price the coffee receives. These issues led the AFA to establish their own shop and hire a shop attendant. Peasants can bring crops of their choice to the shop, which are then sold directly to the consumer. The crop

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<sup>12</sup>This entails keeping certain types of vegetation that arises spontaneously. Although these appear as weeds and are commonly interpreted as a form of neglect, they are subject to deliberate management through, for instance, selective weeding and weeding parts of the plant to keep it from interfering with the coffee.

remains the responsibility of the farmer. The shop does not buy the product from the farmer. Maize, beans, vegetables, fruit, coffee and farm-processed foods such as sugar, cassava flower and maize flower are available in the shop. Peasants argue that these sales are advantageous. No contract is needed. Goods can be dropped off at any time. There are no restrictions on what they can sell. They can sell their surpluses. The initiative has encouraged farmers to diversify because now they can sell bananas, avocados, lettuce, cabbage, potatoes, yams, maize, beans, cheese and sugar to the *mercadinho*:

It is because when you have ... are able to get things directly from producer to consumer, both gain. Because you can sell better and the consumer pays less. Because the middlemen [usually] take the largest share [of the profit]. Unfortunately. (Samuel)

A study by Souza et al. (2012) showed that agro-forestry systems had a 43 percent higher production value than full-sun coffee systems over a period of 12 years, mainly because of the additional income generated by the diversification of production.

On their own initiative, some peasants have also begun to sell potatoes and yams to people in the municipality, using horses or motorbikes to deliver the produce. Neighbouring families have begun to specialise in a particular vegetable or bean type and exchange part of the harvest. They argue that this saves labour and enables them to maintain bonds with other families. A group of farmers has also started producing organic coffee for which they receive a higher price. The coffee is sold directly to the final retailer through a cooperative in *Novo Resende*. The cooperative purchases coffee that is already peeled and roasted, allowing the farmers to capture a larger share of the value than they would if they sold to intermediaries. Many farmers, however, find the certification criteria too strict.

### **Autonomy as a process increasing the self-efficacy of peasant farmers**

Small-scale peasant family farmers, sharecroppers and farm workers in Araponga have been driven by a loosely defined quest for autonomy resulting in a process of repositioning, regrouping and self-regulation (Van der Ploeg 2006, 2008). This was an evolving process of joint experimentation and joint learning that resulted in various novel farm practices that got crucially embedded in a newly created patchwork of relations creating a favourable enabling institutional setting that supported their project. The transformative collective agency thus resulted in a gradual enrichment of the resource base and effective institutional reform. Obstacles and failures have had to be overcome. Importantly, agency, the capacity to mobilise and conduct joint, collective and individual initiatives, has gradually grown as networks within the community have strengthened and expanded, most importantly through the CEB. The farmers do not stop at acquiring land. They continue to develop their transformative agency through alliances with outside organisations, for instance with the CTA-ZM and the UFV. Ties have been forged and consolidated with these bodies in order to develop new agro-ecological farming practices and new nested markets, and to assist farmers in organising themselves and raising their self-efficacy. External actors and mediators have slowly been incorporated so as to avoid 'capture' from external interests<sup>13</sup> and to allow the ideological aspects of the agrarian question to

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<sup>13</sup>Fressoli et al. 2014 understand this as an active form of mobilisation by grassroots innovation movements; whereas capture stands for insertion of their 'projects' by the institutions promoting science, technology and innovation.

remain oriented towards concrete everyday struggles and practical solutions. Autonomy has been gained through acquiring land by pooling financial resources, and by reorganising, redefining and (re)discovering productive resources. A resourceful social-material infrastructure has been built. It comprises a self-controlled and managed (human and natural) resource base that has enabled rural producers to farm as autonomously as possible. The farmers have developed the knowledge and experience to produce and reproduce ecological capital. The development of new farming practices in conjunction with the CTA-ZM and the UFV has played an important role. This has entailed retaining autonomy within an alliance. Political and external support has been enlisted without undermining farmers' independence. Formal recognition from bodies such as the *Fundação do Banco do Brasil* and Action Aid has followed.

Ultimately, farmers have reversed land degradation, improved productive capacity, increased resilience to climatic fluctuation, and reduced dependency on global commodity markets. They have developed collective and reciprocal arrangements in order to process and market their produce and to gain access to land. The experience gained through the CEB and joint initiatives, such as the Joint Land Acquisition Movement, has been critical. Land is now acquired for both newcomers and the younger generation by collective purchase. This ensures that there is a high degree of post-settlement freedom. People can decide how to dispose of their crops and how to allocate their time. They decide which crops to plant, animals to keep and practices to use. All of this is critical to the reproduction of the peasant way of life. Assembling an enriched, resourceful social-material infrastructure entails the development of a discursive space that challenges and protects initiatives from the dominant way of doing things. Exposure to the discourses of liberation theology and agroecology has been important in this regard. The 'Ten Commandments' are a perfect example of this.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued for the empirical and theoretical significance of the process of re-peasantisation, understood as a twin process in which social actors such as farm workers, rural labourers and *favela* dwellers return to or access land and construct a social-material infrastructure that enables them to be as independent as possible of dominant markets and technology relations. Establishing a favourable and supportive institutional embedding for agro-ecological farming practices has been a gradual, re-iterative, knowledge-intensive learning process. Re-peasantisation as a transformative process has generated a set of robust farming practices that require continuous fine-tuning and ongoing social struggle to enforce a proper institutional embedding. It entails resistance to corporate control over production and consumption. Arapongan settlers understand that independence from the dominant industrial agro-food system and the simultaneous redesign of their mode of farming revolves around the construction of agro-ecological alternatives. This is the key element of a resourceful social-material infrastructure that suits the needs of peasant family farmers and also the needs of low-income, non-farming populations. Another key ingredient is the capacity of actors to construct new interfaces with support organisations to further strengthen their agency. Their autonomy is not absolute, therefore. It does not represent isolation from the wider society. Instead, it is a precondition for efforts to negotiate the conditions of re-engagement and to build the capacity to create new, more beneficial, sets of relations in different interrelated domains and at multiple levels. This is a dialectical process of repositioning: a distancing from the dominant, squeezing sets of relations and a re-engagement in a more beneficial set of relations. Ultimately, this is what transformative agency is all about.

Although this paper may have evoked images of a Chayonovian category of rural producers achieving autonomy in relatively remote situations, the Araponga case is significant in that it underpins the argument for the relevance of re-peasantisation, understood as a process that ultimately constitutes a viable attempt by rural people to develop a more robust agrarian livelihood. Paradoxically, re-peasantisation has gone hand in hand with de-peasantisation and the displacement of rural people from their land, and with the advance of contract farming arrangements between producers and agrarian capital. Contemporary agrarian capitalism, as a global structuring force, also creates the conditions and incentives for what is framed as re-peasantisation. The capacity of the new generation of peasants, deeply embedded in an extended supportive network, to transform the agro-food system profoundly cannot (and should not) be denied. The transformation of the agro-food system entails both the construction of an enriched agro-ecological resource base and a favourable institutional setting. One cannot do without the other.

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