



A demonstration for the right to land. Photo: Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)

More than access to land: MST in Brazil

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Brazil is a continent in itself and has abundant natural resources. The potential that lies in its water, soil, biodiversity, coastline, diverse climate and mineral wealth is to be envied. It has one of the world's largest river basins and its people come from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It is a rich and fertile country.

Yet Brazilians live in conditions that compare to the most needy in the world. Incomes are heavily concentrated. The richest 10 percent take 48 percent of annual income leaving the poorest 20 percent to share just 2 percent between them. Today, 23 million Brazilians live below the poverty line, and 52 million cannot get enough food for a balanced diet.

Analysis

The social and environmental degradation prevalent throughout Brazil is rooted in the way agriculture has developed in the country. Agriculture has always been subordinate to the logic of foreign trade, its profits generated by exploiting natural resources and the labour of the Brazilian poor. Since the time of European colonisation, extraction and later the extensive productions of export agriculture for the European market have been the main priorities.

This pattern has been sustained in recent years by advanced technological interventions. The "modernisation of agriculture" has enabled Brazil to maintain its present agricultural export strategy, which is based on extensive *latifundio* (estate) land-holding patterns, export-oriented commodity production and sub-human labour relations. In Brazil today one percent of rural household own 47 percent of the country farmland while more than 12 million people live in landless destitution. At the same time 166 million hectares of arable land lies unused in large estates. Small farmers make up 80 percent of the countries rural

population yet they own less than 18 percent of the available farming land.

A drastic reduction in the demand for farm labour has intensified poverty. In the last ten years more that five million jobs have been eliminated by mechanisation in the sugar plantations alone. In 1984, hundreds of thousands of hectares of agricultural land was lost through the creation of the Itaipu dam, the largest dam in the world. In the cotton and coffee plantations 65 percent of the labour force have no formal working papers and work 14-16 hours for US\$2.00 a day. As a result there is a constant exodus from the countryside to the already overcrowded cities. In the last 30 years 20 million people have left the rural areas for the towns. In 1903, when Brazil's total population numbered some 17.4 million 80 percent of its population lived in the rural areas. A hundred years later Brazil has a population of 175 million people and 80 percent live in the overcrowded urban areas. Staple food is scarce and although agribusiness ensures that Brazil has a favourable export surplus, it still imports such basic items as beans, rice, and wheat. In 1990, Brazil imported US\$1 billion worth of basic foodstuffs. Today, it imports US\$10 billion.

Agrarian reform is fundamental to the social, economic and political transformation of Brazil and there is an urgent need for an extensive and large-scale re-distribution of land. The political and economic geography of the country needs to be changed and land given a real social function.

Organising the landless

The struggle for land has dominated Brazil's history. The *Canudos* resistance movement and the *Contestado* war in the late 1800s and the Peasant Leagues and MASTER movement of landless farmers from in the 1950s and 1960s are typical of actions taken by rural workers to access land and improve their working and living conditions. *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (MST) is part of this tradition.

MST is one of 35 people's organisations fighting to get agrarian reform onto the political agenda. Established in 1984, it is active in 23 of Brazil's 27 States. More than 1.5 million people are involved in the MST, and it has managed to provide access to land for some 300 000 families who now live in 1600 settlements. Another 80 000 claimants are still living in camps while negotiating the legality of their claims. The process of land occupation and the struggle to secure tenure rights is a complex, hazardous and sometimes violent process. MST supports groups in occupying land and in their efforts to negotiate and formalise legal ownership. When claims are recognised, MST works with the new settlers to establish communities in which agroecological and social reform guide development.

The wider activities of MST touch all aspects of community life including education, health, cultural identity, environmental education, leisure, sports and jobs. As an organisation MST tries to introduce men and women to a fairer, more fraternal and egalitarian way of life. Over the years it has developed its own methods and ways to help people organise their struggle and while winning land is important, its wider objectives are to initiate a process of agrarian reform that will not only re-organise the land tenure but also contribute to deeper transformations in the society as a whole.

Taking care of nature

MST's struggle for agrarian reform is, in fact, a struggle to preserve life and nature. MST has always tried to increase the awareness of landless workers of the important role they play in preserving nature. In general, the areas chosen for agrarian reform tend to be areas that have been devastated and degraded by inappropriate and exploitative estate management. In MST settlements, the major challenge has, therefore, been to regenerate the environment and ensure that there is enough environmental education to encourage sustainable practises. Considerable effort is invested in elaborating ways to sensitise and educate families to the need to promote reforestation, build seed beds and nurseries for native and exotic trees, preserve the river banks and springs, build ecological corridors, work towards the collective management of forests and develop settlement patterns that encourage soil and water conservation.

With a growing awareness of the importance of agroecology, MST has also introduced new production and consumption patterns into its settlements. Healthy, pesticide- and chemical-free food is cultivated, a wide diversity of plant life is encouraged, and animal varieties that are best adapted to local conditions are reared and bred. In addition MST is involved in strengthening the local economy, ensuring that settlers do not become dependent on any single product and trying to establish links to wider regional markets where there are other potential sources of income.

Activities

Since 1997, MST has accumulated much experience in agroecology and forestry. Many settlements produce and market organic rice, soybeans, peanuts, cassava, corn, cashews, coffee, bananas, peaches, chickens and pigs.

Together with other social movements in the *International Via Campesina*, the MST is involved in the *Campaign for Seeds as the Heritage of Peoples in the Service of Humankind*. The objective of this campaign is to confront the global process of privatising biodiversity in which a few major trans-nationals are taking over life on the planet and turning nature into a commodity. MST has undertaken activities to recover local seed varieties focusing on corn, rice and beans, crops that are basic to the food security and

animal husbandry of its settlements. In the municipality of *São Miguel do Oeste*, in the southern State of Santa Catarina, for example, 48 varieties of corn have been recovered and an additional 18 corn varieties and five bean varieties are being bred. During the last harvest, 80 metric tons of seed was collected. This was enough to secure supplies for local families and provided a surplus for further distribution.

For several years, MST has been building up the agroecological production of horticultural seeds through BIONATUR and today they are the only suppliers in Brazil producing and distributing such seeds. BIONATUR grew out of the need to confront the monopoly that multinationals have established over the seed market. It was first established in Rio Grande do Sul, a state in the far south of the country and subsequently expanded to other regions of Brazil. BIONATUR works exclusively with horticultural varieties. There are no hybrids. The result of these activities has been to enhance the regional distribution of seed and today these are being cultivated as near as possible to the regions in which they were obtained. In 2002, BIONATUR produced and marketed seven tons of seeds from 32 different varieties. By 2008, it expects to be marketing 15 tons of seed from 56 different varieties.

Another important activity has been the biodiversity management project in the settlements of *Pontal do Paranapanema* in the south-eastern State of São Paulo. Here MST enabled gene flow between three areas of native forests classified as Interior Atlantic Forest. These forests cover 33 000 hectares, 400 hectares and 300 hectares respectively and are home to many small farmers. The project consisted of planting exotic and native species in the areas belonging to farming settlements in order to enhance gene exchanges amongst the various species of animals and plants in the three forest areas. Over time a migratory corridor for animal species (in particular birds and insects) has been created and the transmission of genetic material from the native trees that make up these ecosystems has been greatly facilitated. From a social perspective, these islands of biodiversity – which also contain multiple-use agroforestry groves – will support the improvement and diversification of farming activities in rural allotments located between the forest fragments.

In the same region, Ribeirão Bonito, some 123 families are involved in a project known as *Abraço Verde* – the Green Embrace. The main aim of this project is to plant a belt of native and exotic trees between the forest and the areas used by farmers for crop and cattle production in order to halt degradation. From an economic and social point of view, the sustained exploitation of the Green Embrace has provided a new source of income for these rural communities, and has helped to reduce conflicts over access to fauna and flora.

Challenges

The MST faces many challenges. One major difficulty is that agrarian reform is still seen as a way to compensate the landless and to relieve social tensions, rather than as policy to restructure land tenure. Therefore, MST has adopted a broad agenda in which it commits itself to lobbying for public policies that reflect not only a concern for the value of rural spaces and the preservation of the landscape but also guarantees the well-being and rights to land of those who live in the countryside. ■

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