

Working the land to feed the people

Hunger is spreading in a world of plenty: in Brazil, one of the world's big food producers, a third of the population goes hungry. The governments and corporations that run the world insist that only free markets, the removal of trade barriers and the spread of GM crops will solve the problem. But so far this sort of globalisation has only brought more, not less hunger. Yet a movement that grew out of violence and despair claims to have found the answer. Its solutions are radically different from those on offer from the rich countries. They involve empowering the poor through land reform, education and mobilisation. The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)-the Landless Rural Workers Movement - has become one of Brazil's biggest popular movements, and their red T-shirts, caps and flags are now a familiar sight at every demonstration, rally and strike. Through direct action - occupations, marches, confrontations with the authorities - they have won land and undeniably eliminated hunger from the lives of hundreds of thousands of Brazilian families.

Twenty years ago war raged throughout Brazil's vast interior. It was an unequal conflict: peasant farmers and smallholders, share-croppers and rubber tappers against the powerful forces unleashed by the military regime's economic policy - ruthless cattle ranchers and landowners, road and dam builders. In the 1970s this policy led directly to the displacement of almost 5 million people in the three southern states alone. They became *sem terra* - or landless. Their choices were stark: move to the cities and shanty towns or migrate thousands of kilometres north to the malaria-ridden shallow soils of government colonies in the Amazon, far from roads, schools and hospitals. Those who tried to stop the advance of big capital were eliminated. Between 1981 and 1984

alone 277 peasant leaders, union officials and rural workers were killed. It was in this climate of violence and desperation that the MST was born. With nothing left to lose, families began occupying the estates of absentee land-lords.

"We've come a long way in 20 years," said Vilmar Martins da Silva, president of a farm cooperative in one of the many MST settlements. "By occupying huge unproductive estates, we forced the Brazilian government to carry out land reform. Today we've got about 1 million members."

The learning curve has been steep. At first the families tried to beat the big farmers at their own game, planting cash crops instead of food. Claudemir Mocellin, who as an eight-year-old child accompanied his father on one of the early occupations, today works as an agronomist on a settlement. "We used the most fertilisers. We bought the modern hybrid seeds and the biggest machines. We wanted the largest harvests." But it did not work.

"Families found that, as their soils got exhausted, they were spending more and more money on pesticides and fertilisers, and they were getting ill from the side effects of the chemicals. It didn't make sense, either economically or environmentally."

Gradually the families adopted more environmentally friendly ways of farming and went back to growing their own food. "I don't like calling it subsistence farming, because that suggests we're sub-existing . . . whereas really, with our concern for biodiversity, we are the truly modern farmers," said Mocellin emphatically.

"Chemical farming is doomed, as it exhausts the soils so rapidly."

While the government's agrarian reform programme gave land to 260,000 families, in the same period (1995-99) more than 1

million small farmers lost their land under market pressures. Only the big exporters of soyabeans, coffee, orange juice and poultry and the transnational companies who control the export network, have benefited.

There is little room for small family farms in this world, unless they are willing to provide what amounts to bonded labour, growing seeds for Monsanto or rearing chickens for Sadia. The MST believes that, because of its extraordinary

capacity to mobilise the excluded, it can take on these forces and win. Yet the outcome is still uncertain. Future historians may look back at the MST and see landless peasants who attempted "a revolution that never happened". Or it may just be that the MST are front runners in the global movement towards greater sustainability, greater equality and less hunger.

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Glossary:

Smallholders: Owners of very small farms

Sharecroppers: A farmer who grows crops on someone else's land and receives part of the money earned from selling the crops.

Rubbertappers: Person who taps rubber from trees

Malaria-ridden: Full of ridden

Bonded labour: A situation in which workers are obliged to work for their employer in conditions close to slavery

1.TRUE or FALSE

- a Brazil is one of the world's biggest producers of food.
- b One third of the population of Brazil goes hungry.
- c In Brazil, cattle ranchers struggle against road builders.
- d Using fertilisers and pesticides means bigger and better harvests.
- e Chemical farming rapidly exhausts the soil.
- f Small farmers rather than big companies have benefited from the government's reforms.

2.Answer the questions

- 1 How has the MST won land from the government?
.....
- 2 How many people were displaced in the 1970s in the 3 southern states of Brazil?
.....
- 3 How many peasant leaders, union officials and rural workers were killed between 1981 and 1984?
.....
- 4 How many members does the MST have today?
.....
- 5 Why was the attempt by poor families to grow cash crops unsuccessful?
.....
- 6 Why does chemical farming have no future?
.....
- 7 How many families benefited from the government's reform programme?
.....
- 8 How many small farmers lost their land between 1995 and 1999?
.....

3. Comprehension check

Choose the best answer for each question:

- 1 What is the main objective of the MST
a to occupy land b to empower the poor c to overthrow the government
- 2 Who fought the "war" in Brazil's interior twenty years ago?
a rich and poor b farmers and rubbertappers c landowners and cattle ranchers
- 3 How did the MST force the government to carry out land reform?
a by migrating to cities b by occupying unproductive estates c by violence
- 4 Why was planting cash crops unsuccessful for the peasant families?
a it was difficult to sell the crops b it didn't make economic sense c they got exhausted
- 5 Why is chemical farming doomed?
a it isn't traditional b it exhausts the soil rapidly c it requires big machines
- 6 Between 1995 and 1999 how many small farmers lost their land?
a 260,000 b almost one million c more than one million
- 7 Why does the MST believe it can take on the forces of multinational capital and win?
a because it is excluded b because it can mobilise the excluded c because the future is uncertain

4. Vocabulary

Match the words in the left-hand column with the meanings in the right-hand column

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 1 crop | a an area where very poor people live |
| 2 spread | b a large area of land |
| 3 ruthless | c a plant grown for food, usually on a farm |
| 4 shanty town | d a person who works to get social or political change |
| 5 absentee | e control completely |
| 6 estate | f without mercy |
| 7 side effect | g a poor farmer with no land |
| 8 dominate | h growth or development |
| 9 campaigner | i an unintentional effect of a medicine or chemical |
| 10 peasant | j a person who is not present |

Find the words that mean the following:

- 1 a verb meaning to give power to someone or something

- 2 an adverb meaning certainly correct or true

- 3 a verb meaning to continue with force and violence

- 4 an adjective meaning without mercy

- 5 an adjective meaning without land

- 6 a noun meaning an area where very poor people live in improvised housing

- 7 an adjective meaning having no future

- 8 a noun meaning the eventual result

5. Vocabulary – collocations

Fill the gaps with words from the text.

- 1 Poor farmers found themselves pitted _____ powerful forces.
- 2 Landless peasants were left with a _____ choice.
- 3 Poor families began to occupy the estates of _____ landlords.
- 4 The Brazilian government was forced to _____ land reform.
- 5 Many people got ill from the _____ effects of the chemicals.
- 6 Chemical farming _____ the soil.
- 7 The global food industry seems likely to _____ its control.
- 8 Many poor farmers are forced to _____ chickens for big companies like Sadia.

6. Vocabulary – Suffixes less and ful

In the text there are some words with the suffixes above. These include *ruthless* and *landless*. In both cases here the suffix *less* means *without*.

Try to fill the gaps below using the following words formed with these two suffixes.

Careless Homeless Heartless Thoughtless
Meaningless Brainless Countless Topless

Thankful Meaningful Grateful
Bellyful Careful Beautiful

- 1 I have had a _____ of his rude comments. I've had enough!
- 2 Jane had a difficult past. She was _____ for a year until she found a place to stay with the help of a friend.
- 3 I'm not getting in the car with him. I've never seen such a _____ driver.
- 4 The politician was photographed having a little too much fun in a _____ bar.
- 5 She was really _____ for all of the help you gave her.
- 6 The boss made some really _____ comments in the meeting today. He really offended Henrik.
- 7 We have had _____ applications for the new design job. I don't know where to start.

7. Discussion Points

Do you agree with genetically modified foods (GM foods)?

Do you agree with the saying "Small is better"?

Should the government give land to everyone?