

## Agrarian Reform in Brazil

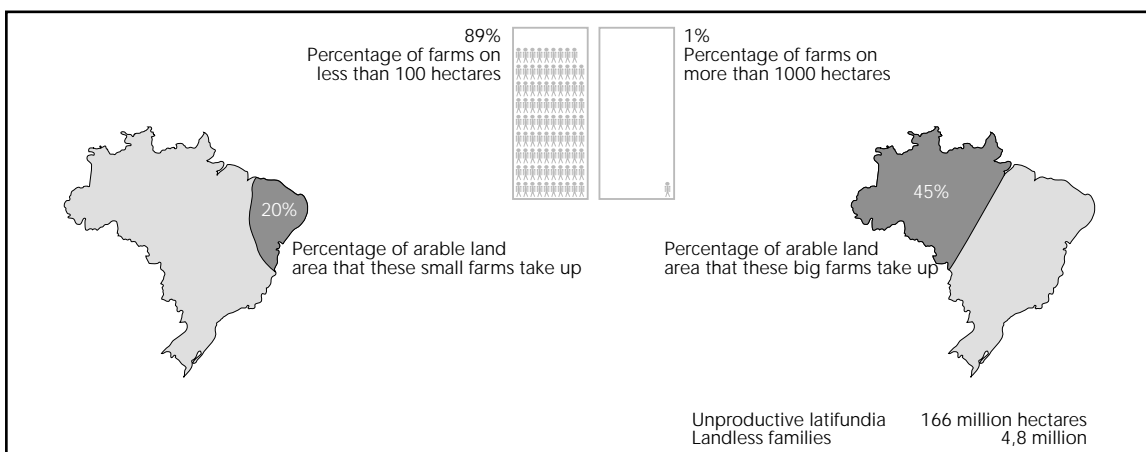
The gate opens: for the procession of thousands of men, women and children the long silent march through the cold night comes to an end at the moment they set foot in the Fazenda Giacometi. After walking for five hours they have now, at the first light of dawn, occupied the biggest large scale land-holding in the Brazilian state of Paraná measuring 83,000 hectares. According to the agrarian reform laws, a portion of this enormous estate should already have been distributed among landless families by the beginning of the 1980's. However, it was not until the landless agricultural workers took over the Fazenda in 1996 that the Brazilian government found itself compelled to introduce a land title transfer initiative, under the umbrella of which over 4,000 families are to be given land to work and live off.

### A country of big landowners

Few countries of the world have such a skewed land distribution pattern as in Brazil. The agricultural development favours the latifundium (large private agricultural estate operating with commercially exploited labour force). Only a small minority from the members of the land oligarchy who allied themselves to the industrial, financial and trade capital investments, have profited from this, while the majority of the population were driven out and excluded. During the last 25 years more than 30 million agricultural workers, men and women, have had to quit their land and a further 4.8 million farming families can only dream of having their own peace of land. One of the most shocking consequences of this injustice is hunger: of the 31.5 million people suffering from hunger in Brazil, half of them live in the countryside.



### The land issue in figures



Source : Agricultural census 1996, Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística

The process of agricultural modernisation has further exacerbated the inequalities and emphasised the exploitation of the agricultural labourers. The majority of the agricultural workers are being denied their basic rights. So serious is the situation that in certain regions of the agrarian borderland (in the north and mid-west) and in the most highly developed regions various forms of extreme exploitation, to the point of slavery, are accepted practice. No less disturbing is the discrimination which the female workers are subjected to. They work twice as long as their male counterparts and are paid less.





The model of 'modern' agriculture in Brazil is based on the intensive exploitation of the land and its natural resources, on the use of heavy machinery, on monoculture, export orientated production, the increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, on extensive stock breeding and the disdain for the cultural values of the indian and local farming communities. The irrational and environmentally disastrous nature of the modernisation process has had severely detrimental effects on the land, water management and the forest, and has thereby proved that the model of the so-called Green Revolution has reached its limits.

It is the social conflicts which are the most alarming expression of the injustice of the current agrarian model and of the necessity for fundamental reforms. Since the reestablishment of the democratic regime occurred in 1985 and between then and 1998 8.943 social conflicts occurred in the Brazilian countryside. In 5,612 of the cases the conflicts were over land. During the same period the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) recorded 1,167 cases of murder perpetrated against agricultural workers, lawyers, agricultural experts, union leaders and church activists. These murders were all committed in the context of land conflicts. The fact that these crimes go unpunished and the lack of solutions for the dilemma in the country's agriculture both serve to nurture the cycle of violence and conflict.

## Why is Brazil still struggling with the same problem today ?

The fact that Brazil's agrarian problem still remains unsolved today can be explained by historical and structural factors. The history of the latifundium dates back to the beginning of the Portuguese colonisation 500 years ago. While in many countries the concentration of land ownership was considered an obstacle to capitalist development and, therefore, during the course of history agrarian reforms were implemented in different ways. In Brazil, however, Capitalism and the extreme concentration of land ownership always went hand in hand. The process of agrarian reform over the last 50 years is closely correlated with the modernisation of the latifundium, with the increasing trend towards exports, with the growth of agro-industrial complexes and the integration of financial and industrial capital investments with agricultural capital investments and land ownership. This integration of the financial and industrial capital investments with the agricultural, strengthened through the control that the oligarchy exercises over the apparatus of state at all levels, has impeded a resolution of Brazil's agricultural problem. The power of the big private

landowners and backward thinking have invariably won through in the political alliances which control the state. They are responsible for the violence unleashed against any movement bent on the fight for land and agricultural reform.

Since the coming into force of the new constitution in 1988 which acknowledges the social function of ownership and which envisages measures of land expropriation as a means of carrying out an agrarian reform process, social pressure has increased significantly in favour of a redistribution of resources. At the same time the big landowners are endeavouring to hinder the success of the land reform movements with all the means at their disposal. Their initiatives range from projects aimed at the revision of the land reform legislation and the undermining of the legal expropriation instruments to the rise in violent evictions, as currently witnessed in Paraná. Since the beginning of the year there have been twelve evictions in which 54 people have been arrested, 46 injured and 570 families evicted.

## The government's agrarian policy: 'The New Rural World'.



Until now no Brazilian government has viewed land reform as a priority. The present government has expropriated 3.4 million hectares in the last three years. This accounts for less than 2% of the area needed to settle all the landless families. At this pace the problem of the landless would still not be solved in 50 years time. According to information provided by the Landless Workers' Movement, the MST, 70,000 families occupied unproductive land in order to hasten their resettlement.

The timidity manifested in the distribution of the wealth is a result of the alliance of the government with the land oligarchy and of their own perceptions of what land reform actually means. In their view agrarian reform belongs to the realm of social politics and is not regarded as a project of socio-economic development which generates income and jobs. As if this were not enough, the agricultural policy as currently implemented favours the large-scale producers and marginalises the great majority of the small farmers and those running family small holdings. In 1997 alone 1.6 million jobs in agriculture were wiped out. Furthermore, in the last two years more than 400,000 small holders have left their land while the government, chasing their own goal of settling 280,000 families, has fallen short. These figures are a testimony to nothing other than a *counter agrarian reform*.

If one were to believe the government's rhetoric, Brazil is the very model of the birth of a 'New Rural World'. Behind this ideological label there lurks in practice a package of neoliberal measures, through which the government has further exacerbated the agrarian problem in recent years. Namely

1. the beneficiaries have been exposed to the competitive markets without being adequately prepared;
2. the real costs of agricultural production is being imposed on the small farmers; and
3. the transfer of the responsibility for land distribution to the big private landowners. The 'Cédula da Terra' and 'Banco da Terra' (land title and land bank) are programmes established to serve this aim.

The Cédula da Terra Programme is a programme for the purchase and sale of land. This programme is already up and running in the following states : Minas Gerais, Bahia, Pernambuco, Maranhão and Ceará. Before the Cédula da Terra was properly tested and without any evaluation of its repercussions having been carried out, Congress 1998, under pressure from the government parties, approved the Banco da Terra programme. It is an extended version of the Cédula da Terra, which should be valid in all of the states. Both programmes enjoy the support and financing of the World Bank. Apart from the countless problems engendered by excessive debt and the lack of mechanisms for real participation, the Cedula da Terra and Banco da Terra programmes in practice wipe out the social achievements which are established in the constitution and in the land statute : the fulfilment of the social function of property and the means of expropriation. Earlier practice shows that these programmes set out to bring a quick halt to the expropriations, although the government declares that they were only ever conceived as a supplementary measure to the whole land reform programme.



## Agrarian Reform and Human Rights

The Agrarian Reform forms part of the Brazilian State's obligations regarding the human right to food as recognised in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The landless farmers cannot realise their basic right to feed themselves, to free themselves from hunger and malnutrition, if access to the resources of production - in particular to land - is denied to them.

## The fight for land reform

The fight for land and agricultural reform is becoming more and more intense. The movements fighting for land have achieved a lot through land takeovers in which thousands of farmers have been mobilised. These land takeovers are currently the most valuable lever available to pressurise the government. During the course of 1999 76,482 people took part in 599 land takeovers. Thanks to these actions many agricultural workers now have land which they are already cultivating and on which they are exercising their rights.

The movement, which is engaged in the fight for land, comprises various groups. It is active throughout the whole country and enjoys the sympathy of broad strata of Brazilian society. The National Forum for Agrarian Reform and Justice

on the Land provides a forum allowing the most diverse organisations to articulate their views and develop actions for agrarian reform. The forum was founded in 1995 as a pluralistic amalgamation. Social movements and the NRO are to be found there just as are the Union of Agricultural Workers CONTAG, the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) and the Landless Workers' Movement (MST). Meanwhile agrarian reform is viewed by society not merely as a solution for the problems of the rural communities, but as an initiative affecting everybody, as a factor in the generation of income and the creation of jobs, in the curtailment of the migration from the countryside into the congested cities and in the distribution of land and wealth; in other words, as an instrument for sustained development.

In tune with the goals of the National Forum for Agrarian Reform the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform plans the following for the year 2000 :

- The visit by an international delegation of the Campaign within the framework of the Action Days for Agrarian Reform from 10th to 17th April. The visit underpins the lobbying and the support for the work of the national campaign.
- Pressure directed against the Brazilian Parliamentarians, in order to prevent the above mentioned reform of the land legislation.
- International support for the initiative for the creation of upper limits for land ownership.
- Exchange visits by Farmers' and Human Rights Organisations from Central America, South Africa and Germany.
- Work on a study about 'market assisted land reforms' and their effects and consequences in Brazil.
- Promotion of the lobbying work and criticism against the World Bank over the Banco da Terra project.
- Building awareness of the connections between agrarian reform and the right of people to feed themselves.



Global Campaign  
for Agrarian  
Reform

Fact Sheet

The goal of the **Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform of FIAN and La Via Campesina** is the implementation of an agrarian reform which is centred around human rights, and pursues an agriculture which:

- gives the poor peasant families control over the land, seed and water, so that they can live with dignity,
- produces healthy and GM free foodstuffs for all,
- guarantees a sustainable production process which safeguards the principles of healthy nutrition for future generations,
- reinforces the rights of the female agricultural workers
- guarantees the sovereignty of the right of every human being to feed himself
- strengthens the communities in rural areas.

**Further fact sheets on the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform:**

- Agrarian reform and Human Rights
- Agrarian Reform in Honduras
- Agrarian Reform in the Philippines
- World Bank Land Policies
- Agrarian Reform and the Environment
- Agrarian Reform and Women's Rights

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**FIAN (Food First Information and Action Network): For the Human Right to Feed Oneself**

FIAN is the International Human Rights Organisation working for the right to feed oneself. FIAN was founded in 1986 and

today has members in over 60 countries world wide. FIAN's aim is to contribute in the whole world to the implementation of the International Bill of Human Rights.

FIAN works in particular for the right to feed oneself of persons and groups threatened by hunger and malnutrition.



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**La Via Campesina: For the right to produce and for food sovereignty**

Via Campesina is an international movement coordinating organizations of small and middle peasants, agricultural workers, rural women and indigenous people in more than

65 countries in the Americas, Asia, Africa and Europe. The main aim of Via Campesina is to develop the solidarity and unity in diversity between rural organisations in order to promote economic relations based on equality and justice, the defence of their lands, food sovereignty, and a sustainable agriculture based on small and middle producers.