

LAND AND LAND RIGHTS > FARMERS' AGENCY

# Gaining

"Re-peasantisation"



# control:

## in Araponga

Innovative policies in Brazil, such as the Zero Hunger Programme, have

significantly reduced poverty in the past decade. Yet, land distribution remains a serious challenge: 46% of all land is controlled by 1% of the population. In Araponga, farmers have not only been able to acquire land: they have increased their options in a sustainable manner.

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**L**andless sharecroppers and rural wage labourers are the poorest layers of the population in the municipality of Araponga. Until recently they dared not even dream of running their own farms. Most of the land belonged to landlords. “Land grabs” have been happening here for decades, largely because many farmers are vulnerable and do not possess legal documents to their land, even if they have lived there for several generations. This changed when a group of landless sharecroppers organised themselves to purchase land and establish a farm. Since 1987, more than 200 landless families have purchased land covering a total area of more than 700 hectares. This has not gone unnoticed and is being replicated in neighbouring municipalities. Thanks to their agency, or their capacity to act, these seemingly powerless peasants are refuting the commonly-held idea of “the disappearing peasantry”. They have embarked upon a “quest for space” which, over the course of time, has proved successful.

**The “quest for space”** This change grew out of the dissatisfaction of sharecroppers and rural wage labourers in Araponga, a municipality with just over 8000 inhabitants in the Zona da Mata region, in the state of Minas Gerais. Sharecroppers cultivate

land owned by a landlord, in exchange for a share of the harvest. The life of a sharecropper involves hard physical labour and long working days with little control over their harvest or income. Many sharecroppers receive less than half of the harvest (in some cases, they only receive one-eighth of the harvest, despite being promised half in agreements), while they do all the work and are not even allowed to choose which crops to plant or how to carry out farming activities. They are often expected to do extra tasks without extra payment. Rural wage labourers often work under even worse conditions. Some have tried to escape the situation by moving to the city, but many find that life there is even harder.

Farmers became increasingly interested in change after the *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (CEBs) were established in 1979. A Catholic priest trained interested community members to become lay leaders, and form small groups of 5 to 20 neighbouring families, who’d meet twice a week to pray, sing and discuss their everyday problems. The CEBs were one of the products of Liberation Theology, a doctrine that has been embraced by large segments of the Brazilian Catholic church since the mid-1960s. Its advocates argue that, rather than limiting themselves to prayers on an individual level, people could develop a deeper relationship with God by joining hands and helping



**Pooling ideas, commitment and resources.** Photos: Leonardo van den Berg

poor communities. The objective of the CEBs was to promote social justice by helping small communities of Christians to become more autonomous. In Araponga, the establishment of the CEBs increased farmers' *agency* in two important ways. First, it led to a social/cultural redefinition of their way of thinking. Whereas sharecroppers had understood their relationships with their landlords as God given, they started to believe that they could (and, in the name of social justice, should) change them. Second, it led to an expansion in networks: whereas sharecroppers had

previously only had close contacts with their relatives, they now began to establish relationships of trust with other CEB members, which included both their neighbours and members of other CEB groups in and outside the municipality. These sharecroppers began to imagine that the space they were seeking could perhaps be found by establishing their own farms.

### **Control over money, land and labour**

To establish these farms, sharecroppers and wage labourers first had to obtain financial capital and land. This was not easy, as most of them did not have enough money to purchase land. Several people started saving, but soon realised that, given their low earnings, this would take a very long time. A few began to borrow money from their relatives, friends and CEB colleagues. This strategic use of relationships of trust and reciprocity spread, and soon became common practice. Another problem that they encountered was that most of the land was owned by landlords. While some landlords were selling land, they were only selling the areas degraded by their poor farming practices. These areas of land were very large and too expensive for most people. Moreover, most landlords did not trust the sharecroppers. Three brothers, Alfires, Aibes and Niuton Lopes, successfully purchased land for one of them by putting all their money together. Gradually, this type of purchase, known as the "*conquista de terras em conjunto*", became common. Groups of people, mostly consisting of CEB members who trusted each other, started pooling their finances, purchasing a large piece of land and dividing it amongst themselves. To avoid raising the landlord's suspicion, those who already owned land or a small car posed as the buyer. The third obstacle was labour, which was needed for harvesting coffee. To solve this problem, an old traditional practice called "*troca de dias*" was revived. Through this system, farmers mobilised a group of people to harvest on a particular day in exchange for their providing help on another day. This approach was also later used for other tasks, such as weeding. With all these means of production under control, the farmers further increased their capacity to act.

### **A favourable environment**

Several other organisations emerged from the CEBs and *conquista* efforts. In 1989, the *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais* (the Arapongan Farmers' Union) was founded. It began by offering legal support to sharecroppers and wage labourers who were involved in a dispute with a landlord. Later, the union also helped farmers to secure their land rights and acquire the necessary legal property documents for their land. Other organisations began to be established. The *Cooperativa de Crédito* started to offer small, interest-free loans to farmers, making it possible for them to borrow money to purchase inputs. The *Associação dos Agricultores Familiares de Araponga* (or the Araponga Farmers' Association) was

established to purchase seeds, fertilizers, and other inputs in bulk, and sell them to farmers. A regional “umbrella” association was also founded together with other farmers’ unions in the Zona da Mata region to lobby at higher levels to change policies that worked against peasants. In short, the “quest for space” led to a growing number of organisations, all of which, together, created a more favourable environment for peasants.

Yet despite these developments, the future still looked grim for many farmers. Most were mono-cropping coffee, and relied almost exclusively on commodity markets for their inputs, produce and food. With the prices of fertilizers and purchased food increasing, and the coffee price remaining stable, farmers’ incomes were being squeezed. Moreover, their practices were degrading the land. A group of several farmers’ unions (including the Araponga Farmers’ Union) joined forces with a group of recent graduates from the University of Viçosa and founded an NGO, the *Centro de Tecnologias Alternativas Zona da Mata* (CTA-ZM) in 1987. A formal alliance was formed between CTA-ZM, several university departments and the farmers’ union, to analyse the possibilities for promoting farming practices based on agro-ecological principles. As a result, farmers have turned their coffee plantations into agro-forestry systems and now produce for their own consumption. They have also devised several other practices, such as green manuring and multi-storey intercropping – all of which have improved their soil and secured their livelihoods.

**Dealing with future threats** When external threats to land arose, farmers in Araponga were well prepared to fight them off. In 2001, the establishment of a nature reserve, the *Parque Estadual Serra do*

*Brigadeiro*, threatened to displace several farmers. The Arapongan Farmer’s Union and several other organisations were able to renegotiate the contours of the park with state authorities so that most of the farmers could remain. In 2007, when a large corporation was planning to buy a plot of land in the community, several farmers organised themselves and jointly purchased the land so that the area would remain free of actors that they did not trust.

Farmers in Araponga have shown what a seemingly powerless group of sharecroppers and rural workers can do. Driven by a *quest for space*, their agency has contributed to the establishment of new organisations, social relations and arrangements that give them control over key resources. This helps them to ward off external threats and establish diversified agricultural production, with a long-term perspective and in accordance with their own norms, values and quality standards. Araponga has shown that considerable change is possible when family farmers have a strong drive, are able to mobilise and expand their networks of social relations, create a protective environment to secure their rights and devise innovative practices. NGOs and government organisations can play a key role in facilitating this.

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## Agency

The idea of (farmers’) agency emerged in opposition to the “structuralist” line of thought, which argued that human behaviour is determined by large structural forces – and which predicted that the forces of capitalism would lead to the disappearance of the peasantry. In his “Central problems in social theory” (1979), Anthony Giddens argued that, “within the limits of information, uncertainty and other constraints (e.g. physical, normative or politico-economic), social actors are ‘knowledgeable’ and ‘capable’. They attempt to solve problems, learn how to intervene in the flow of social events around them and monitor continuously their own actions, observing how others react to their behaviour and taking note of the various contingent circumstances.” “Agency” refers then to the capacity to act which is embodied in the individual.

In “Development sociology: Actor perspectives” (2001), Norman Long took a different stance by arguing that agency is only manifested, and can only become effective, when individuals interact: “[...] the capacity to act also involves the willingness of others to support, comply with, or at least go along with particular modes of action. Hence [...] agency entails a complex set of social relationships [...] made up not only of face-to-face participants but also of components acting at a distance that include individuals, organisations, relevant technologies, financial and material resources, and media-generated discourses and symbols. [...] How they are cemented together is what counts in the end.”