

RURAL DEVELOPMENT FORESTRY NETWORK

FROM THE FIELD

A Grass-Roots Response to Landlessness in Rondônia, Brazil

Nicolette Burford

Traditional Uses of Native Shrubs in the South of Puno

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*Hermes Torres, Rolain Borel, Nicanor Bustamente and María
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(adapted from: Torres et al, (1992), *Usos Tradicionales de
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Nicolette Burford can be contacted care of FATA, Caixa Postal 231, Cidade Nova, CEP 68,501-970, Marabá, Pará, Brazil.

Hermes Torres, Nicanor Bustamente and María Isabel Centeno can be contacted care of Proyecto Arbolandino, Apartado 965, Correo Central, Puno, Perú. *Rolain Borel* is Director, Ecology for Peace Masters Programme, University of Peace, Department of Natural Resources, Apartado 222, Plaza Viquez, San José 1001, Costa Rica.

Michael Richards is a Research Fellow of the Rural Development Forestry Network, ODI, Regent's College, Inner Circle, Regent's Park, London NW1 4NS, UK.

Stephanie M Harris is Overseas Projects Coordinator at the Henry Doubleday Research Association, National Centre for Organic Gardening, Ryton-on-Dunsmore, Coventry, CV8 3LG, UK.

A GRASS-ROOTS RESPONSE TO LANDLESSNESS IN RONDONIA, BRAZIL

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INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of an ambiguous and often contradictory legal system and biased law enforcement in Amazonian Brazil, many landless farmers, in their quest for land, have begun to take the law into their own hands. A number of organizations exist in Rondônia, amongst them the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), the Rural Workers' Union (STR) and the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), directly involved in coordinating and stimulating the rural workers' fight for land and rural development incentives. Much of the work of these organizations takes place at grass-roots level within the community. Their primary aim is to raise the rural population's awareness of how political structures, agricultural policies and, in some cases, environmental policies, act to impair or paralyse their prospects for securing a decent standard of living. In this way they seek to stimulate rural resistance to brutal coercion and oppression by large landholders and their privately-hired militia. They also provide advice and legal assistance for squatter families harassed by landlords, the police or government officials.

THE LANDLESS RURAL WORKERS' MOVEMENT (MST)

The MST is the organization most active in practically organizing landless families to take occupation of large unutilized landholdings. This movement emerged in the Southern States of Brazil in the early 1980s. It has grown steadily in Rondônia since 1985. Its regional headquarters in Ouro Preto do Oeste is run by a 14-strong team whose members offer their multi-faceted services in return for subsistence allowances. Claims to large areas of land made by wealthy, often absentee, landlords are scrutinized to identify holdings that qualify for compulsory expropriation without compensation, ie holdings that from a legal point of view are public lands (**terras devolutas**) since their alleged owners either possess false land titles or have failed to satisfy the conditions attached to contracts they entered into with the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA). Holdings deemed eligible for expropriation on the basis of invalid land documentation are then further investigated to determine whether their soils and water sources can support farming families and to ensure that they are located in malaria-free areas adequately serviced by the infrastructure.

Whilst this takes place, MST contacts landless people throughout the State, informing them of how they can be helped by the Movement. In particular it attempts to reach **posseiros** illegally squatting in Indian and forest reserves, the urban homeless, landless families staying with relatives in the countryside, and share-croppers and tenant farmers.

Families that express an interest in joining an MST-organized land occupation are screened to verify that:–

- ! they have never sold land and;
- ! they want to acquire land for its productive, and not speculative, value.

If they appear to comply with these criteria, they are invited to attend a 4-5 day intensive MST

workshop designed to impart organizational skills and heighten political awareness.

ORGANIZED LAND OCCUPATIONS (ACAMPAMENTOS)

The initial land occupation takes the form of an **acampamento** (camp). In mid-1991 there were a total of three **acampamentos** in Rondônia; one in the municipality of Pimento Bueno (number of families not known), one in the municipality of Ariquemes (about 30 families) and one in the municipality of Colorado do Oeste (about 90 families). An **acampamento** resembles a village composed of makeshift shelters covered with polythene sheeting. Depending on the size of the holding targeted for expropriation, one **acampamento** may accommodate over 500 families.

Within an **acampamento**, emphasis is placed on collective work. Cooking, fetching water and collecting firewood are done by work groups on a rotational basis. A school is built in which children are given daily lessons by the **acampamento's** literate members. A pharmacy is set up, staffed voluntarily by one or two **acampamento** members whose training in the preparation of herbal remedies is sponsored by the MST and CPT.

Each day, **acampamentos** hold a session during which literate members read out newspaper articles and other literature on issues such as land disputes and the law, environmental projects and policies, farming methods, crop marketing and so on. Members then debate on how these issues relate to their present situation and future prospects as well as to small farmers in general. Daily meetings are also held to review the latest developments. At these, **acampamento** members analyze how they have dealt with situations of conflict and the attitudes they adopted in negotiations with the police and/or INCRA, in order to identify weaknesses in their tactics and seek ways to improve the presentation of their case. All present take turns to express their opinions. Throughout an **acampamento**, one or more MST workers are present to assist with the organization of all activities.

Acampamento members are encouraged to begin farming the occupied land without delay. Invariably this provokes a violent reaction from landlords who, with the help of the police and **pistoleiros** (privately hired gunmen), usually manage to evict them and destroy their crops within a matter of weeks. Meanwhile, with the assistance of the CPT, the MST files legal proceedings against the landlord. Whenever **acampamento** members are thrown off the land, they immediately organize its reoccupation. They may have to reoccupy the land four or five times over a one- or two-year period or even longer, before the MST wins the legal battle to have it expropriated and transferred into their names.

Everyone, from the time of joining an **acampamento**, is urged to seriously consider how they will manage their land once it is permanently theirs. In most **acampamentos**, about half the families prefer to work as part of a cooperative. This means that when their plots are eventually demarcated, 50% will be amalgamated to be farmed on a collective basis and the other 50% pooled to form a block legal forest reserve. MST guarantees that in all the post-settlement extension work it undertakes, equal priority is given to farmers who choose to farm independently.

At the **acampamento** in Colorado do Oeste, currently the largest in Rondônia, farmers who intend forming a cooperative are considering a 30-year agroforestry rotation system which would include the growing of certain commercial timber species as well as some tree species chosen

specifically for their ability to help restore soil fertility. They envisage clearing more natural forest to install the system than they would otherwise clear in the short-term, but claim it is the sustainability of the system that interests them and that this would protect any remaining forest from future threat. They are learning to graft Brazil nut trees and are gathering information on the compatibility of different tree and crop species. They are also studying the market for non-timber tree products as they do not wish to commit themselves to planting single-purpose trees whose produce is of low economic value.

The first landholdings occupied by MST to have been expropriated by INCRA in Rondônia were two adjacent holdings in the Seringal in the municipality of Espigão do Oeste. Part of one of these holdings and the whole of the other were expropriated by INCRA in March 1990, after 9 months of occupation. Shortly thereafter, INCRA divided the approximately 9000 ha involved into 30 ha sized plots and allocated these along with provisional land titles to the 318 occupant families. Only a small section of the land had been converted from forest to pasture. The rest was covered with forest that had been illegally depleted of its timber stocks by its previous alleged owners.

TREE PLANTING AT THE SERINGAL SETTLEMENT

Twenty-eight of the families settled in Seringal pooled their land and formed a cooperative. In a joint effort these families planted 2,400 trees in the rainy season of 1990/91, on land which did not form part of their legal forest reserve. The tree seedlings, a mix of eight species including indigenous timber and multi-purpose species, were supplied by a private nursery in Pimento Bueno. They were planted by the settlers in lines cut by them through degraded forest and forest regrowth (**capoeira**) as well as on slopes, in stony areas and amongst their food crops. The trees are all regularly inspected, weeded and mulched. Had the nursery more stock, they would have planted more — they requested a further 2,500 seedlings from the nursery to plant in the 1991/2 rainy season.

They claim the capacity of the nursery in Pimento Bueno is too small and, on account of its distance, transportation of the seedlings is slow and expensive. They are, therefore, planning to create a nursery on their own land to supply other farmers in their region with seedlings. Lack of professional guidance, equipment and transport is, however, holding them back. Although they received some advice from Pimento Bueno's nursery staff, they lacked sufficient knowledge about the light requirements of the different species at the time of planting. Some of the trees were planted in the wrong places and have suffered from exposure. Now they are planting banana stems around the affected trees in an effort to save them. To help prevent such mistakes in the future, they want one or two forestry extension officers to be posted in their district.

The reasons the cooperative members gave for planting trees were to control erosion and run-off, to maintain wildlife habitats and provide future generations with timber resources. They expressed their concern about the imminent exhaustion of Amazonia's timber resources. When asked why they thought individual farmers in Rondônia rarely planted trees they explained that individuals generally do not look far into the future whereas a group of people working together is more likely to think in the way a government should, ie in terms of longer time spans and is, therefore, also more likely to pay attention to environmental conservation and associated long-term benefits.

POSSE AND LAND SALES

Right-wing political factions are derisive of MST's political credentials, accusing the organization of merely providing **posseiros** with free land which they then sell for a quick financial gain, fuelling, as it is said, an '**indústria de posse**'. Indeed, government spending on INCRA colonization projects during the 1970s and 1980s has come under similar criticism.

During the 1980s land prices in Rondônia increased dramatically as, in consequence, did the potential gains from land speculation. Mahar (1989) traces the increase back to a number of causes including infrastructural improvements, fiscal incentives, credit subsidies, the growth in the timber trade and the growth in demand generated by rapid in-migration. According to Hecht and Cockburn (1990) at one time families with definitive titles to land in Amazonia could sell their land for more money than they could earn by continuing to farm it for the next five years. Clearly, the temptation to sell land has been exceptionally great in certain localities at certain times.

In 1986 FIPI undertook a sample survey of colonization projects along the BR-364 highway to furnish information on Rondônia's colonist turnover rate (Martine, 1991). The results indicated that by 1986 only 41% of the families originally settled still occupied their plots. In the World Bank funded Machadinho project, 24% of settler families interviewed in 1985 had left their plots by 1986.

MST recognizes the fact that there has been a high incidence of smallholder participation in the speculative land market. However, the Movement maintains that the decision of many colonists to sell their land is not so much based on visions of speculative profits but rather on the exigencies of circumstances beyond their control. Colonists have commonly been known to sell part or all of their land to lift themselves out of debt or to pay medical bills. In more remote isolated regions and areas where poor soils prevail, farmers encounter difficulties in trying to sell their plots. Unable to make ends meet, ie not being able to raise enough food for their families or to transport their crops to market, they simply abandon their plots — often permanently — and search for work elsewhere.

MST only permits the participation in **acampamentos** of families who express a long-term commitment to developing a landholding. Members have been warned of the complications that will arise if they attempt to sell the land they obtain within the five-year period, during which they will only have provisional INCRA land title deeds. Furthermore, the Movement seeks to exhort families into not selling the land they receive for at least 15 years. Currently it cannot enforce such a regulation. However, it has submitted a petition to the National Congress pressing for a decree to be passed that will make it unlawful for settled families to sell land within 15 years of having been settled.

Current speculation indicates that the market demand for land has reached an all-time low in Rondônia. This is reputed to be partially due to the State's stagnating economy as its gold and timber resources approach exhaustion. The value of land has also declined as a result of the Government having removed fiscal incentives for forest clearance and pasture formation and having reduced the subsidy element in rural credit. Consequently, the number of large landholders willing to allow their land to be expropriated by INCRA in return for compensation payments is said to have risen remarkably. However, INCRA does not possess the funds to purchase unproductive land from private owners.

The situation of small farmers having to, but yet not being allowed to, sell land is inherently

problematic. Those who are landless because they sold their land are generally bound to remain landless, whatever the reason for selling. Whilst the importance of safeguards against the abuse of free access to land is not questioned here, it is perhaps more important to ensure that smallholders are not victimized by the limitations inherent in any such safeguards. The extent of these limitations is linked to, and exacerbated by, agricultural policies that discriminate in favour of large-scale mechanized farming. They have also been made manifest by INCRA settling migrant farmers on infertile land. Undeterred by its awareness of the dilemmas facing these misplaced families, INCRA, attempting to avoid expropriating land, has repeatedly offered MST two portions of infertile, reputedly malaria-infested, public land in the municipalities of Pôrto Velho and Pimento Bueno, for the settlement of **acampamento** participants. MST has always firmly rejected these offers. This demonstrates that INCRA's treatment of land reform is fundamentally bureaucratic and divorced from a broader agrarian context.

Finally it should be pointed out that, given quality soils, the vulnerability of smallholders to landlessness remains a compounded measure of deficiencies in the targeting of rural credit, agricultural extension services, marketing networks, infrastructural facilities and food pricing policies. These deficiencies and the market distortions they underpin, together with inadequate health and education facilities, undermine the ability of farmers to use their land in a productive and sustainable manner. Clearly land security on its own is not enough to ensure the colonist farmer's survival at the forest margin.

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ACRONYMS

CPT	<i>Comissão Pastoral da Terra</i> , Pastoral Land Commission
INCRA	<i>Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária</i> , National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform.
MST	<i>Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra</i> , Landless Rural Workers Movement
STR	<i>Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais</i> , Rural Workers Union