
Land grabbing and its consequences: The case of Brazil

Throughout history, rural areas have been occupied two different ways in Brazil. One of them is the colonial, capitalist and entrepreneurial way, which is nothing new, but has recently gained new momentum and adopted new methods. The other way of occupying rural land, which dates back to before the capitalist production model, is that of peasant agriculture, based on the way of life of indigenous peoples and traditional communities

Capitalist enterprise views land ownership as a means of production aimed at the reproduction and accumulation of capital; it focuses on profits, and as a result, develops productive activities that will generate the greatest revenues. This model has been strongly supported by governments, through public procurement programmes, insurance schemes, price guarantees, loans, infrastructure, etc. In order to take advantage of these state policies, in some cases, land ownership alone is enough to guarantee profits – the land does not even need to be used to produce anything.

On the other hand, in the case of peasant agriculture, indigenous peoples and traditional communities focus production on the social reproduction of the community. The work is carried out by members of the family themselves, who seek to cultivate the most diverse range of foods possible and use agricultural practices adapted to the local environment. In this model of production, which does not receive the support of governments, communities live in precarious conditions and lack access to basic services, and therefore confront numerous difficulties. Nevertheless, this is the model of production that continues feeding the world, and currently involves around three billion people.

Up until a short time ago, the big international, multinational and transnational economic groups sought to establish control over production chains through inputs such as seeds, chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and through the processing and marketing of agricultural products. These efforts were strongly encouraged by the state apparatus, through universities, research centres, government technical assistance agencies, financial incentives, etc., demonstrating that the state works for these big economic groups. However, capital market saturation in the so-called “core” countries and the imminence of a crisis due to the speculative nature of this capital have led to massive new investments in rural areas, primarily in the countries of the so-called “periphery”.

Companies come to buy up land, invest in the production of commodities, accumulate profits, and then channel the capital invested and revenues generated back to their countries of origin. This is a new process of colonization and plunder of the countries of the so-called Third World, although in the discourse used by the companies it is portrayed as “sustainable production”. It is the last frontier in the advance of the capitalist model of production, by way of the “green economy” and investment in the production of biomass to meet the energy demands of the industrialized countries, through plantations of sugar cane, eucalyptus, soybeans, oil palm, etc. The aim is to reap profits by continuing to feed an unsustainable model of consumption.

What is most remarkable is that these companies are eagerly and enthusiastically welcomed by governments. In the case of Brazil, this included the launching of the second phase of the so-called Growth Acceleration Programme (PAC), with planned investments of 955 billion Brazilian reais

(around 530 billion US dollars), including 465 billion reais in energy production (through 104 projects) and 104.5 billion reais in transportation (3,157 km of railway lines, ports and airports), which are essentially investments aimed at improving infrastructure for the benefit of these companies and their production.

At the centre of this situation in which the state apparatus is at the service of the capitalist model of production and development, reforms to the Brazilian Forest Code are currently making their way through Congress, thanks to omission and/or collusion on the part of the executive branch. The underlying objectives of the reforms include an amnesty for environmental crimes and the expansion of the agricultural frontier. The relaxation of labour laws in the countryside is also being fast-tracked through Congress, while a Constitutional Amendment Bill (PEC) establishing the expropriation of landholdings where slave labour is used, although tabled ten years ago, has yet to be submitted to a vote.

In the meantime, another proposed constitutional amendment, PEC 215, is moving quickly through the Brazilian Congress. Under this amendment, the power to demarcate the territories of indigenous peoples and quilombola communities (traditional communities of descendants of escaped African slaves) would be taken away from the executive and transferred to the legislative branch. Approval of this amendment would signify an enormous step back for the demarcation of indigenous and quilombola lands, considering the conservative bent of the Congress in which the majority of members are either large landholders themselves or have close links with them. And finally, quilombola communities, whose territorial rights are guaranteed in the Brazilian Constitution, are fighting against an action underway in the Supreme Court aimed at the annulment of Decree 4.887/2003, which regulates the process of the demarcation of their territories.

The new phase of land grabbing has direct impacts on all of humankind, but the consequences of this process for peasant farmers, traditional communities and aboriginal peoples are brutal, because the expansion is happening on their territories. On one hand, the rising price of land prevents peasant families from buying land; on the other hand, it motivates those who own parcels of land to sell them, pushing them out of the countryside, whether to make way for infrastructure projects or for the expansion of capitalist enterprise.

The growth in the production of commodities and agrofuels, and in the use of toxic agrochemicals, seriously threatens the food sovereignty and health of the population. The increasing use of agrochemicals also works to the detriment of the production of healthy food through agro-ecological farming practices. And it should be stressed that there are currently one billion people in the world who suffer from chronic hunger and 800 million who face a situation of food insecurity, while every five minutes a child dies from malnutrition. Who will produce food for all of these people if capitalist enterprise continues its advance on the lands of peasant farmers? The logical outcome will be a decrease in the production of food crops, which will lead, in turn, to higher food prices and more hunger.

Another serious risk we are facing due to large-scale specialized agriculture is the reduction and concentration of the food products consumed by humans to just a few: "Today, of the 50,000 plants used as food worldwide, 200 are used to a significant extent, 100 are commercially marketed, but 80% of the food consumed comes from 20 crops, and of these, wheat, rice, corn and soybeans represent more than 85% of grains consumed (Guterres, 2006)." What are the consequences of this limited diet for human health?

Finally, large-scale production in tropical countries, which have high degrees of biological diversity,

leads to environmental dysfunctions, converting simple insects into powerful plagues and creating fungi and bacteria that cause serious diseases. The solution adopted is the intensive use of toxic agrochemicals, which has resulted in environmental disasters, the contamination of food, and the proliferation of neurological diseases, cancer, birth defects, etc.

Society needs to adopt a position on this matter before it is too late. Rural communities, who are guardians of life, are being threatened, and are responding with struggles of resistance and confrontation. The advance of capitalist enterprise is met with resistance every step of the way, but in order to stand up against this model of production, a global effort is needed. This is a struggle that must be waged by everyone, not only communities who live in the countryside. The involvement of everyone is needed to fight back and to build another possible world.

Globalize the struggle, globalize hope!

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Guterres, Ivani, "Agroecologia militante: contribuciones de Enio Guterres", São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2006.

You can participate in the fight against PEC 215, mentioned above, by signing the online petition at <http://www.peticaopublica.com.br/PeticaoVer.aspx?pi=P2012N22454> and another online petition against the revocation of the decree regulating the demarcation of quilombola lands: <http://www.peticaopublica.com.br/?pi=P2012N23370>