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Seeds & Change

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Sue Branford reports on how Brazil's landless peasant movement is going organic.

A biting wind blows straight across the rolling open fields of Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul. The sun is shining but it is bitterly cold. Adriana, a 15-year-old girl, is spraying rows of onion seedlings with biofertilizante, an organic fertiliser. She works methodically, carefully, because she is helping her parents to 'purify' seeds. After two harvests tended only with natural products, without chemicals, they can be classified as organic and her parents, who live on the Conquista da Fronteira settlement, run by Brazil's Landless Movement, the MST, will be able to sell them to the movement's own organic seed producer, Bionatur.

The biofertilizante is homemade. Gilmar Paulo Zanovelo is mixing his in a plastic drum in a shed behind his wooden house. 'About 20 ingredients go into it,' he says. 'Cattle manure, calcium, phosphate, milk, sulphur, honey; all natural ingredients. It only costs about 20 reais (£7) to produce 200 litres, so it's much cheaper than a chemical fertiliser. Plants that are fed with it grow slowly but sturdily. They become very resistant to disease.' The Bionatur company was set up in the south of Brazil because the cold, dry climate makes it an ideal region for growing seeds. The biotechnology companies, including Monsanto, also run all their seed operations from here.

Bionatur's production is still small, but it is an important step in the landless peasant movement's slow, often hesitant, move into agro-ecologia – sustainable farming. After a long battle with the authorities, the MST, founded in 1985, has won land all over Brazil for the people it represents. Today it runs about 1,200 settlements, where around 100,000 families live. Without the MST, these families would have been forced to migrate to shanty towns in Brazil's cities, or to try to survive as seasonal labourers on the big farms.

Winning rights to the land was an enormous achievement for the MST. At first, the families thought that, in comparison, farming it would be simple. All they would have to do, they thought, was copy the farming methods used by the big farmers. They couldn't have been more mistaken.

Claudemir Mocellin who, as a child, went with his father on one of the first land occupations organised by the MST, is today a qualified agronomist and passionate supporter of organic farming. Shutting the door of his office so that he can escape from the horde of settlers who have come to talk to him, he says that in the beginning the MST got it wrong. 'We reproduced the system. We wanted the most modern hybrid seeds. We used the most lime, the most fertilisers. We wanted to have the biggest machines and the largest harvests.' But it didn't work. 'Families found that, as their soils got exhausted, they were spending more and more on fertilisers and pesticides. Their purchases on these modern inputs started absorbing 60, 70 per cent of the price they got for their crop. It didn't make any sense.'

'We got very worried by what was going on around us,' says José Armando de Oliveira, an agronomist at CETAP (Centre for Alternative Technologies), one of the main centres of organic farming in Rio Grande do Sul. 'Small farmers, including MST settlers, were moving into soyabeans in a very big way,' he adds. 'They were using a lot of pesticides. We could see it was ruining their land and damaging their health, but for a long while they wouldn't listen to us. The propaganda in favour of chemical farming was so strong that people didn't believe that an alternative model was possible.'

The pressure for change, says Claudemir, came from the families themselves. 'We didn't wait for the MST leadership to alter its policy. We started to do the sums. If a family plants 10 hectares of soyabeans, it might produce 400 bags, which sounds a lot. But then it has to use the proceeds from 200, or even 300, bags to cover all its costs. It might have just 100 bags left. That would bring in 1,500 reais (£500). How can a family of four or five people live on that for a year? Especially if it has to buy all its food? I was getting really worried about the ecological problems – farmers were applying five litres of poison

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for every hectare of farming land. Imagine what that was doing to the soil! But what made people start changing were the economic arguments. People began to realise that they didn't necessarily get any better off by having a bigger crop, if they were spending a lot on their inputs.'

The MST's switch into ecological farming has the full support of one of Brazil's leading environmentalists, José Lutzenberger. He, like Claudemir, believes that peasant farming is the agriculture of the future. 'What we call modern agriculture is totally unsustainable,' he says. 'It works with resources that do not grow back. It uses absurd amounts of energy; more energy in the inputs than it fixes in the photosynthesis, and it causes tremendous social and ecological havoc all over the world.'

Lutzenberger is giving courses in sustainable farming to MST settlers. 'It's not really a case of teaching them new things, but of recovering knowledge they had in the past; techniques like painting fruit trees with whey from cheese-making to prevent fungus,' he said. 'It's been very good to see the change in mentality in the MST,' he added. 'It's encouraging but not enough. We need to forge a much broader alliance to stand up to destructive modern farming.'

Sue Branford is writing a book with Jan Rocha on Brazil's Landless Movement to be published by the Latin America Bureau in spring 2002.

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