Brazil: Community management of the forests and Cerrado in defence of territories and food sovereignty

Since the colonial era, the history of land tenure in Brazil has been marked by the expulsion of indigenous,*quilombola* (1) and peasant communities from their territories by large landholders, including companies. As a result of this process of " deterritorialization", the population of Brazil is now roughly 85% urban, and the country has one of the most unequal distributions of land ownership in the world. Another consequence of this process is the rupture of ties between communities and their territories and biomes. Many new generations of indigenous, quilombola and peasant communities are no longer able to learn or practice a way of life based on the rich diversity of plants and animals in some of Brazil's main biomes, such as the Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Forest), Amazon Rainforest and Cerrado (tropical savannah).

However, large landholders have not always succeeded in breaking the ties between these communities and their territories. The resistance and determination of many communities have proven stronger. In search of freedom and a way to overcome the panorama of violence and loss, many peasant, *quilombola* and indigenous communities have resisted and organized to fight back, not only to regain control of their territories, but also to show that their ways of using and managing these territories, in close connection with local biodiversity, are far more beneficial for the communities themselves, for local economies and for nature than so-called "modern agriculture". Traditional peasant agriculture, based on agroecology and agroforestry systems, represents a stark contrast to the vast stretches of relatively unproductive pastureland and large-scale monoculture plantations that use massive amounts of toxic chemical pesticides and fertilizers – which currently predominate in the Brazilian rural landscape and are primarily geared to export. This so-called "modern" agricultural model causes many deaths due to the intensive use of toxic products, exacerbated by the use of transgenic seeds. In the meantime, peasant, indigenous and *quilombola* agriculture contributes to food sovereignty and stimulates life in these territories, while providing 75% of all of the food consumed by the Brazilian people.

Here we present a few examples of struggles waged in Brazil (2) which, beyond guaranteeing territorial rights, have strengthened and motivated the communities involved, as well as inspiring others who, alongside the fight for land, have implemented land use practices that generate life and diversity, autonomy and food sovereignty, self-sustenance and income. Through the community-based management of their territories, the communities involved have managed to strengthen their resistance and achieve advances in the hard-fought struggle to guarantee their control of the land.

- Vereda Funda, Minas Gerais: The struggle against industrial eucalyptus plantations

More than 30 years ago, an area of more than a million hectares of land in the north of the state of Minas Gerais was taken over by companies that operate large-scale industrial plantations of eucalyptus trees for the production of charcoal, used as a source of energy for the region's iron smelters. The companies were mainly interested in the high plains areas called *chapadas* . These lands were used by the traditional communities of the region, known as *geraizeiras,* to graze their

cattle and gather the many fruits and medicinal plants of the Cerrado. As a result of the invasion of eucalyptus plantations, these communities were left trapped in the valleys, and their streams and springs dried up. When they tried to gather firewood in the *chapadas* , they were deprived of the freedom to move about in their own territory and were even prosecuted as criminals.

Motivated by meetings promoted by the Alert Against the Green Desert Network, several communities in the north of Minas Gerais, including the 130 families of the community of Vereda Funda, began to organize to recover their territory, which had been leased by the state government to Companhia Florestaminas, a plantation company. When the lease contract expired, the community, inspired by other struggles, mobilized in 2005 and with the support of La Via Campesina reoccupied its traditional territory of approximately 5,000 hectares.

After a great deal of struggle, confrontation and persecution, the community gained control of the area, pressuring the Minas Gerais state government to transfer the land to INCRA – the federal government agency responsible for agrarian reform – and establish an agro-extractivist settlement. On the settlement, each family was to have its own area to plant crops, and there would also be collective areas for agro-extractive production and livestock grazing. With the support of the union of rural workers of Rio Pardo de Minas and the Centre for Alternative Agriculture of Minas Gerais, the community drew up a plan for the reoccupation of the territory and a map indicating the areas where they would promote the rehabilitation of the native *Cerrado* vegetation and those where they would plant crops. The recovery of their territory breathed new life into the community, especially the older members. Once the plantations were removed, the streams began to flow again and wild animals began to return to the area. The recovery of their freedom was one of the community's main victories.

Currently, the members of the community of Vereda Funda are implementing an agroforestry system and they are once again growing their own food: corn, beans, cassava and other crops. They plan to expand food production using agroecological practices, as opposed to the heavy reliance on chemical products of the former eucalyptus plantations. The women of the community, who actively participated in the struggle to recover their territory, have started up a small industry for the production of fruit preserves, generating income and creating employment for themselves and their families.

- Antonino and Guaraqueçaba, Paraná: The struggle against a REDD project

Since the end of the 1990s, a forest carbon project has severely affected dozens of traditional communities, including *caiçara* (3), indigenous and *quilombola* communities, in the municipalities of Antonino and Guaraqueçaba. This project is currently classified by the Brazilian Forestry Service as one of the “REDD actions that have yielded good results.”

But this forest carbon project, promoted by SPVS, a Brazilian nature conservation NGO, led to the expulsion of traditional communities from the region, one of the best preserved areas of the Atlantic Forest in Brazil. The fact that this area of forest is so well preserved is precisely due to the communities who have traditionally lived in the region and have always sought to live in harmony with the forest, growing crops on small areas of land to feed their families and carrying out other activities that never caused the destruction of the forest.

The SPVS project, undertaken in partnership with the US-based NGO The Nature Conservancy (TNC), blamed the local communities for the destruction of the forest and began to persecute them if they attempted to enter the forest, prohibiting them from fishing, hunting, raising crops, etc. Numerous people have been detained by the police, who act on behalf of the SPVS. In fact, however,

those responsible for the deforestation were ranchers who were using the area for buffalo farming.

One of the communities, Rio Pequeno, organized with the help of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) and occupied an area of land that was used by its members, but for which the property title was held by a large rancher who planned to sell it to the SPVS. In this area, which was considerably degraded by the deforestation caused by the rancher, the community not only resisted the police's attempts to evict the families, but also began to collectively implement an agroforestry system. This system has been a success because it has not only guaranteed the recovery of the land, but has also generated income for the community's families at the same time, combining fruit trees with various crops to provide food for the community and for sale in the region. For example, the settlement currently produces food through this system for a federal government programme that supplies food to public schools in the region.

The experience of this community is not only an example of resistance to REDD projects, but also demonstrates the importance for communities to organize and to design and implement proposals to defend their territories so that they remain under community control. This in turn demonstrates how it is possible to live well and, when necessary, to rehabilitate the land, guaranteeing the autonomy and food sovereignty of communities. There are currently efforts underway to create a solidarity network among all of the communities in the region affected by the REDD project to strengthen resistance.

- Baixo Parnaíba region, Maranhão: The struggle against Suzano's biomass plantations

The territories of dozens of traditional communities in the Baixo Parnaíba region of the state of Maranhão have been invaded in recent years by the pulp and paper company Suzano, which has deforested areas of *chapada*– transitional areas between the Cerrado tropical savannah and the Amazon Rainforest in northeast Brazil – to establish eucalyptus plantations. Suzano's objective is to produce wood pellets to be exported to the United Kingdom for use in biomass energy plants, as a supposedly “renewable” source of energy.

But there is nothing “renewable” about the devastation caused by Suzano, which has been destroying thousands of trees, including the bacuri , a symbol of the traditional communities of the Baixo Parnaíba region, who make use of the tree's entire fruit. Its pulp is used to make a delicious and nutritious juice, and its sale provides an important source of income for local communities, since bacuri is an extremely popular fruit in the urban centres of the state. Its skin or seeds can be made into a tasty jam. The oil extracted from the seeds is used to treat skin ailments, and the fruit can also be used as an anti-inflammatory. The bacuri is a mysterious and fascinating tree, and has been little studied, as is the case with the natural environment of the Cerrado region of Baixo Parnaíba as a whole. The Cerrado, like the bacuri tree, moves at its own pace and sets the rhythm for the human beings who make use of its abundance. The local inhabitants, following the rhythm of the bacuri, normally wait until the mature fruit falls to the ground in order to harvest it. Anyone who knocks down the fruit that is still in the tree can be certain that it will yield less pulp and that the tree will not produce fruit the following year. In this way, the inhabitants of the *chapadas* of the Baixo Parnaíba learn about the limits of nature and, above all, the importance of respecting them.

At the same time as they have resisted the advance of eucalyptus plantations, placing themselves in front of the machinery used to deforest the Cerrado, the local communities have developed small collective projects for community-managed intensive production of bacuri to boost their income and increase cultivation of the fruit at the very time that it is being threatened. Small areas where bacuri trees are managed can provide a good income for local communities. The local inhabitants criticize the currently dominant concept of productivity applied by state government technicians, usually

agronomists, who often consider the Cerrado to be “unproductive”. This is because they do not take into account its thousands of bacuri and pequi trees, laden with valuable fruit, the babassu palms, whose seeds are the source of valuable oil, the buriti trees, whose fruit is used to make everything from jam to wine, and the small clearings on the slopes where the local residents plant various crops all mixed together: rice, cassava, beans, corn, squash, watermelons. In the view of the technicians, productivity means large-scale monoculture plantations and the intensive use of inputs like fertilizers and toxic pesticides. But nobody in the communities of the Baixo Parnaíba region eats eucalyptus, and soy, the other crop grown on large-scale industrial plantations, does not form part of the local “menu”, either.

Final considerations

Community-managed agroforestry systems – a centuries-old indigenous tradition throughout the continent – have demonstrated, with their diversity of trees, including fruit trees, tremendous capacity not only to promote the rehabilitation and conservation of the land, but also to provide a source of food for families and even to contribute to local economies throughout the year. The three experiences described here highlight the rich biodiversity and the value of these biomes for the traditional communities who live in them. By developing these initiatives and improving them through practice, while fighting for their territory, these Brazilian communities now have an important additional weapon with which to wage the unequal battle against companies and other large landholders who are supported, without exception, by governments. These communities deserve the recognition of their practices by society and governments as a viable solution for confronting the multiple crises that humankind is currently facing.

Notes: (1) *Quilombola* communities are traditional communities of descendants of Africans who were brought to Brazil by force in the colonial era to work as slaves. (2) More information on the experiences of these communities can be found in WRM bulletin articles and other publications available on the WRM website. (3) Traditional communities of the southeastern and southern coastal regions of Brazil.