

Luiz Geraldo de Oliveira Moura lives in Ceará in the semi-arid north-east of Brazil. Having seen for himself the damaging impact of the “green revolution”, he began working with peasant families and consumers on an alternative. At his instigation, families in the towns and families in the rural areas have been collaborating for more than a decade in a project geared to regenerating degraded land and to improving living standards for the rural poor. What has emerged is a strong “Social Alliance” that is transforming social relations.

Luiz Oliveira



Tell us a bit about yourself, Luiz?

I'm from Ceará, I was born in Fortaleza. My mother was brought up on a family farm in the Boa Viagem sertão (dry hinterland). She was the daughter of poor peasants, and one of nine children. They had only a very small plot of land, so planted crops on large properties owned by neighbouring farmers. They had no irrigation so they planted in the rainy season, from March to June. My mother, Letícia, was the oldest child and always liked to teach. So she spent a lot of time travelling around the region teaching the children of landowners how to read and write. She spent months at a time at some of these estates, teaching the children.

Every time they had a child, my grandfather, Zeca Pompílio, and grandmother, Francisquinha, would buy a goat to help feed that child. As the child grew up, it learned to look after the goat and its kids. This allowed the children, over the years, to earn money through selling the kids, which they used to cover the cost of basic necessities, such as clothes, shoes, travel, and so on. The goats were tied up in the rainy season and allowed to wander free in the summer, although they were brought back to the farmhouse at night. They made an important contribution – milk, kids and manure.

When she grew up, my mother went to live in Fortaleza, where she married and where I was born, in November 1943. I never knew my father, who died in an accident. But I did know my stepfather, Moura, who helped my mother to educate me and allowed me to become the person I am today. We were poor and lived on the outskirts of the city, where my parents built their own house and worked hard to send me to the state school when I was 13. My mother still lives there but my stepfather died 10 years ago. Until I was 16, I was always in close touch with my grandparents, my great-grandmother, Manuela, who is now 100 years old,

and my aunts and uncles in Boa Viagem. I used to go and stay with them for a few days every year, so I was able to experience the local culture and their way of life, see how they treated each other and the ethical basis of these relationships. None of this was written down, but was completely natural to them, all the time, with family, friends and strangers alike. I also spent time with many of my grandparents' neighbours. I learned a lot from both old and young, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and discovery. My grandfather, who was illiterate, used to tell me that his signature was “a hair from his moustache”. They all treated both wild and domestic animals, the land, plants and water and their crops with great respect and reverence. They did not see them as “inputs” but as a source of life characterised by dignity, co-operation and solidarity.

Then I went down to the south of Brazil to carry on with my education. My parents sacrificed a lot so that I could complete a three-year science course in São Paulo. I went on to study electronic engineering, thanks to a scholarship, and completed that in 1968. Then I worked for a multinational, Ericsson, for 20 years, all over Brazil. I was married for 15 years and have three children and five grandchildren.

How did you get interested in agro-ecology?

As you can see from what I have already said, I always valued the knowledge that local people had. When I left Ericsson and came back to Ceará, I bought 60 hectares of land in the municipality of Baturité. There was nothing growing on that land but it is now really productive. It was a great experience from the environmental, economic and social points of view. But, what really encouraged me to turn to turn to agro-ecology was seeing the impact of the Green Revolution. Family agriculture is based on intuition and ecological principles, crop diversification and subsistence

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agriculture. It produces plentiful harvests that ensure there is enough to eat throughout the year. It provides full employment but leaves time to do other things between the harvests. Instead of all this, the Green Revolution promoted the harmful agricultural practice of monoculture, ignored local knowledge that had been passed down from generation to generation, and glorified technical, scientific and academic knowledge. It imagined this would increase production and productivity every year on the same land and that it would create employment, income and food supply for all the people. In practice, it increased the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few people and increased the concentration of poverty and misery among the many. It also did a lot of environmental damage, by causing physical, chemical and microbiological pollution, as well as increasing genetic erosion. So we decided that we had to come up with an alternative and to promote family agriculture.

What did you think you could do?

I realised that we had to try and change the way society regarded family farmers. For as long as I can remember, people think family agriculture in Brazil is of marginal importance to capitalist society. People think that family farmers are not very bright, are incapable of taking decisions and unable to manage their land efficiently. The children of family farmers do not want to continue working on the farm. Since the Green Revolution, governments have had no policies to promote this sector of society, and see it as a burden rather than as a participant in national development. The government marginalised family agriculture until very recently, in terms of technical assistance, rural extension services, research and credit.

But family agriculture is crucially important. Around 85 per cent of all rural properties are family farms, with more than 13 million people, and they are responsible for producing much of the food consumed in Brazil, including staples. Moreover, it has the very important social and economic role of narrowing the gap between rich and poor and promoting social justice. So we decided to try and change attitudes and to help family farmers, and in 1996 we set up the Centre for Learning and Applied Studies (NEPA) in Fortaleza, and started work with our Social Alliance.

What is the Social Alliance?

The Social Alliance is a project that encourages society to get actively involved in a process of social, economic and environmental change. We bring together urban consumers and rural

producers in a scheme that benefits both groups. Consumers give rural families financial support so that they can cultivate crops in a healthy and environmentally friendly way; in return, they get food that they know is free of chemicals and good for their families. But it's not just an economic relation of mutual benefit. It's more than that. It's a relationship that helps people change the way they live. It's the seed of a new society, a new way of relating.

Let me be more precise. In Brazil we have basically two kinds of rural families – peasant families, who own their land, and *meeiros* (share-croppers) who rent the land and have to give the landowner a large share of their production. We have to work with both groups. Essentially, in a town we form a *núcleo* (small group) of people who are willing to provide some funding – be it R\$100 (R\$2 = US\$1) or R\$50 or R\$25. This *núcleo* uses this money to bring one rural family into the network. The people in the *núcleo* visit the rural family, talk about crops, commit themselves to buying part of the family's produce and discuss how they can help in the recovery of the land. We make sure each time that we plant at least 70 trees, some fruit trees and other native species. Everything happens quite quickly. After 90–120 days the family can harvest its crops and deliver them, in vegetable and fruit boxes, to the families in the towns. Each time the urban families visit their partners in the countryside, they can see for themselves that the landscape is changing and that the families' way of life is being transformed. After six months, we start charging a small fee so that we can raise money for the scheme to be extended.

What are main difficulties?

They usually occur at the beginning, because the scheme means breaking old habits and forming new paradigms. The families take time to believe in the process. For the rural families it seems too good to be true. They are so used to exploitation, they think there must be a catch. But when they start applying the principles of agroecology, using their own knowledge and translating it into practical action, then there is no holding them back. They see the landscape change. Their self-esteem grows. They acquire new experiences. All this happens after about 30 days and then there is no going back. For the urban families it takes a bit longer, about 60–90 days, for them to get really involved in the process. It's then that they start to leave behind the passive and anonymous market relation of selling and buying and to engage in an ethical, respectful relationship in which they express solidarity with the whole process of transformation.

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