

Seven Sins of Agribusiness

By Miguel Enrique Stedile, Jornal Sem-Terra, February 2014

Whoever thinks of agribusiness and imagines large estates producing food for Brazil's refrigerators is gravely mistaken. What the television doesn't tell us is that agribusiness is a form of agricultural production in which food isn't actually produced. It doesn't tell us that agribusiness depends on large amounts of agritoxins, and that what is produced is, in the end, exported abroad – even if public resources are used. Even worse, most land is in the hands of foreign businesses and international banks. Check out below what the real consequences of agribusiness are.

The soils are poisoned

Thanks to agribusiness, Brazil has been the world's largest consumer of agritoxins since 2009. According to official figures more than a billion litres of poison have been thrown onto crops. These agritoxins contaminate food production and the food we consume, as well as water (rivers, lakes, rain and groundwater). They remain in our bodies, including in breast milk. More than that, 22 of the 50 most used poisons on Brazilian fields are prohibited in the European Union, making Brazil the largest consumer of agritoxins which have already been banned in other parts of the world.

Food isn't produced

Agribusiness production isn't meant to feed the Brazilian people. Quite the opposite, agribusiness produces mostly soya for processing into fuel and animal feed for European livestock. Pines and eucalyptus trees are used for making paper while sugar cane is used for ethanol-alcohol.

Typical for large properties and estates, production of this sort takes the place of food production. According to studies, the production of sugar cane and soya has replaced 31% of rice crops, 26% of beans and 35% of wheat.

With reductions in food production have come increases in prices, as happened with tomatoes and onions in 2013. What's more, we end up having to import food that we can produce here, such as the beans we buy from China.

However, family farming, peasant agriculture, and the agrarian reform settlements produce 70% of the food on the plate of the Brazilian worker.

Jobs aren't created

Agribusiness doesn't create jobs. Quite the opposite, it destroys jobs. In São Paulo, the growth of sugar cane production destined for export has translated into 700,000 job losses, according to São Paulo State University. That is to say, almost a million people left the countryside to compete for jobs and try out life in the city.

Agrarian reform and peasant agriculture meanwhile generate about four jobs per hectare (the size of a soccer field). That's why family farming is responsible for 77% of jobs in the countryside in Brazil.

Slave labour is used

Slavery ended about two centuries ago but not for agribusiness. Many agribusiness estates engage in forms of bondage to increase their profits, such as through forced labour, debt slavery, long days and

degrading and exploitative work and working conditions. More than 44,000 people have been freed from slavery in Brazil since 1995.

One of those accused of enslaving workers in his fazendas is the brother of the senator Kátia Abreu (Social Democratic Party for Tocantins). Her brother is also President of the National Confederation for Agriculture, an agribusiness entity.

The government supports it

Agribusiness likes to say it sustains Brazil, but the truth is the opposite. It is thanks to the government that agribusiness is able to get so much money.

In 2013, sugar cane producers received more than R\$6 billion from the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES). Of the R\$111.4 billion of rural credit made available by the government, agribusiness took 85% - at low interest and serviceable over the long-term.

And thanks to the 'Kandir Law' created by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, agribusiness doesn't need to pay export duties. That is to say, nothing is left in the country.

Our wealth is sent abroad

Besides producing neither food nor jobs and poisoning our soil, agribusiness still sends abroad what it earns. This is because the main agribusiness enterprises are European or American, receiving in profits what is produced over here. In 2013 alone these businesses sent 18 million tons of corn abroad to be turned into fuel in the United States.

Our land is handed over

The ease with which money can be made at the cost of the Brazilian people has made land purchases in Brazil a profitable endeavor. As a result, land that could be used for agrarian reform is being bought up by foreigners. Very often they use 'oranges' as a way of getting around Brazilian laws that limit the purchase of land. In fact even the government doesn't know exactly how much land has fallen into foreign hands. In 2008 foreign businesses had already acquired territory the area of 4 million soccer fields.