

Working the land to feed the people

LEVEL TWO - INTERMEDIATE

Pre-reading activities

Key Vocabulary

Match the words in the left-hand column with the meanings in the right-hand column

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| 1 crop | a an area where very poor people live |
| 2 spread | b a large area of land |
| 3 ruthless | c a plant grown for food, usually on a farm |
| 4 shanty town | d a person who works to get social or political change |
| 5 absentee | e control completely |
| 6 estate | f without mercy |
| 7 side effect | g a poor farmer with no land |
| 8 dominate | h growth or development |
| 9 campaigner | i an unintentional effect of a medicine or chemical |
| 10 peasant | j a person who is not present |

Find the answer

Find the answers to these questions in the text:

- 1 How has the MST won land from the government?
- 2 How many people were displaced in the 1970s in the 3 southern states of Brazil?
- 3 How many peasant leaders, union officials and rural workers were killed between 1981 and 1984?
- 4 How many members does the MST have today?
- 5 Why was the attempt by poor families to grow cash crops unsuccessful?
- 6 Why does chemical farming have no future?
- 7 How many families benefited from the government's reform programme?
- 8 How many small farmers lost their land between 1995 and 1999?

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Brazil is one of the world's biggest producers of food but a third of the population goes hungry. The governments and corporations that run the world say that only free markets, the removal of trade barriers and the spread of genetically modified foods (GM foods) can solve this problem. But so far this sort of globalisation has only brought more hunger, not less. But a movement that grew out of violence and despair says it has found the answer. Its solutions are radically different from those offered by the rich countries. It wants to give power to the poor through land reform, education and mobilisation. The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) - the Landless Rural Workers Movement - is now one of Brazil's biggest popular movements, and their red T-shirts, caps and flags can be seen at every demonstration, rally and strike. Through direct action - occupations, marches and confrontations with the authorities - they have won land and rescued hundreds of thousands of Brazilian families from hunger.

Twenty years ago there was a secret war in the vast interior of Brazil. It was an unequal conflict: peasant farmers against ruthless cattle ranchers and landowners, road and dam builders. In the 1970s this policy led directly to the displacement of almost 5 million people in the three southern states of Brazil alone. They became *sem terra* - or landless. They had two choices: move to the shanty towns of the big cities or migrate thousands of kilometres

north to the government colonies in the Amazon, far from roads, schools and hospitals. Those who tried to stop the advance of big capital were murdered. Between 1981 and 1984 alone 277 peasant leaders, union officials and rural workers were killed. It was in this climate of violence that the MST was born. Families had nothing left to lose so they began occupying the estates of absentee landlords.

"We've come a long way in 20 years," said Vilmar Martins da Silva, president of a farm cooperative in one of the many MST settlements on former big estates in Rio Grande do Sul. "By occupying huge unproductive estates, we forced the Brazilian government to introduce land reform. Today we've got about 1 million members."

It has been a difficult journey. At first the families tried to copy the big farmers - planting cash crops instead of food. "We used the most fertilisers. We bought the most modern seeds and the biggest machines. We wanted the largest harvests." But it did not work. "Families were spending more and more money on pesticides and fertilisers, and they were getting ill from the side effects of the chemicals. The land was exhausted. It didn't make sense, either economically or environmentally."

Gradually the families began to use more environmentally friendly ways of farming and went back to growing their own food. "With our concern for biodiversity, we are the truly modern farmers," said agronomist Claudemir Mocellin emphati-

cally. "Chemical farming has no future because it exhausts the land so rapidly. Families have now begun to remember the way their parents and grandparents used to farm".

While the government's agrarian reform programme gave land to 260,000 families, in the same period (1995-99) more than 1 million small farmers lost their land because of market pressures. Only the big exporters of soyabeans, coffee, orange juice and poultry and the transnational companies, such as Cargill, ADM and Bunge, who control the export network, have been successful. If the battle GM foods is lost, the big biotech companies, led by Monsanto, will dominate farming through their control over the seed companies, just as they already do in neighbouring Argentina. Sebastiao Pinheiro, a leading environmental campaigner, has warned: "As the global food and agricultural complex strengthens its control, the avalanche that will come will be terrible."

There is not much room for small family farms in this world, unless they are willing to grow seeds for Monsanto or rear chickens for Sadia. The MST believes that it can confront these forces and win. But the result is still uncertain. Future historians may look back at the MST and see landless peasants who attempted "a revolution that never happened". Or it may just be that the MST are leaders in the global movement towards greater equality and less hunger.

The Guardian Weekly 4-7-2002, page 22

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Comprehension check

Choose the best answer for each question:

- 1 So far globalisation has brought:
a less hunger b more hunger c free markets
- 2 20 years ago the secret war in the interior of Brazil was fought between:
a road and dam builders b poor farmers and rich landowners c cattle ranchers and landowners
- 3 Why didn't the landless peasants want to move to the Amazon region?
a there were shanty towns b there was no land c there were no schools or hospitals
- 4 What will happen if the battle against GM foods is lost?
a big companies will dominate b small farmers will die c small farmers will raise chickens
- 5 What does the MST believe?
a it can win the war against the big companies b people should grow seeds for Monsanto
c the revolution will never happen

Vocabulary Work

Complete these sentences using words from the text or forms of those words:

- 1 GM crops are foods that have been genetically _____ .
- 2 The solutions of MST _____ radically from those offered by the rich countries.
- 3 The MST is one of Brazil's biggest popular _____ .
- 4 Their direct action includes occupations, marches and confrontations with the _____ .
- 5 In the 1970s almost 5 million people were _____ in the three southern states.
- 6 The _____ of unproductive estates forced the government to introduce reforms.
- 7 Chemical farming rapidly _____ the land.
- 8 The loss of the battle against GM foods could lead to the _____ of farming by big companies.

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Prepositions

Complete these sentences using an appropriate preposition:

- 1 The MST grew _____ violence and despair.
- 2 Its solutions are different _____ those offered by the rich countries.
- 3 There have been many confrontations _____ the authorities.
- 4 Peasant farmers fought _____ ruthless cattle ranchers and landowners.
- 5 This policy led _____ the displacement of almost 5 million people.
- 6 The MST is one of the most successful peasant movements _____ the world.
- 7 Companies like Monsanto have control _____ the seed companies.
- 8 There is not much room _____ small family farms.

Now look in the text and check your answers

Discussion

What are the arguments for and against GM foods?

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KEY

1 1c; 2h; 3f; 4a; 5j; 6b; 7l; 8e; 9d; 10g

2 1. through direct action 2. almost 5 million 3. 277 4. about 1 million 5. because they spent more and more money on pesticides and fertilisers 6. because it exhausts the land 7. 260,000 8. more than 1 million

3 1 b; 2 b; 3 c; 4 a; 5a

4 1. modified 2. differs 3. movements 4. authorities 5. displaced 6. occupation 7. exhausts 8. domination

5 1. out of 2. from 3. with 4. against 5. to 6. in 7. over 8. for