Review

Contrasting the impact of the *Movimento dos Sem Terra* – MST and the International Land Coalition - ILC on empowerment of local communities

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The influence of international donors of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) acting in developing countries has been the subject of a significant amount of academic literature. This article adds to such body of study by examining specifically the effect of international donors in the fight for land. Through contrasting how the International Land Coalition - ILC and the Movimento dos Sem Terra - MST work in Brazil the article substantiates the theory that international donors constrain the liberty of NGOs to act freely in determining what is best for local communities. The focus on self-help solutions to local problems and the need to avoid conflict with donors reduces empowerment and chances of eliminating the conditions that originally created poverty and unequal distribution of land.

**Key words:** NGOs, empowerment, international donors, international land coalition, movimento dos sem terra.

INTRODUCTION

Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in the world. The inequality also reflects on land distribution, where property is highly concentrated in the hands of few. By comparing the methods used by the International Land Coalition – ILC and the grassroots Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Sem Terra*) – MST in the fight for land as the object of study, the present article has the purpose to demonstrate how accountability to international donors make non-governmental organizations - NGOs less capable of empowering local communities.

Although the debate regarding local empowerment is common to NGOs acting in all areas, the land issue is a fertile field for study because it presents two highly opposing views for economic development, solving poverty and protecting the environment. It confronts the interest of big agroindustry against that of peasants and small farmers. There is no neglecting the importance that agribusiness has for Brazilian economy, since it corresponds to 23.5% of Gross Domestic Product – GDP (Boadle and Mano, 2017) and 40% of exports (Bernardes, 2018). However, pursuant to Fernandes et al. (2012: 11) small farms employ 74% of the workforce using only 24% of cultivated land and are responsible for...
38% of gross agricultural product. Still, poverty among peasants is widespread. The inequality in the rural area leads to many related problems, such as exodus to big cities and environmental degradation through expansion of giant plantations to forest zones such as the Amazon. Education is a vital aspect of the discussion. According to Meek and Simonian (2017: 516) controlling education is part of the Brazilian elite land strategy to prioritize the current capitalist agroindustry structure, since by teaching that financial success is more accessible in cities they are able to attract workers to the urban areas, where they face poverty and reduce opposition in the fields. Therefore, NGOs that intend to resolve the land issue and empower locals in rural areas need to face the power of big business and foreign governments with impartiality, which may not be the case when they are funded by international donors, as shall argued in the following sections. The first section of the paper will address the greater discussion on donor dependency, not restricting it to the land matter. Subsequently, the paper will contrast the structure and methods of ILC and MST, before finalizing with concluding remarks.

THEORETICAL REVIEW: DONORS, NGOS AND EMPOWERMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The notion of social capital put forward by Putnam et al. (1993) helps to contextualize the discussion on the impact of international NGOs on empowerment. Putnam argued that networking and participation in community associations would be essential for the development of economy. The concept fit perfectly into neoliberal thinking, since it ignored the influence of power, domination and governments. Social capital underpins the rationale that international donors and their chosen NGOs suffice for reducing poverty in developing countries if they are fruitful in bringing community together to fight the problem. Although at first glance the idea of local communion promotes empowerment, scholars such as Harris (2002) argued that social capital would be an ‘anti-politics machine’, preventing demands for relevant social-political transformation. Over time, it appears that the opinion that poverty-relief based on social capital and international donations diminish local empowerment has substance.

The supposition can be evidenced in various situations where NGOs backed by international donors work to mitigate poverty, but without actually changing status quo: (i) Manji and O’Coill (2002) conclude that reliance on international donors have made African countries lose control of social policy; (ii) according to Baruah (2010: 991), microfinance NGOs are always popular among donors, but do not question the balance of power and inequality that leads to poverty; Karim (2008) corroborates the critique and argues that the celebrated Grameen Bank uses women’s fear of dishonor and shame to make the system work, resulting in less female empowerment; Farmer (2008: 10) evidences how excluding governments from health services can lead to less social justice and citizen empowerment; Pfeiffer (2013) states that health NGOs have undermined self-determination with negative long-term consequences for local citizens and infrastructure; Ferguson (2010: 179) mentions that international donations of food supply may actually reduce power of local industry, because they lose market and become more dependent; when studying women’s rights, Alvarez (2009) concluded that feminist NGOs depoliticized local women by making them focus on gender causes that did not contradict the neoliberal agenda, neglecting women citizens’ rights.

Nevertheless, there is room to reason that not all international donors and NGOs are detrimental to local empowerment. Doherty and Doyle (2006: 698) make a distinction between international NGOs that are project focused, have centralized governance and act based on moral principles and those that face the social questions and focus on local causes. The second group would have a positive impact on empowerment. Ferguson (2010: 167, 168) ponders that the Gates Foundation in Mozambique has such an extensive role that it is a sort of 20th century welfare State and that politics may also be seen successful if the poor simply get what they want, moving away from the constant condemnation of the rich and neoliberal policies. With respect to labor rights, it could be claimed that the successful campaign by NGOs against low wages paid to workers producing Nike apparel (Spar and La Mure, 2003) would be an example of international donors empowering locals. Notwithstanding, although these are all noteworthy examples, an opposing view would argue that the Gates case is just another form of colonialism, while the absence of active and powerful unionized movements in Asian countries leaves unproven empowerment in the Nike case.

Therefore, not neglecting the continued controversy, this essay sides with the position that internationally backed NGOs lead to less local empowerment, primarily because of the difficulty for them to act contrarily to the institutions that provide their funding. As per Hulme and Edwards (1997), the proximity between NGOs and international donors lead to a series of negative consequences, such as: having to follow donor’s norms; restrictions on hiring locals; and, emphasis on actions that may generate donor promotion and public relations. Additionally, it should also be considered that many international NGOs are funded by organizations such as the World Bank, which reduced the size of developing countries and, consequently, space for empowerment, by prescribing budget cuts, privatizations and tax incentives for foreign investors. Dansereau (2005) uses the World Bank recommended privatization of the African mining industry to show how it created more poverty, even harder to fight when the State is smaller. Although there are international NGOs that defend policies such as
international debt relief to bring empowerment back to the locals (Manji and O’Coill, 2002: 582), the ILC analysis that follows validates the theory of empowerment limitation.

THE ILC: INTERNATIONAL DONORS GUIDING LOCAL ACTION

The ILC was formed in 2003\(^1\) as a global alliance between civil society and intergovernmental associations aiming to work with the rural poor to increase access to land and natural resources. Its charter provides that it is non-partisan and independent. Accordingly, it does not take political positions, albeit supports members to dialogue with government. In 2018 ILC had over 202 members world-wide (ILC, 2018: 3) and its funding history mirrors the NGOs mentioned by Petras (1997), which are dependent on international donors, primarily European governments, World Bank and the United States.

The World Bank was a founder and initially one of the main donors. However, given that land disputes potentially have political repercussions, a few years after ILC’s creation the World Bank demonstrated concern with reputational risks deriving from the possibility of local members of the organization taking policy positions against the bank’s guidelines (World Bank, 2008: 35). The alert, included in a World Bank review of organizations in which it invests, shows how international institutions may provide constraints to local engagement. Currently, ILC’s main donors are Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, through their respective development agencies, the European Union and the United Nations through the Fund for Agricultural Development – IFAD (ILC, 2015). The list of donors is of utmost importance, since presumably it would be unlikely that Switzerland, headquarters of agribusiness giant Syngenta, accept that ILC funds be destined to projects that may ultimately hurt its own economy. The same can be said for Germany, the most powerful European Union member, and its leading multinational corporation Bayer. These facts and the need to secure funding appear to influence ILC’s stance on the land issue, in which it stays away from controversial positions.

The hypothesis is strengthened after analyzing how ILC conducts its groundwork and interacts with the local member NGOs. In Brazil, ILC has three member NGOs: Sabiá, Espaço Feminista and Centro de Estudos do Trabalho e de Assessoria ao Trabalhador – CETRA (ILC, 2019).\(^2\) All have very similar characteristics and focus exclusively on projects in their respective regions (Sabiá and Espaço Feminista in the State of Pernambuco and CETRA in the State of Ceará). Using CETRA as an example, it is possible to illustrate ILC strategies with local communities.

CETRA’s objectives are to develop social and technical assistance to rural workers and their families, regardless of their political preferences, ideology and religion, aiming at sustainable and human development (CETRA, 2019).\(^3\) An analysis of CETRA’s projects shows that they have a self-help nature and are pointed at very small communities, with limited interaction with outside persons that suffer the same problem. Examples of projects are: (i) promotion of agroecology and sustainability in the Serra do Sertão region; (ii) building networks of local farmers; (iii) promotion of human rights for Tremembé indenigenous population; and (iv) stimulation and support of family agriculture. Certainly, these are all very important initiatives that play an import part in ameliorating the lives of locals, but they have in common their limited range. There is no mention to changing government policy as a solution for poverty. The model, which begins with international donors, has the international NGOs (in this case, ILC) act as broker and finalizes with a local organization in contact with the people is exactly the one described by Petras (1997) that leads to anti-statist views and reduces local empowerment.

An opposing view would argue that the praiseworthy work performed by the ILC and CETRA partnership is backed by theory which sustains that it also empowers. Edwards (2008: 49) makes a distinction between NGOs that have an ‘international development’ vision, where international donors transfer resources with the sole purpose to uphold democratic ideals in non-developed countries, and an alternative ‘global society vision’, in which case international donors and NGOs would partner to alter global consumption patterns that generate poverty and therefore empower locals. When CETRA sponsors family agriculture it could be said that it acts against agroindustry, giving voice and empowerment to the local community. Notwithstanding, what seems to prevail is the characteristic of an NGO that mitigates poverty, without questioning its reasons.

Therefore, ILC’s pattern of action basically replicates the textbook example of NGOs that prioritize individual capacity and elimination of poverty through community projects. In this sense, it clearly builds on Putnam’s social capital concept. Furthermore, the way ILC fragments its investments in different local NGOs, which compete for investments and attention, also jeopardizes empowerment. These features, coupled with the lack of a national or global agenda, lead to depoliticization of local communities and their leaders. The strategy is the opposite of that adopted by the MST, which given its absence of dependency on international donors is not afraid of confrontation if there is chance for structural improvement.

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\(^1\) ILC is a successor of the Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty, created in 1995.


\(^3\) CETRA, 2019, Carta de Princípios, viewed 2nd June 2019, <http://cetra.org.br/index.php/pt-br/institucional/carta-de-princípios>
THE MST: FIGHT FOR LAND AND EDUCATION, DEMANDING STATE ACTION

The MST was created in the eighties and acts by occupying and camping on unproductive land. Once land is occupied, MST activists pressure government and judiciary to legally transfer possession so that they can create settlements by using the Constitutional argument that land in Brazil must have a social function. Until the mid-2000s pressure to legalize land transfer was exerted through highly publicized occupations of government buildings, railroads and roads, a confrontational tactic that has been less used (Meek and Simonian, 2017: 517). Currently, approximately 350 thousand families live in MST settlements in 24 of the 27 Brazilian states, evidencing its National presence (MST, 2019). In such settlements, decisions are taken at general assemblies, building a collective form of society that approximates MST space to its socialist principles.

It is during the second period that MST reverts attention to education, pressuring governments to establish schools in the settlements. Since its inception it has influenced government to create two thousand public schools and provided education to over 250 thousand students, not restricted to those that are part of the movement, since people living close to settlements also benefit (MST, 2019). There are various examples of success in the demands made to government, such as the National Program for Education in Agrarian Reform – PRONERA, whereby MST members were provided with access to postsecondary education that was managed and organized by social movements. These courses include classes in history, politics and cooperative organization, important tools in empowering the local community. This is clearly distinct from educational investments in the poor that result in depoliticization, such as those focused exclusively in training workers to occupy lower paying jobs (Ciavatta and Ramos, 2012; Pahnke, 2017: 10).

MST education has the purpose to make laborers question the structures that are responsible for their poverty and not merely integrate them into market-based solutions.

Accordingly, Meek and Simonian (2017) argue that MST occupies material and immaterial space, since it conquers land for peasants, but also transforms their knowledge, impacting social relations. The authors arrive at such conclusion by examining the Jornadas de Agroecologia, which are encounters bringing thousands of MST members together to participate in various theoretical and practical workshops. Vendramini et al. (2016) have also studied how an important aspect of political empowerment stems from the fact that MST provides education of all levels to its members. In his analysis of MST administered schools Pahnke (2017: 3) praises the emphasis on collective power instead of individuality. Students participate in a wide range of decisions, ranging from which course to take to how to clean the classrooms and what to offer for lunch.

However, the strategy of land occupation and education based on its principles also has a negative side. Acting politically makes MST face constant dispute, such as lawsuits filed by government prosecutors attempting to terminate partnerships with Brazilian public universities (Vendramini et al., 2016: 199, 200). MST’s ideological underpinning also restricts growth, with various forms of opposition, including bills of laws to criminalize the movement (Betim, 2018). Additionally, conflicts have not always produced the best results. In 2003 activists invaded a Monsanto laboratory and destroyed all its apparatus to publicize their fight against transgenics. The images of activists destroying private property was highly publicized by the concentrated Brazilian media which does not let pass opportunities to criticize the movement (Meek and Simonian, 2017: 523). Although MST was successful in closing Monsanto’s facilities, it lost mainstream support. Moreover, it cannot be ignored that land occupations expose their members to violent reaction from landowners and police.

Notwithstanding, the risks inherent to its form of action do not detour MST from its ultimate objectives, which are not limited to reducing poverty exclusively for its members. They defend being part of a national and global movement that can serve as a reaction to the negative outcomes of capitalism (Cazorla, 2018). In the national agenda, MST supports structural battles such as protesting budget cuts in the educational sector (MST, 2019). Their opinions on world issues such as European austerity programs, the conflict in Venezuela or poverty in Haiti are always disclosed (MST, 2019). Knowledge, education, agroecology cultivation and production, as well as constant demand from government and political parties are tools that they use to counterattack the hegemonic domination of multinational corporations and neoliberal thinking. These are all features that show empowerment and many positive outcomes have come from it to the poor, such as land and housing; access to good public education; and, limitation of eight hours a day for working on plantations (Cazorla, 2018: 173); achievements that provide long-term impact for society and not only temporary poverty-relief.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In a study of land issues in the 21st century, Fernandes et

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5 MST, 2019, Solidariedade Internacional, viewed 2nd June 2019 <http://www.mst.org.br/solidariedade-internacional/>
al. (2012) examined for the ILC the agrarian problem in Brazil and concluded that it could be viewed under two completely different perspectives: (i) an ‘agrarian capital paradigm’, which accepts as natural the consequences of a capital society and believes that the form of reducing poverty would be to bring the underprivileged workers to take part in the capitalist structure though training and integration; (ii) an ‘agrarian question paradigm’, which takes in consideration territorial disputes and views unequal distribution of property and consequent poverty as a result of the capitalist system, in which case solution would depend on questioning the system. As an introduction to the work of Fernandes et al. (2012) ILC’s director questioned if authors had made justice to the ‘agrarian capital paradigm’, hinting a partiality for the first approach. MST, on the other hand, clearly faces the agricultural problem through the lenses of the second approach.

These diverse visions of how to solve inequality and poverty in land distribution have direct impact on the structures of assistance. They also appeal to different types of donors, which make choices and demand action based on their view of economic and political development. Through contrasting how ILC and MST work in Brazil this article substantiated the theory that international donors constrain the liberty of NGOs to act freely in determining what is best for local communities. By focusing assistance on self-help solutions to local problems and avoiding positions that conflict with donors and which reduce empowerment of the local community to demand structural change from government, lessening chances of eliminating the conditions that created poverty in the first place.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES


