

# Food production and fair trading

By MST Commercialization Front

The production, processing and commercialization of food produced by peasants is an issue of strategic importance for the peoples. Who and how food production, distribution and sales, along with the strategic orientation of production, are central elements of food sovereignty. In this article, the Commercialization Front of Brazil's MST shares with ROOTS the movement's experience on the processes of commercialization for the production of the People's Agrarian Reform.

## **The MST and the People's Agrarian Reform**

The Landless Rural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra, MST) was born in 1984 and was consolidated on three mobilizing objectives that last until today: the fight for land, for agrarian reform and for social transformation. The first mobilizing axis concerns the immediate struggle, the need for people to conquer a piece of ground to work on; the second refers to a State policy, since without it the conquest of land cannot be maintained or carried out on a massive scale; and the third carries with it the idea and constant pursuit of practice based on the need to transform power relations in society, in favor of the working and peasant classes<sup>1</sup>.

Over time, the need to broaden the debate about the concept of Agrarian Reform was collectively perceived, incorporating the mission of producing healthy food for the entire population, thus involving a broad and people's based dialogue with society. Starting in the 6th National Congress, held in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mst.org.br/2021/07/16/o-que-e-o-programa-de-reforma-agraria-popular-do-mst/>

2014, The MST adopts the concept of Popular Agrarian Reform, raising the challenge of “[P]roducing food with the people and for the people, cultivating sustainable environments with healthy production, based on agroecology, free of pesticides and transgenic seeds. Developing production and social relations, ensuring permanence in the rural environment through forms of work and income from associations, cooperatives and agroindustries”, as cited in the Agrarian Program of the MST<sup>2</sup>.

It is important to state that the organization of production in the MST settlements has been developing over these almost 40 years, consolidating the political and economic organization in these territories. In the conceptualization of People's Agrarian Reform, the production of food on an agroecological basis is a fundamental element which not only enables a new dynamic in the peasantry's relationship with nature, but also enables a dialogue with society, thus building political strength in relation to the model of agriculture and society that the Brazilian people want. For the MST and a large group of peoples' organizations, this model must be based on life and on environmental, social, economic, cultural and ethical sustainability.

In order to build this dialogue with society and a new model of agriculture, based on more harmonious relationships with the environment and among people, it is not enough just to produce. We realize that it is necessary to consider the various stages of the production process, adding income, generating decent working conditions, incorporating young people, women and all the diversity of the rural society, and, more than that, showing our identity in the foods we sell.

We depart from the idea that, even though all stages of production are fundamental, commercialization is the most dynamic link. The one that

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<sup>2</sup> <https://mstbrasiliem.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Cartilha-Programa-agr%C3%A1rio-do-MST-FINAL.pdf>

conducts and materializes the needs of those who consume and, therefore, the main factor in organizing production.

### **The MST Commercialization Front**

In order to deal with the political definitions of the MST as a whole, the Commercialization Front has the mission to contribute to the structuring and support of commercialization tools, which enables access to healthy food for different sectors of the Brazilian population and at the same time dispose of the vast production of our settlements.

The front is organized at a national level based on four main commercialization channels, with the goal that the products of agrarian reform reach the greatest diversity of commercial distribution sites as possible. Each one has its specific characteristics, challenges, and potentials: the Conventional Market, mostly referred to large supermarket chains; the Institutional Market, which involves public sector bodies; the Armazéns do Campo Network, as a public site of the MST for dialogue with the population and for propaganda of the Popular Agrarian Reform, and the Alternative Market, or direct sale practiced by consumer groups in National, Regional and Agricultural Agrarian Reform State Fairs. The fourth channel involves the commercialization of agrarian reform production through international markets as well.

Commercialization through these multiple channels aims at ensuring that the complexity of production based on food sovereignty is met. Synergy between the different marketing strategies is necessary, so that there is no forced specialization in certain, more profitable crops and, at the same time, the viability of smaller-scale or initial agrifood systems is promoted. To find out more about each of the channels, read below.

## **1) Institutional Commercialization Office**

Given the diversity of demands for institutional purchases (by different government agencies at the municipal, state and federal levels), it was necessary to create a tool for the Commercial Representation of the Cooperatives of the Agrarian Reform areas' products in the Institutional Market of the PNAE (National Program for the Acquisition of School Meals) and PAA (Food Acquisition Program). This will make it possible to draw up a strategy for organizing the marketing of Agrarian Reform products through institutional public policies, which were built from the struggles of peasant families to ensure that healthy food is delivered to schools, hospitals and other public bodies.

From the perspective of the urban working class, the relation with schools both in the countryside and in the city, directly affects the quality of school meals and the quality of learning itself, as well-nourished children are more capable of learning. Over the past 20 years, this process has helped to organize the production of the settled families, expanding diversity and, above all, enhancing agroecological transition processes.

## **2) Chain of Stores 'Armazem do Campo'**

It is a network of social enterprises, developed over the last 6 years, with the brand called Armazém do Campo – Produtos da Terra (Countryside Grocerystore - Products of the Soil, translation from the original Portuguese). There are currently 25 stores, aiming at reaching 100 stores over the next 4 years. The stores operate in the direct-to-consumer market, selling food but also functioning as a site for culture, art, music, training. They become a meeting and fraternization for people who see healthy food and agrarian reform as being aligned and close to each other.



Armazém do Campo store in São Paulo. Source: MST

### **3) Conventional Market**

This commercialization channel has the function of operating in the conventional food retail market, a realm very difficult to access for production cooperatives. Due to the complexity and high competitiveness of these markets and retail chains, a private label strategy is adopted, taking the flags of agroecology and cooperation as the great differential element for its products.

This channel also allows for the organization of healthy food production chains in the settlements, as well as other marketing channels.

### **4) Alternative markets (fairs, baskets, consumption groups)**

These are other realms for the commercialization and dissemination of our products that are organized and are part of the peasant culture of direct engagement of consumers by the producers themselves. Fairs are encouraged at all levels, from local, state fairs and MST national fairs,

where quality and diversity are the main elements. There is also a wide variety of formats for consumer groups and basket deliveries in each state.

Product exports are another important issue from the commercialization point of view. The external market is one where we can take food produced in settlements and organized by cooperatives from different production chains to other parts of the world, embedding our production model project based on healthy foods. The commercialization tools used for these transactions operate in 1) partner countries that have great difficulties in producing food and guaranteeing sovereignty and food security, by means of promoting international solidarity between countries and workers; and 2) countries in Europe and other continents that believe in the proposal and promote the consumption of healthy foods.

### **Final considerations**

On this journey, many challenges were presented to families and cooperatives, as well as to the several processes involving the various tools that materialize the commercialization of the MST. Challenges that are important for collective learning and that must go beyond national borders, seeking solutions that can arise from the exchange of information, but above all from international solidarity.

From the point of view of our cooperatives, a first challenge is to keep improving to meet not previously existing demands, including 1) organization of production with a focus on meeting the quality, quantity and productive efficiency necessary to expand access at a mass scale; 2) advancing the techniques, technologies and knowledge suitable for the peasant agriculture model, based on agroecology. Here, attention is drawn to peasant control of seeds, bio-inputs, renewable energy, agricultural machinery and implements; 3) investments in agroindustries with the

efficiency and scale suited to productive conditions throughout the production chains; 4) allowing for credit, mainly involving working capital, to put the project into execution without compromising a share of the product value, a limitation of cooperatives which is often used by middlemen to their advantage; 5) technical training in management.

Another challenge is related to the efficient distribution and expansion of the most diverse marketing channels, in order to bring healthy food to the tables of workers around the world.

Food is the original way in which human beings relate to nature. Since the first social divisions of labor were structured thousands of years ago, the peasantry has ensured the production of a countless diversity of foods. Even with all the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production and its expressions in rural societies all over the world - agribusiness in particular -, it is still the peasants who guarantee food production. Establishing popular connection channels between this peasantry and the urban working class is a fundamental task for the development of a just, ecological society with a shared future.

## References

[1]

<https://mst.org.br/2021/07/16/o-que-e-o-programa-de-reforma-agraria-popular-do-mst/>

[2]

<https://mstbrasilien.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Cartilha-Programa-agr%C3%A1rio-do-MST-FINAL.pdf>