Brazil is currently undertaking one of the world’s largest and most ambitious land-reform programs. This is beneficial, given that 23.1% of the Brazilian labor force works in the agricultural sector. During the past five years, the Brazilian government has invested US $6.5 billion to settle nearly two million people on 18 million hectares of land. Since 1995, under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s administration, more Brazilians have been given their share of the land than in all of Brazil’s 500-year history.

Despite the creation and implementation of Brazil’s Plano Nacional de Reforma Agrária (“National Plan for Agrarian Reform”) and the existence of an official government agency responsible for administering agrarian reform, Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (“National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform in Brazil” or INCRA), several outside land reform groups such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (“Landless Workers Movement” or MST) and the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (“Pastoral Land Commission” or CPT) have emerged. These grassroots organizations work side-by-side with the Brazilian farmers in land struggles.

INCRA (NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR COLONIZATION AND AGRARIAN REFORM)
INCRA is the official government agency responsible for agrarian reform in Brazil. Created in 1970 under the military regime (1970-1984), it continued to exist under President Itamar Franco’s New Republic government (1985-1994) and has been much a part of current President Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s agenda:

Figure 1 illustrates the numbers of families settled during these three time periods shows that the majority of families have been settled under the most recent administration.

INCRA’s mission is to “Further agrarian reform with a focus on complete and sustainable local development with a base in the principals of social justice, seeking to guarantee citizenship and improve the socio-economic conditions of the rural population.” Consequently, INCRA’s role in agrarian reform extends much beyond the expropriation of land. An INCRA official specializing in projects explains the duties of the organization:

Our role does not just include the expropriation of land. It includes the whole process of social organization and production of the families…. It is to help the families become independent from the institution’s administration. So, we work with the entire process, organization, all of the productive process—what the farmers will produce, how they will produce it, where they will produce it.

Additionally, through créditos, or money loans in the amount of 2,000 reais’, are apportioned in order for farmers to be able to feed their families and have some start-up money for their newly-acquired farm.

Above: Children of Assentamento Che Guevara stand by the front gates.
CPT (Pastoral Land Commission)

The CPT was created in 1975 to serve the rural land workers of Brazil. It collaborates directly with the Catholic and Evangelical churches of Brazil and works as an advisor to labor unions, small producers’ associations, social movements, and other popular initiatives. Between 1975 and 1984, the CPT played a fundamental role in agrarian reform by developing contacts between local and regional leaders and by creating a national dimension to land struggles. Currently, the role of the CPT is to provide acompanhamento (“formal government assistance in establishing a settlement”) to the men and women who work in the countryside by acting as a theological, methodological, political, and sociological advisor. The acompanhamento that the CPT provides primarily focuses on support in the production process—deciding what is produced on the settlement, how it is produced, and what is easiest to produce. This often involves working on a research project with the workers to determine what action is best.

MST (Landless Workers’ Movement)

The MST is the largest social movement in Latin America. Formed in 1984 by breaking off from the CPT, the movement was formed in response to Brazil’s dire economic inequalities, principally that of land concentration. It is currently active in 23 of Brazil’s 26 states. The MST pursues a variety of strategies in their fight for land, including occupations (which they consider their most important tactic). The movement is the first and only grassroots pressure group in Brazil to have influenced the political agendas of the national government. MST land occupations have led to the attainment of over 15 million hectares of land for between 250,000 and 300,000 families across Brazil. In addition to obtaining land and security food accessibility, MST members have created an alternative socio-economic development model, placing people before profits.

If INCRA is expropriating land and effectively pursuing their mission of creating sustainable development in rural communities through aiding settled farmers by way of education and monetary assistance while simultaneously guaranteeing citizenship and improving socio-economic conditions, why do organizations and movements persist? In this paper I look at the roles and perspectives of INCRA, the Movimento Sem Terra and the Comissão Pastoral da Terra in the land reform process. Then, through interviews and document review, I will evaluate the current land reform program, combining the perspectives of the government officials, numbers of movements, and settled farmers. Finally, I will make a recommendation to the government on how to improve the implementation of Brazilian agrarian reform.

Importance of Research

Brazil is the largest and most populous country in South America, and it is the leading economic power in all of Latin America. It also continues to face the problem of severely unequal income distribution, primarily in the form of land concentration. The statistics are alarming:

- Two-thirds of Brazil’s arable land is owned by less than 3% of the population.
- Sixty percent (60%) of this arable land lies idle, while 25 million peasants struggle in temporary agricultural jobs.
- Nearly 4.8 million families are considered landless, according to the 1995 Census.

This inequality has led to the formation of movements and pressure groups like the MST and CPT that are critical of the government’s social and economic policies. These groups are composed of members of the left wing of the Catholic Church, labor unions, and the Workers’ party and have emerged in response to the mounting pressure to redistribute land and wealth.

Location of Research

My research in Brazil took place in the northeastern state of Ceará. Ceará’s state population figure rests slightly above 7 million people with approximately 2.6 million people residing in the capital city, Fortaleza, where I lived while studying in Brazil. In Fortaleza, I spent a significant amount of time at the headquarters of INCRA, the MST, and the CPT. The second major piece of my research took place at assentamentos (“land settlements”), all located outside of Fortaleza. In Ceará, 13,981 families have already settled and there are land vacancies for 6,117 more families. The state is divided into 184 municipalities which form the local government structure. The three assentamentos that I visited were located in different municipalities, all situated within two and one-half hours from Fortaleza. I accessed all of the settlements through a complicated combination of public transportation including mini-buses, buses, motorcycle taxis, and trucks. Settlements were selected based on their proximity to Fortaleza, the current and / or past presence of a social movement group, and the history of the settlement’s formation. I chose to conduct research at the following settlements:

- **Assentamento Che Guevara**, as it calls itself and is known by the MST (or Assentamento São José, as it is called by INCRA) is located in the Ocara municipality, approximately two hours to the south of Fortaleza. This settlement, comprised of 45 families, was formed in 1999 through a MST land occupation of a fazenda (“large-scale farm”) in a neighboring municipality. The settlement follows the MST ideology, including the collective nature of production. The CPT is also very much present at Che Guevara; one representative actually lives on the settlement.

- **Assentamento Santa Bárbara** is located in the Caucaia municipality, on the northwest periphery of the Fortaleza metropolitan area. Santa Bárbara, home to 95 families, was created in 1996 through negotiations directly between INCRA and the former fazendeiro (“landowner of large-scale properties designed for farming”). Thus, there was no formal struggle for the land through occupation. At the end of the prolonged negotiation process, however, the MST became involved in order to pressure INCRA to keep the agrarian reform process moving forward. Today, Santa Bárbara struggles to maintain the organizational structure that MST tried to implement during the early days, but the discussion groups designed for political means have lost their function as discussions of economic purposes have become predominant. There is not a strong MST or CPT presence throughout this settlement.

- **Assentamento Erva Moura** is located in the Pentecoste municipality, 2.5 hours to the west of Fortaleza. Like Santa Bárbara, Erva Moura was also obtained without a direct MST land occupation. INCRA negotiated directly with the former fazendeiro...
(who had expressed interest in selling the land), assembled a list of interested agricultural workers, and settled them on the land. Since its creation in 1995, 160 families are currently part of Erva Moura. During its inception, MST was a large presence on the settlement and aided in establishing its internal organization. No other MST or CPT influence is currently present.

**Research Methodology**

My research was done during May 2002, and was conducted using two methods. Background research, as well as research regarding the official position of organizations on agrarian reform, was done through document review. Documents were accessed on the internet as well as through books, articles, and pamphlets and provided excellent sources on the missions, goals, accomplishments, challenges, and positions of these organizations.

The majority of my research was done through personal interviews at government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and land settlements. Land settlements were difficult to reach due to unreliable transportation; there were times I was not sure if I was going to make it to the settlement, or back to Fortaleza. These mishaps often turned into opportunities, as my best interviews occurred when I had the farmers’ undivided attention when the buses broke down. Interviewees included agrarian reform experts in the Brazilian government, leaders of and participants in agrarian reform movements, and farmers living on settlements. Personal interviews with settled farmers involved in the struggle to obtain land and the current reality provided perspectives from local experts in these settlements. Each interview was recorded on a dictaphone, transcribed directly in Portuguese, and later translated into English. In the interest of protecting the interviewees’ privacy, their names will not be revealed.

**Content of Research**

**Legal Provisions for Agrarian Reform**

Provisions for agrarian reform date back to the 1964 Estatuto da Terra (“land statute”), which was the first land reform law created in Brazil. It was passed under the President-Marshall Castelo Branco in response to the need to redistribute land in order to avoid social revolution, such as those in Cuba in 1959. The Estatuto da Terra introduced the concept of função social, or social function of the land. Social function is defined as land being used in a productive and adequate way with respect for the environment while still adhering to labor laws.

The Plano Nacional de Reforma Agrária was created in 1985, under the direction of President José Sarney. The plan was designed to immediately implement the Estatuto da Terra and make agrarian reform a visible national priority and action. It included lofty goals, such as settling 1,400,000 families within a five-year period. However, only 89,950 families actually settled on newly appropriated lands.

The current Constitution, adopted on October 5, 1988 also recognizes the redistribution of land as a national issue. According to Chapter III, Title VII, Articles 184-191, lands that do not fulfill a social function, as defined in the Estatuto da Terra, must be expropriated for agrarian reform. According to the Constitution, the fundamental objectives of the Brazilian government are to construct a free, just, and unified society; guarantee national development; eradicate poverty and marginalization; reduce social and regional inequality, and promote the well being of the people without regard to their origin, race, sex, color, age, or other discriminating factors.

**Hypothesis of Research**

According to an article published in Newsweek during January 2002, Brazil's agrarian reform statistics are incomplete for the 4,200 some settlements. Despite not being able to reveal what the agricultures (“farmers”) produce or how they fare in this process, statistics do indicate that at least one out of every four settled farmers in Brazil gives up his plot within two years.

What is responsible for this breakdown in the agrarian reform program? In theory, INCRA professionals travel to the settlements, create a short-term and long-term plan for the community, and address local needs including organization and administration. The problem, however, is that this acompanhamento does not reach all of the settlements in Ceará due to lack of resources, and it fails to include all necessary components.

This lack of completion of the intended plan has impeded Brazil’s success. It is impossible for Brazil’s marginalized countryside population to become “full socioeconomic citizens” solely by having arable land; they must also be handed the education and abilities to become them. The Brazilian agrarian reform program must not only redistribute land, but also provide all settled farmers with the information, education, and training necessary to turn these former farmhands into self-sufficient agricultores.

**Problems: Grassroots Perspectives on Brazil’s Agrarian Reform Program**

Based on interviews and conversations during my visits to three settlements (Che Guévara, Santa Bárbara, and Erva Moura), I have identified three persistent sentiments held by settled people regarding Brazil’s agrarian reform program and the role of INCRA.

**Little Effort on the Government’s Behalf**

Despite the massive program of agrarian reform that the current Cardoso administration has undertaken, settled people see the federal government’s actions as acting solely as a response to social pressures, not as a true priority to attain social justice:

“Agrarian reform is occurring because of the movements. If it weren’t for these movements, I think that the government wouldn’t have done anything.”

“Today in Ceará think we have about 200 settlements. If it weren’t for the MST, it would probably be around 50.Maybe not even 50. Because the MST pressures….If we waited until INCRA expropriated on its own, if there were no pressure, it would take INCRA 10 years. Who knows if it would even do that.”
The people view the government’s actions as a result of social pressure, and in the absence of social movements, they believe that agrarian reform would not be a governmental priority.

**Abandonment of the Settlements**

The settled farmers also express their disappointment and disapproval of the way that INCRA was present during the encampment. Not only did they express their dissatisfaction with the acquisition of funds, but they have also been unable to relay organizational and technical information. INCRA is waiting because it is an election year. It is very political. When INCRA said we would get it last October, it was an isolated thing. There was hardly anyone working with INCRA. Very… Someone will win the election because of this, because he can say he brought electricity to the settlement.

**INCRA was present until the expropriation of the land. When it was expropriated, INCRA left the people. We haven’t had one more visit. They promised a technical presence, but they haven’t come in a long time.**

There are some programs. But they are small that really don’t help the people who have been settled… Of the 300 settlements in Ceará, 60 benefit. So, it’s a very small quantity…. The other thing in relation to empowering settled workers, the world has advanced significantly, technologically…. We don’t have access to the research, we don’t have access to information.

Settled farmers expressed not only their united feeling that INCRA’s involvement in their settlement ended when the expropriation was finalized, but also their desire for INCRA to be present at the assentamentos, especially to be able to relay organizational and technical information.

**No Cooperation in the Process**

The residents of the land settlements not only expressed their discontent with INCRA’s abandonment of the settlement, but also their frustration during their few encounters with INCRA, principally in relation to the acquisition of funds:

“We have been discussing a program to install electricity for over one year. INCRA said we would get it last October, but it is already May. The program has been finished for two years. All INCRA has to do is approve the project to release the money…. INCRA is what is keeping the project from happening…. INCRA is waiting because it is an election year. It is very political with INCRA. Very…. Someone will win the election because of this, because he can say he brought electricity to the settlement.”

“We are always looking for more information. After getting the information we need, we look for technical assistance, which we also have to go through INCRA for. We have a hard time, there is a lack of resources, and INCRA doesn’t pay. When INCRA does pay for technical support, they pay late.”

Thus, when the settled people do actually come in contact with INCRA for money matters, they are frustrated with the interaction. The difficulty in accessing resources in order to be able to successfully establish their settlements seems to be the primary complaint.

**Solutions: What Land Settlements Want and Need**

Settled farmers freely articulated the primary problems their settlements experienced in the early part of the process and the problems they continue to experience. To remedy these problems, they ask for the government, through the INCRA agency, to step in and educate them on the issues that they need to address. There are three main themes on which they wish to have more information and instruction:

**Organization**

History of formation of the settlement is often determinant of its future. In some cases, such as the Che Guevara settlement, the workers had already united and formulated a sense of internal organization with priorities such as cooperative work and an established leadership program. In others, however, such as the Santa Bárbara settlement, INCRA made a list of people who were going to get land and live together in a community. Few of these people had previous experience with organizing a community:

“INCRA was here, four or five years ago…. It was an isolated thing. There was hardly any organization. They did the minimum amount they could. INCRA never actually worked with us. If it weren’t for the three or four people here who are part of the MST, and for MST’s model of organization… our settlement’s organization is thanks to them.”

“The government has no interest in organizing the settlements…. They know that education will enable the people to organize themselves, and to fight for more.”

Not only do we see that the government failed to play a large role in organizing the community, but also that people speculate why—teaching people to organize would not be in the best interests of the government.

**Administration**

Administration and management of private property and farms is another challenge these settled farmers face. Many come directly from agricultural work, but have worked their entire lives for a boss. Thus, they have significant experience working the fields, but have never decided what to plant, where to plant it, when to plant it, and finally what to do with it:

“Those who come (to the settlements) were employees, worked for a boss. They worked for other people…. So, do these people know how to organize their own jobs? To produce things? To sell them? These people don’t. They are totally lost.”

“The government tells the people they don’t have the ability to work, that they don’t have the ability to manage a settlement. But we know that these people just aren’t used to this role, they are used to being coordinated by a boss…. All of the production was for the owner, and now each farmer is controlling their own land. If they don’t already have the ability to manage themselves, it is hard. But the government doesn’t have an interest in teaching them.”

Settlements recognize that not all of the agricultores arrive with the same knowledge regarding administration, and that this disparity results in the success of some and the failure of others.

**Technical Assistance in Production**

Technical assistance, or advice and consultation in the area of production, is another area in which farmers desperately seek help. They are in dire need of learning about what crop is the best to plant on the land, when is the best season to plant these crops, how
to harvest, etc. When newly autonomous farmers are given land, they have very little experience in determining these things, especially if they have been settled far from lands that are familiar.

“The CPT doesn’t have one land technician. We have access to some, when the workers ask for it.... We contract outside companies for technical assistance, and it should come from INCRA. But INCRA isn’t providing this....they are not providing acompanhamento.” 39

“The settlements are really in need of technical assistance. And the government wants to cut it. We are fighting. We are fighting to get a program of technical assistance available for the settlements....Exactly in order to contribute to the development of the settlements. For them to be able to develop economically and organize.” 40

Thus, there exists a strong demand on behalf of the settled farmers for technical assistance. Technical assistance would include everything from learning what, where, when, and how to produce, as well as how to sell products.

ERVA MOURA: MODEL OF A SUCCESSFUL ASSENTAMENTO

Life on the settlement has improved for everyone

Through conversing with people at Erva Moura, I discovered that their satisfaction with life on the settlement was thoroughly apparent. They pointed to improvements in medical services, job opportunities, and their overall quality of life:

“When I first arrived here, because I lived far away, the people didn’t have any awareness of available services. Not anymore, now they do. We have a doctor, a dentist....Living conditions got better for everyone.” 41

“I consider the assentamento a success....There wasn’t any electricity, houses, schools, orientations, education here before. Now we have nearly all of these things....Things improved quite a bit. There are many more opportunities for people.” 42

After hearing mixed opinions on the successfulness of other settlements, I realized I needed to determine what differentiated Erva Moura from the other assentamentos. All ideas credited the excellent internal organization and communication of the settlement:

“[Internal organization] is great....Community leaders orient and teach the people what they need to do. Everyone goes to the meetings....They explain what to plant, what the land is capable of producing like beans, corn....You have to have this person to orient people.” 43

“We discuss mostly organization. Planning....the planning of projects, agriculture, administration, and when to plant things.” 44

Organization, education, and information were the top reasons that people believe that life conditions and opportunities have improved for the settlement. Not surprisingly, these also directly correlate to the factors that the other settled people, at the Che Guevara and São José settlements feel are lacking. Identifying these factors is helpful for determining the best course of action for the government.

Organization/operation of the settlement

The community’s positive response to the internal organization, classes offered, and meetings begs the question, how is all of this possible? What role do the leaders in the community play?

Erva Moura is a large community of 160 families, and one of the first problems they faced was choosing a convenient meeting time for everyone. Leaders needed to organize the community, and the first step they took toward this end was dividing the settlement into three communities that have a little more than 50 families. These communities were further broken down into smaller groups of about 8 to 12 families; this strategy of organizing the community was learned from the MST. The MST, though not a permanent presence, aided the communities in the earlier days in establishing an effective internal organization. The role of the leaders of the community is to collect as much information as possible from the politicians and government. This information, dispersed through orientações (“informational meetings designed to orient, or teach the community”) ranges from credit-lending programs, to health and education programs, to teaching people about selling their products, to environmental concerns, to appropriate behavior within the settlement.45

Finally, the internal organization that the settlement established for itself had the most beneficial impact. INCRA’s presence and contribution, according to the settled people, began and ended with the expropriation of the land. Technical assistance at Erva Moura, like at the other settlements, is in high demand. The leadership of the settlement knows that if they wait for a specialist, they will not get one. This is why, they explain, they have had to assume the duty to gather as much information as possible. “We have been able have successful leadership through talking with one another, meeting together.” 46

EVALUATION OF INCRA’S SERVICES FOR SETTLEMENTS

Drawing from Erva Moura’s successful experience and the other settlements’ challenges, it is important to make a recom-
Expropriation of Land. The INCRA office of Ceará reports that 290 settlements currently are home to 13,981 families in this state, while 6,117 spaces on settlements remain vacant. It is clear that during the current Cardoso administration, the rate of expropriation has increased substantially. For example, until 1994, there were only 68 settlements in Ceará measuring 190,947 hectares. During the 1995-2002 time period, 222 assentamentos were formed, measuring 484,632 hectares. While these numbers are impressive, the settled people still seem to universally hold the sentiment that without pressure from the MST, the government would be nowhere near this number.

Credit to Construct Houses and Begin Production. The latest INCRA statistics reveal that the Institute has paid out R$24,334,800 in basic aid money. This money, according to INCRA Official #1, is used to help the farmers obtain tools for working the land, a small number of livestock, etc. Families are also supposed to receive money to construct their houses. Popular sentiment among settled peoples is that obtaining money for programs from INCRA is a very political and bureaucratic process, as demonstrated through the Che Guevara settlement’s 2-year struggle to bring electricity to their settlement. Thus, INCRA is currently working in this area, while at the same time holding the success of the farmers back.

Acompanhamento of the Settlement in Areas of Organization and Administration. According to INCRA, this is already part of their mission and responsibility. The settlers, however, noted that INCRA is in fact not providing acompanhamento in any of these three settlements. People from all three settlements spoke of the absence of INCRA personnel. INCRA Official #2 explained this problem: INCRA has these programs established, but there are nearly 300 settlements and very few INCRA professionals. This role seems to have been assumed by the MST and CPT.

Technical Assistance. Technical assistance, while articulated as a major need of the settlements, is not part of the INCRA mission, both INCRA officials I interviewed explained. INCRA officials interpret this mission to include providing acompanhamento, but to simultaneously exclude providing technical assistance. In spite of this, INCRA Official #2 admits that technical assistance is “fundamental” to the success of the settlements:

Technical assistance gives a guarantee that what is going to be produced and how it will be produced will be successful. It attends to the needs of the people….All the big companies have professionals that specialize in this area.

In sum, both INCRA and the settled peoples agree that technical assistance is an essential component of successful agrarian reform. Yet, it is not being provided by INCRA with the explanation that it does not fall within their jurisdiction. Given the importance of technical assistance, however, there is no way that INCRA’s mission can be fulfilled without providing this crucial service.


During my interviews with INCRA officials, they acknowledged their absence from the settlements, and explained that they had had a temporary pause in their services. But they maintain, as of March, 2002, that they have resumed their jobs. INCRA launched its “Plano de Ação 2002/2003” ("2002-2003 Action Plan") in March 2002, which restarts their role of providing collecting data and implementing each settlement’s systematic development plan. Nevertheless, there is reason to be skeptical. INCRA’s own numbers reveal that in 2001, it was able to provide technical assistance to only 16 of 290 settlements. A few years ago, its yearly maximum peaked at 22. What further reinforces this pessimism is that even INCRA believes that it is unlikely their resources will increase.

Analysis of Research Findings and Recommendation for Action

By evaluating the government’s performance of the four key steps of agrarian reform, it is evident that the very agency that is supposed to carry out this massive program is actually impeding the fulfillment of its mission. While technical assistance is not explicitly spelled out as a component of INCRA’s mission, it is apparent that it is a necessary factor—confirmed even by INCRA officials. The government has outwardly made a commitment to social change; it has already spent $6.5 billion on the agrarian reform program. But, by failing to provide sufficient funding for all components necessary to the success of the program, namely technical assistance to the settled farmers, the government makes success difficult, if not impossible.

If INCRA’s Plano de Ação 2002/2003 is indeed able to be carried out successfully in Ceará, and their acompanhamento and other services improve, this may be a start in working to consolidate the Brazilian Agrarian Reform Plan. But, cuts in funding that have decreased available resources for agrarian reform make future possibilities look bleak. In 1998, 2.2 billion Brazilian reais were budgeted for agrarian reform, and from 1999-2002 that number was cut nearly in half—only 1.3 billion Brazilian reais were allocated. The Brazilian government must allot the necessary resources – both monetary and professional assistance – to their program of agrarian reform. Without it, agrarian reform will make little positive change in the socio-economic status of the Brazilian people.

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