

Rural development and strengthening civil society

Context

Brazil is a country of continental proportions with unique ecosystems like the Amazon and the shrub-lands and wooded savanna of the Cerrado. The country's biodiversity and cultural diversity face an ever greater threat from the growing number of large-scale soybean, sugarcane and eucalyptus plantations, as well as extensive cattle farming. Over and above the environmental problems caused by extensive forest clearance, social problems too have been considerably compounded by evictions from and conflicts over land: families who have lived on their land for generations, for the most part without land titles, are being systematically evicted by large landowners and national and multinational corporations.

There are extreme social and economic disparities in Brazil. According to government data, one third of the country's 199 million inhabitants live below the poverty line. The gap between rich and poor is also bound up with regional differences and discrimination against huge swathes of the population. Sixty per cent of rural dwellers are poor. Afro-Brazilians and indigenous people in general have less educational opportunities, lower quality housing and living standards, as well as smaller incomes. One of the main reasons for hunger and poverty is the unfair distribution of land. Concentration of land in a few hands has become even more pronounced in recent years: 4.8 million Brazilian families are landless, whereas about 4,000 large landowners own over 85 million hectares. Over the past 10 years, more than one million agricultural small businesses have had to close down.

The Brazilian Government's social policies under Lula Da Silva and Dilma Rousseff did indeed raise the living standards of the poorest, but the structural causes of poverty have remained largely unchanged. Implementation of the agrarian reform has all but stalled.





HEKS/EPER has been engaged in Brazil since the 1980s. Following the demise of the dictatorship, the relief agency heeded the call of the ecumenical churches to implement the «Option for the Poor», which bore the hallmark of liberation theology. From the outset, HEKS/EPER concentrated on the thematic priorities of rural development, which means access to land and water, food security and the creation of rural grassroots organizations as well as the prevention of violence through informal education while working with children and young people.

Objectives, priorities, activities

Geographically, the HEKS/EPER Country Programme focuses on the Cerrado savanna region in central Brazil and on Mato Grosso do Sul. Thematic priorities are support for rural communities and the strengthening of civil society.

The programme's cross-cutting aims are to improve the food situation and incomes of rural communities as well as to strengthen rural organizations, with special emphasis on young people and women.

The Country Programme encompasses the following activities:

Access to resources: Supporting the peaceful struggle for fairer land distribution, access to water and means of production, as well as realizing the cultural and territorial rights of traditional ethnic groups.

Organic farming: Training small farmers in sustainable agriculture (soil and water conservation, production of traditional seeds, cultivation of organic vegetables and grains, agro-forestry). Cooperation with agricultural research institutes and universities.

Promoting value chains: Production, processing and marketing of foodstuffs (such as native fruits, medicinal plants and honey) and crafts, setting up production and marketing units and fair trade structures.

Strengthening civil society: Continuing education for young women and men in social leadership, institutional consulting and the strengthening of social organizations such as the landless movement, regional and international networking.

Lobbying and advocacy: Claiming economic, social, cultural and civil rights. Endeavouring to influence policy with a view to changing ownership and power structures.

Target groups

Target groups are ethnic minorities, women's organizations, the landless, traditional smallholder associations and young people. Some 50,000 persons benefit directly each year.

Partnerships, networks, alliances, memberships

Partner organizations include local grassroots and people's organizations such as the landless movement, as well as church and social non-governmental organizations (NGOs). To ensure that the grassroots organizations it supports are not isolated, HEKS/EPER facilitates networking among them locally, as well as their incorporation into wider national networks. This enables them to access important technical forums through which they can participate in shaping regional and national policy on agriculture and the environment. HEKS/EPER is also part of the network of European ACT Alliance members, which address selected topics relating to globalization.



HEKS/EPER on the ground

HEKS/EPER works with 10 partner organizations in Brazil. HEKS/EPER runs its own Coordination Office, which provides technical and methodological guidance to partner organizations and monitors projects on the ground.

Topics and working approach

HEKS/EPER and its partner organizations follow a human rights-based approach in their work. Brazil is a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Internationally, the right to food is legally enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN in 1948 and in the 1966 Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. At the domestic level, this law is expressly incorporated in Brazil's Constitution and implicitly in the various legal codes and in decrees. HEKS/EPER and its partner organizations support people in claiming these rights.

Country:

Brazil

Programme costs 2018:

CHF 1 401 800.–

HEKS/EPER No.: 381.200

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