

INTERVIEW WITH A BRAZILIAN AGRICULTURIST

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Maria Jose Guazzelli, a Brazilian agriculturist specializing in organic farming, is with the Acao Democratica Feminina Gaucha (ADFG), the Brazilian branch of Friends of the Earth, a non-governmental environment organization. She coordinates the Vacaria Project, a 125-acre experimental farm in the highlands of southern Brazil which trains peasants and agricultural workers in low external input agriculture:

"My experience is that it is usually women who have been the first to organize and lead ecological grassroots movements to press for change, perhaps because we are directly involved with family affairs. The model of development proposed and executed by men has proved to be unsustainable, even if it can be economically successful in the short term. Now, and increasingly in the future, it is women who fight for sustainable development.

In my own work I can see clearly how environmental degradation and unsustainable development have severely affected women. Until the mid-1960s, the rural structure in Brazil permitted a reasonable standard of living for a peasant family: a piece of land, a house, enough food and - most of the time - surplus food production which could be sold.

Green Revolution's cost

But from 1964 to 1985, the development system chosen by the Brazilian military government, with its increased industrialization of the country, radically changed this situation. The Green Revolution brought increased debt because it depended on expensive foreign inputs (chemical fertilizers and pesticides, heavy machinery and hybrid seeds) and was promoted through subsidized bank credits. Under this model, production is characterized by monoculture and cultivation for export - and it has destroyed the peasant social structure in southern Brazil. Increasing impoverishment of the land is driving farmers into the Amazonian rain forests and to the urban centers. By

concentrating land ownership in the hands of a few, the Green Revolution has promoted a rural exodus of some 30 million people.

The work we do in ADFG-FOE Brazil can be seen as one example of how a women's group (with male members since 1983) can be active in the field of environmental conservation. Since 1974, Magda Renner and Giselda Castro, ADFG's president and vice president, have been working for social and political changes that promote sustainable development and environmental conservation.



In 1985, with financial support from Friends of the Earth in Sweden and the Swedish International Development Authority, ADFG launched a project on Low External Input Agriculture. The project involves the management of a farm and a training center, with a program for peasants, extension workers and students from agronomy and veterinary faculties. The administrative and technical coordinator for agricultural matters is a woman agriculturist, while a woman veterinary surgeon coordinates animal-related matters.

The Vacaria farm's 125 acres (half of which are natural woodland) are managed to include cropping, gardening, fruit growing, animal husbandry and agroforestry. The main goal of the project is to demonstrate that sustainable agriculture can make small farms viable, provide work for unskilled labor and slow migration to the cities and rainforests. It is hoped that the demonstration will bring about changes in Brazil's agricultural policy.

Sustainable agriculture is based on the adoption of techniques that increase soil fertility or maintain fertility indefinitely. The approach aims to protect the environment, to keep the energy balance and control erosion without using chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and to

integrate a diversity of crops and animal production. Most of the inputs are locally or regionally produced so that food production is free from international arrangements and trends that create dependency. The technology is also less expensive than modern technology - a distinct advantage in view of Brazil's current economic crisis.

At its inception, the ADFG project gained widespread support. But it was also strongly criticized: in addition to launching a new agricultural concept in opposition to large corporate pressure, two young women were running a project in what was considered a traditionally male domain.

Since then, however, results have been so successful that people from many different backgrounds - students, church extension workers, peasants and farmers - have requested advice and training. Around the project area, a reduction of land exploitation is already noticeable as farmers begin to use the sustainable agriculture techniques pioneered by the Vacaria project.

A message I would like to share with you is my idea that we - millions of people, especially Third World women - all need development and better living conditions. But development will only be socially right and sustainable in the long run if it includes respect for the environment and wise natural resource management as an essential part of decision-making.

For more information on the Vacaria Project:

Acao Democratica Feminina Gaucha (ADFG), FOE-Brazil, C.p. 2617, Porto Allegre, Rs.90.001, Brazil.

Original Source:

Women and Environment in the Third World: Alliance for the Future by Irene Dankelman and Joan Davidson (1989), Earthscan, London.

Our Source:

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Packaging: Consumer Pressure Works!

Friends of the Earth report that their campaign of mobilising consumer pressure and political lobbying has had a marked effect on packaging, drastically reducing the use of CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) which are responsible for destruction of the protective ozone layer in the outer atmosphere.

Plenty of work still needs to be done, but it is evident that consumer education and pressure can bring big changes very quickly, and that less damaging alternatives are well received by consumers. Controversy continues, however, over some of the alternatives to CFCs which may have less dramatic but still marked effects on the environment.

A more radical approach to packaging is to call for an end to the excess packaging which only adds to our grocery bill, uses up non-

renewable resources, is often non-biodegradable, and adds hugely to the growing quantity of unsightly and unhygienic rubbish which litters our streets and countryside. About a third of all domestic rubbish is packaging.

We do need a certain amount of packaging - for food hygiene or to keep small items together - but the essential items are a fraction of what we get loaded down with by the shops. Excess packaging does have a purpose but it's nothing to do with our interests as concerned consumers. The idea is to add "perceived value" so that we think we're getting more than we really are. We can:

Buy fresh food whenever possible, in the minimum of wrappings. Health food shops may be a better bet than supermarkets.

Avoid aerosol sprays, tins (especially for drinks, go for glass bottles or

cartons instead) and plastic packaging (at least paper bags will biodegrade).

Buy things which come in recyclable containers: cardboard egg boxes, milk in bottles instead of packets.

Avoid clingfilm; store food in airtight containers instead.

Use our own shopping bag instead of accepting a new plastic one every time.

Choose items with as little packaging as possible.

For a briefing on packaging, write to the Women's Environmental Network, 287 City Road, London EC1, England.