

## Participation and Education in the Landless People's Movement of Brazil

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### **Abstract**

*This paper analyses the significance of participation in the educational work of the Landless People's Movement of Brazil (MST), a social movement for agrarian reform that has established a network of schools in its communities. In contrast to the tokenist approaches of many government and supranational agencies, the MST's view of participation is rooted in principles of radical democracy and social justice. The movement aims not only to enable the landless to participate fully as citizens in society, but also to be active in challenging and reformulating societal structures. Education in the MST is related to participation in two ways: firstly the education system itself is participatory, allowing the involvement of all stakeholders in planning, implementation and evaluation; secondly, education is a means by which landless people can develop the skills and knowledge to participate more effectively in the wider society. While there are certain areas, such as gender, where the MST is still developing an effective strategy, the movement displays high levels of internal participatory equality, and has developed a pedagogy designed to enable transformatory participation in the political, economic and cultural spheres.*

[Note <sup>[1]</sup> ]

The Landless People's Movement of Brazil (MST<sup>[2]</sup>) fits uncomfortably into any simplistic categorization of contemporary society. It is a political organization engaged in the struggle for land reform, while at the same time developing radical

new forms of grassroots democracy, environmental care and co-operative production. It is a constant foe of the government<sup>[3]</sup>, implementing an almost unending series of occupations of land and public buildings, and yet runs its settlements and schools in partnership with state bodies. It has a strong hierarchical structure and at the same time a deep involvement of all members in short and long term policy making. While having an atavistic and romantic attachment to the land and traditional agriculture, the movement is committed to a modern progressive education for all in the communities.

Perhaps it is this unusual combination that explains its remarkable success. Starting in the early 1980s from a unification of various landless people's mobilizations in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, the movement has grown into a vast national enterprise. Through its non-violent land occupations<sup>[4]</sup>, intended to pressurize the government into fulfilling its constitutional obligations as regards the redistribution of idle farmland, the MST has won 15 million acres for land reform (an area almost the size of the Republic of Ireland), and created 1,500 agricultural communities, settling over 250,000 families (Brandford and Rocha 2002; Landless Workers Movement 2002; MST 2003)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Its achievements have been no less remarkable in the area of education. Recognizing the needs of the many children in the new settlements, a series of makeshift 'itinerant' schools were established, led by the few qualified teachers from among the landless and by committed educators from the nearby towns. As the settlements became permanent communities, these were gradually converted into officially recognised public schools. In light of the specific needs of the rural world and those of a radical social movement a new pedagogy and philosophy of school organization emerged, based on the movement's principles of social justice, radical democracy and humanist and socialist values (MST 1999a)<sup>[6]</sup>. The movement now runs over 1,200 schools, educating approximately 150,000 children, as well as 25,000 young people and adults in literacy courses (Brandford and Rocha 2002).

An area in which the work of the MST is of particular significance to social movements worldwide, and to public policy in general, is that of participation. Almost all the landless joining the movement come from a state of acute exclusion: the task of the movement is to enable them to participate in the different spheres of society - political, economic and cultural - and to exercise their full rights as citizens. However,

in addition to this, the movement aims to enable a still deeper form of participation, one in which the individual and the community have a real influence on the formation of those societal structures in which they are participating.

### **Frameworks of participation**

Participation is now so widely accepted as an essential feature of governance and policy formation that even unconstitutional dictators can hardly omit it from their manifestos. The understandings and practical applications of the concept are, however, startlingly diverse.

Participation has been defined as the principle that:

those who will be substantially affected by decisions made by social and political institutions must be involved in the making of those decisions. (EEC, quoted in Bullock et al. 1988: 630)

All democracy requires some participation, yet levels of political involvement in contemporary democratic societies are most often limited to voting in national and local elections (with a limited selection of viable candidates). According to Barber (1984) our representative democracies have a combination of *authoritarian*, *juridical* and *pluralist* approaches, none of which provide a genuine opportunity for citizens (with the exception of politicians) to be active politically. Only participatory democracy (in its *strong* and not *unitary* form) is seen to provide an adequate model.

While models of participatory democracy have been developed since the time of Rousseau, it is only since the 1960s that the concept has gained real prominence, with growing demands for participation in decision-making in the work place, universities and local administration, as well as national government.

The growing movement for participatory democracy today is largely a response to globalization, neo-liberal economic policy - and the consequently increasing concentration of wealth and power - and the disproportionate influence of multinational corporations and unelected supranational bodies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO). Neo-liberalism is characterized by a conception of the individual as consumer,

participating 'freely' in the market, rather than as a citizen achieving freedom through active participation in the political sphere.

Even elected democratic governments, while using the rhetoric of participation, are seen to provide few real opportunities for involvement in decision-making. Gentili (1998) describes the *falsification of consensus*<sup>[7]</sup> whereby neo-liberal policies are implemented on the basis of processes that are apparently democratic, but which deny the majority a genuine opportunity to consider alternatives and make choices. It is not only neo-liberalism, however, that is seen to be lacking: the centrally-planned socialist governments, and even the social democracies of the twentieth century rarely showed evidence of true participation by all members of society.

Participation, and lack of it, is today seen as a key indicator of quality of life. The oppressed suffer not just from *poverty*, but from *exclusion*, which can involve economic, political and cultural arenas. Social policy, therefore, must aim for the *inclusion* of all in society. As well as individuals within a society, whole countries and regions can be seen to suffer from exclusion. This has made the participation/exclusion rhetoric central to international development and the work of the large NGOs and transnational aid agencies. Increasing resistance has emerged to outside modes of development being imposed on communities without their active involvement. In addition to this, participation of local communities is also seen as leading to more effective implementation of development projects. All areas of development from the 1960s onwards began to consider participation as a vital ingredient.

One of the high gurus of participation in international development is Robert Chambers (1997), who has written extensively on the subject in the context of rural communities. He was closely involved with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in the 1990s, which aimed to harness rural people's skills in order to plan, implement and evaluate their own development projects. These approaches are, without doubt, an improvement on externally planned development, but it is important to identify the exact nature of the participation involved. Are people able to define the structures of their participation for themselves, or are they participating in arenas that have been defined by others?

With PRA, although the villagers are strongly involved in the projects, there is little attention paid to their general ability to participate as citizens in society, or to challenge existing societal structures. Participation for Chambers is mainly technical, focusing on the geographic and economic without great emphasis on the political or the historical. Archer and Cottingham (1996) describe his view of culture as static and *unproblematized* and contrast it to the more dynamic approach of Paulo Freire.

One of the most scathing of attacks on the empty rhetoric of participation is made by Rahnama (1992). Opposing the forms of participation advocated by Chambers, he analyses the contradictions, dangers and hypocrisy associated with the term. Participation has universally positive connotations, but in reality people can participate in organizations that are harmful, or have a harmful effect on beneficent organizations. He shows how what was initially a radical proposal has been co-opted by governments and other powerful agencies. Far from being a threat to the state, participation is increasingly seen as an economically efficient and politically attractive form of governance.

Since the 1980s a major force in developing new forms of participatory politics (and a strong influence on the MST) is the Brazilian Worker's Party (PT<sup>[8]</sup>). Rebecca Abers's (2000) study on the PT in the Southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre explores the decision-making process known as the *participatory budget*, which allowed widespread involvement in expenditure as well as local voting on neighbourhood improvements. The study seeks to show why the PT succeeded in mobilizing and empowering the poor where many other institutions have failed, defining as key elements of empowering participatory policy that it must be open to those hitherto excluded, involve discussion rather than just implementation, and involve effective citizen control.

Abers makes the distinction here between *instrumental* and *empowering* participation. The former is where participation is used as a means of implementing policy more efficiently, with no real desire for any power to be devolved to the participants. With the latter, people have genuine influence on decision-making and develop their own personal capacities in the process.

This *instrumental* participation is evident in many neo-liberal policies in the field of education. Researchers, such as Apple (1999) and Gentili (1998), have identified contradictions between elements of centralization and decentralization. While neo-liberalism is normally characterized by the latter, control over the content of education has actually been centralized in the form of national curricula and standardized assessments. Decentralization is often financial, and used by the state as an opportunity for abdication of responsibility. The individual is seen to be participating not as a citizen involved in policy formation, but as a consumer in the education market.

Hawes and Stephens (1990) in their research on primary schools in Africa found that in practice participation was often limited to financial or labour contributions with little local influence over the content or nature of schooling, raising suspicions that governments were more interested in reducing expenditure than decentralizing decision-making.

Apple and Beane agree:

Moreover, much of the talk about ‘site-based’ management, while appearing to reverse such centralization, actually amounts to little more than localising struggles over limited resources and accountability for policy and programme decisions made in different places. (Apple & Beane 1999: 21)

However, there are signs of hope. Gandin and Apple’s (2002) study on the ‘Citizen Schools’ in Porto Alegre shows radical new forms of participation in education, with community members having influence over school organization, curriculum and choice of staff, with no extra financial burden. Other inspiring examples are presented in Apple and Beane (1999). The MST, in a different context, is aiming to achieve a similar degree of radical democratic participation.

## **Research**

Research into the educational work of the MST consisted firstly of interviews conducted with teachers and educational co-ordinators<sup>[9]</sup> in April and May 2002. These interviews (ten in total, with numbers varying from one to four interviewees) were carried out in six different communities - four *assentamentos*, one *acampamento*

[10] and the building site of the new MST national school - in the states of Espírito Santo, Bahia and São Paulo.

The second main source of information for the research was official MST educational material. These pamphlets are written by the movement's National Education Sector, are published centrally and distributed to all the communities. They are intended to act as teaching guides, to aid educational workers in establishing new schools, and to inform community members about the movement's general principles of education. Six of these pamphlets were used for analysis.

These sources provide different perspectives on the educational work of the movement: while the latter give a theoretical outline of its organization and principles, the former consist of personal experiences and views of the work in practice. The research in general did not attempt to determine the 'results' or 'effects' of education in the movement, but to identify principles and understandings.

The MST is unusual among social movements in having a large and well-developed system of schools, providing an education that is directly linked to the aims of the movement. While the MST considers all movement activity as educational, this study will focus primarily on participation in the school system.

### **Understandings of participation in the MST**

If it is to be part of the movement, a school must have the involvement of all, in an organised, participative and democratic way. (MST 2001b: 73)  
[11]

MST understandings of participation in education go beyond the involvement of parents in the schooling of their child, or pupil choice in curriculum matters (though these elements are also present). Participation in the MST is based on the movement's ideal of radical democracy.

[F]or us democracy is not just a detail, a word. It is one of the fundamental pillars of our pedagogical framework and our plan of social transformation. (MST 1995: 8)

To consider democracy a pedagogical principle means, according to our educational framework, that it is not enough for students to study or discuss it;

they need also, and most importantly, to experience an arena of democratic participation, educating themselves for social democracy. (MST 1999a: 20)

In other words in order to prepare people for democracy and participation through education, the educational system itself must be run on the democratic principles it is trying to promote.

The MST believes that socialism is only possible with grassroots participative bodies, rather than a centralized decision-making structure. For this end, each camp or settlement has elaborate systems of democratic representation, feeding information up to local, state and national levels who are intended to act as co-ordinating and not directing entities.

The relationship between the participative groups is that of ascending and descending democracy. That is to say the issues are discussed in the grassroots nuclei and then approved in the general co-ordinating body. They are then implemented with a distribution of responsibilities. (MST 2001b: 34)

The co-ordination has a part, but decisions in the MST are really taken by the people. (João, Acampamento Boa Vista <sup>[12]</sup>)

Participation is seen here to be closely linked to the idea of the collective, a fundamental principle of the movement. Firstly, the educational work itself must be carried out collectively:

The big and even the little activities of day-to-day life in the school must be planned collectively.... Where the planning is concentrated in a few heads (from top to bottom) there is no democracy.... (MST 1995: 8)

The document is clear to point out that collective planning does not mean the involvement of all people in all decisions: there must be a combination of *participation* and *division of tasks* (MST 1995: 8).

Education must then prepare people for *living* collectively. Effective participation is usually seen as occurring via a group or collective, rather than as isolated individuals. This has implications in terms of the ability of members of the MST to participate in society outside of the movement, an important issue that will be discussed further below. Nevertheless, despite the emphasis on collectivism and rejection of the cultural legacy of individualism, the MST stops short of discarding the individual altogether:



However, this does not mean sidelining the person: on the contrary all the pedagogical principles that we are dealing with here have the person as their central focus; not the isolated individual, but the subject of relationships, with other people, with collectives and with a particular social and historical context. (MST 1999a: 23)

The individual that the MST theory of participation is built around, therefore, is not the *homo economicus* of neo-liberal development programmes, but one who exists in a particular historical and political context and as part of a collective identity.

Education must aim to promote amongst students the idea of participation itself. The values transmitted must be concerned with:

the collective production and appropriation of the material and spiritual goods of humanity, justice in the distribution of these goods and equality of participation in all these processes. (MST 1999a: 9)

The concept of citizenship was raised a number of times by the teachers and co-ordinators without prompting by the interviewer. This suggests that despite being part of a social movement with strong boundaries, they consider participation as something that must extend to society in general. While criticising the present government and politico-economic system they do not reject the idea of the state and the need to be a citizen within it. The comments on citizenship must be seen in the light of the fact that many people in Brazil, while nominally citizens, are not able to claim their rights and fulfil their duties, and therefore have been denied true membership of society.

Our schools work directly with the idea of the citizen.... We need the idea of a citizen so people don't feel inferior to others. They have to learn their rights and respect those of others. (Daniel, Assentamento Marajó)

With education a person becomes a citizen, becomes human.... People leave school and they say, 'Look I'm a person too, I'm a citizen'. After that they have no difficulty with learning. The people in the settlements come from a complex poor background. Without school they can't really be part of society on an equal footing. (Joana, Assentamento Chico Mendes)

It is interesting to observe here that as well as citizenship being enabled by education, it is seen to facilitate further learning.

Firstly, children need to have their constitutional rights to schooling met.

The movement...also needs a legalized school, so that the children of this struggle can exercise their rights as citizens.... (MST 2001b: 73)

This educational citizenship is by no means guaranteed in Brazil. Official figures show net primary enrolment to be 96%, although nearly half of these will repeat at least one year. Only 25% go on to secondary school, and 11% to university. Illiteracy nation-wide runs at 12.8%, with the figure much higher in rural areas, and there are many more who are only semi-literate (IBGE 2001). The first aim of the movement, therefore, is to obtain basic access to education for the landless. The practice of demanding government funding for their schools rather than seeking independent sources is an indication of the movement's desire to claim for its members their rights as citizens of the state.

Yet these basic rights are not enough: participation must be taken to deeper levels. In *Escola Itinerante: uma Prática Pedagógica em Acampamentos* (2001) one of the stated aims of education is:

To awaken the organizational consciousness and spirit of leadership of the children, adolescents, educators and community, with political clarity in order to exercise citizenship. (MST 2001b: 72)

This suggests that true citizenship requires an element of conscientization, an idea that will be developed further below.

Citizenship is therefore seen to be an essential pre-requisite for effective participation. There are two stages: claiming one's fundamental rights and then extending one's own capabilities for exercising those rights.

There also appear to be two aims of participation in the MST. The first is organizational, contributing to the effective running of the community and the movement; the second is the conscientizing effect that the process can have on the participant. The 'organizational consciousness' described above is a bridge between the two, allowing the conscientizing process to feed into more effective organization. Ideally the organizing and conscientizing elements - both essential for a social movement - can co-exist, although they may be in conflict.

This, therefore, is the theoretical framework of participation in the MST; the implementation in practice will now be discussed. It is important to note that the movement freely admits that its ideals have not all been realised, and that their achievement is a long, slow process.

### **Participation within the MST education system**

As with all aspects of MST organization, the education system has an elaborate series of structures designed to ensure the participation of all. This occurs at the level of the individual community<sup>[13]</sup> as well as in terms of the decisions made by the movement at the regional or national level.

The following entities are found in the communities:

The *general assembly* is composed of all the members of the community, meets once or twice a year and discusses and approves the overall plan for the school as well as other significant or controversial matters.

The *education team*<sup>[14]</sup> is composed of a representative number of teachers, pupils and community members and meets monthly. Here the details and implementation of the overall plan are discussed. Like all MST nuclei, the community representatives are chosen by direct vote by the community as a whole and are accountable to the general assembly. The pupils are generally chosen by their classmates, and all the teachers are normally represented.

The *teachers' collective* involves all the teachers, and customarily meets once a week to organise the day-to-day running of the school, including lesson-planning, special activities and the 'generative themes' (cross-curricular topics of study).

The *pupils' collective* organizes those tasks for which the pupils have responsibility, such as the school pharmacy, meals or assemblies. It also provides suggestions on the general plan of the school as it affects the students. The age of the representatives and the selection procedure depend on the individual community.

(MST 1995: 8-9; MST 1999b: 19)

These bodies are intended to give all those with a stake in education the chance to contribute and have their voice heard. There are efforts to make the national co-ordination equally participative. Teachers from the different regions and states meet periodically to exchange ideas and to train; co-ordinators also meet to discuss progress and problems. The National Education Sector is comprised of representatives from each of the states, and elected by the co-ordinators, who pass on the experiences of the individual schools in their area. In this way decision-making at the national level is intended to emerge from the experiences on the ground. The same is true for the movement's educational publications. However, while the pedagogical principles do without doubt emerge from practical experience, their formulation and expression in practice is the work of a core group, in particular the educationist Roseli Caldart<sup>[15]</sup>.

The interviews provided a number of perspectives on participation within the communities, concerning parents and other community members, pupils and teachers.

### **i) Community**

In educational work worldwide there is little argument that the involvement of parents and the local community in the schooling of children is beneficial to the general efficiency of the school and to pupil's learning (Hawes and Stephens 1990). The MST shares this view, but extends it in significant ways.

Community members are seen to be able to participate in the following ways:

1. Being part of school council or educational team
2. Working on projects for school improvements
3. Helping to maintain the memory of the struggle
4. Inviting teachers to take part in community events
5. Giving technical help to the school
6. Contributing their skills to the learning in school
7. Using the school space for meetings and courses
8. Adopting the school as part of the community

(MST 1999b: 18)

There is therefore a two way process: involving the community in the activities of the school and giving the school a more active role in the community.

Parents were seen to be closely involved:

Whenever a decision needs to be made about the school, it's always parents, pupils and teachers together: in all the schools there's this concept. (Nara, Assentamento Chico Mendes)

To organise you have to evaluate. The parents come in every month and say what was good, what helped and what didn't help. (Nara, Assentamento Chico Mendes)

They are also seen to be prepared to mobilize in support of the school:

Here the government can't just decide to remove a teacher. I for example don't have *pedagogia*, just *magistério*<sup>[16]</sup>, but the governor won't get rid of me because the families would react and he'd have to put me back. (Nara, Assentamento Chico Mendes)

However, some teachers had reservations about the extent to which parents actually involved themselves.

There are some families that send their children to the school in town. It's a democracy, everybody chooses: some choose not to send their children to the MST school. Some don't like the *alternância*<sup>[17]</sup>.... (Daniel, Assentamento Marajó)

This is particularly true for families that have come into the settlements from outside the movement:

Because people who come in from outside don't have any identification with the schools or the movement or anything. We did some research to find out about the families: some didn't even respond, they had no interest in the school whatsoever. (Paulo, Assentamento Marajó)

This shows how community participation is dependent not only on concern for children's schooling but also on an identification with the body running the school.

In contrast to the community consultations of many development programmes, members of the MST communities are seen to have a real influence on the running of the school, particularly since in most cases it was they who built it, set it in motion and fought for state funding. The extent of involvement in day-to-day management

and curriculum decisions, however, will always depend on the capacities and inclination of the individual community members.

## ii) Students

We understand by *self-organization* the right of pupils to organise themselves into collectives, with their own space and time, to analyse and discuss their own issues, to elaborate proposals and make their own decisions with a view to participating as subjects in the democratic management of the educative process, and of the school as a whole. (MST 1999b: 14)

In addition to community members, students are also intended to participate in the development of their own education and the running of the school in general. ‘Student self-organization’ is one of the thirteen pedagogical principles of the MST, intended to help young people develop skills in leadership, co-operation, problem solving and critical thinking (MST 1999a: 21).

When people are given everything, dependence is reinforced and the person never becomes a subject. It is part of the process that people wanting to become literate organise themselves to achieve this objective. (MST 1994: 15)

This statement refers to adults: clearly the nature of participation for younger children is going to be different. The interviews, however, revealed strong perceptions of pupil involvement at all levels:

The teachers decide the themes, but it is the children who elaborate, fill out the content. (Daniel, Assentamento Marajó)

Researcher: Do pupils also have involvement?

Renata: Yes, they do in the making of the rules: there are rules, duties and rights that the pupils have in the school....

Alexandre: We normally put them in groups and they debate problems and proposals. This can change things in the school.

(Assentamento Marajó)

This is contrasted with the attitude of pupils in government schools:

I arrived in the middle of the year as a supply teacher. Some of the pupils had already got the grades they needed so they weren’t interested in the work anymore. Learning’s not important to them, just passing. (Paulo, Assentamento Marajó)

Evaluation is an important area for participation:

Together with them we evaluate the work, through dialogue. In this evaluation everyone gives their opinion, teachers, pupils, other staff, some people from the community. Everyone can get involved in order to improve things. (Wagner, Assentamento Chico Mendes)

There are also efforts to increase participation within the classroom itself, by encouraging students to express themselves and organizing seating arrangements to encourage contributions from all (MST 1999b: 39). The classes observed during this research generally had the chairs arranged in semi-circles rather than the traditional rows.

Good examples of student participation in the MST are the teacher training courses, described in detail by Caldart (1997), where course management and organization are the responsibility of the students and not the trainers.

Efforts to encourage student participation in the MST are clearly oriented towards the conscientization of the individuals and community. These types of involvement are seen to enhance the school learning of the pupil, as well as provide opportunities for learning not normally present in school. The participation of children in decision-making will always be limited to a certain extent by their age: however, a genuine commitment to listening to and acting on their views can be seen.

### **iii) Teachers**

Thirdly, it is necessary to assess the organization of the teachers themselves. *The Principles of Education in the MST* (1999) goes as far as to say that:

Without a teachers' collective there is no real educative process. (MST 1999a: 21)

These relations between teachers are encouraged to ensure that all have a stake in the management and success of the school. Assentamento Chico Mendes did not have a headteacher at all: the staff organised themselves in an entirely horizontal manner, supported by MST co-ordinators. During the time I spent at the school they were discussing plans to create the position of organizer to co-ordinate school activities, rotating between the different members of staff.

Teachers frequently emphasised the involvement they themselves had in the community, particularly in contrast to those in government schools.

There's a huge difference. Teachers outside [in non-MST schools] are just worried about their salary: they teach their lesson and then off they go. They don't worry about what the child is doing at home, what he or she ate. The link with the family isn't there. At least we are trying to do it. We have a great concern for these things. (Nara, Assentamento Chico Mendes)

Here we're always involved in the community. We know everyone, we know all the parents. When we have parents' evenings we send out invitations and everyone comes. (Mercia, Assentamento 1 de Maio)

It must be noted that this level of involvement is present in those teachers that are part of, or sympathetic to, the movement; there are some teachers in MST schools that have simply been allocated by the state and do not have a strong connection to the community.

Teacher participation seems to have a dual function in the MST: firstly the 'organizational' aspect, creating a co-operative and efficient body of workers, and secondly to increase their identification with and commitment to the community and the movement. Although the fundamental orientations are formulated by the National Education Sector and enforced by the co-ordinators, teachers do have influence on pedagogical and organizational decision-making in schools.

#### **iv) Gender**

Finally, there is the question of the extent to which other factors affect an individual's participation in the education system, most importantly that of gender.

This kind of exclusion exists in Brazil. Recently in the movement it is getting better, but it still exists. Now you see a group of boys playing football, but there is a girl with them, or girls playing in a ring but with a boy. We have our Gender Sector and women's groups to debate all of this. (Maria, Assentamento Caraiva)

Why should men's work be valued more? There's a great difference in the job market.... So we work with these issues in the camp, women and men being valued equally for going out to the fields. So this way we break what the media has been giving us since the time of our ancestors. (Olga, Acampamento Boa Vista)



It is clear that there are efforts to change the arenas of participation of both genders, and to change attitudes. However, despite the positive impressions, the official rhetoric and the prominent role of some women in the movement, there is undoubtedly survival of traditional machista attitudes and exclusion of women. Further research would be necessary to determine the exact extent of women's participation in the movement.

Some mention was also made of racial discrimination:

Despite the ending of slavery years ago, Black people are still the objects of prejudice. So this is brought out in the classroom and the camp in general. (João, Acampamento Boa Vista)

There is also some concern for other types of exclusion:

We need, as educators, to keep an eye on each child, since in the games, an overweight girl couldn't participate in the race and gave up. That is to say, she was excluded. We really have to work with this. (MST 2001c: 21)

However, there is not as yet any significant provision for students with disabilities or special educational needs. These elements of exclusion that occur within a system of full enrolment have yet to receive full attention in the MST, which, for obvious reasons, is still primarily concerned with the extension of schooling to all.

### **Participation in society**

These, therefore, are the ways in which the MST perceives and practices participation within the movement and its schools. However, the influence is not mono-directional: the movement creates the schools in its image, but the schools in turn create the movement of the future. The effect of education on the ability to participate in the movement and the wider society will now be considered.

It can be seen that there are two processes necessary to enable participation: firstly the transformation of external factors - such as discriminatory legislation - and secondly that of internal factors - such as literacy, self-confidence and other personal qualities needed to be able to take advantage of opportunities.

In terms of the former, the MST organises a range of mobilisations to pressurize the government into fulfilling its constitutional duties. The most prominent of these are the land occupations, but there are many concerning education.

This school is the product of the struggle. It's not here because the government wanted it here; it's here because the families marched in Salvador and struggled and finally got it. Everything you see in the settlement is the product of the struggle.(Claudia, Assentamento Caraiva)

Researcher: Do all the funds for an assentamento school come from the local council?

Claudia: Yes, apart from the actual structure.... It was marches in São Paulo and Salvador that won grants from the state to put the buildings up.

Researcher: Does the community make a contribution?

Maria: Their contribution is mobilizing, marching.

(Assentamento Caraiva)

Literacy courses for adults are also won only after long battles with the authorities.

Yet once the government has been forced to fulfil its constitutional duties or make legislative changes, reducing the structural influences affecting participation, there are still significant internal factors. Effective participation cannot simply be granted to an individual or community: it depends on a gradual process of human development.

Our experiences have demonstrated that the *structures* of participation of students, teachers, parents and administrative staff do not in themselves guarantee the process. (MST 1999b: 20)

A vote in a national election, for example, cannot be taken advantage of if the voter does not have the skills and knowledge to access and analyse information about candidates. Education is a key factor here. This is not a question of educational *qualifications* - which, after all, are only removing external barriers to participation - but of personal capabilities. Literacy, knowledge, analytical skills, self-confidence and communication are all essential if an individual is to be able to use the participative opportunities available.<sup>[18]</sup>

The aim [of literacy] is to give workers marginalized from academic life access to the knowledge accumulated by humanity.... Grasping this will make them individual and collective subjects of the historical process of which they are a part. (MST 1994: 9)

Without this access it is not possible to participate in society, since participation depends on having particular knowledge about the functioning of one's own social context and the wider world. MST efforts to implement a politicized and conscientizing pedagogy based on the ideas of Paulo Freire are directly linked to this ability to participate.

There is a final important question. The MST prepares its members for participation, but is this participation confined to the movement? Participation within the education system is fundamental, but is not meaningful unless it is contributing to an increasing ability to participate in society. It is necessary to assess the ways in which the MST empowers its members to participate individually and collectively in the political, economic and cultural spheres.

While not participating in electoral politics as a movement, the settlements do put forward candidates (landless people themselves) for positions as local councillors. MST sympathisers from outside the movement stand for election at all levels under the aegis of the PT.

However, political activity in the MST generally involves pressurising the government and forming strategic links with parties such as the PT, rather than standing for office directly. For *Sem Terras*, political participation is a part of everyday life from the time they enter the movement. The MST aims to enable people to participate more effectively in elections - by having a more critical perspective on candidates - and by taking direct political action through mobilizations and occupations. The participatory democratic structures of the schools - described above - while valid in themselves, are also a preparation for political participation in the wider society.

A large part of the work of the MST is to enable landless people to participate effectively in the economy: exclusion from this sphere was, after all, the main impetus for the founding of the movement. The main means of achieving this was originally, and still is, the acquisition of land for families; yet the failure of many government-led land reform programmes convinced the MST that this was not enough. Newly settled families needed financial support to get them started and training to increase their skills.

One way of supporting this is the *alternância* system, where pupils spend alternate weeks at school and at home. In this way children can put into practice the technical skills they have learnt, and are also able to help their families. They attend double the amount of classes in the week they are at school. The movement has the one proviso that contributing to family income must never take precedence over participation in school activities (MST 1999b: 37). While some parents are opposed to the *alternância* format, it is widely implemented in settlements.

The formal school system is intended to provide for agricultural life, but there are also specialist courses for adults, particularly those who have missed the opportunity of conventional schooling. Most important of these is the TAC<sup>[19]</sup> (co-operative administration) course in Rio Grande do Sul.

The MST does not intend to prepare young people for work in the cities (in fact it is looked on as something of a failure if a young person leaves the settlement). There is no desire for a neo-liberal conception of participation consisting of entry into the job and consumer market, which for the landless will almost invariably mean exploitative and precarious work. However, the completion of primary education - and the chance of further education - which the MST can guarantee to nearly all of its children, is clearly allowing them the opportunity of participation in the labour market beyond that of the rural environment.

Cultural participation is also a concern of the MST. This is strongly linked to the idea of dignity and the valuing of the rural world from which the majority of the members come.

Perhaps the central part of the movement's cultural work is the promotion of the *Sem Terra* (landless) identity. This, however, while intending to combat exclusion, can cause problems in terms of integration. While the cultivation of this identity helps achieve movement aims, it also creates a distance between the members of the movement and the rest of society. Ironically it might be seen that while valuing citizenship, the movement is encouraging participation in society as *Sem Terras* and not as ordinary citizens. The difference of identity can be difficult for young people: some teachers referred to their students' shyness at admitting to living in a settlement.

The MST is trying to transform the whole of society and not create an isolated enclosed world of its own. The concern with citizenship seen above also seems to show a commitment to integration into society. Yet, some people might question the degree to which the MST is really preparing people for participation outside the movement. The residents of camps and settlements are not restricted in their activities, nevertheless the vast majority of arenas in which members participate are mediated by the movement, and the education is intended to prepare for participation in society via the movement.

However, the movement as whole is becoming progressively less insular and increasingly linked to the larger movement for social justice. Caldart (2000) describes the stages of historical development, from a local to a national movement for land reform, and gradually towards incorporation in a wider project for popular national development and social justice. Events such as the World Social Forum, and the anti-capitalist/globalization movement in general, have introduced the MST to an even larger world platform.

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Nancy Fraser has as one of her axes of social justice the Principle of Participatory Parity.

According to this principle, justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers. (Fraser 2001: 6)

This is dependent on two factors: distribution and recognition. The former, the 'objective' factor, requires that participants must have the material resources to ensure their independence and access to goods. The second, the 'intersubjective' factor, requires that cultural values express respect for all members of society and do not discriminate against some because of their 'difference'.

The MST appears to have gone a considerable way in ensuring equal interaction of individuals as peers according to this conception. The movement is attempting to bring social justice to society as a whole in terms of Fraser's factors of *distribution* - by providing stable livelihoods for landless people - and *recognition* - by building a positive identity of the *Sem Terra*.

As has been seen above, there are some limitations of MST participation, particularly in terms of the extent to which its members are able to participate in the wider society. In addition, further research will be necessary to show the extent to which participation is hindered in subtle ways by factors such as gender and race. However, on the whole the movement shows considerable depth in its understandings and implementation of democratic participation.

Participation in the MST is based on direct and not representative democracy, and is *empowering* rather than *instrumental*, in that it leads to an increase in control over decision-making rather than more efficient implementation of externally-formulated policies.

The act of participation itself is seen to lead to further conscientization, leading to a cyclical process of development. This process is described in the context of children in the acampamentos:

With time these children gain a greater consciousness of the struggle: this happens...where they have the right to speak, to sing. They have a strong desire to participate, they have pleasure in contributing to the assemblies, meetings, celebrations, building toys and the school tent.... It is this space for participation that makes the children critical, so they don't accept things as they are.... (MST 2001b: 26/27)

One of the central aims of the MST is to enable its members to become subjects and not objects of historical events (the fundamental base of conscientization as described by Freire). The end of the process - becoming a subject of history - is nothing more than participation itself, in its truest sense. This is not just appearing in consultation groups, or even deciding how an international agency's money will be spent in the village, but the ability to have a deep and lasting influence on society and history.

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## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> This paper is based on research conducted by the author in 2002 for the dissertation of the MA in Education and International Development, Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>[2]</sup> Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra

<sup>[3]</sup> At the time the research was carried out, Fernando Henrique Cardoso was in power; the relationship of the MST to the new government, led by Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, should be considerably more amicable, although the movement has stated that land occupations will continue.

<sup>[4]</sup> At the first National Conference in 1984 the significant decision was made not to co-operate with the newly elected government which had succeeded the military dictatorship. Since then the following strategies have been used: land occupations, road marches, hunger strikes, occupation of public buildings, urban camps and public demonstrations (MST 2001a: 199-203). The use of violence is not sanctioned by the movement.

<sup>[5]</sup> Of all nations, Brazil is second only to Paraguay in terms of unequal distribution of land. 1% of owners control around 50% of the agricultural land (Brandford & Kucinski 1995). An estimated 60% of the productive agricultural land in the largest farms in Brazil is lying idle. At the same time there are about 25 million agricultural workers in precarious and poorly-paid temporary jobs.

<sup>[6]</sup> A fuller description of the general aims of the movement is presented in *Como Fazer a Escola que Queremos: o Planejamento* (1995):

- i. To build a society without exploitation where labour has priority over capital.
- ii. To ensure that the land is at the service of all in society.
- iii. To guarantee work for all, with a just distribution of land, income and wealth.
- iv. To constantly strive for social justice and equality of rights, whether economic, political, social or cultural.
- v. To encourage humanist and socialist values in human relations.

- vi. To combat all forms of social discrimination and promote equal participation for women.

(MST 1995)

[7] A similar concept, described as the ‘engineering of consent’, is analysed in Graebner (1987) with reference to US national governance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

[8] Partido dos Trabalhadores

[9] These co-ordinators provide pedagogical support for teachers and carry out general administration at the local and state level.

[10] *Assentamentos* are permanent settlements; *acampamentos* are temporary camps of landless people who have made an occupation and are waiting to be settled.

[11] All the quotations found in this study, both from the documents and the interviews, are the author's translations from the original Portuguese.

[12] Pseudonyms have been used for individuals and communities.

[13] The structures are usually more clearly defined and energetically implemented in the *acampamentos* than in the *assentamentos*, as the former have a greater degree of communal living and a greater necessity for co-operation.

[14] This is known as a *school council* ‘in those places where collective management of the school with the participation of pupils and the community is legally possible’ (MST 1995: 10). In this case it is an officially recognised body: examples of these are found in the PT-run schools in Porto Alegre described by Gandin and Apple (2002).

[15] Caldart is an activist of the movement and the most important writer on MST education. An academic from the South of Brazil, she has published two books on the subject as well as a number of articles, and is a major contributor to the official MST publications.

[16] These are teacher-training qualifications: *magistério* is a secondary school course, and *pedagogia* a university course. The government is proposing to ensure all teachers



have the full university teacher training by 2005: this will be difficult to achieve in rural areas.

[17] A system in which pupils spend alternate weeks at school and at home.

[18] Gandin and Apple (2002) found that the most important variable affecting the extent to which individuals contributed in public meetings was not gender or class, but number of years of involvement. This indicates that the act of participating itself provides the required training for effective participation. The same argument is also given by Taylor (1998) in her research on political participation in Chile and Argentina.

[19] Técnico em Administração de Cooperativas

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