



Tropentag, September 19-21, 2012, Göttingen -
Kassel/Witzenhausen

“Resilience of agricultural systems against crises”

Farmers’ Decisions Concerning the Rainforest in Land Reform Settlements in the Brazilian Amazon

KARIN MARITA NAASE

University of Marburg, Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology, Germany

Abstract

Land reform is a sensitive topic in public Brazilian debate due to the landless workers movements’ national and international visibility, due to the social and economic inequality in Brazil and due to the complexity of interests and positions involved. But, as a matter of fact, land reform settlements in the Amazon are amongst the fiercest destructors of tropical rainforest in the region. This reality is against customary explanations for deforestation, presuming traditional population (including ribeirinhos (riverside dwellers), indigenous people, rubber tapers, and small peasants do not destroy nature (*i.e.* tropical rain forest and the general environment). In considering this reality common to other regions in the Amazon, there is one central question unanswered, far behind political and environmental debates on tropical rain forest and land reform: Why do people deforest? During my fieldwork in land reform settlements in the Brazilian Amazon, it became evident that there are several options and behavioural patterns that lead some settlers to conserve the legal reserve areas (80 % of the soil) and others to log nearly every tree on their land-reform allotments. Additionally, further questions should be asked about settlers’ options, motives, and strategies. Finally, we might ask whether it is truly possible, as land reform proposes, to combine conservation of the tropical rain forest with the search for social equity.

The focus of this contribution is on decisions made by settlers regarding rain forest conservation or destruction on their land allotments, as vital element of their livelihood-strategies. Therefore, this case study of landless people in the Amazon (in the state of Pará) attempts to analyse the decision-making of settlers in a complex social, political, economical, and environmental reality, which represents for recently established settlers a new situation at different degrees, according to former experiences and actual assets available. For most of them, it is a challenge endowed with multiple uncertainties and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, in this context, we have to consider the weight of the State and its development strategies through the land reform programme and environmental policies on peasants’ decisions and actions

Keywords: Amazon, deforestation, farmers’ decision making, land reform, tropical rainforest