

Organic farms improve profitability in dry North Eastern region

The Monteiro family lives in Bom Sucesso, a small community in the state of Pernambuco in North Eastern Brazil. Despite proximity to the Amazon River and government reforms that lifted many residents around them from poverty, many in that region consider clean drinking water a luxury.

At her home, Margarida Monteiro proudly places a dozen different dishes on the dinner table for her family and guests. The dishes include bean stew, tomato salad with coriander, fried okras with onions, chicken stew, cous cous made of semolina, and fresh carrot salad. She serves fresh squeezed guava juice as refreshment.

“Everything you see on the table is organically grown here at the family farm,” she says, “everything but spaghetti and rice.”

Her children and grandchildren gather around Margarida’s table and make their picks of her kitchen’s delights. A couple of hours later, when the adults sat in front of the TV, and grandchildren moved into the yard to play, she poured some leftovers in her own plate and turned to a quiet corner to eat.

“A few years ago, it was different. We used to go through a day to day struggle to get water, especially after a severe drought that left the nearby ponds completely dried out.” She says.

Behind her house, there are several water tanks which make it possible for her to grow different types of crops in her farm, as well as provide drinking and cleaning water for her family and their pets.

Her son Ivan, 29, says the situation has drastically improved.

“We had to walk five kilometres to the nearest well to fetch water. When we arrived there were already 10-15 people and queued. Sometimes we found animals bathing in the water so it was not clean for drinking any more.”

In recent years, the number of farmers living in extreme poverty has fallen, the poorest have new family allowances and minimum wages have increased, largely as a result of President Lula’s social reforms, but not as a result of revenue from their farms.

Mario Farias, who works as coordinator of the local ecumenical organization Diaconia agricultural programs in North Eastern Brazil, says there are many hurdles ahead of small farms to move from being barely self sufficient to actually making profit, with the scarcity of water topping the list of barriers.

The direct cause to water shortage is that rainfall is very little during the rainy season and non-existent in the dry season, when water in rocky ponds and rivers evaporate quickly.

Farias says despite presidential reforms, parliamentarians have blocked several initiatives to further improve the situation.

“Lula, who himself comes from a poor farming family in North East Brazil, has good will. But unfortunately the parliament, ruled by a majority from the upper classes who have no interest in solving problems for small farmers, minimized his authority to improve the situation here.”

A major hurdle approved by the parliament, according to Mario Farias, is the building of large-scale structures that the government built up over the years around water bodies, such as the massive construction of dams, where the power of water is concentrated for a few farms.

Another example is the government's focus on large-scale monoculture farming, such as soybean cultivation, eucalyptus and sugar cane cultivation (for export of sugar and ethanol), which, according to Mario Farias is environmentally unsustainable.

“These agricultural models impoverish the soil and undermine the independence of small farmers, since they have to adapt to the price paid.”

Another trend that worries him is that large companies are buying up land from small farmers, which means that they can not grow their own food. This, says Mario Farias, has a negative impact on food security in the country. “If natural resources would be allocated in the right way, there would not be poverty, ”he says.

Most small farming families like the Monteiros often lack the knowledge, money, land and technology to improve their farm productivity. But Faria’s organization, Diaconia, encourages them to grow diversified and organically produced crops, opening up new marketing opportunities. It helps them get started by learning the basics of building water tanks where rain water collected enough throughout the year, both for drinking and irrigation of crops.

It is now ten years since the family Monteiro got their first tank. Since then, they built several tanks for irrigation, a water trench that prevents rain water from evaporation, and a pump powered by solar energy. Now, the family has both drinking water and water is sufficient for cultivation. Their 13 hectare farm produces over 50 varieties of fruit, vegetables and herbs, as well as goats, cows, chickens and honey.

“And I have just started to grow strawberries and a new kind of potato, ”says Ivan Monteiro enthusiastically.

Since about three years, they have become self-sufficient and even though everyone in the family work on the farm, it has become Ivan’s primary responsibility to market the farms products in organic markets in the cities Sao José do Egito and Tuparetama and for sale to the state food program that distributes food, for example, to schools, hospitals and retirement homes.

Family Monteiro receives both trainees and students who want to learn more about organic farming. In addition to up to 50 local and international visitors a month who want to learn about the farm’s success story.

However, says Ivan, many farmers are lured into moving to the cities because they think they can earn more money and have a better life there. “But most end up in slums. They do not understand that, with the right methods and technology, it is possible to live a good life in the country,” he says.