

AGRICULTURE & BRICS: REFORMS AND RESISTANCE



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INTRODUCTION

The 13th Summit of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations was held in India, on 9 September 2021. The Summit was also the 15th anniversary of the yearly BRICS meetings and was organised on the theme, 'Intra-BRICS Cooperation for Continuity, Consolidation and Consensus.' BRICS ministerials address various strategic areas including public health, environment, science and technology, security and agriculture.

The volume of trade in agricultural commodities and among large agrarian communities in these countries makes agriculture a key area of cooperation. Food security, sustainable cultivation and agricultural markets also play a fundamental role in achieving development goals. In 2019, the BRICS ministerial on agriculture made a call for more ICT and technology based solutions which culminated in the 'Operationalisation of the BRICS Agriculture Research Platform.' The main aim of such a platform is to "intensify cooperation in the areas of agricultural research, technology, policy, innovations and capacity building including technologies for smallholder farming and to sustainably increase yields and farmers income in the BRICS member countries."¹ Given the large impact of the emerging BRICS economies on the global agricultural value chain these partnerships require more scrutiny, especially in the aftermath of a devastating pandemic.

The Peoples' Forum on BRICS is an attempt to gather workers, citizens, organisations and academics to discuss practises, challenges and solutions that are otherwise ignored in the official Summit. In collaboration with the Peoples' Forum on BRICS² the Focus on Global South organised a civil society dialogue on the status of agriculture in these emerging economies including a discussion on the ground-level impact of the pandemic on farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists and indigenous people. The discussion was held virtually with participants from Brazil, India and South Africa talking about the various agricultural reforms in their countries, their impact and peoples' response and resistance.

BRICS' ORIGINS

The BRICS nations have come a long way from being a moniker used in financial and economic circles to an active multilateral partnership on several issues such as economic growth, agriculture and climate change. While the origins of the term 'BRICS' can be traced to an early 2000s Goldman Sachs report, a meeting of leaders Hu Jintao, Vladimir Putin and Manmohan Singh during the 2008 G8 conference cemented the diplomatic partnership. The first meeting took place in Russia in 2009; South Africa had not yet entered the partnership. In 2010, South Africa became an official member of the forum.

The BRICS partnership is unique given the different political structures in the countries and the existing geopolitical tensions between the two biggest countries in the grouping- India and China. However, differing ideologies and goals notwithstanding, the fundamental purpose of a forum such as BRICS is giving emerging nations more prominence in international institutions and global governance. The strategic importance of diplomatic relations between nations also draws from the fact that their combined GDP was 23.5 trillion USD in 2021³ They are also home to a population of 3 billion people. According to a 2017 study, intra-BRICS trade was at 10.61 per cent of these countries' total trade with some countries like Brazil conducting 24 per cent of its trade intra-BRICS. This figure has been on the rise with multiple trade fairs and investment partnerships in these countries.⁴

There is a lot of criticism of the BRICS but the forum allows member countries to exchange information and gain bargaining power as a bloc in different spheres of international governance. BRICS summits also provide a good mid-way platform for member countries to discuss their positions in other global conferences or summits. This makes it a crucial avenue for discussions on policies related to agriculture, trade, healthcare and infrastructure.



AGRICULTURE AND BRICS

BRICS countries are responsible for a significant portion of the world's agricultural output⁵ and wield a lot of power in the world's supply chains. The trajectory of their cooperation can play a significant role in world food security. As emerging sites of agricultural production, consumption and capital accumulation, decisions taken in these countries can either provide an alternative to the existing paradigm of global agrarian systems or as some fear, become another extension of it.

The dynamics of the global value chain have also changed considerably with BRICS countries building new alliances with other middle-income countries. What was once a primarily western led, neoliberal development agenda has also undergone changes with bilateral and multilateral partnerships between emerging economies. However, the growth in trade relations and the promotion of agribusiness has taken precedence over discussions on the agrarian crises faced by these countries either in the form of debt, crop failure, land banking, climate disruptions or the rapid commercialisation of agriculture. This has resulted in a lot of scepticism about the official BRICS summit process and the subsequent birth of various 'Peoples BRICS' forums.

This report discusses three presentations from Brazil, India and South Africa focusing on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agricultural landscape in these countries and the response from their governments. It also discusses peoples' resistance and solidarity in the face of a worsening agrarian crisis. Given that the 2021 BRICS Summit insufficiently addressed the pandemic and its effects, these presentations will help piece together common problems and solutions across continents. These case studies are based on three presentations made at the counter Peoples' Summit, providing a progressive alternative view on agrarian changes in the BRICS countries based on solidarity and equity.



BRAZIL

Fabio Tomaz⁶ from Brazil's Landless Workers Movement or the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)⁷ said that one of the main contradictions of the COVID-19 impact on Brazilian agriculture was that while agricultural production reached record numbers, so did hunger and food insecurity among the population. According to one study, almost 116 million Brazilians or 54 per cent of the population suffered from some form of food insecurity in 2020.⁸ The pandemic also worsened the hunger divide, hitting small agricultural producers, fisherfolk and agricultural workers much harder.

Brazil's informal food markets, where most of the peasants sell their produce, were closed during the COVID-19 lockdowns which adversely impacted their incomes. The Brazilian real also became one of the poorest performing currencies in 2020, devalued by nearly 30 per cent with marginalised communities bearing the brunt of rising food prices. Tomaz explained that as the largest producer of soybeans and sugarcane the

focus of Brazil's agricultural production is outwards. This agricultural model has steered towards exports rather than focusing on the internal market which has resulted in skyrocketing food prices in the country. The consumption of certain staple foods such as meat also decreased significantly during the pandemic. Meat consumption in Brazil was at its lowest in 25 years due to high prices and limited domestic availability. Tomaz told the participants that people stood in long queues to procure bones and other meat parts that are usually discarded.

The cycle of low production, low sales and low incomes was met with a highly inadequate response from the government. Tomaz added that under the leadership of President Jair Bolsonaro, the Brazilian federal government operated under the false pretext that saving lives could not go hand in hand with saving the economy.⁹ Even during the most alarming stages of the pandemic, the virus was dismissed as a simple flu and people were asked to go back to life as usual. Lack of proper public healthcare facilities along with cuts in public spending and other austerity measures resulted in devastating casualties. The same policies that were imposed to save the economy, ended up stunting any form of recovery. This period saw the weakening of several labour and environmental protections resulting in land grabbing of indigenous land for mining, deforestation and monoculture.¹⁰ Tomaz added that the chaos of the pandemic made it easier for the federal government to deepen its right-wing political agenda.

The onslaught of environmental deregulation has a direct link to the agribusiness model that Brazil hopes to leverage globally. In the heights of the pandemic, Bolsonaro's government dismantled several environmental laws through acts, ordinances and decrees that granted some control over forest land to the Ministry of Livestock and Agriculture. Deforestation in Brazil is at its highest level in a decade, with 10,476 square kilometres of rainforest lost between August 2020 to July 2021.¹¹ In July 2021 alone, 2,095 square kilometres of land was deforested. Most of this deforestation was in the Amazonian states like Acre and Amazonas where local corporations see a potential for growth in deforested land.¹² However, increased growth and productivity did not translate into better development indicators for small producers, agricultural workers and the rural population.

In terms of food security, after significant pressure from the Congress the federal government's response came in the form of 'corona vouchers.' Initially, a monthly sum of 600 reais (USD 107) was directly transferred to low income workers but eventually the programme significantly reduced the sum to 250 reais per month (\$44). During President Bolsonaro's regime, most of the social protection policies were gradually disman-



tled. This severely undermined access to the Unified Health System, the Unified Social Assistance System and the Food Security and Nutrition System.¹³ A delayed and uncoordinated response to the pandemic was the final straw on an already weak emergency response set-up.

Social movements such as MST tried to organise food donation centres on a weekly or daily basis that connected producers and households. This was an important step in addressing some of the issues mentioned earlier. The solidarity between peasants who are a part of the movement is an important agenda for MST. With over 2,500 land occupations, peasants have not only been able to reclaim land through the movement but also ask for education and access to healthcare and agricultural credit. In its recent 'Cultivation of Solidarity' meet, MST provided vulnerable families with food produced in their agrarian reform areas.

One reason for providing a link between food donation and production is denouncing the harsh reality of peasants experiencing hunger in a country that has some of the largest cultivations of monoculture crops such as soybean and corn.¹⁴ Tomaz also mentioned that the MST were in the process of making a Peoples' Health Brigade to visit low income families for offering medical help and spreading awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic.



SOUTH AFRICA

Professor Ruth Hall, South African Research Chair at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies at the University of Western Cape, spoke about the South African perspective at the Peoples' BRICS panel. She started by discussing two contrasting images that captured the essence of the South African government's response to the pandemic. One was that of long queues of people trying to access well-guarded supermarkets for food. The second image was of fruits and vegetables being confiscated from roadside informal vendors by state authorities. These images captured the contradictions of the South African response to COVID-19 protecting large conglomerates and supermarket chains on the one hand while criminalising people trying to make a livelihood. Professor Hall also made an intriguing point - that the pandemic was not good for South African Capital. South African retailers such as Shoprite have been closing operations in various countries across the African continent.¹⁵

This is symptomatic of a deeper problem. The struggles of small farmers and agricultural workers are met with incongruent solutions. The focus, Professor Hall said, was on capital expansion, big infrastructure development, setting up special economic zones (SEZs) and mining deals. The BRICS narrative of growth is promising, especially for an economy like South Africa and Professor Hall's research indicates that agriculture and food systems are at the centre of BRICS strategy for regional growth. There are sig-

nificant connections between Brazil's Embrapa (Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation) and the commercialisation of African agriculture¹⁶ and a steady expansion of agribusiness and biotechnology by the Chinese state and the African Union. Any notion that the BRICS nations are an alternative to global capitalism needs to be revisited; rather they should be seen as an 'artery' through which global capitalism is pushing new frontiers.

South Africa is the latest member to join the BRICS nations in 2010 and its inclusion has been touted as important for African integration into the grouping. It is often understood as a 'mini BRICS' because it has a smaller economy as compared to the rest of the BRICS nations and yet remains significant due to the channels it offers for greater transnational cooperation and investments, especially on the African continent. These come in the form of access to land and resources such as water and minerals and growing consumer markets. Professor Hall recalled that in the 2013 BRICS Summit held in Durban, the South African government announced a range of tax incentives and exemptions that would benefit global finance. South Africa became an important tax haven and this move by the then Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan was termed the 'Gateway to Africa.'¹⁷

According to Professor Hall the pattern of capital accumulation was also evident in the relief and mitigation packages that the government provided during COVID-19. Food that was distributed was mostly processed food produced by one of the four large corporations in South Africa. Relief vouchers were encashable only in major supermarkets and not in the informal sector. Therefore, public spending fed into a neoliberal food economy with the spotlight on four large supermarket chains and food manufacturers --Shoprite, Pick n Pay, Spar and Woolworths.¹⁸

The deregulation of the agricultural sector has allowed corporations to take over the state agricultural marketing boards and trade institutions. Even during the first slew of reforms, deregulation changed South Africa's agricultural portfolio with a focus on horticulture and cash crops such as wool, fruits and wine for exports¹⁹ On the consumption side, Professor Hall mentioned that about 30 years ago, only 10 per cent of the food was procured through supermarkets. Now this has gone up to 60-70 per cent. Smallholders took a hit during the pandemic as they were also given relief through vouchers and there was only a small initiative to channelise their output.

South Africa also noticed the contradiction seen in Brazil. In 2020 agricultural production increased by 13 per cent while the economy declined by 7 per cent and hunger in-

creased manifold.²⁰ An interesting comment that Professor Hall made in her presentation was that the crisis was going both ways and even capital was facing the pressures of an economic slowdown. One of South Africa's biggest food retailers – Shoprite -- has closed several stores in Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Madagascar. Devalued currencies, high commodity prices and inflation rates have adversely hit corporate retail due to the significant reduction in peoples' disposable incomes and spending powers. The flipside to this is the clarion call to 'buy local,' providing an opportunity for traditional mom and pop stores and informal vendors to tap into the market.

Transnational investments in food systems are being encouraged widely. For instance, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Plan (CAADP), an initiative of the African Union aims to increase productivity and foreign investments especially post the pandemic. Many such initiatives come with a climate narrative but as seen in the recent United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), this narrative is easily co-opted by large corporations espousing technocratic solutions with organisations such as the World Economic Forum and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) steering important conversations around agriculture and food systems. Climate smart agriculture is still envisioned as a "production driven expansion of corporate agriculture."²¹ Professor Hall described this year's COP26 summit as one of the most corporate heavy summits on climate change which speaks volumes for the ways in which issues such as climate change and agriculture are actively prescribing solutions that do not address systemic issues such as landlessness, poor agricultural wages, increased debts, invasive technologies and unsustainable production practices.

Some of the key responses to these changes come from social movements. Professor Hall explained that usually a community activist organisation in collaboration with trade unions tries to build bridges between urban and rural movements and help promote activities such as land occupation for both housing





and access to food production. There have been several calls to re-localise food systems and also educate people about the failures of multinational retail chains' long and extended supply chains and the over-reliance on seed inputs from large corporations. These efforts highlight the vulnerabilities that exist in the food system that can be addressed only through a politics of reclamation: reclaiming land, water, climate and food commons. Initiatives that focus on building direct links between small farmers, peasant producers and working class communities in urban centres are vital for resistance especially in the context of authoritarian governments.



INDIA

Farmers in India were in the midst of one of the largest protests in history²² against the introduction of new farm laws and legal guarantees for remunerative prices in the country. It was a year of continuous protests by farmers at the borders of the national capital Delhi and across various states. In his presentation Dr Vijoo Krishnan, the All India Joint Secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS),²³ one of the largest peasant unions in the country and a scholar of Indian agriculture, talked about the opportunistic ways in which three new farm laws were passed at the height of the pandemic. There was little to no consultation with state governments, farmers' groups and civil society organisations.

The three farm laws fundamentally altered the rules of the game in Indian agrarian markets. The three laws consisted of a major relaxation on where agricultural produce was to be sold and procured, a relaxation of stockpiling under the Essential Commodities



Act (1955) and a new piece of legislation that enabled contract farming. The minutiae of these laws notwithstanding, the promise was ease of doing business for private players to enter the agricultural value chain under the pretext of greater efficiency and higher returns. However, there was scepticism about whether the supposed benefits of these laws will be passed on to farmers and worse, their potential to harm Indian farmers and the agro-food system in the country.

On 19 November 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the repeal of the three farm laws in a televised address. After a year-long protest, farmers in India succeeded in rolling back the laws but organisations such as the Samyukt Kisan Morcha have said that certain demands such as legislation that will guarantee a mandatory minimum support price (MSP) for agricultural produce will continue to be flagged by the farmers till the government takes a step in the right direction.²⁴

Like most other BRICS nations, agricultural productivity was not the only issue during the pandemic. Dr Krishnan mentioned that Indian farmers expected a bumper harvest but the arbitrary, stringent implementation of the first COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 made it difficult to harvest and market crops. Several reports have identified wastage and dumping of crops by defeated farmers unable to sell their produce for a profit. As disposable incomes reduced, hunger and malnutrition became more acute in rural India. India ranked 101 out of 116 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) in 2021 trailing behind other developing countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan.²⁵ Hunger amid plenty was a common experience in all the three countries discussed in this paper.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, rural India also faced a mass influx of migrant workers from urban centres. As more workers headed back home, often in rural parts of the states, they faced hunger and unemployment. Most of rural to urban migration in the last few decades happened because of an agrarian crisis and the migrants' forced return to villages came with its own set of issues. Workers who moved back to their native places were unable to find work and some even committed suicide.²⁶ The government's decision to aggressively push reforms without proper debate in the Parliament amidst these hardships was met with severe criticism.



Dr Krishnan, who has been an active participant in the farmers' movement in India, spoke some encouraging words about resistance to the farm laws and the pro-corporate agenda in agriculture reforms. Over the last several years, peasant organisations have cut across class, caste and linguistic barriers to build an issue-based unity. He reported that over 500 organisations under the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (United Farmers Struggle) came together to protest peacefully. On 26 November 2020 the all-India general strike saw over 250 million participants across the country. The protesting farmers and workers surrounded the borders of the national capital and stayed firm despite the government clamping down with water cannons and tear gas. More than 700 farmers died during the year with multiple episodes of police repression including battery-charging peaceful protestors. In one such incident, a car was rammed through a peaceful protest allegedly by a union minister's convoy, killing four farmers.²⁷

Despite several attempts to intimidate the farmers, Dr Krishnan added that the farmers' resolve is strong. It is their livelihood at stake and there is a strong demand for an alternative approach to the agrarian crisis. However, the real question is whether multilateral forums such as BRICS want to discuss and share information on issues pertaining to income support, strengthening food security and promoting sustainable agriculture or they only want to promote corporate investments and trade deals with member countries.



THE FUTURE OF BRICS AND PEOPLES' BRICS

In many ways BRICS has the potential to be an alternative to North American and European led capitalism. However, South-South cooperation does not necessarily indicate a more inclusive and equal path to economic growth and development, and even more so with the prominence of right-wing and conservative governments and policies. What are some of the possible opportunities for robust, peasant friendly agrarian systems across BRICS?

One of the first steps to build inter-BRICS cooperation is identifying common challenges across agrarian communities in these countries. For instance, all three speakers spoke about the agricultural marketing crises through the pandemic. In many cases, despite normal yields, farmers could not sell their produce due to stringent lockdowns and lack of proper interventions. Food insecurity continues to be prevalent even among producers which has a subsequent impact on other areas such as health, gender equality and education.

The internal agro-industrial shift in Brazil, India and South Africa can be seen as a vertical integration into the global supply chains, super-marketisation of food systems, concentrated land holdings and the development of large agribusiness corporations.²⁸ These internal agricultural transformations are auxiliary to the bilateral and multilateral investments and trade deals that BRICS countries are engaged in. Governments and businesses in the BRICS countries have more opportunities to seek resources and labour in other countries and invest in projects in neighbouring middle income countries. Therefore, the development of BRICS speaks to a larger set of countries beyond Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. As nation states there should be an active effort to safeguard food security by building common food banks that can reach the population through a public distribution system; providing streamlined access to agricultural inputs and agricultural marketing channels to prevent wastage.

What stands clear in the face of a global agrarian crisis is a resilient set of peasant movements across these countries. In Brazil, in collaboration with its members MST was able to mobilise rural workers to reclaim land while also participating in the programme for agrarian reforms to make structural changes in Brazilian agrarian relations. The objectives of this programme include democratising access to land; reforestation; preserving sovereignty over the management of seeds; and abolishing exploitation, oppression and alienation of farm workers. The movement has been able to reach a global audience through the La Via Campesina Movement.

In India, the farmers' resilience saw a tangible outcome in the repeal of the three farm laws. The scale and the duration of the protests undoubtedly demonstrated the power of the peasantry and its ability to mount pressure on the state. Indian farmers made use of various strategies like the formation of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha bringing together several farmers' unions, railway strikes, picketing toll plazas and a historic march from different parts of the country to the nation's capital, Delhi. This landmark protest brought various agrarian communities in the country together and started a crucial dialogue on the direction that the agriculture policy should take.

At the international level, building a solidarity movement will provide farmers direct access to their global counterparts and help in exchanging information while also building civil society's powers. At the national level, as most of the speakers explained, a sustained effort at building unity on agrarian issues across various communities can empower the farmers and the peasantry. Private companies and government elites have been building partnerships under the BRICS umbrella. The opportunity is rife for peasants' movements, civil society organisations and farmers' groups to also reach out and build a network of their own.

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FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Food and agriculture play an important role for the BRICS nations given their combined prowess in agricultural output and trade. The countries also house a large agrarian community with several peasants, fisherfolk, workers and indigenous peoples dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. The pandemic has provided an important juncture for these emerging economies to re-examine global value chains and policies that affect agrarian livelihoods, food security, nutrition and sustainability. However, the 2021 BRICS summit leaves us wanting in terms of policy and accountability for the devastating consequences of COVID-19 on the agrarian landscape. This policy brief examines the status of food and agriculture in three of the BRICS nations - Brazil, South Africa and India to discuss the potential implications for future multilateral cooperation.