

From the ground up

Capitalism, monoculture and remote politicians had left north eastern Brazil in a bad way. Then small farming communities started reviving their land and their fortunes, by rejecting the conventional wisdom of competition.

Naji Makarem investigates.

Governments talk about democracy, yet politics is all too often a top-down exercise, with a patronizing 'we know best' attitude. This strategy suits politicians who can either claim credit for their actions, framing their duties as favours, or use public policy as bargaining chips for votes. But communities are waking up to reality and sidestepping the system by organising themselves and unleashing the knowledge gained over generations.

In today's world information is an asset, and is often perceived as a source of competitive advantage. It is therefore kept under a tight grip, shielded from the ears and eyes of others who could use it to gain the fruits of its rewards. From childhood we are trained to strive to be the best. Winning is the only meaning given to us, and there can only be one winner. Renouncing this philosophy, if it warrants such a title, has given small farmers in North-Eastern Brazil a lifeline in a world where the odds are stacked up against them.

There was a time when the government encouraged monoculture farming in this arid and semi-arid region, thanks to a healthy world market for tobacco and cotton. The day came however, as it always does, when this region ceased to be the most competitive. So commercial farmers sold off their large lands into smaller plots, and today, unusually for Brazil, the land belongs to many small farmers with plots of land ranging from five to twenty hectares.

After years of monoculture the land had been cleared of the plants and trees that had naturally 'learned' to live under these tough weather conditions, and small family farmers found themselves in a serious predicament. They had to learn, from scratch, how to survive in these tough circumstances. Their immediate needs were for water, seeds and medicine.

Large landowners were happy to send trucks-full of water, which they sold to small farmers. The government collected seeds from other regions and gave them to farmers in return for votes. These seeds however were not bred to survive in this particular climate, and needed to be donated again after two or three harvests. As for medicine, farmers relied on expensive remedies on offer in the towns.

Then came the ASPTA, one of Brazil's many NGOs committed to helping people become as self-sufficient as possible, and to live sustainably with their environment. They began with an analysis of Pernambuco, the North Eastern region of Brazil. Their study revealed good and bad news. The bad news was that change was necessary if farmers were to survive in the ruthless global economy that favours cheap imports and exports of large commercial monoculture businesses. The good news was that solutions to their most pressing needs, water, seeds and medicine, were within reach. Some families had overcome these problems, but lacked a local community system for sharing information and accelerating community learning. The ASPTA came to fill the local organisational vacuum created by a political system that made self-motivated decisions from afar.

The ASPTA, with the cooperation of ActionAid UK's Brazil office, began to hold community meetings, where successful farming families shared their strategies with the rest of the community. Water shortages and dependency on large farmer's water sales were overcome by creating groups of farmers willing to work together to building water storage tanks. The products needed for this were very cheap, but installing them would have been too much work for any one family. So in breach of the capitalist rule of 'each man for himself', they got together and rotated between farms,

building the water reservoirs for each other, using their rooftops to capture rainfall.

It was a simple and common sense solution, but the national government, the local community had previously relied entirely on, had failed to think of it. As in many other such cases all over the world, local communities, when empowered, have the know-how and complex perspective of their own local reality to find solutions to their own problems.

Thus began the dynamic knowledge-sharing exercise enabled by the commitment of the ASPTA and ActionAid. Before long these small farmers found a solution to the lack of good seeds. They created community seed banks. I visited such a seed bank and spoke to the family running it, to make sense of this simple system that was solving the 'bad-seed' problem. Instead of relying on the government for seeds, seeds which were not suited to the climate in Pernambuco, and which were all too often used as bribes for votes, the community united in sharing the seeds which best suited the climate. The best seeds were offered to the nearest community bank, which protected and stored them. The next season, farmers would approach the bank, and borrow good quality seeds for the season. When the harvest came, they would give back the seeds borrowed, plus a little extra to make sure other farmers would have access to them.

Bending the rules of capitalism is proving to be the saviour for the farmers of Pernambuco. Cooperation and sharing of information as opposed to competition, has given this community a new lifeline in a pretty hostile environmental and economic climate. More and more farmers are capturing rainwater when it does rain, and gaining free access to seeds suited for their region. They could have waited in vain for these simple yet creative solutions to come from above, but instead they developed alternatives by generating power from the ground up.

Pernambuco is a very tough region for growing food, especially in the extra-dry western area, and even with better access to free water and seeds families often found themselves with little excess production to sell. In particular, many lacked money for expensive medicines. Some families found natural remedies to most of the usual illnesses, such as colds and stomach upsets. So naturally, with their newfound spirit of cooperation and communication, they shared information on how to grow what seeds for what ailments. Today around 90% of common illnesses are self-treated by herbal medicine, which are often shared between neighbouring farms.

Few expect the government to implement such creative and simple solutions to medicinal needs, as these would work against large pharmaceutical interests, not to mention reducing tax intakes. But what the government fails to realise is that the productivity is seriously reduced when workers are too poor to pay for health. I visited a small urban favela where philanthropist Ary Morais had built a small house on a small piece of land and begun growing medicine for the community he had grown to love. The police paid him a visit on three occasions, warning him to close his illegal medicinal operation. When I asked him why it was deemed illegal, he said he didn't possess a license something he could never afford, as he was running a non-profit operation to help people who had no money. If this community and many others had achieved a level of participative local democracy and control over their own destinies, they would vote to allow Ary to grow natural remedies and save the whole community a great deal of money and suffering. In Pernambuco it is legal to grow remedies for personal use, and families are continuously learning from techniques from each other. The ASPTA has shown that communities can manage their own local complexities and find a way round the difficulties they encounter.

Today, the internet has lowered the cost of communication further at any other point in history. Local communities now have the potential to manage their own complex worlds, whilst keeping in touch with other communities anywhere in the world. We have the opportunity to finally become truly global and local at the same time. In fact one is not possible without the other, for gaining a global perspective allows communities to gain control of their own destinies without losing sight of the overall picture. The need for centralised control is becoming redundant now that we can all gain equal access to the relevant information to make decisions.

The technology is there, and communities such as small farmers in Pernambuco have successfully tested ground-up politics, where decisions are generated locally. The time has come for the technology and the social re-engineering to merge, so that we can finally begin building a new global/local world; a world full of countless, networked democracies.

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