

**SISTER DOROTHY STANG:
STRUGGLING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
IN THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(The following is an executive summary of a report prepared in December of 2005 by the students of Dr. Miguel Carter, School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC. The complete study with bibliography can be obtained at http://www.rfkmemorial.org/human_rights/2001_Frigo/AUStangReport.pdf) or e-mail DotEdAids@sndden.org.

On February 12, 2005, Sister Dorothy Stang, an American nun from Ohio, was murdered in the Brazilian Amazon. During nearly half a century, Sister Dorothy had been fighting for human rights among the rural poor in the northern states of Maranhao and Para. Working with the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), an ecumenical social justice organization linked to the Catholic Church, she appealed to the government for a more equitable land distribution in northern Brazil. Together with the CPT, she promoted sustainable development and land reform as an alternative to the current “predatory model” of economic development in Brazil, which is viciously exploitative of the country’s natural and human resources and has created one of the deepest domestic gaps between rich and poor in the world.

Sister Dorothy’s murder shocked the international community and brought to light Brazil’s brutal history of violence over the unequal distribution of land. This paper examines the complex historical and contemporary issues that from Sister Dorothy’s life and death, including patterns of wealth accumulation and social power in the Amazon, the environmental impact of economic development, the history of land acquisition and land reform in the Amazon, human rights violations in the Amazon, the history and livelihoods of the indigenous communities, and the social forces struggling for sustainable development.

During her years in Brazil, Sister Dorothy – an honorary Brazilian citizen – struggled alongside the landless poor, demanding social justice through Federal reform of highly unequal land distribution in the Amazon region. Through her caring and insightful leadership, she helped to raise the collective consciousness, the hopes and the self-confidence of the communities with which she worked. Through her fearless pursuit of justice and her thorough knowledge of the law, she managed to obtain concrete responses from the government, including the demarcation of 600 family plots by INCRA, the government’s agrarian reform agency. Sister Dorothy’s violent death and the international attention it received have intensified the struggle to complete her mission: “She will accomplish with her blood what she could not fully accomplish with her life,” a local priest said. In response to the international outrage over the nun’s murder, the Brazilian government made significant concessions to benefit the rural poor and protect the environment. In her life, Sister Dorothy brightened the lives of countless people. In her death, she leaves a lasting legacy and a powerful call to serve the causes of social justice and agrarian reform.

The Brazilian Amazon is home to one-third of the world's biodiversity and over 200 indigenous ethnic groups. The region's natural wealth makes it a prime target for exploitative economic activity such as logging, mining, ranching, and intensive soybean farming. These industries are extremely lucrative in the short term, but they are unsustainable and often destructive to the environment and the inhabitants of the forest. Road building is a catalyst for extraction of natural resources and roughly 85% of the deforestation has taken place within 50 kilometers of a road. Legal limits placed on logging do little to slow the destruction, since the Amazon is a largely unregulated frontier. The absence of police presence or official oversight allows loggers and ranchers to evade environmental laws and seize land through violent threats and the practice of *grilagem*, the falsifying of land titles. Foreign investment in Brazil's booming logging, mineral extraction, cattle ranching, and farming has in many cases intensified local struggles for land. An increasing proportion of the world's timber comes from the Amazon, specifically from the state of Para. The landowning elites, emboldened by the absence of law enforcement in Para and motivated by the huge profits to be gained, intimidate or forcefully evict smaller farmers from the land.

What role does the government play in these power struggles, and in whose interests does it act? This question is at the root of Sister Dorothy's efforts to challenge the government to uphold its own laws and advocate for its own people. An underdeveloped nation striving to be a competitive player in the global marketplace, Brazil has pursued development policies that promote large agribusinesses and logging industries, since these economic activities are the most lucrative for the national economy. There is an undeniable financial and political alliance between Brazilians of influence – namely the elite landowners, many legislators and government officials – and the large-scale extractive enterprises in the Amazon region. In the view of the government, “development” means large-scale agriculture and manufacturing, and export surpluses, from which the elite profit disproportionately. Subsistence farming and preserving the environment are not considered worthwhile investments; deforestation and continued poverty among the least fortunate are considered necessary sacrifices to national “progress.” International pressure is building upon the government of Brazil to address the problems of the poor and the environment. Responding to the international outcry at Dorothy's murder, the Brazilian government created two large forest reserves, placed a six-month ban on logging licenses in parts of the territory, dispatched 2000 troops to control the area, and announced the establishment of 19 domains for the protection of peasant livelihoods. Whether these moves signify substantive reforms or mere window dressing for international observers remains to be seen.

Each year an area approximately the size of Belgium is cleared and burned in the Amazon. This shocking rate of deforestation has important repercussions for all of us, not only in the increased rate of carbon emissions and global climate changes, but in the destruction of biodiversity. About 25% of pharmaceutical products used worldwide are derived from Amazonian plants; the destruction of the Amazon means the loss of vital genetic material from which to draw new medicines, food products and useful research. Predatory development also has social consequences. By encouraging the poor to move

deeper into the Amazon to “colonize” it, the government has caused rapid population growth in the region. Since the soil quality of the Amazon is poor, it is only useful for a decade; the destruction of the forest through mining, ranching, and logging further drains the soil, making it even harder for subsistence farmers to eke out a living. As a consequence of crowding and competition of big interests with smallholder needs, security problems have increased and poverty has deepened in the Amazon. Unfortunately, destructive development reaps big profits and therefore wins support from the general Brazilian population. Is there an alternative development method that values protecting the environment as well as promoting economic growth?

For Dorothy Stang, the CPT and those involved in the landless movements, agrarian reform is an essential component of sustainable socio-economic development in Amazonia, an area where land is the important currency. Brazil has the second-highest concentration of land ownership in the world. Roughly 1% of the population controls about 47% of the territory. Brazil’s income inequality is also among the highest in the world, illustrating the clear connection between wealth, power and land in Brazil. Land ownership is even less equitable in Amazonia, where 82% of Brazil’s largest landowners hold their estates. There is a centuries-long history of violent land conflict in northern Brazil, a legacy of the Portuguese Crown, which awarded enormous tracts of land to the Church and to a few elites. The origin of many contemporary conflicts over land ownership dates back to the privatization of public land under the Land Law of 1850, which generated conflict among large landowners and between large landowners and smallholder pioneers. The organized struggle for a federally directed program of land reform began in the decade prior to the military takeover in 1964. The military government, however, severely curtailed the movement for agrarian reform.

The CPT was formed in 1975, as a result of the Catholic Church’s growing involvement in grassroots activities and the increasing instances of land conflict and human rights abuses in the countryside. Charged with supporting the formation of peasant associations, the CPT and other progressive sectors of the Church played a decisive role in the establishment of one of the best organized landless movements in the world, the Movement of the Landless Rural Workers (MST) in 1984, just as the military regime was edging out of power. Through its carefully organized and peaceful occupations of unused land, the MST has helped bring about the official resettlement of 350,000 families on about 15 million acres of land.

The unequal distribution of land and income in the Amazon region is one of the primary sources of the violence and human rights abuses. As the landless movements challenge wealthy landowners’ questionable or illegal land holdings, these landowners – tacitly or directly aided by the local law enforcement and lawmen – defend their ownership claims with arson, eviction, intimidation and assassination. Para and the surrounding states are lawless frontiers, distanced from federal oversight, where local authority figures determine the law. Frequently landowners pay gunmen (*pistoleiros*) or even collaborate with the police to eliminate those who directly oppose their power – like Dorothy Stang – and any who are linked to them. CPT lawyers, pastoral agents and members of the NGOs who research crimes against landless peasants and indigenous people are often the object

of death threats. Although there is a state-sponsored witness protection program, it employs public police as the “protectors.” In some cases, policemen may be on trial for a crime and simultaneously be assigned to protect the witnesses to that very crime. In the few cases in which a criminal is prosecuted – as in the case of the murderers of Dorothy Stang – the local authorities may charge the hired gunmen with murder but make no attempt to bring to justice the landowners who ordered the killing. Sister Dorothy Stang was well aware that her life was in danger, and she repeatedly appealed to local authorities for protection. Hers is but one of nearly 1000 land-related murders in Para, only a handful of which have ever reached the courts.

One cannot talk about rights violations in the Amazon region without discussing Brazil’s indigenous and peasant communities. Today there are between 215 and 241 indigenous groups in Brazil; 61% of them live in the Amazon region. Few of the original inhabitants of Brazil have official rights to their land. Their history has been one of land dispossession by government policies and private developers. Deeply poor people of the Brazilian northeast are the principal victims of an insidious practice known as debt slavery. Contractors referred to as *gatos* go into rural towns in this regions to recruit men, promising work on Amazonian cattle ranches. Trucks then transport these penniless workers to the estates where they are given extremely precarious lodging. At that point the workers are informed that they must repay their transportation, housing and food expenses at a very high cost. In effect, the migrants are forced into slavery. If they refuse to work or try to escape, gunmen may kill them. Although the plights of the indigenous people and the rural peasants are not identical, they share a common thread. It is in both of these groups’ interest to oppose large-scale intensive enterprises that dispossess them of their lands.

Like the struggle of the MST, the indigenous struggle in Brazil is gradually gaining ground. International organizations, including United Nations agencies, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, have become strong advocates of indigenous rights, landless peoples’ rights and of sustainable development. The Catholic Church, rural networks and civil society actors are promoting an alternative model of development to large-scale, mono-cropping and natural resource exploitation. The small-scale farming advocated by Dorothy Stang, the CPT and MST is not only environmentally sound, but it would allow for a more equitable, entrepreneurial and self-sustaining society. By continuing her work, these key organizations and stake holders hope to transform the current elitist model of development that foments Brazil’s deep economic inequities and the uneasy social climate that framed the death of Sister Dorothy Stang.