

## **Environmental Justice and the EU's Relationship with Latin America**

**Article by Eszter Szedlacsek**

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The EU's proposed trade deal with the Mercosur bloc, dubbed a "cars-for-cows" swap, has gained less attention than other EU free trade deals in the last few years. The deal's future is uncertain, but if passed in its current form it would lock in the environmental and social damages caused by large-scale agricultural production in Latin America. Informed by political ecology and ecofeminism, Eszter Szedlacsek exposes the flaws of the deal "painted in green" by the false promise of sustainable development.

Seu Raimundo de Miranda and his wife come from a small town in the Cerrado region of north-east Brazil, where they used to raise livestock as subsistence farmers. Their lives changed drastically when they were driven off their land, forced to sell to one of the large-scale soy growers that have been pushing the boundaries of cultivation in the region for decades.<sup>[1]</sup> Campos Lindos, where they now live, is known both as a centre for soy and for its extreme levels of poverty.

They are one of many families that are losing their homes in land conflicts against large corporations producing soy to feed cattle, largely for European consumption. In 2018, 40.3 per cent of EU beef imports came from Brazil, with equally high imports of soybean. Seu Raimundo's land was acquired by Cargill, a large US-owned company that is notorious for land grabs in rural Brazil, and which supplies Tesco, McDonald's, and Morrisons in the UK, as well as shops in the Netherlands and France. In Europe, beef and soybean imported from these plantations, among other food products make up 40.2 per cent of EU trade with Brazil. In total, the EU accounts for 18.3 per cent of Brazil's trade.

### **What is the deal about?**

The EU is the Mercosur bloc's primary trading partner. The fifth largest economic bloc in the world outside the EU, established in 1991, Mercosur is a political and economic association whose members include Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay (Venezuela has been suspended since December 2016). In June 2019, following nearly 20 years of negotiations, the EU and Mercosur reached an agreement on a proposed trade deal. The agreement proposes greater trade liberalisation between the two blocs, eliminating duties on industrial goods, and lifting 93 per cent of tariffs on food products such as meat and soybeans.

The EU is not only a major importer from Mercosur countries but the largest foreign investor in the region, despite the relatively high import duties in place. With the diminishing tariffs outlined in the deal, the production of agri-food products for export is expected to increase significantly. The most significant changes are projected in animal production (with an expected increase of 31.9 per cent in Brazil and 36.6 per cent in Paraguay) and processed food (with projected growth of 46.6 per cent in Brazil and 72.9 per cent in Paraguay) in the case of full liberalisation. The highly unequal trade balance between Mercosur and the EU in agricultural products and raw materials is set to intensify due to the deal, along with the associated socio-economic and environmental impacts.

Due to increased media coverage in recent years, the adverse environmental impacts of meat production and consumption are gradually becoming common knowledge. At the same time, demand for meat products has not gone down significantly in Europe. Agri-food systems and deforestation account for 13 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, coming mostly from a small number of countries including Brazil. The EU bears a high responsibility for this part of global emissions. A report by German Watch put Europe's responsibility for Brazilian deforestation at up to 19 per cent in the period 2002 to 2006, while EU meat imports from Brazil increased by 60 per cent between 2010 and 2014. Besides emissions, agricultural production contributes to enormous freshwater use. A 2013 study found that farming accounted for 92 per cent of global freshwater use, of which animal products accounted for nearly one-third.

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In late 2019, images of the burning Amazon rainforest, “the lungs of the planet”, shook the world. Despite international reports about the damage and the link between the fires and deforestation, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has refused to rethink an agribusiness model that threatens biodiversity and the survival of local communities. Alongside US President Donald Trump, Bolsonaro has rolled back environmental protection by questioning the Paris goals and loosening protections for forested areas. Just one month after Bolsonaro's electoral victory, Brazil withdrew its successful bid to host the 2019 COP25 United Nations climate talks. The president's environmental agenda aligns with his misogynistic stance on women's rights as well as his hostile approach to the protection of indigenous land.

Bolsonaro's inaction has raised concern among European policymakers. The politically mixed deal will need approval from the European Parliament as well as national parliaments, and its chances of achieving this are questionable. France, Ireland, Austria and, more recently, Belgium have confirmed that, should the Bolsonaro government not change its approach to environmental protection, they will not approve the deal. Motivated by environmental concerns, some 340 organisations sent an open letter calling on the EU to roll back Mercosur negotiations. In contrast, some argue that an agreement with the EU could tie Brazil to the requirement of meeting global environmental goals, as envisioned in the EU's recent deal with Japan.

The agreement with Mercosur has also received harsh criticism from Copa-Cogeca, an EU-wide agricultural lobby group, claiming that it would have a devastating impact on the European family farming model by forcing farmers with high-standard requirements to compete with low-safety products from Mercosur countries.

## **Political ecology, feminism and global trade**

Political ecology thinking provides a basis to assess how the EU-Mercosur agreement has not only environmental but also socio-economic flaws, as the experience of Seu Raimundo's family shows. As a stream of thought that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, political ecology aims to rediscover the connection between unequal power exchanges, socio-economic inequalities, and ecological harm. The critical rethinking of nature-society relations (as in the works of thinkers such as David Harvey and Neil Smith) developed into a mixture of critical political economy and agrarian political ecology, framed in English-speaking academia by the work of thinkers such as Michael Watts, Harold Brookfield, and Susanna Hecht.

Political ecology broke with earlier, apolitical considerations of nature to consider human-environmental relations as a source of power imbalances. Inspired by Marxist agrarian political economy studies in the 1960s, political ecology developed an understanding of the social and ecological spheres as being both interlinked and evolving. According to this approach, the exploitation of labour is interconnected with the exploitation of natural resources and extractive industries. Perspectives from the Global South have significantly contributed to political ecology's critical evaluation of post-colonial dynamics, in which "developing" countries serve as the suppliers of energy, raw materials, and cheap labour.

In Latin American, with the establishment of the Washington Consensus in the 1980s, agricultural production saw a shift away from local-based demand towards production for export. Export orientation led to the "soy boom" of the 1990s. By 2007, Brazil and Argentina accounted respectively for 24 and 20 per cent of global soybean production. The effects are stark in rural areas, where the conditions of family farming are threatened by continuous land grabbing. The transfer of land, by both purchase and lease, from family farmers to large transnational corporations, a handful of which control millions of hectares, has led to an agricultural system characterised by an unequal land distribution, abysmal working conditions, and gender inequality.

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Ecofeminism, a distinct strain of political ecology thinking, argues that elements of women's oppression and environmental oppression share the same origin. Ecofeminist thinkers such as Ariel Salleh explore how patriarchal ideas of domination affect women and the environment in similar ways. The interconnection of the social and ecological spheres seen in political ecology thinking is equally significant in ecofeminism. Ecofeminism rejects the conventional logic of modernity based on dual, hierarchical interpretations that see the human as superior to nature, or man as superior to woman. It also rejects that women are inherently closer to nature due to their ability to reproduce. Conscious of women's oppression through processes of industrial development which fail to acknowledge their work as caregivers, ecofeminism uncovers women's skewed economic participation.

## **Women's burden in agriculture**

Maria Antonia Trindade Mendes walks the babassu palm groves surrounding her home, situated at the meeting place of Brazil's Cerrado savanna region and the Amazon rainforest.<sup>[2]</sup> Around her waist, she carries a bag where she collects babassu nuts. She sells the nut kernels to a cooperative that extracts the oil for use in beauty products and cooking.

Maria is one of around 350 000 "babassu breaker" women who survive on the income generated by harvesting these nuts. Their livelihoods are threatened by deforestation, increasing land privatisation, and the growth of industrial babassu farming.

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Once untouched territories are now closed off from the women whose work collecting, breaking, and selling parts

of the babassu nuts supports their families throughout the year and ingrained in their cultural identity. According to the 1997 Free Babassu Law, the women should have free access to babassu on private land in some regions. Yet today, this law is often ignored by private landowners. Even when the women are granted access to their rightful territories, due to the additional burden of caretaking activities, they often cannot compete with formally employed (and mostly male) workers hired to harvest the nuts by large corporations.

The experience of the babassu breakers demonstrates how extractive processes exacerbate the burdens borne by rural women in Brazil. Brazilian women do approximately 22 hours of unpaid, domestic care work per week, compared to 5.25 hours for men. This unequal division of labour assigns childcare and other caretaking (or reproductive) tasks assigned to women, hindering their participation in the formal labour market and restricting their access to a stable income.

At the same time, rural women's productive activities often go unrecognised, rendering them practically invisible. In 2000, about 80 per cent of women working in agriculture in Brazil (4.3 million women) did not even identify themselves as workers and were not paid for their activities. Today, the lack of – especially gender-disaggregated – data on informal and unpaid work in rural areas is staggering. Women's work in subsistence farming is considered as “help” to the family, even though women are concentrated in the most labour-intensive parts of the production process: caring for livestock, raising, feeding and milking animals, as well as providing post-harvest labour such as stocking, processing, and selling at local markets.

Moreover, these women tend not to own the lands they work: in rural Brazil, only 11 per cent of women hold land titles. Those women who do own land often lack access to the public and private loans that help male farmers modernise equipment and recover from environmental challenges such as floods.

Against this backdrop, women's resistance movements are becoming increasingly relevant, combining the fight against gender inequality with class-based struggle against extractivist, land-grabbing industries in rural communities.

The Interstate Movement of Babassu Breakers, formed in 1991, is just one example of the widespread form women's activism takes in Brazil. The collective organises babassu breakers and fights to improve living conditions whilst protecting the palm and the environment. In more general terms, they have sought to reorganise relations between markets, state actors, and society to reflect their community's understanding of babassu trees as a common good and not something subject to private ownership.

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The movement has raised awareness of babassu breakers' struggles as a marginalised group and their main goals. Today, the babassu breaker community is fighting for a national-level initiative to grant access to babassu territories, but they are facing an uphill struggle due to the Bolsonaro administration's open preference for the agribusiness lobby over indigenous groups and small-scale farmers.

In August 2019, Maria joined some 100 000 women in Brasilia to participate in the March of the Daisies, a demonstration organised by female rural workers. The march sought both to protect the last agricultural frontier in the world but also represent wider rights of millions of working women in Brazil.

## **What does this mean for free trade, then?**

The EU-Mercosur deal is supposed to represent the EU's increasingly independent agenda as the bastion of a global rules-based trade system. However, the deal also contradicts the bloc's ambitious environmental agenda. If we use the insights of ecofeminism and political ecology to ask how to extend rather than undermine social and environmental justice, several avenues for EU policymakers emerge.

First, in general, trade deals should focus on local, regionalised agreements instead of inter-regional trade deals. Political ecology's critical stance toward global trade stems from its wider critique of the historical accumulation of power and wealth in the West. If Europe continues to source its consumption from Latin American countries, the most marginalised in those countries will continue to suffer most from the negative effects of production. If the deal is to go ahead, the EU should pursue an agenda with local civil society organisations and municipalities to start soy moratorium projects in the Cerrado. In 2006, the Amazon Soy Moratorium announced that national and international traders would not purchase soy from deforested land in the Amazon. While the moratorium was an effective temporary solution in the territory concerned, it also contributed to the deforestation of bordering regions as the boundaries of production were pushed further afield. Thus, the extension of the soy moratorium to the Cerrado region presents a viable solution if combined with an approach that shifts away from "more soy on fewer farms" and embraces small-scale family production. Expanding the earlier soy moratorium would be a step closer to a radical restructuring of the sector by challenging the power of agribusiness stakeholders.

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Second, the prioritisation of short-term economic growth for the few should be replaced by long-term sustainable degrowth agendas. As the Mercosur bloc's largest trading partner, the EU has the leverage to exert influence on Brazil's environmental agenda via "assurances", legally binding clauses on the protection of the environment and rural communities. Reducing soy imports from third countries overall, as proposed by the EU's Agriculture Commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski in December 2019, would also contribute in this regard. Such a policy would change the food value chain to promote European-grown agricultural products, where small-scale family farming dominates.

Third, the EU should not separate gender, environment and climate policies from its other areas of action such as trade. In October 2019, while the Amazon was burning, representatives of the German car and pesticide industry as well as British mining and fossil fuel companies met with Brazilian partners. The EU must avoid double standards and stop treating climate change and gender as secondary issues. A first step could be due diligence legislation, demand-side import regulations concerning environmental and social damage and covering the entire supply change.

Fourth, the EU-Mercosur negotiations should transparently include civil society actors, women's organisations, land defenders, and indigenous communities' representatives. This would recognise the most challenging and gender-sensitive issues faced by peasants such as inequitable land grabbing and historic exclusion.

Should these avenues not be taken into consideration, it would be best for national governments and MEPs not to support the EU-Mercosur trade deal at all. It is time for Europe to rethink its role in an unsustainable global system

of accumulation and fulfil its desired role as a standard-bearer in environmental, social and gender-based protection. Reconsidering EU-Mercosur trade agreement would be a good start.

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## Footnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> According to [this study](#), agricultural production in the Cerrado region of Brazil expanded by 87 per cent in the period from 2000-2014.

<sup>[2]</sup> For more on Maria Antonia Trindade Mendes's story and the babassu breakers, see this [2019 report](#) by Sarah Sax and Maurício Angelo.

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Eszter Szedlacsek is a postgraduate student at Central European University (CEU) and the University of York where she pursues a master's degree in European public policy. Previously, she interned at the European Parliament for a Hungarian MEP in the Greens/EFA Group. Her research interests include critical theory and gender, European foreign policy and green politics.

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