

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FM - 12
Tiriri: an Experiment.

Recife,
Pernambuco.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York, 17.

6th. March 1967.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The North East of Brazil has ceased to be the neglected and forgotten region that it was eight years ago, and has become the battlefield of the Brazilian development men. The obstacles to development are legion, and the process is uphill work. Yet as a result of these efforts the area is rapidly changing from one of untouched misery to one pock-marked by attempts to improve the situation.

The results are not entirely negative; in some cases experiments have proved unqualified successes, and in many others they have at least given those concerned a chance to learn from their mistakes. However, the picture in these latter cases is just as sad as in those that have been total failures, for the victims of such experiments have had their hopes raised and subsequently dashed. They now live in a state of despair and disillusionment that is more wretched than the state of ignorance and consequent resignation of those who have never been affected.

My last newsletter was devoted to the general problems of the sugar zone: this one will be an account of one experiment made to improve the position of the morador, the salaried worker, on a sugar plantation. The problems encountered are not atypical of this type of experiment, and they well illustrate the magnitude of the obstacles to be overcome in any development plan here. Up to now the experiment has been a resounding failure. For this, those responsible are partly to blame, but circumstances beyond their control have also played a large part in producing the present pitiable state of affairs. As so often happens, those whom the plan was intended to help, although least culpable, have suffered most. To what extent each sector involved has been responsible for the present situation should become clearer by the end of the letter.

Before the Revolution of 1964 general preoccupation with the critical and potentially revolutionary situation on the engenhos (sugar plantations) led SUDENE (Superintendency for the Development of the North East), as the major development organ of the North East to feel that it should help in seeking a solution. The politically popular answer at the time was land reform: give the land to the workers and break up the feudal system of the latifundias. The social appeal of this solution appears to have outweighed or blinded the reformers to any economic shortcomings. At any rate a means of giving land to the peasants was sought, and other ways of helping them were ignored.

Under the illusion that much of the land in the Zona da Mata had no owner, SUDENE originally intended to withdraw many workers on sugar plantations and re-establish them as smallholders on common land. However, on closer

investigation it turned out that such land did not exist, and the **only** alternative was to buy some waste land belonging to the local railway company, land which was formerly used as a source of wood for fuel but subsequently abandoned. The railway company were in debt and glad to sell the land, albeit cheaply, and SUDENE found themselves in possession of the terrain known as Tiriri, a hundred and fifty acres populated by squatters living at a minimum level of subsistence and very overcrowded.

Rather than experiment with sugar they thought it preferable to try a cooperative growing basic subsistence crops first. Many of the squatters were moved out, and the land was distributed amongst thirty families. These were taught to plant a variety of crops for their own needs, and sold the surplus to the cooperative. A barracão, store, was set up selling initially free food from the Alliance for Progress to supplement the inadequate diets of the planters. The United States' government does not allow this food to be sold and therefore a devious system of payments was organized so that gradually a stock of other foods could be built up. Prices in the cooperative store were naturally much lower than in those of the neighbouring engenhos, and although outsiders did not get all the benefits of the members, they nevertheless began to patronize it in preference to their own stores. As the barracão of the Tiriri cooperative became the local meeting place for exchanging ideas, the advantages of a cooperative system were spread. The benefits of a system that did not exploit the workers made a strong impression on the engenho workers who were simultaneously being stirred to action by the Peasant Leagues, the sindicatos (labour unions) and elements of the Catholic Church.

At about this time plantation owners began to get seriously worried at the overt signs of discontent appearing throughout the Zona da Mata. At times these were restricted to political demonstrations, but at others atrocities committed in desperation led owners and administrators to take yet more precautions in self-defence. The owner of the engenhos adjacent to Tiriri, who was also an owner of two sugar factories, was more nervous than most with the local example of liberty being held up to his own discontented workers. His fears were increased by a rumour in 1962 that the minimum salary was to be greatly increased, which would cause him considerable financial hardship, and which, with the consolidation of peasant organisations, it would probably be impossible for him to avoid paying.

As a solution to these problems, the landowner, Rui Cardoso, had an idea that looked as though it would be nothing but beneficial to all concerned. He offered to rent to SUDENE the five engenhos next to the cooperative for an initial period of ten years. This would reduce his labour force and thus his wage bill, and SUDENE would be given a chance to extend the cooperative scheme to the sugar industry. SUDENE readily agreed to the proposition which was regarded as highly acceptable by both sides.

Others, however, did not regard the scheme in such a favourable light, and Rui Cardoso made himself very unpopular with his fellow usina owners in the process. A group of men of generally limited vision, they immediately leapt to the conclusion that such an experiment would mark the beginning of their own downfall. Once SUDENE had proved the success of such a venture, they feared that laws would be passed compelling them all to make over their land to their peasants. They were completely blind to the advantages of disposing of their own excess labour with little if any financial loss.

Despite this criticism Rui Cardoso went ahead with the scheme, and with SUDENE drew up a contract with the terms of the lease. It was at this stage that SUDENE made its first misjudgement, and let the contract be drawn up heavily in the favour of the landowner, thus immediately handicapping the cooperative's chances of success.

SUDENE was to rent the five engenhos with a total of about five thousand hectares, half of them planted with cane, the remainder mainly forest and swamp, for ten years with the option of buying at the end of this period. They were to return the land at the end of the lease in the same condition or better than it had been at the beginning, and land already planted with cane was not to be put to any other use. All the cane was to be processed in the landowner's usina (sugar factory) unless he gave permission for it to be processed elsewhere.

The rent was to be five per cent of the value of 32,000 tons of cane annually. Even if the harvest was less than this SUDENE were to pay on this amount, but as an added incentive to maintain production at this level, they were to pay a fine of fifteen per cent of the value of the difference between the crop actually produced and the set 32,000 tons. On the other hand, in order not to flood the usina, they could only send over 35,000 tons to be processed with Rui Cardoso's permission. With the vagaries of weather and other hazards a working limit of only three thousand tons was ludicrously narrow. Those responsible for the plan in SUDENE should have foreseen at the time that it would hardly be possible for the cooperative not to suffer with such exacting terms.

The terms of the contract were clearly designed to keep the cooperative workers up to the mark and not to let the land suffer through maladministration or ignorance. In such an aim, the landowner cannot be blamed for looking to his own interests, but SUDENE can be strongly criticized for accepting the contract. The exaction and inflexibility of its terms have, the whole time, hamstrung the activities of the cooperative. Crop diversification, for instance, might well have proved more profitable than the exclusive production of cane. Furthermore, the imposition of a maximum quota removed the incentive to increase the amount of cane per hectare, since the land planted could not be reduced and a general increase in the production was not permitted.

SUDENE assumed control of the project in July 1963, and from the very beginning ran into a maze of problems. The most serious of these was a gross underestimate in the costing of the scheme. The budget had been drawn up before the announcement of the new minimum wage, and although SUDENE had allowed for some increase, the rise was very much greater than they had expected. One of the strongest arguments in favour of the experiment had been that the workers on the cooperative would receive the double benefit of higher pay and better social conditions than employees on other engenhos. When the government finally announced the new wage it was approximately twice as high as SUDENE had estimated, so that far from paying the workers more than on other engenhos, SUDENE found it very difficult to meet even its legal obligations. Social benefits were minimal, and many of the financial resources set aside for buying cattle, fertilizer and for investment in the cooperative were absorbed by the weekly wage bill. Psychologically, the effect of this miscalculation was disastrous, and the scheme got off to a bad financial start from which it has never recovered.

Financially, those responsible were hard pressed, but equally serious were the initial problems of administration. Rui Cardoso had handed over a group of workers dissatisfied with their lot, and who fully expected to get immediate benefits from the cooperative. Each looked upon the situation as an opportunity to improve his own position. Working for the common good and a hope of only long term returns have little appeal for those living in the conditions to which they were accustomed, and with their level of education. Such men look for guaranteed short term returns. When the cooperative brought them neither of these they felt let down and disillusioned. They were no better off than their neighbours who were also receiving the new minimum wage, and when there was trouble about them even being paid this amount, they followed the example of others and went on strike, wasting in the process a great many days of badly needed labour.

Moreover, insufficient explanation to workers led to serious misunderstanding about the role of members. Many thought that the cooperative owned the land, and that by becoming a member of it they also became part owners. From this they argued that being owners they could not be forced to work if they did not want to, and frequently refused to do so. Some spent weeks on end doing nothing, and others misused the equipment belonging to the cooperative. I am told that one of the tractors used to be sent down to the coast every day to collect fish for a group of members. The most embittered looted the property and burnt the cane. Unfortunately, the officials in charge were totally incapable of controlling the chaos, and although some of the reactions to such an experiment could not have been foreseen, much of the irreparable damage could have been avoided by intelligent briefing of the workers and a tougher, but at the same time more understanding, line taken by those administering the scheme.

The Revolution of March 1964 marked the beginning of a new epoch. The change in government brought a change in administration, and all those in ~~SUDENE~~ responsible for the original plan were replaced. The complete break enabled the new arrivals to deny all responsibility for the mistakes of the past. Left to pick up the broken bits and pieces of a scheme that could not be dropped but was hardly proving a success, the new men took a much tougher line. They were helped by the government's severe attitude towards any sort of political demonstration and gradually regained control of the situation. The strike~~s~~ ceased and the men went back to work either as ~~salari~~ed workers, or in a few cases as small holders with land of their own to work.

The full harm caused by the looting and striking in the first year was only fully realized later on. The cane crop takes twelve to eighteen months to mature so that the neglect ~~only~~ became apparent in the second year when the crop was harvested. The first harvest under the new regime lasted from September 1963 to March 1964, and this, planted by the usina produced a crop very close to the quota. The next two harvests, planted by the cooperative were under half the amount. This disaster further shattered the frail economic structure of the enterprise, as the fine had to be paid as well as the five per cent of 32,000 tons.

Initial expenses were further increased by the need to buy capital equipment, such as animals, machinery and new buildings, so that any money that might have been left for redistribution was reduced even more. The

cooperative was operating at a heavy loss, the burden of which had to be borne by SUDENE. Banks were very reluctant to lend money for such a novel experiment which had no guarantee that it would succeed even in the long run, so that SUDENE officials had the greatest difficulty in raising funds. Originally they had thought that their estimates would cover the costs, but even if they were to need to borrow money they did not foresee any difficulty.

Panic at their financial straits led the planners to resort to desperate measures to increase the crop. When the common policy of plantation owners was to reduce their labour force, the cooperative took on more men in order to clear more land for planting. Unable to raise the money to buy tractors and ploughs to maintain the productivity of the land already under cultivation, they found themselves compelled to take the retrogressive step of increasing the labour force which, although cheaper in the short run, would clearly in the long run be far more expensive.

At all levels of the administration there has been a lack of continuity in policy; not only in SUDENE itself but even at the local level there seem to have been numerous changes in the employees. Only one man working in the office has been there since the start. The common Brazilian practice of having a top-heavy administration appears to have been true in this case, and one of the economies made after the Revolution was a reduction in the local office staff. The manager himself was changed at the beginning of 1965. The old one seems to have made himself popular with his subordinates but to have been relatively inefficient at his job; his successor is of a different kind. While he has improved the economic situation of the cooperative, he has also increased the tension and dissatisfaction of all those living there.

Rightly or wrongly, I visited the director of the cooperative in his office in the SUDENE building in Recife before visiting the cooperative itself. The director was fed up with the experiment, anxious to hand over his responsibility, but at the same time would not admit that it was being a failure. His first excuse was that the whole of the sugar zone was going through a crisis and it would be unreasonable to expect the cooperative to have escaped. The low price of sugar was causing the cooperative as much suffering as anybody else. Secondly, he blamed his predecessors for drawing up such an exacting contract which would always make it difficult if not impossible for the cooperative to be run at a profit, and thirdly he attributed their difficulties to the unfortunate underestimate of the original budget. For this he did not blame anybody, and moreover felt that the wage increase in 1963 had been unnecessarily high. He thought that it would have been better to have increased it more gradually, for this would have avoided many of the strikes and much of the violence on many plantations, and would not have given the workers the taste of a higher standard of living that was not to be maintained.

Very much on the defensive, he told me that despite their financial problems, the workers on the cooperative were better off than their neighbours on other engenhos. I pressed him on this, and he willingly elaborated. Firstly, he maintained, the salaried workers received the minimum wage. Although pitifully low, being only about 66cents a day at the new exchange rate, payment of even this amount is rare in this region, above all in the sugar industry. Perhaps thirty per cent of sugar workers are receiving it

at the moment. Had the cooperative workers been getting this, the director would have been justified in his claim that they were better off. However, I was later to discover that this was unfortunately not true. Whether he was purposely misleading me or whether he really thought that they were receiving the minimum salary, I do not know. He seemed sufficiently vague on other points to have been mistaken on this as well. In either case it is hardly excusable.

The director did not go as far as to say that the cooperative members were able to share the profits among themselves, but he did maintain that they had other advantages. For instance, each engenho had its own school. This in itself is nothing extraordinary, but the standards of most engenho schools are abysmal, and I therefore asked the director whether they employed qualified teachers. He replied that they did not, as such girls would have to be brought from the city and would never tolerate the living conditions of engenhos and would therefore leave. He thought it preferable to employ local girls who would stick to the job. However, these would know little more than their pupils and apart from a slight reduction in the turn-over of staff it is difficult to see how the schools on the cooperative are better than any others in the area.

Finally he told me of the members' medical facilities. Every day a doctor from the local town held a surgery for an hour in the administrative centre of the cooperative. Consultation was free and patients had only to pay for medicines. Free transport to hospital was arranged when necessary, and members could pay for their medicines in instalments if they wished. Compared with some engenhos this system is preferable, for it at least has the advantage of letting the workers know where they stand. Yet on many others the employees are better off than those on the cooperative. On these the senhor do engenho (plantation owner) acts as a free doctor giving simple diagnoses, and when he is unable to do this he either sends the man to a local doctor in transport belonging to the engenho or in the ambulance belonging to the local union to which all have a right if they pay their union dues. Medicines are often given away free by the senhor do engenho, and although these gifts cannot be counted upon, in respect to medical treatment it is doubtful whether the cooperative workers are on average much better off than their colleagues elsewhere.

The picture that emerged from this discussion, then, was of an experiment that had suffered numerous setbacks, but despite these, SUDENE had managed to keep it going, and had even managed to treat the workers on the cooperative better than those on other engenhos. The only hint that the director gave me that all was not well was an intimation of the tension existing between the manager and the workers; but this, he told me, was common throughout the sugar zone, and was only to be expected. SUDENE had had great difficulty in raising the necessary funds, and although running at a loss the workers had not suffered the deprivations of those elsewhere during the present crisis. They had paid the full minimum wage throughout, and had not resorted to the substitute forms of payment adopted on many of the engenhos.

Expecting to find a situation basically not very different from other sugar plantations, I then went to the cooperative itself. This lies some forty kilometres south of Recife along a recently made up road and quite close to the town of Cabo. Nearly six hundred workers are employed on the five

engenhos. Each engenho is run as a semi-independent unit with its own administrator, school and shop. The central office lies close to the road in Engenho Algodoads and it is from there that the affairs of the cooperative as opposed to the component units are run.

At the top of the administrative hierarchy are the SUDENE officials in Recife, who are responsible not only for the organisation, but also the financing of the project. Beneath them come a manager and his assistant employed by SUDENE to work on the site, and it is these, in the eyes of the workers, who are the real bosses while the technicians in the city remain remote shadows. Theoretically at least, working closely with the manager are the cooperative officials elected annually by the members and acting as intermediaries between the administration and the workers. At the bottom of the ladder are the members themselves and the other salaried workers whose position is identical to that of employees on other engenhos. Apart from these, there are also a large clerical staff and the individual engenho administrators.

The day that I went the manager himself was not there. With a couple of engenhos of his own to run as well as the cooperative he only attended on a part time basis. However, although I should like to have met him personally, his absence probably made contact with the workers easier, as they may have felt freer to discuss their problems openly. While I was there the second in command, a certain Dr. Jorge did, nevertheless, put in a an appearance for a short time. A well-fed young man he told me that he was an expert on cooperatives: where he obtained this expertise I am not sure.

Like his chief in SUDENE, he was rather too anxiously defensive about the situation for me to feel that it was as happy as he made out. To further increase my doubts, he produced some very far fetched arguments to strengthen his position. Referring to the schools on the cooperative he told me without apology, that they were like the schools on other engenhos. It would be wrong, he continued, to raise the standard as the cooperative was intended to be an experiment to be followed by others, and other engenhos would not be able to afford better schools. Of course, if the profits were sufficient to cover the costs it would be justifiable, but to borrow money from SUDENE for this purpose he considered inadmissible. Incidentally, this was first and only time that I heard anybody referring to the scheme as an experiment to be copied by others. Everybody else, and from the rest of his arguments even Dr. Jorge himself, seemed to consider Tiriri as an experiment that even if not a failure was hardly proving sufficiently successful to be followed by others.

Dr. Jorge seemed to prefer eristic arguments to trying to get at the truth. How far this was solely in his treatment of me, it is hard to say, but from his treatment of his colleagues and subordinates he struck me in this brief period as one rather too prone to issue commands without listening to the point of view of others. He was not a sympathetic man, but was one who felt unsure of himself, and lest others should doubt his position, was determined to assert it. His behaviour as a result seemed callous if not brutal.

It was during my conversation with him that I first saw the misery in which the workers were really living, since two of them appeared with requests. One was a man, evidently not young, but whose age it was impossible to guess from his wretched state. Dressed in tatters that would hardly do credit to a beggar, cap in hand, he waited patiently for Dr. Jorge to attend to him. He was

trembling either from nervousness or weakness, I suspect the latter, and found it difficult to remain on his feet. Despite my request that he should interrupt the conversation to deal with him, Dr. Jorge continued for a full ten minutes and then finally told the man to wait outside until he was free. The other supplicant was a young negro woman with her face pinched with pain, the cause of which was a hand so swollen that it was deformed. She had a thin anaemic child in tow, and had come to ask for a lift to the hospital for treatment. Dr. Jorge listened to the request, and brusquely gave her permission to use the ambulance.

As Dr. Jorge clearly had other things to do besides talk to me, and as it seemed clear that he was unlikely to present a rounded picture of the situation, I asked to be allowed to talk to some of the members to hear their opinions. I was therefore shepherded to another room, introduced to the Secretary and the brother of the President, and Dr. Jorge then left us.

The Secretary was a man of middle age with a sensitive face. He was better dressed than his colleagues with a clean white shirt and shoes, although this outfit was probably donned to exercise his role as secretary rather than cane planter. Up to four years ago he had spent all his life on engenhos as a morador, being paid a salary and holding no responsibility. He had also taught himself to repair shoes to eke out his meagre earnings. Despite this distinctly limited background he impressed me with his sense of determination and for his pride in the cooperative. Life was still hard for him but his responsibilities firstly as the owner of a small plot of land and secondly as an official of the cooperative had greatly increased his self-respect. He had none of the servility common to most engenho workers, and was a man who obviously commanded respect from his colleagues.

The President's brother had a rather different history, although he too was a planter of a small plot of cane and now differed from the Secretary only in the amount of land he owned. He came from a small shopowning family in a nearby town, and had spent several years as the sub-administrator of one of the engenhos. Now in his late thirties, he had decided shortly after the foundation of the cooperative that he would be better off planting cane, and since that time had been planting enough to enable him to live well above the bread line.

Both these two men were extremely well informed on all matters to do with the cooperative. They knew far more than their SUDENE superiors and it was from them together with some other members that I was given a more accurate picture of what was happening.

All the workers on the constituent engenhos have the right to become members of the cooperative, and as such they receive various benefits. Although in theory these are considerable, in practice they amount to almost nothing. They have the right to vote for the President and Council of the cooperative, to medical treatment, and to a share of the cooperative's profits. Obviously the greatest attraction would be the last of the three, but since the profits have never yet materialized, nor are they likely to do so in the foreseeable future, many of the workers have withheld their membership. Although the entrance fee is only eight cents, under half of them have joined, while the rest are waiting for some more tangible benefits to be offered. The members consist of all the landholders and some of the ~~salariated~~ workers.

I had been told that the moradores on the cooperative were receiving the minimum salary: they are not. They are still being paid the minimum salary of over a year ago. The administration has promised to pay them the difference between this and the current salary, approximately twenty cents a day, for the whole period that it has been in force. Yet a promise, especially a Brazilian promise over a financial matter is very different from actually having the money to spend. Inflation has already eaten into much of its real value. The matter would not be as serious if the workers were not desperately in need of the money: without it they are on the verge of starvation and the extra eight cents a day together with the full back payment would make a great deal of difference to them.

The workers on the cooperative suffer from another less obvious disadvantage: they have no patrão (patron). The man they would traditionally look to in cases of great difficulty has been replaced by an administrative machine. This makes their lives more predictable and they know better where they stand, but for many human needs a salaried manager and his underlings are a poor substitute for a senhor do engenho. On other engenhos the patrão sometimes pays for some of the medicines of his employees, and may try to help if a family is starving. On the cooperative, the costs of the medicine are deducted from the week's pay packet, and there is little hope of a personal problem being resolved by semi-interested officials receiving their salaries from Federal funds.

From this it seems reasonable to conclude that the salaried workers even if they are members of the cooperative, have few advantages over their colleagues on other engenhos: but what about those who constitute the real raison d'être for the experiment, those who are planting their own plots with cane? The number of these and the size of the plots has been increasing every year, and there are now just over a hundred planters working from one and a half to fifteen hectares each. No upper limit to the size of the plots has yet been established, but it will probably be about twenty hectares. The planters are elected by the cooperative members from among volunteers, but apart from one year when there was not enough land to go round, few who have wished to plant cane have been refused.

The attractions of working on one's own are few, especially for the first few years, and ironically planters are even worse off than moradores. The plots are allocated on the basis of what each can afford to work: since most men start without any financial backing they can begin with only ludicrously small and uneconomic areas. Up to the harvest, for each process that is completed, such as cleaning the ground, planting and fertilizing, the cooperative pays the planter a certain sum per conta (about 1/20 of a hectare). By this means it was planned that the planters should live until they received the money from the usina for their harvested cane. Yet this financing, it must be stressed, is not a form of payment but a loan that has to be repaid when the crop is harvested. Moreover, these payments are only made after the completion of each process, so that for the first one or two months nothing at all is received. For this reason those without capital cannot start with sufficient land, and are handicapped from the very beginning.

The cooperative provides the capital equipment and fertilizer, but these also have to be paid for, and they are often in short supply so that they have to be rationed. When final payment for the crop arrives, the advance financing has been deducted together with the price of the fertilizer and the rent of tractors and other facilities, so that the sum actually received by the planter is pitifully small, and at times he ends up with a debt to be

paid the following year. It must be remembered that the price paid for cane by the usina is lower than to other engenhos as the rent for the land has to be taken off. The cooperative also levies a quota for administrative costs so that the price paid per ton of cane is under eighty per cent of that paid to planters elsewhere.

Theoretically this system sounds viable. In practice it is leading to so much hardship that it is doubtful whether it should be continued. I discussed the problem with five plot holders with areas under cane ranging from one and a half to twelve hectares, and only one of them, the man with twelve hectares, was able to live under the system. The others were either supplementing their income by other means or were on the verge of starvation and in a state of total desperation.

The twelve acre man was the President's brother. He seemed to be making a success of the venture, but had started with the advantage of having sufficient capital to work a much larger initial plot, and had benefitted from this ever since. After all his debts had been paid he received the equivalent of 250 dollars at the end of the harvest this year. At times he had employed ten men to help him work the land and paid them the full minimum wage. ("There is no point in paying them less as the difference will only have to be paid later".) The cash that he earned was spent on improvements to his house and on buying animals, mainly cattle which he would later sell for a profit. Part of the money, therefore, went as an investment. He appeared to be living quite comfortably, and could be said to have taken off. He will increase his plot this year, and providing the price of sugar does not fall, or the price of labour rise disproportionately, and providing the system of financing is maintained he should be able to live well by local standards.

Since he was clearly thinking on a bigger scale than most of his colleagues, I asked if he would not prefer to buy his own land elsewhere so that he could earn the full price for his cane. His reasonable reply was that despite the drawbacks of the cooperative, the possibility of borrowing money more than made up for this. Several of his friends had tried to plant cane independently, but had found it impossible to obtain the necessary loans. Therefore, he preferred to let SUDENE do the fighting for the money and pay a high price for it, rather than attempt to do himself as an individual without connections.

The Secretary was working six hectares, and after paying his debts was left with 120 dollars, most of which went on domestic goods; there was little left for investment. He told me that he would not be able to live off his cane plantation alone, and even with a small allowance for his services as Secretary he was forced to spend much of his free time working as a shoe repairer to make both ends meet. Judging from his appearance, he was able, by working hard, to live quite well, and was certainly a great deal better off than as a salaried worker. He too proposed to plant more cane next season, and should in a couple of years be able to live exclusively from this without needing to supplement his income from other sources.

The other three planters that I met were more representative of the majority and presented a much less encouraging picture. One was a woman very different from the normal passive moradores that one encounters on private engenhos. She had been a morador herself on one of the constituent engenhos, but by planting cane saw some hope of improving her situation in the long run. She had already increased her plot from one and a half to two and a half hectares, and was

planning to plant more next year. Her advance payments are still pitifully small, an average of forty cents a day, and at the end of the last harvest she received only eight dollars. Yet she had four sons earning salaries and a small patch of land planted with bananas to sell. She is worse off materially than she was, but greatly prefers her independence with its hopes for the future.

The other two were men who, overhearing the conversation, felt compelled from their desperate plight, to put forward their side of the story. Planting only one and a half hectares, one of them supplemented his eight dollars a month by working as a morador and collecting crabs in the mangrove swamp to sell in the market. By working extremely hard he scraped together enough to keep himself and his large family alive, but the effort was such that he could not keep it up. Utterly disillusioned as regards planting his own land, he reckoned that the rewards were insufficient, and was going to give up his plot.

His colleague, also working one and a half hectares, claimed that he had not the time to work for a salary as well as tending his own cane, and having no other resources, was thus dying of hunger. He was clearly desperate and beyond seeing reason. He had arrived two years ago under the impression that he could earn more in the cooperative than elsewhere. He maintained that the usina should pay more, and even if they did not, the cooperative should offer higher payments to keep its members alive. He even, with no proof or anybody to support him, accused the cooperative officials of abusing the funds. Most of his arguments were emotional and it took much persuasion for him to realize that higher payments would not help him as he would be unable to pay the money back. As it was, he was already in debt, since his crop had not produced enough to meet his expenses. When I asked him why he did not go back to being a morador, he replied that he was thinking of doing so, but that he thought that they were little better off.

The low price paid for cane, further reduced by the rent for the land, is one of the cooperative's unsolvable problems. They cannot make higher interim payments since the planters would be unable to repay the money. Only when the plots are over about seven hectares is it possible to live with the present price level. The owners of smaller plots must either work like blacks to supplement their pay or suffer accordingly. Those like the woman and the Secretary thought that it was worth suffering for the time being in order to live better later. The other two small plot owners felt deceived and were opting out, or thinking of doing so. Yet to date, only one man has actually left his land, which in itself shows that most have some faith in the scheme, or at least think that they are better off than as salaried workers.

All were critical of the SUDENE administration, and claimed that it was creating a great deal of unnecessary tension. They hoped to run the cooperative themselves shortly, but realized that their officials were not yet capable of doing so. In every respect they were anxious to learn, and to make the most of any technical advice offered. They were only too aware of their own ignorance. Moreover those who were suffering least took an almost pathetic pride in the institution and seemed determined to make a success of it.

After nearly four years of operation some conclusions can be drawn from the experiment. It would seem that criticism could be levelled primarily at the organ running the cooperative, SUDENE. Now that the political ferment has died down, it has been realized that land distribution and cooperative systems are not necessarily the best way of helping the cane worker. The administrative costs, in this case doubled with both SUDENE and local officials, are inevitably high, and the workers might well be able to earn more by being employed on efficiently and democratically run large plantations. Given that they were anxious to try out a cane cooperative, SUDENE chose some very poor land for the experiment. The original cooperative on the railway land has collapsed, neglected and overshadowed by the

cane plantation. The lands of Rui Cardoso are some of the best in the state, but the part that SUDENE has rented is both poor and hilly and could never be adapted to mechanization.

The contract with the usina has been a continuous handicap, and those responsible deserve strong criticism for not drawing up a more viable proposition at the time. Unfortunately SUDENE has not the power to rescind the contract so that while the scheme remains under SUDENE's control the contract must remain in force. The original underestimate in the minimum wage and the consequent lack of financial resources have severely curtailed the chances of success. Not only has this caused much human suffering, but the cane also has suffered from neglect. The low price of sugar, through no fault of SUDENE, has further played havoc with plans. The looting and strikes in the early stages could have been largely avoided by preparing the workers better and explaining the situation to them without raising their hopes unduly.

Finally, the lack of continuation in planning and administration has led to a tepid commitment on the part of the officials concerned with the scheme, and the political upheaval meant that sight was lost of the original aims. The staff that came in after the Revolution had none of the enthusiasm of its predecessors and looked upon the project as a chore to be continued rather than looking for its possibilities. They have also felt, rightly, that the contract damned the scheme from the start.

The landowner has hardly behaved creditably, and has never attempted to further the project. The contract was drawn up at others' expense and by not paying the salaries during the present crisis, the burden of finding money for this has fallen on SUDENE's shoulders. The landowner's most culpable action has been in not collecting the cane during this harvest. The cooperative's crop this year promised to be at least up to its quota, but quite inexcusably the usina has been failing in its duty to collect it from the engenhos. Left several days on the ground, the cane dries up and loses much of its value. SUDENE have sent down a couple of lorries to help, but even this is inadequate. Powerless, all concerned with the cooperative are watching their sorely needed cane being dried up in front of their eyes. If the quota is not met this year it will be entirely the fault of the usina: but the cooperative will have to pay.

The third party concerned in the plan are the workers themselves. Everybody puts the blame on others for the failure of the scheme, but significantly nobody blames the victims. Even the looting was attributed partly to lack of preparation and to poor administration. Any positive results that have come out of the experiment are side effects that have become apparent in the character of some of the workers. The planters making a success of the venture have shown that they are able, given the opportunity, to do things for themselves and take the responsibility. Despite many set-backs they have never abused it. They have lost their servility and passivity and proved that the traditional arguments about the ignorant, incompetent peasant do not hold water. They have shown that, given reasonable conditions, they could make such a plan viable.

The real victims of the experiment are the remainder who are a miserable band of men, disillusioned and in a pitiable state physically. The SUDENE director told me recently that a group of his officials visiting the cooperative had been shocked at their state. My own impression was equally strong. SUDENE had made promises raising their hopes: when these did not materialize and moreover they lost their patrão, they became totally dejected. Credit can be attributed to those who have made a success of the venture: but the rest cannot be blamed, only pitied.

With so many problems, SUDENE is anxious to hand over the scheme to the Brazilian Institute of Agrarian Reform, a new federal organ with broad powers of land reform. This will be able to break the contract and probably take the land from the usina, thereby immediately solving many of the financial problems. For the remainder they have ample resources at their disposal. Although a sad admission of defeat for SUDENE, it appears the only viable solution in the circumstances.

Like so many projects in Brazil, Tiriri has suffered from one overriding drawback. No official has ever fought for it with singlemindedness for any length of time. This lack of commitment and continuity have prevented the scheme from ever getting its head above water. The final irony is that other plantation owners are without doubt, rubbing their hands contentedly, and dismissing Tiriri as yet another example of ignorant peasants unable to sort out their own lives.

Yours sincerely,

Fanny Mitchell

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Received in New York March 20, 1967.