

The empowerment gap...

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In Rio de Janeiro, colourful favelas skirt the mountains rising up from the sea. Piled haphazardly against themselves like broken blocks of Lego, these hillside shantytowns provide an almost picturesque backdrop to the beaches of Ipanema and Copacabana, nestled below. Buses filled with foreign visitors set out on "favela tours". Inside, cameras clicking, 5-Star guests capture through the window of their air-conditioned coaches the endemic poverty that is Brazil.

In Rio for a few days holiday prior to attending a conference on rural land reform, my daughter and I are disturbed by what we see and hear.

A wealthy country only slightly smaller than Canada with roughly 6 times the population, half of Brazil's 180 million residents are poor. Twelve million children live on the streets. Muggings are common – we are repeatedly cautioned not to wear jewelry. Rumours of bounties on street kids – initially dismissed as preposterous – are confirmed by the Global Justice Centre, the Montreal-based NGO Alternatives Inc. and Brazilian film-maker Jose Padilha, whose award-winning [Bus 174](#) documents the life of hijacker/terrorist Sandro de Nascimento, a survivor of a '93 death squad that saw two carloads of Rio's finest open fire on children sleeping in front of a church, slaughtering seven.

After a few days, my daughter and I travel inland at the invitation of the Canadian NGO Development and Peace; I am to speak on the Canada-Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project, colleagues from Cuba also present to conference delegates from Brazil and Paraguay.

With almost half again as much arable land as Canada, Brazil's imports of corn from the US are blamed for one million small farm bankruptcies since 1995. Four million of Brazil's farmers are without land. Large farms that produce export crops - soy, wheat, rice, corn, sugar cane, cocoa, citrus and beef – are snapped up by foreign investors. Already, 17 US-based multinationals control 43 percent of food exports from Brazil.

The empowerment gap between Cuban and Brazilian farmers is striking. In my remarks, I place Canada somewhere in between.

While we may not have landless farmers, economic concentration pre and post farm gate is squeezing farm margins, forcing many off the land. Canada's dairy sector is controlled by Parmalat and Saputo. US-based multinationals Cargill and Tyson control 74% of Canada's meat packing sector, a fact brought home to Canada's ranchers who've suffered twice since May 26th - once from Ottawa's failure to use NAFTA to open the US border to Canadian beef and again by abuse of dominant market position by Canada's packing sector (2¢ a pound for cows, indeed...). The acquisition of Schneider's will give Maple Leaf 80% ownership of hog slaughter capacity in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The feed and seed supply sectors have similar stories.

Early this fall, when a group of Quebec farmers protesting the continued closure of the US border to Canadian beef held a media conference and shot a cow on the national news, animal rights activists howled in protest and children were hustled away from the TV set. The news had turned violent. Yet the policy violence done to Canada's farmers every day by politicians with little understanding of economics and governance goes largely un-reported by a media with little understanding of farming.

Cuba faces many problems. But lack of farmer empowerment is not one. Through a completely unique confluence of events — three years of drought, my qualifications on the water/NAFTA issue and standing in the farm community, the challenge of the March '02 Canadian farmer delegation as we sipped rum in my hotel room in Havana ("How do we take the empowerment we see here and bring it back to Canada?") — the Farmers Resolution to Exempt Water from the NAFTA was born.

This Valentine's I will again travel to Ottawa to present to all political parties the resolution of Canada's farmers. In raising one farm voice, we are building a solid platform – a “table with 1000 legs” —that Canadians will be only too eager to climb onto. “We support Canada's farmers in their Resolution...” And that's where respect for farming begins.

If your farm group hasn't already signed the Farmers Resolution, do so now and get it to me in time to add your voice to farm groups across Canada this February 14th.

In closing, a HUGE thank you to the Women's Institutes of BC and Alberta, who have strongly embraced the Farmers Resolution to Exempt Water from the NAFTA and are lending organizational support to a speaking campaign to bring this message to farmers. For over 100 years, in farm communities across Canada, the Women's Institutes have brought their formidable resources to bear on issues of concern to “home and country”. On behalf of Canada's farmers, big hugs and a warm thank you to the BC and Alberta Women's Institutes for their solid support. We look forward working with Women's Institutes across Canada to bring this message forward to Canada's farm communities.

BOOK NOW FOR CUBA

If you haven't yet been, come with me to Cuba and see for yourself where all the emphasis on empowerment and voice is coming from. Deductible for farm couples, our strong Canadian dollar makes this year more affordable than ever.

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January: A response to the October 2003 reply of the Prime Minister's office.