

Portraits from the World Social Forum

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[Vince Medeiros speaks to Pedro Costa](#) [0]

- [Solana Larsen speaks to Durga, Kali, and Sonal](#) [0]
- [Caspar Henderson speaks to Adrian Harewood and Paula Madden](#) [0]

[MST](#) [1]). His home is a campground at Magaratiba, Rio, and his main activity consists in invading unproductive lands to make the government slice them up and give them back to the people. “I’ve been offered a piece of land already but I’ve decided not to take it”, says Costa. “Until every rural worker has been given land to plant on we are all landless peasants. I’m with the movement until the very end.”

Don’t miss [openAlegre](#) [2], the **openDemocracy** blog from the World Social Forum summit – where Caspar, Solana and Vince are joined by James Crabtree

For more discussion, analysis and argument on the social forum movement – from Peter Waterman, Susan George, Paul Kingsnorth, Ezequiel Adamovsky, America Vera-Zavala, and Meenakshi Shedde – see **openDemocracy’s** “Globalisation / DIY World” [debate](#) [2]

Pedro is typical of a mass movement that brings together workers from a wide spectrum of society: peasants, migrant workers, city labourers, the unemployed. His roots lie in Brazil’s impoverished northeast.

“I was born in Paraiba, where my parents were both rural workers. When I was 7 I started working in the same plantation as them. It was mostly slave work in the sugarcane fields, which are very common in the north.”

Pedro eventually left in search of greener pastures.

“To poor northerners, Rio is known as *Rio de Dinheiro* (River of Money). Up north we work for food, but in Rio there’s the dream of a better life. Thousands leave the countryside every year.”

While most end up in the overcrowded *favelas* of Rio and São Paulo, Pedro stayed with an aunt in Jacarepagua, on Rio’s west coast. He could read and write and soon landed a minimum-wage job chopping vegetables in a restaurant. But while the job paid the bills, life in Rio was almost as hard as back home.

Then, in 1996, he heard of the MST. “Ever since I moved to Rio it’s been my goal to go back to the country”, he says. “When I found out there was a movement that fought to expropriate large estates and give you land to plant on I joined straight away.”

MST is the largest movement of landless people in the world. Its size reflects the magnitude of the challenge it faces in Brazil's [3] concentration of land ownership. About 45,000 landowners – hardly enough people to fill a football stadium – own all properties larger than 1,000 hectares. Most large farms are still in the hands of patrician families who had strong ties with the Portuguese crown. The largest landed estate in the country is the size of Belgium and is owned by a construction company which, the MST says, has never used it for agricultural purposes. The MST and others estimate that only 10% of productive land is properly managed, and of that proportion the great majority is used to grow mostly export produce such as cocoa, coffee and sugar – a situation not unlike that of the country's early colonial days.

"In the beginning, I just wanted to get some land for myself, but after I started coming to the meetings I realised that what we're fighting for is much deeper", says Pedro,

"We want to change the rural structures of this country. And then change the country as a whole. Only by redistributing land can we make people stay in the countryside and produce, rather than getting stuck in the misery of urban slums."

Pedro denies the contention that many MST members [4] today are essentially city boys disguised as peasants.

"It's true that some of our members have never really worked the land. But their parents and grandparents did – until they lost their jobs or were removed from the land by owners of large estates."

What are his views on the World Social Forum [4]? "It allows the different social movements around the world to meet and learn from one and another", he says,

"We cannot look at social issues in isolation. We cannot look at rural injustice in Brazil without solving the same problem in Venezuela, Bolivia or Peru. We're all interconnected and this is the place for us to meet and share our experiences. This is where we map out the future of our movement and of other social movements around the world. "

[back to top](#) [4]

caste [4] or tribe called *Vaidu Samaj*. Her mother sells trinkets on the street, and her father has recently become too ill to work as a sweeper. An organisation called Yuva helped Durga become one of the first in her community to get an education.

Since then, she has become an active member of a collective of street and slum children called *Bal Adhikar Sangarsg Sangathan* (Children's Struggle for Rights). She was recently elected by 500 children to become mayor of the Children's Municipal Corporation of Mumbai [4].

Kali Samal is 15 and belongs to a landless family of six in the Indian state of Orissa. Her father was a rickshaw-puller, but because of ill health has now become a daily wage-labourer like her mother. Kali used to work fourteen-hour shifts in a brick kiln in Cuttack to help make ends meet. An organisation working to end child labour called Suprativa helped her to attend school, and she has now become a dedicated speaker for children's rights.

Sonal Danabhai Baraiya is 16 and from Gujarat [4], where her father is a diamond-cutter. He earns 2,500 *rupees* a month for a family of seven. Sonal left school in 2001 to help the family after her father underwent a kidney operation. She earned 550 *rupees* a month weaving plastic

ropes. Four months ago she too became a diamond-cutter. She now works eleven hours a day but still hasn't earned any wages, because she is regarded as only a trainee.

Neither of the girls have travelled outside India before, and just being in Brazil amounted to more than half of the experience. "Women have a lot of freedom here, and don't have to cover themselves," says Durga. Forum participants from around the world constantly photographed the girls [4] in their colourful saris. "Maybe it's because we're the only ones who aren't half-naked!", she joked.

Durgu says another delegate had told her about "consumerism" and how freedom was much more than the right to dress as you want to. But the most important thing Durgu says she is bringing home is ideas from the other children she met – from Peru, Colombia, Brazil and Britain – about how to structure youth organisations, and organise cultural activities that can help inspire them.

Alpa Vora from Children's Rights in a Globalising World [5] spent the week escorting the children to exhibitions and children's programmes, dances and interactive events. "I may have attended some more meetings if I were alone", she says, but Vora is satisfied with their efforts, and amazed by the sense of empowerment she has seen the children gain over just a few days.

Sonal describes what she learned at the forum:

"I realised it was not just in our country we had these problems, but in many countries all over the world. Just knowing this is important, so we can work together for a better world."

Kali agrees: "Listening to the children from other countries I realised that I am not alone."

Not everything is perfect. Durga says: "I wish there were more spaces where children had an opportunity to speak, and adults would listen."

[back to top](#) [5]

media [5]. Entertainment conglomerates shore up an unjust system and stifle constructive alternatives, he believes,

"Public broadcasting – in Canada as much as elsewhere – has been squeezed over the last ten to fifteen years. It has become increasingly timid and conservative. Serious analysis and debate are in decline. News is never contextualised. This means people are not properly informed, which presents a real danger to democracy."

Part of the solution, he hopes, will be a network to be called Independent World Television (iwt.tv [6]), to be launched in early 2006. So besides reporting on the forum for radio audiences back home, Adrian has come to network and share ideas on iwt.tv.

Paula, an educator and graduate student at Trent University [7], is researching historic interactions between black Africans in Canada and indigenous [7] (pre-European) Canadians. This is her first forum too,

"I want to get a sense of how people are shaping their struggles for solidarity here in Brazil, how that's different from what we're trying to do in Canada and how we can learn from each other."

Paula had seen the *favelas* when driving from Porto Alegre airport to the forum site in the centre of town. She noticed that almost all the inhabitants of the *favela* were black, whereas the great majority of those taking part in the forum are white. (Porto Alegre, like much of Brazil's south, is the most "European" part of country, and people with white skins form 80-90% of the population).

A big question in her mind is how far different groups and identities can unite [7] around common causes. "Is each group fighting for inclusion of their group into society or are people truly interested in building an egalitarian society for all?"

[back to top](#) [7]

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