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THE BANANA PRESIDENT

THE CONFLICTS OF INTEREST INVOLVING
JAIR BOLSONARO, BANANA PRODUCTION AND
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST BLACK RURAL
COMMUNITIES IN BRAZIL



DE OLHO
NOS RURALISTAS
Agribusiness Watch

THE BOLSONARO DOSSIER (I)

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Agribusiness Watch (De Olho nos Ruralistas) is a non-profit organization dedicated to research and investigative journalism about the social, environmental, political and economic impacts of the agribusiness industry in Brazil. From deforestation to human rights violations against indigenous peoples, peasants and other traditional communities. From pesticide overuse to the influence of landowner politicians in the Congress. We believe independent critical journalism plays a vital role in Brazilian democracy as it contributes to build a renewed and more humane treatment towards its people and environment.

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KEY FINDINGS

- In March 2019, Jair Bolsonaro banned banana imports from Ecuador, fulfilling a promise made to his banana-producing allies in the Ribeira Valley region during his presidential campaign. The ban disregards a public civil action filed in federal court.
- The Ribeira Valley is where Bolsonaro grew up and where part of his family lives. Located in the state of São Paulo, the region is marked by land conflicts, labor rights irregularities and human and environmental contamination by pesticides, according to several press reports and scientific research.
- Bolsonaro worked with the Ministry of Agriculture to sanction a Normative Instruction that broadened the permission for aerial spraying of pesticides in banana plantations up to 250 meters away from neighborhoods, cities, towns and villages. The minimal area defined by the previous Normative Instruction was 500 meters.
- Residents of the region report that their homes, crops and themselves are affected by the poisonous rain. They point out health hazards from direct exposure or contamination of water supply.
- Bolsonaro's brother-in-law was convicted in 2018 for invading a black rural community in the Ribeira Valley. One year before, Jair gave a famous racist speech about the quilombolas, measuring them as if they were cattle.
- One of Bolsonaro's brothers, known for serving as a ghost employee in São Paulo, is the intermediary between the president and the banana producers of Ribeira Valley. Bolsonaro and his family are directly involved in this industry.
- In June 2022, the president participated in Brazil's largest banana-industry exhibition, held in the Ribeira Valley, alongside his candidate for the São Paulo state government, Tarcísio Freitas, and the former presidential adviser Mosart Aragão, a candidate to the House of Representatives.
- Jair Bolsonaro maintains an electoral and clientelist agenda for the region, characterizing what is known in Latin America as a Banana Republic.

FOREWORD

In December 2018, a delegation of banana producers from the Ribeira Valley, a rural region in the state of São Paulo, was received in Brasília by Jair Bolsonaro and the Congresswoman Tereza Cristina, who would become Minister of Agriculture in the following month, when Jair's presidency began. In June 2022, he went to the city of Pariquera-Açu, at the Ribeira Valley, to participate in Feibanana, the largest banana exhibition in the country. He was there with Tarcísio Gomes de Freitas, who currently is his candidate for the São Paulo state government.

Those events are separated by almost 4 years, but president Bolsonaro has shown, since before January 1st, 2019, to be particularly interested in bananas. What has happened in the meantime? How important is the banana industry for Bolsonaro, who grew up in the region, and his family? What is Jair and his brother Renato's relationship with the Association of Banana Growers of the Ribeira Valley (Abavar), Feibanana's organizer? Why did they act to stop banana imports from Ecuador and to facilitate the aerial spraying of pesticides? Why does the Brazilian corporate press ignore the conviction of Bolsonaro's brother-in-law in 2018 for the invasion of a black rural community in the region?

In order to answer these questions, this report describes the lobbies and political articulations involved in the banana issue, ranging from the parochial to the national. We also describe the health and environmental risks arising from the spraying of pesticides in the Ribeira Valley, as well as the human rights violations of rural, indigenous and quilombola communities, who remain on the margins of the benefits granted to Jair Bolsonaro's relatives and political allies.

A recurrent trait of president Bolsonaro and all of his clan's policies involves blurring the boundaries between the public and the private spheres. Agribusiness Watch calls attention to this, as we publish a series of reports on his administration that quite literally show the president's willingness to erect a Banana Republic, confronting quilombola black rural communities.

1) THE BOLSONARO VALLEY

“I went to a quilombola [sic] in Eldorado Paulista. The lightest Afro-Brazilian there weighed seven ‘arrobos’. (...) I don't think it's even good enough for breeding anymore.”
Jair Bolsonaro, during a campaign speech in 2017



Outdoor paid by banana growers shows support to Bolsonaro's campaign in 2018.
(Facebook)

Located between southern São Paulo state and northern Paraná state, the Ribeira Valley is the familial and political birthplace of Jair Messias Bolsonaro. Long before he was elected the 38th Brazilian president, he already defended the interests of landowners and distilled his racism against the region's black rural communities, known in Brazil as *quilombos*. Famous for housing the largest continuous corridor of preserved Atlantic Forest in the country, the Ribeira Valley concentrates a large number of *quilombos*, indigenous peoples from the Guarani ethnic group, traditional fishermen and small rural producers.

They are the main responsables for maintaining the region's ecological heritage. From the 2.8 million hectares that make up the total area of the Ribeira de Iguape River Basin, 2.1 million hectares are still preserved, despite the proximity of large economic centers such as São Paulo, Curitiba and Campinas.¹

The main economic activity of the region is banana production. More than 700,000 tons of the fruit leave the Ribeira Valley each year, representing 65% of the production in the state of São Paulo. The state is the largest national producer of bananas, with 15.7% of the total volume produced in Brazil in 2018.² In 2020, the

planted area was 30,764 hectares; palm trees, the second largest crop in the region, occupied only 9,355 hectares. But the income generated by these crops is not reverted into dignified living conditions for most of the 481,224 inhabitants of the region.

According to the 2017 agricultural census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), small properties of up to 50 hectares predominate in the Ribeira Valley's municipalities. Both in São Paulo and Paraná, the region's municipalities have a Human Development Index below the respective state averages.³ A situation that worsens in the face of invisibility and the lack of public policies to its traditional communities.

One of the episodes that highlight the racism against the *quilombolas* of the Ribeira Valley was led by Jair Bolsonaro himself. In a campaign speech at the Hebraica Club in Rio de Janeiro, in April 2017, he reported an alleged visit to a black rural community in the city of Eldorado.

"*Quilombolas* are another joke," he stated. "I went to a *quilombola* [sic] in Eldorado Paulista. The lightest Afro-Brazilian there weighed seven 'arrobas'.* They don't do anything. I don't think it's even good enough for breeding anymore." But the residents of *quilombola* communities in the region report that they have never seen the politician.⁴ At the time, Bolsonaro was targeted in an accusation by the Attorney General, Raquel Dodge, for the practice, inducement, and incitement of "discrimination and prejudice against *quilombola* communities," but was acquitted by the Supreme Court under the pretext that, as a Congressman at the time, he enjoyed parliamentary immunity.

Contrary to what he preached, the Ribeira Valley *quilombolas* work hard. In total, there are 33 communities, with 1,573 families and 4,602 inhabitants, according to the Articulation and Advisory Team for Black Communities (Eaacone).⁵ For most of them, banana production is the main source of income. Their agricultural system is largely ecological and some plantations have organic certification.

One of these communities is confronted, face to face, with the territorial advance of the Bolsonaro family. Married to Vânia, Jair Bolsonaro's younger sister, businessman Theodoro da Silva Konesuk was sentenced in September 2018 to return an invaded area belonging to the residents of Bairro Galvão, a *quilombola* community in Iporanga – another municipality in the region. According to the civil inquiry filed by the Public Attorney of the State of São Paulo, after the invasion, Konesuk's employees returned to the site and destroyed the *quilombolas'* fences and banana plantations to introduce cattle. With the signing of a Conduct Adjustment Agreement, Konesuk committed himself to "cease the irregular use of the permanent preservation areas". He is the target of another MPSP lawsuit, in which he admitted being responsible for devastating native vegetation inside a

legal reserve area, in a farm he owns on the banks of the Ribeira do Iguape River, in Registro, the largest city in the region.⁶

Politics in Ribeira Valley: a family business

Third of six children, Jair Bolsonaro lived in the town of Eldorado until he was 18, when he left to join the Army Preparatory School, in the city of Campinas.⁷ His father, Percy Geraldo Bolsonaro, arrived in the Ribeira Valley in the 1960s, where he became a prosthetist. He was accused of illegally practicing dentistry and was even arrested. In 1974, Jair migrated to the Agulhas Negras Military Academy, in Rio de Janeiro state. In 1989, he was elected councilman in Rio de Janeiro, and the following year, federal deputy. In the 1970s, his father had tried unsuccessfully to become councilman in Eldorado for the MDB, a party in opposition to the military regime, which his son now defends.⁸

Since then, Bolsonaro has returned to Ribeira Valley on sporadic visits to see family members and his friends. Some of these trips are used to strengthen political ties with banana producers in the region. On the last one, in June 2022, the president went to the municipality of Pariquera-Açu to participate in Feibanana, the largest banana exhibition in the country. The event is organized by the Association of Banana Growers of Ribeira Valley (Abavar), with whom Bolsonaro maintains close ties.



Bolsonaro participates in an exhibition of banana producers in Ribeira Valley.
(TV Brasil)

On the stage, Bolsonaro detailed the actions of his government in favor of agribusiness and, more specifically, in favor of the banana farmers of the Ribeira Valley – emphasizing the suspension of banana imports from Ecuador.⁹ The president traveled accompanied by the licensed minister Tarcísio Gomes de Freitas, Bolsonaro's official candidate for the government of São Paulo, and the

special advisor to the presidency, Mosart Aragão, candidate for a seat in the House of Representatives.¹⁰

Linked to banana producers, Mosart is close to Jair's brother Renato Bolsonaro, who also participated in the presidential visit to Feibanana. Besides being brothers-in-law – Mosart was married to the sister of Renato's ex-wife – Renato is Mosart's campaign coordinator and was with him at the launching of the cornerstone of a campus of the Federal Institute of São Paulo in Miracatu (SP), where he also works as chief of staff for Mayor Vinícius Brandão (PL). According to journalist Guilherme Amado's column on Metrôpoles, Mosart used public money to pay for the per diems and airfare from Brasilia to Miracatu.¹¹

Renato Bolsonaro has been a candidate several times, without success. He ran for the House of Representatives in 1998, and in 2000 and 2004, for city councilman in Praia Grande, on the southern coast of São Paulo. Back in Ribeira Valley in 2008, he received 202 votes when he ran for councilman in Miracatu. He also ran for mayor of the municipality in the following two elections. Former military, he used the name Capitão Bolsonaro in some disputes. Like his brother, he jumped across several parties: PPB, PFL, PTB, PSL, and PR (now PL, the party for which Jair is running for reelection). Before the 2018 presidential election, Renato was appointed as a "ghost employee" in the office of a state deputy in São Paulo, emulating a common practice in the mandates of his brother and nephew, Flávio Bolsonaro. In the office of André do Prado, he received a salary of R\$ 17,000 while working regularly in one of his four furniture stores in Miracatu. After the story broke, Renato was eventually exonerated from his position.¹²

With his brother as president, Renato began working behind the scenes to release funds for municipalities in the region. In 2020, the government transferred more than R\$110 million (equivalent to US\$ 21.4mm) for the construction of bridges, asphalt resurfacing, and investment in culture and sports centers in the municipalities of São Vicente, on the southern coast of the state, Itaoca, Pariquera-Açu, and Eldorado, all three in Ribeira Valley, through his direct intervention.¹³ Renato denied having received any payments, benefits, or even the return of travel expenses incurred in order to get the money released to the municipalities.

The following year, Renato became chief of staff for the Miracatu municipal government and began working in Brasília to release funds for the municipality. In the last half of 2021, Miracatu benefited from the commitment of R\$35 million (US\$ 6.8mm) for construction projects. Of the total, at least R\$10 million (US\$ 1.9mm) came from the amendments of the rapporteur of the so-called 'secret budget', in which a member of parliament allocates federal resources to a locality without being identified. The amount would be used to buy bulldozers, maintain local roads, improve the drainage of streets, and build an events center.¹⁴

In addition to political alliances, the president's brother is potentially benefited by measures that favor banana farming in the Ribeira Valley. In a column published by the newspaper Folha de S. Paulo in March 2019, journalist Janio de Freitas claimed that a nephew of the president produces the fruit.¹⁵ In response, during the weekly live broadcast on his Facebook page, Bolsonaro denied that his family has ties to banana production in Ribeira Valley: "No relative of mine has a single hectare there growing bananas. We don't have an air conditioner, my family doesn't deal with banana transportation, nothing in this regard."¹⁶

Based on the National Rural Register System of the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (SNCR/Incra), De Olho nos Ruralistas identified three rural properties in the municipality of Maracatu in the name of lawyer and military police officer Luiz Paulo Leite Bolsonaro, Renato's son. The farms Kelin, Bonanza and Boa Vista total 75.89 hectares.¹⁷

The rest of the Bolsonaro family doesn't appear in the spotlight and has kept its feet in the region. His mother, Olinda Bonturi Bolsonaro, who died in January 2022, at the age of 94, lived until her last days in Eldorado. Guido, one of the president's brothers, lives there until today, where he owns a lottery and an electronics shop. On the wall of his house, a small sign is the only reference to his famous last name.

2) THE BANANA LOBBY

*"We will give a banana to those who want to import it from Ecuador"
Jair Bolsonaro, in a video published on his Facebook account in October 2018*



**After being elected, Bolsonaro received a shipment of bananas from his friends.
(Facebook)**

Bolsonaro interfered in banana imports from Ecuador

In January 2018, a year before taking office as president, Bolsonaro visited the headquarters of Abavar in Registro, the banana growers' association, and promised: "Next year we will solve your problems."¹⁸ In November of the same year, right after his election, Bolsonaro received friends from Eldorado at his home in Rio de Janeiro. From them he received a shipment of bananas. The delivery was made at the request of Maria Denise, Bolsonaro's sister who lives in the region. Banana grower João Evangelista, Bolsonaro's childhood friend, attended the meeting and said: "He said he will try to regularize this business with Ecuador that is putting bananas here in Brazil, which doesn't seem to be of good quality."¹⁹

The following year, in a live broadcast held on March 7, 2019, the president said he intended to end the "ghost of banana imports" from Ecuador. Alongside Generals Otávio Santana do Rêgo Barros, then presidential spokesperson, and Augusto Heleno, chief minister of the Institutional Security Cabinet of the Presidency, the

president said he could not understand how bananas leave the South American country and travel about 10,000 kilometers to arrive with a competitive price at São Paulo's distribution centers, given the amount of bananas produced in the Ribeira Valley.²⁰

Bolsonaro has spoken publicly on the issue of banana imports since 2014, when he was a Congressman. In a speech in the House of Representatives in May of that year, he criticized the Workers' Party (PT) for advocating the release of the product's imports. At the time, the politician published a video on his YouTube account entitled "Dilma gives a banana to Ribeira Valley."²¹ To "give a banana" is a famous expression in Brazil that means a person who doesn't care about others' opinions.

The banana imports from Ecuador are, historically, a subject of debates and disputes among banana growers, technicians, the judicial system, and the government. It involves sanitary and trade issues. The imports were banned for 20 years, from 1997 to 2017, due to phytosanitary restrictions related to the alleged presence of diseases in Ecuadorian plantations. In 2017, Normative Instruction No. 46, dated December 6th, 2017 (IN 46/2017), was published by the Secretary of Agricultural Defense of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply, which indicated the commercial opening of Brazil for banana imports, recognizing the sanitary safety of the fruit. This Normative Instruction amended the wording of IN 3/2014, which imposed sanitary restrictions on imports. Since then, associations representing banana growers have sought to reverse the situation with the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches.

As a result, the trade of Ecuadorian bananas was suspended on February 26th, 2019 by a preliminary injunction decision from Judge Luciana Raquel Tolentino de Moura, of the 7th Federal Court in Brasilia, until studies were conducted on the sanitary condition of the fruit. A public civil action was filed by the lawyers of the Central Association of Fruit Growers of the State of Minas Gerais (Abanorte) and the National Confederation of Banana Growers (Conaban), under the technical responsibility of the agronomist Francisco Ermelindo Rodrigues, requesting a ban on the import of the fruit.²²

A little less than a month later, in a video recorded during a trip to the United States, Bolsonaro announced to his allies in Ribeira Valley the imports from Ecuador would be suspended:



Bolsonaro promoted a crusade against banana imports from Ecuador.
(Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería/Ecuador)

"Hello, my friends from Ribeira Valley, banana growers from all over Brazil. At the moment I am in the United States and I want to give you good news: in a meeting today with the Minister of Agriculture, Tereza Cristina, she assured us that, in tomorrow's edition of the Federal Register, two Normative Instructions will be revoked: no. 3, from March 2014, as well as no. 46, from December 2017. These instructions gave Ecuador the right to export bananas to us. With the revocation of these Normative Instructions, this banana import will cease to exist. At this moment I want to thank the work of [Valmir] Beber, from Eldorado Paulista, as well as my brother, Renato Bolsonaro, among others who have worked to find a solution to this serious problem, not only for the people from Ribeira Valley, but also from all over Brazil, who cultivate bananas. So, friends from Abavar, from Ribeira Valley, thank you all very much, a big hug and stay with God."²³

Normative Instruction No. 4, dated March 18, 2019, was then published, suspending the effects of IN 3/2014 and IN 46/2017. The document did not provide a justification.²⁴ In April 2020, the president of Abavar, Ézio Borges, published a video thanking "the support of president Jair Messias Bolsonaro."²⁵ "Abavar, recognizing the agricultural political project for the country, and especially for banana production, during the last presidential campaign has always remained faithful in its unconditional political support to the current president, Jair Messias Bolsonaro," said the banana producer.

According to a report in the newspaper Valor Econômico, replicated by the National Agricultural Society (SNA) in May 2019, Bolsonaro's reaction to the trade risks of banana imports seemed out of proportion to reality: "Apparently, the president was worrying for nothing. In 2018, [imports from Ecuador] reached a

measly US\$ 34.000." Furthermore, the report said that "(...) the banana conflict with Ecuador, renewed by President Jair Bolsonaro, has reached the World Trade Organization (WTO), with an accusation from the country that Brazil is violating international rules by blocking its main export product." The government of Ecuador states before the WTO General Council that by issuing the ban, Brazil is violating international rules.²⁶

There are technical controversies about the phytosanitary risk of banana imports from Ecuador; some are documented in the civil public action filed by Abanorte and Conaban. The lawsuit is still in progress. The last movement occurred in August 2021, when the Federal Prosecutor Felipe Fritz Braga issued an opinion in which he considered the initial request to be groundless and manifested for the revocation of the injunction granted, due to the technical insufficiency of the documents that support the alleged phytosanitary risk of the fruit imported from Ecuador.

In 2018, Bolsonaro's candidate for the House of Representatives in the region was Valmir Beber, with whom he and his brother Renato posed in videos during the campaign. One of the agendas was bananas. Beber was not elected. Although the president did not make it clear what was his and Renato's work, it is clear that he was quite effective in fulfilling his electoral promises in Ribeira Valley.

Bolsonaro administration approved aerial spraying of pesticides in banana production

Another front of the Bolsonaro government's actions to please its banana-producer allies in the Ribeira Valley is related to the aerial spraying of pesticides on banana plantations.

On May 4, 2020, Normative Instruction no. 13 came into force, sanctioned on April 8th by the Secretary of Agricultural Defense of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply.²⁷ Without going through any public consultation, the measure revoked two previous instructions to allow aerial spraying of pesticides on banana plantations located up to 250 meters away from neighborhoods, cities, towns, and villages. The previous minimum distance was 500 meters.

On his Facebook page, Jair Bolsonaro posted on April 13th, days after the promulgation of the Normative Instruction, a video where Ézio Borges thanked the government for its new policy. "The maintenance of jobs, production and zeal for the workers' lives, is our administration's goal," the caption said.²⁸ The president of Abavar says in the video that fungicide spraying has been occurring in the region for 50 years and that, in this period, there has never been a "single case of aggression" to people's health and the environment.



Aerial spraying of pesticides on banana plantations was an old demand by Ribeira Valley farmers. (NIH)

"The Normative Instruction No. 13 from the Ministry of Agriculture guarantees the health of banana groves, the quality of bananas and, mainly, the maintenance of employment for all people involved in the banana chain," celebrates the farmer. "Here, agribusiness doesn't stop, we are producing bananas every day to supply consumers all over Brazil, especially in São Paulo. Many thanks, President Jair Bolsonaro, we are with you."

The scientific literature shows that the “zeal for the workers’ lives” to which Bolsonaro refers does not seem to be the goal of IN 13/2020. By reducing the distances for spraying the banana crops with pesticides, the government intended to directly favor producers in Ribeira Valley.

During the campaign for the presidency of the Republic, in July 2018, Jair Bolsonaro was with his son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, and Valmir Beber – both candidates for the House of Representatives that year – at the headquarters of the aerial spraying company Banaer Pulverização Agrícola, in the city of Registro. "Jair Bolsonaro is from our region, knows our reality and we want him to make a commitment to regional development," Beber said in a post on a social network.²⁹

Who is Valmir Beber, Bolsonaro's banana-producer friend?

Candidate for the House of Representatives in the last general elections, businessman Valmir Beber was sentenced in March 2018 to one year in prison by the court in Eldorado after being found out committing an environmental crime. He was accused of maintaining a banana plantation in an area of 19.5 hectares inside the Caverna do Diabo State Park, an important conservation unit in Ribeira Valley. The conviction was replaced by a sentence obliging him to repair the damage caused. Judge Gabriela de Oliveira Thomaze granted the businessman the right to appeal the decision in freedom. The farm was sold by Beber a few years later, without having completed the reparation.³⁰

Beber received 22,031 votes and was not elected. His main supporter in the region was Renato Bolsonaro, who recorded videos alongside the businessman and actively participated in rallies and other campaign events. Jair Bolsonaro himself, who was running for president at the time, recorded videos in support of Beber.

The Comercio de Bananas Beber Ltd page posted on October 4, 2018 – three days before the first round of the presidential election – a video where the owner of the company appears alongside Renato Bolsonaro, asking for votes for himself and for the presidential candidate.³¹ Jair appears in a picture in the background, next to Beber. "The Bolsonaro family is helping us in this final stretch," says the businessman. "Every day he mentions my name." The video shows Renato saying, on behalf of his brother, that Beber was chosen to represent, in Ribeira Valley, agribusiness and his presidential project. "He really wants you to get there", he said. Companies are prohibited by the Electoral Justice system to publicize candidates.

Beber's defeated campaign page also features videos with Jair Bolsonaro by his side. The businessman asks for votes for his friend. One of the videos was recorded when the presidential candidate was hospitalized after being stabbed during a rally.³² "Friends from Ribeira Valley, on October 7th everyone should vote for Beber," he says. "No more importing bananas from Ecuador. The banana is ours. Let's give a banana to those who want to import bananas from Ecuador."

One of the partners in Banaer Pulverização Agrícola Ltd is Rene Mariano, another ally of Bolsonaro in Ribeira Valley. The Ribeira do Iguape and South Coast Water Resources Master Plan for the period between 2004 and 2011 pointed out Mariano's company as one of those responsible for the contamination of the region's rivers.³³ The report confirmed the environmental damage, carrying out a detailed survey of the problem, a risk assessment and a remediation plan. Banaer was again fined by the Environmental Company of the State of São Paulo (Cetesb)

in November 2013. The agency understood that the company discharged pollutants in a way that caused a nuisance to public welfare and harm to flora and fauna.³⁴ Besides doing the application, Banaer is also approved to do the maintenance of Embraer's Ipanema aircraft, widely used by the agricultural aviation sector.³⁵ A few years later, in 2017, Rene Mariano was convicted in a public civil action filed by the São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office for failing to maintain the legal reserve on his farm, São Lourenço, in Jacupiranga. The property has just over 780 hectares.³⁶



Bolsonaro welcomes delegation of banana growers from the Ribeira Valley. (Abavar)

In December 2018, a committee of banana growers from Ribeira Valley led by Abavar was received in Brasília by Jair Bolsonaro, already elected president, and by Congresswoman Tereza Cristina (DEM-MS), soon to be Minister of Agriculture. The participants from Abavar side were Rene Mariano, partner at Banaer, Valmir Beber, then director of the entity, Agnaldo Oliveira, from the Integral Technical Assistance Coordination (CATI) and researcher Wilson Moraes, from the São Paulo Agency of Agribusiness Technology (Apta). According to them, the subject of the meeting was the increase in research and development investments for the sector, in addition to support measures for production and commercialization of bananas. One of the themes was the ban on imports from Ecuador.

In the state of São Paulo, on July 22nd 2020, months after the enactment of IN 13/2020, the state Agricultural Defense published the Resolution SSA 39, which provides for the creation of the Phytosanitary Safety Program for the Banana Culture.³⁷ In article 10, paragraph VIII, there is a mention to the federal government's Normative Instruction. According to the Resolution, a committee should be created with the attribution of both establishing criteria for the

selection of the program's target audience and to coordinate, plan and implement the actions that guarantee the phytosanitary quality of the banana production chain in the state. This committee held a few meetings in the following months and is currently paralyzed.

On at least two occasions, Bolsonaro himself has made explicit his direct intervention in the public policy that benefits banana growers in the Ribeira Valley. In a ministerial meeting on April 22nd 2020, days after the enactment of IN 13/2020, Bolsonaro mentions a measure that would have been revoked by the Ministry of Agriculture: "And so are other decisions, each ministry, as I talked about Tereza Cristina, who changed a Normative Instruction, helping 400,000 people in the Ribeira Valley – congratulations to her," he said.³⁸

A few months later, in a video broadcast live from Eldorado on September 3rd, 2020, the president admitted to interfere to make the aerial spraying of pesticides in banana plantations more flexible: "We also solved an issue with Tereza Cristina, Minister of Agriculture, because I couldn't spray the banana with an airplane," he revealed. "Well, between an airplane and a person with a little machine on his back, messing with the pump there, what is the possibility of someone becoming more contaminated? The pilot or the guy with the little machine on his back pumping directly into the bananas? Obviously the second one. Tereza Cristina changed this."³⁹

The statement contradicts a note sent by the Ministry of Agriculture to De Olhos Ruralistas, which denied any interference by the president in the edition of IN 13/2020. In a note sent on May 29th 2020, the General Press Coordination of the Special Advisory Office of Social Communication of the Ministry of Agriculture stated that the instruction met "demand presented by the National Confederation of Banana Growers of Brazil (Conaban) in 2017, therefore more than a year before the beginning of this management" and that "there was, therefore, no presidential pressure to change the cited rule."

3) “THEY DON’T CARE ABOUT US”



Quilombola agricultural practices was recognized as a Brazilian Cultural Heritage by Iphan.
(Anna Maria Andrade/ISA)

The use of pesticides represents a serious problem for the health of ecosystems and human beings. A systematic review published in March 2022 in the scientific journal *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, with 51 researches produced by 27 Brazilian public institutions, pointed out impacts such as kidney dysfunction, intoxication, alteration in cognitive performance, skin cancer, hematological and hepatic alteration, mental disorders, congenital malformation, tremors, hearing impairment, damage to reproductive hormones, and DNA alteration related to the exposure to pesticides.⁴⁰ Its application through aerial spraying accentuates this impact: studies show that a large part of the products sprayed on the crops are lost during this practice, ranging from 34.5% to 99.9%, as pointed out by the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz).⁴¹

Still in force in Brazil – although banned in several countries – the aerial spraying of pesticides is responsible for the contamination of the soil and air, in addition to affecting neighboring areas due to drift, surface runoff, spillage, and soil leaching, even when applied under ideal temperature and wind. This can put water sources at risk, affecting fish and other organisms, contaminate surface soil and groundwater, and poses a danger to people, who become vulnerable to ingesting contaminated water and food, as well as to potential exposure during application.

A technical note from Fiocruz points out the risk inherent in spraying related to the number of aircraft accidents, which fly at low altitude and perform potentially

dangerous maneuvers.⁴² In March 2022, an agricultural spraying plane crashed in a rural area of Registro. The aircraft was identified with the logo of the company Aero Agrícola Caiçara, which attends the municipalities of the South Coast and Ribeira Valley, in São Paulo. The pilot, Nilton Cesar Silva Romero, 70, died.⁴³ In 2018, Human Rights Watch published a report recommending the suspension of the practice in Brazil.⁴⁴ In the state of São Paulo alone, a survey by De Olho nos Ruralistas identified the active registration of 217 agricultural aircrafts.

The dangers faced by rural workers exposed to pesticides range from the limited availability of protective equipment and labor qualification to the lack of adequate organization of the spraying schedule. The scientific literature has been approaching this issue in researches that allow, from rigorously collected data, to understand the severity of the consequences of the activity, especially in what refers to banana farming. Research has identified high rates of occupational cancer in workers operating in banana production.⁴⁵ In Ribeira Valley itself, predisposition to mouth cancer and lung dysfunction has been detected in rural workers.^{46 47}

A recent study conducted by researchers from the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp) among rural banana workers in Registro concluded, from the workers' perception, that the use of pesticides in banana production in the region – especially through aerial spraying – exposes workers to health and work safety risks, requiring more attention and inspections, as well as more effective public policies.⁴⁸ Reports from workers interviewed in the research reveal the seriousness of the situation: "(...) Like the part of spraying airplanes, right ... the plane will throw oil in the *bananal*, whoever is inside the area"

According to the legislation in force, workers must be notified in advance so that they can collect themselves at the time of aerial spraying, and they are allowed to transit through the sprayed area only two hours after the end of the activity. According to interviews with rural workers in the aforementioned study, this is not what occurs in the Ribeira Valley:

"(...) There are places out there where the airplanes drop [pesticides] on top of the guy, they don't care about us, about the river, about anything. Then you get this oil all over people (...) we could see that it would harm your health, but you can't leave your job. So you have to stay there under the poison!



Bolsonaro 'gives a banana' to the press in front of the Alvorada Palace, government headquarters. (YouTube)

The interviewees declared the presence of gastric symptoms (22.2%), headaches (36.1%), dizziness (20.8%), and shortness of breath (58.3%). According to the authors of the survey, studies indicate that such health problems are often associated with constant exposure to pesticides.

On November 21th and 22th, 2018, a delegation of the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH) visited Ribeira Valley to hear from local communities about reports of human rights violations. According to the news released on the website of the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights, the president of the Council at the time, Fabiana Severo, and the coordinator of the Permanent Commission on the Right to Work, Education and Social Security, Leonardo Pinho, conducted active listening sessions with leaders of *quilombola* communities in Eldorado, and an extended meeting with family farmers from Registro. The population made a series of complaints, among them the indiscriminate use of pesticides. They asked the CNDH to help them demand from the responsible bodies a more incisive inspection of illegal aerial spraying and to guarantee the development of a transition model so that there is a more rational use of pesticides in the region.⁴⁹

In 2007, prosecutors and inspectors from the Labor Prosecutor's Office carried out inspections in farms in the Miracatu area and found that workers from Ribeira Valley were not registered, did not use protective equipment, had to pay for the costs of their tools, and were sprayed with pesticides. According to an article published by Folha de S. Paulo, the blitzes resulted in 38 fines for lack of compliance with labor legislation.⁵⁰ "With the diligences, we were able to verify that the work situation in the region is more degrading than we imagined," said Cláudia Marques de Oliveira, a Labor Prosecutor. "Besides the predominance of informality, there is no guidance for handling pesticides. As there are no job perspectives in the region, they submit themselves to degrading conditions."

Antonio Carlos Avancini, agronomist and subcoordinator of the mobile group of rural inspection of the Regional Labor Office in São Paulo, said at the time that he was "shocked" by the way spraying is done in Ribeira Valley: "The workers are at risk, the environment is at risk, and consumers can even be at risk."

The defenders of aerial spraying in the region claim that it is impossible to produce banana without the application of mineral oil and fungicide, due to the need to fight black sigatoka, a disease caused by the fungus *Pseudocercospora fijiensis*. In a meeting with state deputy Padre Afonso Lobato, Rene Mariano, the owner of Banaer Pulverização Agrícola Ltd, declared that the activity will become unviable if aerial spraying is prohibited.⁵¹ The politician is the author of Bill 405/2016, which deals with the prohibition of aerial spraying and the use of insecticides for this purpose in the state of São Paulo. The proposal has been in the Legislative Assembly since 2017, having received favorable opinions in the committees through which it has passed.⁵²

The case of the legal prohibition of aerial spraying in banana production in Ceará shows a reality quite different from the scenario pointed out by Rene Mariano and Abavar. The approval of Law 16.820/19 – called Zé Maria do Tomé Law, in homage to a rural leader killed in 2010 after denouncing the illegal use of pesticides – represented an achievement for those who suffered the daily impacts of the practice in their communities. A Technical Note from the Semiar Research Group, of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), investigated the effects of the law on state agricultural production.⁵³ It has concluded that the prohibition of aerial spraying did not negatively impact banana production in Ceará: the sector registered an increase in volume, planted area and in productivity in the years after the law was enacted. Likewise, there was an increase in banana exports from Ceará, both in quantity and in added value.

In April 2020, the Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock of Brazil (CNA) filed a Direct Action of Unconstitutionality (ADI 6.137) against the Zé Maria do Tomé Law in the Supreme Court. The court postponed the vote in November 2021, when Minister Gilmar Mendes asked for access to the case; until the postponement, two ministers had voted. The rapporteur, Judge Cármen Lúcia, and Judge Edson Fachin were against the plea – upholding the constitutionality of the law.⁵⁴



Traditional plantation by quilombola communities is threatened by aerial spraying.
(Manoela Mayer/ISA)

In opposition to the paradigm of agriculture in which agribusiness currently manifests itself in Brazil – in an authoritarian, predatory, violent, and exclusionary way – other perspectives are being developed and put into practice. From an agroecological point of view, methods of controlling sigatoka and other diseases do not require the use of pesticides. Among them are the use of resistant cultivars, the induction of systemic resistance, the use of agroforestry systems, the maintenance of agroecosystemic biodiversity, and biological control.^{55 56} Even within conventional agriculture, there are alternatives to aerial spraying: the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa) has been developing technologies that can minimize the negative impacts of this practice on people's health and the environment.⁵⁷

Despite the seriousness of the situation and the possible alternatives, banana growers in the Ribeira Valley – with Bolsonaro's support – are not only allowed to continue to spray their crops with agrochemicals, but will be able to do so in even larger areas.

Quilombolas defend themselves against banana agribusiness

According to reports collected by De Olho nos Ruralistas, residents of the region complain that their homes, crops, and even themselves are affected by the poisonous rain. They point to health risks from direct exposure and the contamination of water supply. The spraying of pesticides makes the certification process of organic products difficult due to wind contamination caused by the application in areas neighboring those that do not use pesticides. The precarious inspection of this activity by the competent agencies intensifies the problem. And the expansion of the area subject to aerial spraying leaves communities even more vulnerable.

Faced with the advance of banana plantations, *quilombola* leaders agree that the solution is to guarantee their territorial rights. The only demarcation process that took place in Ribeira Valley during Bolsonaro administration was approved by determination of the Federal Public Attorney. The Pedro Cubas community, in Eldorado, was demarcated after a public civil action. The paralysis and delay in the demarcation of the territories of indigenous and traditional peoples hinders their access to public policies, such as resources to support local production, and increases land conflicts. A study made by the Socio-Environmental Institute (ISA) shows that there are 393 land registers overlapping with *quilombola* territories in the region.⁵⁸ In the Abobra community alone there are 68 of these registrations, which total more than 88% of the area. "There are more third parties than quilombolas there", says a resident who, fearing to suffer threats, asked not to be identified. She explains the tension that exists in the region between the city dwelling elite and the *quilombolas*. "We have three characteristics that they don't like: we are poor, from the countryside, and black", she summarizes.

The dispute over the territory also involves mining. From 2018 to date, 32 individuals and companies have filed applications or obtained authorizations to search for minerals within *quilombola* areas, according to a survey by the Articulation and Advisory Team to Black Communities (Eaacone).⁵⁹

4) AGRIBUSINESS, ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST



Traditional plantation by quilombola communities is threatened by aerial spraying.
(Foto: Manoela Mayer/ISA)

The hegemony of agribusiness in Brazil has only been made possible by the diffusion and indiscriminate use of technologies whose liberation foregoes in-depth studies, debates, and social participation that properly evaluate their environmental, social, economic, and cultural effects, in addition to the damage to human health.⁶⁰ The Bolsonaro administration has been accentuating its harmful impacts because, at the same time that it promotes policies to please a circuit of close allies and fulfill electoral commitments, it alienates rural and forest peoples from their benefits. This distortion of the public interest, in the case of banana cultivation in Ribeira Valley, is woven as much by actions – such as the expansion of aerial spraying and the ban on banana imports – as by omissions – such as the paralyzing of the demarcation of territories and the absence of policies that support the most vulnerable populations.

The political-family games conducted by the Banana President are expressed through clientelism and speeches, but also through legal and political instruments. They are the same ones that, irresponsibly, contribute to increase social inequality in rural areas and negatively impact the environment of one of the greatest ecological and cultural assets of Brazil, the Ribeira Valley.

The resourcefulness with which a brother-in-law of Bolsonaro invaded a black rural community in the region and the racist slur in which the president refers to *quilombolas* shows, along with public policies that favor large producers, an evident conflict of interest that deserves, in this electoral context, to gain more visibility.

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