
Straddling the frontier:
rural-urban linkages, livelihoods
and land use dynamics in Amazonia

Natasha Grist

School of Development Studies
University of East Anglia, Norwich

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Abstract

This thesis addresses a gap in the understanding of settlers in the urbanising frontier of Brazilian Amazonia. Previously, settlers have been characterised by conservationists and rural development specialists as predominantly rural-based farmers, with subsequent interventions and programmes designed on this premise. Research to date has not focussed on the effect of the development of urban centres on settler livelihoods. Brazilian Amazonia is now urbanising rapidly, with most population expansion currently occurring in small urban nuclei in frontier areas such as northwestern Mato Grosso. The presence of an urban centre provides opportunities for employment, wealth generation and stabilised livelihoods for rural populations, whilst urban dwellers may choose to invest in local rural ventures. However, the exact nature, strengths and types of linkages between urban and nearby rural populations in frontier Amazonia, and in particular, the effects of this on natural resource use, are poorly understood.

The case study examines the urbanisation of Amazonia through an exploration of urban and rural livelihoods in the southern Amazonian frontier of northwest Mato Grosso, Brazil. Recent arrivals and established settlers are investigated in a case study based in Juruena municipality, a 27-year-old, corporate-planned settlement. Data collection, based on a modified livelihoods framework, was undertaken through semi-structured interviews, household surveys and participant observation. The case study examines linkages and interactions in settler households focussing on motivations for migration, livelihood diversification, wealth and natural resource use.

The research demonstrates that, despite a political climate that promoted and supported initial migration from the south of Brazil, more recent agricultural subsidy removal limits settlers' ability to realise their agricultural aspirations. This encourages out-migration from the rural area and the growth of rural-urban hybrid livelihoods. Rural-urban proximity increases livelihood diversification and income generation activities amongst most sectors of the population. Migrants currently establishing plots in settlements for landless rural workers use urban employment as a critical source of income for the family and its farm, ensuring the survival of the farm enterprise and decreasing household vulnerability. Household composition reflects this diversification through commuting and the existence of dual and straddler households found in urban and rural areas, notably amongst the poorer settlers. In general, the relationship between urban links, natural resource management and deforestation on settler lands is not direct, and varies with settlers' aspirations towards cattle husbandry, livelihood diversification choices and wealth.

This thesis contributes to an increasing awareness amongst researchers of the issue of urban growth in frontier Amazonia. Urban and rural linkages explored and clarified in settler households demonstrate the flexibility of migrants in taking up urban and rural opportunities. The thesis argues that planning for natural resource use and land management in Amazonia will be more accurately focussed and more successful in outcome through a better understanding of the effects of local rural and urban links on household management, labour allocations and aspirations. Finally, the identification of an impoverished subgroup of the population, and a discussion of the elderly in Amazonia, who are outside the positive rural-urban linkage feedback loop, will be of interest for those planning poverty alleviation strategies in Amazonia.

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