

# TOXIC TRADING

The EU pesticide lobby's  
offensive in Brazil





# Credits

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# Executive summary

The EU-Mercosur trade deal, if ratified, will heavily increase crop exports to Europe, and imports of dangerous agrochemicals to South America, particularly Brazil. The likely expansion of agriculture for export risks aggravating existing problems with the conversion of forests and other important ecosystems for agriculture, and adds to the toxic burden of pesticide-intensive agriculture on nature and local communities.

**European corporations like Bayer and BASF, who are the leading European manufacturers of pesticides, have been promoting the EU-Mercosur trade deal through lobby groups.** Their lobbying has sought to increase market access for some of their most harmful pesticides by joining forces with Brazilian agribusiness associations. In doing so, they have supported a legislative agenda that seeks to undermine Indigenous rights, remove environmental safeguards, and legitimise deforestation. Through Brazil's powerful agribusiness lobby groups – like the Bayer-founded CropLife Brasil – European pesticide corporations support efforts to weaken environmental protection measures, **including the “poison package” which will undermine existing regulation of pesticides and fundamentally change and weaken the approval process for pesticide use.**

The Brazilian agribusiness lobby and the EU pesticide industry are represented by the influential agribusiness bloc in Brazilian congress – the *bancada ruralista* – who have a notorious reputation pushing back environmental legislation.

These agribusiness associations also run public awareness campaigns. As part of the agribusiness lobby, Bayer and BASF support large-scale rallies and platforms designed to greenwash the image of agribusiness in

Brazil, win over consumers and decision makers in Europe, and counter European critics of the EU-Mercosur deal.

Another key lobby strategy used by EU pesticide corporations is financing third-party voices to promote their commercial interests. For instance, Brussels-based think tank ECIPE runs a Bayer-funded EU-Mercosur project. On the Brazilian side, think tank *Instituto Pensar Agro* promotes more pesticide use and downplays agribusiness' role in deforestation. The Instituto Pensar Agro works in partnership with decision makers of the influential agribusiness bloc in the Brazilian congress. **Major agribusiness associations which represent Bayer, BASF and Syngenta, contributed around 2 million euros to support the lobby activities of the Instituto Pensar Agro.**

Their joint lobby efforts have borne fruit: **pesticide use has multiplied sixfold over the last 20 years and a record number of new pesticides has been approved in Brazil since Jair Bolsonaro came to power.** Bayer and BASF have both benefited from this support, with Bayer reportedly getting at least eight new products approved each year. **Together, Bayer and BASF have got 45 new pesticides approved over the last three years, 19 of which contain substances prohibited in the European Union**

European pesticide corporations not only benefit from weaker environmental and pesticide regulations in Brazil but also from generous tax exemptions on pesticides.

**While the European pesticide industry seeks to maximise its profits, one person dies from pesticide poisoning in Brazil every two days, and around 20% of these victims are children and adolescents between the ages of 0 and 19.**

UN bodies increasingly urge greater action to tackle the damaging impacts of pesticides on biodiversity and local communities demand to prevent powerful companies with a vested interest in pesticide sales from blocking policies that support more climate-resilient agroecological farming practices.

However, wealthy European pesticide corporations keep gaining political power in Brazil, while the country's civil society and social movements – many of which are fighting against pesticides – are being excluded from political participation and even criminalised by the Bolsonaro government.

The EU's recently announced Farm-to-Fork Strategy aims to dramatically reduce pesticide use and completely ban any residue on food of pesticides not registered for use in the EU. The trade promoted by the EU-Mercosur deal is fundamentally at odds with these and other EU green goals. **EU member states must reject the EU-Mercosur deal and move away from promoting the pesticide-intensive monoculture model and support more sustainable, nature-friendly and people-centered approaches to agriculture.** They should also introduce an immediate ban on imports of products with residues of chemicals that are forbidden in the EU itself.

## Profiting from poison: European agribusiness' deadly trade in Brazil

 **6x**

Pesticide use has multiplied sixfold in Brazil over the last 20 years.

 **2 MILLION EUROS**

Groups representing Bayer, BASF & Syngenta have spent around 2M euros to support the agribusiness lobby in Brazil.

 **45**

45 new pesticides were approved by the Bolsonaro government for Bayer & BASF over the last 3 years. 19 contain substances banned in the EU.

 **2 DAYS**

A person dies from pesticide poisoning every 2 days in Brazil. Around 20% of victims are children & adolescents aged 0-19.

# Glossary

**ABAG** – Brazilian Agribusiness Association (Associação Brasileira do Agronegócio) – One of the biggest agribusiness associations in Brazil.

**Agrosaber** – platform that runs public campaigns established by agribusiness in Brazil to promote a positive image of agribusiness and the agenda of the bancada ruralista – the agribusiness bloc in Brazilian congress.

**Anvisa** – Brazil's national health protection agency.

**APEX Brasil** – Brazilian agency for promoting exports and investments (part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

**Bancada Ruralista** – a group of parliamentarians, including landowners and agribusiness owners, that promotes an agribusiness agenda in Brazil.

**Conama** – the Brazilian National Environment Council.

**CropLife International** – an influential lobby group for the world's major agrochemical and pesticide companies. Its members Syngenta, Bayer Crop Science, BASF, Corteva Agriscience, and FMC.<sup>1</sup>

**CropLife Brasil** – one of the biggest agribusiness lobby groups founded by pesticide companies Bayer, BASF, Syngenta and other agrochemical companies.

**ECIPE** – European Centre for International Political Economy (Brussels-based think tank).

**FUNAI** – National Indian Foundation – government body in Brazil responsible for Indigenous people.

**Highly hazardous pesticides (HHP)** – classified as extremely damaging to human health or the environment.

**IBAMA** – Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources. IBAMA is the Brazilian Ministry of the Environment's administrative arm and implements laws against deforestation.

**IPA** – Instituto Pensar Agro (Think Agriculture Institute).

**MAPA** – Brazil's Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock.

**Matopiba** – a region in Brazil which has been targeted for soy expansion.

**PamAgro** – Program for Access to Markets for Brazilian Agribusiness – a campaign set up by APEX Brasil.

**Poison package** – legislation (PL 6299/2002) put forward in Brazil to change the regulation of pesticides. It has been passed by Congress and is waiting for approval by the Senate.

**SINDIVEG** – National Union of the Industry of Products for Plant Defense (Sindicato Nacional da Indústria de Produtos para Defesa Vegetal) – One of the biggest pesticide lobby group in Brazil.

# Introduction

The European Union (EU) and the Mercosur countries (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay) are seeking to ratify a new trade deal which will see an increase in exports of agricultural crops to Europe, and an increase in imports of agrochemicals to Mercosur – particularly Brazil, which is world's leading exporter of soy. While the deal will bring opportunities for agrochemical companies operating in the EU, including agrochemical companies Bayer and BASF, it also risks exacerbating the devastating damage being done to nature and local communities, including Indigenous peoples, whose way of live and land rights under attack by the Brazilian agribusiness.<sup>2</sup>

The trade relationship between Europe and Latin America cannot be properly understood without understanding its colonial origins. Since the late 15th century, Europeans have been extracting raw material from the region, exporting natural resources and monoculture crops to Europe.<sup>3</sup> This pattern can still be seen in Europe's trade relations with Mercosur countries today. Around 84% of EU exports to Mercosur are services and high value industrial products, whereas about three-quarters of Mercosur exports to the EU are agricultural and mineral resources.<sup>4</sup> The trade liberalisation envisaged by the EU-Mercosur trade deal will reinforce this neo-colonial relationship, increasing exports of raw materials to Europe, while also continuing the damage to nature and local communities, who already bear the toxic burden from the spread of intensive monoculture agriculture on their lands.

This deal comes as the signs of dramatic global biodiversity loss related to pesticide use become more and more evident.<sup>5,6</sup> If the EU-Mercosur trade agreement is ratified,

tariffs on agrochemicals will be reduced by up to 90%, leading to a likely increase in the export of dangerous pesticides from the EU to Mercosur countries<sup>7</sup>, including an increase in exports of pesticides that have been banned in the EU due to the risk they pose to human health and the environment.<sup>8,9</sup>

The deal is also expected to boost exports of crops and crop-based products, including soy, sugarcane, and sugarcane-derived ethanol, that depend heavily on pesticides, and to increase exports of meat products such as poultry which depend on soy-based animal feed, driving even more pesticide use. These agricultural products are also linked to deforestation and biodiversity destruction, as well as the violation of Indigenous rights.

Brazil and Argentina are already among the world's biggest users of pesticides<sup>10</sup>, primarily due the cultivation of millions of hectares of pesticide resistant soybeans and maize. As the cultivation of pesticide intensive crops has increased, so too has the use of pesticides.<sup>11</sup>

Brazil's vast soybean plantations, which cover an area the size of Germany<sup>12</sup>, have made it the world's biggest market for pesticides and for highly hazardous pesticides (HHP), classified as extremely damaging to human health or the environment.<sup>13</sup> Soybean farming is the biggest user of agrochemicals in Brazil, accounting for 50% of sales. Almost two-thirds of Brazilian spending on highly hazardous pesticide was for use on soy, grown to supply global demand for animal feed, including from Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Europe's pesticide corporations are major suppliers of these highly hazardous pesticides. Many European based companies export banned pesticides from Europe,

including German giants Bayer and BASF, French company Borie Industries, Sipcam Oxon from Italy and the Belgium based Arysta Lifescience.<sup>15,16</sup> Germany, the UK, France, Belgium and Spain are the biggest exporters of pesticides to Mercosur countries.<sup>17</sup> The European chemical industry body, CEFIC, which includes German multinationals BASF and Bayer as members, has welcomed the EU-Mercosur trade deal stating that reduced tariffs for chemicals will allow steady growth in chemical exports to Mercosur countries.<sup>18</sup>

Brazil is also one of the main export destination for agrochemicals banned in the EU with European pesticide companies benefiting from weaker pesticide regulations and generous tax exemptions on pesticides.<sup>19,20</sup>

While European pesticide companies are capitalizing on weaker pesticide laws, they are also working with Brazilian agribusiness to shape how these laws are drafted. This agribusiness agenda is reflected in the Brazilian Congress by the powerful agribusiness bloc, the *bancada ruralista*, which is notorious for pushing to weaken environmental and pesticide legislation and to dismantle governmental bodies responsible for environmental protection.

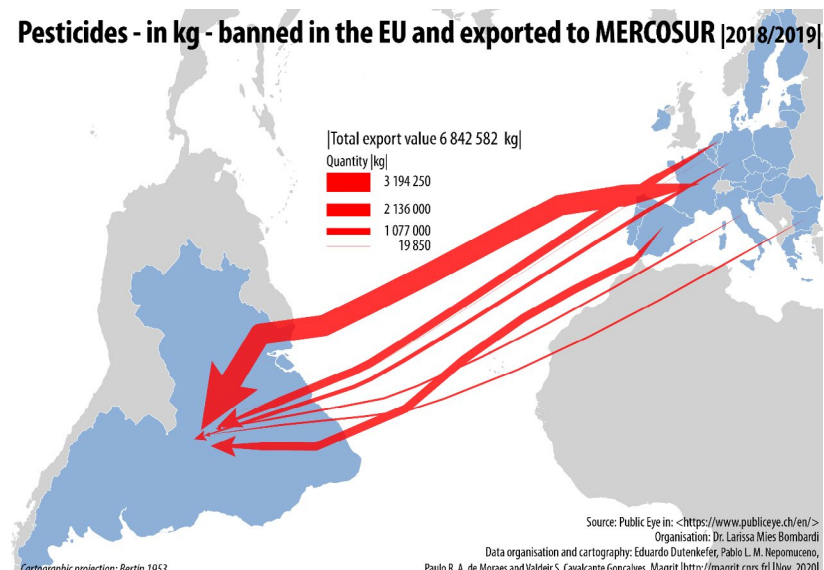
EU companies are supporting this bloc, and in turn facilitating their agenda which seeks to legitimise large-scale land grabbing and undermine the rights of Indigenous peoples and rural communities.

Pesticide companies are also engaged in sophisticated multi-million dollar lobbying campaigns, seeking to influence public opinion through the media, as well as directly lobbying politicians. And as the pesticide industry has gained substantial lobby power, civil society bodies responsible for monitoring environmental and human rights violations have been severely under attack.<sup>21</sup>

**This report reveals the influential alliance between the European agrochemical corporations and the Brazilian agribusiness lobby**, highlighting their key lobby tactics to push for increased market access for more dangerous pesticides. It shows how the EU-Mercosur deal will benefit the European chemical companies, including Bayer and BASF, with dire consequences for nature, local communities and Indigenous people.

In 2019 alone, the European Union exported more than 6.5 million kilos of pesticides banned or never authorised in its territory to the countries that make up Mercosur.<sup>22</sup>

**Pesticides - in kg - banned in the EU and exported to MERCOSUR |2018/2019|**



# 1. Brazil's pesticide problem: Human rights abuse and damage to ecosystems

There has been a sharp increase in the number of pesticides authorised in Brazil in recent years, first under President Michel Temer and now under Jair Bolsonaro.<sup>23</sup>

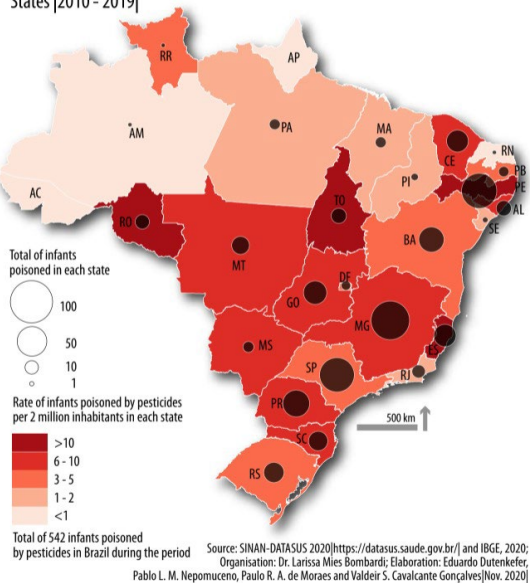
The use of these pesticides has caused significant harm to species and the wider environment in Brazil.<sup>24</sup> Pesticide run-off has led to groundwater contamination<sup>25</sup>, while spraying cause widespread pollution, with harmful effects on mammals, birds and insects.<sup>26,27</sup>

Fipronil, an insecticide produced by BASF and banned from use in the EU, was linked to the mass deaths of more than 500 million bees in 2019<sup>28</sup>, with reports linking use on soy plantations in the Brazilian Amazon to devastated beehives.<sup>29</sup>

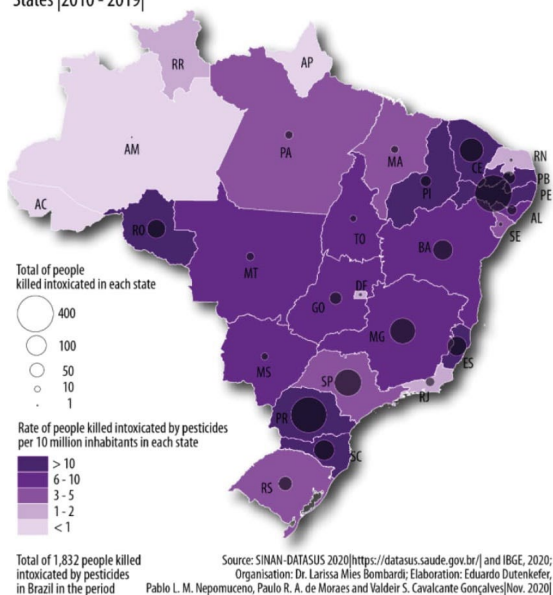
Agrochemicals linked to soy production have been identified in waterways in the Pantanal, a highly biodiverse and unique tropical wetland, as well as in the Amazon and the Cerrado, a unique savannah grassland ecosystem.<sup>30</sup>

**UN institutions have warned that the level of pesticide use in Brazil is having serious impacts on human rights<sup>31</sup>, including that “Victims rightly allege deaths, health problems, as well as cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment resulting from pesticide exposure”.<sup>32</sup>** During his visit to Brazil in 2019, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on toxic and human rights raised concerns about the situation of Indigenous peoples whose human rights are violated and abused by agricultural expansion and the deliberate spraying of toxic pesticides over their lands and homes, with reports of pesticides being used as “chemical weapons” and children exposed at home, school and work.<sup>33</sup>

**BRAZIL - INFANTS POISONED BY PESTICIDES [0-12 months]**  
States [2010 - 2019]



**BRAZIL - PEOPLE KILLED INTOXICATED BY PESTICIDES**  
States [2010 - 2019]





While many rural communities have reported the contamination of plants and water sources as well as serious health effects caused by aerial spraying of pesticides, many also fear reprisals from wealthy and politically powerful large landowners.<sup>34</sup>

The impacts of chronic exposure to highly hazardous pesticides are of particular concern with studies showing increased risks of cancer, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, hormone disruption, developmental disorders and sterility.<sup>35</sup>

Researchers and academics exposing health impacts have come under attack for their work on agrochemicals<sup>36,37</sup>, including harassment, career-threats and personal attacks.<sup>38</sup> Institutions that have identified links to health problems have seen government funding cut.<sup>39</sup>

Many of the pesticides involved have been banned in the EU, and the practice of exporting EU-banned pesticides was called out as a human rights abuse by 36 United Nations rapporteurs and human rights officials in July 2020.<sup>40</sup> Residues from these pesticides are found in imported crops, and pesticide companies have lobbied aggressively for residues of certain hazardous pesticides to be permitted in imports.<sup>41</sup> **CropLife International, the powerful lobby association of agrochemical companies including BASF and Bayer, raised concerns about proposals to end the export of banned pesticides from the EU**, saying that governments and farmers rely on imported pesticides to protect their agricultural economies.<sup>42,43</sup> The European Chemical Industry Council sought to delay measures by calling for "detailed and rigorous impact assessments" before any action was taken.<sup>44</sup>

## 2. Brazil's powerful bancada ruralista and their destructive agenda

The bancada ruralista – the agribusiness bloc – is a conservative political bloc in the Brazilian Congress representing various political parties who act on behalf of the agribusiness interests.

They are the most powerful political force in Congress, represented by 241 politicians in the 513-strong Brazilian parliament (46%), and by 39 members in the Senate<sup>45</sup> making up almost half of senators. **Many of these politicians are also involved in agribusiness or are large landowners, particularly in the Amazon region and “Matopiba”<sup>46</sup>, a region that has seen rapid soybean expansion.**

The bancada ruralista is a close ally of the Bolsonaro government and endorsed his candidacy in 2018.<sup>47</sup> In his first year in office Bolsonaro appointed four members from the bloc as ministers, telling the group: “This government is yours,” symbolically handing control of Brazil over to agribusiness.<sup>48</sup>

The bancada ruralista has the support of the Minister of Agriculture, Tereza Cristina, who was the former president of the group, and who has deep ties with agribusiness.<sup>49</sup> Before becoming agriculture minister, Cristina presided over a parliamentary commission that approved a controversial bill to lift restrictions on pesticides, known as the “poison package” (PL 6299/2002).<sup>50</sup>

**The poison package would permit the use of more dangerous agrochemicals, many of which are banned in the EU. If approved, the bill is likely to lead to a rise in the number of registrations, authorizations, and use of pesticides, without proper assessment of their socio-environmental consequences.**

The bill makes the use of pesticides in the country even more flexible and invalidates the Principle of Precaution established by the Agrotoxins Law of 1989 which prohibits any agrochemicals with agents that can cause developmental problems, cancer or mutations. The new bill, with its “risk-based assessment” of substances, would theoretically allow carcinogens to enter the market if the risk isn’t considered “unacceptable”.<sup>51</sup>

The bill was originally introduced by former Minister of Agriculture Blairo Maggi<sup>52</sup>, who is known as Brazil’s ‘soya king’ as he owns the Amaggi group, the world’s biggest soybean producer. It will give more power to the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAPA)<sup>53</sup> which will have sole responsibility for approving new products. Currently, pesticides must be approved by the National health protection agency (Anvisa), the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA), and the Ministry of Agriculture. ANVISA and IBAMA will be removed from decision making and a purely advisory role in the new process.

It also establishes a deadline of no more than two years for the government to respond to a request from a pesticide company to approve a substance. If this deadline is not met, the substance is automatically approved and registered as permitted for use.<sup>54</sup>

The bancada ruralista support and promote the pesticide bill, which was passed by Congress in February 2022 and is now waiting for approval in the Senate.<sup>55</sup> **It had been opposed by many organisations, including the United Nations who called it “a serious threat to a number of Human Rights”.<sup>56</sup>**

## Box 1: Promoting laws that damage land and communities

The bancada ruralista has also been successful in its push for drastic cuts to Brazil's environmental budget<sup>57</sup>, with resources destined to FUNAI (Brazil's indigenous protection agency), IBAMA and the Environment Ministry cut by over 40 percent over the past years.<sup>58</sup>

They are also behind bills that aim to criminalise civil society and social movements. **There are about 20 bills before the National Congress, in particular Bill 1595/19, Bill 272/16 and Bill 732/2022, that, if adopted, would effectively criminalize social movements' activities under the guise of national security and the fight against terrorism.**<sup>59</sup>

Several other bills are also being pushed through to change environmental protection laws and redefine Indigenous rights.

- Bill 3.729/2004, also known as the "The General Law on Licensing", will facilitate the issuing of environmental licenses for exploration activities. The text envisages dispensation of licensing for the majority of agricultural activities and infrastructure ventures. If approved, agricultural producers in the areas of crop growing or cattle rearing and activities like forestry, Eucalyptus plantations for example, would not require authorization.<sup>60</sup> The bill was already approved in the Parliament and yet to receive the Senate's final approval. If approved it would directly impact on people who are known to be vulnerable, particularly Indigenous people and Quilombolas (Afro-Brazilians descending from escaped slaves). The exclusion from the right to information is one of the chief concerns.
- The "time frame" of Indigenous lands Bill PL 490/2007 – threatens the legal protection for Indigenous territories. The bill would prevent or hinder many Indigenous peoples from claiming their right to traditional lands, violating their rights under international law. They will also lose their right to be consulted on the use of their land by non-Indigenous peoples. The government could allow unrestricted access to natural resources, including extractive activities such as mining and commercial agriculture. The parliamentarians of the bancada ruralista argue that Indigenous people should only have rights to the land if it was in their possession on October 5, 1988, the date the Federal Constitution was enacted, ignoring the historical violations that these peoples have suffered since colonisation.
- PL 191/2020 would allow mining activity and hydroelectric generation inside Indigenous territories. This would have a major impact on deforestation, and according scientists could lead to \$5 billion in annual losses to ecosystem services.<sup>61</sup>
- PLS 510/2021 (PL 2633/2020): Regulation of Land Grabbing bill relaxes the land-title registration rules for federal public lands and seek to amend the Property Regularization Law to offer a sort of amnesty for land grabbers and invaders who irregularly occupied and exploited Federal lands even where they are used by indigenous, quilombola, and traditional communities. In practice, it will allow landgrabbers to claim ownership status for illegally occupied areas. It will also exempt them from monitoring compliance with environmental laws by increasing the area that can be registered without an inspection by INCRA (National Land Reform Agency), where legal reserves, permanent preservation areas, use of pastures and land exploration are checked. The bill is being debated simultaneously by the Environment Committee and the Agriculture Committee of the Senate.

## Box 2: Corruption, lobbying and politics

Commercial interests and politics often appear to overlap in Brazil. The bancada ruralista and the Brazilian agribusiness lobby have been tainted by numerous allegations of corruption, with a revolving door operating between agribusiness companies and political affairs.

The current president of the bancada ruralista, Sérgio Souza, was accused of receiving bribes as part of a pension fund fraud scheme.<sup>62</sup> and received donations for his 2014 campaign from companies cited for environmental crimes by IBAMA.<sup>63</sup> He was also investigated by the federal police regarding the possible receipt of a bribe in 2019.<sup>64</sup>

Almost half of the 513 politicians elected to the parliament in 2014 receiving around 60 million Brazilian reais (approximately 10 million euros) in total in official donations from companies or individuals that have been fined for environmental crimes (such as illegal deforestation or burning by IBAMA.<sup>65</sup> This includes the current Minister of Agriculture, Tereza Cristina.<sup>66,67</sup>

The reach of the agribusiness lobby extends from helping to elect members of congress to determining the appointment of ministers (and ambitions to elect the President).<sup>68</sup>

### EU Agribusiness lobbying in Brazil: a checklist

- ✓ Weaken environmental regulations
- ✓ Prevent transparency
- ✓ Criminalise civil society
- ✓ Gut the public budget for the environment
- ✓ Greenwash Brazilian agribusiness companies

### 3. European pesticide giants and the Brazilian agribusiness lobby

In 2017, a UN report highlighted that oligopoly of the pesticide industry has enormous power and that lobbying efforts by corporations such as Bayer, Monsanto (now part of Bayer) and Syngenta to influence governments have obstructed reform and paralysed attempts to regulate pesticides.<sup>69</sup>

More recently the UN body on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services – IPBES – said that regulatory mechanisms to address the risks of co-option and lobbying were needed to be able to protect biodiversity, given that “commercial interests may work to maintain high levels of demand, monopolies and continued use of pesticides and chemical inputs”.<sup>70</sup>

The commercial interests of the agribusiness sector are vocal in Brazil, with European-based pesticide companies actively involved in the agribusiness lobby in Brazil.<sup>71</sup> **Multibillion dollar pesticide companies with headquarters in Europe, including BASF and Bayer<sup>72</sup>, finance influential Brazilian agribusiness associations that serve as a lobbying platforms for the interests of the pesticide industry and other agricultural sectors such as grain, soy and meat.**<sup>73,74</sup>

**Bayer, BASF and Syngenta are members of pesticide lobby group SINDIVEG (Sindicato Nacional da Indústria de Produtos para Defesa Vegetal)<sup>75</sup>, for example, which has aggressively lobbied for the use of dangerous pesticides such as glyphosate<sup>76</sup> and paraquat.<sup>77</sup>** While the body’s name – the Brazilian National Association of Plant Protection Products – suggests it works to protect nature, it promotes toxic, polluting pesticides. The pesticide companies also support ABAG – Brazilian Agribusiness Association and Croplife Brazil (formerly ANDEF).<sup>78</sup> All three agribusiness associations have lobbied in support of the Poison bill.<sup>79,80,81</sup>

These companies and their associations lobby by directly targeting the executive and legislative branches of government, including by financing election campaigns for representatives of the bancada ruralista.<sup>82,83</sup> They also lobby through campaigns designed to shape the policy narrative and influence the population at large.

## 3.1 European companies fund agribusiness “think tank”

The pesticides industry also uses think tanks to promote a policy narrative in favour of relaxing pesticide regulations. Their apparent impartiality makes them a useful vehicle for corporate lobbying. In Brazil, the *Instituto Pensar Agro* (Think Agribusiness) provides such a vehicle for the agribusiness lobby, financed at least in part by European pesticide companies.

**Major agribusiness associations which represent Bayer, BASF and Syngenta, contributed around 2 million euros to support the lobby activities of the “Instituto Pensar Agro”.**<sup>84</sup>

Its aim is to influence public opinion<sup>85</sup> and promote policies that serve agribusiness interests, acting as the right hand of the *bancada ruralista*. They have a shared agenda<sup>86</sup>, with Instituto Pensar Agro financing the activities of the *bancada ruralista* and working with them behind the scenes to put forward proposals, scrutinise draft legislation and provide technical support.<sup>87,88</sup> Top of their priority list is removing constraints on the agrifood industry’s expansion, especially in the Amazon<sup>89</sup> and pushing through the Poison package bill.<sup>90,91</sup> **The Instituto Pensar Agro also has a close interest in the EU-Mercosur trade deal and meets with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to define a shared “Strategy for the conduction of environmental issues in the European Union”.**<sup>92</sup>

The executives of Instituto Pensar Agro have met with members of the Bolsonaro government more than 200 times (between 2019-2021) – an average of five meetings per month.<sup>93</sup> The majority of these meetings (148) were with members of the Ministry of Agriculture, but they have also met with President Jair Bolsonaro<sup>94</sup> and have met Vice President Hamilton Mourão three times.<sup>95,96,97</sup>

A revolving door seems to exist between the Instituto Pensar Agro and the *bancada ruralista* with members from the *bancada ruralista* moving to the Instituto Pensar Agro and vice versa. The former president of Instituto Pensar Agro, João Henrique Hummel, worked as an official for the Ministry of agriculture and Brazil’s federal authority for the biosafety of “genetically modified organisms.”<sup>98</sup> The current president of the Instituto Pensar Agro, Nilson Leitão is a former member of parliament and previous head of the *bancada ruralista*. Other staff at the Instituto Pensar Agro have come from agribusiness associations which represent European pesticide companies, including one official previously employed by Bayer.<sup>99</sup>

The parliamentarians of the *bancada ruralista* meet every week at the headquarters of Instituto Pensar Agro in a villa in a classy district of Brasília.<sup>100</sup> They discuss how, when, and on what they should vote<sup>101</sup>, influencing Congress and even the presidential palace. Their influence can be seen in the legislative packages that threaten the environment and human rights, including the proposed changes to the pesticides regulations in the poison package.<sup>102,103,104</sup>

## 3.2 Public campaigns paint the Brazilian agribusiness green

Another way to bolster public support for the agribusiness agenda is through public campaigns. The *Agrosaber* (Agricultural knowledge) platform was set up by a number of agribusiness associations and claims to combat fake news around agricultural production and pesticide use<sup>105</sup>, promoting the pesticide legislative package. But in reality the platform disseminates information based on false or biased studies<sup>106,107</sup> downplaying the impact of soy and beef production on deforestation, for example<sup>108</sup> (some 20% of the soy and 17% of the beef exported to the EU is likely to have come from illegally deforested area).<sup>109,110</sup> By manipulating the facts, the platform seeks to create a positive and green image for agribusiness, and promote the agenda of the *bancada ruralista*.<sup>111</sup>

Agribusiness lobby groups are also working with the *bancada ruralista*<sup>112,113</sup> to clean up the image of Brazilian agriculture for European audiences to pave the way for ratification of the EU-Mercosur trade deal. Operating through the Instituto Pensar Agro they support the work of the Brazilian Trade and Investment Promotion Agency, APEX Brasil (Agência Brasileira de Promoção de Exportações e Investimentos), which is part of Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Relations.

The Brussels-based think tank, the European Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE) is also involved, and runs a EU-Mercosur project that is funded by Bayer.<sup>114</sup>

APEX recently launched the PamAgro (Program for Access to the Markets for Brazilian Agribusiness) campaign to promote Brazilian agriculture in Europe<sup>115</sup> to **'improve the image of Brazil outside the country, particularly how sustainable their business practices are to support and enable the approval of the Europe-Mercosur treaty'**

Agribusiness sectors that are key supporters of the EU-Mercosur trade deal are supporting the programme.<sup>116,117</sup>

The TV launch involved the Instituto Pensar Agro and ECIPE<sup>118</sup>, represented by Emily Rees, the coordinator of ECIPE's Bayer-funded EU-Mercosur project<sup>119</sup> who has also worked for APEX as head of EU affairs.<sup>120</sup> At the launch, Rees advised Brazilian agribusiness to downplay their size if they wanted to appeal to the European market. "Europeans value small production and local production," she said. And she advised that Brazilian agribusiness needed to be involved in European political discussions on a daily basis, right from the start. If you don't participate you don't advance your agenda or "advertise" yourself to policy makers and public institutions, she said.<sup>121</sup>

**The Agrosaber platform and Pamagro are supported by agribusiness associations financed by Bayer and BASF such as pesticide lobby group SINDIVEG and Croplife Brasil<sup>122</sup>, both key supporters of the EU-Mercosur trade deal.**<sup>123</sup> Croplife Brasil was founded by Bayer, Syngenta, BASF and other chemical companies<sup>124</sup> to give the sector a common voice, to provide a platform to greenwash their damaging business activities and a way to combat fake news.<sup>125</sup>

CropLife Brasil's chief executive, Christian Lohbauer, who previously worked for Bayer, told Brazil's largest newspaper, *Estadão*: "We want to show Greta [Thunberg] that we are not evil."<sup>126</sup> He also claimed that the large number of pesticides approved for use under the Bolsonaro government was to correct previous failings, which he said "has hindered the arrival of new technologies in Brazil". At Cop26, he argued that Brazilian soy production is not the result of deforestation.<sup>127</sup>

# 4. EU pesticide companies' lobby strategy bears fruit in Brazil

The agribusiness lobby in Brazil was given fresh momentum with the election of President Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, with agribusiness representatives and supporters elected to the Senate and the parliament. In Bolsonaro's first year, his government approved a record number of pesticides. The Minister of the Environment at the time, Ricardo Salles (known as the anti-environment minister), travelled to Europe where he had meetings scheduled with Bayer and BASF.<sup>128</sup>

The current Minister of Agriculture, Tereza Cristina, who has close ties to agribusiness,<sup>129, 130</sup> has led the accelerated approval process for approving new pesticides.<sup>131</sup> A former president of the bancada ruralista, Cristina is a welcome ally for the pesticide industry and regularly meets with representatives, including executives from Bayer.<sup>132, 133</sup> She previously has said that "pesticides are like medicine".<sup>134</sup> It is perhaps therefore not surprising that there has been an escalation in the number of new pesticides approved under the new government, with **a record of 500 new commercial products approved each year.**<sup>135</sup>

These have included BASF and Bayer products, providing a boost to their sales under the Bolsonaro government.

**Bayer's chief executive, Werner Baumann, told journalists that the company has not only had success with the current government regarding the expansion of soy and corn crops, but that it also expects to see the approval of eight new chemical substances a year.**<sup>136</sup> Baumann is also Bayer's Chief Sustainability Officer<sup>137</sup> and he led the \$63 billion take-over of pesticide giant Monsanto.<sup>138</sup>

**BASF has seen a significant increase in approvals of its commercial products since Bolsonaro's election, with 60% of its new products approved since 2016.** There was a 'plan of action' to strengthen sales, profits, and cashflow.<sup>139</sup> Together, Bayer and BASF have seen 93 new pesticides approved over the last six years.<sup>140</sup> Four of Bayer's 15 authorised new commercial pesticides contain substances that are prohibited from use in the EU: Thiodicarb, Indaziflam, Thiacloprid and Beta-cyfluthrin. Thiodicarb<sup>141</sup> is an insecticide which is neurotoxic and causes irritation to the respiratory system; Indaziflam<sup>142</sup> is a herbicide which is neurotoxic; Thiacloprid<sup>143</sup> is an insecticide that is associated with reproductive effects

## Dangerous pesticides: banned at home, booming in Brazil

Four of Bayer's 15 authorised new commercial pesticides contain substances that are banned in the EU due to their impacts on health.



Thiodicarb



- neurotoxic insecticide, harms respiratory system

Indaziflam



- neurotoxic herbicide

Thiacloprid



- insecticide, causes hormonal disruption

Beta-cyfluthrin



- neurotoxic insecticide, causes hormonal disruption



and hormonal disorders; and the insecticide Beta-cyfluthrin<sup>144</sup> is known to be neurotoxic and is associated with reproductive problems.

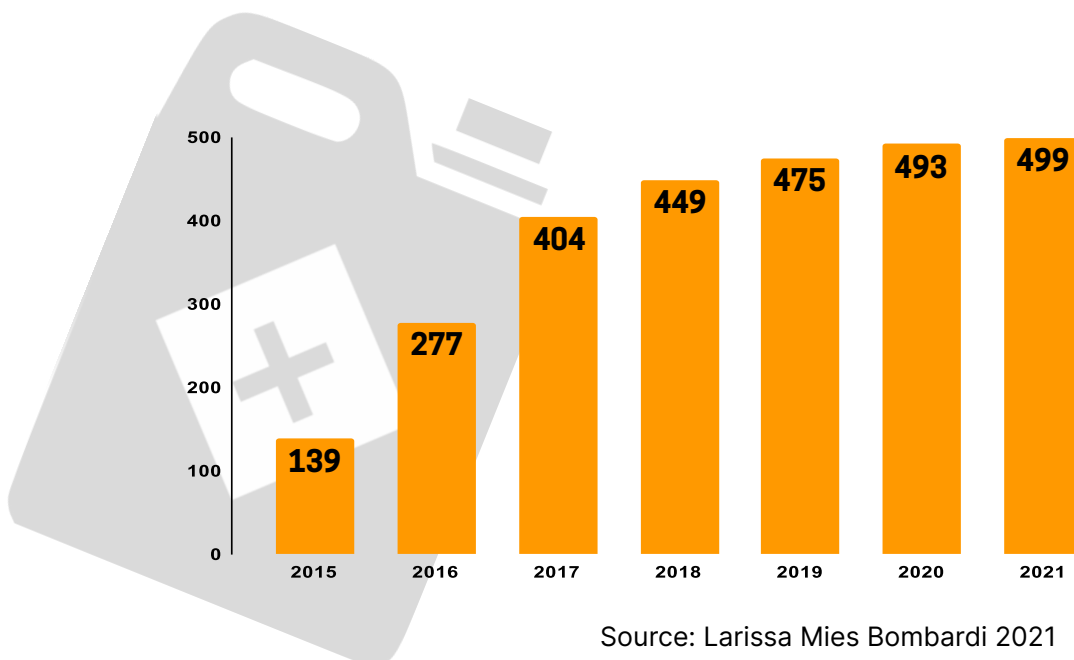
**BASF has gained approval for 30 new pesticides between 2019 and 2021, 15 of which contain substances prohibited from use in the European Union.** These include Fipronil which is neurotoxic and is associated with bee deaths<sup>145</sup>; Dinotefuran which also impacts bees<sup>146</sup>; Imazethapyr which causes respiratory problems in humans and is toxic for aquatic plants<sup>147</sup>; and Chlorfenapyr<sup>148</sup> which is highly toxic to birds and bees.<sup>149</sup>

Pesticide companies also enjoy generous tax exemptions on pesticides. The amount that the Brazilian government fails to collect because of tax exemptions on pesticides was nearly four times as much as the Ministry of the Environment's total budget in 2020.<sup>150</sup>

**Pesticide companies have been able to hide these benefits behind a veil of “commercial confidentiality”**, with information about a large number of the pesticides that are being sold not made available. In 2018, IBAMA only disclosed data for 28% of the agrochemicals in use.<sup>151</sup> **Brazilian consumers are kept in the dark as to which substances end up on their plate.**

The agribusiness lobbying strategies are clearly paying off for Bayer and BASF, who have benefited directly from the weakening of laws and protections and the permissiveness of the current federal administration to sell products in Brazil that are banned for use in their home territory. In fact, pesticide use has grown significantly in Brazil, multiplying **sixfold** over the last 20 years. At the same time a person dies from pesticide poisoning in Brazil every two days, and around 20% of these victims are children and adolescents between the ages of 0 and 19 years.<sup>152</sup>

## Annual approval of new pesticides in Brazil (commercial products)



Source: Larissa Mies Bombardi 2021

**As the pesticide industry has gained substantial lobby power, the monitoring of environmental and human rights violations by civil society have been under severe attack.** Hundreds of committees and councils that were part of the structure of the Ministry of the Environment were terminated or reduced to powerless entities.<sup>153</sup> For instance, Conama – the National Environment Council – was targeted via a presidential decree in 2019, dismantling one of the most important technical bodies for Brazilian environmental policy.<sup>154</sup> As such, environmental organisations, Indigenous peoples, traditional populations, the scientific community and rural workers effectively lost space for representation and participation.

**Recently the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of association announced the erosion of Brazil's democracy and urged safe spaces for civil society.** He particularly expressed concerns about restrictions to full and active social and political participation of Brazil's civil society, and the appalling levels of violence directed against human rights defenders, indigenous peoples and traditional communities in particular of African-descent.<sup>155</sup>

# Conclusion

Brazilian agribusiness has found common cause with European pesticide corporations like Bayer and BASF in promoting the EU-Mercosur trade agenda as they seek to expand markets for agricultural exports that rely on agrichemical inputs. **Bayer and BASF have worked hand-in-hand with politicians from Brazil's parliamentarian agribusiness caucus – the bancada ruralista – to push for a light touch regulatory regime for pesticides and for lax environmental standards. In doing so, they have supported a legislative agenda that seeks to undermine Indigenous rights, remove environmental safeguards, and legitimise deforestation.**

European agrochemical corporations who are exporting banned toxic pesticides to Mercosur countries, expect to profit from the deal, exploiting weaker environmental regulations and enjoying generous tax exemptions. At the same time, they hide details of the products being sold behind commercial confidentiality. **The increase in pesticide use will have a toxic legacy, damaging biodiversity and exacerbating the already serious impacts on local communities.**

The trade promoted by the EU-Mercosur deal is fundamentally at odds with the EU's green goals and the EU's recently announced Farm-to-Fork Strategy, which aims to dramatically reduce pesticide use and ban of any residue on food of pesticides not registered for use in the EU.

The science is clear. As the recent IPPC report highlighted, there is an urgent need to move away from industrial agriculture and shift to an agroecological framework.<sup>156,157</sup>

Brazilian movements for food sovereignty and agroecology are already leading the way for more sustainable agricultural practices. The Agroecology Alliance (ANA) – “Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia<sup>158</sup>, and the MST (Movimento sem Terra) cooperative – Landless Rural Workers movement – show that an alternative model of flourishing rural life is possible<sup>159</sup>, providing thriving livelihoods for farmers, producing high quality and low cost food for the region, and restoring the soil. Yet these practices are under threat from the trade deal undermining the next-generation of food and people's livelihoods, environmental and health policy in both the EU and Mercosur.

This follows the historic colonial legacy of resource extraction from the Mercosur region, with around three-quarters of Mercosur exports to the EU today based on agricultural and mineral resources. In contrast 84% of EU exports to Mercosur countries are services and high value industrial products.

# Demands

**The EU already bears a large share of (historical) responsibility for the environmental degradation, environmentally linked conflicts and human rights violations in the Mercosur countries because of its colonial history<sup>160</sup>, especially in its role in promoting the Green revolution in Latin America, which turned agriculture into agri-business and heavy dependence on seed, fertilizers and pesticides – resulting in the loss of local knowledge and traditional agroecological practices.**

**As such, the EU has a major role to play in supporting the region in the transition from intensive agriculture to more sustainable, agroecological practices.**

As the economically stronger and wealthier trading partner, the EU must recognise its responsibilities and act to stop the damaging ratification of the EU-Mercosur deal – and it must intervene to prevent European-based pesticide corporations from exploiting weaker regulatory controls overseas. It should also introduce a ban on imports of food products with residues of chemicals that are forbidden in the EU itself and it should not allow that EU chemical industry exports products forbidden in the EU due to their harmful impacts to other parts of the world.

**Business as usual is not an option** when current industrialised and globalised food systems drive climate breakdown, social injustice and health risks.

**We must move towards a more sustainable way of producing and consuming food**, producing safe and healthy food, respecting human rights and our planet's ecological limits.

**Trade policy must support shorter supply chains, for resilient and decentralised food systems**, following the principles of agroecology. Policies must put small-scale farmers at the center, respecting those who feed us.

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# Acknowledgments



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