

Marina Silva

Marina Silva was born on the 8th of February 1958, in the *colocação* Breu Velho in the *seringal*¹ Bagaço, seventy kilometres from Rio Branco, the capital of the Brazilian state of Acre. Her family suffered all the hardships of the prevailing debt bondage system (*aviamento*), under which the rubber tappers were obliged to buy their food and supplies from the estate store, thereby remaining permanently in debt and with no cash income, in a state of semi-slavery. To help their father, Marina and her sisters collected latex, planted staple food crops, hunted and fished. These were not normal women's duties in the rubber estates.

In 1974, at the age of sixteen, Marina contracted hepatitis and travelled to Rio Branco in search of medical treatment and her twin dreams of studying and becoming a nun. At this time she did not know how to read or write, and had just enough basic numeracy to know how to avoid being cheated when delivering the rubber collected. In Rio Branco she worked as a family maid and enrolled in a government literacy course. She was so anxious to learn that within a month she was assessed as literate. She then moved into the regular public education system and after two months was allowed to take the tests for the conclusion of the first four grades of the primary school course. She then entered the convent and completed primary and secondary school courses. By the time she was twenty she was ready to take the entrance exams for the undergraduate course in History at the Federal University of Acre.

Having got to know Liberation Theology and the ideas of Chico Mendes, Marina became involved in social movements and the struggles of the rubber tappers' movement, abandoning her aim of becoming a nun. The beginnings of a movement of peaceful resistance to the process of clearing the forests in Acre and in defence of the way of life of

¹ A *seringal* is a rubber estate, an area in the forest where native rubber trees are tapped for their latex. A *colocação* is the area assigned by the estate owner (*seringalista*) to an individual rubber tapper (*seringueiro*) and his family comprising a number of rubber trails (*estradas de seringa*) connecting the rubber trees (*seringueiras*) that the *seringueiro* taps for their latex.

their traditional indigenous and rubber tapper inhabitants that sprung up with the arrival of the agricultural frontier in the 1970s and 1980s provided the learning environment for the emerging political leadership of the young Marina Silva.

Her political activities and life path were built around the concrete ideals of building networks, negotiation, peaceful mobilization, awareness raising and opinion forming, creative thinking, and the peaceful defence of her positions that she had learned during her life in the forest and her collaboration with Chico Mendes, murdered in 1988.

Prior to the murder of Chico Mendes, other leaders of the movement such as Wilson Pinheiro, Ivair Higino, Elias, Calado, had also been killed. However, despite the violence to which it was exposed, the rubber tappers' movement never responded in kind. Nevertheless the changes this movement brought about in Acre were substantial.

This philosophy of passive resistance, the search for alliances, and an emphasis on legal and institutional progress characterizes the trajectory of Marina Silva. Her arrival on the national and international political scene has been marked by innovative approaches and actions in respect of environmental issues and characterized by a strong ethical dimension. In the course of her journey, Marina Silva has sought to introduce people to the values of a new framework for civilization under which the main theoretical and practical underpinning is sustainability in all its dimensions – social, cultural, ecological, economic, political and ethical.

In each of the struggles for upholding rights in which she has been involved these aspects have always been present. Such was the case in the fight for the creation of extractive reserves, a novel form of land reform characterized by the collective use of natural resources without the institution of private title, ensuring both the rights to continuity of the way of life of traditional communities in the Amazon region and the conservation of its forests.

She has always used her mandate as a Federal Senator to defend the rights of the most vulnerable sectors of the population, such as indigenous peoples and traditional forest-dependent communities. She has also fought for improved public policies in support of social inclusion, such as public health, education and the rights of minorities. Examples include her presidency of the Commission to Combat Hunger and her proposals to the former federal administration of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso that resulted in the first official price support for natural rubber at a moment when the market price had fallen below the cost of production and in the first line of credit available for traditional extractive activities.

Another important act as Senator was to prepare in 1995 the first draft law to regulate access to genetic resources and protect the knowledge of traditional populations concerning their use. The draft was the result of an extensive consultation process involving public hearings across the country. The issues of access to genetic resources, the sharing of benefits arising and protection of the associated knowledge of traditional populations is currently at the heart of the negotiations in the United Nations, including the Convention on Biological Diversity.

At the start of her second Senate mandate, Marina Silva was invited by President Lula to become Minister of the Environment. Her name was the first name of his ministerial team to be announced by the President during a visit to Washington DC.

From the outset Marina was faced with two enormous challenges: the accelerating rate of Amazon deforestation, and the habitual political isolation and lack of strength of the environment ministry. In defining her main strategies and guidelines, she saw there was a overwhelming need to promote institutional cohesion that would align public policy for the environment with their integration across government in such a way as to internalize environmental policies throughout all sectoral public policies.

The main strategic aim of Marina as regards public participation was to open a dialogue with all stakeholders for each issue and to build a culture of transparent negotiation built on

ethical and not ideological premises. Substantial efforts were also made to encourage and support changes in production patterns so as to include social and environmental sustainability criteria.

The first big test was the Plan to Combat Amazon Deforestation, which resulted in a major revolution in the way public policy for the region was developed and implemented. Firstly, because it did away with the idea that deforestation was the concern of the environment ministry alone and made all ministries, in particular those responsible for economic development, co-responsible for the identification and implementation of policies to eliminate the direct and indirect incentives created by other portfolios and which fuelled deforestation.

In one of the tensest and most violent regions of the country as a result of the prevailing levels of land conflicts and disputes over the natural resources of the Amazon region, her administration was able to significantly increase the number of protected areas, establishing twenty four million hectares of conservation areas in locations suffering the greatest pressure from the expanding frontier in a break with previous practice that established such conservation areas in remote regions with low levels of conflicts over land.

The plan was founded on three pillars: combating illegal activities, land zoning and titling, and support to sustainable production activities. Over the period that Marina Silva headed the Ministry of the Environment, a million cubic metres of hardwoods was confiscated, more than seven hundred perpetrators of environmental crimes arrested, more than four billion reais² worth of fines were issued, more than fifteen hundred enterprises operating illegally were closed down and around thirty seven thousand properties illegally occupying public lands were notified as a result of improved monitoring and intelligence gathering activities grew substantially. A further high impact action was the change in the rules of the national financial system that prohibited access to public and private sources of finance by agricultural enterprises in contravention of environmental legislation in the Amazon.

² Roughly US\$ 2 billion

In three years, by means of exercising a clear option for inclusive and open institutional processes, the annual rate of Amazon deforestation fell to 11,500 square kilometres. This was the second lowest rate since records were begun in 1988 and represented a 57% reduction in the area deforested, thereby avoiding the emission of 1,4 billion tons of CO², contributing to global atmospheric greenhouse gas reduction efforts. Such avoided emissions represented around fourteen percent of the total emission reductions required by developed countries under the terms of the Kyoto Protocol.

Official efforts to reduce the rate of Amazon deforestation enabled Brazil to review the concerns it had expressed in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and to establish greenhouse gas emission reduction targets, given that emissions from deforestation and land use change represent around three quarters of its emissions, according to its most recent national communication to the UNFCCC. This important change to the Brazilian diplomatic position was announced during the Thirteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP-13) held in Bali in December 2007.

At this COP Brazil headed the G-20 group of developing countries which agreed to the establishment of voluntary targets which were measurable, communicable and verifiable. This new position was fundamental in putting pressure on those countries, most notably the United States, who had not ratified the Kyoto Protocol. The new position also qualified Brazil at the same meeting to launch the Amazon Fund, a pilot project to encourage the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions resulting from the conversion or degradation of its tropical forests.

In addition, Brazil technology for monitoring its forests, as well as policy instruments for tackling deforestation are being made available to other tropical forest countries worldwide, in particular Brazil's Amazon neighbours as well as African and Asian countries.

During her period at the Ministry of the Environment, Marina's way of working led to other innovations in public administration. At the most general level, the priority aim of promoting sustainable development provided a clear framework for the direction of

environmental policy; that is to say, the search for alternative ways to generate social and economic growth through the adoption of forms of production that conserve Brazil's socio-environmental assets so as to maintain the quality of life now and for future generations.

Extremely important results were achieved through enabling the real participation of stakeholders, especially through the creation of systems of access to strategic national environmental management information; for example, through providing open internet access to the Amazon deforestation monitoring system and the national register of public forest lands.

The organization of the National Environment Conferences, three adult and two junior versions, also had a tremendous impact. The adult versions mobilized almost three hundred thousand people across the country and the junior version involved almost ten million children and adolescents in the national school network. This army of people, true militants for a more sustainable world, is creating new processes and actions for environmental protection across the country, the results of which are not yet known but will almost certainly surprise us. The experience is being transferred to the international level with the organization of the first Children and Youth International Conference on the Environment, to take place in 2010 and involving a hundred national governments and a considerable number of civil society organizations.

Before leaving government and returning to her seat in the Senate, Marina Silva also oversaw the approval of a national policy to support development among Brazil's traditional forest-dependent communities, such as indigenous peoples and rubber tappers, and the Law on the Management of Public Forests which regulates the utilization of Brazilian public forest lands and establishes the Brazilian Forest Service as a new modern public body responsible for promoting sustainable forest use. Her tenure also saw the creation of the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation, a specialized public agency responsible for the administration of federal conservation areas, which currently comprise an area equivalent to that of the United Kingdom and half of France.

Awards

- 1996: awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in the South and Central America category
- 1997: selected as one of the “25 Women in Action in the World for Life on Earth” by the United Nations Environment Programme
- 2007: identified as one of the “50 people who could save the planet” by the Guardian newspaper (UK).
- 2007: nominated a “Champion of the Earth”, together with Nobel Peace laureate Al Gore, the United Nations’ major award in the environmental field.
- 29 October 2008 decorated by HRH Prince Philip with the Duke of Edinburgh medal, awarded by WWF International in recognition of her efforts in defence of the Brazilian Amazon.

It is significant that the majority of these awards were granted during Marina Silva’s period at the Ministry of the Environment or shortly after leaving the post, signifying the recognition that whilst occupying high public office she retained the same commitments that have characterized her public life ever since first becoming involved in the struggle to protect the forests of Acre alongside Chico Mendes.