

## Introduction

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Extensive livestock farming, the search for gold and other minerals, and the possibility of penetrating far into the interior by way of easily navigable rivers in order to establish military support posts or gather forest products – these were the main reasons for the vast extent of the Portuguese colony of Brazil. The country now has an area of no less than 8.5 million square kilometres and this makes it one of the largest states in the world.

The greater part of the population, however, had been concentrated in the eastern fringe up to the 1970s. In the eight southeastern and southern states, which occupy less than 18 % of the area of the country, lived no less than 62 % of the total population and these states formed the economic centre of gravity of Brazil (Fig. 2). The North East, which is usually defined as consisting of nine states, accommodated about 29 % of the country's population on 18% of the national territory. In the extensive interior areas formed by the "North" and the "West," on the other hand, together accounting for no less than 64 % of the country's area, lived only 8.7 % of the Brazilians. These areas still had little economic importance up to 1970, as appears from the fact that they contributed only 5 % of the gross national product.

Brazilian publications of that time also often contrasted the region *Amazônia Legal* with that of *Centro-Sul*. The former comprised part of the "West" as well as the "North" and covered no less than 59 % of the land area, but only 8 % of the Brazilian population lived there and no more than 4 % of the gross national product derived from there. The *Centro-Sul* region, on the other hand, covered 26 % of the land area, accommodated 67 % of the population and provided 83 % of the GNP (see Fig. 3).<sup>2</sup>

The need to reduce these marked contrasts in development and the uneven distribution of the population had already been felt for some time. The poverty of the North East, in particular, was regarded as a serious problem. The new capital Brasília, built under Kubitschek, and the construction of a number of links with this centre formed the first modest attempts to modify the socio-spatial structure in order to reduce somewhat the dominance of the coastal zone.

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2 Figures derived from *Sinopse estatística do Brasil* (1971), Ministério da Agricultura (1972a, 8), and from *Revista Geográfica* (70, June 1969, p. 224).

Figure 2. The administrative divisions of Brazil in the 1970s



Source: Kleinpenning (1975) (author's own elaboration).

Since then, the problem of regional inequality has not been lost sight of. On the contrary, integration of the different regions by means of further economic and social development, accompanied by a less uneven distribution of the population over the territory, officially became one of the main objectives of the Brazilian regime which came to power in 1964. It even aimed to make such progress in Brazil that the country would, in a few decades, become one of the great developed nations.

Within the framework of this policy, an important share of the attention and activities were concentrated on the vast Amazon region. While this region had enjoyed little or no attention after the decline of the rubber gathering economy, now there was a marked change, particularly after 1970. The government made it increasingly clearly known that it was serious in its intentions to open up the North, colonise and develop it, in order to integrate it more into the national economy and society. This policy of integration was regarded as the logical and necessary continuation of a centuries' long and still incomplete colonisation process. In the past, a more intensive occupation and utilisation of the immense northern territory had lain beyond the capacities of Brazil for a number of reasons, but at the end of the 1960s the country felt equal to the task.

Figure 3. The boundaries of *Amazônia Legal*, *Centro-Sul* and *Nordeste*



Source: Kleinpenning (1975) (author's own elaboration).

From the beginning, the efforts to integrate the Amazon region more into the country and to develop it – a policy known in Brazil as *Operação Amazônia* – gave rise to criticism and resistance, but the government did not let itself be discouraged by this, especially since the plan also evoked sympathy and enthusiasm among a considerable part of the Brazilian people. Many Brazilians believed that the integration of the Amazon basin was indeed necessary and had even come to regard this integration as one of the principal national tasks for the coming decades. They assumed that not only the Amazon region would benefit from this integration process, but also that the further opening up and development of the North would bring considerable advantages for the rest of the country.

As far as the latter were concerned, people were thinking, for example, of an enlargement of the market for the industries of the Southeast and of a considerable expansion of the production of raw materials.

*Amazônia* was spoken and written about in Brazil more than before. Natural resources were increasingly mapped and, in other fields too, the development prospects and problems were being, or began to be, investigated. Besides the federal government, the various states started to take a number of measures to encourage development.

The growing interest in the Amazon region was incidentally not limited to Brazil. There had already been a certain international interest in this immeasurable and still scarcely inhabited primeval region for a long time and this interest had clearly gained in strength over the years. In fact, it may be stated that, since the building of Brasília, nothing had so much caught the attention, both nationally and internationally, as the plans for the further opening up and development of the Amazon basin.

This study discusses in detail the various attempts since about 1965 which were to give the Amazon region a more important place within Brazil, while attention is also paid to the underlying motives and to the results achieved up to the early 1980s. Particular attention will be paid to the extent, the nature and the results of the colonisation activities of the Brazilian government. In the early 1970s, colonisation as such was regarded as an extremely important means of realising the aims of integration and development. In particular, colonisation would help to lessen the socio-economic problems of various Brazilian regions and bring about a more balanced population distribution.

The ultimate aim of this analysis of Operação Amazônia is to answer the question whether the effect of the changes sought in the socio-economic structure of the Amazon region in the 1970s were of such a kind that the policy of integration would indeed contribute towards the reduction of under- and uneven development in Brazil.

A more detailed discussion of the motives underlying the attempts to development the North – and the characteristics of the policies after 1970 will follow in Part 2.