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# Food sovereignty

The people's alternative

Ernest Cañada

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Cover photo: A boy picks a chayote vegetable (a native type of squash), watched by his father, a farmer in Jalapa, northern Nicaragua. Photo: Sean Sprague / Still Pictures

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### **About the author**

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# Food sovereignty

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Our master's voice tells us our countries must believe in free trade, although it doesn't exist; honour our debts, although they're dishonourable; attract investment, although it's corrupt; and enter the wider world, albeit through the servants' door. Enter the wider world, because the wider world is the market – the world market, where entire countries are for sale. Nothing new there: Latin America was created to obey the world market before the world market even had the name. Today, for good or ill, it's still our duty to obey.

This sad, centuries-old charade started with gold and silver and continued with sugar, tobacco, guano, nitrate, copper, tin, rubber, cocoa, banana, coffee, oil... What have these marvels left us with? No inheritance, nothing. Gardens converted into deserts, abandoned fields, mountains full of holes, fetid water, great caravans of the discontented, condemned to early death, and palaces, empty but for the ghosts...

Now it's the turn of transgenic soya and cellulose. And again the story of transient glory will repeat itself, announcing our great disgrace with a fanfare of trumpets.

*Eduardo Galeano, 'Salvavidas de plomo' [Lead lifejackets]*

**M**ARÍA LOURDES RODRÍGUEZ was born at Jalapa, northern Nicaragua, into a small farming family. From early childhood, she worked the land; today, helped by her children, she tends a small, organic farm producing a range of crops. With bright, defiant eyes she tells us what we can expect when the free trade agreement between the United States and Central America (CAFTA) is implemented:

Things are already difficult, but after CAFTA we'll have to sell our land and find out how to emigrate, or, if not, look for work with a company, or do who knows what?... CAFTA pits David against Goliath. Goliath was a giant, and the US is a giant, but I think, David beat Goliath, so, with the strength of God, and our own strength, why can't we? Of course we can. All we need to do is unite and fight. There's no other solution. This is a barbarian threat. I say it's worse than the weevil infestation that killed the pines, because CAFTA is going to destroy us all.<sup>2</sup>

The threat to small family farmers is real – but so too is their struggle to defend their livelihoods.

### **Life-threatening transnational agribusiness companies**

Two conflicting productive models divide world agriculture and food production: on the one side, agribusiness controlled by corporate capital; on the other, the agriculture of small farming families. The future of small farmers like María Lourdes Rodríguez is endangered by the growing hegemony of transnationals over the entire system of food production and sale.

A 2005 report compiled by the Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration (ETC Group) unearthed indicators that say much about agrifood sector trends in recent years.<sup>3</sup> According to the study, the industry has seen rapid integration and concentration. Just two decades ago, there were thousands of seed firms, none of which accounted for more than one per cent of the world market. Today, the 10 largest seed firms (Dupont, Monsanto, Syngenta, Groupe Limagrain, Savia, Adavanta, Delta & Pine Land, Dow, Bayer and BASF) control 30 per cent of the market. Just three multinationals (Cargill, Bunge and Dreyfus) control more than 75 per cent of the trade in cereals. The 10 main agrichemical companies (Bayer, Syngenta, Monsanto, BASF, Dow, Dupont, among others)

control 90 per cent of the world market. Similarly, 34 per cent of the food and drink market is controlled by just 10 transnationals (Nestlé, Kraft Foods, ConAgra, Pepsico, Unilever, Achier Daniela Midland, Cargill, Coca Cola, Diageo, Mars). Further, as well as vertical integration as same-sector companies purchase and absorb each other, there has also been a concentration of industries working across sectors. As ETC Group researcher Silvia Ribeiro has emphasised:

The fusion of chemicals companies with seed companies was intended to increase farmers' dependence on agrichemicals by selling them a complete package. Then came the fusions with the pharmaceutical companies, who shared many aspects of development and production. According to ETC Group's analysis, these horizontal integrations will continue into food and drink processing. Ultimately, they'll be swallowed whole by the supermarket chains that easily surpass all those already named in the sheer volumes of money they move. This chain of fusions will lead to unprecedented control over producers and consumers, from seed to supermarket. As early as 2002, for the first time, the largest company in the world wasn't an oil company or a car manufacturer: it was the supermarket chain WalMart.<sup>4</sup>

Small family agriculture has experienced this monopolistic expansion and concentration of agribusiness as a frontal attack. Much of the rural population has had little alternative but to seek work elsewhere, increasing population flight toward the principal growth industries in many poor countries: urban assembly plants or tourist enclaves.

Inherent in this dominant model, inspired by neoliberalism, is the tendency for each territory to specialise in activities that, in a heavily globalised economy, give it an advantage over other parts of the planet. Agriculture's priority is not production for local consumption, but intensive farming for export to distant markets. This model has been consolidated and refined over the years, although one of its earliest expressions was the plantation of monocultures for export in colonial times. Later developments included heavy machinery, the intensive use of agrichemicals (pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers), crop varieties improved during the 'green revolution' of the sixties and seventies, and, most recently, genetically modified organisms.

Each innovation has been one more assault on the rural economy. At the same time, the export motive for livestock and agriculture production has generated asymmetry in international trade. Among other things, wealthy nations dump food products in other markets at prices below production cost, destroying local economies.

Not only does the dominance of agribusiness threaten the survival and diminish the autonomy of rural economies; it compromises national sovereignty by reducing the capacity to produce and distribute foodstuffs locally. It has adversely affected health, reduced consumers' ability to obtain wholesome locally produced foods, and it has damaged and degraded natural ecosystems. Its expansion is unsustainable, in any light.

The clash between these productive models drives the main debates surrounding agriculture, food and, more generally, rural development. Without it, the struggle of millions of small farmers and social activists all over the world, and the importance of their arguments on fundamental issues like land, water, seeds and forests, cannot be understood. Therefore, the following pages discuss the principal episodes in the conflict. They will also describe the efforts of organised small farmers to defend a living rural world based on the family farm, producing a wide range of crops according to agro-ecological principles, in the name of a clear political strategy: the struggle for food sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

### **Monocultures: history repeats itself**

From colonisation to the present, production for export to the international market has characterised the history of many countries in the South. The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano has observed that the international division of labour is that some countries specialise in winning, and others in losing. The agrarian history of Nicaragua, for example, has followed those lines, characterised by monocultures like cotton, banana, sugar, coffee and beef.

Intensive farming for export has a cyclical pattern. First, a given crop is chosen because of high international market prices. The monoculture takes over the most fertile, best positioned land, while small farmers, producing food for their own consumption and for local markets, are displaced to less productive areas or towards the agricultural margin. The consequence of this displacement, caused by the exploitation of the land under new criteria, is a reduction in the



production of foodstuffs, which creates a deficit resolved by imports from other areas. For a time, the monoculture funds years of abundance: small groups amass great wealth. But later, overproduction, competition from elsewhere or increased production costs lead to a drop in international prices and crisis, and the cycle approaches its end with unemployment and plummeting land prices – which create optimal conditions for the *next* great monoculture. As Peter Rosset, an expert in agro-ecology and one of the main advisors of the international rural movement *Vía Campesina*, says: ‘Successive cycles of export crops feed on the crises they create.’<sup>6</sup>

The end of the cycle leads to disastrous social and environmental consequences. Take Nicaraguan cotton, which started in the fifties, mainly on the Pacific coast in the north of the country, in the departments of León and Chinandega. At the end of the sixties cotton covered 250,000 hectares, and employed approximately half a million people. It was the era of the cotton bonanza. Ernesto Balladares and Félix Guardián, two former cotton entrepreneurs from León, remember those years with sadness. According to Balladares, cotton boosted the area’s economy: ‘It put huge sums of money in circulation. Lots of people accumulated large fortunes. Cotton was so attractive, we met people of every profession involved in the cotton business: doctors, lawyers, students, chemists – everything.’<sup>7</sup>

However, in the nineties, Nicaragua’s ‘white gold’ went into crisis after a combination of factors made it unviable, including excess world production, the appearance of new synthetic products on the market, and increased production costs. Cotton production required continuous increases in chemical use to combat ever more resistant diseases. According to Félix Guardián: ‘Diseases increased sharply, production costs exceeded sale prices, so it was no longer profitable and we could no longer produce.’<sup>8</sup>

But the cotton story didn’t stop there. Its consequences lasted decades. The environmental damage was catastrophic: unimaginable numbers of trees had been felled; the soil was eroded and left, like the water, poisoned by chemical treatments. Ernesto Balladares’ regrets are of little comfort today: ‘I witnessed the woodland destruction. It was incredible: a virgin mountainside, with soil of the highest quality cleared to create farmland for the cotton... It hurts to think what we did: it was indiscriminate. We should have had more respect for nature.’<sup>9</sup>

The story is repeated time and again. Yet there are those who remain convinced that specialisation in one crop is a magic formula for lifting a country or region out of poverty. Matagalpa, in the north of Nicaragua, was coffee rich until an international slump in coffee prices in 2002/3 condemned thousands of poor families to hunger. Many coffee growers were left unemployed, and landless labourers took to the streets in protests. The town mayor, Nelson Artola, believed he had the solution: beef farming would allow them to invade the world's wealthy economies. All they needed was to inform the world of the quality of their beef – and how better than to support chef Ramón Mejía's attempt to organise the biggest barbecue in the world? Artola enthused to the press: 'One of the reasons for this barbecue is not only to get into the pages of the Guinness Book of Records, which we soon will, but to launch exports of Nicaragua's farm products, especially beef, because I've never seen, either in writing or on television, a barbecue as gigantic as this one here.'<sup>10</sup> But they missed the record and the chef, now heavily indebted, attempted suicide using Gastoxin, a common pesticide used in the countryside and popularly known as 'love pills'.

Unfortunately, dreams like Matagalpa's beef exports aren't rare: prawns from El Salvador, Colombian flowers, Chilean salmon, Argentine soya... This is the new geography of monocultures, creating the problems of the near future – one of which is food deficit. A book which has become a classic on agriculture and food, *Hunger in the world explained to my son* by Jean Ziegler, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, describes Senegal's experiences, which resemble what Nicaragua has been through. In Senegal, the near-exclusive production of peanuts was imposed by the colonial government. Today, farmers continue to produce hundreds of thousands of tons of peanuts, which the government buys and exports to Europe. 'The farmer generally receives a much smaller price for his product than the government raises at export,' says Ziegler. 'From what remains – that is, from the sweat of farmers' brows – the government finances a parasitic bureaucracy and the luxury in which its leaders live, among other things.' Meanwhile rice, the staple diet in Senegal, is imported from Thailand, Cambodia and elsewhere. Ziegler comments: 'Senegal is increasingly dependent on other countries, despite having vigorous and capable rural classes who could, without many problems, produce all the food it needs.'

Instead, the cross of its colonial bonds weighs ever more heavily on its shoulders.<sup>11</sup>

The same sorry tale goes for countless other poor nations: the home-produced food is exported, which means the food people need to eat has to be imported. Peter Rosset has observed: 'If a country is incapable of feeding its own people, if their next meal depends on the world market, that country is extremely vulnerable.'<sup>12</sup>

### **Agrichemicals: our daily poison**

The growth in agrichemical use is closely tied to monocultures. One of the defining features of the green revolution in the sixties and seventies (in addition to heavy machinery and increasing monopolisation of production) was the intensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The chemical industry's links with agriculture began with the conversion of the arms industry at the end of the second world war. According to Falgun Guharay, a doctor in biology of Indian origin, now settled in Nicaragua, where he promotes organic farming: 'When the war finished, the US equipment for tank manufacture was converted to tractor production. Gunpowder factories became fertiliser plants, because many of the chemical constituents are similar; and nerve gas factories were turned to pesticide manufacture.'<sup>13</sup>

Agriculture was quickly transformed, becoming ever more dependent on the chemical industry, in what Guharay calls a vicious circle: 'With each generation, parasites became more resistant and needed more pesticides. But the pesticides eliminated the parasites' natural enemies, so, with no natural enemies, the parasite population exploded.'<sup>14</sup> This way, rural communities become increasingly dependent on bought-in chemicals, while traditional knowledge of agro-ecological pest management is being lost under the pressure of modernisation.

Chemical abuse not only cost rural communities their autonomy: it had dramatic effects on public health. In western Nicaragua, the growth of cotton, banana and sugar-cane production in the seventies brought with it intensive chemical use and massive fumigation to control pests. Pesticides had two effects on public health: short term, acute poisoning, and long term, chronic illnesses leading to severe neurological and reproductive damage, cancer or death. According to Dr Marianela Corriols of the Pan American Health Organisation

(PAHO): 'A few years ago in Chinandega pesticide residue levels were measured in local women who came to hospital to give birth. One hundred per cent of them had DDT residues. In some parts, mothers' milk contained 700 times the permitted limits of pesticides.'<sup>15</sup> Once used, pesticides take many years to disperse. Their nefarious effects are spread still further through water pollution.

Despite PAHO's repeated advice to ban the most harmful pesticides, the national authorities look the other way and many remain on the market. To questions from the journalist Félix Zurita, the then agriculture minister Augusto Navarro replied: 'Nothing in existence poses no danger whatsoever. Kitchen knives are dangerous, cars are dangerous, and journalists who spread disinformation are dangerous too. Danger is everywhere, and I wouldn't go so far as to tell you that an agrichemical used badly does not represent risk and danger for the population.'<sup>16</sup> At the time of these remarks, agriculture minister Augusto Navarro was also the co-owner of Distribuidora San Cristóbal, one of Nicaragua's largest agrichemicals firms.

Yet, even if some turn a blind eye, the danger is real. That's why, in order to be seen, thousands of former banana workers from western Nicaragua, severely affected by the use of the pesticide Nemagon, camped in front of the National Assembly in Managua in 2005 to demand attention and support. Over 900 workers had already died; more followed as the protest continued. Nemagon was in intensive use during the years of the banana plantations. According to Peter Rosset: 'In Nicaragua's case, the recklessness of the banana industry was even worse since the terrible events in Costa Rica were known. According to rumours, when Costa Rica finally banned Nemagon, firms exported it to Honduras and Nicaragua, where it was still permitted. They knew what the dangers were. They just didn't care.'<sup>17</sup>

### **Pressure for seed control**

As agribusiness has grown, it has tried to chase profits by making rural communities totally dependent on its products. Seed control is at the heart of the clash between agribusiness and the rural family. For Sinforiano Cáceres, president of the Nicaraguan Federation of Cooperative Societies, the introduction of genetically modified seeds, also known as transgenics, reveals the intent of large agricultural corporations to control crop and livestock production:

The transnationals say: 'We want to control the farmer, but the best way isn't to control the system of production directly. If we control the seeds, we can decide how much he produces, what he produces and how he produces it. It will cause genetic erosion and sterilise native varieties – and what will happen then? The farmer, who survives thanks to the seeds, will no longer be an autonomous producer. Each year, he'll have to buy seed. So if we control the seeds, we control the system of production, and if we control the system of production, we control consumer trends. In other words, we control the whole market.'<sup>18</sup>

As well as eroding the small farmer's autonomy, the introduction of transgenics means rural impoverishment because it forces small farmers to look outside their land for seeds and for the chemicals they need to fertilise them and control pests. Little wonder the agrichemical and seed industries are converging. According to the ETC Group's 2005 investigation: 'It's difficult to separate pesticides and seeds. The same corporations dominate both sectors, and seed and agrichemical products are frequently developed and marketed in symbiosis.'<sup>19</sup>

Worryingly, transnationals are also using patents to expropriate traditional knowledge and practices from rural communities. The Indian ecologist and Alternative Nobel Peace Prize winner Vandana Shiva has repeatedly denounced the 'biopiracy' wealthy-nation transnationals inflict on rural cultures. In her book *Stolen harvest: The hijacking of the global food supply*, Shiva explores the case of Indian basmati rice. Over the years, a wide range of basmati seeds have been developed by Indian and Pakistani farmers: today, 27 documented varieties of basmati are grown in India. However, a US company, RiceTec, based in Texas, has obtained patent rights over basmati rice and grains sold under brand names like Kasmati, Texmati and Jasmati. The patent will make it possible for RiceTec to sell internationally what it claims is a new variety of basmati, developed with the name of Basmati.

The Basmati variety patented by RiceTec is derived partly from Indian basmati crossed with other varieties, like Indica. These varieties have been developed by farmers on the Indian subcontinent for many centuries. Shiva comments:

Patents are supposed to be granted for industrial inventions that are novel in non-obvious ways. Yet the aroma of Basmati rice, which the patent claims as new, is not novel... The very conventional derivation of varieties through crossing is neither a novel nor a non-obvious step. In fact, the RiceTec patent treats derivation as creation and piracy as invention. The US Patent Office has protected not invention but biopiracy.

It could also lead to basmati farmers being prosecuted for violating RiceTec's patent. According to Shiva: 'The piracy of Basmati is just one example of how corporations are claiming "intellectual property rights" to the biodiversity and indigenous innovations of the Third World, robbing the poor of the last resources that allow them to survive outside the global marketplace.'<sup>20</sup>

The small farmer's nightmare doesn't stop there. The most radical attempt so far to establish corporate control over the productive process is Terminator technology, a type of Genetic Use Restriction Technology (GURT) known by its opponents as 'suicide seeds'. These are seeds whose second generation cannot reproduce (ensuring that small farmers will not be able to grow harvested seeds) or seeds with markers that can only be activated using agrichemicals produced and sold by the same companies. This technology was first developed by the US Department of Agriculture and the seed company Delta & Pine Land (now taken over by Monsanto).

If Terminator technology reaches the marketplace, its impact on family farms would be catastrophic. In one blow, the transnationals would have broken the plant-seed-plant-seed cycle traditionally controlled by farmers, and locally adapted agriculture would grind to a halt. Aware of the enormous risk this entails, a broad coalition of social organisations from around the world responded with a campaign entitled 'Ban Terminator'. In 2000, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) adopted a moratorium on the implementation of Terminator technology. However, for the meeting arranged for March 2006 in Curitiba, Brazil, the biotechnology industry, accompanied by the governments of Australia, Canada and New Zealand (closely followed by the United States, which is not a party to the CBD), exerted pressure to lift the moratorium. Despite their efforts, the eighth conference of the parties to the CBD chose to maintain the moratorium on the further development of

Terminator technology.

Despite this setback, efforts by transnationals to enter the market with Terminator technology show no sign of relaxing. The business that would come from its implementation is far too great. On the other side, small farmers' organisations won't easily cede to the technology that would destroy them. In January 2003, during its Seed Campaign presentation at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Vía Campesina clearly stated its unconditional opposition to any form of agribusiness control over seeds:

Perhaps never before has the bloodcurdling slogan of the freedom struggles, *Patria o muerte – venceremos* [Homeland or death – we will overcome], had such meaning for the men and women of the countryside, the people of the land, because *Patria o muerte* for us today means preserving our seeds, defending our land and water. Either we will save our land and seeds or we will die in the attempt. Small farmers and seeds are a single entity. If you destroy one, you destroy them both. This is why we have one task before us: victory! Victory over capitalism, patents, appropriation, plundering, and the manipulation of life by biotechnology under the control of capital. That's why we're here, declaring with our hearts and souls that seeds are the inheritance of the people, at humanity's service. An inheritance is a common good with symbolic value, spiritual value, with *meaning* – and the seeds are our inheritance, our livelihood, and it is our duty to treat them with care, to conserve them, and to defend them from the destructive globalisation of capitalism on the rampage. This is our challenge and our mandate...

Seeds and people of the land, we are interdependent, we have raised and fed each other, engendering diverse cultures with different visions of the cosmos, accompanied by the sun and moon, following nature's cycles, conversing with the rain and stars, clearing paths for the water and living together with the trees. We are the agriculturalists of the world, the guardians of the land and of the seeds. Without seeds there is no agriculture: without agriculture there is no food, and without food, there are no people.<sup>21</sup>

## **Policies against the countryside and small family farmers**

Agribusiness has flourished thanks to favourable policies that have jeopardised the family farm economy. These policies are dictated both by the rich nations where the transnationals acquire their capital, and by elites in the poor nations who have benefited sumptuously from their connivance with foreign interests. By the same token, multilateral organisations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or the World Trade Organisation have assumed policies that clearly favour food production based on agribusiness.

Consider the impact of the policies behind regional economic integration, better known as free trade agreements, between the US and the European Community, and other countries or regions of the world. These policies mask yet another attack on the rural family economy. For Sinforiano Cáceres, president of the Nicaraguan Federation of Cooperative Societies and a close follower of the concerns of Nicaragua's small farmers, the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) is like a boxing bout between Nicaragua's junior flyweight world champion Rosendo Álvarez, and Mike Tyson: 'They're both champions, it's just that one weighs in at 105 pounds and the other weighs in at 320. So if you put them in the same ring together, one's going to kill the other. Forcing them to compete in equal conditions is the most unjust scenario imaginable. This applies in trade, too.'<sup>22</sup> An unequal competition that, according to a Nicaraguan saying, is like setting 'a prowling tiger against a bound donkey'.

Carlos Pacheco of the Centre for International Studies in Managua agrees:

CAFTA spells disaster for the countryside. We're looking at the imminent disappearance of our economy's capacity to produce what it consumes. The United States controls 80 per cent of world maize production and trade. How can a national maize producer who receives no support, and certainly no subsidies, start competing with some of the largest corporations on earth, with an annual turnover in maize production and sales alone of thousands of millions of dollars? It goes without saying that CAFTA will reinforce the dominance of US multinationals.<sup>23</sup>



Even before CAFTA comes into effect, developments in the maize market are instructive. Several years ago Cargill, one of the world's largest grain exporters, bought up a Nicaraguan chicken producer called Tip Top. Cargill immediately replaced the traditional chicken feed, Nicaraguan sorghum, with US maize, thereby marginalising thousands of small sorghum producers.

MASECA provides another example of how agribusiness marginalises the small producer. MASECA is a Mexican producer, with US capital, which controls 70 per cent of the world cornflour market. It makes its flour with transgenic maize produced in the US. This maize, subsidised by the most powerful economy on earth, reaches the market at a price unmatched by small Nicaraguan producers, who have no public support. But Sinforiano Cáceres is clear:

The tragedy isn't that MASECA has entered the market. The tragedy is that the government doesn't support us with incentives and development projects to allow maize farmers to produce cornflour and compete in the marketplace with MASECA, which certainly could be done. Thousands of tortilla bakeries are moving over to MASECA. That means the small farmer is going to have fewer and fewer customers, which is why the price is stagnant, and is going to stay stagnant in the years to come.<sup>24</sup>

The Nicaraguan government's concerns point in a very different direction. Former agriculture minister Augusto Navarro's contempt for the rural economy is unmistakable:

We are on completely the wrong road if we believe that each small farmer must live alone, in isolation, tending 10 chickens, three pigs and a plot of land producing 20 or 30 hundredweight of maize. I believe it's impossible under that regime. If all you know is the way your grandfather and great-grandfather did things, that's the only way you'll do things, even if that way of doing things, that pattern of production or behaviour, is what has led us to poverty.<sup>25</sup>

The national development plan passed by Enrique Bolaños' Liberal government is based on increased agro-exports and foreign

investment in things like assembly plants or tourism. The plan aims at concentrating production around rural development 'poles', bringing together small producers and subordinating them to major ones. The logic is simple: one of the difficulties Nicaraguan agriculture is experiencing – according to the agriculture minister – is due to 'the dispersion and small scale of most rural activity, with more than 200,000 small producers, many doing no more than subsistence farming of staple grains.'<sup>26</sup> Thus, the argument goes, government attention should not focus here. Instead, the participants in these unviable activities must be concentrated around poles where they can develop economic activities capable of pulling their weight in international markets.

The problem with such policies is that they are rooted in a series of myths, perpetrated as articles of faith by the neoliberals, about the benevolence of free trade. Myths like: if international food trade grows, world hunger will diminish; or, if poor nations increase their food trade, they'll reduce their poverty index; or, if they increase exports, the foreign exchange raised will allow them to buy what they need; or, the main problem facing poor nations is access to markets in the North; or, markets in these countries are too closed – they should join the global economy to improve their trade indicators. But how can you solve rural poverty through international trade, which makes it worse? The myths hide an ideological construct serving the interests of the great transnational agribusiness corporations.

### **Food sovereignty: the alternative of the small family farm**

Former minister Augusto Navarro may disagree, but the small family farm, far from being a problem, is part of the solution. For years great sections of the rural community, and the organisations that have supported it, have resisted Navarro's model and developed according to a productive model based on agro-ecology and diversification on the small family farm. With the right public policies, family farmers and rural workers' associations are perfectly capable of developing a sustainable agriculture, producing high quality harvests mainly for local and national markets. This meets the needs of the population, safeguards natural resources and protects the health of producers and consumers.

Far from the backwardness some associate with the Nicaraguan countryside, the rural community has made great efforts, with virtually no public support, to acquire new skills and improve production. Two examples are chemical-free Integrated Pest Management and the conservation of native seeds. Both represent new modes of production and technological innovation; both strengthen rural communities instead of weakening them. Integrated Pest Management emerged 40 years ago and is based on organic pest control. According to Julio Monterrey, an engineer with the Tropical Agronomy Centre for Research and Education, which has for years worked to spread these techniques: 'Instead of thinking of the pest first, we try to develop an integrated control programme that strengthens the decision-making powers of farmers so that they deal agro-ecologically with the crop, the pest and its natural enemies according to the variability of the systems of production.'<sup>27</sup> Between 1999 and 2004 more than 8,000 coffee-growers and producers of staple vegetables and grains were trained in these techniques, which have allowed thousands of rural families to improve their crops and manage pests without damaging their wellbeing or the environment.

The Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (Programa de Campesino a Campesino, or PCaC) and the National Union of Farmers and Livestock Owners (Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos, or UNAG) have been campaigning to rediscover and promote native seeds. Faced with agribusiness attempts to colonise the seed market, the rediscovery of native seeds is one of the most significant agro-ecological developments (see the appendix for more details).

Nonetheless, in spite of all these initiatives, small family farms remain threatened, impoverished and marginalised by the expansion of agribusiness. Millions of landless farmers around the world are trapped: either they choose to work as casual labourers or, with no prospect of a dignified living from their work, they flood into urban slums. This is why, faced with the impoverishment and exclusion that neoliberalism offers the rural world, farmers' organisations around the world, coordinated by Vía Campesina, have developed an alternative strategy to the agribusiness system: food sovereignty.

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## **What is Vía Campesina?**

Vía Campesina is an international movement which coordinates rural organisations of small and medium-sized producers, agricultural workers, rural women and indigenous communities from Asia, Africa, America and Europe. It is an autonomous, pluralist movement, independent of political, economic, or other ties. Its members are national and regional organisations whose autonomy is respected.

It was founded in April 1992, when peasant leaders from Central America, North America and Europe met in Managua at the UNAG Congress. The first conference of Vía Campesina was held at Mons, Belgium, in May 1993, where it was constituted as a world organisation and defined its strategic aims and structure. The second international conference was held at Tlaxcala, Mexico, in April 1996. Thirty-seven countries and 69 organisations discussed the concerns of small and medium-sized producers, including food sovereignty, agrarian reform, credit, external debt, technology, women's participation and rural development.

Vía Campesina's priorities include: reinforcing and giving greater voice to its member organisations; influencing decision-making within governments and multilateral organisations to shape economic and agricultural policies that affect small and medium-sized producers; promoting women's participation in social, economic, political and cultural matters; and formulating proposals in relation to agrarian reform, food sovereignty, production, trade, research, genetic resources, biodiversity, gender and the environment.

Vía Campesina works to create alliances with other global social, economic and political forces to fight together against neoliberalism and promote an alternative model in which the majority plays the principal role.

One of the most innovative aspects of Vía Campesina as a social movement is its ability to unite small-farmers' organisations from North and South. This alliance is based on the consequences of the export-based agribusiness model that marginalises them both. Transnational corporations pay very low prices to producers, whether they are in the United States or Tanzania. This tactic allows the big transnational corporations to compete: buy cheap, sell expensive. And it is this that has created the impetus for a new alliance between Northern and Southern producers in defence of an alternative model based on family agriculture.

[Source: [www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org)]

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The food sovereignty initiative was born in the debate about food security in the seventies, a time of widespread concern at food scarcity. At the time, the concept extended no further than food production and availability. However, the idea evolved and took on components like food quality, nutritional needs and cultural preferences. In 1996, the World Food Summit organised by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations reached the following definition of food security, which remains valid: 'For the individual, the home, the nation and the world, food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.'<sup>28</sup>

However, by its very nature, this formula has limitations. For instance, it fails to address how these requirements should be met. Therefore, in a parallel conference, rural organisations from around the world designed a development strategy that confronted this issue. It became known as food sovereignty. The World Forum on Food Sovereignty, held at Havana, Cuba, in 2001, defined it as:

... the peoples' right to define their own policies and strategies for the sustainable production, distribution and consumption of food that guarantee the right to food for the entire population, on the basis of small and medium-sized production, respecting their own cultures and the diversity of peasant, fishing and indigenous forms of agricultural production, marketing and management of rural areas, in which women play a fundamental role.<sup>29</sup>

Food sovereignty is considered a path towards eradicating hunger and malnutrition and guaranteeing lasting, sustainable food and nutritional security for all. It requires the prioritising of food production for local and national markets by diversified family farms using agro-ecological production. It entails guaranteeing the small farmer access to and control of land, seeds, woodland, fish and other productive resources. Its goal is to promote community control of productive resources, in the face of growing attempts at expropriation by private corporations. It requires public policies that protect domestic markets from dumping, stimulate family and community agricultural production, and increase local powers and local control over food production in order to tailor it primarily for

local and national markets. Equally, genuine land redistribution policies are required that, unlike those of the World Bank, do not rely on market forces. It also presupposes the rights of consumers to buy healthy, locally produced foods which meet the cultural needs of national gastronomy and culinary history.

Faced with the dominant food system, rural and urban families and communities need to be empowered and to regain control of the process of production, trade and consumption. This entails advocating with greater force agro-ecological solutions, and social organisation and participation, to make the food system more just and sustainable. Pressure from citizens, consumers, civil society organisations and social movements is essential to change current regulatory frameworks and structures which hinder democracy and sustainability in the food system.

*Managua, August 2006*

## Appendix: Reviving Nicaragua's native seeds

*Andreu Pol and Jorge Irán Vásquez (PCaC-UNAG, July 2006)*

The Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (Programa de Campesino a Campesino, or PCaC) was created in 1987 by members of the National Union of Farmers and Livestock Owners (Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos, or UNAG). It began with events allowing Nicaraguan and Mexican farmers of both genders to meet and exchange experiences of water and soil conservation. During the nineties, the PCaC programme spread to other Nicaraguan towns and departments, where it promoted water and soil conservation, organic agriculture and native seeds.

From 1999, supported by the Italian non-governmental organisation Terra Nuova, PCaC made the farming of native staple seeds a central strategy in its three-year Food Security campaign to promote biodiversity, crop rotation and seed diversification in the Madriz and Nueva Segovia departments in northern Nicaragua. Between 1999 and 2001 censuses of staple varieties in 74 rural communities (38 in Madriz and 36 in Nueva Segovia) listed the qualities and distribution of 85 maize varieties, 74 bean varieties, and 10 sorghum varieties farmed by rural families. The censuses also tracked the increase or reduction in land area dedicated to each variety in their respective communities. We developed techniques and training programmes for the small-scale and organic production of native seeds, post-harvest practices, seed exchange and seed improvement programmes, among other things; and studied and promoted the role of rural women as improvers of native seeds and protectors of farm biodiversity. During data gathering, two support group members from the Estelí School of Agriculture and Livestock Farming wrote engineering theses on native seed varieties in the towns of Totogalpa and Palacagüina in the department of Madriz.

This work was then extended to 10 departments across Nicaragua: Boaco, Carazo, Chontales, Estelí, Madriz, Managua, Masaya, Matagalpa, Nueva Segovia and Rivas (Rivas had already started processes of native seed production as a local initiative). In 2000-2001, farmers, activists and members of the technical support teams, of both genders, working together, held three national forums on family farming, seeds and biodiversity. These forums produced the document 'Principles of the Farmer-to-Farmer Programme on seeds

and biodiversity,' reproduced at the end of this appendix.

The PCaC programme has also studied the threat of transgenic varieties as potential contaminants of native seeds, which are an essential part of Nicaragua's genetic inheritance, protected under the 1996 General Law for the Environment and Natural Resources (Law 217). To counter the threat posed by transgenic varieties and apply Law 217, the alternative is *in situ* conservation by farmers of native seed varieties. We therefore created a network of seed banks, some centralised and collective, others non-centralised and family-based.

The first seed fair for the department of Madriz was held at Somoto in July 2001, under the slogan 'Protect our native seeds'. Later in the year, two more native seed fairs were organised in Nueva Segovia. These events led to yearly seed fairs in other departments. On 10 and 11 September 2003, Managua's Olof Palme Youth Centre hosted the first national native seed fair. As well as the exchange of large quantities of seeds for many native crops, the fair saw the publication of the National Census of Native Staple Seed Varieties, compiled with SWISSAID support. The census covered 144 rural communities in 34 districts spread over 10 departments. It inventoried 114 varieties of maize (*zea mays*), 121 bean varieties (*phaseolus vulgaris*), 18 other edible legumes (varieties of *phaseolus* and *vigna*), 24 sorghum varieties (*sorghum bicolor*) and eight varieties of rice (*oryza sativa*), including native and neo-native seeds – ie, foreign seeds that have become native. (A variety is considered to have become native when, after its introduction as a conventionally improved seed, it has adapted to farm conditions for more than 15 years, whether through natural or assisted selection, or through spontaneous crossing with other local varieties.)

During 2004, the PCaC programme was represented at the fifth annual meeting of the Central American and Caribbean Committee of Participatory Phyto-Improvement in Honduras, in tandem with the Centre for Rural and Social Investigation and Advocacy (Centro de Investigación y Promoción Rural y Social, or CIPRES). In November 2004, we took part in the 14th scientific congress of the Cuban Institute of Agricultural Science, and delivered a paper entitled 'Phyto-improvement and seed production on the basis of *in situ* conservation and the sustainable management of farming community agro-biodiversity in Nicaragua'.

In addition, from 2004 to 2006, we held a number of national



conventions on the conservation and improvement of native and neo-native seeds, of staple grains, and other crops. We published and distributed a document entitled *Native seeds: Our inheritance, our tradition, our food*, about the conservation of native seeds, based on accounts by rural families. The aim of this document is to increase communication between producers of both genders, rural development agencies, universities and state institutions. This was the motivation for taking part in the international seminar/workshop 'Towards sustainability in rural innovation,' held at the National Agrarian University in October 2005.

In recent years, our core policies have been the multiplication of native seeds, rural storage techniques and organic preservation of seeds, as well as organising community seed banks (PCaC now has 70 seed banks in rural communities). To consolidate these core policies, a participatory action and investigation group, working with PCaC-UNAG and the Regional University Centre (North) at Estelí, has looked into the multiplication and storage of seeds in three communities in the district of Condega. This investigation led to interesting observations on the *in situ* conservation of 32 varieties, and different techniques of organic seed conservation. Radio broadcasts aimed at producers and consumers have started, as has the commercial sale of seeds belonging to these varieties. The results of this work were presented in the research and development forum organised in Managua by the Association for Research into Sustainable Development (Asociación para la Investigación del Desarrollo Sostenible, or ADESO *Las Segovias*).

The Nicaraguan PCaC programme has also had an impact in Latin America. In September 2005, it took part in the meeting of the Latin-American Network for the Conservation of Rural Biodiversity in Venezuela. In March 2006, it attended the meeting organised in Curitiba, Brazil, by the Agro-Ecological Movement of Latin America to try to prevent the introduction of transgenic organisms into Latin America.

Since January 2006, PCaC has been an active member of the Central American Alliance for the Conservation of Biodiversity, an umbrella organisation working to 'promote ways to affect public policy relating to the protection of biodiversity, advocating the prohibition, regulation or precaution in the use of genetically modified organisms and the use of synthetic agrichemicals that

threaten human rights, food and nutritional sovereignty in Nicaragua and Central America.' In June 2006, the alliance, with the agreement of other public organisations, universities and state institutions, presented before deputies in the National Assembly of Nicaragua a white paper on biological diversity, as part of the campaign to guarantee the protection of our national resources.

As we write (August 2006), with the support of SWISSAID, a tri-national campaign for native seeds, biodiversity and food sovereignty involving Colombia, Ecuador and Nicaragua is being set up. The campaign's overarching goal is to increase awareness in Nicaraguan society and encourage union leaders, politicians and members in public and private institutions to promote food sovereignty and security, sustainable agriculture, a moratorium on the introduction of transgenic seeds and foodstuffs, and the protection of our biodiversity.

In conclusion, the PCaC programme is consolidating the conservation of native seeds in Nicaragua on the basis of four principles: food sovereignty; the empowerment of small family farmers; the defence of our national genetic inheritance; and agro-ecological innovation complemented by the knowledge of our ancestors. The framework for this process is an alternative viewpoint based on agro-ecology for the 21st century, in direct contrast to the conventional perspective based on the green revolution of the last century.

The *conventional viewpoint* and the *alternative viewpoint* on variety management, seed production and seed improvement are compared in the table opposite. The conventional viewpoint is based on the principles of the green revolution of the last century and led to unsustainable agriculture. The alternative viewpoint is based on the principles of agro-ecology and agro-biodiversity, approaches with a long term future in sustainable agriculture through the 21st century.

**Conventional viewpoint**

1. Technological modernisation package.
2. Commercial dependence.
3. 'Improved' varieties.
4. Purity of varieties: genetic uniformity.
5. Official certification.
6. Exclusion of women.
7. Consumer uniformity.

**Alternative viewpoint**

1. Traditional rural knowledge.
2. Self-supply of seeds.
3. Priority to native varieties.
4. Evolution and adaptation: biodiversity.
5. Identification in the community.
6. Participation of women.
7. Consumer diversification.

**Principles of the Farmer-to-Farmer Programme on seeds and biodiversity**

Given the philosophy of the PCaC programme, and bearing in mind both local experience and the importance of conserving and benefiting from biodiversity, the farmers, promoters and support team members who assembled at the second national forum on family farming, seeds and biodiversity agreed to continue their work on seeds and biodiversity on the basis of the following principles:

- 1 To conserve, improve and promote plant and animal diversification, and to prioritise and make rational use of local resources to ensure food security and improved quality of life both for men and women producers in rural areas, and for men and women consumers in rural and urban settings.
- 2 To promote the recognition, protection and commercialisation of native varieties by identifying them at the local level, and encouraging exchanges of seeds and know-how between producers and communities.
- 3 To promote small-scale and organic production of native seeds adapted to our soil and climate conditions, applying methods deemed appropriate by producers, and gaining the experience required to evaluate and disseminate them.
- 4 To prioritise self-supply of seeds among all PCaC producers, encourage all producers to harvest and conserve seeds through community seed banks, and strengthen local organisational structures which will monitor and channel commercialisation, demand and seed supply.

- 5 PCaC producers must prioritise the improvement of native varieties and ensure that support teams maintain the small farmer's perspective.
- 6 The PcaC programme opposes the introduction of transgenic varieties in view of the threat they pose to biodiversity, environmental balance and human health. For this reason, it will promote education and information among producers, and coordinate its action with other institutions.
- 7 To encourage the participation of all family members, especially women, valuing their knowledge and experience as traditional promoters of local seeds and biodiversity.
- 8 PCaC training methods relating to local seeds and biodiversity must be participatory, practical as well as theoretical, and use the language of the small farmer.
- 9 The PCaC programme will be self-critical in its internal relations and proactive in its relations with other institutions, neither losing nor departing from the productive culture and the methodology of the PCaC programme.

## Notes

- 1 Eduardo Galeano, 'Salvavidas de plomo', Inter Press Service, August 2006. Source: [www.ipsnoticias.net](http://www.ipsnoticias.net)
- 2 Interview in *El tigre suelto* [Tiger on the prowl], documentary film by Félix Zurita, produced by Alba Films for Fundación Luciérnaga and SIMAS, Nicaragua, 2005.
- 3 ETC Group, 'Oligopolio S. A. 2005: Concentración del poder corporativo' [Oligopoly Inc. 2005: Concentration in corporate power], *Communiqué* number 91, November/December 2005. Source: [www.etcgroup.org](http://www.etcgroup.org)
- 4 Silvia Ribeiro, 'Quiénes comen y quiénes nos comen', *La Jornada*, Mexico, D.F., 1 March 2003.
- 5 The concept of food sovereignty is discussed and defined later in this Comment: see page 19.
- 6 Interview in *Cosechas amargas* [Bitter harvests], documentary film by Félix Zurita and Joaquín Zúñiga, produced by Alba Films and Fundación Luciérnaga, Nicaragua, 2005.
- 7 Interview in *Cosechas amargas*, as above.
- 8 Interview in *Cosechas amargas*, as above.
- 9 Interview in *Cosechas amargas*, as above.
- 10 Interview in *Cosechas amargas*, as above.
- 11 Translated from the Spanish edition: Jean Ziegler, *El hambre en el mundo explicado a mi hijo*, El Aleph Editores, Barcelona, 2000, pp98-99.
- 12 Interview in *Cosechas amargas* (see note 6).
- 13 Interview in *Nuestro veneno de cada día* [Our daily poison], documentary film by Félix Zurita, produced by Alba Films and Fundación Luciérnaga, Nicaragua, 2006.
- 14 Interview in *Nuestro veneno de cada día*, as above.
- 15 Interview in *Nuestro veneno de cada día*, as above.
- 16 Interview in *Nuestro veneno de cada día*, as above.
- 17 Interview in *Cosechas amargas* (see note 6).
- 18 Interview in *El tigre suelto* (see note 2).
- 19 ETC Group (see note 3).
- 20 Vandana Shiva, *Stolen harvest: The hijacking of the global food supply*, South End Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000, pp85-6.
- 21 Vía Campesina, presentation of the Seed Campaign to the World Social Forum at Porto Alegre, 24 January 2003.
- 22 Interview in *El tigre suelto* (see note 2).
- 23 Interview in *El tigre suelto*, as above.
- 24 Interview in *El tigre suelto*, as above.
- 25 Interview in *Del dicho al hecho* [From words to action], documentary film by Félix Zurita and produced by Alba Films for the Tropical Agronomy Centre for Research and Education (CATIE), Nicaragua, 2004.
- 26 Interview in *Del dicho al hecho*, as above.
- 27 Interview in *Manejo integrado de plagas en manos de familias campesinas* [Integrated pest management by small farming families], a documentary film by Félix Zurita produced by Alba Films for El Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza [the Tropical Agronomy Centre for Research and Education], Nicaragua, 2004.
- 28 See [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)
- 29 'For the peoples' right to produce, feed themselves and exercise their food sovereignty', Final Declaration of the World Forum on Food Sovereignty, Havana, Cuba, 7 September 2001.



Progressio works for sustainable development for communities and people in developing countries. We believe that sustainable development can only be achieved through a sustainable approach to our use of and care for the environment.

Progressio argues for rational use and local management of natural resources to improve the lives of poor urban and rural communities. This includes promoting sustainable cultivation practices and resource management techniques, while improving productivity, income and living conditions in small farming communities.

Producing food in a sustainable way is fundamental to protecting livelihoods and protecting the environment. Progressio works alongside small-scale farmers in several Latin American countries – Peru, Ecuador, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic – helping them to reduce both their poverty and environmental vulnerability by farming in a way that conserves natural resources.

Progressio also carries out advocacy work to raise awareness and understanding of how policy and practice in the North can contribute to environmental degradation and poverty in developing countries. We advocate more and better support to small-scale farmers in developing countries and for policies and practices that take into account the socio-economic and environmental needs of those farmers.

For more information, please visit Progressio's environment website [www.eco-matters.org](http://www.eco-matters.org)



## Food sovereignty

Two conflicting approaches to food production are currently dividing the world: on the one side, the large-scale production of crops for export, controlled by transnational agribusiness companies; on the other, the agriculture of small family farmers.

In this Comment, Ernest Cañada outlines how small family farmers are opposing the dominant agribusiness model with an alternative approach based on the concept of food sovereignty. Drawing on a detailed discussion of the situation in Nicaragua, he argues that the small-scale production of food for local consumption can provide lasting, sustainable food security for people in Latin America and throughout the world.

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