Agroforestry in the Shadow of a Green Monster

The Politics of Confronting Hunger in the Northern Cauca, Colombia

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When driving through the northern Cauca, a state in southwestern Colombia, it is difficult to see anything beyond the fields of green that extend far into the distance, which finally dissolve into the *Cordillera Occidental* and *Cordillera Central* mountain ranges that border the Cauca River valley. This sea of green, often known as the *monstruo verde* (green monster), is composed of vast expanses of sugarcane, a crop that the *ingenios* (sugarcane processors) own and harvest for national biofuel production. Sometimes, as you drive quickly along the gravel side-roads, a patch of oasis appears in the tall cane. Looking closer, you will notice fruit and plantain trees nestled in around the short brick houses. These little patches are remnants of the type of agriculture that used to characterize the valley – a sort of agroforestry called a *finca tradicional* (traditional farm), one that only exists today in small fragments.

These traditional farms are integrated systems of forest, crop and livestock management that have been forced into obscurity in recent decades by the arrival of sugarcane *ingenios*. As the *ingenios* have bought up or rented out the lands of struggling farmers in this region over the past half century, many residents have been forced to leave the area for work in cities. In the northern Cauca, 14.5% of the entire population experience chronic malnutrition.[1] Food insecurity, broadly defined as a lack of physical, social and economic access to a food supply that meets nutritional needs, is an even greater problem: 43% of households are food insecure.[2,3] This situation is emblematic of a global phenomenon in which biofuels and land grabs are threatening food security.

In this essay, I will explore some of the current food projects aimed at alleviating hunger and malnutrition in the northern Cauca, first by explaining the root causes of global hunger, then by contextualizing the region and, finally, by tracing the origins of 'alternative' approaches to international development have manifested in the region. Some of these projects label themselves as working for "food sovereignty," an approach that asserts the right of individual communities to determine their own food systems or processes, ranging from food production to consumption. However, the use of this term obscures a vast diversity of approaches to food systems present in the region. I suggest that applying a newly theorized "food regime/food movement" framework may help elucidate a variety of approaches to hunger in northern Cauca.[4]

The Problems with Food for Profit

Around the world, agroindustry, land grabs, the consolidation of land ownership and the menace of agrochemicals and biofuels threaten the health and nutrition of local populations. These phenomena suggest the impossibility of truly addressing issues of food and nutrition without addressing people's lack of power in determining their own food system. For scholars of international development, this idea is well established. Amartya Sen (1983) showed that a household- or individual-centric approach to food scarcity ignores the importance of addressing the political forces that determine the abilities of groups to access food. Thus, an emphasis on endowments of land and labor; on the conditions of exchange, such as employment, wages and prices; and on changes in social protection are crucial lenses for understanding – and ultimately combating – hunger and famine.

In the 1970s, countries in the developing world began a process of agricultural development that depended on cheap imports to feed workers and on agro-exports to boost national GDP.[5] This policy shifted developing countries from importing almost no grains in the first half of the century to importing half of the world's grains by 1971.[5] Models of economic development suggest that the incomes that result from such specialization should translate to more and better food for all, but unfortunately this has not been the case: incomes have often not translated to increased food access, both because they were increases for only a select few and because the increases were insufficient. In many instances, such food exports have occurred in the face of widespread malnutrition. Food insecurity usually only makes headlines when food prices skyrocket and riots break out, but it is an under-the-radar, daily reality for much of the world.

Hunger in the developing world is partially rooted in the creation of a system in which development institutions such as the World Bank export industrial models of agriculture, which involve high inputs of petrochemicals and machinery use. Traditional economics proposes that agricultural productivity growth is the driving force of economic development, but this perspective is highly flawed. Most economic growth models, such as the foundational Harris-Todaro model, define agricultural productivity growth as allowing workers to exit the rural agricultural sector and enter the urban, "modern" sector.[6] Such models assume that the true goal of economic development is to draw workers out of food production and into manufacturing in order to create economic wealth, ignoring the role that smallholder agriculture[1]* can play in creating livelihoods for the rural poor.

A system of food distribution has emerged since the 1970s that, while supported by institutions such as the World Bank, is increasingly condemned as both inequitable and ecologically unsustainable.[7,8] The economic liberalization of developing countries in the '80s and '90s, as part of widely promoted policies by development institutions, combined with developed countries' own trade protectionist measures, led to the import of environmentally malignant, Western-style monocultures (commonly defined as the practice of growing one crop over large areas) into developing countries.[5] This form of agriculture uses chemical fertilizers and pesticide-based, low-labor and highly mechanized farming processes of wheat, corn and soy, which deplete long-term soil quality. Moreover, they are associated with a number of health and environmental implications.[9] The system has also been criticized for contributing to food insecurity both by reducing the nutritional diversity of national food production to only a handful of crops and by making developing countries dependent on these exports, the prices of which fluctuate with newly-liberalized markets.[7,10] Treating the problem of malnutrition as a mere production problem ignores the fact that issues of malnutrition and food insecurity are rooted in unequal power dynamics. This problem is created by the concentration of monopolistic political and economic powers among a select few corporations (often multinationals) and the lack of democratic control of much of the food system.

Consequently, dealing with problems of food necessitates the reconceptualization of food systems through the lens of power dynamics. As the movement for "food sovereignty," a term coined by the

* Smallholder agriculture refers to family farming that occurs on relatively small plots of land.

international peasants' movement, La Vía Campesina, points out, home-grown solutions to food insecurity are needed. When food systems are left to the forces of globalization, markets, and neoliberalism, the result is often food insecurity among the poorest.[9] The term "food sovereignty," as opposed to "food security," centers on the basic human right to food and to the control over access to food through the democratic control of agriculture, a right affirmed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[4] La Vía Campesina has brought together 200 million peasants from multiple continents under this banner of food sovereignty.

The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) report in 2007 highlighted the agreement of hundreds of researchers on the necessity of a small-holder and agro-ecological approach to agriculture, one that recognizes agriculture's place in the broader ecosystem. Agro-ecology emphasizes the importance of conducting agriculture that is sensitive to the needs of the local ecosystem. The IAASTD establishes that integrated, smallholder agriculture is both more able to optimize long-term production and more ecologically sustainable than industrial agriculture, maintaining biodiversity and limiting the use of imported chemical fertilizers and pesticides. This kind of smallholder, agro-ecological production requires the use of local inputs, knowledge, and practices to thrive. Thus, intimate knowledge on the part of the farmer is used in place of chemicals in order to boost yields.[11,12] The implications of such recommendations support the need for food production that is returned to the hands of local smallholders, not large agro-business.

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Introducing the Northern Cauca

The northern Cauca is a historically Afro-descendant area located a one- to two- hour drive from Cali, one of Colombia's major cities. In the past few decades, many residents of the northern Cauca have been forced to migrate to Cali because of lack of work. There is a high incidence of poverty in the northern Cauca; 42% of the population lives below the government poverty line.[1]

In the summer of 2012, I spent two months in the southwest of Colombia conducting fieldwork for my Masters of Philosophy in Development Studies. Much discourse regarding post-development and "alternatives to development" has emerged from this area.[13] Such new approaches, which are deeply skeptical of the standard growth-oriented, neoliberal approach to international development, are rapidly gaining traction: globally, social movements have begun to voice their alternatives, often through the World Social Forum. This growing discussion raises questions: to what extent can social movements challenge the economic and political systems that create poverty and hunger? And, to what extent can they formulate successful answers to these problems?

The history behind the growing food insecurity in the Cauca valley is tied to the gradual undermining of peasant agriculture, the consolidation of land tenure,* and a state development agenda that favors businesses over people. At the beginning of the 20th century, the region was characterized by many small farms run by the descendants of slaves who, once freed, had found livelihoods at the edge of plantations.[14] These populations developed a form of traditional agriculture, the *finca tradicional*. Over time, however, these farms began to disappear because of outside influences. A series of outside academic institutions (many from the US) and government initiatives facilitated a shift from traditional crops, such as plantains, cacao and fruits, to seasonal crops, such as soy, corn and beans, which were seen at the time as the best path to productivity growth.[14,15]

Many of the seasonal crops failed, and as peasants became indebted to the *Caja Agraria* (an agrarian government lending agency), they lost their lands.[15] Since the 1970s, partially as a result of this consolidation of land tenure, the predominance of seasonal crops has given way to monocultures as *ingenios* have bought up or converted previously rented lands for sugarcane production.[16] As a result, land tenure is highly consolidated and dominated by a few major landowners who produce sugarcane. The national biofuels mandate, which requires that all vehicles run on a certain amount of biofuels, has exacerbated this spread of sugarcane for biofuels production.[16]

Large-scale development projects and an industry-oriented development agenda have also contributed to the growing issue of food insecurity. In 1985, the CVC (the Cauca Valley Autonomous Regional Corporation) built the La Salvajina hydroelectric dam, aiming to protect sugarcane plantations from the flooding of the Cauca River and to produce energy for the city of Cali. The government and the CVC have not yet fulfilled their promise to use the revenue created by the dam to create development projects in the communities that were displaced by the dam. In addition to displacing more than 3,000 families, the project has altered soil quality and fishing conditions, and certain forms of agriculture have become more difficult. As a result, residents' livelihoods and food sources have narrowed.[16,17]

More recently, the 1995 Páez Law designed to incentivize business development through industrial parks was enacted in the Colombian states of Cauca and Huila. Through this law, the government encouraged the establishment of new businesses such as agricultural, ranching, industrial, touristic and mining projects via tax exemptions and tax holidays. However, because the northern Cauca's workforce lacks the proper qualifications for many of the jobs created by these projects, businesses have brought in outsiders to work at the parks.[1,8,19] Thus, while the enterprises created through this law have created employment opportunities and diversified the region's economic base, the law has failed to increase sustained employment in the region.[18]

A Turning Point: The Law 70 and Afro-Cultural and Territorial Rights

In 1993, the passing of Law 70 (the *Ley de Negritudes*), signaled a key turning point for Afro communities in Colombia and brought the concept of "food sovereignty" into the national agenda. The law gave Afro-descendent groups the right to cultural and communal territorial rights. For example, it designated improvements to education, training, credit access and other issues for black communities and gave lands to Afro-communities in the Pacific region of the country.[13] The Afro-Colombian social movement, *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* (PCN), emerged from these mobilizations to push not only for these defended cultural and ethnic rights, but also for the rights to collective land. An important part of this Afro-Colombian rights discourse centers on "food sovereignty," echoing the term coined by Vía Campesina.

However, other factors have prevented food sovereignty from gaining significant traction among the PCN in the northern Cauca. While other historically Afro areas in Colombia received collective land titles from the government, the northern Cauca was not one of these regions;[2]* because of this, the PCN in the northern Cauca continues to mobilize predominantly around land. In particular, it focuses on keeping mining titles from multinational corporations, such as AngloGold Ashanti, so that the corporations cannot push community members off their lands. The struggle over mining rights comes in addition to regular human rights violations

* Because the mobilizations were led by activists in the Pacific region, the Afro-Colombian social movement put forward a version of 'blackness' centered upon the riverine, rural cultures of the Pacific region, and did not include the northern Cauca, the population of which is seen instead as peasant or semi-urban. [20]

(such as kidnappings of activists) and violent conflict between guerillas, paramilitaries and the Colombian army.[16] Perhaps because of this plethora of issues, the PCN has not been able to focus specifically on promoting food sovereignty.

In addition to the PCN, a plethora of NGOs and development institutions have emerged to address issues of poverty and hunger in the region, focusing on supporting the Afro populations identified and protected under Law 70. These organizations have adopted the label of "food sovereignty" for much of their work and have approached the issue from diverse perspectives. For example, the regional development corporation VallenPaz, whose name literally means "valley in peace," was founded by business owners in the region to keep *coca* production and its associated violence out of the region, and sees its work on promoting traditional farming and nutrition as necessary to that larger aim.[21] The NGO Asociación Cultural Casa del Niño, on the other hand, supports traditional farming for a different purpose: to offer livelihoods for the many formerly local residents who have been forced to leave the region.[22] Such NGOs, many of which have strong ties to Afro social mobilizations, have undertaken projects to restore traditional farms in the region.

"Food Sovereignty" and "Food Alternatives": A Diversity of Approaches

Among social movements and development institutions alike, various self-proclaimed "food sovereignty" projects are currently being implemented. The PCN Project Solstice is the only example in the northern Cauca of a community that has successfully gained collective territorial rights. Residents farm this land according to agro-ecological principles. Other NGOs, as mentioned above, support similar traditional farms, but these are individually, not communally, owned and managed. While communal ownership can help levy the market power necessary for participating in value chains, it does not allow residents to access private credit if desired.

A consortium of domestic and international organizations has piloted a project called *Territorios Étnicos Productivos,* or "Productive Ethnic Territories," aimed at helping farmers develop traditional farms that place extra emphasis on intercropping* cacao for export. The regional development organization, VallenPaz, has a traditional farm project as well, although many of the project participants I spoke with expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of VallenPaz's help, noting that its training sessions were often unnecessary and that the purpose of credit was more effective in helping farmers purchase inputs for production.

While many of the projects aim to support *fincas tradicionales,* each of these projects is rooted in different visions of development and attitudes toward the importance of an Afro-oriented social movement. This variety shapes each project's approach to re-envisioning the northern Cauca food system. Variety can be seen in the projects' approaches to the environment, to knowledge forms and transmission, economic growth, community work, land and their different organizational structures. For example, while some emphasize collaborative community work, others place emphasis on the individual. Some see the incorporation of farmers in the research process as necessary, while others use outside experts to transfer new technology forms to farmers. Land is an especially important issue; only some organizations directly assert the importance of land redistribution in order to push for food sovereignty. Most of them do not, instead focusing solely on helping traditional farmers increase productivity.

Even among the PCN organizations there is great diversity in terms of the understandings of food sovereignty. Through "Project Solstice," (*Proyecto Solsticio*), the PCN has established a traditional farm in which approximately 40 families collectively own and farm the land, producing a variety of agroforestry crops that hark back to the agriculture of their ancestors: plantains, citrus, livestock and other foodstuffs. The PCN branch in the urban area of Puerto Tejada does not have traditional farms, but instead defines "food sovereignty" as backyard garden projects, in which women grow tomatoes, cilantro and onions for household consumption. In La Toma, although the PCN's women's group has a collective plot that they tend, the group does not apply the same agroforestry traditional farming principles as in other groups. Instead, it utilizes farming fields of plantain monocultures and occasionally uses pesticides. The PCN La Toma also has a plantain- and cacao-processing factory, which was built with funds from a Spanish coalition. The variety of PCN projects raises the question: if a project does not address issues of land tenure and choice over foods and products, is this project really a "food sovereignty" program? Does it present a truly "alternative" perspective on hunger and poverty, one that re-envisions the power relations implicit in hegemonic development?

The variety of projects under the banner of "food sovereignty" and "food alternatives" do not seem to reflect the initial goals outlined by the Afro-Colombian mobilizations that introduced them. Rather than presenting alternatives to development, many of the projects appear to use these labels to promote quite contradictory approaches. This variety can be seen in the differing attitudes of the projects: for example, those that endorse export-oriented economic growth rather than livelihood sustenance, and those of top-down knowledge diffusion rather than bottom-up knowledge creation. Thus, despite the transformative nature of the term "food sovereignty" as it was originally conceived, the projects described as "food sovereignty" initiatives often do not share the same political orientation or goals. This indicates the potential for co-optation present in the various manifestations of "food sovereignty." Does food sovereignty mean territorial and political autonomy, or ecological sustainability, or does it simply mean extra fresh produce?

A Possible Framework for Assessing the Transformative Potential of Food Systems Alternatives

My goal here has not been to prescribe one correct way to alleviate hunger and malnutrition, but rather to argue for the importance of understanding these approaches as intrinsically political phenomena. In finding solutions, it is crucial to be cognizant of the variety of political projects that underpin any general approach to food systems.

In dealing with such complexity, I suggest that Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) offer a possible framework for analysis. They assert that we can understand approaches to hunger as proposing two general solutions. The first, a "food regime" approach, urges a continuation of a corporate model of hunger alleviation, while the second sees this model as at the root of the problem itself. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck argue that only the second, a "food movement" approach, truly identifies and addresses the underlying roots of hunger. They divide this food movement approach into two categories: "progressive" and "radical." Progressive approaches aim to empower communities marginalized by the current system. These emphasize the right to food and social protection, as well as more sustainable, agro-ecological forms of production. Radical approaches, on the other hand, aim not just to empower populations, but to also reassert their entitlements to the land and natural resources. In the northern Cauca, "food regime" approaches tend to ignore the role of inequitable land tenure and big agribusiness in contributing to hunger. On the other hand, "food movement" approaches do not aim just to alleviate hunger, but also to succinctly identify a key cause of hunger: a regional development model that favors sugarcane producers over local residents.

It is impossible to categorize certain food projects in the northern Cauca as clearly part of "food movements" or "food regimes." Instead, projects tend to have overlapping characteristics. For example, the PCN La Toma's plantain processing factory does not seem to exemplify the kind of agro-ecological production of "food movement" approaches. Yet, in other ways, the PCN La Toma's approach to social organization does fall into the "food movement" approach: the group's organization is largely non-hierarchical and emphasizes collective work, both features of a radical approach to food systems. Similarly, while Vallenpaz might be dismissed as a reformist institution, it contains elements that may be characterized as "food movement," for example by supporting agro-ecological production.

Such a framework offers the potential to understand which approaches to food systems challenge the industrial, corporate food paradigm, and which do not. It is surely a necessary question to re-emphasize in light of the divergent goals that food sovereignty projects currently pursue in the region. If food systems are truly to serve the interests of the communities of the northern Cauca, paying attention to the transformative power of different approaches to food sovereignty must be of central importance.

References available at
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