

AN IMPERCEPTIBLE GROWTH: HEALTHY FOOD AND TRANSFORMATIVE SOLIDARITY

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It is well known that COVID-19 has exacerbated an already precarious food and nutrition situation in many countries. Over the last five years, the number of people affected by food insecurity in Latin America has been on the rise. In 2019, a third of the population, amounting to 191 million people across the region, suffered from moderate or serious food insecurity.¹ Among those affected, there are almost 20 million more women than men: 32,4% are women, and 25,7% are men.² The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, CEPAL) calculated that the number of people living in poverty increased to 209 million by the end of 2020 – 22 million more than the year before.³ Following decades of austerity policies, weakened public institutions have prevented states from providing the necessary responses to comply with their human rights obligations to tackle the current crisis. What is even more worrying are the clearly regressive measures that states have taken amid the crisis. One example is the flexibilization of employment in Ecuador, which made working conditions even more precarious.⁴ Another example is the downsizing of food reserves in Brazil just as the pandemic hit, following the dismantling of the Companhia Nacional de Abastecimento (National Supply Company, CONAB), which had been set up at the end of 2019.⁵

Amid the crisis, in addition to documenting state violations committed either through their actions or by omitting their obligations, we have also compiled social organizations' initiatives that seek to promote solidarity and a sense of community in moments of hunger and concern. In our view, these initiatives are ways of reaffirming human dignity, peoples' sovereignty, and their capacity to persevere in the face of adversity. This article intends to reflect more in depth on some of the

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1 FAO, FIDA, OPS, WFP and UNICEF. (2020). *Panorama de la seguridad alimentaria y nutrición en América Latina y el Caribe 2020*. Available in Spanish at: doi.org/10.4060/cb2242es

2 *Ibid.* p. 16.

3 Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL). (2021). *Panorama Social de América Latina 2020*. (LC/PUB.2021/2-P/Rev.1).

4 See: fianecuador.org.ec/2020/09/01/informe-crisis-alimentaria-en-ecuador-nuestro-derecho-a-la-alimentacion-en-tiempos-de-covid-19/.

5 Peres, João and Victor, Matioli. (2020, September 19). *O governo deveria estocar arroz, não você*. Available at: ojoioetrigo.com.br/2020/09/o-governo-deveria-estocar-arroz-nao-voce/

self-managed initiatives that have emerged in two Latin American countries: Ecuador and Brazil. Based on interviews with members of the Movimiento Sem Terra (Landless Movement, MST), the Movimiento dos Pequenos Agricultores (Movement of Small-Scale Farmers, MPA) in Brazil, and of the Huancavilcas/Santa Elena communities, the Corporación de Organizaciones Campesinas e Indígenas de Flores (Association of Peasant and Indigenous Organizations of Flores, COCIF), the Unión de Organizaciones Campesinas de Esmeraldas (Union of Peasant Organizations of Esmeraldas, UOCE), and the Centro Agrícola Cantonal de Quevedo (Agricultural Centre of Quevedo Canton, CACQ), as well as through consultations on social media and by reviewing other sources, we seek to understand how these initiatives emerged, how they work, what their scope is, and which actors are involved. We conclude by assessing the extent to which these initiatives are merely conjunctural one-offs, or whether they constitute an alternative for reinventing social relations, and relations of production and care.

RANDI RANDI: FOOD BARTERING AND SOLIDARITY AMONG PEOPLES

Randi randi (a Quichua term which means ‘barter’, ‘to give and receive’, or ‘to give for the sake of giving without harm’) is an ancestral custom that peoples from Latin America practiced as a way of trading their goods. It consisted in exchanging goods of the same value or importance. In the current context of COVID-19, this action is regaining ground. Bartering demonstrates that, in times of crisis, solidarity among peoples is crucial, and that money-based commercial transactions are not the be-all and end-all.

During the pandemic, lockdown measures imposed by the Ecuadorian government led to, among other measures, the closure of local markets, the prohibition of peasant and indigenous fairs, and the banning of informal trading and artisanal fisheries. These measures predominantly impacted rural sectors. Hence, between March and May 2020, several indigenous, peasants’, and fishers’ organizations started practicing food bartering in order to address food needs. Two thousand families from 27 communities in the Flores municipality (Riobamba Canton) benefitted from food bartering undertaken with CACQ (Quevedo Canton), in which 150 families from across six CACQ communities participated and benefitted. In parallel, UOCE also engaged in food bartering: 500 families from their grassroots communities participated by donating food, which benefitted 956 families from across popular neighborhoods in the province of Esmeraldas. They locally bartered with fishing families. Approximately fifteen tons of food from peasant farms were donated to Huancavilcas communities.

Meanwhile, the Movimiento Nacional Campesino (National Peasant Movement, FECAOL) also engaged in food bartering.⁶ According to their reports, this initiative was nation-wide. Approximately 1000 indigenous and Montubio families participated in fighting against the food crisis in Ecuador, in alliance with Mujeres sin Límites (Women without Limits), the Tungurahua prefecture, and the Conferencia Plurinacional e Intercultural de Soberanía Alimentaria (Intercultural Conference of Food Sovereignty, COPISA). A novelty was FECAOL’s establishment of peasant pharmacies in several popular neighborhoods of Guayaquil to supply local people with medicinal plants, as access to health centers was limited during the pandemic.

In addition to food bartering, people also shared culturally adequate recipes that stem from rural women’s cooking pots. These are alive with wisdom and traditional knowledge, in particular about medicinal plants that women from peasant and indigenous organizations preserve in their respective territories. These plants mostly

⁶ For more information, please visit: www.alainet.org/es/articulo/206824

helped to strengthen the immune system of consumers, but they also served to recuperate the living memory of healthcare. Women in these organizations prioritize life and show how important it is to care for earth and for the reproduction of life, and how this can become an objective for all community members. This is what these women mean when they speak of food sovereignty. In addition to exchanging native seeds, the produce they exchange stems from diversified and agroecological food systems. The food is used to partly cover their own families' needs, while local markets are supplied with any surplus produce. These families grow food in an environment of tranquility and safety and do not feel particularly vulnerable to the virus. Indeed, thanks to their surrounding diversity, they are able to produce independently without relying on agrochemicals.

Several operational modes and strategies were implemented to organize the bartering. First, they surveyed available produce in peasant farms. Then they brought it all to a single space where the food was adequately packed to then be transported. Logistics were in the able hands of young people who collectively led all activities. They also reached out to municipal governments to count on their support in mobilizing local people to collect and then distribute food for bartering. According to young members of CACQ – who have formed their own political and agroecological unit named Machete y Garabato (Machete and Scribble) – bartering is an act of live currency. This is because exchanged produce not only has a nutritional and economic value, it also represents the work values of peasants and Indigenous Peoples who grow food agroecologically and in harmony with nature. In the face of lockdown, self-organization was fundamental. Coordinators were able to obtain some safeguards that enabled them to move with no restrictions. This was also the case with families who needed to move to see to their harvests.

MINGA⁷ AGAINST HUNGER: “WE ARE NOT DONATING OUR SURPLUS. WE DISTRIBUTE WHAT WE PRODUCE”

In the face of hunger and food insecurity unleashed by measures to contain the pandemic, members of peasant organizations (interviewed in Brazil and Ecuador) spontaneously organized solidarity actions to feed homeless people and unemployed persons who had been evicted. There were varied ways of providing food: donations of produce from camps, settlements and peasant farms; donations of food baskets; access to meals through soup kitchens; and access to locally established food banks where food could be donated to. It is hard to ascertain the size of these initiatives, but evidence shows that they were significant. MST affirms that they are developing solidarity actions across 24 states in Brazil, while MPA works in 13 states. In Ecuador, our research only covers the coastal province of Santa Elena, and coastal cantons of Quevedo and Esmeraldas, as well as the canto of Riobamba de la Sierra. MST reported that it donated 3,400 tons of food between March and September 2020,⁸ and MPA registered a volume of 1,100 tons by February 2021 (Huancavilcas communities reported having donated 11 tons of vegetables, benefiting 600 families). In Brazil, a collective action named Real Food mapped over 300 initiatives between August and October 2020, led by both urban and rural social movements, peoples' organizations, and grassroots groups which emerged to bring together healthy food producers with consumers.⁹

Access to healthy food had already been a major concern of Brazilian society before the pandemic, and as the current crisis hit, it received renewed attention. Healthy food became a cornerstone of efforts to build new urban-rural relations. Interviewees emphasized that it was not about charity, but rather about solidarity. It was not enough to just distribute food; rather, it was necessary to work closely and jointly

7 Minga is an indigenous traditional form of community or collective work with different purposes.

8 Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (MST). (2020, September 9). *Desde o início da pandemia, MST já doou 3400 toneladas de alimentos você*. Available at: mst.org.br/2020/09/09/desde-o-inicio-da-pandemia-mst-ja-douu-3400-toneladas-de-alimentos/

9 See: acaocoletivacomidadeverdade.org/

with urban dwellers to better understand where food comes from, who produces it, and under which conditions. They highlighted how important it is for the urban population to place value on peasant agroecological food production, and even to learn how to create agroecological vegetable gardens in cities. In this sense, different food solidarity initiatives implied securing collective ways of addressing food-related issues. One example is Brazil's municipal councils for food and nutrition security. Another example can be seen in people's food committees weaving new types of social and community relations. In some cases, local health agents participate,¹⁰ covering tasks that go from organizing local food banks, to training in social rights, and even to training in agroecology for community vegetable gardens. Similarly, MPA shares how food distribution channels have been restructured so as to adjust to health security protocols that were established to contain the pandemic. MPA youth reinvented operations to distribute food. For example, in Rio de Janeiro they signed an agreement with over 80 workers from the Independent Taxi-Drivers' Association of Santa Teresa to distribute food to consumers' addresses. This agreement not only benefitted food consumers overall, it also helped taxi drivers who had seen their incomes drop due to reduced mobility during the pandemic.¹¹ Youth was also at the forefront of the Huancavilcas community experience, as they organized transport and distribution logistics of donated foods. In Brazil, many of the initiatives to restructure social relations to feed people are documented in databanks such as the following: <https://agroecologiaemrede.org.br>.

10 Local health agents are trained by social or community organizations (sometimes in cooperation with municipal authorities) to assist people with public or community health issues, especially in early detection of problems and prevention practices.

11 Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (MPA). (2020, April 15). *Campanhas do MPA asseguram a distribuição de alimentos saudáveis durante a pandemia da Covid-19*. Available at: mpabrasil.org.br/noticias/mpa-asseguram-a-distribui-cao-de-alimentos-covid-19/

CLOSING REMARKS

The pandemic has triggered an era of uncertainty and volatility, with structural reconfigurations taking place at several levels. Arturo Escobar affirms:

Food [...] is one of the areas in which there is the most communitarian and re-localizing innovation (that is, innovations that break with the patriarchal, racist and capitalist ways of living). One example is the emphasis placed on food sovereignty, agroecology, urban vegetable gardens etc. These re-localizing activities, especially if they are agroecological and 'from below', enable us to rethink national and international production frameworks, everyday common things, and urban-rural relations [...] This re-localizing builds on a series of strategic verbs: to eat, to learn, to heal, to dwell, to build, to get to know. It goes well beyond reducing our ecological footprint; it involves significantly reorienting how we design the worlds we live in.¹²

It is therefore essential to understand the potential that lies in these experiments and proposals in order to forge new pathways to realize the human right to adequate food and nutrition. To this end, it is key to closely follow the initiatives that we have humbly documented in this article. This type of experience has not only emerged in Brazil and Ecuador, but also in Latin America as a whole, and across other continents. Clearly, these are not charity initiatives that seek to mitigate the hunger crisis unleashed by COVID-19. They do not replicate social relations of domination that strengthen the industrial market-centric model of production and distribution of junk food. Rather, these initiatives are self-organized by peasant and indigenous producers (not by supermarkets or companies), which are reconfiguring relations of food production and distribution in such a way as to strengthen a social and solidarity economy.¹³ What's more, it is worth noting that these initiatives have improved access to healthy agroecological food for people who have limited resources. This is a significant achievement. Until now, discussions had mainly been about guaranteeing that agroecological production receive sufficient support from consumers. They were not necessarily about guaranteeing that those with a high level

12 Escobar, A. (2020). El pensamiento en tiempo de pospandemia. In R. L. Segato et al. *Pandemia al sur*. (1st ed., pp. 31-54). Prometeo Libros.

13 The Constitution of Ecuador, in Article 288, stipulates that the Ecuadorian economic system is a social and solidarity system, thereby placing the solidarity economy on a par with the public and private economy. The goal is to promote a

of food insecurity gain access to healthy food. It is fundamental that we assess how to ensure that this trend continues. Equally important is the fact that these proposals are de-commodifying food. They reaffirm communitarian values to guarantee the production of healthy food that also reaches those most in need. It is essential that in the future we research more in-depth how these social and community initiatives are reshaping relations with public and governmental institutions, and are secured as spaces in which to exercise autonomy and the realization of rights.

new development model which the Constitution defines as “*sumak kawsay*” (in Spanish “*buen vivir*”). The Movimiento de Economía Social y Solidaria del Ecuador (Social and Solidarity Economy Movement of Ecuador, MESSE) describes the social and solidarity economy as follows: «a way living together among people and with nature which satisfies HUMAN needs and guarantees the sustainment of LIFE, through a COMPREHENSIVE approach, by means of the strength acquired from ORGANISING, and by applying ANCESTRAL knowledge and practices to transform SOCIETY and build a culture of PEACE».