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From 2017's forthcoming book,
*Fertile Ground:
Scaling Agroecology from the Ground Up*



Honduras: Building a National Agroecology Movement Against the Odds

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This case study describes the context for the development of Honduras' decades-long movement to create ecologically appropriate farming systems, spread them across the landscapes, and defend the rights of small-scale family farmers. It highlights the work of Vecinos Honduras, an NGO that supports community-led development and agroecology primarily in Honduras' drought-prone south, and the National Association for the Promotion of Ecological Agriculture (ANAFEA), an important network to which it belongs.

The Seeds of a Movement

Don Elias Sanchez of Honduras once said, "If the mind of a campesino is a desert, his farm will look like a desert." One of the early leaders of Honduras's 40-year agroecology movement, Don Elias sought to improve agriculture by starting with people, not farms. He believed that if farmers' innate creativity and motivation were cultivated (what he called "the human farm"), they could transform their farms, their lives, and their communities.

Don Elias started his career as an educator, and in 1974 joined the Ministry of Natural Resources to direct the training of agricultural extension agents. He became frustrated because while most Hondurans struggled in poverty on steep, mountainside farms, their harsh reality was largely ignored by agricultural professionals. Instead, extension agents promoted the inappropriate technology packages of conventional agriculture (hybrid seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides). He tried to introduce them to alternative thinking and expose them to the realities of rural life through field visits. "Technology transfer' is an offensive concept," he believed. "You have to transform people."¹

In 1980, Don Elias left the Ministry to try a different approach, developing his Granja Loma Linda, teaching farm on the outskirts of the capital city of Tegucigalpa. He turned a tract of poor-quality, steeply sloping land crossed by a ravine into a terraced, diversified, productive farm. It was a place of constant innovation with local resources, where many hundreds of campesinos and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) came for hands-on learning about personal development and agroecological farming. From 1980 until his death in 2000, Don Elias is estimated to have helped 30,000 hillside farmers shift from slash and burn farming to more agroecological approaches that were productive and provided a good livelihood.²

Then, in November of 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated much of Central America, causing landslides and massive loss of soil and farmland. It was the region's worst natural disaster in 200 years, affecting 6.4 million people. At Granja Loma Linda, a landslide came down the center of the ravine and buried Don Elias' training center and home, even while

some of his terraced plots on the hillsides survived. "This Mitch is a lesson I hope we will never forget," said Don Elias at the time.³ The lesson was that even a model farm could not be protected if the upstream farmers were not practicing soil conservation. Agroecology needed to be scale up from something being practiced by isolated farmers, to an approach adopted across watersheds and landscapes. Don Elias died in 2000 as the reconstruction of his training center was nearing completion, but his dream lives on.

Agriculture in Honduras

Hillside farming, poverty, and political marginalization have long been linked in Central America. As happened throughout Latin America, when Spanish colonizers arrived in Honduras, they took the prime farmland in the valleys, forced indigenous people to work it, and relegated them to hillside farming to produce their own food. It was the beginning of a long and painful history of exploitation and political oppression.

In the 1960s, the "Green Revolution" came to Central America. It was instrumental in creating smallholder system across the region that combined traditional shifting cultivation (slash and burn) with dependence on modern chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and hybrid seeds. As land becomes more scarce and fallow periods shorter, farmers mine the soil nutrients, leading to increased soil erosion, dependence on chemical fertilizers, and a steady decrease in yields.

The conditions of poverty and marginalization in the 1970s led peasant organizations to demand land reform—with some limited successes.⁴ Initially, their primary focus was on obtaining access to land, as well as agricultural inputs. Later, a strong focus on agroecological alternatives to conventional farming developed.

In the 1980s, the neoliberal policies promoted in Honduras and across Latin America pushed to "modernize" the agricultural sector. Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), required by the IMF, World Bank, and the United States, reduced the role of the state, slashed budgets for agricultural extension, deregulated international trade and investment, and promoted privatization and corporate investment. Support for land reform declined. The favored agricultural model was the promotion of high value (monoculture) crops for export. Overall, family farmers were not considered to be economically viable, with neoliberal theory holding that growth in Gross Domestic Product would trickle down, creating more



Farmer-to-farmer learning continues to this day. Photo by Alejandra Arce Indacochea.

jobs for them in other sectors. It has not worked out that way.

After Hurricane Mitch, some hoped that the clear evidence of the vulnerabilities created by conventional agriculture, contrasted with the superior resilience of agroecological farming, would lead to a change in national priorities and policies and increased support.⁵ Instead, neoliberal policies and investments in conventional agriculture were re-doubled. For example, in 2001, the Plan Puebla Panamá was launched as a Mesoamerica-wide initiative to promote infrastructure, such as highways, ports, and telecommunications, in particular for export agriculture and tourism. That was followed in 2005 by the passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which built upon and extended the earlier North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1994) between the US, Canada, and Mexico.

A 2009 military coup in Honduras weakened the rule of law and increased political violence and impunity.⁶ Gang violence, drug trafficking, common crime, as well as political persecution left Honduras with the highest homicide rate in the world in 2012.⁷ In this context, the Honduran government has continued to deepen this neoliberal policy trajectory: providing broad concessions for international mining and hydroelectric

companies that allow rural communities to be dispossessed of their land; promoting laws to privatize seed ownership and introduce GMOs; promoting Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEDs)—which are essentially free trade enclaves within the country, with their own laws and governance.

Predictably, the interests of the economic elite predominate in shaping national policies, while family farmers and their interests are largely ignored. Campesino farmers seeking to promote agroecology or protect their land and territory have little political voice. In recent years, dozens of campesino leaders involved in land struggles have been killed. Tragically this included indigenous, environmental, and human rights activist Berta Cáceres, the General Coordinator of the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH, Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras), who was shot to death on March 3, 2016.

Response: A Movement for Agroecology

In this tremendously challenging context, the agroecology movement sparked by Don Elias Sanchez and many other leaders has continued to seek pathways to grow and evolve. Farmers and civil society leaders who have witnessed agroecology's economic, social, cultural, and environmental contributions have been seeking to expand its great potential

to contribute to a more hopeful future for the country. Since the late 1970s, many farmers' organizations and NGOs have supported farmer-to-farmer approaches emphasizing the participation and leadership of farmers in all research and extension activities. Key sustainable agricultural techniques have included soil conservation, in-row tillage, crop residue management, cover crops, agroforestry, companion planting, and use of organic fertilizers. At the time of Hurricane Mitch in the late 1990's, an estimated 10,000 farmers and farmer-promoters were using agroecological approaches on their farms across Central America. Yet these represented only a fraction of the more than four million hillside farmers in the region at the time.^{8,9}

After Hurricane Mitch, a study was carried out to measure the resistance and resilience of sustainable agriculture to natural disasters, in comparison to conventional practices.¹⁰ A key finding of the study was that agroecologically farmed plots fared better than conventionally farmed plots on key ecological agriculture indicators. For example, surface erosion was 2-3 times greater on conventional plots. Agroecological plots suffered 58% less damage in Honduras, 70% less in Nicaragua, and 99% less in Guatemala. Agroecological methods may not have added to resilience when damage originated on unprotected slopes or watersheds upstream. There is a need to work at the level of the wider watershed or entire hillside.

Bottom Up Strategies, Government Indifference, and Opposition

In spite of this clear evidence of the effectiveness of family farmer agroecology, after Hurricane Mitch the Honduran government did not increase its support or alter its unfavorable policies. Nevertheless, Honduran farmers' organizations and NGOs, as well international NGOs, have continued to support various strategies to spread agroecological farming and create a broader movement. Key strategies have included teaching farms, advocacy networks, and community-based programs.

Community-based Programs

A number of NGOs are supporting community-based efforts to strengthen and spread agroecology. Vecinos Honduras is one of these, and is also one of the 32 member organizations of the National Association for the Promotion of Ecological Agriculture (ANAFEA, Asociación Nacional de Fomento de la Agricultura Ecológica).

The Role of Vecinos Honduras in Supporting Community-led Agroecology

Farmer leaders and professionals who had long been involved with the agroecology movement in Honduras founded Vecinos Honduras in 2009. The organization grew out of the previous work of NGO World Neighbors, when it closed programs in the country.

Vecinos' core program strategy is to strengthen the capacity of community-based organizations to lead processes of local development so people can improve their own lives. While programs emphasize sustainable farming and food sovereignty, they also focus on community health, citizen participation, gender, youth, environmental regeneration, resilience to climate change, and risk management.

As Edwin Escoto has described of Vecinos:

“We start programs through dialogue with communities, usually who are asking for our support. Then we carry out processes of participatory planning with them, so together we can understand their reality, identify priorities, and develop initial action plans. Based on the priority challenges farmers have identified, we then facilitate farmer experimentation with them. Often the initial program staff promoters are experienced and successful agroecological farmers from other communities. Local farmers test a few agroecological practices, such as improving soil conservation, the use of cover crops and green manures, and the diversification of crops to improve their farming strategies. The key is for farmers themselves to observe the results, and ideally identify recognizable results and benefits. After a year, as they continue to learn and innovate, community organizations select motivated farmers as promoters to teach others, farmer-to-farmer. They use field days, inviting people to visit a successful farm, learning exchanges between communities, and also provide direct advice and follow-up to other farmers interested in benefitting from more agroecological approaches.”¹¹

Community organizations, such as the Association of Experimenting Farmers of San Antonio of Las Guarumas, are strengthened to coordinate work they prioritize related to agriculture, health, and other issues. Vecinos Honduras works with community members to promote a critical mass of farmers who are experimenting and adopting agroecological practices. The assumption is that this critical mass of farmers, involved in effective local organizations, can create a multiplier effect to further spread agroecological practices across families and communities. Community-



Woman with millet harvest in southern Honduras. Photo by Christopher Sacco.

based organizations are linked to wider networks and movements, such as ANAFAE, to address the root causes of poverty and environmental degradation and create more enabling policies. In addition to sustainably improving farming production, with an emphasis on basic grains and diversification for improved nutrition, other activities that often motivate community members include savings and credit groups, improving basic household and community infrastructure for sanitation, hygiene and health (latrines, water purification, improved cooking stoves, managing garbage, etc.), local grain banks, and leadership training for women, men, and youth. “In Vecinos we are placing more emphasis on working with communities to better connect farmers to local markets,” said Escoto. He continued:

“For example, using community radio and other popular communications tools to spread understanding about agroecological farming and the value of people eating the local, traditional foods that farmers produce. We believe there is important opportunity for youth, many of who don’t see a strong future for themselves in their communities. We are also facing an incredible drought crisis in southern Honduras. To address this we are focusing more attention on water harvesting and water management in the context of agroecology. We are

part of a learning network with six other NGOs and farmers’ groups in the region to share lessons and strategies for confronting drought.”¹²

Results in Southern Honduras

In spite of being marginalized, family farmer agriculture remains vital to Honduras’ economy and food security. About 50 percent of Honduras’ population of 8 million continues to live in rural areas. Few Hondurans realize that family farming households still produce 76 percent of the food consumed in the country—including staple crops of corn and beans. Overall, the agricultural sector employs 37 percent of the working population, and generates 14.3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).¹³

Some Results from Vecinos Honduras Programs

While Vecinos Honduras’ programs are still young, they allow people to sustainably improve their lives. As of the end of 2015, Vecinos Honduras was supporting six programs, working in 65 communities, with over 1,400 families engaged and improving their wellbeing (about 7,500 people). Over 880 farmers (42 percent women) have been specifically involved in farmer experimentation

and farmer-to-farmer learning, and are adopting improved agroecological practices. These farmers are regenerating 980 hectares (2,421 acres) of degraded land. In the context of chronic drought, achieving food security through increased household production is a long-term goal. Initial evaluations show that 20 percent of the involved families have achieved food security through their own farm production (enough food for the year), while 40 percent produce enough for 8 months; and another 40 percent only produce enough for three months.

“We have seen evidence of improved gender relations and empowerment of youth as well,” says Escoto. “This includes reduced domestic violence, more sharing between men and women of domestic labor, and increases in female leadership. For example, 58 percent of the membership of community organizations focused on economic activities is women and youth, who occupy 41 percent of leadership positions. At the same time, we see that in the top decision making positions at community levels, women still hold less than 30 percent of those positions. So there is still much work to be done.”¹⁴

Farmer Testimony

Juan Ángel Gutiérrez¹⁵ is 38 years old and his wife Alba Luz is 36. They have six children, ages 18, 16, 14, 8, 2 years, and 2 months old. They live in the community of Caserío del Mal Paso, in San Antonio de las Guarumas, in Nacaome Valle, Honduras. The area is in the dry corridor of southern Honduras, characterized by frequent droughts. His community is 70 meters above sea level, with eight months of dry season and temperatures that range from 82-107 degrees Fahrenheit. Juan, Alba Luz, and their family participate in the Las Guarumas program of Vecinos Honduras.

“I was born here in Caserío del Mal Paso, and grew up here. Since I was a child I have been cultivating corn and sorghum using conventional techniques. I’ve stopped practicing them because I saw the negative impacts on the environment and on my family. My family has changed since we began participating in these activities, even though I’ve only been participating for a couple of years. We are involving the whole family in the farming activities, and are using agroecological practices that provide great benefits to my family and the community. Now we have more food than before. But I am also busier than before working the land, because before I only grew corn and sorghum, and the majority of the time I spent playing billiards. Now we are also growing beans, cucumbers, yucca, sweet potatoes, and squash for our family consumption. I am thinking about integrating fruit trees into our farm for the longer term. I’ve been learning about and

using organic compost, and [learning] which crops do best under these dry conditions. We’ve seen a lot of positive changes. We have a family garden that is producing, an improved wood saving stove, and a latrine.

We have a great challenge with lack of water here, for drinking, household use, and to irrigate crops. We’ve had a great challenge producing enough food for our family. We have constructed a tank from recycled materials to collect rain water. And we are treating and managing the limited water better. But we have been participating with the community organization in learning opportunities on agroecology and health.

But also the communication and relations among my family members has improved. I think what makes me most proud is the unity of our family. Now there is more communication and respect. Our children participate in the youth group. We’ve diversified our production, and are collecting more water and using it better. Before, our children constantly had respiratory infections. Now our health is better and they rarely get sick.”

Key Lessons

The movement to spread agroecology and contribute to food sovereignty has been going on in Honduras for 40 years under incredibly challenging circumstances. Yet many farmers are practicing agroecology, and multiple local farmers’ organizations and NGOs, as well as international NGOs, are supporting it. Campesino farmers are still responsible for producing the great majority of the food that Hondurans eat. While documented evidence shows that agroecology has been resilient and beneficial for those practicing it, its full benefits and potential are undervalued by society and neglected or undermined by government. Just as the destructive force of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 exposed both the potential and the limits of agroecology, the wave of neoliberal policies since the 1980s and the deteriorating rule of law since the 2009 coup have made Hondurans more vulnerable. Widespread support for and adoption of agroecology could increase resilience to climate change, drought, and disasters; improve the wellbeing and health of millions of people; generate employment; and contribute to a more democratic and just society.

A number of lessons can be drawn from the experience of the agroecology movement in Honduras. First, farmer experimentation and farmer-to-farmer learning are key to spreading agroecology. The first teaching tools that farmers use are their own plots, their knowledge, and their

own words. In addition, agroecological farmers first produce food for household consumption, and then for the sale and exchange of surplus products.

Second, agroecological farms are more resilient to climate change and natural disasters, but agroecology must be adopted across wider landscapes to reduce vulnerability. Agroecological production systems both enhance diversification on farms and depend upon the biodiversity of healthy local seed systems. This genetic diversity is threatened by the promotion of GMOs, which displace biodiversity and create dependence on inappropriate chemical inputs. Agroecological farming also improves family wellbeing and reduces the motivation to migrate.

Next Steps

Neoliberal policies of the government and international agencies, promoting extractive mining, hydroelectric, and large-scale monocropping projects are threatening family farmers' rights to the land and territories they depend upon to live. Alliances are growing among community organizations,

NGOs, and farmers' organizations to defend their land rights and change these policies. Organizations in Honduras need to make the public, the consumers, and the politicians more aware of the realities and benefits of family farming and agroecology. Most Hondurans do not realize that an estimated 76 percent of food consumed in the country comes from peasant agriculture, and that spreading agroecological farming can generate many economic, social, environmental, and cultural benefits. It could also generate significant employment and income generation for family farmers.

Even after the clear evidence of agroecology's effectiveness in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, farmers' organizations and NGOs have not yet adequately succeeded in influencing policies.¹⁶ This seriously limits the degree to which agroecology can be spread, and leads to persistent poverty and vulnerability. Supportive policies, as well as strengthened rule of law and democracy, must be created to allow agroecological strategies and movements to fully contribute to a more beneficial future for Honduras.



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