Scaling up sustainable agriculture

Lessons from the Campesino a Campesino movement

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For thirty years the *Campesino a Campesino (CaC)* movement of Mesoamerica has been hard at work developing Sustainable Agriculture, patiently, empirically, step by step. What started as a village alternative for a small group of Cachikel Mayans in the Highlands of Guatemala has spread through Mesoamerica in spite of (and sometimes because of) military conflict, widespread agrarian failures and chronic economic crisis. Presently there are well over ten thousand practising farmers in Central America alone.

The effectiveness of the agroecological practices promoted by the movement were made clear in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch: thousands of "agroecological" farmers survived the century's most destructive hurricane with more topsoil, less erosion and fewer crop losses than their neighbours practising conventional agriculture. (LEISA Magazine 17.1, p.18-20).

A Campesino a Campesino workshop, Santa Lucia, Nicaragua. Photo: Eric Holt-Gimenez

The essence of Campesino a Campesino

CaC is more than a wide-flung, loosely related collection of NGO projects. It is not simply a horizontal methodology for learning or technology transfer. It is a social *movement* based on the belief that farmers are capable of developing their own agriculture (Holt-Gimenez, 1996).

The CaC movement **"walks"** on the legs of 'innovation and solidarity' by experimenting on small, local scales and by widely sharing knowledge, creativity, experience and wisdom, farmer to farmer.

The movement **"works"** with the two hands of 'production and protection'. By focusing on overcoming limiting factors to production and on strengthening the weak ecological functions in the agroecosystem, farmers first reduce and then substitute external for internal inputs. To the extent possible, they gradually eliminate inputs altogether by redesigning the farm system to rely primarily on ecosystem functions. Protection of the environment then becomes crucial to the productive function of the farm. Watershed hydrology, habitat and biodiversity become key considerations for on-farm soil and water conservation and pest management, thus linking farmers' collective watershed management to their individual farm management.

The movement **"sees"** with the shared visions of farmer-led sustainable agriculture. In its **"heart"** members of the movement are motivated by deeply held beliefs in the divine, in family, in nature and community. The shared expression of these beliefs in practice has led CaC to reaffirm the cultural capabilities and the social imperative of farmers' contribution to sustainability, both locally and globally (Holt-Gimenez, 1997).

Basic principles of Campesino a Campesino

The basic principles of CaC evolved from Roland Bunch's concept of "people-centred development" three decades ago:

- Start small, go slowly
- Small-scale experimentation to overcome limiting factors and stabilise ecological functions
- Multiplier effect
- Limit introduction of technology
- Teach others
- Reduction, substitution, redesign: 3-phase conversion to sustainability
- Vertical and horizontal integration of production

Lessons from experience

Experience over the years has brought out a number of activities and methodological/ organisational lessons. First is the centrality of campesino culture. Farmers learn from each other by sharing wisdom, creativity and knowledge, not just information and techniques. Rather than simply transferring technologies, farmers first and foremost "make culture" - sharing that leads to action builds a culture of sustainable agriculture. Technology transfer is actually just one (and not always the primary) component of this cultural matrix.

Part of farmers' enthusiasm for developing agriculture comes from the sense that they are actually contributing to and shaping society. This subjective, but very powerful motivational force has been nurtured through **cross visits**, "**encuentros**" (farmer gatherings… sometimes similar to scientist's symposia) and the inclusion of farmer-promoters in workshops held by national and international agencies for agricultural development.

Farmer promoter teams have played a key role in CaC. Teams have the advantage of spreading the knowledge, time, talents and risk among several like-minded promoters. They also allow for entry and exit of farmers from promoter duties and the continual renovation of the team itself. Teams are peer mentorship programmes for young or new promoters, as well as a reservoir of expertise for NGOs who frequently hire experienced promoters, (either on short or long term basis) to open new programmes. Teams also ensure an installed capacity for a wide range of social, economic and technical activities that work directly and indirectly to help sustainable agriculture scale out (geographically) and up (i.e., research, organic certification, Fair Trade, etc.). Promoter teams usually rely on an agricultural technician from an NGO for technical, logistical and/or some form of economic support for their activities. Field days, study sessions and workshops that are held continuously have been broken down to modular 1-3 day activities to make them more accessible to farmers. Some teams have found it important to arrange themes and experiments seasonally to coincide with the cropping calendar of local farmers.

A more sustainable agriculture

This combined approach of developing pools of local expertise and sharing experiences widely has accomplished three important tasks in the development of a more sustainable agriculture:

1) It has generated and adapted locally-based alternatives that are easily incorporated to the ecology of each particular area, increasing agroecological diversity and resilience,
2) It has spread simple, adaptable technologies at low cost to thousands of farmers and has improved the capacity to innovate,
3) It has developed farmers' social and agroecological capabilities.

The widespread adoption of Velvet Bean (*Mucuna pruriens*) and other green manures in Mesoamerica is largely due to farmer to farmer innovation and solidarity, as is the knowledge and practice of soil and water conservation technologies (ILEIA Newsletter 13.3, pp.12-13). These farmers have often been the first and/or most successful in converting to organic practices, in diversifying their markets, and in vertically integrating production.

While over 10,000 farmers identify in one way or another with the movement, thousands more have been influenced. (The numbers are undetermined because these farmers fall outside the NGO areas of influence). Likewise, many professionals within NGOs have adopted parts of the CaC methodology or technologies without specifically identifying with the movement. In fact, the movement has profoundly influenced the technical and methodological agenda of many NGOs in Latin America (ILEIA Newsletter 16.2, p.26).

Success not the only key for spread

In the recent Central American study on Farmers' Agroecological Resistance to Hurricane Mitch (Holt-Giménez, 2001), one thousand practising farmers indicated that their reasons for adoption of sustainable practices included:

- Need (highly degraded agroecosystems, high cost and diminishing returns on credit and external inputs)
- Access to farmer to farmer training
- Consistent technical assistance
- Access to appropriate credit and market opportunities

However, while these factors help explain CaC's success, the question remains, "If it works so well, why hasn't it spread more?" One thousand conventional farmers from the same study indicated that their lack of adoption was due to:

- Insecure access to land
- Too much land (can afford to degrade the agroecosystem)
- Access to credit for external (chemical) inputs
- Lack of time/labour (engaged in pluri-activity)
- Ignorance
- Apathy

At this juncture, the limits to scaling out appear to be related to the structural problems of scaling up. These problems have less to do with technologies and methodologies than with national policy contexts and institutional behaviour. The CaC movement provides a perspective on these factors as well.

Factors that impede scaling out

Lack of documentation: There has been little "*sistematización*" or documentation of the movement done in a way that actually provides feedback to technicians, promoters and farmers. This has meant that the sharing of most of the agroecological, methodological and organisational knowledge in CaC is limited to farmer to farmer exchanges. While these horizontal learning networks are of prime importance for building the culture for sustainable agriculture, the lack of documentation prevents these lessons from scaling up into institutional networks. This in turn limits institutional learning, resulting in many projects "re-inventing the wheel." Further, lateral learning by government and private sector institutions is virtually non-existent, resulting in little headway for CaC outside the informal social networks connecting remote villages and the NGO institutional world.

No effect on formal research: Several interesting studies regarding technologies and methodological approaches have been undertaken. Some national and most international centres for agricultural research (NARIs and IARCs) have a small section or project that deals with sustainable agriculture, in general. Yet, CaC has not significantly affected formal agricultural training and research. In fact, lately, privately-funded research in biotechnology has begun to dominate IARC research agendas, dwarfing sustainability-oriented projects, which remain isolated and wield little influence.

Lack of appropriate training: Not only is formal research for sustainable agriculture largely out of touch with the farmers who are actually practising it, relatively few agronomists or technicians are being trained to work in agroecology or with campesinos. While it is true that over the last ten years, many technicians have learned about sustainable agricultural techniques, (primarily on the job, many from campesino promoters), very few have any grounding or formal training in agroecology. Thus they have difficulty applying basic ecological principles to solving a changing array of complex agroecological problems. This also limits their ability to design effective on-farm agroecological experiments, hampering innovation.

Adoption with no integration: Success and the lack of a fixed organisational focus encouraged many NGOs to adopt CaC methodologies (and its rhetoric if not its ideology). However, this has not always translated into greater farmer input or control over programmes, nor has farmer-led sustainable agricultural development necessarily become a guiding approach for NGOs. NGOs are still primarily accountable to donors, and few of them have direct mechanisms for accountability to farmers. While it is true that farmer participation is a key indicator in most project evaluations, "participation" continues to mean the participation of farmers in the NGOs' projects, and only rarely considers the nature of the participation of NGOs in farmers' processes for development. The conflation of "participation" and one-way accountability prevents clear strategies for farmer organisation and empowerment (beyond technologies and/or markets), particularly in regards to influencing the policy context for sustainable agricultural development. Claims to partnerships

Don Pedro Rodriguez, promotor, Nicaragua explains how CaC walks on the legs of solidarity and innovation, works with the hands of production and protection, has a heart that loves family, nature and other campesinos, and eyes for a campesino vision of the future. Photo: Eric Holt-Gimenez

notwithstanding, campesinos remain "clients" of most development programmes, rather than "constituents" of organisations working for social change.

Inability to influence decision makers: Despite its extensive presence in one of the largest farmers' unions in Central America, CaC has not been very successful in scaling-up its agenda within national and regional farmer organisations. Basically, promoters from CaC have been unable to penetrate decision-making circles (boards, directorships, etc.), dominated by medium and large producers interested primarily in conventional agriculture. Consequently, while some farmers' unions can boast of CaC projects (this is important for obtaining international funding), the lack of power sharing and the dominant conventional strategies for agricultural viability precludes these unions as lobbying agents for sustainable agriculture.

Rogelio Sanchez Ledesma, a Mexican promoter helping Jose Jesus Mendoza (now a well known Nicaraguan promoter) to establish the first terraces on his land in 1987. Photo: Eric Holt-Gimenez

Conflicting economic interests: The importance of economic viability has led many CaC groups to establish international linkages for Certified Organic and Fair Trade marketing. While both Fair Trade and the Certified Organic market have proven a windfall for many campesino groups, neither is *necessarily* agroecologically sustainable or *intra*-generationally equitable. Farmers anxious to obtain quick certification have chopped down forests for access to fertile, uncontaminated soils. Others have shifted from diverse agroecosystems that produce food for local consumption to organic monocultures geared for export. Finally, many NGOs, eager to attract farmers to their projects, substitute broad-based organising efforts around food security, autonomy and sustainability, for short term, market-oriented strategies. This has drawn in farmers interested more in profits than sustainability and has excluded those farmers whose factors of production do not permit farming for the international market.

Establishing linkages with the international market does not in and of itself develop local or inter-sectoral linkages with urban, consumer, or environmental interests. But these linkages on local, national and regional scales cannot be ignored if scaling up itself is to be sustainable. This does not mean that sustainable agriculture must operate outside the market or that Certified Organic and Fair Trade should not be pursued. Simply, it means that programmes for sustainable agriculture cannot afford to push market options uncritically.

Unfavourable institutional and policy contexts: The decentralised, informal and horizontal nature of CaC has given tremendous resilience and diversity to the movement, whose reticular development has allowed it to establish effective technical and methodological alternatives for sustainable agriculture over a broad geographical area. The knowledge-based, farmer-driven approach has been especially appropriate to the ecosystem-specific nature of sustainable agricultural development. However, it appears that CaC has found its limits in the unfavourable institutional and policy contexts that do not favour sustainable agriculture or farmer-led development. There are many credit and market mechanisms that could be brought in to improve the conditions for sustainable agriculture, as well as research, training and extension programs - just as they were for the Green Revolution. However, the lack of effective political will on the part of governments and research centres makes this a remote possibility. Developing this political will depends in large part on pressure from civil society. For the CaC movement to successfully influence decision makers reluctant to sustainable agricultural policy, institutional mechanisms for this expressed purpose must be developed. How much of this can or should happen within the NGO, academic, or private (market) sectors should be a subject of serious debate. It is likely that all avenues should be pursued in some form.

Movements and alliances for scaling up and out

To be an effective social movement for sustainable agriculture, CaC may well need to establish broad social alliances for sustainability with other sectors and with actors from Central America's new social movements (gender, environment, urban dwellers, social justice, etc.). Given that many NGOs working in sustainable agriculture also address many of these issues (either within the agricultural project or within the organisation itself), there may be good opportunities for this. However, it should be noted that while NGOs have been very good at introducing issues, technologies and methodologies into civil society, until now, they have not necessarily pursued a strategy for building movements or alliances for social change. Many professionals working within NGOs see their organisation or their project as and end in itself, and not as a means to enable social change. On the other hand, Central America's rich (if violent) political history has meant that activists once involved in movements for social change are still around, many of them are in NGOs working for sustainable agriculture. Experienced or not, these professionals can help develop strategies for "scaling out" through movements such as CaC, and "scaling up" through farmer-led, inter-institutional alliances.

CaC illustrates the importance of farmers' movements for developing sustainable agriculture on the ground. Perhaps the most pressing lesson is simply that agriculture in general will change not only when farmers change, but when farmers (and their allies) are capable of changing the institutions that hold change back. We still have much to learn about just how to do that. The formation of international and regional alliances for influencing agricultural research and development may provide a useful way to overcome the present policy impasse in sustainable agriculture.

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