

Citizen Action in the Americas

Corn, Free Trade, and Crossborder Organizing

by Spring Miller and Amy Shannon, Enlaces America | July 15, 2002

Food security and labor security are the fundamental priorities for Mesoamerica: without dignified work, families don't have enough income, and without income, we have hunger, hopelessness, and migration. We must reinvigorate and reorient small- and medium-scale production in the countryside if we are to break the cycle of hunger and exodus from the region.

With this call to action, Armando Bartra, president of Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural Maya, an organization that supports community-based rural development in Mexico, opened the International Corn, Commerce, and Community Conference on June 17, 2002, in Chicago, IL. His words became a central theme for conference participants, who arrived in Chicago from throughout Central America, Mexico, and the United States to explore common concerns regarding economic integration and rural development. By the end of the meeting, participants had embraced a new vision of "Mesoamerica," a region that has been transformed by migration and that now includes communities ranging from Panama to Canada. Although the region suffers from many problems, it also contains vibrant local and transboundary communities. Reclaiming and revitalizing Mesoamerica as a region gave participants a new angle for working together to solve common problems.

This assessment is reflective of a growing awareness throughout the region that our national realities are increasingly intertwined, and that efforts to address issues of local concern like poverty, dislocation, food insecurity, and environmental degradation, must be conducted from regional perspectives and with crossborder coordination.

The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 represented only the most visible step in the development of a regional market system in North and Central

America—one that has been consolidated over the past decade via both national-level policy decisions and international agreements. Under this system, the term "economic development" has become largely synonymous with infrastructure and integration projects that reorient national economies toward export-based economies and that facilitate market entry by foreign capital. The jolting transitions associated with the insertion of local economies into regional and global economic systems have had a variety of social, environmental, and cultural repercussions for communities throughout the region.

As governments in North and Central America continue to pursue deepened integration (notably in the form of such proposals as the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement, and Plan Puebla Panamá), affected communities and civil society groups are coalescing across interest sectors and national borders to educate one another and to jointly articulate alternatives to current regional economic development models.

In Managua on July 17-18, a loosely coordinated network of civil society organizations from Mexico and Central America calling itself the Mesoamerican Forum will gather for the third time since May 2001. Participants in this forum are particularly concerned about the social and environmental repercussions of Mexico's Plan Puebla Panamá. Their previous meeting took place in May 2002 in Tapachula. The Tapachula gathering, called the Campesino Forum, was unique among international meetings in that it was designed and organized by small farmers from throughout southern Mexico and Central America. Those campesino leaders decided to organize their own meeting in order to



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take a strong leadership role in articulating solutions to rural problems in the region.

The Corn, Commerce, and Community Conference held recently in Chicago represented another step forward in the creation of multi-sectoral spaces for regional communication and collaboration. The meeting focused on the impact of current models of trade and development on the rural sector North and Central America. Rural communities and indigenous people bear the brunt of the push for the “modernization” of regional economies.

Around 25% of Mexicans live in the countryside, but half of those who do are living under conditions of extreme poverty. The countryside is also home to two-thirds of the indigenous population. In Central America, the numbers vary from country to country, but the patterns are the same.

Rural people are not only poor, but are also getting poorer. The only option for many is to leave their homes in search of work in large cities or across borders. Recent years have shown that in an increasingly interconnected world, problems such as these are problems shared by all. The intensifying collapse of rural economies in Mexico and Central America—as well as the increasing dominance of corporate agribusiness in U.S. agricultural production—will have profound repercussions for all citizens of this hemisphere, not just those living in the countryside.

The Chicago meeting focused on corn because it is such a powerful, concrete example of how an array of interconnected issues—environmental degradation, threats to biodiversity, lack of food security, rural displacement, and migration—impact communities in the United States, Mexico, and Central America alike. Corn has historically played a central role in the economic and cultural life of peoples in this hemisphere, but in recent years the aggressive pursuit of economic modernization has transformed regional processes of corn production, trade, and consumption.

The cases of Mexico and the United States following the implementation of NAFTA provide particularly stark examples.

Corn has traditionally been a cornerstone of rural life in Mexico, accounting for most of the land under cultivation in the country and forming the basis of rural people’s diet—currently, 70% of their daily caloric intake. Right now, three million Mexicans—8% of the national population and 40% of agricultural workers—are corn farmers.

However, officials involved in NAFTA negotiations viewed Mexican corn cultivation as inefficient compared to that in the United States, where input-intensive techniques result in high yields. Without taking into account the environmental, social, and cultural value of Mexico’s small farmer corn production system, these policymakers deemed the comparative advantage in corn production to be with large-scale U.S. farmers and made a calculated decision to reduce tariffs on international (predominantly U.S.) corn imports to Mexico.

Originally, this tariff reduction was supposed to be phased in over a fifteen-year period, but as Mexican economist Alejandro Nadal has demonstrated, tariffs on corn imports had been almost entirely eliminated by 1997. Between 1994 and August 1996, corn prices in Mexico fell by 48%. During this period, Washington increased agricultural subsidies for domestic producers, further driving down the effective costs of production for U.S. agribusiness.

This abrupt transformation of the agricultural economy in Mexico has had a variety of social and environmental consequences. Over the past seven years, poverty rates have risen and increased numbers of rural people are migrating to Mexico’s cities and to the United States. Mexico now depends on its northern neighbor for 23% of its corn, much of which has been developed for animal feed, not human consumption, and some of which has been genetically modified. Researchers in Oaxaca recently uncovered evidence of contamination of that state’s native corn species by genetically engineered corn strains. This is particularly alarming news, since Mexico is the center of corn biodiversity, including several wild species of corn precursors. This repository of natural genetic diversity is a resource of worldwide importance and could be critical for responding to plagues or future climate changes.

Ironically, regional integration hasn't benefited most corn farmers in the United States either. Although U.S. corn exports to Mexico have doubled since 1994, prices have dropped by more than half. As George Naylor from the National Family Farm Coalition pointed out in a recent article for *Enlaces News* (forthcoming, July 2002), "Cheap corn creates large profits for the corporate food processors... [resulting in] fewer and fewer family farmers [who are going] deeper in debt, along with the closing of schools, churches, and stores in rural [U.S.] communities."

And the problems do not stop with the decline of rural livelihoods. Agricultural run-off from fertilizers and pesticides used in U.S. corn production have helped create a 20,000 square kilometer "dead zone" stretching from the Mississippi Delta out into the Gulf of Mexico almost to the Texas coast. No fish or shellfish can survive in the dead zone, causing severe interruptions of both commercial and artisanal fishing. With ever-increasing doses of nitrogen fertilizer used on Midwest farms, the dead zone is expected to continue growing.

At the two-day Corn, Commerce, and Communities conference, participants representing environmental, sustainable development, migrants' rights, small farmers, fair trade, and organic consumers organizations from across Central America, Mexico, and the United States gathered to explore these problems, discuss common interests, and begin to articulate strategies for future communication and action.

Through panel discussions regarding the links between corn, trade, the environment, culture, and migration, participants developed a broad perspective on the deep cultural and economic importance of the grain for rural communities throughout the region. They also deepened their understanding of the threats to environmental and social stability posed by current trade and development regimes. At the same time, discussions on innovative transnational community development strategies and on creating linkages between producers and consumers in areas as diverse as Oaxaca, Honduras, and urban Chicago presented hopeful examples of

community-based responses to the challenges posed by current economic systems.

Several of the recurring themes in panel discussions at the conference include:

- Policies formulated in one nation or in multi-national arenas have profound impacts on communities throughout the region. We must develop ways to understand and address these policies with regional approaches.
- We must work together to promote just and equitable trade and investment models, allowing residents throughout the region to sustain themselves.
- We must devise long-term mechanisms of recognizing the social and environmental benefits that small farmers throughout the region bring to our society and which are not "counted" in current economic models. This means we must develop alternative markets where consumers who recognize the social, cultural, and environmental benefits of sustainable, locally produced food can access it.
- We need to make explicit the connections between rural and urban life, to demonstrate the critical importance of viable, sustainable rural communities to the future of the entire region.

In small group discussions following panels, participants had the opportunity to reflect on what they had learned and to generate ideas for potential follow-up action steps. Because this meeting represented a first encounter of many diverse sectors and organizations, there was no pressure to arrive at firm joint conclusions or definitive plans for future actions. Rather, the idea was to identify areas of common concern and to generate ideas for future collaboration. All participants firmly agreed on the need for continued cross-border, cross-sector communication on the issues raised at the event.

One of the most salient conclusions that emerged from the small group discussions and the gathering as a whole was that migrant community organizations should play a central protagonistic role in facilitating crucial transboundary, cross-sector discussions in North and Central America. Immigrants

have often personally experienced the disruptions associated with the reorientation of rural economies toward regional and international markets, and through individual and collective remittances, they have become active players in maintaining the economic viability of countries in the region. In particular, the community-based efforts of immigrant Home Town Associations (HTAs) represent a potentially instructive model for effective transnational economic and political engagement in local development issues.

Participants in small group discussions were also particularly interested in mechanisms for linking sustainable food production and consumption throughout the Americas. Several suggested focusing on ways of expanding already existing niche markets into mainstream markets without getting caught in commodity market pricing cycles.

The presence of representatives of Itanoní, Flor del Maíz, a Oaxaca-based gourmet tortilla company, gave participants insight into an innovative model for promoting locally produced food with unique cultural and ecological value. Itanoní defines itself as a project of cultural and culinary rescue of local species of Oaxacan corn. In a country whose markets are flooded with processed tortillas made of imported corn, Itanoní sells tortillas produced in a traditional manner with native species of corn, thereby offering consumers the option of purchasing a tortilla with cultural and biological identity.

The Corn, Commerce, and Community meeting marked the official commencement of the development of a regional forum to link civil society groups

concerned with economic development, improved protection of social, economic, and political rights, and environmental sustainability in North and Central America. This Enlaces America forum, which is sponsored by the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights in Chicago, IL, will serve as a platform for coordination and collaboration on a broad but interrelated set of goals including: reducing regional inequalities; ensuring political, economic, and social rights for all; using natural resources sustainably; and promoting development strategies that will ensure the long-term prosperity of people in the region.

Enlaces America staff are in the midst of a broad consultation process with a variety of civil society groups in Mexico and Central America and immigrant communities in the United States to hone the concept of this forum and to ensure that it is as useful a space as possible for groups throughout the region. Consultative meetings have already taken place in El Salvador and Oaxaca, and gatherings are planned Guatemala and Michoacan in upcoming months. For more information on Enlaces America, please visit our website (online at www.enlacesamerica.org), which will be fully operational by the end of July 2002, or email us at < smiller@enlacesamerica.org > .

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