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Globalization And Sterilization Of Nicaraguan Agriculture

by LADB Staff

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The first Foro Nacional Campesina sobre Globalizacion opened in Esteli with a resounding negative critique of the effects of globalization at the local level in Nicaragua. The real-life experience of campesinas is, said Consuelo Alforo, a resident of the rural community of Pueblo Nuevo, that families have been sundered by emigration, and people have gone hungry as a result of government policies shaped by a world economic order in whose making Nicaragua had no part.

Alforo, a member of the foundation Entre Mujeres that sponsored the forum, said that 50 people have left her village this year alone to look for work in Managua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. Two of her neighbors set out to cross illegally into the US, she said, even after another neighbor, Rosalia Olvias, died in the Arizona desert on a similar quest.

Olvias took the risk in hopes of earning enough to pay off a bank lien on her home. "The men leave the community to find work, and the women are left to look after the family, collect firewood, clear the land, and fix the fences. Meanwhile, the men are in another country illegally, so employers take advantage of them," said Alforo. For these campesinas and the communities they come from, what is at stake is their way of life and even their confidence in their ability to feed themselves. They are being pressured to cultivate nontraditional products for export.

The provisions of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which Nicaragua has not yet ratified, would force upon them the need to become "competitive." For them, this means abandoning traditional crops, becoming dependent on imports of basic foods they used to be able to grow themselves, and resulting in a perpetual state of insecurity.

An alien way of life

Maria Teresa Blandon, forum facilitator, said that this trend toward an alien way of life would accelerate. Nudging rural communities out of their culture and into the city will not prove a viable option. City life will become more difficult as well, as transnational corporations displace national businesses in every aspect of production, distribution, and consumption. "Promoters of free trade often talk about improving competition, but it is competition among unequal parties. It is competition between big monsters with access to technology and money and small, underdeveloped businesses," Blandon warned.

The forum ended with participants sending a declaration to President Enrique Bolanos and the Asamblea Nacional rejecting neoliberal policies and privatization of basic services. Instead, the declaration demanded protection for traditional agricultural practices, affordable housing, and a national rural development plan. They did not expect much to come of the declaration.

"This is affecting the whole world, it doesn't just depend on Bolanos," said Erika Inglesias of Esteli. Alfaro added, "Bolanos is just an employee of globalization." As an employee, one of Bolanos' jobs during the past couple of years has been to see that little is grown in the Nicaraguan countryside without a transnational corporation making a commission on it.

Starting in 2002, Bolanos has been pushing a program that simultaneously deprives campesinos and other growers of their native seed stocks and replaces them with genetically modified (GM) seeds patented by these companies. Modifying the countryside, genetically The program is known as *Libra por Libra* (Pound for Pound).

Financed in part by the World Bank and other international lender-donors, the program encourages farmers to trade in the rice, bean, corn, and sorghum seeds they have been using for generations for GM seed advertised to bring bigger yields. To get growers to do this, farmers, whose methods have been largely organic, are now offered the opportunity to trade in their seed on a pound-for-pound basis for the crops-on-steroids varieties.

The Ministry of Agriculture says the purpose of the program is "to promote the development of a market for seeds, through strengthening demand and establishing distribution networks." For these subsistence and small producers, however, demand is a code word for dependence. The engineered seeds may produce greater yields, but they produce sterile seeds. Campesinos must buy new seeds every time they plant.

The GM seeds cannot be stored and are therefore useless for another traditional practice, using some of the seed stock for food during the dry months of June and July. Campesinos also use these stores of native seed to feed livestock. When they tried this with the GM seed, animals developed weak joints, campesinos discovered. Rather than becoming competitive with Cargill, ConAgra, Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), and the like, forum participants just become hungry, dependent, and alienated from an identity based on traditional practices. The forum's declaration will not mark the first time that Bolanos has heard of broad resistance to his government's program to transform the country's agriculture.

In May 2002, the *Alianza por una Nicaragua Libre de Transgenicos* was formed. In June 2003, Julio Sanchez, facilitator of the *Alianza* and coordinator of the Humboldt Center's biodiversity project, warned that the program is an exercise in biopiracy that will push the population further into poverty. Sanchez said that, even then, in 2003, campesino resistance to the new seed, produced by Monsanto, was growing. He did not know at that time what had been done with the seed, called *criollo*, that was turned in, but only that "the pillage continues. Campesinos hand over their seeds and become hostage to a model in which they own nothing but their debt."

Sanchez characterized the process as the same kind of robbery of the poor by the rich, except that "now its more diplomatic....They are taking our germ plasm, mostly our corn, using the terminology of 'aid,' 'world hunger,' and that the campesinos are technically deficient. Pure lies. The country has lost much, economically, socially, and now in terms of food sovereignty." Sanchez saw the *Pound-for-Pound* program as a tendency toward the appropriation of Nicaragua's resources that would only get worse with CAFTA. "In fact," he said, I consider that this pound-for-pound initiative is a

preliminary strategic step. The problem is that the United States has a lot of technology, but they can't make healthy and natural products with it as we can. The strategy is clear: contaminate us, control the market, and monopolize the production that will be theirs, that of transgenetics that they have specialized in."

Sanchez said that a well-informed campesino would never accept this situation, but in Nicaragua the campesinos have not been well-informed. "However, there are various organizations, for example the Alianza and the program Campesino al Campesino, as well as some communications media, that have helped." He said that in order not to be further subjected to loss, civil society must become strengthened, unified, and well-organized. He said civil society must be proactive, generating proposals and alternatives, and, where there are no alternatives, "create them and promote them at every level."

Now, two years later, the forum has become an example of a proactive civil society, but whether it can compete with a government touting bountiful harvests and other benefits remains a question. Bolanos has sweetened his pitch by interspersing the Pound-for-Pound program with religion, declaring every other Sunday a National Day of Prayer for Good Weather, and featuring giveaways sponsored by nongovernmental organization (NGOs).

During a seed roundup in the municipality of La Paz in Carazo, he presided over the ceremonial gifting of 71 houses provided by the German NGO, GTZ. During the 2004-2005 growing season, Nicaragua was hit by a drought that spelled out the limits of genetic engineering. Not even Monsanto's super seeds can grow without water. In the northern departments of Leon, Chinandega, Madriz, Esteli, and Matagalpa, farmers suffered corn and bean losses of from 50% to 100%. The losses translated to losses in seed stock as well for those still using criollo seeds, and the government took advantage, supplying for the next season the modified seeds and the specialized fertilizers without which they cannot grow. While they await the new crops, the international community has provided food aid.

For the growing cycle beginning mid-May, the Pound-for-Pound program will feature a partial giveaway of corn, bean, rice, sesame, and white sorghum seeds. Under the program, small and medium-capacity producers will buy seed and be given a coupon covering 60% of the price of the seed and assume the rest of the cost themselves through a private bank-credit arrangement. The recent history of this kind of financing is poor. In 2004, the private system received US\$42 million from the government to finance agriculture. The government subsequently admitted that only 6% of those funds ever actually reached the sector.

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