

# BACKGROUND

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## Movimiento Campesino a Campesino: Linking Sustainable Agriculture and Social Change

by Eric Holt-Giménez†

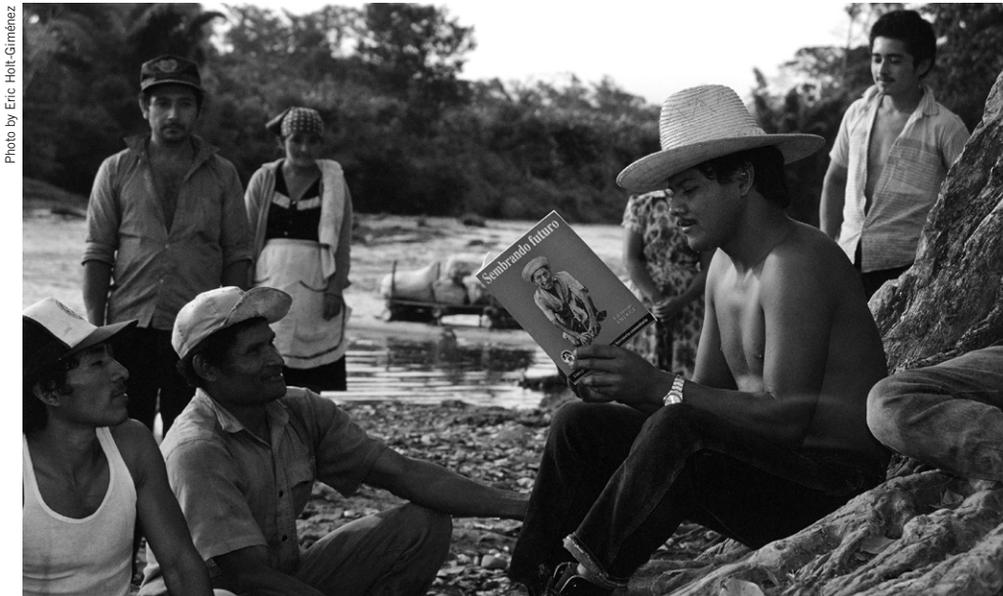


Photo by Eric Holt-Giménez

Promoters reading about soil conservation, Nicaragua.

Ten years ago I wrote a Development Report for Food First about the *Movimiento Campesino a Campesino* (Holt-Giménez 1996). At that time little was known about “MCAC” and many development professionals had high hopes that the farmer-to-farmer methods for developing sustainable agriculture would help transform Mesoamerican agriculture. A decade later, we are still hopeful, but it has become clear that in the face of powerful global agribusiness interests, the sustainable transformation of agriculture will require more than farmer-led techniques and methodologies.

The development of sustainable agriculture will require significant structural changes, in addition to technological innovation and farmer-to-farmer solidarity. This is impossible without social movements that create political will among decision-makers to dismantle and transform the institutions and regulations which presently hold back sustainable agricultural development. Sustainable agriculture requires broad, multinational organizing by farmers and their supporters.

The Campesino a Campesino Movement has linked campesino communities across village, municipal and national divisions using agroecology and horizontal learning networks.

—ERIC HOLT-GIMÉNEZ

From the introduction to Food First book *Campesino a Campesino*, available at [www.foodfirst.org/campesino](http://www.foodfirst.org/campesino)

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*I think we should not fall in the trap of seeing the development of agroecology by just looking at the physical aspects of the farm or just at the economics. Agroecology is not just a collection of practices. Agroecology is a way of life... We can't have an agroecological change without a campesino movement.*

—NELDA MARTINEZ, NICARAGUA

For thirty years, the Movimiento Campesino a Campesino, now with several hundred thousand farmer-promoters, has helped farming families in the rural villages of Latin America improve their livelihoods and conserve their natural resources. The promoters of MCAC have shown that, given the chance to generate and share agroecological knowledge freely amongst themselves, smallholders are perfectly capable of developing sustainable agriculture, even under highly adverse conditions. The capacity to develop agriculture locally is not only the agroecological key to sustainable agricultural development, for campesinos it is a matter of survival. This explains in a very fundamental way why the movement has spread as widely as it has. It works!

However, the Campesino a Campesino experience still leaves us with the question: If sustainable agriculture is so great, why aren't *all* campesinos doing it? What keeps it from scaling up? Why is it still the exception rather than the rule?

The transition to sustainable agriculture ultimately depends on a combination of efforts between farmers and economic and social institutions; the markets, banks, government ministries, agricultural research institutions, farmers' organizations, churches, and nongovernmental/non-profit organizations (NGOs). Each of these institutions—including the market—has its own strengths and weaknesses; and each responds to the political agendas of the actors who are able to use it. Scaling up the successes of any experience in sustainable agriculture, including MCAC, is therefore not simply farmers teaching other farmers to farm sustainably, but a political project that engages the power of these institutions to permit, facilitate, and support sustainable farming.



Photo by Eric Holt-Giménez

*At an “Intercambio” or farmer-to-farmer exchange in Nicaragua, a promoter shares agroecological knowledge with other campesinos.*

Smallholders have relatively little control over the institutions shaping agriculture. If MCAC has provided them any influence at all, it is because the movement's successes expose the glaring failures of conventional agricultural development. Though they may still be just “islands of sustainability,” MCAC's farmers have tremendous social and political potential, simply because conventional agriculture has failed to produce anything better—for campesinos, for the environment, or for the food security of the millions of poor rural and urban dwellers in Latin America. However, without structurally enabling institutional changes, a few hundred thousand agroecological smallholders will not tip the balance away from conventional to sustainable agriculture.

Campesino a Campesino's extensive knowledge networks have been highly successful in generating and spreading sustainable agricultural practices on the ground. In effect, MCAC has decentralized the practice of agricultural development. This is both a measure of and an explanation for its successes. If agriculture is to be sustainable, it must not only be based on the ecology of the specific agroecosystem where it is being practiced, it must evolve from the social structures and cultures in which the system

itself is embedded. But if sustainable agriculture is to become the norm rather than the exception, then these embedded, agroecological experiences must scale out, geographically; and up, into the institutions that shape agriculture's social, economic, and political terrain; and in, into the culture of agriculture itself. To go to scale, Campesino a Campesino must not only be effective on the ground; it needs cultural, social, and political power to affect the structures and policies that hold back the development of sustainable agriculture.

As evidenced by the appearance of sustainable projects across Latin America, sustainability, equity, social justice, and the conservation of ecological and cultural diversity are now part of the discussion among development institutions. However, they are far from replacing the emphasis on monetary return of national, multilateral, or regional development programs. In this context, sustainable development, whether through state intervention, multilateral projects, or the “invisible hand” of the global market, is still fundamentally focused on sustaining economic growth to pay off foreign debt. In this logic, strategies that address local and national food security, sustainable livelihoods, social and economic justice,

***If Campesino a Campesino is to become an effective social movement that influences both agricultural practice and the structures holding back sustainability, it will need to link its agroecological practice to structural literacy and to the transnational advocacy networks that lobby and pressure for structural change worldwide. By the same token, if activists for sustainable agriculture expect to have a social impact on political and economic structures, they will have to integrate their advocacy to ground-level campesino struggles for sustainable livelihoods.***

and the conservation of ecological and cultural diversity are at best secondary to export production aimed at debt payment. Changing the superstructure of economic development to favor sustainable agriculture implies the political, economic, and social transformation of the societies that produce that superstructure. The transition to sustainable agriculture requires social change. This includes massive education and mobilization of citizens who live in first world countries where economic institutions hold the debt incurred by third world leaders who were counting on economic growth to pay back loans. Today many third world countries are bankrupt and exporting agricultural goods is simply delaying the inevitable default on these usury loans.

Though the MCAC has been highly effective in supporting local projects and developing sustainable practices on the ground, it has had little impact on the policy context for sustainable agriculture. Despite a far-flung network of hundreds of NGOs, these supporting institutions have generally not lobbied, pressured, or otherwise organized around policy issues in a significant way. Lobbying is only effective to the extent that it represents and articulates significant political and social force. In the Latin American countryside, “lobbying” often means mobilizing hundreds or thousands of campesinos in marches, protests, invasions, or occupations. Presently, neither the NGOs nor

the advocacy groups promoting sustainable agriculture have the capacity to do this. Some farmer organizations do mobilize around agrarian issues, particularly on access to land. However, once peasants receive land, support for the sustainable use of that land is rarely, if ever, the subject for protest or mobilization.

A focus on the socioeconomic policies limiting sustainable agriculture, and the ability to create social pressure, are necessary conditions for MCAC to become an effective movement for social change. The campesinos in MCAC will need to become as knowledgeable regarding the structural conditions for sustainable agriculture as they are in the practices of sustainable agriculture itself.

MCAC’s promoters are very aware of globalization. Their information, however, is patchy, and their understanding of where and how they might resist is unclear and limited. There is every reason to believe that promoters in the Movement could become literate in understanding and teaching farmers to incorporate political-economic information about industry, policy, markets, and finance into their existing networks for sharing agroecological knowledge. With support from NGOs, promoters could develop farmer-to-farmer methods for incorporating structural information into MCAC’s body of agroecological knowledge—much as the MST attempts to do in Brazil. Structural issues including food sovereignty, agroecological

agriculture versus genetically modified crops, intellectual property rights versus farmers’ rights, and other themes could be included in MCAC workshops, cross-visits, and regional gatherings.

The missing link between practical sustainable farming techniques and structural knowledge could be bridged by linking advocacy groups and farmers unions and federations to sustainable agricultural development NGOs. Advocacy groups could provide training and information regarding structural issues, NGOs could help promoters develop appropriate methodologies, and MCAC’s farmer to farmer networks could take care of spreading structural knowledge. As was the case with agroecological knowledge, it would probably only be a matter of time before these networks began to generate information as well. Experiences in preserving agrobiodiversity in the face of transgenic contamination, resistance to colonization by the soy-beef industry, or the creation of local and regional markets for food sovereignty, could all be easily shared alongside the agroecological innovations that constantly emerge and spread within MCAC.

Just as the expansion of farmers’ agroecological knowledge created a demand for services in sustainable agriculture, the expansion of structural knowledge

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- *Order this book (see order form on page 4)*
- *Educate yourself about global economic issues affecting farmers.*
- *Join list serves and visit the web sites of organizations working on these issues including:*
  - \* *La Via Campesina at <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php>*
  - \* *Our World is Not For Sale at <http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.org/>*
  - \* *Jubilee USA at <http://www.jubileeusa.org/>*
  - \* *Focus on the Global South at <http://www.focusweb.org/>*
- *Talk about these issues with friends.*
- *Vote with your pocketbook by buying local, sustainably farmed meat, fish, and produce.*

among campesinos will build a demand for agroecological advocacy to pressure for institutional changes.

How this demand is met will depend largely on smallholders and the possibilities for complementary capacities with farmer organizations, NGOs, and advocacy groups, and will likely vary widely from place to place. For example, promoters might pressure farmer organizations for agroecological policy advocacy or for greater representation on the boards of directors in order to insure that their agroecological demands form an integral part of the organization's political agenda. Or, they might seek more direct linkages with advocacy groups for direct action. Then again, they might demand more political accountability from the funding institutions and NGOs that bring them agricultural projects, pressuring them to take proactive positions on structural reforms for sustainable agriculture. Peas-

ants might pressure agricultural research institutions for greater accountability and transparency as well. After all, the biodiverse crops of smallholder's provides the basic genetic material to these institutions to begin with. Smallholders might decide to organize locally in opposing multinational seed companies and research institutions to keep their counties GMO-free. They might demand that governments set up programs to channel and match remittances to finance and market sustainably-farmed products.

### Integrated Transnational Advocacy Networks

The Campesino a Campesino Movement has used agroecology and horizontal learning networks to link campesino communities across village, municipal and national boundaries. These networks occur in a larger, structural context of national and transnational movements

for social justice and environmental sustainability. The MCAC's networks have practice and demographic weight, but no political influence. The advocacy networks can exert significant political influence, but lack a social base for lasting change. The divide between sustainability as advocated by activists, and sustainable agriculture as actually practiced on the ground by MCAC reflects the social and political marginalization of both campesinos and activists. Overcoming the marginalization between alternative politics and the struggles of everyday life in the countryside depends on linking the two. Successful social movements are formed by integrating activism with livelihoods. These integrated movements create the deep, sustained, social pressure that produces political will—the key to changing the financial, governmental, and market structures that presently work against sustainability.

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