

GUEST EDITORIAL

Latin American Agroecologists Build a Powerful Scientific and Social Movement

Around 3800 people came together in Curitiba, Brazil last November for the joint meeting of the Latin American Scientific Society of Agroecology (SOCLA; www.agroeco.org/socla/) and the Brazilian Agroecology Association (ABA; www.aba-agroecologia.org.br). The number of participants was impressive, their diversity was inspiring, and the movement they are building sets an example for the planet.

We assigned a random sample of about 10% of the poster and oral presentation abstracts ($n = 99$) to the levels of Gliessman's sustainability framework (JSA 33[1]:1-2, 2009), and found evidence of both deficiencies and progress in the topics these scientists are tackling. Disappointingly, the bulk of the presentations were at level 1, increasing the efficiency of conventional practices (7.1%) or level 2, substituting alternative practices for conventional ones (45.5%). Level 2 presentations typically focused on the effects of alternative inputs such as soil amendments, green manures or biological control agents on yield. Fewer presentations approached farm design and function from a systems perspective (Gliessman's level 3; 19%). However 28% looked at agroecosystems in their social, cultural and economic contexts (level 4).

Level 4 analysis was even more prevalent among the plenary speakers and panelists. These scientists and leaders were clear that agroecology as a science is responsible to agroecology as a movement for biodiverse fields and landscapes, food and energy sovereignty, and healthy environments and economies. Among the most powerful talks were those by farmers who described lifetimes of struggle to sustain their livelihoods, traditions and communities in resistance to economies that treat them as obstacles rather than the foundations of sustainable development. Field trips to farms, organic markets, research centers, Via Campesina's Latin American

Agroecology School and a Landless Workers Movement (MST) settlement underscored the depth and breadth of the movement. Although many speakers were critical of government policy, the level of public commitment to Brazilian agroecology was evident in the sponsorship by various local, state and federal agencies of the conference itself and of many of the institutions visited, including the MST settlement.

Students and other young people were a strong presence at the SOCLA/ABA meeting as well as at the parallel National Encounter of Agroecology Groups (IENGA). With the help of the MST, more than 500 IENGA participants built a tent city on a vacant lot across the road from the conference venue. They held debates and concerts, organized workshops and demonstrations on topics including traditional knowledge, ecological construction and raw cuisine, cooked and ate communally, and relieved themselves in composting toilets. Out of this encounter, they formed a network of student federations, artists and the Via Campesina to promote interaction among the diverse segments of Brazil's agroecology movement. It is noteworthy that while many of these groups are at odds around other issues, they are able to come together around agroecology.

Gender issues were explicitly addressed by many speakers. Women were well represented among participants (40% of our poster sample) and play an important role in the SOCLA leadership. ABA paid tribute to Ana Maria Primavesi as a founder of agroecology in Brazil. However women were notably underrepresented on the stage for the opening and closing plenary sessions.

International cooperation was on display in the meeting organization, the diverse origins of participants (most were Brazilian but the rest of Latin America was well represented), and the initiatives they presented. Of particular note is the Latin American agroecology doctoral program, based at Colombia's National University and set to begin in March 2010 (http://agronomia.unal.edu.co/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=18).

At the final plenary, participants approved a declaration of their commitment to reversing the consequences of conventional agriculture: poverty, hunger, environmental degradation, climate change, and the energy and financial crises. Agroecology, they state, is the scientific and methodological foundation for the transition to a new development paradigm. Small farms, as the source of traditional knowledge, agrobiodiversity and strategies for maintaining food security and food sovereignty, are its social and productive foundation. The document's affirmations include:

- commitment to equitable rural development;
- the importance of knowledge exchange among farmers and scientists in the construction of the scientific bases of agroecology;

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- the importance of family farmers and traditional and indigenous peoples in Latin America's cultural fabric;
- the rights of these people to land, seeds, water, food security and food sovereignty;
- the role of women in food production and the maintenance of agrobiodiversity, and the need for researchers, extensionists, change agents and leaders to value that role and acknowledge womens' demands;
- the importance of addressing aspects of gender relations, including the routine violence that violates womens' rights and impedes their full participation;
- support for agroecological education at all levels, as well as research and its dissemination, for the formation of the critical mass needed to meet future challenges;
- the need to strengthen and broaden cooperation between SOCLA and ABA and the institutions of civil society in regard to production, education, research, extension, climate change adaptation, biodiversity maintenance and sustainable use of water and energy;
- the need to increase public investment in support of agroecological transition, urban agriculture and family farming;
- the need to strengthen agroecological strategies for sustainable energy, reduce dependence on fossil fuels and halt the spread of agrofuels;
- that maintaining centers of crop origin free of transgenics and ending patents that impede seed exchange are fundamental to the future of humanity;
- opposition to agricultural practices, technologies, public policies and transnational corporations that compromise environmental protection, social justice, food security, food sovereignty and public health; and
- an openness to sharing experiences, debate and dialog between the sciences and social organizations for the construction of agroecological paths toward a healthier planet for all.

This is a powerful set of aspirations and demands from a movement that is flexing its collective muscle. By putting their science at the service of healthy, just and sustainable food systems and forging alliances with social movements, Latin American agroecologists are leading the way for their colleagues everywhere.

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