

No to agribusiness, yes to agroecology

Nicaragua Now reports on alternatives to the unsustainable farming methods that are destructive for people and the planet.

The agro-industrial food system is dominated by a small number of transnational companies that control everything from seeds to supermarkets: they provide food for only 30% of the world's population but use 75 – 90% of land, water and fossil fuels related to agriculture.

Transnational food production is a major contributor to disease, climate change, environmental collapse and displacement of small scale farmers. For every dollar that consumers pay to the industrial food chain in products, society pays two dollars more for the health and environmental damage this chain causes.

In Latin America up to 80% of deforestation is caused by expansion of

Transnational agribusinesses have turned food production and consumption into one of the greatest health hazards for people and the planet.

ACTION GROUP ON EROSION, TECHNOLOGY AND CONCENTRATION (ETC GROUP)



viacampesina.org

the agricultural frontier; globally more than 70% of agricultural land is used for livestock feed.

In comparison, 70% of the world's population are peasants and indigenous peoples who have less than 25% of global land and water, but produce food on small scale farms, and from fishing, urban gardens, and hunting and gathering.

La Via Campesina (LVC), the global movement of millions of peasants and indigenous people, has argued for the past thirty years for a food system that respects human beings and the environment. LVC highlights the fact that Covid-19 and the climate crises have exposed 'the profound dangers this globalised food system and unsustainable capitalism pose to all life forms... We must learn from this crisis and invest in building local, resilient and diverse food systems.'

Agroecology. As well as denouncing agribusiness and the role of the World Trade Organisation, LVC is building an alternative model, one based on agroecology. This is a model that is not only about growing healthy local food to enable communities to live well but also about building a new political culture through promoting social transformation.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. LVC declaration, 2007

Climate Justice: 'It is imperative to create harmony among the living beings of the planet and to cool Mother Earth. Food sovereignty links climate change and the collective rights of humanity, it guarantees the protection of the peasantry, and indigenous people and their role in food production.' La Via Campesina International Collective on the environment and climate justice, Managua, 27 August, 2018

The Rural Workers Association (ATC), representing Nicaraguan campesinxs

NSC's partner organisation in Nicaragua, the ATC, was a founder member of LVC when it was set up in 1993.

The organisation has a long history of struggle for peasants' rights going back to 1978 when rural labourers led an insecure, often nomadic life under a semi feudal system of land ownership.

The ATC formed part of a broad alliance that brought the Sandinista government to power in 1979. Agrarian reform was fundamental to building a new society based on social and economic justice.



Organic maize and beans

In the 1980s the ATC played a central role in improving the living and working conditions of campesinxs on state or private farms and farming co-operatives. However, as the US war on Nicaragua intensified, rural areas became the target of Contra attacks: many campesinxs lost their lives defending their families and communities.

After the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990, the ATC helped to facilitate a complex process of reconciliation between former Contra and Sandinista peasant families, essential to recognising common interests over



Agroecology students harvesting maize

Building a youth movement for agroecology in Latin America

The first Latin American Agroecological Institute (IALA) was set up in 2006 in Venezuela through an agreement between LVC and then Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. Since then eight other IALAs have been established across the region to provide training for young people.

Each IALA has its own dynamic but all use LVC peasant to peasant popular education methodologies combining technical, political and ideological training.

The latest IALA was founded in 2018 by the ATC for young people from Central American and Caribbean organisations. The two year course provides a holistic training based on the values of co-operation, internationalism and the struggle against capitalism.

To deepen the experience of the students IALA Ixim Ulew, like the other IALAs, follows the methodology of alternating time spent on campus with practical application

‘The task we have is to recover the land and our identity as young campesinxs, to have our own land to grow food in a holistic, diversified way.’

IALA graduate Migdalia Cruz, ATC Jinotega



in the rural communities.

The first intake of 22 students between the ages of 18 – 30 began their course in February 2018 and graduated in November 2019.

In the context of the COVID crisis the second cohort of 40 students from Mexico, Central American and the Dominican Republic started their online course on 15 April this year. This means the challenges – and some advantages – of Moodle, Zoom, and Whatsapp.

political affiliation.

Under consecutive neoliberal governments from 1990–2006, the ATC organised to defend the gains of the Revolution including the right to retain land distributed through the agrarian reform programme.

Since 2007 the Sandinista government has implemented social programmes based on the restitution of rights such as free health care and education combined with infrastructure development with a particular focus on improving the quality of life in rural areas.

This includes programmes to strengthen the rural economy so that small scale farmers are able to feed their families and communities and contribute to building national food sovereignty. Granting land titles, technical training, credit programmes, and workshops that promote gender equality are some of the great diversity of integrated initiatives. Peasant farmers played a major role in sustaining the country’s food supplies through the 2018 crisis.

The ATC movement with 47,000 members has two main areas of work: defending the employment rights of agricultural workers in the banana, coffee, tobacco, and sugarcane industries; and strengthening struggles for political, economic, social and climate justice in rural areas.

Providing training and access to government programmes. This includes courses at five residential centres for community leaders in employment rights, agroecological farming, political and community organising, and food sovereignty.

Working directly with campesina communities organised into co-operatives and associations. The focus is on building local, resilient and ecologically diverse food systems and promoting gender equality.

Promoting the interests of rural women and young people. National ATC movements include the Movement of Rural Women (MMC) and the National Youth Movement (MJC).



NSC activists at a national rally organised in London by the Landworkers Alliance, the UK affiliate of LVC

NSC, working in solidarity with the ATC

For the past year NSC has been working in solidarity with the ATC. For obvious reasons, we postponed a UK speaker tour by two ATC representatives, which had been due to take place in June. Covid-19 also meant the cancellation of sponsored events and conferences, which has had an impact on our income. However, we have taken full advantage of the opportunities that have opened up through virtual platforms to reach more people in far flung places who would otherwise have been unable to participate.

In collaboration with another solidarity organisation, Friends of the ATC, we have produced a short video and organised a

webinar entitled ‘Land, agroecology and peasant identity’ featuring the director and two recent graduates of the Latin American Institute of Agroecology (IALA) Ixim Ulew, the ATC’s school in agroecology and leadership. We have also published regular updates on the work of the ATC and IALA, organised a webinar with representatives from the ATC and Landworkers’ Alliance (the UK affiliate of La Via Campesina), and fundraised for our ATC solidarity work in the UK and for ATC projects in Nicaragua. In addition, we have circulated more regular newsletters to our members and supporters, organised very successful online Spanish classes, and developed a new website.

See page 2 for contact details

What does Sandinismo mean? Campesina Emerita Vega's story

I was born in 1948 in the rural community Marlon Alvarado in the department of Carazo. Our community has links with the ATC stretching back to the founding of the organisation in 1978.

My childhood was very sad. I grew up when Nicaragua was governed by the Somoza family dictatorship. I was raised in extreme poverty, the second of ten children. We had no [running] water, so

we had to go to fill buckets five kilometres away. We had no electricity either, so we used a bottle with a rag soaked in diesel [which we lit with a match] and used for a light. The roads were just trails where the horses could drown in the mud holes in the rainy season, and we all went barefoot.

We didn't have a school, so we were all illiterate. Later a school was provided to third grade, so I learned to read and write.

At twelve I had to go to work in the city to help my parents to raise my younger brothers and sisters. I worked as a maid, and in those days there were no laws to protect us. We had no days off, vacation time, or extra pay at Christmas. My father died when I was nineteen so I continued working to support my younger siblings.

It wasn't until July 19, 1979 with the Sandinista Revolution that we poor people saw a change in our lives. It was like waking up. Until then that we had any rights, such as the right to land. Through the agrarian reform we were given an area of land to plant; land that had always belonged to a rich landowner, where we were the badly paid labourers.

But that era was also very hard due to the Contra war that the US imposed on us. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) lost the 1990 elections because people were tired of so much war, scarcity of basic items, and the loss of our loved ones. The neoliberal propaganda promised that if the US backed 15 party coalition won, the war would end.

With [the neoliberal governments of] Violeta Chamorro, Arnoldo Aleman and Enrique Bolaños, we went backwards. They wanted to rescind the [Constitutional requirement] that 6% of the budget is for university education, including scholarships for people who can't afford it.

Young people protested to claim



Rice, beans, plantains. Nicaragua has achieved 80% food sovereignty in staple crops

Marlon Alvarado community

Situated in southwest Nicaragua, the community is home to 127 people. Many families own a few acres of land as a result of the 1980s agrarian reform.

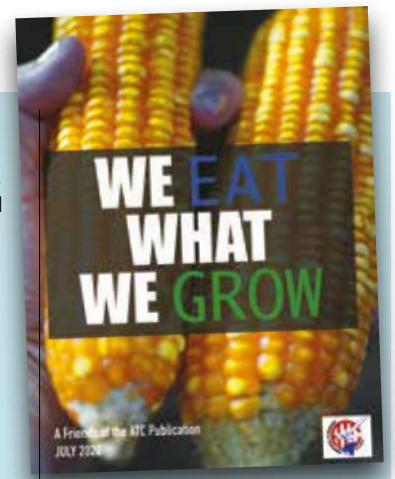
Most families have vegetable gardens and fruit trees around their houses. Nearly every family also has chickens and roosters; some also have pigs, horses, goats, dairy cows, sheep, and cattle.

In larger fields staple crops include maize, beans, rice, sugarcane, and sorghum for their own consumption, to share with neighbours and to sell in local markets.

The families have received support from the Ministry for Family, Community, Co-operative and Associative Economy (MEFCCA) and the Agricultural Technology Institute (INTA) to diversify their production and strengthen the household economy, especially for women. These government programmes

are complemented by ATC organisational, technical and political training. For example, the ATC organised training and exchanges on agroecology including nitrogen fixing cover crops, organic fertiliser, soil and water conservation, and alternative animal feeds.

Diversifying income sources is particularly important for women. The ATC organises trainings in business development and the production of piñatas, jams, hammocks, and other value-added products.



This is an edited version of testimonies entitled 'We eat what we grow', published by Friends of the ATC, July 2020
www.friendsatc.org



Emerita grows pineapples supported by the ATC as part of crop diversification programme

their rights, and some were killed and wounded. The roads weren't maintained so they became unpassable again. The infamous 'blackouts' meant that we had electricity for only six hours a day. In the hospitals and health centres there were no medicines. In the schools, we [even] had to pay to take tests. Everything went backwards and people got tired of it.

In 2007 the FSLN led by Daniel Ortega returned to power through the elections, and a new period began in which the government works with all sectors: private businesses, farmers, medium and small-sized businesses, and unions.

Now, thanks to the Revolution we work

this land for our own benefit, which has helped a lot to change how we live. We also have good roads all year round, electricity, and easy access to water.

I am one of many poor people in the rural areas who have benefited from government programmes such as Zero Hunger whereby we were given 'production packages' consisting of a pregnant cow, a pig, hens, rolls of barbed wire, bags of cement, and zinc roofing.

Health care and education is free. This has meant major changes for my family. For example, my brother Antonio Vega, is a farmer. He has four children who have graduated from the university:

one civil engineer, two doctors, and one psychologist. This would have been impossible if it weren't for the 6% law that provides accommodation as well as tuition for students from families who can't afford it.

The opposition parties know that through elections they won't return to power, since the majority of the people are content with this government. That's why the opposition have had to use tricks and lies to try to destabilise the country, using the internet to wage a media war.

They may be able to fool people in other countries, but they can't fool us because we can see what is really happening.

Untangling the property rights labyrinth

The period of the Somoza dictatorship was characterised by an extreme concentration of wealth – including property – in the hands of a powerful elite. Semi-feudal property ownership focused on export crops, left landless campesinos living in extreme poverty.

After the triumph of the Revolution, the family and

close associates of Somoza had their property confiscated. This land was taken over by the state and four million acres of farmland was redistributed to 80,000 families.

The 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinistas opened the doors for former owners who had become US citizens to appeal for redress under US laws that prohibit US aid to any country that has confiscated property that formerly belonged to US citizens. Successive Nicaraguan governments paid

out \$US1.3bn compensation: continuing US aid depended on 'satisfactory progress' in resolving these claims.

In contrast, in 1986, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found the US guilty of military and paramilitary aggression against Nicaragua, in violation of international law. Nicaragua submitted a claim for \$US17bn damages which the US has never paid claiming that the ICJ had no right of jurisdiction over the case.

In 2007 the Sandinista

government inherited 'an archipelago' of structures, property insecurity, and land conflicts. Faced with the mammoth task of unscrambling the chaos, with the support of the World Bank, the government has established effective systems for managing property rights. Urban and rural titles have been granted to 430,000 people, the majority women. On the Caribbean Coast 37,800 sq km has been demarcated and titled to indigenous communities.