Food Justice Voices

WhyHunger

Agroecological Approaches to Poverty, Migration and Landlessness

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While Congress attempts to reform the federal immigration system, centering its discussions primarily around issues of border enforcement, monitoring and deterrence, communities on the U.S.-Mexico border confront an ongoing system of enforced inequalities.

Many institutions structure and reproduce these unequal relations: from the global industry reliance on low-wage labor, land grabbing and toxic dumping, to the bi-national industry of militarism driving the construction of the border wall and related infrastructure to deter, detain and remove migrants. These projects include the *Merida Initiative*, the intelligence-based anti-narcotic agreement between Mexico and the U.S., which has injured, exiled and killed many men and women in this bi-national corridor. The resulting system is one of disrupted livelihoods and ancestral relations. This context creates the need for a thorough examination of border inequalities and a need to find frameworks that fully restore communal, ecological, and political landscapes.

In June 2013, I had an opportunity to participate in the Agroecology of Urban Farming[i] session organized by Food First,[ii] the Center for the Study of the Americas[iii] and the U.C. Berkeley College of Agroecology.[iV] Agroecology, as it is practiced and studied today, encompasses the study of all ecological, social and economic processes within agricultural systems. The course provided invaluable tools to change conditions of oppression and social injustice.

Borderlines

Everyday, migrant and border communities confront excessive rates of family separation, persecution and emotional trauma. This community has grown accustomed to the news of migrant bodies found each year on this vast desert, to the thousands of disappeared, the countless unidentified. I reflect upon the work of my colleagues in Texas, Arizona and California who have documented and fought for many years to redress these inhumane border control policies. This article documents the small but persistent efforts of local farmers and community organizations to rebuild local farming systems in the El Paso and Southern New Mexico border region and to rebuild peaceful, egalitarian community landscapes. Our work is grounded in the larger political and social struggle for equality, dignity and self-determination of indigenous citizens, migrants and border communities on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Migrants face multiple systems that perpetuate their marginalization and exclusion. In our home countries, we confront systemic discrimination on the basis of skin color, language, ethnic or social status. We are confronted with unfair government systems that are incapable of providing us with safety, protections, or justice. Our farming systems are continuously dismantled in favor of commodity cash-crops for international exports.

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These projects profoundly undermine the agrarian life of peasant people, dismantle biodiversity and are almost decimating ancestral knowledge and villages: the first ▶

agroecologies. While several movements and academic voices have highlighted the ability of peasant agriculture to feed the world's population, global institutions continue to push for resource-intensive farming practices and exploitative working conditions to feed production for the global north. These projects are destroying millenary agricultural systems; polluting lands and rivers and driving migrants north in a quest for opportunities and to defend an inherent right to self-determination.

Forced migration, on the contrary, is characterized by the urgent need to free ourselves, to find a way out of poverty and exploitation, an urgent quest for self-determination. By challenging these exploitative circumstances, we are coerced into becoming landless, stateless and criminalized.

Constrained by environmental disruption, displaced from our lands and sources of livelihood — while, restricted to a few economic spheres, we engage in a process of forced or coerced migration. Whether economic refugees or those suffering hunger, violence and famine, coerced migration includes those involuntary victims of trafficking and all other categories of involuntary migration. It is a commonly held belief that migration is prompted by better economic opportunities and better employment prospects, to achieve the dream! Every migrant under this scenario must hold a visa, a passport and must follow the "legal entryway." Forced migration, on the contrary, is characterized by the urgent need to free ourselves, to find a way out of poverty and exploitation, an urgent quest for self-determination. By challenging these exploitative circumstances, we are coerced into becoming landless, stateless and criminalized.

In the Paso del Norte corridor, a migratory route for millennia and a home to many generations of indigenous groups including Mexican Americans, people struggle to adapt ▶

to the scarcity of fresh food, safe water and other critical services. Low-income people are consistently pushed to live in substandard unincorporated neighborhoods as a result of unemployment or underemployment primarily from the food service industries, from restaurants to farms – subjected to the violence of economic exploitation, very few meaningful social and economic opportunities. Trying to fill the gap are poverty alleviation programs aimed primarily at providing emergency assistance, filling food pantries with canned food and promoting nutritionally-deficient school lunch programs.

Borderlands

These circumstances led local leaders and community organizations to seek alternatives to poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Founded in 1981, La Mujer Obrera[v] is an organization led by former garment women workers. Seeking to redress the economic and social devastation created by the Maquiladora industry, the organization is focused on the opening of a farmers market in the most impoverished urban neighborhood of El Paso. The organization also enlisted the support of Sin Fronteras Organizing Project[vi] and the Adult and Youth United Development Association (AYUDA).[vii] Together, they launched the Sustainable Urban Rural Collaborative (SURCO).[viii] SURCO is an initiative of migrant women, agricultural workers, youth and indigenous people to rebuild a local food system in the Paso del Norte border corridor.

Within the first year, SURCO developed an outreach strategy to recruit sixty low-income families, provide them with farm training and create three small farming projects. With a few Agroecological principles under their belt, SURCO members began transforming three empty lots into vegetable farms. SURCO families learned basic farming principles about soil fertility, sustainable watering systems, traditional crops and companion planting. The second year, these community farms inspired the creation of almost thirty backyard vegetable gardens. For the first time, la Mujer Obrera's Farmers Market sold produce sourced from their own farm. Many low-income families continue to benefit from these farming efforts. Throughout the process, we held periodic community meetings to evaluate our farms and identify other social and community needs; these dialogues informed our actions.

Our community, however, confronts several challenges, which enunciate the wide range of problems faced by migrants and low-income border people. Drawing primarily from my experience in human rights work and from my most recent experiences in Agroecology and Food Sovereignty, I made the following associations:

1) Landlessness and weak land access are at the root of all economic poverty and food insecurity.
2) Immigration reinforces existing inequalities of race, gender and economic status.
3) Because land tenure and immigration status are basic tenets of political and economic power, migrants and their families are marginalized from decision-making and policy-making projects.
4) Weak citizenship rights undermine all forms of individual and communal rights, including the right to water, the right to food, to fair labor standards or political participation. ▶

Agroecology

The Agroecology of Urban Farming training in Berkeley allowed me to delve more deeply into the history and practice of Agroecology and to examine how we can fully apply it in the border region. Dr. Miguel Altieri[ix], the convener of the training and one of the most influential Agroecological scientists in the world, explained, Agroecology is a science based on universal principles applied in the design of farming systems that are productive, diversified and resilient to climate change and pests. Agroecology is based in the ancestral traditional knowledge of peasants, and includes modern elements of agronomy science, ecology and sociology. It is a matrimony of knowledge; a dialogue between wisdoms resulting in certain principles.

During the Agroecology training, Dr. Altieri explained the extent and significance of ecological agriculture around the world. Dr. Altieri has advanced and documented the vast experiences of small farmers in building resilient farming ecosystems with minimal economic resources. Eric Holt-Giménez, Executive Director of Food First, provided an in-depth overview of the Green Revolution in Latin America and the vast peasant efforts challenging it. This provided a political location to our Agroecological discussions. Understanding the importance of ecologically-based peasant agriculture around the world and its contribution to food sovereignty, or the right of all people to determine their own food policies and practices[x], reaffirms our determination to ecological agriculture as a way of rebuilding transnational families and transnational livelihoods.

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Dr. Altieri proposes an alternative "reversed south-north technology transfer." Rather than science and knowledge being delivered ▶

from global industries in the global north to countries in the global south, Altieri recommends learning from indigenous and peasant-farming practices that promote biodiversity, conserve natural resources, help combat the uncertainty of food prices and relieve the pressures of climate change. These principles were demonstrated in each of the in-field sessions of the Urban Agroecology course. Local urban farmers like Rene Zanzueta and guest trainers from the Post-Graduate Agricultural College in Mexico taught us that it is possible to produce food with almost no agricultural inputs: we learned to observe, listen and feel the texture of the soil in order to assess nutrients, to manage pests with locally available resources such as companion plants and crop rotation. As explained by Dr. Altieri, Agroecology is "knowledge-intensive" as opposed to "input-intensive." This process encourages biodiversity, resiliency and communal forms of food production.

Dr. Altieri kindly sat down with me to discuss general approaches to Agroecology, including those of particular relevance to our border/desert region. I will attempt to highlight some of the key principles he mentioned:

1) **Diversification.** Diversity of plants, animals and genetic diversity (such as traditional varieties). This principle takes technological forms according to the environmental, social and economic conditions of each project. In our desert environment, constrained by water limitations, we would look at plant varieties that are resistant or tolerant to drought.

2) **Activating the biological activity of the soil.** Increasing organic matter with compost to promote water absorption. This will promote the creation of fungi that grow in the roots and help retain water.

3) **Mulching.** Utilizing crops such as straw or other materials to prevent evaporation and to promote water conservation.

4) **Organizing crops according to both time and space.** Associations in space include the use of polyculture with crops that complement each other, such as those traditional relationships of corn, beans and squash also known as "the three sisters." Associations in time include crop rotation to charge the system with nutrients — a crop that demands more nutrients should be rotated with another one that replenishes the soil. Crops should not be rotated with another one from the same family as this could deplete nutrients from the system and make crops susceptible to the same diseases.

One of the most important things highlighted during the Agroecology course is that when building alternatives to industrial agriculture, it's impossible to redress the problems created by that system using the same tools, frameworks and paradigms that created it. We must instead build an entirely different model.

Reclaiming and rebuilding our food sovereignty involves searching for alternative praxis, one that fundamentally transforms peoples' relationship with the land and fundamentally transforms relationships of power. The following questions were developed within the context of working with migrant and low-income people living within a highly militarized border region. They may be useful to other communities working to build their own futures and sovereignties. These questions derive from the principles and methodologies of popular education:

- **Is our community involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of our project? Are indigenous/native communities included in the process?** What kind of reality do we collectively want to ▶

build? Who are the most vulnerable members of our community? Are we considering their needs, solutions and visions in our process?

- **Are we providing food aid or are we empowering people to achieve or reclaim rights such as land, water, human or citizenship rights?** What are the laws or government entities responsible for guaranteeing these rights? How can we influence and impact them? How is our project challenging militarization?

- **Are we recovering and documenting ancestral agricultural knowledge?** Are we preserving and propagating the wisdom accumulated throughout generations in our families and communities?

- **Are we developing alternative economies in low-income communities?** Are we building autonomy from market prices through bartering and other community trading systems?

- **Are we recovering important social institutions such as land tenure?** How can we strengthen people's rights to land ownership? How can migrants use Agroecology to revitalize their farmlands in their countries of origin?

- Are we developing **new leaders** and new social actors?

- Are we **empowering women** to participate in the decision-making and priority-setting of our process? Women are not only at the center of all inequalities, but are also at the center of family and community struggles for justice and self-determination.

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If human rights is the theory, Agroecology is the practice.

In our border region, characterized by walls, surveillance cameras, military check-points and identity cards, Agroecology represents an opportunity to rebuild a healthy ecosystem. In our experience, Agroecology also means the possibility to build solidarity, reclaim our political voice and advance our collective aspirations.

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Alma Maquitico

Alma is a popular educator working on grassroots-led farming initiatives with low-income communities in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. A migrant woman from Mexico, Alma first became a human rights defender with the Immigration Law Enforcement Monitoring Project, where she led several community inquiries into human rights abuses, civil liberties violations and other forms of state violence against migrants and border peoples. Through her work with the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and the American Friends Service Committee, Alma has helped to train various generations of immigrant organizers and community leaders. Alma is currently a Farm Apprentice Fellow with the American Friends Service Committee and provides support to the Sustainable Urban Rural Collaborative (SURCO), an initiative of migrants, women, agricultural workers and indigenous people working to create a dignified food system in the El Paso del Norte region.

[i] http://www.foodfirst.org/en/Bay+Area+urban+agriculture+short+course

[ii] www.foodfirst.org

[iii] http://agroecology.berkeley.edu/

[iv] www. globalalternatives.org

[v] www.mujerobrera.org

[vi] http://www.farmworkers.org/sinfreng.html

[vii] www. ayuda-elpaso.org

[viii] http://surcoblog.wordpress.com/

[ix] http://ourenvironment.berkeley.edu/people_profiles/miguel-altieri/

[x] http://www.foodsovereignty.org/FOOTER/Highlights.aspx
(six principles of food sovereignty from Nyeleni)

[xii] The seven principles of Food Sovereignty as proposed by Via Campesina are as follows: (1) Food is a Basic Human Right (2) Agrarian Reform (3) Protecting Natural Resources (4) Reorganizing Food Trade (5) Ending the Globalization of Hunger, (6) Social Peace and (7) Democratic Control.
http://viacampesina.org/en/

WhyHunger is a leader in building the movement to end hunger and poverty by connecting people to nutritious, affordable food and by supporting grassroots solutions that inspire self-reliance and community empowerment.

WhyHunger brings its unique assets and history to building a broad-based social movement to end hunger. Our set of core values rests on the understanding that solutions and innovation are often found in the grassroots. WhyHunger's programs work to support these community-based organizations as they grow and develop, and bring new ideas and practices to creating a just food system that provides universal access to nutritious and affordable food.

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