

## COUNTRY AND CASE STUDY REPORT : COLOMBIA “Women reclaim solidarity, agro-biodiversity and cultural identity”

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### 1. Colombia - Facts and figures on rural development

- **Total population** (2005)<sup>1</sup> : 42,090,502 inhabitants
- **Rural population** (2005)<sup>2</sup> : 10,524,226 people living in rural areas (25% of population), 1,742,429 farming units (associated to a rural home), 3,844,623 people in agricultural labor.
- **Women and men in agricultural labor** (2005)<sup>3</sup> : 6.5% of total female employment and 29.2% of total male employment are dedicated to agricultural labor.
- **Gross domestic product per capita** (2006)<sup>4</sup> : US\$ 6,381
- **Proportion of undernourished in total population** (2005)<sup>5</sup> : 41% of Colombian households suffer from food insecurity, with indices of food insecurity affecting 58.2% of rural people and 87% of displaced families.
- **Government investment in agriculture** (2008)<sup>6</sup> : \$ 815,661 million Colombian pesos
- **Official development assistance - total aid** (2006)<sup>7</sup> : US\$ 988 million
- **Sources for development aid to the governmental sector** (2007)<sup>8</sup> : United States (105), United Nations (57), European Commission (35), International Organization for Migration (28), Japan (13), Spain (10), Germany (7), Holland (6), (figures in million US\$)

### 2. Context of agriculture and rural development in Colombia

It is sadly paradox, that Colombia, a country that is privileged with an immense patrimony in cultural and biological diversity, with all the ranges of agro-climatic landscapes, with a coastline conformed of both the Caribbean and Pacific ocean, with a tradition of peasant, indigenous, afro-descendent and fisher-folk people who have a vocation to produce abundant and healthy food, is now contrastingly

<sup>1</sup> Data as reported in the national census of Colombia: Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística - DANE (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> FAO - Oficina Regional para América Latina y El Caribe, “Actualización estadística situación de las mujeres rurales en Colombia”, Bogotá, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) income - UNDP Human development report (2006).

<sup>5</sup> According to the governmental research document: *Encuesta nacional de la situación nutricional en Colombia (ENSIN)*, Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar - ICBF, Bogotá, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural de Colombia, ejecución presupuestal (2008). Retrieved from web-page: [http://www.minagricultura.gov.co/archivos/presupuesto\\_2008\\_a\\_31-12-08.pdf](http://www.minagricultura.gov.co/archivos/presupuesto_2008_a_31-12-08.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Colombia - Encuesta Seguimiento de la Declaración de París - OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

facing conditions of hunger, malnutrition and poverty, and that food-aid programs<sup>9</sup> are evermore institutionalised as a governmental policy.

It is clear that agriculture in Colombia has suffered in the last 20 years the extension of three catastrophes, which without doubt have consolidated the rural crisis and have put at risk our countries potential to attain food sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> Firstly, the rapid decrease in the production of basic food-stuffs and cereals, due to a rising dependence on food imports<sup>11</sup>; secondly, the stigmatization and degradation of rural-work<sup>12</sup> and small-hold farming practices<sup>13</sup>; and finally, an increase in the inequitable distribution of wealth and rural land.<sup>14</sup>

With a total population of 42 million people in Colombia, there is a growing shift towards urbanization; now only 26% of people live in rural areas, while 74% are concentrated in urban areas, with evident problems of inequity and social exclusion within rural and urban society, as well as between regions. This is not surprising taking into account that the country has been inflicted by a legacy of violence and social injustice; some estimates report that close to 4 million people in the last 15 years have been displaced from the countryside, and that 6.8 million hectares of land have been taken by force and dispossession.<sup>15</sup>

In this perspective of Colombia, it is inevitable to link the rural and socioeconomic crisis with the increasing fragility and erosion of natural resources and agro-biodiversity, including the privatization of environmental patrimony. An estimated 40% of natural ecosystems have undergone grave deterioration and many regions are suffering problems of access to clean and adequate water supplies.<sup>16</sup> The tendency to open-up the country to international investment through the

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<sup>9</sup> Relief and food-aid programs in Colombia have been highly criticized by NGOs, communities and indigenous authorities, particularly because of their ignorance of local peoples' cultural practices, alteration of community governance structures, tendency to create food-dependency and the loss of agro-biodiversity due to the introduction of modified seeds, animal breeds and GMO contaminated food-stuffs. A more detailed discussion is given in the article: Revista Semillas No. 24/25, "Ni ayuda ni alimenta - Ayuda alimentaria en comunidades indígenas de Colombia", Fernando Castrillón - Swissaid, Bogotá, June 2005.

<sup>10</sup> "¿Qué es lo que pasa con el campo?", Aurelio Suárez Montoya, Salvación Agropecuaria, El Tiempo, 12 de junio de 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Colombia has passed from being a country that was auto-sufficient in many products such as maize, to being a country that now annually imports more than 8 million tons of food, which in terms of the percentage of total consumption, represents importing 86% of soy, 66.6% of maize, 93.3% of wheat, 23% of beans, 32.8% of peas, and all chick-peas, lentils and barley.

<sup>12</sup> In terms of rural incomes, it has been reported that 66% of agricultural workers in Colombia receive less than the legally-established minimum monthly wage. The recent strikes (2008 - 2009) to demand improved salaries and working conditions of 18,000 sugar-cane cutters and 17,000 banana plantation workers highlights this situation.

<sup>13</sup> An innumerable list of recent decrees and resolutions with the pretext of improved sanitary conditions, have in effect discriminated against small-holder production of milk, meat products, poultry and panela which is sold in local plazas, while benefiting the expansion of multinational supermarket chains.

<sup>14</sup> The Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi (IGAC, 2005) estimates that Colombia has 82.1 million hectares of cultivable land. However, 57% of land-owners (small-holders with less than 3 hectares) merely hold 1.7% of the countries agricultural land, whereas, 0.4% of land-owners (who possess areas >500 hectares) control 62.3% of cultivable land. Moreover, the most recent calculations of the United Nations (PNUD / 2007 - 2008) gives Colombia a Gini coefficient of 0.59 (as a measure of inequality of income distribution), which puts us amongst the 8 countries with the worst distribution of wealth in the world.

<sup>15</sup> A more detailed discussion of the tragedy of rural displacement in Colombia can be found in: Revista Semillas "Tierra y Territorios", No. 30/31, Grupo Semillas, Bogotá, Dec. 2006.

<sup>16</sup> A governmental study of the Instituto de Hidrología, Meteorología y Estudios Ambientales - IDEAM (2000), calculates that 25% of town municipalities present an index of water stress, and that by 2015 it is estimated that this will rise to 55%, affecting principally the Colombian Andes region inhabited by 80% of the national population.

implementation of mega-projects (plantations, large-scale mining<sup>17</sup>, hydroelectric dams, agribusiness<sup>18</sup> and agro-fuels<sup>19</sup>) gravely threatens essential forest ecosystems, traditional fisheries, as well as collective territories of ethnic and rural communities.

Local communities have also had to affront the brutal impacts of flooding, landslides and desertification, distressing local peoples' food production and livelihoods. The first semester of 2009 showed an increase of 42% in flooding disaster victims in Colombia compared to 2008. Official figures for this period show the real calamity of climate change: 88 deaths, 79 injured, 33 disappeared, 137,792 people affected, 1,469 houses destroyed, with damages reported to 14,616 homes and 22,289 hectares of farmland.<sup>20</sup>

This panorama necessarily implies significant changes in the focus and delivery of public policies and international cooperation towards the fundamental need to uphold cultural identity, agro-biodiversity, sustainable rural lifestyles and collective peoples' rights.<sup>21</sup> Development aid should address problematic structures of social - ecological justice which are entrenched within rural society and sustained by the dominant political - economic model. Moreover, is it vital to recover the diversity of the rural economy and enhance local - regional food circuits, since it is not only necessary to ensure dignified livelihoods for women, peasant and fisher-folk families, but also to ensure the adequate supply of healthy, traditional and locally-produced food for the urban population, strengthening cultural ties, sustainability and solidarity within this inseparable rural - urban relationship.<sup>22</sup>

### **3. Proposals and alternatives from social movements and NGOs**

Mario Mejía Gutierrez, a recognized leader and advocate of alternative agricultures in Colombia, eloquently describes the legacy and creativity of the "vía campesina", as a popular movement which seeks to return to the countryside, recover rurality and food cultures, encourage inter-cultural dialogue and spirituality, defend the principles of life and healthy food for all, and support the peoples' struggle for land, water, seeds, manual labor and food autonomy. As paraphrased by an Arabic proverb: "who has your bread, holds your dignity".<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> According to Rafael Colmenares Faccini - Comité Nacional en Defensa del Agua y de la Vida and director of Ecofondo, 50 - 60% of the total area of essential cloud-forest ecosystems (páramos) in Colombia are threatened by mining concessions. The mining authority - INGEOMINAS has already approved 65,176 hectares of mining titles in areas of páramo, with further mining applications of 402,628 hectares under review for approval.

<sup>18</sup> During 2007, the Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario - ICA approved the commercial release and planting of 5 varieties of GMO-corn in the departments of Córdoba, Sucre, Huila and Tolima, ignoring the voices of opposition and concern of indigenous and peasant communities, environmentalists and biodiversity experts. Additionally, this authority has approved the use of GMO maize, rice and soy as raw materials for animal-feed - Germán A. Vélez "El maíz transgénico en Colombia destruye nuestra soberanía alimentaria", Marzo 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Governmental policies to cultivate sugarcane and oil palm for agrofuels have resulted in an alarming increase in mono-crop plantations: for example in the period 2000 - 2007, the area planted in oil palm in Colombia expanded from 150,000 to 316,000 hectares, with a reported "potential" area for plantations of 3.5 million hectares. Data: FEDEPALMA (2008).

<sup>20</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Colombia (Jan - March, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> The Constitution of Colombia (1991) proclaims for the special protection of the nations food production and the progressive access of the rural people to land and other common goods (education, health, housing, social security, recreation, credit, communication, technical assistance, etc.).

<sup>22</sup> Illustrative examples of the importance of local market economies in Colombia are given in the following publications: "Implicancias económicas de la agricultura ecológica", Revista de agroecología - LEISA, Vol. 21 No. 2, Lima, Sept 2005 and "Lineamientos estratégicos para una política pública agroalimentaria para Bogotá", proyecto Planeta Paz.

<sup>23</sup> Mario Mejía Gutiérrez, "Agricultura y ganadería orgánicas a condiciones Colombianas: retorno de los pobres al campo", Cali - Colombia, 2006.

A key point of reference of the present-day social movement in Colombia, is the Agrarian Mandate of Colombia, a compendium of 14 points presented to the country in April 2003 by a broad range of civil-society groups (peasants, indigenous, afro-descendent and NGOs) which combines in essence the rural crisis of Colombia and the collective demands for change:

<b>Key action point headings of the Agrarian Mandate of Colombia (2003)</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Right to life, democratic liberties and respect of human rights.</li><li>2. Food security and food sovereignty.</li><li>3. Alternatives to Free-Trade Agreements.</li><li>4. Right to land and integral agrarian reform.</li><li>5. Reconstruction of the small-holder farming and food economy.</li><li>6. Environmental protection and recovery of agro-ecosystems.</li><li>7. Negotiated policies to resolve the situation of cultivators of illicit crops.</li><li>8. Social, economic and cultural rights of peasant, indigenous and afro-descendent people.</li><li>9. Political recognition of the peasant movement.</li><li>10. Recognition of peasant, indigenous and afro-descendent women and their rights.</li><li>11. Right to cultural identity and territory.</li><li>12. Put an end to forced displacement of the population.</li><li>13. Political solution to the social and armed conflict.</li><li>14. Unity within the social and popular sectors of society.</li></ol>

Similarly, in the same year, the catholic church issued a significant doctrine for rural teaching and oration entitled “La Tierra un Don de Dios”,<sup>24</sup> where they reclaim for fundamental principles of solidarity, fair land distribution, food sovereignty and co-responsibility and participation of all sectors of society to seek a real solution to the structural problems that concern rural territories of Colombia, recognising the fundamental rights of all peasant men and women to live with dignity and integral well-being.

More recently, the historic annulment of the Rural Development Statute by the Constitutional Court opened up a new chapter in the debate on agriculture and agrarian reform in Colombia. The Statute, was declared unconstitutional in March 2009 because it did not comply with the requirement of prior consultation with indigenous peoples and afro-descendent communities. This is the second piece of legislation that has fallen for lack of adequate consultation, as the General Forestry Law was declared unconstitutional in January 2008 for this same reason.

These two laws had been highly criticized by civil-society organizations as the policies directly infringe fundamental rights of indigenous and afro-colombian people, and also degrade the livelihoods of peasants, rural workers, and those displaced by violence, particularly in terms of food sovereignty and food security. It is important to highlight, that the fall of the Rural Statute was one of the objectives of the "Minga Social y Comunitaria", a mobilization of at least 10,000 indigenous people throughout the country, who marched to the capital of Bogotá during October and November, 2008.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the different manifestations of the food, economic and ecological crisis have brought together civil-society organizations from many regions of Colombia in a series of national campaigns

<sup>24</sup> “La Tierra: Un Don de Dios, Tierra de Todos, Tierra de Paz”, Declaración Final de la LXXV Asamblea Plenaria del Episcopado Colombiano, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Hector Mondragon - coordinator of the Agriculture and Commerce Group of the Continental Social Alliance, retrieved from web-page: <http://www.zmag.org/znet/viewArticle/20968>

and social platforms to reclaim for food sovereignty, defence of biodiversity and water as a fundamental right.

A notable example is the promotion of a national referendum to proclaim water as a fundamental human right in the Colombian constitution.<sup>26</sup> The confluence of union leaders, environmentalists, public service consumer groups, educational sector, youth groups and peasant and indigenous communities was strategic in the achievement of more than 2 million supporting signatures, which permitted the initiative to be registered in the Colombian Congress in October 2008.

Similarly, the recent national meeting<sup>27</sup> of 200 social, peasant, indigenous and rural organizations from seven eco-regions of Colombia have demonstrated the importance of designing a collective plan and platform for action to face the food crisis:

### **Civil-society proposals and alternatives to face the food crisis in Colombia**

#### **Political and Organizational Actions**

- The need to promote and strengthen peasant and women's organizations, as well as to ensure scenarios for community meeting and inter-exchange.
- That institutional support is focused according to the social and ecologic realities of the food crisis in the different localities and regions.
- Regional and national networks that endorse public policies within a framework of food sovereignty, and that are developed from the grass-roots and with the participation of youth.
- Promote the production and consumption of locally-produced and traditional food products.
- Defend biodiversity, small-holder farming and indigenous territories as a collective patrimony.

#### **Cultural Awareness and Actions**

- Foster life-projects that dignify the peasant cultures and promote the sense of territorial identity.
- Processes of popular education that encourage local food production, based on traditional knowledge.
- Use media resources and alternative communication to disseminate information on the rural and food crisis.
- Public awareness on the right to healthy food, the protection of peasant lifestyles and the impacts of GMOs.
- Collective work-days (mingas), bartering and community gatherings which promote solidarity.
- Civil-society mobilization to oppose the privatization of water and environmental patrimony.

#### **Alternatives for Sustainable Production**

- Promote the production and diversification of family vegetable and fruit plots.
- Conservation, use and exchange of native seed, plant and animal varieties.
- Dissemination of agro-ecological production practices and traditional knowledge.
- Alternative marketing schemes that link rural and urban communities.
- Pedagogical tools and technology transfer which focus on community-to-community partnerships.

<sup>26</sup> For more information on progress of the water referendum campaign in Colombia: [www.ecofondo.org](http://www.ecofondo.org)

<sup>27</sup> "Food crisis in Colombia - Social actions to defend food autonomy and sovereignty", Bogotá, 4 - 6 of September, 2008.

#### 4. Introduction to the Case Study: Women immersed in the rural crisis of Colombia

On the occasion of the V International Conference of the Via Campesina, the women's peasant movement declares: *"We are women with a history and common struggles for life, land and territory, food sovereignty, justice and dignity ... we commit ourselves to struggle together to get comprehensive agrarian reform in order to eliminate all forms of violence generated by capitalist modes of production, and that have caused the global food crisis, climate change, the advance of monocultures, GMOs and agribusiness"*.<sup>28</sup>

In a country inflicted by social injustice such as Colombia, the situation of rural women is just as drastic. While 68.2% of rural people in Colombia are impoverished and 27.5% live in extreme poverty, the condition of women is more critical: the index of women without any self-supporting income in 2003 was 42%, compared to 20% of men.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the repercussions of rural displacement and urbanization for women and female-headed households<sup>30</sup> imply that they are significantly more exposed to impacts such as malnutrition<sup>31</sup>, as rural women's livelihoods are intrinsically linked to natural-based resources.

One of the foremost conquests of peasant women in Colombia was the declaration in 1984 of the first National Policy for Peasant Women, which constituted an event in the history of agrarian policies in Latin America<sup>32</sup>, ironically at a time when the agrarian reform in Colombia (since 1961) was shown to be a failure. The "visibility" achieved by peasant women was due to the confluence of various factors: the world conferences on women, the food crisis which began to be felt at national and international level, and social investigations which highlighted the inequity and exclusion of women in society. One important outcome of this national policy was its catalysing effect to create the first national organization of peasant women: Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas e Indígenas de Colombia - ANMUCIC.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently during the last 25 years, there has been a progressive multiplication of women's peasant organizations in Colombia at regional and local scales, and these organizations have been crucial in the empowerment of women by giving voice to their struggles. However, the work of women's groups has been fraught by the inequalities of land distribution, patriarchal models of society and the limited possibility to participate in institutional scenarios.

<sup>28</sup> *"Food Sovereignty now, Unity and struggle of the people"* - Declaration of the V International Conference of La Via Campesina, Maputo - Mozambique, 19-22 October, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Metodología de medición y magnitud de la pobreza en Colombia. Misión para el Diseño de una Estrategia para la Reducción de la Pobreza y la Desigualdad - MDERPD. Bogotá, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> According to governmental surveys (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar - ICBF), 25% of the economically-active female population of Colombia correspond to female-headed households; these women have had to fend for themselves and their families alone due to reasons of being made a widow, separation, abandonment, family violence and/or physical incapacity of their spouse.

<sup>31</sup> The problems of hunger in sectors of the population of Colombia are alarming: 45% of pregnant women are diagnosed with anaemia, 58.2% of rural families declare that a child goes to bed without having a meal, and more than 80% of children (less than 5 years old) in various indigenous and afro-descendant communities suffer from chronic malnutrition - figures as reported in the investigation: *"Right to Food in Colombia : Situation, Context and Failures"* - an approximation of the Colombian State in the framework of the Voluntary Guidelines, Plataforma Colombiana de Derechos Humanos - Observatorio de Seguridad Alimentaria - Comisión Interfranciscana - Fundaexpresión - FIAN, Bogotá, December, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Ana Isabel García Q., Enrique Gomáriz M., *"La perspectiva de género y mujeres rurales en las estrategias y políticas de desarrollo territorial sostenible"*, Serie Cuaderno Técnico / IICA (No. 24), San José, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Donny Meertens, UNIFEM - Programa Paz y Seguridad - Colombia, *"Tierra, derechos y género: leyes, políticas y prácticas en contextos de guerra y paz"*, Bogotá, enero de 2006.

The Colombian Law 731 on Rural Women (2002), which was considered to be a great achievement in terms of access to credit for women and institutional participation, has fallen far short in its ambit of application and effectiveness. Equally disturbing has been the impact of the armed conflict on women's organizations, moreover, many struggles led by women to demand social justice are being repressed and criminalized by governments.

This panorama is sufficient enough to demonstrate the vital importance of women's peasant associations and movements in Colombia, which are highlighted as a key point of action within the Agrarian Mandate<sup>34</sup>, proclaiming for the: *"Recognition and protection of the role of women in the construction of cultural identity, in the permanent defence of the integrity of communities and as guardians of life ... (as well as) guarantees for the decisive participation of rural women in the scenarios of planning, management and development"*.

As regional partners of the **More and Better campaign**,<sup>35</sup> we strive to consolidate and disseminate this platform of common principles which can improve the quality of rural cooperation targeted for agriculture, fisheries and local development, giving particular attention to the empowerment of women and the recognition of the fundamental role of women to uphold agriculture, biodiversity, cultural identity and food autonomy.

Hence, this case-study seeks to illustrate some of the fundamental principles, community experiences and underlying policy issues related to women's empowerment in Colombia, taking as a testimonial example, the work of peasant associations in the Soto Province of the Department of Santander - Colombia<sup>36</sup>, and specifically the 14 years of accumulated life-stories of the Women Peasant Association of the municipality of Lebrija.

## 5. Brief background to the Case Study: Municipality of Lebrija (Santander)

*"We came to set up home in El Salado, and I remember that there were always trees, vegetation and water to be seen. We cultivated yuca, pineapple, plantain, coffee and a variety of fruits, but pineapple was only grown in small plots, and our families could live a good life off the land"*

- Rosalía Jiménez (community elder of Lebrija)

Pineapple is one of the many exotic and desired fruits of the tropics. However, beneath its sweet aroma, there hides a sour truth, involving peasant communities who have seen their quality of life rapidly deteriorate, due to mono-cropping and agri-business. This is the case of the municipality of Lebrija<sup>37</sup> (Santander), situated 17 km from the metropolitan area of Bucaramanga in the north-eastern Andes region, considered to be one of the principal centres of pineapple production in Colombia.

<sup>34</sup> Agrarian Mandate of Colombia, April 2003.

<sup>35</sup> The principles and regional partners that have collectively endorsed the **More and Better Campaign -an international campaign for food, agriculture and rural development aid to eradicate hunger and poverty-**, are fully described in the campaign web-page: [www.moreandbetter.org](http://www.moreandbetter.org)

<sup>36</sup> FUNDAEXPRESIÓN has recognized the importance of intercultural dialogue and territorial identity to safeguard the vitality, traditions and cultural patrimony of peasant and fisher-folk peoples. We have recreated and disseminated this collective knowledge through testimonial literature, poetry, radio and videos to give voice to women, youth and rural associations. Readers are invited to consult our following publications: testimonial journal "Despertar Campesino", radio series "Por Aquí Pasa el Río" and "Son de Maklenke", video "Piña Dulce, Agua Amarga", among others.

<sup>37</sup> The municipality of Lebrija is conformed of an area of 549.85 km<sup>2</sup> with a total population of 30,980 inhabitants (2005), 13,898 people in the urban area (44.8%) and 17,082 people (55.2%) in the rural area.

Months of continuous drought more than 5 years ago, were enough for the rural people from Lebrija to understand what the word “desertification” meant. Mono-cropping, climate change and agri-business have transformed the landscape into a desert, gravely affecting nutrition and the peasant farming community. Moreover, these families confront an ongoing struggle to obtain basic rights of access to water supplies.

The landscape is highly fragile, as it has been devastated by intensive mono-crop (slash and burn) pineapple production<sup>38</sup>, causing extended desertification, water contamination and malnutrition for the underprivileged peasant community. Irrational precipitation regimes and over-exploitation of water resources by agro-industries (poultry and pig-farming) have also accentuated water scarcity. In general, women and youth have been more exposed to the impacts of water contamination and scarcity in the rural areas.

Women’s participation in rural society is immersed in complex socio-cultural scenarios, where men have typically worked the mono-crop production and controlled economic income, while women have been more dedicated to “subsidiary” activities: small livestock, vegetable and fruit plots. However, experience has shown that the path to social and ecological recovery necessarily requires a process of social organisation and empowerment of the local community. Understanding the historical transformation of the landscape and its people, has motivated the women to recover traditional seed varieties as food-crops and implement diverse rain-water harvesting techniques and declare community forest reserves. Women have gained communication skills and political-standing in their communities, and have contributed to forging a dynamic, self-dependent and unified process.

## **7. Case Study : Women reclaim solidarity, agro-biodiversity and cultural identity**

*“The strength which constitutes a group of women is the combined potential of each of its members and the accumulated experience of the organization”*, manifested Cecilia Ibagos, founding member of the Association of Peasant Women of the Municipality of Lebrija - AMMUCALE, in a meeting of women leaders in the month of March 2009.<sup>39</sup> This meeting as on other occasions, has been part of a continuous process of reflection and planning, which these peasant women have sustained since the association was constituted in 1996. This case-study report has permitted the women to appraise their joint endeavours, and the many projects and initiatives developed during 14 years, accompanying more than 300 families affiliated in 12 rural committees of Lebrija.

Our analysis has taken as a central feature the significance of ‘autonomy’ seen through the eyes of this community process and how different projects of cooperation have had a positive or negative impact in the women’s association. Emperatriz Roman, currently the president of AMMUCALE, says assertively: *“we embrace rural cooperation as long as it does not affect our dignity”*. Furthermore, the concept of ‘dignity’ is established in the first article of the Political Constitution of Colombia, as

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<sup>38</sup> The area cultivated in pineapple production is an estimated 5,074 hectares, being the principal activity of subsistence for 1,800 peasant families of Lebrija and represents 35% of the cultivated land; the region is also a major producer of citric fruits, vegetables and cacao. The economy is also dependent on pig-farming and poultry (6.35% of national production).

<sup>39</sup> The experience of AMMUCALE initiated in 1996, the year in which the idea to establish a community organization which could bring together and represent peasant women in the municipality of Lebrija was finally consolidated. The association was founded on the principles to transform gender relations, to promote integral development and to improve the livelihoods of the women associates and their rural families, through leadership, empowerment and the development of social, economic, environmental and cultural projects. During this same period, rural women also showed progressive levels of representation in the Communal Boards of Action and the parent - teacher associations, as well as other peasant movements at a national level. For more information, please contact AMMUCALE at the following e-mail: ammucale@hotmail.com

follows: *“Colombia is a Social State of Rights, (...), founded in the respect of human dignity, in the work and solidarity of the people that it integrates and the prevalence of the common good”*

Based on the accumulated experience of AMMUCALE, as well as the many years of work and struggle it has shared with peasant and social sectors from the region, it is clear that the women members hold diverse perceptions with regards to the concept of rural cooperation and the significance of development ‘aid’, be it good or bad. Nevertheless the most meaningful form of analysis has been through the optical of human dignity; and here it is undeniable, that the prevalence of the common good which should be upheld by the Colombian State, has not been effectively applied and even less when we consider the drastic situation of peasant women and their families:

*“With regards to gender equity, the women of Lebrija subsist in conditions of discrimination and inferiority with regards to their male counterparts and the society as a whole, which represents a barrier to gain access and full control over the resources they require for self-development. Hence, the women of AMMUCALE have had to face up to these limitations and obstacles, which in essence has configured their course of action from the beginning, including: the lack of recognition of productive, domestic and communitarian work of women; inter-family violence; low self-esteem and subordination; high level of illiteracy and lack of access to the educational system”.*<sup>40</sup>

In the following sections we will take some daily examples of how human dignity is a central aspect to the lives and struggles of these peasant women:

#### **Debt with rural education:**

The educational debt is plainly evident in the rural territory; this concept is employed within a report<sup>41</sup> published by the Colombian Ministry of Education in 2001, which announces the inequalities of rural education: *“The problems inherent in the Colombian rural sector are in great part caused by the low coverage, deficient quality and unsuitability of the educational service which does not respond to social needs and is far-less an agent of renovation for the local people. This is reflected by the levels of poverty, increasing unemployment and violence which inflicts many rural areas of the country”.*

This debt continues and certainly has not improved much with time; the figures reported by the current Minister of Education, Cecilia María Vélez, ascertains: *“Today, in Colombia, there are 720,905 peasant children, between the ages of 5 and 16 years, who are not in the educational system ... primary school enrolment is close to 98%, however rural children do not surpass this level and on average only study up to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the schools where they can finish secondary education are usually situated far away from their homes, and continuing in the educational system, means moving to the city with high economic costs”.*<sup>42</sup>

In the case of the women who belong to AMMUCALE, many of them have to send their children long distances to be able to attend the schools and educational centres, which means paying high transport costs when it is not possible to walk, as Colombia is also characterised for its expensive fuel costs. Furthermore, in the face of the multiple problems of youth displacement and uprooted communities,

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<sup>40</sup> CIDEMOS - RIMISP - Fondo Mink’a de Chorlavi, *“Sistematización de la experiencia organizacional de la Asociación Municipal de Mujeres Campesinas de Lebrija”*, Bucaramanga, December 2005.

<sup>41</sup> According to the article: “Más campo para la educación rural”, Al Tablero No. 2, Ministerio de Educación Nacional, March 2001: *The index of coverage in rural areas is 30% compared to 65% in urban sectors, and the rate of school desertion of the rural population is 10.9%, compared to 2.5% in the cities. The participation in pre-school educational programs is less than 4% in rural localities.* (available in web-page: <http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/article-87159.html>)

<sup>42</sup> “Cerca de 720 mil niños campesinos del país están por fuera del sistema educativo colombiano”, El Tiempo, 24th of July 2008, available in: <http://abc.gov.ar/lainstitucion/noticiasdeladgcyev072/internacionales/internacionales.cfm?id=3284>

including mandatory military service and the lack of appropriate educational systems, it is vital to develop training strategies that focus on building values of self-esteem, cultural identity and sense of belonging to the land.

**Popular education, from peasant to peasant:**

The Agroecological Peasant School is an innovative training process which involves vulnerable peasant communities, and emerges from the need to establish a fruitful dialogue among rural communities of the Soto Province - Santander, and socialization with other community initiatives (peasant, indigenous, fisher-folk and afro-descendent) at a national level. The methodology of the Agroecological School is based on the collective construction of knowledge, including ancestral wisdom, the implementation of appropriate technologies and the itinerant interchange of experiences between farm-lands and rural localities.

*“When the first invitations to participate in the Agroecological School were distributed to the women of AMMUCALE, none of them thought of the consequences and obstacles this implied. Firstly, for any peasant women, to attend monthly training sessions implies a immense workload at home ... moreover, the need to prevail over the resistance shown by their husbands or the so-called “boss of the house-hold” is no minor task. But evermore intimidating, the biggest challenge was to interact and participate with participants who came from other regions. To deal with outsiders, overcome their own fears and complexes. Thus, a great challenge arose: to face-up to her mental and social ties that society has created to subdue women”. - Cecilia Ibagos*

The women of AMMUCALE have been acclaimed for their traditional knowledge in relation to their agriculture and husbandry such as natural medicines, ways to perceive life, forms to cultivate, traditional cooking, their dedication to raise their children. This internal life-force is evident in the way changes and transformations are proposed: from within to the outside world, from an individual approach to public and communitarian renovation, from their farmlands to food processing, their relationships with neighbours, communities and the region as a whole, as an act which is none different than the sacred giving of birth to life.

AMMUCALE has been appraised for its initiatives to promote food sovereignty, community forest conservation, micro-enterprises, communication and the recovery of traditional seeds, and as it was acclaimed by Mario Mejia (a well known agroecologist in Colombia) the women members of the Agroecological School *“have been able to understood their great capacity for self-nutrition, autonomous organisation and social management”*.<sup>43</sup>

**Ecological debt, health and sanitation:**

According to Paulina Rodriguez, president of the Communitarian Board - El Salado (Lebrija) and member of Ammucale: *“We suffer daily problems caused by water contamination from poultry and pig industries; the lack of drinkable water for our families. Also, our animals have health problems. Likewise, we face social and environmental impacts due to the scarcity and unfair water distribution”*.

This testimony is confirmed by data from the hospital of Lebrija which shows that intestinal infections, skin-rashes and parasites represent 20% of illnesses in the municipality. This problem is a direct consequence of water contamination, which affects the most vulnerable population, women,

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<sup>43</sup> Mario Mejía Gutiérrez in the book: “Agricultura y Ganadería Orgánicas a Condiciones Colombianas” (2006, page 298).

children and elders. In the rural area of Lebrija, only one water supply plant has adequate treatment facilities, the rest of the countryside population (aprox. 95%) uses crude or untreated water.<sup>44</sup>

By confronting these difficult circumstances, peasant women have shown both commitment and tenacity to uphold a process of change to recover their dignity and landscape. With regards to their struggle to reclaim water as a fundamental and collective right, AMMUCALE have started to question the root causes of the scarcity and contamination of their principle water resources. Women have actively supported the Civil-Society Water Referendum<sup>45</sup> as a tool to promote environmental awareness, demonstrating alternatives such as the community management of their aqueducts and the conservation of essential ecosystems.

### **Technological packages versus food sovereignty:**

Here again, Paulina Rodríguez questions why many development projects come as technological packages and underlines: *“there was a governmental project that obliged us to reforest an area of one hectare per family, but with exotic species (inappropriate for our local ecosystems); can you imagine, we had to cut and burn native vegetation to plant these trees. The conditions of the project obliged us to plant a mono-crop of ‘acacias’ and then when the local community discovered that these trees brought more damage than benefits, they began to sow native trees again .... We as women know the importance of the natural forest, but many times our ancestral knowledge as peasants is disregarded”*.

For this reason, several women of AMMUCALE have determined to auto-recognise and declare their farm-lands and niches of forests as part of the *Collective of Peasant and Community Reserves of Santander*, with the vision to conserve the environmental and cultural patrimony of Andean forests.

We should also highlight that amongst the many families associated to AMMUCALE, there are diverse viewpoints regarding how development projects have been implemented and the criteria established about food-aid, external assistance and technological packages, which varies according to the specific family experiences and community needs in each rural locality.

However, in general, we have perceived a decisive move forward by women in aspects such as rural public policies, environmental planning and civil-society education. This has involved a recognition and an awareness of the significance of ‘territory’, based on strategies such as crop diversification, catchment management and the empowerment of women in municipal planning scenarios. Furthermore, it is now commonplace to hear in the debates and discussions of these women, concepts such as sustainable development, agroecology, native seeds and food sovereignty.<sup>46</sup>

Various members of AMMUCALE have decided to put into practice and multiply the option of food sovereignty as an alternative life-project. Rosa Isabel Rincón, for example, gives priority to projects of “internal cooperation”, in other words, initiatives created, conformed and self-developed by the diverse peasant and community associations of the region, which also dimension the empowerment of women and youth: *“When I started working on my farm, I was totally dependent, I would buy everything I needed from the shops and suppliers. Now I cultivate my own maize, yucca, plantain, coco beans, spinach and vegetables. With the maize, I make my own products: ayacos, tamales, tortas, coladas and I have plenty to feed all my family and my livestock. I almost don’t need anything from the outside, just the basic elements”*.

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<sup>44</sup> Data as reported in the Municipal Development Plan, Alcaldía de Lebrija.

<sup>45</sup> For more information of the civil-society Water Referendum in Colombia: <http://www.agua.ecofondo.org.co/>

<sup>46</sup> CIDEMOS, *ibid*.

It is apparent for this leader of AMMUCALE, that food sovereignty signifies autonomy and the freedom to consume healthy food products and without the dependence of having to buy outside: *“In times of economic crisis, if there is food available it is a lot easier to survive, we produce our own food. Solidarity and cultivable land are the most important elements of our work as peasants”*

### **Road infrastructure and market strategies:**

The majority of AMMUCALE have expressed their constant problems of transport and the awful state of road infrastructure interconnecting rural localities and which limits access to the urban centres. It is clear that the governmental discourse which makes emphasis on topics of business efficiency and competitiveness, falls far short when we analyse the situation of rural areas, and specifically in this case the municipality of Lebrija; this “efficiency” is greatly diminished when we see that the conditions of rural transport are very precarious.

In the planning and evaluation meetings, the women of AMMUCALE wrote in their note-books phrases such as: *“we need autonomy to transport people and supplies between rural localities”*, and then added *“but the road infrastructure does not exist”*. This reality, signifies that any proposal defined within the so called <agribusiness market chains> promoted by government policies, are really a paradox when we consider that the “dream of efficiency” clashes with the non-existent infrastructure in many of the rural areas of Colombia.

Although the goals of various Colombian Ministries aim at achieving competitiveness as a strategy linked to export market economies, many peasant organisations and specifically AMMUCALE has understood that the most direct and beneficial way to sell their products is by strengthening local market schemes, which are much more tailored to the needs of crop diversification and food sovereignty, and also giving the possibility to exchange or barter goods.

Moreover, through initiatives of micro-enterprises and local food processing, we have seen the benefits of taking full advantage of the harvest. Hence, fruits can be transformed into pulps, marmalades and wine. Home-made bread and chocolate are also processed locally. With medicinal plants, they prepare soaps, oils, creams; these products not only provide an economic incentive, but also permit a community learning process to recover alternative and natural remedies.

### **Women custodians of seeds and native breeds:**

Norma Henríquez and Bertina Sandoval, members of AMMUCALE, are distinguished in their rural sectors as custodians of agro-biodiversity. Norma has collected and grown a great variety of maize, beans, yucca, fruits and medicinal plants; whilst Bertina has raised and multiplied more than 30 traditional breeds of hens. Likewise, Hercilia Hernández, another women’s leader, has recovered and put into practice her ancestral knowledge to use biomaterials such as natural fibres and dyes for handicrafts and clothing.

In this way, the participation of AMMUCALE and the Agroecological Campesino School in national and international campaigns<sup>47</sup> such as the Campaign “Seeds of Identity”, the Campaign for Human Rights to Food, and the Campaign for Food Sovereignty - SALSA<sup>48</sup>, have allowed local communities to begin to envision development and cooperation projects according to the following principles:

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<sup>47</sup> A description of the context and application of these campaigns in the region of Santander is highlighted in the following article: *“Minga social y comunitaria en defensa del patrimonio ambiental y la soberanía alimentaria”*, Fundaexpresión, Revista Semillas No. 28 / 29, Bogotá, June 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Food Sovereignty Campaign in Colombia - SALSA, see web-page: <http://salsa.ecofondo.org.co/>

**PRINCIPLES OF THE “SEEDS OF IDENTITY” CAMPAIGN - COLOMBIA**

- Seeds and biodiversity are essential to promote and uphold sustainable livelihoods of local people.
- Seeds and traditional knowledge are a collective patrimony that must not be privatised, and are fundamental elements to achieve food sovereignty.
- The defence of seeds is tied to the defence of life, land, territories and cultures.
- No to the use of genetically-modified organisms, because they put at risk the integrity of seeds and the traditional forms of life and subsistence of rural populations.
- Reject public policies and laws at national and international levels that endanger native seeds, biodiversity and their collective use and exchange by farmers.

**Women, agrarian reform and land-rights:**

The issue of land-rights on behalf of peasant women is a vital and urgent matter, because many women in AMMUCALE still do not possess access to land titles. According to a study developed by the women members in Lebrija, and in the words of Cecilia Ibagos: *“when the issue of purchasing land is defined, in most cases, men are assigned to hold the land titles, according to them, to be able to get a mortgage, to rent or to sell the land later on”*.

In general, AMMUCALE is aware that the fact of not holding land-titles, puts women at a great disadvantage to be able to implement development projects. Even when women are identified as priority beneficiaries, as was once the case with a project with the Municipality of Lebrija, it was impossible to access funding, as many of the women did not have titles, and did not even figure as joint-owners with their husbands.

In addition, to the evident problems of traditional “machismo”, women without land, female headed-households or displaced women have to confront many obstacles with the institutions of agrarian reform, which in Colombia falls under the mandate of INCODER.<sup>49</sup> Empeatriz Roman affirmed: *“as a peasant woman, head of my household, and without any land-titles, I went several times to present a formal proposal for land distribution for small-hold farmers, but the situation is very difficult, since much of the paper-work necessarily requires having to pay commissions either to civil-servants or to private agents, so that they can even begin to consider studying your case”*.

It is clearly evident that the right to land for peasant women signifies a fundamental right, since it relates directly to the possibility to cultivate or harvest their own products, which also defines other civil liberties such as the right to dignified work, the right to food and the opportunities for personal development. Another factor, that has restricted and complicated the work of this women’s peasant organization has been the control of some rural territories of Lebrija by legal or illegal armed-groups. This has been a limiting factor in some occasions for AMMUCALE, as these armed-groups many times do not allow the conformation of women’s committees, they restrict autonomous decision-making and they also control the access of visitors to the region.

<sup>49</sup> Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural - INCODER

## 8. Conclusions and recommendations for action (national - international)

*“As women we have a tendency to renovate and to be innovative, to seek structural changes, especially with regards to this macho society, dominated by male chauvinism. We have shown our capacity to transform this reality that we live on a daily-basis ... I think significant changes have taken place, when we have been empowered by popular education, but not only at a family level, also within our communities and municipalities. This process has brought us together and united us as peasant associations”.*

- Rosa Isabel Rincón (AMMUCALE)

Our contribution as part of the **More and Better Campaign**<sup>50</sup> and the investigation of this case-study, has allowed us to comprehend the importance of effective cooperation; which necessarily requires adhesion to basic principles of human dignity and dialogue between agrarian and fisher-folk peoples of the world. Therefore, through this platform provided by More and Better, we are convinced that women’s peasant and indigenous associations can find a strong voice to promote alternatives for sustainable rural livelihoods. This will permit us to discuss structural problems and issues of equity, social dignity and environmental justice. Likewise, we would like to share the following conclusions and recommendations, which can be taken onboard within the framework of the campaign, with an aim to strengthen our incidence in national and international public policies, and specifically towards the empowerment and participation of rural women:

- A countless number of factors impede the effective implementation of development and cooperation projects, primarily due to the structural conditions of inequity and marginalisation in rural areas, and evermore when we consider the vulnerable position of women in society. However, many women have shown great vision, and are active leaders in scenarios such as peasant associations, community boards, municipal and regional planning bodies.
- We acknowledge that the role and position of women is at a disadvantage in the face of social and cultural models that are deeply-rooted in family, community and governmental structures. Nonetheless, it is evident that women’s networks and associations in Colombia have historically been and are a vibrant platform to demonstrate real alternatives and life-projects towards upholding social, cultural, environmental and economic rights of local communities.
- The empowerment of women implies a process of building self-awareness to examine the factors that have an influence on their own lives, to develop confidence and self-esteem to analyze and express this reality, enhancing opportunities to create real and effective forms of participation in rural cooperation projects. In the case study, we speak of food sovereignty, local markets, economic autonomy, which are all essential for rural women and their family livelihoods.
- Peasant women have understood the importance of the concept of dignity, as a means to reaffirm their customs, traditions, cultures and ways to preserve life, in the face of antagonist models which promote the commodification of life, inequity, violence and harmful technological packages.
- We have seen the positive results brought about through a process of dialogue among grassroots women’s groups, which can be promoted through exchanges with other community-based organizations: indigenous women, afro-descendants, fisher-folk and communitarian mothers. In a broader sense, this dialogue implies sharing of knowledge, experiences and the defining of common priorities and plans of action at regional, national and international levels.

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<sup>50</sup> For more information on the guiding principles of this campaign, please see web-page: [www.moreandbetter.org](http://www.moreandbetter.org)

- It is fundamental to provide a new outlook to cooperation projects which takes as a basis-line the cosmovision of peasant and indigenous women as its starting point, from a perspective of food, culture, production and environmental issues. This implies a full recognition of the implications of ecological debt and food insecurity, and the inequities of decision-making and political structures and the restrictions of access to common resources (land, water, biodiversity, seeds), particularly as an approach to uphold women's rights.
- We should actively encourage and stimulate women's participation through national and international meetings, where decision-making by women is brought to a forefront in planning and development of rural projects, especially regarding initiatives of food sovereignty, rural housing, alternative education and their valuable insights to conserve biodiversity, mitigate climate change and to build a society of justice and peace.
- Equally, we seek to strengthen alternative economic schemes for rural women, giving emphasis to rural micro-enterprises, agro-productive gardens and farming plots, use of medicinal plants, food-processing techniques, husbandry and animal raising, handicrafts, amongst many others. Moreover, we should promote the recovery of ancestral knowledge and practical skills relating to the sustainable use and conservation of agro-biodiversity.

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