

PEASANTS BEYOND PROTEST IN CENTRAL AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

Kees Biekart
Martin Jelsma ()*

In the early 1990s, encouraging developments are taking place in the most traditional and marginalised parts of Central America: the countryside. After more than a decade of political crisis and civil war — which particularly affected the rural sector — peasant leaders throughout the isthmus are coming up with a new vocabulary. Dialogue and negotiation have replaced the language of armed struggle and confrontation. The tradition of political sectarianism is being countered by a call for *concertación*: national and regional collaboration among popular organisations, based on minimal agreements. This is aimed at confronting the threat to the very existence of the peasantry posed by neoliberal economic policy. Developing alternative proposals is a crucial element of this. *No hay protesta sin propuesta* — no point in protesting without presenting alternative proposals, the current slogan warns. Although the recent peasant insurrection in Chiapas, Mexico, might suggest otherwise, with their discourse of constructive dialogue and strategies beyond protest, Central American peasants are announcing a new and exciting chapter in the region's current history.

The *Association of Central American Peasant Organisations for Cooperation and Development (Asocode)*¹, a regional platform of peasant organisations which was established in 1991, embodies this change. Linking over a hundred organisations of small and medium-sized farmers, including some from Belize and Panamá who have been marginalised in earlier regional initiatives, Asocode has provided a voice for their major concern: the economic survival of

(*) *Kees Biekart and Martin Jelsma are research fellows at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam and coordinators of the European part of the research and advocacy project with CRIES and ASOCODE.*

the peasantry as a productive sector which is threatened with extinction by economic adjustment schemes and agricultural modernisation. As one of the authors in this volume puts it: "They (the small farmers) are today demanding political space for those who fought in the past, and a solution to the basic structural problems that gave rise to the armed conflicts, but still remain unsolved" (Chapter 3, Isabel Román).

The background to these structural problems, and the viability of various alternative solutions proposed by the peasant sector via Asocode, is one central issue addressed in this book. The other relates to the international linkages of such organisations, especially with Europe. In early 1994, after more than a decade of being the focus of newspaper headlines and solidarity work, Central America ceased to exist as far as the European press was concerned. Attention shifted towards Eastern and Central Europe, where the civil war in former Yugoslavia might have caused more casualties in two years than the decade of conflict in Central America. However, the Central Americans have not forgotten the Europeans and are expecting a continuation of political and economic relationships.

The papers presented in this book are the result of a research project undertaken by the Central American Coordination of Socio-Economic Research (CRIES) in Nicaragua, and the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute (TNI), which involved a team of about twenty Central American researchers.² At its inception, the project aimed at examining popular movements in rural Central America and assessing their opportunities within the emerging democratisation process, as well as surveying possibilities for more intensive regional collaboration between national peasant organisations.

During this phase of research formulation, however, Asocode emerged. So we decided to change the focus to a review of national and regional collaboration between organisations and an assessment of their proposals regarding land reform, commercialisation, credit, development cooperation, etc. In consultation with Asocode, we decided to involve the peasant organisations directly in the research process. The result was a series of seminars involving peasant leaders as well as economists and social scientists, so that empirical input from rural leaders could be combined with analytical reflection. The papers that resulted were used by Asocode as an input in their policy papers on productive strategies and alternative proposals. These were edited by CRIES and published by Latino Editores in Managua under the title, *Alternativas Campesinas: Modernización Agrícola y Organización Campesina en Centroamérica*.

The first section of the present volume, *Challenges for Asocode*,

consists of a selection of these in translation.³ The second section, *Strategies towards Europe*, assesses future relations between Europe and Central America. This was one of the outcomes of a conference TNI organised in the Netherlands in April 1993. Opportunities for long-term relationships between civil organisations of both regions were discussed with Asocode-representatives from all seven Central American countries. The Central American delegates followed this with an extensive tour of eight European countries.⁴ Special focus was placed on the potential of international alliances between farmers' organisations, as well as connections with groups working on fair trade, development cooperation, sustainable production and lobbying.

Challenges for Asocode: a regional platform

Central America has a notorious reputation as an impenetrable forest of acronyms. When we first learned of Asocode, therefore, we were somewhat reluctant to engage with another platform which claimed to represent the great majority of peasant organisations in the region. However, after working closely with Asocode over a period of time, we have discovered that, in its three years of existence, it has not only developed into a legitimate regional voice on the interests of small farmers, but has also emerged as one of the most dynamic regional bodies within the popular movement in general.

Since 1990, regional integration has re-emerged as one of the major issues in Central America, after the earlier Common Market collapsed in the crisis of the late 1970s. The common wish to reinstate the process of regional integration awakened just after the Sandinistas' dramatic election loss in Nicaragua and during the early period of the negotiation process in El Salvador. It is not surprising that Asocode was born in this new regional context, where civil wars, ideological polarisation and foreign intervention were coming to an end. The resulting conditions — new political spaces and an urgent need for a socio-economic agenda that could confront the offensive of neoliberal adjustment — were far more favourable to the construction of regional alliances of popular movements. Regional integration became a priority after 1990, and the bi-annual summits of the seven Central American countries devoted most of their efforts to the development of new regional institutions. What is surprising, however, is that peasant organisations have managed to play a role in this, far beyond the regional articulation of their sectoral demands, similar to that of the wellorganised regional

federation of entrepreneurs, *Fedepricap*.

Asocode's being invited to inform the presidential summit in Panamá (December 1992) on its alternatives for regional agricultural policies was a sign that the new platform could indeed play an important political role. (Chapter 6, Jorge Hernández). After the establishment of the *Central American Integration System (SICA)* in late 1992, Asocode was given consultative status in the process, along with a number of other regional networks of civil organisations.⁵

The peasant leaders are somewhat overwhelmed by their own success and keep repeating that, at this initial stage, Asocode is a slow process of regional collaboration. This is certainly a realistic assessment, if one considers that Asocode is well organised on a regional level, but virtually unknown to many small farmers in far-flung areas of Guatemala or Honduras. Moreover, there are criticisms from the lower ranks of the peasant unions over the rapidity with which its regional commission has institutionalised itself as a negotiation partner with governments and international organisations. In addition, the speed with which new issues like sustainable production and the inclusion of women in decision-making have been parachuted onto the agenda — from the regional to the national and subnational levels — sometimes creates tensions. This obvious problem of internal communication and democratisation is recognised by the national leaders, but has its roots in the traditional — often verticalist and sometimes clientelistic — culture of internal organisation within peasant unions. In response to this unease, as Hernández explains in Chapter 6, the leaders have reduced the speed of regional initiatives and increased the regularity of meetings with lower ranks, to avert the danger of alienating themselves from the grassroots.

They stress that their platform does not constitute a new supra-national level of institutionalisation, but that decision-making is based on mandates given by seven national peasant coordinations, the *instancias nacionales*. Representatives of these coordinations are elected to the Regional Commission in order to coordinate activities, not to become a new institution. The metaphor which is employed is that of a table, *una mesa*, which is admittedly not quite round, since representatives from Costa Rica and Nicaragua have been the driving force behind Asocode from the beginning. The Nicaraguans have been the traditional motor of regional initiatives because of the well-organised and innovative UNAG, the union of small and medium-sized farmers founded by the Sandinistas. The Costa Ricans have contributed substantially to the regional refor-

mulation of strategies and issues, since they have the paradoxical advantage of suffering many years longer from neo-liberal adjustment policies, and hence, gathering experience with concerted action and direct negotiation with government.

This unequal division of experiences created some frictions in the early stages, but it also accelerated the formation of national peasant coordinations which, in the majority of countries, simply did not exist before. The need for unity and coordination on national and regional levels is not being challenged, but the inclusion of a great diversity of small farmers from the lower ranks — and the variety of often conflicting interests — remains one of the major challenges Asocode is facing in the near future.

Systematising the diversity in national experience with peasant organising has been a central focus in TNI's research project with CRIES and Asocode. For practical reasons, we decided not to include national case-studies in this English edition; we refer the interested reader to the Spanish edition. Their main conclusions, however, are summarised in Isabel Román's contribution (Chapter 3). Jorge Hernández's historical overview of Asocode (Chapter 6) will serve as a useful reference to those who have not followed its development. In addition, in Chapter 2, we present the introduction to the Spanish edition, which was written by Wilson Campos, the recently re-elected General Coordinator of Asocode's Regional Commission.

Challenges for Asocode: a peasant road to democracy

Throughout the isthmus, governments have now been chosen through pluralistic elections. The polarisation that characterised the region for so long is withering away, no matter how slowly things may seem to be moving in some countries — remnants of the *contra* war are still troubling the Nicaraguan countryside, the Salvadoran peace process is at its crucial stage and, in Guatemala, negotiations to end the civil war are only just beginning.

Democratisation is the term most often used to describe the current transformation. But what does *democracy* mean for the peasantry, which still constitutes the largest section of Central American economies? How have peasant organisations benefitted from this new conjuncture and how has the installation of institutional democracy influenced their own internal process of *concertación*?

In largely rural societies like Central America's, democracy remains an elusive goal as long as it does not involve broad par-

ticipation by the peasant population. As Edelberto Torres-Rivas argues in this book (Chapter 4), "*No democracy can be constructed or can function if it ignores the peasants politically.*" Most peasants still regard Latin American democracy, taken in the narrow sense of an electoral process and pyramid of representative organs up to the government, as basically an urban phenomenon. Political parties are predominantly centred in capitals and largely consist of different factions of the same political elite. Traditional parties cannot claim, with any degree of veracity, to be *channels of communication* between the rural population and the state, as the dominant ideology expects them to be. In fact, the current democratisation process has led to an increasing and deliberate estrangement of peasant organisations from *their* representatives within political parties.

The democratisation process has, however, gradually opened up the polarised political culture of the region, which has made the organisational strengthening of the peasant movement possible. The space has widened within which civil society can develop its own process of reconciliation and build independent channels of communication. The peasant movement is rediscovering its own interests, free of ideological polarisation, and trying to construct its own representative organs on a national and regional scale. Amidst democratic institution-building controlled by party elites, peasant organisations are choosing their own mechanisms of *empowerment* through *concertación* and direct negotiations.

In a joint document presented before the 12th Central American Presidential Summit in Panamá in December 1992, for example, Asocode — and other regional platforms of cooperatives, coffee producers and workers' unions⁶ — demanded direct participation in all decision-making processes which affect them directly. They also claimed the right to review decisions already taken *in their names*, including the NAFTA treaty, Central American integration and the renegotiation of foreign debt.

Demetrio Polo Cheva, one of the researchers in this project, notes that it is not clear how such claims can be implemented. "*What is being postulated is participation, but as yet there is no definition of the mechanisms and bodies which will make this participation effective, or guarantee the agreements negotiated are followed up.*"⁷ But such demands suggest a notion of parallel channels between civil society and the government and state apparatus, which disputes the exclusive right of political parties to represent the population politically. An alternative political model can be imagined behind this, though it has never been made explicit

by Asocode itself, in which the role of political parties would be reduced, and government would either negotiate with different vehicles of popular representation, or act as a manager, implementing consensus agreements reached within civil society.

A lot of ground remains to be covered. But working so closely with Asocode in this project has convinced us that the new vocabulary surrounding the debate on *civil society* in Central America is more than just a set of vague concepts. *Concertación* is more than a magic spell to defuse the revolutionary fervour that propelled the popular movement in support of armed liberation struggles of past decades. Such concepts suggest a new dynamic, in which attempts are being made to push the democratisation process beyond its current institutional stalemate, force it to include the indispensable element of popular participation and to enter the terrain of economic democratisation.

These elements are essential for democratisation to succeed in the longer run. The same period in which political space was opened for civil society, and democratic governments installed, has also witnessed a narrowing down of the economic margins in which the poorest sections of the population survived. The rigours of structural adjustment have struck small agricultural producers hard, as Eduardo Baumeister makes clear in his contribution (Chapter 5). This obvious contradiction between political democratisation and economic marginalisation has to be dealt with in any attempt to set afloat the stagnating democracy in the region — if not in the entire Third World.

As Arias and Rodríguez (Chapter 7) point out, "*If this process of political democratisation does not result in changes of an economic nature, it is unlikely to modify the structural factors that gave birth to the crisis which still afflict the region. The region could slip back into social and political instability and, if it does, it will be the peasants and the indigenous peoples who will suffer more than anybody else.*"

Challenges for Asocode: peasant alternatives

"*We are realists. We are not going to stop structural adjustment. We cannot forever use up our energy saying no, no, no to structural adjustment. Now we are looking for ways to join the dialogue to ensure economic changes do not wipe us out.*"⁸ As this statement by Wilson Campos reveals, Asocode's alternatives do not fundamentally challenge the current economic system. They are, basically, constructive policy proposals, in which the peasant movement

attempts to go beyond "the ineffective defensive posture and resistance tactics with which it previously confronted the agrarian policies that did not take its interests into consideration. Rather than rejecting out of hand the official agrarian policies which systematically denied their demands, the movement is seeking to develop its own alternative proposals for agriculture and broader development issues on the basis of a negotiated consensus" (Chapter 7).

The creation of viable alternatives is Asocode's highest priority. Its primary reason for existence is to develop the ability to formulate proposals on a regional level. Given the fundamental economic malaise of the region, this is not an easy task. The methodology of our project aimed at achieving a high degree of cooperation between the peasant organisations (through Asocode) and researchers, to prevent the outcome being too academic to fulfil the real intellectual needs of the peasant organisations. The process was not always without friction, as, for most participants, it was the first experience of joint analysis between popular leaders and academics on the subject of the peasant movement's dynamic. All major decisions on research priorities and methods, and all discussions on draft results, took place during seminars in which researchers, Asocode representatives and CRIES/TNI coordination staff participated.

The research planning coincided with another initiative by Cadesca⁹ and Asocode involving a series of local, national and regional peasant meetings on the four priority issues: land distribution, credit facilities, commercialisation of products and sustainable agriculture. Honesty requires us to mention that the interaction between these parallel processes did not go as smoothly as intended — all researchers were not equally enthusiastic about attending such meetings and discussing the proceedings of their research, while only a few of the planned peasant consultations actually came about because of organisational shortcomings. Still, the research process resulted in a unique experience, a "pioneering work", according to Wilson Campos (Chapter 2).

The more specific outcomes — policy proposals on land reform, credit mechanisms, marketing strategies and sustainable production — have not been translated for this publication. They were considered too specialised and country-specific to serve the purpose of this European edition. We did, however, include the chapter, *Peasant Agriculture and Development Alternatives* by Salvador Arias Peñate and Roberto Rodríguez, which drew together the conclusions in the CRIES publication.

In synthesis, they challenge the current neo-liberal trend of abandoning state involvement in the economy completely; they ask

for protective measures for the most threatened sectors of small producers; plead for a redirection of part of the credit flow away from non-traditional agricultural products into traditional and food producing sectors; make suggestions for more efficient use and distribution of land; and stress the potential task of agrarian producers in developing systems to protect the environment. All are elaborations of the more general aims set forward in Asocode's policy documents, aimed at producing concrete proposals which can be tendered at negotiation tables. Taken together, they envision an integrated alternative to the rigid adjustment policy of the moment, without advocating a completely different socio-economic system that goes beyond the visible horizon of the current political conjuncture. As Salvador Arias once noted: "Neo-liberalism is in crisis. Asocode will be ready to seize the initiative when the world once again realises economies cannot be run without government intervention."¹⁰

Strategies towards Europe: peasant alliances

During the month-long European tour in April/May 1993, about a hundred different encounters enabled the Asocode delegation to explore possibilities for transatlantic alliances. Roughly a third of these encounters were with farmers' organisations.

The most instructive part of the experience seems to have been that of getting to know farmers in Europe. During an internal evaluation, two observations were striking. On the one hand, there was a warm feeling of recognition and solidarity during meetings with *small alternative farmers*. After days in meeting rooms, offices and hotels, visiting a Dutch ecological cattle-farm was a relief — to be able to breath in the open countryside, taste the fertile soil and eat a home-cooked family dinner in a farmer's home. They were happily surprised at the concern of the family over the environmental impact of intensive cattle-breeding and the disastrous consequences of *dumping* practises, over-production and EC agricultural subsidies on the South. Their hosts had chosen their own production systems with all these issues in mind. Asocode's representatives heard the echo of their own search for an integrated approach, combining sustainability and economic survival, in the efforts being made.

However, they were shocked at the enormous distance between themselves and regular European farmers — including those termed *small and medium* — and their established and powerful unions.¹¹ Even though the delegation did not leave Central America with high expectations about possibilities on this level, the experiences were

clearly disappointing. "A basis to talk about alliances in this direction is simply non-existent, you could only talk in terms of maintaining relations and exchanging viewpoints". "There are shared terrains of problems, like the disappearing of small producers, which is taking place also in Europe, the influence of transnational corporations, GATT, the topic of dumping, etc. But it is highly doubtful whether a discussion on these issues could ever lead to common proposals, actions and solutions."

The coordination of all farmers' contacts in Europe was done in close collaboration with the Paulo Freire Foundation (PFS) in the Netherlands, in order to synchronise the tour efforts with an initiative called *The Peasant Road*.¹² This initiative, which celebrated its constitutive meeting in May 1993 in Mons, Belgium, is a response to a call by Asocode to begin drafting development alternatives born out of the peasant movement itself. Its aim is to link peasant organisations together on a world-wide basis so as to develop proposals on an international level. Southern organisations and alternative farmers' organisations in the North are its backbone, but it also attempts to find openings for developing relationships with the powerful farmers' bodies in Europe.

The second meeting of *The Peasant Road* planned for November 1993 in Manila had to be postponed because the host union (KMP) was in a severe crisis, which eventually resulted in a split. The fierce internal debate and fresh views that emerged made it clear that the trend embodied in Asocode is not an isolated phenomenon. The *protest-and-proposal*-attitude and the need for peasant channels independent of political parties are being voiced in the Philippines. The majority of the KMP — now with a *D* for *Democratic* added to its acronym — wants to overcome its subordinate position under a vanguard that is still holding on to a dogmatic political ideology. Honorary chairman of D-KMP Felicissimo Patayan: "Seven years ago there was a different situation. What mattered then was to get rid of dictator Marcos and all popular organisations, including the KMP, shared the same priority: to contribute to his downfall. Now the political situation has changed. Political opposition alone is no longer enough; we have to offer our members more. But let there be no doubt about the fact that we haven't set aside our political views, nor have we chosen to adjust to the current system. Neither are we happy with the current government. We just don't want to constrain ourselves to political propaganda."¹³

The postponed first *Asian Peasant Congress* is now scheduled to take place in June 1994. The first *Latin American Congress of Rural Organisations* took place in Peru in February 1994. Both initiatives

are important steps in an ongoing process towards closer regional cooperation, a trend *The Peasant Road* intends to strengthen and support, as was expressed in the Mons-declaration. This declaration airs the new dynamic this volume describes in respect of Central America: "We decided to strengthen our efforts to share proposals, knowledge, statements and mutual experiences, in order to formulate peasant development strategies. We will continue, therefore, to generate these proposals and will integrate research capacity (...) To attain our objectives and to secure the impact of our forthcoming proposals, direct mechanisms for action and negotiation with the bodies that decide on agriculture, environmental and other policies, will be established. Pressure will be put on governments to attain the political and economic democratisation and the genuine participation of peasant organisations in the elaboration and management of development programmes."

Producer alliances were not the only sort of linkage explored in the European part of the project. Producer-consumer relations were also on the TNI-Conference and tour agendas.¹⁴ The crash of coffee prices on the international market have profoundly affected the situation of producers in Central America. CRIES recently completed a study covering almost all aspects of the production and trade of coffee, including proposals on how to emerge from the current crisis.¹⁵ Although the solidarity market in Europe for coffee amounts up to a total of about 50 million ECU, *fair trade* initiatives can only help the coffee sector survive to a marginal degree. An integrated approach is therefore recommended, based on using the extra income from alternative trade channels for specific investments by peasant organisations to promote other options, such as quality improvement, diversification of production and of commercial relations, a system for the distribution of information on market developments and lobbying efforts towards governments and international fora. Both Asocode and Fair Trade organisations in the North can play a role in changing the current thinking about producer-consumer relations and international trade mechanisms.

Strategies towards Europe: lobbying activities

Since it is national and regional agrarian policies which are leading to the gradual extinction of small and medium-sized farmers, governments and high-level policy-makers need to be influenced to create a change in policy. Getting direct access to the offices of government officials responsible for policy and convincing them to

adapt them in favour of small-scale agrarian production has therefore been Asocode's main lobbying activity. In fact, the word lobby — in Spanish *cabildeo* — is avoided in favour of the more neutral *incidencia*: starting discussions on areas where there is agreement and using that as a base for raising those which are problematic. Being *recognised as a legitimate partner* via contacts with government officials or international institutions is seen in Central America as a major achievement of lobbying activities since it provides a basis for future work. Asocode's easy access to Ministries of Agriculture and even Presidential Summits must therefore be valued as creating considerable potential for exercising political influence.

Lobbying efforts by the peasant platform towards European governments and the European Community is of a relatively recent date, and was stimulated by an umbrella-group of European development NGOs. This *Copenhagen Initiative for Central America (CIFCA)* was founded in 1991 as a European coordination for joint lobbying initiatives on Central American issues, especially social policies related to structural adjustment and human rights.¹⁶ Initially, CIFCA members worked with their natural counterparts — mostly local development NGOs of the *Central American Concertación de Organismos de Desarrollo (CCOD)*. Since 1992, however, Asocode and other regional networks have also been involved in lobbying the European Commission on its policies related to development cooperation and trade with Central America. The second part of this book outlines these efforts.

Two main concerns have dominated. The first is that Central America is about to lose its special relationship with European governments and the EC, especially on development programmes, most of which started in the mid-1980s, but also on trade issues like bananas (see Appendix of Chapter 8 on the *banana-war*). The return to peace in the region obviously contributed to a change in European political priorities, but the Central Americans insist that financial support for reconstruction and re-activation of the economies is now more urgent than ever.

To discuss these matters, annual meetings between the governments of the two regions have been scheduled. In recent years, this so-called *San José Dialogue* has become the main target of joint lobbying activity between CIFCA, Asocode, and *Concertación*. This Dialogue seems to be merely a symbolic event since the major decisions are being taken months before the summit. But after ten years, the Dialogue is also about to enter a stage of *"inertia"* — as Sanahuja explains in Chapter 8 — in which its role *"will be limited to the mere management of development cooperation and being a*

channel of communication". As far as lobbying is concerned therefore, the emphasis is being placed on government officials preparing for the summit, ministries and embassies, especially since the *asymmetric relations* between the two regions are being used as an advantage. Central America is a low priority for the Europeans, whereas Central Americans still consider Europe to be a crucial actor in its economic and political development. As Piet Dankert, the Dutch Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs said at the TNI-Conference: *"The relative minor economic and political importance of Central America may place certain limits on the Dialogue's future. (...) But the Central American countries are aware of the opportunity that the Dialogue offers them to raise their profile in the world and to reinforce their own identity throughout the Western Hemisphere"*. The lower priority for Central America in Europe leads to decision-making on a lower, more accessible level. As a result, it appears to be easier to get access to European decision-makers and influence their agenda than to do the same in Central America, where relations with Europe are still a top-level issue. That was one of the conclusions of the lobbying-workshop held during the TNI-Conference in April 1993. Coordinated lobbying work on both sides of the ocean could have a strong impact on European policy-making, and the recent activities to influence the agenda for the upcoming San José Conference in Greece (March 1994) seem to confirm that notion.

A second major reason for a network like Asocode to be involved in international lobbying-activities is to give civil society a voice in the definition of future development options for Central America. Development strategies are ultimately defined at governmental levels and by international institutions such as the World Bank, the Interamerican Development Bank and the EC. These agencies are willing to consult with the non-governmental sector and have been surprisingly receptive to Asocode's proposals. During their trip to Europe in April/May 1993, the delegation was received by top-level officials of eight European countries. However, we have to wait and see what happens to the policy-proposals offered before we evaluate the effectiveness of this. To institutionalise these meetings, Asocode and other networks have requested the participating governments in the San José Dialogue to establish a consultative forum for non-governmental organisations to express their opinions and proposals on the future relationship between the regions. (Chapter 9, San José X: An opportunity for all of us).

But as we said earlier, Asocode and European agencies still have little experience with lobbying activities at these levels, and some

agencies are planning to set up training courses to develop the professional skills required for effective lobbying. Another important ingredient is a clear understanding of political decision-making, and as a contribution to this, we include in this volume a well-documented and thorough essay by José Antonio Sanahuja on the San José Dialogue, with suggestions for future lobbying-agendas.

Strategies towards Europe: Development Cooperation

By publicly attacking Central American NGOs as bureaucratic, corrupt and not representing the needs of the popular movement, in early 1992, Asocode's coordinator, Wilson Campos, unleashed a fierce discussion on the relationship between NGOs and peasant organisations.¹⁷ "The good ones excepted, of course, there are simply too many NGOs in Central America acting on behalf of the peasants. (...) Besides, too much money is being wasted on setting up all these organisations and paying salaries". (Chapter 10, Interview with Wilson Campos).

According to Campos and other peasant leaders, intermediary NGOs should stop speaking in the name of peasant organisations and putting conditions on services or projects which they offered to the peasant sector. By dispersing their activities in an uncoordinated way, he asserted, they have misused millions of dollars worth of development aid, have divided the peasant movement in doing so, and even worse, development aid and intermediary channels have created dependency and bureaucracy as a result. The peasant organisations should therefore *liberate* themselves from the conditions and regulations of the local NGO-bureaucracy, he argues, and tell them, instead, what the peasants needs are and under what conditions development projects will be accepted.

This so-called *NGO-debate* emerged at a moment when many newly-established NGOs appeared on the scene — as in Nicaragua after the elections and in El Salvador — but when, at the same time, foreign agencies had become more open to the idea of direct funding to peasant organisations which were mature enough to deal directly with foreign aid. But, apart from the discussion on *aid channels*, Asocode also promoted a rethinking of the danger of dependence and addiction to foreign aid. Instead of donations, an argument was made for loans and credits, and the examination of peasant organisations for self-sustaining resources. During its First Conference on Development Cooperation in March 1993, Asocode presented a discussion paper to a dozen private international aid agencies in which it proposed to mediate between national peasant

organisations and aid agencies in the presentation of funding proposals. According to this proposal, Asocode would act as a coordinating body between the *instancias nacionales* and the agencies, thereby maximising human resources with a minimum of bureaucracy and foreign funding-trips. But more importantly, this was a way to neutralise the interference of local intermediary NGOs.

The agencies initially reacted somewhat reluctantly. During a workshop at the TNI-Conference in Wageningen, the fear was expressed that Asocode was taking over the role of existing NGOs, while it was about to create its own super-NGO. A call for more coordination of European agencies was also viewed in a sceptical way, since the private aid sector operates according free market principles. However, the fundamental idea of working on more integrated project financing and improving coordination directly with the peasant organisations was accepted. The agencies also considered it as a positive sign that a re-definition of development aid strategies is being introduced by the peasant movements themselves, but there is still doubt as to whether peasant organisations will be able to meet new European requirements on efficiency and sound administration and whether nation-specific problems will not drown in Asocode's regional approach.

The firmest relationships with Europe are undoubtedly with the private aid agencies, and it is here that Asocode showed its capacity to come up with provocative alternative proposals. During their tour in 1993, Asocode's ideas were received with sympathy by Development Aid Ministries and private agencies. With its call for decreasing dependency on aid and its search for self-sustainability, its arguments could, of course, be used as an excuse for further cuts in Development Aid budgets. But it is clear that Asocode also catalysed the discussion in Central America on the future of the quality and quantity of foreign aid, which will be a major issue in the discussion on the construction of participatory democracy in the region in the coming years.

NOTES

1. Asocode (*Asociación de Organizaciones Campesinas para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo*) was formally founded in December 1991 in Managua, after a preparation period of more than one year.

2. The following researchers participated in the project: Fernando Vargas (Guatemala); Alfonso Goitia, Roberto Rodríguez (El Salvador); Mario Posas (Honduras); Rubén Pasos, Luís Serra, Eduardo Baumeister (Nicaragua); Gerardo

Castro, Edelberto Torres Rivas, Isabel Román, Sandra Cartín, Rolando Rivera (Costa Rica); Demetrio Polo Cheva, Raúl Leis, Salvador Arias (Panama). Coordination CRIES: Klaus-Dieter Tangermann and Ivana Ríos. Participation from Asocode in the research seminars: Wilson Campos (Regional Coordinator), Jorge Hernández (Costa Rica), Oscar Mejía (Honduras), Juan Ruíz (Nicaragua), Luis Alfaro and José Granada (staff).

3. Two authors, Isabel Román and Salvador Arias, were invited to the TNI-Conference *Central American Peasant Organisations: Strategies towards Europe* in Wageningen (Netherlands) in April 1993, to present the results of the CRIES-research project. Both presentations were reworked by the authors and translated for this volume; Isabel Román's article in the Spanish version is different from the one included in this edition, as it deals only with the peasant movement in Costa Rica.
4. Between 19 April and 18 May 1993 TNI organised a tour of a delegation from the Regional Commission of Asocode to Spain, The Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Belgium, and France. The main purpose of this visit was to present the regional platform Asocode and its demands in Europe, in order to broaden Asocode's European network of contacts. One of the challenges was to look for new alliances between Asocode and European organisations and institutions. A large number of meetings and seminars were arranged with European farmers organizations, NGOs, environmental organizations, fair trade associations, politicians, journalists, academics, etc. The delegation was composed of: Wilson Campos (Coordinator), Jorge Hernández, Guido Vargas (Costa Rica, Alberto Blanco (Nicaragua), Julio Bermúdez (Panamá), Inés Fuentes (Honduras), Eulogio Villalta (El Salvador), Oralia Velázquez (Guatemala), and Julián Avila (Belize).
5. In late October 1993, during a meeting in Costa Rica, the *Civil Initiative for Central American Integration (ICIC)* was founded, when a dozen regional networks of civil organisations presented a joint declaration to the Presidential Summit in Guatemala. This stressed that regional integration in Central America was unthinkable without the active incorporation of civil sectors. A joint proposal for regional integration, incorporating proposals of every civil sector, was included in the declaration. ICIC is composed of the following networks: Asocode (small farmers organisations), CCOD (development NGOs), Concape (small enterprise), CCC-CA (cooperatives), CTCA-ORIT and Cocentra (labour unions), FCOC (community organisations) and Uprocafe (small coffee producers). The presidents welcomed the initiative and invited ICIC to become a consultative member of the Integration System (SICA).
6. Asocode was chosen to represent this inter-sectorial coalition with the CCC-CA (Confederation of Central American and Caribbean Cooperatives), Uprocafe (Union of Central American Coffee Producers) and Cocentra (Central American Workers Coordination).
7. Demetrio Polo Cheva's article "*Peasant Modernisation and Democratisation in Central America*" was published by TNI as part of the documentation for the conference in Wageningen, 22-23 April 1993.
8. Wilson Campos interviewed in *Mesoamérica* (Costa Rica), February 1993.
9. CADESCA, the Action Committee for Support to Economic and Social Development in Central America, is a research institute based in Panamá. Its

Education Programme on Food Security (PFSA) has played an important role in the formation of ASOCODE as a regional peasant platform. The publication resulting from this programme is *Democracia sin Pobreza: Alternativa de desarrollo para el Istmo Centroamericano*, Eduardo Stein, Salvador Arias Peñate (eds.) (San José: Colección Universitaria DEI 1992).

10. *Mesoamérica*, Costa Rica, February 1993.
11. Established European farmers' unions are organised in COPA, the European branch of the *International Federation of Agricultural Producers (FIPA)*; the alternative and relatively marginal counterpart is the *Confederation Paysanne Européenne (CPE)*, which is also taking part in *The Peasant Road* initiative.
12. The Paulo Freire Foundation is running the administrative secretariat of *The Peasant Road*, formally based on the Managua Declaration, approved during the second UNAG Congress in Managua, 1992. Kees Blokland, coordinator of international agrarian relation at the PFS, was one of the speakers at the TNI-Conference in Wageningen. The constitutive meeting of *The Peasant Road* took place at the end of the tour programme, on 15-16 May 1993 in Mons, Belgium. By then 55 peasant organisations from 36 countries were involved.
13. 'Ka Memong' Patayan was interviewed by Jur Schuurman for *Intercambio*, the bi-monthly magazine of the Paulo Freire Foundation, Volume 7, Nr 6, December 1993.
14. The issue of *Fair Trade* was the theme of a workshop at the TNI-Conference. Bert Beekman of the Max Havelaar Foundation not only gave a speech on the issue, but also used the opportunity to launch the first *Fair Trade* chocolate-brand. Guido Vargas was on the Asocode tour-delegation as a representative of the coffee-producers.
15. Welvin Romero and Finn Hansen (1993), *Café Amargo: pequeños productores de Centroamérica y crisis cafetalera*, (Managua: CRIES/Latino Editores).
16. The following organisations are actively participating in the Copenhagen Initiative for Central America (CIFCA): OXFAM, CIIR, CAHRC (United Kingdom), HIVOS, NOVIB, MAK, TNI (Netherlands), OXFAM, NCOS, MAK (Belgium), IBIS, MS, (Denmark), Iepala, Las Segovias (Spain), Diakonisches Werk, Romero Stiftung, Terre des Hommes (Germany), OIKOS (Portugal). Current secretary (1993-94) is Hans Peter Dejgaard from IBIS (Denmark).
17. Trish O'Kane, 'Sembrando futuro; interview with Wilson Campos', *Pensamiento Propio* (Managua: CRIES), Enero-Febrero 1992. Reactions were published in the issues of May and June 1992.