

PEASANT ORGANISATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA: TAKING THE PATH TOWARDS THE FUTURE¹

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One of the most important features of Central America today is the creation of a new framework of negotiation and compromise in which the different social groups in each country are trying to redefine the region's future for the next twenty years. Three main processes are influencing the emergence of this new framework: the moves towards peace and democratisation of the last decade, the stimulus for a new economic strategy based on an economic opening to third markets brought about by neoliberal structural adjustment programmes, the resumption of moves towards economic integration among the countries of the region, which are seen as a way of inserting Central America into the new development processes beginning in the world economy. This is the context in which rural struggles and peasant organisation have gone forward.

A new context

One of the most important tendencies that has developed within this new regional context has been the revitalisation of civil society, expressed by the redefinition or reconstitution taking place in some of the main participant groups; these are the ones who believe that the search for peace, democracy and economic growth in the region must be based on the inclusion of the majority social groups and their proposals for participation in the new political and economic processes taking place in the region. One sector that has been prominent in this, is that of small agricultural producers; they 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 unresolved.

From this point of view the peasant population of the region is

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facing the effects of a new process of agricultural modernisation that, among other things, encourages the development of new export crops to the detriment of production for the domestic market, and encourages indiscriminate trade liberalisation, leaving the small producer exposed. This modernisation also encourages the presence of foreign capital, favouring processes of renewed concentration of land ownership and attacking earlier efforts at agrarian reform. This capital also seeks an intensive use of natural resources, undermining the prospects of a sustainable development of the region. In the political process rural communities have been subjected to governments that have attained the legal status of democracies but still encounter serious difficulties in establishing genuinely democratic regimes, with properly institutionalised spaces for participation in which the different social forces can debate their positions and proposals.

Within this context of modernisation there can be said to have taken place an expansion and revitalisation of Central American rural organisation, stimulated by the urgent need of the producers in most countries to meet the basic social and production needs of the sector. There is a need to fight the negative effects of the new economic processes on small producers and to combat the conditions of political violence and ethnic exclusion that still persist in some countries, especially Guatemala. Farmers need to guarantee their basic food security while at the same time entering the new production processes successfully so that they can improve their living standards. Rural communities are also anxious to take advantage of the region's new political situation to work on alternative development proposals that will embody their needs and can be incorporated into the new economic and social models being produced for the region.

The experience of organisation

In the last ten years peasant groups have shown new tendencies to insist on their political autonomy in relation to the state, political parties and other wider groupings such as mass coalitions. There has also been a growing concern to strengthen negotiating capacity *vis-à-vis* governments, by means of specific proposals for production and demands for active participation in the formulations of agricultural policies. There is also a greater concern to establish production projects under their own management and control. In this area many organisations have found themselves required to transform a discipline developed for armed and political struggle into

a production discipline that enables their members to ensure and take control of economic development.

Together with this desire, there is a concern to democratise organisational structures by abandoning the *vices of the past* such as centralism and ideological intolerance. This means looking for new forms of unity and collaboration between rural sectors that start from the search for practical solutions to production problems and not homogeneity in the area of ideological viewpoints and the forms of organisation of different groups of producers. These moves towards unity are also appearing at regional level in a search for spaces for collaboration which enable peasant groups to build a political strength that will allow them to intervene in regional integration processes and negotiate strategies for economic and social development for the benefit of the sector.

Obstacles on the path

The search for new alternatives in production devised by the peasants and benefiting them is a feature of the new tendencies in peasant organisation in the region, but there still remain important constraints on its consolidation. One of these is the political repression that still continues in some countries. Another is the diversity of this sector, in forms of production and organisation and in ethnic and social composition, which calls for arduous and creative work to devise processes leading to national and regional unity. This unity cannot be, as in the past, limited to efforts at leadership level only tenuously related to the bases.

This diversity requires groups to work out comprehensive policies to take into account different situations among peasants and requires integral plans that can deal with peasant problems from different perspectives. The phenomenon of diversity must also be considered and reassessed, not just in its organisational dimension but also in its cultural dimension. This means, for example, recognising the distinctiveness of indigenous peasant families who are not just agents of production, but also peoples with different world views, traditions, forms of production and expectations of development.

Peasant women

At the same time, for organisations and unification processes to be legitimate, they must take account of the interests and needs of peasant women both as farmers and as people excluded from the

organisational processes. This is a serious problem when it is realised that they represent, according to recent estimates, more than 30 per cent of the agricultural labour force in Central America and not the 8 per cent misleadingly given in official statistics.²

Women heads of household are also a significant proportion in rural households, around 17 per cent. Women not only play a fundamental role in agricultural work, to which they devote on average five hours a day, but in addition they act as a coordinating force in the productive activities of the family unit and take the most important initiatives on family survival strategies through the diversity of activities they perform. This issue poses an important challenge to organisations, because it is not enough to try to add on women's needs to existing proposals or even to integrate them; the proposals have to be rethought and expanded in the light of their needs.

Regional and inter-sectoral unity

The important advances that have taken place in moves for regional unity are reflected especially in the experience of the Association of Central American Peasant Organisations for Cooperation and Development (Asocode), created in 1991. Nevertheless expanding and consolidating these moves at national level still remains a challenge, in view of their recent start and because the differences between countries remain great and peasant priorities within each of them still vary widely. The viability of Asocode's development proposals depends a great deal on the extent to which the proposals support diversity and encourage a variety of ways in which peasants can be involved in economic development. Strengthening alliances with other social sectors is another challenge; it is also a necessity to increase political pressure on governments and to avoid the isolation of the sector from the interests of other organised popular sectors.

Development and consolidation of peasant proposals depends on their political and economic viability, and also on government commitment to them. So far governments have shown little interest in producing differentiated agrarian policies. At the same time, the anti-democratic nature of adjustment policies and the lack of political will in the regional integration process to guarantee institutional space for peasant participation form obstacles to development options for the sector. One example of this is the contradiction between the proclaimed interest of governments in giving all social sectors a say in the design of the integration process and the technocratic and excluding character of most of the institutions with

responsibility for executing policies. Connected with this is the problem of the organisations' lack of financial and technical resources to develop their own proposals. From this point of view, the task of technical training of groups is an essential condition for the success of the new projects being discussed under the slogan *concertación productiva* (collaboration in production).

The task of regional collaboration being undertaken by the national organisations means encouraging and developing a similarly regional outlook among peasants so that, despite economic, political, social and cultural differences, they can value commonalities and possibilities for joint action. The development of attitudes of this sort is fundamental if tolerance and solidarity are to prevail among groups from different countries in taking forward alternatives for production.

Moves towards national and regional unity must today be a basic organisational strategy if the sector is to survive in the new Central American context. These are complex and fast-moving processes and if they are to be firmly established, groups must show flexibility in adjusting and redefining their work in the light of the concerns that are with them every day as they embark on the new days' tasks.

NOTES

1. Paper presented at the TNI-Conference *Central American Peasant Organisations: Strategies Towards Europe*, 22 and 23 April 1993 in Wageningen, the Netherlands.
2. Numbers derived from IICA/BID (1993), *La política del sector agrario frente a la mujer productora de alimentos en Centroamérica y Panamá: Conclusiones y recomendaciones* (San José: IICA/BID).