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## ASOCODE: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR THE CENTRAL AMERICAN PEASANT MOVEMENT

Jorge Hernández (\*)

### 1. The old challenges: the anti-peasant bias

The poverty of the peasant and rural sector increased with the application of structural adjustment programmes, coinciding with the exclusionary model of development that marked the postwar period. During this period, the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) promoted an integrationist, import-substitution-seeking strategy — a model of development characterised by:

- promoting and legitimising state interventionism by means of public investment;
- encouraging industry through a variety of fiscal, financial, and labour policies;
- favouring accelerated growth in the public sector, with the state rapidly taking on various areas of production, services and apparatuses of control and cohesion;
- extending and diversifying the penetration of transnational capital, especially in the most dynamic branches of the new regional economic space;
- facilitating a progressive and irreversible cultural invasion;
- permitting military repression and social and cultural subordination. Models of social containment in Central America display a broad array of strategies, from the institutional and legal subordination seen in Costa Rica to the repressive military state in Guatemala and other countries;
- rising external debt, impossible for the region's weak economies to pay and bringing in its wake more extensive and varied external dependency.

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Politically, the social exclusion provoked by this development model was fed by a bureaucratic institutionality that took root over the period, and by cultural, social and racial segregation exercised by the wealthy governing elites over the indigenous and peasant majorities.

The principle of exclusion applied not only in the political and cultural fields but had a direct expression at the economic level in mechanisms of subordination operating through the market (price-fixing), access to money (credit systems), and labour (the starvation wages paid to semi-proletarianised peasants). (Hernández, 1989)

Historically, agrarian policies (for example, those promoting cattle-raising, rice, cotton, and coffee) tended to benefit highly-capitalised production units, transnational in origin, to the detriment of peasant units.

This concept of development embraces a notion of progress which sees the town as the place where space, culture, social and economic life are organised "in a modern, open way" (Plaza, 1991: 5). In this way, society takes on a dominant self-rationalisation that ignores other expressions such as the culture of the peasants. Progress becomes identified with industry and the urban, structurally and historically excluding the vast sectors of the population linked to the peasant economy. This is a global view of what is desirable and acceptable, in which the indigenous or peasant world represents negative values such as tradition, folklore, the past, and — more recently — classes that are seen as inefficient and therefore undesirable.

In this construction of reality, "peasants and rural societies have no place and are invisible" (Plaza, 1991: 16). The process of peasant concertation (*concertación*) that produced Asocode, the Association of Central American Peasant Organisations for Cooperation and Development (*Asociación Centroamericana de Organizaciones Campesinas para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo*), sprang up in opposition to this overall view.

## 2. From protest to proposal

The transition from old to new which the Central American peasantry experienced in the 1980s is one of its most dramatic revolutions, a critical juncture that is one of the least understood in its history.

Grounded in ancient wisdom and gathering together their experiences, the peasants generated a process of change which some

authors have summarised under the slogan *de la protesta a la propuesta* (from protest to proposal). What does this transition, this journey, consist of? Protest opened up spaces and created new kinds of conditions for change and improvement. Gradually, the historical lessons that recreated the organisations, the new openings offered by civil society, the learning experiences undergone and disseminated in the context of peasant culture, and finally the leap to the new stage, that of proposal, brought about a reconversion of the peasantry itself. From this experience springs the effort towards integration and coordination of organisations which we call Asocode.

### *Structural limits*

This proposal for peasant concertation found itself limited by the nature of Central American civil society, in the historical space for representation occupied by the minorities committed to the power structures in the region. Employing the institutions that generate and transmit ideology, these minorities have appropriated the principal ideas of progress and modernity and have woven an intricate web of values and procedures resulting in a particular conception of morality, religion and social life, and of what constitutes culture. These concepts underpin the system of domination the peasant confronts, which considers him or her unlettered, disorganised, ignorant, a coarse country bumpkin, old-fashioned and in need of political instruction and guidance.

From this point of view, any claim to land, credit, technical assistance and the most basic participation in decision-making was seen as a questioning aimed at attacking the established power. For instance, the maintenance of agrarian policies that clearly benefited the dominant sectors enabled increasing polarisation of the Central American social structure. But the peasants found themselves obstructed not only by the kinds of agrarian policy being carried out behind their backs and by the oligarchic, exclusivist system of representation. The structural limits to which they were subjected occurred in other areas of life, such as the systems of education and culture and the absence of services, another expression of the neglect of indigenous and peasant communities.

The postwar period has seen the obliteration of autonomous cultures and the dizzying onward rush of the *civilising mission* projected by new, imported ways of living.

*Old and new enemies: beyond a 'dying class'*

These structural conditions oblige us to ask: Who is the enemy of the peasantry? The peasants have encountered actors who appear to be allies or adversaries according to the particular conjuncture. Central America is a vast field of experimentation, where the negotiating and claim-making capacity of the peasants is put to the test, thanks to the variety of historical situations involving social confrontation.

On the one hand, the peasants insistently point to the useless role played by the state bureaucracies, together with the destruction, the massacres, the devastation of crops and dwellings, the rape, murder and forced military service for which the armies are responsible. The landowners, the state and the transnationals are all connected with each other, and are combined in Central America's agrarian history in such a way that on some occasions they have operated as a compact bloc against peasant communities.

The producers of ideology tend to regroup under new social masks. In this sense, the old systems of ideological domination have changed. More recently, other dream merchants have arisen to reach out to the minds of the peasants. As an example, we could mention here the role of the media, of mass communication especially television, and the national political personalities who, riding the crests of new waves of populism, rampage across Central America like modern Messiahs of the countryside.

On the other hand, commercial middlemen are a sector whom the peasantry more clearly locate in opposition to their interests. Commercial capital has succeeded in getting hold of the peasants' surpluses by every means imaginable, from highly regulated and institutionally organised transactions to the local markets, and including the plunder and theft of land.

The new functions being assumed by professionals, universities, NGOs, support networks of solidarity resources, international financial organisations, transnational companies, governments, and in some cases even peasant organisations themselves, are also not exempt from falling into the category of adversaries. However, to try to classify this group of sectors definitively as opponents or enemies of the peasants' interests would be not only incorrect but also ingenuously simplistic, and would not help to throw light on the social world we are describing here. What we can say in this regard is that, in opposition to the interests and claims of the peasants, the interests of the organisations and groups mentioned above intertwine, complement each other, and sometimes oppose each other.

In the struggle for land, for example, the Central American peasantry's understanding is that access to this resource constitutes the fundamental victory to be won by the sector: as one of the leaders of Asocode has remarked, "*The land is the title we have as peasants, whether it be a tiny piece or several hectares.*" But, for professional agronomists or for lawyers, the problem of the land is a technical specialism in which they can engage and become specialised, and from which, in the last instance, they can earn a living. Thus their emphasis on the problem (and this applies to the land, to credit, to marketing, organisation, and so on) is different from the peasants'.

The permanent confrontation between peasant organisations and states, and the search for negotiations and concertations, show how complex these relations are. In particular, it indicates that the old contradiction, the old confrontation between peasants and capital, or peasants and the state, is today giving way to other equations counterposing the peasantry and the institutional system, the peasantry and transnationals, the peasantry and NGOs, the peasantry and the media, the peasantry and political parties, and so forth.

*History, second mother of the peasants*

Country folk learn from Mother Nature the secrets of production and cultivation, but the struggles waged by the peasant movement over the past decades have not been played out exclusively on the land: they have occupied other stages — ministries of public works, town squares, streets, municipal councils, churches, bridges and roads, and others. The organised peasantry has transferred its sphere of action to the spaces where decisions are taken and policies formulated, precisely in contexts where land and nature are absent.

In reply, it has met with physical repression<sup>1</sup> and also, with equal or greater demobilising effects, actions designed to destroy the institutions of the peasant movement.<sup>2</sup> For decades, actions against this movement included subtle manoeuvres that filled up the organisations' calendars, namely the incipient processes of negotiation and consensual manipulation — a strategy that used legal and institutional tactics rather than military repression.<sup>3</sup> The mass media, the established church, and even educational institutions have repeatedly behaved in ways that corrode the peasants' capacity for organisation, or have orchestrated campaigns designed to discredit the peasantry and deprive it of moral and ideological justification.

Against these actions, the analysis the peasants have made of

the ideological and party-political systems that have normally governed their thinking and the leadership of their structures has been decisive. Recent years bear witness to the process by which peasant groups have acquired autonomy from former leaders who were on the payroll of political parties of every ideological stripe. In this way, the peasants have discovered in history their second *mater et magistra*.

*New spaces, new conditions for peasants to develop their thinking*

So far I have tried to situate peasant protest as the set of practices of struggle which the peasant movement deployed in past decades. I have suggested that this historical movement came up against limits originating in the actual structure of Central American society and economy. I have also tried to establish the peasantry's relationships with its old and new adversaries, and in the previous paragraphs I have outlined the claim-making practices which have had to be reshaped to confront the recent crisis and political shifts.

However, this dynamic of the peasant movement took place in new spaces and under new historical conditions. Structural adjustment processes were particularly important in the region, as was the process of peace-building and integration which served to hold back the advance of war and the imposition of the policies of Reagan and Bush. The will of the Central American governments held out against the spectre of war, culminating in the signing of the *Esquipulas Declaration* in May 1986. The peace process has affected the region as a whole and each country in it in different ways and at different speeds, leading to the evolution of different modalities of concertation and integration.

For the peasant sector, the new historical factor of the democratic opening was an entirely unknown quantity. In fact, subjected as they were to exclusive and destructive treatment, the peasant majorities came to these processes of opening with many doubts and with shortcomings of all kinds. It is timely to recall that the sector remained disarticulated and isolated while the business sectors, through the Federation of Private Businesses and Organisations of Central America (Fedepriacap), and the governments, through their permanent meetings around integration, maintained their unifying structures.

However, the processes of peace-building, concertation and integration in Central America coincided with economic policies imposed by the international financial organisations, and with a change in positions on agrarian policy. Analysis of these events

facilitated a growing movement from specific demands to a more general demand for agrarian reform. Paradoxically, this movement was determined by the advent and generalised application of stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which became another historical factor influencing the new dynamic in the peasant movement in the 1980s and into the 1990s. The application of SAPs according to neoliberal theory entailed a high degree of technocratic mechanisation, which taught agricultural workers lessons about the anti-peasant and anti-popular nature of adjustment.

The proponents of the adjustment programmes had no hesitation in attacking the state institutional apparatus which had been partially supporting the storage and marketing of basic grains. At the same time, they stressed the supposed inefficiency and unproductiveness of the peasant economy. These orthodox neoliberal positions, operationalised by means of the SAPs, goaded the peasants into making a study of the structural conditions.

*The lessons of experience*

The new conjuncture of adjustment, the new approach to development and, particularly, the new policies that were beginning to take shape at the beginning of the 1980s sharply accelerated the change in the peasants' vision and analysis. From this new perspective it was possible to see the need to get the organisations back into operation by reclaiming traditional structures.<sup>4</sup> These forms of organisation began to be re-evaluated as instruments for the peasant communities and as a part of their defence against repression by the police (as in Costa Rica in 1987) or the military (as in Guatemala in 1980).

But a widespread process also began in which organisations which had not yet displayed their full potential began to reconstitute themselves. Peasant organisations which had previously been appendages to political parties, governments or trade union federations run from outside, set off towards new forms of autonomous organisation, sometimes under hitherto unknown legal arrangements, such as the peasant integration in El Salvador or the Justice and Development Council in Costa Rica.

We can discern the results of the peasants' learning experience even more clearly in the regional capacity to seek coordination and joining of forces. By looking at unsuccessful experiences and integrational structures already set up by other sectors, the peasants reached the conviction that integration is possible if it is seen in

terms of broad structures. The idea was not to try to append or attach organisations to giant, transnational bureaucratic structures; it was to take diversity as a given and build unity from that starting point: *"We are generating a structure which respects the organisations and their autonomy; we are setting up a process which starts off from a position of the greatest respect for the diverse expressions of the currents of the Central American peasant movement — because we are convinced that that is what our Central American milieu is like ... Equally, we believe that we are building a social process out of respect for the diversity we constitute."* (Wilson Campos, speech at the Constituent Congress of Asocode)

Using those criteria, discarding those forms of unions that did not fit into the new historical scenario — that is, the traditional, authoritarian structures — and, chiefly, recovering the principle that everyone contributes what his or her historical reality allows, the conditions were generated for the peasantry to rediscover their roots and to identify themselves as a class. Keeping its distance from hollow triumphalism and unilinear systems, the journey from protest to proposal shows that peasant history operates not as a series of episodes but as a complex combination of — sometimes simultaneous — advances and retreats.

#### *Identifying ourselves, rediscovering ourselves, recognising ourselves*

The aspirations with which I have headed this section are frequently found in the peasant movement at both the national and regional levels, especially in the latter years of the 1980s and the early 1990s. Recognising themselves as bearers of *a culture lost in the mists of time*, the organisations gradually found the arguments and concepts with which to oppose the neoliberal discourse which had disqualified and marginalised them.

With the recovery of autonomous productive cultivation, alternatives opened out for autonomy and sovereignty as regards food, paving the way for one of the movement's most important struggles for life, confronting a fresh armoury arrayed against them in the form of commercial agreements and the imposition of quotas. In this context, the Central American peasantry turned towards finding ways of self-identification, locating themselves as a part of the shifting interplay of Central American social blocs but at the same time as a fundamental social actor and a political subject, forging new history. The process of reclaiming themselves led them to re-establish their own terrains for action *vis-à-vis* first the political parties and governments, then other areas and sectors, such as the

space occupied by the NGOs since the 1960s.

These movements coincided with a restatement of the problem of alliances, conceived in different ways according to the realities of organisation in each country and at each historical conjuncture. This last remark is important, I think, because, in every text, we make an abstraction out of the different expressions of peasant organisation that make up the reality of Central American rural life. This abstraction does not aim to conceal the different levels of protest manifested by the peasant movement, which result from the orientation and the speed with which each national government in the region has applied structural adjustment, the historical traditions that characterise the organised peasantry in each country, the dynamic of agrarian policies, and factors related to the internal nature of the organisations themselves.

#### *Bad habits and old attachments*

It is necessary to conclude this section by mentioning some internal obstacles: I am referring here to a variety of faults which limit the advance of the organisations to different degrees and in different ways. A rapid review of these obstacles must include the verticalist practices of some local and national leaders; the expressions of chauvinism or parochialism that appear periodically as part of the process of concertation; the persistence of *private backyards* maintained by leaders who do not want to give up their traditional spheres of influence; forms and methods that are still dragging the ball and chain of old organisational practices; repetition by leaders of the same old organising traditions and their resistance to new spaces of concertation and coordination; the serious problem of failures or deficiencies in communication between leaders and bases; inexperience as a consequence of historically new practices; and the structural lack of resources of all kinds which hampers the practical management of peasant organisation.

#### *A conclusion: the leap towards a new world of peasant organisation*

In a very short time, the peasant organisations of Central America have carried out a joint effort which, only three years ago, was no more than a dream in the minds of a few leaders. The nature of the change has scarcely begun to sink into the minds of the peasants. It is a change in the arena of negotiation, for now action is aimed no longer at the municipality or the province but looks towards the national level and the traditional policy-makers. The organisations

now have an additional resource: the coordination and integration of ideas and efforts beyond the local or national sphere and into the Central American.

This important change in the geographical field of action brings with it a redefinition of the extent of the political and historical space, which we will examine in greater detail in the next section. Asocode is the institutional body which serves to delineate organically the complex dynamic which we have described in this chapter under the heading *from protest to proposal*.

### 3. ASOCODE: its strategies, achievements and influence

- *From isolation to integration*

The 1980s are usually referred to as a lost decade for Latin American countries. This does not hold true for the peasantry in Central America, however, for this was the decade in which its most dynamic processes with respect to political presence, insertion and integration, took place.

Efforts towards peasant integration and exchange of experiences took shape through two regional meetings, held in November 1990 and February 1991 and sponsored by the Food Security Training Programme of CADESCA, the Support Committee for Economic and Social Development in Central America. These events gave rise to a Regional Follow-up Commission, whose first task was to draft and present, for the first time in history, a Central American proposal to the Central American presidents as a group.

The document, published under the title '*El desarrollo requiere concertación*' (Development requires concertation), sets out the position of the isthmus's small and medium-sized farmers. The main points of the proposal are:

- political and economic concertation;
- the promotion of genuine processes of agrarian transformation;
- respect for local cultures;
- genuine participation for small and medium producers.

The Central American peasant process came into being amidst an assortment of obstacles and has developed to the measure of its own capacities, creating and maximising the use of new spaces. It has held to the conviction that it constitutes a single people, a single culture and a shared commitment to integration.

The central core of the Commission's work was the systematis-

ation of a common statement of belief or productive proposal, and the job of strengthening coordination. With this aim in view, permanent sessions of the Commission were held, coordinated by the Costa Rican team, one of whose members is from the *Consejo Justicia y Desarrollo* (CJD) and the other from the National Union of Agricultural Producers (UPANACIONAL). The proposals thus drafted became inputs for the First Central American Peasant Conference, and were presented to the ministers of agriculture and presidents of each country, "*servicing as a basis for the subsequent political validation granted by the presidents to the integration process.*" (Asocode, narrative report, no date)

The beginning of the coordination process aroused a variety of reactions among coordination agencies, local NGOs, peasant organisations and their grassroots, and governments themselves. For the latter, "*a first impression regarding the process of regional peasant integration was distrust, and the explicit assumption that they were 'fronts' for political military movements (like the FMLN, URNG, FSLN), in order to deprive them of legitimacy.*" (Asocode, *ibid.*) It seems that constant lobbying, advances in the concertation processes, and the critical and responsible contents of the document itself, have helped to modify these early government perceptions.

- *The First Regional Peasant Conference*

The First Regional Peasant Conference, held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras in July 1991, was the first conference to be convened and conducted by Central American peasants themselves. During the course of the conference, several proposals and documents crucial to the peasant concertation process were discussed and approved, among which the following stand out:

- a regional productive proposal made by the peasant sector;
- a political position statement regarding Central American reality, concertation and adjustment;
- proposed statutes for a regional peasant coordination;
- a suggested structure for an integrated Central American peasant movement.

The conference brought together the region's foremost peasant leaders. One of the points most hotly debated was the kind of coordination and structure desired. There were two opposite suggestions: one, to create a macro-structure integrating peasant trade unions and confederations, and the other, to coordinate a structure

that would be subordinate to national organisational dynamics. The conference participants opted for the second alternative.

The conference also agreed to present the regional productive proposal before the Tenth Presidential Summit held in El Salvador (17 July 1991). This motion was approved and was included under item 35 of the Final Summit Declaration, which reads: "To give special attention to the proposals of the Association of Central American Peasant Organisations for Cooperation and Development (Asocode), and to instruct the relevant authorities to proceed to their earliest consideration and analysis; in order to find adequate responses to the complex issues raised by those proposals."

After the First Regional Conference, the Follow-up Commission undertook the preparation of the Association's *Constituent Congress*. The newly formed association took on these tasks:

- to facilitate and promote national spaces of peasant coordination and concertation in every country in the isthmus;
- to follow up art. 35 of the declaration issued at the El Salvador summit;
- to consolidate the support work of cooperation agencies;
- to convene and prepare the Constituent Congress of the regional coordination process.

Delegations from the seven countries involved had to do a great deal of organisational work and lobbying for resources, both before and during the congress, in order to make the planned agenda possible. The work programme during the whole second half of 1991 involved everyone from the grassroots level to the general coordination.

This process was not without its obstacles, both internal and external. Among the former, difficulties arose with regard to the national bodies integrated to and comprising the Regional Commission, because they differed widely amongst themselves and were at different stages of development. The peasant organisations redoubled their efforts to put together proposals and structures to contain the advance of adjustment programmes and anti-peasant measures imposed by governments.

By this time a national coordination body in Honduras had already been formed. This was the Coordinating Peasant Council of Honduras (*COCOCH*). In Costa Rica, the main organisations with a national presence had agreed in early 1991 to negotiate jointly a national productive proposal and to create a National Agrarian Coordination (CNA). Likewise, in El Salvador, the main peasant

confederations formed the Democratic Peasant Alliance (ADC) in 1991. Panama did the same, and later this organisation was joined by the Association of Small and Medium Producers of Panama (*APEMEP*).

External factors causing difficulties included the repression of the peasantry, the structural adjustment programmes taking place in the countries, and shortcomings in agrarian reform programmes. These are only some of the obstacles the coordination must face as it develops.

• *The Constituent Congress and its follow-up*

This process of groundwork culminated with the *Constituent Congress* in Managua on 4-6 December 1991. The Central American peasant organisations attending the Congress were:

- *Panama*: ASCOVE, ACOSEM, CONAC, OITCEWD, SEMOQUIECHE, FOUV and CONAPIP;
- *Costa Rica*: UPANACIONAL and CJD;
- *Nicaragua*: UNAG;
- *Honduras*: UNACH, CNTC, ACAH, COCOCH, ANAHUC, FEHMUC, APROCAFE, FECORAH, CODIMCA;
- *El Salvador*: ADC;
- *Belize*: BFAC;
- *Guatemala*: CUC, PRODECA, AIDCOB, Suchitepequez Association of Cooperatives, Colomba Civil Society for Development.

As guests were invited: International Federation of Agrarian Producers (IFAP); Mexican Peasant Union of Regional Autonomous Peasant Organisations (UNORCA); Cuban National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP); Coordination of the Central American Commission of Ministers of Agriculture (CORECA); Minister and Vice-Minister of Agriculture of Nicaragua; representatives of the diplomatic bodies and international missions of government bodies accredited in Nicaragua and other Central American countries; international development agencies; Caribbean and Central American Confederation of Cooperatives (CCC-CA); CADESCA; and the Archdiocese of Managua.

The Congress analysed documents which had been previously distributed to all the delegates, who were divided into three working groups: review of statutes, analysis of the productive proposal, and analysis of all the motions put forward. All the work was later

presented and discussed at a plenary session. The Congress ended with a final session devoted to agreements and recommendations, which were voted upon directly by all registered representatives.

In January 1992 the *Regional Coordination Commission* (CCR) began its work, based on the motions previously passed. These opened several lines of work which the CCR was to broaden and strengthen in practice. In the fields of environment, ecology and sustainable development, the CCR took up the motions approved at the Congress and began promoting national discussions, and broadening the criteria already included in the productive proposal initially sketched out during the 1990-91 Central American meetings and structured at the First Regional Peasant Conference.

Using these inputs, and with new contributions arising from national activities, a new document was drafted, entitled '*Positions on the United Nations World Conference on Environment and Development*'. Asocode then participated in the UN Earth Summit (UNCED) in Brazil, in July 1992. Before the Earth Summit, Asocode put forward a concept of sustainable development consisting of four elements:

- maximum sustainable use of ecosystems;
- more equal distribution of wealth;
- direct participation of small and medium farmers in order to strengthen their self-management capacity;
- conservation of the productive capacity of ecosystems.

Concertation of the productive proposal with governments on the isthmus is, without doubt, Asocode's main line of work. The peasant organisations in the individual countries lack either the political space, the geographic scope, or the historical experience, to meet the challenge of negotiating on a Central American level. However, the new conditions that adjustment and liberalisation processes are imposing, to the detriment of the peasant and indigenous majorities, require that these issues be addressed on a regional level. Through Asocode it is possible to build a unified, common front of struggle, and to accumulate historical experiences, however small, in order to influence the regional framework and the new processes of regional concertation.

This was the perspective undertaken by the CCR as part of the follow-up to motion no. 3 of the congress, which relates to the follow-up of the Tenth Presidential Summit Declaration, art. 35. In this respect, a priority action is the one incorporating motion no. 4, which agreed to "*carry out a formal request to the presidents for an*

*urgent process of negotiation that guarantees the adequate negotiation of peasant proposals regarding the regional trade in food products ... and that CORECA and the Ministries of Economy and Integration be urged to undertake regional government representation in this negotiation.*"

To back up these motions, motion no. 14 was also approved, relating to the document '*The production strategy of small and medium-sized producers in the Central American isthmus*'. This document is the framework of the alternative proposal guiding Asocode's work. Also approved were motion no. 13, which seeks to incorporate women into development processes by means of *their full participation in all national and regional bodies in charge of taking and implementing decisions*. Motion no. 15, which demands the inclusion of Belize in the processes of Central American concertation; and motion no. 16, reinforcing the peace process in El Salvador.

The conviction that alternative proposals to adjustment and free trade are relevant to the reconquest and empowerment of autonomous local cultures is one of the basic elements moulding the new political presence of the Central American peasantry. The pairing of production strategy and peasant culture emerged strongly throughout the whole process culminating in the Constituent Congress, and is extended in motion no. 10, which acknowledges: "*the cultural wealth Central American peasants and indigenous people have contributed and continue to contribute to our societies; the cultural dominance and loss of values imposed by market powers and forces; the fact that the peasant and indigenous cultures are the soul of our production and our struggle against the current adjustment plans.*" Motion no. 10 paved the way towards the *First Peasant Cultural Meeting*, which was held in March 1992 in Costa Rica, with delegates from that country, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Belize and Panama. At this meeting, working guidelines were contributed for a regionwide commission to follow up.

In the field of solidarity cooperation, the Asocode Congress contributed three motions which seek to "*establish a new framework of international cooperation with solidarity towards the peasant sector*" (no. 5). The *Copenhagen Initiative for Central America* (CIFCA) and the *Consulta Nórdica* were widely taken into account.

In internal coordination, two peasant representatives from each national body are members of the Regional Coordination Commission (CCR), which is composed of the following leaders:

- *Wilson Campos*, General Coordinator, Costa Rica
- *Byron Corrales*, General Vice-Coordinator, Nicaragua (December 1993: *Amilcar Navarro*)
- *Julio Bermúdez* Representative, Panama
- *Eulalio Flores*, Representative, El Salvador
- *Inés Fuentes*, Representative, Honduras
- *Julián Avila*, Representative, Belize
- *Jorge Mario Pereira*, Representative Guatemala (December 1993)
- *Jorge Hernández*, Deputy, Costa Rica (December 1993: *Guido Vargas*)
- *Sinforiano Cáceres*, Deputy, Nicaragua
- *Josué Cáceres*, Deputy, Panama
- *Eulogio Villalta*, Deputy, El Salvador
- *Victor Bonilla*, Deputy, Honduras
- *José Luis Lisbey*, Deputy, Belize (December 1993: *Rodolfo Tzib*)
- *Marcelino Apxuac*, Deputy Guatemala (December 1993)

The CCR structured its work under three commissions: financial, monitoring and control, and promotion and support to national authorities. However, owing to a chronic lack of resources and partly because the experience was still so unknown, the CCR had to postpone the work of the commissions for the first months. This caused an undue concentration of functions in the hands of the General Coordinator. In August 1992, it was decided to seek the necessary funding to establish permanent headquarters in Nicaragua, and the first steps towards integrating peasant women into national and Central American structures were also taken.

During the following months the Panamanian peasant movement joined Asocode through Apemep, as did the Belizean movement with BFAC. In December 1992, the Guatemalan National Coordination of Small and Medium-Sized Producers (*CONAMPRO*) was founded, completing the framework of regional peasant integration.

Just as Asocode took charge of representing the interests of Central American small and medium farmers, it also became clear that established governments had little interest in opening to peasants the spaces that had historically been closed to them. The events taking place in 1991 and during the first half of 1992, were a clear expression of this attitude. Possibilities for peasant representation and coordination dwindled, due to the lack of economic resources encountered by the CCR. To help overcome these prob-

lems, Asocode requested support from the Dutch NGO movement (Novib, Icco, Hivos and Cebemo), from *Diakonia* in Sweden, and *Horizons of Friendship* in Canada. The financial help offered by these agencies, and several internal corrective measures, have made it possible for the CCR to restart its work.

• *The Second Peasant Conference*

A Second Central American Peasant Conference was planned for around August 1992, preceeding the Thirteenth Presidential Summit, scheduled for December 1992. This conference and related activity took place during August and September, and focused on integrating the peasant negotiating teams that had been carrying out negotiation processes in their own countries.

Based on Asocode's productive proposal, participants structured their own proposals at the conference's working sessions, making use of national experiences regarding the assertion of their own claims against adjustment and liberalisation measures. The result of this process was the '*Proposal from the sector of small and medium-sized producers of the Central American isthmus to the Presidential Summit on Agriculture*' (Panama, December 1992).

Briefly, this proposal takes as its point of departure the idea of sustainable development and the promotion of a model of peasant entrepreneurial development including credit, commercialisation and production. It demands participation in Central American integration, stresses the current problems regarding land tenure and agrarian restructuring, and finally calls attention to the importance of concertation and the incorporation of Belize into the processes of regional integration.

• *Recent developments*

Asocode's most recent stage of evolution represents an early ripening of Central American coordination, and expresses the regional scope of its proposals, political recognition, institutional empowerment, projection towards cooperation and direct participation in the development of agrarian policies. It is worth while highlighting in chronological order some of the basic activities that make up this stage:

*International cooperation*

- March and September 1992: two visits to Europe to exchange views with related organisations and to present proposals to European agencies;
- April 1992: participation in the Conference on Nordic Develop-

- ment Cooperation (*Consulta Nórdica*);
- preparation of the Cooperation Conference sponsored by Asocode (national consultation process from December 1992 onwards);
- February 1993: participation in San José IX;
- March 1993: first *Regional Peasant Conference on Development Cooperation* (presentation of priority areas to development agencies and discussion of future relationships);
- April/May 1993: tour of Asocode-delegation in Europe, in which (a) the international network of Asocode was reinforced, (b) Asocode presented its proposals to new public and private levels, (c) permanent relations and agreements were established with the EC and the governments of Sweden, France, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands, (d) new commercial opportunities were surveyed for Central American agrarian products.

#### Internal organisation

- November 1992: inauguration of Asocode's headquarters in Managua;
- integration of CCR technical and administrative support teams;
- January/February 1993: reorganisation of accountancy controls;
- January/February 1993: definition of general rules and regulations governing the work of the commissions integrated into the CCR, and the work of the coordinator and support teams;
- first Regional Peasant Women's Consultation, with the aim of fully integrating women into Central American peasant concertation, and preparation of the First Congress of Peasant Women from the Central American isthmus;
- August 1993: *Central American Congress of Peasant Women in Asocode*, discussing the way in which peasant women could be fully integrated into the organisational process at national and regional level;
- July/August 1993: first round of National Meetings to prepare II General Congress;
- September 1993: *Fourth Peasant Conference*;
- October 1993: second round of National Meetings, preparing II General Congress;
- December 1993: *II General Congress of Asocode*, in which (a) first two years were evaluated, (b) proposal for Development Strategy was revised and updated, (c) the Plan of Action for 1994-95 was approved, (d) statutes and rules were adapted and reconfirmed, (e) new commissions and a new CCR were elected.

#### Political and social concertation

- December 1992: *Central American Forum of Popular Sectors*, on free trade and commercial opening in Central America;
- December 1992: direct participation in the Central American Presidential Summit on Agriculture, in which Asocode represented small and medium farmers and the sectors integrated in *Cocentra*, *Uprocafe* and CCC-CA;
- March 1993: start of joint activities on coffee policies in Central America with Frente Solidario, UPROCAFE, ATC and CCC-CA;
- September 1993: participation in consultation of the Socio-Economic Committee (SEC) of the Commission of the EC;
- October 1993: participation in the foundation of the *Civil Initiative for Central American Integration* (ICIC), together with other Central American organisations;
- December 1993: participation as consultative member in the *System of Central American Integration* (SICA).

Here it is relevant to highlight the importance of both the *Central American Forum of Popular Sectors* and the results of the *First Regional Peasant Women's Consultation* in providing the initial elements for drafting a productive proposal covering the entire Central American peasant family.

However, the most significant undertaking for the future destiny of the Central American peasant majorities, is the lobbying work Asocode carried out between August and December 1992, which culminated in Asocode's direct participation in the Presidential Summit on Agriculture in December and contributed to shaping its results. At a regional level, with CORECA and through its president, agriculture minister Rondón from Nicaragua, as well as with the ministries in the other countries, the CCR has worked steadily in exchange of information, analysis and the elaboration of proposals based on the points agreed at the Second Peasant Conference held in September 1992.

This process, strengthened by the support of other regional authorities, reached a climax with Asocode's intervention before the Presidents participating in the Thirteenth Central American Summit. The Summit's Final Declaration clearly expresses the presidents' response to this work: "*To encourage and support trade unions and organisations at a regional level, and to participate actively in the design and execution of the isthmus' food and agriculture policies, within the formal mechanisms of consultation and coordination established in the context of integration.*" (art. 22; Panama Declaration, December 1992).<sup>5</sup>

- *Asocode's policy of alliances*

The innovativeness of the Central American peasant coordination aroused the interest of other social sectors such as governments, local NGOs, cooperation agencies, intellectual sectors linked to research centres and universities, peasant organisations outside Central America, and other Central American grassroots sectors. With regard to these sectors, the CCR has established a policy of alliances, which, due to its dynamism, is in full process of gestation and development.

One of the most important fronts is the policy regarding peasant organisations outside the isthmus. In this case two joint declarations stand out: the *Declaration of Managua* and the *Declaration of Cuernavaca*. The Declaration of Managua (26 April 1992) was issued at a Congress of UNAG, where peasant organisations from different regions in America and Europe gathered together and took the opportunity to define common interests. The Declaration calls for the construction of an alternative model of peasant development. Asocode signed the Declaration together with farmers' unions from the United States, Canada, Norway, and Spain, with the European CPE, WINFA from the West Indies, and a delegation of farmers from the Netherlands. With secretarial support from the Paulo Freire Stichting (PFS), a process of participatory research and alternative peasant proposals is beginning to get under way. Towards this end, Asocode proposed a step-by-step exchange process and the formation of the Managua Declaration Coordinating Team (Ecodem), whose job was to guide the work carried out by the PFS.

The Cuernavaca Declaration (28 May 1992) was the result of a meeting on peasant agricultures and modernisation promoted by the Fund for Human Progress (FPH). This was another opportunity to compile the proposals drafted by peasant organisations all over the continent overwhelmed by structural adjustment, integrationist treaties like NAFTA, and liberalisation policies. It rejects instrumentalisation and submission: "*What distinguishes us as human beings is the power to decide; this is why we maintain our reservations about projects or proposals we are not involved in, and about which we are not permitted to decide.*"

The efforts towards peasant concertation operating throughout Latin America as a whole are acknowledged in the Declaration. The signatories committed themselves to working towards the holding of a peasant and indigenous people's meeting which would facilitate the definition and deeper analysis of alternatives. This Declaration was backed by Asocode and sixteen other organisations from all

over Latin America. It is important to highlight the policy of establishing alliances with other sectors linked to the agrarian sector. This relationship has very strong historical precedents in some countries where Asocode has a presence.

Under the most recent framework of concertation and proposal, in the runup to the Thirteenth Agricultural Summit held in December 1992, Asocode developed a fresh drive towards coordination which came to fruition in the *Forum of Small and Medium-Sized Farming Producers of the Central American Isthmus*,<sup>6</sup> chaired by Asocode itself, and held prior to the Summit, in October 1992. Asocode prepared the proposals it had been structuring internally as one proposal to the Summit, during a meeting held in October 1992 in El Salvador, in a document which was endorsed by those bodies attending. To complement this activity, a commission was created to follow up the process of Central American grassroots concertation.

#### 4. Final remarks

I shall conclude this brief presentation of Asocode with a reference to future developments in the process. Throughout this text I have aimed to present Central American peasant coordination as an institutional expression with three facets that are permanently interconnected and mutually strengthening. These facets correspond to the following areas:

- *Asocode as a space for regional peasant coordination*

This space is made a reality in the regional commission (CCR), through the national authorities involved, the regional women's commission, the work carried out in the field of culture, the holding of peasant conferences and the multiple coordination tasks Asocode carries out.

- *Asocode as a space for negotiation*

The CCR intends to put into practice a policy of alliances, firstly with the rest of the peasant movement through national authorities, and secondly with other grassroots sectors and local non-governmental organisations integrated in the network of NGOs called *Concertación Centroamericana de Organismos de Desarrollo*, in which the different networks of Central American NGOs participate. Established governments are also part of the negotiation spaces which Asocode is called upon to create, as are international financial

bodies. Finally, permanent work with cooperation agencies is also included, in order to establish new schemes of cooperation with the peasant sector.

• *Asocode as an organisation with political influence*

Asocode is from every perspective a political instrument at the service of the isthmus' small and medium-sized farmers. This is how the regional peasant movement and governments understand it. On the one hand governments are forced to make treaties with the CCR-Asocode, and on the other hand they carry out unpublicised actions of regional scope geared towards undermining or eroding Asocode's political representation.<sup>7</sup> This third facet represents a permanent work of building and carrying forward a productive proposal for peasant development; a permanent effort to change, reverse, or create agrarian policy in the interests of the productive culture of the peasant sector.

• *Seven theses*

As for future action, Asocode has *carte blanche*, as an exclusive space for political action — a space which, in a few months of existence, has managed to defend the Central American peasant sector. Asocode can be judged in a simultaneous and complementary form as an organisational effort promoted by the Central American peasants, and as a space of regional peasant coordination, a platform of reference for voicing grievances, and a pressure group with political influence. But Asocode is also a process under construction, and that is its basic feature. With this factor in mind, and more as a closing statement than as a conclusion to these pages, I list the following seven ideas or theses as food for thought:

**Thesis 1**

Asocode is the peak and expression of the most significant efforts the Central American movement has made in its search for the integration of organisational efforts and the advancement of its proposals. Asocode is the result of various historical efforts promoted by Central American peasants during the past decades, in their struggle to attain a representative structure that can have clear influence in guiding the policies affecting the sector.

**Thesis 2**

Asocode is a process under construction: it carries with it a history already played out, running on the rails of old practices; and at the same time its history is one of a totally new rewriting or struc-

turing which shatters the old moulds of organisational work into pieces. It is and it is not yet, and that dynamic makes it rather like a *new car with old tyres*. Because of this characteristic, its leaders, and mainly the CCR, have to be hard-working and to maintain a broad overall perspective, so that they can make order out of all the different rhythms and levels that make the possible advances in Central American peasant coordination so complex.

**Thesis 3**

Asocode is the meeting point and the point of incorporation of around 150 peasant organising projects, which come out of different historical and socio-political contexts. The difficult blending of such varied organisational interests imposes on Asocode's internal functioning a complexity in decision-making which is different from that of any other local or national organisation in Central America. It is evident that experiences of the organisations comprising Asocode cannot merely be copied or applied to Asocode's own dynamic. As Julio Bermúdez, a leader from Panama, pointed out: "*To form friendship clubs is not what is required here, what is needed is to build, within a broad process of convergence, the unity of the peasant movement in each of our countries and at a regional level.*"

**Thesis 4**

Besides being a tool of and for Central American peasants, Asocode is at the same time an innovative expression of the process of peace-building and opening up of Central American civil society; an experience of the people which serves at the same time to strengthen the initial steps in the peace process among the Central American peoples. In this sense, it is a real vehicle for deepening genuine democratisation, for it transcends prefabricated rhetoric and is firmly grounded in the appalling daily experience of the sectors most affected by the current structural adjustment policies. Its proposals and demands for participation and the opening of Central American societies spring out of its own practice.

**Thesis 5**

Asocode is approaching the end of the century as an innovative organisational proposal, although its main novelty lies in its productive proposal. Thus Asocode reclaims the centuries of abandonment, lack of motivation and exclusion which have made the sector's development impossible. Its historic productive proposal demands the restructuring and reappropriation by peasants of the wealth they have usually generated for the benefit of other social sectors.

### Thesis 6

Although Asocode has begun to grow only during the course of the last four years, it is already an obligatory point of reference for the construction of a new model of human coexistence in Central America. Asocode's concept of the region's future development hinges on what the land produces, which is the basis of the wealth of the isthmus' peoples. Development of this kind, in contrast to that of former decades, makes it possible for peasants to have real access to the profits from what they produce, and therefore real social and political participation — something which has been heralded many times, but was always disregarded by the region's dominant groups, as long as the peasantry were incorporated into vertical structures of production. The opinion expressed by Nicaraguan minister of agriculture Rondón at Asocode's inauguration is illustrative in this respect: *"We know and are convinced, that the thrust of future economic development has to be forged on and around the agrarian sector, ... small and medium-sized producers are to be the axis of development, because they are a majority ..."*

### Thesis 7

Asocode is an expression of a Central American, integrationist consciousness, rising out of the hopes of the region's peoples. This characteristic gives peasant coordination a double challenge of participation in regional spheres, where the integration possible is defined (within the framework of prevalent adjustment and liberalisation policies), and in its internal dynamics. In this second aspect the challenge of Asocode is to promote and facilitate working styles that effectively allow a growing and progressively more efficient participation of the grassroots, in such a way that Central America can advance as one single cultural bloc in which it is the peoples who define the pace of integration through concrete actions rather than on the basis of diplomatic treaties or documents.

### NOTES

1. I am referring here to purely repressive actions, among them the massacres perpetrated on all the Central American peoples, such as that carried out in Olancho, Honduras, on 18 February 1972 (Posas, 1985: 56), or the Guatemalan cases (like the massacre of Panzós in 1978 and the Spanish embassy massacre of 1980), or the enormous number of cases in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama.
2. Among these actions, obvious examples are the systematic destruction of organisations, followed by the persecution and exile of their leaders, raids on offices and local premises, intimidation of leaders and the grassroots peasant membership — the traditional practice of governments to promote and maintain peasant organisations coopted and run by labour ministries or pro-government political parties.
3. Here I am referring to the ideological manipulation and the outright careerism of leaders or officials who were appointed via governmental parties and institutions; the common practice of agreeing to everything and doing nothing; negotiations that drag on for months or years, during which the government in power wears down the organisations by means of complicated red tape, rotating negotiating teams, and signing useless declarations which bear no relation to the peasants' needs or demands.
4. As an example we can point to structures linked to the Church, such as the *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods) in Guatemala, or to the local agricultural centres which were traditionally connected with the policies of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock in Costa Rica.
5. The *novelty* of the Panama Summit was that it incorporated aspects contained in Asocode's proposal, such as:
  - Food security;
  - productive diversification and/or reconversion;
  - a gradual approach in the processes of regional integration and free trade on the international market;
  - laying the basis for a differentiated policy for the sector of small and medium-sized agrarian producers;
  - the importance of the agrarian sector in general, and of small and medium-sized basic grain producers in particular;
  - establishment of development plans and programmes for rural women.
6. Participants in the Forum included organisations representing the cooperative sector (CCC-CA); the coffee-growing sector (UPROCAFE), the agricultural workers' sector of COCENTRA, and the Regional Interamerican Labour Organisation of the ICFTU.
7. An example of this attitude on the part of governments is the planned creation of CORCADES, a peasant coordination promoted by pro-government peasant groups in Honduras.

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PEASANT AGRICULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT  
ALTERNATIVES IN CENTRAL AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

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1. Peasant agriculture in Central America

In this chapter, we have not tried to write a synthesis or draw conclusions from what has been presented so far. Instead we have attempted to portray the dynamic, critical and constructive role being taken on by peasant and indigenous agriculture in the regional process of accumulation and to emphasise the alternatives to neoliberalism being put forward by the peasant movement.

However, by way of conclusion, and drawing on the description and analysis of the more structural features of the Central American agrarian situation, we have tried to characterise the historical context in which peasant agriculture has related to the global process of accumulation. This is the key to an understanding of the agrarian origin and regional dimension of the crisis, and of the potential represented by the peasant productive forces for sustainable development in Central America.

As stated in a document published by Asocode, an organisation which has emerged as an important representative of the region's peasant movement, on the occasion of the postponed Presidential Summit on Agriculture which was to have taken place in April 1991: *"The massive process of migration by peasants and indigenous peoples from rural to urban areas and to other countries — a phenomenon made more acute by war — is the dramatic expression of the fundamentally agrarian origin of the crisis and the social cost of an economic model which concentrates income, which is oriented to foreign markets, and which is based on the super-exploitation of workers rather than on a recognition of the value that the peasant*

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