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# Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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**Contested Agrifood Governance:  
Nicaraguan smallholder  
cooperatives navigate the split in  
fair trade and start the struggle  
for food sovereignty**

**Christopher M. Bacon**

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# **Contested Agrifood Governance: Nicaraguan smallholder cooperatives navigate the split in fair trade and start the struggle for food sovereignty**

**Christopher M. Bacon**

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## Abstract

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The big tent version of fair trade collapsed when Fair Trade USA split from Fairtrade International, a global stakeholder governed network of certification agencies, firms, and representative farmer organizations. Despite protest from fair trade pioneers, smallholder cooperatives, and civil society, Fair Trade USA developed weaker standards, granting certification to undeserving coffee plantations and unorganized smallholders. Fair traders became increasingly disillusioned with the organization's shifting standards and non-participatory governance structures. Hybrid approaches linking smallholder cooperatives to "socially responsible" coffee roasting companies have provided family farmers with expanding markets, increased access to credit, and supported grassroots sustainable development projects.

Nicaragua's smallholder cooperatives have simultaneously engaged global fair trade governance debates and shifted focus from coffee exports to local corn markets and food security. Many factors influence rural food security, including harvests, prices, incomes, crop diversity, and access to common pool resources such as water, forests, and pastures. I used a community-based participatory action research approach to develop a case study with coffee farmers and cooperative staff in northern Nicaragua. The results link residents' perceptions of food insecurity to their changing livelihoods, political economic context, and local institutions. From the 1960s to the present, many residents transitioned from farmworkers to cooperative owners. In the mid-1990s, they linked to a secondary cooperative and fair trade coffee markets. Despite these gains, by 2010 most households still suffered an average of 3 months of seasonal food scarcity. One response links the cooperative's organizational capacity with concepts from agroecology and food system to increase farmers' access to food, locally adapted seeds, and other common pool resources. Strategies include cooperative-based grain and seed banks, farmer experimentation, and community water projects. This case and Nicaragua's evolving government policy highlight new opportunities for linking fair trade and food sovereignty.

### 1. Introduction

Changes in fair trade certification enabled large corporations to enter this market during the last 10 years, leading to a dramatic increase in sales—now topping \$6 billion globally (Clark and Walsh 2011). The unilateral decision of the USA-based Fair Trade certification agency to break away from the set of Fair Trade USA's unilateral decision to break away from Fairtrade International's common certification standards characterizes the contested governance where corporate economies and struggling farmers intersect. A critical review of this case and how it

influences smallholder cooperatives in Nicaragua will reveal lessons from one of the earliest attempts to create a more sustainable global agrifood system.

In previous years, fair trade coffee was a frequently cited example of efforts to create and govern a more sustainable international agrifood system (Rice 2001; Raynolds 2002). The study of agrifood systems analyzes the interactions that determine what, how much, by what method, and for whom food is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed (Pimbert *et al.* 2001). A sustainable agrifood system aims to meet human needs in current and future generations; improve environmental, economic, and social well-being; and resist damages from hazards and shocks (Ericksen 2008). Sustainable food systems address social sustainability including issues of non-exploitative relations, fairness, work, human health, gender, and environmental justice (Allen 2008)

Governance and policy change are necessary to expand sustainable agrifood systems (Kremen *et al.* 2012; Iles and Marsh 2012). Currently, agrifood system governance is “fragmented and incoherent,” often serving the dominant political economic interests of powerful financial capital holders (Clapp and Cohen 2009). The creation of sustainable agrifood systems requires governance according to an alternative set of normative principles that often conflict with logics of cost reduction, standardization, and accumulation that characterize the dominant industrial agrifood system. The alternative values that structure the governance of a more sustainable agrifood system often include: quality, proximity, reciprocity, place, solidarity, transparency, social development and environmental sustainability (Goodman and Watts 1997; Goodman *et al.*, 2011; Kloppenburg *et al.*, 2000).

Questions about the governance of fair trade have evolved over the previous 15 years, often in response pragmatic debates about the growth, inclusion, the potential and pitfalls of this emerging sustainable agrifood system. The early questions were: what are the impacts of fair trade among farmers? (Raynolds 2000; Renard 2002; Bacon 2005), followed by “how to scale up without selling out” and, “how to work within and against the market” (Jaffee 2007; Raynolds 2009; Bacon *et al.* 2008; Fridell 2006; Taylor 2005). As larger corporations started to sell fair trade products, markets expanded, and the number of participating farmers and cooperatives grew (now topping 1 million producers, for all agricultural products). Academics and civil society advocates increased their scrutiny of fair trade standards and governance and began asking questions, as: what roles do corporations have in fair trade (Fridell 2007; Reed 2009; Rendard 2005)? Is fair trade being co-opted (Jaffee 2012)? And, who decides what is fair in fair trade (Bacon 2010)?

Food sovereignty offers a community-focused and rights-based answer to food systems

governance questions about who decides what, how, and for whom food is produced, distributed, and consumed. Like fair trade, food sovereignty is a contested academic concept, a discourse, a social activists' demand for change, and, an emerging set of agrifood system policies, and an evolving set of everyday practices. The food sovereignty agenda responds to the aspirations and needs of smallholders, fisher folks, indigenous communities, and social movement leaders in the Global South (Windfuhr and Jonsen 2005; Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). In place of a corporate driven or government planned agrifood system, food sovereignty places farmers and eaters at the center of an alternative proposal. Food sovereignty refers to the right of local peoples to control their own agricultural and food systems, including markets, resources, food cultures, and production modes (La Via Campesina 2009). To achieve these goals, farmers and fisher folk use institutions to obtain access to the environmental commons, including land, water, seeds, and biodiversity. In contrast to fair trade's market oriented change strategy (Jaffee 2012), food sovereignty both claims rights against states and promotes the creation of new institutions for mutual aid and the cooperative governance of commonly resources (Kloppenborg 2010).

The relationships between fair trade and food sovereignty are still underexplored in both theory and practice. A recent paper notes the ambiguous position of food sovereignty advocates regarding the role of international trade in advancing their agenda (Burnett and Murphy 2013). It is clear that a food sovereignty perspective is against monopolistic corporate power, global commodity systems, and agricultural dumping and, contrastingly, in favor of agroecology, self-sufficiency, and local markets. Less is said about the entangled relationships that connect these two idealized positions in the realm of everyday practice. Many smallholders and workers affiliated with food sovereignty social movement organizations also cultivate cash crops as an important part of their livelihood strategies. One aspect of the evolving food sovereignty agenda that could form a strong conceptual connection with the commonly accepted fair trade definition is this phrase from the Nyéléni Declaration (2007): *“Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition.”*

## 2. The Rise and Fall of Big Tent Fair Trade in the USA

In the previous two decades, smallholder farmers and food justice advocates have used fair trade to build collective power by combining green consumerism and advocacy with certification to create a fairer and more environmentally sustainable market (Jaffee 2007). Initially, this market growth represented a tangible alternative to the anonymous commodity markets --a product with a face and a story. Advocacy campaigns critiqued the dominant industrial commodity system and promoted an alternative fair trade certified harvest. Fair

trade coffee, chocolate, and other foods quickly became available as certifiers - in cooperation with many advocates -- decided to license mainstream firms (such as Starbucks and later Nestlé).

Many budding social justice organizations felt a sense of accomplishment after coordinating fair trade organizing campaigns that led to campus offering fair trade certified coffee, chocolate and other products. These short-term victories consisted of more than 100 campus-based social and environmental justice groups coordinating “coffee conversion campaigns,” as university dining commons managers scrambled to offer fair trade coffee. These campaigns frequently led into broader efforts to create more sustainable and local food systems (i.e. the Real Food Challenge), demand worker justice (such as the alliances with the Coalition for Immolakee Workers), and reform free trade agreements. In spite of this student labor investment, organized students received no official voice in fair trade governance decisions (Wilson and Curnow 2012). Optimists could claim that from the late 1990s through about the early 2000s, fair trade as both a concept and practice offered a tool that enabled a degree of political empowerment among advocates, supported smallholder cooperative organizing efforts, and influenced local environmental governance as thousands of farmers converted to certified organic production (Bacon et al. 2008). Participants in this new social movement included a mix of actors ranging from charity-oriented church groups to solidarity-oriented political groups to others interested in issues related to the environment, human rights, and alternative globalization (Jaffee 2012; Raynolds *et al.* 2007).

The collaborative work of smallholders, advocates, cooperatives, and businesses to launch and expand a global fair trade system represents one of the few large-scale transnational projects proposed to transform unfair trade relationships into “ a different kind of market” that empowers small-scale farmers, workers, and consumers. Although there are now dueling definitions, the commonly accepted international definition holds that:

“Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seek greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair Trade Organizations, backed by consumers, are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.”

---Fairtrade International 2013

This definition unites many most of the alternative trade organizations, traders, co-ops and firms involved in the system. However, tensions under this big tent version of fair trade started

to grow in the mid-2000s when economic returns to farmers declined, quality requirements for agricultural products increased, and inspections became more rigorous. Debates erupted concerning the degree of power that organized farmers should have in governing the system (i.e., how many seats, if any, should representative smallholder organizations have on the board of directors?), the required price premiums paid to farmer organizations, and the inclusion of large farms or estates in the coffee sector. There were also debates about the aspirational goals of this system in terms of reforming and even transforming an unfair trade system, as opposed to simply increasing market access and providing a flow of benefits (such as better prices and access to credit) to producers.

The US-certified fair trade market has expanded vigorously since the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy incubated a certification agency in the US in the late 1990s. The USA-based fair trade certification agency contributed to this aggressive growth and gained a strong say in international fair trade governance debates, often critiquing European counterparts for their slower market growth, and the high costs associated with the centralized administration of inspections, marketing, and more. It became evident that these challenges were political, economic, and often ideological and would require difficult dialogues to avoid splintering the system altogether (Bacon 2010; Reynolds 2009; Jaffee 2007; Reed 2009; Fridell 2007; Bacon et al. 2008).

#### *Fair Trade USA vs. Fairtrade International*

The big tent of fair trade collapsed as movement-oriented organizations and many (but not all) smallholder cooperatives became increasingly disillusioned with the mainstreaming strategy (Reynolds 2009) and undemocratic governance structure common to Northern certification agencies, particularly Fair Trade USA (Jaffee 2012). The corporate model of fair trade offers less power to smallholders, since minimum prices cannot keep up with the spiraling costs of sustainable production, and new large-scale entrants could usurp export platforms tediously built by smallholder producer organizations. Caught in the middle and pulled in both directions, hybrid approaches linking social economy-oriented cooperatives to more small and medium sized “socially responsible” companies have provided smallholder organizations with expanding markets, increased access to credit, and supported grassroots development projects that address pressing issues such as seasonal hunger, education, and women’s rights. The solidarity-oriented model represents a third version of fair trade. It primarily consists of 100% fair and alternative trade organizations in the North (e.g. worker cooperatives and mission driven non-profit organizations) and producer cooperatives in the South. These are the founding alternative trade organizations and Third World Shops that launched system more than 40 years ago (Bacon 2010; Reynolds et al. 2007); however, growth remains a persistent challenge for this current within fair trade.

### 3. Different Versions of Fair Trade

One way to approach the diversity of activities under the fair trade tent is to consider a spectrum of three different visions of the relationships between economy and society:

#### *Solidarity Economy Fair Trade*

“The social and solidarity economy is a concept that refers to enterprises and organizations, in particular cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises, which specifically produce goods, services and knowledge while pursuing economic and social aims and fostering solidarity (Fonteneau *et al.* 2011: vi). Alternative trade organizations, most smallholder cooperatives, and many innovative social justice and sustainability-oriented enterprises and mission driven organizations can be classified as promoting a solidarity economy version of fair trade. This value chain regularly connects organized farmers with their cooperative counterparts closer to the retail end of the value chain. The goal is to create and sustain an “alternative” value chain in which each link is coordinated by a cooperative, non-profit, or alternative enterprise-oriented towards the social and solidarity economies (see Table 1). Examples include non-profit craft organizations selling to church congregations, as well as organizations like Cooperative Coffees and Equal Exchange that bring coffee from Fairtrade International certified cooperatives through cooperatively owned importers to roasting companies and cooperatively owned cafes and retailers.

#### *Hybrid Economy Fair Trade*

The hybrid fair trade value chains consist of governance strategies, socioeconomic orientations, and degrees of corporate integration that are best classified as lying between the two ends of the continuum (Bacon 2010). Towards the solidarity economy end, there are the cooperatives and alternative trade networks that sell their products into mainstream retail spaces. Towards the corporate economy end, there are large (or small) firms and allied certification agencies and/or NGOs that promote minor changes to business as usually as they seek improve their image without accepting the values associated with fair trade’s commonly accepted international definition. If the retailer is kept at 'arms length,' and fair trade values and principles remain guide practice throughout the rest of the value chain, Reed (2009) characterizes this as a social economy-oriented value chains. They can work at the intersection of the corporate and social economies, but actively seek to generate returns for workers, cooperatives, environments, and local communities. Another set of value chains within this category includes rapidly expanding specialty coffee roasters. These companies claim to be 'quality driven' and may justify their participation in fair trade as a strategy to sustain their supply of top coffees. This logic places them towards the mainstream corporate end of the



continuum. However, there is an expanding contingency of small, medium, and several larger specialty-roasting companies (like Thanksgiving Coffee Company) that seek to differentiate their coffee on the basis of both quality and sustainability. The hybrid model promotes many partnerships some with tangible benefits that include rapidly expanded fair trade markets and additional investments leveraged with smallholders to support sustainable farmer livelihoods and higher quality coffee. Will the people in this model tilt politically towards the original or the new models of Fair Trade?

### *Corporate Economy Fair Trade*







The certification agency-led profit-oriented model focuses on rapidly expanding high margin niche markets for certified products. This mainstream fair trade approach falls under the neoliberalist ideology (Fridell 2007; Jaffee 2007), which posits that forcefully liberating entrepreneurial freedoms maximize the well-being of all. This value chain is dominated by integrated corporations, which, in some cases, control production (e.g. Dole Fruit Company's Fair Trade bananas), exporting, importing, shipping, and distribution. The larger firms and certain types of NGOs and certification agencies that either follow the corporate lead, or seek to gently push them towards a voluntary corporate social responsibility, are the driving influence on the governance of these value chains. Standards changes may occur with relatively little public debate, and they are likely to focus primarily on accommodating corporate interests and accelerating market growth.

### *Fair Trade Certification and the Corporate vs. Hybrid Models*

Fair Trade USA has increasingly sought to define and promote a corporate fair trade model (Jaffee 2012). In addition to proposing an alternative definition of fair trade, and negotiating 'secret' deals with corporate firms to carry an unknown percent of fair trade products and pay an unknown per pound licensing fees, the two new fair trade standards most closely associated with this model are Fair Trade USA's Farm Workers Standard (FWS) and the Independent Smallholder Standard (ISS). The Farm Worker Standard is intended "to serve farm workers that do not own land, but work on larger farms." It allows the certification of large plantations without worker unions. The Independent Smallholder Standard (ISS) standard is intended to provide access to the benefits of fair trade to farmers who own small parcels of land but are not organized into cooperatives or associations. Fair Trade USA's argument is that this is an expanded version of the model. Fairtrade International's standards are also influenced by the corporate model as evidenced by the certification of large-scale tea estates and banana plantations. However, governance still has a strong degree of stakeholder influence and both the solidarity and hybrid economy interests have thus far have contested efforts to change the standard and thus far maintained an alternative definition of fair trade, excluded large single-

owner and corporate plantations, and large estate farms from the Fairtrade certified coffee and cacao, in favor of the pioneer smallholder-controlled associations.

**Table 1: Selected solidarity economy oriented alternative trade organizations**

	<p>The Fair Trade Federation consists of alternative trade organizations consisting of American and Canadian wholesalers, retailers and importers. This Association adheres to the founding definition of Fair Trade and principles of Fair Trade and is active within the WFTO.</p>
	<p>This is an international federation of alternative and fair trade organizations. World Fair Trade Federation (WFTO) is limited to organizations that demonstrate a 100% Fair Trade commitment and apply its 10 Principles of Fair Trade.</p>
 <p>Pequeños Productores Small Producers</p>	<p><i>Coordinadora Latino Americana y del Caribe de Pequeños Productores de Comercio Justo</i> (CLAC) is the Latin American and Caribbean Network of democratically organized small-scale Fair Trade producer cooperatives and associations. It claims more than 300 organizational members that connect to the livelihoods of 500,000 people as it represents the collective Southern voice within the Fair Trade certification system (they have seat on FLO's board) and beyond.</p>
	<p>The Agricultural Justice Project created a set of standards and more recently a certification specifically for North American food system operations, as it drew upon the example of the international Fair Trade movement and elsewhere.</p>
	<p>Is a 100% Fair Trade worker cooperative operating since 1986. Equal Exchange's founders envisioned a food system that empowers farmers and consumers, supports small farmer co-ops, and uses sustainable farming methods. They started with fairly traded coffee from Nicaragua and didn't look back.</p>
	<p>For more than 60 years, SERRV has worked to eradicate poverty through the creation of join solutions connecting low-income artisans and farmers to the alternative markets. One of the first alternative trade organizations in the world, SERRV is a founding member of the World Fair Trade Organization (formerly IFAT) and a founding member of the Fair Trade Federation (FTF).</p>



Cooperative Coffees (CC) is a green coffee importing cooperative, comprising 23 community-based coffee roasters in the USA and Canada, who are committed to building and supporting fair and sustainable trade relationships for the benefit of farmers and their exporting cooperatives, families, and communities.

CC strives to promote transparent Fair Trade and sustainable development alternatives in both the North and the South.

The increase in these certification agencies and corporate profit-oriented models threatens the original goals that fair trade set to accomplish. We can see an example of this problem in the governance, standards, and even the definition of fair trade. Bacon (2010) found that the Fair Trade minimum prices lost 41 percent of their real value from 1988 to 2012. This decline poses a severe threat to the livelihoods of the smallholders that Fair Trade prices are intended to support. The association of fair trade minimum prices with the international commodities price--rather than direct measurements addressing the costs of sustainable production--is at least partially responsible for its declining real value. Several "market driven" firms and national labeling initiatives argue against price increases, as they would conflict with the profit-maximization model of these firms. Under the neoliberal ideology, the state has little role in second-guessing market signals (i.e., prices), and, where there is an 'externality' (e.g. pollution or social exploitations), the state can create new property rights that enable private profit seekers to spur innovative solutions. Thus, the neoliberal model acts opposite to the alternative trade framework.

While there are multiple projects within Fair Trade, the dominant trend in fair trade certified governance is characterized by these more market-based projects and roll-out neoliberal environmental governance (Guthman 2007). Thus far, the corporate economy model of fair trade has expanded market access for both organized smallholders and new entrants; however, the pilot to certify large coffee farms is less than two years old. Fair Trade USA's new definition exemplifies a neoliberal approach

Fair Trade is a global trade model and certification that allows shoppers to quickly identify products that were produced in an ethical manner. For consumers, Fair Trade offers a powerful way to reduce poverty through their everyday shopping. For farmers and workers in developing countries, Fair Trade offers better prices, improved terms of trade, and the business skills necessary to produce high-quality products that can compete in the global marketplace. Through vibrant trade, farmers and workers can improve their lives and plan for their futures.

–Fair Trade USA

A comparison of this definition and that of Fairtrade International reveals several striking differences. The Fair Trade USA approach eliminates efforts to reform global trade, enhance equity, or to constitute fair trade as 'a different type of market' in the 'another world is possible' sense that fair trade pioneer Franz Vanderhoff and his colleagues use it (Vanderhoff 2009). It also drops the notions of securing the human rights of workers and producers. Finally, there is no reference to partnership, transparency or dialogue in the new definition.

An analysis of the split in fair trade from a food sovereignty perspective, suggests procedural justice questions about the lack of voice and vote for farmers, workers, and consumers in fair trade governance and standard setting. There are no seats designated for the Alternative Trader Organizations on either the Fairtrade International or Fair Trade USA's board of directors, and, while producers have four seats on Fairtrade International's board, small-scale producers lack proportional representation to their numbers and their contribution to fair trade. Representative smallholder cooperatives and other key stakeholders have no representation on the board of Fair Trade USA. Also absent are broad based civil society, activist, and consumer interest organizations, including those that have mobilized millions of volunteer hours promoting fair trade.

The convergence of these private regulatory changes, the recent 2007-09 food crisis, and the re-emergence of state-based food policy prompted several of Nicaragua's global fair trade smallholder cooperative leaders to shift their strategic focus. First, they engaged in open conflicts with their previous allies from Fair Trade USA, strengthened ties with Fairtrade International (FI), and helped launch an FI affiliated certification agency in the USA, Fairtrade America, now in direct competition with Fair Trade USA (Presa, personal comm.). Perhaps most importantly, several cooperatives turned their attention from exports and fair trade politics towards the social and environmental goals of affiliated farmers, partnering with hybrid fair trade companies and NGOs to launch new partnerships for food security and food sovereignty.

I have selected the following case study for several reasons. The farmers I studied with are part of a larger secondary cooperative, which is actively engaging both the global fair trade governance debates and addressing food security and food sovereignty. The secondary cooperative has earned an international reputation for its leadership in fair trade issues and its promotion of local sustainable development. This case does not represent the myriad of possible alternative responses among the 1 million plus producers involved in fair trade, or even the 550,000 involved in fair trade coffee production. On the other hand, the issues of seasonal hunger and the struggle to coordinate collective actions that improve farmer livelihoods are challenges shared by most of the 10 to 24 million smallholder coffee farmers,

including the majority involved in fair trade (Jha et al. 2012; Mendez *et al.* 2010; Morris *et al.* 2013)

#### 4. Case Study: Seasonal hunger and changing food access among coffee smallholders

This case study focuses on the role of Nicaraguan fair trade cooperative institutions in coordinating collective action to improve food security and food sovereignty. To gain a perspective on current conditions and future struggles, I have taken a historic approach that summarizes the experiences of the larger secondary cooperative, PRODECOOP. Then I focus the analysis on the experiences of the smallholder members of one primary cooperative affiliated to PRODECOOP. I am especially interested in analyzing how rural residents access the natural resources needed to make their livelihoods, and how their access has changed through time under different land ownership patterns. This connects with ongoing research about how cooperatives and other stakeholders, such as municipal authorities, co-manage access to common pool resources (i.e., biodiversity, water, seeds, and forests) (Larson 2002) and influence of different land tenure arrangements on household food security (Agrawal and Gupta 2005, Maxwell and Wiebe, 1999).

##### 4.1 Explaining historical patterns of vulnerability to seasonal hunger

Vulnerability to seasonal hunger is influenced by the internal capabilities within a household, including its degree of exposure and sensitivity to external hazards (e.g., droughts or floods) and shocks (e.g., wars and commodity price crashes) and a households’ adaptive capacity (Adger 2006; Eakin and Luers 2006). Previous studies suggest that Latin American coffee cooperatives partially mitigate smallholder vulnerability to climate and market risk (Eakin et al. 2006; Toker et al. 2010). Rural household access to common pool resources, such as forests and water, is key for food security. Although fair trade co-ops often govern common property (Mutersabaugh 2002), I am unaware of

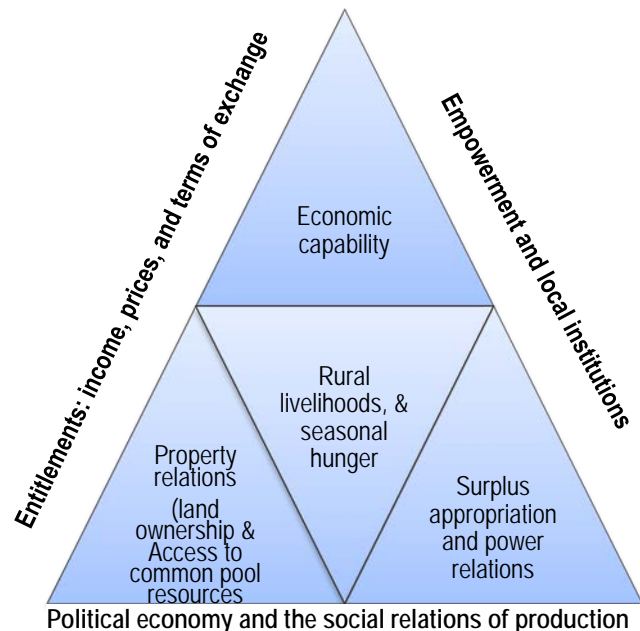


Figure 1: The social space of vulnerability to hunger

Source: slightly modified from Watts and Bohle 1993

studies that link fair trade co-ops and common property access to household food security.

To understand changes in household vulnerability to food insecurity through time, I turn to a foundational framework that explains the causal forces that link poverty, famines and hunger (Watts and Bohle 1993). This framework analyzes the political economic processes that shape the “social spaces of vulnerability” in which rural residents make their livelihoods (Bebbington 2000; Scoones 2009) and seek to secure enough culturally preferred food to eat every day (Pinstrup-Anderson 2009) (see Figure 1). Food insecurity occurs when insufficient food is available and/or the household lacks economic or physical access (Sen 1981). It also occurs when food availability or access is interrupted due to cyclical patterns of food scarcity, often related to higher commodity prices, precipitation patterns, harvest size, agricultural calendars, and the availability of work and income sources (Deveroux et al. 2008). Seasonal hunger is the most common form of rural hunger affecting hundreds of millions of smallholder farmers.

The concepts within the triangles of Figure 1 identify areas for analysis at the intersection of the model’s three interacting domains. Amartya Sen’s entitlement approach addresses a household’s ability to produce, barter, or purchase food. An entitlement indicates the ability to command a specific quantity of a commodity. Institutions shape the exchange terms that a household accesses to command their food entitlements. Examples could include which coffee buyers are in town (is it only the local intermediary paying low prices, or is there a fair trade co-op that is also operating?), what informal social norms govern barter, or what access to credit households possess. Thus rural institutions shape access to natural resources and markets (Ribot and Peluso 2003), influencing the terms of exchange and impacting food security. The broader political economic structure and class relations are the battlegrounds on which different groups struggle to shape the institutions that control access and influence who is vulnerable to what (Watts and Bohle 1993).

## 4.2 Approach, Methods, and Study Site

### *Participatory action research and partnership-based approach*

I conducted this work as part of a research and sustainable community development project that started in 2009. This food security and food sovereignty project used a partnership model that links organizations and individuals, including an agroecology-focused international development, and education nonprofit organization; PRODECOOP, a leading smallholder fair trade coffee exporting cooperative union with 2400 member families and more than 1000 certified organic farms; and CII-ASDENIC, a local development NGO focused on research and technology.

This research was developed as part of larger effort guided by a community-based participatory action research approach that seeks to link democratic knowledge production with positive social and environmental change (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2010). This approach starts with a partnership and the signing formal institutional agreements linking CAN, PRODECOOP, and CII-ASDENIC. Key starting points include initiating work towards a shared vision (through shared visits and farmer to farmer type exchanges to visit other food security programs, seed banks, and related initiatives). We also needed to start the trust-building process, to move individuals beyond a guarded approach, and avoid the tendency to invest minimal effort and managing this like *“just another research or development project”*. Trust is the willingness to sacrifice something (e.g., time and resources) in the short term with the expectation of broader benefits in the longer term (Ostrom 2005).

Once these partnerships were formalized, the next step was to design research questions and a broader agenda. The broader participatory research cycle was focused on identifying the extent, causes, and potential solutions to seasonal hunger. The background data from this survey is used as a small component of the findings. I have also worked on previous projects focused on the governance, standards, and prices of fair trade coffee (Bacon 2010) in which one of my key partners was Merling Preza, PRODECOOP’s general manager and the recently elected president of the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Smallholder Fair Trade Producers (CLAC). Participation is always uneven and h community partners can play roles that range from unpaid labor to powerful partners capable of stopping or alternating the course of the research (Rocheleau 1999). PRODECOOP as a cooperative union is a strong partner that can certainly stop or alter any given research project. The initial ideas about the role of cooperative management of common pool resources in food security evolved from the past three years of collaborative work focused on reducing seasonal hunger. These questions were initially responded to my interests and field observations. However, the research agenda continues to develop in response to farmer and cooperative staff interests.

#### *Data collection and analysis*

The majority of the field research is based on key informant interviews, two workshops, and ten focus groups conducted in July and August of 2013. However, the overall context is grounded in participant observation during field visits in July and December from July 2009 to August 2013. Since additional interviews and a short household survey will be conducted later in 2013, these results should be considered preliminary at this stage. The cooperative study consists of 92 members (35 females and 57 males). Our research team started with a random sample recruiting 29 participants for a household survey. Focus group and interview participants were recruited purposefully, as our team sought out the voices of men and women, old-timers, current community leaders, and young adults. Finally, I selected key informant interview

participants based on their expertise. Questions addressed a broad set of themes related to food security, food sovereignty, fair trade, cooperatives, and smallholder coffee farms. I interviewed cooperatives' staff and government officials. Finally, I spent several days conducting group interviews with leaders from this cooperative and working with them to map their commonly held property.

I facilitated and recorded interviews and focus groups. After transcription, I coded them thematically and highlighted salient quotes. Participant observations during meetings and the review of gray literature, project documents, and documents solicited from government ministries and development agencies further contributed to the contextual analysis presented in the results section. The focus group started with a workshop disseminating and dialoguing about results from the previous research, then divided into 6 groups of 3 to 6 individuals that met for 60 to 80 minutes. Each group was assigned a decade and asked to dialogue in response to the following themes and guiding questions:

1. *Livelihoods, hunger, and the lean months*: How did you make a living during this period? How long did “*los meses flacos*,” the thin months last during an average year? What did you do to access food during this decade? How did you access food during the lean months?
2. *Institutions and access to common pool resources*: What were the most important common pool resources during this time period? About what percent of the community depended on these resources? How would you classify the condition of these resources (i.e., to what extent was the water contaminated or the forest overharvested)? Who controlled access to them? How were they managed?
3. *Climate and precipitation*: Describe the climate during this time period. When did the rainy season start and finish? How did this influence the crop harvests and food security?
4. *Vulnerability to hazards and shocks*: What were the most significant natural hazards and social shocks during this decade?
5. *Adaptive capacity*: How did you and others in the community respond to these hazards and shocks?

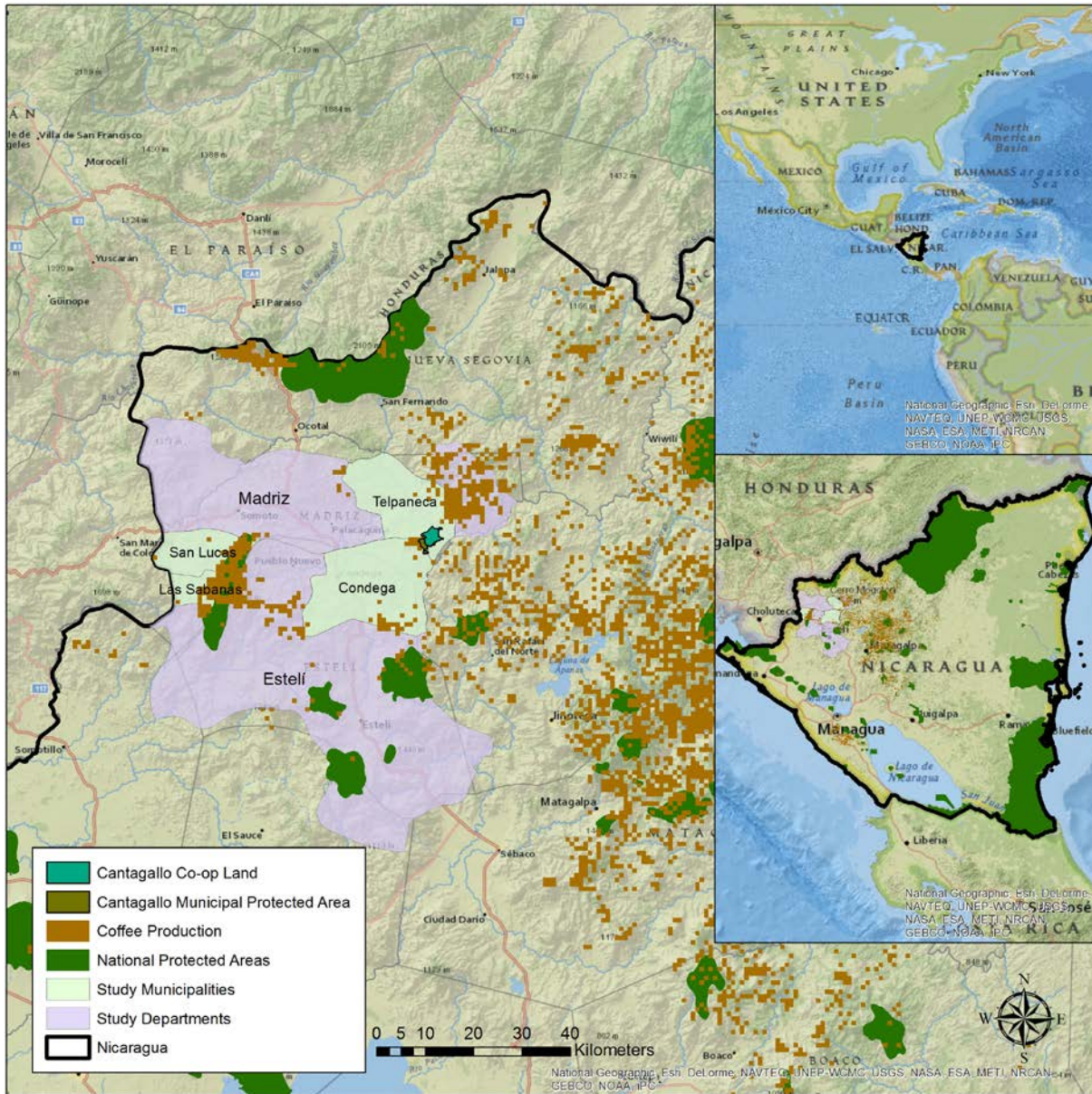
Notes were recorded for each conversation by experienced note takers.

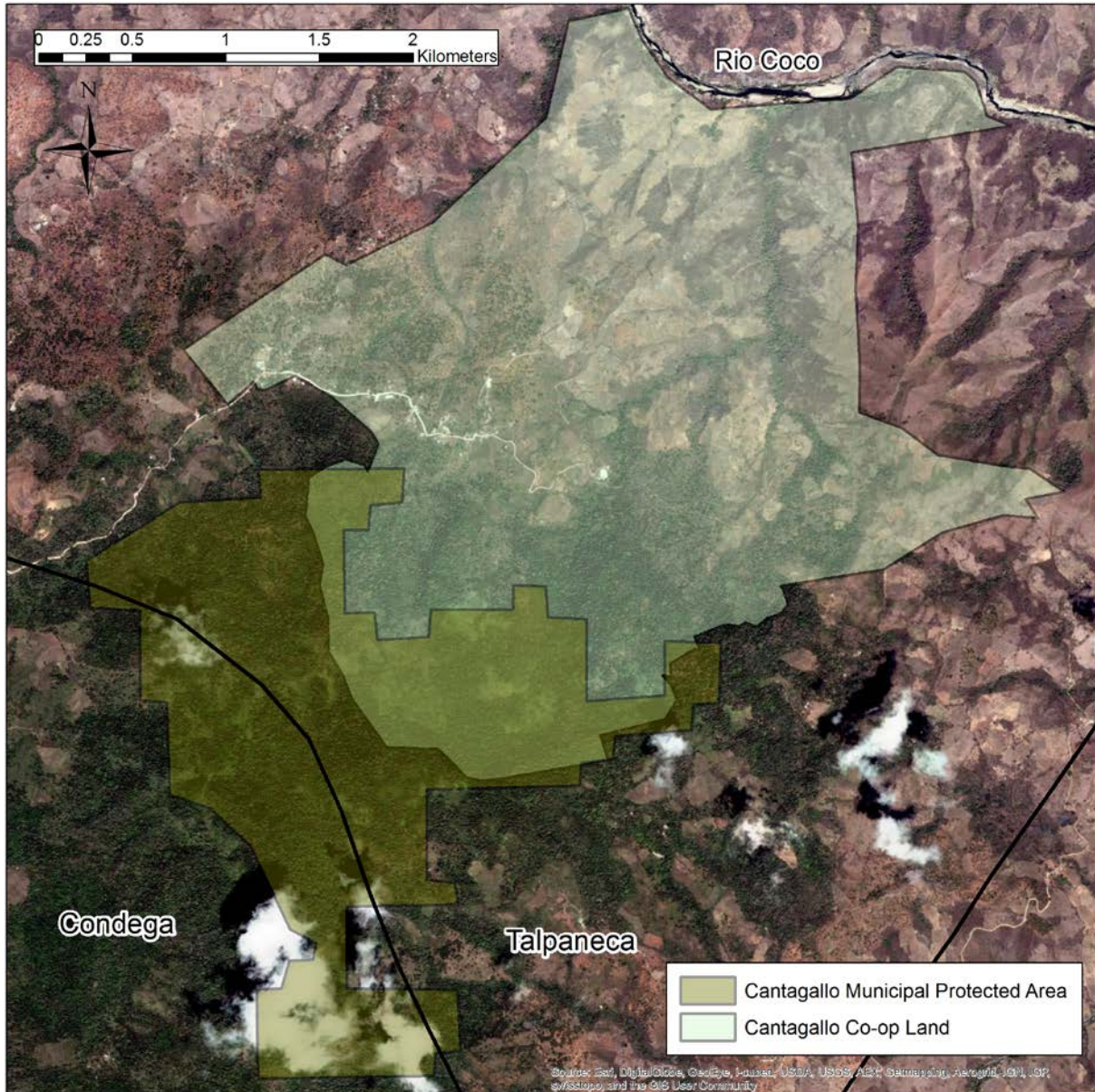
#### *Description of case study area in Nicaragua*

The study area for this project will eventually expand to include coffee growing communities and households from three cooperatives in Condega, Estelí, and San Lucas and Las Sabanas,



Madriz (see map at the end of the document). Current work is focused on the municipality of Condega. The terrain in this region of Nicaragua consists primarily of small mountains, mesas, and hills. Coffee is produced at altitudes from 700 to 1550 masl. Seasonal patterns divide the climate into a rainy and dry season, with the rainy season generally lasting from May through October. The vegetation consists primarily of tropical dry forests at lower altitudes and semi-humid and mixed oak and pine forests at higher altitudes. Most farmers in the study area produce a combination of cash crop coffee production and subsistence cropping of basic corn and beans. However, they also harvest a considerable number of additional crops including fruits, tubers, and medical plants.





#### 4. Findings: The long struggle for food security and food sovereignty

##### *Changing livelihoods, violence, and access to common pool resources*

The residents have lived on these same lands often for two or three generations. As the quotes below illustrate, these histories were full of violence, oppression, and a degree of change and empowerment. Most of these rural residents struggled to make a living from the land or through off-farm employment in the context of a shifting political economic battlefield (see Figure 1). Most participants in focus groups and interviews had lost an immediate family member during the war of the 1980s, but conflict started earlier and continued later. In several

cases their grandparents were members of the indigenous community and recalled land that was “bought” for incredibly low prices by the owner of the hacienda and their process of becoming landless workers for the large estate.

After the 1979 revolution, the Sandinista government appropriated this land from the estate owner as part of the agrarian reform, and many residents were initially workers for a state run farm. Later they received a collective title to the land. The cooperative gained a degree of autonomy from the Sandinista party and the state in the 1990s. In the mid-1990s, they connected to PRODECOOP and linked with fair trade and certified organic markets. This enabled increasing funds for social development and partially buffered the consequences of the 1999-2005 coffee price crises, yet from the late 1990s onward the cooperative has slowly divided the common property into individual parcels.

The residents shared a consensus across time periods about the fundamental importance of common pool resources for their food security. Although the institutions that govern access changed through time, residents agreed that these were the five most important common pool resources:

1. Water, streams, creeks, and springs
2. Forests for their water conservation, fruits, firewood, and animal habitat
3. Pastures
4. Seeds
5. The *Milpa* agricultural plots, for planting corn, beans, squash and other crops

#### *History of land ownership, conflict, vulnerability, and hunger*

In the following section, I integrate resident responses to the five themes and analyze them through the social space of vulnerability framework with particular attention to food security, institutions, access (and empowerment), and the changing political economic context.

*The hacienda and dependency in the 1960s:* The eldest members shared a lively discussion about the severity of rural poverty and early history in relation to changing land use patterns. Several recounted local histories of lopsided land deals that transferred the land to the hacienda owners. A land deal in the late 1800s included the exchange of new cloths and cattle for land. One said, “the indigenous people had a community focus but then the hacienda came and with it exploitation.” They also recounted perceptions of close personal ties linking the hacienda owner to the Somoza dictatorships in the late 1930s through 1979. They recognized that there was not enough food because the families were large and their wages from working for *el patron* were low. Their uneven exchange entitlements tell a powerful story: “We earned

4 Córdoba a day, and we needed to buy the corn from the company store on the hacienda at 10 Córdoba for 25 lbs.” The patron or hacienda owner largely controlled access to common pool resources and markets. Farmers reported the climate as cooler with regular fogs and mists and consistent rains. No major natural disasters or droughts were noted.

*Drought, famine, and the seeds of resistance in the 1970s:* Constrained by their lack of access to land, social support networks, and common pool resources, and with limited economic capability the presence of a drought had severe consequences in this community. One group member stated, “In 1969, families in the 16 houses of this community lost 30 children, nearly two per house from malnutrition compounded with diseases and illness, such as measles, diarrhea and chickenpox.” The suffering associated with the cyclical periods of seasonal deepened as a drought in the early 1970s slammed into this vulnerable community and led to a local famine. According to one participant, the drought occurred after the December 23, 1972 earthquake leveled Managua, leading to famine in 1973 and 1974. Crop prices increased and wages stagnated; residents needed the equivalent of 4 days of work to purchase 25 pounds of colored corn (likely from a more drought resistant local landrace) in Telpaneca. Many migrated to other cities in Nicaragua in search of work and food.

Thus far I have found relatively little published literature to understand the extent of this famine, but it was confirmed by other focus groups held in neighboring municipalities. It may have been localized to central highlands. Drought in Nicaragua is highly influenced by El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) events. Both 1971 and 1972 are considered El Niño years with low precipitation patterns and drought conditions (INETER 2005).

The hacienda dominated the local political economy, “denying us our rights” and controlling access to firewood and fruits from the forests. Several community members started to organize, petition the hacienda owner asking him to work with the government and open a school for the more than 30 children in the community. Though the law supported this right, they were promptly chased away and black listed. By the early 1970s, several community members decided to join the *Frente Nacional de Liberacion Sandinista*, which was actively organizing in this area.

*Agrarian reform, war, and the state run cooperatives in the 1980s:* Broad based armed resistance converged to topple the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, and the Sandinista government subsequently consolidated its power, establishing Daniel Ortega as the president. The government seized resources controlled by Somoza and his cronies that accounted for up to 25% of the country’s productive assets (Austin et al. 1985). The hacienda passed into the hands of the new agricultural ministry as part of the agrarian reform. PRODECOOP’s director

for cooperative and rural development estimates that 25 to 27% of the 2400 members accessed their land through agrarian reform including the major of the farmers in this cooperative.

Residents divided their experiences during this period into several stages. During the first stage, the state- owned the land and hired a manager that enforced many rules that were similar to the old hacienda, but with less violence. For example, if a worker picked bananas and mangos from the shade trees above the coffee, the manager would say nothing, “but in the *‘hora de las horas’* (when it really counted), deductions for that fruit picked appeared on the worker’s weekly paycheck. Food security and seasonal hunger remained a challenge, but government donations were now common (but not necessarily consistent).

By the mid-1980s, the government transferred the title for 2200 mazanas (1540 ha) of common property from a state enterprise to a cooperative of local residents. The agricultural ministry helped them organize the cooperative to make this happen. Residents could now access firewood, fruit, and water without permission or financial penalty. Some reported higher deforestation rates during this period, but a review of aerial photography has not been completed to document this.

However, the wars of the 1980s affected this region as US government backed *Contra* opposition to the Sandinista government grew throughout the decade. An estimated 50,000 people were killed during this war, about 2% of the total population (Kinzer 1991). The threat of an armed attack away from this small housing settlement impacted access to common pool resources, the labor investments in the common coffee plots, and the rest of the lands. In order to harvest coffee, female coffee pickers needed to be accompanied by armed men in the community. Due to the lack of inputs, the risk of an attack, and the fact that many of the men were in the army, coffee plots and the *milpa* received very low labor and agricultural inputs.

*A limited peace, land loss, and cooperative links to fair trade in the 1990s:* Food access changed again when local violence subsided with the conclusion of the 1980s wars, following Daniel Ortega’s decision to step down after losing national elections in 1990. Although this changed the political economic context, peace remained elusive. On October 1991, a group of re-armed rural residents attacked the cooperative, killing one local member and burning the existing infrastructure, including crop storage facilities, coffee, and farm equipment. The goals of this attack are still unclear, but could have been linked to efforts to re-capture this land. It is difficult to overstate the lasting psychological stress associated with these losses and potential cognitive impacts on future motivations for collective work.

Most of the work was organized collectively with payment for a day's work coordinated through the cooperative's board of directors. The periods of seasonal hunger persisted, but the perception is that they were shorter than in previous decades. During the lean months, residents reported harvesting wild foods, such as *flor de izote* and *hojas de bledo* as well as fruits from the forests and coffee shade trees that were now under a common property title. They also accessed food in exchange for their weapons through government-backed pacification programs. Hurricane Mitch, which occurred in 1998, was the major disaster, noted although damages were not highlighted.

*Cooperative dynamics, common property partially divided, and coffee markets in 2000s:* Changes to cooperatives' leadership and then local property rights institutions influenced household access to natural resources. The cooperative members elected a new board of directors in the early 2000s. This followed the loss of 550 mz co-op owned pastureland to an aggressive and corrupt NGO and a microfinance organization in 1995/6 (see map 2), the co-op voluntarily seeded land to another group of small-scale farmers that split away from this cooperative, in part due to their geographic distance. Thus the total size of the cooperative's common title decreased.

The tendency to subdivide common property holdings into individual parcels also continued. In 2000, they started the process of subdividing parcels in the collectively managed coffee plots, titling (or extending use rights) of 2 mz of coffee to each member. In 2003, the process continued in the basic grain production areas, extending down to the Rio Coco (see map 2). Farmers noted the accelerating deforestation rate in the municipal protected area, which the cooperative co-manages with a neighboring cooperative the municipal authorities.

The periods of seasonal hunger during June, July, and August, persisted into the 2000s. The 2007-2009 drought years increased household difficulty in accessing food. Crop losses were often between 40-50% and pest outbreaks were more frequently reported.

However, residents also reported collective and individual responses. These include improved grain storage techniques (eg. silos that in the corn market during this same time. They claimed to survive the lean months with stored corn, chicken eggs, and off farm employment as well as increasing support from NGOs, many linked to the community through the fair trade network and PRODECOOP. Support from the NGOs also included training on gendered empowerment, farmer experimentation, participatory development, and recently a large-scale project to increase access to drinking water in the 800 households that are not in the community.

*Change and continuity: Empowerment and the persistence of seasonal hunger:* Although the

suffering and seasonal hunger have persisted, and collective action waxed and waned from the high points of coordinated armed defense in the 1980s to low moments of internal corruption in the 1990s, it is important to note several significant changes. For example, the cooperative once again has its own building in the center of town and loans one of the rooms for a fourth grade class, since the government built school is no longer large enough. This is a far cry from the members' attempt in the 1970s to convince the hacienda owner to work with the government to build them a school. Many are also owners of the same land they once trod as beleaguered workers.

One of the most powerful changes includes an increased sense of female empowerment. During the focus group, I asked four female participants to respond to the five thematic prompts and record their experiences during the 1990s. They promptly deviated from the instructions, and, after a thoughtful discussion, wrote their own consensus-based narrative. When the individual groups were sharing their responses with all other participants, one of their group members stood up and read the following narrative:

“We had no land. We worked on rented land. The poor life made it very difficult to study. For food the mothers prepared stews of chaya, squash, and mustard. What parents earned was not enough. Those with access to all were the landowners. The minors were given work, but with special conditions attached. As parents we were subordinated to the rich.

We used packing paper to write. Only those with money could pay a real teacher. They are rich. They wanted their children to study because they are going to prepare. And I was not going to work for them. The rich wanted some illiterate [person to serve them].

The rains were very good. At that time there were good harvests, no damaging the environment. We respected waterholes, rivers and streams, because we were not owners.

First we have the land, fertilizing the land, educate about the power to make use of it and be able to respond to the lean months. Today we are free to study. During this time, the one who could decide was the man and woman only served to bear children, keep house and had no right to participate in a leadership.

Before the government had its limitations and was controlling everything. Today, we women are free to choose.

Today we own our own plots of land. Today we women, we have a role in the home as a family member equal with the husband. We have access to free healthcare and planning for children, this did not exist before.

Today I am as a woman, as a mother, I am free to speak, to decide and make our own decisions and we are no longer oppressed.”

*Local practices and global perspectives on fair trade*

*La Promotora de Desarrollo Cooperativo de las Segovias* (the Promoter of Cooperative Development in the Segovias) (or *PRODECOOP*) is a pioneer fair trade cooperative. Many of the professionals and farmer organizers that helped to found PRODECOOP claim to trace part of their inspiration to the ideals of Nicaragua's 1979 Revolution. After the Sandinista government lost the elections in 1990, an intercultural group of young agricultural and social development professionals started organizing with small-scale coffee farmers struggling to survive during the dramatic changes affecting rural Nicaragua. They initially formed an NGO called Colibri and then founded PRODECOOP. PRODECOOP started as a private enterprise before it was legally constituted as a cooperative in 1994.

Farmer organizers and technical staff created PRODECOOP to collectively sell smallholders coffee at better prices and to use these revenues to support agricultural and community development (Denaux and Valdivia, 2012). They sold their first coffee containers to alternative trade organizations in Europe and USA. These alternative trade organizations would later link with others to create the international certified fair trade systems. Farmers risked part of their crop (and with it the vital income and part of their food security) when they committed this coffee to PRODECOOP prior to receiving payment. The alternative trade organizations risked losses as they purchased coffee from a new organization with no prior experience exporting. This trust facilitated the birth of an alternative agrifood system that sought to distribute value more fairly, cultivated more transparent relations, and aimed to social empowerment, and sustainable community development. This contributed to the international expansion of fair trade as PRODECOOP' grew to become a capable secondary cooperative that represents 39 smaller cooperatives with 2200 members. Two key professional staff involved in founding PRODECOOP pursued high profile professional careers involving fair trade issues at Oxfam America and Fair Trade USA.

PRODECOOP uses fair trade's price floor and a social development premium as an organizing tool to recruit and sustain its small-scale farmer membership. The additional funding for social and environmental development projects, partially from the fair trade premium but also from international development agencies, supports a wide range of projects that include promoting women's, expanding organic coffee production, and diversifying farms. The price floor and a more transparent trading relationship can make a significant difference when international commodity prices fall. Farmers and co-op staff speak of a moment, likely in 2002, when PRODECOOP paid farmers \$100 for 100lbs of fair trade organic coffee vs. the \$40 they could get from selling it to local intermediaries and into the commercial markets. Although real fair trade minimum prices have failed to keep up with inflation, PRODECOOP's commercialization staff



uses fair trade, organic coffee and relationships with specialty coffee roasters to sell affiliated farmers coffee average overall prices that are 25-30% above the national levels.

The broadly recognized impacts of PRODECOOP's local development efforts coupled with ties to international fair trade certification, industry, and rural development networks contributed Merling Presa's emergence as a global leader in the fair trade movement. Presa's skills as a business negotiator representing smallholder interests to certification agencies, coffee roasters and development and international development project donors earned her election to the presidency of the CLAC. She also serves on the board of directors for The Fairtrade Foundation in the UK and Fairtrade International's newly formed affiliate office in the USA. In this capacity, she became one of the most vocal and effective opponents of Fair Trade USA's decision to break away from the Fairtrade International and change the key fair trade standards.

#### *Cooperative staff perspectives on food security and food sovereignty*

Simultaneous to managing continued relationships with fair trade buyers and engaging in the governance debates associated with fair trade's global split fair, PRODECOOP's rural development staff and affiliated farmers became increasingly involved in food security and sovereignty related work. These and other experiences contributed to

One of PRODECOOP's experienced staff members states that food security is when there is enough food for a whole meal for everybody, every day of the year. Food sovereignty means that we produce our own healthy food, ensuring there's sufficient food, to preserve the quality, and not rely on external inputs or altered seeds that could contaminate our local varieties or *semillas criollas* (creole seeds), which are the basis of our food sovereignty. Although several farmers in these cooperatives are unfamiliar with term, others hold a broad yet practical interpretation and could provide more specific examples when compared to farmers affiliated with another smallholder that a colleague interviewed cooperative in Chiapas (Fernandez et al., 2013)

PRODECOOP's director for cooperative and rural development stated that they are starting to promote the collection and sharing of the genetic material with the producers that have grown it for many years. The genetic material in corn, beans, sorghum and even vegetables have, represents several varieties that are adapted to a changing climate, including drought varieties, varieties adapted to excessive rain, and the mountain varieties, adapted to growing in these mountain slopes and climatic conditions. PRODECOOP is working with CAN to establish seed banks and this integrates several activities, such as training in seed conservation, research and other techniques, some validation of the technology for participatory breeding.

*Food sovereignty as an emerging practice: Community-based grain and seed banks*

The CAN-PRODECOOP partnership-based response to the persistence of seasonal hunger expanded upon ideas from cooperatives in Las Sabanas and Pueblo Nuevo (see Figure 1) and concepts drawn from the study of agroecology and sustainable food systems (Gliessman 2007; DuPuis and Goodman 2005). The CAN team encouraged PRODECOOP to reconsider its initial proposal to buy export corn and beans from its members, suggesting they develop an internal strategy that prioritizes food security and re-weaving a cooperative food system that links sustainable agriculture to healthy food access. The core elements of this strategy emerged from iterative cycles of participatory action research and dialogue during the previous four years.

PRODECOOP worked with primary level cooperatives and farmers to establish six community-based grain distribution centers that purchase corn and beans from their members and local markets, store it in silos, and sell it back to their members at a “fair price” during the lean months. Barter is common in these centers, and many farmers can borrow corn in July and return it with an additional 50% in November. Prices are about 5 to 15% lower than locally available grains; quality is comparable or better.

The idea for the seed banks came from participation in a farmer-to-farmer exchange hosted by UNAG’s Campesino-a-Campesino program, which had established a national network of community-based seed banks. The seeds banks include locally adapted corn and bean seeds. This decreases dependence on seed donations, avoids the costs of purchasing new seeds, and increases a sense of food sovereignty (De Schutter 2009). However, more research is needed to analyze impacts on crops yields, drought resistance, and seasonal hunger.

PRODECOOP staff drafted a comprehensive 10-year strategic initiative to promote food security, food sovereignty nutritional well being among their members. It used the natThe board of directors and the general assembly adopted this initiative. When asked to explain the role of cooperatives in food security, one experienced staff member, said this:

“Food security requires solidarity. We need it for soil conservation works, seed exchanges, and to make organic inputs. Many families are unable to do all of this on their own, but several families united together as a brigade can handle it. Furthermore, this strengthens the social ties as the community collectively learns the problem areas. For example, right now there is a mutual work brigade preparing to work on soil conservation measures for a collectively owned lot where several families plant their individual corn and beans plots.

The primary cooperatives in Condega and Miraflores have constituted work brigades for making compost and the organic growth stimulant sprays. There is one family that said we have no ability to make the 70 quintals (7000lbs) of organic fertilizer that are recommended. Then the brigade leader said we are going to join in, we came together and organized a brigade to work together. This creates solidarity it strengthens relationships of mutual aid, applying the fourth principle of cooperatives, which is solidarity, mutual aid, and then there is cooperation between cooperatives etc.”

Another response to the lean months that we have perused in partnership is the development of an agroecological approach to diversification. Agroecological diversification is beyond planting more crops, implementing a predetermined set of sustainable agriculture practices, and obtaining organic certification. Agroecology proposes a holistic approach to the design and management of sustainable food systems (Gliessman 2007; Altieri 1995). An agroecological diversification strategy starts with existing ecosystems, local knowledge, and farming practices and then proposes to design farming systems to use ecosystem services, such as nutrient cycling and erosion control for soil fertility, attracting pollinators to increase yields, and natural predators for pest control (Altieri, 2002; Kremen *et. al.*, 2012). It is also rooted in endogenous institutions and cultures, scaling up from existing social-ecological systems to propose principles that guide a broader agrifood system transformations intended to increase food justice and sustainability (Mendez *et al.*, 2013). The operationalization of these principles takes time, flexibility, and experimentation. Nicaraguan farmers and co-ops use many agroecological diversification practices that could reduce seasonal hunger. Examples include fruit trees, such as mangos, bananas, plantain, and guavas, found in their home gardens and coffee plots. However, farmers, cooperatives, and NGO partners have yet to combine these practices into holistic agroecological management strategies that improve food security, farmer autonomy, and conserve biodiversity.

The strategies of the CAN-PRODECOOP-CII-ASDENIC alliance evolved through time and the iterative processes of community-based participatory action research. In research dissemination workshops, farmers proposed that increased access to drinking water and irrigation would be essential to reducing lean months and increasing incomes. Other experiments include the side-by-side comparison of an organically managed *milpa* (corn and bean production system) and a conventionally managed one. A wide diversity of experiments, such as the use of microorganisms from the forest soil to inoculate compost applied on the farms, are also designed and monitored by farmers.

### *New state policy on cooperatives, food security and food sovereignty*

Although seasonal hunger persists for many of Nicaragua's rural residents, overall food security indicators have improved significantly in the past two decades, as malnutrition levels have dropped from close to 50% to 20% (FAO 2013). Factors contributing to these gains include rising capita income, increased investment in agriculture, higher employment rates, potentially changing policies, and state led direct assistance programs. The Sandinista government passed legislation on food security, food sovereignty, and nutrition that further codified the human right to food in 2009. *Hambre Zero* is the government's largest food security initiative (MEFCCA, 2013). The program prioritizes livestock donations, but also creates new cooperatives. Results of the program's first phase were mixed (Kay 2010), but it recently received international recognition (FAO 2013). The Ortega administration transferred *Hambre Zero* to the newly created Ministry of Family, Community, Cooperative and Associative Economy, and this will create new possibilities to partner with fair trade cooperatives.

At the same time, Nicaragua's government recently passed a law on food security, food sovereignty, and nutrition and formed a new Ministry of Family, Community, Cooperative and Associative Economy, naming the former president of a leading fair trade cooperative as minister. Although challenged by the politics of implementation, these domestic changes generate new possibilities as state agencies and those involved in the growing cooperative movement re-think fair trade its connections to food sovereignty. Transnational action in this arena is thin, but proposes to link Southern cooperatives to Northern food justice and food sovereignty advocates in an effort to hold certification agencies accountable, promote solidarity economies, and potentially avoid a fair trade bait and switch.

## **5. Preliminary discussion**

### *What are the implications of this research for fair trade?*

Smallholder cooperatives in Nicaragua play a fundamental role in coordinating collective action for managing market risk, promoting local development, and representing their member interests. They could also play a central role in advancing food security and food sovereignty. Fairtrade USA's revised standards, which allow large coffee plantations into fair trade, have not yet reduced Nicaraguan' smallholder cooperative's market share, but they open the door for a model of fair trade coffee without smallholder cooperatives and less collective action. Thus instead of thickening the rural civil society (Fox 1996), Fair Trade USA's proposal could undermine it. Further declines to rural social capital will have consequences for the community governance of common pool resources.

Fair trade networks need to get serious about food security and protecting its members from seasonal hunger. It is not clear that Fair Trade USA's attempt to expanding the market will have the depth of impact that is needed to address this challenge. Current prospects seem unlikely, unless they push the hybrid companies that are currently using this new certification to increase investments. Fair Trade price premiums and existing support are insufficient, but this could change. One proposal that emerged during these interviews was to increase fair trade's social premium from \$0.20/lb to \$0.30/lb of green coffee. The additional \$0.10/lb would support collective action project food security and food sovereignty.

### *Does this help us re-think food sovereignty?*

The historic analysis of seasonal hunger and famine places fair trade coffee into the boarder context of the long-term struggle for food security. Fair trade alone is not up to this challenge of eliminating rural hunger, but it could be part of broader response.

Although food sovereignty is generally framed in opposition to food security, food security could contribute to the conceptual development of food sovereignty. For example, the questions of food access and entitlements (Sen 1981) are especially relevant to developing a tangible notion of food sovereignty. It also suggests the need to continue developing a causal theory of hunger and famine (Watts and Bohle 1993). There are insights that could complement food sovereignty's current proposals, which often focus on agroecological farming and agrifood system localization. A broader engagement with markets and exchange entitlements could contribute to a more integrated proposal to address the persistence of the hungry farmer paradox and the risk of future famines.

Fair trade also has a very clear –though somewhat limited– role for consumers. Food sovereignty is rights based and prioritizes agrarian citizenship first (Whittman 2009). Together they could contribute to a theory and practice that places food needs and civic action at the center, while still recognizing the powerful role of solidarity and hybrid economy oriented green consumerism. Although food sovereignty as a practice and social movement could benefit by developing more avenues for consumer, eater, buyers to engage, questions remain about how to engage these issues without selling out or diluting the meaning of food sovereignty?

### *Can engagement with food sovereignty avoid a fair trade bait and switch?*

A split is growing within fair trade, as movement-based organizations and smallholder organizations have become increasingly disillusioned with the undemocratic governance structure among many Northern certification agencies, particularly Fair Trade USA. The diverse approaches to fair trade can be mapped to different currents within the broader food movement. Until recently those that use fair trade had very little engagement with the more

radical and transformative proposals for food system change led by La Via Campesina calls for food sovereignty (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). While minimum prices fail to keep up with the spiraling costs of sustainable production, and new large-scale entrants, particularly importers, usurp export platforms that smallholder producer organizations worked hard to develop, the corporate model of fair trade offers fewer benefits and less power to smallholders. Caught in the middle—and pulled in both directions—hybrid approaches have provided smallholder organizations with increased access to credit and supported beneficial grassroots development projects. Changing standards and governance structures risk jeopardizing these gains.

Cooperative and hybrid economy approaches to fair trade offer a more equitable system that listens closer to the voices of an estimated 1 million organized producers involved in coffee, cocoa, and other fair trade commodities. In the US, Equal Exchange, Divine Chocolates, Cooperative America, the Fair Trade Federation, the Agriculture Justice Project, and the Fair World Project all appear to be working toward creating a vision of fair trade that delivers benefits to producers and sustains its core principles (see Table 1).

The fair trade movement in coffee was built over more than six decades through partnerships between smallholders and pioneer coffee roasters, advocates, certifiers, and innovators. They built a social, political, and economic system that sold coffee while educating consumers as part of an effort to support smallholders and transform unfair markets.

Several of the prominent fair and alternative organizations working towards solidarity economies have not made the links to food sovereignty or the broader food justice social movements. There are exceptions, including individuals such as Phyllis Robinson at Equality Exchange who wrote the following in their official blog

“Fair Trade must join in discussions about our industrial food system, the plight facing small farmers in the US, and the governmental policies that created the industrialized food economy in which we all are forced to participate. We need a rich debate within the movement about these larger issues that affect small farmers and consumers.” (Robinson 2008).

## Conclusions

Changes that lower standards and minimum prices not only reflect volatile global markets, but suggest shortcomings in governance and the lack of political will to transform unfair conventional trade systems. Fair trade could be a movement that opens up the politics of food

production, distribution, and consumption. It has the potential to put food justice and ecology on the social agenda, along with an “alternative” global agri-food network that can contribute to the emergence of a more democratic economy in both the Global North and the Global South. It can recognize, value, and give deeper meaning to principles of justice, diversity, solidarity, and democracy in the fabric of our society and economy.

But farmers, advocates, consumers, and firms must each decide which type of fair trade they want. Do they want to be part of a movement oriented, more democratically governed value chain, consisting of innovative enterprises that seek social and environmental protection from “free” markets, or do they prefer a mainstream corporate model that follows the dominant—and economically disastrous—neoliberal logic?

On the other hand, it is clear that solidarity oriented fair trade also needs to address issues of food security and food sovereignty. Companies in the hybrid economy have invested more resources partnering with cooperatives and NGOs to address food security than either the corporate or solidarity currents within fair trade. These practical actions are important and can advance empowerment if they are tied to longer-term visions.

Unless fair trade can revamp its governance structure and include a stronger voice from representative producer organizations and civil society, it risks continued erosion in meaning and impacts.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Christopher M. Bacon](#) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Studies and Sciences, Santa Clara University. Professor Bacon’s primary research examines the political ecology of conventional and alternative food systems and their impacts on rural development in northern Nicaragua. He often uses a community-based participatory action research approach. In addition to continued work in Central America, he recently initiated research focused on environmental and food justice in San Jose, California. He has published in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Ecology and Society*, and *World Development*.