

Feeding the world, the nation or the village? Agrarian movements' battle for food provisioning in Colombia

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1. Introduction

The current global food system has failed to address some of the most critical social and environmental sustainability challenges of our time. Today, 800 million people remain undernourished (located mainly in developing countries), while two billion suffer from malnutrition and obesity (IFPRI, 2016). Agriculture, forestry and land-use change contributes one-fifth of global greenhouse emissions (FAO, 2016), and the expansion of the agricultural frontiers poses even greater threats to biodiversity than climate change (Maxwell, 2016). All of these challenges must be met in a context in which today's agricultural production needs to double to meet the demand of a growing global population that will reach nine billion by 2050 (FAO, 2009). Academics and policymakers agree that these major challenges require rethinking policies, regulations and academic research in ways that contribute to expand our understanding of food and agricultural systems in sustainable ways (Millstone, et al, 2009; de Schutter, 2014; Gollin & Adams, 2015).

The global agri-food system has also excluded poor and marginalized communities who base their livelihoods on agricultural production and that, despite the unevenness of globalisation, play a crucial role in producing food (Pimbert et al 2001, Thompson & Scoones 2009, Millstone et al 2009). This marginalisation has not only been social and economic but also political. Often, voices, perspectives and practices of these communities have been ignored in decisions that affect food and agriculture at national and international levels. Who represents these poor communities and what are they doing about such outcomes? How have these groups organised and created alternatives to the dominant agri-food system? What can we learn from their perspectives of sustainable food provisioning?

This paper explores Colombia's agrarian negotiations established after the 2013 and 2014 agrarian strikes between the national government and national agrarian movements that include peasant, indigenous and African-Colombian groups. The main questions this paper asks are: what are the competing narratives and their implications for the national food system? To what extent can this negotiation re-shape the debates on food and agricultural policies in sustainable ways? The agrarian movements are contesting the development model implemented by the government based on export-oriented agriculture and cheap food imports. Instead, they are proposing a peasant economy model based on food sovereignty and local food systems to supply the domestic demand. In this context I argue that the social and political recognition of the agrarian movements participating in the negotiations with the government is not only a step forward in the inclusion of the most marginalised rural communities, but a step towards a more democratic debate on food provisioning. The agrarian movements' alternatives can also open up new opportunities of sustainable development in food and agriculture.

The political context surrounding the agrarian negotiations is relevant, and it is important to understand which particular elements have led to this moment. The peace talks between the Colombian government and FARC which reached a final agreement in September 2016 are important not only because their main goal was to bring more than 50 years of conflict to an end, but because they put agrarian reform at the forefront of their agendas which shows the centrality of long-standing agrarian problems in the root causes of the violent conflict in the country.

2. Zooming in Colombia

While most of attention from academics and policymakers in recent years has been centred on the peace talks between guerrilla group FARC and the Colombian government, little attention has been given to the agrarian negotiations that started following the agrarian strikes of 2013-2014. What do we know about these negotiations their actors and agendas? When and where have they occurred? Who has participated? We know very little. Until today these talks have been vaguely reported¹ by the official government agencies² and have received even less coverage by the media. This lack of attention is contrasting given the fact that there is a major involvement from the highest levels of government, including the President, Vice-President and ministers, with significant financial support and policy implications. These significant levels of engagement provide insights on the structure, identity and claims of re-structuring and emerging agrarian movements in Colombia and the way in which their ideas interface with those of the official bodies in direct talks. Beyond this, the substantive debates about the past, present and future of food and agriculture taking place in these negotiations indicate that there are new elements to rethink the agrarian policy in Colombia.

This paper is based on my fieldwork in Colombia in which I conducted 120 semi-structured interviews during 2015 and 2016. My main informants included agrarian leaders who participated in the agrarian strikes 2013-14 and who also participated in the negotiations with the government in the negotiations between 2014 and 2016. Among these were peasant, indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders. I also interviewed officials from the national and subnational governments. At the national level interviews included the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Vice-Minister of agriculture (2013-2015), as well as advisors from the same ministry. In addition I attended negotiation sessions between agrarian movements and the national government and consulted physical and online press archives.

2.1. From strikes to negotiations

I argue elsewhere (Roa-Clavijo, 2018) that one of the most important outcomes of the agrarian strikes 2013-2014 was the emergence of the food provisioning question in the wider public debate. During the strikes agrarian movements appealed to food provisioning narratives to draw public support. The main questions that agrarian movements raised were: who should produce the food that we eat? Where should it come from? Who wins and who loses when the food import-export balance changes? These questions resonated among

¹ Prensa Rural, an independent online portal (www.prensarural.org) is one of the sites that have followed up the debates and publish articles on a frequent basis.

² The Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of interior annual reports of 2013, 2014, and 2015 mention the negotiations in a marginal way and offer little information on the progress made.

urban dwellers who organised mobilisations in the cities in August 2013 to support the agrarian strike.

As a result of the pressure put by the groups behind the agrarian strikes, eight subnational and two national negotiations between national and subnational governments and different social movements were initiated (see figure 1). These spaces represent both an unprecedented³ period of dialogue and negotiation, and a political opening to discuss agrarian problems from the perspective of social movements.

While the negotiation agendas are wide and embrace both historical and contemporary demands such as land access, agricultural inputs, technical support and finance, the debates on the provision of food have taken a centre stage. These discussion, as we will see later on in the paper, connects with the global debates about food provision and sustainability. The analysis of the demands by agrarian movements and the government responses gives us key elements to think about these aspects.

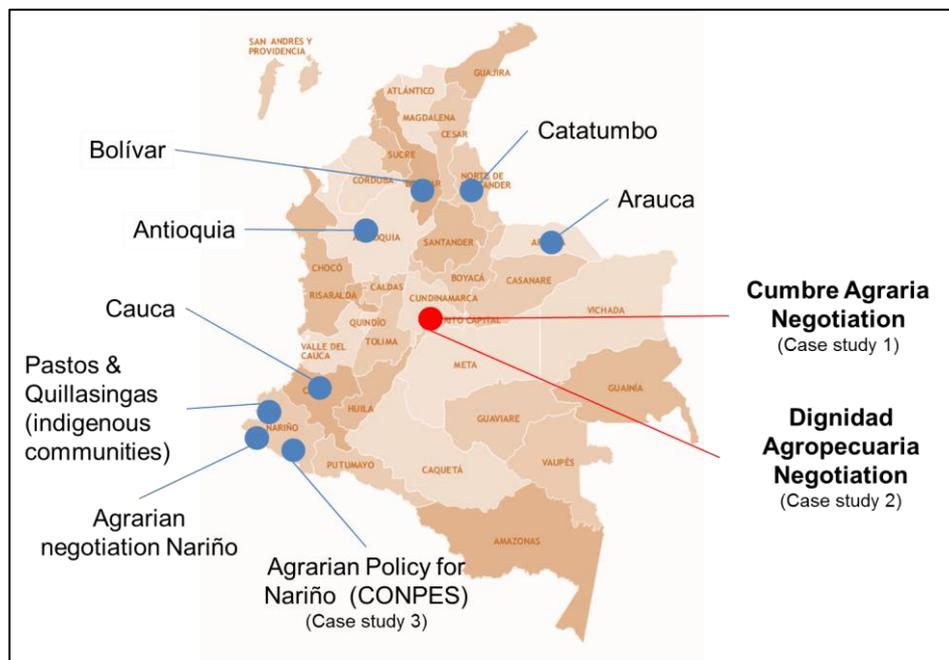


Figure 1. Agrarian Negotiations in Colombia Initiated after the 2013-14 Agrarian Strikes (The Author, 2017. Based on fieldwork, interviews and official documents)

From the 10 negotiations that were initiated after the agrarian strikes I focus on two:

- The negotiation with the Cumbre Agraria (national level -Bogota)
- The negotiation with Dignidad Agropecuaria (national level -Bogota)

The reason for selecting these two case studies is that, at the national level, Dignidad Agropecuaria (DA) and Cumbre Agraria (CA) represent the two major national agrarian movements that emerged after the agrarian strikes. Both deserve attention because they come from different backgrounds and have similar, yet different and sometimes competing

³ They are unprecedented because previous national and subnational governments have not engaged in structured and permanent talks with agrarian movements in order to address their main claims.

interests. Cumbre Agraria resulted as a coalition of peasant, indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups, while Dignidad Agropecuaria started as a coalition of peasant entrepreneurs from the regions of Boyacá, Cundinamarca and Nariño.

2.2. Negotiation settings

Table one depicts some of the main characteristics of each of the negotiation case studies. The negotiations with Cumbre Agraria are face to face and have scheduled meeting calendars. In contrast, the negotiation with Dignidad Agropecuaria started as a face to face space but later on became indirect with occasional meetings.

Table 1. Agrarian Negotiations: Case Studies

| Main Characteristics | Negotiations | |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| | Cumbre Agraria | Dignidad Agropecuaria |
| Type of negotiation | Direct | Indirect |
| Level and reach | National | National |
| Government actors | Ministries of Agriculture and Interior, National Department of Planning | General secretary of the president's office, ministries of interior and agriculture |
| Actors / Social movements | The Cumbre Agraria | Dignidad Agropecuaria |
| Third Parties | United Nations | Archbishop from the city of Tunja, the Governor of Boyacá, the mayor of the city of Tunja and the national Ombudsman. |
| Place where meetings happen | Bogota | Occasionally in Bogota |
| Date when started | <i>Agreed:</i> May 2014 <i>Started:</i> Sept. 2014 | September 2013 |
| Status (December 2017) | Ongoing | Ongoing |

Source: The author, based on fieldwork interviews.

3. The narratives on food provision meet at the table

The agrarian negotiations have provided a space for debate and exchange, but also for contestation of policies and actions undertaken by the national government over the last years. They have also provided a space to express disagreement, critiques and uncover historical conflicts.

An element that has come to the fore in these talks is the debate on food provisioning. The agrarian movements have raised questions such as who should provide food for the country? In which conditions? With which agricultural practices? (TA, 2015; OG, 2016) In this context the first aspect that has come to the spotlight is the government's narrative on becoming a "world food breadbasket". The narrative builds on the challenge of increasing

food availability for a growing global population which has been disseminated by FAO's report on "how to feed the world in 2050" (2009). The main premise is that a population that will reach nine billion by 2050 needs to double the quantity of food today⁴. This has been a significant incentive for several countries to boost agricultural exports.

Having adopted this narrative, the Colombian government has been using it as a vision for the national agricultural sector. President Juan Manuel Santos mentioned this vision in different speeches including in 2015, in the conflict-thorn zone of Montes de Maria, north-western Colombia. Addressing the rural communities of this region he stated:

The whole world is beginning to experience a food crisis. On the other side of the world, China, India, Indonesia, are consuming so much food that the world is going through a world shortage. Therefore, many countries are looking for regions that can become food breadbaskets. This (Montes de Maria) is one of those regions... Some people are already organised and have started exporting to the Netherlands, the United States and Germany. I hope that this region of Montes de Maria will become a food breadbasket that will bring progress and development to all of you. (Santos, 2015)

As the quote above depicts, it involves several elements, including the idea that a global food shortage provides an opportunity for food producers. Therefore a sustained export-led agriculture strategy can bring about progress and development to rural communities. While it is true that the world population is increasingly growing and that the global food production must meet the growing demand generated by this, the narrative ignores other elements. For example, it does not mention access, distribution or inequality. It does not mention either the growing problem of malnutrition and overweight.

The narrative of becoming a world breadbasket is not new. In its World Development Report of 2007, the World Bank mentions regions that have potential of "becoming" or "are" food breadbaskets as places where investment in agriculture for food supply "should take place". Most recently the Inter-American Development Bank published a report called "The Next Global Breadbasket: How Latin America can Feed the World" (2014) which makes the case for increasing global food exports from Latin American countries based on their competitive advantages⁵ (Zeigler & Truitt Nakata, 2014).

The contradiction embedded in the discourse versus practice is that while food exports are meant to increase, they have actually decreased in recent years. This contradiction was shown in the "rural mission" report (Ocampo, 2015) which states that despite a vision of a dynamic export-led agricultural sector in Colombia, the country faces a growing number of agricultural imports that affect the country's internal market. Since 1991 agricultural imports have increased an annual rate of 13 percent versus an annual growth of 4.6 percent for exports (figure 2).

⁴ For example the annual cereal production would have to increase by almost one billion tonnes, meat production by over 200 million tonnes (FAO, 2009)

⁵ Interestingly there are a number of large corporations behind this report as funders and contributors. Some of these include Coca-Cola, Dupont and AGCO among others.

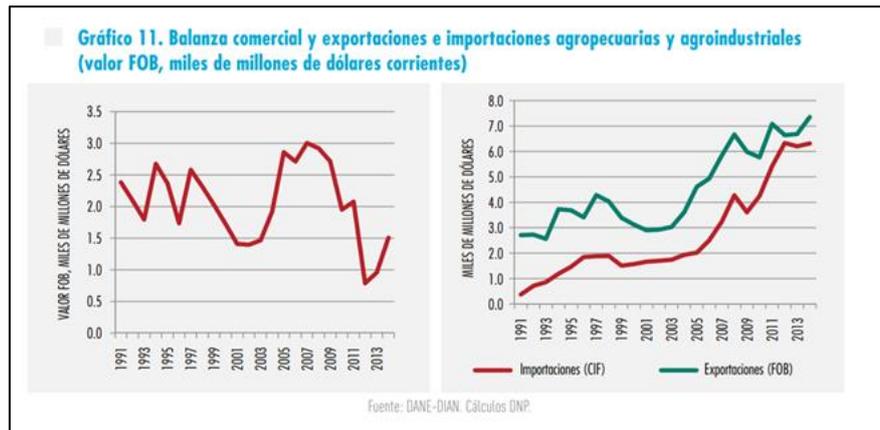


Figure 2. Agricultural imports and exports 1991-2013 in Colombia (Ocampo, 2015).

3.1. The counter narratives

Having outlined the negotiations and the national government's main narrative on food provisioning, I turn now attention to the tensions that arise in the negotiations related to food and agriculture. The strategy of becoming a world breadbasket is being contested at the negotiations in different ways. The idea of a heavy emphasis on both food imports and exports turns out problematic as it is not necessarily the practice that these groups want to implement. The contestation of this strategy highlights sources of conflict, for example imports, exports and value chains. In this context, I argue that beyond opposition, most movements have clear visions of the agricultural practices that they want to practice. These types of agriculture are not merely technical or economic, but also they represent cultural, political and environmental values.

3.2. Peasant economy

A narrative that has emerged at the negotiations, specifically in the talks with CA, a group that represents poor and marginalised rural communities, is the one of a peasant economy that can feed local and regional areas. They argue that neoliberal policies affect in negative ways the livelihoods of rural communities by implementing a model based on dispossession that favours large land owners and multinational corporations and that the cultural and traditional practices of these communities have been disrupted by these processes. In this context, the narrative builds on the idea that a peasant economy that regulates markets and protect smallholders can guarantee not only the provision of food but also well-being, environmental protection and protection of the traditional culture of indigenous, peasant and Afro-Colombian communities. For CA, peasant economy puts in the centre the wellbeing of small and medium holders whose main activity is the agricultural production of food.

For CA, agroecological food production is a practice that reinforces traditional and cultural values, helps to protect the environment and fosters cooperation between communities. A leader from CA elaborates on these aspects:

The peasantry is not only an economic concept but also a cultural one. So, when we talk about a peasant economy model, we are talking about the acknowledgment of peasant life as a comprehensive life project that can contribute to the development of the country not only from an economic point of view but also from a cultural one (TA, 2015).

This idea is also supported by an indigenous leader from the same social movement:

As indigenous communities, we have been reflecting on agricultural processes. We always say that it is the agro and the culture. They can't be separated. Agriculture is the culture of the agro ... we are constantly asking ourselves how to produce food in line with our myths, traditions and legends. How to practice agriculture in line with our culture and territorial context" (RE, 2015).

We can see in this perspective that the identity component – being peasant or indigenous is highly relevant for CA' understanding of peasant economy. The rural communities of Colombia have been historically a rich source of cultural traditions that include agricultural practices, music, dance and oral tradition. So when CA mentions identity and culture in the negotiations they are talking about protecting the cultural heritage that indigenous, afro-descendant and peasant communities have contributed historically to the country. Hence is no surprise that the constitution of Colombia describes the country as a pluri-ethnic and a multi-cultural nation.

The CA's agenda on peasant economy can be summarised in three main points: 1) The transformation of the agrarian model of the country towards agroecological systems with a priority for small and medium-scale farming, 2) food production as an economic activity but also a critical element of culture, traditions and identity and 3) The acknowledgment recognition of the existence of diverse types of agriculture including indigenous, Afro-Colombian and peasant systems. All of these aspects are framed under the political flag of food sovereignty (Cumbre Agraria, 2014).

In terms of agricultural practices, CA is proposing an agro-ecologically based model that reduces and eventually eliminates agro-chemicals dependency. This model also includes control over native seeds, preventing them from privatisation and property rights while fostering community-led seed exchanges. This transformation of the agrarian model also proposes to prioritise small and medium-scale farming as opposed to large scale agriculture which has been the main strategy for the government over the last few decades (Cumbre Agraria, 2014).

The production and provision of food is a central element. Their production is oriented towards the local and national markets and they request, in addition to special protections for the domestic production (i.e. preventing food imports), incentives for small-scale farmers, financial and technical assistance and support in creating cooperatives and other types of organisations in order to organise provision, transformation and distribution of food. Some of these aspects are summarised by one of the leaders from CA who told me:

[According to different reports] ...peasants produce 62 to 68 percent of the food in Colombia. This is why we think that the government should pay more attention to this. Peasants are able to reach these levels of food provision without any financial support, technical assistance or subsidies. We therefore demand that the government supports us because we are making an important economic contribution to the country. In fact, peasants are not necessarily working with an idea of profit from agriculture. Rather, we are thinking more about producing food in appropriate cultural conditions, this means a specific style of life (TA, 2015).

He also adds:

In the negotiation when are talking to the national government, our proposal in terms of peasant economy includes a transition to agroecological practices. We are convinced that the government should officially acknowledge and support an

agroecological model of agriculture which could open the possibility of having organic products in the near future (TA, 2015).

This concern of producing food according to “appropriate cultural conditions” that also represents a “specific life style” connects with the third point: due to its multi-cultural character, the CA acknowledges the existence of different types of agriculture such as indigenous, Afro-Colombian and peasant agriculture. This implies that this social movement does not have a unified vision in this regard but promotes diversity in their approach instead. This underscores the importance of diversity and identity of these communities which are addressed later in this paper.

In summary, CA is proposing structural changes in the country’s agrarian model and policy based on agroecological approaches that give priority to small and medium-scale farming. This is in line with other indigenous movements in Colombia and Latin America who have been able to articulate environmental protection in their territories.

3.3. The national market narrative

Another narrative on food provision that has emerged in the negotiations with the government comes from DA and is related to the national market. As opposed to CA, DA represents the middle peasant, or peasant entrepreneurs. Their demands are exclusively within agricultural development and one of their main demands to the government is to stop food imports of agricultural products that can be produced in the country. Cesar Pachón, a potato producer from the highland department of Boyacá and one of DA’s most visible leaders during and after the strikes spoke in the Congress Hall in 2013 to senators, representatives and the ministry of agriculture who were among the audience. His remarks were focused on the agrarian crisis due to food prices and the lack of support from the government. On food provision, Pachón said:

We can’t compete with international markets because producing a kilogram of food in Colombia is more expensive than producing it elsewhere. ...And don’t tell us that we have to be competitive because we work really hard either under the hot sunshine or under the rain, we are hardcore producers. But we ask the government to stop food imports because we are capable of providing food to this country and to other countries as well [...] stop importing food for god’s sake! (Pachón, 2013)

So DA portray themselves as food providers who can feed the country, but free trade agreements pose a major threat to their work and agricultural goals. In this regard, one of the senior leaders and spokesmen of the movement told me in an interview:

Our goal is to bring about capitalist agricultural development in Colombia. We are not talking about anything else, simply to develop agricultural capitalism in the country (OG, 2016)

Based on their demands and narratives, Dignidad Agropecuaria is not contesting the conventional model of agriculture. Their main goal is to supply food for the national market based on favourable market conditions.

3.4. The clash of the narratives

As we have seen, different and puzzling narratives have emerged in the negotiations of the national government and agrarian movements (table 2). The dominant one, on the government side is that Colombia must become a global breadbasket by prioritising export-

led food production. DA's narrative is that there must be space for a capitalist development of national agriculture based on the idea that Colombian producers should feed Colombian consumers. And CA' perspective is that the implementation of a peasant economy model is the pathway to wellbeing, strengthening cultural identity and heritage and protecting the environment while providing food at local and national levels.

Table 2 Perspectives on food provision

| Parties | Food for whom? | With which agricultural practices? | With which goal? | Meaning of Food |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|--|
| National government | The world | Non-specified | Increase foreign exchange Bring progress and development | Commodity for international exchange |
| Dignidad Agropecuaria | The domestic market | Conventional agriculture | Keeping control on the domestic market | Commodity for domestic consumption |
| Cumbre Agraria | Local, subnational and national | Agroecological and traditional practices | Incomes Livelihoods, Protect cultural heritage Strengthen culture identity Protect biodiversity | Tradition Culture Environmental Protection |

Source: the author, based on fieldwork and analysis

Deere and Royce (2009) have mentioned that the criteria for measuring success of rural social movements include the creation of enduring social awareness as well as the ability to gain recognition and acceptance of their demands while bringing about change in public policies that ultimately improve the well-being of their members. It is difficult at this stage to draw any final conclusions about the success or not of the agrarian movements analysed in this paper. However the evidence that I have provided shows that there is an emerging question of food being raised both by the government and by the agrarian movements. This is not, however, a simple question, as there are multiple angles to it. The national government is asking "how to feed the world"? While agrarian movements such as DA think more about "how to feed the country? And Cumbre Agraria asks "how to feed our families and communities?" These questions portray different approaches to food and agriculture that have created tensions between the negotiation parties. The national government is clearly focusing on a continuous integration with the global market for expanding the scope of neoliberal policies. DA seeks to expand the development of capitalist agriculture, but their focus is the national, not the global market. And Cumbre Agraria is suggesting alternatives, such as the consolidation of peasant economy models based on cooperation, agroecology and environmental conservation.

This body of evidence, I argue, shows that first, these negotiations have sparked a much-needed debate on the present and future of food and agriculture in Colombia. Aspects such as how and who should feed the national population of Colombia, and in which conditions have not been subject to public debate in the past. The decisions made by the government in previous years concerning food imports or export-led strategies for agriculture have not been scrutinised by many groups that also belong to the agrarian sector. Rural communities, marginalised in different ways, have been left out of these debates, which has sparked the emergence and consolidation of agrarian movements who are now calling the government to account. Beyond contestation, these agrarian movements have advanced the food provision

debates by articulating alternative pathways of development that prioritise not only markets and capital, but also people and the environment.

In addition, the discussions taking place at the negotiations provide key elements for reframing sustainability in food systems. A question of food must address the food circulation patterns and the capitalist relations embedded in them, but it also should put social justice and the environment at its heart. This also goes in line with McMichael (2016) and Kay (2015) who have stressed the importance of agrarian movements in the quest of finding just and inclusive paths of sustainable development. In this sense, rethinking sustainable food systems must also address changes in peasantry today.

4. Conclusion

While the dialogues have not shown significant progress in terms of the aspects being negotiated, they are contributing to expand the scope of democracy and thus to build a more democratic food system. The particular conditions that the agrarian sector and the country at large are undergoing open new opportunities for the introduction of significant change at organisational, institutional and policy levels.

The agrarian movements studied here have articulated a critical debate on the future of sustainable food systems by questioning the dominant narrative of food provisioning. Along with the contestation of the dominant model, they are articulating alternatives according to their interests and background. This is relevant due to the fact that up until now this debate was not brought up to a face to face negotiation by any other groups. Therefore, organised civil society is central in raising questions about debates on how to feed the country – and the world-. Global about the sustainable food systems should have these aspects into account.

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