

You spent six years living with communities in the Amazon. How did that affect you?

The experience was interesting because it was a chance to re-educate myself on my concepts of agriculture. You leave the university with all the prejudices and the weight of formal education, thinking only about conventional agriculture, and then you arrive at a place where you have to unlearn what you had studied. You have to relearn how to look at the world, the environment, the means of production and culture as an integrated unit, with all the complexity of this indigenous world. That gave me a new outlook on learning about agriculture and helped me become more sensitive to indigenous and peasant peoples who farm differently from conventional agriculture.

You have done a lot collecting and protecting local seeds, but have also been active in the arena of collective rights. What has your role there been?

We have hosted many activities to sensitise local groups about the problems of privatising life, and on mechanisms to defend and control local resources. With some groups we have worked on designing strategies to control their territories, because to defend their biodiversity, they must first be able to defend their territory. These strategies, which involve both formal legal tools and informal ones, have helped to establish some rules and guidelines for local organisations to use when outside agents approach them. Some groups have advanced more than others in establishing these collective rights, and pass on their experience to others through workshops, seminars and gatherings.

When communities discuss access to biodiversity, do they ever talk about a moratorium on bioprospecting or collecting genetic resources?

A few years ago this was a frequently discussed issue. The person who most actively promoted the moratorium proposal was former Senator Lorenzo Muelas, with whom we worked closely while he was in Congress (1995-1998). Many organisations at the time gave strong support to this position, particularly indigenous organisations that decided to close some doors to bioprospecting – some partially and others entirely. Some organisations have held on to this principle of not allowing outside researchers into their territories until there are clearer conditions about what can be done and how their rights can be protected. These principles included rights to biodiversity, above and beyond simply preventing biopiracy. But this proposal has been on a back burner in recent years, for several reasons. First because very few people are active in



this kind of work in Colombia today. At the same time, the war has become a priority over all other discussions. Indigenous groups are more concerned with displacement and survival in the midst of the conflict. Communities have also lowered their expectations of national or international legal mechanisms, since we all know that it is nearly impossible now to change or bring progress in the recognition of community rights in today's political climate.

"Between 1988 and 1994 I lived with Amazon communities researching agroforestry systems on indigenous *chacras* (peasant farming plots). This research on agricultural diversity and the cultural complexities of farming in the Amazon provided my first close contact with indigenous groups and local communities.

When I came back to Bogotá, I joined the *Semillas* (Seeds) group of the Swissaid Foundation, and began working to support and advise indigenous, Afro-Colombian and peasant organisations in several regions of the country on issues related to the recovery, conservation and management of diversity and of traditional knowledge. The work began by providing support for the recovery and management of local seeds. In the mid 1990s, local groups began urging us to go beyond the recovery of local seeds to cover the political dimension of the problems. So now we help organisations to develop strategies and public policies for the local defence and control over their resources."

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A lot of work has been done in Colombia on developing sui generis rights and access legislation, but you and others seem to be moving away from this work. Why is that?

The Colombian context has been very incise. The country is in the midst of conflict and also in the midst of the agricultural crisis. What has happened to Colombian agriculture has been dramatic. In ten years we have moved from self-sufficiency in food to being net food importers. Today we import 8 million tons of food per year, of which 2 million tons are maize, accounting for 75% of national consumption. We also import 85% of the soybeans we consume. These two crops are particularly significant because most of these would be transgenic, but we also import potatoes, rice, manioc and other food staples that Colombia used to produce and even export.

Local communities are very strong in their capacity to resist attacks – even under such extreme conditions – and all kinds of local initiatives to manage biodiversity from an agro-ecological approach are springing up in order to overcome the attacks. Communities realise more clearly how the model that has been promoted and imposed upon them has utterly failed. The only alternative they see is to pursue organic agriculture, rather than sit back and wait for initiatives from the government.

Despite the conflict tearing apart organisations working at all levels, people are holding more and more meetings, workshops and gatherings. The gatherings on biodiversity are not simply for talking about the beauty of the seeds and exchanging them, but also to take stock of problems related to biodiversity in public policies, like the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas and transgenic crops. Every day people are creating new local and regional networks and consolidating national dynamics while looking at how to fit into international dynamics. For example, at that most recent meeting we were working out how to join Via Campesina's Seed Campaign and join in the globalisation of struggles for the political defence of biodiversity. People are starting to take food sovereignty into their own hands as the only possible solution.

The same is happening all over Latin America, but Colombia is in a special situation. What role does the war play, and what impact does it have on communities?

One of the first impacts of the war is that it breaks down all the social fabric, particularly in the countryside, which is where it is happening and where the most suffering happens. This means that indigenous groups, peasant groups and black communities have been the most affected by forced displacements that oblige them to leave their territories. In the past ten years, nearly three million people have been displaced from local territories, and the most hard-hit have been the peasant and indigenous communities. This has a major impact too on food security, with the loss of biodiversity.

When a community or a family is displaced, the first thing they lose is their local resources, particularly their seeds and their animals. This is the way that many local varieties and breeds disappear. To make matters worse, these resources have often already been under siege from the Green Revolution and other global and national farm policies. Many people cannot return to their territories, and the loss of their varieties has a strong impact on production systems, traditional knowledge and all the biodiversity.

Have you worked with displaced communities?

We have worked with a few who have been able to return to their lands. We have had some very interesting experiences with indigenous groups who were totally displaced and who recovered their local seeds after nearly a year away from their territories. But only in a few cases has this been possible.

There are many cases around the country where displaced populations simply end up living in extreme poverty in the cities, unable to return to their territories. Many are refugees from areas where there are armed groups and mega-projects underway. The populations displaced by the conflict are growing in number in regions where there are economic interests mobilised around mining projects, hydroelectric dams and highway



*Colombia's indigenous peoples' - like the Uwa whose leader Roberto Perez is depicted here fighting Occidental Oil - face many difficult challenges, from war to exploitation by transnational corporations.*



construction, as well as bioprospecting projects in strategic ecosystems with high levels of biodiversity.

All of this revolves around the war context, which also involves drug trafficking and local fights for territorial control by different armed groups who sandwich the residents between them, stifling any chance for organising or consolidating local processes around their own production systems. Some groups return and work hard to recover their production systems which were damaged as a result of the conflict, only to lose all their work and be displaced once again because the conflict continues. Long-term stability is desperately needed, but even so many communities have developed their own strategies to move forward and save these alternatives from being lost. We have very valuable experiences with local groups who for ten to fifteen years now have been consolidating their work in the agro-ecological management of biodiversity.

### Tell us about “Seeds of identity”

“*Semillas de identidad*” is an initiative of about ten indigenous and peasant organisations in the Caribbean region of Colombia, which created the Caribbean Agroecology Network. They are working on issues related to the defence and recovery of their maize-based culture, which is very strong in the Caribbean region, as well as relating to the political context through their proposals for agro-ecology. This work is all the more important given the new threat of introduction of genetically modified (GM) maize into Colombia. There is a lot of concern in the country because the government’s response to the crisis in agriculture is simply to jump off the deep end into GM crops, a policy that fits into all these bilateral agreements and the government’s expectations both to join the FTAA and to sign a free-trade agreement with the US.

One of the priorities in these agreements is the large-scale introduction of GM crops. The government has already moved for the massive release of transgenic cotton. Planting has now been authorised throughout most of the country, after an initial release restricted to the Caribbean region.

Now the government is planning GM maize trials. This is critical, because here we’re talking about food sovereignty and food security, in addition to the fact that Colombia is one of the countries with the highest diversity of native maize, after Mexico. Colombia’s high level of diversity is because it is a point of convergence in the evolution and domestication of maize, with maize from both Meso-America and from South America flowing into a huge maize-biodiversity basin concentrated

particularly in the Caribbean region. Indigenous and peasant communities in Colombia’s Caribbean region are very worried, because raising maize is central to their culture and they fear we may face a catastrophe similar to what has happened with the contamination of maize in Mexico, its area of origin. These organisations have begun organising into networks involving not only integrated agro-ecology projects, but also to develop defensive strategies around maize in the Caribbean region and to coordinate with other groups in the country.

### What strategies have you and other organisations in Colombia used to resist GM crops over the past few years?

Work by civil society organisations has been important because the general population has been left out of the debate and is not aware of these issues. For some years now we have been trying to influence public opinion, particularly raising awareness amongst local groups of farmers. We have worked in *Semillas* to reach various sectors of society such as consumers and academia, to generate more discussion on GM crops.

The mass media is very limited in its coverage of this problem, but events around the release of GM cotton in Colombia have generated significant public debate in the past two years. The issue is breaking out of the small circle, and more people are taking a critical look at how GM cotton’s release was authorised, given the absence of biosafety tests and irregularities committed by authorities during the authorisation process through the National Technical Council (CTN). But it is an uphill battle. There is no room for broad, open debate on technical or scientific grounds, to discuss the issues seriously with public participation. Decisions are made unilaterally and top-down by government officials, riding roughshod over all rule-making bodies where public opinion should be able to hold them accountable.

We have the dubious honour of being the first country in the world in which the vice-president of the official biosafety council works for Monsanto. This means that the company that applied for approval of its own products was in a position to grant it. Monsanto was even able to orchestrate the process of legitimising the release of its GM cotton. A few small trials (designed, run and funded by Monsanto) were set up for one growing season. No biosafety studies were done on the impact the GM cotton on acquired resistance by pests, on soil microorganisms or on the social and economic impacts for cotton growers. Nor was its impact on local biodiversity explored, despite Colombia being



a center of origin for some wild species of cotton. We have a germplasm collection with some 400 accessions (genetically distinct samples) collected in the country. Yet the Ministry of Agriculture denies the existence of native cotton varieties, even though the seed bank belongs to the same Ministry.

Another revealing aspect of how the government has no interest in helping cotton growers is that the Bt cotton to be grown in Colombia does not control the pests we have. The main pest here is the *picudo* (*Anthonomus grandis*, the boll weevil), whose control accounts for 70% of the insecticides used on cotton. Bt cotton targets the tobacco budworm, cotton bollworm and pink bollworm, but is ineffective against the *picudo*. So we are introducing a very costly technology that is irrelevant to the problem. The Bt maize that the government wants to introduce is equally inappropriate, because it targets the European corn borer (*Ostrinia nubilalis*), which is practically non-existent in the tropics. What are we to do with this new maize that is ineffective against one of our country's most important pests?

#### Where does the approval process stand now?

Small-scale field trials have been approved in several maize-planting regions of the country: the Caribbean, the Andean region and the eastern plains (*llanos*). The trials are very limited, as was the case with cotton, and again based on the claim Colombia is not a centre of origin for maize. In Colombia we have hundreds of native varieties that could be threatened. But of even greater concern is that we have already been eating (and probably planting) transgenic maize for many years on a large scale, since we import more than two million tons of maize every year.

I suspect that a lot of illegal transgenic maize has been planted by unsuspecting local communities, and native varieties polluted, just as has been happening in Mexico. We have no biosafety regulations to do anything about it. Colombia has nothing but an isolated rule governing the import of transgenic seeds as such; all other transgenic products are simply out of control in the country.

Two years ago we tested soybeans being handed out in food-aid programs all over the Andean Region. We coordinated that activity with several organisations from other countries like Acción Ecológica (Ecuador) and through the Network for a GM-free Latin America. The most dramatic and critical levels of contamination were found right here in Colombia, based on three random samples taken from three warehouses at the Family Welfare Institute, the agency that distributes food to poor

children. Some 90% of the soybeans were found to be transgenic – Monsanto's Roundup-Ready soybeans. Despite the public outcry, almost nothing was done about it and Colombia continues to import soybeans with no control, and continues to hand them out, especially to the poorest of the country's children.

*The same pattern is being repeated throughout Latin America. Going back to Bt cotton, have you taken any legal action?*

Several civil-society organisations filed a class action suit against the Ministry of Agriculture and the Colombian Agricultural Institute (ICA) over the release of GM cotton in Colombia. This suit is still underway, but is unlikely to end up in our favour, because the judge is not interested in the subject and is too close to the government to offer any kind of independent judgement.

Another class action suit was filed against the Ministry of the Environment and Monsanto, for the lack of an environmental license granted by the national environmental authority. The decision (in October 2003) went against the government and Monsanto. The Ministry was required to process an environmental license and also to include a process of citizens' participation in the approval of Bt cotton in Colombia. That ruling was appealed and will now go to a higher level to be studied by the Council of State. This is a very complex and difficult body, because it is very closely aligned to government politics. But this is still a very important achievement, because it sets the precedent that legal proceedings can be a useful tool in the fight over GM crops.

This first successful class action suit over GM crops means that the courts are getting involved in decision-making on these issues. This has helped public opinion to begin participating more actively in debates and opens up new pathways for the struggle, as there may now be more convergence with other organisations. We need many broad strategies to overcome GM – civil resistance, capacity building, mobilisation, technical training on issues and political and technical discussions, and also actions like this in the legal sphere. Brazil is a good example here. Legal suits have at least held back industry's offensive there and established limits to slow them – and government – down.

*What directions do you see for resistance and for the defence of communities' biodiversity in Latin America?*

We are realising more and more that we have to strengthen the initiatives that move from the



<sup>1</sup> [www.grain.org/gd](http://www.grain.org/gd)



local into the global dimensions. Over the past 15 years there has been a flourishing of activities in biodiversity management, in agro-ecological farming systems, clean agriculture, etc. that show how the model imposed over the past half century has been a miserable failure, especially for small farmers worldwide. Even large-scale farming has failed under this model. The only thing that keeps it going is the huge economic subsidies doled out to northern farmers.

Local alternatives are beginning to come together not only around food sovereignty proposals, but also in political struggles to defend biodiversity, as we have all seen in the Growing Diversity<sup>1</sup> project. That project allowed us to see how indigenous, black and peasant organisations around the world are working towards the same objective, with similar approaches and outlooks and also with their own peculiarities, all of them aimed at consolidating local experience, and united against all aspects of this overwhelming globalisation. This is the light at the end of the tunnel, and these alternatives are

gaining strength as they bring together other social movements to work for the autonomy of countries and of the poor, as well as for food sovereignty in cities and the countryside. Urban and rural social movements are coming closer together, focused on these common issues.

### So you're still an optimist?

Despite the catastrophe we're suffering in Latin America, all these initiatives – even through they are still very isolated and barely visible – reveal that another world is possible. Consensus has also been growing within the World Social Forum and other initiatives that the only way we can get there is by globalising social struggles. And officials at the WTO are worried, because they'll have to hold their next meeting on the moon to keep the anti-globalisation movement from following them. Although the balance of forces is still very unequal – through this struggle we may be able to bring together all these different initiatives.

*Semillas* magazine ([www.semillas.org.co](http://www.semillas.org.co)) grew out of the need for local communities to communicate first of all with each other, to understand the political dimension of the issues, and to have a space where they could express and share their experiences in managing biodiversity. The magazine has two parts, one on general issues of context and politics, and the other on local experiences with biodiversity. In the latter part, the priority is for articles written by the local organisations. It is unusual for magazines to devote as much space as that to local experiences. Although it is sometimes difficult to get the local people to write – they are not used to organising their ideas in this way – it helps them record and systematise their knowledge and experiences. *Semillas* gives strength and a framework for local organisations that normally find no room to publicise their work.

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