

We have two interviewees in this issue, both from Colombia: Mario Mejía, and indigenous Colombian leader Lorenzo Muelas

**Mario
Mejía**

Please tell us about your personal experience with agricultural biodiversity work.



I was indoctrinated at the National University of Colombia to destroy the biodiversity of the Colombian jungles. After graduating in the 1950s, I became involved with mechanised agriculture, growing cotton in the Colombian Caribbean region. This was the “boom” period, involving nearly 400,000 hectares of land. We stopped importing this fibre and began exporting it, following the theories of CEPAL (the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean) and other illustrious economists of the time. We contributed to the burning of thousands of hectares of jungle without the slightest notion of what we were burning. And this was called “civilising” the land.

My first encounter with agricultural biodiversity occurred in the traditional Caribbean fishing villages of Colombia, in sections of Bajo Magdalena and the coastal area. I conducted studies on “adapting” the land for the law of Agrarian Reform 135 of 1961. The idea was to drain the marshes in order to convert them into cattle ranches. From this work, I discovered that the traditional farming systems were both socially and productively superior to the supposed economic benefits of the “improved” systems. Where the “improved” systems would accommodate only one landowner, the traditional systems could accommodate one hundred fishing families on the same amount of land, producing more food in fish than in kilos of meat from cattle.

My second encounter with biodiversity occurred through academic projects which I designed for Marine and Inland Fisheries Engineering and Wildlife Captive Breeding programmes at three universities.

After that, I spent three years in the Amazon jungle with the Amazonian Radargrammetry Project. The results from this project were published in 1979

by the Agustín Codazzi Geographic Institute of Colombia. Through this work, I came to understand that there were other cultural and functional ways of relating to nature. I wrote about these other points of view in 1987 in an introduction to the natural history of the Colombian Amazon, and in 1993 in a history of the land use in the Colombian Amazon.

As a professor at the National University of Colombia from 1979 to 1989, I developed research, especially through graduate theses, on promissory plant and animal species of the Pacific, Orinoquia and Colombian Amazon regions. Of the more than 40 species I have studied, I’d like to make special mention of the publication from 1991, “Diversidad de yuca *Manihot esculenta* Krantz en Colombia: visión geográfico cultural” (Diversity of the cassava *Manihot esculenta* Krantz in Colombia: a geographical-cultural view). I am now retired from the university and have dedicated myself to working with local, afro and indigenous communities in various parts of the country.

What is your view of the agroecology movement and the small farmer movements?

The agroecology movement was created by intellectuals of the environmental movement, beginning in the 1970s. It is a concept that is presented as all-encompassing, and it subordinates values that are, for me, superior, such as the political, the ethical, the spiritual, and the religious. Agroecology is an expression of European environmental colonialism, manifested primarily through organic certification.

What advances and setbacks have you observed?

The indigenous and afro movements in Colombia are governed by constitutional statutes that ignore small farmers. The diverse sources of dominant power exercise that power principally through violence, which has displaced 3 million small farmers in the last 10 years – the highest number in the world today. The system of government is oriented in favour of the gringos and the wealthy involved with import and export businesses, in order to facilitate the Free Trade Agreement. The horizon is dark. I hope we survive.

In addition, the Forestry Law of 2005 deprives all Colombians of the right to “return” to the jungle,

**Farida
Akhtar**

**Benny
Haerlin**

**Carlos
Correa**

**David
Quist**

**Johnson
Ekpere**

**Francisca
Rodriguez**

**German
Velez**

**Hope
Shand**



in order to allow foreign lumber companies to come in.

What is your view of the procedures and mechanisms established for organic certification and the registration and certification of seeds?

The certification of organic foods is a foreign commercial tool that bureaucratises organic products, makes them “elite”, and increases their price. It excludes the farmers who cannot pay the exorbitant fees for certification. It is currently the principal parasite of ecological agriculture. It distances consumers who are poor from healthy food.

The registration and certification of seeds are instruments of private appropriation, involving

the exclusion of local seeds, the domination of “improved” varieties, and the impoverishment of farm workers. Seeds are the patrimony of the people. By right, they are free and available to all humanity. They are the result of 10 million years of development, beginning with the earliest cultures. They are not merchandise. They are cultural values. They are natural.

In your opinion, what are the principal challenges today for protecting agricultural biodiversity?

To survive the entrepreneurship of genetic engineering and nanotechnology, and to overcome it.



Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado

Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado is a member of the indigenous Guambiano people in Colombia. At 68 years old, he has served as governor, senator, and representative to the National Constituent Assembly, which wrote the new Constitution in Colombia. He also attended the Eighth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP8), in Curitiba, Brazil, in March 2006, where he participated in the working group discussions on agricultural diversity, particularly those relating to the debate on terminator technology. Here Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado is interviewed by Oswaldo Braga de Souza from the Instituto Socioambiental, just prior to the COP8 meeting.



Why do you reject the research regarding terminator technology?

These seeds were created to enslave us. The terminator technology was developed to obligate us to buy more and more seeds from the suppliers. On the other hand, the Terminator seeds also threaten our cultural identity. For us, the Guambianos, seeds are not merely our sustenance, providing us with food and clothing. They also play an important role in communicating with our ancestors and the spirit world. They have an important symbolic value as an offering to the spirits who are high in the mountains and in the lakes.

But don't you believe that genetically modified seeds can be a good economic alternative if the traditional varieties are also preserved?

Our seeds have been sufficiently tested over millions of years through innovation and experience. If one wants to consider the issue from merely an economic point of view, I can guarantee that our seeds are very good and resistant. But this kind

of view is for capitalists and our seeds cannot be reduced merely to good economics.

What is your expectation regarding the negotiations of the COP8?

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was not created by necessity of the indigenous peoples, but by governments and biotechnology multinationals. These negotiations caused us worry and fear, and made us uneasy. I believe that the decisions made at the COP do not protect or guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples. I don't expect anything good to come of the COP. They are blind, deaf and dumb to our problems and our rights.

What is the solution, then, to protect the biological resources and traditional knowledge associated with the biodiversity of traditional peoples?

The solution is for us indigenous people to form a mass mobilisation, a large organisation on an international level that can advance our struggle.

Ibrahim Ouedraogo

Jack Kloppenburg

K Joseph Eve

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mario Mejia

m Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado

