

# Towards a social movement of farmer innovation: *Campesino a Campesino*

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The “*Campesino a Campesino*” (CaC) or Farmer-to-Farmer programme was founded in Nicaragua in 1987 by the National Farmers and Cattle Ranchers Union (UNAG). It started with exchange visits between farmers from Nicaragua and Mexico in order to promote and diffuse appropriate technologies among poor farmers. The programme was a reaction to the top-down transfer-of-technology model that prevailed in Nicaragua during the 1980s promoting expensive technology packages involving improved varieties, irrigation, imported chemical fertilisers, pesticides and agricultural machinery. The programme sought to improve soil fertility, productivity and living standards, while reducing production costs and external dependency. The method has taken root throughout Central America and is applied by many NGOs and in some R&D projects. Over 10,000 farmers identify in one way or another with CaC and thousands more have been influenced by it (Holt-Giménez 2000), as they believe that farmers are capable of developing their own sustainable agriculture.

## Farmer promoters

The key elements in the CaC approach are the “farmer promoters” and the mechanisms of communication used (Hocdé *in press*). Farmer promoters are volunteers who conduct experiments in their own fields and share their knowledge and experience with others. Each takes responsibility for guiding a group of experimenting farmers from his/her community and visiting them regularly to help with planning, implementing and interpreting their experiments. They also organise exchanges between farmers and give training on topics determined by their

own accumulated experience and concrete results that range from soil conservation, cover crops, husbandry, forestry and organic agriculture to cropping systems and diversification. Farmers themselves define the research agenda, manage the experiments and assess the results, either individually or in groups. Generally, they do not apply formal scientific methods such as the use of control plots or replications. Today, there are 700 farmer promoters working throughout Nicaragua in a wide range of agro-ecological and socioeconomic contexts.

## Experimentation and communication

The farmer promoters’ basic functions are to find technical solutions to problems in smallholder agriculture and to communicate them to neighbouring farmers who are also seeking solutions. In order to have credibility as communicators, promoters need to have tested recommendations on their own land. The two functions and processes -experimentation and communication- are therefore interdependent. Promoters do not recommend technical recipes or packages, but rather give suggestions and ideas to stimulate experimentation by others. A promoter’s main tool for convincing others is through mentoring and setting an example rather than through the organisation of workshops or training events *per se*. The goal of CaC is to promote a culture of enquiry and experimentation among smallholder farmers.

## Enhancing sharing and dissemination

Sharing and disseminating knowledge horizontally is a central responsibility of each promoter. Each communicates intensively with other farmers as well as with other promoters using traditional communica-

tion media such as sociodrama, theatre, poetry and music. A diversity of mechanisms such as fora and exchange visits are used and a wide variety of Participatory Rural Appraisal tools are used.

Exchanges are visits organised by promoters involving farmers, promoters and communities. They may involve small or large groups and may last between one and several days. In this way, farmer experiments are exposed to the critical eye of a variety of people, each with his or her own perspective. These are intensive training and learning opportunities and their pedagogical content can be considerable. During exchanges, participants explain and discuss results, methods and procedures, often amid criticism, argument and debate. Each participant analyses the strengths and weaknesses of his or her ideas and results before the group. The atmosphere of mutual reinforcement and encouragement permeates these events and helps motivate farmers to continue experimenting. Learning from mistakes is encouraged, as is the idea that each person follows his/her own problem-solving path. The art of facilitating these situations consists not only of creating a constructive and productive atmosphere, but in helping to bring out these ideas and synthesise them in such a way that the design of new experiments is oriented and guided. This requires that promoters be highly skilled in facilitation techniques.

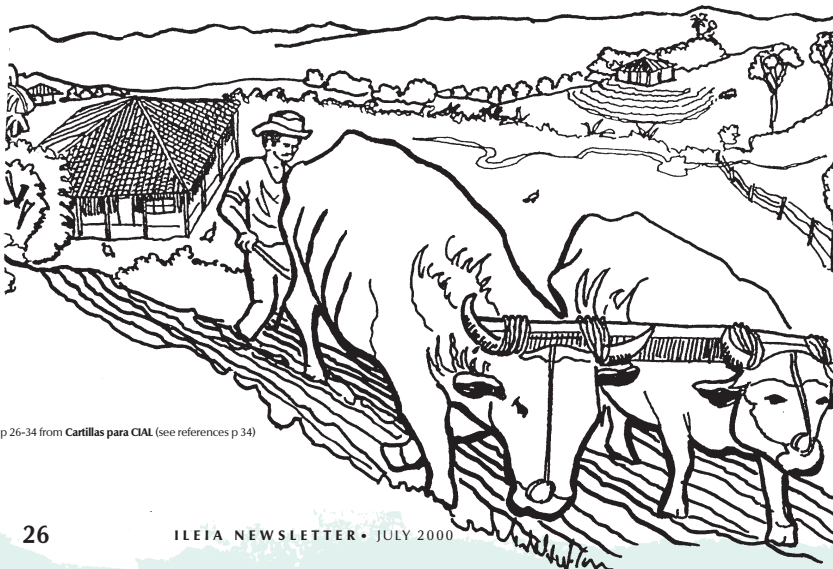
## Radical changes

The CaC process can result in a radical change in the mental map farmers’ have of their role in the process of technology generation and diffusion. Through involvement in the programme, farmers realise that they are capable of experimenting, offering solutions, communicating and transmitting technological options to others (Merlet 1995).

The CaC process builds enthusiasm, self-confidence, pride and hope for the future (*Programa de Campesino a Campesino* 1999). Motivation grows as creative capacities are tapped, and the attitude of dependency on external actors diminishes as farmers begin to identify themselves as experimenters. The most radical of the farmers involved in the programme view it as a way of breaking the monopoly of technology-development process held by agricultural professionals.

## Technological lessons

The following lessons were derived. Farmers’ research themes tend to concentrate on agronomic, animal husbandry and technical issues, not on socioeconomic aspects. In some cases, the advent of a



Drawings p 26-34 from *Cartillas para CIAL* (see references p 34)

## We still have much to learn!

While more than 10,000 farmers and dozens of NGOs are part of the *Campesino a Campesino Movement*, hundreds of thousands more are not. The question is if CaC works so well, why hasn't it spread more? A recent, region-wide, participatory study (Holt, 1999), involving 40 institutions and 2,000 agroecological and conventional farmers, concluded that the obstacles for scaling up agroecology or 'sustainable agriculture' have less to do with technologies and methodologies than with national policy contexts and institutional behavior. But to further "scale out" sustainable agriculture, it also needs to be "scaled up" into existing agricultural policy frameworks. Some important constraints for up-scaling are:

- There has been little documentation and *systematization* done in a way that actually provides feedback to practicing technical advisors, promoters and farmers. This limits institutional learning, resulting in many projects "re-inventing the wheel". Furthermore, lateral learning by government and private sector institutions is generally poor and inconsistent, resulting in little headway for CaC outside of the informal social networks connecting remote villages and the NGO world.
- Not only is most formal agricultural research largely out of touch with sustainable agriculture and the farmers who actually practice it, comparatively few professionals are being trained in agroecology or in working with small farmers. This limits their ability to address agroecological problems, design effective on-farm agroecological experiments and accompany farmer innovation.
- Many NGOs adopted CaC participatory methodologies. However, this has not always led to greater farmer input or control over the program itself neither has farmer-led development necessarily become a guiding approach for NGOs. NGOs are still primarily accountable to donors, and few of them have direct mechanisms for accountability to farmers. The combination of "participation" and one-way accountability prevents clear strategies for farmer organization and empowerment.
- Despite its important program presence in one of the largest farmer's union in Central America, CaC has not been very successful in scaling-up its agenda within national and regional farmer organizations. Basically, promoters from CaC have been unable to penetrate decision-making circles dominated by medium and large-scale producers interested primarily in conventional agriculture. CaC remains a "special project" directed at smallholder clients, not a policy-setter or decision-locus for organizational policy.
- There are many policy mechanisms that could be brought in to improve conditions for sustainable agriculture and farmer-led development. However, the lack of effective political will on the part of governments and research centers makes this a remote possibility. Developing this political will depends largely on pressure from civil society. Unfortunately, the trans-institutional nature of CaC has not lent itself to forms of organization that could exert pressure on governments or research centers. NGOs are organized to implement projects not pressure governments. Farmer organizations can and do put pressure on governments, but not for policies that favour sustainable agriculture over, or even as much as, conventional agriculture.

Perhaps the most pressing lesson is simply that agriculture in general will change not only when farmers change, but when farmers and their allies are capable of changing the institutions that hold change back. We still have much to learn about just how to do that.

Adapted from: Holt-Giménez E. **Scaling-up sustainable agriculture: lessons from the Campesino a Campesino Movement in Meso-America**. Paper for workshop on "Going to scale" 10-14 April 2000, IIRR, Silang, Cavite, The Philippines.

-Holt-Giménez E, 1999. **Measuring farmer's agroecological resistance to hurricane Mitch in Central America**. In: Changes in the thought and practice of rural development in Central America, San Jose, Costa Rica. Free University of Amsterdam.

solution generated by promoters leads to excessive promotion of the technology over an ongoing search for solutions to other limiting factors. The strong emphasis on low-external-input techniques can be a barrier that dissuades some farmers from participating in the CaC movement, thus impeding its growth. More systematic agroecological learning and information on experiences from outside the farmer community, e.g. innovations developed by farmers operating in similar conditions or from scientific research, could provide new options for experimentation.

### Methodological lessons

Farmers' concepts of the experimental process are different from those of formal researchers. For example, farmers may not

limit what they regard as experimentation to plots specifically designated for that purpose.

The relationship between CaC initiatives and the formal research sector have traditionally been limited, with a few notable exceptions. Opponents of CaC approach contend that most formal researchers consider the experiments conducted by farmer promoters as an extension mechanism rather than as bonafide research. Advocates of the CaC approach complain that promoters have found few useful elements in the technical solutions offered by formal research. Overcoming the mutual reservations between promoters and researchers would undoubtedly constitute a leap forward, thereby improving and enriching the

work conducted by both. Potential gains from the joint development of realistic solutions to concrete problems in farming lie not only in the better design and management of experiments, but also in the increased diversity of options that would become available.

### Historical significance

Beside the technical and methodological limitations, Eric Holt-Giménez also mentions important policy and institutional constraints (Box). Despite all these limitations, the CaC experience constitutes an important reference point for both the farmers themselves and the formal agricultural services, in terms of demonstrating the potential of smallholder farmers as researchers and communicators. This approach is of historical significance, because it made a significant break with the conventional models of knowledge and technology transfer, rejecting passive knowledge banking in favour of active knowledge acquisition and generation.

### Towards a social movement

A number of initiatives in or outside of Nicaragua are supposedly applying this approach. Innovation processes are social and collective actions. They are stimulated when a group of people share the same sense of purpose, learn to manage hazards and uncertainties, apply resources to develop their creative skills and socialise their results. The experience in Central America clearly shows that the old myth about creativity and innovation being a special gift reserved for geniuses has been overcome. The results reveal that we (all of us, not only farmers) are capable of being creative. The key factor is to support social processes that unleash the inventive skills of people and their organisations in order to create a permanent movement of innovation driven by the rural population. ■

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