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Food sovereignty in Ecuador: peasant struggles and the challenge of institutionalization

Isabella Giunta

The Ecuadorian Constitution (2008) declared food sovereignty a strategic goal and a government obligation, embracing many of the proposals put forth since the late 1990s by Ecuadorian federations linked to Vía Campesina. The issue of food sovereignty has expanded from the inner circles of peasant organizations to the wider context of the whole Ecuadorian society. The paper provides an overview of this process, describing the collective actions that made it possible. Moreover, it attempts to explain the reasons why the ‘Agrarian Revolution’ is currently evaluated as weak, and the motivations for a gap between constitutional mandates and the ongoing official policies.

Keywords: Ecuador; peasant movement; food sovereignty

Introduction

The Ecuadorian Constitution (2008) declared food sovereignty as a strategic goal and a government obligation, institutionalizing – although partially – the proposal put forward by the international peasant movement Vía Campesina in 1996. The aim of this paper is to critically reflect on the impact of collective actions (especially those promoted by organizations linked to this movement) carried out to institutionalize the principles of food sovereignty in Ecuador, including an analysis of the gap that exists between the formal and the material constitution of the official strategies.

The first part of this paper outlines the situation before the Constituent Assembly (mandated with drafting a new constitution) met. It shows how the inclusion of food sovereignty principles in the new constitution occurred not just as a result of an advantageous political conjuncture but derived as well from struggles against neoliberal reforms and from alternative practices carried out by social movements over the last few decades. In this framework, the paper outlines the role played by the Ecuadorian federations (affiliated with...
Vía Campesina) which, by the late 1990s, had placed food sovereignty as a priority of their specific and common political agendas, through platforms such as Mesa Agraria.

The paper then provides a brief account of how these federations participated actively in the Constituent Assembly process. The new Constitution established radical changes in the agri-food sector and embraced, within the rights of *buen vivir*, many of the proposals claimed by the federations and organizations linked to Vía Campesina. Thus, during and after the Constituent Assembly stage, the issue of food sovereignty expanded from the inner circles of certain peasant organizations to the wider context of the whole Ecuadorian society, achieving centrality in the political arena.

In addition to a review of the constitutionalization process, the paper explores the reasons why, five years later, the process of redesigning public institutions and agri-food policies does not appear consistent with the constitutional mandates. The so-called ‘Agrarian Revolution’ is considered a weak process, not only by social organizations but also by the governmental sector, although it is a component of the so-called Citizens’ Revolution promoted by the ‘progressive’ government of Rafael Correa. The discussion of fundamental issues (especially access to land, water, productive models, use of genetically modified organisms [GMOs] and agrofuels), which began during the Constituent Assembly period, had become even more heated during the approval of the Organic Law of the Food Sovereignty Regime (2009). A reduction in the capacity for mobilization of peasant organizations and the more general shift of power relations in favour of agro-industry, which controls the national food chains, have contributed to postpone the regulation of more sensitive topics. Meanwhile, some official initiatives have been launched, but they do not appear to be fully inscribed within a transition in the food regime.

In this framework, the paper argues that there is a gap between the success of social movements in winning certain innovative normative frameworks and rights (*buen vivir* and, within its rights, the food sovereignty) and the limitations on their institutionalization, formalization and implementation as they bump up against the power structure that marks the agri-food system. This led to some continuity in the neoliberal policies. Indeed, the still-competing currents, in both society and the state, make difficult a transition in the agri-food policies, generating a de facto combination of food sovereignty and agricultural modernization approaches (or, in other terms, between *buen vivir* and developmentalist paradigms) and a tension between revolution (a transition in the food regime) and reform (policies focused on peasants and inspired by food sovereignty principles). Finally, as occurred in other Latin-American countries (e.g. Bolivia, Venezuela or Brazil) a debate arose on the role of social movements in the ongoing change processes, as well as on how their relationship with the state should be moulded.

However, despite the contradictions pointed out, the Ecuadorian institutionalization of food sovereignty – as embedded within a broader transformative vision, grounded in *buen vivir* – brings significant elements to the global debate on food sovereignty paradigm and the efforts to make it more inclusive, overcoming a more ‘productionist’ approach.

**A mosaic of anti-neoliberal struggles**

Agriculture is quite relevant in the Ecuadorian economy: including livestock, it represents 8.2 percent of the real gross domestic product (GDP),\(^4\) and employs about 30 percent of the

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\(^4\)In 2010, with an average of 9 percent for the period 2000–2010.
workforce, a percentage that increases significantly (69.2 percent) if we consider the rural population.

These data, however, fail to recognize the real importance of agriculture. First of all, the distortion caused by the importance of petroleum in the economy should be taken into consideration: agriculture represented 13.2 percent in 2010 and an average of 15.46 percent for the period 2000–2010 of ‘non-oil GDP’ (Carrión and Herrera 2012).

An analysis conducted exclusively using GDP does not take into account other crucial dimensions, such as production for self-consumption and transactions not carried out within conventional markets (that is, transactions that are not invoiced, and non-monetary exchanges). This becomes more relevant in countries such as Ecuador, where the production earmarked for self-consumption is considerable and the informal economy employs 47.2 percent of the urban Economically Active Population (INEC 2013). Similarly, the official statistics underestimate the capacity of agriculture to generate employment, since they do not consider domestic work, indirect employment and employment in agriculture as secondary activities (Carrión and Herrera 2012).

On the other hand, the data related to GDP are often translated as evidence of a trend towards low productivity and of the impelling need to modernize Ecuadorian agriculture, especially the peasant sector. García Pascual (2006) notes that in the last few decades, the gap between Ecuador and other countries grew in terms of productivity levels (e.g. for cereals/USA). The same author observes that the global Ecuadorian production increase (27 percent between 1990 and 2004) was only half due to the improvement in productivity, the rest being attributable to the expansion of cultivated area. Using these arguments, García Pascual critically analyzes the effectiveness of the modernization policies already implemented in Ecuador. Indeed, from an agro-ecological point of view, the low productivity trends are linked mainly to the lack of investments in research, infrastructure and technical assistance in agriculture as well as to the predominance of production models which do not facilitate the regeneration of soil fertility, are not adapted to local ecosystems and result in more vulnerability to recurrent adverse climatic events (Altieri 2009; Martínez-Alier 2011; Carrión and Herrera 2012; ECLAC et al. 2012).

National appraisals report that the value of food exports significantly exceeds that of imports. Carrión and Herrera (2012) state that there is a high degree of self-sufficiency to cover internal food demand (e.g. in strategic products such as vegetables, milk or rice), even if there is a deficiency of certain products, which represents an alarming trend that in the future, if it continues, could seriously affect national food security. The latter phenomenon is related mostly to the agri-food policies that have been implemented. Indeed, in promoting agro-industrial production and exportation, these policies have neglected part of the production allocated to domestic consumption (especially those traditionally managed by peasants), with effects on food security and on the production and reproduction conditions for small producers, who have been increasingly excluded from access to fertile land, infrastructures and public support (Guerrero and Ospina 2003; Chiriboga 2004; Kay 2004; García Pascual 2006; Martínez Valle 2008). In particular, this trend refers to products such as wheat (94 percent), barley (62 percent), oats (86 percent), lentils (73 percent) and apples (66 percent) (Carrión and Herrera 2012). The case of wheat is emblematic since its deficit has risen despite the increase in demand, as

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5In this framework, it is key to add that peasants compete in unequal conditions with agro-industry (e.g. in terms of access to land, mechanization, services or infrastructures).
a result of policies that have favoured imports (from the USA) instead of support for peasant producers and national production (Peltre-Wurtz 1989).

The Green Revolution and structural adjustment plans promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s favoured monoculture (at the expense of food security and agrobiodiversity in this mega-diverse country) and the economic groups dedicated to the export of exotic products (especially shrimp, bananas, flowers and cocoa). Government support for peasants whose work aimed at production for the domestic market decreased drastically, as did the prices of their products, while input costs increased. The Agrarian Reform process stopped, and was replaced by land privatization strategies; meanwhile, peasants were being excluded from the modernization of the rural sector, based on capital-intensive technologies, and thus also from market competition. In this way, neoliberalism has led to important changes in land tenure as well as in rural labour and livelihoods (Larrea et al. 1996; Kay 2004; Martínez Valle 2004).

Nowadays, there is strong inequality in the distribution of wealth and in the access to productive factors. In rural areas, poverty hovers around 49.1 percent, while extreme poverty is 23.3 percent (BCE 2012). As regards the access to land, 64.4 percent of the smaller productive units (less than 5 hectares) only cover 6.3 percent of the agricultural surface, while the biggest properties (more than 200 hectares), which represent 0.1 percent of the total, control 29 percent of the overall surface (Carrión and Herrera 2012; Eclac et al. 2012).

However, the imposition of neoliberal policies, aimed at an indiscriminate opening of the economy to the logics and capitals of international markets, faced many obstacles, in particular the effects related to the decline in the prices of raw material and the debt crisis (Acosta 2006), as well as the conflict with Peru (1981, 1995) and the recurrence of disasters. 6

In addition, the expansion of the ‘petroleum frontier’ produced huge social and environmental impacts, particularly in Amazonia. The forced displacement of indigenous peoples, as well as deforestation, oil contamination and spills, the indiscriminate spread of agro-industrial monoculture and biodiversity erosion are among those phenomena which are often referred to as the ‘environmental disaster’ of eastern Ecuador. Unfortunately, deforestation and the loss of biodiversity has become a widespread phenomenon across the country; the destruction of mangroves in the Pacific coast, for the production of shrimp for export, is only one example.

In reaction to these transformations imposed by neoliberalism, several social conflicts have taken place since the early 1990s. Other factors which contributed to exacerbating social tensions as well as fostering general distrust in the political system were the vicious cycle of debt and the drastic reduction of welfare spending,7 the renewed concentration of wealth, pervasive tax evasion, the progressive collapse of the domestic banking system, the violation of democratic institutions, and their inefficiency and widespread (public and private) corruption (Acosta 2006).

Furthermore, by the late 1980s, a new phenomenon significantly altered the political panorama: indigenous people emerged as political actors reacting vigorously to the subordination imposed on them for centuries. Thus, ethnic demands gained a pivotal role along

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7Between 1971 and 1981, foreign debt increased by 22 times. The payment of debt services increased progressively from 18 percent in 1980 to more than 50 percent of the national budget in 2000; meanwhile, social spending fell from 50 percent to 15 percent (Acosta 2006).
with classist demands (peasants); the main claims were: access to land, legalization and protection of ancestral territories (starting with the Amazonian), bilingual education and the plurinationality of the state as a strategy against domination, violence and invisibility (Dávalos 2005). In addition, there was a consistent rejection of the violent transformations caused by neoliberal policies (Guerrero and Ospina 2003). The Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE) undoubtedly led the innovative movement, even if other organizations, such as Federación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas e Indígenas (FENOC-I) and Federación Ecuatoriana de Indígenas (FEI), participated in it.

The indigenous movement became the emblem of the reaction to the economic crisis and to the structural adjustment package. The claim to the right to diversity and the criticism of the dominant models of democracy and development, which were ethnocentric and exclusionary, played a crucial role in the symbolic opposition against the neoliberal pensée unique (Larrea et al. 1996; Dávalos 2005; Zamosc 2009). Thus, the indigenous movement broke onto the national scene, catalyzing social protests and aggregating multiple social actors: organizations of peasants and Afro-Ecuadorians, women and human rights associations and public trade unions, as well as environmental and ecological activists.

Protests started in the 1990s with the occupation of Iglesia de Santo Domingo in Quito (May 1990) followed by the first levantamiento led by CONAIE (June 1990) with thousands of indigenous peasants, mostly from the highlands, who occupied roads and institutions. In 1992, a march on the capital demanded the protection of indigenous territories in Amazonia. In addition, numerous actions were organized within the Campaña Continental 500 Años de Resistencia Indígena, Negra y Popular (1992), which criticized the commemoration of Spanish colonization, denouncing its impacts and announcing the counter-offensive of indigenous and Afro-descendants. In 1994, a levantamiento opposed the Ley de Desarrollo Agrario and its privatization of land. This general strike organized by the Coordinadora Agraria Nacional (integrated by CONAIE, FENOC-I, the Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Agroindustriales, Campesinos e Indígenas Libres del Ecuador [FENACLE] and FEI), paralyzed the country for 10 days, forcing the government to modify the law (Larrea et al. 1996). Thanks to broad alliances in 1995, social movements achieved victory in the referendum against the privatization of Social Security that had just preceded the constitution of the Pachakutik-Nuevo País (1996). In 1997, social movements were actively involved in the fall of President Bucaram, as well as in the 1998 Constituent Assembly process, without, however, being able to set an anti-neoliberal agenda (Ramírez Gallegos 2010).

At the end of the 1990s, environmental campaigns grew around the defence of tropical forests and mangroves. Within this framework, Acción Ecológica launched the concept of ‘ecological debt’ to the world, in order to make the ‘North’ face its responsibilities for the global environmental degradation towards the ‘Third World’ and to assert the illegitimacy of the country’s foreign debt (Paredis et al. 2007).

Nevertheless, between 1992 and 1996, the main neoliberal adjustments were put in place, such as: privatization, macroeconomic measures related to currency exchange and

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8This movement entered the political-electoral arena, marking the transition from an agenda based essentially on indigenous issues to a ‘national project’ to gather the demands of all the excluded in the country and to promote new radical forms of democracy and state (Larrea Maldonado 2004).

9While some important social rights (e.g. women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) and collective rights of indigenous people were recognized.
interest rates, trade liberalization, financial deregulation and the dismantling of the state as the leading figure in development (Acosta 2006; Falconí and Muñoz 2012). The economic crisis continued to worsen until the end of the 1990s, when the country suffered a recession and accelerated impoverishment, never before experienced.\textsuperscript{10} Emigration increased, with a diaspora in the USA, Spain and, to a lesser extent, Italy. A ‘bank holiday’ (March 1999) led to the freezing of all deposits, inducing a massive rescue operation with public funds. In January 2000, Jamil Mahuad announced dollarization, sacrificing national monetary sovereignty (Acosta 2006).

Against this recession and the measures taken by the government, new protests took place: a March 1999 strike against rising fuel prices and the freezing of bank deposits precipitated a new uprising in July 1999. Indigenous people and peasants, along with transport workers, occupied Quito; for a week, they picketed the parliament and the government palace, forcing the members to dialogue, which was interrupted in September due to the escalation of the crisis. On 21 January 2000, 10 days after the dollarization decree, mobilizations exploded and a triumvirate, integrated by the CONAIE president (A. Vargas) and the Army Colonel Gutiérrez, took over power (for few hours), forcing Mahuad to abandon the presidency. Vice-president Noboa, appointed as successor, ratified the dollarization, but in January 2001 faced a massive new levantamiento against the new economic measures (increasing prices for transport, fuel and gas for domestic use). Several local governments adhered to it, but its peculiarity was the unity of the so-called ‘rural front’, due to the joint convocation of CONAIE, Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras (FENOCIN), Confederación Nacional del Seguro Social Campesino- Coordinadora Nacional Campesina (CONFEUNASSC-CNC) and Consejo de Pueblos y Organizaciones Indígenas Evangélicos del Ecuador (FEINE). Connections and supplies to Quito were paralyzed for two weeks, and seven protesters were killed (Guerrero and Ospina 2003).

Electoral competitions as well as the direct participation of some organizations (including CONAIE) in the government of Lucio Gutiérrez (2003–2005), rifts within CONAIE and Pachakutik, and the process of ‘normalization’ directed towards indigenous and peasant organizations via projects financed by international funds (such as PRODEPINE), are among the factors that contributed to the weakening of social mobilizations in the first decade of the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{11}

With the exception of the mostly urban mobilization of forajidos (2005) which led to the ousting of president Gutiérrez (Ospina 2009; Ramírez Gallegos 2010), after 2001, the bigger protests were animated by indigenous, peasant and environmental organizations. Focused against the regional Free Trade Area of the Americas (especially in 2002) and then the bilateral Free Trade Agreement (2004–2006) with the USA, the mobilizations denounced the impacts (on peasants and biodiversity as well as in the increasing of privatizations) of signing these free-trade agreements.

So, after more than a decade of deep and recurrent economic, political and social crisis, the innovative proposal led by Rafael Correa (the so-called Citizens’ Revolution) received wide consensus. Correa first achieved electoral victory in 2006, embracing some of the main demands of social movements, but without establishing broad and stable alliances.

\textsuperscript{10}GDP fell 31 percent between 1998 and 2000; in 1999, devaluation reached 216 percent and inflation 52 percent. In 2000, the incidence of poverty doubled compared to 1995 (reaching 71 percent) as did extreme poverty (35 percent) (Acosta 2006).

\textsuperscript{11}Ospina (2009) presents a literature overview of these factors, suggesting the addition of the inability to manage the differences inside the indigenous movement, which prevented it from acquiring the political strength necessary to promote more structural changes in Ecuador.
with them. Among other things, there was the request to start the Constituent Assembly process to radically transform the institutions and the social pact.

**Practices and actions aimed at promoting the principles of food sovereignty**

The innovation in conceiving of a radical social, economic and productive transformation (Carrión and Herrera 2012) that took place in Ecuador during the writing of a new Constitution (2008) was largely based on resistance processes that social movements had carried out in the country since the 1990s. In opposition to neoliberal policies, they fought for the defence of diversity (with proposals such as plurinationality and interculturality), territories and natural heritage (with innovative paradigms such as *buen vivir* and food sovereignty or claiming ecological debt) as well as to re-found the models of democracy, state rule and economy on the basis of equity and social justice.

As for the food issue, the goal of the constitutionalization of food sovereignty principles does not appear exclusively ascribable to President Correa’s embrace of the movement’s agenda or, more generally, to a momentarily favourable political climate as favourable as transient.  It can also be explained by retracing previous resistance processes that promoted this innovative paradigm through struggles and piloted alternative practices implemented in the territories. In this context, it seems reasonable to point to the leading role that four federations have played since the late 1990s when they introduced food sovereignty in their political agenda as an explicit priority. These are FENOCIN, the Coorporación (ex Coordinadora) Nacional Campesina-Eloy Alfaro (CNC-EA), the Confederación Nacional del Seguro Social Campesino (CONFEUNASSC) and FENACLE.

FENOCIN, despite the crises faced since its establishment (1968), has played a considerable organizational and political role, becoming, cyclically, one of the main representatives of the national agrarian issue. Over the years, it has changed its acronym, from the initial FENOC, which referred to its peasant composition, to FENOC-I in 1988, marking the transition to the inclusion of ethnic claims (under the banner of interculturalism) along with classist ones, to the current name FENOCIN, adopted in 1997 to highlight Afro-Ecuadorian people’s participation. The latter shift represents a significant break with the subalternity of blacks, historically relegated to the lowest level of the racialized and hierarchical structure of Ecuadorian social classification, which considered them subordinates to indigenous people (Walsh 2009). FENOCIN succeeded in uniting within its organization different social classes and groups, in giving explicit visibility to and politicizing the rich cultural and social diversity of the country, and in building a stable and enduring alliance between the indigenous-peasant people of the highlands, *montubios* (coastal peasants), Afro-descendents and, to a lesser extent, settlers and indigenous people of Amazonia. This is, probably, a unique case in the country as well as on the continent.

The CNC-EA started in 1992 and brings together indigenous and peasant organizations, associations of producers and communitarian irrigation groups on the coast and in the highlands. Founded at the same time, CONFEUNASSC mainly unites members of *Seguro*...
Social Campesino. Both federations were part of CONFEUNASCC-CNC (a rupture occurred in the mid-2000s),\(^{13}\) which played a crucial role in the struggles against the privatization of social security in 1995 and in general for the expansion and improvement of its coverage for peasants. CONFEUNASSC-CNC actively promoted the indigenous-peasant alliance within the movement of the 1990s, with social mobilization as well as through the experience of Pachakutik, which they helped to establish, together with the CONAIE and the Coordinadora de Movimientos Sociales. Both CNC-EA and CONFEUNASSC were engaged in a political agenda that combined the classist peasant claims (access to land and productive factors as well as to a fair market) with a larger framework concerning rural development, conducting battles to claim social security (in particular CONFEUNASSC) and access to better education and health in the countryside (especially the CNC-EA).

Finally, FENACLE, established in 1969, represents a peculiar aspect of Ecuadorian rurality: it participated in the struggles for land in the 1970s, then focused more on the organization of landless rural workers and, to a lesser extent, peasants (about 20 percent). Its members are from the areas of short-cycle monoculture (maize and rice) and plantations (bananas and sugar cane) on the coast and, to a lesser extent, in the highlands (floriculture). Its main struggles are for the rights of rural workers, although claims for land and support for peasants are included in its agenda.

These four federations belong to the international peasant movement Vía Campesina,\(^{14}\) whose food sovereignty proposal has become the federations’ organizing principle for reshaping the national agrarian issue. They are also related to a continental network called Coordinadora Latinoamericana de las Organizaciones del Campo (CLOC), which first appeared between 1989 and 1992 within the Campaña Continental 500 Años de Resistencia Indígena, Negra y Popular, and then officially formed in 1994 (CLOC n.d.). CLOC has a dual role: that of regrouping rural organizations in the Americas (but not those of the USA and Canada), and of serving as a further contact point for dialogue and participation of these same organizations within Vía Campesina.

FENOCIN is a direct participant in the creation of these spaces of continental and international organization. FENOCIN, still denominated FENOC-I at the time, was one of the signatories both of the Mons Declaration in 1993, linked to the official establishment of Vía Campesina, and that of Lima, which in 1994 made the founding of CLOC public. FENOC-I was also one of the supporters of the Tlaxcala Declaration of 1996, with which Vía Campesina, at the conclusion of its second international conference, officially launched, on a global scale, the proposal of food sovereignty as antagonist to the dominant view of food security (Vía Campesina 1996).

These four Ecuadorian federations, in the last 15 years, beyond campaigns and mobilizations, have developed practices to disseminate and concretize the principles of food sovereignty, combining the recovery and revaluation of peasant farming practices with ecological innovations, through the so-called knowledge dialogue (diálogo de saberes). In this way, they have contributed to disseminating initiatives such as agro-ecological farming, diversified farming systems, organic agriculture, intercropping and agroforestry systems in the country. Local organizations affiliated with the national federations – such as Unión de Organizaciones Campesinas e Indígenas de Cotacachi – UNORCAC and Unión de Organizaciones Campesinas de Quevedo – UOCQ (FENOCIN) or Unión Provincial de

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\(^{13}\)After the break-up, the CNC called itself CNC-Eloy Alfaro.

\(^{14}\)Since 2010, also FEI.
Organizaciones Campesinas de Manabí-UPOCAM (CNC-EA) among others – promoted: the recovery of agrobiodiversity (by seed banks and in-situ), the combination of crops with farm animal production, reforestation, soil covering and fertility recovering, as well as the substitution and reduction of agrochemicals. The common objectives of these initiatives were the reduction of external input dependence, the improvement of peasant autonomy, the promotion of solidarity and social cooperation, and environmental sustainability. To complement the above, projects for the transformation, distribution and commercialization of peasant products were implemented. Moreover, training was promoted in the three regions (The Coast, the Andean highlands and Amazonia) on diverse issues, from agro-ecological production (e.g. the program campesino-a-campesino adopted by FENOCIN) to formal rural education (e.g. Unidad Educativa Popular Particular a Distancia ‘Nuestra Tierra’ of CNC-EA) to political leadership (Escuelas de Liderazgo promoted by CONFEUNASSC, CNC-EA, FENACLE and FENOCIN), all aimed at improving the know-how and the abilities of the peasants to influence local and national policies. Planned in contradiction to the current neoliberal agri-food policies, all these enterprises were mostly self-managed and promoted by local organizations and federations, with the support of local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rather than public funds.

These processes are part of a broader phenomenon experienced by Ecuador during the 1990s: a gradual spread of networks for social innovation inspired towards sustainable agriculture as well as solidarity economy. Several initiatives appeared aimed at promoting the processing and commercialization of peasant products, by means of food fairs, peasant markets and shops, in an attempt to revitalize local food systems, overcoming market intermediaries through the direct relation between producers with consumers. In more recent years, urban-marginal consumer groups appeared, organizing themselves for food purchasing and distribution, through the so-called canastas comunitarias. In rare cases, these groups were able to establish mechanisms of direct supply units from local peasants.

The federations linked to Vía Campesina have also concentrated efforts to organize themselves in order to boost their claims, and to influence institutions related to the agrarian issue, as illustrated in the following section.

The dynamics of resistance and creation, briefly described above, as well as the effort placed on regrouping in joint platforms, is necessary background needed to explain the ability to be proactive and the advocacy that federations involved in the fight for food sovereignty exercised in Ecuador during the Constituent Assembly of 2007/2008. However, it is interesting to note that this happened despite the fact that individual federations have undergone recurrent crises, making their collective actions, as well as their networking, discontinuous.15

Mesa Agraria: in search of ‘unity in diversity’ for a joint agrarian agenda

Beginning in the late 1990s, in Ecuador, the Mesa Agraria evolved into a national space which brought together peasant, indigenous and rural worker federations as well as their local member organizations. Initially, the participants were FENOCIN, CONFEUNASSC-CNC and ECUARUNARI.16 The latter, however, quit the Mesa in 2003; meanwhile, in

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15This discontinuity of both networking and collective action, which increased after the Constituent Assembly phase, probably contributes to the future weakness in terms of implementation of food sovereignty principles, as we summarize in the last section of this paper.

16Affiliated to CONAIE, Ecuarunari is not a member of Vía Campesina (unlike the other federations).
2005, FENACLE joined and in 2007 CONFEUNASSC substantially reduced its participation.

Mesa Agraria is defined as a ‘consensus-building space’ by the same promoting entities, to emphasize their non-fusion and to maintain the freedom of action of each federation – individually or within additional networks – with regards to the issues identified as shared.\(^{17}\) Indeed, the aim of Mesa Agraria was to reach, in a participative way, a common understanding of the agrarian question, as a preliminary step to establishing a joint political agenda as well as a consequent repertoire of unified actions.

Mesa Agraria, before its dissolution in 2009, was marked by a continuous succession of intense coordination periods and ‘freezing’ stages, mostly dictated by ‘external’ political circumstances that affected organizations and distanced them.\(^{18}\)

However, during its existence, this network was able to combine different dimensions and create a dialogue. First was a territorial dimension, as it set up a cooperative and bidirectional flow between national leaderships and local militants aimed at processing and validating proposals and actions. In this way, it collected the contributions of national federations as well as grassroots organizations affiliated with them in different areas (several hundred decentralized entities). This allowed, among other things, a dialogue between different territories in the nation’s three regions, whose geographies are characterized by a rich social and cultural diversity. Secondly, different ‘identitarian’ constructions were combined, due to the significant differences between the federations in terms of self-representation, representativeness, geographic coverage and affinity to political parties.\(^{19}\)

Moreover, the Mesa Agraria had to build the internal agreements needed to forge its collective action. This was enacted in two principal dimensions according to the circumstances, similar to Vía Campesina (Borras 2004), protests or dialogues and participation with institutions in order to influence their policies.

Nevertheless, these federations, over several years, have been able to dialogue and regroup around a shared innovative Agrarian Agenda through a permanent process of negotiation and construction of unity in diversity, also characteristic of Vía Campesina (Borras 2008; Desmarais 2008, 2009; McMichael 2008). This process, which is not trouble-free, leads to common goals and discursive practices that politicize and integrate different perspectives on the agrarian issue and, overall, reflect the socio-cultural and ecological diversity of the country.

In the early 1990s, FENOC-I and FENACLE, along with CONAIE and FEI, created a similar network for political deliberation and joint action, the Coordinadora Agraria Nacional (Coordinadora Agraria Nacional 1993; Muñoz 2010). However, with Mesa Agraria, a decade later, the perspective changed: the struggle was no longer meant to include peasants in the dominant agrarian model – chasing ‘modernization and development of indigenous

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\(^{17}\)During Mesa Agraria’s existence, the federations also collaborated with other networks engaged in similar issues (e.g. Foro de Recursos Hídricos, Colectivo Agrario [from 2007] or roundtables promoted by NGOs [such as Centro Andino para la Formación de Líderes Sociales (CAFOLIS)]).

\(^{18}\)After the constituent assembly phase, Mesa Agraria was engaged in the debate on the law called Ley Organica de Soberanía Alimentaria (LORSA), as well as the initial debate on water and land laws. After 2009, the meetings became less frequent, until the coordinating group completely dissolved, without any official statement. Federations then joined renewed areas of coordination, some founded spontaneously and others were promoted by the government, including the Red Agraria.

\(^{19}\)FENOCIN is historically related to the Socialist Party, while the CONFEUNASSC and CNC were founders of the Pachakutik-Nuevo País, which they later quit. Since 2006, they have all maintained relations, even if in different manners and unstably, with the current governing party, Alianza País.
and peasant economies’ (Coordinadora Agraria Nacional 1994) – but rather aspired to a transition towards food sovereignty as an alternative to neo-liberal policies.

Since 2000, the federations intensified their meetings and some NGOs started to technically and financially support this newborn coordination and to participate in the internal debate; at any rate, representation as well as deliberation, according to the approved rules of operation, remained an exclusive prerogative of the participating rural federations.20

Given the impact of free trade in terms of deepening the economic and productive marginalization in the national peasant sector, the anti-free trade opposition was a priority that involved the Mesa Agraria between 2001 and 2006. During that five-year period, the whole country was impacted by social mobilization in opposition to US economic integration policies, initially by the regional FTAA and then its bilateral version, between the USA and Ecuador, the FTA. The Mesa Agraria endorsed demands expressed at continental and regional levels,21 promoted training and awareness campaigns among its member organizations and organized media campaigns, demonstrations and symbolic occupations of public entities. Its mobilizations stood alongside numerous others promoted by several Ecuadorian social actors, including CONAIE and a network called Ecuador Decide.

In addition to the struggle against FTAA, in 2002 the Mesa Agraria started an internal process of analysis and debate that led to the elaboration of an Agenda Agraria de las Organizaciones del Campo del Ecuador (first version dated 2003, then revised in 2006). The document is based on the food sovereignty paradigm and demands measures for an agri-food transition, as well as the relative and indispensable access to productive factors. Planning was followed (between 2003 and 2006) by a decentralized campaign within the local member organizations, specifically targeted at their communitarian leaderships, for the diffusion of the agenda and the improvement of their political action skills.

In 2003 the Agenda Agraria was recognized as a reference point in the elaboration of the Minga para el agro plan launched by the Ecuadorian government under the leadership of the indigenous leader Luis Macas, Minister of Agriculture from January to August 2003, during the presidency of Lucio Gutiérrez. At this stage, a round-table discussion was established between social actors and the Ministry, with the aim of discussing the texts of the General Law on Seed and the Law on Nutritional and Food Security. The first bulwark of agro-industry interests was then withdrawn due to pressure from indigenous, peasant and environmental organizations (including the Mesa Agraria) aimed at defending farmers’ rights to seeds and avoiding GMO introduction. The second was approved in April 2006 with a text that inaugurated the use of the term ‘food sovereignty’ in Ecuadorian legislation.

In August 2003, the alliance between Sociedad Patriótica, Lucio Gutiérrez’s party and Pachakutik (which both CONAIE and CONFEUNASCC-CNC joined) collapsed; from that moment until 2006, Mesa Agraria recoiled from dialogue spaces with the government and

20 Over the years, the Mesa Agraria received the support of various Ecuadorian NGOs, such as Acción Ecológica, Fundación de Campesinos María Luisa Gómez de la Torre (FMLGT), Heifer Ecuador, Terranueva and international organizations such as Centro Regionale d’Intervento per la Cooperazione (CRIC), Terra Nuova, Intermón Oxfam or Solidaridad Suecia-América Latina (SAL). Terranueva was designated to take on the ‘technical-operational secretariat’ but operating on the basis of the political mandate of the federations. It would be interesting to analyze this kind of alliance with NGOs, especially compared to what it has implied in terms of expanding the capacity for the federations’ action and, also, with respect to their autonomy.

21 In meetings against the Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas (ALCA) such as the ‘Encuentro Hemisférico de lucha contra el ALCA’ (La Habana, November 2001), the Andean meeting ‘El ALCA y sus impactos económicos y ecológicos’ (Quito, March 2001), the Third Congress of CLOC (México, August 2001) and even the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (Brazil, February 2002).
decided to focus its action on mobilization against the FTA, internal training and dissemination of the *Agenda Agraria* at national and local levels.

Before the presidential election of 2006, Mesa Agraria drew up a proposal and invited the candidates to dialogue: it is in this context that, in September of the same year, the presidents of the federations signed an agreement with Rafael Correa. He committed – in case of election – to promoting an ‘Agrarian Revolution’ that would democratize access to land, prevent water privatization, and in general foster access to strategic resources for the ‘reactivation’ of the peasant sector. In early 2007, after Correa became president, Mesa Agraria participated in the promotion of a Constituent Assembly, which was also a central request from other Ecuadorian social actors (e.g. CONAIE).

The constituent action of peasants

Mesa Agraria supported the campaign for the Constituent Assembly with human and financial resources (on 15 April 2007, more than 81 percent of voters voted ‘yes’ in the referendum). This commitment was renewed in the campaign for candidates (September 2007), when two of its leaders were elected: Pedro De La Cruz (president of FENOCIN) and Guillermo Touma (president of FENACLE).

The federations then concentrated their efforts on signing agreements with various members of the Constituent Assembly in order to engage them in the promotion of food sovereignty. In the meantime, a participatory and deliberative debate – using regional and national forums – started among federations and their local organizations, aimed at developing a consensual proposal for the new Constitution. Rather than being a text outlining the constitutional articles in detail, it referred to ‘key ideas, the meanings, the spirit that we believe should animate the new Magna Carta, in particular referring to those aspects related to food sovereignty and security, territorial development with equity and workers’ rights’ (Mesa Agraria 2007, 4). In a nutshell, it refers to five guidelines: a guarantee of food sovereignty, a promotion of an agrarian revolution, a model of sustainable and equitable territorial development, a guarantee of workers’ rights, in general and specifically of agricultural employees, and, finally, the necessity of re-establishing a sovereign and intercultural state. As explained in the same text, at the basis of the proposal is the ‘unobjectionable need to abandon neoliberalism’ (Mesa Agraria 2007, 6), to move towards a different economic and social model,

In the coastal town of Montecristi, from 30 November 2007, the Constituent Assembly commenced operating and continued until September of the following year. From that moment, the members of Mesa Agraria increased their actions, both individually and in coordination, aimed at disseminating, on a social level, the proposals through public events, media campaigns and lobbying efforts targeted at the Assembly as well as to other social actors and public opinion. A team of leaders focused on a direct and permanent dialogue with the Constituent Assembly Workgroups, while forums, food and seed festivals

\[\text{Translated by the author.}\]
and other events were organized around the headquarters of the Assembly and during the Assembly sessions.

Among the main events, beyond various parades organized in Quito and Montecristi, was the Feria por la Soberanía Alimentaria (7 May 2008). A hundred producers connected to Mesa Agraria invaded the Constituent Assembly’s headquarters to exhibit their seeds and products and to distribute leaflets. The climax of the day was when they offered lunch based on produce from the extremely varied food culture existing in the country. Members of the Constituent Assembly, their consultants and media reporters (more than 500 people) flocked in massive form to partake, thus commemorating the day as a crucial moment for the positioning of food sovereignty proposals.

In any case, Mesa Agraria was not the only space engaged in the promotion of the constitutionalization of food sovereignty; there were also other actors with whom the federations often discussed and collaborated. Among them were Acción Ecológica, Red Guardianes de las Semillas and Coordinadora Ecuatoriana de Agroecología. In collaboration with them, in March 2008, la Mesa Agraria organized a forum (with more than 100 delegates) to negotiate a common declaration on food sovereignty and seed defence, which was later jointly presented to the Constituent Assembly and spread widely by the media and publications.

During the Constituent Assembly process, the participation of the organizations linked to Mesa Agraria, coming from different parts of the country, was enthusiastic. There was eagerness to show the wealth of the culinary and agro-biodiversity heritage of the territories that they had helped preserve. It suggested the peasants’ willingness to prove that they were key productive and political subjects able to rethink a different society.

**Food sovereignty, buen vivir and rights of Nature: challenges of constitutionalization**

At the end of the process, the balance was positive: the new Constitution includes the proposals regarding food sovereignty in a consistent way. It responds undoubtedly to an ‘external’ favourable political trend, but at the same time it is evidence of the ability for argumentation, communication and advocacy that peasant organizations exercised within Ecuadorian society, giving new focus and content to the agrarian question while redrafting the social contract. Since that moment, food sovereignty has expanded from the inner circles of organizations to the wider context of the whole Ecuadorian society.

In this way, it is not just a demand of social movement organizations, but a national issue that gains centrality in the political debate.

Food sovereignty was institutionalized by the new Constitution of Ecuador as part of the rights to buen vivir (or sumak kawsay); which is a concept borrowed from the Andean cosmovation, but redefined and politicized particularly by the indigenous movement, together with other social movements and critical intellectuals. The introduction of this concept represents an epistemic shift, which is able to cross the borders of Ecuador to broaden, in an innovative way, the global debate on ‘development’ and the capitalist mode of production.

**Buen vivir** is a plural and pluridimensional concept under construction (Quijano 2010; Gudynas 2011; Gudynas and Acosta 2011), based on principles such as reciprocity, solidarity and relationality (Walsh 2009; Villalba 2013) and understood not as an ‘alternative development’, but rather as a regime ‘alternative to development’ (Villalba 2013). Able to decolonize the conceptualization of history, it proposes a multi-dimensional perspective that breaks with the linear and univocal understanding imposed by the Western modernity paradigm. Far from an individualistic approach, the subject of buen vivir is communitarian,
and constructed ontologically upon a harmonic relationship among humans and between them and the ecosystems in which they live.

This leads to pluralism and interculturalism, as ways of rethinking social relations and the state (Walsh 2009; Fatheuer 2011).

Moreover, it is important to stress that the adoption of *buen vivir* implies overcoming the logic of endless accumulation and growth as well as the extraction-oriented development paradigm. It is an innovative ontological understanding of the relationship between human and extra-human nature that recognizes their mutual penetration and suggests an overcoming of the metabolic rift that is part of capitalism. According to this perspective, Nature becomes a subject of rights, and is conceived not as an external factor of production to subjugate and exploit, but as an ‘intrinsic’ patrimony to respect and reproduce (Dávalos 2008). Thus, the constitutionalization of *buen vivir* entails the obsolescence of the logic of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003) and the commodification of nature (and with it of agriculture and food), encouraging Ecuador to overcome its historical dependence on the exploitation of natural resources. In this challenge, the debate on whether or not to extract oil found in Yasuní National Park is emblematic (Fatheuer 2011).

The economy, as conceptualized in the new constitutional text, recognizes humans as subjects and gravitates toward a dynamic and balanced relationship between society, state and market, in harmony with Nature. In this way, the market is not considered to be the exclusive social regulator, while the state is conceived as a guarantor of the right to *buen vivir* of the population and the rights of Nature (Gobierno del Ecuador 2008).

Within this innovative model of conceiving the world and social reproduction, food sovereignty becomes the framework used to change the agri-food model, placing the agrarian issue out of the hegemonic discourse of modernization and productivity.

However, a question remains: to what extent has the concept of food sovereignty been included in the Constitution respecting all its original implications in terms of rethinking the agrarian issue (McMichael 2006, 2008; Desmarais 2009; Patel 2009)? In particular, this question focuses on two main elements inherent in the proposal of food sovereignty and its epistemic fracture:

1. the recognition of food as a right that cannot be mediated (or organized) by the market, but must reside within the free discretion of the ‘people, nations and states’ (Declaration of Nyeleni 2007);
2. the affirmation of the rights of people and countries not only to food but also to the production of appropriate food, claiming, thus, the essential re-appropriation, to the hands of those who produce, of production factors such as land, water and seeds.

In opposition to the policies historically implemented in Ecuador, which aimed at the production of exotic commodities (fruit, flowers, shrimp, etc.) for foreign markets, the new Constitution establishes radical changes in the agri-food sector.

Article 13 of the Preamble affirms the rights of individuals and communities to the secure and permanent access to appropriate food, preferably locally produced, according to different identities and cultures. This article ends by assigning the role of food sovereignty promoter to the state (Gobierno del Ecuador 2008). This first statement, however, does not develop a full definition of what food sovereignty means (Giunta and Vitale 2013). Parts of the elements that characterize and establish the dichotomy of food sovereignty versus food security (Cavazzani 2008) were included in the body of the constitutional text, especially in reference to ‘by whom’ and ‘how’ to produce food, through a chapter specifically dedicated to food sovereignty. Article 281 establishes food sovereignty
as a ‘strategic goal and governmental obligation to ensure that persons, communities, peoples and nationalities reach self-sufficiency of healthy and culturally appropriate food, on a permanent basis’ (Gobierno del Ecuador 2008, 281).23

Also detailed are the desirable measures as well as the responsibilities of the state. According to the claims of peasant organizations, it promotes:

1. short food chains and a greater national self-sufficiency;
2. the agro-ecological conversion and free use of seeds;
3. Ecuador as a country free of GMO seeds (raw material or finished products not included);
4. support to peasants aimed at the access to land, water and credit;
5. prohibition of latifundium and a social and ecological function for land use;
6. prohibition of monopolistic and speculative practices around food;
7. primacy of production for food sovereignty rather than for agro-fuels;
8. fair economy and direct relationship between producers and consumers.

The inclusion of these regulations certainly means a radical rethinking of the agri-food system. However, the Constitution includes points of ‘no determination’. A significant example is given by its demand for the redistribution of land or water without solving how to promote fair access to these productive factors. Perhaps by market rules? Or by an agrarian reform which proceeds to expropriate lands? This is a fundamental matter in the food sovereignty proposal of Vía Campesina and is the key to changing the strong inequalities that cross rural Ecuadorian areas.

In addition, a leading role is assigned to the state as a guarantor of food sovereignty. At first glance, this undoubtedly appears to be a significant achievement for organizations and social movements who fought for the state to take on these responsibilities.

In fact, the concept of food sovereignty promoted by Vía Campesina implies ‘the necessity of governments and states to protect and stimulate family, peasant and cooperative farming with adequate agricultural pricing policies, technical assistance and market guarantees’ (Vía Campesina 2009, 59).

In this way, it claims a central role for the state, although global governance has undermined sovereignty and reduced (but not reset) the centrality of the states. Vía Campesina explains this position, which could be considered a return to nationalism, referring to the ‘national purpose’ of the state and therefore the responsibility of parties and governments in the ‘administration of the so-called “common good”’ (Vía Campesina 2009, 95), pointing out that:

the true solution to the problems within agriculture will not always be resolved by governments and political forces. This statement does not mean that our social movement must construct its own model, parallel to the one of the state, or must construct basic participating alternatives, not related to the political institutionalism or to the market. We must stress that these policies must reach the agricultural sector and rural areas without inequality nor exclusion. (Vía Campesina 2009, 96)

This position implies the affirmation of two issues as a priority: (1) sovereignty of the state over national policies and (2) centrality of the role of the state in the transition of the development model. However, at the same time, it is accompanied by a persistent claim by Vía

23Translated by the author.
Campesina of a leading role in decision-making and over the control of resources held by communities, peoples and nations.

The first two principles are widely found within the Ecuadorian Constitution. As regards the first, the constitutional text claims a ‘plural notion of sovereignty’, considering it as popular, national and referring to food, energy and international relations (Acosta and Martínez 2010; SENPLADES 2013a). As for the second principle, the entire Constitution is founded on state centrality, including the sections dedicated to food sovereignty.

In reference to the third aspect, people and communities hold the right to access to food. However, it is not explicit whether they hold the right to decide, on a permanent and systematic basis, on their agri-food systems and policies, a right that is a fundamental part of food sovereignty as conceptualized by Vía Campesina.

The Constitution generally provides the guarantee of ‘participation of persons, communities, peoples and nationalities’ (Gobierno del Ecuador 2008, Art. 85), through a permanent construction of the so-called poder ciudadano (citizen power) (Art. 95). Here, participation is clearly understood as a right of all citizens to be actively engaged in all matters of public interest through mechanisms of ‘representative, direct and communitarian democracy’. The effectiveness of the instruments provided for this participation remains an open question but, in any case, the constitutional text introduces the paradigm of food sovereignty without explicitly identifying the community as essential subjects of the hoped-for transition, and as politically recognized and visible actors along with the state. This leads to the question of whether the state is able to implement a transition to a food sovereignty regime on its own – without social mobilization and participation – overturning power relations and acquiring, in the meantime, the technical skills needed to transform the agri-food system.

Clearly, open issues are not fortuities, but marked by conflicting interests that clashed during the Constituent Assembly. In fact, the constitutional text must be read as the result of tension and negotiations between pro-change sectors and groups concentrated on the defence of their privileges (Acosta and Martínez 2011), which even occurred within the governing party, Alianza País (Muñoz 2010; Ramírez Gallegos 2010). In this way, during the Constituent Assembly the power relations, as they were, allowed the constitutionalization of a significant part of the pro-food sovereignty proposals, but not to the extent that they led to success for the more controversial issues, such as a total regulation of the agrarian reform and GMOs. Due to this impasse, the choice was to postpone the resolution on the points of disagreement to the consequent legislative regulation (Rosero Garcés et al. 2011), as promoted by executive and Constituent Assembly forces.

The enabling legislation: avoiding the nodal points of conflict

At the beginning of 2009, the LORSA (Organic Law of the Food Sovereignty Regime) was approved by National Assembly, then modified by a partial presidential veto and entered in force in May 2009.24

Local members of Vía Campesina continued their influencing action, but in a more dispersed manner and showed a decreased deliberative and proactive ability; on the other hand, reactionary sectors – opposed to a food sovereignty regime – strived to reduce the constitutional mandate, taking advantage of a political situation which was more favourable to them, due to contradictory positions within the same government, as well as a relative

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24 The LORSA, as modified by the presidential partial veto, entered into force without a previous review, within the 30 days established, by the National Assembly (Rosero Garcés et al. 2011).
repositioning of the opposition forces. The result of the process, in itself very short, is the entry in force of a ‘law of mediation’ that put aside most of the sensitive, even if key, issues, despite the fact that it was a framework legislation aimed at establishing the mechanisms by which the state must undertake the obligations and objectives provided in the constitutional text (Muñoz 2010).

Access to land, understood as one of the main demands of peasant organizations, was ratified in Article 6 on the basis of its social and environmental function and through the inclusion of measures in favour of small producers, including the ones specifically related to women producers and breadwinners (Gobierno del Ecuador 2009). However, the Law does not outline the guidelines and modalities to implement it, or the resources needed to create the National Land Fund. Even the fundamental right to water is ratified, but its regulation was postponed to the corresponding law, which is one of the legislative projects that have generated greater social conflict during the transition period after the Constituent Assembly (Ramírez Gallegos et al. 2013). The free use, interchange and conservation of seeds are once again recognized as a responsibility of the state and society; here LORSA added, however, the specification of ‘native’ which would exclude locally improved foreign varieties (such as rice). Explicitly mentioned is the conversion to agro-ecological systems and diversification as well as that priority should be given to small and medium productions for public agri-food purchases.

However, by the partial presidential veto of the Law, some critical points were introduced, in reference to: (1) inserting greater flexibility for the production of agro-fuels, that must be avoided ‘as much as possible’; (2) granting a time-span of one year for illegal owners to regularize their shrimp production (about 44,642 hectares of mangroves); (3) foreseeing subsidies for big producers in case of market distortions; (4) deleting the specification of destroying the GMO seeds (if entered as raw materials) and, to put it more generally, as disabling their reproductive capacity, without specifying how (Rosero Garcés et al. 2011).

The Conferencia Nacional de Soberanía Alimentaria (COPISA) was founded with members appointed through a competition based on merits and not endowed with a completely autonomous status (as initially proposed by organizations); indeed the COPISA was then ascribed to the Ministry of Agriculture. The task assigned to this entity was to coordinate a participatory debate for the design of subordinate laws (use and access to land, seeds, agricultural development, agro-industry and agricultural employment, animal and plant health, public access to credit, insurance and subsidies).

As in the Constituent Assembly phase, the debate on the points of greatest conflict was postponed to the approbation of the laws subordinated to LORSA.26

Several drafts of the bill were presented; some were promoted by COPISA or supported by it. One instance is the proposal of Land and Territories Law presented by Red Agraria (integrated by CNC-EA, FENOCIN, FENACLE and FEI with other organizations) through a citizen initiative of gathering petition signatures. Implemented between October 2011 and March 2012, it reached a wide social consensus with over 40,000 endorsements when 25,000 would have been sufficient for the legislative qualification. The text – discussed in several workshops by organizations and communities of the three regions – handled the most critical issue of land redistribution, advancing concrete proposals.

26 They are: land, water, productive model, use of GMOs and agro-fuels.
In fact, this bill set the maximum extension for private property,\textsuperscript{27} anything beyond would be turned into agro-productive enterprises (with 40 percent of the stocks sold to the workers involved), or the surplus would have to be sold, otherwise it would be expropriated. It is one of the most debated topics, due to its relevance in defining which properties should be considered as latifundium, and therefore illegal according to Article 282 of the Constitution. This bill also promoted the redistribution of state lands, to be assigned exclusively to associative property (by at least five people) and free of charge, or, at the most, after paying a symbolic price. In addition, it proposed the establishment of a Ministry for Food Sovereignty as a necessary institution to implement the agrarian reform process and, in general, to safeguard the hoped-for transition in the agri-food system.

In total, at least six bills were drawn up (Rosero Garcés et al. 2011), including one by the Chamber of Agriculture that was presented to the National Assembly in March 2012 by a member of the ruling party (who quit a few months later). This text quoted some of the constitutional watchwords, referring to the concept of food sovereignty and the need to regulate latifundism, but was careful to set limits for private property. It proposed to qualify the latifundium only on the basis of its non-productivity or in presence of unused public infrastructure for irrigation. Finally, it provided the transaction on the market as a unique mechanism for land redistribution.

However, the more sensitive subordinate laws were still not approved, probably due to the lack of agreements among (and within) the legislative groups and between them and the executive groups. Land tenure (regulation of latifundium and mechanisms for access to land) and agricultural model (specifically GMOs and agrofuels) appear to be as the most controversial issues, as parts of the more general dichotomy between continuity of the neoliberal approach and transition towards agro-ecological and food sovereignty models. This is a contention experienced also by the same government and ruling party, which is integrated by conservative as well as more pro-change trends.\textsuperscript{28}

Another factor causing delay was probably that in 2009–2013, the governmental block did not reach an absolute majority in National Assembly, having to find a way to gain support for each law approved (Ramírez Gallegos et al. 2013).

In this context, sensitive issues that would leave social movements or, in contrast, powerful economic groups unsatisfied, were intentionally avoided during the campaign for the presidential election (February 2013).

In the light of the legislative majority won by re-elected president Rafael Correa, an acceleration was predictable for the new period of government (2013–2017), as well as a complicated resolution of the differences on central issues experienced within the same government and ruling party, which we have outlined above. Due to the complexity as well as the dynamism of the political arena, predictions are not easy; however, in the next sections, we present some reflections that could contribute to consideration of the different options.

\textsuperscript{27}Coast and Amazonia: 500 hectares, highlands: 200. Moreover, it distinguishes between properties exceeding those limits as either productive or unproductive, each receiving different treatment (processing, sale or expropriation).

\textsuperscript{28}The composition of Alianza País is heterogeneous: it has been promoted by leaders of traditional leftist parties, leftist intellectuals, ecologists, social and women activists as well as people without political trajectory but aligned to Correa or coming from catholic and center-right sectors. This diversity, held together and governed by Correa, has generated tensions, during and after the Constituent Assembly (see e.g. Ramírez Gallegos 2010; Ramírez Gallegos et al. 2013).
Will the ‘Agrarian Revolution’ start?

Since the beginning, an ‘Agrarian Revolution’ has been considered as a strategic component of the Citizens’ Revolution promoted by the government of Rafael Correa. However, five years after the approval of the Constitution, the balance of this ‘Agrarian Revolution’, in terms of implementation of public policies and strategies, is frequently critically evaluated, even by the same government sector.29

The official plans, including the Plan of buen vivir (the National Development Plan) for the period 2013–2017, continue to claim food sovereignty as part of a radical change of the productive matrix. However, the current situation is quite different.

In recent years the agribusiness has been strengthened and exports have increased, due to higher global food prices, but also thanks to a clear continuity in the agri-food policies. Meanwhile, an aid policy, based on packages tailored to traditional monoculture and targeted at small producers, continue to retain sizeable public support.

As for the innovative level, ‘Schools of the Agrarian Revolution’ (aimed at improving food sovereignty and productivity by the promotion of dialogue between local and scientific knowledge) have been implemented, as well as projects designed to facilitate access to credit and land. Yet these might seem to be encouraging a status of peasant dependence, since they are not clearly associated with processes of agro-ecological conversion. The land program (Plan Tierras) addresses, in an innovative way, the issue of land tenure, promoting acquisition by associative models rather than by individuals.

Despite this innovation, mechanisms of the commodification of land and financialization of the rural areas are reproduced by plans which lead the peasants into debt (with the Banco Nacional de Fomento) in order to purchase land on the market. Moreover, this could generate significant increases of the land price on the market.

This seems to be in contradiction with the proposal of food sovereignty as interpreted by Vía Campesina, which affirms the necessity of ‘altering power relations in society in favour of peasants and the coalitions which support them and which have nothing to do with the private patrimonial transactions financed by the state’, a position that involves a severe critique of the strategy of agrarian reform promoted by the World Bank and is based ‘on the liberalization of agricultural markets’ (Vía Campesina 2009, 131).

Moreover, some initiatives, called ‘rural inclusive businesses’, have been promoted with the aim of connecting producers with agro-industry and the big distribution chains, but they do not automatically imply a conversion to the model of production or the traditional accumulation regime.

As for his commitment, President Correa has repeatedly emphasized the need to modernize the Ecuadorian rural sector to increase productivity, including the use of GMOs, and has announced the necessary constitutional reforms to allow it.

In the meantime, social organizations (including those linked to Vía Campesina that animated Mesa Agraria and then Red Agraria) have suffered reshaping of their organizational ability and political action. This is probably due to the inherent cycles of latency and visibility of the collective action and to the necessity to redefine objectives and strategies in a context that has changed radically in a few years. The current leadership is no longer a classic government of the neoliberal era, therefore organizations cannot act as they usually do: they have to reinvent their strategies and political agendas. Autonomous action is complex, especially for those organizations that support Correa’s government

29In this regard, Rafael Correa has declared, on several occasions, that the launching of drastic transformations in rural development is the biggest debt that the government owes to Ecuadorians.
and that are in a precarious balance in the attempt to publicly report the inertia in official agri-food policies without being in opposition to the government – a government that is engaged in the promotion of significant transformations in the country, especially regarding the improvement of social policies, the redistribution of wealth, the defence of the state and its role as regulator. For these reasons, it continues to enjoy high levels of support from the population and from the organizations linked to Vía Campesina.

In this regard, a trend to governmental centralism could reduce the space for dialogue, while at the same time promoting a direct relationship between the state and single producers by means of official programs. In this way, organizations experiment with a reduction of their intermediary role and their abilities to influence the decision-making process. This trend informs, in general, the modalities of relationship between the state and the social actors in a government that, even if ‘progressive’, is far from building itself as a ‘government of social movements’. Indeed, as we have noticed, organized social actors and individuals seem to play an ambiguous role in the institutionalization of food sovereignty principles. This vagueness – in the phase following the Constituent Assembly – leads to the marginalization of those who were the main actors of this innovative constitutionalization. Meanwhile, international cooperation has reduced its financial support, further weakening the possibility of ‘autonomous’ action, at least from the state, of these social actors.

In the early phase (2009–2012) following the Constituent Assembly there were some mobilizations (conflicting and pro-active), such as the protests for water and against mining or, as stressed above, the peasant proposal of the Land Law. However, peasant organizations and federations that have promoted the institutionalization of food sovereignty face difficulties in gaining visibility on the political scene and in the media. They must cope with the risk of being used by several actors: on the one hand, the government itself, which might be interested in treating them as ‘pacified’ allies and, on the other hand, the opposition, particularly by those interested in generating a perception of widespread antagonism towards the government (such as the private media, angered by regulatory policies on information conducted by Correa). The result is that little attention is obtained in the political scene, as occurred in March 2012, on the occasion of the official presentation of the Land Bill, when public attention was fragmented mostly between the Marcha por la vida protest (promoted by CONAIE and the left opposition) and the counter-march supported by the government. On that occasion, the third possibility – aimed at making its voice heard by demanding radical changes in the agri-food system by means of dialogue rather than protest – attracted modest attention, if not outright rejection, from those groups in conflict.

In this context, it seems that power relations are not settling favourably for pro-food sovereignty organizations. If this is true, the space of negotiation – for enabling legislation and policies – will probably turn from the fight for an overall transition in the agri-food system to more moderate challenges. These could be some elements of a food sovereignty agenda that allow greater access to productive resources and to the food chains, by focused policies for peasants.

30 Which are, as argued in the first part of this paper, FENOCIN, CNC-EA, CONFEUNASSC and FENACLE, among others. 31 In this sense, the latest demand of peasant organizations for the establishment of a Ministry of Food Sovereignty, rather than persisting with a transformation of the Ministry of Agriculture, could be an indicator.
Conclusions
Currently, in Ecuador, food sovereignty is part of the national political debate and a contentious issue for the whole society, not only for peasant organizations.

However, the redesign of public institutions and agri-food policies does not appear consistent with the mandates positioned in the Constituent Assembly phase. This is conceivable in light of the slow pace in materializing those challenges (by enabling legislation and official policies) and the persistence of the logic of rural industrialization and modernization within certain strategic components of the government. All this is accompanied by a reduced centrality of social actors that originally sponsored the proposal for food sovereignty.

Nevertheless, food sovereignty remains a collective goal, constitutionalized and therefore legitimate, towards which Ecuadorian society should head. This embodies not only a victory for the Ecuadorian and international movements that have made it their battleground, but also a crucial step that marks the relations of power in the agri-food sector.

A ‘return of the state’ in rural development, after the drastic reduction due to adjustment, is certain, including radical improvements in welfare. Moreover, it is necessary to recognize that the Constitution represents a roadmap. Meanwhile, the transition is complex, considering the structural inequality inside the country and its dependent integration in the global dimension. However, the inconsistency between the challenges institutionalized or included in government plans (such as the National Development Plan), and the slowdown in the adoption of legislations and policies clearly influenced by them, must also be understood as the result of contradiction between divergent interests and concrete power relations in the Ecuadorian agri-food sector. The resistance to food transition is animated, clearly, by powerful groups dedicated to agro-industry and agro-export, which historically grew at the expense of the mass of peasants, indigenous and rural workers. The effects are differences on crucial issues within the same governmental block, between the more conservative elements and those committed to the need for radical changes.

In Ecuador, there is an ongoing conflict related to the control of resources which results in the struggle between two ideas of social production: ‘buen vivir’, as an alternative to development, versus a reinvention of ‘developmentism’, where market maintains primacy and the transformation process is based on an intensive exploitation of nature and modernization.

The result of this clash is yet not clear, just as whether or not the second model (developmentism) is transitonally necessary to reach the first one (buen vivir), as even the most optimists would argue. In this sense, it is interesting to critically reflect on this clash and recognize the role of social movements in the promotion and materialization of new models, as well as in their ability to gain a concrete engagement of the government in order to change power relations. It would imply a rethinking of the role of the state and

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32Welfare spending quadrupled between 2006 and 2012; the promotion of gratuity improved significantly the access to education and health while poverty (income based) decreased by 10 percent. The regained centrality of the state in the planning and implementing of development strategies led the launching of significant plans to improve mobility and transport infrastructures as well as the quality of human settlements (e.g. housing, water, sanitation) and the increase of cash transfer programs (see e.g. SENPLADES 2013b). All these measures were focused on more vulnerable populations, including those in the rural areas.
materializing more participative forms of governance for the transition, that clearly include all social actors.

The food sovereignty proposal offers the possibility of reestablishing the relationship between humans and nature, as well as between cities and the countryside. In this regard, Ecuador, with the institutionalization of the paradigms of buen vivir and food sovereignty, has redefined the route, opting for a break that must radically transform the overall productive matrix.

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