

Food security: a concern for small farmers

In the face of a possible global food crisis, the Government asserts that Colombia is shielded from food scarcity. But apart from the international situation, experts and small farmers consider that there are other factors that should be dealt with: the distribution of land, security that guarantees the right to life and permanence in the territory; development that ensures the right to education, healthcare and drinking water, and in addition, investment and loans for the production and marketing of their crops.



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However, for the Government and experts on the subject, the international situation should not have such a marked impact. Firstly, because “Colombia is shielded from food scarcity, since the country is 90% self-sufficient in what it consumes. Agricultural growth is the source of the shielding”, says the Minister of Agriculture, Andrés Felipe Arias.

Secondly, because, as Professor Elcy Corrales, of Environmental and Rural Studies of the Universidad Javeriana, indicates, the small farm economy, which produces 63% of the country’s food, can react to this situation with alternative forms of production and transport and has shown that it adapts to circumstances with agility. “Since the production of the small farm economy is quite viable, it is important to strengthen it”, she says.

For experts consulted, the international situation would be only one factor of risk because in reality there many others of a structural nature that should be dealt with. For this reason, in March, the Ministry of Agriculture and other Government bodies issued Conpes 113, which contains the national food security and nutrition policy with the aim of “guaranteeing that the entire Colombian population has available, has access to and consumes food in a permanent and timely manner, in sufficient quantity, variety, quality and innocuousness”.

For the National Peasant’s Association, ANUC, there are several aspects to take into account in order to guarantee food security in the country: recognize the contribution of the small farmer population, redistribute the land and plant foodstuffs, connect supply and demand and generate technological development and security. This will allow small farmers to stay on the land.

“Without food no lasting peace, democracy or development is possible,”

declares the World Food Program. For this reason, when there is talk about the risk of a food crisis and the prices of corn, rice, wheat and cooking oil rise, food security has become a concern for small farmers.

At the international level, two situations have sounded the alarm regarding food secu-

rity: the rise in the price of petroleum and an inadequate supply due to the increase in the demand for food, particularly in India and China.

Meanwhile in Colombia, where 13% of children suffer from chronic malnutrition and 10% weigh less than normal, the international situation could have an impact. Firstly, because if the prices of transport and inputs increase, it affects large-scale production and the import-export trade. Secondly, because this, in turn, raises the price of basic foodstuffs.

Small farm production

For ANUC, which has been managing the needs and proposals of small farmers for 41 years, the first thing that is needed is to recognize the small farmer population and its contribution in the production of food. In this regard, Jaime Forero, researcher of the Universidad Javeriana, says the “people think that the small farmer only produces for his subsistence, but over 90% of what a small family farm produces goes to market and less than 10% is for subsistence.

This means that the small farmer is basically a producer of goods for the market. Such is the case, that of the national agricultural production total, which covers what goes directly to market, what is processed industrially and what is exported, 63% is small farm production, asserts Forero.

In addition, the small farm economy contributes foodstuffs at low cost. Although its value increases in the production chain, products from this source form an important part of the household shopping basket for the poor population, which is 45.1% of Colombians, according to the Government.

The concentration of land is another concern of small farmers and national organizations, such as the General Attorney’s office, which has said that the “aberrant concentration of land and agrarian counter reform” carried out by drug traffickers and illegal armed groups is between 1 and 4.4 million hectares.

In addition, what experts such as university professor Darío Fajardo indicate should be taken into account: “in 2001, farms of less than three hectares, belonging to 57.3% of owners, controlled 1.7% of the land, while farms of over 500 hectares corresponding to 0.4% of owners, controlled 61.2% of the land”.

Although during its initial five years the Institute of Rural Development, Incoder, adjudicated land to over 147.000 families, there is still a long road ahead. On the one hand, for representatives of ANUC, the statute of rural development approved by Congress in July, 2007, has meant a backward step

for the redistribution of land, because of the mechanism that was established for its adjudication.

“Previously, a community council was set up to decide which families to prioritize in the adjudication of land, in accordance with the precariousness of their situation. Today adjudication requires presenting projects that must include estimates that cost between 5 and 10 million pesos, resources that those who need the land more do not have.” In this way, says Forero, “small farmers have very little land with which to develop their

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economic potential, so important for the country.”

In addition to the concentration of land, small farmers are concerned about the concentration of land use for cattle ranching. The balance sheets of the national development plans show that the recovery of the area planted with crops in the country commenced in 1998, after the crisis of the 1990’s when the cultivated area diminished from 4.8 to 3.8 million hectares. According to the balance sheet of the 2007 National De-

velopment Plan, “the area planted reached 4.6 million hectares, mainly in crops such as sesame, tobacco, garden produce, bananas, cacao, cut flowers, fruit and sugarcane, among others”. Meanwhile, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, the area of land devoted to cattle ranching is 40 million hectares. In addition, the Conpes on Food Security establishes that “almost half the land used for cattle ranching is not suitable for this purpose, being more appropriate for agriculture, forestry or for conservation.”

On average, “one hectare of extensive

cattle ranching produces about 300.000 pesos annual net income and only generates employment for one worker for 6 days in the year. Meanwhile, one hectare planted produces between two and five million pesos per year and generates about 80 to 300 working days. We have destroyed a lot of forest in order to sustain such a precarious system that produces a good profit only to the owner of a lot of land,” states Forero.

In this regard, the Minister of Agriculture has declared that “we Colombians should





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More investment in food

In addition to land, family farm organizations consider that investment in the countryside is imperative in order to guarantee food security. “Appropriate technologies that enable us to increase food production is lacking,” says Sandoval. In response to concerns about food supply, the division of technological development of the Ministry of Agriculture reinforced calls to support the growing of food, which had lost out to crops for producing bio-diesel and ethanol.

Although small farmers are concerned about the increase in land devoted to producing biofuels, for Forero this is

not a problem because he considers that the country has a great deal of unproductive land used for grass. “The problem is the amount of public resources that are allocated to subsidize investments in biofuels,” he says.

Regarding investment, small farmers demand greater technological development for producing food, loans to enable them to complete the productive cycle, and particularly investment in the rural development of the country.

“Our countryside is becoming old,” says Horminso Reyes, representative of ANUC in

the Department of Meta. “For lack of education, young people cannot complete their studies and have to move to the main towns. In my village, Puerto López, one has send them away to study, especially because a young person without education can easily be recruited by an armed actor.” For this reason, Reyes, as do many other small farmers, demands greater assistance.

Displacement depresses production

“For small farmers to stay on the land” is another of ANUC’s concerns in the face of displacement of many by armed actors (a study in 2006 by the Attorney General’s office revealed that between 2001 and 2006, displaced persons abandoned 2.9 million hectares in five regions of the country) and the spraying of glyphosate that has also affected licit crops, asserts Angel Tolosa, advisor to Planeta Paz for the family farm organizations.

Such situations have led another peasant organization, ANUC-UR, to sponsor a Mobilization for Land, Water and Life in order to call attention to the situation in the countryside and to the living conditions of those who inhabit it.

There are currently initiatives by the Government and civil society to work on remedying some of these aspects, such as the Food Security Network, ReSA, a program of Acción Social, which seeks to stimulate permanence in the countryside of the population in danger of displacement, and the return of displaced persons by means of support for growing crops and the exchange of products that ensure their subsistence.

For their part, civil society organizations have created the Food Security, Sovereignty and Autonomy Network, whose principal action is to support national seed banks that guarantee autonomy in the production and conservation of seeds native to the region. In this way they protect national agriculture from transgenic seeds.

There is a consensus regarding measures that respond to current problems but also to the need to resolve structural problems, such as the distribution of land, security that guarantees the right to life and to remaining in the territory; development that ensures the right to education, healthcare, drinking water and other conditions for a decent life, and finally, investment and loans for the production and marketing of small farmers’ crops. ▀

have 22 million hectares devoted to agriculture and we only have 5 million, which means that we are 17 million hectares short. In forests we should have 67 million hectares and we have 58 million; and inversely, cattle ranching should diminish from 40 to 14 million hectares.”

According to ANUC, there are today around 460.000 families that aspire to have a piece of land. And there are over 150.000 families are in danger of losing their plots of land because they cannot cover their debts, asserts Juan Carlos Sandoval, president of ANUC.

FOR FOOD SECURITY

“The structural solution to the global problem of food security lies in increasing production and productivity in countries of low income and food deficit,” asserted the director general of the FAO, Jacques Diouf, at the opening ceremony of the Rome Summit on June 3, 2008. For this purpose he requested that world leaders commit thirty billion dollars a year to re-launch agriculture and avoid future threats of conflict generated by the high cost of food. In 2006 the world spent 1.2 trillion dollars in arms. As he said, how could it not be possible to find 30 billion dollars that will allow 862 million starving people to enjoy the most basic of human rights, the right to food, and consequently, the right to life?

For him, the current global food crisis already has had “tragic social and political consequences in different countries” and could further endanger “world peace and security”.