

## **Changing Agriculture: Food Sovereignty of the territories in response to the energy crisis and the new world revolution**

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### **Introduction**

In México, one of the most agriculturally-based countries in the Americas, there is a growing tendency among rural farmers to promote a new type of rurality. This new approach aims to solve their ecological, economic and social problems through actions that encourage a de-growth instead of a sustainable growth in development. In this essay I aim to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which the agroecological cooperative *Las Cañadas* redefined the goals of twenty-two small producers in Veracruz, México. In an effort to improve their livelihoods, they shifted their methods of food production during a time in the 90s in which the country faced a backdrop of challenges including the opening of markets and institutional reforms. This is primarily an empirical essay, intended to present collected data on the cooperative during the period of 1996-2012.

To provide some background, I will begin with a summary of Mexican agricultural history and the consequences of the signing of the North America Free Trade Agreement. This is followed by a discussion of what I understand to be de-growth, as well as a description of key concepts within the case study research: institutions, cooperative, social cohesion, identity, agroecology and food sovereignty. Finally, I intend to illustrate some empirical lessons from Mexico's agriculture. My hypothesis is that small-scale farmer cooperatives have the best potential for achieving the de-growth oriented goals of agroecology.

The materials used in this essay were compiled as part of my doctoral field research in México during 2011 and 2012, and include internal documents from *Las Cañadas* and interviews with members of the agroecological cooperative. My perspective on the Mexican rural areas has been shaped significantly by my interaction and participation with environmental and peasant organizations since 1998 and the present essay no doubt reflects such a bias. Nevertheless, I hope that this essay will be valuable to any researcher considering cooperatives in Mexico today.

### **Historical account and general situation of Mexican agriculture**

During the 1920's land distribution and the Mexican Agrarian Law Reform were introduced. Both emerged under Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, where it states the right of the Mexican government to regulate the natural resources which are susceptible to appropriation with the purpose of conserving its resources, promoting balanced development within the country, as well as creating public wealth and social improvement of rural and urban inhabitants.

This legal framework applied to expropriated privately held land between 1934 and 1940. Within this period the government promoted the *ejido* system as an important part of the Mexican land reform. Herein, *ejido* is the land subject to a special regime of public

ownership land tenure, constitutionally recognized and protected as a personal asset, otherwise known as *patrimonio* (Glosario de Términos Jurídico-Agrarios, 2009: 74).

Personal assets consist of: (i) cropland or parceled area, (ii) areas of common use, and (iii) areas to legally inhabit and develop rural areas. Thus, since 1917 ejidos have been continuously created, but its economic purpose has changed gradually, first they were seen as additional income on large farms (primarily in the 1920s at the time of the primary export model), then as small subsistence farms for most backward rural groups (during the Great Depression, the *ejido* was inactive and without any government support). Throughout the forties, it played a major role in agricultural production, but with the 1992 reform, its goals were comparable to the productive private agriculture (Assennatto Blanco & De León Mojarro, 1996).

January 6<sup>th</sup> 1992 was the turning point in Mexico land tenure regulation, when Carlos Salinas, former Mexican president, modified Article 27 and allowed land privatization using the argument that land would be utilized more efficiently (Nigh, 2002). The signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) triggered a withdrawal of direct support to rural areas and a financial crisis, reshaping a new setting within the country (Appendini y Verduzco, 2002:469).

Market liberalization and the privatization of land reduce the ecosystem as well as social resilience. This concept is described as the ability of communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change<sup>1</sup>. It is also an important component of circumstances under which social groups adapt to environmental change. Social resilience is associated with negative impacts on livelihoods and, in the context of the institutions of common property management, collective institutional resilience is also undermined (Adger, 2000).

In the last decades several processes have shaped a new rurality in the country, in a different overall environment, framed by the restructuring of the Mexican economy, along with the implications of NAFTA's chapter seven "Agriculture and Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures", that are persistently jeopardizing the rural population, due to rising commodity imports and lack of support for agriculture to encourage the implementation of strategies of endogenous socio-economic improvement in rural areas.

According to Michael Walton (2004:179) assessment of NAFTA's impact on Mexico has different effects depending on the characteristics and context of each socio-economic group. With regard to large producers, NAFTA has had generally positive influences, but has provided few benefits for small farmers, especially in southern Mexico, particularly among indigenous groups. This was because the latter had no land, no capital, and no marketing infrastructure, problems that were aggravated by the poor conditions of the land, social conflict, as well as social exclusion<sup>2</sup>.

The complexity of cloud forest resource systems reduces vulnerability to rapid economic misfortune and to community instability'. As Neil Adger argues in his research about southeast Asia (Adger, 2000), within the Mexican context such complexity and vulnerability depend on a host of complex institutional arrangements, such as NAFTA.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept is related to the ecological term "resilience" which is the characteristic of ecosystems to maintain themselves in the face of disturbance.

<sup>2</sup> The impoverishment process was particularly serious for those farmers who were undermining their farm size due to the subdivision of land among many land inheritors. Land scarcity creates new forms of social alliances. Peasants begin to establish different degrees of partnerships with more capitalized producers, as they provide an area of agricultural production in exchange for work of its partners. The impoverishment of the farmer provides the conditions for building clientelar networks with other social actors. As Silvetti (1998:124) argues, certain actors with greater economic and political power give farmers some key resources for "social reproduction", but instead require market exclusivity (as channeling the production of a particular intermediary) or political staunch (electoral votes).

Local level property rights associated with land property, are complex mixes of state, private and regulated and unregulated commons, often nested within each other and all changing and evolving over time. Vulnerability and resilience must then be contextualized by these social and institutional factors.

NAFTA has not only led to changes in the production structure of peasant units and their production strategies, but has also created a growing social heterogeneity. The transformation in rural living conditions is also reflected in the new emerging social conflicts, such as the weakening of traditional networks of reciprocity and the construction of new urban-rural clientele networks, that redefines the peasant world's traditional representation

Agricultural-dependent communities are partially buffered from market variability by their subsistence activities, which is one of the reasons why communities can be affected by market integration. Since 1994, conventional agriculture practiced in Mexico —and widely supported by international agencies— is oriented to an exploitation based in monocultives. The limitations of this agricultural model have created resistance by the most affected by the crisis: smallholders, who in an attempt to resist external pressures, have developed alternative agriculture options, such as agroecology. As Tim Bayliss-Smith (1991: 10) says “vulnerability is socially differentiated”.

The North American Free Trade Agreement has provided Mexican large farmers with the opportunity for business diversification, agricultural financial assistance, and tax-free benefits, which is why their livelihood has improved. By contrast, smallholders are more vulnerable to food insecurity due to their reliance on cash crops, many of which still use pesticides and soil degradation techniques, which place them in a more vulnerable position.

At present it is easy to sense a common feeling of uncertainty among peasants and smallholders. Federal government trade policy —as well as private investment in the countryside and changes in the land tenure legal framework— are some of the factors presently affecting peasant's lives<sup>3</sup>. For instance, the agricultural liberalization, which took place in January 2008, is based on the idea of modernizing agriculture by transforming or eliminating inefficient producers, unable to face competition in international markets. The Carlos Salinas government created new institutions and programs, privatized and eliminated state enterprises related to agriculture, and signed NAFTA in 1994. Many of these initiatives were expected to reduce rural poverty and help farmers adjust to the new, less regulated and more open market structure. Critics of this government policy expressed their concern about the probable destruction of jobs and indigenous traditions (Randall, 2006).

Mexican peasants are faced with NAFTA's legal framework without funds and the tools needed to succeed. The Mexican countryside has not been taken into account by the government policies. Peasants are eager to have new funds and alternatives to work in their land. They have indigenous knowledge about agriculture and these practices are environmentally friendly. New projects need to be promoted by the three levels of government and non-governmental organizations in order to increase reliability, efficiency and competitiveness of the agricultural sector. There needs to be a special emphasis in implementing effective and fair competitive conditions, which is something that is missing in Mexico's involvement within the NAFTA context.

There is no single way to achieve global food self-sufficiency, but the search of alternatives —with its risks and limits of sustainability— is which implies a difficult problem of choice. The potential of agrifood must be considered through its cultural, social, political

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<sup>3</sup> On February 2008 several protests took place on the Mexican and United States borders to halt full liberalization under NAFTA of maize, beans, sugar and powdered milk (Garduño, 2008).

and economical context. Unfortunately, at present, agriculture has suffered from oversimplification: the efficiency of markets.

## Conceptualizing de-growth

Sustainable de-growth has been defined as an equitable and democratic transition to a smaller economy with less production and consumption, reducing the energy and material flows while still fulfilling basic and growing human needs such as food, health, education and housing. However, because of the vagueness of the growth concept, there is an ambiguity with the word 'de-growth.'

De-growth is seen as a transition that requires a transformation of the global economic system, it is also a process which seeks to modify the unsustainable path of human development<sup>4</sup>. From an ecological perspective, de-growth implies downsizing economic throughput as measured by materials and energy flows<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, de-growth goes beyond the dissociation of material and energy use from growth, and postulates that efficiency improvements alone are not sufficient and might be counterproductive.

Serge Latouche (2003: 18), describe a society of de-growth, as one built on quality rather than on quantity, on cooperation rather than on competition, liberated from economism with social justice as the objective, leaving behind the illogical objective of "growth for growth". Paul Ariès (2005:75) argues that growth is not the solution but a part of the problem.

Jacques Ellul (1998, quoted in Martínez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien, & Zaccai, 2010) propose a frugal society as a solution, where quality of life and solidarity among people become the leading social values. Ivan Illich (1994) criticized modern institutions, such as the education system, arguing that they tend to generate impediments to people's autonomy. The de-growth movement urges re-examination of the dominant economic values of wealthy societies. De-growth is not just a matter of physically reducing throughput, but to decolonize minds from economism (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010). According to de-growth proponents, economic growth, even if disguised as sustainable development, will lead to social and ecological collapse. It is thus better to promote different social values and to start adapting to forced de-growths that are likely to occur, in order to find a prosperous way to downsize economic throughput.

Last but not least, de-growth does not equal a contraction but the enjoyment of life, centered on the question of how to be able to enjoy a 'good life' (Georgescu-Roegen, 1975); it challenges the significant distinction between the qualitative and the quantitative assets in peoples life.

Sadly, none of the government leaders or private sector managers, has an incentive compatible with a de-growth policy (Ayres, 2008:290), which explains the few institutional actors promoting? de-growth and the lack of organized political programs towards a de-growth transition, in comparison to the success of the sustainable development program promoted in the 1970s. However, an advantage of putting forward questions about scale, downsizing, de-growth, or about the ethical aims of a society, could be to provide us with more powerful tools in the face of the crises we confront.

While de-growth seeks to reduce energy and material flows in the economy whilst maintaining basic human needs, capitalism fosters the opposite trend. The question to

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<sup>4</sup> This transition is voluntary and participatory and therefore, democratic. Herein, de-growth appears as the result of a collective choice for a better living, not an imperative imposed by an external authority. The de-growth process transition allows a redistribution of the global wealth in order to create an equitable society, based on social justice.

<sup>5</sup> According to (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010) the debate rests on how much downsizing is necessary for sustainability and whether there is an optimal scale of the economy.

answer is: How then can de-growth be implemented on a large scale? At present it seems unlikely to happen in an economy based on the accumulation of capital and the free market.

David Schweickart (2002) argues that economic growth is not the answer, therefore a path oriented in de-growth could be a very real option. This essay shows some empirical lessons learned from an agroecological cooperative in Mexico, which illustrates one of the most notable de-growth experiences that can be achieved by empowering smallholders. Specifically, it is argued that small farming cooperatives have the best potential to achieve the objectives of agroecology and de-growth.

Next I will explain six key concepts related to de-growth that I found within the case study research: institutions, cooperative, social cohesion, identity, agroecology and food sovereignty.

### ***Institutions***

Herein, institutions include regular behavior, rules and norms that govern society, as well as the notion of formal institutions with memberships, constituencies and stakeholders. This broad definition is important because institutional structures, such as property rights, command the use of natural resources creating incentives for its sustainable use.

Timothy O’Riordan et al. point out that, institutions can be persistent, sustainable and resilient depending on a range of parameters, including *legitimacy*, (O’Riordan et al., 1998); agenda setting and the selecting of environmental risks which resonate with the institutions’ agenda and the maintenance of social capital (Adger, 2000). In this essay, communities’ social capital describes the existence of integrating features of social organization (e.g. trust norms and networks). At the same time, institutions are never completely static, they are continually re-negotiated in the permanent interplay between human agency action and the wider structures in society, over which individuals have relatively little control (O’Riordan & Jordan, 1999).

### ***Cooperative***

Cooperatives are social organizations made up of people with common interests ties together through solidarity and mutual support. Cooperatives are intended to meet individual and collective needs through economic production activities, and the distribution and consumption of goods and services (Victor de Santo, 1999:84). Cooperatives consider the individual as the center of its activities, giving them autonomy and fostering a culture based on values such as equality, participation and communication. It is therefore “theoretically” possible for a cooperative to start from a better position to develop its economic activity and to better adapt to changes in its environment.

Cooperation is based on common ownership of production conditions, and the fact that each individual is strongly attached to its community. As a result, cooperatives contribute to community development through the construction of physical capital, human capital and social capital (Rojas et al, 2007:208 and Marx, 1975:332).

### ***Social Cohesion***

Social cohesion is the ability of society to ensure the welfare of all its members, including equitable access to resources, respect for human dignity, diversity, personal and collective autonomy, responsible participation, and minimizing social and economic inequalities in order to avoid polarization. Thus, a cohesive society is one that has developed successful ways of coping with pressures and conflicts, in an open and democratic way, and has managed to significantly reduce economic, social and cultural discrepancies (European Committee for Social Cohesion, 2012).

Social cohesion and social capital, although they are close terms, have differences that strengthen each other. Social cohesion refers to an absence of latent social conflict (wealth inequality, ethnic tensions) and the presence of strong social ties and regulations to handle conflicts. Social capital, seen as a subset of social cohesion, is a characteristic of social structures (interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity and mutual aid) that acts as a resource for individuals and facilitates collective action. Social capital is expressed as tangible results in improvements in production, in the construction of common goods and in healthier projects.

### ***Identity***

Francois Dubet (1989:520) defines identity as the subjective side of integration; it is how the actor internalizes imposed or acquired roles and status where he or she submits its social personality. Identity is the definition of a social actor himself, along with a series of images, myths and discourses that allow and recognize her/him as such. This assignment usually defends traditions to appeal to the immemorial past of a social group, based on ideals. The accelerated economic, political and cultural change lived in rural areas results in a defensive “back to the basics”, recreating a local culture and community sense of belonging that, in the particular case of Las Cañadas, promotes diverse alternatives.

In this regard, Hannah Arendt (1982) points out that ideologies allow groups to establish a coherent symbolic ground in which they define themselves and ascribe different features to other actors. Some ideologies can give a sense of belonging to a meaningful world. These positional ideologies are key elements in the collective identities formation, allowing the social actor to reaffirm his position in opposition to others (such as a family, a race, and a locality). Social identity is constructed in accordance with what each social group defines as collective practices, as well as the way they give meaning to them.

### ***Agroecology***

Agroecology is a scheme designed to create integrated, humane, environmentally and economically sustainable production systems. Agroecology intensifies its reliance on farm-derived renewable resources and the management of ecological and biological processes and interactions, in order to provide acceptable levels of crop, livestock and human nutrition, protection from pests and disease, and an appropriate return to the human and other resources (Lampkin 1994, cited in Nelson, Scott, Cukier, & Galán, 2009).

In this context, Miguel Altieri says that agroecosystems are communities of plants and animals interacting with their physical and chemical environments that have been modified by people to produce food, fiber, fuel and other products for human consumption and processing.” (Altieri, 2002).

However, as Charles Francis et al (2003) emphasize, the study of agroecology needs to build bridges and connections between agricultural production disciplines, which goes beyond the farm gate in the rural landscape and community. Sociology, anthropology, environmental science, ethics and economics are essential to achieve it. In contrast to the limited perspective that provides soil-crop interaction, the definition of agroecology proposed by Francis et al (2003) helps to develop research questions of greater scope, in search of solutions within a sustainable agriculture and food system.

Agroecology is the comprehensive study of the ecology of the entire food system, encompassing ecological, economic and social dimensions. This definition expands our thinking beyond production practices and immediate environmental impacts at the field and farm level (Francis et al, 2003:2).

### ***Food Sovereignty***

Miguel Altieri (2009) defines food sovereignty as the right of each nation or region to maintain and develop their capacity to produce basic food crops with the corresponding productive and cultural diversity. Food sovereignty emphasizes the farmers' access to land, seeds, and water while focusing on local autonomy, local markets, local production-consumption cycles, energy and technological sovereignty, and farmer-to-farmer networks. In addition, Via Campesina<sup>6</sup> suggests the idea of human, economic and social rights that everyone owns, including the right to food, to land and to produce our own food (Rosset, 2007). Moreover, Peter Rosset points out that food sovereignty goes beyond the concept of food security, meaning that everyone should get enough food every day and be aware of its origin and means of production.

The type of food sovereignty practiced in the cooperative is the result of the decision of its members, because there have been moments of alliances and ruptures in relationships that have led to this "food sovereignty hybrid ideology", since its members work in order to have the freedom, ability and right to decide the production strategies, as well as the supply and consumption of food<sup>7</sup>. This is why Victor Suarez (2008) says that the practice of sovereignty requires political and economic autonomy, an aspect which the cooperative already incorporates in its practice.

### **Empirical lessons from Mexico's agriculture: Las Cañadas**

Las Cañadas agroecological cooperative is located in the province of Veracruz, Mexico. This province's cattle raising<sup>8</sup> process happened mainly at the expense of land dispossession, both communal and *ejido*<sup>9</sup> (Carrillo, 1993:78). In the late seventies, Mexican national policies that promoted agricultural and livestock production to domestic and international markets allowed large producers to choose livestock production over agricultural production. This not so random elite decision to increase livestock production increased tree felling in the area, which led to large-scale erosion, causing substantial ecosystem deterioration.

The production pattern change of the rural economy to trade agricultural products and livestock, is a result of internal social differentiation processes of those peasants which —because of land grabbing and control of political and administrative positions— are pushed to participate in a process related to the capitalist accumulation logic (Carrillo, 1993; Silvetti, 1998). According to Ivonne Carrillo (1993:80) the *ejido* and community have also changed their pattern of production to livestock and cash crops in two ways: (i) as a survival mechanism to re-organize production, and (ii) as a way to an ongoing relationship with the land.

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<sup>6</sup> An international assambleary movement that coordinates peasant organizations of small and middle-class producers, agricultural workers, rural women, and indigenous communities from Asia, Africa, America, and Europe, to struggle against the big business and agricultural barons, backed up by the policy agenda of the World Trade Organization, NAFTA, and within the European framework, the Common Agricultural Policy (López-i-Gelats et al., 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Food sovereignty must include self-sufficiency in the production of major commodities: corn, beans, wheat and soy, among others.

<sup>8</sup> Livestock production involves a major land degradation processes. Erosion affects around 80% of the surface of agricultural land in the world (Pimentel and Kounang, 1998; Napier et al., 2000 cited in Gonzalez et al, 2007), also depletion and deterioration of the physical properties of soil increases production costs, due to higher fertilization requirements and increased energy consumption for soil preparation and maintenance costs of the production units. The problem of soil erosion in Mexico is significant, with figures around 74-95% of its territory, in different degrees (FAO, 1994; Ortiz et al, 1994; Figueroa, 1995; and INEGI, 1998 cited in Gonzalez et al, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Change in the *ejido* production pattern and agrarian communities not targeted exclusively to livestock, has also been important to the replacement of maize and beans to commercial agricultural products.

Thus, peasants replaced cornfields with grass, and started partnering with local farmers via rental or sharecropping, receiving a marginal income and a temporal (or permanent) proletarian post to ensure the survival of his family. The farmer, a member of the regional rural elite, expanded its wealth by occupying space previously dedicated to the production of staple foods, throwing peasants away and promoting cheap and unskilled workers who were previously employed in low-income jobs in urban areas. They also increased their profits through the extensional couple: *increasing paddocks = increased livestock* (Velasco, 1993:101).

Las Cañadas agroecological cooperative has an extension of 756 acres which houses one of the last remnants of cloud forest and is located in the municipality of Huatusco, Veracruz. The municipality has 72 villages and a total population of 54 561 inhabitants. It is located at an altitude of 1,300 meters, has temperatures between 16-26°C and a precipitation of 1100-1600 mm. The climate is humid with a rains all year around. According to Mexico's Handbook of Municipal Geographic Information (2009) 52% of land is used in agricultural production and 2% is urban. Its vegetation is 26% grassland, 17% forest and 3% rain forests.

The province of Veracruz is classified as a highly marginalized province, it is one of the four most marginalized provinces in the country. However, based on the socioeconomic indicators that reflect forms of social exclusion, Huatusco is considered with a medium degree of marginalization. According to the Mexican government, marginalization is defined as the set of disadvantages of a community (CONAPO, 2010). The marginalization index seeks to establish an analytical parameter for understanding when a sector of society is in a situation where it has little or no development opportunities, nor the ability to access them. However, even though the municipality is regarded with a medium degree of marginalization, the villages that the cooperative members inhabit have a high or very high degree of marginalization.

Around 17 thousand individuals make up the labor force. Employment is mainly concentrated in the primary sector (44.3%), followed by the tertiary sector (38.7%) and, finally the secondary sector (15.6%). While agricultural activities have dominated the area, coffee and cane growing have been emblematic, and the production of maize and beans is increasingly unstable (Aguilar & Ortiz, 2011:31). Furthermore, in recent years, the area's environment has substantially deteriorated.

## **Socio-historical process**

To provide a better understanding of the socio-historical process of the cooperative, this section has been divided into four evolution stages: (i) the livestock stage, (ii) the ecotourism and organic production stage, (iii) the ecovillage stage; and (iv) the cooperative and self-sufficiency living stage. The last three stages overlap at times, but its segmentation is of paramount importance, because each one defines a historic moment in the ideology and practices of Las Cañadas development.

### **(i) Livestock stage (1988-1995)**

The young agronomist Ricardo Romero, inherited *Rancho Las Cañadas* in 1992. At that time, more than 400 acres of the farm (of a total 756 acres) was intended for livestock production in order to produce beef. The effect of this activity was a strong erosion of the land. This livestock stage was consistent with the world dominant idea of development, a linear progress which promises to take control over nature through science and material abundance using superior technology. Herein, two main waves of agricultural modernization may be identified, namely: the Green Revolution of the sixties and, more recently, the Biotechnology Revolution (López-i-Gelats, Tàbara, & Bartolomé, 2009).



As a founder and director of *Las Cañadas*, in 1994 he started to seek and implement production systems and sustainable living. Consequently, in 1995 he decided to change the family business path sowing 150 acres with 50 thousand native trees: oak, walnut, ash, sweetgum and beech. Thus, he developed a new project in *Las Cañadas* farm, namely: a green business. Its main goal was “to respect and care for the environment, achieving economic growth in each of their areas, improving their profitability, and placing it in a competitive market.” This was a critical juncture moment, when he has to choose between several scenarios, which will be described in the next sections.

### **(ii) Ecotourism and organic production stage (1996-2007)**

In 1996 *Las Cañadas* farm began receiving national and, mostly, international tourists through its ecotourism project. There were many activities to offer to tourists, including a hiking, trekking, biking, horse-riding, birdwatching, and even a butterfly garden. Because he did not have the proper facilities to accommodate the influx of tourists, Romero hired workers who started to build an ecological hotel and a *temazcal* (a type of sweat lodge, created by indigenous people).

Later, in October 1998, Romero implemented the first conservation easement in Mexico, protecting remnants of cloud forest and disturbed areas<sup>10</sup>. According to the Mexican Fund for the Conservation of the Environment, *Las Cañadas* is one of the high priority areas for conservation in the country. The land was segmented as follows: absolute conservation (89 acres), buffer (138 acres), recovery (279 acres), and multipurpose (250 acres). Furthermore, in 1997 *Las Cañadas* begun producing cheese, yogurt and jams, all of them organic products which were sold within the domestic market.

At present, Tania de Alba (Romero's wife) says “at that time it was not clear the reason ‘why’ we were doing that. On the one hand we were producing food for us, but on the other we had to attend to the necessities of tourists. It has a clear incoherence for me. Besides, I never liked the ecotourism project, because my family becomes an object of consumption. People come to see us as ‘the green family’ and that was nonsense from my perspective.”

### **(iii) Ecovillage stage (2004-2006)**

As Tania de Alba remembers, the ecovillage project emerged because Romero and she realized the need for a group whom they can relate to in an equitable, fair and unbiased manner. This genuine necessity arose mostly because they saw their little daughter growing up with no peers who held the same ideals as her and her family. In 2004 they invited five families to join this endeavor, two of them even bought land within the *Las Cañadas* farm, another two were neighbors, and the last one declined the offer.

The ecovillage had as its main objectives: (i) to create a sustainable community that would live simply and with joy; (ii) to preserve and restore the 756 acres of cloud forest; (iii) to raise their children with skills and values that enable them to live a sustainable life; (iv) to practice agroecology techniques in order to eat what they produce; (v) to reach energy self-sufficiency through the use of renewable resources; (vi) to share and exchange experiences with farmers, teachers, young people, ecotourists, and those who attend *Las Cañadas'* courses and workshops; (vii) to implement and teach alternative farming techniques that allows local communities to become more sustainable through the Center for Agroecology; (viii) to demonstrate the ability to live outside the “consumer system”; and

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<sup>10</sup> A conservation easement is a tool for landowners to protect natural resources and preserve scenic open space. The landowner who gives an easement limits the right to develop and subdivide the land, now and in the future, but still remains the owner. The organization accepting the easement agrees to monitor it forever to ensure compliance with its terms. No public access is required by a conservation easement.

(ix) to contribute to local and regional community development, focusing on micro-watersheds.

In August 2006 this project ended, or as some of its ex-members say it “failed” because they could not specify a true common goal. In addition, they could not establish a way to build horizontal participation of each ecovillage member, nor establish any leadership. This stage is actually the “obscurest” of the organization, as it is a subject that hardly anyone speaks of. The end of this stage involved the rupture of social relations between ecovillagers, some decided to dissociate themselves from the organization, others, decided to still live within the territory of Las Cañadas, but to not maintain a close relationship with the cooperative itself.

#### **(iv) Agroecology cooperative stage (2006-present)**

In April 29, 2006 eighteen partners legally constituted the cooperative “Agroecology and Ecotourism, Las Cañadas”, within the legal framework of cooperative societies<sup>11</sup>. The cooperative By-laws stated that it was a social and sustainable organization that could not join any political party or religious organization, and would remain autonomous in its activities. The cooperative's mission was to create jobs for partners and third parties through the operation, management and development of productive projects and services, as well as consumer and marketing networks, in order to build an economy characterized by solidarity and sustainability in Mexico. Thus, the *institution*, as described before, was created with its rules, norms and memberships.

Its social objective was to design, promote, implement, operate and manage production and service projects to generate sustainable and permanent jobs in the region, hiring national or foreign technicians to provide technical assistance, management or advice. To achieve these objectives, it was considered necessary to perform activities, such as creating and operating one or more “business centers”, productive or service companies and marketing and supply networks, that would strengthen the cooperative processes. It was thought that these activities would also improve the promotion and marketing of the products and services of its members, and would strengthen solidarity and sustainable entrepreneurship. In other words, it would create a green business.

Nevertheless, both cooperative members and their goals changed four months later when members of the ecovillage left the project and the cooperative assembly approved to affiliate fourteen new members. By-laws amendment established the mission “to learn, implement and transmit alternatives that conserve the natural resources while generating reasonable income and social justice among the members of the cooperative.” They also agreed to establish three social funds:

1. *Reserve Fund*: Made up of 10% of Las Cañadas income per year until it represents twenty percent of the social capital.
2. *Welfare Fund*: Unrestricted reserves to cover medical, dental, hospital and death expenditures; housing support, educational scholarships, and cultural activities; as well as aid with milk, pantry and food. In addition, there are prizes for punctuality, attendance, performance and productivity.
3. *Education Fund*: Designed to cover the cost of education programs to train cooperative members and managers to improve in the performance of his duties and lead to a more efficient administration.

The third critical juncture moment happened in August 2007. Ricardo Romero met David Holmgren during a Permaculture course in Michoacán, México. Holmgren's knowledge changed Romero's perspective about the agroecological cooperative, and as a result, he decided to redesign the cooperative eliminating the organic dairy production as

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<sup>11</sup> Ley General de Sociedades Cooperativas.

well as the ecotourism component. The cooperative ceased its domestic sales, setting apart 42 acres to produce food and dairy goods for self-sufficiency. Several agroecological systems were implemented: bio-intensive gardens, edible forests, agroecologic milpa (maíz, beans and zucchini), legume cultivation, agroforestry, agroecologic poultry, shiitake mushroom production, as well as seed and germplasm banks.

They also installed the “Agroecology and food safety program”, which seeks to implement and share agroecological, forestry and social organization alternatives that enable members to achieve a secure and permanent supply of food, water, timber, and firewood—with quality and quantity—in order to achieve a healthy and active life for the cooperative members and their families. Each year they sow and harvest maize and beans, equitably distributing the crop among their members. Furthermore, they share the organic milk production and make organic cheese and yogurt<sup>12</sup>. Finally, through the cooperative’s welfare fund, some members construct home gardens and hen coops in their homes. As I mentioned before, although they are not inserted in the food sovereignty movement or ideology, they are acting beyond food safety standards, therefore assuming a socio-political stand which brings them closer to food sovereignty.

On February 23, 2009 a new member was accepted and four left the cooperative. As one of the By-Law clauses indicates, every three years the cooperative should vote to reassign the Council presidents. That year the members ratified the permanence of Ricardo Romero as chairman of the Board of Directors, Tania de Alba was assigned as chairman of the Supervisory Board and confirmed as president of the Education and Training Board. Adán Colorado was confirmed as a chairman of the Conciliation and Arbitration Board. Clearly these ratifications are questionable, since most of the members argue that during the first years almost no one spoke during the assemblies, which shows the lack of a culture based on equality, participation and communication values, as theoretically speaking, a cooperative should work.

Through interviews conducted in 2012, the partners agree that one of the main reasons why the cooperative was founded was to cease the difference in the employer-worker relationship. Las Cañadas official webpage points out that all have the status of members. This change within the legal framework was to promote a fair relationship between people, from rural and urban background, and to give social, legal, economic and ecological soundness to the project over time.

At present the cooperative consists of twenty members, eight women and twelve men, and the average age of its members is 36 years old. Sixteen members do not live in the farm, they are from the surrounding villages of Coxolo, Huatusco and Tepetzingo. The four members who live within the ranch are from the village of Axocuapan, and from the cities of Córdoba and Guadalajara. Finally there are non-members living in the farm from Andalusia (Spain) and from Mexico City.

Because of the recent withdrawal of three members, as well as past and persistent conflicts among members, in July 2012 a facilitator carried out a course of mediation, whose main purpose was to teach the basic mediation principles: voluntarily, consent inform, self-determination and impartiality. As an ongoing process, mediation skills should be incorporated through time, although it is an indicator of a *cohesive* group, that has developed ways of coping with pressures and conflicts, in an open and democratic way.

The most recent mandate of the cooperative is to seek a “sustainable living”. They want to not only try to replace conventional inputs and practices with alternatives, but to redesign their systems, needs, food, children’s education and community relations in order to create their own culture. In short, they seek “to live in a simple and straightforward way” where the countryside members, who represent the majority of Las Cañadas cooperative,

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<sup>12</sup> Production surplus are sold locally.

share their knowledge, management, planning and organization skills (Las Cañadas, 2011). Undoubtedly this idea brings back the ability to enjoy a 'good life' that Georgescu-Roegen mentioned in his writings about? Where did he mention it?

## Conclusion

There is a change in the conditions of Mexican peasant life which is reflected in new social conflicts that have arisen around the competition for resources, due to the weakening of traditional networks of reciprocity and the construction of new urban-rural networks that everyday redefine the traditional worldview. There is a promise of a total freedom within the global society that makes available—to whoever can afford it—a modern technological world, full of goods regardless of its permanence; a lifestyle which not necessarily promotes the enjoyment of life, that moves away the society from household management and allows the free-trade economy to dominate our daily life.

As mentioned before, there is no single way to achieve global food self-sufficiency (not to mention food sovereignty), but as this case study shows, there are alternatives which are considering the cultural, social, political and economical context of each community. Las Cañadas, as an agroecological cooperative, fosters family stability in a dignified manner and supports environmental resilience through seeds, soil and water recovery.

Smallholders are more productive, more efficient, and contribute to a wider regional development than large corporate farmers (Rosset, 2007). These microcosms of traditional agriculture offer promising models because they promote biodiversity, thrive without agrochemicals and sustain year-round yields (Altieri, 2009) this may be the most sensible avenue for solving the problems of poverty, food insecurity and environmental degradation (Altieri, 2002).

Although this cooperative reflects the founder and director's own desires more so than its cooperative members, Ricardo Romero's desires have been shaped both by their own participation in alternative food practice and the imperative to do good as they begin to come to terms with the current agricultural situation. However, through their experiences in the last sixteen years it is clear that most of the cooperative members are more aware about the present social and environmental problems. Utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces, but there are also real places which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites can be found, where the culture is simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. These places are absolutely different from all the known sites, named: heterotopias (Foucault, 1984).

The approach I have taken in this research is to conceive the agroecological cooperative as a dynamic agent, whose actors and constitutive relations are constantly changing, and redefining their perspective. Moreover, it is important to notice the organization's critical junctures as well as the emotional aspects that underlie social relations, merging the history of its formation and the stories of their actors, whom constantly learn and reflect on agroecological ideology.

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