

Argentina's open education programs for Food Sovereignty and the Peoples' Right to Food

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Summary

This article describes the establishment of the Open Education Programs for Food Sovereignty at the “Libertador General San Martín” Agrotechnical School and in the Faculty of Veterinarian Sciences at the National University of Rosario. Their development makes concrete the academic proposal of the cátedras libres

(open education programs) from both epistemological and methodological perspectives. We work conceptually with ideas such as food sovereignty and security, environmental education, and Latin American environmental thought, with particular emphasis on specific actions that strengthen ties with other open education programs and affinity groups, empower networks and

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deepen ties between institutions, organizations and social movements which work on these issues through a national and international network.

Key words: Networks—Open Programs—Affinity Spaces⁴—Food Sovereignty and Security—Environmental Education—Latin American Environmental Thought.

Introduction

We live in an historic moment of enormous complexity with many extremely grave crises including the threat of nuclear war, climate change, various pandemics affecting people's health, a great economic depression and an unprecedented racist counteroffensive. We are very concerned by these crises of the environment, climate, ecology, energy, health and food which together constitute what many thinkers in our Abya Yala⁵ characterize as a "crisis of civilization," a crisis which raises for discussion the conceptions of life and models of production, distribution and consumption which, based on neo-extractivist practices, have put on the agenda the threat of an environmental disaster which could make our planet collapse.

The Confederation of Education Workers of the Argentine Republic (CTERA) has for over 20 years expressed the need to rethink ourselves as education workers and to redefine our practices from the perspective of human rights. These human rights include the right to

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education and to an environmental education which has as its foundation a definition of environmental rights and their connection to the human right to adequate nourishment.

This article attempts to share the evolution of the spaces which have been created in some public institutions, labour organizations, and social movements: the Open Education Programs for Food Sovereignty (CaLiSAs)⁶. It seems pertinent to describe the academic proposal of open education programs as much from an epistemological as a methodological perspective.

In recent years, we have seen an explosion of information which gives the disheartening statistics on the food crisis: 925 million people suffer from malnutrition, and the greater part of them live from subsistence agriculture, unable to decide what to eat or how to produce it. This makes it essential to reflect on notions such as food sovereignty and security, environmental education, and Latin American environmental thought, with particular emphasis on specific actions that strengthen ties with other open education programs and affinity groups, strengthen collective work and deepen relations between the various groups through a national and international network in which actions, perspectives, ideas and inspiring proposals converge and interchange in an emancipatory way, maintaining the self-identified nuances of each territory.

As a result of national meetings of the CaLiSAs and affinity groups carried out in recent years, many reports,

4. "Affinity spaces" refers to spaces which are not necessarily within open education programs, or even within the university sphere, but which deal with the same issues. They may be forums, seminars, workshops, social movements, assemblies, taking place within a community, a municipality, a neighbourhood organization, etc. (Translator's note.)

5. Abya Yala, which in the Kuna language means «land in its full maturity» or «land of vital blood», is the name used by the Native American Guna people who inhabit the geographic region called the Darién Gap, between what is now northwest Colombia and southeast Panama, to refer to the American continent since pre-Columbian times. The term is now used by Indigenous movements across the American continent. (Translator's note.)

6. Cátedras Libres de Soberanía Alimentaria. (Translator's note.)



records and conclusions have been prepared. We think it is important to share some of this information in the following paragraphs as we begin this article. We cannot ignore the current context of growing tension - environmental, climatic, health and energy-related, ecological, economic and social - which plagues the entire world and further exacerbates the limitations and hunger of peoples.

We find ourselves in a food and environmental emergency on a national scale. The current reality takes us back to scenarios which were thought to have been overcome some time ago. Previously we talked about the quantity and quality of foods of nutritional value with the necessary daily intake having been established in places where food assistance was given. Today we find ourselves discussing the possibility of accessing basic nutrition. Even though this reality affects everyone, we understand that it is mainly a violation of a national law, 26.061, which has as its objective the protection of the

rights of children and adolescents. The right to healthy, secure and sovereign nourishment and to a healthy environment is a basic right which must be guaranteed. This law must be seen as a tool in the struggle for food sovereignty, which is essentially a struggle for life.

“We understand that the environment is related directly to food quality and to peoples’ living well and we are aware of the environmental disaster caused by food production, whether it be by intensive agriculture dependent on chemical pesticides and the uncontrolled use of antibiotics and hormonal disruptors or the extractivism which various industries exercise over natural resources. For this reason, we must call for a global health and food alert across the countries of our America, where the health of our peoples is put at risk daily with carcinogenic, teratogenic, immunological and endocrinological impacts that are irreversibly affecting planetary biodiversity” (National Meeting of CaLiSAs, 2019).

Food and globalization

In the era of globalization, an historic moment in which food has been produced as never before, the question arises of why we continue speaking of food scarcity and hunger. Hunger is the denial of the most basic and essential of human rights - the right to nourishment. One of the key concepts needed to understand the complexity of food and food policies is “globalization,” understood as a system of networks in which commerce, investment by transnational corporations, financial trends, the movement of people and the circulation of information which links various societies are organized. It is at the same time the space of power within which dominant groups establish, in every historical period, the rules of the game which articulate the global system (Ferrer, 2004). This rebranded globalization involves different variables, mainly: economies, finance, international commerce, politics, culture, society and ecology. However, it is the first two which have given momentum to the system.

Globalization emerged after the Second World War, and since its inception this system has created great crises over the years. The existence of a “global food system” began to take shape when the largest organization related to food, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), legitimized this model. In 2001, for the first time, the development of an agricultural food system was conceived as the goal, which opened the way for a system of oligopolies, or the control of food production concentrated in the hands of a few multinational businesses.

In the preamble to its constitution, the FAO makes it explicit that its member states will promote general well-being, both individual and collective, in order to raise the level of nutrition and the life of peoples, to improve both the yield of production and distribution, as well as the conditions of the rural population, and to contribute thereby to the expansion of the global economy and free humanity from hunger. Raj Patel in 2008, cited by Claudio Tomas (2011), indicates that “this system is fragile owing to the size of its ecological

footprint, the resources required to sustain it, and the exploitation which it requires It is systematically vulnerable, and its vulnerability is found close to the surface of our daily lives: all that is needed to expose it is a slight shake of the system, such as a shortage of petroleum.”

Food Security and Food Sovereignty

Both these concepts originate in the idea of the human right to food. When we speak of food security, it reflects a need for reparation or compensation in response to the consequences of the world food system, and when we refer to food sovereignty, we are proposing an alternative and complementary way of managing and satisfying food needs.

Food security supposes that: all persons must always have physical and economic access to sufficient food for an active and healthy life. The Interamerican Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), whose goals are to promote and support efforts of member states to achieve agricultural development and the well-being of rural populations, understands food security as “... the existence of conditions which make it possible for human beings to have physical and economic access, and in a socially acceptable manner, to a secure and nutritional diet, in accordance with the cultural preferences which allow them to satisfy their food needs and live in a productive and healthy manner.” (IICA, 2009, p.1)

For its part, the notion of food sovereignty arose from civil society efforts in the nineties, the product of various political confrontations and as a proposal to counteract the destructive industrial capitalist model which, even today, continues to provoke hunger, inequality and environmental, energy and food crises, in other words, a “crisis of civilization.”

In 1996, this concept appeared globally at the time of the World Food Summit organized by the FAO in Rome. It was backed by the political strategy, discourse and actions of organizations and movements throughout the world. At this event, which we could call a “counter-summit,” 1,200 organizations from 69 countries



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participated. One of the important organizations was the Via Campesina movement which promotes a campesino model based on sustainable agriculture and production, far removed from the hegemonic agro-export model implemented in Argentina and other countries of the Southern Cone.

This movement defined food sovereignty as “the right of persons to produce in an autonomous form healthy, nutritious, climate-friendly and culturally appropriate food, utilizing local resources through agroecological means, mainly to care for the local food needs of their communities. It is necessary even to guarantee food security and sustainability on the planet.” Under this concept, the production and consumption of food is guaranteed according to the needs of communities, giving priority to production for local and domestic consumption, and confirming the right of peoples to choose what to eat and how to produce it.

The organizations which promote food sovereignty demand the exclusion of food and agriculture from commercial agreements such as those of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and from regional trade agreements. They argue that uncontrolled deregulation of business leads farmers to lose strength and

is, furthermore, the main obstacle to local economic development and to food sovereignty (Curti, et al, 2009). According to the academic Myram Kurganoff de Gorban, an undisputed national and international authority on nutrition and veteran of the struggle to create an equitable food system, “...with the idea of Food Sovereignty, they began to gather and unify global calls and demands such as access to dignified work on the land, the care of the environment, and the recovery of food and production as a human right (...) this is one of the most powerful social movements today” (Gorban, 2009).

They seek to break with the agricultural model imposed by the WTO and add the idea of food security, which the FAO also proposed, demanding that food must be available and accessible to everyone (although in this formulation it is not so important its origin and under what conditions it is produced).

To sum up, food security is supported and valued by various international organizations. This is aligned with the conception of the UN as promoting a path of “civilized” development” which does not oppose the currents of the market, since it allows for regional cultural integration among peoples (Niemeyer and

Scholz, 2008). These writers also postulate that food security, unlike food sovereignty, would guarantee a production qualitatively sufficient for safe foods, without considering local cultural aspects such as: what, who, where and on what scale. They maintain that it is directed toward eradicating hunger in the short term, over and above a sustainable prospect of self-sufficiency.

On the other hand, food sovereignty is a concept in full transformation, and it would be a mistake to think that returning to traditional systems of production would mean returning to prehistory and undoing knowledge already acquired. What this movement truly proposes is a reflection on the fact that it is not the same to be fed by industry as by people who work the earth, conscious of their work.

As described above, it is essential today to develop work on food sovereignty and security and to supply and ensure the methods and tools that communities consider necessary to do so. This is the task which the Open Education Programs for Food Sovereignty are undertaking.

The Network of Open Education Programs for Food Sovereignty in Argentina

Argentina's Network of Open Education Programs for Food Sovereignty (CaLiSAs) and affinity collectives comprises almost a hundred groups, which shows uninterrupted growth since 2003 when the first program was created at the National University of La Plata. Some are found in different academic entities in the country's public universities, while others belong to organizations and social movements in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, but all are aware of the network's interdisciplinary character. Alongside this network, social organizations, unions, family farmers, agrotechnical schools, and various collectives also work together. Those involved bring their own realities, enriching these spaces with a multiplicity of perspectives and a plurality of opinions. The natural, human, and formal sciences, as well as those that provide legal and public policy frameworks, are fundamental to this approach to food sovereignty

when added to indigenous and ancestral knowledge.

The idea of creating open education programs to deal with extracurricular content has its origins in the University Reform of 1918, in which "open teaching" and "open attendance" were spoken of—ideas which complement each other and constitute the basis of the rights to teaching and learning.

The CaLiSA at the National University of Rosario, in accordance with the goals of 2017 for the "Libertador General San Martín" Agrotechnical School and the Faculty of Veterinarian Sciences, is linked to the Network of CaLiSAs and affinity collectives. It is important to note that model is unique in South America, given that it envisions the interaction between an agrotechnical pre-university school, the Agrotechnical School of Casilda, and a faculty, that of the Veterinarian Sciences, thus working at both the pre-university and the university level.

Of the CaLiSAs from which we have obtained data through our survey, 93% work with social movements. Many of these extracurricular groups deal with the same issues as the popular organizations which are so important for food sovereignty. All of the CaLiSAs surveyed join with movements and organizations related to food production, the defense of the environment, Indigenous peoples, student centres and various university communities such as community services, popular libraries, dining halls, and community gardens.

Additionally, different networks (of business, professionals, of CaLiSAs) have joined this Network and some of them work on the legal aspects related to developing food sovereignty practices. Cooperatives, fairs, working groups, agricultural forums, assemblies, and social and union movements are also getting involved.

The survey we conducted investigated the perceptions of those who created and founded the Open Education Programs for Food Sovereignty. The research took as a reference point the statements of members of the programs in the heart of public universities of Argentina. Among the concepts and responses which emerged repeatedly, when respondents were asked to



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express with three words what these spaces represent, the following terms were especially noticeable: “nutrition,” “building collectively,” “exchange of knowledge,” “public policies and the law.”

For their creators, the CaLiSAs represent the possibility of achieving access to healthy food and nutrition through collective construction; a meeting place that multiplies and forms collaborative networks that transform knowledge and territories. They emphasize the recovery and exchange of knowledge and experience. They promote discussion on the right to life, to the environment, and to healthy food as well as the right to create or to improve the design of public policies sensitive to the needs of the members of these communities.

Survey responses from key actors in these spaces show that, among the main issues dealt with in the various CaLiSAs, “agroecology”, or sustainable farming, occupies a leading role and appears consistently in all the programs. Another of the themes dealt with is “nourishment as a human right which highlights the need for nutrition and a nourishing food culture.” This is accompanied by perspectives on a “social and popular economy” as a development strategy: popular markets, accompanying social movements, short supply chains,

local rootedness, among others. There are also issues related to “health,” the practices of “Good Living,” and the “environmental perspective” which highlights the impact of pollution from various factors on the health of our peoples, a consequence of agroindustry and the intensive agro-export model based on commodity production by transnational corporations.

It is interesting to emphasize that “gender focus” appears as an issue dealt with by many of the CaLiSAs, as is “ecofeminism.” In addition, the struggles of women for food sovereignty are reclaimed, recognized and valued.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the “University Extension,” as a proposal undertaken by various CaLiSAs relating to their links with various social actors and the social role of university professionals. As was mentioned earlier, many of the CaLiSAs were created as projects or initiatives of university extension since that is how it has been possible to access, in many cases, the financing necessary for the activities they want to carry out. Furthermore, it is precisely through actions in this field that participation in these areas has been encouraged and knowledge constructed by means of the dialogue of learning both with and in communities.

Some reflections and conclusions

The CaLiSAs understand, given the “one health” approach which emerged over a decade ago through an alliance between the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), that the environment is related directly to the well-being of peoples. Therefore, it is essential to think and create reality from within public universities; viable alternatives, solidarity actions and sustainable options for food production. The main characteristics of this concept are their collaborative, multidisciplinary and multisectoral nature which allow them to approach the threats to health in the interface between human beings, animals and the environment on the regional, national and international level. Their purpose is to promote coordination and collaboration between the various structures that govern programs of human, animal, plant and environmental health in order to confront current and future challenges. In addition, of the greatest concern are the risks that affect the systems on which society depends - health, agriculture, livestock, and the environment (OPS, 2011).

It is also necessary to consider food sovereignty as a strategy of struggle against hunger. The natural, human and formal sciences, together with those that guarantee legal and public political frameworks, added to Indigenous and ancestral wisdom, are fundamental to the integral approach to food sovereignty. The programs which make up the CaLiSaS Network propose to open spaces of dialogue for the educational community and the population in general, taking up some of the perspectives of environmental education in the context of Latin American environmental thought and outlining a dialogical construction of learning, knowledge, thoughts, reflections and ideas. In short, the CaLiSAs are a space of meeting and discussion, with the possibility of making concrete the challenge of re-thinking ourselves as a species and of re-inventing ourselves whenever possible or necessary. Within communities this can mean participating in Living Well, facilitating

reflection on extremely complex concepts such as food sovereignty, or simply getting a little closer to one of the most basic rights of the human species: the right to healthy, safe, flavourful and “sovereign” food.

We know that the dominant agro-industrial model is ecocidal, because it generates significant and irreparable damage to the environment and the ecosystems which many human populations depend on for their own subsistence. It is genocide because it submits peoples, mainly those affected by toxic chemicals, to conditions of life which are making them sick and killing them. It also violates every one of our human rights: the right to life, the right to physical integrity, the right to live in a healthy environment, the right to health, the right to adequate nutrition, the right to water, the right to not be forcibly displaced; we are becoming environmental refugees in our own lands.

All the negative consequences of the dominant agro-industry which, for us, constitute violations of human rights amount to mere side effects for the current economic model. The environmental, social and public health costs, among others, are not seen in the price of goods and services obtained through this system, and it is the community which pays for the hidden costs. It is an inefficient, harmful, destructive, and absolutely unsustainable system.

Because of this, it is fundamental that we claim the collective right to food sovereignty, freely defining our own practices, strategies and policies of production, distribution and consumption which allow effective access to healthy, safe, secure and flavourful food for all.

In view of the above, the CaLiSAs see a real need to create a curriculum sensitive to these proposals. We must review, examine, demystify, unlearn and ask ourselves again - what education do we want, for whom, how, why, what to undertake, articulate, weave and link.

We live in an Argentina in which the agricultural frontier advances dizzily over highly fragile ecosystems, displacing Indigenous inhabitants and generating ephemeral wealth for some and misery and social exclusion for many, constituting an unprecedented environmental

conflict which challenges the design of cities and the shaping of rural space, strains agricultural production and the health of peoples and causes many other environmental issues which are systematically made invisible. It is essential to rely on subjects who educate themselves and can educate others in the construction of forms of knowledge that are genuinely alternative, environmentally and socially sustainable, just and rooted in solidarity.

Contemporary thinkers and activists point out that we are facing an upheaval which requires a paradigm shift that returns us to a civilization based on a planetary awareness of being part of an earthly family and an understanding that our health is rooted in ecological interconnection, diversity, regeneration and harmony (Shiva, 2020). Considering this, we need to design a new navigation map. This will only be possible if we manage to work together to find ways to reimagine centres of learning that are defined by the need to contribute to the construction of collective knowing and are nourished by the support of institutions and other social spaces. In this way, workers of the land, of education and of culture will be able to “sentipensar”⁷

in dialogue with these forms of knowing based on and redefined in an emancipatory key.

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7. “Sentipensar” is a Spanish verb composed of the verbs “feel” (sentir) and “think” (pensar). It means both to think with feeling and feel with thinking. (Translator’s note.)