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PEASANT HANDS GUARANTEE OUR RIGHT TO FOOD IN THE FACE OF CRISIS

We want to denounce the difficult health and socio-political situation that the world population, and particularly the Ecuadorian population in the rural sector, has been facing with the spread of COVID-19, in connection with other historically invisible pandemics, such as hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

In our opinion, such pandemics are the result of the current development model, which has led to the degradation of healthy ecosystems, with the supremacy of transnationals and local economic groups monopolizing land, water, seeds and public policies in defense of their profit interests and in the name of productivity, through production systems based on agro-industrial models. We consider that economic development has increasingly subjected nature to a process of artificializing production, based on highly polluting technological packages and resulting in the deterioration of the immune system of all species living on the planet, as well as in aggravating climate change.

From the viewpoint of small-scale producers, there are two sectors: 1. those who are exploited and chained to monoculture, and 2. those who are dedicated to diversified production. In Ecuador, in the midst of the crisis caused by COVID-19, the situation of the first sector has increased poverty. Its production system is usually shackled by the chain of monoculture of rice, corn or soy on the coast, potato, broccoli or tomato in the Sierra, which implies direct exposure to agrotoxins. These substances weaken agricultural workers' immune systems. As a matter of fact, these people do not have access to healthy air and face the absence of alternatives to provide their own families with healthy food. Added to this is the constant indebtedness to agro-input shops, to state banks or to informal moneylenders, on which production depends.

In contrast, the second sector faces the crisis caused by the COVID -19 from a different scenario. The diversification of products in their production system allows them to have various types of food that are vital for their adequate nutrition. In principle, they produce in the tranquillity and security they live in and do not feel particularly vulnerable to the virus, since they make very little use of agro-toxins. However, because of the movement restrictions imposed by the COVID 19 containment measures, these people are very concerned about the new difficulties in marketing and distributing their products. Now more than ever do they suffer from intermediaries.

The situation has become increasingly complex, especially for the peasant sector in the Guayas province. According to the Organización Campesina Tierra y Vida (Land and Life Peasant Organization), peasant organisations located close to or around the Duran canton have been left totally unprotected. Cases of dead people have been reported, without any information as to

the causes of their deaths and without protocols for handling the bodies. Reports have also been received of older adults with psychological trauma, caused by the stress they have been facing. Health centres that used to operate in nearby rural areas have been closed, private doctors have stopped receiving patients, and pharmacies do not have sufficient medicines.

Also, several families have been reported to have returned from the city to rural areas to escape infection. However, this increases the risk of contagion to the rural sector, all the more so as the majority of the rural population is made up of older adults, a particularly vulnerable population group to the disease. In addition, these are the people who still support agriculture. The aging of the peasant population is due to the lack of agricultural incentives for small producers. Large exporters have always been favoured, yet they cannot respond to this crisis, since their products, such as bananas, cocoa, soy, palm and shrimps, are not used for domestic self-sufficiency. Faced with this situation, preventive measures should be taken, even more so in view of the dramatic lack of medical care for the rural sector, which has now deepened due to the crisis.

The marketing of agricultural products is particularly difficult as their transport has been restricted as part of the virus containment measures. The government has given exceptional safeguards for vehicles to circulate as long as evidence is provided that those requesting them are engaged in the marketing of food products. However, evidence can only be obtained by registering the activity with the Servicio de Rentas Internas (Internal Revenue Service), through the systems RUC (Registro Único de Contribuyentes) or RISE (Régimen General o Régimen Impositivo Simplificado Ecuatoriano) but, in rural areas, access to the Internet to obtain such a pass is very limited. Therefore, peasants cannot have access to the mobility restriction safeguards and cannot transport their agricultural products, which represent an income they rely on to survive.

Peasant and indigenous family agriculture continues to be affected by intermediaries who have their own transport means as well as sufficient marketing opportunities in the cities. It is therefore important that local governments guarantee food transport and forms of direct marketing without intermediaries. A clear example is that of the Prefecture of Azuay¹, or what the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock has been trying to promote. This solution consists in associating producers to collect the products, and then commercialize them through baskets that are delivered directly to consumers.

With regard to policy development for the agricultural sector, during the health crisis caused by the COVID - 19, both in general terms and according to pronouncements by various productive sectors, peasant and indigenous family agriculture has been left out. For instance, the program "dar una mano sin dar la mano" ("give a hand without taking by the hand") is based on partnerships between the government and supermarket chains and calls on society to buy food kits from these same chains via virtual means, leaving aside peasant production and popular markets.² On the other hand, the National Assembly issued a document called "Health Emergency Resolutions due to COVID-19"³, approved on March 24th. Various production sectors have questioned this resolution which, from their viewpoint, does not take them into account, despite some proposals from the peasant sector for the State to buy their products directly from

¹ <https://www.azuay.gob.ec/?p=3862>

² <https://www.darunamanoecuador.com>

³ <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/coronavirus-sesion-virtual-asamblea-ecuador.html>

them.⁴ According to the information available, the national government still has not adopted any program, should it be for small-scale farmers or to prioritize local supply.

Given the restrictions imposed, the organizations have been able to carry out very few - if any - joint actions. Linked to this situation is the fear of going out to the city and getting infected. However, the same peasant families have begun to develop local solutions, such as self-sufficiency gardens. These are essential, due to the existing lock-ups in the global food chains, which are already causing a food crisis in Ecuador and worldwide.⁵ It is therefore crucial to ensure the necessary conditions to maintain local supply circuits. This will not be made possible without guaranteeing land, water and seed tenure for farmers.

On the other hand, we believe that this crisis can be an opportunity to strengthen local food production systems and show the world that peasant and indigenous family agriculture is fully relevant and of vital importance. It provides 70% of the world's food and, at national level, it ensures access to healthy and sustainably produced food. It continues to exist thanks to its production diversity and to the multiple activities that many families have developed. For these very reasons, we are concerned about the violations of labour and related rights, such as massive layoffs in flower plantations and long working days in banana plantations without any protection, and the impact on the informal sector, also affected by mobility restriction measures.

With these scenarios of labour overexploitation, peasant and indigenous family agriculture has been subsidising the real cost of food. However, in the face of this crisis and the measures adopted by the government, this sector is being affected again, threatening the realization of the right to food of the Ecuadorian population in general, both in the medium and long terms.

Peasant and indigenous family agriculture is the only solution to the threats posed by the extractive and unsustainable approach to natural resources. The crisis generated by COVID 19 should lead us to reflect on the importance of putting life at the centre of public policy, above economic interests, in compliance with the constitutional and international human rights obligations that the Ecuadorian State has committed to.

Based on the above, we request that the national government take the following measures:

1. Ensure access to health care for rural people, and generate timely sanitary measures to address the massive return of people from urban to rural areas. Health is a human right for everyone. It should not be the privilege of the few.
2. Allow peasant markets to operate, ensuring the required sanitary measures.
3. Establish transport safeguards mechanisms for peasant products that are appropriate to their realities and do not confront them with digitalization issues.
4. Cancel debt for small food producers with productive loans. The debts of peasant associations that had been granted land seized from landowners and bankers at the end of 1999 should also be cancelled.

⁴ <https://rebellion.org/el-estado-ecuatoriano-deberia-comprar-directamente-a-los-campesinos/>

⁵ This is pointed out by the CFS High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) paper "Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN)" (24 March 2020) available here: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/hlpe/COVID-19/HLPE_Impact_of_COVID-19_on_FSN_-_2020-03-24_-_EN4.pdf

5. Adopt the necessary economic measures to sustain, re-launch and promote peasant and indigenous family agriculture in order to face the coming economic crisis in the medium and long terms.
6. Establish a basic income (a basic wage for at least the duration of this crisis) for the agricultural sector, especially for the peasant and indigenous family agriculture, guaranteeing in this way a continuous supply of food.
7. Establish food reserve zones to guarantee food sovereignty and the right to food.
8. Halt the expansion of large-scale monoculture and extractivism, generating spatial planning and giving priority to the production of various crops.
9. Support and strengthen peasant sector short and direct marketing circuits in order to avoid price speculation and guarantee a fair payment to producers.
10. Adopt measures to ensure the right to food of rural women, through programmes that allow their economic recovery and prevent them from falling into debt.