



Rescuing our maize: Building a network

A network of communities in West-Central Mexico has rescued its traditional landraces of maize. This experience shows that the benefits of defending an ancestral good is not only limited to regaining cultural identity and agrobiodiversity. The defence of native maize has become a space where old and new knowledge redefined agriculture and where people achieved food sovereignty, technical autonomy, and a new sense of community.

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Throughout history, the ‘milpa’ has been the basis of Mesoamerican agriculture. The milpa is an agroecological practice where maize (*Zea mays*), edible gourds (*Cucurbita* spp), and beans (*Phaseolus* spp) are intercropped in association with woody, medicinal, and fodder plants, as well as fruit trees. Maize is more than a crop in Mexico, its centre of origin and diversification. It is the backbone of the

rural diet and culture; it lies at the heart of rural life. It is central to Mexican identity and a vital resource for all Mexicans.

Nowadays, however, Mexican agriculture is dominated by agroindustry and pursuing an agricultural model that has had serious social and environmental impacts in the country’s rural areas. Moreover, it has provoked the disappearance of milpa-based family farming – once the largest food producing sector of

the country and a major source of labour. Industrialised agriculture is also a serious threat to native maize diversity and Mexican cuisine, which was declared an intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2012.

A collective dialogue In response to this situation, various movements emerged in defence of maize in rural and urban areas. The Network for Sustainable Agricultural Alternatives (RASA, in Spanish) is one of them. RASA is a cooperative which was created in 1999 in Jalisco state in West-Central Mexico. It consists of about 100 families of farmers, peasants, indigenous peoples, women, consumers, and advisors from twenty different municipalities. Striving for sustainable family farming, RASA bases its activities on three pillars: co-creation of knowledge, strengthening rural-urban linkages through fair trade, and conservation of agrobiodiversity through the milpa system.

The activities of RASA are based on the belief that knowledge created through dialogue between farmers and scientists must be the starting point for rural sustainability (see page 18-21). As a farmer explained: “We have been practicing agriculture since we were little children. Our knowledge allows us to approach traditional farming as a sustainable form of agriculture. Our relationship with the technicians and professionals in RASA is based on mutual respect and collective dialogue. Learning becomes the foundation that allows new knowledge to settle in. It yields insights that lead to innovative techniques and tools and that enhance our sustainability and autonomy.

Farmer-to-farmer In RASA, knowledge co-creation processes are based on the ‘farmer to farmer’ method, where a considerable number of farmers from the network are supported by others to act as trainers and advisors for other farmers. These activities are planned and organised collectively and they take various forms: experimentation, seed recovery, encounters, tours and workshops.

RASA trains its own group of advisors in *agroecological experimentation* to support producer groups. This training involves participatory assessments, design of experiments, field observations, evaluation of results and reporting skills. It takes place throughout key moments of the agricultural cycle and is strengthened during meetings, workshops and tours. Farmers who are trained serve as support for other farmers as ‘tutors’. Some scientists also assist in these experiments.

In its own sustainable agriculture training centre, RASA established a regional maize seed fund five years ago. The fund’s objective is to propagate and preserve the varieties that farmers perceive as threatened—currently including about 35 maize varieties. So

called ‘seed-keepers’, the farmers committed to taking care of these varieties, conduct experiments and carry out community planting projects with these varieties. They are also exhibited and exchanged at fairs and at regional meetings. Moreover, the seeds have also been the starting point for a *participatory plant breeding* programme. In this programme, seed-keepers, in dialogue with other farmers and advisors, recover old varieties, breed new varieties and experiment with different management practices. Furthermore, the seed-keepers are also responsible for sharing specific seed related knowledge with other farmers. The recovery and improvement of maize varieties, as well as seeds of other plants grown in the milpa systems, can therefore be seen as an important result of the co-creation of agroecological knowledge.

Farmers, advisors, technicians, and scientists also come together in regional-level ‘maize encounters’. These encounters evolve around the exchange farmer-bred maize seed and other seeds grown in the *milpa*, such as beans and squash. In doing so, the participants also exchange knowledge about cultivation techniques and various uses for the seeds.

During *tours*, network members visit sites outside of the state of Jalisco to learn from successful experiences in sustainable agriculture. These tours require the commitment of the network’s farmers and other communities to support each other mutually in their own development processes. Finally, RASA farmers organise *workshops* on agroecological techniques such as planting and experimentation in their own family

A RASA community workshop.

Photo: Patricia Karenina





Varieties of native maize. Photo: Patricia Karenina

plots and in their communities. These are dynamic educational and social events.

Growing through co-creation

In an adverse context marked by the advance of industrial agriculture, knowledge co-creation has accompanied every effort of the RASA network's members. These processes have allowed a move away from industrial agriculture, towards more sustainable milpa-based family farms. The results are impressive.

The network's family farms now grow an average of 8 species of fruit trees, 17 species of vegetables, 4 different types of grasses, 6 species of legumes, and 10 medicinal plants. They also tend to an average of five species of domesticated animals. This agrobiodiversity allows them to regain food sovereignty in the family, to withstand the rural crisis driven by agroindustry, and to achieve autonomy in their production systems. The families of the RASA network with more than 10 years of experience in agroecology are not only able to meet their food, education, and basic health care needs but their incomes are also 40% above the national average.

In all cases the starting point for evolution has been the collective sharing and development of the knowledge held in traditional farming practices such as the use of native seeds. Throughout this process, the vision of members of RASA was based on elements of peasant identity such as freedom, justice and dignity, and respect towards others and to nature. By fostering a caring attitude towards earth, nature and life, this identity shapes sustainable practice in a thoughtful way. As RASA members say: "Talking about seeds brings our people and our knowledges together". Ini-

tatives such as the effort of RASA to defend our native seed, guarantee spaces where knowledge about sustainable management practices can be co-created, and where we make our own decisions, strengthening farmers' autonomy and self-management.

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A 'maize encounter' in which farmers exchange seeds. Photo: Manuel Ayala Velazquez

