



Photo: Jan de Jong

# Constructing autonomy, territory and peace

In the decades-long conflict in Colombia, agroecology has emerged as a strategy that helps women to cope with the war and to feed their families. AMOY, a women farmers organisation, not only promotes agroecological activities, but also supports women to counteract the cruelty of war by providing a space to express fear and sadness, to find refuge, and to protect themselves from armed groups.

Sonia Irene Cárdenas Solís

In the past 50 years, around 5,2 million Colombian farmers have been displaced from their lands, and about 8 million hectares of farmland were taken from their owners due to Colombia's internal armed conflict. The war and neoliberal policies caused suffering, especially for women farmers. In order to overcome this situation, many women started to participate in agroecological processes, improving their agroecosystems, and at the same time fighting for social and environmental

justice. A good example is the experience of AMOY, the Association of Organised Women from the town of Yolombó in the Antioquia department. These women show that agroecology can contribute to the transformation of power relations that were formerly used to subordinate them.

The members of AMOY gathered for the first time in 1994, some years before the escalation of the armed conflict. They discussed problems such as scarcity of water, deforestation, soil degradation and decreasing

diversity of food crops. One women said: “We are worried, because we cannot feed our families. We should work together to improve our lives and to take care of the environment so that our resources will not disappear”. They wondered why they had so little access to credit, why they did not own land, why they did not have access to technology, why they had so few livestock and crops. Likewise, they wanted to increase their income and invest in the items they needed: education, health, and better housing. Women had to spend a lot of time taking care of their families because, for example, they had to walk far for water and firewood.

They felt distressed because they did not have dignified future perspectives for themselves and for their children. No one, including the women themselves, valued their hard work, and as a consequence they had very low self-esteem. During reflections at AMOY meetings, they realised that a major cause of these problems was their lack of autonomy, including a lack of decision making power and poor access to productive means. AMOY followed an agroecological and ecofeminist approach that focuses on the empowerment of the women, on meeting livelihood needs, and on the recuperation of local space, with local knowledge, local biodiversity and a strong relationship with nature.

**Agroecological practices for greater autonomy** Through AMOY, the women started to systematically apply organic fertilizers and soil conservation practices, decreasing their dependence on external agrochemical inputs, and strengthening their autonomy. Today, 87 % of the farms produce with self-made organic fertilizers, and 62% of the animals are fed with products and residues

from the farm. The introduction of appropriate technologies such as bio-composting, solar driers and fuel efficient stoves helped to save energy and time spent on fuel collection. Through encouraging agrobiodiversity several local crop species were rescued from disappearance and local cultural food practices were revived. According to a recent inventory, in total the women currently grow 82 crops for food, medicines and animal fodder. Also, 7 kinds of domestic animals are reared, including 13 local breeds of chickens. Subsequently, the increased production, a credit system, as well as a revolving fund of livestock and materials (for example for building stables or making biopreparations) helped to build capital.

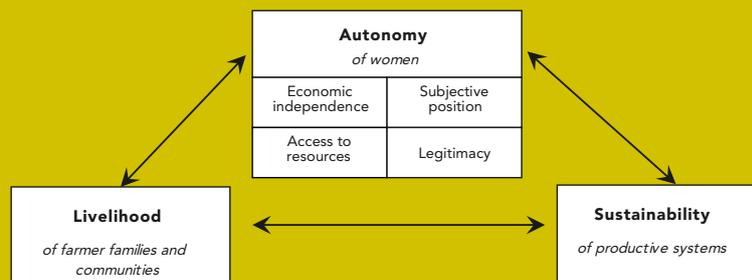
## In their fight for autonomy, the women also achieved transformations within the family

To improve livelihoods, the women of AMOY opted to prioritise production for self-consumption and the diversification of farms, thereby laying the basis for a viable and stable economy instead of depending on the unpredictable ebbs and flows of the market. Currently, the farms produce more than half of the food for their families, while the other half of the food is obtained from exchange and gifts, or bought at the market.

## The approach of AMOY

The transitional agroecological approach of AMOY places women’s autonomy in the center and relates it to socio-political, ecological and economic dimensions. The socio-political dimension includes the social movements that seek social and ecological justice. The ecological dimension aims at recovering the sustainability of agricultural systems and ecosystems. The economic dimension focuses on livelihood, accumulated knowledge, potentialities, resilience capacity,

innovation and mutual support. AMOY addresses the three dimensions interlinking autonomy, with livelihood and sustainability.





**The great diversity of farmer Sofia's farm.**  
Drawing: Diana Isaza. Photo: Gloria Zuluaga

The women increased their autonomy step by step by developing strategies to improve access to resources. They shared their animals and tools according to their needs, and they got small loans from rotation funds and micro-credits. Thanks to these mechanisms, the women have achieved ownership of livestock, and, in some cases, of the houses where they live and the land they cultivate. In their fight for autonomy, the women also achieved transformations within the family, becoming less subordinated and acting against domestic violence. One woman said: "While we were achieving new income and production resources, our position in our homes changed." Now, they receive more respect for their knowledge and labour, and their husbands are getting more involved in farming. The improved self-esteem and better access to resources have reaffirmed women in their role as food producers and contributed to the construction of an identity based on their own strengths and capacities.

**Escalation of the conflict** AMOY's approach proved to be powerful in day-to-day practices, but was also important in crisis situations related to the country's armed conflict. A few years after

AMOY's foundation, the situation in Colombia severely worsened. At the end of the 1990s the armed conflict escalated, and their lives were continuously at risk. AMOY participated in 'Women's Pacifist Route', a movement against the war that calls for political negotiation as a way out of the armed conflict. Being part of this movement empowered AMOY to publicly speak out for truth, justice and reparation. During these violent times about 50 people were killed in the town of Yolombó and about 700 people fled the area. Many people, especially women, lost their property as paramilitary groups occupied their land. Moreover, in this period community meetings were explicitly prohibited by the paramilitary groups, so that it was also difficult for women to discuss and develop long-term strategies based on agroecology. The emphasis on day-to-day survival and self-sufficiency was the priority at this time, when it was very difficult to buy food from the market. Worst of all, there were periods in which the parties in conflict forced the

**Farmer Ismenia working at her agroecological farm.**  
Photo: Jan de Jong





Dora on the land that she bought with microcredit from AMOY, she grows coffee and several food crops. Photo: Sonia Cárdenas



Sofía walks through her farm, an agroecological forest of less than one hectare. Photo: Sonia Cárdenas

farmers to give them their animals and crops. Because of this, the women decided to raise fewer animals which caused a setback in the agroecological transition process.

## AMOY helped its members cope with the cruelty of war

In 2000, when the ban on meetings was lifted after two years, the women groups re-activated themselves and the women that returned to Yolombó received help from AMOY in the form of seeds and breeding animals. AMOY prioritised projects for the reconstruction of farming systems. Apart from the agroecological activities, during this period the organisation also helped its members cope with the cruelty of war. It was a space to express fear and sadness, to find refuge, and to develop strategies to protect themselves from armed groups. AMOY organised symbolic, ritual events to commemorate the beloved victims, and to help cure the wounds of the community. Rituals for example consisted of naming the dead and naming their souls, while collectively planting forage crops on places where massacres occurred.

Since 2005, many people, especially young men, have left the farms. This has been in part because of the conflict, but also because of the lack of policies that promote small-scale agriculture, and steady deterioration of natural resources because of deforestation, erosion and mining. In this context AMOY continues

to re-invent itself, improving agroecological practices that ensure food security and income sources from local markets, based on women empowerment and solidarity.

**Towards a future of peace** After the violent decade there are still many borders to cross. There continues to be a lot of outmigration of men, and agroecology remains mostly a women's strategy. A major bottleneck is the absence of a long-term peace agreement. In this sense, the current peace talks in Havana between the guerrilla and the government provide hope for a period of stability and improved conditions for a further advancement of the agroecological transition in Yolombó.

The journey of AMOY represents a collective path of permanent reflection and learning and shows that agroecological transition cannot be seen as separated from other aspects of life, especially in a context of violent conflict. Particularly, AMOY's approach of linking livelihood, sustainability and autonomy proved to be very effective for its members, especially where practical farming strategies were linked with organisational strengthening. It shows that in critical circumstances such as the armed conflict, agroecology helps build resilience and adaptation to changing situations. The process of AMOY not only has been directed towards the restoration of ecological principles, but also towards the capacity of women to decide on their present, and to influence their future by exercising citizenship and building confidence in their own capacities.

Sonia Irene Cárdenas Solís is from Colombia and doing a PhD on natural resources and sustainability at Córdoba University in Spain. She is also a gender consultant with the World Wildlife Fund in Colombia ([cardosysoles@yahoo.es](mailto:cardosysoles@yahoo.es)).