



250,000 Families! Reconnecting urban and rural people for healthier, more sustainable living

Stephen Sherwood
Caeley Kane

Much energy has been invested in informing political leaders about the problems of industrial food and the benefits of agro-ecology. Following three decades of focusing primarily on good farming, Ecuador's *Colectivo Agroecológico* now believes that people, as “consumer-citizens”, can and must take responsibility for a better future. Such a grassroots counter-response to “modern food” may play a key role in the transformation towards a sustainable and just city-region food system in Ecuador.

There is something fundamentally worrisome about a person's most basic activity – eating – undermining his or her ability to exist. Yet this is precisely what we have achieved in modern food systems, in which production, circulation and consumption distance people geographically, economically and socially from their food. In the industrialisation of a “good” we have created a series of unwanted “bads”: mass destruction of soils and water systems, erosion of agrobiodiversity, and wide-scale pesticide poisonings and deaths, not to mention the two related global pandemics overweight/obesity and climate change. It has become increasingly clear that our present-day modern food systems are jeopardising human health, the economy and the environment. Fortunately, growing awareness of this situation is sparking seemingly endless counter-movements across the globe, including Ecuador's lively *Colectivo Agroecológico* (Agro-ecological Collective).

In 2005, Ecuador's rural-based agro-ecology movements got together with an urban-based wholesale purchasing group, the *Canastas Comunitarias* (Community Food Baskets) to exchange experiences. One conclusion was that, in its enthusiasm about farming practice, the agro-ecology movement had inadvertently isolated rural producers from urban-based consumers. The resulting *Colectivo Agroecológico* shifted its attention from “good agronomy” to “food” – a more holistic platform, which seamlessly linked rural and urban people around a common cause. Their rally call became “food sovereignty”: food for the people, by the people, of the people.

The *Colectivo* played a central role in influencing Ecuador's groundbreaking 2008 Constitution and the subsequent national policy transition from food security (understood as merely meeting peoples' basic needs) to food sovereignty (an emancipatory force for democratic change). Despite seemingly wonderful laws on the books, ten years on there was a sense that this promising legislation had still led to little meaningful family-level change. People needed to become more proactive in their own well-being.

Discovering the consumer-citizen as a democratic force for change

It is far too easy to point a finger at governments and corporations as the source of “the problem” while ignoring one's own complicity as a consumer. We certainly agree that wealth-seeking industries are influential, but consumers are not mere victims. At the end of the day, people, through their daily choices and purchases, wield considerable influence. They effectively vote for their surrounding food realities and their consequences – both the “goods” and “bads” of modern food.



Families committed to invest at least 50 % of their budget in “responsible consumption”. Photos by Stephen Sherwood

Following a decade of advocating for food sovereignty, the *Colectivo* concluded that the dominant food system that it so fervently criticised – what may be the single largest industry on the planet (estimated to be worth over 1.3 trillion US dollars per year in places such as the United States and about 10 billion per year in Ecuador) – had become so influential in national politics that it was no longer realistic to expect government representatives to be able to correct things on their own. Ultimately, people operating both individually and collectively in the family, neighbourhoods and social networks that seamlessly cross urban and rural environments, must wrest control over their food territories and their futures. This is the vision of “consumer-citizens”: they are actively informed, take a position, and act in their own better interests.

The good news is that “the people who eat” are everywhere. Consumers live and operate in both urban and rural sectors, and they are involved in all levels of education, science, industry and government. While consumers may be responsible for the ills of modern food, they are also centrally positioned in the possibility of a better future.

Moving forward: 250,000 families!

As part of the National Festival for Food Sovereignty in the city of Guayaquil and on World Food Day, in October 2014 the *Colectivo* launched its “250,000 families!” campaign. The campaign is a five-year project to recruit a critical mass of 250,000 families – 5 % of Ecuador’s population – to identify families interested in taking charge of making food sovereignty a reality. Through shifting about half of the present food and drink purchases of this population, economists working with the *Colectivo* estimate that these consumer-citizens would amass about USD 300 million per year: more than the total spent on international cooperation for agriculture and health in Ecuador.

In order to become part of the 250,000 campaign, a family must address two questions: what does “responsible consumption” mean for me, and how does my family (business or community) practice it? The *Colectivo* has organised networks of volunteer promoters who record the responses to these

questions and upload them into databases and the internet.

The *Colectivo* has seen that families have richly diverse yet complementary perspectives on what it means to consume responsibly. Some mention investing in locally produced, organic, agro-ecological food or traditional Andean crops, fair prices, or simply preparing one’s own food. Others emphasise recycling and renewable energy. The response of five influential leaders – two urban farmers, consumer representatives, a chef and the hosts of a popular public radio program – can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sh_npk14xul.

In addition to recruiting families for the campaign, the *Colectivo* has begun to organise local working groups of food activists to follow up on the emerging patterns of activity. Already they have seen a demand for informing people about existing alternative foodways, opportunities for organising new purchasing groups and markets, and farm visits, as well as courses in cooking, energy conservation and bio-construction. The possibilities seem endless.

Final thoughts

The consumer-citizen can be found everywhere, in both urban and rural communities. Through processes of reflection and acting more strategically on their concerted interests, the *Colectivo* believes that this emerging actor on the political scene is capable of transforming existing urban-rural relationships, thereby generating more vibrant, equitable economies, healthier patterns of eating, and more sustainable landscapes. A better future is bounded only by the limits of our interest in eating well and our creativity. If you eat, the *Colectivo* invites you to become involved and seek your own sense of responsible consumption.

Stephen Sherwood

EkoRural, Ecuador

E-mail: stephen.g.sherwood@gmail.com

Caeley Kane

Groundswell International, Ecuador

E-mail: ckane@groundswellinternational.org