

# Rural school in the Tenza Valley, rural education and agroecology reflections on rural “development”

## Escuela campesina del Valle de Tenza educación rural y agroecología reflexiones sobre el “desarrollo” rural

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### ABSTRACT

The municipality of Sutatenza (Boyaca), constitutes an important reference for rural education in Colombia due to “Radio Sutatenza” (Educational Radio) and the People’s Cultural Action in the mid-twentieth century. Currently, in the same town, a process called the Campesina Community School del Valle de Tenza has been brewing, under an agroecological approach, guided in its work to the cultural and productive Andean farmers, their families and their young people to cultivate in them a return the field. This article addresses this educational experience for contrasting approaches of “development” with the perceptions and visions that emerge from the rural world, without being radically different, it raises important questions for the call for and controversy of development, from the local.

**Key words:** rural, development, agroecology, education.

### RESUMEN

El municipio de Sutatenza (Boyacá) constituye un referente importante para la educación rural campesina en Colombia puesto que allí tuvo lugar la experiencia de las escuelas radiofónicas ó “Radio Sutatenza” y la Acción Cultural Popular a mediados del Siglo XX. Actualmente en el mismo municipio se viene gestando un proceso comunitario denominado la Escuela Campesina del Valle de Tenza que, bajo un enfoque agroecológico, orienta su trabajo al acervo cultural y productivo de los campesinos andinos, sus familias y sus jóvenes para cultivar en ellos el retorno al campo. En este artículo se aborda esta experiencia educativa para contrastar enfoques de “desarrollo” con las percepciones y visiones que emergen del mundo rural, que sin ser radicalmente opuestas plantean interrogantes importantes para pensar el llamado y controvertido desarrollo, desde lo local.

**Palabras clave:** rural, desarrollo, agroecológico, educación.

“The Colombian agricultural economy is based on a narrow fabric woven with the threads of economic and political domination, which intertwine commercial farming areas with rural counties on which capitalism quietly advances, and which are squeezed out without compensation”

*Darío Fajardo Montaña*

### Introduction: The context

Before the Spanish arrived to the region of Valle de Tenza (1537), Chibcha Indians who inhabited the region had domesticated some plants such as tubers, medicinal species, grains like quinoa and animals such as the guinea pig (Fals, 1973). The crops were planted in the dry portions of the inter-Andean plateaus and terraces built on the hillsides. Among other practices, the Indians used controlled fire to clear land especially late in the dry season when the rains were coming; working with the land was defined by gender roles in which women had a very important role.

The rural population of the Valle de Tenza inherited from the Chibcha, the hoe, which in turn was appropriated by the conquistadores, transforming the stick for planting. In addition, they also inherited the rudimentary plow. The accumulation of knowledge on the environment has enabled farmers to reproduce their conditions of existence, the same knowledge known today and on which agriculture today in part depends (Mejía, 2009).

Scientific and technical developments of the mid-twentieth century, various implemented synthetic chemical inputs, machinery, tools and infrastructure to increase food production and profitability of agriculture, the so-called “advances” were introduced and appropriated by the rural culture. The purposes of increasing productivity and profitability-with the green revolution, generated contradictory social, economic, political and biophysical effects.

### People’s Cultural Action (ACPO, its spanish acronym)

In 1947, the People’s Cultural Action (ACPO) gave rise to Educational Radio and Radio Sutatenza. This process led by

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Monsignor Jose Joaquin Salcedo was looking for improvement in the life of rural Colombia through an educational strategy based on the use of media, radio, newspaper and primers for the formation of rural leaders in different areas of health, production, “culture”, economics and Christian thought on values grounded in the Catholic religion and Western culture. The effectiveness of the ACPO strategy was demonstrated mainly in its coverage reaching thousands of farmers in Colombia and for this reason was taken as a reference to be implemented in other southern countries and four continents (Zalamea, 1994).

ACPO was an essential part of the strategy development of a model agency for tax and its main sponsors were the World Bank, USAID, the Vatican and others, at a time when the nonconformity of the countryside in Latin America was growing. The noble intentions of the church through their leadership gradually coincided in several respects with developmental speech and what Escobar has called the “invention of the Third World” (1998).

Progressive ideas disseminated by ACPO based on cultural change, the transformation of the basic technical and economic rationality and accumulation management, allowed the entry of the green revolution into Colombia through the implementation of its own strategy for this model, development arrived at the countryside. The imagery of a “comprehensive development” included the use of efficient means of communication in rural areas, through media outreach for the dissemination of technology and the introduction of knowledge “modernizers.” The theory of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1962) is based on the assumption that the ability and willingness to adopt technology is related to the level of knowledge and education, and this in turn to the processes of diffusion, as such traditional agriculture was seen as a barrier to the technological change deemed necessary for the change of perception, overcome by the efficient generation and use of methodologies for the persuasion of farmers by making them more responsive to new ideas and introducing patterns of technological consumption.

Educational Radio, the newspaper “El Campesino” and rural leadership training institutes centered in Sutatenza based their strategy on the promotion of technological change, the model was used by capitalist development and Soviet development, under the premise of being instrumental in the passage from traditional societies to industrial societies, the ACPO strategy in turn meant a cultural change beyond the means of production, tended towards the formation of Christian values combined with the construction of a reactionary leadership with a community

vision of being docile and subservient and the formation of a new man with “western culture” and “citizen values” (Houtart, 1960).

Thus the wide influence of the ACPO generated in the countryside and much of Colombia feelings of pride and shame, during a confrontation between traditional and progressive values and presented as “modern” (Mejía, 2007 ). This phenomenon could be read as the continuation of training and tax values instilled in the Spanish colonization, where Western culture was imposed under the category of race as a strategy of capitalist domination in Latin America (Quijano, 2000) and that for the case of Valle de Tenza a special set of rural identity that denies its indigenous roots to be part of the “other non-Western” (González, 2008), building a fragile identity, injured territorial emancipatory construction and internal confrontation of a model contrasts the social relations of production of a traditional sector “retarded” and a modern sector “growth”.

### **Nature and dynamics of capitalist modernization**

The origins of capitalist rural development in Latin America, at least in the references given to its generic conception, were directed from rural visions of what their joint project to settlement patterns and urban consumption, are distinguished in this respect two ways: Farmer who characterizes the capitalist rural farmer as self-sufficient, and the view adopted institutionally in Colombia in the middle of last century of Junker which seeks the weakening of the rural-based agrarian structure, through the support and encouragement of economic exploitation, i.e. productivity gains under a monopoly model, which involved breaking down the social relations of production in traditional order (Moncayo, 1985).

“Capitalist modernization ‘in agriculture has specific characteristics in guidance to its goals to modify the conditions of life through economic growth generated by a joint agro-industry and commerce, a scenario that, according to Garcia (1981) takes on a nature of its own: 1) a model that concentrates resources, power, capital and market. 2) a model of technology implementation, changing patterns of use of natural resources and implements a business and market economy. 3) a system under cost-benefit rationality, work/area and yield/ha. 4) modifying the physical integration of countries, social relationships, types of urban settlements, state agencies and departments. 5) a transnationally driven model.

These features substantially alter the social and structural relations of production, while modifying the resource

tenure, generating marginalization in the occupation, possession and production, polarized distribution of income, from which emerges a proletariat of underemployment and under-consumption. Also, this structural change modifies the relationship with nature, water management and land, as the hub model requires a change in the technical structure (roads, irrigation), a high-input and a demand for foreign technology (fertilizers, fungicides, insecticides, seeds, tractors, planters, plows, concentrates, etc..) impacting the natural environmental conditions, generating dependence, producing environmental imbalances, and paradoxically, stifling internal development of science and technology.

The impulse for “rural enterprise” and management model calls for farms where records are kept and controls for the planning of production, are part of the values of capitalist economic rationality that have been promoted for more than half a century, some by subtle mechanisms such as comprehensive farm calls, and others by technocratic mechanisms such as agribusiness.

In the case of ACPO, developmental values promoted were gradually diminishing for various reasons, one due to the agrarian structure of the Andean peasantry has been sustained on a smallholder basis, which in the case of Valle de Tenza Fals (1973) defined as prevalently microcast family farms, despite the generation of a business linked to emeralds and its related activities. Another circumstance is generated by the difficulties of appropriating the new values by the majority of the countryside, not due to ignorance, but perhaps due to a strong hold that is expressed in a clear-cultural resistance, which for some intellectual development has been presented as a limiting factor or as others call it contradictory: a “resistance to change.” But it is evident that the new values and international cooperation was conceived as paternalistic welfare for the rural community and did not allow profound changes in social structure as noted by Torres at the time (1970), making an assessment of the People’s Cultural Action. The model itself has been seen for the irrelevance of its implementation in rural society; Sutatenza is an example of this, perhaps because it is a society of farmers with an ancestry of farmers, because the plow is still one of their cultural symbols, because on the national level they are farmers who have a stake of more than 50% of the food production. A society that despite the adoption of many techniques and the redefinition of others, has demonstrated the wisdom and the ability to manage resources with a holistic and complex linear paradigm facing a homogenizer.



**FIGURA 1.** Monument to San Isidro Labrador Sutatenza Boyacá.

To summarize and reflect on the review of rural development experience promoted since the mid-twentieth century, the monument to San Isidro Labrador in the municipality of Sutatenza (Fig. 1) clearly represents the vision of technological change, cultural and biophysical development and raises questions in the light of time and our current reality such as: Does economic growth actually modify the conditions of life for the common good?, is economic growth synonymous with agricultural development?, Do the technological paradigm and modernizing actually create free subjects?, what is the validity, relevance and timeliness of the lore and technologies in food production?

### **Rural School Tenza Valley**

Today’s world presents Tenza Valley’s rural landscape as a place where commercial agriculture practices converge with the traditional. On one side, the greenhouse for growing tomatoes -which apply high doses of “pesticides”- on the other, some farmers plant their gardens in the fashion typical of the Andes, through traditional practices such as a rudimentary plow pulled by ox team and hoe planter; these practices are performed in the time approaching rains to the region and are accompanied by traditional religious rituals, where the votes of faith and hope are the best of the tithes paid to bring the harvest gods (Mejía, 2009).

From this cultural heritage and character of the rural community, the “School Campesina del Valle de Tenza” (has been brewing in the town of Sutatenza ESCAVALLE, its spanish acronym). Initially the process was sponsored by the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional that came to rethink education in forming context-graduates as biology educators, who have in their curriculum an area of interest in rural education and Agroecology (Mejía, 2009).

The “rural school” emerges as an alternative space that is constructed from a community-based process of knowledge and dialogue that is woven into the educational community regardless of academic qualifications in order to collectively develop knowledge and skills about agri-food and environmental problems of the region, proposing alternative organizational, production and improvement in the welfare of rural communities to strengthen cultural identity and territorial belonging.

### **Rural education and Agroecology**

The field of interest in rural education and Agroecology, assumes the agroecological approach as a proposal for work in the rural context that takes into account the ecological, and cultural production in a comprehensive holistic complex. Training educators, students of the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Centro Valle de Tenza come forward in a process of interpretation and understanding of the rural world in each agro-ecosystem from ESCAVALLE, with reality gradually engaging in formal educational processes and research in partial work study and design of agroecosystems and developing grade work such as “Andean Garden: family, education, farming and food sovereignty agroecological strategy” and “The agroforestry system as an alternative to agriculture, and biodiversity conservation strategy for the learning”. Also the students’ educational praxis includes non-formal educational processes led as an impact on the local media of radio and television broadcasts which include aspects of agroecology, and foster organization and mobilization in defense of the economy and rural culture food sovereignty, which contributes to their pedagogical principle of “studying the living and defending life”.

### **Agroecological Farmers Network**

The “rural school” has created a agro-woven network of growers among farmers, artisans and producers with important attributes from generations of young people and old farmers and others of the countryside, who interweave a real social network - of affection, mutual aid, solidarity, networks of learning and unlearning, agro-food networks that recover and exchange seeds, and knowledge. Cultivators of the land, culture, spirit, collective dreams, hopes: contribute to a new Colombia. Agroecologist assume a focused approach to thought and action in the generation of knowledge and practices of life from an emerging paradigm that challenges and confronts the conventional views of rural development.

Agroecological growers move toward self-sufficiency with healthy food as a form of consciousness and autonomy, while self-managing new markets in order to break the

gap of economic intermediation and create a fair market with the perspective of healthy food as a human right. For example, we see the experience of the organic tomato growers’ marketing, supply entering university restaurants from local production and the experiences of farmers markets in Bogota.

### **Farmer to Farmer Teaching**

The “rural school” is a process of community-based and non-formal education based foundations in Popular Education, the pedagogy of farmers’ knowledge, the Eco-Pedagogía, la Pedagogía de la Tierra, el Aprender haciendo – Enseñar, by showing, and Campesino a Campesino learning. For its part, the area of interest of rural education and Agroecology structures its formal educational practice on the construction of a conception of pedagogy of to and from the rural, teaching and building life in the actual rural world.

In the area of interest, the rural school is part of learning to read and think for world co-participation, a communicative act in a dialogic relationship as suggested by Freire (1985), and likewise makes a methodological hybridization like the one shown by Medina (2001), i.e. making use of all forms of perception of the natural world, physical and social, appropriate and implement all possible methods to create and recreate endlessly in the context of a proposed open and flexible knowledge taking into account the particular forms of learning and research of each other, creating identity with the earth and planetary consciousness as noted by Boff (1995) and Moacir (2002). It is a pedagogy that promotes learning and everyday life as an event which has a special relationship with the living and the culture in the rural context, in an educational process that begins by recognizing the Andean culture in our tropical context.

### **Countryside and Agroecology**

The approach taken in the ESCAVALLE reflects on the countryside of the century. Rural sociology and rural studies have contributed important elements to agrarian and rural society, beyond the discussions about category of class, partial or minority society, among others, they give the historical perspective of existence to rural society as a social subject with particular forms of natural resource management and technology related to different levels, depending on the historical moment, which necessarily leads us to believe in the existence of different degrees of ruralism (Seville, 2008).

The continued existence and diverse character of rural society of today, compared to the model of development



promoted for more than six decades invites us to think on the interstices of the capitalist system. In this sense, the agroecological approach is a strategic relation in rural practice, the notion that agroecology provides experience is constructed by the rural farmer recognizing rural society as an energy-based social group, or an organic society with agricultural activities whose characteristics, according to Seville, relate to the family economy, mutual support, lines of kinship, cultural ethical code and multiple use of the land. And so the degree of ruralism can be found in rural farms, agro-production, continuing production, diversity, family work, knowledge and technology, a level of self-sufficiency which constitutes a particular “worldview” on the use and management of nature (Toledo, 2008).

However, the rural experiences at the collective level -like the interstices of the capitalist system- have aspects that need to be analyzed and understood, especially political ones, insofar as these are tied to complex situations in the territory and on the stage of social movements. The processes of the rural school-for example, gradually gained autonomy and independence as an organized community, was created and strengthened in alternative to developments at the Universidad Pedagógico Nacional, which could become a differential element to the of conceptions and practices of the ACPO.

The curriculum at ESCAVALLE is built collectively and permanently from local realities and with the people involved. The themes of “rural school” are real problems and needs that become problems of knowledge, which are discussed between students and teachers (farmers, students, teachers). The main virtue is the interaction with researchers, farmers and other national and regional rural organizations in the identification and practice of creative practices more convenient to solving environmental problems and agri-food from biological knowledge, local knowledge and collective action, as is the case of the collective construction of a biodigester, participation in regional committee in defense of the rural economy and dialogue with other organizations of the same character such as the Fundación San Isidro en Boyacá, Fundaexpresión en Santander, participation in the second ecological camp organized by the Asociación Campesina del Valle del Río Cimitarra and contributions to the creation of a Escuela Nacional Agroecológica Bakata. In short, a curriculum for non-formal rural education that transcends the thematic and spatial preconceptions and goes beyond local unilateral actions, showing existing trails of rural organization in Colombia, which despite its stigmatization and persecution in this

country refuses to disappear and proposes alternatives for the rural way of life.

However, this “school” takes some elements from the ACPO and Educational Radio and redefines the political and educational foundations of these processes for a more critical and emancipatory objective, as its legacy is clear in the large buildings it created here that are now in ignominy, desolation and futility, leaving a rural community with deep scars of dependency and marginalization. Indeed, these are the main difficulties and one of the urgent and necessary challenges for both the grassroots rural organization and the pedagogy of farmers’ knowledge as suggested by Nunez (2007), which achieves the emancipation of rural societies from the existing tax homogenizer model and formal education methods, such as extension models that ignore and override their status and their real potential.

### **In conclusion: Dialogue of discourses**

The contrast between these two experiences characterize the differential in both historical situations, modes of rural being, and in the ways of thinking from their different meanings-called development, calling into question the comparative analysis allows learning to contrast between local concepts and practices of different developments, which demands keeping the required proportions and far-reaching deconstruction, because one is the experience of over thirty years of development and another is a local initiative that does not necessarily arise from the ashes of the another, but the evolution of rural life itself, at the confluence of the contradiction of the proposals, the confrontation of powers and interests, the deconstruction of the imaginary in relation to the progress and development and where it is the only thing clear after fifty years of a discourse and the practical implementation of policies for the progress and capitalist economic development in the field. Rural communities with their diverse ways of being and living demonstrate their validity and strength indicating an alternative path marginalized by the dominant culture and demonstrating the potential force in productive ways of building a more just and equitable society, the Rural way.

The contrast between these experiences can enhance the implementation of new educational approaches and working in the “Rural World”, a notion of ruralism which refers to interdisciplinary work and academia committed to political action. The agroecological approach allows a field of knowledge in the making and performing dynamic knowledge, which shows that the complexity of rural areas requires specific teaching, a context of practical interest,

both technical and emancipatory. This process accounts for the synergy between research training, social organization and the social construction of knowledge.

One of the challenges in rural organization is to return to the elders and show young people and children the perception of the countryside as a possible world that is attractive, valid, worthy, and re-appropriate it with an educational practice that is formal and informal and that is innovative with the potential acquired from ruralism.

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