

## ‘Creating (Local) Space for Change’: Strengthening Agroecological Farming and Fair Trade Practices in the State of Jalisco, Western Mexico

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**Abstract:** The article describes the experience of the Network for Sustainable Agricultural Alternatives (RASA: *Red de Alternativas Sustentables Agropecuarias*) in western Mexico, which can be considered an initiative of civil society constituted by different social actors constructing new strategies for sustainable rural development. Presented here are different aspects of the RASA, whose work focuses on farmer training in agroecology and, recently also, fair trade practices, the insights gained and the challenges that lie ahead for strengthening sustainable rural development. The RASA can be considered a social organization with characteristics of the so-called new social movements that seek for an increasing role of civil society in political decision-making, in this case regarding rural development in Mexico.

**Keywords:** *sustainability, participation, new social movements, western Mexico, agroecology, fair trade.*

### Introduction

Much has been written on the negative effects of globalization in the Mexican countryside, describing problems related to the quality of rural producers’ life, identity and traditional practices, as well as the conservation of natural

resources (Cortez, Concheiro and León, 1994; Esteva and Marelle, 2003; Schwentesius, Gómez, Calva and Hernández, 2003). Reference is also made to the trans-national nature of the problem, emphasizing social processes and their effects that go beyond the regional and national

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territory (Halweil, 2000; Schwentesius et al., 2003).

The negative effects of globalization challenge the capacities of governmental institutions to offer pertinent solutions; it also contests the development model pursued by the State (Carabias and Provencio, 1993; Toledo, 2000). Amongst others, it is claimed that poverty alleviation, increased production, appropriate technology development and farmer participation requires profound social and institutional adjustments. More specifically, as we argued in a previous work (Gerritsen, Montero and Figueroa, 2003) a development model is required that is able to respond to the specific necessities of the rural sector, as well as to develop strategies that strengthen governmental intervention in favor of sustainability (Muñoz and Guevara, 1997). Amongst others, new governance processes have been socially constructed and strengthened.

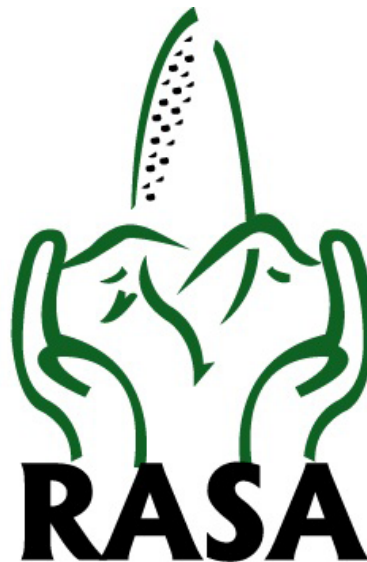
Different ways to strengthen participation of local actors in governance processes for achieving sustainable development is at the heart of the above discussion (Calle, 2005; Ribot and Larson, 2005). But, participation of local actors is directly related to the issues of agency and power, i.e. their knowledge and capacities, as well as (local) socio-political processes (Long, 2001). It also is related to the mechanisms to stimulate and strengthen participation, which can be either externally induced by the State, or emerging from local actors' own initiatives, often built upon the endogenous properties of the region they live in, i.e. from the locality (Pretty, 1995; Calle, 2005; van der Ploeg, 2008).

In Mexico, as in other parts of Latin America, the issue of participation draws attention to the role of social organizations and movements and their role in the construction of local development processes (Morales, 2004). A diverse array of social organizations and movements, such as the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (The Zapatista Army for National Liberation), *El Barzón* (a 'mix' of different farmer unions), *El campo no aguanta más* (The Countryside Does Not Endure Anymore), or *Sin maíz, no hay país* (Without Corn, there Is No Country) have actively been trying to change the political environment in the rural areas of Mexico (Bartra, 2003).

Following Woods (2003: 310), these organizations and movements can be considered 'new social movements' and they are characterized as 'loose assortments of groups now engaged in rural political action'. The struggles that have led to their emergence often originate from the demand to defend local (socio-cultural, organizational and economic) structures, as well as to remain control over the different domains of daily life (Toledo, 1996). Closely related is the defense of the territory, being the place of local identity formation (Escobar, 2001; Gerritsen, 2006). It is also in this setting that specific new forms of natural resource management emerge, as different studies have revealed (Posey, 1999; Gerritsen, 2002; Malischke, González and Gerritsen, 2005). In other words, these organizations and movements stress the need for endogenous approaches to rural development and often develop outside the State's realm (Long and van der Ploeg, 1994; Ray, 1999).

Strengthening social organizations and movements may contribute to sustainable development (Morales, 2004). Their specific role in sustainable development process is the central issue of this paper, based on a case study from the state of Jalisco in western Mexico. In Jalisco, groups of peasants and indigenous farmers, supported by professionals from three non-governmental organizations and two universities, have joined forces in 1999 and created a social organization for establishing a network for sustainable

agriculture at the state level: the *Red de Alternativas Sustentables Agropecuarias* (the Network for Sustainable Agricultural Alternatives; from here onward called RASA according to its Spanish abbreviation - see Figure 1). As we also described in a previous publication (Gerritsen and Morales, 2009), the main objective of the RASA is the search for alternative development paths that permits building sustainability from the locality, i.e. parting from locally specific life-styles and strategies.



### **Red de Alternativas Sustentables Agropecuarias de Jalisco**

**Figure 1.** *The logo of the RASA: farmer hands embracing an ear of corn.*

Source: RASA.

In general terms, the RASA's activities consist of organizing: 1) training workshops on agroecology; 2) farmer-to-farmer meetings for sharing experiences and discussing problems and perspectives of the countryside; 3) the design and implementation of new commercialization circuits for fair trade.

Even though rural stakeholders are the main actors addressed, actions are directed also at 4) the larger civil society, i.e. mainly urban consumers. Finally, 5) articulation with other social movements is also actively sought for.

In this article, the experience of the RASA will be discussed as an example of endogenous sustainable

development. The results presented illustrate a heterogeneous social organization that articulates different rather autonomous locally based farmer groups. It also shows that the strength of the RASA lies in building on local agendas and time frames from a flexible process approach. The following discussion approximates an actor-oriented analysis that is focusing on local knowledge and capacities for social transformation at the local level. This actor-oriented perspective is also related to agroecology and fair trade as relatively newly emerging conceptual entry points for understanding social transformation in the field of natural resource management. It is also shaped within the current socio-political context of the Mexican countryside and the (national and international) strive for sustainability.

It is therefore that in the following, I will first present briefly some methodological comments, which will be followed by some theoretical notions regarding an actor-oriented perspective and agroecology. Then, I will go into the discussion on sustainability and present the current situation in the Mexican countryside, for completing the conceptual and sociopolitical context of the RASA case. After these sections, then, the RASA case will be presented and discussed, ending the article with a discussion and conclusions.

### **Methodology**

The results that are presented in the following sections are a product of the author's participation in the RASA movement since 2001 until today. This

involvement obtained shape as advisor of several RASA (and non-RASA) farmer groups, as well as permanent member of RASA's operative council that gives follow-up to the overall issues concerning the network (see further on). Furthermore, the author has performed and supervised different applied sociological studies to understand farmer initiatives regarding natural resource management and its role in regional sustainable development (see Gerritsen, 2010 for an overview). Finally, for the elaboration of this article, internal RASA documents (technical reports and memoirs) over the period 1999 until today have been consulted. In summary, this article aims at systematizing and (conceptually) contextualizing a concrete working experience related social transformation that emerges from the initiatives of local actors in rural western Mexico.

### **Actors, Agency and Participation**

Understanding the actions and perspectives of local actors (being either individuals and groups or institutions, including social organizations and movements) requires understanding their everyday life experiences and understandings. In other words, there is a need in: 'recognizing the 'multiple realities' and diverse social practices of various actors, and requires working out methodologically how to get grips with these different and often incompatible social worlds' (Long and Long, 1992: 5). Actor-oriented perspectives permit such analysis (Long, 2001).

One of the basic tenets of actor-

oriented approaches is the idea that actors possess 'agency' to realize the fulfillment of their objectives embedded in specific projects. Agency refers to 'the capacity attributed to the individual actor to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life even under the most extreme forms of coercion. Within the limits of information, uncertainty and the other constraints that exist (e.g. physical, normative or politico-economic), social actors are considered to be 'knowledgeable' and 'capable' (Long and Long, 1992: 22-23).

The notion of agency is constituted according to the specific cultural context of an actor. It affects the management of interpersonal relations and the kinds of control that actors can pursue *vis-à-vis* each other. It also implies that the actor exercises some form of power, which can take place in many different forms. At the same time, actors' behavior develops within existing power structures (Scott, 1985). Agency (and power) depends upon a network of (other) actors who become partially enrolled in the projects and practices of a specific actor (Long and Long, 1992).

Related to the notion of agency is the understanding of structure as a duality. Structure, referred as the set of rules and resources that direct social life, has meaning only when it is directly related to the notion of agency. It determines the possibilities and limitations of actors, but, at the same time, it is reproduced and transformed through the actors' actions. The structural properties of social systems then: 'are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize' and they are also 'both constraining and enabling'

(Giddens, 1984: 25). Consequently, dualities, such as: 'macro-micro', 'external-internal', 'endogenous-exogenous', or the frequently heard 'global-local', can have different meanings and can thus be understood only in localized contexts (Long and Long, 1992).

Relating an actor-oriented perspective to the issue of participation implies a shift towards local actor's actions and enrollment in (often externally-induced) projects and processes. These projects and processes are characterized by encounters between different actors with specific agency, and from which particular power relations emerge. Participation then relates to the different ways and degrees in which social actors engage in negotiation processes of different kinds (Chambers, 1997; Leeuwis, 2000).

The achievement of participation in development projects and processes is considered complicated. In many cases, the concept of participation has been used indiscriminately and often confusion exists about its exact nature. In this sense, distinguishing between different types of participation has been helpful (Pretty, 1995). Furthermore, as we have argued before it has to be recognized that participatory processes have often been shaped according to outsiders' views, instead of departing from local perspectives (Gerritsen and Morales, 2001). In these cases, participation is to be understood as following outsiders' agendas, rather than following local needs and aspirations, or constructing projects that are mutually agreed upon (Chambers, 1983, 1997).

Based on the above, the RASA case

can be considered an interesting one, as it is an example of constructing sustainability from the locality, i.e. building upon the locally embedded knowledge systems and available resources. This construction is an outcome of a collective social learning process, however, where governmental institutions have not played any role. Thus, it also sheds light on the knowledge and capacities of local actors, i.e. the agency that they possess in order to shape their own (sustainable) development process.

Agency is present at two levels of the Network that is at a collective level (the Network as a whole) and the individual level (individual farmers and farmer groups). Agency is developed and applied in order to construct a proper sustainable development processes. The RASA has aimed to do so by departing from an agroecological approach, i.e. looking for ways to recuperate socio-ecological processes in agroecosystems. The issue of agroecology (in relation to rural development) will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

### *On Agroecology and Rural Development Strategies*

The overall field of attention of RASA is natural resource management. As such, agency takes place and is developed in this field, interrelating with other socio-political and economic fields. Therefore, the overall strategy of the RASA can be located in the field of agroecology.

Nowadays, agroecology, often interrelated with fair trade activities, has become a strongly emerging strategy for

strengthening sustainable development (Altieri and Toledo, 2011). It has been defined in different ways and from different perspectives, similar to other strategies that look for a more holistic understanding of socio-environmental realities (Guzman, González and Sevilla, 2000; Hurni, Wiesman and Schertenleib, 2004). It is for the same reason that different authors attribute specific interpretations to agroecology, either being a scientific approach, a social movement, or a practice (see Wezel, Bellon, Doré, Francis, Vallod and David, 2009).

Generally speaking, Hecht mentions that agroecology refers to 'an approach more linked to nature and more socially sensitive' (1999: 17). Being more specific, Sevilla Guzmán (*sine anno*: 1) states that 'agroecology can be defined as the ecological management of natural resources'. Moreover, Altieri and Nicholls (2007: 1) talk about 'the fundamental science for orientating the conversion of convention production systems (...) into more diversified and auto sufficient systems'. In this sense, Gliessmann (2002: 13) describes it as: 'the application of ecological concepts and principles for the design and management of sustainable agroecosystems'. Thus, agroecology is not only considered an approach, but also a scientific discipline. Finally, and it is here where we can locate the RASA case, agroecology can be also considered a practice (Wezel et al., 2009). What all these descriptions of agroecology have in common, either being movement, a science or a practice, is the interest in promoting sustainable agriculture. It aims at recuperating and strengthening ecological processes in the local (sociopolitical and economic)



context.

Agroecology can also be considered a rural development strategy. In this case, the research and action agenda generally is defined with the target group that is interested in sustainable agriculture. In other words, transdisciplinarity is closely related to (specific) agroecological strategies (c.f. Hurni et al., 2004). In other words, it becomes crucial to recognize the multi-dimensional and multi-scale nature of socio-environmental problems, as well as the presence of different stakeholders. Finally, this requires considering different methodological tools and techniques. At the same time, an intercultural and inter-scientific dialogue has to be established between the different stakeholders, permitting the revalorization of local knowledge, as well as the creation of interfaces with scientific knowledge systems (Delgado and Escobar, 2006; see also Leff, 1994). The latter challenges professionals, both regarding their scientific capacities and communicative skills (Chambers, 1997). It also draws attention to the debate on sustainability and sustainable development, which I will discuss in the next section.

### **The Emergence of Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development has become a major goal to achieve at the beginning of this new century. Strengthening local actors' knowledge and capabilities in development processes has been seen as one of the strategies for achieving sustainability.

Since the early 1970s, sustainable development has become a guiding

principle, amongst others in natural resource management. It is a globally defined concept, which has been scaled-down to local-level realities (WCED, 1987; IUCN, UNEP, WWF, 1991). In this way, it has been claimed that sustainable development has the potential to bridge the gap between national and local interests (Morales, 2004; Sevilla, 2005).

The origin of the sustainability as a policy issue is twofold. On the one hand, social organizations and movements have questioned the neo-liberal model of development, especially its negative impacts and stressed the need for different strategies. Reference is made here especially to the exclusive nature of neo-liberalism, as well as its negative environmental impacts. On the other hand, partly a result of the pressure realized by these movements, formal institutional efforts for achieving sustainability have been developed through the definition and implementation of new public policies (Morales, 2004). It is the role of social organization and movements that is of main interest in this article.

Parting from the first perspective on sustainability, the concept implies searching for an 'alternative modernity' (Toledo, 2000). With this term, reference is made to a development model that is more ecologically and socio-politically appropriate, and is grounded in a new ethical framework, based on human solidarity, and with all other living beings and elements of the planet (Toledo, 2000). It includes a long-term vision regarding the society-nature relationships in development processes (WCED, 1987; IUCN et al., 1991). As such, the emergence of the sustainability concept is to

be understood as a reaction to the neo-liberalism, since the neoliberal development model has provoked diverse (global) manifestations of resistance, due to its exclusive nature.

Leff (1998) mentions that these expressions of resistance are articulated with the construction of an alternative paradigm of sustainability, in which (local) natural resources emerge as a viable (endogenous) potential to reconstruct the economic process, and as part of a new productive rationality. This new rationality is characterized by a strong social dimension, and is also based on cultural diversity, democracy and nature's productive capacity. From this perspective, the renewed relation between the global and the local can be seen as fundamental for achieving sustainability and provides a useful reference frame for the construction of viable alternatives.

According to Martínez Alier (1994), social movements can be considered representative for this popular environmentalism, as many of them emerged from the (global) contradiction between the need for ecological conservation and uncontrolled (neo-liberal) economic growth. In this sense, their resistance to 'the global' relates to the defense of communitarian and local structures for natural resource management *vis-à-vis* a 'threatening' market or State. In addition, they can also be considered a reaction against environmental degradation and cultural homogenization resulting from globalization. As such, sustainability then can be seen as representing a symbolic limit to and conceptual reorientation of the dominant civilization project of humanity (Leff, 1998; Shiva, 2006).

The relevance of the local in relation to global sustainability is also assumed by Touraine (1998), who mentions that social movements and innovating socio-political practices are not constructed initially at the global or national level. On the contrary, it is in the local space, i.e. the locality (van der Ploeg, 1992), where concrete experiences, connected through interpersonal relations, come together in effective social practices that can confront the negative effects of economic globalization (Pedrazinni, Bolay and Kaufmann, 2004).

In the line of the foregoing, as we argued before (Gerritsen and Morales, 2009; Morales, 2004), RASA can be considered a representative of an alternative sustainable development model, where life-world related and subjective criteria play a role. However, the RASA experience (including agency it possesses and has developed) cannot be fully understood without looking at the structural properties of the Mexican countryside. I will do so in the next section.

### **Turning towards Mexico's Countryside**

As stated before, agency of RASA, as well as its development as an agroecological organization and movement in search of sustainable development cannot be understood without looking at the countryside of Mexico and, above all, its current problematic. The countryside of contemporary Mexico is confronted with many social and environmental problems. This is an especially grave situation because Mexico is considered amongst the most bio-diverse countries



in the world.

More specifically, Mexico has been affected by deforestation, soil erosion, soil and water pollution, and the loss of biodiversity. The social and cultural dimensions of this crisis illustrate how community structures and existing cultures have been profoundly altered, threatening many rural ways of life with extinction (Warman, 2001; Calva, 2004). The rural crisis' economic dimension indicates that agricultural activities have ceased to be economically viable for the small and medium-sized producers, who comprise 87 per cent of all farmers (Warman, 2001). Furthermore, migration to large cities and the United States is a common phenomenon.

The roots of this crisis lie in the rural development policies, which threaten not only the existence of peasants and their families, but also the natural resource and cultural base (Calva, 2004). Throughout history, the presence of a centralizing government has been a constant factor in the design and implementation of rural policies, which, for a long time, inhibited local actors participation in rural development. Constitutionally, the country is a federal republic with 32 sovereign states, which each state composed of independent municipalities; *de facto* the federal government still has strong influence over the state and municipal governments (Warman, 2001; Morales, 2004).

Decentralization has been promoted since the late 1980s in Mexico, but only recently the results have begun to be perceived. For example, it is possible to identify incipient institutional actions oriented towards handing-over responsibilities to state

and municipal governments regarding natural resource management and rural development policies. However, this transfer of decision-making power lacks the accompanying adequate financial resources, as no fiscal and distributional decentralization process has been developed (Morales, 2004).

Some of the decentralization processes have resulted in a privatization of natural resources; they reflect the State's misunderstandings of its constitutional responsibilities towards its citizens. As part of this *de facto* privatization processes, the State has initiated a legal-institutional transformation process that started with changes of the Constitution in 1992 regarding land rights for peasants and indigenous communities. This transformation process has obtained a follow-up in the reforms made for different laws, such as the Federal Water Law, the Forest Development Law, and the very recent Law on Bio-security (Morales, 2004). In this sense, decentralization processes follow neo-liberal trends at the global level, showing an overall retreat from the State from great many public responsibilities.

Within this context, Mexican social organizations and movements have demanded the strengthening of civil society's role in sustainable development. Nevertheless, the formal institutional apparatus is still resistant to these demands, as they threaten their political room for maneuver. In this sense, the countryside can be considered a rural arena, where development projects of different actors, such as social movements or the government, are disputed and can have differential outcomes (Long, 2001).

The state of Jalisco is located in central west Mexico and is the region where the RASA operates. Agricultural and forestry activities have been a central component of the cultural identity of the inhabitants of Jalisco, and the rural sector plays an important role in the economy and politics of the state (Gerritsen, 2002; Ochoa, 2005). However, the countryside of Jalisco also suffers the prolonged crisis that affects all of rural Mexico. Migration rates to urban areas and the United States are high, disintegrating not only family agriculture, but also rural communities and their cultural identities. Furthermore, the spread of monocultures and the technological model that they are based on has destroyed agricultural diversity and led to severe deterioration of soil, water and natural vegetation (Morales, 2004).

In Jalisco, rural development policy is not so much directed towards solving rural problems, as well as it promotes a model that favors agroindustrial agriculture for exportation. Furthermore, it does not take into consideration the diversity in family agriculture. It is in this context that small and medium-sized agricultural

production in Jalisco is developing, facing an overall unfavorable scenario. It is also at this setting that the RASA has emerged; I will discuss its experience in the following section.

### **The Experience of the Network for Sustainable Agricultural Alternatives**

As I already mentioned in the beginning of the article, the Network for Sustainable Agricultural Alternatives (RASA) articulates different groups of farmers and professionals interested in agroecology in the state of Jalisco in Western Mexico (Table 1). As such, it has been creating a network of agroecological farmers in the state of Jalisco, accompanied by different institutions and professionals. In more theoretical terms, the RASA can be considered as social organization with characteristics of a new social movement following national and global tendencies towards the construction of alternative local and sustainable development pathways (Gerritsen and Morales, 2009).

**Table 1.** *An overview of the different actors participating in the RASA*

Type of organization	Total number of organizations	Total number of families involved	Total number of persons involved	Comments
Local (farmer) groups	20	100	500	Different types of (subsistence and market oriented) producers
Advisors	6		30	From different institutions: NGOs, universities, private consultancies and local organizations
Consumer groups	6	25	100	Urban consumers interested organic products and fair trade
Others	Variable	Variable	Variable	This is variable, due to the fact that most RASA encounters are open to the general public.

Source: Author's data.

A basic feature of the network of RASA is that its (farmer) members employ great many strategies; some are totally agroecological in nature, while others can be considered to be farmers in transition towards these farming practices. Thus, a high diversity (or heterogeneity) is the starting point of its work. One of the farmer advisors comments:

It is impossible to work in the same way with all farmers. Some are more advanced than others [in agroecology – author’s note]. Some also have more time than others. Besides, they cultivate different crops and their communities have different [natural – author’s note] resources.

Through its work, the RASA aims at overcoming the social, ecological, economic and cultural crisis that is currently affecting Mexico that was described before. As such, it has been aiming at developing a countervailing power to globalization and its negative effects. However, as the foregoing implicitly makes clear, there is no fixed strategy, instead, the RASA facilitates differential learning processes. A farmer advisor comments:

Well, yes, the whole basic idea of it all is to have a dignified life in the countryside. To no longer suffer and have to do what others tell you (...). Interestingly, within RASA there are no fixed roads that are to be followed, but many can be walked and in fact many are being walked. It all depends of the circumstances one is in.

The activities of the RASA focus on training farmers in agroecological farming (Photo 1), as well as the commercialization of their products.

Agro-ecology and popular education are the conceptual and methodological bases for achieving this. However, once again, a high heterogeneity can be encountered with the network, both in types of farmers as well as advancements in agroecology and farming practices. While some groups have been working already for many years and are headed to more integral farming systems, others only recently started to increase organic matter in their soils. Similar, some, mostly peri-urban farmers are already involved in selling their products in local (organic) markets; others are mainly producing for self-consumption only. This has challenged the network in balancing the different needs for both training and interchanging of experiences. As such, it has been one of the constant themes of discussion.

The work of the RASA began in 1999 in seven rural communities in different parts of the central and southern part of the State of Jalisco; strengthening multi-functional agriculture, maintaining rural life and identity and poverty alleviation has been the common ground between the groups that are present in these communities. Besides, these groups had been working from the sustainability perspective and had relations with social organizations and movements in Mexico and Latin America. Thus, each one of these groups had already been developing similar development models, but it was not until the RASA’s creation that these different experiences were articulated and coordinated in one way or another. One of the founders of the Network comments:

At that time, we were already working on organic agriculture. As



**Figure 2.** *RASA farmers at work* (photo: Peter R.W. Gerritsen)

were other groups, or at least they were developing similar projects. In our case, well, we just started and did not know really which way to go. (...) Then, we started talking with some of the other groups, you know, just for interchanging experiences on similar issues and doubts we were dealing with. (...) This started in the early 1990s. In 1999, we finally decided to join forces in the network.

In 1999, the RASA thus originated as a rather spontaneous collaboration effort arising from the interchanges of the experiences of these various groups in the state of Jalisco. Today, after almost 12 years, it has transformed itself into a social platform where an alternative rural development model can be constructed collectively or at least heart of and discussed. A RASA member farmer comments:

In my community, there always has been few (farmers – author's

note) that practice organic agriculture. Most of my fellow community members always stated that we were crazy to work with compost and manure. They even called us the manure people. (...) RASA showed us that we still are crazy (the farmer laughs at this moment), but that we are no longer a few.

The existing heterogeneity between the different groups in the early years of the Network has profoundly shaped RASA's overall strategy, as stated before. Rather than looking for a homogenization of (farming) strategies, the Network has been looking for the creating of a platform for discussing the multiple pathways towards sustainable agriculture and personalizing technical assistance, based on local specificities and possibilities for transition. It is for this reason that training workshops and farmer encounters have been a central



component in articulating the different groups of the RASA (Photo 2). One of the RASA advisors comments:

The groups are at very different stages regarding advancement in agroecology. This means that you cannot work together with them in

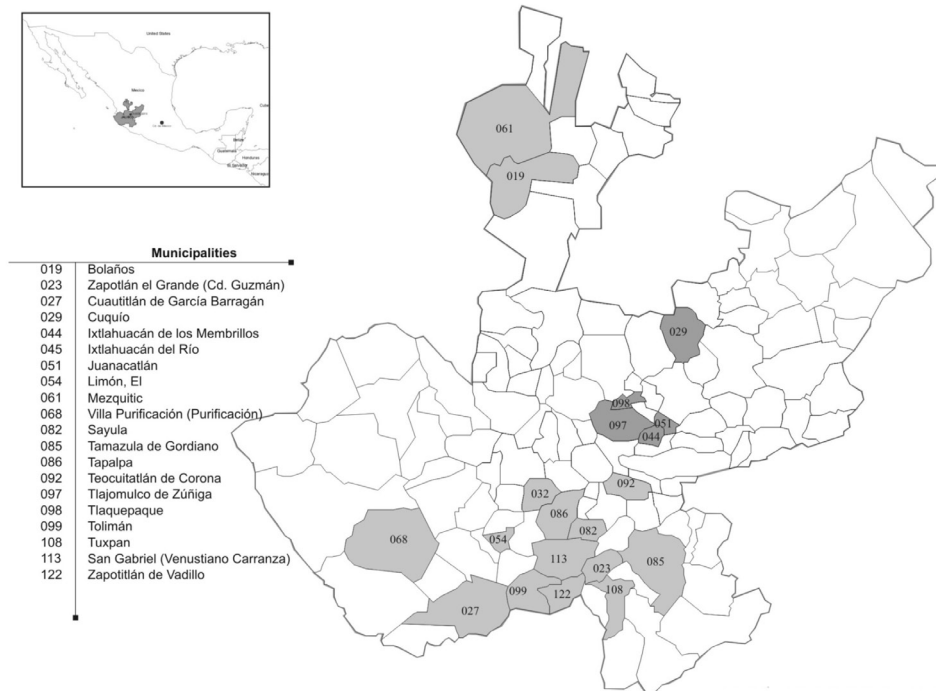
the same way. Some groups more attention than others. (...). The farmer encounters are different, it are spaces where [all kind of – author's note] people can meet, get to know new things and interchange their experiences.



**Figure 3.** *A RASA farmer-to-farmer training workshop* (photo: Peter R.W. Gerritsen)

The network has experienced a significant growth in the number of families interested in sustainable agriculture since its creation in 1999, which, in turn, has generated a growing demand for technical assistance. Currently, the RASA comprises of approximately 100 families that live in 23 municipalities of the State of Jalisco (Figure 2). Besides, these farmer groups, different consumer groups and sympathizers of the Network participate in the different activities. However, the commitment of the latter with the agenda of the RASA is of a more incidental nature. One of the advisors comments:

The Network always has been very dynamic in its composition. People participate, leave the network a while and then afterwards come back. Others participate in order to learn about agroecology and after a while they search for their own road. Finally, and this applies especially for many urban people, many just want to “smell” a little of what is farming and what is the countryside about and then they just go away again. (...) Interestingly, there are several groups of farmers that have been participating since the beginning and that keep on participating. It is they who carry the Network and make things work.



**Figure 4.** *Municipalities with the presence of the RASA-members or groups*

Source: Elaborated by and courtesy of Heliodoro Ochoa, CIFS-ITESO.

The organizational structure of the RASA has evolved according to its growth in members and conceptual shifts over the years. Generally speaking, it is of a very flexible nature. Its current structure consists of different farmer groups (and professional advisors in some cases), as well as the general assembly, being the ultimate authority of the Network, and which integrates by all the RASA members.

The operative council gives follow-up to the decisions taken in the general assembly and is responsible for organizing the farmer encounters, obtaining finance and looking for articulation with other groups and social movements. Currently, the operative council consists of some of the more experienced farmers, as well as several professionals. The general

assembly elects the members of the  
operative council.

In the period 2005-2007 the operative council was divided in a farmer council and a professional council. The former were to be responsible for the strategic lines of the RASA, while the latter gave follow-up to the daily issue. However, these two councils were fused into the current operative council, as having two councils resulted to be inoperative. This was due to two reasons. At the one hand, physical distances between the different farmers were too big. At the other hand, a proper work plan was never defined.

Today, finding a coherent organizational structure still represents a constant struggle within RASA. With the growth of the Network, new demands have arisen that permanently



challenge the operative council. For example, articulation with other social organizations and movements has put pressure on the ongoing work with the different farmer groups, as not always proper follow-up could be given. In other words, combining local development with political articulation at national (and international) level has proven to be difficult. One of the members of the operative council comments:

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It is around 2003 that the mandate of the RASA expanded from a productive emphasis to more general sustainable and conservation issues, such as engaging in the debates on environmental services, water and forest conservation and the issue of genetically modified seeds. Finally, since about 2008 the RASA has been actively looking for articulation with other social organizations and movements in Jalisco and Mexico, although some contact with movements in other Latin American countries has also been established. The latter

activities have been initiated in order to contribute to the different debates that exist in Mexico and Latin America about the future of the countryside. But, as stated before, these activities put tension on the direct work with the different farmer groups, as many of the articulation activities take place outside the state of Jalisco and thus, proper follow-up to local issues and urgencies cannot always be given.

Following della Porta and Diani (1999 – quoted in Woods, 2003), the evolution of the RASA agenda for collective action can be typified as having shifted from more specific (training and interchange of experiences) to more general goals (contributing to debates and consumer involvement); the latter permit better articulation with other social movements (see also Kaltoft, 2001). In addition, it can be characterized by a more segmented nature (i.e. heterogeneity), but tied together by the local groups, the general assembly and the operative council. In this sense, the institutionalization process of the RASA that has been taking place, i.e. finding the proper organization structure, will probably be one of the major challenges for the coming years, as equilibrium will have to be found that permits articulating horizontality, democracy and participation with effective collective action.

Furthermore, following Woods (2003: 318) collective action of the RASA can be categorized as 'progressive and aspirational ruralism'. Following Woods' description, progressive ruralism emerges from the resistance of the RASA members against agro-industrial or modern farming practice and agricultural

policy, as well as several negative aspects of globalization (poverty, rise in food prices, agrofuels, etc.). Regarding aspirational ruralism, the current debate on genetically modified crops in many parts of the world and the role that farmer organizations play in it, is the most recent expression of this form of ruralism. Furthermore, the RASA's collective action can also be regarded as a form of this type of ruralism, as the members are strongly maintaining and defending their cultural heritage and identity (Malischke et al., 2005). And it is in the progressive and aspirational ruralism, where a central element of the RASA can be identified. Notwithstanding the diversity in groups, products and ways of farming, all RASA members agree on the need of an alternative development model, where local culture, traditions and farming practices are at the heart.

## Conclusions

In the foregoing, the experience of the RASA was described in the context of participation and sustainable development. From this description, it has become clear that the different groups integrated in the network have successfully increased their experiences, based on a 'learning by doing' methodology, in spite of the unfavorable context for family agriculture in Mexico. In other words, the RASA as a network and as a collective of different actors involved in agroecology and fair trade possesses and is able to develop agency. This agency, in turn, has permitted to construct an 'alternative' development model and halt the negative impacts

of neo-liberalism. Moreover, this agency is present in the locality that is the local socio-political, economic and ecological context, in which (agroecological) farming takes place.

The learning process of the Network has shown its viability over time and the RASA now has the capacity to design and to operate technological proposals based on practices and methods already evaluated under local conditions, as we described earlier in Gerritsen and Morales (2007). As a result, a growth of the network has taken place and since its beginning the number of groups has almost tripled, as also previously mentioned. Additionally, a continuous presence of newly interested farmers, consumers and professionals can be observed during the RASA meetings and workshops.

At the regional level (i.e. the state of Jalisco), the network has become a reference point for organic agriculture and fair trade, and is now an important actor in the state arena, where new rural development policies are being developed. An example of this is the several courses and seminars on local development and sustainability, RASA-advisors (including farmers) organized for civil servants of the Ministry of Rural Development and of the Ministry of Human Development. However, the relations with governmental agencies remain to be complicated and they depend heavily on the involved civil servants and their goodwill towards the RASA. Thus, RASA's agency for enrolling institutional actors in their project has been limited; its strengths lie in the interfaces between farmers and, in lesser degree, civil society.

The experience of the RASA indicates the viability of rural

transformations based on a farmer-to-farmer approach, similar to other Latina American countries (see Holtz-Gimenez, 2006). Over the last twelve years, the RASA farmers have increased their knowledge about sustainable agriculture, and have acquired a relevant role in the training of other (newly initiating) farmers. Currently, the network is comprised of an important group of farmers that act as trainers in its workshops and meetings, as stated before. These trainers also direct their efforts towards sharing their experiences and knowledge with other groups and organizations. It is in this context that the RASA initiated the construction of a permanent training centre for sustainable agriculture near Guadalajara, the Jalisco state capital, aimed at strengthening farmer's capacities. This training centre has become fully operative by the end of 2007.

Reflecting on the issue of participation in the context of power and stakeholder involvement, it is important to note again that the RASA emerged outside the realm of governmental intervention in rural areas. In fact, during most of its existence, RASA has been systematically neglected by governmental agencies. Moreover, within the rural communities the RASA members often have been perceived as outsiders or exceptions, as one of the farmer statements illustrated. In this sense, the RASA conceptual approach has permitted strengthening self-consciousness of its members, as well as their position in their home communities. The contribution of the professional advisors participating in the RASA role has been four-fold: 1) by facilitation the different training

workshops; 2) by designing and implementing new mechanisms for fair trade; 3) by participating directly in the RASA's operative council; and 4) by participating in different advisory boards of the state government.

The work of the RASA and the results that have been achieved are due to the collective efforts of all its members. The contributions of the members in terms of work and resources are driven by a common goal, i.e. the strengthening of a locally-based development model based on principles of agroecological farming and fair trade. It is this belief in a common purpose, which has allowed the RASA to develop its own space in the Jalisco countryside, and has strengthened the autonomy of its members and their actions. Nevertheless, RASA's collective efforts must be understood as heterogeneous in nature. For example, not all groups are involved in fair trade; only those with a production surplus. Furthermore, some groups focus more on basic grain production, while others are cultivating horticultural crops. Moreover, there are even groups specialized in traditional medicines, next to ecological agriculture.

In conclusion, the RASA is a network that has existed for almost 12 years, in which many changes and adaptations have been made and has to be made. Agency has been constructed, but also reconstructed in different social spaces.

For the coming years, the challenges of the Network lie in four general fields. Firstly, a balance will have to be found between the rather autonomous and independent nature of the RASA and the growing possibility in influencing rural development policies. Secondly

and related, the issue of linking its own experience with that of other social organizations and movements will determine if the RASA's focus will maintain to be on a farmer to farmer movement, or that it will shift towards a state platform for agroecology and fair trade. Thirdly, attention will have to be given to the consolidation of new commercialization channels for organic products, which has to be proven difficult until now. Finally, the RASA will have to turn its attention to

young farmers, as this group has not yet received the attention needed in a countryside that is aging.

The specific way in which these different issues are being addressed will depend of the decisions made by its members, i.e. the farmers and professionals involved. Looking back shows that the RASA strategy is viable, and as one of its farmer member once stated: 'only by walking one reaches its destination'.

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