

# Food communities and peasant farms: strategies for food sustainability

## *Comunidades de alimentos e fazendas de camponeses: estratégias para a sustentabilidade alimentar*

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**Abstract:** This article shows the results of the study “Virtual Office of 10,000 sustainable peasant farms from the regions of Santander and Magdalena Medio”. The study is framed in a Colombian social movement for the preservation of the peasant farm as pivotal axis for food sustainability in the territories. The study has a principal aim to identify the organization process of fourteen (14) food communities and the participatory design of the peasant farm model as strategies for food security in the Colombian territories of Magdalena Medio and Santander. The study conducted a mixed methodology with both qualitative and descriptive, cross-sectional quantitative analysis with data collected from participant communities. Data collection was done through focus groups with seven (7) communities and fourteen (14) interviews with food community leaders from eleven (11) municipalities in three different Colombian departments. Results show that the peasant organization structure called food community and the peasant farm participatory models for each territory are strategies that have led to the strengthening of the local autonomy of the peasant communities for the defense of food sustainability practices within their contexts.

**Keywords:** peasant farm, community organization, food sustainability.

**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta os resultados do estudo “Escritório virtual de 10.000 fazendas camponesas sustentáveis das regiões de Santander e Magdalena Medio”. O estudo tem como foco um movimento social colombiano para a preservação da fazenda camponesa como eixo central para a sustentabilidade alimentar nos territórios. Seu objetivo principal é identificar o processo de organização de quatorze (14) comunidades de alimentos e o desenho participativo do modelo de fazenda camponesa como estratégias para a segurança alimentar nos territórios colombianos de Magdalena Medio e Santander. O estudo conduziu uma metodologia mista com análise quantitativa transversal qualitativa e descritiva, com dados coletados das comunidades participantes. A coleta de dados foi feita por meio de grupos focais com sete (7) comunidades e quatorze (14) entrevistas com líderes comunitários do setor de alimentos de onze (11) municípios em três diferentes departamentos colombianos. Os resultados demonstram que a estrutura de organização camponesa denominada comunidade do alimento e os modelos participativos de propriedades camponesas para cada território são estratégias que levaram ao fortalecimento da autonomia local das comunidades camponesas para a defesa de práticas de sustentabilidade alimentar dentro de seus contextos.

**Palavras-chave:** fazenda camponesa, organização comunitária, sustentabilidade alimentar.

## INTRODUCTION

The open-economy model that was spread globally over the last four decades fostered the escalation and development of agri-food chains based on the increment of monocultures that weaken local markets and artisanal agribusiness. The resulting tension from the global-local contradiction jeopardizes biodiversity and undermines peasant negotiation power, leading to an alarming food insecurity for small-scale rural producers. In addition, it risks sustainability and the welfare of the peasant population, by means of cooperation programs and strategies. These, in many cases may overlook the knowledge and wisdom of communities and the depth and complexity of their actual needs (Gervazio et al., 2023).



In Colombia, 43.6% of people over the age of 18 consider themselves as peasants; 32.3% in municipal seats and 86.3% in nucleated and dispersed settlements also see themselves as peasants. Moreover, 36.7% of those who identify as peasants are 65 or older, followed by 34.3% who are between 41 and 64. According to the data presented in the bulletins of the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, for its acronym in Spanish) regarding the National Agricultural Census, the percentage of people living in multidimensional poverty was 2.9 times higher in dispersed settlements than in urban areas (13.8% versus 39.9%). This rate of extreme poverty is not far from that reported for the northeastern region of Brazil, with 12% (Brandão et al., 2023). In the eastern region of Colombia (where the study was conducted), 44.3% of the population over the age of 18 subjectively identify themselves as peasants. It is noteworthy that according to the data provided by DANE, only 1.9% (IC  $\pm 0.4\%$ ) of the people who identify as peasants make part of a peasant organization or association, either from the agriculture or the fishing sectors (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, 2020).

In the framework of the international movement Slow Food, Convivium Bucaramanga is launched in 2014, with the leadership of the Organization Obusinga. In 2017, Convivium joins the initiative<sup>1</sup> of 10,000 sustainable peasant farms for Latin America. This came up as a strategy of an initiative that was undertaken in Colombia in 2016 and which is promoted, independently and autonomously, by several civil society organizations. This articulation transcended borders reaching out Slow Food across Latin America and the Caribbean by 2019. This initiative seeks to generate a groundswell of public opinion that is sensitive and beneficial to the peasant farm as a cultural unit and bastion of food security and food sovereignty in Latin American countries. Thence, the organization process carried out in 2019 brought with it the creation of the Centro Regional de Santander and Magdalena medio as a strengthening of local forms, such as food communities, scholars, social and private actors, all of them together to empower food sustainability in the territories.

This article is the result of a research study framed in this organizational experience, which constitutes a pilot process that has echoed in several Latin American contexts. This fact turns out to be remarkable when considering that in Colombia, there are few civil organization movements aimed at protecting the peasant culture and favoring their communities. It is noteworthy that the low participation of peasant communities is not limited to Colombia. Also, countries like Brazil, with structural issues and troubled history presents this limitation. Issues such as land concentration, low access to education and information, low access to technologies, funding, infrastructure, and logistics. (Silva & Nunes, 2023). For the Colombian case, the urban-rural gap aggravated by the armed conflict in Colombia has generated a subjective disconnection between the urban and peasant population that needs to be overcome, given the fact of interdependence between both parties that guarantees sustainability of life for them. The purpose of this article is to identify the organization process of fourteen (14) food communities and the participatory models of peasant farm as strategies for food sustainability in the territories of Santander and Magdalena Medio in Colombia.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### The traditional peasant farm and its contribution to food sustainability

The traditional peasant farm is the result of a historical process of adaptation to the territories. With its roots in colonial times with Afro Colombian and mixed-raced communities as main actors, imprinting on the land all their cultural heritage and ancestral wisdoms.

<sup>1</sup> Here *initiative* is defined as a collective action that seeks to reach a common endeavor and is funded by locally owned resources.

For Rodríguez & Mera, the peasant farm is characterized by its mixed gardens, staple crops, agro-industrial crops, prairies, planting pastures near homes, vegetable farming, herbs, shed, barn, store house, fish farming (occasional) near homes (Rodríguez & Mera, 2003).

In terms of sustainability, from the sustainable agriculture viewpoint, there is a myriad of definitions from which two are underscored:

In the first place, the predominant approach that refers mainly to the ecological and technological aspects of sustainability and emphasizes the conservation of resources, environmental quality, and in some cases, the profitability of the agricultural establishment. The second and broader perspective incorporates into its discourse social, economic, and political elements that affect the sustainability of national and international agricultural systems (García, 2009). Under any of the perspectives described, the sustainability of the peasant farm is seriously compromised. The dynamics of the market, promoted by large agribusinesses, affects the forms of agriculture that the peasantry has traditionally developed. La Via Campesina estimates that every three minutes a small farm-type farm disappears (Coordinadora Europea Vía Campesina, 2017).

In the field of public policies, even though agriculture is decisive in alleviating malnutrition, unfortunately this sector in Colombia has been characterized by its instability and by its current approach, which in recent decades, has been oriented towards the export market -flowers, coffee, sugar, cotton, fruits, etc. (Chaparro, 2014). On the other hand, the importance that peasants give to food production is unquestionable, not so much in the quantities produced, but in the characteristics of their offer: they produce throughout the year, they supply a wide variety of products continuously, they offer small quantities in the markets, deliver fresh product, reduce processing and storage needs, and the variety of their products adjusts to the characteristics of each region and the needs of regional markets. In other words, the traditional Colombian peasant farm (agricultural, livestock and artisanal agroindustry) involves within its productive and technological logic the agroecological principles proposed by Altieri & Nicholls (2000)<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, the peasant farm also generates different spaces for inclusion, social and solidarity networks: for example, inclusion of women, who participate in the retail sale of grains, fruits, small animals, etc. Or also support in labor, access to land, supply of inputs, exchange of products, knowledge, and experiences (Santacoloma, 2015; García Rocés & Soler Montiel, 2010).

### Food Sustainability

The FAO defines food sustainability as “the ability to ensure, within a certain period, that the levels of sufficiency, stability and autonomy achieved do not imply such a deterioration of natural, renewable and non-renewable resources, that they make it impossible to sustain the desirable conditions of the food system in the long term, affecting the food security of future generations” (Morón & Schejtman, 1997). In terms of the transport of products from the countryside to the city, to the final handling of the waste generated in the process, natural resources that may have a significant impact on the environment are consumed. Many of these impacts are not fully visible to consumers today, making it difficult to make conscious decisions when it comes to eating. In this sense, food sustainability is not only restricted to productivity, but to a series of activities that revolve around those who seek to obtain and access food (García & Cantú, 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> 1) Plant and animal diversification within the agroecosystem. 2) Recycling of nutrients and organic matter. 3) Management of organic matter and the stimulation of soil biology to provide optimum provision for crop growth. 4) Reduction of water loss and nutrients by maintaining soil cover, erosion control, and microclimate management. 5) Adoption of preventive measures for the control of insects, pathogens, and weeds. 6) Harnessing of synergies and symbiosis that emerge from the interactions between plants and animals.

The conception of food sustainability is related to food systems in a territorial perspective. In this regard, drawing on Rastoin (2013) and Ghersi who define the food system as the network of interdependent actors located in a certain geographical area that participate directly or indirectly in the creation of a flow of goods and services intended for the food satisfaction of one or more groups of consumers, locally or outside the area considered. The sustainability of the food system involves the food security of all the people that make it up, as well as full control over the way they want to eat, respecting traditions and autonomous criteria, that is, in a sovereign manner (Poisot, 2014). Finally, the food system works properly when the full exercise of the right to food by citizens under a jurisdiction is guaranteed. The food system is sustainable when, in addition to the aforementioned aspects, protects ecosystems and guarantees an adequate consumption for future generations. Thus, the concepts of food security and sovereignty have been part of the conceptual evolution of food sustainability and are interpreted as complementary. For the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Oliver de Shutter, the notion of right to food is: “the right of every individual, alone or in community with others, to have physical and economic access at all times to sufficient, adequate and culturally acceptable food that is produced and consumed sustainably, preserving access to food for future generations” (Shutter, 2014, p. 3).

### **Food Communities as Forms of Peasant Community Organization**

As previously noted, the peasant conception of a farm not only refers to technical and economic aspects of production, but also entails social elements that, in the organizational process of the 10,000 peasant farms initiative, have been built collectively and stem from the respect and recognition of peasant culture, politics and epistemology (Giraldo & Rosset, 2021). This valuation of their own implies horizontal relationships within the node or food community and between them. Autonomy is a distinctive mark of the organizational process, therefore, the relationship of the food community with external social or institutional actors should favor symmetry, reciprocity, and the role of the food community. From the social and political component of the peasant organizational process, the revaluation of the social practices called by some of the communities as ‘earned force’ stands out, defined as the traditional solidarity organization of the peasantry, customary in the harvests, including the ‘returned hand’, exchanges of seeds, wages, food, and favors. The strength gained is the union of the peasantry around their identity, their collective and joint progress, and the care of their territory. Without the strength gained, there are no possibilities for cultural resistance or food sustainability.

Peasant community organizations in Colombia that participate in the 10,000 peasant farms initiative have come up with the following organizational criteria: 1. The organization is structured in territorial nodes, which are defined as local (municipal) instances of peasant farm management. 2. The communities have autonomy in the conception, design and development of the model, strategy, and proposal for a sustainable peasant farm, based on the principles of agroecology. 3. The communities must use the 10,000 peasant farm strategy as support for the management of each node. 4. It can only be represented by civil society organizations with the leading participation of communities, peasant families and/or other ethnically differentiated population. 5. In the management process, the nodes can access or receive support from public and/or private institutions, without compromising the autonomy of the concerted processes. 6. The initiative will not be used by any electoral process, nor can it be committed to any party or political movement. 7. The nodes will not be subject

to institutional and/or administrative structures in the territories. 8. Within the strategy, alliances may not be made with organizations or processes that threaten the sustainability of peasant farms. 9. There will be no participation or alliance with any movement that promotes any form of violence. It should be noted that in Santander and Magdalena Medio, peasant organizations have called themselves food communities, while their organizational process focuses on food sustainability, in the terms previously defined. Thus, each food community has a previous organizational trajectory, which is between four (4) in the case of Corchucurí and thirty (30) years in the case of Ammucale.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A mixed approach was used in this enquiry, including a descriptive cross-sectional study with 14 participant food communities and a deep qualitative analysis with the same universe of 7 of the peasant organizations.

Quantitative data was collected by means of 14 direct interviews via telephone to one leader from each participant peasant community that make part of the initiative 10,000 peasant farms from Santander and Magdalena Medio. Likewise, seven focus groups were carried out with seven communities from which written data was registered regarding the models of peasant farm agreed by each group, making use of a semi-structured interview guide.

The participation criteria were as follows: be a leader of one of the participating communities, have a membership equal to or greater than half of the peasant organizational trajectory to ensure sufficient knowledge and legitimacy. The selection criteria of the peasant community organizations participating in the focus groups was the level of organizational evolution measured from the collective design of the peasant farm model. Data collection instruments consisted of a semi-structured interview guide for focus groups and for individual interview. These instruments were key for the design of the prototype of a virtual office of the research project from which this article stems.

Quantitative data was digitized and organized in Microsoft Office Excel® 2010 and analyzed with the software STATA 15, to generate the descriptive statistics. The categorical variables were expressed in percentages and the continuous variables in mean and standard deviation. Qualitative information was digitalized and analyzed manually drawing on the initial categories that emerged from field work.

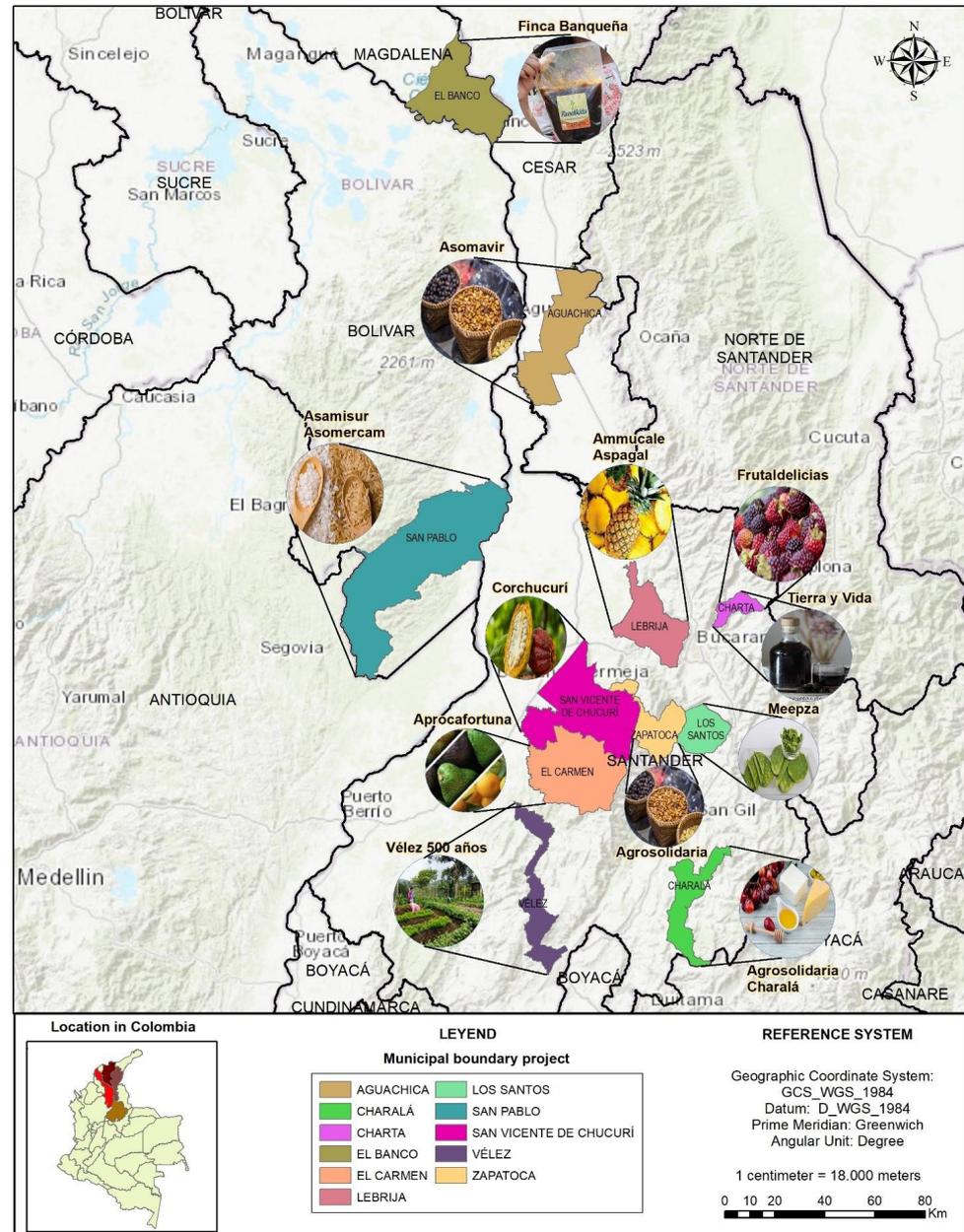
## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The 14 peasant communities have been developing several collective initiatives such as: agricultural production, transformation, commercialization, environmental sustainability, revitalization of knowledge, rural and gastronomic tourism, among others. It is noteworthy that processes regarding tourism are very new, with only four communities introducing this activity. In terms of food production, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some associations and peasant families have focused their efforts within their farms and on individual processes such as the establishment of gardens, exchange of commercial products, including barter, or minor species, especially oriented to the self-supply. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the initiatives currently carried out by each community.

**Table 1.** General characteristics of the food-producing peasant communities organized in 10,000 peasant farms in Santander and Magdalena Medio.

Names of the Communities	Municipality-Department	No. of Families	Current Initiatives
FrutalDelicias	Charta-Santander	11	Blackberry liqueur production and agroecological production of fruits, Vegetables and aromatic herbs
Tierra y Vida	Charta-Santander	62	Home gardens and community sheds
Agrosolidaria-Charalá	Charalá-Santander	40	Community-based monitoring system for ecosystem conservation, Environmental education, Associative entrepreneurship: Community tourism, Agri-food production, Short circuits of food commercialization
Agrosolidaria-Zapatoca	Zapatoca-Santander	120	Management for the infrastructure of the peasant market. Commercialization
Ammucale	Lebrija-Santander	200	Strengthening of farms (garden, minor species), Farmer's street market, Short circuits of food commercialization, Forest preservation
Aspagal	Lebrija-Santander	23	Individual crops
Aprocafortuna	El Carmen-Santander	20	Product processing, Commercialization of fresh produce, Community nurseries
Vélez 500 años	Vélez-Santander	60	Family Agriculture: Gardens for self-consumption and commercialization, Community-based rural tourism, Seed Bank
Meepza	Los Santos-Santander	20	Women's entrepreneurship, Local development from the local level, Biodiversity conservation and sustainable management, Tourist gastronomy, Beekeeping training
Corchucurí	San Vicente-Santander	40	Gastronomic trails, Bird watching, Agro-industrial crops of cacao (nursery, processing)
Asamisur, Asomercam	San Pablo-Bolívar	120	Farmers' market, Brown rice, Broiler chickens
Finca Banqueña	El Banco-Magdalena	50	Sweet potato planting, Native seed nursery with other communities in the region, Recovery of culture and knowledge in each township, Adaptation of a commercial stall in the urban area, Women artisans
Asomavir	Aguachica-Cesar	80	Production and commercialization of coffee, white corn, pink beans and villorrio beans

Food products produced by peasant communities are distributed as follows: fruits (75.0%), followed by dairy products (58.3%) and sweets (41.7%). In Figure 1 you can see the geographical location distribution of the peasant communities' members of the initiative "10,000 peasant farms of Santander and Magdalena Medio" and their food products, in which it is observed that these communities are distributed mostly in the department of Santander, while there are four communities in each of the three departments of the Colombian Caribbean region: that have joined the initiative (Magdalena, Cesar and Bolívar). It is relevant to note that the topography and thermal floor is differentiated between the participating communities, the riverside and swamp contexts stand out, such as the case of La finca Banqueña (Dep. Of Magdalena) and the case of Asomvicmag and Asomercam in San Pablo (Dep. Of Bolívar). The same occurs among the communities of Santander, finding average values between 12C° and 2150 masl in the case of Vélez and 30 C° and 690 masl in the case of San Vicente de Chucurí.



**Figure 1.** Map of the geographic location of the communities that are part of the initiative 10.000 peasant farms in Santander and Magdalena Medio and their food products

Currently, eight (8) of the fourteen (14) peasant communities are beneficiaries from or have financed projects. The other organizations (ASPAGAL, Agrosolidaria de Zapatoca, ASOMAVIR, Agrosolidaria de Charalá and MEEPZA) are developing self-financing processes or have already completed their subsidized projects. The type and nature of these projects are mostly oriented towards technical assistance and training, followed by the delivery of supplies and equipment, and finally, commercialization. Most of the financing institutions are private or NGOs, Others are in the public sector, such as the municipal of national authorities with responsibilities in the technical training and assistance. And to a lesser extent in the international sector for agricultural topics.

In the exploration of potential food products, twelve varieties of fruits, three dairy products, five types of sweets, three leguminous or dry grains, four meat products, four cereals, roots, and plantain, two sausage products, two types of beverages, and six other products, including coffee and cacao, were identified. Table 2 presents the description of food products with potential for agribusiness, products that are prioritized by the peasant communities as having the potential to undertake transformation and value adding processes. This trend of priority production in fruit, dairy and meat implies a challenge for peasant organizations, while sanitary registration licenses entail regulatory procedures that become one of the main problems felt, as explained in the following item, these procedures hinder the peasant economy and favor business monopolies.

**Table 2.** Food products with potential for agribusiness, communities of 10,000 peasant farms in Santander and Magdalena Medio

COMMUNITIES	FRUITS	DAIRY PRODUCTS	VEGETABLES	LEGUMES	CEREALS, ROOTS, TUBERS AND PLANTAIN	SAUSAGE PRODUCTS	MEATS/ EGGS	BEVERAGES	SWEETS	OTHER
FRUTAL DELICIAS		Milk						Blackberry liqueur	Blackberry sweet	
TIERRA Y VIDA	Blackberry	Milk / Yogurt		Beans	Mantecada Plantain					Coffee
ASPAGAL	Lemon Orange							Tangerine liqueur	Pineapple jam	
APROCAFORTUNA	Citrus									Cacao Avocado
AGROSOLIDARIA CHARALÁ		Cheese							Honey	Coffee
AMMUCALE	Pineapple Lemon Mango Passion fruit	Cheese				Chorizo	Marinade semicriollo chicken Eggs			Tomato sauce / Spices
VÉLEZ 500 AÑOS	Banana Borojó Guava	Milk			Corn		Bovine and caprine meat		Sugar cane for panela	Coffee Cacao
MEEPZA										Nopal Cacao Avocado
CORCHUCURÍ	Banana Orange Tangerine									
AGROSOLIDARIA ZAPATOCA	Peach Blackberry	Goat Milk and Yogurt								Organic coffee / Homemade chocolate/ Cacao
FINCA BANQUEÑA	Melon Mango	Costeño Sour cream and Cheese	Pumpkin	Black-eyed beans	Corn Cassava Plátano mafufo flour	Ram products	Bocachico fish		Liquid panela	
ASOMAVIR				Villoro beans						Coffee
ASOMERCAM		Milk			Rice					

Regarding production process, there are transversal issues such as technical assistance (in the agricultural, agribusiness and commercialization areas), access to technical services (soil analysis, food analysis and food science), infrastructure and resource management (connectivity, roads, irrigation system and processing plants), quality and coverage and networking (for all topics), stand out in this categorization.

According to participant communities, the most frequent need or challenge -in first place according to the prioritization made- was related to adequate and sufficient infrastructure for the processing and transformation of their food products, which includes resources such as water and electricity, public utilities for the permanent production and optimal storage of the food they produce (45.5%). In correlation with the previous category, the second problem is the need for sanitary registrations of their products and for machinery and equipment that enable production (18.2%, respectively), and in third place, findings show the need for technical assistance and management/support for production projects (18.2%, respectively).

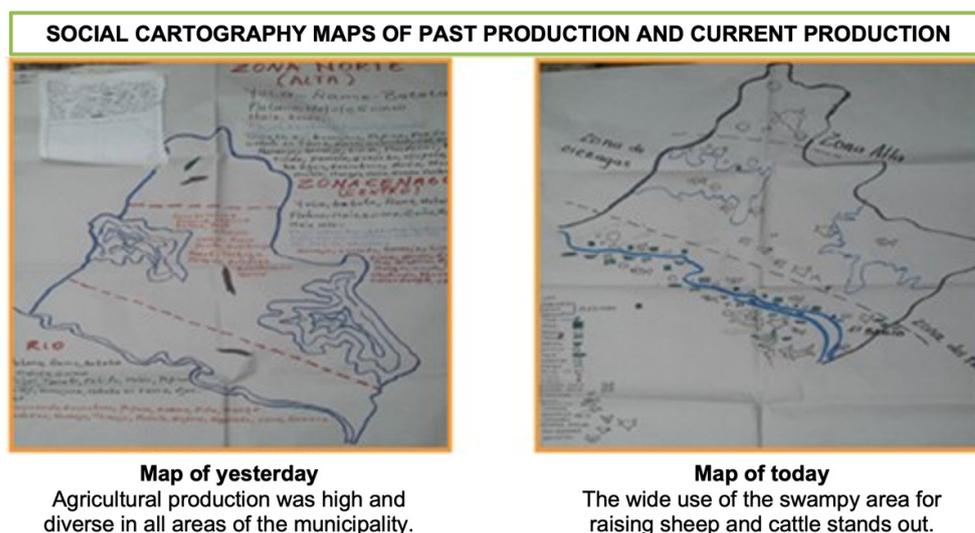
84.6% of the peasant communities have received training on Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) at some point. In most cases, these trainings were offered by the official entity responsible of technical assistance, SENA (81.8%) and on average, 3 years ago, standard deviation (S.D.) of 2.2 years. Notwithstanding, the major demand regarding training is on agribusiness, with 46.2% (product quality improvement, good agricultural practices, food transformation and preservation, food registration process, labeling, organic production); on the use of technological tools, with 36.4% (digital marketing, use of electronic equipment and digital tools); and on agroecology, with 22.2% (water conservation management, rainwater harvesting, reforestation, compost production, protection of minor species, plant diseases and pests). The skills generated with the training (84.6%) have not resolved the requirements that the communities have in this regard, this data correlates with the concern expressed regarding the procedures for sanitary registrations to favor commercialization. The food communities state that the received training is very basic and does not provide sufficient technical tools to resolve the sanitary registration procedures for the transformation of their products.

For the design of the Virtual Office platform, it was relevant to know the connectivity and ICT available in each and all the communities. It is verified that, although there is internet service available in 13 of the territories, in Asomercam de San Pablo, however, 30.8% of the peasant communities stated that only half of the members of their communities have a cell phone with a data plan. The contrast between coverage of the Internet offer stands out versus the real access of the population to the service, a threat to be corrected in the implementation of the Virtual Office. Internet access WhatsApp is the network most used by food communities and cell phones are the device with the highest availability, and 50% of the communities do not have a computer available. This information supported technological decisions for the software design, referring to the weight of the program and the privilege of the smartphone app format over the computer web page.

Regarding the possible organizational protocol to make communication possible through the virtual office, the peasant communities expressed, for the most part, that the best way to establish communication and the process of centralizing information with the virtual office would be through the internal structure of organization and communication already established in each one, called nuclei or invitations according to each organization. Unlike the other communities, Aspagal defines in a pragmatic way that it will use the criteria of members with the best internet quality, this is because it is one of the youngest organizations and it does not have a defined internal structure.

As autonomy has been a political ethical criterion of the organizational process of the food communities, the sustainable peasant farm model corresponds to the proposal that each node or territory has defined in a participatory manner, in which the internal components and supports are described, and the peasant farm requires for its food sustainability and has been configured according to the times of each territory. Some of the communities had carried out their farm model prior to the project design for this research (2020), this is Vélez (2014), El Carmen (2017), El Banco (2017), Zapatoca (2019) and San Pablo (2018). Within the framework of thi research, the communities of San Vicente de Chucurí (2020) and Los Santos (2021) were accompanied in the process of designing their model.

Elderly people from the community, through a process of recalling memories, draw schemes of the farm of yesterday, and younger people draw the farm of today. The contrast between the drawn schemes prompts an intergenerational dialogue that collectively allows the construction of a model farm, based on the premise to ensure food supply in twenty years' time across the territory. Figure 2 is an example of the temporal comparison in which biodiversity turns out to be the axis of changes, a concern that guided the design of the Banqueña peasant farm.

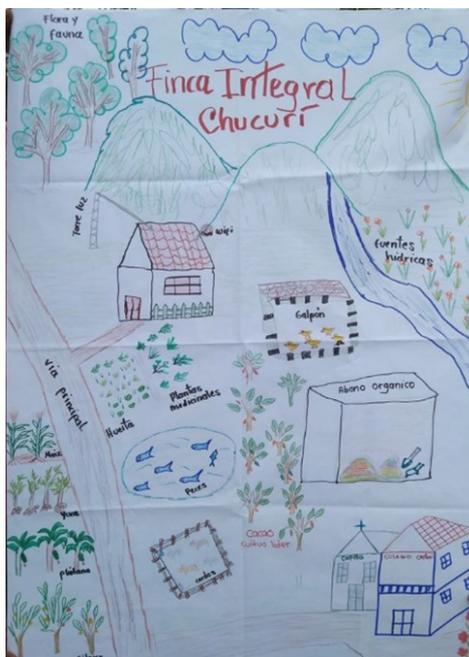


**Figure 2.** Scheme of the Banqueña peasant farm (El Banco –Magdalena).

The first concerted model corresponds to Finca Veleña, built and organized around ten interrelated internal elements: water, housing, livestock spaces, food and commercial crops, fruit trees and agroecological circuits, dialogue family, the strength gained and participation in social organizations. It should be noted that the organizational process from Veleño is part of the political mobilization to defend the territory against mega-mining. The second model is the Carmen de Chucurí Peasant Farm, which integrates components such as the home garden, commercial crops, permanent crops, the forest, housing, minor species, fish farming, fruit trees, livestock spaces, and water conservation.

The third is the Finca Campesina Banqueña, which defines its general farm model with eight components: water management for human consumption and irrigation through wells, ponds, reservoirs and irrigation systems; orchards; livestock production facilities such as a shed, pigsty, ponds, pens or corrals; large crops basically focused on food and cereals and fruit trees; forest and reforestation areas for the protection of river roundabouts and water sources; decent housing; and paddocks and pastures for traditional cattle raising.





**Figure 4.** Scheme of the peasant farm San Vicente (Corchucurí peasant community)

After characterizing the peasant organizations, three relevant topics to be discussed are presented hereunder: tension among inclusion, adaptation, and identity; tension of agribusiness and sustainability and the tension between agroecology and modernity.

### 1. Tension among inclusion, adaptation, and identity

The communities that were characterized indicate the necessity of being supported in four aspects: roads, access to loans, appropriate education, and support in commercialization. Demands that are far from any form of government handouts. These are demands that do not refer to the type of colonialist inclusion that offers opportunities that an individual can only take advantage of as long as they renounce to their own cosmovision and surrender to a hegemonic approach. In this regard, Pacheco and Gómez recognize that strengthening the peasant identity and not the capital allows strategies for social reproduction. The challenge of public policies in promoting the establishment of a sustainable peasant society supports the formation of a rural social identity based on elements of degrowth, sustainable balance and good living (Pacheco & Gómez, 2013). It should be noted that the search for collective welfare is based on principles such as solidarity, trust, and social cooperation, which are opposed to capitalism (Pacheco & Gómez, 2013).

These principles reflected on activities such as production and dispersion of native seeds, solidarity economy practices of a township, socioeconomic forms of solidarity food circulation, and searching of solidarity economic profitability are against the idea of capitalist inclusion. This form of social organization driven by the food production system and the capitalist market promotes the peasant as a market participant. In this regard, Escalona states that there is a displacement of peasants as central agents of the economy and rural societies by commercial dynamics that deprive them from taking control over the means of production, turning them into workers of the labor power (2010, p. 65). There is a reduction in the purchasing power of small producers and peasants in the small agricultural production economy due to the redistribution of income, derived from this production by giant intermediaries (Patnaik, 2012).

The communities studied speak from their condition as food producers seeking access to other spaces, but without losing their peasant status. It should be noted that for Rincón (2017), this partial or complete integration to the market represents different forms of subordination of the poor peasant community to capital, because they do not have sufficient returns from the activities they perform and tend to be disintegrated to become proletarians (p. 20). In this vein, the discussion focuses on the disappearance of the peasant ethos by starting to decrease the peasant form of production. From the perspective of peasant studies, a debate is raised on a phenomenon of depeasantization that centers on the transformation of peasants into capitalist farmers and workers who survive in a context of neoliberalism (Melo, 2015). For the participant communities, their resistance strategies are focused on collective forms of production, marketing practices with the generation of pesticide-free and nutrient-rich food, the care of biodiversity as well as the search for a direct-to-consumer purchasing dynamic. The acknowledgement of this tension led to the inclusion in the platform of the local peasant epistemology which is the core aspect on how peasants interact with their contexts.

## **2. Tension of agribusiness and sustainability**

According to results, there is a trend to move forward in agribusiness processes. Based on the focus groups data, there are expectations of higher incomes for the peasant community by two means: the reduction of crop losses and value-added processes for their products. The incorporation of peasants into agricultural value chains is driven by the idea of producing food that meets market standards.

In connection with the tension already raised, the food communities participating in the project experience dilemmas regarding the definition of sustainable agroindustry. Notwithstanding, communities that have defined their peasant farm model show greater clarity regarding the limits that the agroindustrialization of their products has brought about. In general terms, these communities tend to return to the use of non-genetically modified seeds, selected and reproduced by the farmers themselves in their own farms, it is a step towards expelling the hegemony of agribusiness, which homogenizes peasant farming practices (Rezvani, 2021). Also, going back to artisanal forms of production means rescuing practices centered on diversity and environmental adaptability. This implies tensions with sanitary registry processes that tend to underestimate ancestral food cultures. It is here where the identity and the perspective of inclusion of the peasant community face great challenges. Can the peasant community maintain an important amount of its food traditions and culture, based on agrobiodiversity and its forms of production? Or will agribusiness certainly turn it into a minor element in the agro-tertiary businesses, whose sustainability is questionable? It will all depend on the specific value addition, this means, on peasant communities being able to identify the potential value that they can add up to their agro-industrial production systems, without compromising the principles of sustainability that lead the peasant organization.

## **3. The agroecology and modernity tension**

In the midst of recognizing the historical rural-urban tensions and their ineludible correlation with the tradition-modernity tension (Giraldo, 2018), agroecology rises as a field that unifies these poles. According to García (2003), the massive migration of people from rural areas to the cities causes the loss of traditional agricultural knowledge and native varieties of peasant cultures.

The accelerated displacement in Colombia caused by the internal armed conflict, has deepened the social rupture between the countryside and the city. The food communities have begun to opt for agroecology as an act of resistance to the “Green Revolution” that was offered as a panacea to improve the quality of life of the peasantry and ensure food for the population.

Agroecology has the power to connect the voices of the productive vocation of former years with the contemporary concerns that the environmental crisis has generated in today’s society. It is established as a bridge between different times, worldviews, and ways of life. For Escalona (2013), it is a battle for the reconnection of relations between producers and consumers, it is a reappropriation of food at the local level. The model implies a reorientation to local ecological conditions, recognizes the specific preferences of the consumer, and revalues the specific attitudes of the farmers involved (Escalona, 2013).

Hence, agroecology is meaningfully placed among the formative needs expressed by the food communities, but also as a vital element of their peasant farm vision, which reflects the peasant awareness regarding the food conflict, global warming, and the need to align human needs with environmental sustainability. It is the promotion of an agroecological social change that relies on the regeneration of the local social fabric, from the ecological management of natural resources to socioeconomic mechanisms of solidarity circulation (Cuellar, 2008).

Knowledge of agroecology requires convergence between traditional and academic knowledge. In this area, the academy hears and acknowledges the power of popular knowledge, considered disruptive as it prioritizes practical and daily knowledge as well as it changes disciplinary schemes, having a transdisciplinarity nature. For Gutiérrez (2010), this means focusing on the separation between formal and sociocultural learning, considering that the latter has managed to maintain and preserve the historical and cultural identity of agricultural communities. Furthermore, it has developed systems or frameworks of meanings in which this form of existence is produced and reproduced, as well as the knowledge on which it is based (Gutiérrez, 2010).

This horizontal dialogue of knowledge means a challenge for the Colombian academy, and it is fair to recognize that academia is still not up to the methodological, technical, pedagogical, or epistemic demand of peasant communities. Surely due to these considerations of separation between said learning, it still does not have the status in academic fields and in formal education, and it is an emerging area of research that, due to its borderline nature, remains limited. This, nonetheless, may not diminish its transformative potential, and aware of these limitations, institutions in charge of technical support and universities understand this as an opportunity to address this dialogue.

## CONCLUSIONS

Considering the diversity of processes, actions and current needs and problems presented by the fourteen participating food communities, the challenges that communities must face are salient, these are communities from the Regional Center of 10,000 peasant farms in Santander and Magdalena Medio. However, the work that they carry out in defense and protection of their territory and of peasant life, accounts for their capacity and organizational power that leads them to be the main actors and leaders of their processes.

The participatory construction of sustainable peasant farm models allows communities to work collectively based on the recognition of the transformations that the landscape has had and the impact on their productive units, between the past and present to project food sustainability and a future for their territories, with greater social cohesion. Therefore, it is important that all organizations participating in the study can develop this proposed methodology, ensuring the full participation and leadership of the peasants of each territory as a strategy to strengthen their autonomy, a requirement for food sustainability.

Finally, it is important to recognize the tensions that communities experience in their organizational transitions at a technical level but also at social, political, and cultural levels in order to preserve their identity, strengthen country-city alliances, and guarantee their food sustainability. In this regard, it is necessary to point out the urgency of overcoming the disaffection of citizens with respect to the food system and the mistrust in the public institutions that support it, as well as advancing from academia and scholarship in transdisciplinary readings that recognize traditional knowledge and the peasantry as a valid interlocutor, and to enable horizontal and democratic forms of interaction far from the hegemonic understandings of science.

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