

**UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ**

**Colegio de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades**

**Shout out for the *agro!* Agroecological approaches for sustainable food systems in the Ecuadorian Highlands: An analysis from political ecology**

**María Emilia Noboa Coello**

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## **HOJA DE CALIFICACIÓN DE TRABAJO DE FIN DE CARRERA**

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## RESUMEN

Esta tesis presenta la agroecología, como práctica política y movimiento social, como una alternativa viable y sostenible al modelo de agricultura industrial dominante en América Latina. Con énfasis en la realidad ecuatoriana, la adopción de la agroecología por parte de la agricultura familiar campesina no sólo promueve la sostenibilidad ambiental y la seguridad alimentaria, sino que también refuerza las dinámicas postdesarrollistas al empoderar a las comunidades rurales y fomentar su autonomía frente a las políticas globalizadoras neoliberales y centradas en el capitalismo.

**Palabras clave:** agroecología, ecología política, posdesarrollo, soberanía alimentaria, agricultura familiar campesina, capitalismo, neoliberalismo, ecología política feminista

## ABSTRACT

This thesis introduces agroecology, as a political practice and social movement, as a viable and sustainable alternative to the dominant industrial agricultural model in Latin America. With emphasis on the Ecuadorian reality, the adoption of agroecology by peasant family agriculture not only promotes environmental sustainability and food security, but also reinforces post-developmental dynamics by empowering rural communities and fostering their autonomy in the face of neoliberal and capitalist-centered globalizing policies.

**Key words:** agroecology, political ecology, postdevelopment, food sovereignty, peasant family farming, capitalism, neoliberalism, feminist political ecology

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	8
CONTEXT .....	10
JUSTIFICATION .....	14
QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH .....	16
Central question .....	16
Auxiliary questions .....	16
General objective .....	16
Auxiliary objectives .....	16
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	18
Agroecology and political ecology: a path towards political agroecology .....	18
The role of agroecology in fair and sustainable food systems: food security and food sovereignty in Latin America.....	20
Agroecology as tool for the decolonization of “development” in the rurality: family agriculture in the Ecuadorian highlands .....	24
POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY.....	27
DISCUSSION .....	29
When agriculture becomes political: agroecology.....	29
Agroecology for sustainable food systems in Latin America: an utopy? .....	30
Decolonization of development from the Highland peasantry .....	31
CONCLUSION.....	33
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES .....	36

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis introduces agroecology, as a political practice and social movement, as a viable and sustainable alternative to the dominant industrial agricultural model in Latin America. With emphasis on the Ecuadorian reality, the adoption of agroecology by peasant family agriculture not only promotes environmental sustainability and food security, but also reinforces post-developmental dynamics by empowering rural communities and fostering their autonomy in the face of neoliberal and capitalist-centered globalizing policies.

Agroecology, understood as an integrative practice and approach that combines scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge for the sustainable management of agroecosystems, has gained relevance in the Latin American region in recent decades. From a political ecology perspective, agroecology not only focuses on food production in an environmentally sustainable manner, but also addresses the power relations and socioeconomic dynamics that influence access to and control of natural resources (Altieri, 2002). This critical approach allows understanding how agricultural policies, land reforms and development strategies affect rural communities, especially peasant family farmers, who represent the basis of food sovereignty in many countries in the region (Rosset & Altieri, 2017).

In Latin America, agroecology has emerged as a response to the industrial agriculture models that have dominated the region since the Green Revolution. These models, characterized by the intensive use of agrochemicals, monocultures and the expansion of export crops, have generated multiple negative impacts: soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, contamination of water sources and, significantly, the economic and social marginalization of small farmers (Altieri & Toledo, 2011). In contrast, agroecology promotes crop diversity, the sustainable



use of local resources and the integration of environmentally friendly agricultural practices, thus strengthening the resilience and autonomy of rural communities (Gliessman, 2015).

The case of Ecuador is particularly illustrative in this context. Peasant family farming, which represents a crucial part of the country's agricultural sector, has found in agroecology a way to resist and transform the development dynamics imposed by the neoliberal model (Mier y Terán Giménez Cacho et al., 2018). Ecuadorian family farmers have adopted agroecological practices that not only improve the productivity and sustainability of their land, but also strengthen community structures and promote social justice (León & Salvador, 2020).

Through agroecology, these communities are rebuilding agricultural systems that are culturally relevant, ecologically sustainable, and economically viable (Sherwood et al., 2013).

Agroecology is also closely linked to post-development dynamics, an approach that challenges traditional notions of development based on economic growth and industrialization (Escobar, 2010). Instead of following externally imposed development models, agroecology promotes processes of self-determination and autonomy, fostered by peasant social movements. These movements defend rights to land, water and seeds, and promote ways of life and production that are in harmony with local ecosystems (Sevilla Guzmán & Woodgate, 2013). In Ecuador, movements such as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and the Ecuadorian Agroecology Coordinator (CEA) have played a crucial role in the dissemination and defense of agroecological practices, showing how agroecology can be a powerful tool for resistance and social transformation (González de Molina & Toledo, 2014).

## CONTEXT

The global food crisis has led to the need to seek new alternatives and paradigms to transform the forms of production that threaten ecosystems, societies and territories.

The origin of agroecology as a socio-ecological alternative goes back to social struggles from the peasantry for the vindication of their rights to manage their food systems, later known as food sovereignty. But the rise of agriculture as an escape from the crisis does not begin with agroecology, or at least not consciously. At the end of the Second World War, the food crisis was taking place throughout Europe, and the great powers realized that their food supply could not depend on political stability in their territories, so they looked for ways out in other territories and with other technologies. The green revolution took place between 1940 and 1970, characterized by the increase in agricultural production, through the intervention of seeds and practices that made crops more resistant. While this allowed food to reach more mouths, it presented challenges for the territories that were exploited for decades-territories of the Global South. Soils destined for monoculture, loss of agricultural genetic diversity, and so on. But the consequences were not only of a productive nature. The peasantry, that dedicated to subsistence agriculture, was threatened by this industrial practice that not only appropriated territories but also relegated vernacular practices to a secondary and "rudimentary" level.

Latin America became the scenario for testing and discarding agroindustrial practices, at the cost of the precariousness of peasant conditions. Countries such as Mexico were especially affected, where genetically altered wheat seed produced in this country came to occupy 90% of the total crops.

In the Ecuadorian case, as well as other countries that make up the Andean region, agriculture and later agroecology are shaped by various ancestral practices and traditions.

"The Andean chakra is the form of agriculture proper to the Quichua indigenous peoples of the highlands and we can find it throughout the inter-Andean alley, properly from the south of the province of Carchi (bordering Colombia) to the north of Loja (bordering Peru). It is characterized by a high agrobiodiversity and a complex system of seeds and varietal adaptations that develop in the different agroclimatic levels of the highlands, approximately between 2400 and 3500 m.a.s.l., where three zones are generally recognized: high, medium and low (and transition zones). Since its pre-Hispanic origin, the chakra has been oriented towards satisfying family and community nutrition, and this criterion determines what and how much should be sown. The influence of the lunar cycle and various agro-climatic signs define when to sow; the solstices and equinoxes mark the milestones of the Andean agrofestive calendar. A series of ingenious practices and highly functional technologies for the ecological management of soil, water, crops and livestock are the keys to the sustainability of the agroecosystem and explain how to produce.

explain how to produce. Another key feature is the cultural complex, the ancestral rites and traditions that accompany the development of crops, breeding and food; these give spiritual meaning and a deep connection to the Allpa reality.

of deep connection with the reality Allpa Mama (mother earth -living soil), Yaku Mama (aquaviva) and Pacha Mama (the natural context and universal vital energy), and have been key in maintaining the cohesion and expansion of the social fabric, which is expressed in the family, the indigenous community and its organizational forms" (Gortaire, 2016, p.16).

The rupture posed by agribusiness to indigenous knowledge was largely the reason for dissent in the agrarian uprisings mostly motivated by the indigenous population.

"The first and second agrarian reforms that were promoted between 1950 and 1970, achieved partial modifications in the structure and land tenure in many regions of the country. With great sacrifices and efforts, the indigenous peasant movement, supported by progressive sectors, achieved the abolition of pre-capitalist systems such as concertaje and huasipungo, and in many territories the eradication of the hacienda was achieved. The land back in the hands of the communities implied the awakening of their organizational strength and the great challenge of demonstrating productive capacity" (Gortaire, 2016, p.22).

With the advent of the green revolution, "state institutions and non-governmental organizations are promoting a scheme of "agrarian modernization" that rejects traditional agricultural systems and suggests that the new territories under indigenous and peasant control be integrated into market structures, applying the best available technologies to achieve greater efficiency and productivity, namely: mechanization, monoculture, "improved" seeds, use of chemical synthesis fertilizers and agrochemicals, and the use of pesticides and agrochemicals. In addition, as Luis Macas comments, "...the arrival of different technological packages, not always the arrival of different technological packages was not always aimed at improving quality and productivity in the field, but sometimes eminently commercial purposes prevailed". (Gortaire, 2016, p. 23)

It is then that an imperialist model of agriculture is constituted through "modernization". In what Gortaire (2016) explains as follows: "state institutions and NGO's promoted monoculture structures and the use of higher yielding seeds, mechanization, use of chemicals, and other green revolution technology. The effects appeared within a few years, with a significant reduction of local agrobiodiversity; increased erosion and consequent loss of natural soil fertility; increased presence of pests and diseases, among other consequences; not to mention the serious health problems associated with the use of pesticides" ( p. 23).

From this point on, indigenous peasant agriculture seeks sovereignty: the recognition of its productive and food independence in coherence with its cosmovision. Although Ecuador since 2008 recognizes food sovereignty as a right of Buen Vivir through the Organic Law of Food Sovereignty (LORSA); [...] to promote sufficient and adequate production, conservation, exchange, transformation, marketing and consumption of healthy, nutritious food, mainly from small and medium peasant production, popular economic organizations and artisanal fishing, as well as microenterprises and handicrafts; respecting and protecting agrobiodiversity, knowledge and traditional and ancestral forms of production, under the principles of equity, solidarity, inclusion and sustainability" (Hidalgo, 2014), and certain progress has been made in institutional matters from the Law of Agrobiodiversity and Agroecological Promotion presented by various social organizations to the National Legislative Assembly in 2012 and from the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock on creating the Undersecretariat of Peasant Family Farming, on sustainable agriculture boosted by ancestral knowledges, there is still a long way to go in discursive, conceptual, social and political terms.

## JUSTIFICATION

Food security, nourishment, and sustainable production and consumption of food remains a great problem mainly for rural areas around the world. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), approximately 900 million people experienced severe food insecurity and between 691 and 783 million people in the world faced hunger, measured by the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU), in 2022. (FAO, 2023).

These numbers are particularly alarming in rural populations, where the impact is higher at 7.3%. The consequences are not only evident in the low levels of physical and cognitive development of the populations, the high rate of infant mortality or the increase in cardiovascular diseases, but also in the inefficiency of food distribution, food education, local production, sustainable agriculture, and soil management.

In 2023, FAO published the Regional Overview of Food and Nutritional Security in Latin America 2022 that indicated that in Ecuador almost 37% of the total population is affected by food insecurity (6.6 million people) and the country is located on the third place in Latin America with more food insecurity.

Talking about agriculture and agroecology with peasant representation in Ecuador is more than an advance, it is a necessity. Ecuador depends on 8% of agricultural production, not only business but also family farming (MAG, 2019), with greater emphasis on the latter and its productive importance in an analysis of land concentration vs. agricultural production units, where business agriculture concentrates 80% of the land in contrast to family farming, which represents 64% of national agricultural production.

In this context, agriculture in the country has been marked by immense inequalities, not only in production levels, but also in the equitable distribution of products, overexploitation of labor, unfair payment, poor distribution management and misuse of natural resources and ecological services. This constitutes a major problem, not only for the environment but also

for the development and dignified life of the mainly rural agricultural populations that supply about 60% of the products consumed by Ecuadorians. This poses a delay in the economic and social development of the populations but also restricts, through clear socio-cultural barriers derived from various power dynamics, fundamental rights of rural populations such as child malnutrition, with high incidence rates in the Andean population especially in provinces such as Chimborazo, Bolivar, Tungurahua and Cotopaxi, which have high levels of food insecurity and an unjust lack of food sovereignty and self-sustaining economies.

## QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

### Central question

How can the implementation of sustainable agroecological systems from a political approach have an impact on the living conditions of rural communities in the Ecuadorian highlands?

### Auxiliary questions

- How does agroecology intersect with political ecology, and how can this integration contribute to the implementation of a political agroecology as a transformative approach to sustainable agroecological systems?
- What are the specific contributions of political ecology towards fostering fair and sustainable food systems, particularly in addressing food security and promoting food sovereignty within Latin America?
- How does the application of political ecology serve as means for challenging and decolonizing traditional 'development' paradigms in rural contexts, specifically examining its impact on family agriculture within the Ecuadorian highlands?

### General objective

Assess, from a political approach, the incidence of the implementation of sustainable agroecological systems on the living conditions of rural communities in the Ecuadorian highlands

### Auxiliary objectives

- Analyze the intersection between agroecology and political ecology and its contribution in implementing political agroecology as a transformative approach to enhance sustainable agroecological systems
- Identify and evaluate the role of political ecology in fostering fair and sustainable food systems, with a focus on food security and food sovereignty promotion within Latin America.



- Discuss the application of political ecology as means for challenging and decolonizing traditional 'development' paradigms in rural contexts, with emphasis on understanding its impact on family agriculture in the Ecuadorian Highland

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Agroecology “brings together diverse grassroots efforts to address distributive injustice, environmental degradation, lack of food security, hunger, and the impoverishment of rural and urban life. As a social movement, agroecology aims to challenge power structures, create linkages between rural and urban popular classes to promote food sovereignty, and put control of the means of production, of which land, water, and seeds are the most important, in the hands of the people” (Giraldo, 2024, p. 1). This revision of academic literature, breaks down three main approaches to the agroecology movement have been proposed: a political analysis approach to agroecology, an analysis of the influence of agroecology on the regional food situation, and a deepening of the emancipatory opportunity of "traditional development" with respect to sustainability through agroecology.

### **Agroecology and political ecology: a path towards political agroecology**

Authors such as Toledo, Forshyth and Molina define the branch that intersects agroecology with political ecology as political agroecology. This branch of knowledge proposes that agroecology is the result of processes that sculpt inter- and intra-systemic relationships involving political and power dynamics influenced by social and cultural constructions of what is perceived as the environment. However, political agroecology is not merely a subject of research and theoretical interpretation, but rather a practical projection towards sustainable agroecological and food systems. Accordingly, Garrido and González de Molina (2020) propose two branches of agroecology: as an ideology, dedicated to spreading knowledge and making the structure of ecologically based and sustainable agroecosystems the dominant system; or as a developing area of study that focuses on the creation of institutions, policies and programs aimed at achieving agro-sustainability. Political agroecology then argues that in order to achieve agro-sustainability, efforts must be made to change the institutional

frameworks that impede its diffusion and implementation. In this sense, change essentially relies on political means such as mediation between state and non-state actors, collective action, alliances, social and electoral participation, etc. Thus, and in line with Ostrom (2009), the two main objectives of Political Agroecology are: to create institutions that support the realization of agro-sustainability and to structure agroecological movements so that they can be put into practice.

Therefore, González de Molina (2020) argues how the nature of socio-ecological relations in agroecosystems addresses the need for a political agroecology based on the intrinsic power dynamics that exist in them, which reproduce the social metabolism between nature and society. Consequently, environmental pathologies can constitute social pathologies, and vice versa. "Social inequality or territorial imbalance can induce changes in agroecosystems. From a physical point of view, it implies the unequal allocation of energy, materials, water and environmental services. Pressure on agroecosystem resources can increase if part of the population is deprived of the wealth generated by their appropriation and transformation. Appropriation by one social group through exploitation mechanisms or the forced transfer of rents can reduce the amount of biomass available to satisfy the endo- and exosomatic needs of the rest of the rural population; it can increase social demand above the requirements of the majority of the population, increasing the pressure on agroecosystems. From the perspective of the internal equity of agroecosystems, an unequal distribution of natural resources usually puts pressure to increase productive effort" (González de Molina, 2013, p. 47).

Other approaches to Political Ecology in agriculture suggest the use of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to reject the binary and asymmetric condition of ontologies around agriculture and most social fields. ANT proposes a unification and symmetry between the concepts of nature and humans, opening up possibilities for socio-natures, i.e., things that defy natural or social norms and can be situated between them or as a composite entity. ANT then challenges

to consider non-human entities as actants that can influence and relate to each other at the same level.(Watts and Scales, 2015). With the agricultural modernization of the last decade, new networks and therefore new actors have been generated with projects that include aspects such as transnational agriculture, climate change, capital accumulation, mass consumption, etc. From a political ecology perspective, "the most fundamental questions concerning these emerging networks have to do with their power relations: who does what, who gets what and what they do with it" (Bernstein, 2010). This agricultural shift underlies what should be obvious, but is not often addressed in political ecology studies: agrosystems are the result of two-way interactions between actants, and these actants are, in a wide range, non-human actants.

So what is the role of non-human actors, such as seeds, in political decisions? Or how do peasant practices shape the technologies deployed primarily by industrial agriculture?

Feminist political ecologists present a different approach to a question relevant to ANT: the political ecology of scale. Agricultural networks from a scalar analysis of PE have always implied a multiscalar basis-global, national, regional, local. However, it has recently been criticized for resorting to predetermined hierarchical patterns that can ignore and simplify more complex realities such as households in rurality that are often assumed to be a static and unchanging measure of scale.(Rochelau,2008). Watts and Scales (2015) delve into the critique of situated knowledge in agriculture for reinforcing local/traditional practice binaries as alien to the West, reinforcing dominant perspectives, which privilege Western scientific knowledge and treat farmers as passive recipients of innovation.

### **The role of agroecology in fair and sustainable food systems: food security and food sovereignty in Latin America**

The relationship between food security and food sovereignty with respect to agroecology is not new but certainly has not been static. According to Giunta (2018) the establishment of food regimes has been the basis for the understanding and reproduction of intrinsic power

relations between food production, consumption and circulation and the development of capitalism. On this basis, capitalism has configured current food regimes aimed to reproduce perceptions at international, regional, local, and even individual scale of what fits as food (in)security.

The first food regime concept was suggested in the end of the 80s by Friedmann and McMichael (1989), referring to them as a "rule-governed structure of food production and consumption on a global scale that is based on (and at the same time reflects) the power relationship between states, capital and working classes (peasants, farmers and workers) in certain stable, but transitory, periods of capitalist accumulation" (Giunta, 2018, p. 40). For Giunta "the innovative scope of this theoretical system refers, on the one hand, to the rupture with the unilinear vision of rural development imposed by the paradigm of modernization and, on the other hand, to the assumption that the understanding of agrifood models cannot be dissociated from the analysis of the global economic system. This implies returning centrality to the analysis of how agrifood processes are functional to those of valorization".(Giunta, 2018, p. 40)

However, the author suggests that these underlying rules come to light in times of transition between regimes and presents three regimes already discussed by authors such as McMichael (2015): the colonial regime under British hegemony, the industrial regime under US hegemony and the current one, the corporate regime, under the hegemony of corporations and regulated by the WTO, yet nowadays new actors shape the reality towards a possible new regime influenced by economic powers such as the BRICS countries and the predominance of free trade agreements. The market is the center, under an imperialist configuration characterized by the monopolistic control exercised by corporations in extensive production chains.

This is how food (in)security emerges as part of an attempt to "green" capitalism by appropriating environmental and food struggles, but allowing a complex analysis of their motivations and contradictions.

"Likewise, in Latin America during the last decades, within the framework of the pattern of capital reproduction assumed in the region (Osorio, 2014) the processes of expansion and capitalist development of agriculture deepen sharply, in accordance with the global trends resulting from the rise and consolidation of the corporate food regime (McMichael, 2015) as a concrete expression in the global agri-food system of the neoliberal phase of capitalism.

Among the main trends and general transformations in Latin American agriculture resulting from the neoliberal turn, Kay (2015) identifies the reconcentration of land and capital, the dominance of corporate capital and transnational agribusinesses, which have become involved in the most profitable sectors of agriculture (especially around the so-called flex crops) exerting greater pressures on indigenous and peasant territories, the intensification, precariousness and feminization of labor" (Larrea, 2022, p.190).

In the Latin American context, Cuellar and Sevilla (2009) refer to the origin of the concept of food sovereignty as civil society struggles within the articulation of antagonisms such as neoliberalism and globalization, denouncing the abuses of the hegemonic actors of the current agrifood system over peasants and indigenous peoples. This debate is situated in the context of a boom in the growth of global trade in agricultural goods from the Global South, and the strong opposition of the agricultural sector to the free trade agreements that flooded the 1990s.

Given the lack of consideration of the interests of farmers and small producers during the 1993 GATT negotiations on agriculture (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), priority was given to actions to promote collective work to enable agriculture to defend its rights in the context of trade liberalization.

Thus, what the authors refer to as "agrarian social movements" such as La Via Campesina emerged, seeking to promote the participation of agriculture in global agricultural decision-making and to defend its rights in the face of the growing liberalization of trade.

"Thus, in Mons, Belgium, in May 1993, such a global movement was formally created through the First International Conference of Via Campesina. From then on, a dynamic of articulation of "peasant revolutionary" unions was unleashed through a Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Conference of Via Campesina, which took place in Tlaxcala, Mexico (April 1996, where the concept of Food Sovereignty was raised for the first time); Bangalore, India (September, October 2000) and Sao Paulo, Brazil (June 2004) and in Maputo, Mozambique (October 2008) respectively. Through this dynamic of articulation, concepts were proposed and positions were established, with different nomenclatures, which clearly referred to public policies on Food Sovereignty and "other" trade, agrarian reform and human rights, defense of biodiversity and genetic resources, endogenous rural development and participatory research, gender equity and agroecological practices" (Cuellar and Sevilla, 2009, p.44).

Parallel to the "agrarian revolutionary movements", in 1989 the MAELA (Agroecological Movement of Latin America and the Caribbean) was created, which seeks to establish consensual parameters in the region on agroecological practices and principles. MAELA expressly stated its disagreement with neoliberal agricultural models that compromise the conservation of "nature and society".

"At the same time they established as a right of their local organizations the management and control of natural resources... without depending on external inputs (agrochemicals and transgenics), for the biological reproduction of their cultures, pointing out their support for promotion, the exchange and dissemination of local experiences of civil resistance and the creation of alternatives for the use and conservation of local varieties" (MAELA, 2000).

From then on, peasant movements prioritize food sovereignty as the main form of claim against industrial agricultural models. Agroecology contributes, from an integral approach, to the formation of knowledge from sources other than the West and the visibility of the constructions coming from the peasantry for the peasantry. The authors argue that food sovereignty is the epistemological source of agroecology, and it is the latter that leads the current processes of agricultural transformation towards sustainable socio-ecological management.

### **Agroecology as tool for the decolonization of “development” in the rurality: family agriculture in the Ecuadorian highlands**

Different authors approach peasant family farming as a mechanism towards sustainable agricultural models. Hidalgo, Altieri, Giraldo and Maletta coincide in the conception of peasant agriculture as an active struggle against the capitalist industrial processes of mass agriculture. However, there are deeper debates regarding the origin of the term and its not only academic but also practical application. Mançano (2014) distinguishes in his article, two types of family farming: peasant family farming as that agriculture which is based on the production of the members that make up the family, i.e., the family's income depends on their work; and capitalist family farming that in which labor relations and organizations no longer respond to peasantry but to a capitalist conception of labor. "When a family has surplus value as its main source of income, it ceases to be a peasant and becomes a capitalist" (Mançano, 2014, p. 20).

The author also positions his critique against the common interpretation, both in academia and in spaces of political and social gestation, of peasant family farming as post-modernization agriculture, in need of change and updating, a prejudice that leads to an increase in the gap of social inequalities.

"In almost all of Latin America, governments have replaced the concept of peasantry with that of family farming in their rural development policies"(Mançano, 2014, p. 20). For



Mançano, this in itself should not constitute a problem, if the concepts are correctly used and if public policies do not ignore or relegate agriculture. At the regional level, Brazil and Ecuador are the countries with the highest peasant productivity; in Ecuador, peasant productivity exceeds capitalist productivity, with peasant use of 41% of the territorial units, while still guaranteeing 45% of the productive value. This situation, in addition to presenting social disparities, shows disparities in the distribution of land in relation to the value generated by peasant production.(Mançano, 2014).

Larrea (2022) gives credit for the impulse of agroecology in Latin America, in addition to "factors such as the multiplication of agroecological production experiences, the consolidation of some agroecological innovation poles, the inclusion of agroecology as a university career, and its potential for the generation of substantial changes in agrarian systems", mainly to the political proposal of food sovereignty raised by peasant movements. Regarding the Ecuadorian case, he assures that "it has not been alien to this process. During the last few years, agroecological production experiences have multiplied, especially promoted by peasant and indigenous farmers, while a national agroecological movement has progressively consolidated. Several studies account for these processes in the different regions of the country (Ospina et al., 2020; Lasso, 2019; Gortaire, 2016; Daza and Peña, 2014; Torres, 2018); processes that, in addition, occur against the expansion and deepening of an agrarian capitalism that is distinguished by high productive concentration and social inequality, consolidated in export agriculture and agribusiness". (p. 188)

Approaches such as Giraldo's, agroecology and peasant family farming also share a link from interweaving towards post-development. For Giraldo, the appropriation of nature by capital in a neoliberalist-extractivist eagerness is the main problem that leads to social movements in defense of territory and life.

"Agroecology has come to nurture these struggles and to occupy the meeting place for the purpose of bringing together popular efforts to confront distributive injustice, environmental depredation, food insalubrity, hunger and malnutrition, and the displacement of peasant populations to the cities and the growing proletarianization of rural inhabitants caused by the current market-ordered agricultural system (Rosset and Martinez-Torres, 2012)<sup>1</sup>. In particular, as Peter Rosset (2016: 00) writes, "rural social movements made up of peasant families, indigenous and other rural populations, are actively defending rural spaces, contesting them with national and transnational agribusinesses, as well as with other private sector actors and their allies in governments." (Giraldo, 2018, p.)

"In Latin America, the notion of Buen Vivir (Good Living) has been the most important unifier to imagine post-development from social movements. With this neologism we want to imagine a world impermeable to the relations of force of the great development project, and its imaginaries of growth, progress, industrialization and modernity, and instead move towards a pluriverse, through epistemic decolonization, communality, relationality, autonomy, depatriarchalization and postextractivism (Escobar, 2015), which ultimately means building, from below and with the land, multiple divergent paths to capital" (Giraldo, However, Giraldo recognizes that postdevelopment is not free of generating contradictions and proposes different approaches to establish the margins in which to cement change, proposing that they are "the social processes of agroecology...one of those margins in which we can place ourselves in order to question development, and at the same time, dialectically imagine postdevelopment in a pragmatic way". (2018, p.138)

## POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

In accordance with the earnestness of this work it is important to recognize my positionality on this research as a 22 year-old-mestizo-women from Ecuadorian nationality. Born and raised in Guayaquil by a Quiteña mother, with 4 years living in Quito. Owner of a personal appeal for sustainable food consumption and innovative cuisine of traditional Ecuadorian roots, I identify with movements as Slow Food International. During my studies of International Relations, I have reached different points of interest but they all turned me back to food security and sovereignty. My second major on Journalism has always found me returning to research on models of agricultural production and consumption that go along with indigenous practices and time conceptions. Growing distant from the reality of the Andes, I developed an interest for its further understanding and always searched for new ways of applying my research areas into the highland dynamics. Accordingly, I got later interested in indigenous political participation, social movements, and personal experiences through in-field investigation and ethnographic practices.

This research grounds in constructivist, feminist political ecology, and post-development paradigms, that address relations between gender, ecology, and development from a multidimensional approach. From a constructivist standpoint, I recognise that agroecological knowledge is not an objective entity but a social construct that emerges from historical, cultural, and personal contexts and interactions. This framework positions the multi-contextual and multi-narrative nature of this research.

From feminist political ecology, analysis around intersectionalities of gender, power, and environment allow me to understand complex power relations in agroecological study and political decision-making. This approach allows me to highlight contributions, knowledge,

and experiences of women, often marginalized in dominant discourses of agroecology and development.

Identifying myself with decolonial discourses, I do advocate for indigenous cosmovision as a legitimate source of creation of knowledge that should be included profoundly in Academia. Adopting a post-development in this research, I reject the imaginaries of conventional notions of development and progress, which are frequently imposed from Western and capitalist perspectives, allowing me to promote development from “inside”.

Engaging with reflexivity, I recognize that my background does have an incidence in my interpretation and selection of information, as well as in my contributions to the agroecological field. For this reason, I involve conscious ethical implications about my research being on people that create and reproduce knowledge and not merely bodies of study, compromised with a constant reflexivity exercise.

By adopting this position, I intend to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable production of knowledge that reflects the diversity of the entities represented in this research and their interactions with the environment of study.

## DISCUSSION

### **When agriculture becomes political: agroecology**

"Ecology has become political because the growing interest in the appropriation of nature by capital generates antagonisms, conflicts, and battlefields for the defense of territory and life, as social movements throughout the global South have been championing to oppose the processes of accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2004).

Agriculture is political. The field of study of agroecology imply; in addition to purely productive or consumption notions, political, social and economic notions that undoubtedly alter the dynamics of the management of ecosystems, territories, goods and services. Under this premise, the agricultural process implicit in agroecology represents "more than just a set of practices for agricultural production, ... an enormous apparatus that brings together many emancipatory objectives, and an essential reference point for anti-capitalist struggles and proposals for civilizational transformations". In this sense, political ecology looks for "studying socio ecological change in political terms" (González de Molina, 2024, p. 2)

In fact, from its epistemological origin, agroecology itself, more than a science or a practice, is a social movement with a political character. Agroecology thus proposes intersectionalities from the environmental, economic, social and political perspectives. In this sense, depoliticising agroecology is almost an "unnatural" pretension in the face of the roots of the concept, which, although it has gained relevance and strength in recent years, remains rather ambiguous in terms of its application and scope.

As it results in a rather heterogeneous and dispersed conglomerate both geographically and conceptually—tending to be essentialised and reduced to independent manifestations—it is necessary to understand key concepts that shape and structure it and that have not been

clearly differentiated between one another. To this end, this paper proposes a distinction between the concepts "agroecological movement" as a social movement, "agroecology" as the scientific and theoretical conglomerate of practices and manifestations (social, economic, environmental and political), "agroecological systems" as frameworks of agricultural functioning that respect the social-ecological link, "food systems" as the network comprising the interconnection of different systems and actors that enable food production, distribution and outreach, and "food regimes" as systematized structures of international rules of food production and consumption for the purpose of capitalist accumulation linked to the modernisation of agriculture.

### **Agroecology for sustainable food systems in Latin America: an utopy?**

Giraldo (2024) suggests a classification of the agroecology movement into three categories: agroecologies at the limit (or of return), emerging agroecologies, and historical agroecologies. This paper seeks to focus on the Andes as a reference point for the Global South and Latin America. Following this premise, even if agroecology is constituted as a relatively recent concept, it has been present over centuries as an atemporal practice of those who constitute the land and its production.

In the Andean region, these atemporalities are mainly represented by the indigenous communities of the Highland Regions, it is the indigenous communities that ensure the conservation of the ecosystem and the sustainability of crops, a great example being the inter-Andean terraces that comprise different ecological floors each respecting the synergy between ecological and social variables, as an example of wider dynamics in the Andean world such as exchange in terms of Andean reciprocity. All these interactions are also political.

“Although historical agroecologies do not respond to expressions that at first sight we could think of as politicized, as Rivera et al. asserts, the truth is that they have managed to build infrapolitical tactics (Scott 1990) of collective action deployed for centuries, which has allowed them to persist under the historical onslaught of colonialism, globalized capitalism and the modernizing developmentalist machinery imposed in Asia, Africa and Latin America since the mid-twentieth century. This is a silent, stubborn and flexible disobedience, through which over the centuries people have developed mechanisms of biocultural resistance through modes that are not directly confrontational” (Giraldo, 2024, p.15).

So, agroecology applied in harmony with Andean perspective to institutions, recognizes the indigenous social efforts into what constitutes agroecology. Approaches such as the ones that La Vía Campesina proposed and enforced led to the immense contribution to the agroecological field: food sovereignty. Maintaining utopia ensures mobilization.

### **Decolonization of development from the Highland peasantry**

Escobar, in his extensive works on decolonization and post-development, has identified neoliberalist trends as the ones in charge of reappropriation of the environment and society, mainly in the Global South. From this perspective it's important to understand that the peasantry and the indigenous communities that compose a great majority of them in Ecuador, are not passive agents, used in convenience of “greater needs”. Even if the dynamics of power are indeed present, “domination” is not a certainty. Taking both Giraldo and Escobar approaches, I convene into

In this sense, I advocate for the need of a horizontal contextual education on agroecology in a *peasant to peasant* modality. This involves not pre established practices but rather a common educational core composed of flexible principles that apply to each specific community. This

creates an opportunity of independence, creativity and sovereignty that assures a greater implementation as the education does not come from a hierarchically upper individual that imposes, so information becomes more reliable.

However, as suggested by several post-development authors, it is no easy task to strip away the concept of "development". Beyond the conceptual baggage, "development" has been immersed in so many areas of knowledge and has influenced so many dynamics that today it is normalized and socially accepted by a large part of the world's population. This is why the idea of a total paradigm shift may seem a bit unrealistic. However, I recognize the capacity of agroecology to promote spaces of criticism and questioning of development that seek the creation of alternatives for the pragmatic application of post-development. It is then that the proposal is presented to generate approaches that, in contradiction to those of common development, generate less dependence and control from external agents.

For this same purpose, from a feminist political ecology approach, I also aim for a decolonization of concepts like "peasantry", "peasant family" or "peasant household", normally addressed as static concepts. I position the problem of implementation of agroecological practices in more regional and local scales, to the tendency to universalize concepts and applications, falling into hegemonical perceptions of what constitutes each of these terms and not making an exhausting analysis from the realities of each specific context. Is not the use of the word, but rather the implications of its use what I think should be tackled.



## CONCLUSION

The relationship between agroecology and politics is evident. Agroecology is not simply a technical alternative to industrial agriculture, but a profoundly political proposal that seeks to transform power relations around food production. Agroecology challenges the structures of domination that perpetuate inequality and exploitation, proposing instead a model that promotes social justice, food sovereignty and ecological sustainability.

Similarly, agriculture in general is a deeply political arena. Decisions about what crops are grown, who controls the land, how food is distributed, and who benefits from agricultural production are all political decisions. These decisions are influenced by public policy, power relations and economic interests, and have a direct impact on the lives of millions of people. Industrial agriculture, driven by large corporations and neoliberal policies, has led to land concentration, loss of biodiversity and erosion of ancestral knowledge. This has not only had a devastating impact on the environment, but has also exacerbated social and economic inequality.

In this context, it is essential to recognize that there can be no peaceful coexistence between the modernization of agriculture as understood in terms of the Green Revolution and the ancestral knowledge of peasant and indigenous communities. The modernization of agriculture has historically been oriented towards increasing productivity through the intensive use of chemical inputs, machinery and monocultures, to the detriment of biological and cultural diversity. This model has ignored and, in many cases, displaced traditional knowledge that has been accumulated over generations and is essential for the sustainable management of ecosystems.

Ancestral knowledge not only represents an alternative way of interacting with nature, but is also a historical manifestation that has persisted through the years and that constitutes part of the identity of a community. Therefore, the idea of a peaceful coexistence between agricultural modernization and ancestral knowledge is not only unrealistic, but also undesirable from a social and environmental justice perspective.

Given this reality, it is necessary to restructure the concept of peasant family farming from the concrete contexts and realities they represent. This implies validating and valuing peasant knowledge, differentiating it from attempts at "conceptual laundering" that seek to appropriate the narrative of sustainability for the purposes of "green capitalism". "Green capitalism" represents an approach that attempts to integrate environmental principles within the capitalist framework without questioning the dynamics of exploitation and accumulation that underlie this system. In contrast, peasant family farming and agroecology promote an approach that prioritizes ecological sustainability and social justice over economic profit.

To achieve this restructuring, it is crucial to adopt an approach that respects and enhances the horizontal dynamics between human and non-human entities. This means recognizing that humans are not the only actors in agroecological systems, but are also part of a broader web of interactions that include plants, animals, and elements such as soil and water. This horizontal approach implies a fundamental change in the way we understand and manage our relationships with nature, moving away from an anthropocentric and extractivist vision towards a perspective of interdependence and reciprocity.

In this sense, indigenous practices offer a valuable source of knowledge that promotes sustainable and equitable land management practices that can contribute significantly to the creation of resilient agroecological systems. Implementing a bi-directional contribution to development thinking means not only incorporating elements of indigenous worldviews into

agroecological practices, but also allowing these cultures to influence the way we think about development and sustainability in general.

To achieve a true integration of these perspectives, it is necessary to foster spaces for horizontal share of know-hows from peasant to peasant, understanding that efforts in generating independence of the agro, is also a political trait.

In short, agroecology and agriculture are deeply political fields that require an approach that respects and values ancestral knowledge and horizontal dynamics between human and non-human entities. The restructuring of the concept of peasant family farming from concrete contexts and local realities, together with the implementation of a bidirectional contribution towards development conceptions, is fundamental to move towards a more just and sustainable future. This approach will not only enrich development models, but will also enable true sustainability and equity in the management of natural resources, promoting harmonious and respectful coexistence with nature.

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