

Politics and Policies of Food Sovereignty in Ecuador: New Directions or Broken Promises?

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I. Introduction

The most recent constitution of Ecuador was signed into law in September 2008 and ushered in a new vision for Ecuadorian society under a series of policy promises aimed at transforming the rural development process in the country. Under this banner, Chapter 3 of the constitution states that: “food sovereignty is a strategic objective and an obligation of the state that persons, communities, peoples and nations achieve self-sufficiency with respect to healthy and culturally appropriate food on a permanent basis” (Asamblea Nacional, 2008). The 2008 constitution is a progressive force that establishes the state’s obligation to fulfill the rights of citizens with regards to food security. Moreover, the constitution distinctly states “food sovereignty” as the specific objective of the government.

Broadly speaking, food security is primarily concerned with ensuring a sufficient nutritional supply and adequate access for the country’s citizens. More specifically, food sovereignty places the additional responsibility and right of the citizens to define the origin of their food, which is typically based on supporting local agricultural, livestock and fisheries systems. In line with those basic principles, the Ecuadorian constitution outlines 14 objectives that serve as guidelines to fulfill a path of food sovereignty.¹ Following the constitutional mandate and the right of citizens to build a system of food sovereignty, the government engaged in a planning process to write a national development plan for four years (2009–2013). The National Plan for Good Living (*Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir*) was passed on 5 November 2009 with the objective to outline strategic policy goals as established by the new constitution (SENPLADES, 2009).

Under a rights-based framework to promote adequate and healthy food, the Ecuadorian government is promoting a ‘twin-track’ approach that aims to provide access to food while at the same time promoting sustainable rural development initiatives as an effective long-term solution. Central to the *Buen Vivir* development plan is a rural territorial approach that decentralises the development process and utilises existing capacities of local institutions to establish their needs and individual development goals. This mechanism aims to support a sustainable rural development approach through an institutional and productive transformation of rural areas that is determined to end poverty (Chiriboga et al., 2010).

In the case of *Buen Vivir*, the term ‘territory’ refers to a political administrative area. However, it also could involve a specific economic area, cultural region or a designated geographical area (SENPLADES, 2009). In Ecuador, 86 per cent of total inequality is located within communities, whereas only 14 per cent can be explained between communities (de Janvry et al., 2007). The territorial approach should then be aimed at restructuring inequities between local relations and economies within the territories. During times of economic downturn inequality rises without specific policies aimed at helping small farmers, the landless or rural wage labourers. Furthermore, populations living below or near the poverty line typically experience significant social instability, which can lead to further inequality.

The territorial strategy aims to identify specific challenges and solutions dependent upon each case and to promote wealth redistribution within and between different territories. Furthermore, in conjunction with the *Buen Vivir* strategy, an amendment to the constitution in 2008 granted all Ecuadorian citizens the right to healthy and adequate food, to be realised by supporting medium- and small-scale farmers (Pena, 2008). The country is characterised by three distinct agricultural regions in which each presents a unique challenge to promoting food sovereignty and rural development. Once again, the territorial programme is deemed effective in approaching the varying development needs depending on each region and specific territory. Most recently, the government’s development planning agency, SENPLADES, has begun to develop a National *Buen Vivir* Strategy for Rural Life. This new strategy will focus specifically on the role of the rural sector in the national economy and the significant economic, social and environmental obstacles it faces.

On the consumption side, the government has implemented several programmes that intend to link local producers to the market, with a focus on improving nutritional outcomes of children and elderly people. This umbrella programme, aptly named ‘Eat Ecuador’ (*Alimentate Ecuador*), brings together several different initiatives (see Table 1) to improve nutrition in the country.

Among the programme's initiatives are awareness campaigns to educate the public on healthy and local food along with government-sponsored programmes that provide market vendors with the knowledge to advise consumers on healthy eating habits. The programme of educating market vendors is being implemented by the creation of *Plazas de Buen Vivir* and *Ferias de Buen Vivir*—markets and plazas designated for direct commercialisation of smallholder products that are grown more sustainably and are more nutritious.

Table 1
The Different Initiatives of the 'Alimentate Ecuador' Umbrella Programme

Project	Description	Goals
Food and Nutrition Project for Elderly Care	Ageing and retired adults with disabilities, registered in the National Social Register and residents in the Ministry of Social and Economic Inclusion Care Centres.	Groups of social interaction to promote the inclusion of elderly adults; 214,000 seniors receive the government-sponsored Vilcambamba Soup.
Promoting Healthy Food Consumption	Promoting the consumption of healthy foods by training promoters, merchants and food traders— ranging from training workshops to mass media campaigns.	90,000 people have attended workshops resulting in 4000 promoters of healthy and nutritional eating; 6000 volunteers implementing processes of healthy eating.
Integral Nutrition Food Project	Prevention and control of iron deficiency anemia in children under five years old treated through the delivery of a home iron fortifier (Chispaz) and educational communication strategies.	12,676 child development care units aimed at eradicating anemia by advising 260,000 children between six and 59 months of age and also providing the Chispaz iron supplement.
Places of Good Living	Creating opportunities for cultural exchange by promoting spaces of exchange, supply and training for healthy eating.	A physical space referred to as a Place of Good Living.

Source: *Alimentate Ecuador*, <<http://www.alimentateecuador.gob.ec>>.

On the production side of the *Buen Vivir* strategy, the territorial approach to a sustainable path of rural development incorporates increasing production by the expansion of agricultural education and extension through the Schools of Agrarian Revolution (*Escuelas de la Revolución Agraria*) that increases cooperation between smallholder cooperatives and civil society organisations. However, to date very little evidence has shown a significant impact on the institutionalisation and capacity of rural communities to access markets and productive resources. Another policy outcome from the *Buen Vivir* development plan is the National Programme of Inclusive Rural Business (*Programa Nacional de Negocios Rurales Inclusivos*, PRONERI). PRONERI's objective is to transform the structure of market access for small-scale farmers. For example, the government uses local institutional capacity to strengthen farmer associations and link them with agribusiness purchasers of agricultural products. In this case PRONERI intends to provide market assurance and consistency to small-scale producers, although no concrete evidence has suggested any meaningful impact in terms of a significant reduction in rural poverty or increased production from small-scale farmers. Rather, the government appears to be involved in all sorts of producer associations and cooperatives without fully supporting one idea or another.

II. Obstacles for Ecuador's Path to Sustainable Rural Development

As in most developing countries, many small-scale farmers lack access to markets for their products. This could be for a variety of reasons such as: distance to the market, monopolisation of the market by a large producer or intermediary, lack of crop storage etc. For many Ecuadorian

producers these obstacles have not been overcome, and the promises outlined in the constitution have yet to be fulfilled. However, markets are not the primary problem if full production capabilities are not being realised. In rural Ecuador land inequity and water availability are serious problems affecting the production potential of small-scale producers. First-hand interactions in the country yielded complaints and demands for the government to play a more powerful role to redistribute resources— namely, water and land. For poor people in rural areas to be an efficient and effective unit of production for the country, they need to first have adequate access to productive resources such as land and water. For example, upon completion of the constitution, the government promised over 2 million hectares of unused land to be distributed for small-scale agriculture. To date, only 8000 hectares of this land has been allowed to be used by small-scale farmers (Churuchumbi, 2012). In Ecuador 64 per cent of all farms occupy less than 5 hectares but constitute only 6 per cent of all arable land (AGROecuador, 2000). Furthermore, many capitalily constrained farmers lack access to a reliable water source, which exacerbates existing challenges of productivity and competitiveness against capital-intensive industrial farms.

As a result, the incidence of rural poverty is over twice that of urban poverty, with 61.5 per cent of the population in rural areas living in poverty, compared to 24.9 per cent in urban areas (Chiriboga et al., 2010). In this realm of social protection to provide immediate capital for consumption, the government's flagship programme, the Bono de Desarrollo Humano (BDH), is a necessary lifeline for the poorest people. The BDH is a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT)

programme that provides a monthly stipend of US\$35 to families living in poverty under the condition that their children attend school (with 75 per cent attendance) and receive monthly health check-ups. Together with the BDH, the government has instituted a Crédito de Desarrollo Humano (CDH) that provides an annual amount of US\$420 and allows the BDH to be used as the monthly repayment mechanism at an interest rate of 5 per cent. This credit line offers small-scale, capially constrained farmers a minimal line of credit for productive investment. At the same time, many of the BDH beneficiaries have a lifeline to capital for immediate consumption needs. Despite providing a level of minimum consumption, it has done little to promote productive inclusion. For example, in the coastal region, 40 per cent of agricultural workers rely on wage-labour as their primary source of income and do not own land (Progama de Protección Social, 2012; Chiriboga, 2010). If they fail to provide equal access to basic productive resources, anti-poverty measures such as the BDH cannot be a legitimate pathway out of poverty.

Additionally, the objective to increase market access and to create a definitive link between consumers and producers has yet to be realised. This has led to numerous non-government organisations and civil society groups being active in proposing new and innovative ways that connect small-scale producers with local consumers that are demanding chemical-free traditional food varieties.

The *Canasta Comunitaria* project is one such example of the role that civil society and social movements are playing in designing participatory and grassroots approaches to food sovereignty. The project's popular support and organic approach to capacity-building should be a model for the government on how to support or potentially duplicate local initiatives such as this.

Box 1

Canastas Comunitarias in Ecuador: Food Sovereignty in Action

In 1987, 25 families in Riobamba met in a church in a search for ways to avoid the high costs of food in the area. They came up with a concept based on the biblical story of splitting loaves of bread to feed many. Although that band of families dissolved in 1999, seven families from Riobamba used the same concept and started the *Canasta Comunitaria Utopia* in 2000. Due to monocultures and large-scale farming, the Ecuadorian population has witnessed its nutritional diversity in a constant decline. A country that prides itself on ecological, gastronomical and cultural diversity, Ecuador has varied diets and preferences from city to city. The founders of the *Canasta Comunitaria* imagined fomenting an agreement between consumers and local producers. Under this concept, participating families can reduce the cost of food by arranging agreements of large communal purchases and at the same time establish an important market for local food varieties produced by small farmers without the use of harmful pesticides, fertilisers or lengthy transportation.

Under this concept the project has expanded to over five major cities in Ecuador and incorporates around 1400 families as either consumers or producers. This important network of solidarity is crucial in supporting local economies with a model based in an agroecological approach of agriculture. Many small farmers lack consistent access to markets due to the rise of large supermarkets. However, the *Canasta Comunitaria* offers an immediate and sustained market for farmers producing local varieties of agricultural products without and due to their labour-intensive (as opposed to capital-intensive) agricultural practices; they are able to provide goods at a lower cost than large-scale producers.

The *Canasta Comunitaria* experience has been crucial in not only providing healthier and cheaper food to local consumers but has also expanded the discourse around where food comes from and what it means for the local population. The project has now influenced the creation of new agroecological networks connecting healthy, local and traditional food with urban consumers.

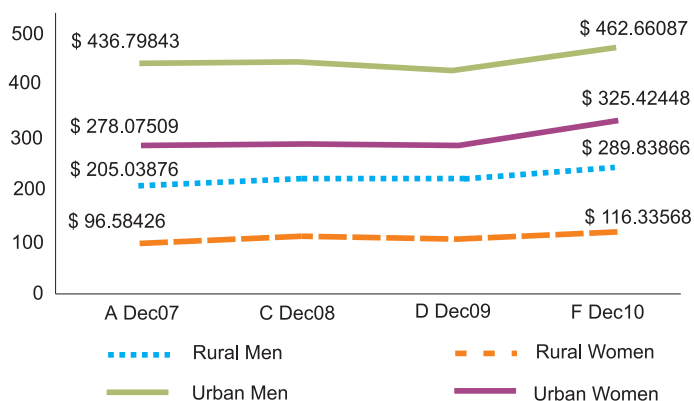
Read more: <<http://www.agriculturesnetwork.org/magazines/global/respect-through-farming/building-an-urban-rural-platform-for-food-security>>.

Source: Gortaire, 2006.

Government support for agriculture has exploded in recent years since the election of Rafael Correa. In absolute terms, public investment in agriculture has gone from \$93 million in 2003 to \$268 million in 2009. However, the territorial distribution of these resources has been extremely unequal. For example, the province of Manabí received over 71 per cent of all federal agricultural funds between 2005 and 2009 (Herrera et al., 2010). Manabí is an important agricultural state, and the Correa government is also focused on investing a significant amount of money on the ports in Manabí to expand agricultural exports and irrigation infrastructure. This may account for some of the unequal distribution in funds, but the total amount leaves one to wonder how well the government is justly distributing federal dollars for the territorial strategy.

Additionally, the territorial strategy had no specific mechanism that highlights or supports the role of women in rural areas. Between 2007 and 2010 the average income for heads of households in rural areas was \$228.50; whereas women heads of households earned an average of \$150.60, the average for male heads of households was \$240.90 (Naranjo et al., 2011). Thus, the country experiences a significant gender gap in rural income but does not have a specific objective or policy to overcome it. A significant barrier facing women in rural development is the lack of productive resources, particularly land and water. Ecuador is no exception; women are the heads of 25 per cent of all agricultural households but only have ownership of 10 per cent of the total area, while male heads of households constituted 74.6 per cent of all agricultural families but maintain ownership of 89.5 per cent of all arable land (Herrera et al., 2010). Further problems often arise without ownership of productive resources such as: access to credit without collateral, necessary extension services, loss of land without proper titling.

Figure 1
Labour and Non-labour Average Income
of Recipients in Urban and Rural Areas by Gender



A significant source of income for women in rural households is often unpaid or informal. In Ecuador, the expansion of the cut flower industry has offered another source of income but often at the expense of increased working hours away from the home. Additionally, the lack of labour regulations and laws does not promise a fair working wage and acceptable employment conditions. The cut flower industry is just one example of the government's lack of a response to support formalising off-farm wage labour and to decrease the gender disparity in rural areas. Another significant obstacle is the lack of proper infrastructure such as adequate roads for transportation, along with access to electricity, water and markets. Proper infrastructure results in less work for the household to accomplish daily tasks such as cooking, travelling to the market or accessing water and gas for the home. Investments in infrastructure can minimise unpaid household labour and maximise agricultural labour inputs for increased production or more income from off-farm labour wages.

III. The Popular and Inclusive Economy: New Rural Opportunities

The National Institute of Popular and Inclusive Economy (*Instituto Nacional de Economía Popular y Solidaria*, IEPS) was created in 2011 to develop capacities for economic and social inclusion of individuals, groups or social organisations. It is an institution that works within the poverty reduction strategy and policies implemented by other ministries and secretariats to guarantee every citizen's right to 'Good Living' as outlined by the National Development Plan (*Buen Vivir*). The IEPS has outlined four primary goals and responsibilities that work in conjunction with specific social protection and poverty reduction policies:

- To promote, strengthen and integrate Inclusive and Popular Economy actors promoting social democratic, participatory and transparent activities to ensure the production and reproduction of their material and immaterial.
- To promote the Inclusive and Popular Economy through the promotion, development and protection of domestic production, access to productive assets, technical assistance and the creation of decent and sustainable work.

- To design, recover and strengthen the strategies of exchange and market access for the Inclusive and Popular Economy, under the principles of equity, efficiency, fair trade, responsible consumption and transparency.
- To support the construction and retrieval of knowledge of all actors in the Inclusive and Popular Economy in the areas of production, exchange, technology and knowledge, to visualise and enhance the institute's overall objectives.¹

Ecuador has developed an extensive rural credit system based on both public and private institutions. The National Promotion Bank (*Banco Nacional de Fomento*, BNF) was established by the government in the 1920s as a financial institution to protect the public from economic crises.

It is currently being strengthened and transformed to serve primarily as a publicly funded microfinance institution. Through the BNF, the government distributed about \$736 million of loans in 2010 to almost 500,000 people in the country, mostly micro, small and medium enterprises or farms.²

In conjunction with the expansion of credit in rural areas, the IEPS is strengthening the prevalence and institutional capacity of rural associations and cooperatives. This capacity of the IEPS is directly connected with the government's mission of productive transformation that promotes market access and information-sharing for and between small-scale farmers. The Schools of Agrarian Revolution are being strengthened as an institutional medium between small and medium-sized producers and marginalised populations living in food insecurity.

Central to this objective is the registration and formalisation of all cooperatives and associations in the country that provides the government with an official channel to offer services ranging from training to financial resources. However, since the IEPS is a relatively new organisation, many of these objectives have yet to be implemented or even well articulated into an integral policy approach.

Indigenous and civil society leaders are voicing their concerns over the ineptitude of government rural development policies that have been promised first by the constitution and later the National Development Plan (*Buen Vivir*).³ A common concern is the unequal access to productive resources such as land and water. Ecuador's unequal distribution of land has a Gini index of 0.839, which is higher than the regional average at 0.80.⁴

Despite the government's promise to redistribute land, many communities are still left without access to productive resources and, therefore, marginalised, impoverished and unproductive. The ineptness of the government to provide the productive basics for small-scale farmers should be the first step of revitalising small-scale agriculture.

The wide array of market initiatives to promote inclusion will have limited results without first acknowledging the importance of resource allocation.

One case is the local organisation of *Pueblo Kayambi* in Cayambe, Ecuador. The *Pueblo Kayambi* was founded to defend the rights of the local community and provide a social forum to express concerns for the area's population. It provides an organisational structure within the reality of the social, cultural, economic and political juncture of the region. Currently, the *Pueblo Kayambi* is developing an information bank with all relevant information regarding economic productivity in the area. Data such as access to water and markets are being collected that reflect the reality of their territorial needs and takes into consideration the specific cultural, geographic, environmental and population differences in the Cayambe region. After their information bank has compiled substantial data, the *Pueblo Kayambi* is planning to propose a territorial model to the government that will request the necessary resources for improving the livelihoods of the area's population. Perhaps this will allow them the necessary space to define their food origin and production.

At the same time, however, the president of the *Pueblo Kayambi* acknowledged the government's lack of a plan to offer productive resources on a national scale. Despite having a territorial approach that provides additional access to credit and strengthening local capacities, the government has not enacted a redistributive policy for access to land, water and markets. As is the case in Cayambe, many small-scale farmers lose market assurance because transnational or industrial agriculture undercuts their prices or establishes contracts with large supermarkets or food processors.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The IEPS is undoubtedly a step in the right direction to ensure more inclusive growth and support productive transformation for Ecuador. However, it has become evident that, without a provision for access to productive resources and markets for small-scale farmers, very little will change to overcome marginalisation and rural poverty. And, beyond providing access to productive resources, the government should design policies targeted specifically at women and their role in the rural household through both wage controls and improving rural infrastructure such as electricity

and water. After hearing from civil society leaders, it appears that there is much more rhetoric than action from the government, especially in the area of agrarian reform.

Still, in the face of such obstacles, many civil society organisations are promoting alternative models to link local production with local consumption. The *Canasta Comunitaria* should be seen as a positive step that could have tremendous implications for a more widespread sustainable and effective food sovereignty approach. Perhaps the government could look at local, grassroots movements and offer increased financial support without transforming their scope and structure. Instead of trying to institutionalise and incorporate everything into government control, civil society could be supported in numerous other ways such as awareness and learning networks. If Correa wins the upcoming election towards the end of 2012, his project will continue, and perhaps more will be revealed about the policies under *Buen Vivir*. However, the government's ineptitude to address the needs of poor people in rural areas, who are primarily indigenous and highly organised, could spell disaster for Correa's once faithful supporter base.

1. For example, objectives 1 to 3:

1. Fostering the production and the agri-food and fishing transformation of small and medium-sized production units, community production units and those of the social, mutually supportive economy.
 2. Adopting fiscal, tax and tariff policies that protect the national agri-food and fishing sector to prevent dependence on food imports.
 3. Bolstering diversification and the introduction of ecological and organic technologies in farm and livestock production. (For the full list of 14 objectives, see Chapter 3, Article 281 of the Ecuadorian Constitution), (Asamblea Nacional, 2008).
2. Source: Institute for the Inclusive and Popular Economy <www.ieps.gob.ec>.
3. \$736 million is a 74 per cent jump from 2009 (Banco Nacional de Fomento, 2011).
4. Personal interviews: Guillermo Churuchumbi, President of Pueblo Kayambe, Cayambe, Ecuador, 25 January 2012; Roberto Gortaire, Vice-President of the National Conference of Food Sovereignty, Quito, Ecuador, 23 January 2012; Manuel Chiriboga, Executive Director, CORLAVI Group, Quito, Ecuador, 12 January 2012.
5. Based on 15 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean – Average Land Gini of 79.86 (Deininger and Olinto, 2000).

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