

Argentina: Disappearing Farmers, Disappearing Food

By [Marie Trigona](#)

Global Research, October 30, 2009

[COA News](#) 29 October 2009

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Worldwide, industrial mono-culture farming has displaced traditional food production and farmers, wreaking havoc on food prices and food sovereignty. This is particularly true for the global south, where land has been concentrated for crops destined for biodiesel and animal feed. In response, peasants and small farmers organized actions in more than 53 countries on October 15 for International Food Day as an initiative of Via Campesina, one of the largest independent social movement organizations, representing nearly 150 million people globally.

The National Indigenous Campesino Movement of Argentina joined the protests taking place on around the world by organizing a march in Buenos Aires for International Food Day. Argentina has often been described as South America's bread basket because it once produced grain and beef for much of the region. But with the transgenetic soy boom the nation has shifted to a mono culture production for export, displacing traditional food production and farmers.

Hundreds of campesinos marked the day with protests against this agricultural model outside of Argentina's Department of Agriculture. "For the government, the countryside [is made up of] the landholding organizations and the agro-businesses, we practically don't exist," says Javier from the campesino movement in Cordoba, an organization that includes more than 1,500 families who have depended on traditional agriculture for generations. "We are also part of the countryside. We are the ones who live on the land and protect the land. We want to continue to live on our land, for future generations."

Evicted Farmers

According to Argentina's 2008 agricultural census, more than 60,000 farms shut down between 2002 and 2008, while the average size of farms increased from 421 to 538 hectares. The shift to soy has replaced cultivation of many grains and vegetables and even the country's beef production. Researcher at the nation's social research institute CONICET, Tamara Peremulter outlines the affects of monoculture soy on food production. "Soy historically hasn't been grown in Argentina. Soy was brought in during the 1960's during the Green Revolution. Transgenetic soy has been brought to lands where before cultivation wouldn't have been possible. The low production cost of soy helped this process. Soy has replaced other crops, invading areas that were historically for cattle grazing and dairy production. Soy has also invaded indigenous and traditional farming communities. This model also implies deforestation and loss of biodiversity"

Land access and disputes over land titles has become one of the central issues for

traditional farmers being replaced by machinery and high tech mono-culture farms. The National Indigenous Campesino Movement of Argentina (MNCI) reports that 82 percent of farmers live off of 13 percent of the nation's land used for agriculture, while 4 percent of large land holders or "growing pools" financial investors in the agro industry own more than 65 percent. The disparities in land titles have led to violent evictions.

On October 12, 2009 a day on which indigenous communities commemorate the genocide of their people following Christopher Columbus's arrival in 1492, an indigenous farmer, Javier Chacoba was murdered during a protest against the forced eviction of indigenous people off of lands. The 68-old farmer died of a gun shot wound to the abdomen by Dario Amín, a landowner. Members of the Chuschagasta community had been camping along a provincial highway bordering the lands to demand land recognition for the Chuschagasta when Amín and two ex-police officers showed up at the protest. "On the day commemorating 519 years of genocide in Latin America, we suffered the loss of our brother (Javeri Chacobar) for simply standing up for his rights, defending his dignity and land that belongs to him," said Margarita Mamaní, member of the Chuschagasta community.

"They have been evicting farmers and members of the indigenous community from lands. People have been killed in the evictions," says Ricardo Ortiz is an indigenous representative from The Campesino Movement of Santiago del Estero (MOCASE). More than 9,000 families make up MOCASE, a grassroots movement of traditional farmers and indigenous groups. "Now they killed a farmer in Tucuman, a brother. He was in a march to demand their rights and the man who bought the lands took out a gun and shot the man and injured four more. The government has been blind, deaf and mute; this is why we are worried."

Police Repression

In 2008 alone more than 35 campesinos were arrested and arrest warrants issued for 95 more, in Mendoza, Formosa and Santiago del Estero, in communities rejecting the agro-industrial model. Santiago del Estero is a province once rich in forest land and untouched by soy. This changed as the boom in soy prices has made these remote areas now profitable for soy growers.

This is a "witch hunt," as the MNCI has described the situation for campesinos resisting land evictions, and defending traditional cultures. Local police enforce eviction orders and meet any resistance with police force, clubs and many times bullets. "Campesinos resisting are suffering a violent political persecution. We demand that detained farmers are released, that officials, judges and police that violate human rights be investigated and that evictions are stopped," declared the MNCI.

Agro Industry Creates Joblessness

The shift to mono-culture crops and land concentration has stretched into cultivations traditionally employing small farmers such as vineyards. Argentina's wine industry has boomed in recent years, with the total value of Argentine wine in the US increasing from 75 million to 146 million dollars between 2006 and 2008. Mendoza is Argentina's largest wine producing region, with a micro climate perfect for the Malbec grape. Access to water is a major issue for rural and indigenous communities there.

Marcelo Quieroga from the Union of Rural Workers (UST) says that much of the vineyards in Mendoza have been monopolized by French and Swiss investors, who buy land and

mechanize wine production. “They are using machinery to replace workers. By producing high quality wines for export the wineries have essentially monopolized the production. Who suffers is the rural worker who can’t find work, and ends up living in a shanty town due to rural unemployment.”

Rural displacement results in poverty and joblessness; the poorest provinces in Argentina have ironically hosted a boom in soy industry, with soy fields replacing forests and even cattle grazing land. The MNCI has reported that the soy model creates only one job post for every 500 hectares cultivated. Meanwhile, traditional agriculture provides 35 job posts for every 100 hectares cultivated, while also guaranteeing food diversity, production or local markets and sustainable use of resources such as land and water.

Food Sovereignty

Industrialization and the globalization of Argentina’s food system has led to spikes in food prices, and increasing rural poverty. This has become a global trend. “A billion people are without food because industrial monocultures robbed them of their livelihoods in agriculture and their food entitlements,” writes Vandana Shiva in the Nation Magazine.

Via Campesina does have an alternative to the agro industry, pushing for governments to promote local, traditional farming which provides communities with real food. “It’s time for all civil society to recognize the gravity of this situation, global capital should not control our food, nor make decisions behind closed doors. The future of our food, the protection of our resources and especially our seeds, are the right of the people,” said Dena Hoff, coordinator of Via Campesina North America.

Food sovereignty as defined by Via Campesina is the peoples’ right to define their agricultural and food policy, and the right of farmers and peasants to produce food. Worldwide communities are seeking an alternative to a model controlled by Cargill, Monsanto, General Foods, Nestle and Kraft foods. Starved by industrialization and concentration, citizens are now hungry for traditional production methods and diversity in the food system.

Marie Trigona is a writer, radio producer and filmmaker based in Argentina. She can be reached at mtrigona@msn.com

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