

Alternatives to the global food system

LATIN AMERICA

Interview with Martín Drago, coordinator of the Food Sovereignty Program of the Friends of the Earth International

“To change the global food system, the subjects of change are the small-scale farmers”

The Friends of the Earth International environmental federation has a presence in nearly 80 countries. Martín Drago, a member of the Network of Social Ecology (REDES)-Friends of the Earth Uruguay, has been responsible for leading the work in the area of food sovereignty since December 2008, as well as facilitating the links with the social movements working in the subject.

In an interview with José Elosegui, a Latinamerica Press, collaborator, Drago talked about the food system that is controlled by agribusiness, while at the same time he raised the need for a change of system. He systematized concrete examples of a transition towards sustainable agri-food models and warned about the main challenges and obstacles for deeper progress in these transformations.

How do you describe the dominant global food system?

The prevailing global food system, dominated by large-scale industrial agriculture, is highly concentrated, integrated or chained and transnationalized. It is characterized by the use of large amounts of capital investment that goes towards inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, pesti-

cides and machinery. It is a system that responds to the interests of international trade, which has the support of public funds and also from international financial institutions, and an increasing involvement of the financial sector, which has a purely speculative interest.

With regard to the high concentration of the production of inputs, according to the ETC Group [Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration that monitors the impact of emerging technologies and corporate strategies on biodiversity, agriculture and human rights], Monsanto was in March looking at possible partnerships with [transnational agrochemicals] BASF or Bayer, following the alliances of Dupont-Dow and Syngenta-Chem China. According to ETC, if Monsanto merged with the agricultural sector of Bayer, the three groups would control more than 65 percent of the global sales of pesticides, and almost 61 percent of commercial seed sales. If instead Monsanto merged with BASF, the control would be 61 percent of the pesticides and more than 57 percent of seeds.

In addition to the fact that this agro-food system is concentrated and transnationalized, it is also integrated. The feedlots dedicated to meat production are



Martín Drago / José Elosegui

“The prevailing global food system, dominated by large-scale industrial agriculture, is highly concentrated, integrated or chained and transnationalized.”

tightly linked to the production of inputs that these animals receive, such as soybeans and corn. However, despite all the pressure, it is the peasantry and the small-scale farming that produce the vast majority of food consumed by humanity; 70 percent according to the ETC Group. In order to change the global food system, the subjects of change are the small-scale farmers.

Why do you consider it important to change this dominant system?

According to GRAIN [international organization that supports peasants, small-scale farmers and social movements], from 44 percent to 57 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions come from the global food system. There is a huge weight in those emissions from this transnationalized system that produces quinoa in Bolivia and sells it in Thailand. It is a system that is starting to require more inputs, machinery, more fossil fuels to move the machinery, for fertilizers and pesticides.

Large-scale agriculture expands the agricultural frontier; it deforests to continue planting, as has happened in Brazil with soybeans, corn, and sugar cane. Agriculture moved to areas where there was livestock and livestock moved to where there were forests like the Amazonia through deforestation, despite the role played by forests in carbon sequestration.

Instead, agro-ecological food production has a completely different effect because it emits fewer gases, but also, in working in harmony with nature, it recovers the soil and the soil reinforces its ability to naturally sequester carbon. In addition, when the distances between those who produce the food and those who consume it are reduced, the transport sector emissions also drop.

What would be the alternative model and the major changes required to reach more just and sustainable food models in Latin America?

What we propose is basically the model of food sovereignty, and today we are talking about agro-ecology for food sovereignty. This means agro-ecological production in harmony with nature, taking care of the natural resources. It also has to do with a way to consume food, which is of a short circuit between producers and consumers. In Uruguay, for example, the Asociación Barrial de Consumo Abierta [ASOBACO-Open Consumer Neighborhood Association] stands out, as so many other initiatives in Latin America do, which assumes the risk together with the producer. The outcome is that at the end, the producer, without intermediaries, receives a much better price and the consumer pays much less.

One of the main changes that are needed is the recognition of the role that small-scale farmers have had and now have, especially women, and the need to create the social conditions so that these people live with dignity in the countryside. To accomplish this also requires services near the territories, as roads, health centers, and reasonable routes to move the production. So we must not only change the patterns of production and consumption, but also the living conditions in the field so that young people can stay there.

The role of the state is paramount here. To facilitate the services, but also in generating infrastructure so that producers can move their production, spaces where they can store their food and sell it.

I think the Brazilian case of the National Plan of Agro-Ecology and Organic Production (PLANAPO) is the biggest paradigm that exists in the region, the one which everyone is trying to imitate in some way, like Uruguay, where the National Plan of Agro-Ecology seeks to replicate that Brazilian initiative with the conditions in Uruguay. The PLANAPO ensured public procurement of food for schools and hospitals from family farming, for example.

In addition to the cases of Brazil and Uruguay you just mentioned, what other concrete alternatives exist in the region?

Examples of transitions to these forms of production and marketing are present in all of Latin America, perhaps not on the scale that is required. In Uruguay there are the Red de Semillas (Seed Network) and the Ecotienda (Eco-store); the former ensures access to a basic input as are seeds, shared with other producers, generating autonomy in production with the principle of solidarity as a base, and the Ecotienda provides a direct sales channel.

In Colombia is the Asociación de Pequeños Caficultores de La Marina (ASOPECAM-Association of Small Coffee Growers of La Marina), which is part of the Movimiento Agroecológico de América Latina y el Caribe (MAELA Colombia-Agro-Ecological Movement of Latin America and the Caribbean). They made a transition to organic production, while at the same time generating markets for direct sales, such as at universities.

There are also more structural cases. For example, a concrete alternative is the taking of land of the Movimiento de Trabajadores Rurales Sin Tierra de Brasil (MST- Rural Landless Workers Movement), which creates real conditions for the construction of alternatives. Without land, without seeds, there is no food production. What the MST does is to occupy unproductive land to then dispute it with the state to be given to them and transform them into production settlements. Many of the MST settlements have also moved towards agro-ecology, and in this way they are transforming the agro-food system.

Another alternative always mentioned by the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo-Vía Campesina (CLOC-Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations) is education for transformation through its Institutos Agroecológicos Latinoamericanos (IALA-Latin American Agro-Ecological Institutes); the ideological and technical education of farmers, indigenous people, and workers to sovereignly build the transformative alternatives.

What are the challenges to further make progress with these changes?

The main challenges are to understand that food production is not something that necessarily has to be in the hands of agribusiness. We need to change that popular perception. In fact, food production is mostly in the hands of small-scale food producers.

We also have to change this belief that all production methods known as “traditional” are a step back. Quite the contrary, they concentrate the evolution of food production from the very bottom of history until today. The farmer is also a scientist in a way, because is a person who through trial and error has been changing and developing his production methods, adapting them. We have to reappraise the role of these actors.

We consumers also have to understand that we need to change our consumption patterns. And another really big challenge is to change the correlation of forces that we have today, where the agronomic and veterinary academy linked to the large-scale food production imposes the idea that there is no possibility of feeding the world without agribusiness.

We also have to see how to deal with the transition to more sustainable production models. It cannot be a transition paid by those who are forever forgotten, but must be done by those that have generated the crisis, which is why it is so urgent to generate a transition. Meanwhile, small-scale producers are challenged to further improve their practices.

In short, the main obstacle is that the state must stop being at the service of national elites and transnational corporations who are owners of agribusiness and to start servicing a food production that generates national sovereignty, less environmental impact and better living conditions for those who produce the food. The challenge of social organizations and movements is to change the correlation of forces, amass the struggle to create conditions for change. □

ARGENTINA

Juan Nicasro in Cordoba

Healthy and supportive food

More than 500 families have created a network that supplies of agro-ecological products.

About 10 years ago, in the small town of Anisacate in the central province of Cordoba, two families came to an agreement to share their food purchases. Gradually, more families joined them, and a community purchase cooperative began to gain strength and was simply called “*La Compra*” (the shopping).

They organized joint orders paying a special interest in agro-ecological products free from agricultural chemicals or artificial additives. In addition, with the intention of finding better prices and to gain knowledge on the crops and processes, they visited farming families which were at the time slowly growing in number and facing the industrial agricultural model established in Argentina that is focused on transgenic soy monoculture plantations, which according to the Rosario Stock Exchange, currently covers more than 20 million hectares.

“*La Compra*” continued adding families and gradually was renamed “*Orgánicos Sí o Sí*” (Absolutely Organic). Groups from other towns in the province began to join, then also from other provinces, and now 2016 finds the network making biannual big purchases, one in the autumn and one in the spring, making it possible for about 500 families in 44 towns and cities to be fed healthily and in a direct connection with more than 80 organic producers in Córdoba, Mendoza, Santa Fe, San Luis and other provinces.

One month before each purchase, each producer receives the details of the order for each village, assembles the orders, prices are frozen in the days before delivery, all goods are brought to a large warehouse chosen for the occasion, each



“*Orgánicos Sí o Sí*” network of more than 80 producers from Cordoba and other provinces seek safeguards for the environment and fair trade.
/ Juan Nicasro

organized town goes to the location, and the distribution is organized in a collaborative, self-controlled and supportive manner. A ceremony also takes place at the site to give thanks and an open fair is set where techniques, latest developments, hugs, rejoicing, and future projects are exchanged.

“They have to be products that are organic, good for the health, safe, and produced in a way that respects nature is the basis, but we also highlight the importance of working in the social and human aspects. The same as agro-ecology is not only about not fumigating so is this network not only about food; it is for a change in lifestyle, group work, self-assessment and personal growth. This is why we are interested in commitment and sharing. Here the idea is not only to come and pick up what one buys. One has to do work for the rest, taking roles on the day of the distribution, also working in each ones hometown organizing the travel, and one has to work to gain the trust and to prove the value of one’s word,” tells Andrea to *Latinamerica Press*. She is a promoter of this network, who preferred to keep her last

name out considering that this is a collective experience, not an individual experience.

In the early days of the network, it was more difficult to obtain organic products in variety and quantity. “There are many things that were not available before, or we had very little of; for example organic lentils,” tells Virginia Leopardi, from San Rafael, Mendoza, to *Latinamerica Press*. She is also one of those responsible for the La Rosendo Farm, an establishment that produces organic wines from grapes kept unsprayed. In their case they lead a double role within the network, producers and consumers. “On the farm we try to have everything, produce the wines and also maintain the vegetable garden, even producing vegetables for sale, and anything we cannot produce we get from others who are also agro-ecological producers.”

Solutions for producers

The network is not only economical, it is also about support. There are cases of products that are not 100 percent organic throughout the process, yet this is exactly one of its tasks, to help and accompany the producers on the road to improvement. “We give them contact information from other producers who have ideas or solutions, or give them information, and we take the time with them. For example, people who elaborated noodles sometimes used plain flour because a few years ago it was not easy to get organic flour. Now there are several parts of the country where agro-ecological wheat is grown and there are dedicated mills for that,” Andrea points out.

Of the 85 current producers, some are great historical examples, such as Campo Claro (Buenos Aires province) or Naturaleza Viva (Santa Fe province); and others consolidated in recent years such as El Peregrino, Germen de Vida, Familia Cecchin, and others that are just getting started. “Everyone contributes to make a change towards food sovereignty of the towns. The idea that we can all be producers of something and in this way integrate even more and contribute directly more is always present in the meetings,” said Andrea.

This is confirmed by Gabriel Quintana, arriving from Romang, Santa Fe, a town which lies about 700 km from the setting of the autumn meeting, where in a conversation with *Latinamerica Press* he tells that “it is the third year that we have come each semester to place an order and collect the provisions. We started uniting; first we were two or three families, and now we are already 25 families. We rotate as coordinator so that all the families participate in this role. Of all these families there are several now who make use of their provisions in a responsible fashion, they plan ahead for six months, that’s the idea, to be provided for six months.”

“Other families buy more specific things. We want to ensure that there are people in the group who also have products there and can bring them to sell here. And then we can make an exchange at all levels, to buy and sell. We now bring avocados, Spanish lime, papayas, mangoes, nuts, persimmons, avocado tree seedlings, passion fruit, things we’re growing there, semi-tropical fruits, and we are happy here because these fruits are barely visible here and they snatch these fruits right out of your hands,” Quintana says.

“Other towns from Santa Fe are also coming now; there is a visible growth. This autumn’s delivery is very large, also because, you see, when you make your purchases, with inflation as it is now, in two months you realize that what you bought was at a great price, so many people are also joining because of that. Contrary to popular belief, we can see here that organic is not expensive,” he adds.

“It changes your life. From going to the supermarket every day to recover the sense of stocking up, of grouping together, organizing for a healthy life,” Andrea says happily.

“The objective is a total change in paradigm, where the center of it all is not the money but the complementarities, the care of the environment, fair trade,” Leopardi adds.

Participatory process

José Luis Lois, from Cañada Larga, Traslasierra (Córdoba), points out: “We offer olives, olive paste, olive oil, and a complete line of smoked condiments such as paprika, sea salt, chili pepper, a Mapuche condiment called *merkén*, turmeric, curry, and mustard seeds. It is not a chemical smoking process; it is a natural cold smoking process, a technique borrowed from the Mapuche indigenous people, with carob and *quebracho* sawdust, and herbs such as rosemary and bay leaf. Smoking is the oldest food conservation technique. This network is growing year after year, and it helps us a lot in our economy, not only because of the volume of the two annual purchases, but by the network of contacts generated with other producers, to help us with everything, and the consumer families in the region who become stable customers. This purchase has generated a lot more of other networks.”

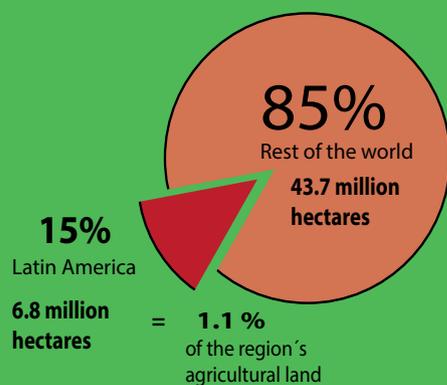
“It is basically being in charge of what you eat, being responsible for more than just nutrition. I choose healthy food, I can enroll in a group or I can start one, I check the list, place my order, and join with other families communally to buy, for example, a 25 kg bag of organic rice, and get quality and savings. Producers are also organized, as in the case of yerba mate Las Tunas [produced by a cooperative in Misiones province], where 30 families each produce a little and then come together to package and ship it,” said Juan Vanadia, who has joined the organizing group to collaborate with the list of products.

“I see a great effort and a lot of dedication coming from the producers who often face very formidable obstacles. I am extremely touched by an example of a family in the area of Pampa de Pocho [Córdoba] that recovered a land that had been devastated and planted with soybeans; they are planting trees, cleaning the land, letting the forest return, taking care of the watersheds. The case of the Naturaleza Viva agro-ecological farm, in the province of Santa Fe, has also been prominent in recent days; it suffered a spraying of agrochemicals caused by soy producing farmers bordering its fields,” adds Juan.

The opening ceremony of the autumn meeting that held on Apr. 8 and 9, besides drums and dancing, delivered a special message about the value of one’s word, trust and the shared responsibility to sustain the network. The program makes it clear that it is not the capital rules which govern it, but rules that are communitarian, supportive and self-generated. □

Latin America: Organic agriculture 2014

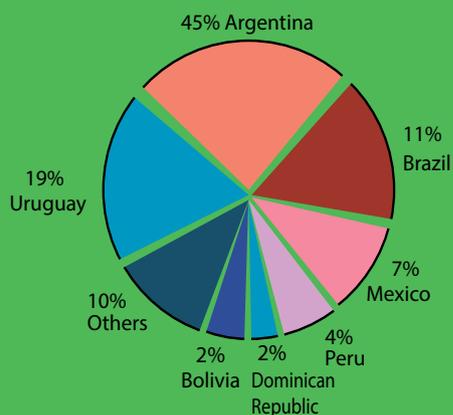
Organic agricultural land



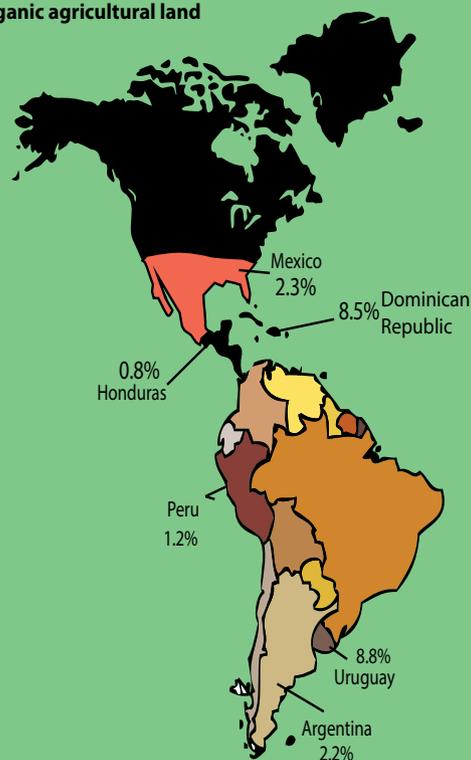
Countries with larger areas of organic agriculture

Country	Organic agriculture lands (million hectares)
Argentina	3.0
Uruguay	1.3
Brazil	0.7
Mexico	0.5
Peru	0.2
Dominican Republic	0.1
Bolivia	0.1

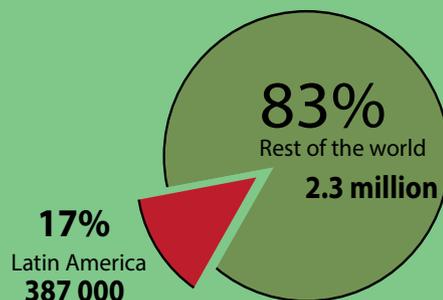
Percentage of the regional total organic land



Countries with highest shares of organic agricultural land



Organic producers



Countries with the highest number of organic producers

Country	Producers
Mexico	169 703
Peru	65 126
Paraguay	58 258
Dominican Republic	26 423

NICARAGUA

Carmen Herrera in Managua

To the rescue of native seeds

Despite being the only Central American country where the use of genetically modified seeds is banned, the possibility exists that a law is enacted that would endanger agro-ecological production.

The use of landrace native (*criollas*) and domesticated foreign seeds (*acriolladas*) for the production of more than 75 percent of basic grains, the establishment of 408 native seed banks in the hands of small producers, the approval of Law 765 for the Promotion of Organic and Agro-ecological Production, the declaration of 11 transgenic-free territories, and the political will of the government, civil society organizations and cooperation agencies to support public policies of agro-ecological production, are part of a strategy that has gained momentum since 2008 focused on the rescue, storage, multiplication, improvement, use and consumption of varieties of native and neo-native seeds as a dynamic to resolve the sovereignty and food security of the country.

The rescue of the use of native and domesticated native seeds was an initiative of the Campesino a Campesino (Farmer to Farmer) Program of the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG), which represents the small and medium producers, for the promotion and positioning of these seeds as an agro-ecological alternative and to avoid the use of transgenic seeds.

A space for dialog called Alianza Semillas de Identidad (Seeds of Identity Alliance), which brings together more than 10 civil society organizations that promote actions based on local knowledge and agro-ecological practices, has been formed ever since. For its part, the state, through the Nicaraguan Institute of Agricultural Technology, carries out nationwide development projects in agro-ecological production.

“We began this rescue work amid doubts and some battles, as many people questioned the fact that to promote this initiative was synonymous with underdevelopment and poverty. The word *criollo* has a traditional connotation of hardship. We were challenged by state institutions. They did not take us seriously, as if we did not have enough scientific knowledge; however, over time, the government agencies as well as non-governmental organizations and aid agencies have joined this effort through research and promotion of agro-ecological technologies, among other dynamics,” says Jorge Irán Vásquez, national specialist of the Farmer to Farmer Program, to *Latinamerica Press*.



Mayra Flores, an agro-ecological producer, owns a native seed bank in the community of Samulalí, San Ramón, Matagalpa. /Carmen Herrera

Despite these positive changes in the vision regarding the promotion of landrace and domesticated foreign seeds, there is still a need to overcome the issue of regulation and provision of funds for the accurate implementation of the legal framework, to halt the advance of the chemical industry that puts pressure for and promotes the sale of transgenic seeds. Also, to overcome the shortcomings of the management of the production system in which the use of agrochemicals as supplies for soil remediation and pest control still prevails, as well as the deficiencies for water collection in a country that depends almost fully on the rainy season for cultivation of food crops and that is facing, for three years running, one of the worst droughts in recent history, brought on by the El Niño phenomenon.

“The *campesino* production is also affected by those transnational industries that influence the promotion of agro-industrial processes that depend on their products: machinery, supplies and seeds. It is difficult for the rural sector to resist the use of these inputs because they depend on agrochemicals. In the case of Nicaragua, machinery was not introduced for the small production sector and in the case of seeds created in the laboratory, they have not managed to penetrate in the basic consumer products,” is the analysis made by Harold Calvo, a promoter of the Seeds of Identity Alliance, in an interview with *Latinamerica Press*.

Legal framework

The Union of Agricultural Producers of Nicaragua (UPANIC), which brings together the major agricultural producers, has made public its request to the government to allow the introduction of transgenic seeds and to take over legally the sales and use of improved and transgenic seeds.

“A 10 percent of native seeds are obtained by the government and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to distribute them to their beneficiary producers. This amount is enough to reach 85 percent of the total production based on native seeds. To date, in the country, the import of transgenic products is only allowed for animal feed, which means that the population consumes transgenic through their meat consumption,” emphasizes Calvo.

As for the legal framework, as it is clear from the information given by some organizations that promote ecological farming, although the government of President Daniel Ortega has supported the adoption of regulations protecting organic production, to date laws like Law 807 of Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity concerning the protection of biosafety approved in 2012 is not regulated; and the recent draft of the Seed Regulation, Production and Import Law, also known as Seeds Law, despite not yet being approved, leaves several of its articles open to the possibility for the introduction of transgenic seeds into the country by proposing the mandatory certification of mother seeds.

“We have made a series of motions to the proposal of the draft of the Seeds Law,” Calvo states. “That law will cause producers to operate outside the law, in the sense that they want to promote production of mother seeds monitored by the state run Agricultural Production and Health Institute. Native seeds have thousands of genes and origins; it is difficult to know which one is the mother because they are crossing them every day. What they want is that all seeds be certified and sold to cover the 75 percent which consumes native seeds”.

Another important challenge faced by the rural sector, although there is progress being made in the use of native seeds for planting both basic grains and vegetables and fruits, is that this is not complemented by the use of any other agro-ecological tools.

“Native seeds are not magical. They should be paired by comprehensive agro-ecological practices to achieve sustainable use: use of water, soil, community organization. The people should have the autonomy and sovereignty to organize themselves in order to defend their productive systems as learned from their ancestors,” Vásquez said.

Biodiversity protection

Erick Barrera, coordinator of the “Rescue, Storage and Multiplication of Native Seeds” project of the Dennis Ernesto González Foundation, highlights the approval of 11 municipal ordinances “for the protection and promotion of biodiversity, native and domesticated foreign seeds and declaring Territories Free of Transgenic Species” and nine other municipal ordinances now in the approval process

as some achievements obtained by the Seeds of Identity Alliance. Another achievements are that the 50 percent of the seed banks are maintained and managed by women producers; there is allocation of municipal budgets in the municipalities for the purchase and promotion of native seeds and domesticated foreign seeds to be delivered to their target population; and more than 35,000 farming families, who are producers of native seeds, are members of organizations in the Alliance.

On the subject of research, the organizations in the Alliance emphasize: the promotion of plant breeding plots of native bean and maize seeds to adapt them to climate changes, agreements with state universities, conducting nationwide marches demanding compliance with the legal framework for the no introduction of transgenic seeds, and lobbying for the regulation of Law 807.

The no-burning practice for crops by 90 percent nationally and the positive assessment made by the current government regarding the use of native seeds, are also considered achievements for the Alliance.

Among the challenges the Alliance face are: specialization by products (maize, beans, sorghum, rice, among others) provided to producers of native and neo-native seeds, the creation of networks of seed banks nationwide, establishing modalities of trading and price for native seeds, the regulation of Law 807, work on the reduction and/or elimination of chemicals for the production of native and domesticated foreign seeds. Since to date, 40 percent of the inputs used in their production are still agrochemicals, according to field specialists of the Alliance organizations.

They also face the campaigns of large companies that are organized in the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), with regard to the statement they have recently made, related to the El Niño phenomenon, that “transgenic seed is the solution for climate change”, and the looming threat of the approval of the Seeds Law that could allow the entry of transgenic seeds into the only country in Central America where their use for growing food for human consumption, is prohibited.

But the most pressing challenge is the lack of awareness of the general population who does not see the importance of buying and consuming organic products in a country where small farmers have spent more than three decades betting on agro-ecological production of the main food items of the Nicaraguan diet: corn and beans.

“We have an outstanding debt with the population as we have not sensitized it on the benefits of consuming organic products to benefit their health and to contribute to the process of stimulation of farmers producing organically,” reflects Vásquez. □

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