



Food sovereignty

means Food sovereignty
means being able to
domestically produce
the country's
staple diet



ARES.

Colombia

Colombian Senator **Jorge Enrique Robledo**, of the Democratic Pole party, recently participated in a meeting held in **Quito, Ecuador** to discuss food sovereignty and exchange ideas on this issue.



Senator **Robledo** made several very interesting points in his presentation, which **SIREL** reproduces here almost in full.

I would like to thank the organization **Ecuador Decide** and the **Institute of Ecological Studies** for this invitation and for having me here in **Ecuador**, where I feel so welcome. It's not that I feel unwelcome elsewhere, but in **Ecuador** I always feel a little bit better.

My presentation will focus on **Colombia's** situation, in the framework of globalization, neoliberalism and "free trade." It is a perspective from **Colombia**, which doesn't mean it is irrelevant to **Ecuador**. But when I started preparing this presentation, I thought I could talk about this country. And as I worked with my colleagues and we gathered information on the current situation in **Ecuador**, I soon realized that it would be irresponsible of me to talk about **Ecuador**, because how could I become an expert on **Ecuador** in such a short time? So I decided to concentrate on how I see this issue from **Colombia's** standpoint, in the understanding that my observations could be useful to **Ecuador** in many ways, even when I believe that it is up to Ecuadorians themselves to assess their situation and decide how to approach this and any other issues.



What is food sovereignty?

In the history of humankind there have been many episodes in which while there were resources available to acquire food, it was impossible to acquire it.

The first thing I'd like to point out with respect to [Food Sovereignty](#) is something so basic it is often overlooked, and that is the importance of food. Food is unlike any other product in our society. **If all the medicine in the world were to run out, it would be a catastrophe and billions of people would certainly die, but the human race would probably survive. If the sources of electricity were exhausted, it might bring a disaster of enormous proportions for humankind, but the human race would still live on, and eventually return to a process of civilization. But if all food were to run out, the human race would be wiped out.** That is the first idea I'd like to share with you. I stress this point strongly because sometimes the teacher in me – I used to teach – just feels like **sitting all the neoliberal executives down and making them repeat over and over again how important**

food, agriculture, and farming and cattle products are for the subsistence of every human being, until it finally sinks in and they understand. There is such great confusion in the world that we lose sight of even the most basic truths.

In some cases there may be enough food available, but no money to purchase it. That's one possibility. The lack of money could be due to multiple reasons: loss of a job, or an illness, just to name a couple of examples of the many things that can go wrong. But then there are other situations, which are the ones I want to stress here, because in my opinion they are a key point in this discussion. **I'm talking about the situations in which the money is available but there is no food!**

I'd like to insist on the importance of the uniqueness of food as compared to all other goods. As I said before, there have been many times in the history of humankind in which it was impossible to obtain food even though there were enough means available.

In **Colombia**, for example, there was the **Cartagena** siege, during the War of Independence from **Spain**. The city of **Cartagena** rose up against **Spain** and was surrounded by the troops of General **Pablo Morillo**. Our



patriots fought valiantly to defend **Cartagena**, until they were literally dying of hunger, after having eaten everything, including their shoes and any leather they could find, and were forced to surrender. In the province of **Orisa**, when **India** was still under British rule, a handful of English speculators hoarded all the food and prevented the native population from accessing it, by setting such steep prices that in a sense it was as if the food didn't actually exist. It was the Europeans who,

after the **Second World War**, coined the term "food sovereignty" because during the war they had come to know firsthand what it meant to be unable to access food. There is a famous poem by the Spanish poet **Miguel Hernández**, which was made into a song by his countryman **Joan Manuel Serrat**, called "**Nana de las cebollas**," which literally means **Lullaby of the Onion** and speaks of people going hungry and having nothing else to eat but onions. ●

Nobody can deny the importance of having or not having food

What do neoliberals say? They agree that governments have the responsibility of ensuring that there is enough food to feed the population. But they take a global approach to this problem. That is, it doesn't matter where in the world the food is produced, they say, because world trade flows will take the food wherever it is needed.

Of course, neoliberals don't take into account the possibility of risks such as terrorist attacks, pandemics, or natural disasters like volcano eruptions. They don't see these as potential dangers, and take for granted that food flows will never be interrupted. So, they say, what each country needs is to domestically produce certain goods that will enable it to purchase the food it needs. In **Colombia**, during the **FTA** negotiations, we were told that it didn't matter if there was no wheat –today we import all our wheat–, or if we imported three tons of corn, or if we had no barley, or if in the future there was no rice production in **Colombia**. We export oil, coal and mining products - which is what they are leading us to specialize in-, and with the foreign exchange we receive for those goods we buy corn and wheat from the US and Argentina. This is, in short, what the neoliberal theory says. It doesn't deny -because it can't- that there is a problem with food demand that must be addressed.

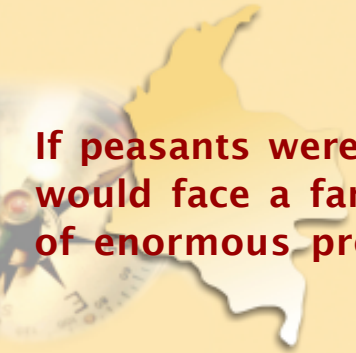
The **second thesis**, which we could call -and I say this with all due respect- a peasant conception, posits that the important thing is that peasants and indigenous persons be able to produce all the food they need on their own plot of land. I'm personally not against indigenous people and peasants producing a great amount of food on their plots. But I would like to make it clear that it is not possible for peasants or indigenous people to operate completely outside a monetary economy, and establish a natural economy where they won't have to sell their products on the market. When we bring corn imports into **Colombia**, we're also hurting our indigenous people and our peasants, because they should have the right to sell us the corn we consume in **Bogotá**, for example. And, moreover, if it were true that peasants could isolate themselves and survive with what they produce on their own plot of land, without having to re-

sort at all to a monetary economy, such a peasant autarchy would still not solve the food problem in urban areas. We would still be asking ourselves: what happens if the volcano erupts, what will people in **Bogotá** eat? And what about the agricultural laborers, who live in the countryside but are not self-sufficient because they're wage-earners working for others and thus are forced to purchase the food they eat, what would they do?

The **third thesis** is, I think, the one we should pursue, as it addresses the issue as a problem of food sovereignty from a national point of view. According to this approach, **the country as a whole should aim to produce as much food as possible within its territory. This doesn't mean that we can't import anything ever, not even a kilo of food.** That's not it at all. Nor does it mean that we can't export any surpluses and even certain kinds of goods that are produced for export, such as

coffee, in large volumes. **But the best scenario, the most favorable one, would be to try as much as possible to domestically produce the components of the country's staple diet. That is what I am specifically referring to.**

Some countries may be able to meet this goal better than others and may be able to produce their staple diet entirely at home. Others may only be able to domestically produce 70 percent of their basic diet, others 60 percent, and still others may only be able to produce 10 percent, like **Saudi Arabia**, as it doesn't have enough land, water or laborers. This must be the policy approach, because globally it also makes more sense than the specialization they are pushing us to adopt. It's the only policy that can protect us from a global food catastrophe. **It is the ideal solution in a harmonious conception of the world, where there is mutual complementation. ●**



If peasants were to disappear we would face a famine problem of enormous proportions

Food sovereignty must be managed to a large extent by peasant and indigenous production, but also by business and agricultural laborer production. **This morning I spoke on the radio, and I was saying that we hadn't come to this country to write in a book where all the pages were blank, but rather in one that already had many pages filled.** There's a kind of business production that from certain angles has a number of positive aspects. There are also many people who earn a living as agricultural laborers working for such businesses. **Which is why I believe that food sovereignty must be solved through a dual policy, that is, by complementing a strong business economy backed by the State with strong peasant and indigenous economies also backed by the State. And businesses, peasants and indigenous people must join to-**

“Poor countries in the South that were once self-sufficient in food but are now desperate for foreign exchange to pay down their debts are forced to turn over valuable agricultural lands to transnational agribusinesses and to convert to cash-crop production while importing food products to feed their own peoples. ‘Export or die’ is the message, but ‘export and die’ is the reality.”

Tony Clarke

gether with the aim of promoting policies that favor national food sovereignty, instead of furthering agricultural imports.

Why is a peasant economy important? The social importance of peasants is obvious. We're talking about millions of people in our countries. And when I say peasants I include indigenous people. We're talking about phenomena that have a huge cultural significance and should not be taken for granted, because they are part of our culture and provide many positive contributions that we must defend. **In Colombia's case, the peasant economy accounts for 70 percent of the total agricultural wealth produced in a year, and in Ecuador that percentage may be even greater. Peasant economies generate a colossal amount of wealth and to a great extent sustain national food sovereignties.**

In **Colombia**, for example, despite all the imports, a very large part of the corn consumed comes from peasant agriculture, as does almost all the potatoes, and many goods that cannot be traded as commodities on the global market, like plantains, cassavas, yams, arracachas and several kinds of fruits and vegetables. All of these are produced by peasant and indigenous agriculture. And even coffee -which paradoxically is one of **Colombia's** leading export crops- is almost exclusively produced by peasant agriculture.

The notion that peasants are somewhat insignificant beings because they are inefficient, incompetent, unskilled, and do everything wrong is refuted by our own national experience. Because we eat thanks to these peasants and indigenous people, forsaken as they are by the State and abandoned to their fate, with only limited access to timely and cheap credits, and no technical assistance. Well then, **if Colombian peas-**

The notion that peasants are somewhat insignificant beings because they are inefficient, incompetent, unskilled, and do everything wrong is refuted by our own national experience. Because we eat thanks to these peasants and indigenous people, forsaken as they are by the State and abandoned to their fate, with only limited access to timely and cheap credits, and no technical assistance. Well, if Colombian peasants were to disappear we would have a huge famine problem in our hands.

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What we have to realize is that peasant economies operate under a different rationality than that of businesses. If we look at the chicken situation in **Colombia**, we'll see how in many cases peasant farmers are highly competitive, which is why they are being undermined with the imposition of impossible sanitary measures, because they can't be beaten through fair competition. **Most of the sanitary measures -and I mention this briefly now, but I'm going to close my presentation with this idea- are tricks designed to target peasants and indigenous people, as they cannot be beaten through capitalist competition.** This peasant or indigenous rationality affords a number of advantages that businesses don't have. When the coffee crisis hit **Colombia** after the failure of the International Coffee Agreement, our peasants resisted far better than small businesses. And now even big companies are getting out of the coffee business. The same large companies that are unable to compete with peasant production.

We also need to examine, without dogmatism, the myth that only big companies and big machinery matter. Our peasant farmers from Nariño may be "inefficient," but they produce cheaper wheat than US farmers. **If they're ruined it's only because the subsidies granted to Northern farmers prevent them from being competitive.** Now if we compare their productivity per hectare, we will find that peasant agriculture does have a lower productivity, but what we're talking about here is competitiveness. **I can produce less wheat per hectare, but more cheaply than with the other method that has a greater yield per hectare, and that's because there are other factors at play. ●**

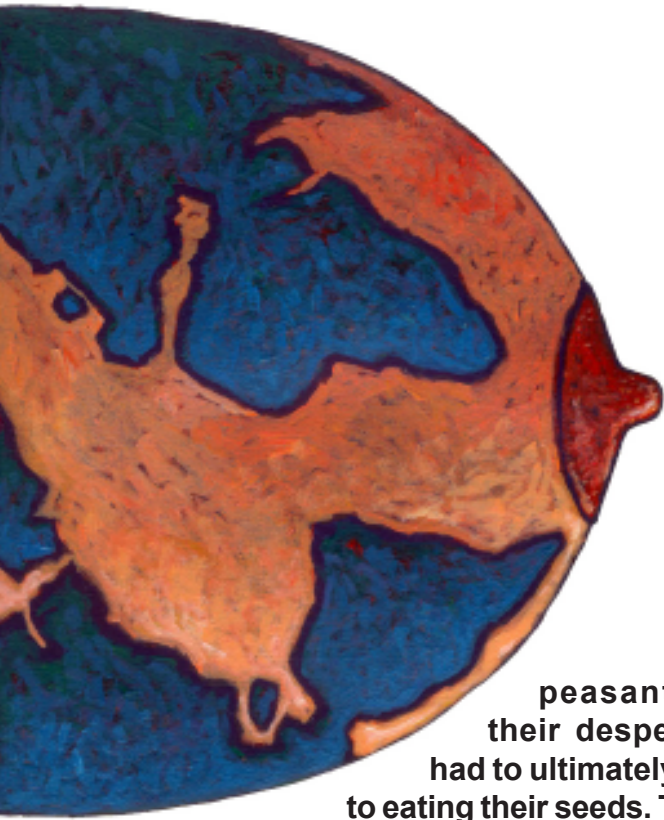
What does "free trade" say about food

We're living in the world of "free trade." It is based on several ideas I want to briefly set out for you. First: "free trade" concentrates trade and production with the fallacy of competitiveness and efficiency. **It concentrates production in a few countries and concentrates trade in a handful of large transnational corporations, while the rest of us spend our lives absurdly exchanging things, goods that we could very well produce.** It is rather nonsensical to be exchanging products, sending them from one place to another, when what we're exchanging are the same

kinds of goods. **Because there's no question about importing tractors when they're not produced domestically, but what is ridiculous is a country having to import corn when it is one of the few things that country can actually produce.** So the **first idea behind globalization** is: concentrate production and trade, especially in the hands of very powerful transnational corporations, and venerate exports as a divine salvation.

Second idea: concentrate science. Scientific and technological development -which I am not against- has gradually been turned into a tool to take competitors out of the market. I'm referring in particular to the case of transgenic seeds. **In terms of food sovereignty there is nothing worse than not having seeds. Nothing can pose a greater threat of hunger to a peasant or indigenous economy than depriving it of seeds. Many of the atrocious famines that have occurred in Africa are explained because**





peasants, in their desperation, had to ultimately resort to eating their seeds. The day they did that was the day they were sentenced to death by starvation.

But transnational corporations are not interested in concentrating just any agriculture or cattle production. No, they just want to concentrate production of the strategic goods that make up the basic or staple diet, which is another concept I would like to introduce here. All food products are food, but not all of them are strategic foods or part of the staple diet. Pro-

ducing coffee is not the same as producing wheat. Here I am, enjoying a delicious cup of strong coffee, but if the world were to be left without coffee, we would not go hungry, like we would if we were left without wheat and corn.

In Colombia's case, they want to force us to specialize in tropical crops, which are not part of the staple diet, and to turn to the **United States** for imports of the grains and essential crops that are part of our staple diet. This poses a huge problem in terms of food sovereignty. **We're talking about food products that are essential components of the staple diet. I don't want to imagine a future Colombia where we're all dining on a cup of hot chocolate, a splash of palm oil and a bouquet of flowers, because everything else has disappeared.** ●



The end of peasant economy and production

A variant of the neoliberal model is what a cocky Colombian minister boastfully called “the Malay model.” **Malaysia** is a country specialized in large-scale African oil palm production, with plantations averaging some 100,000 hectares. The Malay model is the model of transnational capital, and it is not by chance that such a model has been implemented in a country that does not tolerate any form of democratic discussion. The ruling model is the model of transnational corporations, big capital and large-scale single-crop production, and there is no room for peasant economy and production.

In **Colombia**, another problem is posed by the government. And here I'd like to go into the safety risk issue and all the sanitary standards and regulations that are being set now. Our peasants and indigenous people are much tougher than one might think. When I got involved in rural activism I was under the impression that peasants and indigenous people were extremely fragile, and that they gave up easily. But I found out that that wasn't the case at all, that when it came to competing, they were real tigers. And to a great extent their fierceness is fueled by a very painful reason: hunger. They need to compete to keep hunger away. When prices drop, what peasants do is they water down their soup, take their kids out of school, get their hair cut at home, and resort to a number of other resistance strategies so they won't be ruined, and that way they'll be able to remain connected to the land.

So what is happening in **Colombia** is that a strategy of violent displacement is being deployed, the most barbaric of extra-economic measures is being applied. They're practically saying to the peasants: **“You either leave or you'll be gunned down, and that'll be the end of that.”**



But there's another, underhanded, strategy that is starting to crop up in **Colombia** (I don't know if you have something similar here in **Ecuador**), which consists of imposing a number of technical demands that neither peasants nor small businesses can comply with.

In **Colombia** we've put up a great fight, largely led by the **National Association to Save Agriculture**, supported by me in Congress. We've faced a number of problems, such as, for example, the demand made on slaughterhouses to comply with sanitary standards they can't possibly meet, or else be shut down. What is the aim of this? On the one hand, it is intended to open up the way for imports, and on the other, it seeks to concentrate the industry in a small handful of slaughterhouses. That would wipe out small producers, butchers, and meat cutters, because the aim is to market meat through the large supermarkets and big-box stores. **This has already forced almost 400 Colombian slaughterhouses out of business in 2008 alone. The Minister told us that this measure was intended to modernize slaugh-**

terhouses, to which I answered: "No, sir, this measure is meant to put them out of business." And that's exactly what is happening.

The second measure affects the producers of *panela*, which is a product I know you have here in **Ecuador** too. This sugarcane by-product is one of the first agricultural industries of **Colombia**, and it is produced by very poor peasants and indigenous people under extremely difficult conditions. Now these producers are being required -just like the slaughterhouses- to meet a number of regulations that they can't comply with. It is a classic example of a regulation designed to ruin producers. Like slaughterhouses, mills are now being required to have potable water. In connection with this, a mayor said to me recently: **"Senator, if we can't even have potable water in our hospital, how are we going to have it in the slaughterhouses? The peasants don't even have potable water for their babies' bottles, and they're expected to have potable water to produce *panela*?"** ●

Another measure: The ban on raw milk

I don't know if this happens here, but [in Colombia, nearly 30 percent of the milk sold is not marketed by pasteurizing companies.](#) Instead it is sold in the form of raw milk, which must be boiled before drinking, as any Colombian knows. A ban on the sale of raw milk was to go into effect on August 26, 2008, but 10,000 peasants rallied in front of the Ministry of Agriculture and succeeded in postponing the measure. However, the ban is still pending and could be applied at anytime.

Lastly there are the requirements for slaughtering chickens or other fowl in a farm. In order to do so, farmers have to observe 48 pages of sanitary regulations in small print, which are the same requirements imposed on a business that slaughters 20 to 30 million birds a year. **It is a regulation brutally calculated to take family farming and small producers out of what back home we call the peasant chicken business: we're talking about 40 million birds.** This attack on so many fronts can't be merely a coincidence. It can't have happened overnight and by chance, because the government knows these regulations can't be met. In the case of slaugh-

terhouses, we're losing the battle. In the case of *panela*, we've stopped them for now, because they haven't been able to push the measure firmly. The milk measure has been postponed, and we're fighting the chicken requirements. That's how things stand today.

What's surprising is that all these standards are not approved in line with World Health Organization (WHO) criteria, but rather according to World Trade Organization (WTO) criteria. We have to be very careful with this. **Bogotá** is located in a department called **Cundinamarca**, and in the debates in Congress, I told the Minister of Agriculture, **Andrés Felipe Arias Leiva**, not to confuse **Cundinamarca** with **Denmark**, just because the two names sound similar in Spanish. "We can't impose here the same regulations that exist in **Denmark** or **France**," I said to him. Moreover, we've conducted studies that reveal that these standards are not actually imposed in those countries. In **France**, for example, an attempt to ban the production of cheese made from raw milk failed. **There is resistance even in European countries, because sanitary regulations have turned into a way of excluding small producers.** ●

New trends aimed at exterminating peasant culture and production

I want to close with a final thought. When one decides to become involved in these battles over sanitary regulations, one first has to do some serious thinking. And frankly I spent over a year pondering whether or not I should get involved. It's not easy. Because when you go against this issue, it makes you look like you're in favor of filth, of microbes, of bacteria, of children dying from diarrhea, and you start to look like a monster. The Minister and the technocrats, instead, are seen as champions of hygiene and cleanliness, of a world where nobody dies.

But let's take a look at what happens in **Colombia**. It's absurd to demand food safety when you can't even guarantee that the cold chain is maintained unbroken, when people don't have refrigerators in their homes. Because we all know that the extent to which bacteria spreads in food depends on whether it is stored in high or low temperatures. I can have the best milk in the world, virtually bacteria-free, but if I don't have a fridge, bacteria will spread and the very next day I'll be drink very dangerous milk. At least half of the households in **Colombia** lack a cold storage system. And we haven't been educated in good hygiene practices; not even simple things like washing your hands after you go the bathroom or before you cook. Few people observe even such basic hygiene, and there are no efforts to educate the population in that sense.

In many places there is no potable water. I can produce the best milk in the world but if the container I gather it in is washed with water that is not potable, than my milk will be contaminated as soon as I pour it into the container.


I want to make it clear that I believe we must make every effort possible to improve food safety, through both education and technical standards, but always in the understanding that our producers can't be forced to comply with impossible regulations overnight. Nobody should be required to meet regulations they can't possibly comply with and that are meant to put them

out of business. These regulations should be implemented through gradual processes. In **Colombia** slaughterhouses were given six months to modernize. If we really want to modernize production, then we must do it in stages, giving producers five, ten, or 20 years to meet technical requirements. If they've been working this way for 500 years, what's another 20 years?

Food safety and sanitary regulations should not be used as a hammer to stomp out competitors and ruin them. This process took **Europe** and the **United States** 200 years. ■

Your tomatoes are healthy, but I'm still getting an allergic reaction... from you.





**Food sovereignty means
producing the country's
staple diet domestically**

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