



52 Profiles on Agroecology:
The 250 Thousand Families Challenge:
Bringing to bear food practice on health,
equity and sustainability in Ecuador



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Introduction

In Ecuador thousands of families have joined a campaign that promotes fresh, agroecological food produced by family farmers. Most of these foods are from native crops and are sold directly to consumers at outdoor markets and food fairs. These rural *and* urban families strengthen local cultures and economies as well as social organization. Based in their daily need to eat, they generate new value in food, for example by working with chefs who promote new flavors and plates tied to Andean cuisine. The public creates support for agroecology as it organizes around the advantages of “eating well” – i.e., utilizing food as a means for health, sustainability and social equity. The campaign’s motto is: *We are 250,000 families who eat healthy, delicious food from our land.*



Figure 1. Young Ecuadorian boy scouts and girl scouts at an agroecological farm, holding a campaign poster. Photo: Eduar Pinzón Cano

Description of the Agroecology initiative

How did it start?

The *Colectivo Agroecológico* -- a rich combination of hundreds of organizations and individuals dedicated to agroecological food production and consumption -- influenced Ecuador’s ground-breaking 2008 Constitution, which stipulates a transition from food security (understood as the utilization of food for meeting basic human energy requirements) to food sovereignty (food as means of cultural identity, social expression, and building democracy), including a ban on genetically modified (GM) seeds and crops. Members of the Colectivo played a seminal part in lobbying and drafting relevant agriculture and food provisions in the Constitution as well as subsequent legislation, including bills for placing into motion food sovereignty, agrobiodiversity and seeds, and responsible consumption.

Nevertheless, despite the achievement of these pioneering statutes on paper, Colectivo members observed little family-level change in practice. Looking back several years on, they felt the food sovereignty agenda had actually lost ground, as private business interests and industrial science, operating in the name of “productivity”, “food safety” and profit, had sought to limit citizen control over historically common-pool, public goods. They concluded that this process of the “modernization”

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of food production had led to further commodification of food, exclusion from markets, and dependence on expert knowledge and technology.

Concluding that it was no longer realistic to expect the government to represent the public interest, the Colectivo decided to join hands with the country's Movement for a Solidary and Social Economy and place responsibility for transition in food into the hands of "the people who eat". Together, in 2009 they launched an open-ended, citizen-led campaign, entitled *Qué Rico Es Comer Sano y de Nuestra Tierra* (www.QueRicoEs.org). In an effort to counter the penetration of industrialized food, create markets for family farmers' agroecological products and improve rural and urban people's health and quality of life, the *Qué Rico Es!* Campaign connects people where they arguably are held to the highest, most rigorous social standards of responsibility: in their homes, neighborhoods and social networks.



Figure 2. An Ecuadorian urban family showing their commitment to eating healthy, delicious local agroecological food by participating in the 250 Thousand Families Campaign.

250 Thousand Families

As a critical moment of the *Qué Rico Es!* Campaign, in 2014 the Colectivo launched its 250,000 Families Challenge, which seeks to identify and unite a critical mass of 5% of Ecuador's population that is involved in eating responsibly (see box). It is not necessary to "educate" these families on their food consumption; rather this population of vibrant, responsible consumers already exists, if in unarticulated forms. In order to become part of the 250,000 Families Challenge, people are invited to explore two questions: 1) what does "responsible consumption" mean for my family (business, community)? and 2) how do we practice it? The Campaign then facilitates the sharing, exchange and strengthening of healthy, agroecological food practices among the participating families.

Why 250 Thousand Families?

Taking into account the multiple economies involved in the production, circulation, procurement and sale of food and drink in Ecuador, it is estimated that 250,000 families spend upwards of US\$ 600 million each year. At the same time, Ecuador is experiencing serious health problems associated with eating, as the prevalence of overweight and obesity in adults is 62.8%, while chronic malnutrition in children under the age of 5 years is estimated at 25.3%.¹ This double burden is estimated to cost the Ecuadorian people around USD 4,3 billion a year². By asking 250 Thousand families to commit to spending at least 50% of their food and drink purchases on locally produced agroecological products bought directly from family farmers, the Campaign aspires to divert some US\$ 300 million/year towards the transition to healthy, "good" food, agroecology and food sovereignty.

¹ Figures taken from the Encuesta Nacional de Salud y Nutrición del Ecuador ENSANUT-ECU 2011-2013. Ministerio de Salud Pública/Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos. Quito, Ecuador.

² Figures from a study by the Ecuadorian government, and by the World Food Program and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean: <http://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2017/05/17/nota/6187285/malnutricion-ecuador-tiene-coste-anual-4344-millones-segun-estudio>



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Creative linkages between producers and consumers

The families that are involved in the Campaign meet one another at different events around the country, notably at one of the country's many agroecological markets. These markets are a response to one of the main bottlenecks for family farmers and the growth of agroecology: differentiated spaces for commercialization as a result of difficult access to the public space and disputes with authorities. In this context, the Campaign champions *ferias agroecológicas*: autonomous spaces without intermediaries, based on harmonious relations between rural and urban areas, and between producers and consumers. These markets, an age-old Andean practice in Ecuador, are experiencing a resurgence in the country's modern urban centers. So far, we have identified more than 210 such markets in Ecuador. The Campaign's popular guidebook, offering a database of agroecological markets, restaurants and shops in the country, is currently being updated in both digital *and* print forms as a means of better connecting rural and urban families around a joint interest in and need for healthy, equitable, sustainable eating and being.

Other places where the families meet and learn, are gastronomic events and food-tasting "sensorial" workshops. The latter consists of innovative and playful tests which seek to help people become reacquainted with the visceral flavors, feels, smells and sound of their food – ever proven to awaken powerful memories, motivations and desires. In a similar vein, chefs connected to the Campaign who are committed to the promotion of old and new dishes made with traditional Andean vegetables, grains and roots and tubers, initiate public events where they weave together the sensorial pleasures of popular cuisine and the importance of food grown by family farmers and *campesinos*.



Figure 3. One of Ecuador's agroecological food fairs in the South of Quito.
Photo: Diego Viturco Guamán

The Campaign also makes creative use of traditional mass media and social media to help families share experiences and knowledge, promoting real-life encounters in homes, in the fields and on the streets. For example, to date it has created forty, eight-minute radio programs on food, and it holds two weekly national radio shows that bring together the experiences of housewives, farmers, chefs, artists, activists and scholars over shared enthusiasm over "good food". In addition, these people share their work through a monthly, online newsletter that reaches thousands

of families. A WhatsApp group brings together outstanding organizers from different walks of life on a continual dialogue over a litany of on-going requests and proposals. For example, recently a family farmer used the WhatsApp Group to make contacts with a cook and a store that are now purchasing his unique strains of multi-colored white, red, and purple amaranth – just one example of how the Campaign ignites new possibilities among its growing community of eclectic practitioners.

The practices and information that is being shared are highly political. Not only are the families' daily practices creating new relations and power dynamics around food, the Campaign also unpacks the



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linkages between these practices and national policy debates. As a result, a large group of individuals connected to the Campaign raised their voices when new laws were developed around land, water and, most recently, seeds.

Outcomes of the initiative

A citizen-led force for change

Three years on, tens of thousands of families have joined the Campaign. As they are becoming more deeply engaged, the families have proven to both intensify and diversify their food practices - frequenting agroecological markets, exchanging with family farmers, discovering long-forgotten and new flavors and tastes, and trying out new recipes, introducing Andean cuisine to their homes and restaurants. While being connected to the Campaign, the families not only create a new food economy, but also learn about the very real implications of their food practices on public health and social equity as well as on water, land, and biodiversity. Citizens taking control of food and making autonomous decisions on what they eat, has become all the more relevant after on 1 June 2017, Ecuador's National Assembly approved the entry of GM seeds for research purposes, as prescribed by President Rafael Correa made only days before he left office, in clear violation of the Constitution.

Once feeling dependent on the state for their well-being, a growing number of families are now working together autonomously to eat well, healthily and locally - a growing example of the potential of responsible consumption linked with agroecology as a democratic space for change. While its basis lies in such self-organization, where deemed useful the campaign is strategically linking up with policy activity in the Ministry of Health (most immediately to address the priority of rising rates of over disease tied to overweight/obesity), the Sub-secretary of Cultural Heritage (promoting traditional crops, Ecuadorian cuisine and tourism), and the Ministry of Agriculture (to promote direct purchasing and family farming).

This citizen-led Campaign proves the importance of identifying existing inspiring experience in food, connecting people from different walks of life – housewives, farmers, students, cooks, business people, essentially anyone “who eats” – and motivating them to mobilize their daily need to eat into a force for social change. In so doing, it stimulates increased family-level investment in Andean crops, direct purchasing and agroecology, and motivates people to engage in public debates on food and agriculture. As such, we, the participants that make up the Campaign, are growing into a public actor and democratic force for change towards agroecology and food sovereignty.

Message from farmer to farmers

“The Qué Rico Es! campaign has done a great job in raising awareness among consumers, who now understand better why they should eat our food”

—Message from Luzmila Vásquez, an agroecological family farmer at the the Imbabio food market in Otavalo, Ecuador.