“Land is not for sale, we must recover and defend it”
Testimonies of the Latin American Institute of Agroecology IALA Ixim Ulew

A Friends of the ATC publication November 2019
The Latin American Institutes of Agroecology, known as IALAs for their initials in Spanish (Institutos Agroecológicos Latinoamericanos), are an initiative of the international peasant movement La Via Campesina to train or “form” youth from peasant organizations in agroecology. The agroecological model of agriculture—based upon ancestral knowledge, collective action, sustainable techniques, and peasant, youth, women, and indigenous leadership—offers an alternative to agribusiness’ corporate, chemical-laden, and industrial approach to food production. La Via Campesina promotes agroecology as a fundamental pillar for the construction of food sovereignty and the transformation of society.

The first IALA (IALA Paulo Freire) was founded in 2006 in Barinas, Venezuela through an agreement made between La Via Campesina and Comandante Hugo Chavez. Since then, La Via Campesina has created a whole network of IALAs that includes schools in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Paraguay. Each IALA has its own dynamic and context but all use La Via Campesina’s peasant-to-peasant, popular education methodologies and combine technical, political, and ideological training.

“One of the great advances of our movement lies in education, training, and schools positioned to strengthen our leadership and mobilize the working class on very important issues such as stopping the WTO (World Trade Organization), fighting to get it out of agriculture, and proposing another model of production that puts agroecology on the agenda,” writes Fausto Torrez, International Relations Secretary for the ATC (Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo or Rural Workers’ Association of Nicaragua) and part of the coordination of the IALAs.

Based in Nicaragua, IALA Ixim Ulew (which means “land of corn” in Maya K’iche’) was inaugurated in 2017 with students sent by La Via Campesina organizations from throughout Central America and the Caribbean. IALA Ixim Ulew’s campus is a farm-school located in Santo Tomás in the department of Chontales. The following testimonies were collected by the Friends of the ATC solidarity network from a group of students and facilitators who are a part of the first cohort of IALA Ixim Ulew who attended from February 2018 to November 2019.

In these interviews, five students from the five countries represented by this first cohort and Carlos Rodríguez, a facilitator from the ATC who participated in the construction of IALA Paulo Freire, describe the work and learning at IALA Ixim Ulew, the current political contexts of their respective countries, and the importance of agroecology to their organizations and communities. The Friends of the ATC believe that we have much to learn from the wisdom and experiences of these young leaders at IALA Ixim Ulew as we struggle to transform our own food systems. We are inspired by their example of internationalism.

We dedicate this publication to this first graduating class, the organizations they represent, and the many militants and friends who taught, cooked, cleaned, planted, and took on administrative tasks to make IALA Ixim Ulew possible.
ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This publication is a part of a testimonies project produced by the Friends of the ATC, a solidarity network with the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC, or Rural Workers Association). Founded in the context of the Sandinista Revolution, the ATC is an organization of struggle that defends the rural workers and peoples of Nicaragua and is a founding member of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC) and La Vía Campesina.

Friends of the ATC organizes at local and international levels to spread awareness, construct solidarity, and facilitate support for the struggles and initiatives of the ATC and the international movement La Vía Campesina. In the spirit of internationalism, we believe in the necessity of supporting ongoing struggles for justice in our own communities and around the world.

Our main activities are the following:

• Sharing information and news about the ATC, the CLOC, and La Vía Campesina
• Organization of events (exchanges, delegations, and speaking tours)
• Logistical support for relationships between the ATC and other organizations and individuals around the world
• Securing resources for initiatives of the ATC, CLOC, and La Vía Campesina

From July 11–21, 2019, the Friends of the ATC and the ATC hosted their “Solidarity with Nicaragua” delegation. A central purpose of this trip was the collection of testimonies in order to clarify for international audiences and solidarity activists the current state of revolutionary struggle in Nicaragua. Over the course of our time in Nicaragua, delegates conducted more than 20 interviews with ATC organizers, students, and members, whom described today’s political situation in Nicaragua as well as efforts to build agroecology, food sovereignty, socialism, and anti-imperialism in the region. These testimonies have been transcribed, translated, and condensed by Friends of the ATC and will be released in a series of packets like this one.

If you have any questions or want to become involved in the work of the Friends of the ATC, please write us: info@friendsatc.org.

Visit our Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/friendsatc) or our website (https://friendsatc.org/).
What's your name and where are you from?

My name is Carlos Alberto Rodriguez Valera and I am from Venezuela. Currently I live in Nicaragua, primarily with the objective of preparing myself politically. I was part of the construction of IALA Paulo Freire in Venezuela and I came to Nicaragua to be part of the construction of IALA Ixim Ulew in Mesoamérica. That’s why I’m here, working. I also have my family here. So now I have countless responsibilities with the ATC, with IALA, and with my family. And also a commitment to the Sandinista Front. We may not work for the state, we don’t depend on the state, but we do defend a just cause. And the government of Comandante Daniel Ortega is a just cause.

On His Work with the ATC

My work at the ATC began specifically in 2015. Beforehand, I was invited to participate in the construction of IALA Paolo Freire in Venezuela, where students from all over Latin America went to study. When I arrived I learned about the atmosphere of the students, their preparation, and their different organizations. It all interested me because at the time I was a conventional person, a traditional person, a person who didn’t contribute anything to society. Learning about IALA, La Via Campesina, and the CLOC, this all motivated me. And also learning about the real histories of the countries—not the history that a tourist could tell us—but the history that only a peasant can tell us. This is really moving—it really moved me at the time.
Food Sovereignty as our Banner of Struggle

Let’s remember that the Green Revolution left us with food security. La Via Campesina has a banner of struggle that is food sovereignty, the sovereignty of peoples. This is what we always emphasize in our events. I want to use Nicaragua as an example. Nicaragua was attacked last year for perhaps three to four months, and is still being attacked by the international media and by the United States government. A sovereign state is a country or a people, a community that is capable of producing its own food. Nicaraguans produce 70, 80, or 90 percent of the products that they consume. This makes us consider ourselves a sovereign country. That we are capable of producing our own food, that we are capable of changing our lifestyles to be able to advance, to be able to be sovereign as a community, as a person, as a subject.

In the attempted coup that took place in Nicaragua, we would not have endured, we would not have survived the coup if Nicaragua hadn’t been in this transition to food sovereignty. Because let us remember that when there is a coup, there are food shortages, there are blockades everywhere. The people of Nicaragua knew how to fight, during that moment, with beans, with rice.

A clear example is this community. The roadblocks weren’t taken down for three months. In this community people had their beans, rice, yucca, milk—all the basic products for a peasant diet and to feed the communities, to feed the market—even though it was blocked. They managed to take some products to the market so that people could survive.

Venezuela is the opposite. It is not true that we Venezuelans are boludos (lazy) as they say in Nicaragua, but our culture is different. They have cut us off from our culture. We depend 90% on oil. Maybe that’s where the mistake is.

Because if we don’t sell oil, we don’t eat. The production in Venezuela—because there is production, there is milk, there are basic grains, there is meat—but there is a mechanism that makes this production go abroad. What we produce perhaps goes to Colombia, because of a dirty internal politics among the big businessmen where our production goes to Colombia and is packaged and returned to Venezuela at a totally unattainable price. This does not make us, as Venezuelans, a sovereign state, and this is why we are vulnerable to attack, to any attack. We can’t cushion a blow like Nicaragua did, because we don’t have this culture of producing.

So food sovereignty means that we have a chicken, we have a calf, we diversify crops, with which we not only protect ourselves from any imperial attack, but we also protect ourselves from natural disasters. Because if the rain affects my beans, I still have corn. Or if these two crops are affected, I have an avocado tree, or I have a chicken. Having so many different crops allows me to share with my neighbor. I give them a chicken, they give me an avocado. This is the most popular way of understanding food sovereignty. We have to achieve this.

At IALA, we are implementing food sovereignty. We have a small space where we grow crops, in addi-
tion to all of the political preparation. IALA’s greatest strength is political preparation.

Politics in the sense that young people have to be prepared, not to go to work in a commercial house or to be employed by a boss, or an employer; but to strengthen their communities, organizations, the countryside. I return again to the theme of the countryside.

Historically, we sometimes make the mistake of training the producer. But it is not the producer who we have to train, it is the family, it is the community in general. Because when the current producer dies, what will happen to the land? That’s where IALA is training the students, preparing them to return to the countryside so that their education has the multiplier effect. So that IALA is not a space where a person has to come to Nicaragua to study, but rather that the students, as prepared people, go back and strengthen their communities, their organizations, their spaces, where the people who really need it are. This is IALA, touching on the issue of food sovereignty, agrarian reform, land reform, land rights, gender issues, and countless other issues that are also promoted by La Via Campesina.

They are being prepared to construct food sovereignty because we not only have to stay in the countryside producing, but we also have to advocate for our rights. The right to water, the right to land. This also means being sovereign. I have to be sovereign because if this comrade has water, I also have to have water. It is not the hoarding of resources, but ensuring that we all enjoy resources in a healthy, responsible manner.

Food sovereignty is our banner of struggle. It is the sovereign state. We cannot depend on any transnational company and we can no longer depend on oil. We have to depend on ourselves, on the people, on the union of peoples. And this is why Chavez and now Maduro emphasize that we have to unite as Latin America in order to strengthen our countries. These bonds of friendship that Nicolás Maduro has with Daniel, with Evo, and with a lot of countries allied to this struggle, because it is a global struggle. They are killing us, and we have to be the people to raise our hands and say “enough is enough! We have to start working.

Yesenia chopping plantain leaves for worm compost
DADIANA ROSA CALDERON CALDERON
FUNDACIÓN ENTRE MUJERES – FEM
NICARAGUA

What is your name and where are you from?
Dadiana Calderon. Nicaraguan from the municipality of San Juan de Limay, department of Esteli. I come from an organization called Fundación Entre Mujeres (FEM) from Estelí. I’ve been in the FEM for 2 years. It’s been many years since this organization (began working) in my community, even my mother is organized. I never went to a workshop. I had been invited several times but I never went. Then one day they told me that they needed a promoter. A girl there told me, “You wouldn’t like to work in the FEM as a promoter?” She says, “Look, we are looking for a promoter. If you want, go to a meeting tomorrow so they can find out what they need to do.” So, I went, and then, I liked the organicity of FEM and everything because the women there are all very supportive. We all get along well. We help each other and everything. I liked their way of doing things. Also because in the Fundación Entre Mujeres, they help us get ahead, they support us with university scholarships. They support you in your goals. So when I joined the FEM, the girls who have the FEM scholarships, who, thanks to the FEM, already have their degrees, and are working at the FEM, shared a lot with me. This motivated me because I say, sometimes you can be working somewhere, and it’s always the same. On the other hand, in the FEM you are motivated and supported, so that you can prepare yourself better in life.

On Coming to IALA
On behalf of FEM, they called me and told me that there was an opportunity for two young people to come and study here. But I had no idea what it was like, I was told (it was like a university). I wasn’t studying because I had left my university. They told me the training was to be an agricultural technician with an agroecological approach. I liked the idea. But when I came here, it wasn’t what I had imagined. When you say university, you think of a city. I never imagined I was going to be here in the countryside. We went to Santo Tomás and we got lost. We went all over Santo Tomás looking for the university. When the driver finally
communicated with Marlén and she gave us the address, we came down the road with my compañero from Estelí, surprised by the place. We felt strange here. The first days were very difficult because we didn't know anyone. Even me and the other compañero from Esteli didn't know each other before the day we came here. I think the first few days were difficult for everyone.

They divided us into groups to work. We were groups of 5 or 6, and we spent a lot of time as a group. We began building trust because we did a lot of work together, including exhibitions, field work, and we all had meetings to raise something we had to do in the plots. So there more trust began (developing) between us.

That first month, when we were leaving, I was considering if I was going to come back or not. When I got home, I reviewed everything I had lived here. Then it made me think that it would be nice to finish my degree. I think it will help me a lot to work better in the fields. Even though I grew up in the countryside, I've never worked in the fields. Because in the communities, our parents still have ideas that the girls can't do that work, that work is for the boys. So that's it. I never went to the fields. I was never interested. My brother and father never invited me to do anything because for them it was men's work. No, I had to help my mother; I had to study. I had to study a career like a bachelor's degree. They never imagined that I could study a career like this.

**On the Impact of IALA**

When I came to study here, I had a garden, a bio-intensive garden, but I worked in it because I am an agro-ecological promoter for the FEM. The FEM has a garden project. There are 46 women beneficiaries. And as a promoter, I have to monitor these gardens. And I have to have my own garden to set an example for the women. But I did it for the work. And I would even say to my technician, “Why should I have a garden?”

I had a hard time at first because I wasn't used to working in the fields. But when I came here, when we left after the first encounter; we had the task of putting into practice what we had learned here and bring a report to present to our classmates and teachers. When I got home, I said, “Well, here, putting my knowledge into practice would mean practicing in my garden.” Then I started to work with more enthusiasm, putting into practice what I had done here, as I had a reason to work. And seeing the harvest, seeing the changes in the soil—more beautiful now—and that before we may not have used for anything. This motivated me to continue here in IALA. And I decided to finish, to finish the degree here.
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Many people tell us that it is boring to be here, but the truth is that it is very nice because here we share like a family. We spend every day together here. As the teacher says, eating from the same dish, drinking from the same glass, because here we trust each other. We help each other. It’s very nice the relationship between us here and the days we spend, all the things we do, as a group. Sometimes we have to do something in a group, and have a group doing one thing, others doing something else. And so on. What happens here everyday and what we learn is beautiful. You also learn from your compañeros. And not only in matters, let’s say, of work, of study, but also in the attitudes, the beautiful attitudes and behaviors that some compañeros have. Sometimes you learn many things from them as personal training. Or maybe I am doing something wrong but I see my compañeros that they are not, that they are different. Then you begin to change many things. So yes, it has been a nice experience here.

Bringing IALA to the FEM

I always continue to work in my garden, doing practices there as well. I’m a promoter and work with women. They say to me, “You have to create an example. They’re going to make a compost with the women.” I gather the women and I explain to them how to do it. I teach them how and I teach them some of the things that I have learned here. I share this with them as well. We make biological products to fertilize crops, to control pests. We make them altogether with the women. Apart from that I also make my own, for individual practice.

The most difficult thing is the development of the beds. Here we do it as a group, but at home I am alone in my house because my brothers and my father work on the farm. So they don’t have time to help me. So I have to do it, and it is difficult for me. But once I have the beds, it’s easier; all I have to do is grow in them. There are a lot of difficulties, sometimes with plagues, but I am always asking my compañeros here, some who have more knowledge in this. So I ask them everything. What can I do? I take pictures of the crops and all that.

It is also said that peasants have their empirical knowledge, so I say to my brother, for example, “What do I do? Notice that... Look... such a crop... look at the way it’s been put on me” and he says, “Look, you haven’t tried such a thing...” He also supports me a lot in this because he guides me on how to do some little things.
What’s your name and where are you from?

My name is Jocelyn Canales. I’m from El Progreso, Yoro, Honduras. I have been a part of an organization called CNTC (Central Nacional de Trabajadores del Campo) for the past 9 years. Currently I am the national coordinator of youth in Honduras on behalf of FRENAMUC, the National Front of Afro-descendant and Indigenous Honduran Peasant Youth.

In El Progreso, she started to involve me in the organization and so I joined the struggle. I’ve been working for four, five years and I’ve been working with the youth for 2 years. Recently I have been participating in international processes as well. I visited Paraguay once. I have come several times to school here in Nicaragua, in feminist processes, in training young leaders and peasants.

When a coup d’état takes place, it is the youth who rise up. There were quite a few comrades murdered. The first martyr we had due to the coup in 2009 was a young woman, barely 19 years old, who was assassinated and raped by the Honduran military. Then we began to organize. The Youth Front was born in 2009 as a focus of organizations to form young leaders to make change and to support organizations. In 2011, we managed to create a strong, broad movement, and now we are at the national level. We are made up of youth from Via Campesina organizations in Honduras and work in 5 regions. Our axes of work are education, theater and soccer, for the inclusion and attraction of young people so that we can include them in this system.

We are currently working with 800 young people all over the country. We are developing our work, as well as the practices we do here, as we have to go and do practices in our country. We are also going to work
with the young people there. We are implementing family gardens, bio-intensive beds, and small-scale systems.

On the Current Context in Honduras

The current context of Honduras is a bit complex. There is a dictatorial government that for two periods has stolen our elections. He stole our first elections with Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, he stole this other election with Salvador Nasralla, and there will probably be another electoral fraud if he is re-elected. Honduras is not changing like the typical phrase he has. In Honduras, there are migratory exoduses. There are murders. There is femicide every day. They are not reported in the media. Maybe only one femicide is reported because it doesn’t suit them. But the others are left without news.

So, Honduras is now immersed in a dictatorial system, in a nefarious government, a murderer (as president), because he is murdering us day by day because we don’t have food. In Honduras there is no healthy food, you aren’t going to say you are going to put in your mouth three meals a day. Because if you eat in the morning, you probably won’t eat the rest of the day. If you eat lunch, you probably didn’t eat breakfast and you’re not going to have dinner.

In Honduras there is a precarious health and education system. Nor do we have a real agrarian reform law, as I said, I emphasize and I will continue to say; we do not have land to work. When we fight for this right, the government comes, acts, and silences these voices. He keeps quiet about them because he is the direct and indirect murderer of young people, of the elderly, of children.

In Honduras you can’t protest anymore, not even through social media, because if they detect that you are protesting against the government or that you are forming masses against the government, they investigate you and put you in jail for up to four years. You can’t go out into the street because if you start protesting or if we’re in a group and one starts, they bomb you with tear gas, Molotov cocktails, which they also make, and live bullets. In Honduras, the police don’t shoot with rubber bullets like in other countries; they use live bullets, to kill.

Many young people are being murdered in Honduras. Also the femicide that is being experienced is quite high. In January and February, there were 42 femicides in Honduras. Between January 9 to February 5, if I remember correctly. There were quite a few murders. They killed two of our comrades as well. A comrade who was also from our movement. They took him out of his house and killed him. And they killed a teacher who was involved in the marches. The government doesn’t want the people, the youth, to be on the streets because they are threatened. They see a threat. The people, they don’t see as a people, but as a threat of who will carry out a coup d’état, who will remove them from power.

On the Different Contexts in Nicaragua and Honduras

They are quite different because here in Nicaragua, I’ve been to a health center several times, and you go, and the doctor comes and says, “Look, you’ve got to go to the pharmacy and buy this.” But to the pharmacy right there at the health center. And she gives you the prescription and you just take it. You don’t have to pay a dime. In Honduras, from the consultation to the medication, you pay, even in a health center. There, in a health center you pay 2 dollars for a consultation. At the health center that is supposed to be public. But they have already privatized everything.

In Honduras you go to Mario Catarina Arribas, which is one of the most well-known hospitals, and you have to provide everything from the cotton, to the injection, everything. Because if they’re going to operate or they’re going to do surgery, there’s absolutely nothing there, you have to buy the tweezers, the bisturing, the gauze. You have to buy absolutely everything. There are people from Honduras who also come here, because they have access to health.

Education. Recently there was a case of a mother who had to take her four children out of school because they are charging her 200 lempira for each child. And she doesn’t have a salary. She has no income at all. She sup-
ports herself by maybe washing other people’s clothes, working for someone else. And how is it possible that she will be paying 800 lempira each month for her children to go to school? There are many, many children who are no longer going to school for the same reason. Because they have to pay. Where it is supposed to be a public school and education is free, they shouldn’t have to be charging you absolutely anything. So, it is a practically private education because you have to pay. Not here. Here there are many, many young people from Honduras who are studying because they have access to an education.

Honduras doesn’t even reach the heels of Nicaragua. Here, the streets are the best streets in Central America, those in Nicaragua. We don’t have road access, we don’t have it. And if you go to Honduras, every 40, 50 kilometers you will find a toll. A toll where you have to pay. And where is all that money? Where is it? The canasta basica is above the minimum wage. How much is the minimum wage? 8000 lempiras. How much does the canasta basica cost? 13,000 lempiras. In the month of April of this year, electric energy was increased by 50%. They increased the canasta basica by 12%. The tax is no longer 12%, it is 25%. Taxes. So we are living in a state of anxiety. Honduras is really going through an upheaval.

And what happens? Since there are no conditions, people think of emigrating. Recently there was a migratory exodus from Honduras. And what does the government do? It says: “They leave because they want to. They have everything here.” What does the government offer us so that we can stay? We don’t have a real agrarian reform law. We don’t have it. And they are murdering us for the simple fact of going to claim our legitimate rights, the right to land, the right to health, the right to education, the right to a dignified territory where we can go and sow and generate our own food security and sovereignty.

On the Training at IALA

For me it has been quite enriching. Because we are peasants, children of peasants who live off the land and for the land, we bring empirical knowledge, don’t we? But here we have come as if to reinforce, to reinforce that knowledge because here it is a popular education. It is not the hierarchy that our teacher explained yesterday where he is the boss. Here there is an interaction between the teacher, the teacher and the students or who I am.

Here we don’t just study the land but we also have an ideological, popular education. A political ideological education that is not going to tell you that the Sandinista Front is the best or that it is the worst. Here everyone chooses and decides. Because here they don’t impose anything on us. We also have cultural nights. Cultural nights are not just about dancing, not only about eating typical food, no. It is also about a political context, a current context of what is happening, of what is happening in the Dominican Republic, in El Salvador, in Honduras, in Guatemala. As well as in Costa Rica and Panama, because we study

Margret, Joel & Stefany
our entire continent.
I feel I have the ability to go to a peasant group and explain something to them. Before I didn’t feel fit for that, but now I do, I can do it. I feel that we have learned a lot. No, perhaps not everything they tell us has stayed with me, but at least with practice, we have been learning.

On the Meaning of Agroecology
Regarding agroecology, I think that agroecology is not only a flag of struggle that La Via Campesina has, but it is the way of life of our ancestors, because it was in this way that they lived. They didn’t have to go to the supermarket to buy a supplement for the kitchen. They had it there, on hand. They didn’t have to go to the pharmacy to buy, they had the medicinal herbs to cure themselves. They didn’t have to go to Monsanto to buy a chemical for their plot. They had their own repellents, made their own biological product and applied it.

Agroecology is to work and create a synergy between the human being, nature and everything around us. Agroecology is the way of life of a human being. It is complementary, because it is what will give it life and is giving us life because we know that 70-75% of world production is through peasants. It is food. So, it is what is giving life and is continuing to give life and I hope that with agroecology we give a counter-hegemonic blow to the Green Revolution that is affecting us and is causing a lot of harm to human beings.
What is your name and where are you from?

My name is Ever Antonio Martínez Escobar and I’m from El Salvador.

My organization is called FECORACEN, which means the Federation of Agrarian Reform Cooperatives of the Central Region. FECORACEN is an organization that is working hard on gender equity, public policies, food sovereignty, and youth issues because in El Salvador, as in other countries, youth are not given many spaces. So these organizations are implementing the idea of how they can put young people into social and political spaces. Besides that, they work a lot with agroecology, which is why I’m here: to acquire knowledge and put it into practice in an agroecological strike that they are calling where we plan to work agroecologically. Other than that, to create an agroecological school where we ourselves can share the knowledge that we have acquired here with other young people and adults.

In the Federation there are only people affiliated with cooperatives—women cooperatives, youth cooperatives, mixed cooperatives. I work in a cooperative where we produce coffee. It’s the biggest product we have. So, when I entered the cooperative, I began to learn about all of these themes of political, ideological, agro-ecological training. I used to work in the fields, but I had to do it because my father died and someone in the family had to stay and do it. But now with all these processes, I’m realizing how important the fields are.

Many times we as youth aspire to office jobs and that’s it. But with all these processes I realize the importance of the environment and ourselves, because many times we ourselves are destroying the environ-
ment and ourselves, because many times we ourselves are destroying the environment and we don’t realize it. We ignore that and we ignore the consequences that it brings. In fact we are already seeing the consequences of climate change. It is not like before when they used to say that the rains began at the beginning of May. Today that has changed. It is affecting quite the same as the implementation of chemicals, deforestation, pollution with plastic.

On the Significance of Food Sovereignty and Agroecology for El Salvador

Food sovereignty is to produce healthfully for ourselves, not to depend on the market or transnationals. In El Salvador there are many people who produce agro-ecologically, but then go and sell their product to the transnationals. Then to be able to consume it themselves, they have to buy the product from the most expensive transnational. So, for me, food sovereignty is to produce for oneself, to sustain oneself as a society. Agroecology, as they say, is ancestral practice. When I started this process I was going to tell my cooperative about the fertilizers we made here, like the biological products. They told me that when the cooperative began, they used all that, but capitalism came in and gradually introduced the use of chemicals. They began to produce coffee only with chemicals, but now that FECORACEN is promoting agroecology, they have taken it up again. They still need to remove some chemicals, but most are already working agroecologically. So, I feel that this is why all these processes are important because, perhaps, one as a youth didn’t know about them, but the older generation already has the knowledge.

The bio-intensive bed method caught my attention because in my community, there are people who don’t have much space to grow, so this is a method that can be implemented in my community. Apart from the fact that they can produce a diversity of vegetables in a very small space, they can have their little garden in the courtyards of their homes, have diversity, and thus not be going to the market to buy produce that one does not know how it was grown, if they were grown with chemicals, because we know very well how many chemical companies use. That is why many times humans end up with so many diseases, cancer.

But a bio-intensive crop is treated ecologically without using chemicals. You work with what you have around you in your environment.

Carlos & Ever

On the Political Context of El Salvador

In El Salvador, we just had presidential elections. Unfortunately, the left-wing party lost the elections. A right-wing party was elected and what I felt most was that the left-wing party had benefited the peasant people so much through social projects. There were people from the countryside who no longer sent their children to study because they didn’t have the resources. They benefited in a big way from the social programs that the left-wing implemented; they were given supplies, uniforms, shoes, and food in the schools. First for elementary education, and later they implemented the program for high school education as well. Before the left-wing left the government, they were going to make the National University free so that everyone could get degree.
On the Experience of the Failed Coup Attempt at IALA

We were studying when the failed coup took place here in Nicaragua. We had a set date to travel back to our countries and we were delayed by what was happening. For us it was a bit of a difficult experience because we had traveled to Nicaragua to see a very beautiful country and live that experience. We left one morning wanting to return to our countries, we didn’t want to be here in this confinement anymore, not being able to leave, where I don’t know anyone. We went through about twelve roadblocks to get to Managua. We left at about five o’clock in the morning and arrived in Managua at one o’clock. There were a lot of roadblocks and there were people with weapons surrounding our bus. They told us to get off, they searched our suitcases, our identity cards. At the last bus stop, they told the lady who was taking us that they were going to let her pass but that she should leave all the women there, that only the men could pass. She said no because she had been assigned that group and had to help all of them to reach their countries. So, there they were talking to the people at the gates and they let her pass with the whole group. It was perhaps the hardest roadblock to go through because they wanted all the women to be left behind.

A result of this training is that one can no longer be brainwashed by anyone, that things are this way or that way and so on. Because as soon as the failed coup began in Nicaragua, my family wrote to me: “Is it true that they are breaking into houses and killing people?” No, it’s not. “Yes, there are people in the streets.” I told them, “but they’re not going to enter the houses.” From there they called me from my cooperative: “Look Ever, why don’t you come back?” We inside IALA felt protected from any problem because here we never saw anyone come close or want to do something. When I arrived to El Salvador, people asked, “Look, it’s true that…?” “No!” The media manipulates information as they please. After the encounter we had with the failed coup, people in my cooperative told me: “Don’t go, the news is saying that Nicaragua is very dangerous, that they are killing people and that they are not letting people pass.” But since I had already lived here, I had young people here in Nicaragua tell me that it was a lie. Then I told my cooperative that they should not let themselves be guided by what the media was reporting because everything was a lie. Since the media in El Salvador are mostly right-wing, what they were doing was trying to disrupt the information in order to discredit Nicaragua.

What I say to my family is that Nicaragua is the safest and healthiest country in Central America, perhaps because I don’t feel like I’m free in my country, or that I can go anywhere I want. One day here when we went out and came back late at night, we walked all the way from the entrance. Not in El Salvador, not after eight o’clock. We young people can’t walk at night because of the gangs that want you to join them and if you don’t join, they give you a hard time or kill you. That’s why I told my family that I would like to come to Nicaragua when the situation in El Salvador gets ugly.
What is your name and where are you from?

José Luis Pérez Ciprian from the Dominican Republic. I’m from Azua, a province to the southwest near the border with Haiti. I’m from the Young Entrepreneurs Association Planting for the Future. It was formed in 2004 with 12 young producers who said: “We are not doing anything. Let’s make an organization of our own to help the peasantry.”

We have a representative named Joa (Josefa) Sanchez and because of her I’m here. She met Fausto and they became good friends, and Fausto asked her if there are any young people who are interested in studying. She said to me: “You want to go to Brazil to study agroecology?” And I said, “I accept, I’ll go.” And she told me to get ready, to apply for my passport. She said: “Other companions are going with you too.” I prepared, applied for my passport, but then some changes came up on the trip to Brazil, because the president changed and everything was a disaster. She said: “You’re not going to be able to go to Brazil. You’re going to Nicaragua. There are problems in Brazil.”

On the Political Context of the Dominican Republic

The government we have in the Dominican Republic focuses on education, schools, health, hospitals, but there isn’t a total vision of what it does. The president is named Danilo Medina. He’s right-wing. He doesn’t focus on the main thing, the rural workers. He does not think about the food that arrives day by day at the table, mostly produced by us campesinos, with a few things imported. The government doesn’t focus on the country people, very little. It’s one of the most racist countries. In the Dominican Republic, saying that you are a peasant, you can even be discriminated against. A peasant goes to the city and only with his way of talking, people listen and say: “That is a peasant. He can’t even speak, he speaks like a peasant.”
They discriminate against us. They don’t think that what comes to their table every day is from our fields. Those people who think they’re like the rich in the city don’t see those sacrifices that the people in the countryside make day by day for them to eat, so that healthy foods get to their table.

On His Family’s Farm in the Dominican Republic

My dad’s plot measures 4 manzanas (about 6 acres). I used to go with my dad, I watched him work the land where he planted coffee. One of the most important items there is coffee, which is of national importance. He produces coffee, bananas, malanga, cocoa, oranges, sweet lemon, sour lemon, guava, soursop, and pears. It is for family consumption and also to generate income, and he takes products to the local market. He produces mostly not organic, more with herbicides, agrochemicals. For me to succeed, with a career, he sent me. He said: “It’s your chance, you’re not going to miss it. Our parents bought our tickets to Nicaragua.” In my training, I have acquired a lot of knowledge and I am quite proud of myself, because I had not studied this before.

On His Personal Transformation at IALA

When I got here, I was ready to throw in the towel, thinking this isn’t for me. My other colleagues said the same thing. They said: “what am I doing here? I’m uncomfortable here.” With the food here it was very hard. Your organism is used to another diet. Beans are consumed only at lunchtime, not three times a day like here. That’s what impacts us Dominicans the most.

During the time, year and a half, I have been here in Nicaragua, we have had everything, they have been very good and very nice. We Dominicans arrived here with little knowledge. My time here at IALA has been of good use. I’ve gained a lot of knowledge. Before, I was afraid to stand up, to develop a topic, to give a talk in public, I was shaking in front of my classmates, I was afraid. I didn’t know how to do it very well, but now I can. I didn’t know how to write a report. In class I hardly participated, because I didn’t know what to do. When the Dominicans arrived, it was already the second course. Our paperwork to go to Nicaragua took a long time. It wasn’t easy at all.

On His Plans to Bring His New Knowledge to the Dominican Republic

With the knowledge of agroecology and politics, once I arrive in the Dominican Republic, I do not intend to keep the knowledge in my pocket, no. I want to get that knowledge out to the other producers so that they can visualize and learn why it’s not good to use chemicals, that it kills. The World Health Organization has found that these chemicals, such as granoxon and glyphosate, are causing cancer. And back in my area, producers use more chemicals, and I want to support them with this knowledge, and support my organization—it’s because of them that I’m here.

I want to help others with training so they can learn about agroecology and food sovereignty, that it is not necessary to produce with chemicals, that that is harmful to health. It’s good to produce organically, healthy, disease-free foods.

Susan, Jose Luis and Marc
What is your name, where are you from?

I am Fabiana, from Guatemala and a women’s organization, the National Coordination of Widows in Guatemala, CONAVIGUA.

What is the political context of your country?

In Guatemala we are are experiencing corruption on behalf of the state, the leader of our country. The people of the right-wing, who do not favor us as a people, have always governed. They always look out for their own interests. We never have programs in favor of the indigenous people in Guatemala. We are always discriminated against, for speaking our languages, for wearing our traditional clothing, even though our languages—the 21 languages spoken by the Mayan people in Guatemala—have been legalized. Our rights are still violated. In our regions, many people have been evicted from their lands where they live, by transnational companies such as hydroelectric, mining, cement.

The people, then, have organized themselves and spoken out against these situations. Media publications always contradict the experience that is really lived in the communities. So we as a people have always been or are suffering this type of discrimination, the violation of human rights, and even more during the armed conflict where the native people of Guatemala were most affected—millions of people who had to emigrate to Mexico, to El Salvador.

During this armed conflict, the women’s organization, CONAVIGUA, had lost children, husbands, brothers in persecution, buried in clandestine cemeteries. The women remained as widows, with their children, assuming the responsibility of being a mother and a father at the same time, to be able to move forward and survive. So it
was then, in the years 82 or 83, that they organized
themselves, but clandestinely so. When the army
heard that a group of people was organizing, they
would be there, surrounding.

Some people completely disappeared. In-
formation was never obtained by the families, about
where they are, if they were buried. It is a struggle
that women in Guatemala are waging, so that their
families can arrive at a process of investigation. Many
families still want to know where the bodies are, so
that they can have a dignified burial. There are many
people who have won their case, but many other
families are still in the process, investigating something
that happened in the 80s.

The education that we have in Guatemala
is a conventional education. So we don’t study the
reality we live in, we are taught a different history, a
history that didn’t happen. They always say that it was
a conquest of the people when the Spaniards arrived.
On the contrary, it was an invasion of the peoples.
From the 1500s onwards, they completely divided
the people. They colonized the territory, evicted the
people, killed them. They invaded the whole territory.
They were trying to exterminate the original peoples.

They weren’t able to do it. In Guatemala, we always say that they managed to cut off the branches, but they were
not able to finish off the roots, and we are the fruit of that root, which still lives in Guatemala.

**On the experience of IALA**

From my experience, that we as peasants are native peoples. We have a culture from our ancestors, a cul-
ture that has been lived for centuries. Agroecology did not begin with the study of agroecology, but it is a way or a
path that the people had to take, that we were already working with before. The people were living at that time, in
harmony, in coexistence, with nature. They lived in a pleasant way. Later, when many things were introduced to the
people, that harmony with nature was lost.

They had a healthy diet. It wasn’t like the diet we have today, everything processed, without knowing where
it comes from, how much time it has been around before a person consumes it. They had everything around them,
their harvests, their fruits. In Guatemala what is consumed the most is corn, for the three meals. Everyone said that
at that time the land was fertile, no chemicals or agro-toxins were used on the land.

It is for that same reason that I could mention that many of our elders managed to live about 130-150
years, today. Now, we sometimes reach 50 years and we wonder why we are living for less time. It is for those
same impositions that the capitalist has imposed on the people, that has invaded our way of communicating, our
way of feeding ourselves, our health.

We always go directly to a pharmacy, we no longer give importance to the natural medicines that our
ancestors practiced. We in Guatemala still live and resist with natural medicine. We don’t depend so much on
pharmaceuticals, unless it is an emergency. We prepare a tea to drink, we know the plants that help any pain that
one can present. That’s what we do in the countryside. A lot of that has been lost, not all people go on with those
practices. They have been lost.

The students at IALA currently represent five different countries, and that helps us to see the reality, to
know the reality that other brothers and sisters live in other countries. It is not only Guatemala that lives in this
way. It is necessary that as young people we have this training, to know the reality. That they be trained, but not to obtain a good economic income. The idea of IALA is that we as peasants help each other.

That will give us the guidelines, of helping each other not to depend on Monsanto, because that is what we are practicing here in our plots. We have always made biopreparations, repellents, traps, more than anything for the biological control of insects. The purpose of agro-toxics, or insecticides, is to end the life of insects. But the insects also need to live, just like we do as people. This is the training at IALA. It is a biodiversity between us as human beings and also those who live in nature.

I come here to train so that I can share experiences with other people from the communities and mainly the organization that has community bases. I have this obligation to go and share this experience with those women who live in the communities. We can no longer use agrotoxins in our crops, but we can make biopreparations so that our crops are not affected by insects.

**On internationalism & sovereignty**

Internationalism in Latin America and at the world level is a struggle of La Via Campesina. It is a way for us to unite, as peasants in other continents for these situations that we are suffering. Not just one country is suffering that situation. For example, the brothers and sisters here from Nicaragua, the brothers and sisters from Honduras, from El Salvador; me from Guatemala, are living in similar situations. Also other countries that I have had the experience of sharing with, live the same situation and more when there is a right-wing government, that provides no support for the people. What they do is carry out the extermination of the people.

We are living on the land but we are not exploiting it as agribusiness does: exploiting the environment, the contamination of the environment, the erosion of the soil that they use as machines. We peasants take care of mother earth, but they don’t see it that way. And that is why this union of internationalism allows us to share this experience. To have an objective as peasants with all these needs.

For example, Nicaragua has had this current government for 10 years; it has carried out a program in favor of the peasantry and the peasantry has seen it, or is living it. We have to unite with other countries to build strength. Because if only one country fights, it’s not that easy. But if all of us unite, we are going to move forward. But it is going to depend on us as people, or those of us who are already organized, or those of us who already know the political situation in our countries or in other continents.

The vision that I see for us as peasants that we are, that we have to be more conscious, to know our realities that we live and know that at the level of Latin America, we are living the same realities. We have to contribute our grain of sand to help other people so that our struggle has the strength to move forward because it is necessary for us to organize as a people. If we organize as peoples in different countries, we can have a future. If we don’t organize, we are always going to be living in the situation we are going through today.