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Food Sovereignty in Colombia: Seed Certification as Property Rights to Agro-Biodiversity, Enforcement, Controversies and the Seed Freedom Movement

EMMA JANE LORD

University of Copenhagen, Dept. of Food and Resource Economics, Denmark

Abstract

Food sovereignty is a critical concern across the globe as the concentration of power in the hands of a few agro-industrial corporations structures the agricultural economy. The process of definition, enforcement and subsequent resistance to intellectual property rights for seed certification in Colombia presents an iconic case among global controversies. Neo-liberal politics to attract capital and guarantee markets for corporations dominate negotiations over trade and generate legislation. From 2006, Law 1032, art. 306 protects breeders' rights over plant varieties, forbidding farmers to replant certified seeds. From 2010, Resolution 970 of the Colombian Agricultural Institution (ICA) regulates the production, commercialisation and use of all improved seeds, both conventional and transgenic, with the justification of ensuring seed quality and crop health. Application of this resolution, resulting in the destruction of over 4 million tons of seeds, created so much confusion, controversy and resistance that by August 2013, nationwide agrarian strike, campesino mobilisation and road blocks brought Colombia to a halt. Governmental negotiations suspended Resolution 970 and counteractions surged from the newly formed national collectives, revived seed trading networks, rural strongholds of cultural knowledge and urban home-garden and educational projects. This research empirically documents dynamics of the exercise of political authority governing access to seeds as property, associated protocols for use of inputs, agrochemicals and cultivation practices on the one hand and social processes of resistance through the movement for 'seed freedom' on the other. Tension for the commercialisation and legitimisation of seeds as property has inspired a 'shift to the left' and strengthened resolve to guard and share agro-biodiversity and eco-agricultural knowledge, traditions and practices. Fundamental power hierarchies framing food sovereignty manifest within the concept of seeds, evoking a potent symbolism of struggles for freedom from control over life itself.

Keywords: Agrarian problem, agro-biodiversity, international trade, power, social movements