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Scaling up Agroecology through Peasant Schools: resilience and Vulnerability in Post-conflict Colombia

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Abstract

In the last decades, Colombia experienced a state of prolonged internal unrest that introduced complex land-related issues, which perpetuate impoverishment and marginalisation of rural people. Despite conflict having officially ended in 2016, the remnants of war in a so-called ‘post-conflict’ era are far from being solved. In such a setting, the Colombian peasantry remains particularly vulnerable to adversity and lacks predictability for pursuing long-term rural reconstruction endeavours. Peasant schools emerge as farmer-led initiatives that utilise agroecological education as the main instrument for social transformation. Their purpose is to empower peasants to develop their territories alternatively, prioritising territorial sovereignty and food security. Their strategic focus lies on promoting autonomy and self-reliance among farmers by strengthening their capacities through horizontal knowledge exchange related to sustainable resource management. Due to its vast potential to revert the socio-ecological crisis caused by the industrialised food system, agroecology represents a pertinent approach for pursuing the needed socio-ecological reconstruction of the countryside. This research sets out to analyse the contributions of peasant schools to strengthening rural livelihoods on a grass-root level. Through the systematisation of seven heterogenic case studies, a resilience and vulnerability analysis is carried out for revealing their potentialities and identifying the vulnerabilities and geographically-specific challenges in three study areas. The results show that, approaches advanced by peasant schools contribute to the territorialisation of an integrated, sustainable and participatory model of rural reconstruction. The agroecological focus serves to enhance the resilience of peasant systems for adapting in face of shock and adversity, thereby enabling farmers to maintain sovereignty over their territories and resources. The insights revealed in each case study illustrate how the most pressing issues in a given territory define the objectives, activities and approaches pursued by each school, and enabled the formulation of recommendations for strengthening the formative and organisational processes of peasant schools in the aim of ensuring their permanence in the territories. By providing a perspective of grass-root efforts and emphasising the vital contributions of small-scale farmers to rural reconstruction, this paper articulates the interests of peasant communities in the new reconfiguration of the Colombian countryside.

Keywords: Agroecology, extension, farmer training, popular education, territorial sovereignty farmer-to-farmer