

Organizing process, organizing life: collective responses to precarity in Ecuador

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Abstract

In Ecuador's central Andes, members of the Indigenous village of San Isidro are engaged in various community-level projects which seek to secure and stabilize rural life, in the face of increasing temporary labour migration. The 'action notes' presented here take an introductory look at how the 'organizing process' at the centre of such forms of collective action is adapted to encourage participation through responsibility, and how subsequent collaborative projects are designed to counteract some negative impacts of precarious labour conditions and opportunities. In these activities we see a snapshot of people who not only yearn for, but actively cooperatively set out to build and re-make, a 'happier life' or their version of a good, or just, or sustainable, or dignified way-of-being.

San Isidro

Porfirio Allauca looks up from the accounts-book he's helping review with young Betty Guamán. Soon, she'll take on the role of community-treasurer in place of her father, Don Gonzalo. Once again, he is away working in Ecuador's Amazon oil fields, far from their home which is here in the Indigenous village of San Isidro in the country's central Andean mountains. In a population of about 500 people, almost every household here has someone –usually a father or son aged 18-45 – who makes the day-long journey to spend two weeks of every three away in the jungle. There they work in a range of jobs including kitchen porter, mechanic, chef, security guard or drill-operator.

Tomorrow there will be this month's community-assembly meeting here in the village hall, hence the need to inspect and prepare the accounts. Despite the widespread, periodic absence of some residents, communal life in San Isidro continues to take shape and organize collectively around community-level projects. Of course there are still hurdles to clear, not least those that stem from the precarity of contemporary labour conditions, or the results of historic processes of marginalization (such as being denied access to land or facing political exclusion and discrimination from state officials). Institutional oppression at the hands of colonial settlers may be formally less visible than in times past, but the varied effects of contemporary forms of labour-related exploitation are no less felt. Porfirio, someone who has spent nearly all of his 38 years of age engaged in community organizing in one way or another, turns to

me and tells me, "today we face a new form of slavery... today we have new landowners, new overseers, new rulers: new powers governing us, people we can't see... we can't see them to tackle them."

Water Supplies and the 'Food Circle'

The 'organizing process' of collective life in San Isidro has sought to counteract some of the negative impacts of widespread temporary labour migration with people travelling long distances to take up shift-work in the oil industry. Migratory practices are not a recent phenomenon, but have become more commonplace with Ecuador's intensified focus on drilling oil export. This period – the last 20-30 years – has also seen an increasing cost-of-living (linked to fluctuating prices in the global marketplace for things such as cooking-gas and certain staple foodstuffs), a subsequent increase in wage-dependency, and also a decreasing land-base among residents of San Isidro.

Similar shifts among rural populations are occurring throughout the world, where such instability often leads to very severe outcomes in terms of malnutrition and hunger. Whilst the community here seeks to build some of its own solutions, responses at the macro level fail repeatedly. In her analysis of such shortcomings, Lappé (2012) argues that resolving the paradox of hunger in a world which bears a global agriculture capable of feeding 12 billion people is a matter of distinguishing between a lack of food and a lack of power, between the symptoms and causes of hunger. For small-scale farmers across the globe, including in Ecuador's Andes, such a 'lack of power' is counteracted by efforts to secure the freedom, ability or autonomy which would enable them to opt out of, control or influence any market systems that affect their access to food, to decide what crops they themselves will grow and in what quantities, and to direct the destinations of what they produce.

As we have seen, life in San Isidro itself could generally be described as "semi-subsistence", in the sense that economic and dietary needs are largely met by some form of cash-earning income, in combination with family-scale farming. Through the structure of the community (*comunidad*), which is centred on a directing committee elected bi-annually by community-members, collective activity here has increased in intensity over the last couple of years. Though there is a long history of organized Indigenous mobilization and action in this region and throughout the country, this recent intensification in San Isidro has occurred since the community was successful in securing government funding for an irrigation-water pipeline. This project has, since then, depended on collaborative action and cooperation for its upkeep and maintenance.

Among other initiatives, this has led to the creation of a 'Food Circle' which, by localizing food production, distribution and consumption, ties together efforts to counteract the precarious nature of local employment and fluctuating food prices. This matches efforts throughout the world that seek to address both labour instability and often unaffordable food-costs.

Here in San Isidro, a variety of traditional and staple crops are cultivated on small landholdings irrigated by rainfall and the community's own irrigation system. The idea of holding weekly exchanges in the village square among a collective of food producers was outlined initially in economic terms, by community activist Tannia Rojas, who studies at the local Technical College: "rather than, say, ten families all going to Pujilí [the nearest market town] each week and each spending \$10... they stay here and these families make a wheel, or circle, of produce [a 'food circle']... that way, staying here, there is \$200 in San Isidro that was not going to be there otherwise". In the same meeting, a list of everything that could be made available was drawn up¹, as well as a list of things to plant - popular products which it would be good to make available each week². The events themselves bring together families and, as with many such acts of localised activity and resistance, the lead here is taken mainly by women (and some of their older children), since most men travel away to work³. Here, deals are quickly struck and subsequent plans discussed for what might be available the following week. Access to food is thus directly negotiated (in contrast to the global inequities in food distribution), and the destinations of crops agreed among the producers themselves.

'Food Circle' meetings take place in addition to the larger monthly community-assembly sessions to which all members are invited typically involving between 6 and 12 participating adults. Often older children and teenagers are just as actively involved in the decision-making process, which is done by consensus (unlike in the community-wide meetings, there is no elected 'council' or board), and so usually around 15 voices will contribute to proceedings. During the planning stages, which lasted a couple of weeks, Tannia (who outlined the project's approach to interested parties, above) and Porfirio (with whom we started this visit to San Isidro) acted as nominal leaders as they had previously met with organizers from other communities in the region who had tried such projects in the past. As in other areas of collective action in the village (and discussed briefly below), an emphasis is given on not only 'participation' but also on an equitable division of responsibility. When the weekly exchange-meetings began, this theory was put into practice, since all participating members were food-producers within the circle, and thus everyone present had an interest in taking the lead for a particular crop or crops: it is in everyone's interest that there are not too many potatoes or radishes, say, one week and then none the next. Sharing, through negotiation, responsibility for food production in this way serves to secure access both to food and to a market for produce brought to the 'circle'.

The 'Food Circle', then, maximizes community- and producer-control over food prices and destinations, and helps to secure income to compensate for

¹ This included: lettuce, taxo/papaya, skinned guinea pig, radish, carrots, tree-tomatoes, blackberries, milk, pumpkin, garlic, cheese, onions, potatoes, eggs, beetroot, maize-flour, morocho/corn, lemons, fried beans.

² Suggestions were: acelga/chard, other potato varieties, spinach, tomatoes, peas, beans, kidney beans, tubers: ocas, mellocas, mashua.

³ For more on new forms of territorialized struggle, gender and resistance, see Motta et al. 2011.

precarious local employment practices. It also complements existing efforts to collectively manage natural resources crucial to crop cultivation in the village. By thus governing both productive and commercial processes, participating community-members in San Isidro can better safeguard their access to food.

Action, Responsibility, The Commons

Not everyone is able to commit fully to this initiative. However, there are very few people who do not get involved in community life in one way or another, even if their working life limits their participation. Geovanni Allauca, a 23-year-old following his older brother into work in the Amazon regions for a drilling company from the USA, lamented how his work schedule means he can't be as much of an active member in community-life as he used to be – especially compared to when he worked as a group-leader with young people in San Isidro and in neighbouring communities. He was very clear on the need for the 'organizing process', not least to counteract something of the 'new slavery' that Porfirio described, above: "We need to organize. Organize to make demands, and organize to defend – to defend ourselves, all of us, against what we're being forced to do and to become. Life here has changed so much, and in my lifetime."

This critical organizing process shares features of commons systems⁴ that are found across the world, and not only because it is centred on a specific 'community'. Much like if it were being used to control hunting rights or fish stocks, the process is collectively defended and managed, implemented and adjusted, controlled and negotiated, by the very same people who are set to benefit from it. At the same time, this group of people is equally in a position to lose-out if it is mismanaged, for example if regular maintenance work is not sustained this can cause an interruption to the water-supply or if there are informal alliances this can lead to an inequitable distribution of water. This mirrors the dynamics and concerns of commons regimes.

There are two key steps to consider in efforts to support the development of these practices. The first is finding ways to retain control over natural resources that the community needs. This is not to ignore or overlook the benefits of receiving support from outside sources, but to underline the fact that these are generally only temporary, and often unpredictable or unreliable. As mentioned above, San Isidro has benefited from some government funding recently, but this came about only after many years of campaigning and organizing, and there is now no further promise of cash toward the irrigation project's upkeep (hence the renewed collective efforts to maintain it with communal labour). Similarly, in this part of the country there has been a presence of international NGOs, though this too is visibly dwindling as NGO offices in 'the West' feel the pinch of economic collapse and consequently close-up their offices in smaller countries such as Ecuador. Even in the past, this kind of support has been patchy, as

⁴For more on Commons thinking and practice, see Kenrick 2012.

Porfirio reminded me: "the task is ours, and ours alone. The government might change next week, who knows? And then what? And you see the same thing with many NGOs, they don't travel to the places that need more support, the places that are far away and hard to travel to... some places have been neglected completely. Either people are helping the communities who need help, or not. Anything else is just pretty speeches."

The second step is to maintain these forms of action by encouraging widespread participation, and doing this through sharing responsibility. We have seen this in the example of Betty, above, being trained in the role of community-treasurer before she has left school. This is an integral element of community organizing as it is being used and developed in San Isidro. Porfirio, again, found words to sum this up succinctly whilst engaged in dialogue in an assembly-meeting: "We all work, we all have families... the thing is to do it not for our family – though our families are supremely important – nor for ourselves, but for the community... for the system to work, any system, and for this project to work, it is about giving responsibility, a sense of responsibility to everyone who works on the project... "

An example of this in action came whilst talking with 18-year-old Iván who was working up in the hills on pipeline maintenance for the community, in a week-long stint of voluntary work that project-members take it in turns to complete. I asked him what it was about working on the project that he enjoyed, what made him want to do it, what encouraged him to share in the work. His motivations stemmed from, and reflected, strong collective and affective solidarities and loyalties. He replied: "My grandparents used to tell me how their life was extremely hard: they lived as slaves lived – they told me about their slavery... it's not like that now, now that we have Human Rights. They say there's no more slavery now, and maybe I believe it... but life is still very hard. Very hard. For me, the community is important: this place, this project: the water... all are important to us these days. And this is why we work here. This is why I am here now".

Undoubtedly, life is hard in different ways both at home and away at work, and as basic costs for things like gas and electricity continue to rise, there is extra pressure on rural populations to find new ways to meet their economic needs. Even if projects like San Isidro's Food Circle can boost these efforts, more work within the community will be necessary to incorporate all 84 households.

Today, however, aided by the collective strength of *el proceso organizativo* or *la vida organizativa* (the organizing process/life), prospects are looking increasingly positive. For many, the community is more cohesive and productive than ever before, even in the face of precarious labour conditions. Don Enrique Copara, now in his 70s and someone with a whole lifetime of experience as both a highland herdsman and as an elected member of the community council, would often tell me how the community is more organized than ever today, and that it's a good thing too since "otherwise, I'm sure all the youngsters would have had to leave". His words echo a strong sense of the

potential contained in the building and weaving together of sociability and community, a potential that can counteract something of the exclusionary logics of dominant global social and economic processes.

In this snapshot of collective rural life in highland Ecuador, we have seen something of the solidarity and substantial help which is both generated and expressed by people engaging in a collective 'organizing process'. At the heart of community life, this form of cooperative activity is being constructively used to counteract something of the precarity which defines labour opportunities and conditions in the wider region. This clear example of a positive trend toward community-building is one way in which the sense – and actuality – of such place-based collectivities is not a given, but is something that stems from both experience and aspiration. That is, a project that utilizes and builds on the specific knowledge of local political and agricultural conditions, and at the same time operates in open, ongoing dialogue among participant-members in order to strategize, devolve responsibility, and design further needs-meeting actions. All of which is hard work indeed, as my friend Porfirio told me – hard work that seeks to "build a hopeful future, and create a worthy life".

References

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About the author

Tristan Partridge has worked with community groups and farmers' networks in highland regions of both India and Ecuador, most recently whilst completing 15 months' fieldwork in Cotopaxi province as part of a Social Anthropology PhD at Edinburgh University. Along with collaboratively produced short films and photographic essays, these experiences are now being explored and examined through audio work as well as publications.

With a focus on collective action and notions of 'community' in the particular setting of an indigenous 'comunidad', this builds on previous work with activist groups in India and the UK during a Glasgow-based MSc in 'Global Movements, Social Justice and Sustainability'. As such, commons-based regimes and ideas about place, inheritance and control are considered in light of broader processes of rural change (precarity, migration, agroecology, food sovereignty).

More info at

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