

Agroecology Feminisms: Paraguay's Conamuri in a sea of soy

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Background and Objectives

Paraguay has been shaped by a global agricultural system that rearranges land access regimes to favor large corporations (Correia, 2017; Hetherington, 2014; McMichael, 2006). Since soy's introduction in the 1980s, Paraguay has become the fourth largest exporter of soy in the world, outpaced only by Brazil, Argentina, and the USA (World Bank Group, 2018). Rural people reliant on subsistence agriculture are being dispossessed as soy monoculture increasingly dominates the Paraguayan landscape. As a result, many rural peasants (*campesinos*) are organizing in their communities in order to protect rural livelihoods, even as many elect to migrate into urban areas in search of remunerated work. As the ability to sustain rural livelihoods declines and few rural wage labor opportunities emerge, people move to urban centers in search of work. That soy is altering rural Paraguay is undeniable, but this does not mean it has been passively accepted by all. The growth of soy production is contested by multiple social movements, including Conamuri. A women's peasant and indigenous social movement, Conamuri envisions agroecology as an alternative model of rural development that will protect *campesino* livelihoods and improve the situation of women in Paraguay. Because of its alternative vision for rural development, the movement is especially active in areas of rapid soy expansion, such as the department Caaguazú and Itapúa (Riquelme & Vera, 2015). The ongoing situation in Paraguay presents a paradox for Conamuri: As the recent expansion of soy in the area renders its agenda more pertinent, this very same process drives many young adults into urban centers. It becomes harder for Conamuri to advance its vision as the rural population declines.

The objective of my research is to understand how Conamuri is reproduced as it confronts the interwoven challenges of soy expansion and a declining rural population. In order to address this objective, my research asks the following questions: (1) *how do the long-term effects of dispossession shape the possibilities of alternatives to soy development?*; (2) *how does rural-urban migration effect Conamuri organizing, and what strategies do they use to deal with migration?*; (3) *do these strategies effect how young adults in urban centers do or do not participate in Conamuri?* These questions integrate the dynamics of social mobilization and the intergenerational dynamics of dispossession as they articulate through Conamuri.

Field Research

My research followed to of Conamuri's major ongoing projects: their seed exchange house in Caaguazú and their agroecological yerba mate production facility, called Onoiru, in Itapúa. These two departments represent two distinct levels of soy production. Caaguazú is on the frontlines of contemporary soy expansion, whereas Itapúa has been a major soy producer for thirty years. Following these two projects in their distinct socio-economic contexts allows for insights into how the social movement operates in different places.

My research began with a few weeks in Asuncion, Paraguay's capital, where I took Guarani language courses, and conducted interviews with Paraguayan scholars and human rights

NGOs to further contextualize my work. I also utilized this time to do archival work in Conamuri's offices. After a few weeks in Asuncion, I began travelling to Caaguazú and Itapúa, where I conducted interviews with thirty individuals who are involved in Conamuri or participate in its projects. My interviews were supplemented by participant observation as these projects operate in daily life. This also involved attending a day-long workshop meeting in Asunción with Oxfam-Paraguay for Onoiru. In addition, Conamuri asked me to participate in three seed fairs, including two district-level seed fairs, and the national seed fair that took place at the end of July in Asunción. In both Caaguazú and Itapúa, I worked closely with three young agroecology technicians who were able to receive technical training in Brazil through Conamuri's support. These three individuals now support and run these two projects. The funding from CLAG facilitated my ability to do this work by funding bus travel between these various sites.

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In the eastern-most departments of Paraguay, the landscape is dominated by soy and corn production.



Corn ready to be exchanged at a seed fair in Encarnación, Paraguay.