

## **CLAG Field Study Award 2020 – Field Report**

Anika Rice

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To whom it may concern at CLAG:

In summer 2020 I was planning to do three months of ethnographic work with women leaders and members of agroecological community organizations in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. My goals were to document women's organizing and barriers to organizing within these organizations, and to record the agrobiodiversity contributions of these projects to their communities. An action-based part of my research plan was to facilitate a farmer exchange between members at my sites in Rabinal with a similar organization in the Western highlands of Guatemala in the department of San Marcos, in collaboration with other UW Madison researchers.

Because of the pandemic and my inability to do in-person fieldwork, I pivoted to a remote study about Guatemalan farmers' challenges and responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have used contacts at other organizations, mentioned above, and partnered with two other researchers to identify a wider set of field sites. In December 2020-April 2021, I partnered with eight farmer organizations in five departments to conduct surveys and record short interview responses with farmers via Zoom and Whatsapp. I had four research questions (RQs):

**RQ1:** How were smallholder farmers who are connected to agroecology organizations affected in terms of production, consumption and commercialization of food crops during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**RQ2:** How does agroecology affect smallholder resilience to the economic shocks associated with sudden shifts in access to formal markets?

**RQ3:** Given the variable and differentiated effects of the closure of municipal markets on smallholders' ability to sell agricultural products, how did farmer organizations influence farmers' responses to economic shock?

**RQ4:** How do organizations' efforts to promote agroecology open up space for long-term solidarity building among farmers?

In short, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data suggests that farmers were most affected in terms of sales of agricultural goods during the pandemic, due to the qualitatively distinct nature of mobility and market restrictions during the pandemic. I also found that among farmers with different levels of exposure and participation in agroecology, the more agroecologically-engaged farmers were more resilient at the farm level (in terms of production and consumption). Finally, qualitative data suggests that agroecology organizations support social networks that made farmers more agile in their response to economic shock. This research uses a resilience framework to evaluate livelihood outcomes during the

pandemic, while contextualizing debates around agroecology and critiques of resilience in marginalized and/or indigenous communities.

The field study award was used for compensating my partner organizations as well as individual farmer participants. I asked each organizational contact to fill out lengthy surveys with the leaders and directors of their organization. At each organization, my contacts were also research assistants who spent time identifying farmer participants. At four field sites, I provided additional hourly compensation for translation services from Mayan languages to Spanish. I also provided a modest stipend to the individual farmer participants (70 in total) for their time and the use of internet data on their devices. Some other minor costs were incurred for bank and money-sending transaction fees to each of the eight organizations.

While this remote research was vastly different than what I had expected, it is contributing to my future academic plans in exciting ways. Because I got to work with eight agroecology organizations, I now have more research contacts around Guatemala. I plan to visit many of them in Summer 2022, and see these new connections as possible partners for PhD research. I also feel grateful that I have a deep understanding of the rural and agrarian effects of the pandemic in Guatemala, because any future research will need to be situated in these new realities.

Thank you for your continued support; I look forward to sharing this work with the CLAG community via presentations or publications.

Sincerely,  
Anika Rice  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

## **Abstract**

(335 words)

***Title:*** *Guatemalan Agroecology Movements During Covid-19: Resilience, economic solidarity and constraints for smallholders*

By Anika Rice

At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Guatemalan government's nation-wide quarantine, curfews and restrictions on mobility directly affected rural *campesino* families who depend on both subsistence and commercial food production. These unprecedented market restrictions created a distinct economic shock for Guatemalan smallholder producers, which arrived on the trails of multiple other economic and environmental shocks. Of concern for smallholders during the pandemic was the inability to purchase and sell agricultural and other goods at local and regional markets, loss of off-farm employment, a lack of access to agricultural inputs and other related factors. At the same time, farmer organizations have been promoting agroecology – the science, movement, and practice of sustainable agriculture and resource management – in Guatemala for decades in order to strengthen rural livelihoods, develop food-sovereign communities, defend indigenous rights to land and life, and develop adaptations to climate change. This study works with eight farmer organizations within agroecology movements to explore how agroecology affects resilience during economic shock and to identify constraints and opportunities for agroecology in Guatemala as it relates to market access and solidarity building. Surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely, then coded for qualitative and statistical analysis.

Qualitative and quantitative data suggest that smallholders engaged in agroecology maintained production and consumption to higher degrees than sales during the pandemic, given the difficulties of maintaining intra-community and regional market connections. Data also suggest that agroecological practices and prior engagement with agroecology organizations are correlated with increased resilience to the pandemic's economic shock at the farm level, with regards to production and consumption. Farmer organizations that promote agroecology may play a role in supporting farmers' resilience to extreme economic shock. Organizations support social networks that increase producers' agroecological practices and their ability to respond to market shocks. This study highlights the collective actions that farmer organizations took during the pandemic to support food access and informal market access. The variation across organizations offers a set of salient examples of people working toward economic solidarity within agroecology, while facing myriad structural constraints.