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## **Cultivating A Movement**

### **Title**

José Montenegro: Farm Operations Director, Rural Development Center

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# José Montenegro



## Farm Operations Director, Organic Farming Training Program Rural Development Center, Salinas, California

*José Montenegro grew up in Providencia, a small farming community in the state of Durango, Mexico. As a child, he was troubled by the impoverishment of rural life in his community. He studied agronomy in Mexico in 1988, and despite sadness about leaving his homeland, decided to emigrate to the United States.*

*This oral history focuses on Montenegro's period as farm operations director of the organic farming training program at the Rural Development Center (RDC). Located on a 110-acre farm eight miles south of Salinas, the RDC was originally founded in 1985 by the Association for Community-Based Education (ACBE) of Washington, D.C. The RDC initiated a 'Farmworker to*

*Farmer' program where agricultural workers received training that allowed for their advancement on the job, in farm management or possibly farm ownership.*

*In 2000, Montenegro left the RDC to begin Proyecto de Arraigo, a program that offers training and resources to farmers in rural Mexico. Meanwhile, the RDC transformed into the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA). Montenegro recently earned a master's degree in public policy from California State University, Monterey Bay, where he met Ellen Farmer (then also a graduate student in the program). Farmer conducted this interview in Salinas, California, on January 9, 2008.*

#### Additional Resources

See the oral histories in this series with ALBA farmers Florentino Collazo and Maria Luz Reyes; JP Perez; and Maria Inés Catalan. Also see the oral history with Rebecca Thistlethwaite, who worked with ALBA as Director of Programs and as manager of the organization's Rural Development Center and Farm Training & Research Center.

"Interview with José Montenegro by Rebecca Reider," in Avery Cohn, Jonathan Cook, Margarita Fernandez, Rebecca Reider, and Corrina Steward, editors. *Agroecology and the Struggle for Food Sovereignty in the Americas*. (Published by the International Institute for Environment and Development, the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic, and Social Policy (2006). Available through Google Books.

Rose Marie Berger, "A New Team Takes the Field," *Sojourners*, May 1, 2000.

### Early Background

**Farmer:** This is Ellen Farmer, on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008. I'm with José Montenegro in Salinas, California. I would like to start the way we've started with everyone, and ask: where were you born, and where did you grow up?

**Montenegro:** I was born in the state of Durango, Mexico, in sort of the southern part of the state, in a town called Nuevo Ideal. I was just born there, but I actually lived and grew up in a small farming community called Providencia.

**Farmer:** And how did that atmosphere contribute to what you've done with your life?

**Montenegro:** Tremendously. It's most definitely shaped not only my life, but my professional interests, my perspectives. It was interesting to see how I was able to look at my experience growing up as a child of small family farmers, traveling family farmers, in a community where, like many small communities in Mexico, we're disengaged from civic life and civic participation. These communities were gradually being displaced, and I was able to look at that experience once I came to the United States, because it made me realize what the barriers were that these communities confronted in achieving sustainability. I was able to see and understand how there were policy-related issues, issues of technical assistance or lack of access to technical assistance, credit—a whole range of issues that have influenced my peasant-based community and many other communities in my region in the state of Durango.

**Farmer:** You said these were displaced communities. What did you mean by that?

**Montenegro:** These communities, for the most part, did not have access to basic resources, including access to relevant knowledge, access to economic opportunities including credit, access to infrastructure. I think this impacted the communities' ability to be successful and to thrive and to maintain their way of

life. Over the years, I saw how farmers began to sell their tractors. They began to sell their horses. They began to sell their lands, and then emigrated and left their communities to sell the only thing they had with them: their labor. Most people did not want to leave their communities of origin, but felt that *“la tierra ya no da para vivir,”* “the land can no longer support us.”

**Farmer:** These were isolated rural communities?

**Montenegro:** These were isolated rural communities, yes. But there wasn't a whole lot of advocacy on behalf of these communities going on, no organizing to represent the rights and the needs and aspirations of these farmers and communities. All of that put together had a major impact on these communities. In time, so many of these communities became ghost towns. And you see that when you go back; they are like ghost towns. Young people left, which represented a loss of social capital, of human capital, in these communities. Unfortunately, young people who leave these communities do not go back to their communities of origin.

Many people from rural Mexico have come to the United States, like myself, and while many immigrants send money or remittances back to our relatives and families in Mexico, there is also the issue of growing dependency on these remittances. Young people lose interest in farming because it isn't viable; this leads to “forced” migration, a human exodus.

So these are part of the trends that impacted my own life.

**Farmer:** So did you leave on your own, not with your family?

**Montenegro:** Yes.

**Farmer:** Can you describe your education and formative experiences?

**Montenegro:** First of all, I never wanted to leave my community. I told my father especially, and my mother as well, that I didn't want to go to school, that I wanted to stay at the farm because that's what I loved and that's what I was passionate about and that's what I wanted to do. And my father said, "You know, things are going to become more difficult at the farm level. You should definitely think about other options. If, after you go to school and graduate, you see that there is viability and possibility for you, well, you can come back to the farm."

I said, "Oh, okay. I'll go to school, but I promise you I'm going to come back to the farm." So that was kind of an agreement. So for high school I actually ended up going to an agricultural-based technical school in the state capital, Durango. And from there I went to a university and got a degree in agronomy.

By the time I graduated, in 1988, I looked back at my community and saw that what my father had predicted had pretty much become a reality—economic conditions for peasant-based communities were so difficult that I saw little hope and little possibility. I thought, while I want to go back to the farm, maybe there is another way for me to get back, for me to contribute to this way of life. Maybe there is another way to fight back. My choice was to emigrate. I saw how the government system at that time was so corrupted, and so disengaged from or out of touch [with] people's lives and the reality going on in these communities. I wasn't going to be a part of it. While I had opportunities to work for the

government, I felt that I was going to be betraying my own way of life and my father, by being a struggling farmer. [I saw] the profound disengagement between government institutions and rural communities. It seemed that there was a major misalignment between the programs and services offered by government institutions and the needs of rural communities. They did not match. That misalignment has led to major gaps and problems. I said, I don't want to be part of it. I wanted to "escape" and just go away, and ended up coming to the United States.

**Farmer:** So what was your life like on the farm [when you were growing up]? Did you have a lot of chores? Did you do farm work as well as go to school?

**Montenegro:** Yes, I did, absolutely, and especially during the early years, because for high school and college I had to go to the state capital. Then we were able to go back and work at the farm only every weekend or every other weekend, and the summers.

**Farmer:** So did your father have other help besides you, or other kids or—

**Montenegro:** No, not really. That actually became part of the challenge as well. Even to this day, at least in my region, no one really wants to work as an employee at a farm. It just doesn't pay.

**Farmer:** It's not their own.

**Montenegro:** Yes, it's not their own, and so it's not sustainable. And it's understandable.

**Farmer:** So what kind of things did your father grow?

**Montenegro:** Well, when I lived in my community, we used to have milking cows. So I was milking cows since I was, like, nine years old. And then growing primarily oats, corn, beans. Then my father moved into growing apples. But marketing-wise, that wasn't successful. Farmers in my area grew beautiful apples, but they were not really organized to deal with the commercialization of their apples. So they were vulnerable to exploitation, and could not defend themselves and market the apples and products fairly. The brokers would come in and take advantage of them all the time, year after year. Pretty much there're no apples being grown in the region at this point.

### Sustainable Agriculture

**Farmer:** Okay. Can you say what does sustainable agriculture mean to you?

**Montenegro:** Sure, I'll do my best on that. When I think of sustainability, I think of it as a process. I don't think of it as an end product, necessarily. It's a means to something. Of course, it's also an outcome. I think sustainability has many faces, and I say this from my own experience growing at the farm. Sustainability involves direct community involvement, direct community participation in civic life. And obviously when it comes to agriculture, it involves relying on the type of agriculture that works *with* nature, rather than against nature—that protects our ecosystems, that protects our resources, but also that sustains families and communities and their way of life. So that's my take on it, in general terms.

**Farmer:** Have you been involved in any organic research projects?



## The Rural Development Center

**Montenegro:** Mostly informally, especially when I worked at the Rural Development Center. I did not direct rigid research projects myself, but I had an opportunity to work in partnership with the UC Cooperative Extension Service, UC Davis, and other experts in the field in conducting some research projects. I can give some examples of that, of course, if you would like me to. I think that, if I may talk about the experience at the Rural Development Center—

**Farmer:** Sure.

**Montenegro:** It was sort of a wonderful experiment, if you will, in that, initially, back in 1993, most of the land at the Rural Development Center was farmed as conventional land. And in the course of five to seven years, pretty much ninety percent of the land was transitioned into organic certified land. A major, major transition was underway.

**Farmer:** How many acres is it?

**Montenegro:** About a hundred acres of farmable land. But that was the result of an evolving process. It was an organic process that took place, and it was a process of ongoing dialogue with the program participants. There were many challenges along the way. There was some resistance to going to organic agriculture.

**Farmer:** From who?

**Montenegro:** From the program participants, primarily. The resistance [was] coming out of not having experienced and seen the benefits from organic agriculture before. And so, just to give you one example, part of the whole concept was to—okay, let's look at the farm as an ecosystem. That includes, for example, planting windbreak trees, diversified trees to protect your soil from erosion, environmentally sound soil management practices and so on. And a lot of the program participants expressed concern. They said, "Well, you know, the trees are going to provide a habitat for birds, and the birds are going to eat my seeds." Some of the concerns may be legitimate, but we had to sit down and look at the cost/benefits of things. And rather than planting 1,000 trees at once, we had to plant a few at once and allow time for the farmers themselves, the program participants themselves, to see the benefits.

The use of cover crops—that was another example, just allocating a small section of their plots to try out different cover crops and then seeing the benefits the following year as their crop yields improve and so the quality of their products.

So it was a gradual change, a gradual transformation. I think that what I'm trying to say is that the challenge was more in the area of attitudes and behaviors. That was the barrier: How do we change attitudes and behaviors? A lot of dialogue and information and education had to take place, and more so from the perspective of the participants. Because it wouldn't work had our approach been paternalistic, top-down. That wasn't going to work. Solutions do not come [in] a nice package. It's a difficult process of ongoing dialogue, and it was a learning process to all of us. It started as a result of the farmers themselves expressing interest in turning the Rural Development Center into an environment that was

safe for their own families. No hazardous pesticides. That's how it started. That was the spark. "I'd like to see my child come to my farm and help out, but also see and learn. I'd like to see my wife being a part of the operation. And we'd like to see this as a community space." So that was a major turn along the way. As a result of that, we turned to organic agriculture. We started with four organic acres, experimented with them, and then after a couple of years, people got into it.

**Farmer:** Did they sell some of the products?

**Montenegro:** Yes. They also obviously saw the value added of [organic]. But also, it had to do—I remember my conversations with several of the participants on a daily basis, and I remember one of them talking about his love and his passion for farming. He said to me, "You know, José, maybe I'm not making enough money to survive from farming at this stage, but I'm gaining other things. Because of this opportunity, I was able to sort of go back," he said, go back to his roots, go back to his love for agriculture, and continue the learning from his own father and his family and his ancestors. So there were other important aspects.

**Farmer:** So do you think they were able to take lessons they had from their grandparents, say, in organic farming? You didn't call it that back then, but—

**Montenegro:** Absolutely. Especially the older participants definitely brought that experience into their plots—how they farmed and how they produced and how they took care of the land. But also, when I talk about attitudes and the challenges that we face, many of the program participants came from farming

communities in Mexico that were largely dependent on pesticides due to the Green Revolution in Mexico and many parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> They viewed and understood the use of chemicals and pesticides as the most viable solution, because that's what the institutional system preached and promoted in our regions.

**Farmer:** So can you say what your role was there at the Rural Development Center and how the program worked? Can you describe it when you were first there?

**Montenegro:** Yes. I first was hired as the farm manager-educator, and there were two roles or responsibilities. One was to manage the farm—taking care of the irrigation system, and the land, planting cover crops, maintaining the equipment, etc. But also I was responsible for providing technical assistance to the program participants and responsible for teaching some of the courses.

When I got there, the education curriculum that was in place was rather informal. And so Ann Baier, who at that time was the director, and [I] had an opportunity to look at the informal program that was in place back then and propose a more structured course, which later became the Small Farm Education Program course, a six-month, intensive course that is required for the program participants in order for them to have access to the land at the farm, and machinery, and irrigation equipment. Ann, I, and others, including the program participants, worked in formalizing this six-month training curriculum. And we included in this program curriculum topics around sustainability and organic agriculture.

Then, in 1995, Ann Baier stepped down as director, and I became the director of the program. So my roles obviously shifted more into the administrative aspects, including fundraising, grant writing, day-to-day management, but also being able to network and travel around the country and learn from other models. During this time I served on several boards and steering committees.

**Farmer:** Were those national organizations?

**Montenegro:** Yes. I remember especially the Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture, based in Washington, D.C. It was a wonderful experience being exposed to so many interesting people and places around the country. At least once a year we visited sustainability models in different states. It was inspirational.

**Farmer:** Were most of the programs starting up about the same time? Were they about the same age as your program?

**Montenegro:** No, I think that some of them were more sophisticated and well established. Some of them started in the early seventies; they have a long history as part of the sustainability movement around the United States. I got to learn about what worked for them and what hasn't worked so well. Drawing from those lessons was instrumental to us, because I would go back to the Rural Development Center and share ideas based on those experiences so that we were not spinning the wheel and duplicating things. There was ongoing learning. In fact, an integral part of the education program at the Rural Development Center included frequent site visits and tours to other farms. We visited with Phil Foster, and Molino Creek<sup>2</sup>, the Agroecology Program at UCSC, and many other farms

from which we learned important lessons. That kind of ongoing exchange of knowledge and ideas and experiences is critical to building a more sustainable agriculture system.

**Farmer:** Do you remember any particular regions of the country besides ours where they had an established program that you visited?

**Montenegro:** We visited programs in Michigan State; we visited farmers in Arkansas; North Carolina; I remember, Taylorsville, Florida, as well.

**Farmer:** And they were all doing sustainable and organic.

**Montenegro:** Sustainable and organic, yes. Iowa as well—organic livestock production as well as utilizing agroforestry, planting trees as part of the farming ecosystem. So we visited several projects. We made it our goal to visit with farmers specifically and talk with them and engage with them. We had access to firsthand knowledge and experience. That was great.

Additionally, there were so many opportunities to engage with projects locally. the Eco-Farm conference<sup>3</sup> annually, and other conferences and workshops going on all the time in the Central Coast. We were actively engaged in those opportunities.

**Farmer:** And can you describe how someone became a participant in the Rural Development program?

**Montenegro:** Yes. The participants first had to fill out an application, tell us a little bit about themselves, their interests. We asked them basic questions about

income as well. Because that was part of our criteria, that they had to be low-income families to become eligible. The program participants who were selected to participate had two options. If they wanted to have access to the land and other resources at the farm, they had to complete at least eighty percent of the six-month training program. But also they had the option of just participating [in] whatever workshop they were more interested in, and just do that but not have access to the land.

But most participants were interested in the land, in experimenting and testing whether or not farming was feasible to them and a viable economic opportunity for their families. Most participants ended up going through the program and graduating from the program, and then having access to some land: a half-acre to an acre the first year, then up to two acres the second year, and then up to four acres the third year. Then by the end of the third year, they would graduate. Some found land and leased land in the area: Hollister, San Juan Bautista and elsewhere; Monterey, South [Santa Cruz] County as well. The idea was to allow sufficient time for the participants in the program to hopefully establish some marketing connections and options so that when they graduate, they can continue with those relationships and those marketing opportunities.

**Farmer:** Did you find that people had different interests so they could use the land in different ways? For example, participants might want to specialize in vegetables or specialize in animals. Did you have that kind of variety?

**Montenegro:** Yes, except for animals. We would have *loved* to see animals at the farm, cows or pigs or chickens at the farm, but the conditions just weren't there,

mostly in terms of the infrastructure. We had participants interested in those areas as well. But in terms of crops, we had families who were interested in growing organic strawberries, for example. Others were interested in growing a wide range of different varieties of cherry tomatoes and they specialized in cherry tomatoes, and others in growing zucchini and growing corn or potatoes.

I think that that's where the research came into place, because we encouraged the participants to act as researchers themselves. Research wasn't something that only people with [a] master's or Ph.D. could do, but was something that they, the participants themselves, could do as well. For example, they would grow six or eight tomato varieties in one row, in a hundred lineal feet. When those tomatoes were near ready for harvesting, we would call a couple of potential buyers, and we'd invite them to come and see the tomatoes and tell us which varieties they thought would be marketable. So that was obviously an incentive for the buyers.

I remember by the fifth or sixth year that I was at the Rural Development Center, by 1998 or so, the farm had become quite diversified in terms of types of crops. We had thirty, at some point up to forty different crops growing—specialty crops: lettuces, and salad greens, green peas, cut flowers, fava beans, cilantro, strawberries, celery, corn and many other crops. Most participants figured out that they had to diversify in order to enhance their marketing options. So that was a good idea on their part. Initially, when I came into the program, most farmers were growing two crops: zucchini and fava beans. I remember one instance in which three or four of the program participants came to the same buyer one day with lots of zucchini. The buyer said, "Guess what. I can only buy this much of zucchini, a hundred cartons or boxes of zucchini." "But we have



four hundred, we have four hundred and fifty boxes,” the farmers said, “What are we going to do with the zucchinis?” And he said, “Well, I don’t know. You’re going to have to dump them or sell them or figure out a way, but I can only buy a hundred boxes.” And that was a major lesson. The following day they came back, and we had a meeting in the evening. They talked about that experience, and they looked at each other and said, “What are we doing to ourselves? We need to get organized and work collectively, plan things and increase our chances of competing and getting fair prices.” So that was part of the reason why the farm became so diversified in terms of crops. By 1998, the RDC farm became a beautiful place.

### *Proyecto de Arraigo*

**Farmer:** And you moved on from there at a certain point.

**Montenegro:** Yes, by the end of 2000 I decided to step down. By then I had developed other interests related to sustainable agriculture. Maybe I should give a brief context, if I may. One of the things that the RDC program participants kept talking about all the time, informally and formally, was that need and aspiration to both go back to their communities of origin in Mexico or Central America, wherever they came from, and to maintain strong social networks to their communities. I felt the same way. I learned that we wanted to maintain a physical and spiritual connection to our geographies, to our places. I learned that if we give up those connections, we’re not who we are. Therefore, we need to maintain those connections.

And so one day I remember asking the question in one of the meetings. I said, “Well, you know, I have been here for four or five years in this program, and almost every day I hear one or two participants talk about ‘my community in Mexico or Central America. Oh, I wish I could go back, if I could.’” I asked the question, “Why don’t we do something about it? What if we do something about it?” And they said, “Well, what would that be?” So at that time I had some general ideas. I said, “Well, we could start by exploring the potential for a bi-national exchange program. Maybe we invite farmers from your communities of origin in Mexico, help them process their visas, and invite them to come over and see and tell us what they’re doing, what challenges they are facing, how do they see migration from their perspective, what is it doing to their communities and to their lives. And on the other hand, we can also visit their communities in Mexico, visit with them and ask some of the same questions, share with them what our experience and life is like in the United States.”

It was so intriguing and so unique, the response that they gave me to that question. Powerful. Because, first of all, I never expected that answer. I expected them to say, “José, that’s a great idea. Let’s go for it. We’ll do it! What do we need to do?” They said, “Look, José, that’s a good idea. But you know what? What’s lacking is opportunities for young people to stay and thrive in their communities of origin in Mexico. We need to create *means* for them. For those who wish to stay, we need to create those means.” One at a time kept saying, “Had I known of opportunities in my community to stay, I would have never left. I would have stayed.”

And so my initial idea was [chuckles] set aside. I said okay. I identified a foundation that was interested in supporting the concept of my idea, and they said, “Talk to us about it, and we’ll see how we can develop a proposal together.” What we decided to do was a pilot program that we called *Proyecto de Arraigo*, or Arraigo Project. *Arraigo* stands for rootedness, developing roots in your community, staying and thriving in your community. So we contacted several community-based organizations, farmer associations, indigenous-based organizations throughout Mexico, and asked them to tell us about who would be interested in participating in a pilot project. It was going to be a two-year pilot project that would engage key leaders from farming communities, rural communities throughout Mexico in an education, capacity-building process.

So as a result of that, we received sixty applications. Because of the limited resources that we had, we ended up selecting about sixteen leaders from mostly indigenous-based communities throughout Mexico.

**Farmer:** In southern Mexico?

**Montenegro:** In southern Mexico, including one from northern Mexico, the Tarahumara (Raramuri) community. The first task for the participants selected was to spend some time in their own communities and regions, assessing and identifying their top three priorities. They came back with that information, and we took that information to develop a highly responsive curriculum in response to that community-based assessment. For example, some of the communities said, “We have lost our ability to grow our own food in our own backyards. It’s so basic, but we are interested in showing our young people how they can grow

their own food.” Another example: One community said, “We are interested in organic livestock management and production. We don’t know how to do it. We don’t understand what the process is for certification.” And other communities said, “We’re interested in learning how to build our own homes or houses using resources available to us locally.” As a result of that, we set up a workshop based on the concept of ecological architecture, and each program participant developed a small prototype of the house they would build in their own community. There were other wonderful examples. But the idea, Ellen, was that these participants were viewed and understood as multipliers of change. They would go back to their communities and share this knowledge. That was the main criterion, which is why we asked that each of the participants had to be sponsored by an association, by an organization.

**Farmer:** That makes sense.

**Montenegro:** Yes. So the participants went back, and two years later the projects that evolved out of the *Proyecto de Arraigo* [were] just remarkable. One example I can give you was in the state of Oaxaca: in a town or community called Jalapa del Marques, there is regional-based farm organization called Comunidades Campesinas en Camino (CCC), and the participant in the pilot project, Ageo Vasquez, who was a member of this organization decided to develop a project for young people in his community as part of the idea of creating opportunities for them to stay and thrive in the community.

Ultimately, the *Proyecto de Arraigo* lasted four years rather than two years.

**Farmer:** Was it under ALBA [Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association] at this point?

**Montenegro:** No. That's a good question. We developed the concept right before I left the Rural Development Center. I proposed the *Proyecto de Arraigo* idea to the executive director at that time. I said, "I have this idea, and it's supported by this information and these dialogues. Can we make it happen as part of the Rural Development's work?" They looked at it; they analyzed the idea. Their response was, "It's a great project but it's not aligned with where the RDC is going." I said, "To me, this project is fundamental and I am going to pursue it." So we ended up setting up a project under the fiscal auspices of the Tides Center in San Francisco.

**Farmer:** And they do international work.

**Montenegro:** Yes. They have many projects that they sponsor, not just in Latin America but in other parts of the world. That was a wonderful resource to us. It was so important because it enabled me to focus on the action part of the project and the programmatic areas, and not [be] worried too much about the administrative things on a day-to-day basis.

**Farmer:** So did you travel and visit all these different projects?

**Montenegro:** Certainly. I was able to travel [to] all of these communities throughout Mexico and interview most of the people that applied to the program. It was inspirational to see. When I first visited some of these communities that applied to the *Proyecto de Arraigo* pilot program, it was stimulating, in that I remember seeing some indigenous communities actually

were very happy with their way of life. You know, from the outside, people view them as poor, as not being on the train of progress. When I look[ed] inside, at the heart of these communities, I realize[ed], gosh, I wish I would have had this knowledge that they have before I emigrated. Visiting with indigenous communities was a transformational experience and process of discovery and realization.

### **Studying in the California State University, Monterey Bay Public Policy Program**

**Farmer:** So is that what led you to go into the public policy program [at California State University Monterey Bay], being part of this?

**Montenegro:** My experience as an immigrant in this country influenced my interest in public policy. Over the first six, eight years of my life in this country, the United States, I struggled with this question: why did I come? Why did I leave my community? It was sort of a sense of guilt [that] kind of drove my thinking. And I came to a point where I said, I need to do something to be able to deal with a sense of feeling endlessly overwhelmed. I need to do something about it: either go back to my community of origin for good, or do something here in my new community in the United States. I realized that what I needed was to engage in a learning, reflective process that would allow me to look deeper into the forces that impacted my life and that of thousands like me, immigrants with similar realities and conditions in Mexico and also similar conditions in the U.S. The public policy program at CSUMB [California State University, Monterey Bay] has provided me with tools such as a framework for

objective analysis. For instance, I have used this new expertise to analyze the corrupt, paternalistic PRI [*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or Institutional Revolutionary Party] system that lasted for seventy-five years in Mexico and, through erroneous agrarian reforms, led to the collapse of the peasant-based model, a way of life in Mexico.

**Farmer:** So as part of this public policy program, you decided to continue this work as your internship. Can you talk about that?

**Montenegro:** Yes. My interest was to go back to my state (Durango, Mexico) and work with a group of rural communities in assessing their challenges, their assets and their interests. The organization that sponsored my internship in Durango was my former technical school, CBTA No. 3, which is based in the outskirts of the state capital (Durango City). By the way, it is a beautiful agricultural-based school. The school is surrounded by several rural communities from which many students come. I thought that it would be a great opportunity to develop a research project and work with these communities. I went back this summer and spent several months conducting my research. We designed a survey and a set of data-collection tools and trained several of the students and ourselves to conduct these dialogues and surveys with many farmers in the region. We looked at the results and analyzed the results and had an opportunity to reflect on the findings from this assessment with the school administrators and faculty at the school. Then we developed a strategy as to, what are we going to do with these findings?

Some of the findings were nothing new. They reinforced the trends and the issues or challenges that farmers, rural communities, had been facing all along. But there were some other, intriguing findings that we realized were important. One of them was the misalignment between services provided by government institutions and the needs and aspirations of the farmers. That lack of equitable partnerships, lack of two-way dialogue (horizontal dialogue, not top-down dialogue) is a major problem. It's a major problem. The two stakeholders—rural communities and government institutions—we learned need to look at ways of converging and coming together and understanding each other's needs and approaches, and develop programs that are responsive to the needs of the rural communities, that engage rural communities in the design of these programs, in evaluating their effectiveness, in assessing their impact. That issue of participation in the decision-making process is key.

**Farmer:** So where are you in your process now? Are you writing the results?

**Montenegro:** I'm writing my essays and my case study already, and I'm starting to write my policy memo as well. This is the document that I will submit to CBTA No. 3, the technical-based school that sponsored my research. I had the opportunity to go back this fall to Durango and we had a meeting with representatives from government agencies and present[ed] the results of the research. There was some resistance, as expected, among the agency representatives (and some degree of openness as well), but definitely some resistance about, "Mmm, we don't know why—we don't understand why the farmers are saying that."



**Farmer:** Oh, dear.

**Montenegro:** And so we said, “Look, this *is* what the farmers said. This is what they said, and we felt that it was important to bring those results to light and be honest with you about those findings.” And we did so in a respectful manner, but also in a direct, honest way, and presented that information to them. Part of my plan involves another meeting between agency representatives and farmers during this spring. That will be the opportunity to have constructive dialogue between the stakeholders and say, “Well, this is what was learned from this research. Where do we go from here?”

**Farmer:** And does it have to do with the technical school programs?

**Montenegro:** Yes. On one side, the school is interested in possibly creating a new [program] based on agroecology. So that’s one possibility that they’re going to be looking at. They developed a multidisciplinary team to explore the feasibility of this option. They were very interested in this research opportunity, because many of the students, fifty percent or more of the students, come from those rural communities that participated in these surveys. And so they said, “Well, we need to make sure that our educational programs respond to those needs because these students would eventually (and hopefully) go back to their own communities. We want to make sure that they go back and spread the knowledge and contribute to the viability and sustainability of these rural communities.”

**Farmer:** So the government officials that were resistant, were they part of the school?

**Montenegro:** No, they were not. They were not part of the school. They were government-based agencies. What we found is that there is little collaboration and coordination going on among these agencies; hence, there's little understanding about where to go. So that's part of what the findings show as well: that due to this lack of collaboration/coordination and lack of dialogue there isn't a shared vision. And if there isn't a shared vision, then there's a lack of clear direction as to how to channel resources, what type of technical assistance should be provided, what kind of information should be shared with the farmers on an ongoing basis, what kind of programs should be designed. Typically the programs have been designed [without] the participation of the affected, of the farmers themselves. That has been typical. And so that's part of the challenge, exclusion and lack of intentionality on the part of government agencies.

**Farmer:** Yes, to humanize, to put a human face on both groups and have them get together and build community. Now, do the people that work in the agencies—have they lived there for a long time, too, or are they a mobile population around the country?

**Montenegro:** You know, that's a good question. I think it used to be that way before. I think part of the reason why it happened before is because higher education was concentrated in a couple of places in the country. People with master's and Ph.D.s came from either Mexico City or Guadalajara and a few other places. But now you have higher education programs in many states in Mexico that offer master's degrees and/or Ph.D. programs. Now it's mostly people who are locals, native to the state, that frequently run these agencies.

**Farmer:** Well, then, there might be stronger stakeholders.

**Montenegro:** Yes.

**Farmer:** Yes, yes. Well, that's exciting. So what do you see in your own future? Do you know?

**Montenegro:** I see myself maintaining as strong a connection as possible to the sustainable agriculture movement, not just necessarily in Mexico. Farmers—especially family farmers, small farmers—are struggling in every part of the world. My goal is to hopefully be in a position to continue perhaps creating opportunities to shift public policies that are more responsive to rural communities and that support sustainable agriculture, sustainable forestry as well, that support young people. I don't know exactly for sure where this is going to take me in terms of a future organization or professional role, but I do know that I will continue to maintain a connection and a commitment to sustainable agriculture. I have to do it in order to keep going. It's part of my life.

**Farmer:** And do you see your family sometimes?

**Montenegro:** Yes. My parents, they still live at the small farming community, Providencia, where I grew up. My brother and sister also live in Mexico. I'm the only one who emigrated from my family. But I do go back a few times a year, a couple of times. I wish I could be there almost all the time, but I have to now live and appreciate my new reality. Because as an immigrant I've also [been] given opportunities to broaden my views and my perspectives in life and also contribute in different ways to sustainable agriculture.

**Farmer:** Do you ever speak at conferences now?

**Montenegro:** No. No, I have not. I have spoken in a couple of workshops here and there that I was invited to as a speaker. But very few, really. And I actually would have felt pretty inhibited, I think, especially prior to my involvement in the public policy program. The policy program has given me more tools and analyses to be able to speak to some of the issues that I'm concerned about. I'm excited about the future, and this program has given me so much more confidence and opened up a whole range of possibilities. So I'm excited about that.

**Farmer:** Well, it seems to me that what you're doing is so timely, with people talking about local food and going back towards community farming and farmers' markets.

**Montenegro:** Yes, and it's a trend that is actually growing in Mexico as well. I mean, that was rarely ever seen. The CSA [community supported agriculture] concept is growing in some parts of Mexico strongly.

**Farmer:** Oh, really?

**Montenegro:** Yes! People have been organized against the genetically modified seeds and crops, and there is a whole movement in Mexico going on, especially around the preservation of native corn. But in terms of developing just markets, fair markets, it's something that is slowly growing.

**Farmer:** Yes. Good time for you to be graduating.

**Montenegro:** Perfect timing. I'd like to thank you for this opportunity that enabled me to share with you some of my thinking.

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<sup>1</sup>The Green Revolution began post-World War II, when plant breeder and soil scientist Norman Borlaug spearheaded a Rockefeller Foundation-funded program to increase yields of wheat in Mexico. The term itself was coined by U.S. Agency for International Development director William Gaud in 1968 and referred to the attempt to increase crop yields through variety of agricultural technologies including irrigation, “genetically improved” hybrid seeds, petrochemical fertilizers and pesticides, and mechanization. The Green Revolution has been widely criticized by environmentalists, including agroecologists, for its dependence on petroleum-based fertilizers, large-scale irrigation projects, and for promoting monocultures and loss of genetic diversity.

<sup>2</sup> See the oral history with Mark Lipson of Molino Creek in this series.

<sup>3</sup>See the oral histories with Amigo Bob Cantisano, Zea Sonnabend, and others for more on the Ecological Farming Conference [Eco-Farm].