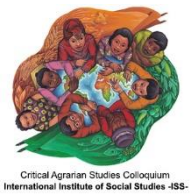

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Land Occupations, Rural Livelihoods and Food Soverignty: the Case of the Movimientos Campesinos in Bajo Aguan Honduras

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Land Occupations, Rural Livelihoods and Food Sovereignty: the Case of the Movimientos Campesinos in Bajo Aguan, Honduras

Claudia Schur and Laurence Roudart

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the world has witnessed growing food, climate, agricultural and ecological crises, as well as deepening poverty, mainly in rural areas (Rosset 2009). In this context, peasant movements organized in many countries to oppose their exclusion from land as a productive resource by actors of the globalized agri-food system. Many of them have united to form *La Via Campesina*, a broad and transnational agrarian movement struggling for peasants' rights and food sovereignty (Borras *et Al.* 2015, Desmarais 2009). Through the food sovereignty paradigm, *La Via Campesina* seeks to politicize debates on food and agriculture from below, by questioning the distribution of productive resources, labor, wealth and power among the various players of the agri-food sector. *La Via Campesina* advocates for a viable and locally controlled food system to improve peasants' livelihoods. According to *La Via Campesina*, agrarian reform is a key step towards food sovereignty (Rosset 2009).

In the absence of agrarian reform policies, peasant movements have used direct action to pressure the state to redistribute land, i. e. collective land occupations.[1] These occupations have drawn a lot of attention from scholars over the last years. Many scholars conceptualize land occupations as peasant-led agrarian reform initiatives (Courville, Patel 2006), that challenge the neoliberal agricultural production model. By occupying land, peasant movements materialize the land struggles, since movements directly and physically confront land-based power (Fernandes 2005). They thus reverse cycles of dispossession and achieve a "counter-enclosure" (Jacobs 2013; Akram Lhodi 2007a: 557; 2007b). Most studies in the Latin American context focus on the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), which has contributed to the settlement of thousands of families.

For most authors (Pahnke 2015; Vergara-Camus 2011, 2009a, 2009b; Martins 2000) agricultural cooperation is central in the struggle against neoliberalism and key in the MST's success. However, scholars mainly look at land occupations from a social movement perspective, especially at their strategies (Fernandes 2005), trajectory and challenges (Ondetti 2008; Meszaros 2000), their interactions with the state (for example their use of law (Brabazon 2017, for Bolivia) and their role in democratization (Carter 2010)). Scholars often focus on the perspective of movement leaders. In terms of impacts, scholars look at the extent to which they have been able to raise social awareness, broadening the democratic process, foster participation and change policies. The concrete impacts on families' daily lives and forms of agricultural production, and to what extent the households improve their living conditions as a result of land occupations are more difficult to

[1]According to their position, authors use either the term of "invasion", "occupation", "recuperation" or "grab back." Since to us it seems the most neutral, we will use the term "occupation."

evaluate (Deere and Royce 2009: 21) It has been less the focus of attention, at least in the English speaking literature.[2]

Yet, we argue, it is essential to deal with the concrete livelihood changes for the families involved in land occupations. Mobilization – what the MST calls the "struggle for the land" - and rhetoric opposition to claim rights are crucial elements of resistance and land occupations. However, land occupations are not only about contesting and disrupting the social order, but also about constructing alternatives during the "struggle on the land" (Pahnke). The right and necessity to implement peasant farming in order to secure livelihoods - land to work it and not for capitalist accumulation - is a central element of the movements' land claims (Moyo, Yeros 2005 35). Ultimately, most people participate in land occupations primarily in response to social exclusion and to build sustainable livelihoods through access to productive land (Deere, Royce 2009; Fernandes 2005). The enhancement of livelihoods and the reduction of social inequalities is thus an important dimension of "success" of land occupations. It is thus key to look at the "struggle on the land." This will also help to move forwards in debates on the implementation of food sovereignty.

The existing literature on the struggle on the land shows that there are important achievements, but also many challenges. In Brazil, during the initial phase of encampment - before the settlement by the state – households depend on donations, state support and wage work in rural or urban areas (Rangel Loera 2010). This period can last several years. Agricultural production is only fostered after the settlement by the state. Pahnke (2015) highlights the importance of the MST's strategy based on production cooperatives, which challenge state power and private property in several ways: through collective work, collective ownership of land, collective debates on the uses of resources, and by encouraging the families to decommodify production. However, he argues that fostering agricultural production is more difficult than education and influencing agrarian reform policies, for several reasons, including the need to pay off debts, members' lack of training and lack of experience in managing agricultural production, as well as their aspirations for large scale production. Vergara Camus (2011, 2009a, 2009b) shows that the MST promotes subsistence production, but as a first step, before focusing on commercial production. The ultimate objective is to reinsert families into modern agriculture under better conditions. The cooperatives allow to buy tools and machines, transform the production and commercialize it. Autonomy is limited and has to be conceptualized as room for manoeuver and negotiation with respect to the state and market; there is no dichotomy between capitalist and non-capitalist. Scholars also highlight that the results of the MST's strategy vary a lot between settings, according to cultural and ideological differences, but also historical characteristics of the environment (Pahnke 2015; Vergara Camus2011, 2009a, 2009b; Martins 2000).

In this paper, we examine the case of the *movimientos campesinos*[3] (peasant movements) that are occupying land in the Bajo Aguan in northern Honduras. This region is known at the international level for its enduring and violent agrarian

[2] We are aware that a large literature exists in Portuguese, and which unfortunately is beyond our language skills. For an extensive overview of literature, see Rangel Loera (2010).

[3] We use the term "movement" because the interviewees use it to describe the organization they are part of. We will not enter here the discussion to what extent they form a social movement.

conflict opposing these movements and local *terratenientes* (landholders) (Human Rights Watch 2014; Kerssen 2013; Amnesty International 2012; FIDH 2011).[4] Most of the activist literature focuses on rights issues, and on the point of view and discourse of movement leaders and other civil society activists. These particularly insist on the importance of land for campesinos to produce food crops for local consumption, and on *campesinos*' opposition to monoculture, especially African palm, the "hallmark crop" (Kerssen 2013) of the region. If c*ampesinos* produce palm, it is because they don't have any choice. This claim is a central pillar of alliance building with other actors - mainly international civil society organizations and networks advocating for peasants' rights and food sovereignty.

However, in one of the few academic studies on the Aguan movements,[5] Leon (2015) highlights the importance of the region's agrarian history, memories and disciplining ideas of development, which shape *campesinos'* livelihoods. One of his key ideas is that since the agrarian reform, the countries' elites constructed palm as the only profitable – and hence desirable- crop. Cultivating palm has become "common sense" for members,[6] thereby closing possibilities for other livelihood options, not only objectively but also subjectively. While there is no doubt about the importance of palm in the agrarian history and livelihoods in the region, we think that it is important to have a closer look at the way the members articulate the production of this crop with other options to make a living, and how these articulations evolve over time. As research has shown, especially in increasingly vulnerable and uncertain contexts, poor people's livelihoods have become more and more diverse, differentiated and changing. In this paper, we use the rural livelihoods approach (Scoones 2015; Ellis 2000; Bebbington 1999) to explore how members have shaped their strategies to survive since land occupation. We especially focus on how the role of farming has evolved over the years within their trajectories, and to what extent it can be considered that they are becoming more food sovereign. We go beyond leaders' discourses to focus on "ordinary members" - on their everyday farming practices, but also their representations and aspirations regarding livelihoods. We focus on the socioeconomic dimension of food sovereignty: food production for local consumption to enhance *campesinos'* livelihoods.

The paper is structured as follows: in section 2, we present the theoretical approach and research methods. In section 3, we briefly explain the *movimientos'* emergence in the context of increasingly vulnerable livelihoods and absence of policy support for access to land in Honduras. We also explain how fieldwork was conducted. In section 4, we present our results, and then conclude.

[4]The few recent qualitative studies on rural livelihoods in Honduras do not focus on collective action for access to land but on diversification strategies at the household level (Nygren, Myatt-Hirvonen 2009), the impact of migration (Reichmann 2011), women's rights to land (Casolo 2009) and on the causes of property rights insecurity (Roquas 2002). The study of Boucher *et Al.* (2005) focuses on impacts of land titling policies on a macro level, using a quantitative approach. Ruben and Van der Berg (2001) focus on non-farm employment in rural areas, also using a quantitative approach.

[5] Some research is currently underway, but to our knowledge has not been published so far.

[6]By "member" we refer to the household head, who legally is the movement member and thus detains the land rights. By "member household" we refer to the households belonging to the movements.

Theoretical approach – linking food sovereignty, land occupations and livelihoods

Food Sovereignty

Within the debates on access to land, food and agriculture, food sovereignty has emerged as a broad-based grassroots movement and counter paradigm to free trade, the corporate agribusiness model and the global food regime (Martiniello 2015: 509; Shattuck et Al. 2015; Ayres, Bosia 2011: 47). Initially, food sovereignty was a common political statement by very diverse small-scale producers who had "lost faith in the ability of magic words like modernization, development, and liberalization to bring prosperity to all" (Hospes 2014: 121). Food sovereignty was a direct attack on the World Trade Organization to denounce the displacement of peasant livelihoods by unequal trade rules (McMichael 2014: 936). The 1996 definition given at the World Food Summit defined food sovereignty as "the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity'' (La Via Campesina 1996, cited in Agarwal 2014). It thus focused on national self-sufficiency and diversity in food systems (Agarwal 2014: 1249). It was a call to bring back sovereignty back to the State, thereby defending and supporting peasant livelihoods (Shattuck *et Al*. 2015: 423). The rise of transnational agrarian movements and their coalitions with international NGOs and donors for advocacy have opened spaces for them to be heard in global governance institutions (Edelman *et Al*. 2014: 914-915). Food sovereignty has become even more important from the 2007-2008 food crisis on (McMichael 2015: 935).

Over time, food sovereignty has been embraced by an increasingly diverse set of local, national and international actors calling for radical changes in food and agricultural policies (Alonso-Fradejas *et Al*. 2015: 433; Hospes 2004 :120; Edelman *et Al*. 2014). These included the rural, urban, farmers and non-farmers, from North and South, consumers and producers: that is, almost everyone involved in the food chain (Borras *et Al*. 2015; Agarwal 2014). Subsequent definitions of food sovereignty thus significantly extended its scope to be inclusive and rally many actors in order to strengthen the movement (Agarwal 2014). Food sovereignty moved from the right of national self-sufficiency in 1996 to local self-sufficiency and decision making autonomy (Martiniello 2015: 510). A range of other rights were included, for example land management and gender issues (Agarwal 2014: 1248). The 2007 Nyéléni Declaration was the product of consensus building on definition among diverse social actors and is still a key reference (Shattuck *et Al*. 2015).

Food sovereignty has been very successful in bringing together a broad-based and diverse movement and to inspire collective action. It has helped to develop new ideas and practices on territory - rather than just land (Borras *et Al.* 2015) -, the relocalization of economy, and agroecology (Martiniello 2015: 509). It has been increasingly framing advocacy of farming rights within a broader struggle of creating the conditions of a viable alternative based on the reconfiguration of social relationships, towards a post-capitalist transition (Shattuck *et Al*. 2015: 430; Akram-Lhodi 2013; Figueroa 2013). It implies fundamental changes in the way food production is organized, by creating alternative land and labour relationships through institutional innovations (Alonso-Fradejas 2015; Agarwal 2014).

Critics, however, have pointed that success has led to "self-congratulatory celebrations" rather than to critical reflection (Edelman et Al. 2014: 911-912). They argue that so far food sovereignty has only achieved very limited changes in the global and local food systems and policies (Hospes 2014; Akram-Lhodi 2013). The main point is that food sovereignty doesn't present a clear, coherent and viable alternative (Hospes 2014). In fact, pluralism within the movement has led to diverging interests, contradictions and incoherencies within implementation strategies, as well as to conceptual limitations (Shattuck *et Al.* 2015; Edelman 2014). Moreover, they argue that since the emergence of food sovereignty, the socioeconomic, political and economic context has changed. The financialization of agriculture, changes in geopolitics, unstable climate conditions, changes in urban and rural ways of making a living (Shattuck *et Al.* 2015) or the rise of flex-crops represent new important challenges for food sovereignty. Yet these "thorny questions" (Edelman *et Al.* 2014: 911-912) are given too little attention. Given these difficulties, scholars like Agarwal have rightly asked: "is it workable on the ground?" (2014).

Over the last years, more in depth and nuanced debates involving both scholars and activists have taken place. While the more skeptical speak of a deadlock in the food sovereignty paradigm and call for fundamental changes (Bernstein 2014; Hospes 2014), others consider that "a new degree of flexibility in the way that food sovereignty is imagined, researched, and put into practice" is needed (Shattuck *et Al.* 2015: 424).

The rural livelihoods approach

The livelihoods approach emerged at the end of the 1980s, when scholars and professionals sought to overcome the "ready-made" solutions to poverty as well as shortcomings of structural and macroeconomic rural development theories (Kay 2006: 464; De Haan, Zoomers 2005). They aimed at getting a better understanding of the diversity and multidimensionality of poverty. Strongly influenced by Sen's concept of entitlements and his capabilities approach, livelihoods emphasized the agency and capability of the poor, who were viewed as subjects actively constructing their own strategies (Kay 2006: 464; Bebbington 2004: 176; Kaag *et Al*. 2003: 3). Influential early papers and frameworks (Chambers and Conway 1991; Scoones 1998) focused on a basic set of assets/capitals, which were seen as basis of livelihood strategy construction through the continuous access to, reallocation of, and trade-offs between these (Bebbington 2004).

A first set of critiques to mainstream livelihood approaches revolved around the analysis of people as neoclassical *homo economicus*. They criticized that transforming assets in strategies was described as material, mechanist, and deterministic processes of rational strategic agents transforming economic assets (capitals) into materialistic outcomes, with the objective to increase assets. Critiques underlined that assets embody other dimensions (Bebbington 1999) and that their value is subjective and relational (Van Dijk 2011). Moreover, people pursue other objectives in life than accumulating capital, and not all their decisions are strategic Kaag *et Al.* 2003). A second set of critiques was that the approach celebrated people's creativity and capacity to survive, even in very harsh contexts, saying little about long-term structural factors constraining people's agency, not only objectively but also subjectively (Sakdapolrak 2014; Van Dijk 2011; O'Laughlin 2004: 388). In fact, social relations shape subordinate's people's access to resources

and livelihood opportunities, but they also shape their subjectivities, identities and positionalities, which are "culturally framed and may be deeply internalized parts of an unconscious social knowledge" that limit the range of options people consider available to them (Scoones 2015: 53). Theses structural factors are underpinned by power relations which reproduce inequality and are thus the major obstacles to overcome poverty (Scoones 2009; Kay 2006: 465; O'Laughlin 2004: 392).

Understanding why members opt for certain activities to survive thus requires both to move away from a neoclassical approach and to adopt a longer term perspective of livelihoods as a process embedded in structural conditions at different levels (Kaag *et Al.* 2003, De Haan, Zoomers 2005). "Livelihoods emerge out of past actions and decisions are made within specific historical and agro-ecological conditions, and are constantly shaped by institutions and social arrangements "(Scoones and Wolmer 2002: 183). This longer term perspective is captured by the concept of livelihood trajectory – or "individual actors' life path" (De Haan, Zoomers 2005). It accounts for the evolution of livelihood strategies over time, taking into account that people take decisions in the light of past experiences and according to future aspirations. The idea is to get more than a "snapshot" of a given situation, but "to penetrate into a deeper layer of beliefs, needs, aspirations and limitations and especially need to be contextualized in relation to power and institutions" (De Haan, Zoomers 2005: 43). These are central but often not reported by people. Furthermore, they argue that we have to move beyond individual strategies because people of a same class have similar dispositions, opportunities and expectations (habitus) (Bourdieu 1980, cited in De Haan, Zoomers 2005). In short, an analysis of livelihoods has to be systemic, thus analyzing the interplay, over time, between factors that are multidimensional, multiscale, and subjective and objective.

Linking land occupations, food sovereignty and livelihoods

In this paper, we focus on the way households have organized their livelihoods since land occupations, with a special focus on their farm activities so as to see to what extent they have become more food sovereign or not.

Following Ellis, "a livelihood comprises the assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital), the activities, and the access to these (mediated by institutions and social relations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household" (2000: 10). Social relations refer to gender, caste, class, age, ethnicity and religion. Ellis also distinguishes between institutions and organizations. Institutions refer to formal and informal rules, and organizations to players (Ellis 2000). A livelihood strategy is "composed of activities that generate the means of household survival" (Ellis 2000: 40). Within households' strategies, we distinguish between 3 types of activities (Ellis 1998):

- Farm activities: non-permanent food crops, perennial cash crops, livestock
- Off-farm activities: agricultural wage work
- Non-farm activities: non-agricultural wage or independent work

We look at the evolution of households' strategies – their trajectories since land occupations. We identify the different factors that come together at different points in time to shape livelihood choices, both by opening up opportunities and by constraining action.

In the light of the previous discussion on food sovereignty (Martiniello 2015; Shattuck *et Al* 2015; Edelman *et Al*. 2014; Akram-Lhodi 2013), we understand food sovereignty as an agricultural and food model based on territorialized, diversified, culturally acceptable food production and consumption, as well as environmentally sound farming practices. It provides for peasant livelihoods and builds local economies, through institutional innovations for land control and the organization of production. Food sovereign practices are those agricultural and food practices by which diverse actors translate these dimensions in specific contexts. While food sovereign practices are an expression of the food sovereignty paradigm, there is neither a unilineal way towards food sovereignty, nor a unique form of practicing food sovereignty. So food sovereign practices can take many forms, and since they are embedded in the dominant economic model, they are incomplete. They are also dynamic.

Since movements aimed at *collectively* occupying land in order to *produce food*, we specifically focus on the socioeconomic dimension of food sovereignty: the enhancement of food production for local consumption. We thus look at 3 interrelated dimensions:

(1) What the households produce: to what extent have households been developing farm activities based on food crop production?
(2) How the households organize production: are there institutional innovations?
(3) What is the role of farm activities in the households' livelihood portfolio? To what extent have farm activities, and in particular food crops, been contributing to households' food and income?

Study setting and fieldwork

Study setting

The Bajo Aguan, a part of the Aguan Valley, is located in the northern department of Colon on the Atlantic Coast of Honduras. Most of the population left the region after the Trujillo Rail Road Company, a subsidiary of United Fruit Company, abandoned its banana plantations ruined by the Panama disease.[7] A few *ganaderos* (ranchers) took possession of the best lands, which they mainly used for pastures and traditional crops like corn, beans and rice. Ex plantation workers formed small *campesino* communities in the mountainous areas. The region had little infrastructure and commercial activity (Macias 2001; Castro Rubio 1995).

[7] The concession dated back to 1912. The company decided to leave the in 1935, taking with it all infrastructure and investments. The land was definitely turned in to the Honduran state in 1942 (Castro Rubio 1994: 29-30).

Source: Google Earth

Tenure structure and agriculture changed radically in the 1970s, when agrarian reform became central in agrarian policies under the growing pressure from the national peasant federations[8] (Edelman, Leon 2013: 1705; Castro Rubio 1994: 9; COCOCH undated: 37). The Aguan – considered as empty - became central in this process.[9] In fact, agrarian reform was a tool for the state to mitigate social unrest after the crisis in the plantation economy, and thus focused on the colonization of the agricultural frontier rather than redistribution. Furthermore, agrarian reform was also a tool to promote a development strategy based on non-traditional export crops. The state created cooperatives, which were supported through access to land and other productive inputs to produce palm and citrus fruit, and built roads and other infrastructure (Macias 2001). The region became one of the country's centers of economic development.

The neoliberal policies introduced at the beginning of the 1990s completely reversed agrarian policies, (COCOCH undated). The *Ley de Modernizacion para el Desarrollo del Sector Agricola (*LMDSA), promulgated in 1992, meant state subsidy withdrawal for the cooperatives, the privatization of their lands and the legalization of land transactions. This led to a rapid process of dissolution of the cooperatives, and the selling out of their land. Most of it concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy landowners (Edelman, Leon 2013: 1710). These agrarian policies supported the development of large agribusinesses because they aimed at modernizing the agricultural sector to improve its insertion in international trade (Nygren, Myatt-Hirvonen 2009; Macias 2001; COCOCH undated). They displaced small-scale producers and led to the decrease of traditional staple crops production for the

[8]There were different successive decrees, but the most important was Decree 170 (1974), by which all lands in the hands of the State were destined to agrarian reform. Moreover, national and *ejido* lands that had been ceded to individuals but were not adequately used, all lands that didn't fulfill their social function, those not worked or indirectly exploited (through lending etc.) could be expropriated. The decree also established the *Instituto National Agrario* (INA) as the instance that organized the adjudication of agrarian reform land (COCOCH undated: 19).

[9]31% of land distributed during the agrarian reform was located in the Aguan (Edelman, Leon 2013: 1708).

national market (COCOCH, undated). Today, African palm monoculture covers most arable lands of the northern coast and continues to be expanded.[10]

Like elsewhere in Latin America, this systematic disengagement of policies with most land-based livelihoods, paralleled by the cut back of government expenditure on social welfare and subsidies of basic foods, entailed semi-proletarianization, livelihoods and food crisis, as well as increased social instability and rural outmigration to urban areas as well as abroad (Kerssen 2013; Rosset 2013; Kay 2006; Bebbington 2004; Appendini 2001; Macias 2001; Veltmeyer 1997). Over the last decades, formerly essentially agrarian livelihoods have become increasingly diverse, flexible and mobile, looking to increase non-farm income (Ellis 1998). This phenomenon is part of what many authors have called Latin America's "new rurality" (Kay 2008).

In Honduras, hurricane Mitch[11] further exacerbated the increasing levels of poverty and was a catalist for land occupations (Edelman, Leon 2013; Casolo 2009). Organized by the national peasant federations with support of the Diocese of Trujillo and the director of the *Instituto Nacional Agrario* (INA) of that time, a mix of very heterogeneous families were brought together in the *Movimiento Campesino del Aguan* (MCA). Families had different backgrounds – urban and rural, different regions of the country – but all had precarious livelihoods. In a specific *momentum* allowing access to land, they seized this opportunity with the hope to enhance their livelihoods by producing food for themselves and their families. They occupied around 3000 ha of national land they claimed had been illegally sold to *terratenientes* by the Municipality after the dissolution of the agrarian reform cooperatives[12]. Indeed land transactions following the promulgation of the LMDSA were often confuse, and contested because parts of the lands had been sold illegally or under pressure.

The experience of the MCA received strong international attention and support because it was overshadowed by conflicts and repression. Despite of this and the rapidly vanishing support from the INA under the following administrations, the MCA created an important antecedent, and dozens of similar occupations by other groups followed in subsequent years. These invoked the only arguments accepted under the LMSDA: the absence of a legal title, the non-compliance with the legal land ceilings and the obligation of adequate land use.

An important step in the conflict was Decree 18-2008 passed by the Zelaya government (2006-2009), which granted legal titles to those c*ampesinos* who had been cultivating land for more than 10 years (Kerssen 2013: 39-42). However, after the 2009 military coup which overthrew president Zelaya, this decree was declared unconstitutional and social conflicts intensified again. A turning point was the formation of the *Movimiento Unificado Campesino del Aguan* (MUCA), which was the first movement in occupying running palm plantations belonging to Miguel Facussé, one of Honduras' most important *terratenientes* and businessmen.

[10] It is the third most important export crop after coffee and bananas (Edelman, Leon 2013: 1713). Its share in the country's PIB is 4,86% in 2014 (Rios 2014: 6).

[11] Hurricane Mitch hit the country in 1998. It is central in the agrarian history in Honduras, which was the worst affected country in Central America. It caused massive losses of infrastructure, crops and stored production (Morris *et Al.* 2002: 49-50; Macias 2001: 172).

[12] Other lands occupied by the movements were among those national lands destined by the state to agrarian reform.

Since the coup, competition for land has further increased in the context of the deepening of neoliberal restructuring. The subsequent governments have supported the expansion of palm plantations even more massively than those before, and have sought to increase direct foreign investments, mainly in tourism, mining and *maquiladoras,* through land concessions.[13] Over the years, movements, backed by other national and international civil society organizations, have relentlessly denounced the militarization of the region, repression, human rights violations and criminalization of the movements by the state and landowners' private security forces (Edelman, Leon 2013: 1712; Kerssen 2013: 42).

Fieldwork

Our findings are based on 8 months of fieldwork – September to December 2014 and August to December 2015. We collected detailed qualitative data on the trajectories and current situation of the movements and the member households, mainly through semi structured interviews. Participant observation provided us with valuable additional information allowing to verify and compare information from interviews.

During the first period of fieldwork, we stayed with a family of the *Movimiento Campesino del Aguan* (MCA) and also visited six other movements in the region. Since movements are independent from each other and located in different areas of the region, this allowed us to have a better overview of their specificities and commonalities, in terms of history, legal situation and agricultural production. We had two interview guides. The first was destined to movement activists, whom we met at the local *Observatorio Permanente de Derechos Humanos del Aguan* (OPDHA).[14] It aimed at gathering information on the history and current situation of the movements. Among other it included questions on the process of organizing, the legal situation of lands, the living conditions and organization on the settlements or the organization of production, and relations with external actors (both governmental and non-governmental). These activists also granted us access to the movements. The second interview guide was aimed at understanding individual experiences of the households engaged in the movements: their livelihoods before and since occupation, as well as their farming practices.[15] When possible, we interviewed a same person several times, or different members of a same household, since in many cases several members contribute to the livelihoods. Interviews took place either in some common area (meeting area, *pulpería…*), at their home or in the fields. Many times, the member showed us around on his lands, which allowed us to get a better understanding of the agricultural reality.

During the second period of fieldwork, we deepened our understanding of the members' livelihood trajectories. We focused on 3 movements: the *Movimento Campesino del Aguan* (MCA), the *Movimiento Campesino de Rigores* (MCR) and

[13]Emblematic is "Honduras is open for business", an initiative launched in 2011 by the government, which includes a series of laws and projects to attract foreign investment, and which has been widely criticized by civil society as measure that sells off national resources belonging to Hondurans.

[14] The Permanent Observatory is a local organization created in 2011 by members of the movements, with international support, among other to document human rights' violations in the area and grant support to victims.

[15] Based on the method of "Compared Agriculture" Mazoyer (1993), Mazoyer and Roudart (1997), Touzard and Ferraton (2009). It has been developed to analyze family farms, and thus had to be adapted to the context in the Bajo Aguan.

Unidos Lucharemos. These had been occupying land –most of which was idle by the time of occupation - for several years. This was essential to understand the evolution of livelihoods and especially farming. The movements were of different ages - the MCA occupied land since 2000, the MCR since 2000 (but suffered a violent eviction in 2011, which was severe setback), and *Unidos Lucharemos* since 2011. There is of course no unique trajectory; of course each movement had their own characteristics, histories and temporalities. However, the fact that they were at different moments of the occupation process allowed us to better understand similar patterns of evolution.

Again, we stayed at families' homes in each of the 3 movements. We focused on the trajectories of 40 member households, which we interviewed several times each. Among other, our interview guide focused on (1) household composition (2) households' main livelihood activities when they decided to join the occupation (3) the process of joining, aspirations and difficulties (4) the evolution of their livelihoods since occupation. (5) Farm activities, both collective and individual, including types of crops and animals, labor and farming practices.

During both stays, we actively participated in daily life at a family's *pulperia*[16], attended movement meetings, many different social events and celebrations,[17] and frequently accompanied members to collective and individual work on the fields. We also participated in several trainings, marches and protests organized by local support organizations. We took daily field notes, based on observations and informal conversations before and after interviews. We also took many pictures to document both living conditions and farming practices. In addition, we conducted around 25 interviews with key informants from local and national organizations and NGOs working with the movements on agriculture, land, food and rights issues, and which are based both in the Bajo Aguan and in Tegucigalpa, where we stayed twice, during a week. Other sources of information included various types of documents: legal documents, project documents from the local NGOs working with the movements, maps of the region, maps of the movements' lands, etc.). As the occupied lands are extensive and at times difficult to access, and official maps not always available, we asked several members to make drawings of settlements and fields.

Results

Movements, Empresas Asociativas Campesinas and households

Today, around 15 *movimientos campesinos* of very different ages and sizes are occupying land in different parts of the Aguan river lowlands. The lowlands are relatively urbanized and well connected, since the main road that leads to the main urban centers of the rest of the country hugs the Aguan river in this area. Most land is concentrated in the hands of three large *terratenientes.* Palm monoculture covers most of the arable lowlands, and continues to be expanded.

[16] Small family-run shop that sells food and other essential items.
[17] For example marriages, birthdays, religious services, and a Christmas celebration.

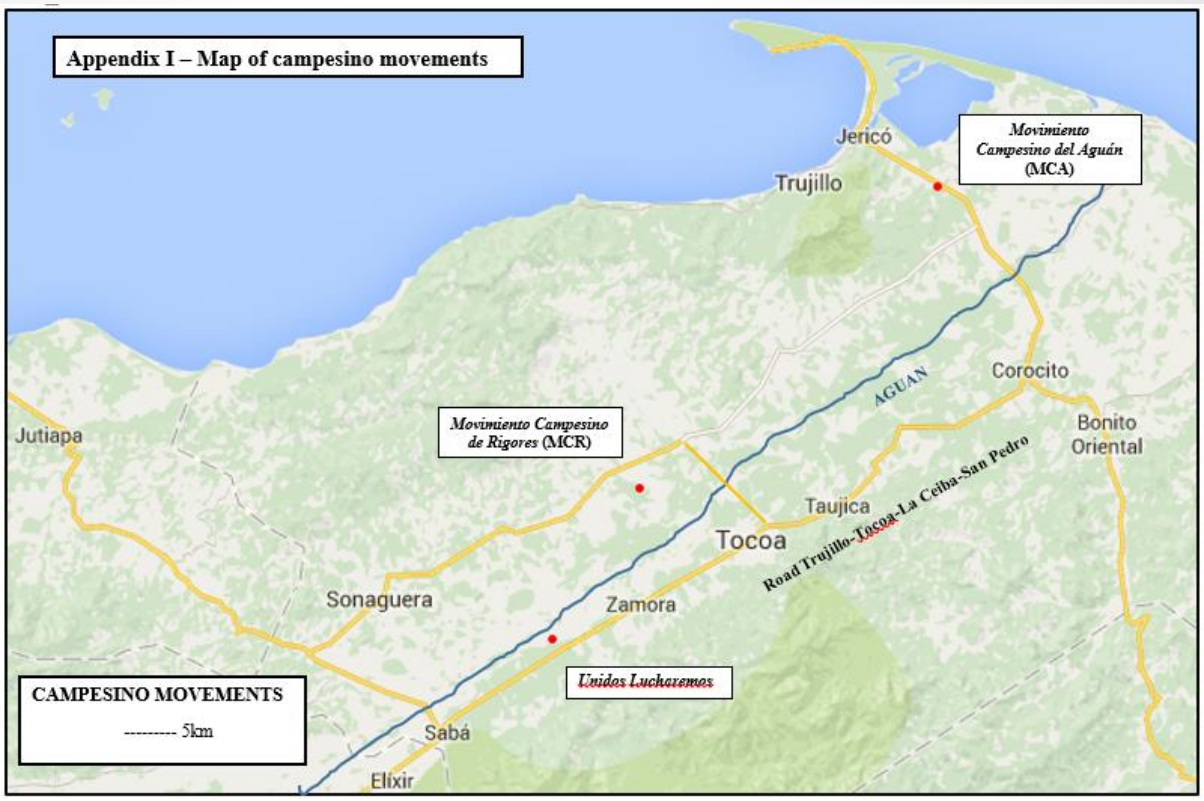
Each movement is composed of one or more *Empresas Asociativas Campesinas* (EAC) (peasant enterprises). Forming an EAC is a legal requirement to introduce a land claim to the *Instituto Nacional Agrario* (INA). The INA has to verify the state of the land, and if it decides to expropriate it, to negotiate a compensation with the current holder (for the *mejoras* on the land, i.e. infrastructure, crops etc.). However, this process is slow, little transparent and its outcomes more than uncertain. So the movements occupy the claimed lands to put pressure on the INA. If an agreement is reached, the INA pays the *terrateniente,* and provisional titles are granted to the EACs, which have 20 years to pay back the INA. Each EAC has to follow a *reglamento interno* (rules of procedure). Among other, it regulates the collective work, which in the majority of EACs is around 3 days per week.

With it 45 EACs, the MCA is the largest of the 3 movements. As mentioned above, the MCA occupies around 3000 ha of formerly national lands which hosted a military base in the 1970s and were sold under dubious circumstances by the municipality to local *terratenientes* at the beginning of the 1990s. The MCR – composed of 8 EACs - and *Unidos Lucharemos* – composed of 1 EAC- occupy private lands –around 600 and 100 ha respectively. Both movements argue that the *terratenientes'* land exceeds the authorized land ceiling and that he didn't use it adequately. The number of members per EAC also varies greatly, from 4 to 30. So does the size of occupied land: between 30 and more than 100 *manzanas*[18] per EAC.[19]

The three sites have both advantages and disadvantages in terms of proximity to the river (and thus soil quality), roads, and urban areas. The MCR is located a few km from the Aguan, close to a secondary road, about 30 minutes from Tocoa. *Unidos Lucharemos* is located right on the Aguan, and a few km from the main road linking the town of Saba and Tocoa. The MCA is located further away from the river Aguan and Tocoa, in the dryer hillsides. However, it is right on the main road, and only a few km from the seaside town of Trujillo.

[18] 1 *manzana* = 0,697 ha.

[19] There is no fixed amount of land per household. It varies between around 5 and 15 *manzanas*.



Source: elaborated by the authors based on Google Maps

The basis of the household is the nuclear family, which shares a house as well as income and consumption. Very often, adult children – either without partner or separated - and sometimes their children. Members of the extended family and friends may also temporarily or permanently live with the household. Furthermore, in most households, one or more members (mainly male adults) have migrated to urban areas in Honduras or headed north (mainly to Mexico and the US).

Productive and reproductive roles within the household are well defined and highly gendered. Traditionally, the main income provider is the male household head. Adult unmarried adult children – especially sons - also contribute to income, but often keep a higher part for personal expenses. Young children and the elderly help with small tasks. The girls and women of the household are in charge of time consuming reproductive tasks and the backyard. At least over the last generation, however, gender roles have been evolving, and many women now contribute to some extent to income. This can be because they are the household head, but often it also happens at a later stage of the household's life cycle. On the one hand, their children have grown and they thus have less reproductive tasks. On the other hand, their husbands are older and do less of the exhausting off farm work. This pushes the women to find complementary income sources, especially when their grown up children have left the household and thus no longer regularly contribute to income. This being said, children often settle close to their parents' home. Frontiers in terms of income and consumption are blurry. Income is not shared, but food is often cooked together and shared with the extended family and visitors.

Participating in land occupations: origin of families, expectations and process of joining

Households came from very different places. Some came from the villages and towns close to the occupied land, others from other parts of the department, or even other departments. Although in different ways, they all had precarious livelihoods. Most were asset poor young couples with several small children, and who had, at best, barely finished primary school. In many cases, the household head was the only one who generated an income. Many of these households had very mobile life paths in search for opportunities. They participated in the occupation because they saw land as the key asset they were lacking. Their main expectation was to significantly improve their livelihoods through farming, especially through food crops for own consumption. Moreover, they would have a place on their own and a patrimony for their children. Many members mentioned that joining a movement was their only option to get access to land.

However, there were also differences between them in terms of livelihood activities, assets and expectations. We distinguish 3 categories of households. A first category includes those who, at the time they decided to join, had been living in urban areas for a long time, and depended either on non-farm activities or on a mix of non-farm and off farm activities. Their income sources were unstable, and they lived with their parents or had to rent. They had spent their childhood in rural areas and, given their precarious situation in an often violent urban context, wanted to give farming a try and see if they could improve their livelihoods. A second category of families came from rural areas, and depended on a combination of off-farm and on farm work. They had access to land through different types of contracts. They cultivated food crops, principally corn and beans, both for own consumption and for the market. They decided to join the movement in order to stop renting. They saw this as a way to expand farm activities, thereby escaping from wage work. A third category was from remote rural areas in the mountains. These families farmed a lot, and when available did some off farm work. They had land, but its quality was low or their access was threatened. So they were looking for another piece of land to farm that would be of better quality, and also closer to urban areas, mainly to have better market opportunities as well as the possibility to educate their children.

Although to different degrees, there were always key actors who supported the group of initial organizers to identify lands, and provide legal and material support (for example, in the case of the MCA, the national peasant federations and the Diocese of Trujillo). Especially for those families not living in the area of the occupation, kinship networks were essential to get involved in the occupation. Often the household head decided to join because other members of his enlarged family were part of the movement. At this time, joining was not complicated, because often the movements needed more members to form a EAC and carry out the occupation.

On occupation: the dependency on food provisions and the slow emergence of food crops

For the families, the first months of the occupation were a very hard time – often far beyond what they had imagined. They had to start from nothing on land that had often lied idle for years. Life was characterized by very rough work, violence,

fear of eviction and very poor livelihood conditions. Although some brought a few resources with them or got support from their families outside the group, they had very limited means to invest in production. Moreover, they were regularly evicted and harvests destroyed. Due to the hardships, many families left during these first months of occupation.

During the first months and sometimes even years, the households' livelihood strategies were mainly based on food provisions provided by external actors (the Diocese of Trujillo, several national and international NGOs). These actors also provided support for collective non-permanent food crop production (beans, corn, rice, yucca) for own consumption and to generate some income, for different reasons. First, food crops had several practical advantages. They could be harvested after a relatively short period of time. They required a lot of labour – which was available - but relatively little starting capital, and most members were familiar with them. Second, the external actors encouraged these food crops for ideological reasons, that is, to promote collective resistance based on peasant farming.

Due to the ongoing conflicts, the members were doing very little off-farm work. On the one hand, the local *terratenientes* didn't hire the movement members. On the other hand, the movement members were afraid to leave the settlements due to the violence and repression. Moreover, the movements had set up strong rules that imposed members to physically remain on the land in order to defend it. The act of collectively occupying land also generated a feeling of solidarity among these families which often barely knew each other before joining. In fact, leaving all behind to start from new in an unfamiliar environment was a strong decision. They had collectively taken a high risk. Although the households were initially differentiated in terms of assets, in this new place they were all experiencing the same hardships and violence. They also shared the common objective of remaining on the land in order to improve their livelihoods, and had a common opponent, the *terrateniente*. From this first period, many recall a spirit of solidarity and *compañerismo*, and mechanisms of collective support (such as community security, or support to build houses).

The changing role of farming within livelihoods: towards a strategy based on non and off-farm

After a few months, external actors stopped providing food provisions, but continued to support production. This support strongly oriented productive choices towards collective food production like rice, yucca, watermelon or vegetables. Since the beginning, there were also informal arrangements and so members cropped patches of collective land individually. They cultivated food crops, which were important to make ends meet, because they didn't have the means to invest in permanent crops. Moreover, conflicts were still latent and the movements didn't have a secured access to land; an eviction was always possible, making it hazardous to plant permanent crops.

Despite of this, households needed to find alternative livelihood sources. In fact, returns form farming were too limited. As main reasons, they evoked bad soils and climate, as well as lack of inputs and equipment. Farming under these conditions also required skills, knowledge, and physical endurance. Part of the members had only very little experience with farming. Moreover, many expressed that they were not used to work collectively, and had had difficulties to adapt to it. Moreover, they

were used to salaried work and thus regular monetary entries in addition to farming. Although jobs were scarce, underpaid, hard and mostly not permanent, members increasingly neglected farming – especially collective - and looked for other income sources.

Diversification into off-farm work was possible because over time, more opportunities for unskilled off farm jobs slowly started to appear. In fact, when negotiations around land started, land conflicts became less open and violent. On the one hand, this meant that members' physical presence to defend the land was less needed, and on the other hand that *terratenientes* became more inclined to employ members. There was also diversification into non-farm activities. In fact, many had also some other skills or experience (for example in construction), and thus often returned to their previous activities. Control by the EACs declined, so diversification also increasingly included temporal migration outside the region. Despite of these new possibilities, households remained in an extremely precarious situation and seized all work opportunities.

Over time, as children became young adults, women played a growing role in income generation. Some started working off-farm in specific "women's jobs" like picking loose palm fruit or packaging bananas. But most of the time, they did very diverse non-farm jobs, both employed and independent: tortilla selling, washing, sewing... For many households, these daily incomes became the pillar of their livelihoods. Grown up children also increasingly contributed to income generation. Many were better educated than their parents, and some started to find more skilled non-farm jobs and/or migrated. However, their contribution remained less important (both less regular and lower) than that of their mothers. In fact, as mentioned earlier, their parents didn't expect them to give all the money they earned to the household.

All households remained poor, but the increasing off and especially non-farm diversification slowly brought about internal social differentiation. For many households, both collective and individual farming became a more secondary activity. It became a fall back option for those who struggled to obtain sufficient off and non-farm income.

Provisional titles and the rise of cash crops

A key moment in the evolution of farm activities were the agreements passed with the landowners. Provisional land titles were granted to the EACs. This unleashed a process of cash crops plantation. In fact, the risk of eviction decreased. Moreover, land was now officially and clearly delimited, so members felt more secure to invest. On the other hand, with these agreements, the pressure for profit generation through farming increased, since the compensations for the *terratenientes* were high. Moreover, since off and non-farm work had been increasingly available, expectations for income levels rose. Finally, many household heads were getting older and started to think about means of survival when they would be too old to work off farm. This was possible at this moment of the households' life cycle, since often their wives and children generated the necessary income to cover the daily consumption needs. Moreover, NGOs started to support permanent crops and livestock. So at this moment, the material conditions of land security, more capital and labor met the subjective conditions - the faith in cash crops and a new preoccupation for the future - to invest into crops that didn't give

immediate returns.[20] Often they had little experience with cultivating these crops - they had not cultivated them with their parents. However, they had learned about them during off farm work or through courses provided by NGOs that supported their implementation.

Two cash crops, oranges and palm, as well as livestock, embodied hope to secure their future livelihoods. Once planted, these cash crops required less labor, and would be there for many years. Members deemed them less vulnerable to climate, to grow on poorer soils, and to provide higher and more stable incomes than food crops. A similar logic applied to livestock. In the case of the MCA, many EACs had large tracts of rocky and hilly land, which the families couldn't crop entirely. This perception of cash crops certainly partly reflected agroecological, equipment and market conditions. However, it also reflected the fact that cash crops for export – especially palm - have a long history in the region. As mentioned above, these crops have been continuously promoted by the state over the last decades. Moreover, members continuously saw the welfare and success of the *terratenientes* they worked for.

In the case of the MCA, since external actors supported EACs and not individual members, cash crop plantation first started at collective level. Over time, however, members' differential personal investment in collective farming increasingly led to internal conflicts within the EACs.[21] Together with the lack of faith that collective farming could enhance their livelihoods, these conflicts contributed to the decline of collective farming, until the complete individualization of collective livestock or palm in many EACs. In the case of the MCR, there was no external support for cash crops. The EACs planted a few *manzanas* collectively, but mostly members invested individually. In fact, through the agreements, the EACs ceased some land to every member for a *huerta familiar* (family garden), usually around 1 or 2 *manzanas*. Although they had cropped land individually before the agreements, this created a feeling of individual property and security over the land. Much like food crops, they more and more associated collective farming with poverty and failure. Both were synonyms for survival, insecurity and continuous loss of harvest. In this context, it was not surprising that individual cash crops were perceived as the only farm option allowing to get out of poverty.

Of course, cash crop production didn't happen in a homogeneous way. Since cash crops required more starting capital, and only provided returns after several years, it was a long term strategy primarily done by the better off - those who regularly accessed income from off farm and non-farm – including remittances -, and thus capital to invest. In an environment of daily survival (need for cash, hardships), this type of long term strategizing was of course difficult for many. Although they didn't go hungry anymore, often everyday life was a continuous struggle. For many, off farm and non-farm activities remained occasional and didn't allow them to surpass daily survival. Therefore they also often reasoned in terms of short term improvements; the little bit of occasional income surplus was often spent on improving the diet or housing, health care, schooling, pay off debts, or buy

[20] However, lack of capital remained a problem, since the state didn't provide any support for production.
[21] Members were not kicked out and replaced –maybe because leadership was too weak or because most EACs already lacked members – due to the very harsh living conditions, many families left during the first weeks or months of occupations.

consumer goods like phones or stoves. Over the last years, they have also started to plant cash crops, but to a lesser extent and at a slower pace.

In the process of cash crop plantation, there have been switches from one (semi) permanent crop to another. For example, plantain – a semi-permanent cash crop – is often an intermediate step towards permanent cash crops. Livestock has often been replaced by palm, which members perceived as a more promising alternative. Both livestock and oranges have been "rediscovered" more recently, since members are starting to have doubts about palm, essentially because price have been declining sharply.

Livelihood strategies today: the importance of non and off-farm activities, and the hope given by individual cash crops

Collective ownership and labour was not a choice made by the households. As mentioned above, many found it difficult to adapt to it. Moreover, it was relatively time consuming and generated little income. Members saw it as a constraint but felt they had to comply with their *reglamento* – which embodies the rules imposed by the INA. Moreover, external actors mostly provided support at collective level. Members have thus imagined mechanisms to render collective ownership and work more flexible. The most common is either to do ones share of work on another day or to attribute a collective parcel to each member to take care of it. Another very common thing for those who can afford it is to hire someone to do the collective work, often someone from the extended family.

Their main focus is on individual crops. The better off – those who have more non and off farm income - hire other members of the extended family or *compañeros,* either to do all the farm work or in key moments like harvest. Family remains the main provider of support, rather than the EAC or the movement. Many members regret the *compañerismo* of the initial times. As one of them stated "*Aqui cada uno reza por su santo*!"

Most members grow around 0.5 to 1 *manzana* of corn and/or up to 0.5 *manzana* of beans, once or twice a year. Some members, however – mainly the younger ones who have developed independent non-farm activities and/or planted cash crops – grow them less. In addition, most households have a few fruit trees, little patches of vegetables and a few backyard animals on their plot, mainly poultry and from time to time a pig. Corn is also the only food crop still planted collectively by several EACs, but frequency and extension seems to be decreasing, except in the case of *Unidos Lucharemos*.

Corn and beans are for the household's own consumption in the first place. Small quantities are also given to the extended family and friends or traded in their or the surrounding communities. This is also the case of fruit, vegetables and eggs. In the case of corn, members also often sell larger quantities to richer individuals outside of the community or to the so-called *camiones* (trucks) coming from San Pedro or the south of the country. Whenever possible, members have started to cover their individual land – between 1 and 15 ha - with cash crops, and often plan to extend it. Except in the MCA, few members sell them yet, but they are for longer distance trade (national market and beyond). Often they have little accurate information about the products' final destination, because they mainly deal with *coyotes* (intermediaries).

Today, the contribution to food and income of both food crops and cash crops is very limited, and doesn't cover at all households' consumption needs.[22] Bean and corn productivity is low. Harvests have been even worse during the last three years due to climate extremes. Often it is not enough for consumption until the next harvest. Fruit and vegetables are only occasionally consumed. Although they are a welcomed complement to vary diet, households don't seem to consider them essential, so most do not seek to actively grow them. Chickens are regularly decimated by a contagious disease.

Income from farming is also limited. Households sell corn it at the moment of the harvest, when prices are low. In fact, most members have limited storage capacity.[23] More importantly, they cannot afford to defer the sale since they need cash on a regular basis. Collective corn indirectly contributes to members' livelihoods, since it is used to feed collective animals, to cover the EAC' running costs and if there is enough, is reinvested in collective crops. Since most of the cash crops have been planted recently, they don't produce yet. Exceptions are palm in the case of the MCA and plantains (since they produce after only 9 months). Moreover productivity of cash crops is also low. In the case of palm, prices have been steadily declining during the past years.

So today, households depend essentially on off farm and non-farm work. They have to purchase most of the daily foodstuffs. Nevertheless, households hope that the share of their income provided by cash crops – both on individual and collective lands - will increase during the next years.

Conclusion

Members participated in land occupations to improve their livelihoods. They wished land to work and produce food for their families. It was for many a way to escape a violent urban context and subordination within wage work. Land occupations were thus a way to become more food sovereign.

Our research reveals that although the movements have been relatively successful in obtaining access to land, this has only partially led to food sovereign livelihood strategies among members. These have started with collective food crop production and more horizontal labour relations. Over time, however, they have progressively reduced food crop production and increasingly returned to off-farm and non-farm activities. They have individualized collective lands and are gradually planting permanent cash crops for longer distance markets. This has gone hand in hand with social differentiation. Through our research, we have highlighted how this process came about: increasingly deagrarianized livelihood trajectories before land occupation, together with a series of structural constraints – agroecological, economic, political, sociocultural – rendered peasant farming hard and non-viable, especially food production.

Today, many feel disappointed, especially in view of the sacrifices they made to occupy the land. Not only do their livelihoods continue to be very precarious, but

[22] The diet is essentially based on beans, rice and tortilla, and plantain for those who grow it. Whenever possible, this is complemented by eggs, cheese and poultry.
[23] Those who have silos can only store up to 6 *cargas* (1 carga = 200 pounds); others use bags, but these last less time.

many feel they still struggle to offer a significantly better future to their children. As a result, especially the younger members and the new generations associate food crop production with poverty and marginalization, and see it as a constraint to be overcome rather than a livelihood choice. For many, hopes and aspirations for their families' future lie now in non-farm activities complemented by individual cash crop production rather than diversified food crops.

However, while not currently a significant income source, land is still a key asset for the households. In fact, the land contributes to their livelihoods in many other ways. Members produce part of their food. Crops and animals act as a safety net and give them stability. They clearly gained quality of life through housing. They also escaped urban violence, and many older members have been able to reduce wage work.

The families' future on the occupied lands, however, is more than uncertain. Based on our assessment of their current livelihood incomes, it is not very likely that they will be able to pay back the state in the required time span. Moreover, the state actively promotes concessions in the region, so competition around land is increasing. In addition, the next generation doesn't really have a future on the lands. Although some have been able to become a member, most are not. So either they leave, or their parents split their plot to allow them to build their house. They live in the countryside and help their parents on the land, but farming is not part of their life in the same way as for their parents. If the latter are better-off, they have been able to give them education. But many do unqualified wage work. Many migrate and most plan to do so.

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Nazioarteko Hizketaldia

ELIKADURAREN ETORKIZUNA ETA NEKAZARITZAREN ERRONKAK XXI. MENDERAKO:

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