

AcPrac Case Study

From Fights for Land to Mutualistic Collaborations Between Academia and Social Agents

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Special thanks to: We would like to emphasise the collective efforts that have shaped our reflections, through our work with communities, organisations, grassroots groups, as well as the interactions and many experiences that we shared with them.

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About AFSEE

[The Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity \(AFSEE\)](#) at the LSE International Inequalities Institute is an innovative fellowship programme that is funded through a landmark grant from Atlantic Philanthropies.

AFSEE aims to build a community of changemakers whose work addresses social and economic inequalities across the globe, while supporting them in developing imaginative approaches to their work. Adopting an ethos of collective action, the programme encourages collaborations between a range of stakeholders, including academics, activists, artists, development practitioners, and policymakers.

About the AcPrac Project

This case study is published as part of the '[Exploring the Potential of Academic-Practitioner Collaborations for Social Change \(AcPrac\)](#)' project. The AcPrac project has two key objectives: 1) to contribute to AFSEE's theory of change by exploring the conditions that are conducive to developing generative processes of knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners; and 2) to examine the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching inequalities, and particularly how the latter might be reproduced through the research process itself.

The project also makes theoretical contributions by reflecting on the drivers behind the collaborations that different stakeholders pursue and it explores the potential of collaborative research, as a methodology, in challenging knowledge inequalities and in decolonising research.

From Fights for Land to Mutualistic Collaborations Between Academia and Social Agents

Abstract

Drawing on our experience working with social movements struggling for state recognition of territorial rights across countries in Latin America, we argue that there are at least three essential aspects for conceptualising fair and effective collaborations between academia and practitioners; first is the capacity to cultivate nurturing relationships, where agents openly discuss their collaboration interests and aims, while genuinely helping each other achieve them (what we call '*mutualism*'). Second is observing the context and identifying the role of each agent within the broader *ecosystem of relationships* in which any collaboration takes place. This is essential to spatially and temporally locate the collaboration (in its broader network and as part of a longer process that goes beyond its timeline). This process entails being frank about the possibilities and limits of collaboration as well. The third aspect is to destabilise the westernised hierarchy in knowledge production, by treating practitioners' knowledge on equal footing. This in turn provides opportunities for fruitful theoretical developments. Keeping these three elements in mind can help give rise to collaborations that last longer, prove more generative for those involved, and effectively challenge the inequalities that pervade in knowledge production.

Towards Long, Fruitful and Radical Collaborations

How can academics and social movements forge better collaborations amongst each other? In what contexts can these yield effective and sustainable results, overcoming the kinds of inequalities that often shape knowledge production? What differences do we witness between collaborations that emerge from social movements and those that come from academia? And how may we learn from them? These are the central guiding questions of our reflection, which we consider important for the purposes of directing our attention towards the aspects that, in our experience, have facilitated or hindered the sustainability of collaboration between academia and a specific type of 'practitioner'¹: namely, social movements for land in Latin America, and particularly in Colombia. The questions that guide our investigation allow us to focus on several aspects that we deem crucial for understanding what needs to be improved in collaborations between academia and other practitioners.

We consider it important to pay attention to the *interest* raised by individuals seeking collaboration and to reflect on its origins - in other words, whether it is a call that derives from social movements or from academia - and to honestly reflect on its implications. It may be uncomfortable to recognise the possibility that the only interest is in taking advantage of a resource; however, this is not necessarily detrimental to building a better collaborative relationship. This step allows us to then consider a second element; the *type of relationship ecosystem* in which collaborations between academia and social movements take place. Identifying the ecosystems that are most consistent with the aim of achieving structural, societal changes, is crucial for allowing academia to contribute with relevant and appropriate

¹ Here, we use a broad, general notion of 'practitioner' including activists, leaders, social movements, non-governmental organisations and other agents whose work seeks to produce changes in society.

knowledge. However, this is only possible if academic partners are invested in thoroughly questioning the *power* that they hold in the knowledge production system.

In line with these elements of analysis, our approach aims to foster better collaboration between academia and practitioners including, at least, through an attempt to create relationships that are guided by mutualism, where both parties achieve their respective aims through mutual support. Achieving a relationship ecosystem based on mutualism requires a more honest dialogue about the interests that give rise to collaboration between academia and practitioners, and about specific actions to counter the effects of coloniality of power in knowledge production.



The hands of a historic peasant leader of the Valle del Cauca Workers' Association (ASTRACA), after a long day of hard work. Photo by Berta Camprubí.

We base our reflection on our experience with people's movements that fight for land in Colombia (and Latin America more broadly). We focus on two processes that illustrate both positive and negative factors within the relationship between academia and social movements. On one hand, we refer to the fight of the *Colombian Peasant Movement* for constitutional recognition as political subjects, particularly given its aim to convince the state to count the peasantry using a statistical instrument. On the other, we refer to the *Regional Movement for Land and Territory* (MxTT), which has been documenting and interlinking different success stories of access to land by communities in the region, including Colombia.

To this end, we briefly present both processes in the following section, describing the type of relationship, past and present, between academia and these social movements. We turn in the second section to presenting our analysis of the *interest* underscoring the collaborations between academia and social movements, as well as to the *relationship ecosystem* and *coloniality of power/knowledge* within them. We conclude by summarising the main lessons that can be drawn from our analysis, reviewing the central elements that form our proposal to achieve better collaborations between academia and practitioners.

The Cases: Struggles for Territorial Rights

A. *Statistical Counting of the Peasantry and Academia's Contribution*

The first case that we will analyse is the relationship between the peasant movement and a section of Colombian academia that researches agricultural topics. This interaction arose in the wider context of the Colombian peasant's decades-long fight for recognition, in response to the 'asymmetry' of rights created by the Political Constitution of 1991 (Güiza Gómez *et al.*, 2020, p.164). This introduced multiculturalism as a way of recognising and embracing the diversity of Colombian peoples, but by doing so it denied peasant communities the rights granted to indigenous and black communities. While the latter are recognised as political subjects with differentiated rights - such as accessing collective ownership of their territories or preserving their cultural traditions - peasant communities were left unprotected and named using the ambiguous 'agricultural workers' category (República de Colombia, 1991 Art. 64). For this reason, the demands of the Colombian peasant movement include reforming the Constitution to clearly recognise peasants as cultural, political and economic subjects and agents worthy of special protection (Congreso Nacional Agrario, 2003).

Within the framework of this struggle, between 2013 and 2017, several peasant organisations took legal action, intending to convince the state to count the peasantry using official statistics. In 2018, a writ for protection of constitutional rights brought by over 1700 peasants from across the country, coordinated by the most important peasant organisations and with legal advice from Dejusticia (a human rights NGO), bore fruit and the judges ruled in favour of the peasant movement (Güiza Gómez, Bautista Rebelo and Fuerte, 2018). Thus, despite the fact that, due to lack of time, it was not possible to demand the state to include additional questions in the population census that the national government at the time would carry out, the judges did order the state to define a concept of peasantry (with the participation of the claimant peasant organisations), in order to count the number of Colombian peasants and design differentiating public policies for this sector (Güiza Gómez, 2018). At this point, academia became involved, since a roundtable was created to bring together peasant organisations – accompanied by the NGO Dejusticia, executive state agencies, such as the

National Department for Statistics (DANE), as well as independent regulatory institutions, such as the National Attorney General's Office. The academic committee was responsible for creating a concept of 'peasantry,' by working in cooperation with the peasant organisations. This was the context and aim of the collaboration between academia and the peasant movement.

For months, peasant organisations and academics affiliated with several Colombian universities discussed the concept of peasantry to be proposed to the institutions. The peasant organisations that led the process - namely, the Cauca Peasant Working Group (formed of CIMA, CNA-Pupsoc and Fensuagro-CUP), the National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC) and the National Association of Peasant Reserve Areas (ANZORC) - provided documents and reflections on the defining characteristics of the peasantry and rural life (Güiza Gómez *et al.*, 2020, p. 47). With this material, and the discussions that took place in the Technical Roundtable, a technical concept of peasantry was produced, eventually adopted by the institutions - the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History (INCAH) - and published in 2018 (Saade Granados, 2020).



In the village of Venus, Tuluá, Ever is fighting for his territory to become a zone collectively own by peasants. Photo by Berta Camprubí.

The concept not only includes key elements presented by peasant organisations – such as peasant subjects having cultural, political and organisational characteristics, or being inter-culturally fluid (e.g. at the intersection between peasant, indigenous and black characteristics) -

but also suggests that the state use several measuring and characterising instruments, from censuses to surveys.

Based on the concept of peasantry constructed by academia with contributions from the peasant movement, the National Department for Statistics (DANE) adapted and applied some of its information-gathering instruments. DANE included questions regarding self-identification as peasants, based on the concept, and has used them in several surveys since 2019, such as the National Survey on Quality of Life (Departamento Nacional de Estadística - DANE, 2020b) and the Political Culture Survey (Departamento Nacional de Estadística - DANE, 2020a), the latest of which was published last May (Departamento Nacional de Estadística - DANE, 2022). Although, in the long term, this information should serve to produce differentiated public policies for peasants, this was not possible in the 2018-22 period due to a lack of political willingness from the national government at the time. With a left-wing government in power that is close to Colombian people's movements (at the time of writing, in late 2022), peasants hope that their demands will at last materialise through differentiating public policies (Organizaciones Campesinas, 2022).

B. The Regional Movement for Land and Territory in South America

The second case we turn to is of the Regional Movement for Land and Territory (MxTT)²: a regional structure initiative with its physical headquarters in La Paz, Bolivia, which seeks to promote a change in perspective on rural development in South America. Its aim is to systematise, make visible and interlink 1000 cases of South American peasants, indigenous and black communities that have successfully accessed collective land. This process of systematising and characterising cases allows for collective reflections that lead to the questioning of the traditional categories most frequently used by the institutions and by academia, and suggestions of others more closely related to the reality of the territories that have been used for the theorisation³ and implementation of another possible type of rural development.

MxTT was created by the Institute for Rural Development in South America (IPDRS): a civil society initiative that straddles the roles of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and academia. Despite being formally founded as an NGO (as an institute formed of individuals who have spent many years mainly involved in activism and academic research⁴), we consider it to be an academic agent. However, in its 12 years of existence, the group has been profoundly critical of traditional euro-centric academic practices and seeks to move away from their formal frameworks. The history of work between IPDRS members and different rural communities,

² Information on the movement and case documentation can be found at <https://www.porlatierra.org>.

³ Creation of theoretical content on different rural topics and in different South American countries, compiled by MxTT, can be consulted here: <https://porlatierra.org/documentos>.

⁴ For example, until 2022 the Bolivian sociologist Oscar Bazoberry, one of the founders of IPDRS and its current coordinator, coordinated the Master's in sustainable rural development at the Higher University of San Andrés.

particularly in Bolivia, and their joint understanding of the problems faced by the latter gave rise to MxTT. As such, the purpose of this collaboration between academic agents and social movements arose from an organic alliance between them, through a common perspective that is based on the reality of daily life in the territories as well as on a more abstract, general analysis produced by IPDRS.

To date, using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, MxTT has documented and raised awareness of 212 cases of access to land by means of collective purchasing, recovery through direct action or land expropriation by the state resulting from the pressure of social movements' collective struggle. In the case of Colombia, this initiative has systematised cases of successful experiences in the fight for land, such as that of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó (Antioquia), the Association of Rural Workers of Tuluá (Valle del Cauca), the Inga de Mandiyaco Indigenous Protection Area (Putumayo) or the Nasa de Corinto Indigenous Protection Area (Cauca), among an additional 37 experiences.⁵

Many of the communities at the heart of cases of access to land have met one another at the regional meetings organized by MxTT, where they were also able to exchange knowledge and mutual support. With the participatory methodology, the project aims to give a voice to the leaders of rural organisational processes and prove, with the reality of the territories, that much sought-after rural reforms result from the action of communities and people. The cases are systematised by individuals with academic and activist profiles, but also by members of rural communities without any specific higher education and always with the direct participation of communities.

Towards Mutualistic Alliances and Collaborations

A. Dimensions of Collaboration Between Academia and Social Movements

We consider it important to analyse two key dimensions of the collaborative relationships cultivated between academia and people's movements that fight for land in South America and in Colombia particularly. We explore the origin of this relationship, the interests behind it and the factors enabling its construction, while also considering the context in which such interactions take place.

Origin, Orientation and Interests in Collaboration

One of the multiple forms in which interactions can take place is when researchers or academics have projects to conduct that require the involvement of grassroots communities. This often occurs because academics devise projects to apply for grants, offered by domestic and foreign governments and non-governmental organisations, as well as international

⁵ View the cases of land recovery in Colombia at: <https://porlatierra.org/casos?pais=colombia>.

cooperation bodies, among others. Apart from funds that universities allocate for research, researchers are usually somewhat restricted when choosing their research topics. To a certain extent, these are predetermined by the work agenda that funding entities set, which are in line with certain goals. In other words, research agendas are not necessarily defined by researchers, but rather by the aims of their affiliated state (namely how it decides to allocate the resources at its disposal for research purposes), or that of other countries and international cooperation bodies.

This situation creates inequality and reproduces global (colonial) patterns in knowledge production, especially when there is no critical reflection on the implications of funding research agendas that do not take local agents into account, or when the aim is to protect the funding agent's interests. The direct consequence of this is that academics and researchers, when approaching communities, seek a type of interaction that helps them carry out their tasks and achieve the results that they promised when applying for research funding. At best, they may be well intentioned and have research goals with a theoretical and practical impact that benefits local communities; however, it may also be the case that the results are purely theoretical, with little positive impact on social relations. Research processes may even negatively affect or disadvantage communities in extreme cases. This type of research, which can be deemed 'extractivist,' is born solely from the interests of researchers and agendas that remain disconnected to the needs of local communities and is frowned upon though pervasive in academia. Our direct experience with social movements in Cauca (Colombia) has revealed how some of the frustration felt within social movements vis-à-vis researchers, comes precisely from these types of interactions.

However, other ways are possible: our experience with movements in defence of territories provides us with some good examples. On the one hand, a better way of interacting occurs when academia responds to a call made by social movements or looks to address a specific need that they have. In other words, when movements themselves directly request the involvement of academia, or indirectly request it as part of engaging with their struggle.

This was the case for the process to produce the concept of 'peasantry,' a space for dialogue opened in Colombia in 2018, with academia called upon to participate. This development came as a result of the years-long struggle of the peasant movement to convince the state to count them using appropriate instruments. More generally, it was also a product of their fight for the recognition of rural peoples as political subjects. Despite the reticence of governmental institutions to progress with this topic, the peasant movement's pressure through direct action, such as the 2013 national agricultural strike, which included a demand to recognize them as political agents whose needs must be accommodated for in the design of public policies (such as limiting the prices of agricultural products) (Cruz Rodríguez, 2017).

Legal action was also taken through judicial institutions – eventually resulting in the opening of the space where academia was called upon to contribute its knowledge.



“El Negro”, as he is affectionately called by his friends and other community members, is one of the oldest leaders of the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó. Photo by Berta Camprubí.

On the other hand, MxTT defined its work and research agenda in cooperation with the organisations in the region and, based on this, it began to seek funding to document cases of access to land in the region. In other words, it chose the exact opposite path to that often taken in cooperation between academia or researchers and social movements. Through discussions with social organisations, the need was detected to document popular practices for access to land and to share the lessons learnt among the different cases, thus forming the fundamental basis of the movement’s work agenda. The strategies used to secure funding did not derive, therefore, from research agendas defined by agents external to the territories and to the communities’ needs, but rather they took the same path (from bottom to top) used to define the need in the first place. The funding sought served to meet a need detected collectively by the social movement.

That said, our approach does not imply a vision of one-way relationships between academics and social movements, with the latter stripped of all agency. On the contrary, we consider that social movements and grassroots organisations can have sufficient clarity regarding their desires and needs and can understand the reasons why academia seeks them

out. Therefore, they can strategically maximise these opportunities and interact with researchers and funders with the aim of achieving their agendas. However, this depends on the movement's level of organisation (background, political training, autonomy) and on the different sources of funding and grants that it can access. Particularly in the case of organisations or collective movements with political training which are sufficiently consolidated, they are able to take advantage of and use externally defined academic and NGO research in their favour. This organisational capacity and political training give them the tools to understand and, if they wish, maximise the dynamics of funding. Here, the idea of a relationship ecosystem, which we discuss in the next section, comes into play.

Context of Interaction

It is important to recognise that any interaction between academia and social movements takes place in a context that includes other agents, and within a timeframe that is part of a longer process.

Although interactions frequently take the form of a specific action to obtain clear results, they are rarely ever limited to engagements between the two parties in question (academia and social movement), nor are they carried out in isolation from the influence of other social or state agents. In the case of the partnership between academia and the Colombian peasant movement to produce a technical concept of peasantry, in its immediate context the interaction included agents associated with different branches of public power in Colombia - the Supreme Court of Justice, the National Department for Statistics (DANE), the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INCAH) and inspection bodies (the National Attorney General's Office) - alongside non-governmental organisations that work to protect human rights (Dejusticia). Some academics also have fluid relationships with other agents, which decentralises their role as academics. This is the case, for example, of the lecturer and researcher Darío Fajardo, who has worked closely with peasant organisations (as a form of activism) and currently holds the position of Deputy Minister of Rural Development (hence a formal institutional affiliation) (Agencia Prensa Rural, 2022).

In our experience as researchers and activists working closely with movements for land and territory in Colombia, we have found that this type of network of agents, or ecosystems, characterise the fieldwork experience. It is technically impossible to detach any link between academia and social movements from the context that immediately preceded their collaboration. Consequently, there are multiple ways in which the agents involved in the collaboration may interact in a given context or ecosystem.

In the case of the link between MxTT and the more than 200 cases of communities that have successfully and collectively accessed land across the continent, interaction was built through invisible threads created over the course of years between groups and individuals,

communities, organizations, associations, universities and NGOs. To give a practical example, we can use our case as experience systematisers for MxTT. The relationship began during filming of a documentary on one of the land access cases: the families of the *League of Poor Peasants of Rondonia* (Nunes, 2014), in Brazil. The documentary's director, now a lecturer at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and currently a student at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, knew of the Institute for Rural Development in South America from her regional activism as a journalist. Thus, a network between activists, academics and social leaders has allowed for this interaction to gradually transform, sometimes growing and sometimes shrinking, over almost a decade. The general dynamic of this relationship network or ecosystem means that systematisers of cases in permanent connection with MxTT reflect the need for visibility and interlinking of small, often invisibilised experiences of fighting for and remaining in rural territories.

Thus, as discussed above, an extractive relationship may arise when academia seeks to meet research aims that are totally external to the activity of social movements, but a relationship guided by mutualism, where both parties benefit, may also occur. With other agents, relationships may be competitive (for example, when securing resources) or antagonistic (for example, with other pressure or interest groups, such as those opposing land redistribution policies), to name but a few. It must be considered, therefore, that in a single context, several of these relationships may take place. Thus, the question of how to improve collaboration between academia and 'practitioners' implies recognizing the limits of this relationship, that social demands will not be exhausted through academia's actions, and that social agents will look to achieve their interests using other types of action, with the support of other agents and at other times. Moreover, it is necessary to start by understanding that there are different ways of interacting in the ecosystem, and that some may be much less productive than others.

Additionally, collaborations also take place in a specific timeframe that is, however, part of longer processes. The immediacy or inevitable time limits stipulated within research projects in academia are at odds with the long processes favoured by grassroots movements, where a specific action is part of longer struggle of demands for structural change. For example, the collaboration that arose between academia and the peasant movement to produce the concept of peasantry was a specific, time-limited contribution that lasted months, but within a broader context that goes back to at least fifteen years, and within a wider process of peasants' struggle for recognition as political subjects. Better collaborations between academia and practitioners are based, therefore, on recognizing the wider causes with which to align with and contribute to, not only in support of specific social movements or organizations but to carrying out more socially and politically relevant research.

B. Coloniality of Knowledge and the Construction of Own Categories

'Coloniality of knowledge' derives from the concept of coloniality developed by Aníbal Quijano (2000). It refers to the Eurocentric character of modern knowledge and learning and denounces a European vision of superiority that legitimizes the imposition of Western perspectives onto all knowledge-seeking practices and worldviews. In contrast to colonialism, which alludes to a political and economic system of domination that, according to History books, seems to have been left in the past, coloniality refers to the present day. It very frequently finds its way into collaborations between academia and social movements. Indeed, creating partnerships based on mutuality and equality is complex, as is the process of understanding how to appreciate the enriching nature of difference. However, through the two experiences that we analyse, we can retrieve some characteristics that help us mitigate this coloniality -features which also resonates with our broader experience witnessing movements fighting for land in Colombia.

The Role of Criticism and the Epistemological Resistance of Communities

According to the coordinator of the Movement for Land and Territory (MxTT), Ruth Bautista, IPDRS has developed a critical position on academia through the careers of its members and its experience building links between social movements and academia. According to Bautista – a Bolivian sociologist and part of the Ch'ixi Group alongside the anti-colonial thinker Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui – this relationship between organizations and rural grassroots communities 'is complicated in itself, because there is a series of hierarchies, a series of power relationships (...) who knows, who can write, naming the Other, and practically bringing this Other into existence.' (Bautista, 2022).

Thus, an essential requirement for fighting this coloniality of knowledge, is for academics and other partners to adopt a critical and self-critical view when producing and analysing knowledge. Self-criticism means recognizing and transforming the historical role of academia in observing and treating communities, social movements or ethnic groups as subjects-objects of study, and instead viewing them as holders of rights and partners for thinking, discussing and constructing.

The case of MxTT gives indications of a critical, committed position: by analysing its origin and the aim of its creation, we can establish that this initiative was devised as an agent to showcase and highlight the knowledge of the social movements with which it works and creates links; in other words, it recognizes the path of epistemological resistance taken by South American rural communities. The path towards cultural resignification, building autonomy, harmonious coexistence with nature and rural and communal agricultural resistance in the midst of an increasingly urban, consumerist and individualistic world.

In our personal experience, and as a reflection, the case studies that we carried out as MxTT systematisers in Chile, Brazil and Colombia were all extremely intense experiences, where we shared with communities, in their territories and homes, and were willing to listen, learn and document voices, memories and actions experienced by these resilient groups. The case studies published on the website of this initiative are merged like a mosaic of voices, and they become the story of these exchange experiences, the result of Research-Action-Participation (RAP), demonstrating that peasant and indigenous groups, families and communities are relevant agents for change in the rural environment. In a country like Colombia, where a thorough land redistribution policy has never been implemented, they are key agents for developing a type of agricultural reform launched through recovery of ancestral territories or collective access to land.

Rural grassroots communities and movements have worked hard and greatly resisted to achieve successes such as the possession of hundreds of hectares of land where they can live, plant food and continue to be and exist. This existence that, bearing in mind the model of capitalist-extractivist development looming over the Latin American region, is already an achievement is also a political exercise capable of generating knowledge. For this reason, an important task to add to self-criticism of the historical role played by academia is research of this epistemological resistance, to recognise the significant role of people's struggles and, based on this, build knowledge starting from the experience of social movements, that respects their contributions and helps to question dominant knowledge.

In a more abstract, academic framework, at its offices in La Paz, MxTT has been able to observe the great diversity of experiences, but also what these cases have in common. This has allowed it to create a theoretical framework to analyse rural development in the region. By means of this exercise, each year IPDRS publishes a report on the status of "Access to Land and Territory in South America". This is a unique document of its kind, consulted by the media and universities and which interconnects the institute's theoretical approaches.⁶ Both the cases and the reports published bolster this capacity for epistemological resistance by communities, carrying out a task of questioning and transforming the categories that have often been imposed on the rural environment using logic and public policies promoted by large, multilateral mechanisms, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations⁷. Thus, for example, categories such as 'people',

⁶ The [2018 Report on Access to Land and Territory in South America](#), notes, for example, that "we consider the platform of inspiring cases promoted by the Regional Movement for Land and Territory in the region to be potentially interesting input, in order to rethink the usual categories for understanding the rural world."

⁷ In the report on the [6th Meeting for Land and Territory](#), the chapter "Por otros horizontes de sentido" ["In Defense of Other Horizons of Meaning"] questions these categories, concepts and hegemonic consensus. In this case, the report - providing a formal space to the voice of social, indigenous and peasant leaders - criticizes the Washington Consensus and the Water Scarcity Consensus, assuring that these global agreements "legitimize crises that are also agreed upon: one day a food crisis, the following day an energy crisis, the following day a financial crisis".

'territory', "property" and 'gender', and processes such as "productivity" and "efficiency", are reconceptualized. Oscar Bazoberry spoke to us about this, stating that:

'Nowadays, based on the movement's systematic work, we know that the State is not an efficient land distributor. Communities are more efficient. Or, for example, we defend the idea of communal ownership in territories, because we know about it. I don't know of any other institution that does the same. Or we see that land ownership can also be understood as a symptom of land deterioration. We need to discuss categories. For example, nowadays agricultural reform has perhaps become a category that hinders access to land.' (Bazoberry, 2022).

Communities as Producers of Theory

Another way to push the limits imposed by the coloniality of knowledge involves becoming aware of, and rejecting, the 'folklorisation' of grassroots communities and movements, going beyond this to recognize their work as producers of knowledge. Those who take interest in social movements – be it academics, public sector workers, aid workers or NGO researchers – may be tempted to pay more attention to what could be called communities' 'practical knowledge.' Aspects such as knowing the medicinal properties of plants or the way in which they cultivate the land – which is, undoubtedly, important knowledge – may lead us to lose sight of the fact that communities, people's organisations and social movements also produce the type of knowledge most valued by academia: that of conceptual categories that serve to analyse social reality. By not recognising these reflective processes and their contribution to knowledge, we relegate people's movements to the category of agents upholding a supposedly past culture, at risk of extinction, who are incapable of social agency in the present and of influencing decisions about their future (e.g., through public policies).

In Colombia, the way in which indigenous communities understand their relationship with nature has been essential for moving from the notion of 'land,' referring to a plot of soil, to that of 'territory,' understood as a set of cultural, political, economic and social relationships. This broad notion has been adopted by the Colombian judicial system through multiple Constitutional Court sentences (Rojas Ríos, 2013; Borrero García, 2018, pp. 183–186) and regulations, such as that governing the reparations system for victims of the armed conflict belonging to indigenous people (República de Colombia, 2011). Similarly, the peasant movement has been constructing conceptualisations of 'territoriality' that allow it to progress in its struggle to access rural collective property and protect its ways of life linked to a relationship with the land that goes beyond a strictly productive relationship (Castilla Salazar, 2015).

In the specific case cited in the previous section, the main regional and national organisations of the Colombian peasant movement contributed documents to propose defining elements of 'peasant subjects.' Thus, for example, while ANZORC put forward a type of peasantry that considered the effect of the armed conflict on the rural population differentiated by regions, the Peasant Working Group included the 'political-organisational' component as a defining element of peasantry. The space gained through the fight of the peasant movement, and which led to creation of the technical roundtable where academics participated, allowed the latter to open up enough to listen to and value the reflective exercises used by the peasant movement to effectively conceptualise its relationship with the world and its vision of the social change needed to secure more equal relationships in the rural environment. Romanticisation of peasants gives way to the existence of subjects who reflect and collectively produce knowledge that impacts on institutional designs. In this transition, the role of academia may consist of contributing to the technical translation of this knowledge, positioning it in theoretical debates and supporting, with the capital held by scientific knowledge, the social and political legitimacy that may be needed to break down institutional barriers. We consider that, in part, this is how we can interpret the contribution of the technical roundtable to the process of defining the concept of peasantry.



Leyder Burbano is one of the keepers of traditional peasant wisdom in La Vega, Cauca. Photo by Berta Camprubí.

A Mutualistic Ecosystem is Possible

To conclude, we offer a few reflective and practical lines on what a good interaction or collaboration between academics and practitioners could be like. This proposal revolved around three elements: the direction that the interaction is heading towards; the approaches that academics should consider to avoid reproducing Eurocentric, colonial and paternalistic logics; and the need for a broad, comprehensive approach from which a collaboration can be understood as part of a larger ecosystem, which would help avoid reductive and binary ways of seeing it.

Firstly, to build collaborations considered successful by all participants, it is necessary to question interactions that are solely based on academics' and researchers' need to achieve aims promised to research funders. It is also necessary to leave behind extractivist research practices that are guided by the desire to obtain experiences, opinions, memories and useful information for a result, instead of building relationships based on reciprocity. Doing the latter is possible, even with pre-designed research frameworks, as long as academics act flexibly, adapting research to the needs of social movements. That said, research projects would be ideally co-designed from the start by researchers and community members. In terms of positive collaborative practices, we highlight the important role of mediation between individuals, within an equal relationship that foregrounds partnership, dialogue and care.

Thus, a good relationship between academia and social movements is built on alliances and the joint quest for satisfaction of each agent's needs. This is achieved by cultivating ecosystems or ways of interacting based on mutualism, which involves academia placing its collaboration, through research, within the structural struggles defined by social movements. If constructed in this way, the collaboration results become practical, as will be the case when Colombian peasants are recognised as collective subjects of rights,⁸ or with the recognition of the processes of accessing territory as acts of land redistribution. If the collaboration generates notable theoretical input, it should be shared with relevant communities instead of being filed on shelves or published in scientific journals that are difficult to access. Facilitating access to knowledge in this way may help advance social transformation in the pursuit of their aims.

Secondly, a critical approach to the hegemony of Eurocentric western thinking is necessary to deconstruct the colonial relationships historically implemented between academia and social foundations. This can be achieved if academic research decentralises its position on knowledge, listens to social agents and recognises their ability to create knowledge. Thus, accounting for the coloniality of knowledge, enables a more critical analytical perspective,

⁸ In the first month of its term of office, Gustavo Petro's government submitted, through legislative act number 19 of 2022, a project proposing the modification of article 64 of the Political Constitution of 1991, to specify that the State will give special assurance of protection and guarantee of the individual and collective rights of peasants. If this constitutional reform is approved, it will be a great victory for the Colombian peasant movement and will also have involved a specific, useful contribution from academia.

rendering more visible the epistemological resistance of communities and other social sectors that collaborate with academia. This mode of interaction leads to real impact, such as the collective building of methodology, the creation of communal mandates as well as even public policies.

Thirdly, collaboration between academia and social movements cannot be understood outside a more complex perspective that sees it as a network or ecosystem of interrelated agents connected to one or several aims. Although the essence of a specific collaboration may be defined by the relationship between an academic agent and a social community or organization, their simultaneous interaction with strategic agents such as NGOs, groups formed around the topic of collaboration, experts in collaboration and even public administration entities will be key for reaching the desired practical goals or theoretical reflections.

Ultimately, an ecosystem with multiple dynamics between agents whose central point is a collective need, who deconstruct coloniality of knowledge and listen and respect one another when building knowledge may be a good possible collaboration between academia, social movements and other practitioners.

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