



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Grupo de Agricultura Orgánica, GAO (Cuba)

(1999)



for showing that organic agriculture is a key to both environmental sustainability and food security.

Fernando Funes & Maria del Carmen Pérez

GAO was founded in 1993 as the Asociación Cubana de Agricultura Orgánica (ACAO) at a time when the country was facing its most serious food crisis since the revolution. The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the loss of its economic support, meant that hunger was threatening and the government had to find alternative, self-reliant means of boosting farm output. With only a fraction of the agrochemicals previously used still available, these alternatives were necessarily organic or semi-organic. However, the generally prevailing view was that these measures were a stop-gap and that things would return to 'normal' when fertiliser and pesticide imports could be resumed. The primary goal of ACAO, in contrast, was both to demonstrate that organic farming systems can be superior to the high-input, capital-intensive kind in all important respects, and to persuade policy-makers, scientists and farmers that there should be no going back.

Within four years the membership of ACAO spanned the whole agricultural sector, from farmers and farm managers to extension agents, researchers, professors and government officials. In addition to its base in Havana, ACAO now has local chapters in most provinces and each member is active in his or her own workspace. They make it their job to educate others about organic technologies and to promote the idea that the current use of organic methods should be considered a permanent transformation of Cuban agriculture.

As part of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s 'Agroecological Lighthouse' programme, ACAO created a number of exemplary farms, serving as a demonstration to other farmers, policy makers, etc., of what is possible. It has held dozens of workshops around the country, produces its own magazine with a good mix of general and technical articles, and has created an accredited agroecology course at the Agricultural University of Havana with more than 500 students enrolled. A network of 10 regional documentation centres has also been established. In addition, ACAO has held three international conferences on organic farming, hosted numerous delegations from around the world and helped to develop a master's Degree in Sustainable Development at the University of Havana. An evaluation of the Lighthouse Programme concludes

that its main benefits have been to show that agroecological production can produce similar and sometimes superior yields to conventional methods, as well as other economic benefits and improved soil fertility. The importance of ACAO's work lies in that it has both proved the economic advantage of organic agriculture and legitimised this approach with policymakers, helping farmers obtain new technologies, transforming educational curricula and research programmes, and pushing for institutionalisation of the alternative model.

In 1999 ACAO achieved formal recognition by the Cuban Government and became the Grupo de Agricultura Orgánica (GAO) within the Cuban Association of Agricultural and Forest Technicians (ACTAF), an institutional change which gives it more freedom of action and influence with the Cuban Government. GAO is publishing a book *Transforming the Cuban Countryside: Advances in Sustainable Agriculture*.

Quotation

"The common use of organic methods must be considered a permanent transformation in Cuban agriculture."

Maria del Carmen Pérez

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