

# Food Sovereignty in Colombia: Addressing health and social welfare



Morganne Blais-McPherson  
2014 McBurney Fellow  
McGill Institute for Health and  
Social Policy

## Project Overview

**Student:** Morganne Blais-McPherson

**Department:** Neuroscience and Anthropology, U3

**Organization:** Asociación Campesina de Antioquia

**Location:** Medellín, Colombia

**Mentor:** Prof. Duncan Pedersen, Department of Psychiatry, Division of Social and Transcultural Psychiatry

**Fellowship Duration:** June 25 – September 15, 2014



## About the McBurney Latin America Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations over a period of 2 to 3 months. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

## Contents

Project Overview .....	1
About the McBurney Latin America Fellowship Program .....	1
Contents .....	1
Fellowship Rationale and Objectives.....	2
Background .....	3
Activities .....	4
Small Project Fund.....	6
Challenges and Successes.....	6
Recommendations.....	8
Advice for Future Fellows.....	9

# Addressing social and health issues in Colombian agricultural communities through food sovereignty

## Fellowship Rationale and Objectives

My project focused on addressing social and health issues faced by agricultural communities in Antioquia, Colombia. To do so, I concentrated on promoting local food sovereignty. This project was part of a larger partnership between the Universidad de Antioquia and the Asociación Campesina de Antioquia (ACA). The main component of this project is to build a region-wide network of seedgrowers. As the anthropologist on the team, my role was to plan and take part in a series of activities with members of the local communities to discuss problems related to current agricultural practices and the local economy. Discussions included possible solutions for these problems, and dreams for the future. These activities emphasized the communities' agricultural knowledge and practices, especially those related to access to seeds. In collecting such information and building plans with the community, the project was able to better address on-the-ground problems and get the community involved in solving them, building a solid base for the independent functioning of the project once the financial and institutional support recedes.

## Initial Objectives

- Observe and take part in activities held by ACA.
- Plan and conduct interviews with individuals in the community.
- With the research team, lead popular education workshops to introduce the project and include community members into the research project. Activities included workshops on “what is research”, “how to conduct an interview”, and discussing problems reached during the research process.
- Collectively create maps of neighborhoods with local communities.
- Help in developing a mental health component within ACA through meetings with members of the organization and professors at the Universidad de Antioquia.

## Background

The *Asociación Campesina de Antioquia* is a community-based organization working with agricultural communities throughout the department of Antioquia, Colombia. Through various activities with rural and urban groups, most of which have been affected by the years of political violence, ACA aims to promote empowerment and local participation in public policies. ACA was founded in 1988, as part of a greater social movement in Colombia led by the umbrella organization *Coordinador Nacional Agrario de Colombia*. Based in Medellín, ACA has offshoots throughout the department of Antioquia, such as in the municipalities of San Francisco, Argelia, and Cocorná. However, it is only recently that the organization has resumed its work in the countryside, after having fled from 1995 to 2008, when the political violence in the region intensified. As such, the organization is still in a period of rebuilding its networks and slowly regaining the trust of the communities.

My work with ACA was part of a larger project focusing on food sovereignty. The need for food sovereignty is a recurring theme among communities that rely on agriculture to survive in Antioquia.<sup>1</sup> With coffee being the only profitable source of income, most households are completely dependent on coffee sales to respond to their household needs. Given the fluctuating price of coffee on the global market, such dependence places many households in a precarious situation.

Precarity is coupled with a deterioration of soil quality in the region. Coffee growers buy their coffee seeds from the *Federación Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia*. These seeds require heavy use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which negatively impact soil quality. The health of the farmers is also affected, as most do not own or wear any form of protective clothing or equipment. The steepness of the Andean hills in the Antioquia region does not permit mechanization. Human labor and the use of machetes are the basis of the local economy. This work is physically demanding and there are minimal opportunities for non-agricultural work. Lack of opportunity, as well as the continuing presence of coca, marijuana, and poppy growers in the region as a remnant of the narco-trafficking that flourished during the armed conflict, has resulted in an ever-growing incidence of drug abuse among young people. Furthermore, communities in Antioquia are experiencing an exodus of their youth. Teenagers are moving to the city as early as the age of 16, in hopes of finding work. Frequently, the precarity and difficulty of *campesino* life pushes many young adults towards Medellín. Once in the city, where there is little to no family support, many work in shops or find work in the trucking industry.

This emigration, furthering the departure of families from the countryside caused by the armed conflict, is drastically affecting local economies. Although most families own or have access to a significant number of crops, families lack the human power to cultivate them. As harvest periods are rigid, the crops die without



---

<sup>1</sup> All information was gathered through individual interviews and community workshops in Antioquia. These interviews were performed from June to August 2014 by myself, Laura Antonia Coral from the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*, Carlos Ramirez Chaves from the *Université catholique de Louvain*, Elsa Pilar Parra from ACA, and Beatriz Elena López Arias from the *Universidad de Antioquia*.

the required attention. This phenomenon of unattended crops is intensified by the shift of attention towards cash crops such as coffee, which provides no direct food to families. In fact, many families do not consume the coffee they grow – everything is sold.

Lastly, knowledge of traditional agricultural and medicinal practices is rapidly disappearing in the countryside. The diminishing soil quality and the ever-growing disappearance of knowledge surrounding organic fertilizers has pushed many farmers towards an intensified use of chemical fertilizers, further degrading soil and food quality. This is further exacerbated by multinational companies, the major one being Monsanto, that sell the *campesinos* seeds requiring chemical fertilizers, leaving farmers little choice as to their cultivation practices. Further, some families who own medicinal plants do not know how to use them. These families therefore have to travel anywhere between 30 minutes to 5 hours to the nearby town to buy the appropriate pharmaceutical remedy.

In sum, the diminishing soil quality, the difficulty of agricultural work, the high dependence on coffee sales, and the long-term effects of the armed conflict are having a serious impact on agricultural communities in Antioquia. Local economies oftentimes fall victim to fluctuations in coffee prices, and provision of seeds, health products, and some food items are provided by external sources, leading to a high level of precariousness. Such precariousness affects the mental health and composition of families, especially those that are fragmented between countryside and cities such as Medellín. The recourse to illicit drugs among the rural youth, a response to the difficulty of daily life in the countryside, is an ever-increasing phenomenon.

It was therefore decided between ACA and the *Universidad de Antioquia*, along with the affected communities, that building local food sovereignty would help in addressing many of these social and health problems. One part of this project, for which I received the Small Project Funds help, is to build a network of local seed growers, which will be discussed further in other portions of this report.

## Activities

In the three months I worked with ACA, I took part in a range of activities – from cultural and gastronomic fairs, to community workshops, to popular education camps, to family interviews. In general, the activities and my tasks fell into three categories – bureaucratic, cultural, and social.

Bureaucratic tasks included transcribing interviews, transcribing workshop discussions, translating ACA's documents from Spanish to English, and writing reports of the organization's activities. As well, I oftentimes ended up being the designated photographer and sound recorder for all events. After each event, I transcribed, compiled, and organized all the audiovisual and written information, in order to archive the development of ACA's multiple projects. Although at times tedious and difficult due to language issues, the wealth of knowledge I learned through transcribing interviews and workshops helped me better understand the *campesinos'* situation, thus aiding me when it was my own turn to create and lead interviews and workshops.

Although I did not lead in the cultural activities held by ACA, I participated in many. For example, one weekend we held a cultural and gastronomic fair in order to interest the neighborhood in ACA's activities and to promote community actions, the use of traditional organic cultivating practices, and the consumption of healthy balanced meals, among others.



During the fair, I was able to see the difficulties in organizing such an event, especially in the Colombian context. The police had to be forewarned, flyers had to be distributed throughout the neighborhood on market days, the kids had to be kept interested through the lengthy meetings, decorations and food had to be coordinated with the women of the neighborhood, and much more. During the days preceding the fair, I attended the boys' music classes, and was pressured by my new friends into taking part in the girls' dance classes. The day of the fair started with a 4 AM wake-up call, after which we went into the streets to wake everyone up through the local tradition of hitting pots and pans. We then set up the square, with kiosks and stages. The boys played the music, and we danced the *cumbia* – all in flamboyant traditional garb. The women sold traditional *campesino* food – *sancocho*, *mazamorra*, *tamales*. The men sold other products – coffee, beans, and seeds. After these events, we oftentimes held meetings with the members of the ACA and the teenagers to go over the strong points of the event, and what went wrong.

However, my internship mostly focused on more social activities, as part of the joint project between ACA and the *Universidad de Antioquia*. My first few days in Medellín were spent sleeping at ACA headquarters and taking part in a five-day popular education camp for youth from agriculturally based communities from all over Antioquia. This event allowed me to become acquainted with the teenagers, the staff, and ACA itself. Most of my activities with the ACA involved planning and leading workshops. As the collaboration between the ACA and the *Universidad de Antioquia* follows a Participant Observatory Research methodology, we held workshops to teach community members about research. Many community members volunteered to be co-investigators on the one-year project, and so every few weeks we held meetings to organize the next step and to see where our co-investigators were in the research project, what questions or concerns they had, and their reflections. One of my favorite parts of my internship was our popular education workshops on “*la investigación*”, as well as teaching adolescents and adults how to conduct interviews. Unsurprisingly, it was in these discussions that I learnt the most about research, more than I ever did in school. The questions and concerns of the community members showed me the constraints of research – primarily, people's time. Coordinating interviews during *frijol* harvests – now *that's* a challenge!

I was assigned to develop and conduct a series of interviews with *campesinos* on the difficulties they faced, including (but not limited to) how the global economy affects them at a local level, how the armed conflict affected agriculture, the types of food that families cultivate, how to grow crops such as coffee, and what kinds of fertilizers are used and why. We also held workshops to identify problems within the communities and possible solutions. Later, I planned and helped lead a series of workshops in which we created maps of how the community imagined their neighborhood in the future.

Although not directly connected with my work at ACA, I was asked by the *Universidad de Antioquia* to teach an undergraduate nursing class about the relationship between anthropology and neuroscience. A month after the class, I was asked to lead a symposium on the topic, as well as on my work with the ACA and its pertinence to health policy. Although the symposium was cancelled at the last minute, the



undergraduate class offered interesting discussion on how to approach health issues through policies - either directly or through prevention.

Lastly, a meeting was supposed to be held with faculty members at the *Universidad de Antioquia* on the use of cartography in public health services. Unfortunately, the school year was starting the same week, and it had to be postponed. I will also be helping write an article with faculty members on territory and health. Through these activities, my colleagues and I will be exploring the various activities that can be held with *campesino* communities and the ACA to address health problems.

## Small Project Fund

All of the information collected from these interviews and workshops will be used for our seed-growing project, for which I received the Small Projects Fund. Using discussions about local problems, as well as the maps of community members' dreams for the neighborhood, we are helping create a network of seed-growers as a way of promoting food sovereignty within agricultural communities.

The financial help from the fund will go towards building a greenhouse in the neighborhood of El Zancudo. The greenhouse will be accessible to all 40 families (approx) living in the neighborhood. The greenhouse in El Zancudo will be there first in the project, but will be followed by many all across Antioquia.

The last week of my internship, the organization was starting to build the gardens. Thanks to the project, we were able to buy gardening supplies such as pressure hoses and watering cans for the participants. We were also able to buy the necessary material for the construction of a municipal greenhouse. Lastly, we bought hundreds of seeds, as we plan to grow vegetables, herbs, and medicinal plants. I will continue to help in this project from afar in the year to come, both through archiving and planning further interviews.

## Challenges and Successes

Upon my arrival in Medellín, it became apparent that I was the assigned anthropologist within the research group and staff at ACA. Although this position gave me more freedom to plan and lead activities, as well as push the project in certain conceptual directions, it also had its drawbacks. The organization did not expect me to lead any activities or help in ways that were unrelated to the project. Noticing the limitations I would have to deal with due to my position as an academic from Canada, I realized that the only way to get more involved in the daily activities of the organization was to come up with concrete activities I could do. In this way, I took on the bureaucratic tasks mentioned above.

This low bar for my participation in the organization's overall activities was coupled with high expectations for the many project-related activities. I determined my contribution to the project, in consultation with my colleagues at the *Universidad de Antioquia* and last-minute discussions with members of ACA. This freedom was exciting, but also terrifying, given my relative inexperience in on-the-ground activities and my level of Spanish. Regardless, I learnt that taking the plunge is the best way to go. Within a month, my fear of leading discussions in Spanish disappeared, and I began to look forward to this leading role.

During my internship, I had a lot of difficulty with my work schedule. I would have two weeks of slow, bureaucratic work, followed by two weeks of intensive workshops and interviews. The three months thus oscillated from 3 hours of work a day to 10 hours of work a day (weekends included). The intensive periods were especially grueling given that even my time off required concentration, as the kids would ask me endless questions

in a language that I was still learning. Another challenge was living with the *campesino* work schedule. The teenagers would wake up at 5AM after having gone to bed at 11PM, and the diet was much heavier than I am used to. I saw my health rapidly degrade. Luckily, by the last weeks of my internship, I learnt to follow the rest of the staff, and leaving headquarters for 30 minutes a day, if only to have a coffee in my own thought space.

Unfortunately, I was not able to contribute to the formation of a mental health component while in Colombia. Although enthusiastic about the idea when I had first contacted them, it became apparent once I got there that the organization wanted to focus more explicitly on food sovereignty and cultural conservation issues than mental health. Although this was frustrating at first, it was a good lesson in how sometimes, on-the-ground needs differ from what specialists want to address or offer. Listening and adapting to the needs of communities was the most evident and important issue that I observed during the internship. When plans change, it is important to sit down and ask oneself – what can I bring to *this* project?

My experience working with ACA follows a general tendency within the organization. The organization is heavily centralized, with only a few people doing a great bulk of the work. These select members are constantly moving from one locality in Antioquia to another, leading political schools in other regions of Colombia, and attending Pan-American conferences in other countries. As a result of this bewildering structure, many tasks simply do not get done, or get done late and/or poorly. At times, the task gets delegated to another member the day of the event - the leading member simply did not have time to do it, thus causing stress and resentment among other members. This heavily centralized system is coupled with a great amount of faith in specialists. As one of these specialists, I was given free reign to plan activities and hold the necessary workshops. When it comes to specialists, there seems to be a no-questions-asked policy. Given the short duration of my work there, I had hoped that many of the leading concepts and methodologies I used would be picked up by full-time members in order to continue this work within the project. Ironically, it was not the rest of the members of the organization that took up this knowledge and practices but members of the community I worked with, as well as members of the academic community in Medellín. Seeing such an organizational structure taught me a lot about organizations themselves, and how important the question of centralization is.

The training offered by the Institute of Health and Social Policy before my internship helped me think and write for policy. More importantly, however, was the inspiring discussions and emotional support I received from other fellows, some of whom I stayed in contact with throughout the internship. Hearing news from all over South America from people who were going through a similar, yet completely different, experience than myself was a great support. As well, the help I received from my mentor, especially before the trip, was essential in finding the organization and contacting the *Universidad de Antioquia*. In the field, it was comforting to receive an email from my mentor. Being in a foreign country, having to speak a foreign language, and being given many responsibilities can be overwhelming. A friendly message from other fellows or a mentor helped relieve some of these anxieties.



## Community Implications and further work

The joint project between the *Universidad de Antioquia* and ACA promises to have an important impact on health and social issues within agricultural communities and Antioquia by addressing food sovereignty. Through addressing this issue, many downstream effects should be seen. First, these measures will improve local economies by moving agricultural production away from a reliance on coffee sales. As well, the promotion of the use of organic fertilizers, which previously were not an option due to the use transgenic seeds, will increase soil quality. Better soil quality offers more sustainable and fertile land practices, increasing the productivity of the now depleted soil. By decreasing the precarity of *campesino* life, we hope to eventually slow down the exodus of the youth from the countryside, and help youth turn away from drug use..

As I was not able to stay for the full length of the one-year project, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact outcomes of my work. In the activities I did take part in, I can say that my work helped in getting community members involved through workshops. As well, I collected important information about local problems and community dreams through interviews and workshops. I believe these discussions were my most important contributions - assuring the long-term participation of community members in the project and ensuring that we were responding to actual needs.

As well, it should not be belittled how being a stranger can be of help in an organization such as the ACA. By discussing economic and political issues in my own country, I was able to move discussions forward within the various communities. More than once I was stopped in the middle of a meal or in the middle of a walk by someone who wanted to talk about agro-subsidies, or climate change, or fluctuations in coffee prices, or medicinal plants, or when the next meeting is. Through a desire to know about my own country and my reflections on Colombia, I got people interested in food sovereignty and the project. As my new acquaintance Faber said, when asked if he could come to a workshop during the *frijol* harvest, "I'm very busy. But I'll go if the Canadian is there. I love that topic!" There is nothing more flattering than that!

I will be continuing my work with ACA and the *Universidad de Antioquia*. We will be publishing a large piece based on the one-year project. The project brings together researchers from the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the *Université catholique de Louvain* and the Faculty of Nursing at the *Universidad de Antioquia*. Two members from ACA will also be co-authors. Additionally, I will be publishing an article with Beatriz Elena Arias Lopez, a professor at the *Universidad de Antioquia*, in early 2015. This article will discuss the relationship between land and mental health.

## Recommendations

Policy-making has a long way to go in Colombia when it comes to addressing problems in rural areas. One of the most cited requests is for agricultural subsidies. Most of the people I met and interviewed repeated the same ominous sentence – if things do not change, rural life will end in Colombia. Either communities have to develop food sovereignty, or they are going to have to receive subsidies from the government. Without it, people believe that the rural exodus will continue, with drastic effects on local economies. Further, coffee growers should have access to non-transgenic seeds. Transgenic seeds have degraded the soil and threaten the health of the *campesinos* who use them daily. As well, there should be an attempt by the government to promote the cultivation of subsistence food. Many people I talked to rely on coffee sales to buy a significant proportion of their

food, as they do not cultivate all the food they need to survive. When the price of coffee plummets, household expenditure shrinks, and the family's needs are not met. Lastly, there should be help for *campesino* youth who want to go to university, either through larger and more numerous scholarships or through work programs. As it is, the cost of living in the city for the length of a degree is keeping many of my new friends from studying the professions they wish to take on. Many of the adolescents I befriended have lost hope of a future without precarity. It is my hope that our project will show these adolescents another, brighter, future.

### Advice for Future Fellows

My greatest advice for future fellows is that if things are not as you had planned, don't take it personally. Wires always get crossed, and sometimes, the situation in the community changes. New problems have to be addressed. This is your chance to be creative – what can you do to help? Don't be afraid to go to your new colleagues, express your concerns, and ask them if you can help. You will probably have to come up with concrete tasks and activities, as I had to. This is not because the organization thinks you are useless – they are just unaware of your abilities, or of what you want to do. Be proactive; don't just wait to be told what to do. You don't want the frustration and loneliness of waiting three months to be part of something you think is important.

Second, make sure you have the basics of Spanish or Portuguese before arriving. I was not an expert upon arrival; I just knew the basic structure, grammar rules, and key vocabulary. If you're a perfectionist like me, you may not want to start speaking with people without having "mastered the language." Fortunately, that fear was something I was able to get over. You'll never learn if you don't practice, as clichéd as that sounds. You are going to be submerged in a new language – with the basics under your belt, you'll learn to communicate your thoughts within weeks. I taught myself Spanish before arriving, and by the end of it, I was leading interviews and workshops.

Third, don't be afraid of saying no. I over-stretched myself during my fellowship, and my health suffered for it. I had never had so much attention in my life, or so many new friends. I wanted to do everything and be everywhere at the same time! But you can't be at your best without sleep and personal space. People will understand that you are going through a lot – a new work schedule, a new language, and a new culture. If you're in Colombia, your colleagues and friends may even prepare you some traditional medicinal tea and check up on you twice a day.

Lastly, try to take an active role in the community. It may be frightening at first to be in the limelight in a new country, especially if you are still learning the language. However, you will be missing out on an amazing experience if all you are doing is observing and listening. For me, as a white, blonde, female academic, I was seen and treated as an untouchable outsider at first. I had to take the first steps and present myself, make a joke, and start asking questions about people's lives. Importantly though, I had to know about the Colombian context and issues before arriving. Asking the right questions is a great start to an amazing internship. I encourage any fellows to research the local communities beforehand and ask your new colleagues about local problems or activities.

