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“Take me with you, mother maize”

A tale of maize in peasant woman’s livelihoods

by Georgina Catacora-Vargas, Bolivia

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of **Stories
Change**

Connecting traditional knowledge and
innovations for fair and sustainable
food systems

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Decade of
**FAMILY
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Stories of change: *Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems*

In December 2017, the [United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming \(UNDAF, 2019-2028\)](#) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#) in collaboration with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) organized a series of “writeshops”, writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

Cover photo by Georgina Catacora-Vargas

“Take me with you, mother maize”. A tale of maize in peasant woman’s livelihoods

by *Georgina Catacora-Vargas, Bolivia*

Sara’s childhood was full of sunshine. She remembers herself in farming fields under the sun, in the dry valleys of Bolivia. Many seasons had lacked rain which dried the soil and the air she breathed. The landscape became a palette of brown colours, intensifying the feeling of heat. Sara grew up planting seeds of different varieties of maize, every summer, in the furrows made with her father’s hoe. Although at times she became dispirited, she tenderly recalls the voice of her father saying, “Keep going Sara!” and, with that, helping her to remain focused and hopeful for a future colorful maize harvest.

Sara’s family and her ancestors are those who had developed the rich maize landraces in Bolivia, making the Andes an important center of genetic diversity of this crop. I got to meet her through research carried out by myself and a colleague, interested in the social and ecological dynamics and roles of women around maize landraces.

In peasant communities “maize is like a mother”, once I’ve been told. She dresses with bright colors to provide a generous source of nourishment. She transforms into many traditional foods. Maize provides means of work and income to many women. She also heals if you get to learn the secrets of grandmas on which parts are medicinal. She shelters wisdom that is kindly passed from women to women through generations.

Now, Sara is 45 years old. She is a single mother of three. Every summer she still sows maize. It is not an easy task, but the challenge of cultivating by herself is balanced by the confidence she has that the different varieties of maize will guarantee food and nutrition to her family. When talking about her past, she recalls what she learned from her father at the field, and from her mother at the kitchen and backyard. She passes those memories and knowledge to her kids.



Photo by Georgina Catacora-Vargas.

But she remembers the maize landraces that her parents used to grow and regrets that some of them are not available anymore. The reason, she tells me is that commercial varieties are slowly replacing them, eroding the genetic and cultural richness developed and sheltered for millennia in each maize landrace. Droughts cause loss of harvests and, therefore, of seeds reproduced and conserved by peasants. Traditional maize foods substituted by processed ones drain

the motivation to plant different native maize varieties. Low prices paid to peasants discourage them to cultivate the maize landraces.

While listening to Sara, I hear deep and long-standing memories threatened by the current context, affects the women more than the men. "For women there is no help" she laments. "You have to be married or be a man to get a loan or any other type of assistance". Sara's words make me realize that her resilience lies on the support of her family and community, her own knowledge, the seeds she conserves, the agrobiodiversity -mostly landraces- she maintains, and the restoration and care for the life of her soil through agroecological approaches.



Photo by Georgina Catacora-Vargas.

Last season came with plentiful rain, blessing Sara with a good harvest. She produced eight maize landraces, each one with a different color, size, texture, and use. Her plot is rather small, but agroecologically managed, and so is biodiverse and productive. Among other vegetables and roots, she harvested enough maize to dry and store, both as grain and seeds. She got a surplus to sell as fresh maize cobs and as dried grains in the local maize grain market, where only women meet and trade. Some Tuesdays, when the grain market takes place, she woke up before the

birds when it was still dark, to sell dry maize to an intermediary woman trader. In those journeys she returned home before the sunrise, celebrating that this year her family has food and income secured. "Perhaps my father came this season to help me", she says with a smile.

“

Sara's family and her ancestors are those who had developed the rich maize landraces in Bolivia, making the Andes an important center of genetic diversity of this crop.

"Sara, you planted more maize varieties this season. Where did you get them come from?", I ask.

"My midwife's grandmother gave them to me," Sara replies. "She had them hidden, almost forgotten, in her house roof. She was happy to share them. She told me that 'Now my seeds will keep alive.'"

"What triggered you to search for these varieties?" I asked her.

"It was the memory of my parents in my childhood. Sometimes we feel embarrassed about planting old traditional varieties because others plant the new, modern ones. But the new ones get sick easily while the old ones are very resistant. Now I have eight maize landraces. I will feed my children with them and I will find even more varieties."

Listening to Sara is like witnessing the power of memory and feelings. I recognize that what we

cultivate and what we eat, builds strong ties with our personal lives. "I grew up with maize," Sara says, "and if I lose my maize seeds, I will be poor. Our seeds are the richness that we, the peasants, have."

Sara keeps busy with her farming and home chores, and she is somehow shy. She has no time and, perhaps, not the personality for being a local leader. Yet, her journey of cultivating and recovering maize landraces speaks to and teaches her children, relatives, and neighbors. With her I learned that everyone can contribute to recover, conserve and re-value local agricultural varieties, and to contribute to revert their loss. Resilience lies in family and community connection.

This peasant woman deeply inspired me. From her modest life, she shows that it is possible to foster strength, and the constant reproduction of human and non-human life, and to re-create

intergenerational wisdom. She is a testimony of the wealth of biodiversity and the knowledge that peasant women nurture, many times silently, despite the challenging, unfavorable contexts they must face.

In Quichua, a major native language in the Bolivian valleys, "Sara" means "maize", and that there is a traditional saying that recites "*apamuy sara mama*", which -as a kind of pray for protection and guidance- translates as "take me with you, mother maize". In Sara's community, at every Carnival, people dance with maize leaves carried on their backs inside native fabrics, as a way to celebrate and pay tribute to her, the maize. After all, it is true that it is more than a crop, but a truly caring mother, as portrayed in the memory and narrative of peasants who grew up and were made with this bountiful grain, like Sara.

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