Commercialisation and the demand for improved production conditions

Autor: Horacio Almanza-Alcalde

As Stavenhagen asserts, in the traditional view of the anthropologist, commercial exchange of products, in addition to outside wage labour, were commonly seen as external factors disturbing communal stability and self-sufficiency, which were regarded as the backbone of peasant communities (1978: 27).

Currently, the market has been a main concern of both researchers on agricultural production issues and peasant organizations’ efforts to achieve their social, political and economic aims. Although nowadays, the peasant economy is increasingly diversified, issues about production and marketing have long been considered one of the mechanisms through which the peasant economy is integrated.

One of its longstanding problems has been lack of control over the market process itself, being exposed to a wide fluctuation of prices and hence, to the activity of ‘intermediaries or businessmen in positions of monopoly control’. As a result, peasants are forced to sell their product at less than its real price, likewise, credit and technical assistance are delayed (Stavenhagen, 1978: 32; Mejia and Sarmiento, 1987: 19).

Peasants’ and indigenous people’s demands are mainly focused on changing the structural conditions that generate these negative outcomes. They seek official recognition of their organizations and participation in the design and application of state policy towards communities.

They also claim facilities for production, better guaranteed prices, elimination of intermediaries, fair trade of their products, market information, adequate and timely credit, and effective technical assistance (Mejia and Sarmiento, 1987: 22, Edelman, 1999b: 332, 349). The fight to obtain better prices refers to three different exchange relations according to Martinez: a) product selling, b) buying production goods (productive consumption), and c) livelihoods consumption (1991: 34).

The fight for the democratic control of production and marketing, was fuelled in the 1970s by the crisis of CNCs’ corporativism and the emergence of independent organizations. However it is based on a longstanding demand from the main and most combative peasant organizations, such as the CNPA (from which COCEI is a member), the CIOAC, and UNORCA.

It includes diverse strategies for direct commercialisation of agricultural products, in order to avoid intermediaries (also known as ‘coyotes’) (Mejia and Sarmiento, 1987: 209-210, 223, 273; Flores, Pare and Sarmiento, 1988: 20, 40). The control of the productive process refers to production, commercialisation and consumption, as well as the peasantry’s general social conditions, such as participation and political representation, education, housing, and services; in sum, ‘the capacity to organize and convert into a social and politically autonomous force’ (Martinez, 1991: 15)

Although it is agreed that land has been the central issue, organizations from the independent movement have stated that the peasant struggles doesn’t finish with the obtaining of land (Flores, Pare and
Sarmiento, 1988: 169). UNORCA representative Pedro Magaña argues that, instead of past concerns about the appropriation of the productive process, currently, the principal demands are of a social character: health, housing, education (1993:1). Otero suggests that in the past decade the new dimensions added to the demand for land are production, self-management, autonomy, and territory (1999: 188, 201). These views are interlinked if understood in terms of the ‘appropriation of the productive process’ defined by Martinez. In addition, they may be seen in the context of the independent movement where the most important struggles over the production sphere have taken place, and where organisations are characterized by solidarity relations (Flores, Pare and Sarmiento, 1988: 140, 143). A clear example is Via Campesina coalition, which gives as a main point of its agenda a ‘...comprehensive reform of agricultural systems to favour small-farm production and marketing’ (Desmarais, 2002: 109); and at the same time it has established cooperative links with a wide range of organizations.

Martinez points out that the peasant strategy is based on the achievement and consolidation of their autonomy in different dimensions of social life: the political, ideological, and economic. The latter includes three strategic branches: a) market autonomy, manifested in disposing of their surplus through exchange channels, without being excluded; b) financial autonomy, allowing peasant control over credit and financial sources, and over resources to ensure control of the decision making for the development of production; and c) technical autonomy, in terms of ownership of technical resources for the creation of peasants own productive process (1991: 44)