

# Corn, Commerce, and Community/ Maíz, Mercados, y Comunidades

June 17-18, 2002

Chicago, IL

## Conference Report

### Enlaces América

Heartland Alliance

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## **I. Introduction**

*“Food security and labor security are the fundamental priorities for Mesoamerica: without dignified work, families don’t have enough income, and without income, we have hunger, hopelessness, and migration. We must reinvigorate and reorient small and medium scale production in the countryside if we are to break the cycle of hunger and exodus from the region.”*

With this call to action, Armando Bartra opened the first plenary of the Corn, Commerce and Community conference held at the Garfield Park Conservatory on Chicago’s west side on June 17 and 18, 2002. Bartra and other participants went on to suggest that recent patterns of migration from Mexico and Central America have made “mesoamérica” stretch all the way from Panama to Canada and we have to find ways to work together to make it a healthy region where the rights of all citizens are respected.

The Corn, Commerce, and Community conference was sponsored by Enlaces América, a program of the Heartland Alliance of Human Needs and Human Rights. Enlaces América aims to empower transnational communities to improve the lives of people throughout the Americas. Given that the conference is part of an ongoing effort to promote dialogue and interchange among transnational civil society organizations, the meeting did not attempt to come to joint conclusions. Instead, participants tried to lay out and understand the complex web that links communities in North and Central America and to identify opportunities for making collaboration across borders more effective.

More than 85 people attended the vibrant two-day meeting. Participants included leaders from Mexican Hometown Associations in Chicago; farmers’ organizations from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and the United States; academics; and representatives of international, national and local non-profit organizations. Speakers addressed a variety of issues, including immigrants’ rights, human rights, nutrition, trade policy, sustainable agriculture, and the environment.

Although discussions covered a wide range of topics, the theme of corn created a unifying thread which helped participants focus on concrete ideas for promoting what speaker Frank Sharry, Director of the National Immigration Forum, termed “regionalization from below, by the people.” Current patterns of regional development have increased poverty in many parts of Mexico and Central America and have dramatically increased migration flows toward the United States. At the Corn, Commerce and Community meeting, participants signaled the urgent need for integrated solutions that will support a dignified way of life for all citizens in the “new mesoamérica.”

A full list of participants and panels in the conference is attached as an appendix to this report.

## II. Panel Discussions

On Monday, June 17, and during the morning of Tuesday, June 18, conference participants listened to panel discussions in which speakers explored the linkages between corn and a range of issues facing communities throughout the region. Several of the major themes that emerged in these panel discussions included:

1. National realities in the United States, Mexico and Central America are increasingly intertwined. National policies can have economic, cultural and social impacts throughout the region. Understanding and addressing these connections requires regional approaches.
2. We need better ways to strengthen each other and learn from each other. We need to make existing networks more effective and take advantage of opportunities for collaboration.
3. We need to work together to promote trade and investment that is just and equitable BUT we must also appreciate that economic gains are not the only important goals. The cultural and spiritual elements of our lives (including autonomy and respect for diversity) are also important.
4. We need to recognize that migrant populations are social groups with knowledge and expertise that should be a part of redefining our regional dynamics. Immigrant communities should be enabled in order for them to play a greater leadership role on these regional issues.
5. If transnational communities are to take increased leadership on regional integration processes, reform “from below” must be linked to broader participation in political decision-making at all levels both in the United States and in the countries of origin.
6. Rural dislocation continues to be a critical root cause of migration. However, urban residents are more and more disconnected from rural life. We need to make the connections between rural and urban communities more apparent.
7. Consumers could be key allies in promoting a sustainable future in the region. We must look for ways to “vote with our dollars” and demand products that are both more nutritious and are produced in ways that support farmers and don’t damage the environment.

The panel on innovative transboundary solutions sparked some of the most lively discussion of the conference. Representatives of three alliances of Mexican immigrant communities from the states of Michoacan, Zacatecas and Oaxaca spoke of their initiatives to build transborder cooperation between immigrant communities in the U.S. and their places of origin. Along the way, these initiatives have relied on a massive outpouring of volunteer interest and have confronted political and organizational challenges. There was strong consensus that immigrant communities must be supported in their efforts to exercise greater leadership roles in efforts to create sustainable solutions for the region. Immigrants are already a substantial source of economic support in their countries of origin, but they are often left out of policy debates. Participants at the

meeting expressed a strong interest in finding common ground with immigrants' organizations and in finding ways to collaborate with them in efforts to promote a dignified life for communities throughout the region. Unfortunately, there was no contribution from a Central American immigrants' organization. This gap will be remedied in future gatherings.

The discussions around the transformation of small, family farms to agro-industry also generated strong reactions. Farmers from places as diverse as El Salvador, Iowa, and Chihuahua found common ground in decrying the pressures for large-scale export-oriented agriculture that results in ever-increasing uses of chemical inputs, and pushes people out of the countryside. Farmers from Mexico and Central America heard from counterparts in Iowa about how these same tendencies have damaged family farming in the United States. Several proposals for assisting small farmers were debated in small group sessions, including increasing consumer education and organizing farmers into networks for mutual technical assistance.

Throughout the day and a half of panel discussions, the beauty and tranquility of the Garfield Park Conservatory's gardens served as a welcome respite from discussions regarding such difficult challenges as linking trade and rural livelihoods, integrating cultural diversity into regional development, building transboundary communities, and creating consumer demand for local food production.

In addition to the panel discussions, the meeting featured two interactive demonstrations of traditional tortilla production methods using native Mexican corn species, provided by Itanoni, "Flor de Maíz" from Oaxaca, Mexico. On Monday, June 17, conference participants gathered for a banquet featuring traditional Oaxacan cuisine prepared by Gilberto González, President of the Oaxacan Federation of the Midwest.

### **III. Day 2: Small-Group Strategizing Sessions**

The small group strategizing sessions gave participants the opportunity to reflect on what they had learned from the panels and to discuss follow-up strategies regarding the issues and ideas explored over the previous two days. Participants noted that the conference had allowed them to make important cross-border and cross-sectorial connections that are often difficult to forge, and that it had helped deepen their understanding of the interrelationships between issues of rural revitalization, sustainable development, migration, the environment, and food production and consumption. However, several participants wished that more time had been devoted to the strategy sessions and expressed frustration at not having the opportunity to work more intensely in a workshop-like setting.

After the first day of panels and discussions, participants filled out a form with their recommendation. These recommendations fell into seven general categories:

1. Get the word out! Get more people involved in efforts to create a better/more just world
2. Support Producers
3. Shape trade agreements and international policy

4. Make rural/urban and producer/consumer connection
5. Protect unique local resources – respect diversity
6. Increase capacity for joint action with immigrants' organizations
7. Strengthen institutional capacity for local groups to take leadership on issues with regional impacts.

The small groups used these recommendations as a basic outline for discussion of future follow-up actions. Follow-up recommendations ranged from the very concrete to broader and longer-term ideas. We have divided them into five major categories: strengthening cross-border and cross-sectorial communications mechanisms; development of joint cross-border action strategies; analysis of existing regional policy proposals and the articulation of alternatives to them; production of accessible educational materials regarding rural revitalization issues; and marketing strategies that would link small producers and consumers interested in organic and sustainable food options.

### **Strengthening Communications Mechanisms**

Strengthening communication among conference participants and communities affected by rural development issues throughout North and Central America was a central, recurring theme in all five small group discussions. Participants noted the importance of maintaining contact among conference attendees themselves, but also identified several specific who should be included in future discussions.

Several small groups recommended nurturing connections between small producers in the U.S. and producers in Mexico and Central America. Many small farmers throughout the region face similar challenges, but remain isolated from one another. Others stressed the importance of forging connections between producers and consumers throughout the region; one group suggested forming small, transnational committees that would serve as bridges between producers and consumers. Another group emphasized the need to strengthen linkages between the academic/research and advocacy worlds concerned with rural development, environmental, and migration issues.

One group proposed a follow-up meeting in southern Mexico or Central America in order to ensure continued communication among conference participants and in order to widen the scope of the regional discussion sparked by this conference. Another suggested forming or identifying a uniquely Mesoamerican space in which broad action plans could be developed and existing networks could be strengthened.

Finally, a number of participants identified U.S.-based immigrant community organizations as being key elements of any strategy to strengthen transnational communication and collaboration. They proposed utilizing the resources of immigrant organizations in order to facilitate cooperation and “translation” between local communities in the U.S. and communities in countries of origin. This strategy was proposed as a way of overcoming language and cultural barriers that can complicate transboundary collaboration efforts.

### **Joint Cross-Border Action Strategies**

Although participants focused most on the need to strengthen spaces and mechanisms for cross-border communication, they also articulated several ideas regarding coordinated cross-border actions that conference attendees and other interested civil society members could take in response to the issues explored in the conference. These suggestions included a regional educational campaign regarding the environmental and social benefits of organic agriculture, an educational campaign regarding the dangers of chemicals/pesticides for farmworkers in Mexico and the U.S., coordinated cross-national media campaigns with several clearly and jointly articulated key messages, and a sign-on letter regarding the perils of transgenic corn to Latin American presidents.

### **Public Policy Analysis and Advocacy**

Most small groups discussed the need for the development and dissemination of multi-dimensional analyses of regional policy proposals impacting rural communities, such as Plan Puebla a Panamá, the proposed U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement, and the proposed Free Trade of the Americas. Diagnoses of existing policies and proposals will not be sufficient, however; most groups also emphasized the importance of the articulation of transnational civil society alternatives to these proposed policies. One group suggested that just as gatherings in Seattle and Porto Alegre have become reference points in the development of alternative models of globalization, conference participants should begin to use their gatherings to create reference points of alternative models for rural development.

### **Educational Materials**

Many of the issues explored at the conference, while central to the lives of communities throughout the Americas, are complex and seemingly abstract for many of the people affected by them. Several small groups stressed the importance of developing bilingual educational materials that would present in an accessible manner some of the issues explored in the Conference. These materials might be written or audiovisual depending on the audience and the topic. Several representatives of immigrant community organizations noted that written materials would be particularly useful for distribution in U.S. immigrant communities. Others suggested compiling resources on more specific issues, such as a systematic documentation of the experiences of remittances-based local development initiatives. Several participants pointed to existing videos or reports that might be translated and made available to organizations for training purposes.

### **Promote Sustainable Consumption at local, national and regional levels.**

Linking sustainable food production and consumption was a central theme in the discussions regarding sustainable development and rural revitalization in the Americas. Participants discussed several ways of using markets to promote viable alternatives to current models of trade and development in this hemisphere. These ideas ranged from the very local to the regional. One participant proposed starting at the very grassroots level, asking all the meeting participants to personally commit to buying organic, local or sustainably produced food. This commitment could be spread outward to the organizations and communities that the participants represent. Others focused on the possibilities for developing of marketing schemes for locally-produced food with unique cultural and ecological value (such as criollo corn). Others addressed the question of

scale: how to expand opportunities for products that currently have small niche markets into mainstream markets without getting caught in the commodity market pricing cycles. Others explored the idea of cutting out middlemen by creating linkages between small producers and consumers throughout the region.

### **III. Next Steps**

Enlaces América will report on the results of the meeting in a series of regional consultations in Oaxaca and Michoacán in Mexico and in Guatemala. These consultations will serve to get additional input and to link more organizations into ongoing civil society efforts to develop regional proposals for economic development, improved protection of political, social, and economic rights, and environmental sustainability. In response to several comments on the format of the Corn, Commerce and Community meeting, the regional meetings will adopt a workshop format and will focus on joint strategizing.

As noted in the reports from the small groups, many participants made specific commitments to work together on issues of mutual interest. Enlaces América staff will follow up on the recommendations from the small groups and will report on progress on a regular basis through our newsletter *Enlaces News* and our website, [www.enlacesamerica.org](http://www.enlacesamerica.org) which we plan to have operational by the third week of July. For now, you can also access our newsletter and reports at [www.mexicousadvocates.org](http://www.mexicousadvocates.org). We also invite participants to keep us apprised of any joint initiatives that have emerged from the meeting and to let us know if there are issues on which they would like to ask for assistance or collaboration from other organizations. We will make every effort to support those collaborations and/or make connections among organizations.

# Appendix 1: Final Conference Agenda

June 17, 2002

9:15am Conference Opens: Welcome from **Sid Mohn**, President, Heartland Alliance for Human N & Human Rights

Introduction: **Oscar Chacón**, Director, Enlaces América

9:45 am **Opening Plenary: Overview of significance of corn in the region and linkages between corn and trade; corn and culture; corn and environment.**

**Mark Ritchie**, Executive Director,  
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

**Armando Bartra**, President  
Instituto Maya

10:30 am Coffee Break

10:45 am **Panel Discussion: Corn, Culture and Community**

**Lourdes Palacios**, Fundación CORDES, El Salvador

**Miguel Colunga**, Frente Democrático Campesino de Chihuahua, Mexico

**Pedro Torres**, Red para la Defensa del Maíz/Frente Democrático Campesino de Chihuahua, Mexico

**Moderator: Bert Kreitlow**, Carroll College

12:00-1:30 Lunch: Traditional Tortilla Demonstration featuring native corn species from Oaxaca  
**Itatoni S.A.**

1:30-3:30 **Panel Discussion: Corn and Trade**

**Victor Suarez**, Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadores de Productores del Campo (ANEPCO), Mexico

**George Naylor**, National Family Farm Coalition, USA

**Miguel Pickard**, Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria (CIEPAC), Mexico

**René Rivera**, Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo (FUNDE), El Salvador

3:30-3:45 Coffee Break

3:45-5:00 **Panel Discussion: Innovative Transboundary Community Proposals and Responses**

**Leoncio Vásquez Santos**, Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Bilingual, Fresno, CA

**Elena Duran**, President, Zacatecas Federation of Illinois

**Gonzalo Arroyo**, Michoacán Federation of Chicago

**Moderator: Emilio Kouri**, University of Chicago

- 5:00-5:30 pm      Wrap-up and Discussion
- 5:30 pm            Reception and Private Tour of Garfield Park Alliance and Chihuly Glass Exhibit
- 7:00 pm            Dinner: Chef Gilberto Gonzalez, President of the Federación de Oaxaqueños del Medio Oeste will treat us to delicacies from his home state of Oaxaca, Mexico

**Dinner Speakers:**

**Adele Simmons, Vice Chair and Senior Executive of Chicago Metropolis 2020**

**Teodoro Alonso, Mexican Consulate of Chicago**

**Frank Sharry, Executive Director, National Immigration Forum**

June 18, 2002

9:00am            **Corn and Migration Plenary**

**Rodolfo Garcia Zamora**, University of Zacatecas

**Frank Sharry**, National Immigration Forum

**Moderator: Susan Gzesh**, University of Chicago

10:00 –10:20      Coffee Break

10:20-noon **Panel Discussion: Corn and Environment**

**Liza Covantes**, Greenpeace Mexico

**Javier Rivera**, UNES, El Salvador

**Tim Wise**, Tufts University, Boston, USA

**Moderator: Christopher Boyer**, University of Illinois at Chicago

12:00-1:00    Lunch

1:00-2:00    **Panel Discussion: From Farmers to Consumers :**

**Amado Ramirez**, Itanoni flor del Maíz., Mexico

**Erika Allen**, Growing Power, USA

**José Martínez**, Red COMAL, Honduras

2:00-2:20    **Introduction to Small Group discussion:**

Moderator, Oscar Chacón

Discussion of responses to the question: “Where would you like this conference to lead us over the next two years?”

2:20-4:00    Small Group discussion: strategies for reaching goals identified in plenary.

4:00-4:30 Final Plenary: Reports and Recommendations from Groups

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## Appendix 3: List of Currently Available Presentations

1. **Innovative Trans-Border Community Responses Panel** – *Oaxacan Migrants: An Example of Trans-border Activism and Organizing*, by Leoncio Vásquez, Communications Coordinator of the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional
2. **Corn and Migration Panel** – *Agricultural Crisis, Corn, and Migration in Mexico*, by Dr. Rodolfo García Zamora, Professor at the University of Zacatecas
3. **“From Farmers to Consumers” Panel** – Cultural Project of Culinary Rescue of Native Corn Species and the Tortilla, by Amado Ramírez Leyva, Itanoní flor del Maíz

## Appendix 4: Detailed Suggestions from Small groups

### Group 1

Desire to facilitate communication and action between small farmers in North, Central, and South America.

Issue of rural revitalization – this conference really demonstrated the importance of it.

Need to address rural revitalization as a central element of global justice work.

People appreciated this conference as an opportunity for network-building with groups from Zacatecas, Chihuahua, and Oaxaca, to help collectively construct a “bottom-up” vision of sustainable development.

Immigrants’ rights organizer appreciated that this conference forced him to think about why the people he works with had to leave their home countries.

### Group 2

1. Take positions on trade policies – NAFTA, PPP, FTAA, internal and external development policies
2. Strengthening linkages between existing actors (producers/farmers, organizations, consumers, etc.) in all of Mesoamerica
3. Develop strategies for informative communication:
  - a. media strategies
  - b. university training
  - c. approaching foundations
4. Follow-up/next steps: meetings in Central America and Mexico

### Group 3

1. How can we continue to strengthen this process?
  - a. continue with these meetings, follow up on this process
  - b. we need to meet to carry out concrete activities relating to what we have discussed and listened to
  - c. we could form small committee, creating bridges between producers and consumers – information would need to get to these committees

- d. promote reflection among groups with which we work on issues of international agricultural policies, WTO free trade agreements, FTAA, etc. with organizations of agricultural producers and migrants to lobby on public policies
2. How can we strengthen our work to help others?
    - a. we have now come to an understanding of the problems, but we need written information in order to improve our work with immigrant organizations
    - b. need to maintain linkages between participating organizations in this conference

#### Group 4

Joint strategies to improve our work:

- intensive education campaign in favor of organic agriculture
- intensive education campaign about the dangers of chemicals for farmworkers in Mexico and the U.S.
- market promotion schemes for native corn species
- identify a Mesoamerican space in which broad action plans can be developed and networks for joint activities can be articulated
- systematize experiences of local development initiatives related to migrants
- use migrant organizations as “translators” between the U.S. and Mexico- both literal and cultural “translation”
- promote relations between producers in the U.S. and producers in Latin America, who all confront common problems, many of which are due to U.S. public policies
- summarize alternative proposals for rural development – just like Seattle and Porto Alegre have become reference points in the development of alternative globalization proposals
- in future events focus on the comprehensive “campesina” economy
- compile bilingual material about different countries
- promote training and the diversification of small farmers’ production
- develop national and internal marketing strategies from alternative markets to big markets

#### Group 5

- Important issues:
  - messaging
  - media campaign
  - FTAA consultation
  - El Paso border pilgrimage
  - Strengthen links between academics and people

- Analysis of farm issues
- Popular education materials
- Focus on food
- Getting information out to mainstream
- Link PPP, FTAA, free trade agreements, trans-genetics
- Letters to Latin American presidents on corn
- Stay connected
- Regular updates