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Land redistribution does not make an agrarian revolution. A critical view on the Costa Rican peasant settlements in the Arenal-Tempisque Irrigation District, 1981-2016

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Abstract

Costa Rica is not an exceptional case to the rest of Central America in terms of its agrarian history and redistributive reforms. The creation of ITCO in 1960 and its project of land colonization with peasant settlements—the least threatening of all styles of agrarian reform—fails as an agrarian reform because of its limited redistributive scope, and because of the lack of interest in changing the power structures and concentration of the land in the countryside. This article examines the Costa Rican agrarian policy on peasant settlements through the history of the Bagatzí and Falconiana settlements in Guanacaste, Costa Rica, with a critical approach to agrarian reforms. As one more example of the class character of Costa Rican agrarian policy, the tension between the proposals of Israeli cooperation and the objectives of the Costa Rican State is evident in the rejection of a cooperative model for the settlements.

Keywords: agrarian reform, peasant settlements, rice monocrop, international cooperation, Costa Rica

La redistribución de tierras no hace una revolución. Una mirada crítica a la política costarricense de asentamientos campesinos del Distrito de Riego Arenal-Tempisque 1981-2016

Resumen

Costa Rica no es un caso excepcional al resto de América Central en términos de su historia agraria y reformas redistributivas. La creación del ITCO en 1960 y su proyecto de colonización de tierras con asentamientos campesinos -el menos amenazador de todos los estilos de reforma agraria- fracasa como reforma agraria por su limitado alcance redistributivo, y por el desinterés por cambiar las estructuras de poder y concentración de la tierra en el campo. Este artículo examina la política agraria costarricense sobre asentamientos campesinos por medio de la historia de los asentamientos de Bagatzí y Falconiana en Guanacaste, Costa Rica, con un enfoque crítico a las reformas agrarias. La tensión entre las propuestas de la cooperación israelí y los objetivos del Estado costarricense se evidencia en el rechazo a un modelo cooperativo para los asentamientos, en un ejemplo más del carácter de clase de la política agraria costarricense.

Palabras clave: Reforma agraria, asentamientos campesinos, monocultivo de arroz, cooperación internacional, Costa Rica

Introduction

Land redistribution alone does not make a revolution. Since 1960, the Costa Rican case of peasant settlement and peasant colonization has been an isolated social project disconnected from the rest of the agrarian policy focused on improving and enhancing the plantation model for export of bananas, pineapples and coffee. The Costa Rican Land and Colonization Institute (ITCO from its Spanish acronym) was created in 1961 as a part of the state social democratic policies to strengthen Costa Rican society. Among the areas that received attention were urban industrial workers' rights, access to affordable housing, public education, healthcare, public transportation, and, of course, the agricultural production that was the leading economic sector of the time. Costa Rica implemented a state-led agrarian reform and peasant colonization project through the ITCO. Other countries of the region, impelled by revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 70s, undertook deep social and political transformations throughout the last century (Albertus, 2015; de Janvry & Ground, 1978; de Janvry & Sadoulet, 2002; Dorner, 1992; Kay, 2015; Rosset et al., 2006).

Using a critical approach to the characterization of the agrarian policies implemented in Latin America from authors like Cristobal Kay (2002, 2015) Alain de Janvry (1989, 2002) and, more recently, Michael Albertus (2015), the colonization project and land redistribution implemented in Costa Rica since 1960 are positioned as limited and failed land reforms. The social reach of the governmental actions on this matter is limited and highly partisan. Agrarian reform efforts fall short when the acquisition (Chonchol, 1970) and land size are conditioned by the money the government wants to expend on properties from private hands. Finally, politics will matter. The scattered set of 880 peasant settlements spread along the Costa Rican rural landscape are, at best, a truncated colonization effort. This is the main argument pursued in this paper, to show how in the case of peasant settlements of the Tempisque lowlands in the province of Guanacaste, access to land titles did not guarantee the transformation of the social relation in the countryside where strong monopolies of rice and sugarcane industries still reign in the agricultural landscape of the province. The same pattern occurs in other regions of the country. This pattern can also be observed in the Central American context where the unbalance of power in the countryside is not challenged when limited redistributive efforts could be implemented. These are among the central questions investigated through this article: (1) in what form did the Costa Rican government put in motion a substantial program to create peasant settlements throughout the province of Guanacaste? And (2) how did these settlements influence and accelerate peasant transformation, otherwise known as the modernization of the agricultural sector?

Recent literature like Albertus's work on land redistribution in Latin America or the recent set of volumes on Capitalism, land, and power in Latin America from Guillermo Almeyra et al. (2014) are crucial to this research because they show the reach, limitations, and the power struggles and unbalances in the Latin American countryside as scenarios of agrarian reforms, land colonization and redistribution projects. Previous works from the first decade of the 2000s

show a fruitful analysis of the reformist agrarian policies implemented in the Latin American region during the last part of the 20th century. Solon Barraclough's *Land Reform in Developing Countries: The Role of the State and Other Actors* (1999) and *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform* by Petter Rosset et al. (2006) introduce a broad analysis of implemented agrarian reforms in the global South, bringing back discussions about the traditional agrarian question in Latin American context of agrarian redistributive reforms just in time. Other groups of literature that discuss critical approaches to agrarian reforms in Latin America and Central America come from the last two decades of the past century with Charles Brockett's *Land, Power, and Poverty: Agrarian Transformation and Political Conflict in Central America* (1988), Peter Dorner's *Latin American Land Reforms in Theory and Practice: a Retrospective Analysis* (1992), Alain de Janvry's *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America* (1981), and Jacques Chonchol's "Eight Fundamental Conditions of Agrarian Reform in Latin America" (1970).

Misconceptions of the Costa Rican case as a full agrarian reform come from works like George Hill's "The Agrarian Reform in Costa Rica" (1964), an early and cheerful celebration of the start of the colonization project that failed to critically assess the real scope of these redistributive policies; the doctoral thesis of James Rowles's "Law and Agrarian Reform in Costa Rica: The Legislative Phase" (1982), which only centers the success of the so-called agrarian reform on its legal framework; or Mitchell Seligson's "The Impact of Agrarian Reform: A Study of Costa Rica" (1979), written just nine years after the beginning of the peasant settlements project. More recently, Antoni Royo's "La Reforma Agraria en Costa Rica (1962-2002): Balance de las Intervenciones Estatales en el Cantón de Osa" (Agrarian reform in Costa Rica from the experiences of government interventions like the creation of peasant settlements in the southern county of Osa, Puntarenas Province, 2003) again falls short in critically engaging in a deeper assessment of the real scope and limited transformative potential of these redistributive efforts.

Land distribution, land access as a human right, and food sovereignty are key topics to consider when implementing an agrarian reform, rural and peasant colonization project, or a land redistributive initiative. The question here is to fairly focus these efforts as what they are; in many cases they have become just populist efforts to capture and provide electoral bases to partisan policies. In other cases, by implementing very limited and nonintrusive actions that only reinforce what is already there, these efforts do not challenge the traditional unbalanced power structures of the Latin American countryside.

Costa Rica is not an isolated case in Central America. The call for Costa Rican exceptionalism has only ideological purposes, and this is based on the presumption that Spanish colonizers installed their colonies in land empty of native inhabitants without resistance and violence and that there was a lack of natural resources to exploit, unlike other countries of the region (Albertus, 2015). While the last assumption may be true, the first one is problematic. Extensive research on the colonial structure of property lands and its adjudication process in the region call for the inclusion of the Costa Rican case in the same scenario as the rest of Latin America (Edelman, 1992; Edelman & León, 2014; Gudmundson, 1984; Rodríguez Solera, 1988;

Torres-Rivas, 1994). This article proposes a critical reading of the Costa Rican agrarian policy of colonization and land redistribution as a mild—if not failed—agrarian reform during the last 70 years. Through the peasant settlements policy, the Costa Rican peasant colonization project did not change or challenge the traditional structures of power relations and agricultural trends of the countryside. Where there were large enclave plantations of transnational enterprises like in the North and Caribbean lowlands, the peasant settlements installed there produced the same crops that were dominant in their regions; where there were monocultures, the peasant settlers designated their lands to the same purpose like rice and extensive sugarcane crops in the Tempisque lowland basin in the province of Guanacaste; where there were isolation and disconnection, the peasant families of these settlements remained idle and abandoned. This research aims to observe what happened with the Israeli cooperation project that envisioned these settlements as a group of peasant settlements with a central administration.

The fieldwork discussed in this article was conducted within the Arenal-Tempisque Irrigation District's peasant settlements of Llanos de Cortez, focusing on the history and development of Bagatzí and Falconiana, the most emblematic peasant settlements of the Guanacaste region. The first section of this article is dedicated to situating theoretical coordinates and utilized methodology to understand the magnitude and reach of the Costa Rican redistributive agrarian policy and colonization project and the specifics of the cases of Llanos de Cortez, Bagatzí, and Falconiana. This research proposes the analysis of the Costa Rican agrarian policy of land redistribution and peasant colonization as an expression of the contradictions of capitalist estates' class interests when implementing peasant settlements as a land distribution and colonization process. The case of these peasant settlements unfolds through the conflicts of implementing a design proposed by the Israeli international cooperation for the Guanacaste region's peasant settlements. The original proposal would have created communities like the peasant settlements and cooperatives in Israel, which are called moshavim. The second section of this article analyzes historic and statistical data, interviews, and images to characterize the purposes and consequences of the Costa Rican colonization project and land redistributive policy from the perspective of these peasant settlements. Finally, some remarks are made on the contradictions of implementing peasant settlements, colonization projects, and how land redistribution in Costa Rica has low success and engenders more problems than solutions to the deep crisis of the countryside.

Costa Rican agrarian and institutional context for the past five decades

The more significant urban areas of Costa Rica are located in the Central Valley of the capital, surrounded by the small farms of the peripheral south and west belt of the valley. Outside the valley, the countryside revolves around a plantation model of medium-scale agricultural production. According to the 2014 Costa Rican Agricultural Census, as shown in Table 1, 22,500 farms out of a total of more than 60,000 agricultural farms are dedicated to coffee, followed by 9,000 fruit farms (mostly pineapple and banana), and 4,500 farms dedicated to the production of

basic grains like rice, beans, and corn. Another 30,000 farms are devoted to cattle-ranching activities (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, 2014).

When the Costa Rican government initiated the program of peasant settlements in 1961, the primary beneficiaries were families from the belt of small coffee towns in the Central Valley: San Ramon, Tilarán, Acosta (Edelman, 1987, 1992; Gudmundson, 1984; Rodríguez Solera, 1988; Rosero-Bixby et al., 1997). Those participating in the program were not necessarily pursuing a peasant livelihood themselves when they joined the ITCO settlement project, but they were descendants of coffee farmers and small orchard farmers. Others were former urban workers such as small merchants or unemployed agricultural workers from the sugarcane industry and vast cattle ranches.

With the creation of ITCO and its implementation of the peasant colonization project through the creation of the peasant settlements, the Costa Rican government in the early years of 1960 wanted “to create peasants” and transform them into small to medium-sized agricultural entrepreneurs through technical assistance, credit programs and land tenure programs. Much has been written about Costa Rican “peasant transformation” policies (Almeyra et al., 2014; de la Cruz, 1980; Edelman, 1999; Pérez Brignoli & Samper, 1994). One wonders what goal was envisioned by the state as the outcome of such a transformation.

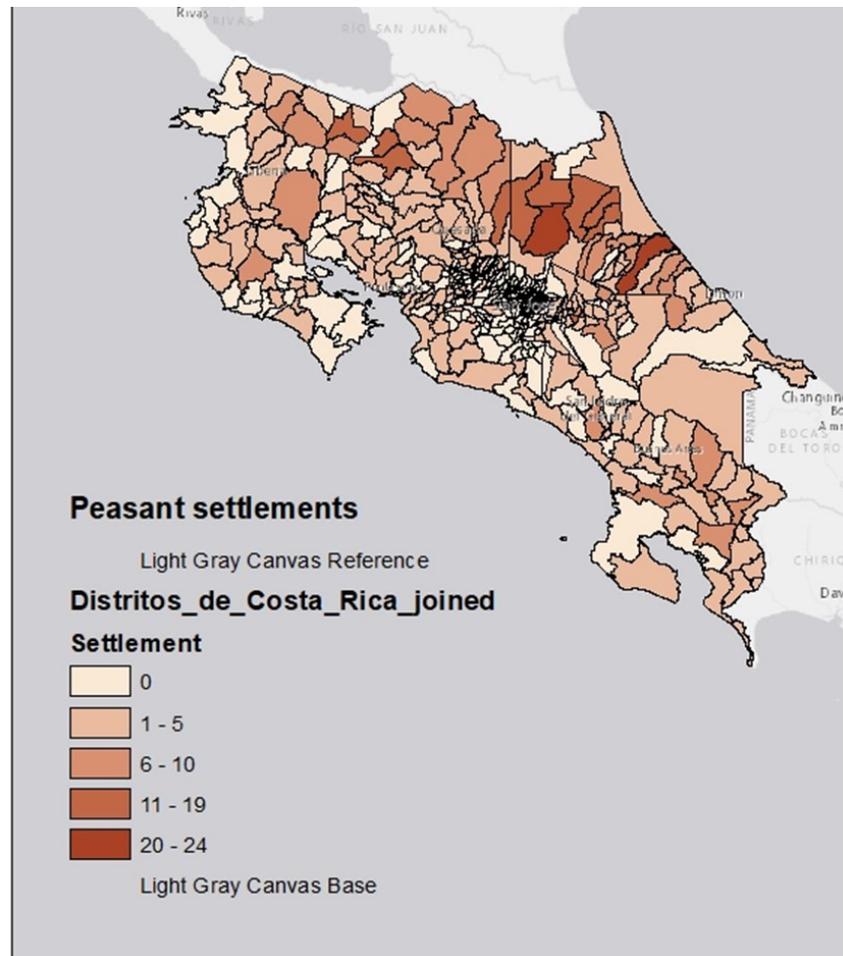
Colonization projects and land redistribution processes in context

The theoretical framework for this research focuses on the characterization of the agrarian reforms, land redistribution projects, and colonization processes (Albertus, 2015; Araghi, 1995; de Janvry, 1981; de Janvry & Ground, 1978; Dorner, 1992; Kay, 2002) to later contrast the implementation of a set of land distribution/colonization projects by Costa Rica. Through its colonization project, the Costa Rican government attempted to modernize the traditional peasant family units of production by pushing the newly settled families of these state-made peasant settlements toward agricultural production for the market. The result was that the ITCO’s peasant settlements did not promote shared work between landholders or shared resources and management but, rather, located landholders’ residences far from their productive parcels, which ultimately contributed to the disconnection of the second generation of settlers from the land and family businesses.

Map 1 (below) shows the concentration of peasant settlements created by the state by district (the smallest political land division of the country). The higher number of settlements correspond to areas where industrial agricultural plantations and monocrop were already developing. These are the dark orange areas of the Northern Lowlands and the Caribbean where banana and, more recently, pineapple plantations are well established. This is the same pattern as in the southern chain of small valleys of San Isidro del General. The province of Guanacaste in the north west pacific coast and Tempisque basin has been the region of rice monocrop for decades (agricultural census 1950-2014, INEC Costa Rica). There the cattle ranches and big pasture haciendas gave place to the rice agribusiness, and, recently, the sugarcane industry, both for export. Here the

number of settlements did not need to be large because they followed the pattern of land concentration that engendered the monocrop industry.

Map 1. Concentration of state-made peasant settlements by District. Costa Rica, 2016



Source: INDER, Government of Costa Rica. Silvia Vasquez Olguin, 2019.

From a critical reading of the work of Alain de Janvry (1981), de Janvry and Sadoulet (2002), and de Janvry and Ground (1978) on Latin American agrarian reforms, the agrarian question, and reformisms in Latin America, agrarian reform refers to an energetic redistribution of rights over lands and their resources. The Costa Rican agrarian reform standard bearer was its program of peasant settlements and colonization. Focused on colonization and expansion of the agricultural frontier, the Costa Rican agrarian policy failed to create the political conditions to transform the power structure in the countryside. The change in the legal and institutional frameworks was the creation of ITCO, with a recent decentralized, plural, and regional structure. The Costa Rican case failed as a successful agrarian reform because the colonization project was never part of an integral plan to develop agriculture or the economy. Colonization efforts ended in many cases with isolated communities languishing to disappear. Bagatzí and Falconiana are two of these

isolated, abandoned and almost ghostly towns. The most problematic outcome of this mild agrarian reform is that it served the capitalization of the dominant sectors that sell their land to the state, which is the case in Costa Rica and many other countries in Latin America where land redistribution was conducted via the acquisition of private land, like in Honduras and Brazil (Albertus, 2015; Deininger, 1999).

The more the government pays for land, the less land reform is done. According to the authors with critical approaches to assessing the scope and successful goal achievements of agrarian reforms like Alain de Janvry (1978, 1981; de Janvry & Sadoulet 2002), Jacques Chonchol (1970) and Cristóbal Kay (2002,) or Peter Roset (2013), a successful agrarian reform must contemplate the plurality of local knowledge and practices on the use of natural resources and the agricultural production of each area in particular. It cannot be standardized and applicable without cultural or social reference.

The Costa Rican agrarian policy of expansion of the agricultural frontier, modernization of the countryside, and population of inhabited zones of rural unproductive areas of the country do not amount to substantive agrarian reform (Alfaro, 2005; Barraclough & Dominike, 1970; de Janvry, 1981; Dorner, 1992; Hill, 1964; Pérez Brignoli & Samper, 1994; Rowles, 1982; Samper & Torrens, n.d.; Seligson, 1979, 1980).

Negotiated land acquisition for agrarian reforms in a capitalist country will not produce profound changes in the power structure and access to resources, but they will tend to reinforce already existing power relations and logics of production. Thus, the Costa Rican agrarian policy reinforced historical patterns of land access, logics of production, and power relations because it was a colonization policy and a contingency policy for preventing future social struggles, and defusing tensions that arise from urban inequality (Albertus, 2015; de Janvry, 1981) is one of the most positive outcomes of the high rate of land titling of the country (Dorner, 1992, p. 77) in comparison with the rest of Latin America.

Peasants and peasant ways of living

The peasantry is defined by its relationship to the land, in a parallel form to how the relationship with the means of production defines proletarians or bourgeoisie. Autonomy is an important factor in understanding the peasantry. Autonomy of decisions about the land (as a central resource) is of key importance. Ownership of the land and resources is not requisite because peasants are those who work the land in an autonomous way, reproducing themselves and producing agricultural commodities for their subsistence and for the market. However, one of the limits to peasant autonomy concerns the market economy (van der Ploeg, 2006, 2010). It demands or impels peasants to produce for the market in order to increase the income of the family unit. It is also important that the peasant does not receive a fixed income like a worker. The third important characteristic of the peasant is the limitation of their time and effort on the plot. Here is where it lies in the balance between exhaustion and the demands for survival of the family. To ensure family survival and offset exhaustion, peasants may limit the expansion of the

size of the farm, hire seasonal workers to help with the harvest, or work long hours. An autonomous peasant family may have all its members participate in such work without the mediation of salary or wages for their common wellbeing and subsistence in connection with others through the market. In this approach to defining the concept of a peasant, the market plays a social role that connects peasants with other peasants and consumers. From the classic Marxist approaches to the more recent debates of its validity in the 21st century, at stake in the traditional agrarian question is how much of this balance of motivations and autonomy is disrupted by capitalist production and social relations (Bernstein, 2006; Kautsky, 1988; Kay, 2015; van der Ploeg, 2006, 2010).

Employing the definition of a peasant discussed earlier in this paper, a peasant space—like the peasant settlements the Costa Rican government implemented—is characterized by the implementation of a set of autonomous decisions that the family unit carry out on issues of production and land use that are not entirely oriented toward the market economy. A peasant space consists of an array of non-commoditized land, labour, and products that coexist and resist the logic of the capitalist economy and its production of space. Through this assumption, the Bagatzí and Falconiana settlements are peasant spaces transitioning toward capitalist spaces for agricultural production. Peasant spaces like backyards used as *milpas* (small traditional gardens for self-sustenance) in Bagatzí (Picture 1, below) persist as pockets of resistance in the face of a highly-commoditized market and profit-oriented economic system, which was the motivation behind the colonization project implemented. The system of land distribution implemented by INDER physically separates peasants from their land and contributes to monopolizing the means of production in the hands of a single class—an (agrarian) bourgeoisie or landed capitalist—with the consequent polarization of class relations.

Picture 1. Corn and “coyote” cilantro in a backyard in Bagatzí



Source: Silvia Vasquez Olguin.

The Moshavim model: A case for peasant cooperatives from the Israeli international cooperation in Costa Rica

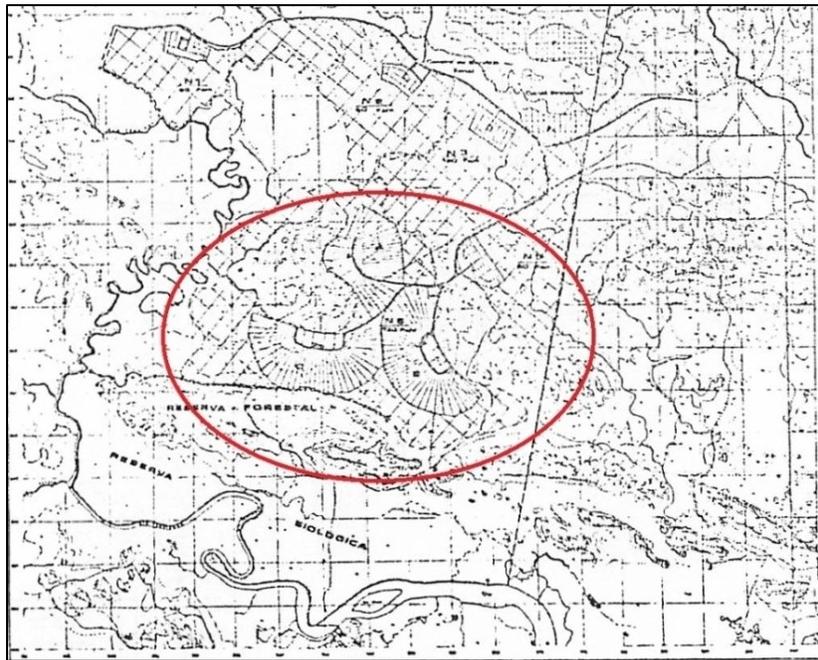
From the 1962 Costa Rican-Israeli cooperation agreement to exchange experiences on agriculture came the 1976 proposal of the creation of the agricultural and peasant nucleus of five peasant settlements in the Arenal-Tempisque Irrigation District. For the purpose of implementing this project, ITCO acquired a large portion of the historic Hacienda Ciruelas in the province of Guanacaste. From that land, the government created Palo Verde national park, Lomas de Barbudal biological reserve, and added four peasant settlements to the Llanos de Cortez region (Bagatzí, Falconiana, Tamarindo y Llanos de Cortez settlement). In the framework of this cooperation agreement (Costa Rican Law #5175), the state of Israel sent a group of six consultants in 1975 to work with the Costa Rican Ministry of Agriculture in the design and implementation of a group of peasant settlements in the northern region of Guanacaste.

The Israeli cooperators, Dr. Arie Szeskin, chief of the group, Eng. Slomo Abarbanel, agricultural economist, Eng. Aron Lantzkrone, irrigation and drainage expert, Arc. Nahum Porat, planner, Mr. Eli Turgeman, rural management and cooperatives expert, and Eng. Haim Yogeve, agricultural specialist in plant breeding, planned these communities before the people even arrived. Their report—located in the Reference library of INDER, San Jose, Costa Rica—revealed

a world of ideas and imagined communities, cooperatives, plantations of tall papaya trees, shadowy marañón (cashews), orange trees, and gardens of fruits and vegetables. In the main town, not yet named, there was to be a group of buildings for the central management offices, classrooms and laboratories, barns, and storage rooms for tools, trucks, machinery and supplies.

The Israeli authors of this report imagined a group of peasant settlements with a central administration of water carried by the canals, an administration that would also oversee research and development. But what happened with these dreamt-of communities? When these places are visited now or these pages are read, one will notice that the communities are isolated and disconnected from the other towns and cities of the region. The settlements are largely bankrupt, the population diminishing. There is no high school or graveyard in any of these towns. Bagatzí and Falconiana are midway to becoming ghost towns.

Map 2. “Fan” settlement model proposed by Israeli co-operators based on moshavim cooperative settlements in Israel. *Finca Wilson’s Report, 1978*



Source: Israeli “Finca Wilson’s report” to ITCO. Jerusalem, December 1978.

A *moshav* (*moshavim* in plural) is an agricultural cooperative that consists of all the residents of a single village. In each moshav, production is individual, as is consumption, and only matters of mutual concern are handled collectively, like purchasing inputs, marketing, financial transactions, and other activities in which economies of scale exist (Amit Cohen & Sofer, 2017; Applebaum & Sofer, 2012; Kimhi, 1998, 2010; Kislev, 1992; Sadan & Weintraub, 1980; Schwartz, 1999; Sofer & Applebaum, 2006). The moshav emerged in the early 1920s as a kind of village

smallholder cooperative in the territories of the British mandate. Over the next three decades, its cooperative structure and rules underwent some changes in response to developments affecting its environment. During Israel's first decade of statehood (1950s), the moshav became the country's most prevalent form of agricultural settlement. Three decades of success in the Israeli agricultural landscape were enough reasons for the Israeli cooperation to "export" this model to other regions of the world. Costa Rica did not adopt the proposed model. The government and authorities of the agricultural sector did not give it a chance.

Michael Sofer (2005), following Schwartz (1999), argues that the moshav plan was based on ideological and practical principles (Schwartz, 1999). Moshavim and other types of peasant settlements were part of a colonization process and planning, not an agrarian reform. The Israeli government introduced peasant settlements like moshav in Palestinian territory with political and economic guarantees to expand Israeli presence and control in occupied territories. To Schwartz (1999), the success of the moshav's consolidation period rested in the hard work and puritanical standards of their members as much as the high demand at the national level for agricultural produce that began in the pre-WWII period and continued after Israeli statehood.

After the mid-1980s economic crisis in Israel, a process of intense decooperativization followed. The Israeli state retracted its original support for the moshav cooperative model, and with its abandonment, the model started to contract and slowly decline. In the mid-1990s, few moshavim remained in place, and even fewer of them still received government support. Israeli international cooperators in the early 1980s could not forecast the future of the moshav model in Israel and its progressive transformation in part because of the search for new sources of income through pluriactivity and because of the decline of agricultural employment due to the intensification of agricultural production (Amit Cohen & Sofer, 2017; Applebaum & Sofer, 2012; Kimhi, 2009; Schwartz, 1999; Sofer & Applebaum, 2006).

The Israeli report for the Costa Rican peasant settlement in the Arenal-Tempisque Irrigation district proposed a model of strong state-supported peasant cooperative settlements based on Israel's particular national context. The Costa Rican government -through the ITCO director's opposition- rejected the proposal of a set of peasant cooperatives because it could be interpreted as a contradiction to Costa Rican position concerning the Central American context of low-intensity war, civil unrest, and international intervention. The Israeli proposal that Bagatzí and its nearby settlements work as cooperatives with democratic participation, shared resources and decision-making, and a non-profit orientation was interpreted by the Costa Rican government as a threat to the dominant capitalist economic system and the political alliances against the recent Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua.

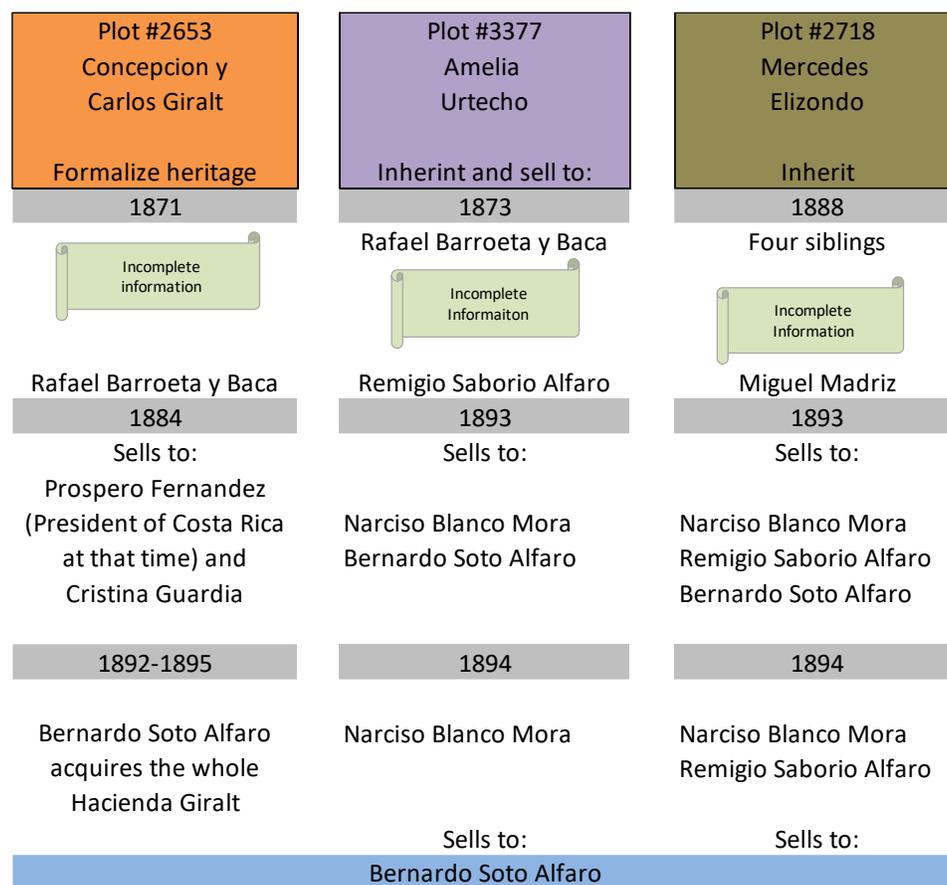
The decision of the Costa Rican government to reject the Israeli proposal leads to the question of why an unimplemented design was important. Other countries like Angola (Kimhi, 2010) successfully implemented peasant re-settlement programs based on family-owned property similar to the moshav model. In the Angolan case, the entire region was revitalized, and more than 600 families from the original resettled ex-combatants arguably thrived and dealt

well with social and productive struggles. The original idea of the moshav model implemented in Israel would benefit peasant settlements in other contexts like Guanacaste settlements in Costa Rica. However, this was not possible due to political opposition within the Costa Rican government.

Guanacaste peasant settlements of Llanos de Cortez and Hacienda Ciruelas

The history of Hacienda Ciruelas or “Finca Wilson” was orally passed down by three families, the Giralt’s, Urtecho’s, and Elizondo’s. The older cadaster files come from them. This history included many engagements, sales, and inheritances that linked them to each other. The archival research¹ notes that the archives are incomplete at some point in 1880.

Figure 1. Land tenure history of Hacienda Ciruelas

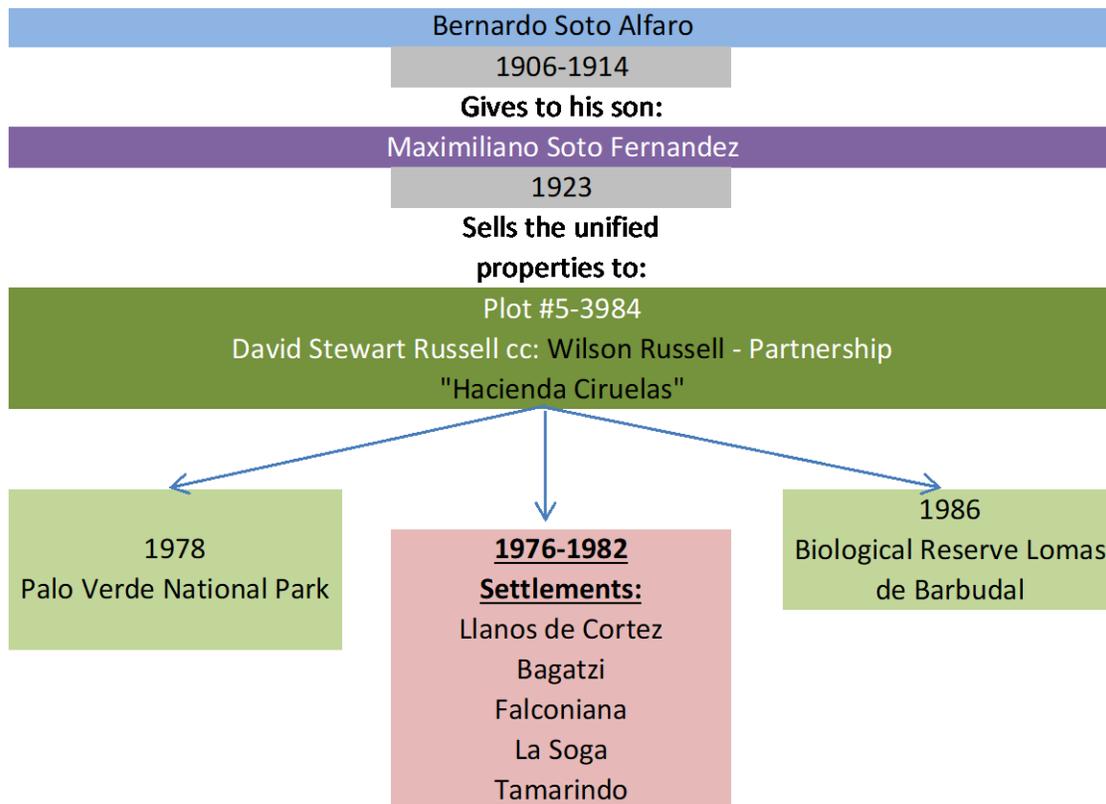


Source: From data collected at National Register of the Property, Costa Rica. Milagro Carvajal and Silvia Vasquez Olguin. 2018.

¹ Tenure history was retrieved from the archives of the National Property Register and National Cadastre in San Jose, Costa Rica in January to July 2016, thanks to the invaluable collaboration of Milagro Carvajal—a sociologist from the University of Costa Rica.

The properties appear again under new names as a product of marriages and inheritances. The names of the different haciendas have also been lost in time. Rafael Barroeta y Vaca bought and sold two of the three farms that constituted the origin of what is now Bagatzí, Falconiana and the other peasant settlements, Palo Verde national park, and Lomas de Barbudal biological reserve. One farm went to the ex-President Próspero Fernández, and the other went to Remigio Saborio. The third hacienda belonged to the Urtecho family and passed through inheritance until it ended up in the hands of Miguel Madriz. At this point in the beginning of the 20th century, a society of three men appeared: Narciso Blanco, Remigio Saborio, and Bernardo Soto Alfaro—the latter was president of Costa Rica in 1892. Bernardo Soto Alfaro purchased all rights to the three haciendas from Saborio and Blanco and bought the last piece of this puzzle from Próspero Fernández.

Figure 2. Land tenure history of the properties that will constitute Palo Verde National Park (PVNP) and Bagatzí and Falconiana settlements

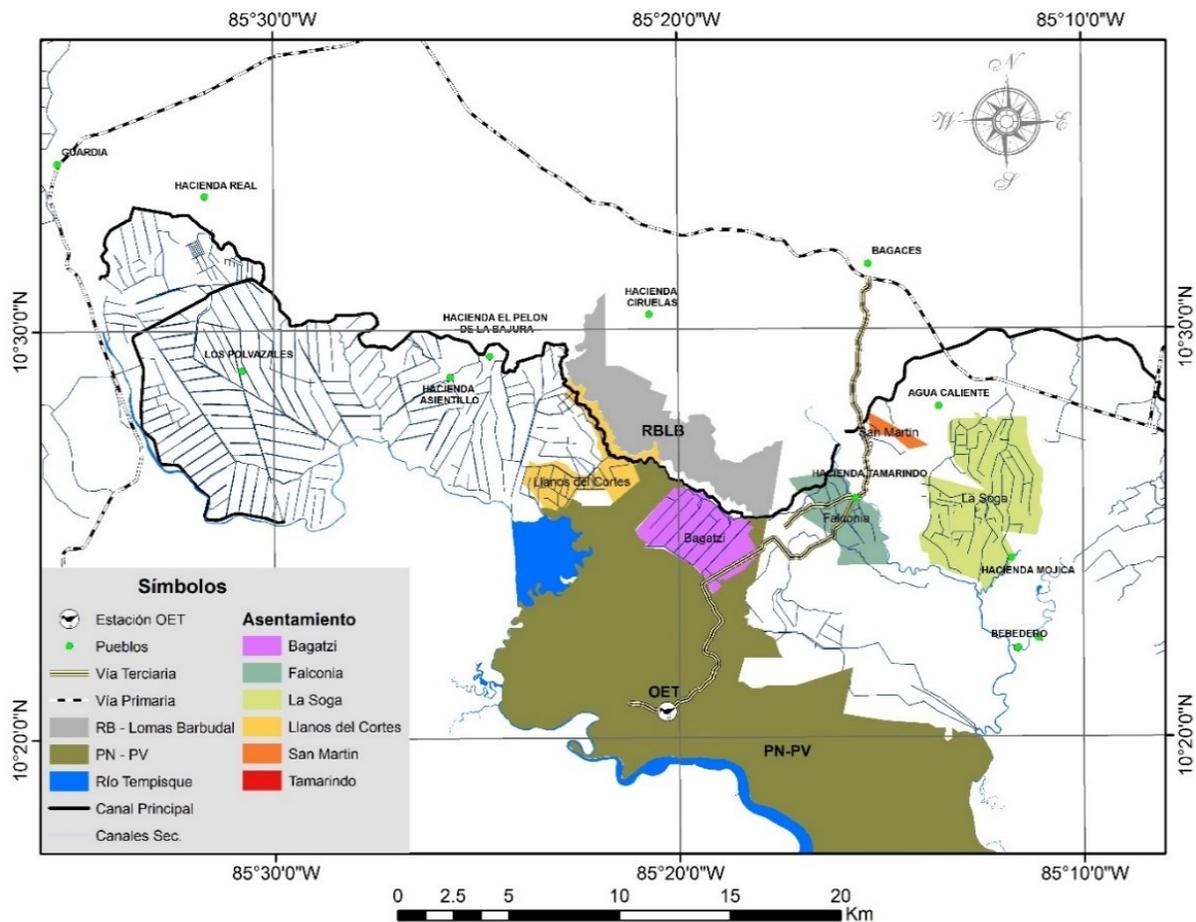


Source: From data collected at National Register of the Property, Costa Rica. Milagro Carvajal and Silvia Vasquez Olguin. 2018.

For the first quarter of the last century, Bernardo Soto Alfaro and his son, Maximiliano, consolidated the huge properties that would pass to David Stuart Russell in 1923, giving birth to

the Wilson family haciendas in the Tempisque basin, Guanacaste (Edelman, 1992; Gudmundson, 1984). Map 3 shows how Hacienda Ciruelas, known as “Finca Wilson,” currently appears: one National Park (Palo Verde), one Biological Reserve (Lomas de Barbudal), and six peasant settlements (La Soga, San Martin, Tamarindo, Bagatzí, Falconiana, and Llanos de Cortez). A system of irrigation canals covers this area and includes four huge haciendas to the north (Hacienda Asientillos, Hacienda Los Polvazales, Hacienda El Pelón de la Bajura, and Hacienda Real).

Map 3. Settlements and Palo Verde National Park (PVNP), Guanacaste, Costa Rica



Source: Atlas CR-2014, IGN-CR 2014, INDER 2015, OET-PV 2014, Plan Manejo MINAE-PV 2014-2024. February 2017. Juan Serrano OTS-PV, Costa Rican Office, and Silvia Vasquez-Olguin York University. Projection: UTM-Z16. Datum: WGS – 84.

Bagatzí and Falconiana peasant settlements

“There was a golden age of Bagatzí,” Don Lucas²—from Falconiana—commented during his interview. People from Falconiana and Bagaces came to Bagatzí to work under contract twice a year for each rice harvest because there was not yet artificial irrigation to allow more than two harvests each year. Many people from the Falconiana settlement, Bagaces and Cañas worked in Bagatzí’s first rice harvests as waged agricultural workers. They worked in different stages of the crop: spreading seeds, mulching, and applying fertilizer to the soil. Complementary off-farm income has been discussed in many studies (Gómez, 2003; Kay, 2008, 2008, 2015; van der Ploeg, 2010), and it has been contested, rejected or accepted, but it has not disappeared from the landscape of peasantry globally in an increasingly capitalist world.

Picture 2. *Seasonal workers spreading fertilizer on a rice paddy in Bagatzí*



Source: Silvia Vasquez Olguin, 2016.

Don Lucas was born in Bagaces, the nearest town to these settlements, in the year 1956. However, early in his youth, he travelled with his father to find virgin land for him and his siblings. There were too many brothers in his family and not enough land for all of them in his father’s original farm. As a result, his father decided to sell his land in Bagaces and travel all the

² The names have been changed for identity protection. The interviews were conducted during June 2016 to August 2018.

way to Pavones in the south of the country. “We were destroyers of the land”³ said Don Lucas; this was because his father and many others like him felled forests and exposed the bare soils in the process of colonizing new lands. Felling trees and preparing the ground for agriculture is a process not unique to them but known to all new peasants in the agricultural frontier of Costa Rica (Dorner, 1992; Downing et al., 1992; Groot & Ruben, 1997; Rosero-Bixby et al., 1997).

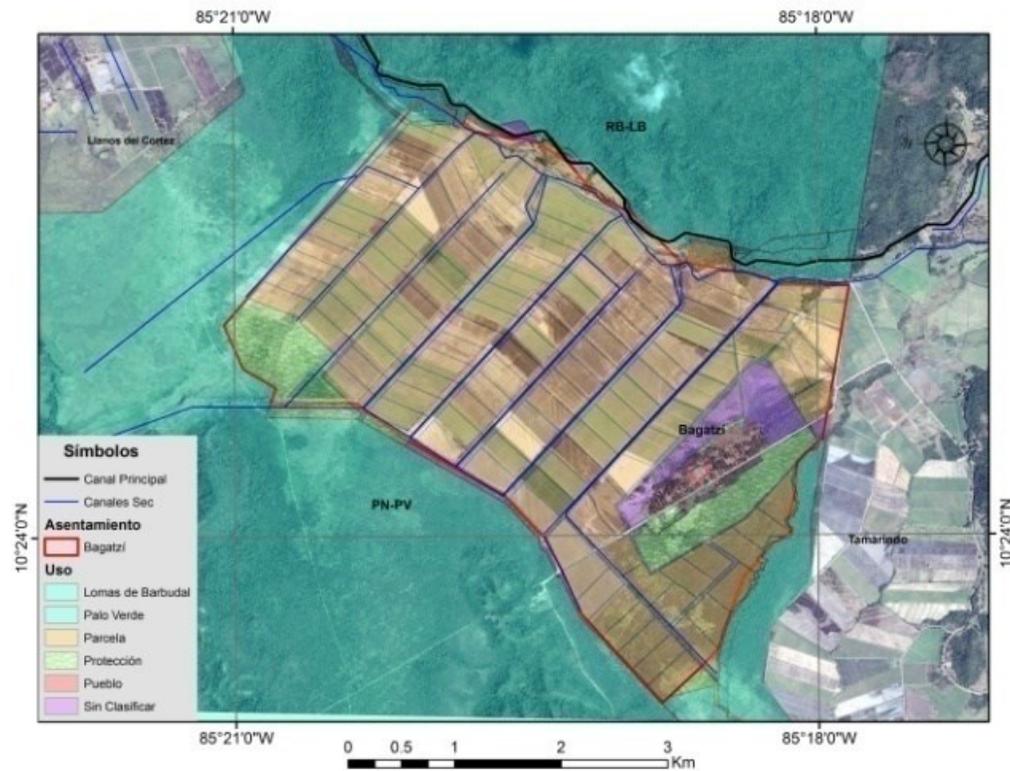
Land rights for peasants and small stakeholders are typically inaccessible until either the state creates accessible land to be allocated to peasants or there is a revolution that restructures the entire country (Albertus, 2015; Dorner, 1992; Hill, 1964; Seligson, 1979). However, the Costa Rican state was well aware of the risks to their allies if a revolution came and changed the order of the things that were working for the dominant class. Nicaragua and Mexico were reminders of changes the Costa Rican state did not want to happen. Costa Rica thus focused on the redistribution of land centred in the form of the peasant settlements and under the ideals of a developmental State (Groot & Ruben, 1997).

The effort to produce and the need for subsistence must be in equilibrium within each peasant family farm. Van der Ploeg (2013, p. 6) points out that “these balances combine incommensurable entities (e.g., labour and consumption) that are necessarily related to each other.” However, in the case of Bagatzí and Falconiana, they were altered by the separation of land for producing rice monocrop for the local market and space they inhabited. Through the separation of house and lot, young children and women would not participate as actively in productive activities, in part due to accessibility and because the separation reinforced the gender roles and the age-related activities that each member of the family could develop. Through interviews conducted for research, it was found that families stated that they preferred that young children and the wives stayed in the houses while the work on the parcel was carried out by the husbands. This often led to hiring seasonal labour, and occasionally, if the sons were older, incorporating family labour, but never integrating the work of the wives and daughters on the plots. Further, the families became more and more dependent on nearby local markets to supply everyday needs for food and services.

In many cases, the family inhabits the land from which they produce their earnings (Kerblay, 1986; van der Ploeg, 2013). In the case of Bagatzí and Falconiana, the separation between living space and productive space introduced profound changes in the production practices implemented by these families, as can be seen in Maps 4 and 5 below. The two settlements focus primarily on rice monocropping. The labour force required for the extension of the parcels came from seasonal migrant workers, not from the family unit. This is where the imbalance between production from the farm and consumption is apparent.

³ Interview conducted in June 2016. Falconiana, Guanacaste, Costa Rica.

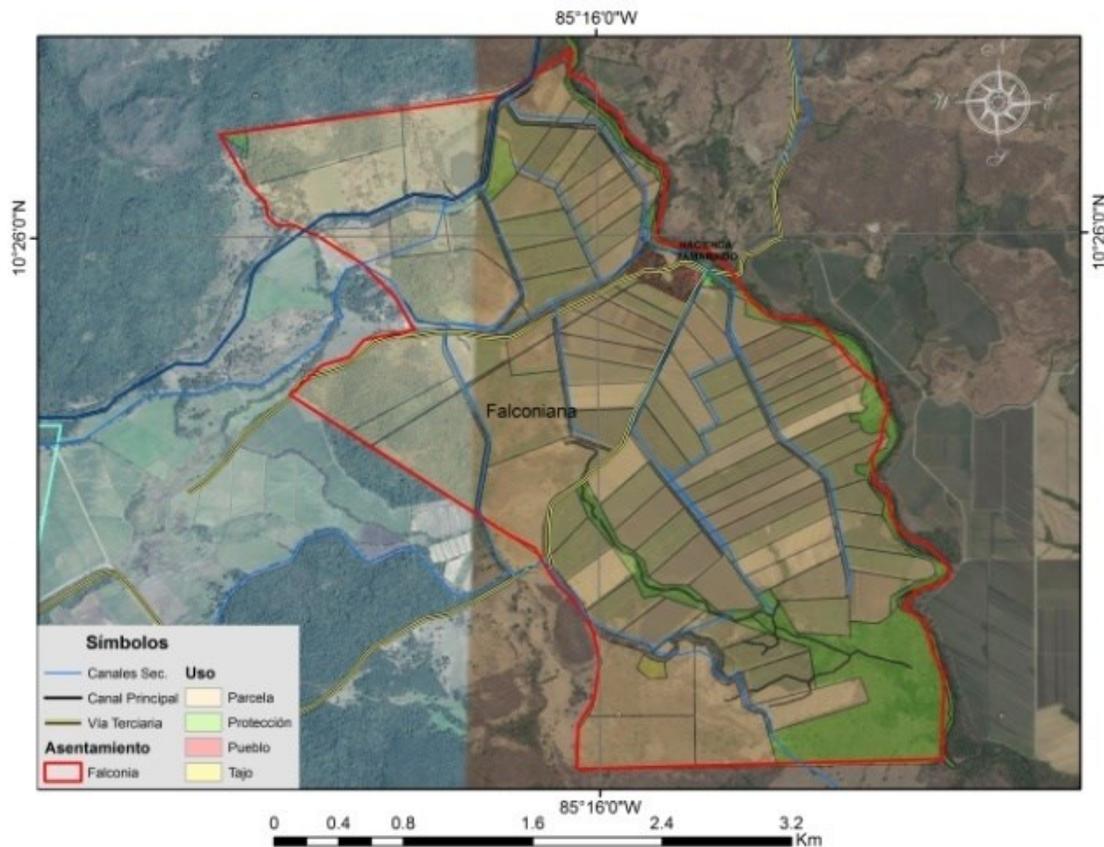
Map 4. Bagatzí peasant settlement. Province of Guanacaste, Costa Rica



Source: Atlas CR-2014, IGN-CR 2014, INDER 2015, OET-PV 2014, Plan Manejo MINAE-PV 2014-2024. February 2017. Juan Serrano OTS-PV, Costa Rican Office, and Silvia Vasquez-Olguin York University.

Projection: UTM-Z16. Datum: WGS – 84. Note the housing centre in both settlements in pink surrounded by purple and that some of the yellow/green lots are more than three kilometres from the centre town.

Map 5. *Falconiana peasant settlement. Province of Guanacaste, Costa Rica*



Source: Atlas CR-2014, IGN-CR 2014, INDER 2015, OET-PV 2014, Plan Manejo MINAE-PV 2014-2024. February 2017. Juan Serrano OTS-PV, Costa Rican Office, and Silvia Vasquez-Olguin York University. Projection: UTM-Z16. Datum: WGS – 84. Note the housing centre in both settlements in pink (dark cluster near to the top of the settlement) and that some of the yellow/green lots are more than three kilometres from the centre town.

Thus, ultimately, the agrarian structure, the “set of institutions, norms (both written and unwritten) and social, political, and economic relationships governing the access to and use of land as a productive resource” (Stavenhagen, 1970, p. 1) that dominates the Costa Rican countryside remained the same even after the creation of these settlements in this region. The big corporation that shaped Guanacaste's agricultural landscape, the old and wealthy families that owned the haciendas, did not lose their resources; rather, they were enriched by selling of pieces of their land to the government. Moreover, the corporations were not displaced by the peasants relocated to these settlements. Rice is still the main crop produced in Guanacaste, followed closely by sugarcane and grasses for feeding cattle. The state-made peasant settlements filled empty and unused spaces in the countryside while leaving the power structure and logic of production in the regions where they were situated intact. Thus, production continued to

follow the Costa Rican agricultural policy based on monocropping for exports, fruit plantations, and small to medium-scale family-owned coffee plantations.

Roberto Fúster Vasquez (former ITCO employee, now retired) and Marvin Coto (current senior employee of SENARA, National Artificial Irrigation Service) worked closely with the “Finca Wilson” ITCO project. They were interviewed in 2016-17 for this research because of their connection and the value of their memories. Roberto Fúster Vasquez, also an engineer, was one of the few Costa Rican counterparts to the Israeli mission. Fúster was a direct participant in the development of the Bagatzí settlement and worked closely with the Israeli researchers and cooperants. He first pointed out that the emphasis of agrarian policy of ITCO at the end of the 1970s was to develop “growth poles” following Francois Perroux’s 1955 models of development (Higgins & Savoie, 2017). To this end, the Costa Rican agrarian development policy of the 1970s was oriented to reclaim all abandoned spaces, spaces never previously settled, or spaces with irregular land tenure rights. The areas designated as growth poles in Costa Rica were the counties of Coto Sur of Pérez Zeledón in the south of the country, Río Frío in the Northern Caribbean lowlands of the province of Heredia, and Coyolar of Cañas in the province of Guanacaste. The process of developing these areas included investments in social infrastructure, such as roads, settlements, education or healthcare services, and a strong impulse toward agribusiness. Rice was the perfect crop to help with the development of a large growth pole in Cañas, Guanacaste where Bagatzí and Falconiana settled later. However, the President of ITCO at those times, Mr. Manuel Salazar Navarrete—another engineer, felt the opposite and disagreed with cooperative initiatives, Fúster said. Instead, the director of ITCO pursued the development of growth poles through individual, small to medium-scale land tenure. To Roberto Fúster, a former ITCO employee, although the new settlers of Bagatzí were people with the desire to possess land, they were not peasants. He thought they planted rice because that is what they knew best, without knowing what was best for the land and the climate. In the province of Guanacaste and in the lowlands of the Tempisque basin, there were large rice enterprises at that time that lent heavy machinery, trucks, and shuck infrastructure to the new Bagatzí settlers. New settlers needed the services of soil preparation, weed control and harvest, which they attained from major local rice enterprises (Tio Pelón Hacienda and Pelón de la Bajura Hacienda).

The new settlers of Bagatzí and Falconiana were viewed by the government and its institutions mainly as potential entrepreneurs. The process to produce rice requires a minimal workforce, and when it was necessary, it was Nicaraguan migrant workers who performed that function. From the interviews and observations, there were dozens of migrant worker houses in each of these two communities, and plenty of workers were already enrolled in some of the duties of the rice or sugarcane crops. In the history of this region, the province of Guanacaste was a hub and entrance point for the arrival of migrant workers from Nicaragua⁴ (Rodríguez & Meneses, 2011; Rodríguez Vignoli, 2004).

⁴ To Abelardo Morales, one of the most prominent researchers of migration patterns in Central America, the Nicaraguan population settled in a territorial pattern formed by an axis of localities located in the regions of

Tens of years after the establishment of Bagatzí settlement (Agricultural Census, INEC, 1955, 1963, 1973, 1984, and 2014), rice was the main crop in the area, if not the only one. Rice was easier to develop than fruit trees or other diversified crops that needed more time to grow and be profitable. Large-scale rice production requires high-cost machinery and services with a workforce employed. Given this, logic would point to the consolidation of a production cooperative to face the high costs of intensively mechanized production. However, in Bagatzí and Falconiana, the individual producer's model prevailed. Once the settlements were established, ITCO had the mandate to support whichever organizational model the settlers wanted to follow. In preparation for this, ITCO facilitated a series of workshops, educational processes, and participatory research with the members of Bagatzí settlement to inform them about the variety of organizational models they could choose from.

The men of the beneficiary families of the Bagatzí settlement came to plant rice in the fields of the settlement even before their families were living there. In 1979—three years before Bagatzí was officially established—they hired a small airplane to deliver fertilizer, fungicide, and agrochemicals during the different stages of the rice harvest, a practice followed by large haciendas like Tío Pelón and Pelón de la Bajura. The money from the first and very successful harvests was deposited in a fund for financing the costs of future rice harvests, but it was so much money that the men decided to create a cooperative of “goods and services” to supply the necessary inputs for rice production and small credits to the families, and to later operate a supermarket in Bagatzí⁵. “*Coope-Bagatzí*” was the name of the producers/consumers cooperative that still exists only by name, and it was highly successful during the 1980s and 1990s.

Thus, the opposition to the consolidation of a producers' cooperative came mostly from distrust and uncertainty about the behaviour and capacities of other members. The people of Bagatzí wanted individually owned properties without having to share the work with others or depend on the other inhabitants. The rice crop also facilitated delocalized management. There were strong results from the cooperative effort to manage the first harvest. Although, many of them, Don Manuel recalls, wanted the same success (the same money) for themselves and did not wish to share with the rest of the community, even though that amount of money and success was only possible because of the shared effort.

the Costa Rican Pacific coast. Historically, this is where the most important cities were concentrated (Morales et al., 2010). Regarding the demographic dynamics in the bi-national border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, in the last three decades, a process of increasing settlements led to a higher concentration in urban agglomerations, and the intensification of cross-border flows of the mainly migrant labour force. Both trends are juxtaposed insofar as both processes of settlement and mobility are stimulated by the economic/labour dynamic characterizing recent development of the border region in both countries. Indeed, the most relevant feature of the border dynamics between Nicaragua and Costa Rica is migration as a whole complex process.

⁵ From Don Manuel's interview and personal communications with members of Bagatzí and Falconiana's communities, 2016-2018.

Final remarks

To consider a set of agrarian policies to be an agrarian reform, the critical view of the authors that guided this reflection will be discussed. From a critical perspective, using de Janvry (1981) and Chonchol (1970), a reform of a successful agrarian reform must be an energetic redistribution of rights over lands and their resources. An agrarian reform is not only a colonization effort, nor can the methods of colonization be used to prompt an agrarian reform. A successful agrarian reform must count on ample political support from the majority of its citizens. It must create the political conditions that make it possible and change those legal or institutional frameworks that do not allow it. Further, a successful agrarian reform must be part of a plan for the development of agriculture and a general plan for the development of the economy. One without the others will never work. More importantly, and the problem in the case of the Costa Rican redistributive policy, is that it should not serve the capitalization of the dominant sectors that sell their land to the state. When more is paid for land, the less land reform is done. A successful agrarian reform must contemplate the plurality of local knowledge and practices on the use of natural resources and the agricultural production of each area in particular. It cannot be standardized and applicable without cultural or social references. The reinforcement of cheap food production systems (de Janvry & Ground, 1978) with the accompanying principle that the “landed elites” would not lose power meant that land tenure redistribution did not challenge the historical trend of land concentration in the continent.

The Costa Rican case does not reflect a substantive agrarian reform, but rather the implementation of rural settlement (rural colonization) policies focused on the expansion of agricultural products for export and the containment of possible struggles for land access. However, the Costa Rican agrarian policy cannot be interpreted as the answer to the isolated cases of popular land reclamation during those years. Under these conditions, land distribution led by the state did not empower the peasantry.

Within the state-made peasant settlements, the traditional agrarian structure characteristic of Latin America with its concentration of power (in the relations of “patron-peon” in Spanish for the complex relations of power and money between owners of the land and the seasonal agricultural workers that, in many cases, resided in the same haciendas), land and resources, and structures of exploitation did not change. Armando Bartra (2016) stated that the peasantry is a category that explains relations with and within capitalism, and its very existence embodies the contradictions of an economy that is modernized and growing at the expense and sometimes despite, but in need, of agriculture. In that relationship, for capitalism and modernity to exist, the features of the past and the countryside must disappear in the crucible of industry, homogeneity, and technology. Yet, peasants persist and do not disappear as predicted even when differentiating among themselves or introducing technology and adapting to many social, economic, and climate changes.

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Interviews

Falconiana

Don Lucas One of the original members of the first set of settlers of Falconiana.

Don Juan One of the later members of the Falconiana community, cousin of Don Lucas.

Bagatzí

Don Manuel One of the original members of the first set of settlers of Bagatzí.

Don Luis One of the original members of the first set of settlers of Bagatzí.

Don Gerardo Late settler of Bagatzí, whose brothers were in the second wave of settlers who bought land from the original founders of the town.

Government institutions and departments, and universities

MSc. Álvaro Azofeifa, University of Costa Rica, Agronomy department, interview and personal communications. interview (June 2017) and personal communications (2015-19).

Eng. Marvin Coto SENARA – National Artificial Irrigation Service, interview (July 2016).

Eng. Roberto Fúster Vasquez ITCO – Institute of Land and Colonization (recently renamed INDER – National Institute for Rural Development), interview (July 2016).

Eng. Cecilia Villalobos Sánchez Cadaster department, ITCO–Institute of Land and Colonization (recently renamed INDER – National Institute for Rural Development), interview (June 2017) and personal communications (2014-19).

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