Appendix III. ANECs’ Best Practices in Engaging Farmers in an ACCI/MICI Transition
(or Why ANEC’s approach is the “agroecological transition ANEC’s farmers need”)

ANEC’s national staff and regional and local tecnics work collaboratively to promote ACCI/MICI by applying the four best practices, rooted in its mission and principles, that are especially essential to ANEC’s success developing and promoting ACCI/MICI, listed below.

1. Meeting Farmers where they are

ANEC meets farmers where they are, introducing them to the practices and techniques of ACCI/MICI that address their most pressing needs and adapting these techniques to their capacities. Most farmers who are applying ACCI/MICI practices are determined to lower costs and increase profits. Other farmers want to eliminate the use of toxic pesticides because of chronic health problems and others want to be less dependent on volatile prices of inputs. Depending on the motivations and local contexts—like if farmers receive state subsidies for fertilizer or pesticides—ANEC’s staff will strategically select elements of ACCI/MICI that address farmer’s motivations. For example, if farmers are interested in ACCI/MICI to reduce costs and they do not receive subsidies for fertilizers, ANEC will often start the transition by introducing farmers to the organic composts and vermiculture extracts. Once farmers experience a reduction in cost by reducing application of commercial fertilizer, ANEC can introduce other ACCI/MICI approaches.

ANEC’s member farmers have diverse capacities and capabilities—some farmers have retained knowledge of traditional farming practices but most have become accustomed to a model of agriculture that is formulaic. Using farmers’ knowledge and the production techniques farmers are familiar with, which in many cases are derivatives of green revolution production practices, ANEC introduces members to alternative practices. Worm compost and microorganisms might come in packaging or “doses” that are similar to conventional inputs, making their application less daunting for a farmer who is just beginning to adopt ACCI/MICI. Some farmers are interested in developing their understanding of the complex ecological interactions occurring on their land and others want to be given simple instructions. For the latter, ANEC has to work harder to engage these farmers in the collaborative and co-innovative agricultural processes that make it possible to maximize productive efficiency and sustainability.

ACCI/MICI is premised on the co-innovation that happens between farmer and scientist or tecnico, what ANEC refers to as the dialogue of knowledge\(^1\), or the interaction of a farmer’s praxis-based knowledge with a scientists or tecnico’s theoretical knowledge. The combination of these different kinds of knowledge results in an approach to farming that is uniquely adapted to a farmer’s land, an approach, which maximizes yields while minimizing waste. Farmers who have become accustomed to a one-size-fits-all approach to production often find that ACCI/MICI requires much more work and steep-learning curve. ANEC helps minimize these burdens by making farmers feel that staff and other farmers are available to support them. Moreover, national, regional and local staff develops and exchanges techniques for helping different farmers build their capacities. Some local tecnicos have created names for ACCI/MICI microorganisms or pheromones that help farmers understand what the “input” does. Instead of the opaque industrial names of chemical inputs—like the glyphosate-based herbicide Roundup—we have a combination of microorganisms that we call “strengthen-root” or “flower-aid” so that when our local tecnicos recommends the

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\(^1\) *Dialogo de Saberes* is a term used by Victor Toledo and other agroecologists to refer to
microorganisms he or she can share the scientific names of the organisms while helping farmers learn their different functions.” (Don Bacilo). Finding ways to adapt to farmers' unique motivations and capacities allows ANEC to meet their diverse membership where they are and engage them in an agroecological transition.

ANEC’s approach to working with member farmers has always been pro-active, staff are constantly visiting farmers, organizing workshops, presentations or visits, where one organization hosts another. These interactions create spaces for discussion, debate, and information exchange and allow ANEC’s staffs to stay in-tune with local realities. This practice has been instrumental to the development and scaling of ACCI/MICI among member organizations.

**Fostering Dialogue**

The dialogue of knowledge that occurs in the expansion of ACCI/MICI is a process of co-discovery and co-innovation. Many of the tecnico's are learning about agroecological techniques and coming to understand ecology, soil science, and microbiology for the first time. Tecnico's are learning about ACCI/MICI at the same time as the farmers that they are meant to advise and accompany. Even the scientists that ANEC collaborates with may have a theoretical understanding of the way that agricultural systems interact but they are testing, and therefore learning from, the theories that farmers are putting into practice in their fields. “ACCI/MICI started out as mostly theory that the scientists thought would work but they need us and the farmers to test it in practice, to see how theories play out in different contexts.” (Ing. Toño).

ANEC provides farmers with information about every aspect of farming systems and creates ample spaces for dialogue and for farmers to mutually support each other. These spaces allow for co-learning and empower farmers, giving them ownership over new ideas and approaches they can use to improve production practices. In order to foster this kind of space, where farmers and tecnico's and scientists can exchange information and collaborate, there needs to be a strong foundation of trust and mutual respect. ANEC has fostered strong relationships with farmers by recruiting and retaining staff, especially tecnico's that share values. In addition to getting training in the ACCI/MICI approach, every new recruit is trained in ANEC's democratic principles and practices. This training helps mitigate traditional power hierarchies between agriculture engineers, extension agents, and small-farmers.

“A lot of agronomists come out of school and think they know everything, they are used to traditional hierarchical relationships between tecnico and farmer where the farmer doesn’t question the tecnico's knowledge and there’s no accountability of the tecnico's to the farmer. We recruit and train tecnico's to be humble and to respect and value farmer's experience and their knowledge. Our organizational structure also helps because tecnico's salaries are determined by the local organizations, which makes tecnico's accountable to their farmer organizations rather than to a government extension program.” (Betí)

**A Different Kind of Technical Support/Agricultural Extension**

An integral part of ANEC’s success with ACCI/MICI is the recruitment and retention of tecnico's who demonstrate their capacity to help farmers solve problems. ANEC helps local organizations recruit and train tecnico's that have certain characteristics, including humility and appreciation of small farmers and an interest in learning about the ACCI/MICI approach. Tecnico's play a crucial bridging role in the dialogue of knowledge as well as helping transmit information
back to ANEC’s national staff and also serving as entry-points for ANEC’s socio-political work, strengthening the democratic practices and capacities of local organizations.

The tecnicos ANEC recruits do not have the same profile or experience of a traditional agricultural extension agent. The majority of ANEC’s tecnicos do not have degrees in agronomy. Of the 15 different local tecnicos interviewed, only 3 had degrees in agronomy. The others ranged from no formal degrees to systems engineering, biology, and some younger tecnicos had studied agroecology. ANEC’s staff member, José Atahualpa, explained, “I actually think it’s harder for a traditionally trained agronomist to be an effective tecnico in ANEC because their schooling teaches them completely different approaches to production… also, they usually think they already know everything and don’t have the humility or curiosity to engage in learning more.”

The tecnicos that stay with ANEC's organizations are committed to the socio-political values of ANEC. “They don't do it for the money, that's for sure” (Don Simon, Nayarit) said one of the farmers. Tecnico incomes are known to be inconsistent; many of the tecnicos interviewed were owed 2 months of back pay because of delays in government programs that subsidize their incomes. More than ¾ of the tecnicos were farmers themselves and were applying an ACCI/MICI approach to their own land. Often times they are from the community, some times they are sons or daughters of a member farmer. This is a deliberate strategy employed by ANEC “we want to hire more sons and daughters of farmer members, they already have a relationship with farmers in the community and they are invested in the community’s well-being” (Jose).

ANEC is also attempting to hire women tecnicos. The two newest hires were young women from rural communities who had studied agroecology at the Chapingo Autonomous University. Since ANEC respects local organization’s autonomy, it cannot impose quotas for women or force local organizations to elect women leaders. However, since ANEC helps cover part, or all, of most tecnicos salary, ANEC can help influence recruitment and advocate for women and youth to be in positions of influence in a local organization.

Recruiting and holding on to effective tecnicos is a constant struggle for ANEC. It is difficult for local organizations to be able to afford salaries year-round and it has been difficult to find tecnicos who are willing and interested to attend the intensive workshops and training in ACCI/MICI required of all staff. ANEC has attempted to invest in building the capacity of younger members and the sons and daughters of members, subsidizing their training and, when it can, subsidizing the income of tecnicos that apply ANEC’s principles in practice and that have been able to create strong, trusting relationships with farmers. When ANEC identifies a tecnico that embodies its democratic principles and that works collaboratively with farmers, the staff will go to great lengths to retain that person. Sometimes this means transferring them to another service area until the local organization or ANEC can find the resource to pay their salary again. The collaboration between staff at local, regional and national scales increases ANEC’s ability to adapt its approach and respond to local contexts. It also enables ANEC’s national staff to design and advocate for programs and policies at a national-level that support their diverse membership

2. Look for Entry points

ANEC relies on strong channels of communication between local, regional and national staff and leadership to identify key moments to introduce ACCI/MICI and key actors that can help promote ACCI/MICI. Key moments for introducing ACCI/MICI are often moments of crisis or transition, when there is a climatic event or farmers have struggled to make production profitable
or when there is a transition in leadership. ANEC also identifies key actors, farmers, leaders and/or local tecnicos that are interested in learning about, and applying, the ACCI/MICI approach. These key actors are seen as catalysts for change in their organization and community and ANEC invests in their capacities to transmit knowledge to other farmers.

A number of farmers interviewed mentioned their first introduction to ACCI/MICI happened after a particularly devastating weather event (like a hail storm) or a crisis moment, where they were facing the prospect of abandoning production. A tecnico from Nayarit posited that crisis was key, a common entry-point for ANEC to introduce ACCI/MICI and start convincing farmers of the virtues of agroecology.

Many farmers also recounted that their first interaction with the tecnico were around parcels of land that they had essentially given up on. Don Nacho in Jalisco described his first: “I was about to mow down my whole sugar cane crop because I had tried everything and I went to go see Inge Pancho [local tecnico] and he convinced me not to, hold off he said, let’s try a few of the microorganisms and oxygenate your soil…and it worked! Now I have him come help me all the time…Inge, if my harvest comes out well this year, it’ll be because of you. I’ll owe you a beer.”

The local tecnico’s in Jalisco, Inge. Toño and Inge Pancho mentioned that Don Nacho had been a very critical of the tecnico’s and a skeptical member of the local organization, The Union de Ejidos Ex-Laguna. “He’d never asked us for help before a few years ago and he rarely attended meetings. That’s changed since he has started applying ACCI/MICI.” (Inge Pancho.) The results farmers have seen through the application of ACCI/MICI has sometimes helped strengthen local organizations, showing farmers the benefits of working collectively to address both productive and political issues.

“Sometimes we can influence an organization, spur change, by directly appealing to the social objectives we aim to achieve, other times farmers are interested in the agricultural support or the economic services we offer and, gradually, we can engage them in our social project or our agroecological project. All of these are entry-points that help us advance our objective, lead to local organizations adopting the ANEC model, which is premised on participatory democracy, and result in strong agrarian citizens.” (Victor)

Every organization participating in ACCI/MICI had at least one identified key actor, which could be a local tecnico, farmer or leader of an organization. The transition process was faster an organization had more than one key actor-- when leadership, technical staff and membership are all onboard with adopting ACCI/MICI. However, identifying even just one advocate for ACCI/MICI at the local scale, one person who is capable of transmitting the benefits of ACCI/MICI practices by demonstrating its results on their own land or by accompanying farmers in its successful implementation, can help foster the transition process.

3. Use existing resources

The diverse key actors involved in the ACCI/MICI transition reflects the wealth of existing knowledge and capacities present in each of ANEC’s member organizations. ANEC’s approach to promoting ACCI/MICI leverages local human and ecological resources, like the rich agro-

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2 *Inge*, short for Ingeniero, or engineer, is a term of respect that farmer use for tecnico’s. The term typically refers to someone who has a formal degree in agronomy but many farmers refer to staff or other farmers with extensive knowledge as Inge to show respect.
biodiversity present in Mexican rural communities, to accelerate farmers’ transition to more sustainable and resilient farming systems. Some of ANEC’s key actors are “model farmers”; members that have been using agroecological practices for a long time and have a deep place-based knowledge. Don Javier from Jalisco is one of these farmers. Even before joining ANEC he was using organic practices for farming corn, beans and squash. “I just don’t like chemicals, I’ve always thought they were bad,” he explained as his reasons for avoiding conventional industrial paquetes. Don Javier has been performing his own agroecological experiments, selecting from his heirloom seeds, and developing a native corn that ANEC is using in an experiment it currently facilitating in partnership with researchers from the Autonomous University of Chapingo.

The experiment is comparing five different corn seeds and testing them for their resistance to ecological shocks and their yield potential. Two of the seeds are native heirloom seeds cultivated and selected by Don Javier and another of ANEC’s model farmers in Chiapas. These two native seeds are being compared to three commercial hybrid varieties. The experiment is being conducted in four different states and being monitored by a team of tecnicos, leaders and farmers from local organizations. Collaborating researchers from Chapingo, who will also be analyzing the results, designed the experiment, which also compares conventional vs. ACCI/MICI production practices. This experiment is part of ANEC’s initiative to improve native seeds as a means of further reducing costs (seeds represent about 20% of farmers’ production costs) and promoting agrobiodiversity. The investment in native seeds is also part of ANEC’s strategy to increase local farming systems’ resilience to climate change. This seed experiment exemplifies the dialogue of knowledge that grounds the ACCI/MICI approach to farming. Moreover, it demonstrates ANEC’s use of existing resources, the knowledge and capacities of its diverse membership, to promote and innovate sustainable farming practices.

4. Share information

While ANEC has some model farmers, the majority of ANEC’s members have been integrated into a state-subsidized, agro-industrial system. “We’ve become dependent on paquetes, the seeds and fertilizers and chemicals that the state used to give us for free, and we’ve forgotten all the conocimientos (knowledge and practices) of our forefathers.” (Don Simon, Jalisco). In addition to not possessing the kind of place-based ecological knowledge that agroecological farming needs to be effective, a lot of farmers do not have the confidence in their capabilities. By creating mechanisms for knowledge exchange and mutual support, ANEC empowers farmers to engage in what may seem like a risky or daunting transition to a different farming system.

Beside from the regular (sometimes-monthly) workshops led by allied scientists that ANEC organizes for farmers and tecnicos to deepen their agroecological knowledge, ANEC also fosters information exchange among regional farmer groups. ANEC organizes regular visits where farmer’s organizations that may not be convinced of ACCI/MICI can see the parcel of other farmers applying ACCI/MICI. This farmer-to-farmer learning technique is not unique to ANEC but it is essential to the transition process. ANEC and tecnicos have also helped farmers set up Whatsapp text-message groups where they can share information and ask questions of other farmers and tecnicos from other regions. “I sent a message to the group asking about how they were dealing with a pest I’d started to see on my sorghum crop and I got a several responses of things other farmers had tried. Any time I have doubts or questions, I send a message to the group and I get responses almost immediately from a tecnicos or another farmer” (Don Juan, Chiapas)
In order to increase farmer's information about weather and pest risks, ANEC is in the process of developing a platform that will send farmers alerts about upcoming climatic events or pests that are affecting agricultural systems in the area. This project is in collaboration with researchers from Mexico’s National Institute of Forestry, Agriculture and Livestock Research (INIFAP). Dozens of local farmer organizations are receiving equipment to set up meteorological stations that will feed information into the platform. The objective of the project is to alert farmers in advance of biotic or climatic threats and to accompany the alerts with recommendations of what to do.

The practices outlined above describe how ANEC fosters a transition to ACCI/MICI amongst its diverse members ANEC has developed its approach, and the practices of meeting farmers where they are, fostering dialogue, looking for entry-points and sharing information, over the course of 22 years of work in rural communities. These practices have been essential to all of ANEC’s program areas. In its efforts to support farmers in commercialization ANEC is constantly building local organization’s capacities to negotiate fair contracts and sharing information about fluctuations in grain prices. The organizational strengthening and support program area helps local organizations establish transparent accounting practices and offers training in leadership and democratic governance. Each organization decides what services and support it wants from ANEC. ANEC empowers farmers with the information they need to help articulate solutions to the complex political, economic and ecological obstacles they face but, ultimately, ANEC respects local organization’s autonomy.

Multiple representatives from each organization are invited to attend ACCI/MICI workshops. The workshops are given by allied scientists that ANEC have identified for their capacity to work with farmers and transmit complicated scientific concepts to farmers. These workshops are intensive and participatory, often entailing field visits and practical applications of skills. They cover all aspects of the farming system, starting with soil health, soil improvement and conservation (oxygenation, mineralization, increase of organic matter, balance of microorganisms, etc.), and then helping farmers understand plant physiology (identification and characterization of key stages by crop, nutrient needs, etc.). Workshop participants also develop their capacity to interpret and address biotic factors (pest and disease management), and abiotic factors (time, different ecological cycles).

Every season, tecnicos help farmers design a farm management plan. Using meteorological data, soil analysis and data collected from the previous year, these plans help farmers set production targets and track the growing quantity of organic matter or the nutrient levels of their soil. Tecnicos also help farmers establish record keeping systems to monitor crop development. The plans help tecnicos and farmers implement and track the results of an ACCI/MICI approach by systematizing the record keeping and monitoring needed to respond to climatic or biotic threats to a harvest.

Respecting local organizations’ autonomy, while also advising them, empowering them with information and knowledge to make better decisions, is how ANEC has fostered strong, trusting relationships with many rural communities in Mexico. Fostering local ownership over processes of rural development has been essential to the ANEC’s success in all of its different initiatives, especially the development and scaling-out of ACCI/MICI.