Agroecological Transition in Mexico

ANEC’s Journey to a Better Farm and Food System

By Zoe VanGelder
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ANEC is an organization with more than 20 years of work in alternative models of production, financing and commercialization of basic grains based on the economic organization of small and medium producers at local, regional, state and national levels.

More at anec.org.mx
A multitude of alternatives to industrial agriculture are emerging, and small-scale farmers have been the pioneers of one such alternative, known as agroecology. As an integrative interdisciplinary science, agroecology offers techniques for producing healthy food and restoring ecosystems. Rooted in ecological and human rights based values, agroecology could be integral to a transition from our current food system to one that is equitable and sustainable.

The small farmers, social movements and scientists involved in the evolution and innovation of agroecological practices conceive of agroecology as part of a transformative process that will help overturn the current agri-food regime. These agroecology pioneers argue that business as usual has resulted in technocratic programs and policies that have left rural communities unchanged or worse off and their natural resources and livelihoods further depleted. They are also concerned that integrating agroecological practices without adhering to its original principles and values will not generate the kind of change needed to address climate change or poverty. They suggest that both ecological and socio-political principles and practices must be included for agroecology to be transformational.

A need for both the socio-political and ecological principles and practices of agroecology is compelling in theory; however, many questions about the feasibility of a transition towards agroecological farming systems remain. The challenges to scaling-up and scaling-out agroecological farming systems are varied. Many farmers are already embedded in an agro-industrial food system that is highly mechanized and dependent on chemical inputs. Countless countries have policies and programs built around an agri-industrial system, creating institutional barriers to a transition. While the support that small-farmers receive from these institutions is often negligible, some farmers depend on existing subsidies. It may prove difficult to dismantle the current regime while ensuring that small farmers and rural communities continue to survive. More insight into how agroecology’s practices and principles can foster transition is needed. Best policies, programs and practices that support farmers in an agroecological transition need to be identified, too. By observing processes of change and transition currently happening, we can gain insight into the catalysts for change and the mechanisms behind agroecology’s transformative potential.

Not surprisingly, it is the small farmer movements and the rural communities at the forefront of the fight for food sovereignty that can shed the most light on some of these questions. After all, they are the ones who have been grappling with them the longest. The following case study turns to one of these movements, the Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productores del Campo, known as ANEC.

ANEC’s experience helps illuminate the connection between democratic principles and agroecological transition and provides useful lessons on some of the challenges involved in that transition. The adaptive and flexible approach to sustainable farming that ANEC has developed may not conform with all socio-political and ecological principles and practices of an agroecological ideal. Still, ANEC is successfully helping farmers—who are reliant on an input-dependent, one-size-fits-all approach to agriculture—transition to more sustainable production practices. ANEC’s agroecological transition empowers member farmers by reducing their dependence on external inputs and subsidies and strengthening their individual and collective capacities to make sustainable decisions about their land and their communities. The strength of the local farmers’ organization, and their capacity to act collectively, affects the speed and depth of the agroecological transition. Similarly, the transition process can strengthen farmers’ capacity to act collectively in political and productive decision-making and advocacy.

**AGRO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSITION IN MEXICO**

ANEC, a Mexican farmers’ organization with over 60,000 members, began to develop an agroecological farming approach called ACCI/MICI in 2008. The implementation of ACCI/MICI, which translates into Peasant Agriculture of Integrated Knowledge/Management of Resilient Crops, has had remarkable results. Farmers report higher yields, a 30–50 percent drop in production costs, healthier soils and crops that are more likely to withstand ecological shocks like drought or frost. ANEC’s experience with this program reveals the importance of an integral and community-led approach to an agro-ecological transition. Guided by democratic principles like accountability, transparency, and autonomy, ANEC accompanies member organizations in their adoption of democratic practices while supporting member farmer organizations in everything from commercialization to productive innovation to political advocacy. ANEC’s integral approach to working with farmers has built trust and established the dialogue necessary for farmers to collaborate and co-innovate with allied scientists and agronomists to transition to an agro-ecological farming system.

ANEC seeks to, as its motto says, foster a modernization of rural communities and agriculture that is catalyzed by, and for the benefit of, peasant farmers. Guided by this objective, ANEC has developed best practices that apply to the organization’s political advocacy as well as the work it does supporting farmers with organizational management,
The following best practices are especially essential to ANEC’s success developing and promoting ACCI/MICI:

1. Meet farmers where they are; adapt a transition to meet local needs. While sharing a common overall agricultural and socio-political objective, each community of farmers defines what achieving this objective might mean in their local context. ANEC’s approach to supporting local communities is adaptive and flexible, responsive to farmers’ needs and to existing local human capacities and ecological and political resources. ANEC accompanies local leadership and farmers, helping farmer organizations become more democratic and creating stronger local institutions. It seeks to generate and catalyze opportunities for change while respecting that farmers will go about transitioning in a way, and at a rate, that is right for them.

2. Look for entry-points, create space for dialogue and knowledge exchange. By creating countless opportunities for farmers to learn about and see the results of ACCI/MICI or the benefits of democratic leadership and organization, ANEC fosters local interest in alternative approaches to production or improved governance. This practice generates local ownership over transition processes. ANEC does not wait for local leadership or farmers to come to them, however. ANEC’s staffs are in constant contact with members and look for key actors or key moments to help catalyze change and advocate for better practices and policies at the local level.

3. Use existing human and material resources. ANEC staff work together to identify and invest in existing capacities of community leaders, technical advisers and community members. Community members with democratic leadership capabilities or pedagogical skills are mentored and given access to formal leadership training and technical training. The wealth of agricultural knowledge and capacities among ANEC’s member farmers bolster ACCI/MICI techniques and are the groundwork for technical innovation.

4. Share information. Communication and information sharing help farmers feel more supported and less vulnerable as they take on the risk of these innovations. Also, information sharing is key to upholding the ANEC’s values of transparency and accountability, which are essential for building trust and fostering better collective decisions. ANEC provides ample opportunities for leadership, farmers and technical advisers to build their skills, exchange best practices and learn about a wide variety of topics, including agricultural policy, climate change, accounting and agroecology.

**METHODOLOGY**

The following best practices are distilled from observing and working alongside ANEC for five years. This experience is complemented by three weeks of intensive fieldwork, accompanying ANEC on visits to 15 different member organizations in the Mexican states of Chiapas, Guerrero, Jalisco, Nayarit, Michoacán and Puebla. Over 40 corn, bean, sorghum, wheat, sugar cane and vegetable farmers were interviewed along

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACCLI/MICI Participation in 2016 and 2017</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Member Farmers Applying ACCLI/MICI</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>1,617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superfice (Hectares)</td>
<td>1,725</td>
<td>5,459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
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ACCLI/MICI Results in 2016: Results gathered from various pilot parcels administered by participating local organizations where ACCLI/MICI was applied to one half of parcel and the other half left as control.

**Corn**

- 30 percent increase in output per hectare, from 6.59 to 8.66 tons/hectare
- 30 percent reduction in costs of production from $2,912.71 to $2,000.14 pesos per ton
- 60 percent increase in profits from $5,538.14 to $8,905.63 pesos per hectare

**Sorghum:**

- 30 percent increase in yields from 3.40 to 4.75 tons per hectare
- 28 percent reduction in cost from $3,138.36 to $2,441.71 pesos per ton
- 600 percent increase in profits from $686.00 to $4,252.90 pesos per hectare.

**Sugar Cane:**

- 40 percent increase in yields from 100 to 140 tons per hectare
- 60 percent reduction in costs from $398.73 to $147.96 pesos per ton
- 265 percent average increase in profits per hectare from $279,269.00 to $742,205.00.
with local and national staff and leadership. ANEC’s internal records and evaluations of ACCI/MICI, along with several external studies about ANEC’s work, bolster the qualitative data collected. Allied scientists and representatives from other Mexican civil society organizations, as well as funding organizations, were also consulted. The member farmer organizations included in the study were selected as a representative sample of the diverse organizations affiliated with ANEC. They were also selected because they are at different stages of their agroecological transitions. This case study is from ANEC’s point of view; the results achieved by ACCI/MICI are results ANEC has gathered and are not independently verified, and most of the evidence used to make arguments in this paper is from ANEC’s records or ANEC’s staff, member and leadership accounts. That said, this case study attempts to maintain a critical perspective on ANEC’s approach.

ANEC’s work fostering a transition towards agroecological farming systems is rather incipient; only a fraction of its membership is applying the ACCI/MICI approach. Moreover, ANEC still grapples with some contradictions and dissonance between its ecological and democratic principles and its practices. For example, ANEC talks about the importance of social inclusion and equity, but the majority of ANEC’s members are men and they are also landholders, which gives them a privileged position compared to other members of Mexico’s rural communities.

There are interesting examples of ACCI/MICI creating spaces for non-landholders that will be discussed, and ANEC also has examples of women farmers in leadership positions and women staff members, too. While there are instances of inclusion, these examples do not reflect a dedicated strategy for overcoming status quo power dynamics in Mexico’s rural communities. Despite a few attempts at developing programs and strategies to address the inclusion of youth and women, ANEC recognizes that it struggles to have representative participation of all the members of Mexico’s rural communities. Systemically fostering inclusion and equity among its member organizations is something that will likely require deep reflection and dialogue and the development of an explicit strategy. A more detailed analysis of these challenges is included at the end of the case study.

Despite existing challenges and potential contradictions, ANEC’s achievements are laudable. ANEC has successfully developed and promoted an agroecological approach to farming and an organization model that empowers small farmers to work collectively for the benefit of their communities. This work is happening despite inconstant funding and constant climatic and political threats to rural livelihoods.

ANEC’s experience offers insight into the mechanisms of an agroecological transition and transformation of the current food system. Tim Wise, in a blog post responding to Francis Moore Lappé’s essay, *Farming for A Small Planet: Agroecology*
Now, remarks on how “far removed from agroecological ideals” ANEC’s approach seems to be, referring to the ways that ANEC’s farmers continue to practice monoculture agriculture and depend on certain industrial agricultural practices. Despite being less than ideal, Wise goes on to describe ANEC’s approach as “the kind of transition small farmers around the world need.” In a recent publication called Agroecological Transitions: Changes and Breakthrough in the Making, van Mierlo et al describe agroecology as “broad and varied processes of experimentation and innovation [...] that have the potential of transforming the dominant agri-food system into a more sustainable one.” This definition of agroecology most closely fits ACCI/MICI. What Wise and van Mierlo et al are identifying is the need for a transitional approach that is flexible and iterative, responding to local realities.

Agroecology is much more than an ideal approach to farming that will characterize a just and sustainable food system; it offers pathways towards that more democratic and sustainable food system. Observing the ongoing transitions, the processes that result in change production practices and farmers’ perceptions and attitudes occurring in Mexico through ANEC’s work reveals the following lessons:

- A transition strategy is more effective if it is integrated, affecting multiple levels of decision-making, policy and the supply chain. It must envision change in agricultural practices, finance mechanisms and the commercialization of crops.

- Working through farmers’ organizations reduces the risks of experiments with new techniques and fosters more effective practices.

- Local farmers’ organizations need the capacity to oversee both crop extension and financial controls to ensure trust, accountability and ownership over the transition process.

**Decentralization**

ANEC is decentralized and federated upwards, which allows local realities to be amplified to regional and national policy arenas and allows farmers to benefit from economies of scale.

At the core of ANEC’s model is the local farmer organization. Local organizations are small businesses with socio-political values and responsibilities. ANEC calls these local organizations Peasant Commercializing Enterprises, ECCs. Each ECC is its own legal entity and must conform to Mexican business standards, paying taxes, keeping records and so on. In addition, ECCs adhere to a set of democratic principles [Appendix 1], and practices [Appendix 2] required of ANEC members, which include meeting regularly, making decisions democratically and transparently, and being accountable to their membership. Local organizations should have a president, treasurer and delegates. Any decision, like signing contracts for commercialization or taking out loans, must be approved in assembly with a written act, which is signed by a majority of members. In addition, each local organization should have its own accountant and technical adviser or técnico. As discussed below, the técnicos are not traditional agricultural extension agents but rather community members with technical expertise who play important roles in bridging information between farmers and scientists. Ideally, local accountants and técnicos are paid by the farmer organization. However, many organizations cannot afford to pay full-time salaries, so ANEC attempts to find funding through government programs or private grants to cover the costs until an ECC is economically autonomous and self-sufficient.

**Laying the Groundwork—ANEC’s Organizational Structure**

With a large membership across 17 different states, ANEC’s organizational model accommodates a diverse range of small and medium-size commercial farmers producing grains, particularly corn, along with beans, sorghum, sugar cane and some fruits and vegetables. Many members own land, but a fair number of members are tenant farmers. While the average member cultivate less than five hectares, there are some members that cultivate more than 50 hectares. Developing an organizational model that meets the needs of this diverse membership and allows for decision-making and policy advocacy that amplifies their collective interests in national and international policy arenas is a challenge. There are conflicting interests and competing needs. Balancing the business-like nature of farmer organizations and their need to be profitable with ANEC’s overall socio-political objectives requires navigation and democratic deliberation. A decentralized governance structure helps the organization collectively work for better conditions for all its member farmers while simultaneously helping them survive in their local context.

Clearly defined democratic principles [Appendix 1] and practices [Appendix 2] combined with an interdisciplinary staff that works collaboratively to transmit information and coordinate spaces for dialogue and debate helps ANEC build the capacities of local level leadership and membership to foster sustainable and equitable rural development processes.
Local organizations are grouped in second tier, regional organizations called integradoras. All the local organizations in Michoacán, for example, are members of the regional integradora REDCCAM, the Regional Network of Producers from Michoacán, which has a laboratory for soil testing and a network of technical advisers to support local-level técnicos. Regional organizations also commercialize the harvests of local member organizations. They have a general assembly and an advisory board where the leadership from local organizations meet and discuss everything from annual price forecasts, potential government subsidies, and state-level and national policies and programs. Regional organizations are also meant to be involved in state-level advocacy. The regional organizations (there can be more than one per state, depending on the size of the state and concentration of member organizations) are federated into the national association, ANEC. ANEC itself has a general assembly with representation from local and regional organizations with a president; an advisory board; an Executive Director; and an interdisciplinary staff of economists, agronomists, sociologists and political scientists that coordinates five different program areas:

**COMMERCIALIZATION:** This program area monitors markets and price trends, gives farmers advice about contract negotiations between a buyer and the ECC and helps negotiate national-level contracts to commercialize grain. Staff members have organized trainings, workshops on trade agreements and visits to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, where many international grain prices are set, to help farmers and leadership understand the commercialization process better and to help them compete in Mexico’s agricultural sector.

**POLITICAL ADVOCACY:** This area is dedicated to advocating for public policies and programs to support members and advance a sustainable and just food system. ANEC advocates for its members in state, national and international policy arenas, and builds alliances with other civil society organizations. It also proposes projects to different government entities, contributing to the design of rural development programs that help support member farmers. ANEC invites politicians to events, creating spaces for constituents to speak to their representatives and also organizes lectures about agrarian politics and agriculture and trade policy trends.
FINANCE: This area provides micro-finance products including crop-insurance, credit and a savings-and-loans program. Trainings in financial literacy are also given to members.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTHENING AND SUPPORT: This area supports ECCs with business practices and democratic governance. It helps ensure that organizations are maintaining good records and being transparent about accounts. It also assists leaders, offering leadership trainings and working with them and their members to set socio-political objectives and address issues like the inclusion of women and youth.

PRODUCTION (ACCI/MICI): This area provides support for farmers transitioning towards ACCI/MICI through the development of infrastructure (such as laboratories for soil testing) and the organization of trainings about agroecological science and practices. ANEC recruits and trains regional and local technical advisers, or técnicos, in the ACCI/MICI approach, and ANEC’s central staff connects local and regional organizations to technical experts, academics and scientists that are invited to collaborate on projects or to give talks and workshops on everything from renewable energy and climate change to soil science and agroecology.

These different service areas were developed as a response to identified needs, which evolved over time. “When we first started in 1995, facing the effects of NAFTA and the dismantling of national markets, our primary objective was to help negotiate better prices for farmers by organizing them and leveraging production at-scale for better contracts.” (Antonio Hernandez, ANEC staff)

Initially, ANEC had only three service areas; commercialization, advocacy and organizational strengthening and support. Through ANEC’s forays into financial services, Seguros ANEC and SofomANEC, crop insurance and micro-credit funds were developed to alleviate member farmers’ difficulty accessing credit and in response to generally ineffective and expensive crop-insurance programs. “Together with our members we realized that there were no decent options for credit and then no decent options for crop-insurance and so we decided to get in the game” (José Atahualpa Estrada, ANEC staff).

ORIGINS OF ACCI/MICI-AGROECOLOGY BY NECESSITY:

We had been fighting for the return of guaranteed prices from the government, and the provision of other programs and services, more credit, crop-insurance. But conditions weren’t changing. Our survival depended on finding a way to increase yields and lower costs. We became agroecologists by necessity” (ANEC adviser, Antonio Hernández Alarcón).

Farmers needed help lowering costs. So ANEC began reaching out to researchers and scientists who were developing alternative agricultural practices. "With volatile prices of inputs and the visible effects of years of soil erosion, we realized that ACCI/MICI was developed for similar reasons. In 2006, ANEC designed and received federal funding for a program to boost corn and bean yields. By subsidizing soil testing and intensive technical support, farmers matched yields of industrial farmers in the northern Mexican state of Sinaloa. “We showed that small farmers, with the same subsidies and technical support, could match the yields per hectare of industrial farmers in Sinaloa” (Victor Suarez, ANEC Director). The increase in production also meant a significant increase in costs, however. “We were able to harvest 8-10 tons a hectare, but our costs went up, too,” recounted one of the participating producers, Don Simon Perez, from Nayarit. “If your yields double but your costs double, too, there’s no point.”
The ACCI/MICI approach to farming is comprised of many agroecological principles and practices. Like many agroecological approaches to farming, ACCI/MICI offers an alternative to one-size-fits-all agriculture, replacing industrial techniques with farming practices that are adapted to local agro-ecosystems. The ACCI/MICI approach to farming helps create ecologically efficient production systems that are grounded in farmers' knowledge of their land and their crops. In workshops on ACCI/MICI, farmers are taught to use renewable resources, minimize waste and reduce external inputs. They are given the tools and skills to produce their own compost and microorganisms. Farmers also learn how to read and manage local agro-ecosystems so as to minimize pests and reduce (and eventually eliminate) the need for toxic chemicals. Central to the application of ACCI/MICI is the Farm Plan, which farmers develop with the support of their local and regional technical advisers. ANEC provides farmer organizations with information, human and capital resources, and strategies for assisting members in an ACCI/MICI transition for free. It is up to each farmer organization to decide to what degree it participates in the ACCI/MICI transition, attending the trainings necessary to receive capital for microorganism biofabricas or composting operations.

Multiple representatives from each organization are invited to attend ACCI/MICI workshops. The workshops are provided free of cost to at least two representatives of each organization, so a combination of a local technical adviser or leader and a member farmer have their travel costs fully subsidized. This practice helps ensure that each organization has multiple actors invested in ACCI/MICI and trained in the approach. The workshops are given by allied scientists that ANEC has identified for their capacity to work and collaborate with farmers. These scientists share in common a respect for farmers knowledge and a capacity to communicate complicated scientific concepts.

ACCI/MICI workshops are intensive and participatory, often entailing field visits and practical applications of skills. “The last workshop was over a week and we barely slept! We were up at all hours of the night tracking plant metabolisms and conducting experiments.” (Yuliana, technical adviser and member of local organization). 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 and different ecological cycles).

Every season, technical advisers 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. Técnicos also help farmers establish record keeping systems to monitor crop development. The plans help advisers and farmers work together to implement and track the results of an ACCI/MICI approach by systematizing record keeping and monitoring needed to respond to climatic or biotic threats to a harvest.

With ACCI/MICI, we have to spend a lot more time watching and monitoring our parcels. Any sign of a pest or any time there’s hail or high-winds, we go out and check the impacts and check-in with the our técnico to devise a response. –Adán Hernández Guérrez, Chiapas

In addition to investing in farmers and técnicos knowledge, each participating organization is given tools to build their own biofabrica to cultivate microorganisms. Some farmers produce their own compost, but a number of organizations have decided to centralize worm-composting operations to supplement members’ fertilizer needs. These tools and techniques help farmers work collectively to produce the
alternative inputs that ACCI/MICI requires, lowering their labor-costs. Also, selling microorganisms and fertilizer helps farmer organizations generate profits to cover the costs of a técnico or other local staff. Many organizations have small meteorological stations, too. ANEC is in the process of developing an early alert system that collects data on weather and biotic and abiotic threats and advises farmers on how to minimize damages in anticipation of these threats.

Change happens on campesino time—they often have to see results before they spend time coming to a workshop or adopting a new practice. (Ing. Isaiás Solorzano)

ANEC has developed an approach to support farmers in an ACCI/MICI transition; however, this transition is still rather incipient. The number of ANEC’s members applying an ACCI/MICI approach to farming increased from 600 in 2016 to more than 1,600 in 2017, although many of the 60,000 member farmers still rely on some industrial inputs. Some farmer organizations have packaged microorganisms and worm-compost extract to look like conventional inputs and to fit in the conventional spray-tanks or mechanized fertilizer applicators. These organizations see this as a way of making ACCI/MICI more familiar, piquing farmers’ interests and allowing them to experience the benefits of more sustainable, cheaper inputs and then slowly working to accompany them in a more comprehensive transition. For ANEC, any change in practice or replacement of input is progress.

As mentioned previously, ACCI/MICI is an approach to farming grounded in agroecological practices and principles. However, there are ways that ACCI/MICI diverges from the agroecological ideal. Most of the farmers currently applying the ACCI/MICI approach use a hybrid of agroecological practices and industrial practices, combining worm fertilizer with occasional applications of synthetic nitrogen. Some farmers still apply chemical pesticides and few farmers practice inter-cropping or have truly diversified farming systems. While these practices are not ACCI/MICI ideals either, ANEC sees this hybridization of practices as part of the transitional process.

We’re really just beginning to stimulate real change here. Many of our member organizations are not convinced [of ACCI/MICI] yet. One of our largest organizations in Chihuahua has been quite reticent about ACCI/MICI but that’s ok, we continue to invite them all of our ACCI/MICI workshops and demonstrative events and, when they’re ready, we’ll be here. (Luis Chaparro, ANEC Staff)

The ACCI-MICI approach to farming

The ACCI/MICI approach works at different levels, starting with soil improvement and conservation (oxygenation, mineralization, increase in organic matter, balance of microorganisms, etc.), plant-specific factors (identification and characterization of key stages by crop, nutrient needs), biotic factors (pest and disease management), a biotic factors (measurement of time variables and their effect on crops, inducers of plant resistance, etc.), among others. To implement these concepts, the following process is performed:

- Diagnosis and definition of production goals. (Physical chemicals analysis, and MRI, molecular and atomic analysis)
- Soil conditioning and seed selection.
- Oxygenation, inducing microorganisms, applying minimal tillage.
- Phenological characterization of each crop (i.e., the crop’s requirements in terms of units of heat and cold hours)
- Attention to the nutritional demand of the crop.
- Demand for nutrients per unit of production desired.
- Assessing energy and nutrient stocks; their availability, how they complement one another, the sources and efficiency of use (State and mode of application of inputs are also assessed and timed to correspond to lunar cycles and the changing Ph. of soil).
- Monitoring of crop stressors. (Meteorological, parasitic, pathogenic, competition, etc.) and definition of crop thresholds.
- Integrated management of crop resilience (acquired plant resistance, induced plant resistance, biological control, use of and management of competition for light, use of agrochemicals in extreme cases).
- Induction of growth promoters.
- Monitoring and conditioning ripening of the crop.
- Storage of grains in proper storage facilities.

The accompaniment and knowledge exchange is fundamental to achieving results and the farmer-to-farmer transfer of techniques. To promote theoretical and practical knowledge acquisition we organize:

- Workshops and training courses for field technicians.
- Workshops and training courses for producers.
- Constant access to specialists who are available for consultations.
- Técnicos specialization in modules, and long-term apprenticeships in laboratories or in research settings.
- Experts who visits and advise técnicos and producers.
HOW ANEC ENGAGES FARMERS IN AN ACCI/MICI TRANSITION

ANEC’s approach to engaging farmer organizations in an agroecological transition varies depending on farmers’ motivations and capacities. ANEC’s commitment to democratic principles and practices and its respect for local organizations’ autonomy and governance processes bolsters the adaptive nature of the ACCI/MICI approach. ANEC introduces certain ACCI/MICI practices or techniques based on what farmers have identified as their most pressing need. By demonstrating that one element of ACCI/MICI can address a most pressing need, ANEC gains inroads with an organization and opens pathways for fostering a more holistic transition to ACCI/MICI agriculture. By engaging farmers in a dialogue and looking for opportunities and entry-points to demonstrate the virtues of agroecology, ANEC accompanies farmers in an agroecological transition that they appropriate, adapt and ultimately make their own. ANEC’s national staff and regional and local technical advisers work collaboratively to promote ACCI/MICI by applying the four following best practices:

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 farmers’ 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. As farmers see results, and a benefit in the reduction of costs, ANEC introduces other ACCI/MICI practices and principles.

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 highly mechanized industrial agriculture, ANEC introduces members to alternative practices. Worm compost and microorganisms might come in packaging or “doses” that are like conventional inputs, making their application less daunting for a farmer who is just beginning to adopt ACCI/MICI. Some farmers are eager to develop their understanding of the complex ecological interactions occurring on their land from the onset of the transition. Many farmers, however, want to be given simple instructions. For the latter, ANEC must work harder to engage these farmers in the collaborative and co-innovative agricultural processes that make it possible to maximize productive efficiency and sustainability.

The Green Revolution spoiled our knowledge and made us lazy. With the formulas and packages we were given, we didn’t even need to go out to our parcels that often. There is more work, more thinking, with ACCI/MICI. But it’s worth it. (Pedro Díaz from Jalisco)

ACCI/MICI technologies and techniques are premised on the co-innovation that happens between farmers, scientists, and técnicos. ANEC refers to this co-innovation as the dialogue of knowledge, or the interaction of a farmer’s praxis-based knowledge with a scientist’s or técnico’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 that 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 a 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 develop and exchange techniques for helping different farmers build their capacities. Some local técnicos 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 técnico recommends the microorganisms he or she can share the scientific names of the organisms while helping farmers learn their different functions. (Don Basilio Andrade, ECC leader, Michoacan).

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 proactive. Staff are constantly visiting farmers or 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.

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 empowering 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, técnicos 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 técnicos that share ANEC’s 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 agronomists, 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 técnico and farmer where the farmer doesn’t question the técnico’s knowledge and there’s no accountability of the técnicos to the farmer. We recruit and train técnicos to be humble and to respect and value farmer’s experience and their knowledge. Our organizational structure also helps because técnicos’ salaries are determined by the local organizations, which makes técnicos accountable to their farmer organizations rather than to a government extension program.

(Beatriz Sandoval, ANEC staff)

A DIFFERENT KIND OF TECHNICAL SUPPORT/AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION

An integral part of ANEC’s success with ACCI/MICI is the recruitment and retention of technical advisers, técnicos, who demonstrate their capacity to help farmers solve problems. ANEC helps local organizations recruit and train técnicos who have certain characteristics, including humility and appreciation of small farmers and an interest in learning about the ACCI/MICI approach. Técnicos 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 técnicos ANEC recruits do not have the same profile or experience as a traditional agricultural extension agent. Of the fifteen local técnicos interviewed, only four had degrees in agronomy. The others ranged from no formal degrees to systems engineering, biology and three younger técnicos had studied agroecology. ANEC’s staff member José Atahualpa Estrada explained,

I actually think it’s harder for a traditionally trained agronomist to be an effective técnico in ANEC because their schooling teaches them completely different approaches to agricultural production also, they usually think they already know everything and don’t have the humility or curiosity to engage in learning more.

The técnicos 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” explained Don Simon, a farmer from Nayarit. Técnico incomes are known to be inconsistent; many of the técnicos interviewed were owed two months of back pay because of delays in government programs that subsidize their incomes. More than three quarters of the técnicos were farmers themselves and were applying an ACCI/MICI approach to their own land. Often, they are from the community, sometimes 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” (José Atahualpa Estrada, ANEC staff). ANEC is also attempting to hire women técnicos. The two newest hires were young women from rural communities who had studied agroecology. Because ANEC’s approach to governance is premised on respect for local organization’s autonomy, the national level organization cannot impose quotas for female membership or leadership. However, since ANEC continues to subsidize part, or all, of most técnicos’ salary, the organization can help shape recruitment and advocate for women and youth to be in positions of influence in a local organization. This is one of various informal strategies ANEC uses to increase the leadership and active participation of women and youth within the organization.

Recruiting and holding on to effective técnicos 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 técnicos 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 técnicos that have forged strong, trusting relationships with farmers.

When ANEC identifies a técnico who embodies its democratic principles and who works collaboratively with farmers, the organization 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. As a result, ANEC has a growing team of technical advisers at the regional and local levels that have a deep understanding of ANEC’s model. A técnico can be well-versed in agroecological practices and administration and good governance. The collaboration
between staff on local, regional and national scales increases ANEC’s ability to adapt and respond to local contexts, quickly meeting memberships need and cultivating a relationship of trust. It also enables ANEC’s staff to design and advocate for programs and policies at a national level that support their diverse membership.

We have been members of many different farmer organizations in the past but ANEC is the only one that we’ve stuck with because it actually helps make our lives better. Also, no one from ANEC has ever asked us for votes. They [staff] are genuinely interested in helping us improve our livelihoods. (Simón Pérez, from Nayarit)

2. Look for entry points to foster dialogue
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 and a new leader may be more amenable to changing governance or production practices. ANEC also identifies key actors, farmers, leaders and/or local technical experts who 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. ANEC invests in their capacities to transmit knowledge to other farmers by covering their costs to attend trainings and involving them in experiments, subsidizing their production of compost or micro-organisms, and using their parcel as the local demonstration plot.

Several farmers interviewed mentioned that 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 técnico 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 técnicos were around parcels of land that they had essentially given up on. Nacho in Jalisco described his first experience:

I was about to mow down my whole sugar cane crop because I had tried everything and I went to go see Inge. Vicente and Andres [local técnico] 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 técnicos in Jalisco mentioned that Don Nacho had been very critical of the técnicos 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.” (Vicente García, Local Technical Adviser) 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 production 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 of our agroecological project. These are the different 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. (Víctor Suárez, ANEC’s Executive Director)

Every organization participating in ACCI/MICI had at least one identified key actor, which could be a local técnico, farmer or leader of an organization. The transition process has been faster if 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-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 Moises 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 Moises Fregoso 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 is 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 Moises 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 técnicos, 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 percent 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 and 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.” (Salvador Buenrostro and Carlos Pelayo from Jalisco). In addition to not possessing the kind of place-based ecological knowledge that agroecological farming needs to be effective, many 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.

Aside from the regular (sometimes monthly) workshops led by allied scientists that ANEC organizes for farmers and técnicos to deepen their agroecological knowledge, ANEC also fosters information exchange among regional farmer groups. ANEC organizes regular visits where farmers 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 técnicos have also helped farmers set up Whatsapp text-message groups where they can share information and ask questions of other farmers and técnicos 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 técnico or another farmer (Samuel Salas, from Chiapas)

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 organizations’ capacities to negotiate fair contracts and to share 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 organizations’ autonomy.

Respecting local organizations’ autonomy, while also advising them and 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 ANEC’s success in all its different initiatives, especially the development and scaling-out of ACCI/MICI.

CASE STUDIES OF DIVERSE AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITIONS.

Each of ANEC’s local organizations is in the process of its own, unique agroecological transition. Every organization participating in the ACCI/MICI transition has its own history and its own approach to scaling-out ACCI/MICI among members. The diverse change processes occurring among ANEC’s members underscore the need for an adaptable approach to agroecological transition.

Below, the transition process of three different local organizations is examined. These mini-case studies highlight the different entry-points used to introduce ACCI/MICI principles and practices and the key actors involved in promoting ACCI/MICI. The strength of the local organization—the ability of farmers to work collectively and the capacity of leadership to practice democratic governance—often correlates with the efficacy and depth of the ACCI/MICI transition. Local organizations that are stronger, who have more key-actors, democratic leadership, técnicos and members collaborating, often adopt ACCI/MICI faster. These organizations also contribute to technical innovations and the improvement of the ACCI/MICI approach. Weaker organizations are still capable of engaging in agroecological transition; however, their transition is slower. When organizations are less collaborative and less horizontal in their decision-making processes, farmers are less empowered and have less ownership over the transition. The first case study examines one of these organizations, La Union de Ejidos Ex-Laguna in the state of Jalisco.

One of our organizations in Chiapas still negotiates for paquetes [technology packages delivered by government agencies that include free or subsidized commercial inputs]. We’ve had a number of conversations with them about this practice. We’ve said ‘look guys, you don’t need to do that. It doesn’t help our political objectives—to transform the current food system. Also, it makes it more difficult to promote ACCI/MICI among members if they’re getting free chemical inputs,’ but we have to understand that and respect that that’s where that organization is at in its evolution. Perhaps their local situation and context requires it. Perhaps their membership expects leaders to behave this way and it’s still what leaders need to do to respond to member’s needs. We have to respect their local autonomy. All ideas and initiatives have to be owned by the local organization, otherwise, in the long-run, they don’t work (Víctor Suárez, ANEC Director).

Jalisco- La Union de Ejidos Ex-Laguna de Magdalena:

La Union de Ejidos Ex- Laguna was formed over 40 years ago. It is one of ANEC’s oldest member organizations and presents an interesting case of an organization that has successfully scaled certain agroecological practices but not managed to catalyze a holistic agroecological transition among member farmers. This seems to due, in part, to weak democratic governance and lack of buy-in from leadership.

Two extremely committed técnicos, Andrés Rivas and Vicente García, are the key actors that have been largely responsible for the adoption of ACCI/MICI practices by members of the Union de Ejidos. These two técnicos are both farmers and both have applied an ACCI/MICI approach to farming to their own land, using their own parcels as demonstration plots. Andrés
and Vicente are limited in how they can introduce farmers to ACCI/MICI, as the organizational leadership is not supportive of ACCI/MICI and expects the técnicos to provide traditional extension services. Instead of farmers participating in ANEC’s workshops and trainings, farmers rely solely on Andrés and Vicente for help. As a result, farmers do not have a deep understanding of the science behind the ACCI/MICI practices and “inputs” the técnicos had prescribed. “The Inge gave me this product, what was it called? Microorganisms! Yes! And it worked great!” (Don Simón Pérez). The farmers interviewed referred to ACCI/MICI inputs (microorganisms and worm compost) as a different kind of paquete. They understood that these alternate paquetes were cheaper and more sustainable.

Replacing conventional technical packages with more sustainable alternatives is neither the objective of ACCI/MICI nor agroecology. Introducing sustainable inputs can mitigate the negative impacts of conventional agricultural practices; however, it does not compare to a farmer learning to read and respond to their unique agro-ecological system. While ANEC is not interested in replacing current industrial paquetes with more sustainable inputs, it recognizes that each local organization has to start somewhere.

ACCI/MICI is a process that intends to change farmers’ approach agriculture. ANEC has to respect local organizations’ approach to introducing ACCI/MICI and work with who and what is available. In cases like the Union de Ejidos Ex-Laguna, ANEC will need to continue looking for other entry-points, possibly waiting for a transition in leadership, and work to create opportunities for exchange and dialogue, generating buy-in from the Union’s member farmers and supporting the two técnicos who are currently promoting ACCI/MICI.

Asking questions about why ANEC has not worked with the Union more closely to strengthen governance practices and foster ACCI/MICI revealed tensions and conflicts among staff, membership and leadership about the organization’s affiliation with ANEC. Much of the membership would like to be more affiliated with ANEC, but the Union’s current leadership is associated with Mexico’s ruling political party, the PRI. Recently, the Union went through an economic crisis because of an untimely investment. The government of the state of Jalisco reportedly offered the Union financial support on the condition that the Union distance themselves from ANEC. This is likely because of Victor Suarez’s, ANEC’s Executive Director, known affiliation to an alternative political party.
ANEC, as an organization, does not have formal party affiliations. However, its Executive Director Victor Suarez has held political office and is a recognized figure in the Mexican political landscape. Victor’s political affiliations do not implicate member farmers’ affiliations. In numerous interviews, farmers listed the fact that ANEC is not linked to a political party as one of the reasons they choose to affiliate with ANEC as opposed to other Mexican peasant organizations. “ANEC has always helped us out and never asked us to show up to a certain politician’s rally or to vote for anyone. All of us here [in this organization] are affiliated to different political parties. This has never been an issue.” (Don Roberto, Farmer from Chiapas). Many farmers mentioned the fact that ANEC has never asked them to vote for a specific political party as something that sets ANEC apart from other farmers’ organizations in Mexico. “ANEC is not political,” many farmers repeatedly asserted when explaining how ANEC was different from other farmer organizations in the region. ANEC is far from politically neutral, however. The political affiliations of its director and the political stances the organization takes reflect the desire to improve conditions for small farmers and foster democracy and full agrarian citizenship in Mexico’s rural communities.

Examining the case of the Union de Ejidos Ex-Laguna gives a glimpse of the complexity of agrarian politics in Mexico and the way that ANEC navigates local and national politics while simultaneously attempting to meet farmers’ needs and improve livelihoods. In Jalisco, the transition towards ACCI/MICI will be slow until there is more buy-in from member farmers and leadership in the Union de Ejidos. ANEC works to support the key-actors currently promoting ACCI/MICI and depends on these actors to share information about progress and other potential entry-points for promoting better governance and production practices.

Organizations have to do what they have to do to survive, times are tough, we respect that. All we can do is maintain the dialogue that we have with them right now through ACCI/MICI and hope that there will be an opportunity to re-engage with the organization about democratic principles and practices at a later point. (Victor Suarez, ANEC Executive Director)

Ing. Antonio Hernández Alarcón (ANEC Staff), and Antonio Andrade and Leovigilda Lepiz Apolinar (Farmer Leader)
Chiapas-Totikes and Red Chiapas

There are two regional organizations in Chiapas that are involved in the ACCI/MICI transition. One of the organizations is a network of indigenous farming communities called Totikes. Totikes farmers have small parcels of land and practice more subsistence agriculture than the other organization, Red Chiapas. Red Chiapas is made up of commercial farmers who do not identify as indigenous. Totikes has been involved in the ACCI/MICI transition for longer; however, the leader of the organization has been less supportive of ACCI/MICI in the past. The primary catalysts have been young técnicos and a few model farmers. Yuliana, one of the young técnicos at Totikes is a daughter of a farmer member and is emerging leader in ANEC. She and two model farmers are the key actors that attend the ACCI/MICI workshops and promote ACCI/MICI to member farmers.

Red Chiapas is an interesting case because, unlike in other organizations where farmers were primarily motivated to integrate ACCI/MICI practices to reduce costs, farmers in Red Chiapas were drawn to ACCI/MICI because of collective health concerns over pesticide use. With Red Chiapas, farmers reported little to no savings or increased yields. Rather, the impacts of ACCI/MICI were improved conditions for themselves and their families. Several farmers mentioned cases of poisoning from pesticide application. The majority of farmers had only applied ACCI/MICI techniques having to do with pest management. During the field visit, ANEC’s national staff was leveraging the successful experience reducing pesticide use to encourage members to begin applying other ACCI/MICI approaches. Specifically, ANEC’s staff was introducing the idea of producing and applying organic composts and worm fertilizer. Red Chiapas farmers were eager to experiment with a different ACCI/MICI practice because they had seen results using an ACCI/MICI approach to pest management.

The regional organizations in Chiapas have not invested in scaling vermiculture compost production to the same degree that other organizations have. This may be because the state government of Chiapas continues to distribute paquetes that include commercial fertilizer for free. It has been difficult to encourage farmers to invest labor and time into making their own compost when they receive free industrial fertilizer. Still, ANEC’s técnicos and staff have continued to engage members in discussions about the benefits of organic compost and the importance of soil fertility. This year, there was less fertilizer allocated through state programs, which offered ANEC an entry-point. Over the course of the visit to Red Chiapas there were conversations about getting worm compost extract from ANEC’s member organizations in Michoacán to test on a few parcels and explore the possibility Red Chiapas investing in its own worm-composting infrastructure. ANEC hopes, over time, to draw Red Chiapas further into other organizational aspects of ACCI/MICI.

Nayarit—San Pedro Lagunillas, La Moderna and Tecuala

There are three farmers’ organizations in Nayarit that have worked together and been some of ANEC’s pioneers in the development of the ACCI/MICI approach. They were the organizations that were testing organic practices in 2006, before ANEC decided to invest in developing an agroecological approach to farming, and are by far the furthest along in the agroecological transition. The organizations—San Pedro Lagunillas, La Moderna and Tecuala—are small but have strong democratic practices and dedicated técnicos. Of all of the organizations included in the study, the organizations in Nayarit had the most member farmers using little if any agro-industrial inputs. Five members from every organization were interviewed and each had a deep knowledge of the ACCI/MICI approach and the science behind the techniques they were applying. Many had attended either local workshops or the ANEC organized workshops on ACCI/MICI. What was especially noteworthy was that, during the visit, there was no way of distinguishing the técnicos from the farmers. During a visit of their collective demonstration plot, where the three organizations were collaborating to test heirloom seeds against commercial hybrid seeds, farmers and técnicos alike were sharing information and discussing the results they were observing. This was the dialogue of knowledge in practice!

Each of the three organizations had self-sustaining biofabricas and produced enough microorganisms and organic fertilizer to meet members’ needs. Two of the organizations were selling their fertilizer and microorganisms to farmers outside their organization and promoting ACCI/MICI among farmers that are not members of ANEC. The tone of farmer interviews was often giddy, members were excited to recount the traction ACCI/MICI is gaining in their community. Two farmers said that their neighbors were coming to them for advice instead of consulting the local government extension agents.

ACCI/MICI is about to be big, really big... it was slow at first but things are gaining momentum ... the only thing that would make the transition to ACCI/MICI happen faster is if we could offer our fertilizer and micro-organisms on credit. I bet you that in a few years, most of the farmers around here will be using ACCI/MICI. (Pedro Gamboya from Nayarit)
Michoacán–Agricultores Unidos Región Guayangareo:

Agricultores Unidos de Guayangareo, a local organization in Michoacán, is one of ANEC’s model ECCs. It is the organization that any visitor is taken to see and is likely the local organization that most closely approaches ANEC’s ideal in terms of democratic practices and the engagement in the ACCI/MICI approach.

Guayangareo has a thriving commercial enterprise; they commercialize hundreds of tons of grain every year and are able to support over 15 staff members, including accountants, two técnicos and a manager of the biofabrica and worm composting operations. They have developed some of the newest ACCI/MICI innovations, including natural pesticides that they have tested with member farmers.

The head of Guayangareo, Olga Alcaraz, is an important figure in ANEC and a tremendous advocate for ACCI/MICI. She is both the head of Guayangareo, as well as a member of the regional organization’s advisory board (REDCAMM). Olga has also been elected Secretary of ANEC’s National Assembly on multiple occasions. Her trajectory as one of ANEC’s few female leaders reflects the challenges to establishing thriving and democratic local organizations in Mexico’s rural communities. Olga recounted that farmers began initially organizing in Guayangareo in response to corrupt intermediaries and grain processors that were taking advantage of a monopoly and lack of farmer agency. “Farmers have been mistreated and stolen from for years. [The organization] had to start small and had little to offer initially except for a fairer price for grain and the knowledge that you weren’t going to get ripped off by us.” Farmers in the area frequently received late payments or unfair payments from intermediaries and were subject to a series of injustices. “We gained their trust by being transparent about accounts, being clear about expectations and holding up our end of the bargain, paying-out when we said we would and involving member and non-member farmers alike in big decisions.” The fact that Olga is a woman created even more obstacles for her to gain the confidence of member farmers. “It was hard at first, they doubted that I knew what I was doing.” A founding member said that now, “with everything we’ve been able to do under Olga’s leadership, we have confidence in her. If she comes to us with a new idea, like she did with ACCI/MICI, we are eager to support her and to listen.”

The reputation the organization has developed through its transparent and accountable practices commercializing grain has allowed it to grow as a business. “We are one of the largest grain traders in the area.” The income from the commercial activities supports the organization’s ability to provide more technical accompaniment and to experiment with ACCI/MICI techniques. More and more farmers are affiliating themselves with the local organization, “Now we have started a savings-and-loans program, which is another way to get local farmers to join us.” Visionary leadership, democratic practices and a strong team have been, and continue to be, key to Guayangareo’s success.

As a result of Olga’s leadership, Guayangareo has developed a strong team of técnicos, model-farmers and model leadership that are promoting the ACCI/MICI approach among member farmers. She commented that, “Every member of our organization should know how microorganisms work, that’s our goal, everyone from the farm-worker to the técnico to the accountant.” This team, ranging from técnicos with formal agronomy degrees to farm workers who showed an interest in ACCI/MICI, help disseminate the ACCI/MICI approach throughout Michoacán. “Farmers come here to sell us their grain and we take advantage of them coming to talk to them about ACCI/MICI, showing them our test plots and our worm-compost fields, giving them samples of microorganisms.” (Miguel Tapia, Local técnico, Guayangareo).

Olga has also helped promote ACCI/MICI among other regional organizations outside of Michoacán, drawing from Guayangareo’s experience and the experience of Michoacán’s REDCCAM, to convince other farmer organizations of the benefits of the ACCI/MICI approach. REDCCAM frequently hosts workshops and meetings on ACCI/MICI and regularly hosts demonstrations for local organizations and organizations from other states. REDCCAM has also established its own soil-testing operations and a laboratory that will serve all of ANEC’s member organizations.

Guayangareo is an example of how effective an integral application of ANEC’s model can be for community-led rural development. The combination of good governance practices combined with strong democratic leadership and a team of effective técnicos and model farmers has accelerated a transition to agroecology and laid the foundation for scaling ACCI/MICI up and out to farmers all over the state.

In an ideal world, where the ACCI/MICI approach was fully implemented, local organizations would all be like Guayangareo. They would be strong, autonomous, self-sustaining and democratic. They would be able to produce their own inputs and have their own biofabrica that produced all the microorganisms, composts and seeds they would need. They would also have equipment to do soil testing and a weather station that gave farmers up-to-date local information. Member farmers would be deeply knowledgeable about their land and their local agroecological systems, and organizations would be able to pay for full-time técnicos that were
also farmers in the local community and who could support members. This is an ideal, something to strive for, but it is not, as of yet, a reality.

There is a steep learning curve for most farmers and técnicos and there are significant increases in time and labor required to apply an ACCI/MICI approach. It comes as no surprise that only a fraction of ANEC’s members are currently participating in ANEC’s agroecological transition. While the ACCI/MICI transition is still incipient, ANEC has found a productive approach to farming, and a process of introducing farmers to this approach, that seems to be working. This suggests that ANEC, through ACCI/MICI, has found a way to scale out agroecological practices, supporting their diverse member farmers in an agroecological transition. While exciting, the transition process is messy and complicated and, in practice, ACCI/MICI can sometimes seem far from agroecology’s socio-political and ecological ideals.

The transition towards an ACCI/MICI approach to farming conflicts with many agroecological ideals. Reflecting on ANEC’s experience, there are various productive and socio-political themes that have not been effectively addressed. These different themes, which include crop diversification, food security and social inclusion, are discussed below. How ANEC has addressed these themes, and possible reasons for why it has fallen short of achieving ideals, are explored. Suggestions for how ANEC might improve its approach are also provided.

ACCI/MICI does not place the same emphasis on crop diversification as other agroecological approaches to farming. While ANEC mentions the benefits of diversifying crops as a means of promoting ecological equilibrium and diversifying livelihoods in its ACCI/MICI workshops, it is not a priority area. Most of ANEC’s farmers grow two or three crops commercially and have not yet been convinced of the benefits of diversifying production. Some model farmers still practice milpa agriculture, planting corn, beans and squash together. When this intercropping occurs, it is usually for household consumption. Currently, it is difficult for farmers using agroecological
techniques to compete in a conventional market because their production expenses are not always lower than those for industrial agriculture, especially if the additional labor costs are included. ANEC’s small and medium farmers have to compete with larger industrial farmers who benefit from economies of scale and who also receive greater subsidies and support from the state. Since ANEC was founded as an organization that helped farmers commercialize their harvest in a conventional agricultural system, ANEC will likely have to continue to make adjustments to its organizational and productive model to foster diversification of crops. Continuing advocacy efforts that promote fair food systems that acknowledge the multiple social and ecological benefits of investing in small-scale farmers could help.

The localization and regionalization of food systems is another area ANEC could dedicate more time to. Selling locally, and cultivating stronger local and regional economies, is something ANEC talks about but has not been able to make much progress on. This may be because it requires state and municipal engagement and there is not much buy-in from Mexican local and regional governments.

ANEC is a member of a national campaign, called Valor al Campesino, which brings together other farmer organizations, civil society and researchers to advocate for policies and programs that support small farmers. As part of this initiative, ANEC has participated in discussions about fostering Community Supported Agriculture; linking urban communities to rural communities; and providing a reliable market for diverse, sustainably produced crops. Without a significant shift in Mexico’s national agricultural policy, though, ANEC and allies’ efforts will take more time.

Food security, and measuring the impact of ACCI/MICI on local food security, is something that ANEC has not explored. Since all of ANEC’s members are commercial farmers, there is not much discussion about how much of the food produced is eaten, which is a possible explanation for the lack of exploration. ANEC implemented a pilot project, in partnership with Oxfam Mexico, which promoted diverse backyard gardens as a means of increasing food security and engaging women in their organizational work. The pilot program had some success but it was never scaled-up beyond Chiapas. It would be useful to collect baseline information about ANEC’s members’ food security and to measure how adopting ACCI/MICI might affect household food security.

One of ANEC’s biggest challenges in the next five years will be the inclusion of youth and women into its organizational structure. Rural communities everywhere are struggling to find ways to encourage youth to stay and practice farming. Integrating youth and women into decision-making processes, and giving them the opportunity to learn about ACCI/MICI, is key. One of the reasons ANEC has lower participation of women and youth is because women and youth are not typically landowners. While ANEC has addressed the need for agrarian reform in its political advocacy, internally it has no explicit strategies to include non-landholders.

ANEC’s experience promoting ACCI/MICI has resulted in some promising cases where jornaleros, the day laborers who do much of the agricultural labor in rural communities, have been inspired and encouraged to rent their own parcels and apply ACCI/MICI. In both Michoacán and Guerrero there are cases of farmer organizations supporting jornaleros (usually young men) by giving them access to microorganisms or worm compost on credit. “We have seen how ACCI/MICI approaches work and result in higher yields at lower costs by managing other farmer’s land. It made us this that we could actually make a profit using ACCI/MICI on rented land and we did.” (Jornalero interviewed in Michoacán)

There are numerous exciting initiatives and examples of inclusion that could help ANEC develop more comprehensive strategies for engaging youth and women. However, ANEC needs to invest time and energy identifying and systematizing these initiatives if it is effectively going to address gender equity and youth exclusion. Currently, women represent only 20 percent of membership overall. Only 16 percent of ANEC’s farmers participating in ACCI/MICI are women. ANEC has some promising initiatives, such as favoring the recruitment of women hires, and all the new technical hires in the last year have been young women. ANEC has also piloted a number of programs to involve women in rural communities (especially members’ wives and single women, mostly widows who have inherited their husband’s land and membership in a farmers’ organization) in the ACCI/MICI approach. For example, women members were supposed to be trained in running the biofábricas. In one of the ECCs in Nayarit, women are in charge of producing microorganisms and managing the worm compost production. While there are various cases of women in leadership roles or women participating in the ACCI/MICI transition, women and youth inclusion is not systemic and no initiatives to include women and youth have been scaled-out through regional or local organizations.

ANEC’s central leadership recognizes that inclusion of youth, women and non-landholders is a problem. “We were founded by mostly older male campesinos and ejidatarios.¹³ We haven’t yet been able to find the right entry-point or pathway for engaging our membership on the issue of gender equality... it’s important to us but we don’t know how or what to do.” (Víctor Suarez) It could be fruitful for ANEC to partner with other civil society organizations that have more experience with youth inclusion and gender mainstreaming. Strategic
partnerships could help ANEC identify obstacles to inclusion and potential entry-points for engaging women in decision-making and productive processes. An initial diagnostic, analyzing how women and youth currently contribute to agricultural production, would be key. Unfortunately, little is known about women's role in agricultural systems in Mexico and more studies are necessary. It is likely that women and youth possess unique knowledge about local agroecosystems that could enhance the ACCI/MICI approach.

While various aspects of ANEC's model fall short of agroecological ideals, when put into context, the strides ANEC has made, and the support ANEC has provided rural communities throughout Mexico, is laudable. Mexico's small farmers face numerous political, economic and ecological obstacles to sustainable rural development. For the last 22 years, ANEC has been at the frontlines, advocating for political transformation while simultaneously helping farmers survive the dismantling of agricultural support systems. Despite a lack of political will and dearth of funding, ANEC has pieced together an approach to sustainable farming that is adapted to its member farmers' needs and capacities.

ANEC'S EXPERIENCE AND APPROACH CONTEXTUALIZED

ANEC's work is in response to, and despite, Mexican policies that have fomented poverty, dependency on state welfare and a gradual divestment in smallholder agriculture. Projects like Subsidios al Campo and publications like “Subsidizing Inequality: Mexican Corn Policy Since NAFTA” have documented the ways that Mexican agricultural subsidies are regressive, benefiting large-scale farmers over small-scale farmers in Sinaloa, Jalisco and Coahuila. These studies illustrate how state policies have resulted in the concentration of power in the agricultural sector. In addition to receding government support, rural communities have also been hard hit by the global economic downturn. Over the course of this research, the Mexican peso experienced a drastic devaluation that is still underway, leaving imported inputs like seeds and fertilizers out of reach for many farmers. A weakened Mexican economy prompted the federal government to slash the annual budget, cutting some rural development programs by more than half. Apart from some funding from private foundations, nearly all of the public support ANEC has received has been for improvements in production methods, not organizational strengthening or democratization. This context of nearly perpetual crisis, a lack of political will and insecure funding is the context ANEC has been working in since the organization was first started in 1995.

Confronting dominant narratives and changing mind-sets is one of the biggest obstacles for ANEC and its allies in advocating for small-scale farmers and agroecology. This experience parallels the struggles the movement for agroecology faces globally. Some arguments against agroecology suggest that the global food system is already industrialized, dominated by large producers who can produce much more than small farmers. These arguments overlook the ecological and social costs—high greenhouse gas emissions and poor labor conditions that foment rural poverty. Another argument against agroecology suggests that the current system is so entrenched that it is too late to implement an alternative. This is simply not true. Like in Mexico, the majority of the world's farmers are small-scale farmers, many of whom have yet to become wholly dependent on extractive industrial agricultural practices. Despite decades of policies and programs to dismantle small-scale agriculture and push farmers to move to cities or work in factories (maquiladoras), Mexico's food system is still very much supported by its campesinos. This fact presents a tremendous opportunity that the Mexican government should exploit; Mexico's small farmers harbor unrealized productive potential and provide numerous social benefits to rural communities.

ANEC and allies, through an initiative called Valor al Campesino, have documented how small-scale farmers support rural economies and Mexico’s food system, despite a lack of investment. Seventy percent of Mexican farmers are small-scale farmers, which means they are cultivating five hectares or less of land apiece. On these five hectares or less, small-scale farmers produce almost 40 percent of Mexico’s food. Moreover, smallholder agriculture is the bedrock of rural livelihoods, generating three out of four jobs in rural communities. All of these social benefits are realized on 16.9 percent of Mexico’s workable land, much of which has no irrigation and little subsidies from the budget allocated to agriculture production. These statistics, which are all available on Valor al Campesino’s website, show that status quo agricultural policy and politics do not make sense. ANEC participates in various strategic alliances, like Valor al Campesino, to overturn these dominant narratives and advocate for political change. ANEC participates in various national campaigns, partnering with consumer advocacy groups, international environmental NGOs, and other farmer movements to lobby for political change. Collaborating with diverse civil society organizations and partnering with research institutions and universities throughout Mexico helps ANEC work to dismantle the agro-industrial system and create a pathway for transformation.

At the same time ANEC is advocating for political change and the implementation of policies and programs that support rural communities, it has to find ways to support its different
program areas and provide member farmers the services they need to survive. ANEC often receives funding from the Mexican government, but it has to adapt its program initiatives to the dominant agricultural paradigm. The current policy trend promotes the provision of technical services and production support, which means that ANEC has to compromise on the commercialization or organizational support it can provide members. ANEC has shifted its energies, investing more time in the development of ACCI/MICI than in other program areas, partly because there is more external funding for this work. While ANEC has worked to become more financially autonomous, creating program areas that can generate internal funds (like microfinance products), it is still dependent on external funding.

Funding and political will can limit ANEC’s capacity to foster collaborative and collective rural development processes. Over the last few years, ANEC’s Organizational Strengthening and Support program area has suffered. Because of ANEC’s socio-political objectives, investing in its members’ organizational capacity has always been a priority. Unfortunately, this is the aspect of ANEC’s work that it the most undervalued by both its members and outside funders. From 2008–2012, ANEC was able to support member local organizations with a dedicated organizational staff member paid for by a federally funded program.17

We were able to provide ECCs with both agricultural technicians and organizational advisers so each organization had help with agricultural production and an adviser to help implement good governance and business principles and practices. These organizational advisers were able to help ECCs be more efficient and transparent. Relationships among farmers and leadership improved and organizations increased their capacity to implement changes. But it is very difficult keep these advisers on staff after funding runs out—the work they did and that our program area does—ensuring transparency, accountability and good governance—is underappreciated. (Beatriz Sandoval, ANEC staff.)

The lack of funding for ANEC’s organizational support area, combined with the energy and resources it has dedicated to developing and scaling the ACCI/MICI approach, has meant that less time and energy is spent strengthening governance capacities of member organizations. This has an effect on the ACCI/MICI transition and the overall strength of ANEC’s member organizations, too. The organizational case studies reflected that weaker democratic governance generally means a slower and less integral adoption of the ACCI/MICI approach. Continued investment in local organizations’ democratic capacities and fortifying farmers’ abilities to act collectively are essential to fostering a transition that conforms to ecological and socio-political agroecological ideals.

Recognizing that the organizational program area has suffered in the last few years, ANEC reinitiated conversations with members about the importance of strengthening local governance. ANEC’s leadership was consulted about potential initiatives to improve transparency and accountability. One emerging idea is to create an autonomous audit council, made up of ANEC members and staff, tasked with evaluating ECCs implementation of political and economic norms and monitoring fiscal transparency accountability. Also, ANEC has identified organizational assessments as a priority for 2017. “It’s been a couple of years since we’ve sat down with local organizations and evaluated their organizational strength, but we are planning on doing this assessment again this year, scoring organizations on their democratic practices.” (Beatriz Sandoval, ANEC staff) ANEC recognizes the important role strong, local, democratic institutions can play in fostering sustainable rural development. Despite a lack of funding, ANEC will continue working to foster democratic governance and prioritize strengthening farmers’ capacity to act collectively.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

A difficult political and economic context aside, ANEC is helping prove that small-scale farmers are not only capable of efficient and sustainable production but also integral to agricultural innovation and effective, inclusive rural development processes. By investing in the democratic and entrepreneurial capacities of local small farmers’ organizations, ANEC is laying a pathway for transformational agroecological democracy. More detailed analysis of ANEC’s work is needed, however. While ANEC has developed an approach that supports farmers in a transition towards sustainable agriculture, the transition process is just beginning. As ANEC works to scale ACCI/MICI up and out among member organizations and through Mexico’s rural communities, it would benefit from more information about ACCI/MICI’s impact on livelihoods, food security and crop resistance and resilience. Mechanisms to guarantee that small farmers’ knowledge, and contributions to the development and innovation of sustainable farming approaches, remains in the hands of rural communities and is not privatized or co-opted, must be developed.

Preliminary indicators about ACCI/MICI’s impact on farmer livelihoods and agro-ecosystems are encouraging. However, ANEC’s experience requires more rigorous assessment and
Local farmers’ organizations need the capacity to foster innovation, developing new techniques and tools for sustainable farming. The systematization of principles and practices of ACCI/MICI, and the documentation of their impacts, could serve as resource for other farmers and organizations. ANEC’s experience can contribute to improving agricultural policies in Mexico and help strengthen a burgeoning agroecological movement in Mexico.

As ANEC continues to foster innovation, developing new techniques and tools for sustainable farming, it needs to begin to identify ways to guarantee that those tools and techniques (including seeds) remain part of the collective commons. “We want to make sure that our investment in developing tools and innovations remain in the hands of campesinos. We’re not necessarily interested in patenting these innovations but we want to make sure that they aren’t used for profit by anyone else.” (Olga, ANEC leadership). Exploring alternatives to patenting technologies and seeds and examining the possibilities offered by creative commons will be necessary to help guarantee that the knowledge and material resources that ANEC and member organizations and farmers are developing stay in the hands of farmers and rural communities.

The dominant agricultural practices that drive our global food system are unsustainable and extractive. Reliant on non-renewable resources and harmful chemicals, agro-industrial approaches to farming are accelerating global warming, contributing to 20 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions generated yearly, depleting our soils, and eroding our biodiversity. This system also marginalizes the world’s small farmers, whose important role in alleviating hunger, mitigating poverty and managing natural resources are discounted. A transition to a food system that is equitable and sustainable will require the development and implementation of alternative farming practices and food politics.

Agroecology offers a solution to the social and ecological deficiencies of the current food system. There are, however, numerous obstacles to transforming our agro-industrial food regime. The transition towards agroecology must offer strategies for dismantling the current system while helping farmers and consumers adopt and adapt to different practices and norms. As van Mierlo et al (2017) suggest, examining ongoing processes of transition towards agroecology can help us understand the mechanisms behind change. Studying these transitions can help answer questions such as how can farmers, consumers and decision-makers be convinced to engage in the transformation of an extractive and unsustainable global food system? What policies and practices best address rural poverty and the marginalization of small farmers? ANEC’s ongoing transition highlights the following three lessons:

- A transition strategy is more effective if it is integrated, affecting multiple levels of decision-making, policy and the supply chain. It must envision change in agricultural practices, finance mechanisms and the commercialization of crops.
- Farmers’ organizations also help foster the adoption of new practices more effectively and efficiently. Working through farmers’ organizations reduces the risks farmers take on, making them feel less vulnerable as they experiment with new techniques.
- Local farmers’ organizations need the capacity to oversee both extension services and technical staff as well as the financial operations of the commercialization. This helps ensure trust and accountability, which is necessary for the dialogue of knowledge that allows for co-innovation between technical staff and farmers.

More studies (like this one) that examine change processes will help identify different mechanisms for fostering transition and help illuminate pathways towards transformation. Farmers’ organizations, like ANEC, have and will continue to play important roles in the expansion of agroecology.

All errors are the Author’s own.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY:


APPENDIX 1: ANEC’S PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

1. Economic organization with a social impact and environmental responsibility
2. Independence
3. Autonomy
4. Plurality
5. Self-management
6. Democracy
7. Subsidiarity
8. Justice, equity and solidarity
9. Transparency
10. Being proactive, innovative and constructive

APPENDIX 2- ANEC’S MISSION AND CODE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE PRACTICES

We work with devotion and stay committed to the mission, principles, values and organizational model of ANEC.

We are organizations at the service of and for peasants who take part in them, and for the women and men of the Mexican countryside.

We are economic organizations with a solid commitment to social and environmental well-being, made up of peasants who mainly produce basic grains, and we organize to work on our problems, needs and initiatives in order to acquire greater economic and decision power. We are dedicated to improving equity and the quality of life of our members, their families, their communities and the rural sector.

We are autonomous, independent self-sufficient and diverse organizations, and we govern ourselves according to democratic principles.

We are organizations that are dedicated to and answer to our highest decision-making body, the General Assembly. We value and develop our autonomy and self-management abilities, and we do not depend on any external authority (e.g. political parties, peasant unions, governments, companies, legislators, etc.). We are diverse and respect the political, religious and sexual preferences of each member. We make collective and democratic decisions, through the General Assembly, Board of Directors sessions and work meetings, in accordance with our interests and needs expressed in plans and programs, and employing methods, procedures and mechanisms that allow us to improve peasants’ governance in our organizations.

Our management and operational structures are at the service of the organization.

ANEC’s organizational model regards the General Assemblies comprised of members of each organization as the highest authority, and according to this model we work with a management structure made up of producers, and our own professional managerial and technical structure, which must strengthen members’ self-management skills, and operate in strict compliance with their established mandates, principles and norms.

We work towards the development of local strengths and capabilities.

We are committed to developing local organizational, technical and technological capabilities, and to sustainable economic development. To this end, we will promote the exchange of experiences at the local, regional and national level, and we will provide annual training and education programs in each organization, with a focus on equity, to promote training for local leaders, administrative staff, organization members and the technical team. This
training will also facilitate the operation, duties and obligations of members, governing bodies and the technical-managerial team.

We are committed to practicing sustainable and integrative agriculture that cares for nature and consumers

We strive to practice agriculture that safeguards soil, water and the environment and produces healthy food for consumers, combining peasants’ knowledge with scientific and technological knowledge. Our organization embraces the production chain comprehensively, from production to consumption, by including the by-products of members’ productive activity, and promoting the use and development of modern technologies while also being mindful of environmental sustainability and the integral development of communities and the environment.

We are inclusive and we organize ourselves with an equity approach.

As inclusive organizations, we promote our growth by admitting all producers who wish to organize, as well as new organizations, that commit to adhering to ANEC’s principles. This also entails eradicating inequalities by developing mechanisms that promote the active and equitable equal participation of women and young people in the governing bodies of our organizations, in decision-making, and in each and every one of our activities.

We practice and demand an honest, efficient and transparent administration in our organizations and we strictly comply with our accountability to organization members

The principles of democracy, justice and equality commit us and require us to conduct an honest, efficient and transparent administration in our organizations at both the individual and collective levels. Transparency regarding our accountability and access to consistent, accurate, sufficient and timely information of all organization activities is one of our most appreciated, fulfilled and mandatory practices.

We build and use standardized management methods and systems and commit ourselves to an annual comprehensive management audit.

All our organizational and resource management processes are carried out using specific systems and methods that ensure efficiency, democratic governance and transparency for all organizations and members. In order to achieve greater control of operational and administrative practices, we accept and promote the implementation of strategic plans, as well as a comprehensive audit of annual management as a basic procedure of self-regulation.

We mobilize to demand our rights and stand in solidarity with other fair causes, and to influence national and rural sector public policies.

In defending our principles, values and objectives and by building transformative citizenship, we commit ourselves to mobilize in a legal and peaceful manner in order to demand our rights and advocate for our demands and proposals, as well as stand in solidarity with other fair causes in Mexico and in other countries. We analyze and propose public policies that are favorable to the development and sustainability of peasants’ advocacy and the sustainability of the Mexican countryside, maintaining our independence and political autonomy from external agencies.

**CODE OF MINIMAL GOOD PEASANTS’ GOVERNANCE PRACTICES**

Operation of organizations’ governing bodies

Establish the General Assembly as the highest governing and decision-making body of the organization in the statutes and in the conscience of the members, as well as ensure it in practice, and that the main actions, programs, projects, management and credits will be approved by this authority. These decisions will determine the organization’s future direction and will incorporate the mission, principles and heritage of organization members.

Hold General Assemblies, at least one bimonthly, with member producers from local grassroots organizations, and with delegates for organizations comprised of legal entities, in accordance with annual calendars approved in the General Assembly and known to all.

At each General assembly, a memorandum of agreements must be drafted and recorded in the corresponding minutes book, ensuring proper follow-up and compliance of agreements by the Board of Directors and management.
In the integration of the Board of Directors or Administrative Board, women and youth must be elected and participate in at least 30% of positions to ensure and promote their representation and equal participation in decision-making. Likewise, External Directors will be included in ANEC’s national initiatives and those of organizations with larger scale operations.

Ensure the attendance of the majority of members (more than 60%) in General Assemblies by means of prior announcements and effective campaigning.

Conduct at least one monthly session with the Board of Directors. Each director will have information about the duties, responsibilities and faculties of his/her function and will sign an agreement committing to these prior to discharging his/her duties.

**Transparency and accountability**

The Board of Directors or Administrative Board must ensure effective communication with the entire organization and each of its members. At each assembly, it will present a complete, accurate and up-to-date report showing the financial position of the company, as well as the plans and activities it is carrying out and intends to carry out, and this report is to be reviewed and analyzed by members.

The Manager shall issue monthly financial and operational reports, which shall be reviewed by the Board of Directors and the Supervisory Board and approved, where appropriate, by the General Assembly of Members.

**Self-regulation**

All operations carried out in the organization must be submitted to a registration and accounting process that applies commonly accepted standards, procedures and systems. They will have updated and regularized their control systems and will use the instruments developed by ANEC, in order to standardize accounting and financial criteria.

The Board of Directors and the Supervisory Board or Commissioners will be responsible for promoting an annual internal and comprehensive management audit (administrative, accounting, fiscal and financial), whose results will be known to the Board of Directors or Administrative Board and the General Assembly.

**Planning**

The Board of Directors will be responsible for promoting a strategic five-year plan for the organization, and will annually evaluate improvements or setbacks to correct mistakes or negative attitudes in time. And for it, a General Assembly of Balance and Programming will be held to approve, where appropriate, the operational and financial report of the Board of Directors and of the Management, as well as to define and approve the operational program for the following year.

**Building Local Skills and Training**

As part of the strategic plan, a training plan will be defined each year, aimed at strengthening the capabilities of each and every one of the organization’s members, especially women and young people, and strengthening their respective roles as well as their respective projects: members, the administrative board, the managing director and technicians by area.

ENDNOTES

1 National Association of Rural Producers’ Commercial Enterprises
2 Agricultura Campesina de Conocimientos Integrados/Manejo Integrado de Cultivos Inducidos
3 ANEC, 2016
4 Una modernización del campo por y para campesinos
5 Empresa Comercializadoras Campesinas
6 While guided by the principles and objectives of the national organization, ANEC’s credit fund, crop-insurance service, and savings and loans initiative are intended to operate independently from ANEC.
7 Lourdes Rudín, a Mexican journalist and researcher who first wrote about ANEC’s forays into productive innovation, argues that the increase in yields ANEC realized were because the productive innovation was grounded in ANEC’s organizational model (Rudín, 2010). ANEC’s members had access to training/capacity building, financing, and commercializing services which ANEC developed and tailored to meet their needs. The introduction of new agricultural practices was bolstered by strong, trusting relationships cultivated by ANEC’s staff and técnicos with members and the collective nature of the innovation. ANEC works with groups of organized farmers who work and learn collectively and who rely on one another for support when taking on the rather risky endeavor of trying a new production practice. ANEC’s integrative approach to rural development is distinctive in Mexico and “goes against the current of individualism that is promoted in the public programs implemented in the agricultural sector in Mexico” (Rudín, 3, 2010). The combination of a strong organizational structure and existing pathways for transmitting information and fostering dialogue is essential to ANEC’s success in developing and scaling-out the ACCI/MICI approach.
8 Don is a term of respect used in Latin America.
9 ANEC opposes the use of genetically modified seeds. The use of GMO corn seeds is illegal in Mexico.
10 Diálogo de Saberes is a term used by Victor Toledo and other agroecologists to refer to the iterative dialogue among scientists and farmers with different kinds of knowledge. It explicitly rejects the idea of top-down delivery of technical assistance and acknowledges the political dynamics among the various actors involved in farming systems. (Toledo, 1996)
11 Inge, short for Ingeniero, or engineer, is a term of respect that farmer use for técnicos. 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.
Ejidatarios are farmers who received or inherited land through Mexico’s collective ejido land tenure system.


Fox and Haight, 2010

On September 26 the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* featured a cover story estimating that budget cuts would push 800,000 more peasants into poverty.

Valuing Peasant Farmers is a campaign and initiative that agglutinates prominent civil society organizations, researchers and Mexican farmer movements. The details of advocacy and research efforts spearheaded by the campaign are available on their website - [http://valoralcampesino.org](http://valoralcampesino.org)

The name of the federally funded “Formación de dirigentes campesinos y fortalecimiento de los órganos de gobierno de organizaciones regionales y de base e iniciativas de ANEC” that ANEC designed and implemented in the mid-2000s, which greatly strengthened local organizations and ANEC’s mechanisms for fostering good governance.