

El Sueño Americano - The American Dream

By: Kathia Ramirez and Meghan Hurley

“I do not want my children to suffer like I did but how will I do that? If I stay over there, I will not be able to better myself because I noticed that in my country, the situation is harsh. You can't succeed. You can't. And so I made a decision. I said 'It's better if I go, and I only ask God to help me make it, and I will make it no matter how the journey is. No matter how the route is, all I think of is getting there. And once I arrive there, I know that I will work and I will start sending money so my children can go to school...' and thank God for helping me. It took so long, I suffered. They kidnapped us and everything that happened on the way here but I never gave up; for my kids. And I arrived here, and all my check, all of what I earned, I would send it and I told my wife to buy them clothes, take them to school so they can study and thanks to God my children, not all, but two have graduated...”

-CATA Member

Many of our parents left their home country and their families to be able to give their children a better future. The majority of those who migrate to this country, do so with the hope of finding and living the so-called “American Dream” that they hear about from those who have returned from being in the United States. The American Dream means different things for different people, but most comes with the hope of rising out of poverty and providing future generations with opportunities that they themselves never had.

When migrants go back to their country of origin, they tell their countrymen that life is lived to the fullest^[1] in the United States. Often time they say that people make a lot of money, that life is great, that many people have cars, etc and they live life to the fullest. Then, people continue to migrate based on this image in their heads, one of motivation and hope, so they take the risks to come to this country without much thought on the consequences and obstacles, some of them potentially deadly, that they will encounter.

Regardless of the high risk factor, people cross the border with the hope to enough money to build houses back home, and provide the best for their children, including an education. It is with this mindset that they embark on a journey to foreign country, with hopes of finding a great job and being able to send money back home to their families. However, once in this country, they encounter a harsh reality that they have to live everyday. Although many become discouraged with this reality, they stay. They stay because they are now in debt after borrowing the money needed to make the trip. They stay because they want to fulfill the promises they made to family and prove that leaving them behind was worth the trip. Many say they will come for a short period of time, just to make the money they need, but by the time they realize it, they have spent their entire lives here.

One summer, while working at a produce packing house in southern New Jersey, a supervisor screamed to their workers “You want the American Dream, but the only dreams you’ll have will come from exhaustion.” This is something that struck me because it’s true, many people suffer through hunger and exhaustion in order to have enough money and be able to survive the month. They are willing to eat cheap food that harms their health and work long hours to make more money. We say that people should work to live and not live to work, but in most cases people have to work constantly just to be able to survive.

Los Invisibles - The Invisibles

Farmworkers are the ones who make sure we have our food on our tables and yet they are the ones who have the least access to it. Because of industrial countries like the United States, Latin American countries suffer the most due to bad trade policies and cheap labor practices, divesting many people from their roots and home countries. Many living in Latin America lose their land leaving them in bankruptcy circumstances because they cannot sell their produce at a lower price than what competitors sell it for.

“The biggest problem in our country when us peasants sow beans and cornfields is that we invest too much money and sometimes we borrow money to be able to purchase fertilizer and seeds. When the time to harvest comes, it does not even make up to the expenses that we had; it’s so cheap. It is so cheap and people do not even buy it.”

--CATA Member

Because many of them sustain themselves through agriculture in their home country, they have that knowledge of working the land and seek jobs in agriculture. From many past generations, migrants who work in agriculture in their home country were referred to as Campesinos or peasants because they worked their land. Here in the United States they do the same work with the difference being that now they are working for someone else and therefore considered farmworkers. Many of these workers are wealthy in knowledge but because they are working for someone else, they do not have the chance to apply their knowledge as much.

On the East Coast, they start from the state of Florida harvesting oranges and move North. They move up to North Carolina to work in the production of tobacco, to New Jersey for blueberry and peach season, to Pennsylvania and New York for apples, and then Maine for more blueberries. It is said that agriculture is an industry that does not require any skill, but many of these workers are wealthy in knowledge but because they are working for someone else, they do not have the chance to apply this knowledge.

Farmworkers not only work from sun up to sun down harvesting our fruits and vegetables, but they are also the ones who package our food. You may ask, why do they work such long hours? The assumption could be that they want to work long hours to make overtime, but farmworkers are generally not paid overtime and in many cases are not even paid an hourly rate. The reason why many of them try to work as much as possible is because the longer and faster they work the more they will earn. Many farmworkers work on contracts where they get paid for what they pick but working under this piece-rate system forces them to overwork. They spend long hours at work being exploited to yield a great amount of work for which they are not compensated enough.

For example, the city of Hammonton in New Jersey is known as the world capital of blueberries, and is surrounded by blueberry fields. From late June to early July, the town fills with workers who come in just to pick the blueberries. You know it's blueberry season because the supermarkets, the laundromats, and local parks are filled with people. One farm can employ up to 700+ workers for those few weeks of blueberry season and, as of 2016, the average pay per bucket - which is equivalent to about 3 pints of blueberries - was \$4.25. You can imagine what it's like for workers who have to sustain themselves and their families back home while finding the stamina it requires to earn enough each day.

As time passes we see more and more youth migrants coming due to their ability to produce more. Sometimes they get yelled at for picking fruits and vegetables that are not yet ripe or that are already rotten. Workers are not thinking about what to pick and what not to pick because the only thing that is on their mind is to pick as much as they can as fast as possible. In some instances, workers end up earning less than the minimum wage if they don't pick enough. Workers concentrate on working longer hours, to pick more blueberries and earn more money, despite the extra work and exertion that takes a toll on their bodies and can later lead to long term illnesses.

Justicia Alimentaria - Food Justice

CATA - The Farmworker Support Committee is a membership-based migrant and agricultural worker advocacy organization. In an effort to improve the conditions of workers, CATA has been working for over 35 years to help farmworkers and migrant workers improve their working and living conditions through organizing, capacity-building, and self-empowerment. CATA's Food Justice Program provides the resources and space for members and their communities to build sovereignty over their food and work towards a more fair and just food system. The areas where CATA works in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, are rural communities where many of the members come from Puerto Rico, México, Guatemala and Honduras. Many think that the skills needed to work in agricultural are few, but making sure we have good food that is

produced with a care for the land in mind, takes special knowledge. Many of the workers who work in agriculture, are people who grew up with these skills.

Here in the United States, food is produced more as quantity over quality. It is not about whether it is nutritious but rather if it looks “good” on the outside even though it might be tasteless or have been forced to grow in a short period of time. Our food system is dependent on pesticides and paying workers a low wage in order meet the demand for cheap food. This creates a vicious cycle because farmworkers are only able to afford cheap, processed food with little access to healthy, organic produce.

“Since the time that I entered the “North,” during the 9 years that I have been here, all the time that I have been in the fields - All the fields use chemicals to grow...to grow fruits, so that fruits won't get damaged, so that the flower doesn't get damaged, and all that, they use a type of chemical for each stage of the fruit's lifespan - to have color, so that they don't get attacked by pests, so that the “quality” improves, and each chemical has its way to grow the field. And so the bosses apply it, that's how they do the work.

-- CATA Member

Part of CATA's Food Justice Program is establishing organic community gardens. The purpose of the community gardens is to create a space for people to grow their own chemical-free and culturally-appropriate food. Many migrant workers do not have permission to grow their own vegetables at home due to them not owning the property or they simply cannot access the seeds they need. The gardens are also a learning space where others can learn of different techniques and ways to grow food with no chemicals.

Many call this way of growing agroecology, but these practices were in existence even before pesticides came to exist. It was not until recently that the word “agroecology” became trendy but the concept of agroecology has been in existence for many years. Now, we are trying to create an alternative to industrial agriculture to save our planet. These practices are not new, but many of them have disappeared or are disappearing because our ancestors are taking this knowledge with them. For this reason, it needs to be passed on to those who remain. If we really think about it, many of those who came before us were able to live long lives because they ate healthy and were not exposed to all those hazardous chemicals that are used keep our food ripe and fresh and that are now not only destroying our bodies but our land, climate and our future.

CATA is there to provide the necessary tools but the community has the knowledge. Some of that knowledge not only consists of growing food but also knowing ways to treat illnesses and use herbs as medicine. Due to the immigration status of many members of the community, they have no access or limited access to health care. Even if they can get access to get treatment,

medicine is quite costly. As part of CATA's food justice work, in 2015 we initiated an exchange between an herbalist and members to get advice on how to treat illnesses using local herbs and plants. Members also have the chance to share some of their remedies using herbs that are native to their home countries. So now the garden is a way to access organic produce, give people control over what they grow and eat, and give them access to herbs that could be useful for medicinal purposes.

Having a community garden is a small change but we see this work as a model that could have an impact across the country. CATA has been in the movement for sustainable agriculture, advocating for workers' rights because of the many concerns from workers and organizations on their exposure to pesticides. This led us to co-create with several other organizations The Agricultural Justice Project and develop the Food Justice Label. Over fifteen years ago, CATA along other organizations, initiated a conversation among farmers and farmworkers and those who practice sustainable agriculture. Through this collaborative effort to promote fairness and equity all the along the food chain resulted in the Social Justice Standards for organic and sustainable agriculture. These high-bar standards, when met, allow for a truly fair and safe workplace for workers and production for vendors and consumers. They guarantee organic growing practices, a living wage and collective bargaining for workers, and fair prices for farmers.

The current agricultural system requires much labor, and workers should be treated in a way that fairly compensates them for their hard work. But, it doesn't work that way. Farmworkers are some of the most vulnerable and face many health risks in their line of work. The Food Justice Program is just one way we are addressing those vulnerabilities and risks. All workers and all people have the right to dignified work and to be able to meet their most basic human needs. That is our goal. For migrant workers to organize and stand up for what is right and what they deserve. The only way to create systemic change to to come together and work together for what is right and just. That is what's CATA's mission is all about and that is the goal we will always strive to meet.