

Episode 34 - Wisdom within Indigenous roots / MCC staff Ricardo Salinas in Guatemala

Much of the farming industry across the Americas has been industrialized over the course of colonization. Storyteller Ricardo Salinas in Guatemala, is learning how Indigenous farming methods are getting a comeback in the San Marcos community to help combat the effects of climate change. He says sharing the stories of the people who are using these communal practices is important and shows the value of ancestral methods.

Fredy Fuentes 00:00

We seek to rescue ancestral knowledge from the communities where we work. And that knowledge is linked to the agro-ecological practices.

Don Eulalio's case is one where everything he does functions around the agro-ecological practices. When you walk into his garden there you will find these farmers, you will find his market, the animals that will provide the manure necessary for their crop production and the source of protein for their meals. All the extra crops will be sold in his community and will represent a source of income for his family. His family is also involved in the production. He produces and sells his own organic fertilizer, which is a key part within the method of the recovery, nurture and protection of his crops. For him agro-ecology has turned into a way of life and a means to sustain his family.

Christy Kauffman 00:56

That was Freddy Fuentes, describing the garden of Don Eulalio. Eulalio is a farmer who uses Indigenous farming practices that are taught by MCC partner Pastoral de la Tierra.

I'm producer Christy Kauffman, and today I'll be your host. You're listening to relief, development and podcast, production of Mennonite Central Committee.

Freddie worked for years with MCC partner Pastoral de la Tierra and teaches the methods in his community. Today I'm speaking with Ricardo Salinas, who works with Freddie at Festival de tierra as a part of MCC Seed Program. Much of what he does is collecting stories in the community about how they're affected by the changing weather and how they're adapting with ancestral knowledge.

Hi Ricardo, thanks for speaking with me today.

Ricardo Salinas 01:50

Thank you for having me.

Christy Kauffman 01:51

We just listened to a little bit of what Freddy had to say about the San Marcos community. Where are you from? And how long have you been in the San Marcos community?

Ricardo Salinas 02:00

Yeah, so I am from Tegucigalpa, Honduras. And I've been living in San Marcos for about a year and four months now.

Christy Kauffman 02:15

Yeah. And you're with the Seed Program? Correct? Yes. What is? What is that program? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Ricardo Salinas 02:21

Oh, yeah, so the Seed Program is one of MCCs Service Worker opportunities. In my case, I've I've been assigned I've been working with Pastoral de la Tierra in San Marcos, Guatemala, which is a community like up in the Highlands, in the west side of Guatemala, like about two hours or so from the border with me with Mexico. And my job consists more of accompaniment to with Pastoral de la Tierra and their processes. And more specifically, I work with a group of young social communicators, and I provide some training for them. And I also like, follow and give any sort of help they may need in their communications processes.

Christy Kauffman 03:24

Yeah. What do you mean by when you say social communicators? What does that group look like?

Ricardo Salinas 03:30

Yeah, well, it's a it's a group of 15 and 20 young men and women who are, yeah, they tell the stories of their communities. At the moment, we are in the process of creating and recording our second the second season of a podcast that we started about a year ago. Back then they were speaking about ancestral Mayan medicine and the huge role and importance that it had for the people in Guatemala when dealing with a pandemic, but more like bringing into notice, like for the public to know that this knowledge is valuable. This knowledge is ancestral. And it comes from like, the Mayan heritage that is shared by at least 50% of the people here in Guatemala which is usually overlooked. And in the case of the second season, we want to shed light into the effects on climate change, but even more how those effects are magnified by the poor practices of agro-industries in terms of how they are destroying the forest, polluting water sources, just killing the environment and also, they are endangering the social fabric of the communities, hear in San Marcos so that that's what we mean by social, young social communicators is shedding lights until this situations happening in the, in the department in their communities, and being able to tell those stories to the people, here in San Marcos, Guatemala

Christy Kauffman 05:20

What are some of those stories that you're telling around that, that are standing out to you personally?

Ricardo Salinas 05:25

Well, many, a lot of them. For our, the stories that we've been picking, and for the first two episodes of our podcast, we've been following the case of a community called La Blanca, which is it's a municipality that has to deal with the agro-industries of palm oil, and bananas and plantains. You [may]

think oh, this is great, you know, all this money and progress and jobs and whatever is created for this community like everybody for sure is working for these places isn't in they have jobs or they made their lives may be just fine. But when you start speaking with the people from the community, you realize that there is little to no jobs that people from those communities actually have access to, that most of them are farmers or in their main livelihood is growing crops because of the presence of this field in their community. Now, whenever there is like the dry season, what they call here in Guatemala whenever there is summer, people do not have access to the to the water because the river is being, the water from the rivers being used to water all these crops and the agro-industry crops. And so they have created either canals or or walls around the river, so they can channel the water into their fields. And they leave the community members without, like with no water at all for them too, to be able to water their crops or even for just basic human uses, like needs like cooking or showering, or Yeah, I mean, like for hygiene in their homes. And whenever it is rainy season, the opposite happens because the crops are, are getting too much water. So now they're gonna open the dams that they've created within there, to retain water at their crops. And now they're flooding the fields where the people have worked in order to grow their food. And so no water in the summer, or dry season and an excessive amount of water during the rainy season that just ends up flooding, everything leaving their crops, useless. It's very hard to define those realities in which it does, it's an uphill battle that the people within those communities are fighting that it's just going to be really, really hard for them to ever be able to see some justice or just to be able to live at their communities.

Christy Kauffman 09:17

Yeah, and you're talking about advocating for bigger change, but the work of Pastoral de la Tierra they are working within the community, in what way how are they working within people's gardens and farms?

Ricardo Salinas 09:33

Yeah, so a lot of the work that Pastoral de la Tierra does is it also goes pushes for that accompaniment into going into people's communities kind of assessing or sometimes even people from those communities reach out to Pastoral de la Tierra and they asked they asked for support and how to grow crops organically. And also how to be able to exercise some of that, like food sovereignty that comes with being able to grow your own food and not depending on external entities that may bring food to your community. So one of the ways that Pastoral de la Tierra achieves this is by agro-ecological training,

Christy Kauffman 10:27

Would you define Agroecological?

Ricardo Salinas 10:30

Yes. Agriecological or agroecology.

Christy Kauffman 10:35

Yeah, how would you explain that?

Ricardo Salinas 10:36

So, yeah, so the way the way I've, I've learned and I've come to understand agroecology, which is also a fairly new concept for me, is it's more of a way of life, where it kind of merges organic agriculture, but also in a sense where it is it is not only like producing organically in order to, all the health benefits that come with organic agriculture, but also because of the independence that it promotes and how it kind of everything within the within the agro-ecological system, it's kind of a cycle. So for example, you're gonna, most of your fertilizer is going to be is going to come from manure, or any organic material that is coming from within your garden, have animals within your garden or within your system that are going to provide the fertilizer needed for your crops, there is a huge push for, if you're going to use pesticides, make sure that it's some sort of organic pesticide that is coming into play. So avoiding everything that is chemical, and then is understanding the importance of soil conservation, of crop rotation and in also learning what are the species of crops that are native Indigenous to that land, and also like growing those as well, because of all the resilience and resistance that they provide, because they've adapted to that environment over a long period of time, you know, the rescuing of ancestral heritage into giving value to the indigenous plants within the community. So soil conservation, organic growth of organic agriculture, and the rescuing of Indigenous seeds and Indigenous species within the agro-ecological gardens. The point with this is to create a system that is going to involve the family that is going to provide food sovereignty and food security for the family. And where everything like works within the within the garden. So they're not depending on external sources of food, they're not speculating or they're not affected by any changes in the price of fertilizers or pesticides. Instead, they're learning how to be more independent from any of those external forces. However, as we heard, Fredy, speak before, it also provides a lot of like community engagement, because of like, it creates this kind of synergy, where if this community members growing at specific kinds of seed, then you can go to them and kind of like either create an exchange, or, or help and support local economies like help them grow. So agro-ecology, it's not only like the organic growth, but also the promotion of food sovereignty, and in, in the change of a way of life where people are going to focus on nurturing their bodies, but also helping and contributing to their community overall.

Christy Kauffman 14:12

Yeah. And you mentioned about the origins of these techniques, it's something that is maybe ancestral knowledge. Is it something in the community that people feel like they're coming back to? Or does it feel like they're learning something new?

Ricardo Salinas 14:27

What I've learned also about the Pastoral de la Tierra processes is that it also comes with a lot of like, yes, we're going to teach you about this techniques, but it also brings a lot of the social movement side of it. So in terms of the practices that, that we're teaching you, these are things that they, we have adapted from, from that ancestral knowledge. So yeah, it brings bringing back the value of that of the of the knowledge from in terms of like, the way I hear them explain is like the the knowledge of our grandparents the knowledge of our grandma, knowledge of our grandpa's. And they're referring to people who have lived for 1000s of years in that land that have adapted processes. So I think it's also that it's kind of like fighting that westernized kind of like even colonial idea of that everything that is great and or everything that is good had to come from a lab, instead here is like, there's this, like tons of knowledge and practices that have come like have been passed from generation to generation. And it

is important to consider them and give them the value that they deserve. Because this was the knowledge, this word, the practices of our ancestors of our grandparents. And so people can also feel some sort of maybe pride will be the best word like, into their, their Indigenous roots, that there was also knowledge and wisdom within their Indigenous roots.

Christy Kauffman 16:10

Is there a peace building element to that?

Ricardo Salinas 16:14

For sure, for sure, because when you realize it is also like, I think it comes back to that synergy part and in the community finding out that they need of each other, someone may have the expertise as to how to, into the whole agricultural techniques, but then someone else might be really good at marketing these products and selling them. And so it has, like, I believe, like the peacebuilding effect that comes here is, is affected the community realizing the realizes that they need each other, and the value that each one of them has to has to add into the whole process. So instead of fighting and seeing people as their competitors, instead they see them as associates as partners that are that are going to make this network stronger and better, of course, with all the challenges that this may bring, and human and human nature in between. But there's also that big part of of the work that Pastoral is doing is that they're not only sending technicians, to teach them how to grow better crops, organically, but also there is always going to go someone who's going to give this sort of like social training, whereas like ancestral knowledge, and why it is important for the community to stick together and work together for assured the success of the agro-ecological process.

Christy Kauffman 17:56

Why is it important to tell the stories of these people that are using these Indigenous practices?

Ricardo Salinas 18:03

The biggest reason why, why we believe what we think it is important to tell the stories is one is for the re- vindication of Indigenous knowledge. So, people can realize that, that indigenous knowledge and practices they have always been there. And kind of breaking the colonial mindset that tells us that everything good that we have on, on this side of the world was brought in by you know, European people. It's, it's we want to make sure that people know the whole story and the validity, like how valid whatever Indigenous communities are protesting or is an at the end that they will also realize that the quality of water in this community is not only important to the Indigenous group that is protesting about it, but it is important for everyone. Because if a law is passed, that is going to protect water, make sure that that water is, is secured for this community, that precedent of law is also going to be useful whenever there is a problem in an urban community. When it comes to water, people are really just looking after the protection of their rights. And so, that is important so that everyone else that may have access to social media or to a podcast app, be able to listen to these things and just see yeah, given light into into this causes and showing like this is important, and everyone within this country should care. Because at the end of the day, it's also like it is collective rights that we're trying to, that the people from this organizations or communities are trying to protect.

Christy Kauffman 20:20

And and you're, you're clearly passionate about this. And you're, you're not from San Marcos or Guatemala, but you've learned so much through the stories you've collected so far.

Ricardo Salinas 20:35

Yes. I think the stories and also like a lot I have learned from just being in conversations or around my co-workers at Pastoral de la Tierra. And also my co workers here at MCC Guatemala and El Salvador...

Christy Kauffman 20:56

You're in a position of learning.

Ricardo Salinas 20:58

I think so. And also like, speaking about the Seed program, I'm thankful that it was very explicit also in the description of what I was going to do that I was going to come in and have a period of learning. And it's also like, it is great because I read and I was like, Yes, that's what I want just to have some time to be able to learn and absorb from their reality here in Guatemala which is also very similar to reality of Honduras. There are a lot of things where we have very similar fights and causes.

Christy Kauffman 21:36

Are you seeing the effects of climate change in the San Marcos community?

Ricardo Salinas 21:42

Yes, climate change in itself is kind of complicated when it comes to just speaking about these things, because, yes, we're seeing climate and weather patterns. Like I said, the rich diversity of ecosystems within San Marcos kind of tells like, gives you a picture of what almost the whole country and I would even go as far as to say, the region, like within Central America, and Southern Mexico are going through. And we realize that there are areas that used to have normal patterns of rain, that are receiving little to no rain today, or other places where there is excessive flooding. So we've gone up in the highlands and see places that fall within the dry corridor that covers most of Central America. And there are' also like, yeah, coastal areas that are flooding most of the year, what we realized that yes, climate change is real. And there is need for processes that are friendlier with the environment. Like I didn't say this before, but even within the agro-ecological model, it understands that there is an extreme need to take care of the forest. Because yeah, everything that comes like oh the like within that ecosystem, everything that it provides for the assurance of good crop production and because you need water and water usually will come from areas where there is a strong and robust forest. Processes, like the agro-ecological processes are going to try to provide a solution or mitigate some of the climate change effects within those communities. But here, this is where climate change gets a little bit trickier. Because for just to give you an example, speaking about La Blanca, knowing that there are manmade causes that have increased the amount of flooding that those communities experience were in the story that we've collected, they used they told us like yes, we used to expect flooding between September and November, which is usually when hurricane season gets a little bit more intense and the soil has been receiving rain for so many months that it is already saturated. People were used to that reality, like our fields may get flooded between September and November. However, because of the construction of walls and canals for like, it like this kind of like dam type of structures whenever

those gates are open because the crops are receiving way too much water, Now all that water is going to go downhill into this communities that have just started to receive rain in May. So now their fields are going to be flooded from the first rains that come in May, all the way down to maybe like September, September, October and November, there is going to be all this water flooding their crops. The problem here is that there is a clear reason why these people are, why their crops are flooded. But the defense from the organizations or the entities in charge of regulating these government entities in charge of regulating this, it's going to be oh, you're getting like your field is flooded because of climate change. So now there is a culprit for everything it's going to be climate change. And not the fact that agro-industries are causing these floods. Oh, no, it's you know, it's the is the raining patterns. Now, it's raining more in the coastal areas. So that's why you're getting flooded, ignoring the old the infrastructure war work that is causing this, this situations for the people in the community?

Christy Kauffman 26:20

I feel like that's a part of the story. You don't hear quite as often pinning things on climate change that could be fixed.

Ricardo Salinas 26:31

I feel like even further inaction is going to be oh, you know, it is what it is. It's climate change. And there is nothing we can do against that. So yeah, it is it is it is a bit frustrating. Because, yes, climate change is real, and it is happening. But there's some things that can be prevented or can, some efforts that would make it easier for people to prepare?

Christy Kauffman 27:00

How do you see hope in the work that Pastoral de la Tierra is doing?

Ricardo Salinas 27:06

Yeah, the way I see hope and Pastoral de la Tierra's work is they are equipping people and communities that are giving them the tools that they will need to guarantee the wellbeing of their communities. Not only because of all the agricultural training, which is key is so essential to places where most people live from agriculture. And the fact that they're bringing crop diversity, reintroduction of species that will guarantee a diverse diet or a healthy diet to the to the people in this community that they will be able to grow and maintain and transform, but also all this social training that is teaching people about their rights, that is teaching them about the importance of living in community and looking after each other, that is fighting against the idea that that everything that is good has to come from a Western source of a Westernized source into value, all the all the ancestral knowledge, all that Indigenous knowledge that has been passed for many generations, and how to build upon that and how to make all this better for, for their community. So yeah, there's all this education that comes into the process on how to make better their techniques, but also how to grow in terms of their mindset and communal identity. It's, it's organizations like Pastoral de la Tierra that are making sure to look after these communities. It's the church also responding Pastoral de la Tierra being an organization that falls within the pastoral social, of the Catholic Church and in some articles, is seeing that, yes, like getting together and the spiritual growth in the spiritual practices are essential for human wellbeing, but also making sure that their rights are protected, that their health is taken care of because of they're getting good nutrition, and that they are able to grow this this food within their gardens within their

communities. It's giving them the tools to make sure that they can that assurance of food sovereignty and food independence within the lives of other people in the communities. And the commitment of many great men and women who work for Pastoral de la Tierra who are trying to share their knowledge and making their best into giving into their community. So, so these people are the people within their communities are fine. Yeah, and if it comes time to go and look after the rights of the they also know that they will have the support of Pastoral de la Tierra to go with them and do this work. So, yeah, it is it is important, it is necessary there are many, many challenges. And, and climate change is for sure one of them. But at least now, like all of those people that have been forgotten and disenfranchised by their government are finding support in organizations like Pastoral de la Tierra.

Christy Kauffman 31:05

Yeah, yeah, thank you so much for that reflection. Is there anything else you would want to make sure to add?

Ricardo Salinas 31:12

listen to our podcast?

Christy Kauffman 31:16

Yeah, tell me about your podcast

Ricardo Salinas

Shameless plug?

Christy Kauffman

It's in Spanish correct?

Ricardo Salinas 31:22

Yeah, it isn't Spanish our podcast is in Spanish. It's mainly the voices that that you will hear in there are the voices of the young social communicators, our little group goes by the name of Colectivo Verde and yeah, it's their voices that go into the narration. It's also members of Colectivo who are learning how to edit the audio and, and prepare it like for the making coming like putting the whole podcast, the show together every episode. Learning how to work their phone cameras to take pictures for the everything that goes into our social media or shooting video within, within their cell phones as well, which is usually what is ready available for them. So yeah, this is like everything that comes along with our podcast, which is called Cero a 42-20, or from zero to 42-20, which is 4220 meters above sea level. That's the height of Volcán Tajumulco, the highest point in Central America. So yeah, what it's also a school for them. This is what they're learning, this is what they're training for and, and that's what you anyone who, who is interested in either practicing their Spanish listening skills, or, or who's bilingual, speaks Spanish as well and wants to listen to the to stories in Spanish. That's what they can find De Cero a 42-20

Christy Kauffman 33:18

Yeah. And you can find that wherever you listen to podcasts, or where can people find that?

Richardo Salinas 33:23

As of now on Spotify, but yes, we're trying to grow and to make it available in other platforms, but immediately, right now you can, you can hear it on you can on Spotify, you can listen to it on Spotify.

Christy Kauffman 33:38

Okay, thank you so much Ricardo for joining me today.

Ricardo Salinas 33:41

Again, thank you for having me. It was it was great to have this conversation.

Christy Kauffman 33:52

If you'd like to dig deeper, and you're a Spanish speaker Ricardo's podcast will be linked in the show notes. His team is interviewing and producing their second season currently, but they have a first season that's there for you to hear.

We'd like to thank Ricardo for joining us and interviewing Freddy, and Emmanuel Ruiz for reading the translation of Freddy's words.

You've been listening to relief development and podcast. This episode was produced on the traditional land of the Algonquin, the NABI Nanticoke, Piscataway, Shawnee and Susquehannock people groups.

This episode was produced by me, Christy Kauffman, and the head producer is Emily Lowen.

That's all for now, next month a story about a man who is forced to flee his home in South Sudan as a child, and today he's helping other refugee children receive an education in Uganda.

May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ. Thanks and take good care.