

Sustainable agriculture is focus of Co-op member's Mozambique trip

Editor's Note: On March 10, Coop Member Logan Perkins will give a talk at the Belfast Free Library on "The International Movement for Food Sovereignty." It will highlight her recent trip to Mozambique to attend La Via Campesina's Fifth International Conference.

La Via Campesina is an international movement of small- and medium-sized agricultural producers, agricultural workers, and landless rural women, rural youth and indigenous people. It promotes economic and social justice for small farmers, sustainable agriculture, and local ownership and control of food production and distribution.

Part of our Food For Thought discussion series, co-sponsored by the Belfast Free Library, Logan's talk will give us an opportunity to reflect on the many forces that shape and define our global and local food systems. We will see how working to create a strong and vibrant local foods community in Maine connects us in solidarity to the global struggle for food sovereignty and security.

By Logan Perkins

Agriculture in Mozambique has been integrally shaped by the political forces at work in the country. When Portuguese colonial rule was ended by organized resistance, the country's agricultural system produced primarily commodity exports for European markets. Subsistence crops—corn and cassava—were being produced by households on a decentralized scale.

When the first democratic government of Mozambique took

over, they created large-scale communal farms to produce the bulk of the country's staple foods and some export commodities. They also nationalized land holdings and created a system where farmers and cooperatives could get 50-year land leases.

After ten years of this export commodity production focus, the major Mozambican women's organization sent a powerful delegation to the government's agricultural policy summit to argue for a return to small-scale production for domestic use. The government responded by creating medium-sized agricultural cooperatives to grow food for local markets. Staples rounded out to include peanuts, coconuts, mangoes, and a variety of vegetables.

A U.S.- and South African-funded war of destabilization disrupted agricultural production in the late 1980s and early 1990s, destroyed the infrastructure created by the cooperatives, and created a perilously unstable food supply throughout the country by hitting the major corn-producing region particularly hard.

National corn yield was reduced to virtually zero when devastating floods struck the country in 1992 and 1993. Facing mass starvation, Mozambique received mass shipments of food aid, primarily consisting of rice from western donor countries, marking a major turning point in the food traditions and agriculture of the country.

Today in Mozambique rice remains a staple food. However, it is a staple that must be imported and bought, creating a dependence on a "money economy," rather than an

economy based on native crops. On our visits to the small agricultural cooperatives in the area near the conference we saw a decent but monotonous range of vegetables in production. Peasant farmers have become completely dependent on hybrid seeds, which must be bought every year. Money must be earned by selling vegetables, hurling the farmers once again into the volatile money economy.

While some of the cooperatives we saw are interested in working to de-hybridize the varieties they use, there is a lack of experience and skill with this task in the country. The National Union of Agricultural Co-operatives (UNAC), our hosts for the conference, are working with Cuban and Venezuelan agronomists to help relearn seed growing, breeding and de-hybridization. The interest of some of the cooperatives has generated a tension between the ecological production wanted by peasants and the many government and international programs pushing the green revolution on Mozambican peasants.

Mozambique's struggles are not unique. In fact, this tension between peasant-based ecological agricultural production models and the international promotion of green revolution production models exists across the world. The universality of this conflict made Mozambique a particularly poignant place to hold La Via Campesina's Fifth International Conference. At this critical moment in history, this tension impacts us all. Its resolution will affect us for generations to come.