

First published by the [Triple Crisis Blog](#)

June 18, 2012

## Spotlight G-20: Mexico's Surreal Leadership on Food Security

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Leave it to Mexico to put surrealism on the agenda at the G-20 summit that opens today in Los Cabos, Mexico. Actually, the Mexican government seems not have put much of anything on the agenda, at least when it comes to food security, one of its stated priorities as G-20 president this year. What's surreal is listening to Mexico's Agriculture Minister, Francisco Mayorga, speaking last Wednesday to an international conference on "New Paradigms for Agriculture," describe without a hint of irony or self-reflection his government's "model program" for sustainable smallholder agriculture.

This from the country that is the world's poster child for the failures of neoliberal agriculture policy. Surreal. Where's Frida Kahlo when we need her?

We had come looking for "new paradigms" to fix our broken food system. By the end of our three-day conference, we'd found some. (Read one participant's [partial summary](#).) But first we got a display of Mexican surrealism from Secretary Mayorga.

He came waving a new [interagency report](#) on increasing smallholder productivity, this from the country's fourth straight administration that has systematically dismantled support for small-scale farmers. Then the Minister of Agriculture known to some as "Secretary Monsanto" for his push to open Mexico to transgenic crops promotes his "Sustainable Modernization of Traditional Agriculture" program as a model to the world in conservation agriculture.

Let's be clear: It is not Mexico's fault that the G-20 will again fail to address any of the causes of the ongoing food crisis. Commodity speculation will continue unchecked, the use of food reserves to buffer price spikes will be ignored despite their widespread and effective use throughout the developing world, biofuels production will expand without a peep from the G-20 or the Mexican government, despite our [recent report](#) showing how much U.S. ethanol expansion has driven up the cost of Mexican corn imports. And small-scale farmers, despite the G-20's own expert report that calls for expanded public investment in the sector, will hear from the kings and queens of the G-20: "Let them eat Public-Private Partnerships."

That's not the Mexican government's fault. Mexico's rural disaster certainly is.

More than half of rural Mexicans live in poverty, many are migrating to the cities and to the U.S. despite the dearth of decent jobs in either country. Mexico imports 42% of its food, while its own farmers can't even get a loan, never mind basic extension services. Fewer than 5% of Mexican farmers have access to formal credit. 5%! The government crows to the G-20 about its Oportunidades anti-poverty program, yet no one asks how many people need that safety net because the Mexican model has sent them into freefall.

How surreal does Mexico's free-market fundamentalism get? The Mexican government just approved the commercial planting of transgenic soybeans, which will happen in the mega-diverse southern part of the country. Mexico basically stopped growing soybeans after NAFTA, presumably because the country's farmers could not grow soybeans competitively. What Mexicans can make competitively, however, is honey, mostly in the southern part of the country. Mexico is the third largest honey exporter in the world, with most going at high prices to

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European niche markets. Arguably, Mexican beekeepers are a free-trade success story.

In comes transgenic soy, despite widespread evidence that even with precautions bees will bring transgenic pollen back to their hives. The transgenes inevitably show up in the honey. European buyers, with their more refined tastes (and laws), refuse to buy honey contaminated with transgenics. So in one fell policy swoop, the Mexican government destroys an internationally competitive industry to bring in a crop it can't grow competitively while putting its biodiversity at risk. (See [coverage in Spanish](#).)

Winner: Monsanto. Losers: Mexico's people and its environment.

The government even disregards its largest farmers, if there's a multinational to please. After drought left Mexico short of white corn last year, Mexico imported one million tons of white corn – transgenic white corn, of course – from South Africa, which had a surplus and subsidized the exports, making them cheaper than market prices. As the ships crossed the Atlantic, Mexico's largest corn farmers were getting ready to harvest their fall-winter crop, and it came in strong. Suddenly, one million tons of subsidized South African corn hit the market. The multinational corn buyers couldn't have been happier. They took the cheap transgenic imports and refused to buy the suddenly-abundant Mexican corn.

But things can always get worse, and under the leadership of the Mexican government they often do. Now, South Africa has shortfalls in this year's corn production. So they contracted for – you guessed it – Mexican corn. That may give Mexican farmers a market for their corn, but they are forced to sell it not at the record high prices on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange but at the new rock bottom price set by those subsidized South African imports.

Winners: grain traders, multinational livestock giants like Smithfield and Tyson, and the two Mexican firms that control 90% of the tortilla flour market. Losers: farmers in Mexico and, when the ship lands in South Africa, South African farmers whose buyers will offer them the below-market prices they originally exported across the Atlantic.

If the corn goes back to South Africa in the same ship, it could be a piece of globalization surrealism even Frida Kahlo couldn't capture.