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زبانهای اروپایی

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24.08.2023

Unregulated Agrochemicals Harm Health of Rural Residents in Central America

[1,482 words]

In his green cornfield, Salvadoran farmer Medardo Pérez set about filling the hand-held spray pump that hangs on his back, with the right mixture of water and paraquat, a potent herbicide, and began spraying the weeds.

Paraquat, the active ingredient in brands such as Gramaxone, from the German pharmaceutical manufacturer Bayer, is sold without any restrictions in El Salvador and in other nations in Central America and around the world, despite its toxicity and the fact that the label clearly states “controlled product”.

“We are risking our lives with these poisons, since we don’t even use a waterproof cape to protect ourselves, so the chemical wets our backs, it gets inside our bodies, through our pores,” the farmer from San Isidro, in the municipality of Santa María Ostuma, in the central Salvadoran department of La Paz, told IPS.

Pérez, 60, said he was aware of the risks to his health, but added that using the agrochemical made it easier and faster for him to get rid of the weeds growing in his cornfield on his two-hectare farm.

“Paraquat is restricted here in Guatemala, but it is commonly used in agriculture; any peasant farmer can buy it; it is sold freely,” David Paredes, an activist with the [National Network for the Defense of Food Sovereignty](#) in Guatemala, told IPS.

In 2016 [the New York Times reported](#) that scientific reports linked paraquat to Parkinson’s disease, and explained that the product could not be sold in Europe but could be marketed in the United States and the rest of the world.

Agrochemicals Everywhere and No Controls

Central America is a region where these and other agrochemicals are imported and marketed with virtually no controls, and where governments appear to have given in to the interests of the powerful transnational corporations that produce and sell them.

Some 51 million people live in the region and 20 percent of jobs are in the agricultural sector, which accounts for a total of seven percent of the GDP of the seven countries of Central America.

In addition to small farmers, agroindustry in the region uses agrochemicals intensively to produce monocultures for export, such as bananas, pineapples, African palm, coffee, and sugarcane.

Sugarcane is the raw material for the sugar that the region exports to the United States, Europe, and even China, through trade agreements.

The sugar agribusiness uses glyphosate, patented in 1974 by the U.S.-based Monsanto, to accelerate sugarcane ripening, but there are reports around the world about the damage caused to the environment and health, [including possible cancer risks](#), as warned by environmental watchdog [Greenpeace](#).

And yet it continues to be widely used in the region and other parts of the world. Glyphosate is known by commercial names such as Roundup, also owned now by Germany's Bayer.

"There is indiscriminate use of agrochemicals by agribusiness," Paredes said from his country's capital, Guatemala City.

Paredes shared with IPS the preliminary results of a study, still underway, that has detected the presence of 49 chemicals in the water due to the use of pesticides, half of them banned in more than 120 countries, he said.

The research has been carried out along the southern coast of the country, where monocultures such as sugar cane, banana, African palm, and pineapple are predominant, he said.

The Fight Against Agrochemicals

"Glyphosate is applied through aerial spraying, it is very common in that area, and when the wind spreads it to the crops of poor communities, their harvests are destroyed," he said.

The same is true in El Salvador, where environmental organizations have been carrying out the [Bitter Sugar](#) campaign for several years, against the indiscriminate use of glyphosate, in particular, and agrochemicals in general.

“In this campaign, we have protested the fact that spraying by light aircraft continues and that it is punishable, as an environmental crime,” Alejandro Labrador, of the [Ecological Unit of El Salvador \(UNES\)](#), told IPS.

In September 2013, El Salvador’s single-chamber legislature approved a ban on 50 agrochemicals, including paraquat and glyphosate. But the decree was rejected by then President Mauricio Funes and the bill has been bogged down ever since.

However, except for a list of 11 products—including paraquat and glyphosate—the agrochemicals that the legislature wanted to ban were already regulated by other national and international regulations, although in practice there is little or no state control over their use in the fields.

“The corporate lobby twisted their arm,” Labrador said, alluding to the failed attempt to ban them via legislative decree.

He also hinted at the influence exercised over presidents and government officials by transnational biotechnology corporations such as Bayer and Monsanto, whose interests are usually defended by the agricultural chambers of the Central American region.

He added that El Salvador is the Central American country that imports the most agrochemicals per year, “at a very high cost to ecosystems and people’s health.”

In this regard, in the last decade, the use of glyphosate during the sugar cane harvest has been linked to a high rate of kidney failure in El Salvador.

This nation has the highest rate of deaths from chronic kidney disease in Central America: 47 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants per year, according to a [UNES report](#) published in 2021, which states that 80,000 tons of fertilizers, 3,000 tons of herbicides and 1,200 tons of fungicides are imported annually into El Salvador.

The Bittersweet Taste of Pineapple

In Costa Rica, the use of pesticides is also intensive in monoculture export crops like bananas and, above all, pineapples, activist Erlinda Quesada, of the [National Front of Sectors Affected by Pineapple Production](#), told IPS.

Quesada pointed out that the product known generically as bromacil has been linked to cases of cancer, while nemagon has been linked to cases of infertility in men and women.

“It happened to us with the nemagon in banana production, which sterilized a lot of men in Costa Rica,” said Quesada, from Guásimo, a municipality in the province of Limón, on the country’s Atlantic coast.

Complaints from environmental organizations led the government to ban bromacil in 2017, due to the impact on underground water sources.

“However, I doubt that they have stopped using it,” Quesada said.

A report by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) revealed in May 2022 that Costa Rica uses up to eight times more pesticides per hectare than other Latin American countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

“The average apparent use of pesticides in agriculture between 2012 and 2020 was 34.45 kilos per hectare, a figure higher than previous estimates” in the Central American country, the report cited, more than in OECD members Canada, the United States, Mexico, Chile, and Colombia.

A Blow to Food Sovereignty

The focus on intensively produced monocultures among national and international economic leaders has ended up damaging the capacity to produce food for the local population, Wendy Cruz, of the local affiliate of the international farmers’ rights movement Via Campesina, told IPS from Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital.

“Now it is the consortiums and elites that occupy large tracts of land to produce for global markets, and agrottoxins increasingly weaken the capacity of the land to produce food for our people,” Cruz said.

“We need to push for a change of model, with governments adopting an agroecological vision that sustains life,” she said.

This vision of producing agricultural products without damaging the environment with agrochemicals is shared by another Salvadoran, Juan Mejía, a 67-year-old small farmer who grows some of his products using ecological fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides.

Paraquat is still used, he said, to “burn the weeds,” but on a smaller scale, and he is trying to use it less and less. He also uses—but “very little”—Monarca, another Bayer pesticide, whose active ingredient is thiacloprid.

“We have learned to work organically, maybe not 100 percent, but as much as possible,” said Mejía, during a break in the work on his two-hectare plot, located in the canton of El Carrizal, also in Santa María Ostuma, in central El Salvador.

Mejía produces organic fertilizer known as gallinacea and a pesticide based on chili, onion, garlic, and a little soap, with which he combats whiteflies, a pest that damages growing vegetables.

“It’s effective, but it doesn’t work automatically, right away, it takes a little more time,” he said.

He added: “We farmers have always mistakenly wanted to see immediate results like we get with chemicals. But organic agriculture is a process, it is slower but more beneficial to our health and the environment.”

In addition to milpa, a traditional ancestral pre-Hispanic system of planting corn, beans, chili peppers, and pipián, a type of zucchini, Mejía grows citrus fruits, plantains (cooking bananas), and cacao.

“We have diversified and included other crops, such as green leafy vegetables so that we are not buying contaminated products and are harvesting our own, healthier food,” he said.