

Returning to land and sea

The harsh economic impact of the ongoing pandemic-related lockdown has spurred fisherwomen in Costa Rica to return to their traditional sources of livelihood

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Although there have been very few COVID-19 cases in the area, the suspension of tourism with the COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on the southern Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. Until recently, tourism was the mainstay of the local economy in the coastal communities of Puerto Viejo, Cahuita, Manzanillo and Cocles. However, the crisis has brought about a re-activation of traditional ancestral livelihoods where fishermen and women take to the sea in boats and kayaks bringing food to their families and communities.

Former fisherwoman, the 72-year-old elder, Cipriana Rocha, who had to stop fishing two years ago in Manzanillo, fulfilled a longtime dream to set up her own bakery. “The coconut has always been part of the fishing livelihood and now it is the basis of the food I produce in this emergency so that that my community has bread and I can make a living,” said Doña Cipriana. Her statement reflects the traditional recognition that land and sea are connected in whatever takes place in the livelihood of the coastal communities.

Tomasa Acosta, a 55-year-old indigenous Bribri fisherwoman, started fishing as a child in the rivers of Guanacaste in the Pacific until she married her Afro Costa Rican husband, and came to live in the Caribbean where they have raised their children and later grandchildren. At the beginning of the COVID-19 emergency, she realised that there would be no food on her table if they did not produce it themselves. In less than a week’s time, she reorganized her life. Her retired husband and two of her three children began going out fishing in their small boat every day. Their efforts have fed her family and community during the crisis. Her message to people who do not fish but find themselves struggling in the middle of this emergency: “Grow food and we will provide the fish to compliment what you grow on the land”.

Recently, a remarkable experience occurred in Casa del Pueblo, Puerto Viejo. A diverse group of women, held together by the shared belief that food sustainability is vital during emergencies, organized a meeting so that they could support each other and tend to their family and community vegetable gardens.

“Among all the grassroots projects to reactivate the economy and culture that have

been generated during this emergency, the ones which have to do with family and community gardens are the ones that resonated the most. And so we organized this meeting”, said Gloria Gavioli, president of the Talamanca Association of Conservation and Ecology (ATEC) and spokesperson for the Mano Vuelta, a campaign organized by the Centro Comunitario de Buceo Embajadores y Embajadoras del Mar (Ambassadors of the Sea). The emergency response initiative Mano Vuelta was started in March 2020 by a group of activists to help elderly community members reactivate traditional livelihoods amid the emergency.

“The idea is to improve our food strategy. We all agree that assistance should be provided to people in need. However, we need a solution that, unlike occasional amounts of money conceded to buy groceries, lasts long-term and in an efficient and productive way. Food self-production and self-sufficiency are essential. With such capacity building, one is able to consume locally-produced and fresh organic food, just harvested or just fished, achieving what too many of us lack today – a balanced diet, rich in nutrients, that reinforces our immune system, which, given the circumstances, should be a priority”, Mariana Valls emphasises. Valls is an Argentinian environmental lawyer living in Costa Rica. She is a specialist in food waste and shared with us some alarming facts about the state of world food production: 821 million people underfed; 155 million children are malnourished; 1941 million people are overweight or obese; there has been a substantial increase in food-related diseases including diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer; 1300 million tons of food - equivalent to one third of the world’s food production – is lost or wasted every year, an amount that could feed 2000 million people, that is, more than the double the numbers currently underfed.

Valls’s motivational talk made immediately clear why the local population resonates with the idea of local food production during an emergency such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, providing humanitarian food is good, but teaching people to grow their own food is even better in the short as well as long term.

The experiences of local participants testify to experiences and benefits of community



Sargassum arrived at the Playa Negra Beach, Cahuita, in July 2020. With support of youth and children, gardener Leda Villa and Esteban Gallo, picked it up and spread in in the collective garden.

gardening and food self-sufficiency. The following examples were shared:

Indigenous activist, Bribri Layli Zarrin, who has a lot of experience with working at her family's finca (ranch), Loroco, in Talamanca, began a partnership with, Javiera Alvarenga, Chilean resident, schoolteacher, and food producer, involving the assessment of family and community gardens.

Leda Villa, member of Mano Vuelta, came to the region 45 years ago to develop a governmental programme of rural gardens throughout the Talamanca territory.

Maritza Medrano and Arlene Diez Forbes form part of an Afro-descendent women's group that was recently trained in community gardening and food security, through a project funded by the Japanese Embassy. "We must return to the land and the sea just as we were raised by our grandparents – rich and healthy. There was neither obesity nor sickness because of the way we were feeding ourselves," Medrano claims.

In a coastal community where once "everything came from the sea", community gardens are now bringing the nurturing elements from the ocean into land production.

Among the coasts of the southern Caribbean, the proliferation of the Sargassum seaweed is far from being an environmental problem like in neighbouring areas of the Caribbean. Instead, the community uses the seaweed to fertilise the crops they grow. Coral components present in the land that was once under sea level, play an important role in replenishing the soil with rich minerals.

Some unexpected outcomes have occurred as well. A traditional Afro-descendant dish re-emerged during this emergency, symbolising the indivisible gastronomical link between land and sea in the Caribbean – this is the Rondon (Rundown), a fish soup made of a diversity of tubers and spices grown in family gardens, including taro such as malanga and tiquisque, corn plantain and yucca, combined with fish cooked in coconut milk.

All in all, women play not only an active but a crucial role in every single dimension of the emergency food chain, not just providing food but also teaching and promoting efficient, smart, and practical habits such as local production in coastal livelihoods that boost health and improve the quality of life. ■

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