Bulletin of Latin American Research
JOURNAL of the SOCIETY for LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

Bulletin of Latin American Research, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 57–72, 2018

Costa Rica's Outward-Looking Development: From 'Agriculture of Change' to Food Insecurity

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Costa Rica provides an excellent example of the neoliberal approach to agricultural policy implemented during the last two decades in Latin America. In the early 1980s, Costa Rica shifted from limited promotion of import substitution industrialisation to export-led growth and non-traditional crops. This article presents important findings about the effects of outward-looking development policies since the 1990s on Costa Rica's patterns of food production and land tenure. While trade liberalisation has diversified agriculture and increased the levels of export production, it has also had negative effects on food security.

Keywords: Agriculture of Change, Costa Rica, non-traditional crops, outward-looking development, small farmers.

Costa Rica, a country with great agro-ecological and biological diversity and a population of approximately four million people, is a classic example of the neoliberal approach to agricultural policy implemented in recent decades in most Latin American countries. The country shifted from a strategy of import substitution industrialisation in the early 1960s (when it was still, however, highly dependent on traditional export agriculture) to 'Agriculture of Change' (the term coined by international organisations and Central American governments to promote non-traditional crops) in the early 1980s and outward-looking development since the early 1990s. A combination of an active state, stable democracy, high social investment and support for small and medium firms, including cooperatives, has resulted in higher economic growth and better income distribution than in neighbouring countries (Mesa-Lago, 2000).

This article defines outward-looking development as the set of neoliberal agriculture policies implemented in the majority of low-income countries since the early 1990s. The main features of this approach are: (a) the liberalisation of agricultural trade; (b) the promotion of more profitable non-traditional agricultural exports in place of traditional small-scale production (e.g. via contract farming, alliances with supermarkets and agricultural conversion programmes); (c) internal deregulation, dismantling subsidies and other incentives for small farmers and basic grain production; and (d) the enhancement of rural non-farm activities as an additional source of income for small farmers (Murray, 2002; World Bank, 2003, 2008; Birthal, Joshi and Gulati, 2005; Birdsall, de la Torre and Menezes, 2008).

Since the early 1990s, new patterns of agricultural development have promoted regional specialisation in production of non-traditional crops. The five traditional Central American exports are coffee, cotton, cattle, sugar and bananas. Non-traditional export crops include: (a) crops not previously produced; (b) crops previously produced for domestic consumption but now being exported (such as tropical tubers or fruits); and (c) crops now exported to new markets (Barham, Carter and Sigelko, 1992). The new strategy shaped agriculture and rural development in different regions, creating new opportunities and challenges for small famers and rural inhabitants.

This article explores the main outward-looking development policies implemented in Costa Rica since the 1990s (when Costa Rica became a member of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the World Trade Organisation in 1995) further liberalising agriculture and promoting new exports). The paper investigates the impact of these policies on agricultural production, land use, agrarian structures and national food security. Finally, the article demonstrates how the Costa Rican experience might be said to typify some of the implementation problems and drawbacks of neoliberal reforms in the agrarian sector in relation, in particular, to food security.

Costa Rica's Development Prior to 1990

Until the 1960s, Costa Rica's economic growth was driven by an agro-exporting economy highly dependent on a few agricultural products, with coffee and bananas accounting for almost 90 percent of the total value of exports (Bulmer-Thomas, 1987; Mesa-Lago, 2000). This economic strategy based on small farming (coffee and basic grains) and traditional crops (banana production controlled by large companies) was very vulnerable to price fluctuations in international markets.

The approval of the Industrial Promotion Law in 1959 sought to enhance industrialisation in Costa Rica. Entry into the Central American Common Market in 1962 was also intended to promote domestic manufacturing through the expansion of tariffs and other state incentives and to facilitate the import of necessary equipment and inputs (Rodriguez, 1998; Fernández Alvarado and Granados Carvajal, 2000; Mesa-Lago, 2000). This strategy also aimed to modernise traditional activities by promoting agricultural diversification. However, industrialisation was limited in Costa Rica and the need for foreign exchange to pay for extra-regional imports and to sustain the process of industrialisation meant the economy continued to be heavily reliant on traditional export agriculture (the dominant model since the late 1800s) (Bulmer-Thomas, 1987; Hveem and Nordhaug, 2002). During the 1960s, Costa Rica regularly channelled 50 percent of all agricultural credit towards coffee. The national bank also offered a great array of funding to promote sugar, livestock, cotton and tropical fruits. The state also supported small farming in order to secure national food self-sufficiency (Seligson, 1977; Bulmer-Thomas, 1987; Rovira Mas, 1987; Mesa-Lago, 2000). In the 1970s, the country remained extremely reliant on traditional exports that still accounted for 91 percent of total exports: coffee exports accounted for 39.5 percent, bananas for 36.1 percent, cotton for 0.2 percent, beef for 9.7 percent and sugar for 5.5 percent (SICA, 1981; Bulmer-Thomas, 1987).

The Central American Common Market entered into crisis after the war between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969. The oil shocks of 1973 and 1979 and large fluctuations in commodity prices (particularly for coffee and beef) generated balance of payments problems (Rodriguez, 1998). From 1978 to 1982 exports to the Central American

Common Market grew at an annual rate of 1.3 percent and GDP at 2.3 percent, significantly below the levels recorded in the early 1970s. The worsening of the Central American crisis and the Nicaraguan Revolution resulted in a severe debt crisis in August 1981. These events led to the demise of the attempt to industrialise while the Costa Rican economy continued to be largely export-led (Pomareda, 2002, 2006).

Following the debt crisis of the early 1980s, Costa Rica underwent a combination of shorter- and longer-term changes to respond to locally specific and especially severe expressions of a broader (regional and international) crisis. With support from international organisations (through two Structural Adjustment Programmes to reduce macroeconomic imbalances and restore growth), the overall development model consolidated export-oriented growth in the early 1980s. The economic model aimed to increase international competitiveness and diversify primary exports by undertaking economic reforms and increasing export incentives (WTO, 1995). The Public Sector Financial Equilibrium Law (No. 6955) issued by Costa Rica's Congress in February 1984 aimed to reduce fiscal imbalances by creating new taxes and granting new government powers to control the fiscal deficit (Conroy, Murray and Rosset, 1996; Rodriguez, 1998; SEPSA, 2002b). In the agricultural sector, the law promoted a range of incentives for non-traditional exports: duty-free export contracts (for intermediate goods imported), income-tax exemptions and tax-saving certificates (*Certificados de Abono Tributario*, CATs) (Conroy, Murray and Rosset, 1996; Rodriguez, 1998). By imposing taxes on coffee, bananas, sugar and beef and reducing the incentives, subsidies and credit available for basic grains producers, the law also dismantled internal support for traditional exports and basic grains production. In less than five years, from 1983 to 1987, agricultural credit available for corn, beans and rice fell by 70 percent. US 'donations' of corn, via the PL-480 programme, also affected local basic grains production and support. This was partly a consequence of the process of trade liberalisation that began in 1986 and led to a gradual phasing out of the 20 percent tariff rates on maize, rice and beans (Conroy, Murray and Rosset, 1996; González Mejía, 1997). At the same time, the US Agency for International Development encouraged the government to pursue 'Agriculture of Change' to promote new exports (e.g. melons, strawberries, broccoli, cauliflower, snow peas, squash and other perishable products) to take advantage of the US Caribbean Basin Initiative (see Conroy, Murray and Rosset, 1996; Picado and Silva, 2002).

Throughout the 1980s, the Costa Rican government also created a wide range of subsidises and incentives for producers engaged in non-traditional crops and for exporting firms. In 1986 the state began to provide licences and quotas to encourage private companies' direct participation in basic grains importation and exportation (BCCR, 1988; Conroy, Murray and Rosset, 1996). Paradoxically, whereas neoliberal ideology called for a sharp reduction in subsidies for small farmers, a vast array of subsidised incentives were made available for foreign and large local firms exporting agricultural produce (Conroy, Murray and Rosset, 1996; SEPSA, 2002a).

Costa Rica's Outward-Looking Development in Agriculture

Two factors have guided outward-looking development in Costa Rica since the 1990s (Pomareda, 2002). First, the economic strategy deepened trade liberalisation. Guided by the commitments made on Costa Rica's 1990 accession to the GATT, between 1989 and 1994 average nominal tariff protection was reduced from 17 to 11.2 percent; tariff

surcharges and restrictive import and export licensing requirements were eliminated; administrative procedures were rationalised and financial assistance to traditional exports was phased out (WTO, 1995). The adoption of the commitments negotiated within the framework of the Uruguay Round (1986–1995) also provided a significant incentive to transform Costa Rica into a very open economy (WTO, 1995). From 1995 to 2008, trade in goods and services (imports plus exports) as a share of GDP increased from 78 to 115 percent (Pomareda, 2002; PROCOMER, 2003, 2009).

The second feature of Costa Rica's economic transformation has been the country's efforts to attract foreign direct investment. Costa Rica's relatively educated population, political stability and pro-investment public policies have allowed the country to become an important offshore manufacturing and customer service centre. The country has placed a lot of emphasis on Free Trade Zones, allowing investors to import inputs and equipment without any duties and tax payments on revenues (Pomareda, 2002). As a result, by 1998, Costa Rica had risen to second position (after Chile) in foreign direct investment per capita in Latin America. From 1997 to 2015, foreign direct investment in Costa Rica increased from US$0.4 billion to US$3.1 billion (BCCR, 2009; PROCOMER, 2009; CEPAL, 2015). In 2015, the country received the second largest amount of foreign direct investment in Central America, with 26 percent of regional foreign direct investment, surpassed only by Panama with 43 percent (CEPAL, 2015).

Whereas foreign direct investment in tourism, trade, manufacturing and services (the key sectors of outward-looking development) increased significantly from 1997 to 2007, however, foreign direct investment in agriculture decreased from US$38.1 million to US$1 million (BCCR, 1997). Agricultural diversification and non-traditional crops attracted further foreign direct investment into agro-industrial activities (rising from US$6.5 million to US$32 million during the same period (BCCR, 1997, 2003, 2009). US investment accounted for an average of approximately 65 percent of total foreign direct investment in 2007 and most agro-industrial companies were US firms (e.g. Del Monte, Dole, Chiquita, Standard Fruit Company, Frutex S.A, Caribbean Pinneaple Exports etc.) (PROCOMER, 2009).

Agricultural Policies

Since the early 1990s, agricultural policies in Costa Rica have been conditioned by the overall economic model. Outward-looking development weakened agricultural institutions promoting production for the domestic market (González Mejía, 1998; Pomareda, 1998). Policies for the agricultural sector became subordinated to the Costa Rican economy's integration into global markets and production networks (Pomareda and López, 2007).

Whereas agricultural policy prior to 1983 clearly supported traditional agriculture and small farming, since the 1990s agricultural institutions have experienced significant changes and size reductions. Agricultural expenditure as a proportion of central state expenditures declined from 6.4 percent in 1995 to 0.5 percent in 2008. In 2008 Costa Rica registered the lowest percentage of agricultural expenditure in the Central American states (CEPAL, 1995, 2008; Bolivar et al., 2005).

During the 1990s and 2000s, Costa Rica also made efforts to redefine the functions and increase the efficiency of public agricultural institutions. Unfortunately, these efforts mostly sought to reduce budgets and the number of civil servants rather than to increase the capacity of these institutions (Conroy, Murray and Rosset, 1996; Pomareda, 1998; Bolivar et al., 2005). From May 1994 to December 1997, the number of employees in the

Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock dropped from 1,854 to 1,162, and its extension service was weakened, although not, as in some other countries, to the point of practically disappearing. The number of employees of the Council for National Production fell from 1,774 to 636 and the Council became largely irrelevant. Similarly, the number of employees dropped from 809 to 476 in the Institute for Agrarian Development (formerly the Institute for Land and Colonisation and today the National Institute for Rural Development) (Pomareda and López, 2007).

From the Figueres (1994–1998) to the second Arias Sánchez (2006–2010) administration, agricultural institutions progressively focused on agricultural competitiveness and rural development. They also promoted social organisation and modernisation of rural development strategies (SEPSA, 1995, 1997, 2002a, 2002b; Arias, 2005; Pomareda, 2006). The so-called Productive Conversion Programme was enacted by the Legislative Assembly in 1994 (Law No. 7742); it aimed to modernise and transform productive activities by promoting small- and medium-scale farmers' engagement in booming non-traditional crops. Fostering novel technologies, productive conversion sought to make agricultural activities more competitive (with higher value-added products) and to increase rural incomes (SEPSA, 1995, 1997; Estado de La Nación, 1998; La Gaceta, 1998; IADB, 2002).

Changing Production Patterns

Trade liberalisation and foreign investment in Costa Rica stimulated imports of technology, agrochemicals and equipment, all with a relatively low tariff (5 percent) (Pomareda, 2004; PROCOMER, 2009). Agricultural conversion programmes also promoted the intensive application of inputs and technologies. Traditional production was also transformed. For example, coffee production changed significantly. This traditional sector placed heavy emphasis on high-quality production, more environmentally sustainable patterns and smaller-scale processing to make the best of new opportunities in international markets.

Fertiliser consumption in Costa Rica increased from 100.1 (kg/ha) in 1970 to 391.9 (kg/ha) of farmed land in 1998, and 707.5 in 2008 (World Bank, 2009). The number of tractors in use per hectare of cultivated land also grew from 10.3 in 1970 to 13.9 in 1998 (although the figure varies for different crops and soil types). Although non-traditional crops were also promoted throughout Central America and Mexico during the 1990s, tractor use and fertiliser consumption levels in Costa Rica were the highest in the region (see for example Mora-Alfaro, 2002; SEPSA, 2002a; World Bank, 2015).

The use of imported pesticides also rose. During the period 1977–2006, the average amount of imported pesticide used per hectare grew from 8.2 to 25.8 kg (Chaverri and Soto, 2001; Chaverri and Blanco, 2002; De La Cruz et al., 2009). By 2004 Costa Rica had become the main consumer of pesticides in Central America (De la Cruz et al., 2004). In 2006, the country imported 4.4 times more pesticides than in 1977, while the area in cultivation was only 30 percent larger than in 1977 (Chaverri and Soto, 2001; Chaverri and Blanco, 2002; De la Cruz et al., 2009). The most recent agricultural census shows that 64,377 farms in Costa Rica use fertilisers (82.1 percent) and 70,699 employ pesticides (90.1 percent), especially in Alajuela and San José (INEC, 2015).

New patterns of production transformed Costa Rica into a country more reliant on imported inputs, technologies and large agricultural firms. These patterns also created new tensions between environmental protection and productive activities competing for the use of land and natural resources (Estado de la Nación, 2010).

Table 1. Costa Rica: Changes in the Area Occupied by Major Crops

Main crops	1990 (ha.)	2008 (ha.)	Compound annual rate of growth (CARG) (%)
Traditional crops	192,716	205,138	0.34
Coffee	105,000	98,681	−0.34
Sugar cane	42,000	57,660	1.78
Banana	28,296	44,313	2.52
Cocoa	17,420	4,484	−7.26
Basic grains	183,484	80,274	−4.48
Maize	49,381	6,837	−10.40
Rice	67,848	62,411	−0.46
Beans	63,664	11,026	−9.28
Non-traditional crops	71,727	201,035	5.90
African palm	23,183	52,200	4.61
Pineapple	6,050	50,000[a]	11.76
Oranges	10,757	25,000	4.79
Melon/watermelon	2,375	8,640	7.43
Roots and tubers	3,092	11,659	7.65
Total cultivated land	451,015	498,079	0.55

[a]In 2009, El Financiero (2009). Source: Author's calculations from SEPSA (1998, 2002a).

Transformations in Land Use

The combination of trade liberalisation, export incentives and the expansion of foreign direct investment resulted in a significant diversification of Costa Rica's agriculture. The area devoted to more profitable crops like melon, watermelon, orange, pineapple, hearts of palm and ornamental plants more than doubled, and total production increased by similar amounts. These developments transformed and diversified land use in Costa Rica (IFAD, 2004; SEPSA, 2005). Total cultivated land did not significantly increase from 1990 (451,000 ha) to 2008 (498,900 ha). The last agricultural census (using a classification of permanent and non-permanent crops) shows that the cultivated area dedicated to permanent crops (crops farmed using the same plant each season) was 557,887 ha in 2014; 353,733 ha corresponded to main crops such as coffee (23.8%), African palm (18.8%), sugarcane (18.4%), banana (14.6%) and pineapple (10.6%) (INEC, 2015). The internal dynamics of the sector also changed, as official statistics clearly reveal (see Table 1) (SEPSA, 1998, 2008; Bertsch, 2006).

With overseas demand for Costa Rican pineapples increasing, no other crop has experienced such impressive growth. The area used for pineapple cultivation grew at a compound annual rate of 11.76 percent between 1990 and 2008 (MAG, 2009). A few large producers and transnational corporations in the Northern Huetar and Brunca regions accounted for 74 percent of national pineapple production in 2009 (MAG, 2009). In 2004, nineteen farms of more than 100 ha accounted for 77 percent of total pineapple production in the Northern Huetar region. In the same year and region, small holders (0–10 ha: 94 percent of the farms engaged in pineapple cultivation) accounted for only 13 percent of the farming land dedicated to pineapple production (MAG, 2005).

Growing national and international demand for vegetable oil for human consumption, cosmetic production and biofuel triggered a sharp increase in the number of hectares devoted to African palm or palm oil (*elaeis guineensis*) (SEPSA, 1989; CORFOGA,

2000; The Costa Rica News, 2012). The area under cultivation experienced an annual rate of growth of 4.61 percent during the 1990s and early 2000s (MAG, 2007).

Traditional crops moved in the opposite direction, with negative implications for family farmers. Although coffee remained the main crop in terms of area cultivated, increasing support for non-traditional crops clearly affected coffee producers. In addition, an international crisis in coffee prices in the early 2000s resulted in significant economic losses for Costa Rican coffee producers and the abandonment of many coffee plots (Bertsch, 2004; INEC, 2007; ICAFE, 2009, 2010). The number of coffee producers in Costa Rica has fallen dramatically, from 72,942 in 1999 to 50,627 in 2009 and a mere 26,574 in 2015 (INEC, 2007, 2015; ICAFE, 2009, 2010). The number of coffee processing plants, coffee exporters and toasting firms has nonetheless continued to grow just as dramatically (see, for example, INEC, 2007; ICAFE, 2009, 2010).

The land used for basic grains has also dropped (Table 1). The area used for cultivating beans fell from 63,664 ha in 1990 to 11,026 ha in 2004 (with the number of bean producers declining from 21,500 to 8,000) (Salazar, 2004; SEPSA, 2004). Between 1985 and 1993, the area growing maize in the Brunca region (one of the main regions for basic grains production) declined by 21,000 ha, while in the Huetar Atlantic region the area dropped by 19,000 ha. In the Atlantic region the great majority of peasants who abandoned maize production sold their lands below market prices and became employees in large banana plantations. Other medium and small farmers shifted to non-traditional crops (e.g. roots and tubers) (MAG, 2005).

The most recent agricultural census (2015) shows that the total cultivated area used for permanent crops is 557,888 ha, accounting for 22.6 percent of total land use. A further 23.8 percent of total land use is devoted to coffee production, 18.8 percent to African Palm, 18.4 percent to sugarcane, 14.6 percent to bananas and 10 percent to pineapples. The two main export crops, bananas and pineapple, together account for 25.2 percent of total farms and over 60 percent of total incomes from agricultural exports (PROCOMER, 2014; INEC, 2015; *La Nación*, 2015). Costa Rica also has important forest crops that represent 30.6 percent of total farms (736,505 ha), with teak and gamhar [*melina*] accounting for 73.6 percent of total production (INEC, 2015).

Land use changes clearly influenced employment opportunities. The population employed in agriculture declined as rural non-farm employment continued to grow (SEPSA, 1997, 2004; INEC, 2009). Dirven (2004) shows that in 2004 non-farm employment accounted for 65.8 percent of the employed population in rural areas of Costa Rica, compared to 34.0 percent in Chile and 51.9 percent in Mexico: Costa Rica recorded the highest figure in Latin America in this respect.

Studies of small farmers in the Northern region illustrate the farming and non-farming opportunities associated with outward-looking development in Costa Rica. In terms of farming opportunities, a lucky few gained access to non-traditional crops through contract farming and other types of deal with transnational corporations and supermarkets because of their proximity to better infrastructure, transport and other services. But most small farmers tried to switch to new crops, continue farming traditional crops for local consumption or devise defensive strategies to deal with internal and external competition. Some producers were unable to convert to non-traditional crops because they faced difficulties in accessing markets, credits and inputs. Agro-tourism and eco-tourism projects were also common non-farm strategies combined with production for self-consumption in these areas (see MAG, 2004; Bolivar et al., 2005; Faure and Meneses, 2005; Botella-Rodríguez, 2015).

Changes in Land Ownership

According to the latest agricultural census (2015), from 1984 to 2014 the total number of farms dropped by 8.7 percent, reversing the previous trend of an increasing number of farms reported in censuses developed from 1955 to 1984. The area occupied by farms fell by 21.6 percent over the same period. In 2014, the average farm size in Costa Rica was 25.9 ha, with a regional variation from 54.6 ha in Guanacaste to 9.7 ha in Cartago. Formal and informal commercial firms (*sociedades de hecho and derecho*) manage 11.7 percent of all farms and 42.5 percent of the total cultivated area (with farm sizes between 25.6 and 119 ha), while individual farmers run 87.1 percent of all farms (with an average farm size of approximately 16.2 ha) and 54.7 percent of the total area cultivated (author's calculations from INEC, 2015). The average age of individual farmers is 53.9 years and 22.5 percent of them are aged 65 years old or more (INEC, 2015).

Costa Rica's agrarian structure is dominated by small and medium farms. However, Bertsch (2006) shows disparities between farms by different types of owners and crops. For non-traditional crops, cultivation has become increasingly dependent on farm workers and land ownership has been concentrated in the hands of a few private owners and transnational corporations since the early 2000s. For example, in 2002 three transnational pineapple producers farmed 6,200 ha and employed 4,340 agricultural workers. In the same year, 200 small pineapple producers each cultivated an average of 8.5 ha (see Table 2) (Bertsch, 2004, 2006). For melon and water melon: in 2002, 8,400 ha of land were cultivated by ten large producers. Meanwhile, 100 small farms producing melon and water melon averaged one hectare in size.

Turning to traditional crops: in 2002, 1,000 large coffee producers owned farms averaging 40 ha in size. In the same year, 62,000 small farmers owned plots of land averaging just 1.17 ha (Bertsch, 2004, 2006). Beans, maize and rice producers owned relatively small farms, ranging from 1.21 to 20 ha (see Table 2).

In short, by the early 2000s, Costa Rican agriculture had come to be dominated by a small number of large farmers whose main source of income came from non-traditional crops, while a plethora of small holders had progressively abandoned agriculture as their main source of income (Mora-Alfaro, 2005). These developments created two polarised agricultural worlds with highly heterogeneous economic features and income opportunities, physical characteristics and diverse social structures competing in the same sector (Pomareda and López, 2007).

Changes in Food Security

According to the World Food Summit (1995: 5), 'food security is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'. When defining food security this article focuses on small farmers' ability to produce food for national consumption and thus reduce dependence on imports (World Food Summit, 1995; Via Campesina, 2002; Rosset, 2005).

Compelling evidence shows that small farmers account for a significant share of agricultural production and specialise in producing goods for the domestic market in low-income countries (e.g. Lele and Agarwal, 1989; Benneh, 1996; Greenland, 1997; Ahmed, Ehui and Assefa, 2004; Machethe, 2004; Altieri, 2008; Berdegué and Fuentealba, 2011; IFAD, 2011). Even those peasants who engage in export agriculture

Table 2. Costa Rica: Structure of Landholdings for Production of Some Typical Crops, 2002

Agrarian sectors	Area cultivated (ha)	Number of farms	Average farm size (in ha)[a]	Employees
Coffee				
Large farms >12 ha	40,000	1,000	40	8000
Small farms <12 ha	73,130	62,000	1.17	0
African palm				
Large producers	21,700	1	21,700	2,240
Independent producers 2–420 ha	5,000	300	16.6	357
Cooperatives (20) <20 ha	15,780	1,600	9.86	1,127
Pineapple				
Transnational corporations >1000 ha	6,200	3	2,066.6	4,340
Large domestic producers >75 ha	7,600	20	380	5,320
Small producers <5–20 ha	1,700	200	8.5	0
Melon and watermelon				
Large farms >75–80 ha	8,400	10	840	8,400
Small farms <2 ha	100	100	1	0
Rice				
Large >200 ha	26,000	60	433	1,040
Medium 51–200 ha	11,849	140	84.6	474
Smaller <50 ha	10,000	500	20	0
Beans				
Large producers (mechanised) 20–500 ha	9,500	200	47.5	380
Medium producers 3 ha	3,088	1,000	3.08	4,750
Small producers 0.5–4 ha	9,500	7,800	1.21	
Maize				
National consumption	6, 776	3,000	2.25	1,500

[a] Author's estimates from SEPSA (2003) and Bertsch (2006). Source: SEPSA (2003) and Bertsch (2006).

(traditional and non-traditional crops) tend to diversify production by harvesting other crops for self-consumption.

In Costa Rica, declining public funding, credit and other resources have progressively dismantled the support available for small farmers since the 1980s. In the early 1980s, the USAID PL-480 US Food Programme (1982–1987) and its massive donations of wheat, corn and rice affected local maize production and prices in Costa Rica (USAID, 1986, 1989; CENAP et al., 1988). The Ministry of Agriculture's operating expenditures dropped by 65 percent from 1979 to 1988 (Lindarte, 1990); agricultural credit for the corn, beans and rice fell by 70 percent in just five years from 1983 (Conroy, Murray and Rosset, 1996). These measures, coupled with dramatic reductions in tariffs on the import of basic grains opened national borders to artificially cheap and lower quality food imported from developed countries (FAO, 2006). In less than twenty years (from 1987 to 2005–2007) the number of basic grain producers in Costa Rica dropped from 45,000 to 7,600 (SICA, 1981; RUTA-AECID-FAO, 2007). From 1985 to 1995 alone, production of basic grains dropped by 40 percent (González Mejía, 1997).

The people of Costa Rica are relatively well nourished compared with their Central American neighbours: undernourishment affected less than 5 percent of the population in 2005–2007 compared to 15 percent in Central America overall (FAO, 2007). Whereas

cereal production fell by 5 percent in Costa Rica from 1979–1981 to 2001, it grew by 35 percent in Central America and the Caribbean, and 32 percent in the rest of the world (FAO, 2007). The ability of Costa Rican small farmers to feed the national population thus became the weakest in the region.

In a little over ten years, between 1995 and 2007, the degree of reliance on imported rice increased from 30.1 to 50 percent; on imported beans, from 16.7 to 78 percent; and, on imported maize, from 94.6 to 97.8 percent (SICA, 2009). These trends were also reflected in the evolution of other food crops produced for national consumption. Based on FAO country statistics (2009), the ratio of imports to total production rose for Costa Rica between 1990–1992 and 2005–2007. The trend was particularly marked for cereals, pulses, oil crops, vegetables, meat and animal fats (see Table 3) (FAO, 2009); but substantial increases in the ratio were reported even for crops produced extensively within Costa Rica (e.g. milk, meat, vegetables, fruits, sugar and vegetable oils) (see Table 3).

On the eve of the global food crisis, Costa Rica's food dependency became abundantly clear. The income from exports of roots and yucca (non-traditional crops that produced US$17–28 million in 2006) and other non-traditional crops like pineapple and African palm were not sufficient to cover even half the cost of importing basic grains (US$90 million) (Pomareda, 2006). By 2008, rapidly rising international food prices demonstrated the problem posed by dependence on imported foods. In an effort to reactivate basic grains production and internal food markets, the Costa Rican government created the National Food Programme and the Integral Food Programme, with a particular focus on more vulnerable and poor families in rural areas (MAG, 2008; PNA, 2008; IDA-CNP, 2009). The National Food Programme provided access to resources to stimulate domestic production of basic grains and re-establish the supervisory role of the National Production Council. It proved difficult, however, to restore the role of basic grains producers after more than two decades of promoting non-traditional crops.

Table 3. Costa Rica: Ratio of Food Imports to Total Production

Food groups	1990–1992 (%)	2005–2007 (%)	Difference (in percentage points) (2005–2007 to 1990–1992)
Cereals– excluding beer	65.2	87.5	22.3
Starchy roots	0.26	6.32	6.0
Sugar and sweeteners	1.96	6.88	4.9
Pulses	12.7	81.9	69.2
Oilcrops	62.8	81.86	19.1
Vegetable oils	1.6	9.83	8.2
Vegetables	3.74	15.8	12.1
Fruits– excluding wine	0.7	3.5	2.8
Stimulants	0.78	7.85	7.0
Meat	0.2	3.47	3.2
Offals	6.25	16.6	10.3
Animal fats	1.96	4.76	2.8
Milk– excluding butter	2.96	3.86	0.9
Eggs	0.82	2.9	2.1
Spices	9.09	23.07	13.9

Source: Author's calculations from FAO country statistics (2009).

Although it is too early to know whether the measures introduced since 2008 will change the nature of the export-led strategy for Costa Rican agriculture, specific policies and support for small farmers did not change significantly in the Chinchilla administration (2010–2014). The main goals of public agricultural policies are the following: increase export-led agricultural competitiveness, promote innovation and technological development and improve the management of rural areas. Small farming and food security are just one of the strategic areas for attention in the management of rural areas in Costa Rica (MAG, 2010). For example, the Strategic Plan for family farming 2011–2014 was amended in 2012 to improve food security, incomes and livelihoods in rural areas. Under the Plan, the National Production Council supports small and medium farmers by promoting new and more dynamic marketing channels such as the new Programme of Institutional Provision (MAG, 2012).

What is more interesting is the current government's efforts to develop a new approach to rural development, with the official transformation of the Institute for Agriculture Development into the Institute for Rural Development in 2012. The new approach to rural development (*Desarrollo Territorial Rural*) aims to improve rural livelihoods and promote partnerships between public and private actors in the management of social, economic and environmental development. This is a more decentralised approach to addressing the specific problems of particular rural areas, which is becoming increasingly common elsewhere in Latin America (in Brazil, Mexico and Chile, for instance), in order to manage access to and use of natural resources in rural areas. Costa Rica's decentralised approach to rural development became an additional pillar of the new agricultural strategy in 2008–2009. It provides a framework within which rural development policies can be devised that are sensitive to the specific needs of individual regions, taking account of local geographies and social actors. These strategies would later be included within the National Plan of Development. This new approach gives a leading role to civil society communities in rural areas where there are significant numbers of small farmers (IDA-FAO, 2008).

Conclusion

Since the 1990s Costa Rica's outward-looking development has been particularly successful in diversifying the country's exports and attracting foreign investment in secondary and tertiary activities. The case of Costa Rica nonetheless demonstrates some of the problems associated with neoliberal reforms in agriculture and indicates why such reforms may not contribute positively to strengthening food security.

Although production has been intensified to increase competitiveness, Costa Rican agriculture has become highly dependent on foreign technology, inputs and machinery. Institutions responsible for promoting agricultural production for the domestic market have been neglected, undermining small farmers' ability to obtain inputs and technologies to participate in the promotion of new agricultural exports and to produce food for national consumption.

These patterns have also transformed Costa Rica's land use and agrarian structures. Today agricultural production is more diversified than ever, while the internal functioning and structure of the sector has been transformed. Large enterprises and a handful of landowners have come to dominate non-traditional products and they obtain significant incomes from these activities. The number of small farmers has declined significantly,

with negative consequences for national food production and increased dependence on food imports, making the country vulnerable to external shocks.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to all the Costa Rican institutions and individuals who welcomed me and gave me access to their valuable testimonies, knowledge and time. My sincere thanks, in particular, to F. Rivera Rodríguez (UNA, Costa Rica) and L. Calderón (Planning Director, IDA/INDER, San José, Costa Rica). I especially thank D. Sánchez-Ancochea for his constant advice and understanding. The research was supported by: HAR2013-40760-R and MEC-HR2010-18544 (sub-programme HIST) research projects, an AECID postgraduate grant (2007–2009) and CEDDAR research grant (2009).

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