

Case Study: Costa Rican Organic Agriculture Movement (MAOCO), San Jose, Costa Rica
Costa Rican Organic Farmers: Putting Earth Charter Principles into Practice
Alison Fischman, University for Peace, Costa Rica

Introduction

The Costa Rican Organic Agriculture Movement (MAOCO) has become an important element of organic agriculture within Costa Rica, beginning in 2004. MAOCO is a social movement that seeks to promote and develop the production of organic products by integrating producers, consumers, and other actors, while focusing on respect to life, biodiversity, and indigenous knowledge. MAOCO works out of its national office in San Jose, and 11 regional offices, to promote a common vision to change politics, society, and economics in order to improve rural livelihoods. MAOCO has created a network of organic farmers by organizing events and providing funding for projects from both the Costa Rican government and foreign investment.

MAOCO plays an important role in disseminating informational and educational materials to organic farmers, by providing them with access to workshops and courses on organic practices. MAOCO works to provide alternative market options for farmers as well ideas for alternative products within the organic marketplace. MAOCO is a movement made up of the farmers themselves, and provides them with the opportunity to participate by making decisions and defining the politics of MAOCO. MAOCO also values the participation of other organizations, government officials, and universities, as part of MAOCO's vision is to diversify its community with those who share common values. Member farmers participate in meetings, trainings, and planning sessions for MAOCO and for the further development of organic markets.

As a student of the University for Peace, I spent my summer working with MAOCO and alongside three of its member farms. I spent six weeks working in the field with organic farmers, learning their practices, and focusing my study on how their practices relate to biodiversity. I sought to study the presence of agroecology within Costa Rican organic agriculture, specifically how the incorporation and preservation of biodiversity can enhance rural livelihoods, and what role MAOCO plays in this promotion. I also wanted to study and discuss with farmers the value of Earth Charter principles for MAOCO and organic agriculture. Though the farmers were not familiar with the Earth Charter and its principles specifically, they expressed a deep interest in its goals and asked to hear more in the future. From what I observed in the field and my time in the MAOCO office, an important role for the Earth Charter exists, as its values are shared by MAOCO and Costa Rican organic farmers. Not only is the mission of MAOCO conscious of much of the Earth Charter's vision, farmers are taking it upon themselves to act responsibly while respecting humanity and nature, and finding the true benefits of these actions.

MAOCO

MAOCO, as an organization, is working within several of Earth Charter's principles such as *Principle 8: Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired*. MAOCO, through its work to promote organic farming practices and to assist farmers with educational courses, is helping to promote this principle and to ensure that important information is made publicly available. Additionally, MAOCO specifically acknowledges and seeks to preserve traditional agricultural knowledge concerning sustainable farming practices. MAOCO is also working on many levels to promote *Principle 13: Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice*. Through its local and national campaigns, MAOCO is strengthening the voice and participation of local communities and their ability to make responsible decisions about the environment. MAOCO is dedicated to the protection of *rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent*, as demonstrated through their meeting facilitation and network collaboration activities. Overall, MAOCO's work is a vivid expression of Earth Charter's principles and presents a promising future for further incorporation.



Finca Familia Solís Lizano: Santa Elena

Finca Familia Solís Lizano is located on 6.5 hectares of land in use for crops, pasture, and forest. The main products include pineapple, corn, cucumber, sugarcane, milk, and cheese. The farm hosts a variety of animals including chickens, pigs, goats, and cattle, as well as a wide range of wildlife. This farm is unique, as it is connected to an international biological corridor, and the family works within the community to preserve and protect its forests. Xinia is an active member of the MAOCO Seed Commission and promotes the values of its members. Additionally, the family is a role model for the community as they are one of the only farms growing pineapple organically in a region filled with conventional pineapple plantations. Despite the difficulty in marketing their pineapple as organic, this family has not lost faith in the value of growing food without dangerous chemicals. These actions are clearly in line with Earth Charter's *Principle 6: Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach*, as they have chosen to not use chemicals despite the norm to do so in the area and within Costa Rica, taking into account the *cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences* of their actions. They are also becoming creative and finding options for alternative products, as Juan is currently building a

cheese house next to the barn. This will enable the family to diversify their income, while further expanding their production. This effort supports *Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being*, by understanding the *full environmental and social costs* of the products they are selling and *enabling consumers to identify products that meet the highest social and environmental standards*. With a deep respect for nature, their community and its health, and a commitment to sustainable living, this family is already practicing many of the Earth Charter principles.

Finca Familia Esquivel Castro: Monterrey

Finca Familia Esquivel Castro is located on 18 hectares of mountainous rainforest, home to cattle, chickens, and a large variety of crops such as rice, sugarcane, yucca, chamol, plantains, bananas, squash, and several tropical fruits. The main products of this farm are cheese and organic fertilizer, made from cow manure and mixed with additional organic items from the farm. Asdrúbal and his wife Rosalia have been living on this farm for the past 45 years and have been dedicated to organic practices since 1994. Since then, the family has been involved in a number of capacity-building courses and workshops to expand their organic production. This farm is very much an integrated biointensive model, using natural systems and native species to grow a variety of food most efficiently. The family's work with biodiversity integration promotes Earth Charter's *Principle 5: Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life*, as most of the farmland is dedicated to forest and natural pasture, supporting an abundance of biodiversity in each and every corner. This farm has continuously been dedicated to the preservation of its native *wild lands and marine areas*, which *protects Earth's life support systems, maintains biodiversity, and preserves our natural heritage*. The family has plans to expand their farm, with the help of MAOCO, in order to establish an educational center for

student volunteers. This project relates to *Principle 14: Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life*, as they seek to provide students from across the world with an opportunity for alternative education while gaining practical skills to live more sustainable, responsible, and spiritual lives. These efforts clearly support the Earth Charter and its principles and provide ample opportunity for future expansion of its vision.





Finca La Amistad: Guápiles

Finca La Amistad is located on 7 hectares of tropical land utilized for a large variety of integrated crops, pasture, and reforestation. This farm supports free-range chickens, pigs, and cattle, as well as several tuber and root crops, pineapple, beans, corn, plantain, banana, lettuce, celery, tomato and many native tropical fruits. The family also has a small plant and tree nursery, which they produce to sell and exchange with others. Virginia is highly active within MAOCO, and is currently working to receive a license to teach organic agricultural courses from the National Institute of Learning (INA). The family has hosted several groups; in fact, they hosted my Agriculture, Natural Resources and Sustainable Development class. Norman showed us around this jungle of a farm, pointing out native species of herbs, plants, trees, as well as insects, frogs, birds, monkeys, and snakes. There is no doubt that this farm is a haven for biodiversity, represented in their expansive seed collection, range of crops, and diverse wildlife. These farmers have a unique perspective on pests, and believe through the diversification of their farm, they have eliminated the need for pesticides. This illustrates Earth Charter's *Principle 15: Treat all living beings with respect and consideration*, which is exactly how these two approach the

issue of "pests", never finding a reason to kill or harm any living creatures. Virginia and Norman have visited the local elementary school to teach the children about soil health and planting organic vegetables, showing their support for *Principle 14: Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life*, as they are providing youth with *educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development*. Their profound commitment to their community, education, biodiversity, and future, boldly exemplifies the principles of the Earth Charter and their dedication to a better world.

The Future of MAOCO and the Earth Charter

I believe there is a strong future for the Earth Charter within MAOCO and its farmers' agricultural practices. It is already clear that many farmers are living many of the principles in their daily lives. *Respect and Care for the Community of Life* is undoubtedly a priority for these organic farmers, respecting Earth, its diversity, as well as understanding the need to preserve resources for future generations. *Ecological Integrity* is a vital component of organic agriculture and in many ways is being practiced by Costa Rican organic farmers. By creating integrated agricultural ecosystems and preserving forests, Costa Rican organic farmers are taking special concern for biodiversity and natural processes vital for life. There are opportunities, however, for MAOCO to assist its members in the expansion of their practices, and to include more pro-active measures of promoting nature and preventing its destruction. Some of these ideas include use of renewable energy while minimizing the use of non-renewable resources, reusing and recycling, and producing biodegradable packaging for products.

Social and Economic Justice is highly relevant for the future of organic agriculture, specifically as it relates to the enhancement of rural livelihoods and access to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation. Much of our world's pollution comes from agrochemicals and their runoff, creating unsafe conditions for many of the world's citizens, often times causing underprivileged populations to suffer greatly. Organic agriculture, and the work of MAOCO, seeks to offer an alternative to food production, while respecting the beliefs of all cultures. MAOCO also challenges the current financial and political system, and pressures it to more justly support its citizens through responsible agricultural decisions. The role of education and the presentation of equal opportunities to learn and develop is a key component of the future of organic agriculture. MAOCO and many other organizations, as well the farmers themselves, are making opportunities to share practices, knowledge, and ideas possible. Additionally, increased consideration of gender equality and equity, as well as a greater emphasis on the importance of culture in the production and preparation of food could help to improve the lives of the organic farming community.

Several of the aspects of *Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace* are critically important in the work of MAOCO and organic farmers. Strengthening democratic institutions and providing transparency is an element that needs to be improved throughout Costa Rica, and MAOCO is working to do so through more just laws and policies related to small-scale producers. Education is highly supported within the organic agricultural community, and efforts to bring more agricultural education into the school systems could be made with assistance from the government. Farmers have the consciousness to treat all living beings with respect and consideration, as shown through their efforts to preserve biodiversity and avoid the use of pesticides. The whole of the organic movement is working to promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace, and tries to work together toward a common goal, understanding that each farmer represents an important element for its future success.

Overall, I feel as though the importance of the Earth Charter and its principles is clear within MAOCO and the Costa Rican organic farming community, creating an opportunity for future growth and collaboration. The consciousness, commitment, and sincerity of Costa Rican organic farmers are valuable contributions to the success of the Earth Charter, and both parties could benefit from further communication. I believe that the future that Earth Charter envisions is in the hands of responsible and considerate farmers and organizations such as MAOCO.