

The Role of Social Networks in Climate-Resiliency among Farmer-Campesinos in Maine and Bolivia

Lauren Hickey, '20

Social networks-- or the social fabric of a community-- are highly important to community resiliency. In his highly-cited article, "The Strength of Weak Ties," Mark Granovetter underscores the crucial role of social networks in information exchange, opportunity mobilization, and resilience in the face of external stresses.¹ Specifically in relation to agriculture, strong farmer-to-farmer networks combined with agroecological practices have been shown to bolster farmers' capacity to adapt to climate change and decrease food system vulnerability.² Farmers in both Bolivia and Maine are experiencing first-hand the effects of climate change, and studying the social capacity of resilience of farmers in both locations has lent itself to a powerful cross-cultural and cross-continental comparison.

During the fall of 2018, I extended my research from the summer on food and agriculture in Maine through an independent study with Dr. Shana Starobin. My research focused on how farmers communicate with each other and agriculture service organizations to access information and resources. During the fall, I continued to interview farmers and traveled to the Common Ground Fair put on by the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association to hear Tristan Noyes '05 speak about the advantages of an 'interconnected community' in his keynote address.³ My interviews with key informants such as Tristan and the Executive Director of MOFGA played an integral role in helping triangulate my primary observations during the summer about the correlation between the strength of social networks and small-scale organic agriculture predominantly in the southern region. For example, I attended the MOFGA Farmer to Farmer Conference, where I observed a fascinating model of inter-farmer exchange, such as a workshop where farmers discussed climate change adaptation.

During May of 2019, I have conducted independent research on the role of social networks in climate resiliency among small-scale producers in indigenous communities. This study builds upon a long-term investigation being carried out by researchers at the Universidad Mayor de San Simón about climate resiliency strategies among various agricultural communities throughout the valley and highland regions of Bolivia. I have carried out participatory observation and semi-structured interviews in the communities of Santivañez, a Quechua community in the Cochabamba valley, and Tapacarí, an Aymaran community in the Andean highland region. In these places I have observed farmers' social networks in the form of seed exchange, support networks, fairs and meetings, and the exchange innovative ideas in the face of new challenges. For example, I attended a conference with producers from various regions-- much like MOFGA's Farmer to Farmer Conference-- where they discussed the role of greenhouses as a strategy to adapt to climate change. I am also currently in the process of producing a children's book on this topic to be translated into Spanish and Quechua, illustrated by a local artist, and distributed to communities throughout Bolivia and the United States in an effort to promote reciprocity in my research.

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Faculty mentor: Professor Shana Starobin

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¹ Granovetter, Mark S. "The strength of weak ties." In *Social networks*, pp. 347-367. 1977

² Altieri, Miguel A., Clara I. Nicholls, Alejandro Henao, and Marcos A. Lana. "Agroecology and the design of climate change-resilient farming systems." *Agronomy for sustainable development* 35, no. 3 (2015): 869-890.

³ Noyes, T. "Growing Together: Reaping the Rewards of a Passionate Interconnected Community." MOFGA Common Ground Fair. 2018. Unity, ME.