

INTEGRAL Season Four: Environmental Justice and the Common Good
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Chris Bacon, Associate Professor, Environmental Studies and Sciences Department
Environmental and Food Justice in the Americas
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THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Welcome to INTEGRAL, a podcast production out of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University; exploring the question: is there a common good in our common home?

I'm Theresa Ladrigan-Whelpley, the director of the Bannan Institutes in the Ignatian Center, and your host for this podcast. We're coming to you from Vari Hall on the campus of Santa Clara in the heart of Silicon Valley, California. This season of INTEGRAL, we're examining the ways in which the work of environmental justice is central to our pursuit of the common good. Today, we'll look at issues of food insecurity and food justice in the Americas, considering the compounding effects of climate change and exploring strategic and collaborative responses.

CHRIS BACON: Some smallholder farmers are frontline environmentalists, asking us to think differently.

DON MARVIN [MARTIN PEREZ]: But there is still time for us to contribute to conservation and care for the little that remains. When practicing agroecology, I am contributing to everything, because I am not contaminating our environment - I am contributing to future generations, and I am trying to conserve the health of every person on the planet.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: To unpack these issues, we're joined today by Chris Bacon, Associate Professor in the Department of Environmental Studies and Sciences at Santa Clara, and Bannan Faculty Fellow in the Ignatian Center. Professor Bacon specializes in sustainable livelihoods and food security in Central America and environmental justice in California. He is the principal investigator for two multi-year collaborative grants with funding from the National Science Foundation and Agropolis foundation in France. Chris's work often takes a community-based and participatory

action research approach to generate knowledge that informs both theory and social change. He teaches environmental politics and policy, political ecology, and food justice. Welcome Chris!

CHRIS BACON: Thanks, Theresa. It's good to be here.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: First of all, what do you mean by environmental and food justice?

CHRIS BACON: Environmental justice is a social movement's demand for rights, a thought-provoking area for interdisciplinary scientific study, and a rapidly emerging area for public policy. Let's start with a definition and several basic principles. Environmental justice is the right of *all* people to healthy livable communities, where they live, learn, work, eat, play, and pray.

First, we're talking about the *right to recognition*. Environmental justice holds that everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before law and society.

Second, we're talking about *distributive* justice. Do all people have equal access to protection from environmental hazards (like protection from high exposure to toxic chemicals or pesticides) and equal access to environmental benefits (like clean air, drinkable water, and neighborhood parks)?

We're also talking about *procedural* justice. Do all people, and especially those that are most impacted by environmental policy decisions, have a right to participate fully in making those decisions, a seat at the table?

Finally, many of us are starting to include *restorative justice*. How do we repair the environmental inequalities we've inherited from the past?

This definition of environmental justice reflects contributions from diverse racial and ethnic communities, social movement activists, interdisciplinary research, and more.

The interplay of environmental justice as a topic for scientific inquiry, a theme for social movement activism, and a space for policy change is one reason I find it such an exciting and dynamic space for scientific research.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: This resonates with what we heard from other members of the environmental justice collaborative, but how does this relate to food justice?

CHRIS BACON: Although many people are only beginning to understand the different historical roots of environmental justice, most of us share a common definition thanks especially to the core Principles of Environmental Justice, drafted and adopted in 1991, at the National Peoples of Color Environmental Leadership Summit.

Food justice applies the Principles of Environmental Justice to the relationships that connect the farm to the fork, or, in the case of coffee, move the bean from the crop to the cup. In this way, food justice becomes the right of *all* people to healthy livable food systems, where they live, learn, work, play, and pray as well as what they eat.

Let's talk about our global food system today and then explore some examples.

Although there is still more than enough food to feed the world, global hunger is rising once again, affecting some 815 million people, more than 1 in 10 as of 2016, while another 2 billion do not eat sufficiently diverse diets. Poverty, exclusion, violent conflicts, and climate change are several driving forces of this hunger, however, astute observers also analyze the persistent injustices in our broken food systems as the contradictions become increasingly visible.

Most of the people facing food insecurity today are food producers and many of them are food workers. Decades ago, Cesar Chavez once said, "*It's ironic that those who till the soil and harvest the fruits, vegetables, and other foods that fill your tables with abundance have nothing left for themselves.*" Thus, the hungry farmer paradox is nothing new.

Yet, many farmers and food workers are not passive victims living silently through recurrent periods of hunger. Chefs, food servers, and cutting edge high road restaurant owners are organizing with the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United to secure better wages and safer working environments for more than 14 million workers in United States.

In the heart of Central America's mountainous coffee growing regions, Nicaraguan producer Don Felipe is diversifying his farm, sharing practices with neighbors, and strengthening his cooperative in the face of drought, low coffee prices, and crop disease. But, before addressing these risks, we need to understand seasonal hunger in context, Let's listen to the farmers from these communities in their own voices.

DON FELIPE [MARTIN PEREZ]: The period of lean months in Nicaragua includes April, May, June, July, and August.

FARMER #2 [KIMMY GRANDI]: There is no harvest, and there is no way to make money.

DON FELIPE [MARTIN PEREZ]: Climate variability has been killing us. Our harvest was sparse.

CHRIS BACON: The most common form of food insecurity is [seasonal hunger](#), occurring when the previous season's harvest runs short, food access is limited, and incomes are too low to buy enough food. Families cope by eating less nutritious diets, skipping meals, and accumulating debt. Mesoamerican families that prefer protein rich beans and handmade tortillas sometimes survive off of *guineo cocido con sal*, or they make due with cooked bananas and salt during these critical lean months. Many people also go full days without eating, or seek off-farm work to afford food.

Recurrent hunger in Central America's highlands occurs in June, July and August. At the same time, corn and bean prices, which are low when farmers harvest them in November and December, reach their highest point during these lean months. Grain traders and even micro credit agencies often corner local markets, offering desperate farmers high interest

loans and bad deals for their future harvests in exchange for desperately needed food or cash.

The lean season lasts longer and becomes more severe due to frequent stressors and shocks, in our case the coffee leaf rust outbreak that started in 2011, low coffee prices, and a drought from 2014 – 2017 intersected with these existing social vulnerabilities to exacerbate hunger and malnutrition.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: So what can be done? How are people responding in Nicaragua and Central America?

CHRIS BACON: Over centuries, indigenous farmers developed and shared effective adaptation strategies. For example, traditional Mayans often exchanged seeds and shared practices for planting the *milpa* with corn, beans and squash intercrops, in ways that can control most pests and produce more yields on their small plots of land. In the last 40 years or so, many of these traditional farming systems have changed, as they were often undermined by “green revolution” agricultural technologies, spreading fertilizers, pesticides, new irrigation systems, and often empty promise of higher yielding seeds. Although broader modernization projects have certainly offered some important benefits, such as access to electricity, better roads, and cell phones, many communities continue to face disproportionate burdens related to the downsides of globalization, wrestling with degraded soils, contaminated water, land speculation, and unwanted out migration.

Over the last 20 years working in northern Nicaragua, I’ve conducted thousands of farmers surveys, hundreds of interviews, and written multiple peer reviewed journal articles. Here’s a brief summary of some of the lessons learned:

1. Growing more crops for family consumption (like corn and beans), planting more fruit trees, and securing access to a little more land all correlated significantly with shorter periods of seasonal hunger. Agroecology is a useful principles-based participatory approach to analyze these strategies as it links ecology with social justice concerns.

2. Connecting households with off-farm job opportunities can reduce poverty and build social networks. Our studies found that households with one member working for a salary off farm reported less seasonal hunger
3. Integrating approaches to build power, reduce poverty and improve access to food and water, could lead to more sustainable adaptations to climate change.
4. Strengthening cooperatives and creating community-based social enterprises.
5. Additional strategies include linking civil society and governments to secure the rule of law and peacefully resolve conflicts, reducing violence and injustice.

Some smallholder farmers are frontline environmentalists, asking us to think differently. Let's stay in northern Nicaragua's highlands for a minute, with a farmer using organic practices and agroecology to cultivate a small, biologically diverse shade coffee plot. Listen to Don Marvin's critical analysis, conscience, and vision for change as I spoke to him on his farm last July.

DON MARVIN [MARTIN PEREZ]: It is important to reflect and think about the study that you have been conducting on our situation. The global situation is stressful. I think we should start with principal actors, which are the governments everywhere, because this is their responsibility. Yet sometimes it's the minority of us that are concerned about the environment and climate change, right? It's the planet's revenge for what has happened. But there is still time for us to contribute to conservation and care for the little that remains.

Governments have the responsibility to decide what is best for their people. It's worrisome that countries do not seem to care, because without the environment we cannot live even one day. It is going to be difficult to stop environmental destruction. Yes there is a necessity for survival, but countries are destroying the environment for economic gain. There is too much heat - it's becoming a hell. We must tell our

governments to change the working technology of agriculture because it causes so much damage worldwide.

For me, a response is agroecological agriculture. When practicing agroecology, I am contributing to everything, because I am not contaminating our environment - I am contributing to future generations, and I am trying to conserve the health of every person on the planet. We have to realize the importance of planting a tree. There are many people that instead of planting destroy the land. We must create a global environmental conscience -- we have to work from the family, from the community, with the schools, and the universities. We can do it from now on by changing our attitude and our way of thinking. I think that every project, everything that is done, is done because you think, and then you act.

DON MARVIN [MARTIN PEREZ]: *Creo que es importante, la reflexión y el estudio que han venido realizando ustedes a través de lo que hemos ido viviendo los últimos años. Es preocupante la situación que ahorita estamos viviendo a nivel mundial. Creo que tendríamos que empezar por los actores principales, que son los gobiernos de todo el planeta. A veces, es de una minoría de personas que estamos preocupados por la protección ambiental y lo del cambio climático. Y esta no más es una pasada de factura por lo que estamos realizando. Pero aún estamos a tiempo de nosotros a contribuir a la necesidad de la conservación de lo poquito que todavía tenemos de nuestro medio ambiente.*

Porque los gobiernos tienen, verdad, la potestad de la decisión de decir que es lo más importante para su pueblo. Es preocupante, que los países, no nos preocupemos por nosotros mismos porque lo dije yo, que sin en el medio ambiente no podemos vivir ni un día. Hay países que también por posiciones económicas, por cuestiones económicas están destruyendo nuestro medio ambiente, verdad? Es un infierno, como decimos: hay mucha calor. Pero tenemos que decirle a nuestros gobiernos que tenemos que cambiar la tecnología. La tecnología de trabajo de la agricultura es lo que nos está haciendo nosotros mucho daño a nivel mundial.

Para mi, la respuesta apropiada sería la agricultura agroecológica. Con agricultura agroecológica, estoy contribuyendo a todo, porque estoy dejando de contaminar nuestro medio ambiente, y estoy contribuyendo a ese futuro que viene para nuestras generaciones, y al mismo tiempo estoy tratando de conservar nuestra salud de cada una de nuestras personas que vivimos en este planeta. Tenemos que darnos cuenta de la importancia que tiene un árbol y lo que nos proporciona cada árbol que nosotros sembramos. Hay muchas personas que en vez de sembrar, destruyen.Pero para eso tenemos que crear conciencia ambiental y tenemos que trabajar desde la familia, desde la comunidad, con las escuelas, y con las universidades.

CHRIS BACON: In addition to concerns about procedural environmental justice, the work of Don Marvin and colleagues that sustain biodiversity through their farming practices helps marginal stallholders secure access to environmental benefits. There are millions of farmers that are starting to share Don Marvin’s vision, often uniting in social movements, like *Via Campesina*. His ideas are also rooted in experiences as a community leader and a participant in Nicaragua’s popular revolutions of the 1970s and 80s, as well as a founding member of the PRODECOOP cooperative that today unites over 10,000 people in northern Nicaragua.

However, many farmers are not responding like Don Marvin. Unable to make ends meet on the farm, they often seek employment on larger plantations, applying pesticides without protective measures. Here they face an unfair dilemma - choosing between poverty or poison.

Farmworkers in California’s Central Valley were facing both poverty and poison in the 1950 and 60s, when UFW’s founder and leader Dolores Huerta started organizing

ANGELA DAVIS [AUDIO CLIP]: Dolores came up with the slogan *si se puede*, or yes we can.

UNIDENTIFIED [AUDIO CLIP]: She wasn’t asking for permission, she just did what needed to be done.

NARRATOR [KIMMY GRANDI]: Rebel.

ELISEO MEDINA [AUDIO CLIP]: She has such a firm belief in what she's doing...

DOLORES HUERTA [AUDIO CLIP]: We've never given up!

ELISEO MEDINA [AUDIO CLIP]: ...that she infects you with it.

NARRATOR [KIMMY GRANDI]: Activist.

DOLORES HUERTA [AUDIO CLIP]: 90,000 people were poisoned in the fields of the United States of America!

RANDY SHAW [AUDIO CLIP]: The farmworkers founded the whole idea of environmental justice.

CHRIS BACON: In addition to coining the term “yes we can,” or *sí se puede*, Dolores Huerta and the UFW fought for better wages and against disproportionate environmental exposures. This advocacy was some of the first to establish stricter regulation protecting workers from pesticide exposures and caused the California Department of Public Health to regulate pesticides, which is unlike many other states, such as Texas, where the Department of Agriculture regulates pesticides and documents the accidents.

In addition to this policy change, UFW and collaborating scientists helped society understand pesticides as a public health issue, while simultaneously prompting the public health sciences to recognize pesticide exposure as a political and economic issue related to the immigration status of farmworker labor. These events of the 1960s and 70s represent an important – and often underappreciated – root of the environmental justice movement.

It is worthwhile to remember that in addition to clean air and safe water sources, common goods include civic dialogue and the common search for truth itself, and that the norms and behaviors that sustain these common goods often involve speaking truth to power.

Many have done this in a tradition rooted in nonviolence and a love inspired resistance,. As Chavez said, “You cannot oppress someone who is not afraid anymore.”

In the tradition of philosopher John Rawls, we must recognize that there are reasonable disagreements about what constitutes the common good and for this we have the rule of law, rights of free speech, and the correspondent duties of civic dialogue. Universities can open spaces for these dialogues, and evaluate the evidence and claims, yet Universities are also called to serve the common good.

Now let us turn our attention more inward, perhaps we can think about our role as faculty, students and staff, asking, “What can we do as a University?”

When seeking my first position as a professor, I was drawn to Santa Clara University because of its long-standing commitment to solidarity in Central America and emerging initiatives for sustainability and justice.

From my own perspective, I see this as evident in the Jesuit Catholic tradition of higher education. In his June 1982 Commencement Address to Santa Clara University, Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría arrived from El Salvador, and said, “There are two aspects to every university. The first and most evident is that it deals with culture, with knowledge, the use of the intellect. The second, and not so evident, is that it must be concerned with the social reality--precisely because a university is inescapably a social force: it must transform and enlighten the society in which it lives.”

The commitment to link solidarity to sustainability emerged with greater focus 27 years later, when Father Engh delivered his Inaugural Presidential Address to Santa Clara University in 2009 and, said, “Attentive to the needs we see, at a Jesuit university we set ourselves this other goal...In our ethical reflection we consider the needs of our world. We see with increasing clarity the fragility of our planet: the depletion of the soil, the destruction of its forests, and the pollution of air and water. Probing more deeply into these issues, we learn that the poorest of the poor suffer the most. They lack the resources and access to basic necessities when the natural world is so corrupted. And we might ask

ourselves: Who hears the voice of the needy and listens to their concerns about exploited lands and economies? Who is the voice for the defense of the assaulted world? Who trains the leaders we need to understand the intricacies of biodiversity and who are also equipped to discern the ethical dimensions of their decisions? Who, indeed?"

Six years after Fr. Engh's Inaugural Address, Pope Francis directed his writings to all people of good will as he released one of the most important environmental, social, religious, and spiritual statements of our time, entitled *Laudato Si: On Care For Our Common Home*. In it, he reminds us that "The present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity..." (*Laudato Si' § 158*).

Our present condition in 2018 has seen some important gains in material well being around the world, yet it is also a world in which hunger exists in unexpected places. Recent studies documented alarming rates among teenagers, and college students in affluent cities across the USA as well as its persistence in more severe forms among the precarious livelihoods of farmers and food workers in Nicaragua and many places in the Global South. Thankfully, we cannot only explain the hungry farmer paradox, showing how poverty, inequality and exclusion perpetuate hunger, but we have identified several strategies to confront it.

Returning to Nicaraguan farmer Don Marvin's environmental conscience and his challenge, let us remember that he asks us to think differently and then act - Are 'we' ready answer this summons to solidarity? A summons to service and deep listening, ethical discernment, and action, a summons to forming empowered partnerships in marginal communities, conducting community-based research, and then discerning collectively before acting with – not for – others to humbly create a more just and sustainable world.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Thanks for listening to INTEGRAL, a Bannan Institute podcast of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University. Special thanks to Chris Bacon for his contribution to today's episode.

Coming up next week is Ed Maurer, professor in the School of Engineering at Santa Clara, who will be examining the impacts of global climate change and exploring partnerships for local and global adaptation.

Technical direction for INTEGRAL was provided by Fern Silva. Our Production Manager is Kaylie Erickson. Our Production Assistant is Manuel Sanchez. Thanks to Mike Whalen for advisory and editorial support. You can find us on the web at scu.edu/integral, or subscribe via iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher, or Podbean.

CITATIONS

- Ending Seasonal Hunger in Nicaragua, Community Agroecology Network CAN, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awVvdJFE6EQ>
- Dolores The Movie Theatrical Trailer, available at: <https://www.doloresthemovie.com/aboutnew>
- Excerpt from Don Marvin's interview read by Martin Perez
- <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/impossible-choices-teens-and-food-insecurity-america>
- <https://studentsagainsthunger.org/hunger-on-campus/>