



# Food or flowers? Contested transformations of community food security and water use priorities under new legal and market regimes in Ecuador's highlands



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## ABSTRACT

During the past three decades, the Pisque watershed in Ecuador's Northern Andes has become the country's principal export-roses producing area. Recently, a new boom of local smallholders have established small rose greenhouses and joined the flower-export business. This has intensified water scarcity and material/discursive conflicts over water use priorities: water to defend local-national food sovereignty or production for export. This paper examines how including peasant flower farms in the capitalist dream – driven by a 'mimetic desire' and copying large-scale capitalist flower-farm practices and technologies – generates new intra-community conflicts over collective water rights, extending traditional class-based water conflicts. New allocation principles in Ecuador's progressive 2008 Constitution and 2014 Water Law prioritising food production over flowers' industrial water use are unlikely to benefit smallholder communities. Instead, decision-making power for peasant communities and their water users' associations on water use priority would enable water user prioritization according to smallholders' own preferences.

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## 1. Introduction

In the early 1980s, large farms with national and international financing started growing roses for export in Ecuador's highlands, especially in some northern inter-Andean valleys. Since then, they have become key stakeholders in the geopolitical landscape. This boom started amidst a globalising, neoliberal environment, taking advantage of exceptional biophysical and societal features (Gasselín, 2001; Brassel and Montenegro, 2011; Harari et al., 2011). Rose agribusinesses can be seen as the latest player in a history where local communities have struggled to keep their irrigation water rights and other crucial resources against powerful external actors, i.e., national (urban) and international investors (Breilh, 2007; Guerra, 2012; Hidalgo, 2015).

Most large-scale flower farms are built on *haciendas* (remaining colonial-style estates), which commonly have water concessions and for centuries grew Andean crops and pastures. While

acknowledging that flowers provide jobs, local communities have expressed concern about the impact on local water security and food sovereignty of a non-edible, individually-produced commodity, with high water demand, for the international market (Soper, 2013; see also Anderson, 2013). Flower firms retort that rose agribusinesses have modernised the regions where they flourish, and enhanced local purchasing power; thus, floriculture has contributed significantly, albeit indirectly, to improving local food availability (Zapatta and Mena-Vásquez, 2012).

The tense social context has been largely understood as a conflict between producing large-scale commercial flowers for export vs. local production for food security and sovereignty, a conflict that has included – as shown by Hidalgo (2010) – overt situations involving bribing, water theft, and mobilisations (see also Soper, 2013). However, the recent boom of very small rose farms managed by peasant families has rendered this dichotomy inadequate. Some local households have tried to follow the promises of modernisation, replicating capitalist technologies and practices, and now engage in the risky endeavours of export farming. This phenomenon intensifies water use for export crops in a region already suffering from water scarcity, and significantly adds

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complexity to irrigation water use and rights conflicts in the valley (Zapatta and Mena-Vásquez, 2012).

Aside from pollution and health problems (e.g., Breilh, 2007), water over-extraction and large water demands by a (flower-growing) minority generate tensions inside communities. Moreover, collective community water control faces internal divisions and new individualised needs. Local discourses defending water for food sovereignty are now being threatened. Concomitantly, many community members do understand their neighbours' wish to 'follow their dreams' (see, e.g., Gasselin, 2001; Hidalgo, 2015).

Concurrently, institutional and legal settings are changing. The current (2008) Ecuadorian Constitution categorises water use types (Article 318); rose farms' use is classified as 'productive', falling into the lowest status below 'human consumption', 'irrigation for food sovereignty', and 'environmental flow'. The recent Water Law (in force since 2014) and its upcoming by-laws are expected to regulate and enforce this categorisation. Given the deep contradictions in actual water control situations, this seems to be more a formal declaration than an enforceable policy. In the field, local Water Users' Associations (WUA) have traditionally defended their water rights against the agribusiness, but now must deal with their neighbours' small local rose farms.

This article focuses on peasant families copying the capitalist export farming dream, producing new water-related complexities, and water rights prioritisation regarding agricultural water uses – 'food versus flowers' – both in everyday water rights conflicts and under the new Water Law. It discusses how the material/discursive water rights conflict between flower export agriculture and subsistence-based food production has evolved with diversifying local production relationships and changing national water priorities.

The main question for this article is: Will the Ecuadorian Government's water use priority regulations support smallholders and 'water-for-food-sovereignty' communities in the Tabacundo flower production region? Four related subquestions that will be answered are (a) What modes of farming prevail in Tabacundo and why did some smallholders change from subsistence to small-scale flower production? (b) How did this induce conflicts over access to and control over irrigation water? (c) How does the Ecuadorian Government plan to intervene in water rights by prioritizing water use? And (d) How does the priority regulation affect the autonomy of water control by smallholder communities?

The study was conducted from October 2012 until October 2014, with follow-up research in 2015 and 2016. Fieldwork included participatory observation and 53 structured and 20 semi-structured interviews with large and small flower farms. Farmers were selected to be representative of all sectors in the watershed's two main irrigation systems with flower production: The Pisque canal and the Tabacundo *acequia*. Interviewees were asked about production figures, rationalities and histories; the fundamental reasons for establishing their rose greenhouses; concerning their dreams, motives, aspirations, and desires; and role models who prompted this decision. Also, four authorities at various administrative levels, eight community leaders and twelve Latin American academicians involved in Ecuador's debate on new water legislation and food sovereignty issues were interviewed. Structured feedback and debates on preliminary research findings were organized with 65 political ecology scholars in two Water Justice alliance meetings, in Quito (November 2013) and Cusco (November 2014). One small flower producer was studied in-depth in the Santo Domingo community. All interviews were in Spanish (by the authors). Additionally, two workshops were organized with community members to discuss current developments in agriculture and water, the impact of flower businesses on community dynamics, and the influence of new constitutional and legal

regulations. An audio-visual documentary was made with food- and flower-growing communities, and used for discussion and reflection among researchers and peasant families. The maps were based on available satellite images.

This article first explains the conceptual framework using the concept of 'mimetic desire' to analyse what drives peasants to shift to entrepreneurial farming. Then, we summarise historical agrarian change, water management and conflicts in the region. To illustrate the 'food or flower' debate's socioeconomic and politico-cultural relationships and locally specific dilemmas, we describe a community where some smallholders have decided to grow flowers. Next, we examine whether the new water law and its changing legal water-use priorities could benefit smallholder communities. After a discussion, we present our conclusions.

## 2. Conceptual framework

The research follows a political ecology approach to examine changing modes of farming, water conflicts and water-use prioritization, focussing on contradictions and interactions among community and commodity spheres (Golte and de la Cadena, 1983; Zoomers, 2010; Boelens et al., 2014; Higgins et al., 2014; Cid Aguayo and Latta, 2015), modes of farming and how the 'mimetic desire' mechanism shifts the social construction of needs and scarcity (Girard, 1961; cf. Illich, 1978, 2005; Achterhuis, 1988; Achterhuis et al., 2010). Finally, we link societal construction of needs to the Ecuadorian Government's water priority regulation and analyse how it affects water-user communities' autonomy and water control.

### 2.1. Commodification of peasant farming

To understand how indigenous peasants<sup>1</sup> shift from subsistence agriculture to small-scale flower production, we start by looking at peasant households' and communities' production and reproduction, which have been influenced by capitalist farming. Three (interconnected and overlapping) modes of farming may be distinguished in Andean agriculture: peasant farming, entrepreneurial farming and capitalist farming (Van der Ploeg, 2008).

In peasant farming, families own most of the means of production. Implicitly, their main purpose and underlying rationality is to reproduce their livelihood: part for family consumption and any surplus can be exchanged or sold locally. Most inputs are produced on-farm. Farm families sometimes complement their income with off-farm employment (locally or by temporary migration). While necessarily engaging and being confronted with capitalist production environments, the inherent rationale is that non-commodity Andean relationships ensure long-term reproduction and offer protection against the vicious circles of poverty, debt and exploitation (Boelens et al., 2014; Mayer, 2002; Van der Ploeg, 2008).

In the entrepreneurial mode, a farming family also owns most means of production, producing mostly for market (local, national or international). Most inputs are bought-in. Family members

<sup>1</sup> We use the concepts of 'indigenous', 'peasant' and 'community' as contextual, dynamic, relational constructs. In the Andean region, as Boelens observes: "the class-based definition (peasant, *campesino*) melds with ethnicity-based identification (indigenous, *indígena*) in complex, fluid ways, depending on who uses which labels in what period, context or place .... Both *campesino* and *indígena* concepts are part of fiercely debated identity politics. In the Andes, indigenous groups commonly use territory-bound names to refer to their identity" (2015:36). All smallholders in the Pisque region are considered *campesinos*, and most consider themselves *indígenas*. This paper does not distinguish between different types of smallholders, using 'peasant' and 'indigenous' interchangeably.

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