

The Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP) and El Colegio de México issue this **call for papers** for an interdisciplinary seminar on

“Poverty and peasant persistence in the contemporary world”

CROP and El Colegio de México jointly organize the interdisciplinary seminar in Mexico City, Mexico.

13-15 March 2012

It is quite widely known that most of the world's rural inhabitants are poor. Several studies state that approximately one billion inhabitants in rural settings are living in poverty. What is more challenging is to find empirically sound explanations about why households headed by peasants or rural day labourers are poor in quite different settings and why these are historically constant situations.

Usual answers revolve around the severe limitations of peasants' resources, which translate into low production levels and therefore low income. Other explanations relate to the fact that they are subject to various forms of exploitation and surplus extraction by other relatively powerful agents. However, this kind of approach would have some difficulties in explaining, for instance, why the majority of the farms existing in the USA had inadequate incomes for an acceptable living standard and their survival depended on their access to income from other sources, even though they are not subject to such limitations of resources. Even more problematic is it to explain this situation in different economic and social settings around the world.

The persistence of peasants and poor farmers in contemporary societies has defied all the predictions about their disappearance from the face of the earth by scholars from different traditions of thought and writers pertaining to the left and right ideological sphere. The classical conception of the development of capitalism in agriculture suggests for instance that, as in industry, the agrarian class-structure will tend to polarize and the small commodity producer will tend to disappear because of the development of market and social relations of production that tend to concentrate income and wealth in the hands of “most successful” economic and social agents. However, this argument has, apparently, been falsified by history. It looks like that in many countries of Africa, America, Asia and Europe, small farmers and peasants continue producing and adapting to the profound changes that have taken place during the last century.

A possible explanation of the persistence of a poor peasantry is the seasonality of agriculture and the fact that in capitalism prices only incorporate (as costs) the wages of days that have effectively been paid for. This explanation is developed further in the background paper for the workshop (available at www.crop.org). The argument is quite straightforward: the social cost of seasonality is absorbed by peasants (and rural wage workers) with the already known result of high human costs and enduring poverty. Peasants are forced to seek additional income outside their land. This thesis could also explain the rationality for agricultural subsidies in developed countries as social recognition of peasants' right to a minimum standard of living, without having to degrade their status by compelling them to hustle for temporary wage labour, meaning that the social cost of seasonality is absorbed by society as a whole. When this right is not acknowledged, peasants are condemned to enduring poverty.

The policy consequences of this situation differ according to the level of development, resources, and socio-political conditions of different countries. An interesting and provocative conclusion that could be drawn from that kind of thesis / argument is that instead of resisting or protesting against the agricultural subsidies of first-world countries, third-world countries – if they really want to reduce rural poverty – should also subsidise their peasants and protect them from overseas prices. However, the level of available financial resources to support such a normative conclusion certainly poses a challenge to its implementation in relatively less rich and developed countries.

Closely related to these issues is the topic of food security, raised as a crucial objective from many different viewpoints, interests and perspectives. Food price volatility (and in fact, high prices) will likely continue and possibly increase, making poor farmers, consumers and countries more vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity. This analysis is widely accepted in international organizations such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) which all agree that small, import-dependent countries – especially but not exclusively in Africa – are especially at risk. Many of these countries face severe problems following the world food and economic crises of 2006-08 and are certainly defying international efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of reducing by half — between 1990 and 2015 — the proportion of people in the developing world who suffer from hunger. This seminar will focus on, but not be limited to, questions like:

What explains the persistence of a large class of small peasants? What explains their persistent poverty? Are the answer(s) to these two questions linked and, if so, how (not)? What are sound policies for eradicating poverty among peasants? What is the relation between food security and the reality of poor farmers?

Thus, the aim of the workshop will be to critically examine the above-mentioned interrelated topics in order to provide explanations and answers that could trigger new lines of thought. Ideally, it will also contribute to providing theoretical and empirical evidence to sustain sound policy actions toward the eradication of peasant poverty and an increased level of food security in all countries, especially in those where poverty and hunger combine in an unacceptable way. This is an unavoidable scientific and policy objective for the near future because even in the very unlikely event that the first MDG were achieved by 2015, around 600 million people would still be severely undernourished in developing countries.



Photo: Oscarsoj/WWW.SXC.IU

The event will bring together a maximum of 25 participants across different disciplines.

This Call for Papers is open to potential participants throughout the world although preference will be given to researchers based in Latin America and the Caribbean. We expect that all participants selected will be active in both the presentations and discussions of papers and we require personal presence during all the days of the seminar. The organizers will cover costs for lodging and meals during the days of the event. In the case of co-authored papers, only one of the authors may participate in the application process for a workshop grant. In general, selected participants are responsible for their own travel expenses and insurance. There will be a limited number of travel grants available. These will be assigned according to criteria, which include geographic origin, and the relevance, quality, and originality of the submitted abstracts. In the case of co-authored papers, only one of the authors may participate in the application process for a travel grant. *The Seminar will be conducted in English.*

THE DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION OF ABSTRACTS IS:

MONDAY 12 December 2011.

The Abstract should include: the title of the proposed paper and a summary of its theme, including its central argument and hypothesis or research question. References to theory, methodology, and findings of the proposed paper **SHOULD NOT EXCEED ONE PAGE IN LENGTH**. A brief (max. 1 page) CV with a list of your recent publications and activities should be included together with the abstract. Please also *clearly* indicate your name, title, gender, nationality, postal and e-mail address, and telephone and FAX numbers if applicable. The abstract (1 page) and summary of your CV (1 page), max 2 pages in total (notice that submissions exceeding 2 pages will not be evaluated by the Academic Programme committee), should be sent via e-mail to *The CROP Secretariat*, at the following email address:

[crop@uib.no].

The participants will be notified once the Academic Committee determines whether a proposal has been accepted or not, and be given information regarding the format/guidelines for the final version of papers, which must be submitted by **Friday 10 February 2012.**