



Interview with Carlos Carballo: “Agrarian transformations go hand in hand with the awareness we build with organized urban society.”

By Yanina Settembrino and Gabriela Cogo, for ROOTS.

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Carlos Carballo is an agricultural engineer who graduated from the Faculty of Agronomy of the University of Buenos Aires (FAUBA); he is a teacher and researcher. As a member of the FAUBA Human Rights Commission, since the early 2000s, he promoted, together with others, the creation of an Open Course about Food Sovereignty within the scope of this academic unit.

Why a Free Chair of Food Sovereignty? What does this figure mean, and in what context is it created?



The figure of the Free Chair was incorporated into the Argentine University Statute after the Reform in 1918. The reformers of that time considered that many of the social demands and advances in science, art, and culture were not included in the curricula of university study plans. That is what the Free Chairs or Open Chairs were designed for, with the aim of bringing into the university curriculum those topics that arose in society, but that were not yet formally contemplated.

The first Free Chair of Food Sovereignty was created at the National University of La Plata, in 2003, in the context of the great food crisis that Argentina was going through.

Only in 2011 did we establish the Free Chair in the Faculty of Agronomy of the University of Buenos Aires. It was not a simple process at all. Since our progress, the Nutrition program of the Faculty of Medical Sciences has also managed to form its chair, thanks to the hard work of the Student Center. Since then, they have been multiplying throughout the country.

Currently we are more than 60 groups, Free Chairs and Open Chairs that, with different degrees of institutional formality, address the problem of Food Sovereignty. In many cases, other related topics are also addressed, such as family farming, agroecology, society, the environment or nutrition, among others.

Who is part of the Free Chairs?

The University Statute does not establish a mandatory composition, so in each case it is different. In most cases, it is made up of teachers, graduates, and students from the same university, and others. In many cases, representatives of organizations committed to family farming, producer organizations, employee organizations, consumer groups, and environmentalist groups also participate. It is presented as a democratic, pluralistic, and intersectoral space. That is, it does not replicate the levels of hierarchy of traditional University Chairs.

Throughout the country, there are approximately 500 to 600 people who are part of the Free Chairs network, with an average of between 15 and 20 people per chair. People who are actively and permanently part of it, with responsibility, work, and ties to the territory. And we coordinate with ten groups and organizations of a local, provincial, regional or national nature, which have a permanent exchange with the chairs.

How are these chairs inserted into a student's educational cycle?



Each chair designs its strategy according to its degree of insertion in the university, and with the spaces it considers most necessary or favorable.

A few offer systematic annual courses. They are optional courses that grant academic credits to those who take them. Some chairs allow the participation of different social actors, even if they are not students or part of the university community. That is, they are open professorships. However, getting this institutionally recognized has not been easy. At FAUBA, for example, we go through this debate.

In 2012, we presented the proposal for the Free Chair to the Board of Directors. It was quickly approved, as a subject aimed at the university community, with the same criteria as the other subjects. But when we proposed that representatives of social organizations, fair producers, and other community actors could also participate as students, the response was emphatically negative.

The argument was that *“That means lowering the level”*. For us, this participation was fundamental; we said: *Who can bring the voice of agroecology, if not those who are building it in the territory? Who can bring the voice, the experience, and the demands of the social economy, if not the community that builds it? What graduate of our university can bring those voices?* And that does not reduce the level, but rather integrates, favors, and multiplies.

After an entire year of intense discussions, the Board of Directors finally approved our proposal. Chairs in the rest of the country followed this model, and in general had fewer problems with approval.

Since that year, we have been teaching the course continuously, in person, with exceptions such as during the Covid-19 pandemic when we kept it virtual. The richest thing about the course is its participatory dynamic: we divide the students into work groups, and each group must visit, analyze and reflect on a specific experience of building food sovereignty and agroecology. This is then presented as a final work.



Participatory visit in the course of 2024. Photo: CALISA_FAUBA

What content is part of a food sovereignty chair?

In general, with nuances related to the diversity of the territory, we start from the basis that the food problem – and, therefore, food sovereignty – cannot be understood without considering the agri-food system as a whole.

Then we include content related to the production, preparation, and distribution of food. And there is a dimension that we work very hard on and that we consider fundamental: consumption, related to food and nutrition.

This last aspect is central to our work, especially in the chairs of more massive universities, which are usually located in large cities.

Argentine society has a high degree of urbanization: more than 90% of the population is urban. From this growing urbanization, and from the history of worker organization and urban movements, one of the strongest ideas that we work on as a collective arises: Agrarian transformations are deeply linked to the consciousness that manages to build organized urban society.

The debate on food-health – which includes the debate on income, occupation, sub-occupation, family organization, dynamics of family insertion in labor markets, women's participation, family reorganization – is key to the processes we are going through as a society.



You talked about how the food issue is crossed by multiple dimensions. However, in the Faculty of Agronomy, this issue seems to be very far away. What role do you think interdisciplinary plays in addressing this?

In this, the collaboration of colleagues from the Free Chair of the Faculty of Medical Sciences was essential, because they incorporate the dimension of food, nutrition and health.

Currently, two of the six classes in our course are taught by members of the Nutrition department. And last year, in one of those classes, a classmate made us all cook. We did it in the college dining room, and each person brought their board, their apron, and their kitchen items. We prepared the food while we debated.

This is one of the richest and most mobilizing practices we do: that all activities include shared food. That is, include the experience. We all carry food and share what we carry, why we carry it, what it means, how we prepare it.

We recover a meeting space around food, and we dedicate a few moments to reflect on food. And this leads us to reflect on something fundamental: Who produces our food? Where do they come from? How are they produced? And there is a name for those foods that we use: *"This rice is produced by such an organization, with such characteristics," "This vegetable is produced by María and her family with such practices"*. That generates an approach to the agricultural production system, to the rural, makes us more aware and supportive of the struggles and demands of the agricultural sectors.



The classes include the participation of rural and urban organizations, and the experience of the students themselves. Photos: CALISA-FAUBA.



In these times, the University's contribution to the current needs of society is under discussion. In that sense, what do you think the Free Chairs of Food Sovereignty contribute to students as future technicians and professionals?

In my opinion, the students who go through the Free Chairs of Food Sovereignty in general already have some type of concern, motivation, and sensitivity. The university does not generate that for you. Most teachers and professionals are not committed to this approach. Neither in health careers, nor in nutrition, nor those linked to agricultural production or technology.

The problem that we try to incorporate from these chairs comes from marginality. And fight from the margins. Incorporating areas or teachers into this reflection is our great advance.

Now, a professorship – no matter how committed and well thought out – cannot change the *chip* that comes from all the previous training, from the dominant approach. That's why we always thought that we had to get the community into the university. That by fighting from the spaces available in the formal chairs, we were not going to achieve real change. That's why we put a lot of effort into creating a fair within the Faculty. Thinking that the participation of the fair's actors, organizations, foundations, associations of all types, sizes, and colors, with their diversity, could move more structures than any academic discourse, no matter how good it may be.

At the fair, there are organizations of agroecological and social economy producers, and for them, it is a very valuable marketing space. It is a collective in which around 150 actors participate, with periodic assemblies. This group is crossed by discussions, but it has life, it is sustained, it is maintained, it is recreated, and it is a proposal of enormous vitality recognized throughout the city of Buenos Aires.

We are convinced that this is the way. But the fair is not enough. We urgently need an active, massive, concrete presence within the university, of all the actors who build Food Sovereignty. And that is not achieved with speeches, but rather through action.

The Food Sovereignty chairs recognize our marginality, we are a space for struggle within the university. One more space for struggle that has the obligation and commitment – not easy – to articulate with the other spaces in struggle.



Producer-to-Consumer Fair at the Faculty of Agronomy. Photos: CALISA-FAUBA.

What do you consider to be the greatest achievement you have had in these years?

The chairs operate in a network: from 2022, we created a national coordination, with a representative from each of the regions, who guides the objectives and strategies. The main articulation tool has been the Annual Reports on the Situation of Food Sovereignty in Argentina. Reports that we have been building for three years, from the territories, from below, with the participation of various social actors and organizations.

And I consider that these Reports express one of our most important achievements. We achieved great recognition from social actors and organizations. We made our contribution to make Food Sovereignty more visible, accompanying the processes and struggles that were already taking place in the territories.

Last year we presented the Food Sovereignty Situation Report at the National University of Jujuy. Authorities from the University were present at the presentation, but there was also support from the parliament of San Salvador de Jujuy. This institutional recognition is another of the achievements of our space.

So, there are small advances in institutional recognition. The University authorities are present at the inauguration of our courses. We present an annual report of our work. The activities we carry out have the Faculty logo. We have our own physical space. One of our main references, Miriam Gorban, has received **honorary doctorate** from several universities.

There is formal recognition of the institution. But that has to grow.

We have to put the role of the Public University at the center of the debate – and in some way we are doing it with our space. How the Public University contributes to knowledge, understanding and commitment to the food issue; and what must change to respond to a social demand of such importance.



We have much left to do. And we are going to do it with the social movements within the university, or we are not going to achieve it.



Presentation of the 2023 Annual Report on the Situation of Food Sovereignty in Argentina. Photo: CALISA-FAUBA

At this time when there is a transition in the global agri-food system, in the way food is produced in the world, do you think that agroecology and the most sustainable forms of production have the opportunity to provide a solution to the problem of food in the world?

The problem of food is urgent; It is not new, but it is dramatic and urgent. We have to build agreements on how to address the food issue of our population. It is not an option, it is an obligation. Although of course it is not easy.

In the case of Argentina, the central debate is the transition in the production model. What is needed, what are the measures to build a transition that dismantles an agri-food model that has been installed in the country in the last 50-60 years, both politically, socially and culturally. There have been institutional advances in the recognition and promotion of peasant agriculture and agroecology. But the structural problem of natural resources remains intact, and the Argentine agrarian model continues to advance in concentration and foreignization of lands.



There are colleagues in the university, in social movements, in political parties who propose “*the path is agrarian reform*”. But the question is, How do we get to that Agrarian Reform? What do we need to build to get there?

A fundamental step is the agroecological transition. And the peri-urban areas are a central space for this struggle and these discussions. Because they are meeting places between producers and consumers, of articulation between the rural and the urban, which have to gain in quantity, quality, and organization.

Thinking about the future, there is a great participation of youth in these spaces. What do you think young people contribute to the course, and what do they take away?

Youth brings us voices, demands and ways of seeing reality that are different in many aspects. And they receive the possibility of participating in a pluralistic and democratic space, something that is not common at the university. In other spaces they can't even speak. And here they talk, propose, question, discuss. That is a seed of a more participatory university – and of a society.

Books, the university or the internet give them some things; But what is felt, what is lived, what is fought, what is worked in the community, is fundamental for training, for understanding and for social participation. It contributes to generating a participant, an actor whose fundamental role has to be in society and not in the academy.

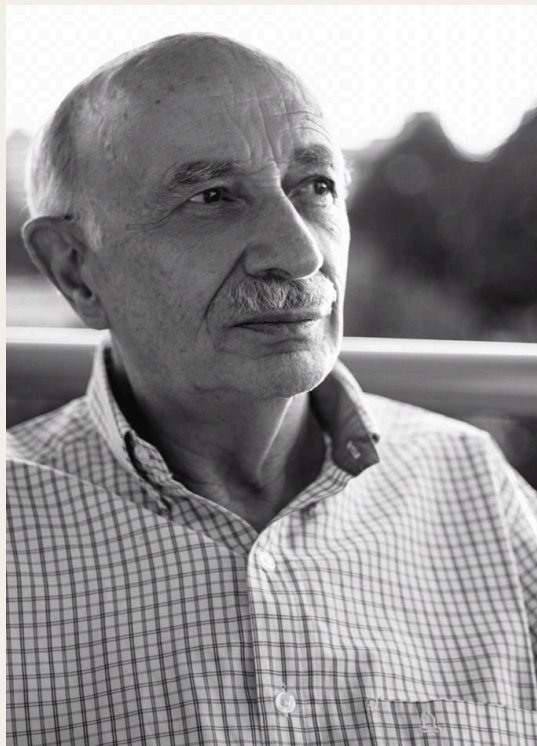
That evidently contradicts the dominant message of the academy, and is one of the points of conflict we have.

But it seems to me that the task of the chairs is fundamental. They bring together groups of students from different disciplines, of different ages, with other social actors. They work together, they go through the process of learning about productive and community experiences together. It is a collective construction that strengthens organizational ties.

What challenges do you have in the future?

We are committed to accompanying those who in different places, whether in Argentina or throughout Latin America, work on the issue of Food Sovereignty. That is our small contribution from the University.

But we need to advance, in a more systematic way, in the permanent participation of social organizations and movements in the University. So that the University builds responses and contributions to the demands and needs of society. That is one of the many challenges we have left.



Carlos Carballo is an Agricultural Engineer of the UBA, creator and referent of the Free Chair of Alimentary Sovereignty. Photo: CALISA-FAUBA.
