

HONDURAS

Sweet as a nut

Hondurans fight drought and poverty with cashews

A female-led community group in the dry south of the country are diversifying crops to adapt to the climate crisis. Now they are reaping the bounty. Cashew trees don't need much water and improve the soil condition, as well as providing an income for people in Choluteca, Honduras.



Photograph: Sarah Johnson/The Guardian

Five years ago, Lucia Alvarez's plot of land was used to grow corn, a staple of the Honduran diet. She was struggling to survive. Her house lies 4km along a dirt track from the nearest town, El Triunfo, in the department of Choluteca, in the south of Honduras. Opportunities for work are scarce, and months of drought followed by unpredictable rains each year meant that harvests were damaged or ruined over and over again.

"We had huge problems," she says. "There was no rain. Then, on the few occasions it did rain, it would pour and ruin all the crops." Now, walking through the same plot of land, she explains how it has been transformed. "Before, none of this was here," she says, ducking beneath the branch of one of the cashew trees she planted three years ago. They have begun to bear fruit and she has three sacks full of cashew seeds to sell, providing income as well as a source of inspiration to her family.



Damaged corn in rural Choluteca, where drought, plagues and unpredictable rains caused by climate crisis often affect crops.

Photograph: Orlando Sierra/AFP/Getty Images

El Triunfo lies within the dry corridor – an area of Central America that covers parts of Honduras as well as El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Costa Rica. “The dry corridor has big problems in terms of being vulnerable to climate change,” says Danilo Manzanares, coordinator of Mesa Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional, a steering group seeking solutions to drought in the south of Honduras. “Everything floods, or it’s the opposite – it doesn’t rain. It’s terrible, and getting worse.”

In response, more people in the region are pivoting to cashew trees and harvesting the seeds, explains Manzanares. Native to Honduras, alongside traditional crops such as corn, beans and yuca, cashews could be a way for people in this area to build resilience and adapt to the effects of the climate crisis, he adds.

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It is an approach that the World Food Programme (WFP) is advocating for those experiencing high levels of food insecurity in the region, says Gustavo Tábora, field monitor of the WFP in Choluteca. “It’s better to have a mixture of crops because people need diversity. Corn, over time, depletes the soil [of its nutrients]. You have to look for and give alternatives so that people can provide for, and feed, themselves.”

Cashew trees don’t need much water; they improve the condition of the soil and provide a habitat for flora and fauna; the climate is favourable for growing them; and the trees provide wood, fruit and seeds – all of which can be sold. I’ve seen people able to buy their own land and educate their children, who have then gone into professions

Alvarez is one of 38 members of the community cooperative Caja Rural 15 de Enero, formed in 2018, and focusing on cashew trees. The trees were already present in the area but no one knew how to harness their potential, explains cooperative president Hilda Betancourt. “The situation here in 2018 was terrible,” she says. “Poverty comes accompanied by little money but also a lack of knowledge. Even if we had potential, we couldn’t fulfil it without knowing how. We weren’t able to take advantage of the few resources we had.” The previous year, the WFP had begun to work with vulnerable families, teaching them how to make best use of the land and grow various fruit and vegetables. The cooperative, made up mostly of women, saw the potential in cashew trees. They take about three years to bear cashew apples; the nuts, still in their shell, are removed from the ends of the fruits and sold to the cooperative, whose members are then paid to process them. The shells are dried in the sun for three days before being cracked open by hand or using a special tool. They are then dried in the sun briefly again before being soaked in water and baked for three minutes.



Hilda Betancourt, president of Caja Rural 15 de Enero, a community cooperative developing cashew crops in El Triunfo.

Photograph: Sarah Johnson/The Guardian

At this point, the cooperative sells them to an intermediary, which sells the raw nuts on to a more advanced operation with the equipment to process them into ready-to-eat cashews. The cooperative's cashew operation is still in its infancy and far from being a stable source of income for the community. This is the second year they have been able to harvest seeds, but their trees are still vulnerable to the weather. The most recent harvest was affected by strong winds.

Betancourt would like to buy machinery so they can streamline and manage the entire process, but it costs thousands of pounds. This is currently out of reach for the cooperative without outside help.

One company in El Triunfo that manages the whole process in-house is Etramasot. It started in 2003 and now has a network of 92 farmers who grow cashew trees and sell seeds to the company. It has branched out into producing dried cashew fruit and nut-flavoured beverages, including wine.

Almi Martínez, 34, the current president, has seen lives transformed through the company. "I've seen people able to buy their own land, animals, and educate their children who have gone into professions," she says.



Almi Martínez president of Etramasot cashew company in El Triunfo.

Photograph: Sarah Johnson/The Guardian

She wants to start exporting to Europe and so provide employment to young people in the region, many of whom take the perilous migratory route to the US. “Some are lucky and get there, some don’t,” she says. “That’s what motivates us and others to keep going in our fight to help.” Betancourt is constantly thinking about how to expand and provide a better future for her children and community. The cooperative has already changed how others view her. “Women often have fewer opportunities, so when you give us an opportunity, even a small one, we take full advantage of it,” she says. “It’s something really emotional. I feel pleased that people don’t view us women as the weaker sex any more, but as strong people.”