

## **What will be the fate of the rural youth in Paraguay?**

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*Abstract.* The paper considers the relationship between the structure of human capital and the intensive displacement of young peasants in contemporary Paraguay. In the description of the agrarian economy, the author defines the peasant sector as a part of the agrarian structure with dynamics strongly determined by agribusiness which is integrated into the neoliberal agrifood regime as an important component of globalized markets. The author's approach to the study of human capital and migration of young farmers is based on Amartya Sen's theory of human capital, according to which both the development of actors' ability to increase production and the definition of the valuable type of life are closely associated with the dominant means of socialization affecting the rural youth (educational possibilities, information-communication technologies, other means for producing meanings). Today these means are dominated by hegemonic knowledge in the interests of large corporations.

*Key words:* rural youth, human capital, displacement of young peasants, Paraguay, agrarian economy, peasant economy, agribusiness, neoliberal agrifood regime

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### **Introductory notes**

Today rural population represents 31% of the total world population of 6,187,644 due to the intensive rural-urban migration which has peculiarities in a society that did not achieve the level of industrial urban development. The social-economic and demographic situation in rural areas, especially of young peasants, is affected by both features of family-economic units and regional dynamics. In turn, the peasant sector is part of the agrarian structure dominated by agribusiness that expands due to accumulation by dispossession in the agro-based country (for instance, in 2022 in Paraguay GDP per capita reached 6,260 USD and has significantly increased in recent years). In the economy Paraguay as a country with an agrarian base, the expanded agricultural production stands out and together with agribusiness constituted a quarter of GDP from 2008 to 2019 and 43% of exports (Birbaumer, 2024).

In such an agrarian structure, agribusiness grows rapidly at the expense of the peasant sector, GMOs are its main products under

the state priorities of extensive growth based on its comparative advantages. Compliance with the roadmap developed by the United States experts, the subsequent national support for large biotechnology corporations and the unconditional agreement of the Paraguayan state with the imperatives of transnational capital bore economic fruits with negative collateral effects for human health and environment. Agrarian extractivism as a result of the neoliberal agri-food regime has transgenic soybeans as an emblematic crop in Paraguay, which with some other crops constitutes 95% of the country's cultivated area (CAN, 2022), making Paraguay today the most transgenized country according to the ISAAA (International Service for Agricultural Biotechnology Applications), since the largest part of its area is occupied by transgenic crops (ISAAA, 2017).

The paper considers the relationship between expulsion of young peasants from rural areas and the theory of human capital; the author's ideas are based on the secondary analysis of national censuses data and relevant publications. The data of agricultural censuses allowed to identify changes in the agrarian structure of Paraguay in the last fifteen years, while the data of the Integrated Household Survey of the National Institute of Statistics (2023) helped to identify the relationship between educational and labor market possibilities. The author also refers to the data collected in the ongoing research project conducted by the CERI on the social-demographic situation of the rural youth in Paraguay.

### Agribusiness and the peasant economy

Table 1 shows the remarkable growth of the transgenic soybeans share in the agrarian economy of Paraguay: from 1,200,000 hectares cultivated in the 1999–2000 agricultural year to 3,504,707 hectares in the 2023–2024 agricultural year. The government policy favors exports based on such a productive specialization determined that in the border departments of the Eastern Region, there are dynamically expanding zones of Brazilian agriculture. Thus, since the 1970s, the Paraguayan economic development is associated with the Brazilian economic miracle, which allowed Paraguay to stop being a stagnant and recessive economy associated with the crisis of the dominant traditional oligarchy (Hill, 1993).

*Table 1.* Situation with transgenic soybeans in Paraguay, selected years (Fogel, Valdez, 2022; CAPECO, 2024; INBIO 2024)

Agricultural year	Area (hectares)	Harvest volume	Yield (kg/ha)
1999–2000	1200000	2911423	2426
2003–2004	1936623	3911415	2020

2009–2010	2680182	6462429	2411
2013–2014	3254982	8189542	2516
2015–2016	3380480	9216937	2823
2019–2020	3500000	10250800	2929
2020–2021	3400000	9518600	2800
2021–2022	3300000	4380736	1327
2022–2023	3687091	9859716	2700
2023–2024	3504707	10002020	2854

The production of transgenic soybeans is typical for extractive economies of the neoliberal agri-food regime due to the advances of genetic engineering and interests of large biotechnology corporations and the state (Cáceres, 2015; Ezquerro-Cañete, Fogel, 2018). In Paraguay, the production of transgenic soybeans is associated with land grabbing by Brazilian soybean growers: they are direct producers but subordinate to large corporations that control technology, processing and marketing; thus, there are two directions for the outflow of surplus product from the country.

Both the expansion of capitalist development in agriculture and public policies created favorable conditions for reproducing this productive system to such an extent that expansion of soybeans in Paraguay was much more intensive than in other countries of the region — the cultivated area increased by 2.3 times from 2002 to 2016 (Fogel, Valdez, 2022). Although in recent years the expansion of the soybean frontier has slowed down, in the intercensal period 2008–2022, there has been an increase by more than 43 % in the cultivated area and a more than doubling of the area under transgenic corn (Table 2), while the area under commercial rice cultivation increased fivefold during the intercensal period. Concerning the traditional peasant agricultural crops, basically used for food, their crops decreased substantially in the period under consideration.

Table 2. Sown area (in ha) of main agricultural crops

Crops	2008	2022	Variation
Normal soybeans harvest and zafriña	2463510	3539808	43.7%
Normal corn harvest	296434	229120	-22.7%
Zafriña harvest corn	472469	963090	103.8%
Irrigated rice	33870	205744	507.5%

Cassava (Birbaumer, 2024)	141470	125464	-9,3%
Other crops	29224	29975	2,6%
Total	3436977	5093201	48,2%

Source: Author's calculations based on the data of agricultural censuses (CAN, 2008; 2022)

The contrast between the remarkable growth of agribusiness, reflected in the cultivated area of transgenic soybeans, and the peasant sector, reflected in the cultivated area of cassava (its main crop) is presented in Table 3: from 1991 to 2022, while the area under oil-seed crops increased sevenfold, the area under cassava decreased substantially. This expansion of agribusiness completely reconfigures the agrarian structure, turning the rural space into soybean deserts.

Table 3. Cassava and soybean cultivated area (in ha) (CAN, 1991; 2008; 2022)

Year	Cassava	Index	Soy	Index
1991	160762	100	500000	100
2008	141470	88	2463510	498
2022	125464	78	3539808	704

In 2022, the population living on 291,497 farms decreased by 40% compared to 2008, and 87% of this reduction was in farms of less than 20 hectares, i.e., peasant farms, which seem to be disappearing. In the analysis of this situation, the critical agrarian-studies perspective is relevant as based on historical materialism which focuses on class modes of production and particularly on the development of the capitalist mode of production and the class struggle associated with it. The 1917 Russian Revolution revived the still ongoing debate between Chayanov, Lenin and Kautsky, which considers the extent of capitalist relations' penetration into the peasant economy, causing differentiation of proletarians and capitalist entrepreneurs (Shanin, 1974; Kay, 2015; Bernstein et al, 2018). The question is whether this differentiation takes place in Paraguay.

### **More development, less employment**

Given that transgenic soybeans, the flagship crop of agribusiness, are capital-intensive, the number of paid workers on business farms fell by 58% from 2008 to 2022. The paradox is that as agribusiness grows, employment declines: according to the 2022 Agricultural Census, productive units of less than 5 hectares hired 80 workers per 1,000 hectares, while large agricultural compa-

nies of 10,000 and more hectares hired an average of 1.1 workers per 1,000 hectares (Birbaumer, 2024). The comparison of the data of 1991 and 2008 censuses shows a substantial decrease in temporary paid labor which reached 74.8%, while permanent paid labor remained unchanged. Thus, in Paraguay at the current stage of agrarian capitalism, agribusiness separates the peasant from land without out proletarianization. The capital-labor relationship is displaced by the capital-nature one, and to this extent Lenin's thesis about the development of agrarian capitalism as resulting in a social structure with antagonistic classes in relation to production is not implemented.

Large soybean companies, which certainly were not established by rich peasants, with their highly developed technologies displace peasants without providing employment possibilities, and temporary proletarianization is basically determined by those peasant units that hire labor to meet their needs, and only in a few cases these are rich peasants and capitalist entrepreneurs. Thus, in the prevailing historical circumstances, we do not witness the formation of the peasant working class based on the division of labor, same material interests (even the group of uprooted and migrants) and a common conscience of those being dispossessed; those who have already been uprooted become dependent on multiple strategies that include precarious jobs in urban belts and receiving remittances. The uprooting increases the atomization of peasant productive units and weakens the peasant actor; in addition to the growing heterogeneity of material interests, there are regional differences. Likewise, the rural class struggle connected with land (in Paraguay with the agro-export economy) weakens, since the class conflict is of a local scale.

Chayanov's ideas on the organization and development of the peasant economy are still useful for understanding the contemporary situation: the economic size of the family unit is determined by the intensity of land use, which creates the strata of small peasants (poor), large family units (rich peasants) and middle peasants. As for the demographic cycle of the peasant economy, Chayanov argues that the heads of families grow old, which starts the replacement cycle, and in this way the peasant economy is reproduced (Nikulin et al, 2023; Shanin et al, 2024). Considering the demographic cycle of the peasant economy in Paraguay, from 2008 to 2022 the age group of 15–24 years old decreased by 66% (the youth), while the group aged 65 and older increased by 13%, indicating that the rural population is aging, and in the medium term the peasant economy will not be able to reproduce. In this scenario, society will feel the reduction of food; it should be noted that in the last ten years the value of imported food has doubled (Table 4), and the lack of generational change would exacerbate the problem of food insecurity.

Table 4. Food imports in Paraguay (BCP, 2019)

Year	Value	Volume
	(thousands of US \$)	(tons)
2008	338237	277754
2010	361867	300475
2014	493400	348975
2016	452903	346025
2018	573227	508634
2020	499194	647565
2022	676377	*639903
2023	*712883	*555730

\* Values are subject to change

There are various consequences for the displaced rural population that cannot adequately integrate into the urban world, since separation from land means losing the habitual way of life, and the youth is the most vulnerable in such a situation. I consider as the main factors pushing young peasants from the countryside the features the family economic unit, regional dynamics and human capital, which means that agribusiness has a strong impact on the agrarian structure, being driven by the neoliberal agri-food regime that operates at the global level. Paraguay has such a specific feature as the state capture by agribusiness. The ruling elite, in exchange for political and economic support of large corporations and Brazilian soybean growers, provides tax exemptions and deregulates their activities. With the lowest taxes in the region (OECD, 2021), there is little room for public investment in human capital, and Paraguay is among the countries with the lowest school performance.

Agribusiness contributes to the economic growth measured by GDP but at the same time destructs biodiversity and worsens the environment and human health due to the increasing and indiscriminate use of pesticides. For instance, in Paraguay cancer mortality rates are still higher than the economic growth (Figure 1); it should be noted that the WHO considers the Bayer's use of glyphosate (herbicide from Monsanto) a cause of cancer. Infant mortality due to deformities, morbidity and mortality due to neurological disorders, which are determined by environmental factors, have also increased (Fogel, 2018).

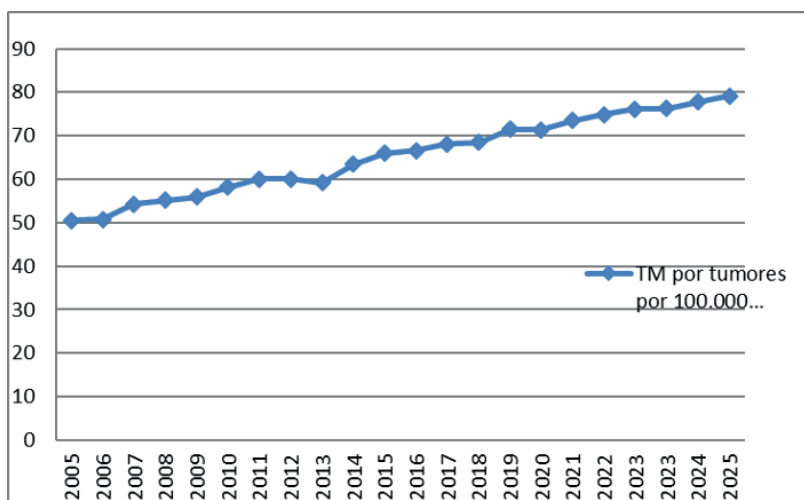


Figure 1. Cancer mortality rate per 100,000 in Paraguay

Source: Ministerio de Salud Pública y Bienestar Rural 2005–2022

With some regional variations, agribusiness constitutes a factor that strongly affects the peasant economy and pushes younger generations from the countryside, responding to the globalized markets' imperatives, i.e., national economic actors operate at the global level. The key actors in agribusiness are those linked to the neoliberal food regime, including representatives of large transnational corporations that use biotechnology. They are the most important economic protagonists in the neoliberal food regime: Table 5 shows the main transnational corporations operating in Paraguay and overseeing the entire production process (processing, export and/or distribution of biotechnological products, especially soybeans, soybean oil and beef), since medium-sized and large agribusiness entrepreneurs are subordinated to global corporations.

Table 5. Largest exporters/importers in Paraguay in 2022 (US \$)

Corporation	Export	Import
Cargill	676145059	34302233
Beef	569495446	15261181
Frigorífico Concepción	560775492	31281
ADM	357438239	781695
Compañía Paraguaya de Granos	342692454	ND

Agrofertil (Grupo Sarabia)	267996748	88416182
COFCO S.A.	131855781	ND
Mosaic S.R.L.	ND	194003759
Monsanto S.A.	1653	40950560
Syngenta S.A.	1571217	107017688
Sodrugestvo	63672633	ND

Source: Centro de Importadores del Paraguay, 2023

On the global scale, some of these transnational corporations control the production of inputs, others monopolize the export of agribusiness products or control processing. Five corporations — Syngenta, Dow, BASF, DuPont and Bayer-Monsanto — control 75% of the market. Their economic power, media support and dishonest practices largely explain the support of their ideas by local professionals who extol the benefits of the system. Of the eleven largest agribusiness companies in imports and exports, two export beef (Brazilian owned and control most of the beef processing and export). In beef production, Brazilian companies participate at all stages — production, processing, export and distribution. Large corporations are connected to the capital of the Global North; however, many transnational corporations are basically Brazilian.

In recent years, the participation of capital from other countries of the Global South (in addition to Brazil) has increased; thus, part of the COFCO capital belongs to the Chinese who also participate in the Syngenta. Giant Chinese corporations produce highly toxic pesticides, for instance paraquat. Russia is also present among the largest corporations of agribusiness (Sodrugestvo). Among the key agribusiness actors in Paraguay, there are Brazilian producers of soybeans, who got the best land in the department bordering Brazil in the Eastern region. The continuous expansion of the Brazilian economy in Paraguay is based on land grabbing, control of soy production and livestock agribusiness, processing and export of beef and maquila. On the other hand, Brazil is also an importer of wheat, rice, corn and meat; therefore, in alliance with Brazil Paraguay joins global value chains with soybeans, meat and recently rice. Soy is an expression of Brazilian geopolitical power and one of the pillars of its participation in the multipolar world; soy contributes to the Brazilian payment balance with China and facilitates the Brazilian control of land in different countries, including in Africa (Oliveira, 2016).

In the analysis of the behavior of young peasants in general and of their migration orientations Amartya Sen's theory of human capital (2003) is of special relevance. According to this theory, both agents' abilities (to increase production) and their definition of a decent life are closely associated with the dominant means of socialization, that is, educational possibilities, information-communication technologies

and in general means of producing meanings, which today seem to support the interests of large corporations. As for the education system, the PISA-D tests show that seven out of ten Paraguayans do not understand what they read and that Paraguay is second to last in the ranking of countries that passed the test (Ultima Hora, 2023c); due to peasant emigration, many rural schools were closed (Sanabria et al, 2024). The educational system, including universities, hinders the employment of young people in agriculture. According to the Integrated Household Survey of the National Institute of Statistics and the ongoing research of CERI (Sanabria et al, 2024), there is the following relationship between educational level and employment in agriculture<sup>1</sup>: the longer young people remain in the education system, the more they become disconnected from agriculture<sup>2</sup>.

In Paraguay, development understood as exclusively GDP growth denies human development (functional illiteracy, diseases). The longer young people remain in the education system, the lesser are chances for their employment in agriculture. The image supported the information-communication technology discredits the technology of peasant and ecologically friendly agriculture; young people can no longer imagine themselves with a hoe in hand and other traditional implements, since such practices are discredited by the media. Five television channels owned by agribusiness extol its advantages, thus, changing the definition of what is valuable in life, which was developed in the theory of human capital by Amartya Sen. The CERI field study showed that young people associated with *Via Campesina*, a coalition from the Global South, have different ideas about the value of life and production in agriculture compared to those imposed by global agribusiness. From the peasant-economy perspective, large agribusiness corporations are perpetrators from both the Global North and the Global South.

Private higher education implies careers that do not suggest agrarian or rural employment: economic programs focus on marketing and business administration, while agronomy — on agribusiness,

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1. The 2023 Continuous Household Survey data was used; the multivariate logistic regression model was applied: response variable — occupation in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors; explanatory variables — social-demographic (gender, years of study, type of household according to its members and region) and social-economic characteristics (type of employment and type of household according to the poverty level).
  2. Young family members who do not receive wages are 50% more likely to work in the agricultural sector, followed by self-employed (26%) and employers (16%). Those in extreme poverty are 28% more likely to work in agriculture. Each additional year of education reduces this probability by 2%, and being a woman reduces it by 24%, indicating a gender gap. Young people in Caaguazú have a 7% higher chance of being employed in agriculture, while in Cordillera this chance is 11% lower compared to San Pedro.

excluding agroecology. Thus, one university with the largest number of branches in the regions of the country has the slogan “to train leaders in agribusiness” and a cooperation agreement with the Monsanto<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the academic career implies following ideas disseminated by scientific journals of the large publishing platforms that reproduce hegemonic knowledge. They extol the benefits of advanced technology and biotechnology, in general supporting economic deregulation and protection of large corporate investment. Researchers are required to publish in the so-called ‘high impact’ journals of the large publishing platforms, but for research results to be published, they must follow theories of hegemonic knowledge (such as genetic engineering, monocultures of the neo-liberal agri-food regime, biofuels and green hydrogen production, etc.).

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### Какая судьба ждет сельскую молодежь Парагвая?

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*Аннотация.* В статье рассмотрена взаимосвязь между структурой человеческого капитала и интенсивным вытеснением молодежи с сельских территорий современного Парагвая. Описывая состояние аграрной экономики страны, автор определяет крестьянский сектор как часть аграрной структуры, развитие которой в значительной степени определяется интересами агробизнеса как компонента неолиберального агропродовольственного режима и важной части глобализированных рынков. Авторский подход к изучению человеческого капитала и миграции молодых фермеров (сельского населения) основан на предложенной Амартией Сеном концепции человеческого капитала, согласно которой и развитие способностей экономических акторов в целях наращивания производства, и трактовка ими ценной/достойной жизни тесно связаны с теми инструментами социализации, что воздействуют на сельскую молодежь (образовательные возможности, информационно-коммуникационные технологии, другие средства производства значений). Сегодня все эти инструменты подчиняются доминирующим системам знания, которые функционируют в интересах крупных корпораций.

*Ключевые слова:* сельская молодежь, человеческий капитал, вытеснение молодых крестьян, Парагвай, аграрная экономика, крестьянское хозяйство, агробизнес, неолиберальный агропродовольственный режим