

The Agricultural Gospel of Elías Sánchez

By Patrick Breslin

All photos by Patrick Breslin



At the hillside farm where, until his death in 2000, he helped thousands of Honduran farmers learn to improve their land, Elías Sánchez would pick up a handful of soil and let it sift through his fingers as he asked the farmers to tell him what it was. Simply a receptacle for seeds and nutrients in which plants would grow? Or something alive and already rich in processes with which seeds, nutrients, air and water would interact?

The notion of the soil as a complex ecosystem, to be understood more than exploited, was one of the pillars of an approach to agriculture that Sánchez called “the human farm.” Another was the conviction that imagination could be stimulated to find resources for development locally. Both are ideas that, by analogy, extend to the whole concept of development assistance. Are regions of poverty containers into which the seeds and nutrients of Western technology and expertise need to be implanted, or have they evolved as ecosystems, with their own processes and resources, among them creativity and leadership?

Sánchez’s career and enduring influence suggest the latter. He is a prime example of the emergence in Latin America over the last half-century of a widespread infrastructure of leadership based in thousands of nongovernmental and grassroots organizations. The men and women who guide these organizations work in vastly different settings, from urban garbage dumps to isolated villages, but their common approach begins with people and their resources. Elías Sánchez began with the poor farmers of his native Honduras and the hillside plots from which they scratched survival.

Ever since the Spanish conquest, hillside farming in Latin America has been synonymous with poverty. The invaders grabbed the prime bottomland in

Elías Sánchez in 1992 at Loma Linda.

the valleys and left the Indians to fend on the hills and mountainsides. A few centuries later, the “green revolution” ignored hillside land and the people on it in favor of industrialized agriculture in the valleys. In the 1980s, the structural adjustment policies prescribed for poor countries emphasized comparative advantage and dismissed poor farmers as inefficient, therefore inconsequential. Market forces, the experts assumed, would soon push them into more productive sectors of the economy, so why waste money on providing them training and credit? (The satisfaction of consigning a whole class of people to Leon Trotsky’s “dustbin of history” has not been restricted to Marxists.) Wars, political instability and drought drove farmers from some areas. Their own poor techniques that hastened erosion set them up like tenpins for hurricanes that bowled away entire hillsides. Finally, the demand for cheap labor in the United States exerted a gravitational pull.

Only a few visionaries still saw any potential on the hillsides of Mesoamerica. One was José Elías Sánchez, born in 1927, a brusque educational expert who blended irreverence, imagination, deep knowledge of farming and a genius for provoking questions from the most tongue-tied peasants to craft an alternative agriculture tailored to their needs. Central to Sánchez’s philosophy was the conviction that you started with the person, not the land. The point of training was to teach farmers to think, to be creative, to have a positive attitude. Without this personal growth, techniques learned would just be a bag of tricks, quickly forgotten or discarded at the first unexpected obstacle.

Sánchez inspired some of his students to form a network to carry on his efforts across Honduras, and several developed model farms, or Centers for Teaching Sustainable Agriculture (CEAS, from the Spanish initials). According to Norman Sagastume, who helps report results from IAF-funded projects and has worked for two decades in rural Honduras, of the country’s 100-plus model farms, 30 were founded because of Sánchez and comprise the network RED-CEAS. For poor farmers, model farms are the only source of hands-on training. Even though 70 percent of Honduran farmers till the hillsides, they have not seen a government extension agent since 1990, Sagastume said. Not that Sánchez would have been

impressed had government programs continued. After a stint working in the Honduran Ministry of Education, and receiving a graduate degree from the University of New Mexico, Sánchez directed a training department for agricultural extension agents in the Ministry of Natural Resources, and he grew cynical. “Burning gasoline” was what he considered the only measurable result of the agents’ field visits. “Cockroach food” was his pungent putdown of the endless studies and reports drafted by agricultural experts to sit unread on ministry shelves.

Sánchez thought there was a better way and so, while still at the ministry, he founded a small nongovernmental organization to serve poor communities. He would take ministry employees to work with residents of these communities, and he tried to expose them to the seminal thinkers in alternative agriculture. But “it didn’t stick,” he told the IAF’s Jim Adriance (*Grassroots Development* 1995, vol. 19, no. 1). By 1980, Sánchez had quit his job in the ministry and turned his attention to the small hillside farm on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa that he and his wife had bought in 1964 to supplement their income. He called it Loma Linda, or beautiful hill, and with the help of a loan from World Neighbors, the Oklahoma-based nonprofit helping small farmers, he sculpted terraces that swooped and curved with the contours of the land, some supported by stacks of used tires buried in the slopes. Thus terraced— and with tires everywhere, including as planters for herbs and flowers—Loma Linda yielded bounties of grain, fruits and vegetables. The significance of the tires was that they were free. A farmer could find them discarded behind the nearest gas station or on the side of the road. Everything Sánchez did contained a lesson. Used tires said you didn’t need money to improve your farm—just imagination and hard work. The farmers he meant to serve knew about hard work. But no one had ever sought to spark their imagination.

Over the next decades, Sanchez helped more than 30,000 farmers move from slash-and-burn practices that exhausted the land and hastened erosion to less chemical-intensive and more sustainable agriculture focused on saving and enriching the soil. Through hands-on training on land much like their own, Sánchez encouraged farmers to value their own knowledge and experience and add to it techniques

he had devised, such as *labranza mínima*, which means minimum labor, known as in-row tillage in English. Carving narrower hillside terraces was easier for small farmers, who didn't have the tools to build the wide terraces agronomists favored. By starting small, and adding compost to the soil each year, they spread their labor over years, while constantly improving the land. Throughout Honduras, you can see hillside slopes terraced using this method, and the practice of burning fields before planting has diminished. Both features of contemporary Honduran agriculture are legacies of Elías Sánchez. In 1996, Brown University recognized his accomplishments with the Alan Shawn Feinstein World Hunger merit award, a \$10,000 prize for public service and education. His life and work were described by Katie Smith in *The Human Farm: A Tale of Changing Lives and Changing Lands* (Kumarian Press, 1994).

In November 1998, Hurricane Mitch wrecked much of Honduras. Entire farms on mountain slopes washed downhill, but those with contour terracing often survived with minimal damage. Loma Linda's terraces survived, too, but its buildings were destroyed, including the Sánchez home and library. Because the farmer farther up the canyon hadn't adopted techniques to fight erosion, a wall of water, mud, trees and rocks roared downhill and obliterated the training center. Sánchez was, however, determined to rebuild. "The physical farm was destroyed, but the human farm lives on," he said pointing to his head. With international funding and the help of volunteers, new dormitories and classrooms were constructed. But Sánchez, then 73, died on March 18, 2000, less than two weeks before the center was scheduled to reopen. With his death, training at Loma Linda ended.

"You know what strikes me," Norman Sagastume said as we drove north toward Siguatepeque several years later, "many of the people who knew Don Elías don't remember the farm. They remember his punctuality, his respect and love for people. Attitudes, values, how he treated people. No one tells me they remember the farm." Sagastume visited Loma Linda often in the course of his work. He was there just two days before Sánchez died. He remembers with a chuckle that Sánchez practically chased him away. "I don't want to see you here again," Sanchez told him,

"until you've bought a farm. The hope of Honduras is in you young people. You have to spread these ideas, teach the human farm."

Sagastume and I were checking on the progress of the RED-CEAS and the continuing impact of Sánchez's ideas. Our first stop was at the farm of Rene Santos, the network's president, who had worked seven years with World Neighbors and come in frequent contact with Sánchez. Since developing his own model farm, he has trained more than 8,000 individuals; thousands more pass through on educational tours, including visitors from Canada and the United States. Most groups have from eight to 25 members and they stay for between one and five days. The U.S. Peace Corps sends its volunteers for training, Santos said with a wry smile, "But they want to get a little of everything in four hours and often you have to begin by showing them how to use the tools. So some subjects don't get covered completely."

The course covers topics as varied as human development and motivation, personal hygiene, family health and nutrition, medicinal plants, canning and preserving foods, organic agriculture, soil conservation, permaculture, biological pest control, hillside terracing, rammed earth construction, and building wells and cisterns. Santos devours information and has a library of books and articles on the subjects he teaches. "People always come here to use it," he said. "One guy from the south comes every week. He spends half a day reading books, taking notes, then off he goes." With help from World Neighbors of Canada, Santos plans to expand the library and add a reading corner for children. "One of the goals is to develop the habit of reading, to offer educational games, even Internet. This is a service, we get no income from this."

The Santos family earns its living from the other services it provides visitors—lodging, meals and guided tours of the farm—and from the farm's own production. Santos has a license to market services, and his business reflects a long-held ambition. "I always had this idea that I didn't want to end up like some men you see, 70 to 80 years old, walking around with a hoe on their shoulder, looking for work," he said. "My vision, God willing, when I'm that age, is to be in my own house, maybe not with



Ismael Vargas demonstrating the use of a horse's jawbone as a tool in 1991.

the strength to work the farm but at least to manage it and live from what it produces. And I tell my children [who still work with him in some capacity] 'Let's build it up. This is your inheritance.'

Later that day, Sagastume and I sat in on a meeting at Santos' farm where other RED-CEAS farmers discussed how to market their expertise to local government and to international donors. It is the biggest challenge facing the network, and it would come up frequently in the following days. One proprietor who couldn't make that meeting was Ismael Vargas, and the next day Sagastume, who had encouraged the network in his previous job with a Swiss development agency, and I drove northeast from the capital into Olancho to see him. After seven years working with Sánchez, Vargas started his own farm near Juticalpa, and received early support as part of an Inter-American Foundation grant to Familia y Medio Ambiente [Family and Environment] (FAMA), a Honduran microcredit organization with which he is still associated.

Impeccable in navy slacks, a light blue shirt and tan working boots, Vargas came down through a green tunnel of fruit trees to welcome us. His hair is completely white, a thick fringe around a head shaped like the bust of a Roman senator. His eyes sparkled at the chance to show us his farm again. When I first saw it, a dozen years earlier, the trees were thin saplings. Now, there are a dozen shades of green in the vegetation that screens the house from the sun's heat. Among the trees are a variety of medicinal plants that Vargas sells. One plant, Vargas

said, eases calf births; women in the area customarily use it as well. Another plant had no insects around it. "It repels snakes, too," Vargas said. "A snake would rather go over hot coals than the leaves of this plant."

Sánchez knew early on that he wanted to spread his approach beyond Loma Linda. He also knew that not all poor farmers worked hillside slopes, and in a country of so many microclimates, conditions vary greatly. He envisioned model farms dispersed throughout Honduras, sharing a philosophy but emphasizing local conditions. "That was one of his earliest plans," Vargas recalled. "He always said that there should be a minimum of five centers in each of the 18 departments of Honduras. For example, nearby we have the village of La Llave, which is higher than here and colder. If you plant corn from there down here, all you'll get is the stalk. It won't produce ears. You have to know the local conditions."

Sánchez actively sought out men to implement his vision of teaching centers all over the country. In 1980, he found Vargas planting coffee on a finca in Guinope after doing some work with World Neighbors in the zone. All through the following year, Sánchez would drop by regularly. "He was evaluating me," Vargas said. "In 1982, I was planning to go work on some land my mother had. Elías asked me about my plans, and whether I had any savings. 'Nothing,' I told him. 'Come with me,' he said. 'I'll pay you a salary, and I'll train you.' So, in June of 1982, I began to work with Don Elías, and I was with him until 1989, when I came here, with the idea of the finca in my head. But even then, I was always



in contact with him. Anytime I had any doubts, or felt overwhelmed, I would go to him for feedback.” Vargas made the connection explicit by naming his farm Finca Elías. “For me, he was like three persons,” Vargas said, “a second father, a great teacher and a great *compañero*.”

Vargas expanded on Sánchez’s technique of provoking his visitors’ imagination by using unusual farm implements. He built beds for seedlings under screens on simple raised wooden platforms. The top half of a bleached cattle skull hung nearby, looking like a prop for a Georgia O’Keefe painting. With its remaining teeth, it became a perfect rake for weeding the miniature rows in the seedling bed. Olancho is cattle country. Vargas was teaching that appropriate tools are lying around, if you use your imagination.

As at Loma Linda, used tires were in unexpected places. Several dangled from a tree, some of them filled with huge onions. “Once I had a group of school teachers here,” Vargas recalled. “And one, looking at the onions, said ‘I think Don Ismael went to the market and bought those onions.’ So I showed them the onions growing in the tires, and the teacher couldn’t believe it. ‘I never knew we could grow onions that size in this area, but you’ve convinced me,’ she said. That’s what it’s about: that people see that it’s possible.”

Groups of teachers still come to learn about organic agriculture, and farmers Vargas has taught visit regularly to talk about their farms. But Honduran institutions that once promoted organic agriculture and subsidized training for local farmers have lost funding and international organizations that supported this work have suffered budget cuts. Meanwhile, local coffee federations were talking with Vargas about training in organic methods, and he was working with microcredit loan officers at FAMA who had discovered that applying human-farm philosophy not only made their work more interesting but was lowering default rates.

A day later, we picked up the conversation at Jorge Amador’s model farm in Sábana Grande, gateway to a devastated area. Southern Honduras experienced major agricultural booms in the second half of the 20th century, first in cotton and then in melons, and all production was large-scale and

Tires as planters.

chemical-intensive. Displaced farmers ended up burning and plowing the mountain slopes until they eroded away. The chemicals poisoned the soil. The result was a textbook case of desertification. Where waterfalls tumbled into forests, now there is only sand and rock. Ramón Velásquez, long active in development work and now a vice president of the Honduran Congress, recalls a jaguar killed in the thick vegetation on the edge of his town when he was a boy. Now you wonder where a house cat could hide.

None of that gives Amador pause. “You put water here and take care of the soil, and you can make anything grow,” he insists. A tour of the farm backs up his words. He points to tall papaya trees heavy with gleaming green fruit. Their trunks are surrounded by layered cornhusks that keep moisture in the soil. “If you let the sun hit the soil, it bakes, and the trees die in the dry season,” he explained. At 60, Amador is a burly man with thick arms—he’s a blacksmith as well as a farmer—brown eyes, dark curly hair, an expressive face and gesturing hands. He never goes anywhere on his farm without a tool in his hands or a hat on his head. “I could go bareheaded,” he said, “but this hat sends a message, that I came from the same place as all these farmers—farmers who know hunger. And I tell them the work we do is so that they can put more tortillas on the table.”

Amador’s father sharecropped because he had no land of his own, and he died when the boy was 12. Amador worked in sawmills for several years. At 20, he took stock of his life. “I came back to my mother’s house from the sawmills with nothing,” he recalled. “I’d drunk up all the money I’d earned. Just to return home, I had to take a job killing snakes in the bush. After that, I stopped drinking, stopped smoking.” He returned to farm labor, but this time he managed to save money. “For the first time in my life, I ate in a restaurant,” he recalled.

The next time he went home, he had money to buy back land that his mother had sold. Later, he bought more land and he built a blacksmith’s forge. One day, he attended a workshop sponsored by Partners of the Americas. “I liked the class,” he said. “There was a part on agriculture, but more than anything, it was about the human mind. Elías Sánchez was one of the teachers. I told him I wanted him to see my land, because I wanted to begin this kind of

agriculture.” Amador started applying the techniques, and when Sánchez came to visit, he was impressed. “After that,” Amador recalled, “the Partners program contracted me as a field worker. I worked three years. But I would always go to visit Don Elías on Saturdays to see what techniques he was using, and then I would bring them here.” Amador quit Partners when Sánchez offered him a higher salary, and he later worked in other programs. “I’ve trained people in 48 different places in Honduras, on contract with different organizations—Partners, Plan International, World Vision, Catholic Relief Services,” he said. “But I always came back to Don Elías. Off and on I worked with him for eight years. I learned a lot from my work with Partners, but I learned most of all with Elías.”

Amador echoes Sánchez’s insistence on the human factor. “Especially in this area,” he said. “We need to shape people, help them learn. I keep insisting that poverty doesn’t exist anywhere in the world. What exists is ignorance. If people are trained, if they’re using their intelligence, they can do it.” With a new dormitory on a rise across from his house, Amador can house 22 students on his farm. Like other model-farm owners, he hopes RED-CEAS will build interest in the human-farm movement and help fill those bunks. The model farms are sustainable, even profitable, enterprises, and their owners can train large numbers of farmers. What is lacking is support for farmers to receive that training.

Paradoxically, the migration that has taken so many potential farmers away from Honduras might eventually rekindle interest in fulfilling Elías Sánchez’s dream. The impact of migration is visible throughout rural Honduras. Ismael Vargas said that 300 men have migrated from his village to the U.S. As migration increasingly becomes a hotter political issue in the United States, the search for real solutions must eventually focus on the conditions that force poor farmers to migrate in the first place. And right now, the human farm offers the only way to make a decent living on marginal land in Mesoamerica. As Jorge Amador says, “If I can make it here, so can you.”

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