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**Health, environment and labor
Lessons from
Latin America and the Caribbean**

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Title: Health, environment and labor: Lessons from Latin America and the Caribbean

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This article discusses the need and the implications of orienting ecohealth research at the nexus of health, environmental and labor concerns. The creation of communities of practice of ecosystem approaches to health has favored the adoption of the ecohealth approach in a variety of countries and contexts in the Americas. The Latin America and Caribbean community of practice in ecosystem approaches to health (CoPEH-LAC) and its Canadian counterpart (CoPEH-Can) are two such communities of practice conducting ecohealth research.

While the CoPEHs share institutional ties, funding sources and theoretical frameworks, there is an interesting difference: A large number of the projects of the CoPEH-LAC are centered on the intersection of health, environmental and labor issues. A cursory review of the literature demonstrates that the emphasis on labor emerges as a distinct particularity of ecohealth work in the Latin American and Caribbean region, with many projects focused on the health and well-being of workers and resource-dependent communities. Some examples from CoPEH-LAC research centers include: pesticide exposure in banana plantation workers in Costa Rica (Wesseling et al., 1993, 2001) and Nicaragua (Rodríguez et al., 2011), heat stress in sugar-cane workers (Crowe et al., 2009), pesticide exposure in floricultural workers in Ecuador (Breilh, 2012), mining in Ecuador (Betancourt et al. 2005), manganese exposure of children in mining communities in Mexico (Riojas-Rodríguez et al., 2008, 2010), etc. By contrast, most of the CoPEH-Canada projects with which I am familiar focus more squarely on the health and environment nexus, without delving much in the labor conditions of workers. I would like to draw attention and invite reflection to why this might be the case, and what are the implications for scholarly research.

Perhaps part of the reason why labor is so central in ecohealth research in Latin America and the Caribbean is that these countries economies depend, to a large degree, on resource-extraction activities, such as agriculture, livestock, aquaculture and mining. Hence, these countries have a considerable population of landless laborers whose working conditions determine their socio-economic circumstance and, by extension, their health and well-being. It is also important to note that the majority of the goods resulting from these extractive activities

are for export to countries in the North and that transnational companies from the North often manage the resource extraction activities. How does this particular North-South dynamic impact research? And more precisely, how does it impact interactions among research teams when researchers from the North likely enjoy the benefits derived from the unequal exchange, in the form of an over-abundance of commodities and enhanced consumer power, while at the same time advance their careers by attempting to fix, reduce or protest the flow of these commodities?

More importantly, what is the impact of this form of research on the well-being of workers and resource-dependent communities? I remember asking this to someone who works with banana plantation workers in Costa Rica and she mentioned that, in one occasion, their research showed that workers living in company quadrants were unduly exposed to agrochemicals. Eventually, the company moved the workers to a community further away from the plantation. As a result, the workers are not exposed to pesticides (as much), but they have to wake up much earlier to catch the bus that takes them to the plantation. I met single mothers in some of these communities that were away from their homes from 4 AM until 7 PM six days per week. I also met workers for whom exposure to agrochemicals was a relatively minor concern compared to the lack of food, shelter or clothing. Considering the absence of organized labor in many of these plantations, the presence of global trade agreements, etc., uncomfortable questions come to mind: What is the likelihood for structural change stemming from ecohealth research? How should scientific research be used in organizing labor for meaningful change? What are the dangers of internalizing the terms of success of the oppressor?

Perhaps the particular historical legacy, the tradition of social movements and the economic and political landscape in the Latin American and Caribbean context leads to a heightened class conscience. The troublesome part is that it makes us question: what does it mean to do ecohealth research without considering labor? What are the important links that, from a Canadian perspective, we are missing by focusing primarily into health and environment questions? What would it mean to make the link between ecohealth and labor in the Canadian, or other, contexts? What are the lessons that should be learned?

Mentor response (300 words)

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