



# Harvest of wisdom: Dialogue Among Via Campesina Representatives

*Excerpts compiled by Annette Aurélie Desmarais \**

In April 2006 seven representatives of La Via Campesina from Africa, Latin America, North America, Europe and Asia met in Spain to reflect on the history of La Via Campesina to date, its accomplishments and its challenges. The seven representatives were Henry Saragih (FSPI, Indonesia), Rafael Alegría (COCOCH, Honduras), Paul Nicholson (EHNE, Basque Country), Nettie Wiebe (NFU, Canada), Francisca Rodriguez (ANAMURI, Chile), Egidio Brunetto (MST, Brazil), Ismael Ossemane (UNAC, Mozambique) and Nico Verhagen (Technical Support from the Via Campesina Operational Secretariat). Below are glimpses into the experiences and wisdom shared over three days of dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

## **Principled and radical action**

*Egidio Brunetto:* Being radical in one thing, and not compromising is something else. We don't, for example, compromise the principles of our movement. Sometimes we are very diplomatic but we don't compromise what we have built and what we wish for other people. In all of the different events in which we have participated we first agree on a proposal and then we defend it radically. I think this core set of values that we have agreed upon is what has the greatest internal impact. This is in the inner culture in La Via Campesina.

One of our principles is that we engage in mobilization -- we have street actions, mass actions. It is not about just being radical for the sake of it -- we need to mobilize people so this is why we need to be strong in our positions.

Although some of our actions are indeed radical, it is the whole that matters, because in addition to the key element of discipline, we also need to highlight the humanistic face to the movement. In any action, any event, we fight for what we stand for. At the same time the whole movement is worrying about how to take care of people, how to give space to our people, space to talk. Our events are beautiful and joyful. They have this *mística* and this is important because people who participate in a Via Campesina activity are impressed and feel empathy. They then say yes, I want to be part of La Via Campesina.

I think we should underscore these important values. It is not only our political strategy. The political strategy is tiresome for most of us. We engage in symbolic actions together and this helps us form new allies. Something else I want to mention is the way we function internally, we try to learn from each other's experiences. We learn all of the time. We travel around the world, and when we come back home we want to modify things, we want to apply what we learn in the exchanges we organize.

*Rafael Alegría:* Speaking about discipline, I think it is important to understand that this has been key. Sometimes discipline can tire us, but at times I ask myself: how come we have been successful? Part of the answer is that it is because we have prepared for everything we do. Our style of organizing meetings before, during, and after an event -- as many events as possible, as many meetings as possible; it is almost like "another meeting is possible". If we did not work this way, I'm not sure that we would have succeeded. This collective soul we have, this collective spirit, we are used to it -- we just go to the meetings and we know that we are there to work.

*Paul Nicholson:* Also, we have been successful because we adopted a strategy of confrontation against the neoliberal system because this system destroys our ability to be peasants, peasant men and women. We had a confrontational strategy and a non-negotiation strategy. With the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF, we decided that there will be no conversation, no negotiation.

I think that one of the things we are clear about is that lobbying and advocacy failed. Advocacy efforts failed because just having arguments, good points in the big conferences, that is not enough. That model is limited in itself. We mobilize ourselves socially to destabilize this train that has no brakes and is rushing forward.

*Fransisca Rodriguez:* I remember we were preparing for the WTO meeting that was supposed to take place in Doha, Qatar. We were going to go there by boat, with many other people. I always wonder what would have happened with that action that we were planning to carry out against the WTO. If it were not for September 11, I think that things would have taken a different direction in our struggle because that was one of the most audacious and brave actions we had ever thought of. We had our own fears, but we would have had to overcome these. Many of us have been frightened

and afraid by our own actions, but we have dispelled these fears so now we have reached the level we are at now. We are always trying to overcome our own limitations. I think that if we tried to take stock, everyone of us has been trying to gain spaces that were forbidden for the peasant-based movements. We have done our best to be present and to listen to other people. Now this is changing because we no longer are there just to listen to others, we are there to be heard so that other people listen to us.

*Rafael Alegría:* In Cancun, there was a difficulty. Cancun is divided into two parts: there is a huge tourist resort that is separated from the town of Cancun, the people of Cancun. The NGOs and trade unions stayed in the large tourist hotels where the State authorities were lodged, but we went to a camping site near the town of Cancun.

There were also many young people. There was the Black Block, all dressed in black, and in their own style, very aggressive. They had their tents and their camping site but they wanted to be with us at the same time. So, they engaged in their own violent actions while we had our strategy of non-violence and this generated a very complex climate. It was important to see how those young people, after the discussion where Martha Jane Robbins was present, where she made a great contribution, they became more disciplined and decided to follow the strategy of La Via Campesina which was very important.

We defined the strategy. There were two strategies: one inside the conference and the other outside on the streets. We realized that the inside strategy was a bit reduced, it wasn't strong, and the main strength was the mobilization. We had thousands of peasants and farmers in the camping site in Cancun. One of our strengths was that the indigenous movement of Mexico, influenced by the Zapatistas, decided to stay with us so that gave us strength.

*Pau Nicholson:* There is an important consequence of social mobilization. For Cancun, we did something different -- we launched an international campaign for resources in order to ensure that there would be the participation of the indigenous populations of Mexico and Central America. And we were successful! Many people, organizations, and movements, donated anywhere from \$10, \$100 to \$2,000.

We were ten thousand people in Cancun! This has taught us something important: we have much more international support than we thought. Support from people from everywhere, not just peasants and farmers. They see La Via Campesina as the engine for social change, the driving force for social change that we all want.

Lee's death has to be highlighted. That sacrifice was an expression of what all peasants in the world suffer. That death put on the table the crisis of family farming. It had a great impact and destabilization within the WTO. The days that followed Lee's death

were very important for political consensus, for action, so that the youth could understand the importance of conveying a strong, united message in the demonstrations.

Groups of people with different ideas were able to negotiate and agree – the Black Block, the youth, the Indigenous Peoples, the Via Campesina and we arrived at a consensus for a plan of action and mobilization. We also had a good exchange with our Korean friends, a group of about 450 people. We slept very little those nights. They were never-end nights of exchanges, of misticas, in honour of Lee and peasant culture.

*Edigio Brunetto:* Then, breaking the barrier was our goal. It seemed impossible, but we made that barrier collapse.

*Paul Nicholson:* It was the wise people from the indigenous populations who started with the basic elements of the earth, seeds, water and corn. Once we reached the barrier that isolated the WTO from society, about 200 women went up to the fence and broke the fence with pliers. Then, the Korean delegation went to the front of the march and tied five long ropes to the posts holding the barrier. And then all of us together, we pulled down those posts. On the other side we saw the police, the military and the hundreds of journalists and media – all waiting for the fight and bloodshed. But, instead of confrontation, we all turned our backs to the police force and WTO. Society turned its back on the WTO, and we launched our proposal, food sovereignty. This was a strong political win.

*Henry Saragih:* At the WTO protests in Hong Kong, the people there supported us because they saw that our actions are non-violent, creative and purposeful. After the women's rally we gained a lot more support from the people of Hong Kong. And, after the Korean delegation's initiative to pray -- as a symbol of the need for prayer for Asia -- many people were sympathetic. We reached a lot of people and gained a lot of support through our actions, and we also had a lot of media attention. In Cancun, we said that the WTO is killing farmers. In Hong Kong, the WTO was arresting farmers – at the end of our actions, more than 1,000 farmers were arrested.

*Paul Nicholson:* Yes, those were difficult physical conditions and circumstances for us. However, if the goal of arresting 1000 activists was to stall the protests, that didn't happen. Their strategy failed! The day after the arrests there was an even greater demonstration when many people from Hong Kong joined us. We didn't even have enough green scarves for everyone. Everyone wanted to be part of La Via Campesina.

*Rafael Alegría:* As Edigio said earlier discipline and action are very important. In Hong Kong, those of us who were not arrested went to the jails where our friends were. We lit candles and stayed there all night to be there with them. Those inside could hear

our actions like the Korean women chanting “Down, Down WTO.” And when our comrades came out of prison they were chanting this slogan too. This was an important action.

*Francisca Rodriguez:* At the Porto Alegre meeting on biodiversity, we had an action inside the official conference and I was surprised because all the delegates ended up applauding! La Via Campesina women said, let's watch over our seeds, let's bring some light into the meeting room, remove the darkness from the minds of people there. There were combinations that spring from our call, from our knowledge, from peasants that was put in practice the moment of that action. This gives our actions a different character, and that makes others people join in. And it is not something that has been planned, it is something that flows because at that moment we are really connected with the earth, and it is that connection of ours with the earth that makes us so different. That is why we say that seeds contain magic because it kind of makes people join together.

When we achieve this the impact we have as Via Campesina in those events is crystal clear. We have a common mystica and reality, common symbols, common colour, and common demands that are the result of not only local struggles, but also a movement and a methodology that makes it possible for a global expression of these.

*Paul Nicholson:* I think that Via Campesina is the expression of local struggles and wherever we are we try to give visibility to those local realities. Via Campesina is precisely that, it is a political expression of local struggles. It is not a group that attends these big international conferences, and by a miracle, it mobilizes people. Not at all. We stem from the daily reality, from our local struggles.

### **Food Sovereignty: Globalizing the struggle, globalizing hope**

*Rafael Alegria:* We have these strong slogans – for example, “WTO out of agriculture” and “Let's globalize the struggle, let's globalize hope” that are the accumulation of previous thoughts and experiences of the different movements in the world, from Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America. “Let's globalize the struggle, let's globalize hope” if we analyze that, if we break it down and get to the essence of it, to what it means, I think it is enormous! It has become universal, it does not only belong solely to La Via Campesina.

*Henry Saragih:* “Let's globalize the struggle, let's globalize hope” is very strong because it demonstrates that we are not Annette Aurélie Desmarais worked as technical support with La Via Campesina and is now a professor. Paul Nicholson was a founding member of La Via Campesina and played leadership roles in the EHNE and the Coordination Paysanne Européenne.

opposed to globalization, we do not oppose all development but we do oppose the model of capitalist development and globalization model of the IMF, the WB and the WTO. It clarifies that we are anti- WTO and anti-neoliberalization.

*Egidio Brunetto:* In analyzing the last 30 years, there has been a change in food producing culture towards a more commercial market-driven culture. Our peasants and farmers started producing money, not food. That's the mindset of our own generation. There was also a change in food culture. Now people eat industrialized products. We didn't realize the real dimensions of these changes. So it is important to change the mindset within our organizations. Food sovereignty is a revolution that involves the political work of recovering a whole food production culture, re-educating and recovering traditional techniques. The earth needs to produce food, real food -- that is the real function of the soil.

*Fransisca Rodriguez:* Yes, La Via Campesina has an identity and it is the identity of our struggles. We understand that agriculture and the loss of agriculture is not a problem of peasants. It is a problem for the country, of the nation. It is a problem for human kind, therefore it comprises us all. That is why food sovereignty today is cross-cutting and it goes beyond food. It affects us all, in all of the different domains.

It is not a question of whether or not food sovereignty has been useful. Instead, this political proposal has placed us on another level because we need to look inside ourselves, look within and understand whether we are sovereign, to see the degree of sovereignty we have. We have to start with ourselves. If I don't have sovereignty, if my communities are not sovereign then we cannot move forward. Understanding what has happened within Via Campesina and within our own organizations, it helps us.

Our organizations today have a greater political presence and that is why today we have, I think, a permanent role within social movements. We are trustworthy. To a certain extent the peasant movement has had to take on a specific responsibility that used to be held by the workers, the trade unions and nowadays we are replacing that crisis that has happened in the working world. We have a comprehensive proposal that has no horizons, no limitations -- for all of humankind and for the political development of movements. Today we are listened to, we are needed, we are required.

Our demand our proposal is comprehensive, it is all encompassing. For us peasants food sovereignty has given back the value that agriculture used to have. Our occupation is to maintain agriculture but we are also reinforcing this relation between food biodiversity, the earth and water. Our organizations have also gone through a process of re-valuing. Politically we have projected so many hopes, pinned so many hopes on food sovereignty that go beyond the definition. We still need to analyze more, starting from ourselves what it means. It is difficult to say whether we have the

right degree of sovereignty, and we want to break this barrier, we want to grow in that space, identify ourselves even better, develop, and be able to put forth this proposal.

As Egidio was saying this is a true revolution. When speaking of food sovereignty, we created a revolution within our own organizations, but at the same time, we contributed to another revolution, with all of these new dimensions to the world at large.

*Paul Nicholson:* Food sovereignty is the expression of thousands and thousands of local movements, especially rural movement whether they belong or not to La Via Campesina. This is a generalized demand by the rural world against the neoliberal world. It counters the neoliberal model with the idea of constructing a different society. La Via Campesina wants fair agricultural policies but in order to get that we want to transform society.

The politics of alliances have been essential. Qualitatively and quantitatively La Via Campesina has grown from being in 1995 a movement that defended some interests to becoming a movement that has real impact. I want to remind you of an anecdote that happened in Cancun. On the last day of the WTO conference in Canada, the President of the Council of Ministers of the European Union asked for a meeting with La Via Campesina and we negotiated the conditions under which he could meet with us. He had to come to the place where Lee died making that sacrifice for peasant agriculture, he had to remove his shoes, he had to pay respect to Lee. And, this Italian man was nervous, and he made a speech that then was matched by Rafael Alegria on behalf of La Via Campesina. This is a snapshot of a turning point in the correlation of forces. This is the moment when the institutions began to understand that in La Via Campesina and food sovereignty there was credibility because this was the expression of the struggle of the local movements. It was the alternative proposal of the rural world to the neoliberal movement and it was being understood by the populations at large. This gave us force, strength and legitimacy.

Food sovereignty responds to our reality of globalizing the struggle and globalizing hope.

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