



La Via Campesina: An Historical and Political Analysis

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“We are men and women of the earth, we are those who produce food for the world. We have the right to continue being peasants and family farmers, and to shoulder the responsibility of continuing to feed our peoples. We care for seeds, which are life, and for us the act of producing food is an act of love. Humanity depends on us, and we refuse to disappear.”

La Via Campesina, Maputo Declaration, 2008

“To date, in all the global debates on agrarian policy, the peasant movement has been absent; we have not had a voice. The main reason for the very existence of the Via Campesina is to be that voice and to speak out for the creation of a more just society... What is involved here is our regional identity and our traditions around food and our own regional economy.... As those responsible for taking care of nature and life, we have a fundamental role to play... La Via Campesina must defend the “peasant way” of rural peoples.”

Paul Nicholson, Proceedings of the Tlaxcala Conference, 1996

“As a response to the current irrational and irresponsible logic of production and to the political decisions which support it, we propose the following basic conditions in order to bring about an agricultural development which is ecologically sustainable, socially just ... The right of small farmers to a living countryside ... The right to a diversified agriculture ... The right of every country to define its own agricultural policy ...

La Via Campesina, Mons Declaration, 1993

“The ongoing displacement, forced urbanization and repression of peasants cannot be tolerated. We strongly denounce all violence against peasants ... We will not be intimidated.”

La Via Campesina, Tlaxcala Declaration, 1996

“The imposition of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and regional trade agreements is destroying our livelihoods, our cultures and the natural environment. We cannot, and we will not, tolerate the injustice and destruction these policies are causing. Our struggle is historic, dynamic and uncompromising. . . .

La Via Campesina is committed to changing the unjust, unsustainable models of production and trade. Peasants and farmers are suffering a financial, social and cultural crisis everywhere north and south. And, we are everywhere committed to working in solidarity to build more just, sustainable peasant societies.

La Via Campesina is committed to building alliances to change the direction of the economic order. We, together with those who share our vision, will change the current economic model in order to protect and develop peasant-based agriculture relying on traditional wisdom. We demand access to land and the right to produce our own food.”

La Via Campesina, Bangalore Declaration, 2000

“One issue was very clear in this V Conference, that all the forms of violence that women face in our societies – among them physical, economic, social, cultural and macho violence, and violence based on differences of power – are also present in rural communities, and as a result, in our organizations. This, in addition to being a principal source of injustice, also limits the success of our struggles. We recognize the intimate relationships between capitalism, patriarchy, machismo and neo-liberalism, in detriment to the women peasant and farmers of the world. All of us together, women and men of La Via Campesina make a responsible commitment to build new and better human relationships among us, as a necessary part of the construction of the new societies to which we aspire. For this reason during this V Conference we decided to break the silence on these issues, and are launching the World Campaign For an End to Violence Against Women. . . .

“If we do not eradicate violence towards women within our movement, we will not advance in our struggles, and if we do not create new gender relations, we will not be able to build a new society.”

La Via Campesina, Maputo Declaration

These words give us glimpses into why La Via Campesina emerged and help explain its key purpose. La Via Campesina emerged in a particular political, economic and social

context that was undermining the ability of peasants around the world to maintain control over land, territory, seeds and water – all resources necessary for the production of food. Key elements of this phenomenon were, on the one hand, the encroaching globalization of a neoliberal industrial model of agriculture and creeping corporate concentration, and on the other hand, the search for alternatives. La Via Campesina coalesced in the North and South around common goals: an explicit rejection of the neoliberal model of rural development, an outright refusal to be excluded from agricultural policy development, and a firm determination to work together on common struggles.

La Via Campesina is now recognized as being the most politically significant transnational agrarian movement existing today. Numerous social movements consider it as a key point of reference in the struggles against the instruments of capitalism and it is also recognized by United Nations institutions as the international voice of peasant communities. Over the past twenty years La Via Campesina has gained strength and legitimacy as it has succeeded in carving out a space in the international arena and filling that space with the voices of peasants, small-scale farmers, women, farm workers and indigenous peoples articulating peasant demands and peasant alternatives. The movement has also grown rapidly; initially bringing together 46 organizations, it now embraces 148 organizations from sixty-nine countries representing millions of rural peoples in Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Africa.

A brief history

La Via Campesina was formally constituted in April 1993 (during a conference held in Mons, Belgium) only months before the finalisation of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) that for the first time included agriculture and food in its negotiations. The forty-six representatives (women and men) of organizations of peasants, small farmers, indigenous peoples and farm workers from the Americas, Asia, Europe and Africa who met at Mons clearly understood that the GATT Final Act, along with the creation of the World Trade Organization, represented a profound shift away from more controlled national economies to an almost exclusively market-driven global economy. They also clearly understood that the further entrenchment of neoliberalism would spur national governments to continue to dismantle the agrarian structures and programs that peasants and farmers had won after years of struggle – these very structures and programs that helped ensure the viability of small-scale farming, promote production for domestic consumption and contribute to national food security. The leaders who met in Mons were quick to identify the threat farming families in the North and South faced: their livelihoods, their way of life, indeed, their very mode of existence were all at stake.

Although La Via Campesina now has a twenty-year history of resistance and mobilization, it is important to acknowledge that the roots of La Via Campesina stretch way back. Throughout the 1980s farm leaders engaged in numerous North/South and South/South delegation visits and organizational exchanges and found they shared much common ground: everywhere, the industrialization and liberalization of agriculture – imposed through structural adjustment programs and regional free trade agreements – were leading to an acute agricultural crisis caused by the restructuring of agriculture, the destruction of biodiversity, further degradation of the environment, increased disparity, greater impoverishment in the countryside accompanied by the consolidation and concentration of agri-business corporations. Increasingly, peasants and small-scale farmers everywhere were being driven off the land. Consequently, peasants actively resisted the imposition of highly capitalized, monoculture, industrial agriculture by mobilizing local and national organizations throughout Asia, and forming regional peasant movements like the European Peasant Coordination (CPE) and the ASOCODE in Central America. And, only ten months after La Via Campesina was formed, the peasant and indigenous organizations that had worked together throughout Latin America on the 500 years of Resistance Campaign articulated a continental peasant movement, the CLOC.

All of these organizations joined together under the banner of La Via Campesina. For La Via Campesina it is not a struggle between peasants in south and farmers in the north. Instead, the struggle is between two divergent and opposing models of social and economic development. On the one hand, a globalized, neoliberal, corporate-driven model where food is considered to be just like any other commodity and agriculture is seen exclusively as a profit-making venture while productive resources are increasingly concentrated into the hands of agro-industry. La Via Campesina, on the other hand, envisions a very different, more humane, rural world: one in which “food is first and foremost a basic human right,” agriculture is based on peasant small-scale production, uses local resources and is geared to domestic markets. La Via Campesina argues that under a food sovereignty framework “we have the right to produce our own food in our own territory,” and agriculture plays an important social function while at the same time being economically viable and ecologically sustainable.

The power of mobilization

Over the years, representatives of rural organizations, from the South and the North organized in La Via Campesina, have walked together in the streets of Geneva, Paris, Seattle, Québec City, Quito, Rome, Johannesburg, Porto Alegre, Cancún, Hong Kong, Copenhagen, and Durban, among other major cities. Whenever and wherever international institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) meet to discuss agricultural and food issues, La Via Campesina is there. La Via Campesina is also there in local communities when peasants and farm families in places as diverse as Mali, Honduras, Brazil, Mozambique,

Indonesia, France, Mexico, the Philippines and Canada are resisting the imposition of genetically modified seeds, or being evicted from their land to facilitate urban sprawl, development of golf courses, intensive shrimp farms, large pig barns, or eucalyptus and palm oil plantations. La Via Campesina is also there in communities that are mobilizing against the increasing presence and toxic legacies of the extractive industry. And, everywhere, La Via Campesina members are struggling against the invasion of corporate, investor-led and government-abetted land grabbing and on-going human rights violations in the countryside. These are struggles to protect and build community, they are struggles for the very right not to be disappeared.

The existence and vitality of La Via Campesina depends very much on strong locally-based national or regional rural movements that mobilize for food sovereignty in their own territory. Its claim to be representative also crucially depends on the participatory and democratic decision-making structures and mechanisms of these diverse local and national organizations that work together at the regional level. Through regional communication, consultation and coordination La Via Campesina works to maintain and strengthen its bottom-up structure and its inclusive ways of working. Solidarity and consensus-building are key instruments in on-going struggles.

The gift of food sovereignty

At the international level, La Via Campesina actions have often been courageous and prescient, eventually contributing to shifting the terms of debate and the international discourse. For example, among others, at the World Food Summits (1996, 2002 and 2006) La Via Campesina introduced and defended the revolutionary concept of food sovereignty and thus pushed civil society organizations and government officials to think beyond the limitations food security and to imagine another agriculture. And while others argued for changes to reform the WTO Agreement on Agriculture, La Via Campesina headed anti-neoliberal demonstrations at the WTO Ministerial Conferences held in Geneva (1998), Seattle (1999), Cancún (2003), and Hong Kong (2005) by demanding that the “WTO get out of agriculture.”

And when the global food crisis was finally acknowledged in the international media in 2008, La Via Campesina stressed that viable solutions could not possibly come from those very national governments, international institutions and corporations that had created the crisis in the first place. Tracing the roots of the recurring agricultural crisis back to over four decades of neoliberal policies that had fostered a market-based, technologically-driven, environmentally devastating global food system -- this had been an undeclared war against subsistence agriculture and it was time to take agriculture back. The answer to the crisis, argued La Via Campesina in its contributions to the High Level Task Force on Food Security, was that peasants and small-scale agriculture were in fact “feeding the world and cooling the planet” and that “the time for food sovereignty has come.”

To the Commission on Sustainable Development, the Conference of Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Civil Society Mechanism of the UN Committee for World Food Security, and the Human Rights Council, La Via Campesina has consistently and strategically rejected the false solutions of market-based green economies and demanded the full realization of all of the rights that are central to food sovereignty. The list of Via Campesina international actions goes on and on.

Critical significance of building alliances

Very early on La Via Campesina began forming alliances with other progressive forces in efforts to mobilize a global civil society movement to challenge neoliberal capitalism. Over the years it consolidated strategic alliances with key grass-roots urban-based social movements, other rural movements, progressive non-governmental organizations and other allies. A strong example of this cross-cultural, cross-sectoral alliance building is the collective work on food sovereignty that spurred the emergence of a global food sovereignty movement.

Food sovereignty was not just a demand for those who grow and gather food; instead, it answered to La Via Campesina's proposal to transform society in general. Although many originally did not support La Via Campesina's notion of food sovereignty when it was first introduced at the World Food Summit in 1996, five years later at the subsequent World Food Summit in 2002, food sovereignty was the rallying cry of the NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty and the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) became the principal civil-society interlocutor with the FAO for follow-up on commitments made at 2002 World Food Summit.

Subsequently, the idea of food sovereignty quickly gained momentum. A growing number of rural and urban-based social movements embraced it as an alternative framework for rural development, international non-governmental organizations and research institutions used it to argue for new food and agricultural policies, and some governments even included it in their national constitutions. Just over a decade after having introduced food sovereignty, La Via Campesina joined other key social actors – the World Women's March, Friends of the Earth, indigenous peoples, nomadic peoples, fisherfolk, NGOs, and urban-based movements – to organize a global forum on food sovereignty in Mali in February 2007.

The Nyéléni Forum on Food Sovereignty, named after a historical local woman farmer known for her work in cultivating seeds and food security in the region, helped consolidate a global food sovereignty movement. The forum was a participatory, bottom-up endeavour that brought together men, women and youth from a wide diversity of movements and civil society organizations to develop common objectives, common strategies and common plans of actions on food sovereignty. Through debates and negotiation the forum process effectively deepened the radical understandings of food sovereignty and strengthened alliances. Food sovereignty was

now understood by many as an instrument to transform societies in general and participants returned home committed to strengthen mobilization. Importantly, La Via Campesina recognized that food sovereignty is possible only with a fundamental transformation of unequal gender relations within and beyond movements themselves.

In the two decades since La Via Campesina emerged it has accomplished a great deal. It has been instrumental in changing the terms of the international debates on agriculture and food: it has put agrarian reform back on the agenda; achieved a temporary ban on GM crops in some countries and moratoriums in others while at the same time raised awareness on the importance of farmers' access to and control over seeds; enhanced the participation and representation of women and youth in agriculture and food policy at the international level; and defined a new framework for the production, distribution and consumption of food -- food sovereignty, which is seen a prerequisite to the full realization of the right to food. Importantly, to help build food sovereignty, it successfully pushed the international human rights community to consider a Declaration of Peasants' Rights (men and women) that is now being discussed by the UN Human Rights Council.

Perhaps most importantly, through La Via Campesina, peasants refused to be disappeared. Instead, by "building unity through diversity" and focusing on solidarity, they transnationalized and successfully carved political spaces for rural peoples. In doing so, La Via Campesina enhanced peasant organizations' presence, power and relevance as key political actors at the local, national, regional and international levels. In many countries La Via Campesina is now the reference point for alternative social movements seeking radical change. In giving us food sovereignty, La Via Campesina yielded perhaps the most precious gift of all, hope. Hope that not only "another agriculture" is possible, but that "another world" is also possible. Indeed, the very existence La Via Campesina along with a growing global food sovereignty movement is living proof that social change is well underway. The challenge is to continue to "Globalize the struggle, globalize hope."

Persistent and new challenges

The context has changed considerably since La Vía Campesina first emerged and it is perhaps now more complex. At the time, the WTO was the clearly identified enemy. According to the statement prepared by the women who participated in the Vía Campesina delegation in Seattle in 1999: "Despite all the protests in Seattle, we thank the WTO for unifying small farmers worldwide. During the week-long work in Seattle, we have now succeeded in globalizing the struggle and globalizing our hopes."

Over the years, however, the increased corporate concentration of global wealth and power has shifted the balance of forces whereby the IMF, World Bank and the WTO no longer have the same political and financial decision-making role they once had.

Transnational corporations are gaining strength, power and influence in their attempts to take over the commons and control the global economy. Meanwhile, “representative” democracies support transnational capital by creating pseudo policy-making spaces that effectively weaken democratic decision-making processes. These changes make the focus more difficult. Furthermore, local communities everywhere continue to experience the onslaught of neoliberal policies and the brutal forces and consequences of the privatization of the commons, the global land grab, the persistent food crisis and climate change.

To counter these forces La Vía Campesina is part of the growing local resistances that are revealing a revived capacity to build alternatives on all fronts. Food, and especially food sovereignty, is now the central and common ground around which local movements are fighting unfettered capitalism. This local resistance in the North and the South is on the upsurge and takes many forms: land occupations; blocking mining and logging companies from entering indigenous territory; stopping the entry of genetically modified seeds; creating local seed banks, local food co-operatives and municipal participatory policy councils; building innovative urban and rural connections and initiatives; and forming local, national and international coalitions and alliances with different urban-based groups, indigenous peoples, and peasant organizations to implement peoples’ food sovereignty principles. The list goes on and on.

The change in the balance of power and extent of revived local resistances pose specific challenges for La Vía Campesina. No doubt, for the past fifteen years La Vía Campesina’s slogan “Globalize the struggle, globalize hope” has been a very powerful dream. In fact, through La Vía Campesina it actually become a reality! The challenges for La Vía Campesina for the next decade are numerous and we mention only a few here:

- How can La Vía Campesina successfully give visibility to all of the local struggles and ensure that these are understood within an international perspective? How can La Vía Campesina reinforce the understanding that all of these diverse and multiple local initiatives are not alone? Instead, they are part of a huge movement of people around the world who are struggling for the basic right to food, for food sovereignty.
- How can La Vía Campesina express the model of society that we are defending? That is, how can La Vía Campesina give visibility to all of the practical initiatives that are functioning outside of the capitalist market and demonstrate how these are effectively creating new foundations for new societies?
- Because women are much more tied to the local struggles against everyday forms of dominance, how can La Vía Campesina change the ways it functions

and how we express ourselves to be more feminist? That is, how can we be more egalitarian and participatory? This means, that the whole struggle against patriarchy – and all of the ways it is expressed -- is absolutely key.

- How can La Via Campesina resist the growing power and influence of transnational corporations? How can we make our presence felt and voices heard at all levels and spaces where decisions about food and agriculture are made?
- How can La Via Campesina help strengthen the global movement as a counterforce to global capitalism? How can La Via Campesina continue to build and strengthen alliances at the local, national and global levels to mobilize for food sovereignty as the solution and for recognition that peasants do feed the world and cool the planet?

At first glance, some of these challenges might also appear insurmountable. But, let us remember all that La Via Campesina has accomplished over the past twenty years. Let us honour the powerful force that we have become and reaffirm our collective commitment to “build unity among diversity”. By working together and with our allies we are countering the rhetoric and false solutions of global capitalism and “green” capitalism. We are building new societies by developing our own food sovereignty economies that are based on agro-ecological principles and social justice. This is already happening at the local level, the alternatives are spreading and the global food sovereignty movement is gaining strength. Clearly, this is necessary for the well-being of humanity and the health of the planet.

“I think that what really unites us is a fundamental commitment to humanism, because the antithesis of this is individualism and materialism. For us in La Via Campesina the human aspect is a fundamental principle, so we see the person, man and woman, as the centre of our reason for being and this is what we struggle for – for this family that is at the centre of all. Common problems unite us . . . But what also unites us are great aspirations . . . What unites us is a spirit of transformation and struggle . . . We aspire to a better world, a more just world, a more humane world, a world where real equality and social justice exist. These aspirations and solidarity in rural struggles keep us united in the Via Campesina.”

*Rafael Alegria, Honduras peasant leader and
Via Campesina Operational Secretariat (1996-2004)*

“Our response to the increasingly hostile environment for peasants and small farmers the world over is to collectively challenge those conditions. We are united in our

rejection of the economic and political conditions that destroy our livelihoods, our communities, our cultures and our natural environment. We are determined to create a rural economy that is based on respect for ourselves and the earth, on food sovereignty, and on fair trade.

La Via Campesina, Tlaxcala Declaration, 1996

“We, the peasant and small-scale farming societies, are not defeated. We are strong and determined and we are the majority in the world. We are proud of our work, which is to produce safe foods for our families and humankind. We cherish our diversity, both biological and cultural. The future belongs to us.”

La Via Campesina, Bangalore Declaration, 2000

“By ourselves, we peasants and family farmers cannot win our struggles for dignity, for a just food and agrarian system, and for that other world that is possible. We have to build and reinforce our organic and strategic alliances with movements and organizations that share our vision, and this is a special commitment of the V Conference.

La Via Campesina, Maputo Declaration, 2008

“We, La Via Campesina, reject the economic and political conditions which destroy our livelihoods, our communities, our cultures and our natural environment. The liberalization of trade and its economic policies of structural adjustment have globalized poverty and hunger in the world and are destroying local productive capacities and rural societies. This corporate agenda takes no account of food security for people. It is an inequitable system that treats both nature and people as a means to an end with the sole aim of generating profits for a few. Peasants and small farmers are denied access to and control over land, water, seeds and natural resources. Our response to the increasingly hostile environment is to collectively challenge these conditions and develop alternatives.”

La Via Campesina, Statement at the World Food Summit, 1996

Youth provide our hope for the future. . . . Youth are our base for the future, so we commit ourselves to the full integration and creative participation of young people in all levels of our struggle.

La Via Campesina, Maputo Declaration, 2008

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