



Food Sovereignty born of Peasant Seeds

La Via Campesina: building shared knowledge
on Peasant Seeds





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Training Module No 1

Created by La Via Campesina

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“Our political objective is to achieve Food Sovereignty, which aims at strengthening and rebuilding local food systems and coordinating a new model of economic and social relations based on dignity, solidarity and ethics.”

- LVC, Derio, Action Plan / Strategic Lines 2017-2020

Introduction

Each organization, region and process within La Via Campesina has the permanent task to sow, protect and harvest Food Sovereignty. This requires we fight transnational capital in all its manifestations, defend our ancestral knowledge and Mother Earth that sustains them, and sow sovereignty in each of our territories. This is what the reality of our peoples demands and this is what we have committed ourselves to within our movement.

As an integral part of this struggle, since 2003 we have been strengthening our Global Campaign “Seeds: Heritage of the Peoples at the Service of Humanity”.

Several organizations of La Via Campesina carry out activities related to the recovery of peasant seed systems. These include political campaigns against threats from the seed industry and against the criminalization of peasant seed producers; advocating before public opinion for peasant seed systems and activities against national and international laws that allow and promote the privatization of seeds. Above all, there is a lot of work done with seeds themselves, a task in which women are main protagonists: especially in the rescue of local varieties and knowledge about them; as well as their revalorization, conservation, reproduction, selection, crossing, multiplication, exchange and distribution through peasant organizations. Within our communities there is an enormous variety of peasant seeds in danger of extinction, and at the same time a strong need for native seeds in sufficient quantity and quality to supply peasant and indigenous families as well as our societies.

In the course of our Global Seed Campaign, we have gained a wealth of both political and practical experience and knowledge in the defense of peasant seeds and the rights of peoples to rescue, save, multiply, and place them at

the service of humanity. In many cases, this experience and knowledge are reflected in our own profound peasant and indigenous reflections on our realities, common enemies, and strategies to be developed. At this point in the process, we have seen that our movement has produced beautiful and richly diverse content that synthesizes our perspective on seeds at a time when we are giving greater priority to both political and technical training to accompany the different processes of social transformation around the world. Without ever neglecting the study of other sources, training from our own perspective, from our own struggle, is a strategic task that we are taking on within the movement and thanks to our organizations in the struggle for peasant seeds, we have all the conditions to do so.

Shared Content & Virtual *Shigra*

As part of the celebration of 25 Years of Struggle for Food Sovereignty, we share this training material in the spirit of building shared content for study, reflection and mobilization. This is also part of LVC's Global Seed Campaign, which seeks to strengthen the struggle for Peasant Seeds as the heart of Food Sovereignty, but also as a legitimate right of peoples guaranteed in Art. 19 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), approved in 2018.

These "Shared Contents", plus a "Virtual *Shigra*", will be organized by modules. Each module will have contents developed by LVC, partner organizations, and publishers that we believe are important to study. The contents will be distributed in three levels - Basic, Medium and Higher - each one with the minimum references that facilitators can use for the training processes, with increasing levels of complexity according to the objectives.

The modules are:

- Food Sovereignty starting from Peasant Seeds;
- Campaign "Seeds: Heritage of the Peoples at the Service of Humanity";
- Peasant and Indigenous Culture of Rural Women;
- History of the domestication and diversification of seeds;
- International mechanisms and organisms.

Shigra: word in Quechua language that means "a bag woven in net stitch". Since ancestral times, Andean peoples have used the *shigra* to carry or store food, plants, seeds, among others.

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Module Objective:

Contribute to the study of Peasant Seed Systems and their importance within the struggle for Food Sovereignty

Target Audience:

Training facilitators as well as rural and urban organizers undergoing political training under the organizations of the peasant movement in its territories, with its peoples, communities, neighbourhoods, among others.

Proposed Methodology:

Collective or individual reading followed by debate to strengthen the understanding of the topic at hand. Include this module within the context of other training processes in the respective organizational structure

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La Via Campesina members have our own views on how the world should be organized. Agriculture, food production, land, seeds, are all basic rights and needs of human existence. However, when agriculture was included in the GATT negotiations [which later became the WTO], it was clear to peasant and small farmer organizations that these rights were being overruled by neoliberalism and the corporate sector. We also knew that free trade agreements would try to legitimize this and set it in stone...We knew that the concepts and ideas behind food security would lead to total control by corporations.... After intense and long debates in Tlaxcala, we decided that we needed a language that would adequately emphasize the issue of power, control, and who makes decisions about the food system. Sovereignty was the word we needed.”

Nettie Wiebe (National Farmers' Union - Canada)



La Via Campesina put forward the proposal for Food Sovereignty in 1996, in extremely difficult times, when neoliberalism was spreading around the world and seemed unstoppable.

This was the moment when the World Trade Organization (WTO) was born, which imposed neoliberalism on the whole world and eliminated all protection for peasant agriculture. It was also a time when the governments that would attend the World Food Summit had decided to limit the right to food and turn food into a mere commodity.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is the international body responsible for enforcing the first global free trade agreement, signed in 1996. Among the measures approved by this treaty are the privatization of seeds, the elimination of any protection for agriculture and the prohibition of controlling the food trade.

The Food Summit is a meeting between governments from all over the world to agree on policies and objectives regarding food. The 1996 Food Summit, where La Via Campesina first presented its proposal for Food Sovereignty, was characterized by the subordination of food to the definitions of the WTO.

By submitting its proposal for Food Sovereignty, La Via Campesina initiated a great grassroots effort of sharing, debate and construction.

There were different milestones, such as La Via Campesina's declaration at the Food Summit in November 1996 and the 2001 meeting in Havana, which brought together hundreds of organizations from all over the world and allowed for the enrichment of the initial definition of Food Sovereignty. In 2007, a similar meeting with La Via Campesina and hundreds of organizations met in Nyéléni, Mali, where they deepened and broadened our vision of Food Sovereignty, coming to define it as follows:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to nutritious and culturally appropriate, accessible, sustainably and ecologically produced food and their right to decide on their own food and production system. This puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, above the demands of markets and corporations. It includes and defends the interests of future generations. It offers us a strategy to resist and dismantle free and corporate trade and the current food regime, and to channel food, agriculture, pastoral and fisheries systems into being managed by local producers. Food Sovereignty gives priority to local economies and local and national markets, and empowers peasants and family farming, artisanal fisheries and traditional pastoralism, and places food production, distribution and consumption on the basis of environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food Sovereignty promotes transparent trade, which guarantees decent incomes for all peoples, and the rights of consumers to control their own food and nutrition. It guarantees that the rights of access to and management of our land, territories, water, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations.

Since then, the struggle for Food Sovereignty has continued non-stop



After beginning as a cry of resistance from peasant organizations a quarter of a century ago, Food Sovereignty is today a principle of struggle for La Via Campesina, as well as for countless social and popular movements in both the countryside and cities. They see in it the basis for a world that respects fundamental rights, eliminates hunger, and guarantees food, dignity, and freedom for the people.

Given its complexity and breadth, the struggle for Food Sovereignty is closely related to many other popular struggles. "To fight for Food Sovereignty is to fight for seeds, for land, for water, against agrottoxins, for the right to organize, for one's own culture, etc." (Geneviève Lalumière, Union Paysanne, Canada).

We will not have full Food Sovereignty if we do not take care of Nature and expel agribusiness and the WTO from agriculture, or if we do not change the many legal

frameworks that put the profits of a few companies above the right to food for present and future generations. It is a long and complex struggle, and so we must pool our efforts/ with our combined strength to make various forms of Food Sovereignty a reality now.



Cultivated and uncultivated seeds and biodiversity allow us to secure our food, avoid hunger and give our children the vision of a better future"

Alimata Traoré (National Coordination of Farmers' Organizations – Mali)

Preserving, cultivating and multiplying peasant seeds are a fundamental part of the struggle. If you don't have your own seeds, you can't get rid of corporate control. The big transnationals today have many legal, technical, propagandistic, economic and biological mechanisms to control agriculture through seeds... In many countries we are also seeing the use of force and/or intimidation. Understanding how these mechanisms work is necessary to strengthen our struggle.

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There is no Food Sovereignty if there is no seed sovereignty..... On the other hand, conserving seeds for ourselves is also a way to defend the land against occupation.”

Doa Zayed, Palestina

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Women, through their work, have been the primary caretakers of seeds, historically and currently. They are primarily responsible for all tasks in the processing of the seeds, and they are the ones who best transmit that knowledge. Women have the greatest interest in and affinity for seeds; they are even symbolically linked to them because they see them as a fertilized egg.”

Geneviève Lalumière (Peasants' Union – Canada)

The arrival of Green Revolution



Until the Green Revolution, peasants around the world, their families and their communities enjoyed some degree of Food Sovereignty, even under conditions of oppression. Although they often had to give up part of their production as taxes, or sell it in disadvantageous conditions, peasant forms of production maintained their independence, focused on ensuring food for family and community, and also on obtaining the wood, fibers, medicines and elements needed for festivals, art and ceremonies.

In the hands of thousands of peasant communities there were hundreds of cultivated and wild species of plants, as well as domesticated and semi-domesticated animals, and there were hundreds of thousands of varieties of plants and animals. That meant there were thousands of ways to fish, hunt, grow, care for, harvest, cook, process and eat. There were also hundreds of ways to obtain medicines, wood, fibers, dyes, etc. And that resulted in an infinite wealth of different cultures, each with its own cuisine, agricultural techniques, sacred beliefs, ways of caring for health, ways of caring for nature, s, of making art, of sharing, etc.

What is the Green Revolution?

In the first half of the 20th century, several companies producing fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides and seeds understood that peasant autonomy prevented them from becoming good customers. Despite countless advertising campaigns and the cooperation of technical extension services in industrialized countries to introduce these inputs, the peasantry continued to maintain a significant degree of independence and freedom to make decisions about what and how to grow or breed, and company sales grew slowly. The situation began to change as companies and research institutes began to produce seeds that, based on fertilizers and irrigation, could achieve high yields. Under pressure from technical assistance systems, such seeds began to be incorporated by farmers in the industrialized countries, and sales of fertilizers and other agrochemicals increased significantly. It was not long before ways were found to implement the same technology in the rest of the world. With the help of the United States government in particular, and of foundations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation, research institutes were set up around the world whose main objective was to create varieties that needed fertilizers and agrochemicals, and technical assistance services were directed at putting pressure on farmers to adopt such varieties and use the inputs they needed. This process was called the "**Green Revolution**".



This so-called revolution has been imposed for more than 50 years and the peasants are still resisting, especially in Africa. Governments and the private sector continue to exert pressure, despite multiple failures and undeniable negative effects.

The Green Revolution devalued and discredited peasant seeds right from its beginning, in order to justify introducing "improved" seeds produced in experimental fields. Such seeds, in fact, have little in the way of improvements: they depend on irrigation and chemical products - fertilizers, pesticides, hormones, herbicides - to achieve good harvests. They are also varieties that have often lost important characteristics, such as resistance to extreme temperatures, water shortages, acidic soils or local insects. They produce fruits and grains that have lost their taste, become difficult to cook or decompose easily. Another characteristic that was frequently lost was multiple uses. A well-known case is that of short cane, which is a modern cereal variety. These varieties can produce more grain when all the required agrochemicals are added, but they do not produce the straw that was formerly used to feed animals that provide manure and urine for use as fertilizers, or as a versatile material to make other items such as hats or adobe.

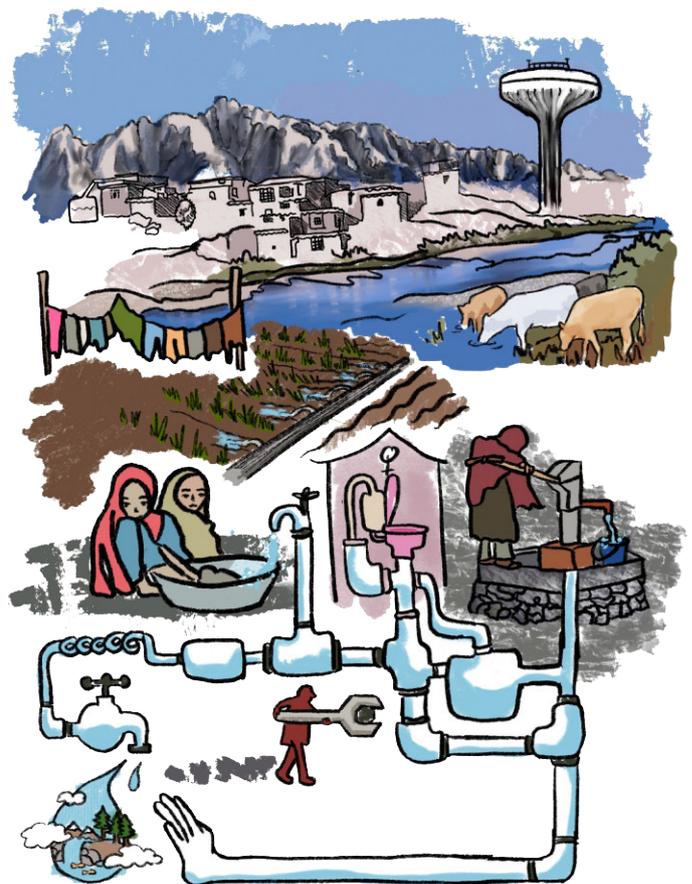
Initially, the "improved" seeds were produced by research institutes and were disseminated through public programs of technical assistance, credit and propaganda. The seeds were freely available and, although there were many that did much damage, the presence of

researchers and technicians committed to social welfare meant that some very useful varieties were also produced. However, neoliberal policies were imposed, such as destroying public infrastructure, neglecting public research, decreasing credit or removing it altogether, opening up agriculture to imports and exports. This meant that the public presence disappeared and the production and commercialization of seeds became controlled by private companies and increasingly by transnational corporations. For these companies, seeds ceased to be a common good and became a mere commodity that also forced the purchase of other goods, such as chemical inputs. In 1971, they began to build a strong seed privatization system through UPOV, which they made even stronger in 1991 and imposed worldwide through the WTO, free trade agreements and other international treaties.

During the decades that this process has lasted, the growing dependence on purchased inputs and the loss of their own seeds has led to a worldwide situation of mass expulsion of rural families and communities from the countryside to the city, as well as the expansion of large agricultural properties. This has facilitated other important processes of loss of food sovereignty: the simplification of the urban diet, the formation of large processing and marketing chains, the expansion of supermarkets, production in large monocultures and the reorientation of agricultural production towards the highest bidder, that is, towards international agricultural trade. With the development of biotechnology, agribusiness companies have acquired a powerful new tool that they have used to further control seeds and expand monocultures without limit.

Despite all the pressure and many years of propaganda, the truth is that the great majority of peasants resisted and did not let go of their seeds. Women peasants in particular continued to cultivate, care for, multiply and share seeds, thus keeping themselves independent from the big commercial interests.

The companies then promoted highly aggressive strategies to break the resistance and force everyone to accept the modern varieties and associated inputs. They did this first in the industrialized world; in Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada. Then they did it in Asia and Latin America, and finally they moved on to Africa, where the pressure has intensified over the last 15 years, especially through programs like AGRA, which is heavily funded by the Gates Foundation.



These strategies include seed privatization, control of commercialization, health regulations, and demands that only favor big business, such as so-called good agricultural practices, food safety, and arbitrary rules such as bans on selling raw milk. The results are continuous expulsion from the countryside, more than 800 million hungry people and more than 1.6 billion people sick due to poor nutrition, as well as the destruction of nature and a growing climate crisis. The COVID19 crisis offers evidence that international trade does not guarantee food, and that by mid-2021 there will probably be 1.7 billion suffering from hunger.

The Green Revolution began in the industrialized world in the late 1950s and began to expand around the world in the 1960s. Since then, the FAO says three-quarters of the farmers' seeds that existed at the time have been lost. If that is the case, it is a tragedy. But it is also highly possible that many seeds are still alive and in the fields and in the homes of farmers around the world, out of reach of researchers, not included in the statistics, and overlooked by authorities and companies. Just as laboratory seeds were the key for capital to take control of food, peasant seeds are the key to rebuilding and recovering our food sovereignty. Our job is to put peasant seeds back at the center of agriculture, food, our cultures and our sovereignty. This is why La Via Campesina is promoting the permanent campaign in defense of seeds as the peoples' heritage in service of humanity, which we present in another section.

It is not and will not be an easy job and it can only be successful if we unite it with the many other struggles that we are fighting for; the struggle for food sovereignty, the defense of peasant agriculture, the fight against climate change, among others. Thanks to 17 years of applying pressure, and permanently debating and drawing up plans, today we have the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), the only international instrument that widely recognizes our right to Food Sovereignty and to seeds. As La Via Campesina, it remains our task to be familiar with this and to make it a powerful tool in our struggle.



How are Peasant Seeds the basis of Food Sovereignty and how are laboratory seeds at the service of big business?



| Peasant Seeds | Seeds produced by laboratories and companies |
|---|--|
| They are produced by the same families. They can be exchanged with neighbors and relatives | You have to buy them every year, they are expensive and cannot be exchanged freely |
| They are a family heirloom, often received from grandmothers. We know their history and are proud to have them. | We do not know their history, nor where they come from. We don't know how they behave, nor the best way to use the harvest |
| They can be produced with our own resources: our seeds, manure, organic fertilizer, intercropping, biological preparations, etc. | They need irrigation, fertilizers, agrochemicals that must be bought from companies, usually transnationals |
| We can take care of them, improve them, multiply them, use them and exchange them freely | We cannot multiply them, nor exchange them, nor use them freely. We have to buy them every year |
| They are adapted to local conditions. Even in bad years they produce something. | They are not adapted to local conditions. If the year is bad or something fails, everything is lost |
| We know how to handle them. If we have doubts, we can consult others in the family or community. | Many times you don't know how to handle them, so they often fail. We depend on technicians or companies to learn about them |
| If we lose the seed, we can get it back from a neighbor or family member | If we lose the seed, we have to buy it back |
| We know how to cook and process the products we harvest. They have the flavors we like the most and many of them are used to care for the sick, pregnant women, the elderly, etc. They also are used in our ceremonies. | The products we harvest are not always adapted to our ways of processing and cooking. Many times it takes a long time to cook them. The flavors are not the same. They lose their medicinal and ceremonial power |
| We know how to store them and prevent them from being eaten by insects or fungi | They are delicate and need toxic chemicals to preserve them |
| It is often difficult to sell the harvest in urban markets. We need to educate the people in the city that our production is the best | It's easy to sell the crop in the city, but they don't always give us a profit, because producing is more expensive |

Virtual *Shigra*

(additional tools)

Read:

[Food Sovereignty. Now!](#)

[Seed laws that criminalise farmers: Resistance and fightback](#)

[Our Seeds, Our Future](#)

[Nyéleni 2007: Forum for Food Sovereignty](#)

[Peasant Agroecology for Food Sovereignty and Mother Earth: Experiences of La Via Campesina](#)

[Seeds and agricultural biodiversity: The neglected backbone of the right to food and nutrition](#)

[Seeds of resistance: Palestinian farmers fight against annexation and pandemic](#)

[Global Action to Adopt a Seed: Explainer](#)

Watch:

[A Movement in Formation](#)

[Globalize Hope](#)

Note: We would like to know your experience with these modules. Which other topics would you like to explore in more depth? When you use this material in your regional, local and organizational processes, please send your reactions and comments to lvweb@viacampesina.org, they will be very useful.

La Via Campesina is an international movement that defends small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice and dignity. It brings together millions of peasants, small and medium-sized producers, landless peoples, rural youth and women, indigenous peoples, migrants and agricultural workers around the world. It strongly opposes agribusiness and multinationals that are destroying peoples and nature. LVC comprises 182 local and national organizations in 81 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

For more information, visit www.viacampesina.org and subscribe to receive newsletters and make donations.

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