Global Campaign for Peasant Seeds, a Heritage of Peoples in the Service of Humanity

La Via Campesina: Building Shared Knowledge on Peasant Seeds
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Training Module N°2

Created by La Via Campesina
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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 for Peasant Seeds, a Heritage of Peoples in 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 for peasant seed systems and activities against national and international laws that promote the privatization of seeds. Above all, there is a lot of work done with seeds themselves, a task in which women are main custodians: 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.
We have seen that our movement has produced rich diverse content 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. 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 into modules. Each module will have contents developed by LVC, allied organizations, and members, 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;
- **Global Campaign for Peasant Seeds, a Heritage of Peoples in 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 sighra to carry or store food, plants, seeds, among others.
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Module Objective:
To promote the dissemination and understanding of the principles and actions of the "Global Campaign for Peasant Seeds, a Heritage of Peoples in the Service of Humanity".

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.
Birth and Growth of the Campaign

La Via Campesina was born in 1993, at a critical time for peasants and rural peoples worldwide. As neoliberalism advanced and imposed itself on the world more and more, various peasant organizations saw how the possibilities of conserving land and seeds, of continuing work in rural areas and of having a dignified life became more and more difficult. With the common objective of defending their ways of life and work as peasants, La Via Campesina member organizations debated and identified the main attacks that agribusiness and neoliberalism were launching on the peoples of the countryside and developed

The Global Seed Campaign has made us see that seeds are magic. They awaken our joy, our pride, and our strength to keep fighting to care for them and keep them alive, whilst at the same time they also feed us. And that magic reaches far beyond the women of La Via Campesina, it also mobilizes our comrades and other social sectors, even in the city.”

Francisca Rodriguez (ANAMURI, Chile)

The diverse women of the countryside have been linked, both in the past and still today to selecting, cleaning and saving seeds. That may sound very simple, but it is not. Once we gave seeds to men and women farmers for conservation, and we agreed that the following year they should return part of the seed produced. After one year, only women returned seed.”

Jeongyeol Kim (Korean Women Peasant’s Association, Korea)
proposals directed toward the entire society that today are fundamental in the defense of peasant agriculture, the feeding of humanity and the care of our planet.

From that debate and construction emerged our defense of Food Sovereignty, which we discuss in another section. The constant struggle against the World Trade Organization (WTO) also emerged, and the slogan was “WTO out of agriculture.” Faced with the advance of GMOs, monocultures and the laws of seed privatization, we saw the urgency of defending our seeds and their tremendous wealth. In 2001, the Continental Assembly of Rural Women of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations, CLOC – Via Campesina, proposed to La Via Campesina to carry out a global campaign in defense of peasant seeds. In their agreements, the women of the CLOC said: “We women, ancestral guardians of seeds, declare that these are the heritage of our communities, our peoples and all of humanity. We vehemently reject the patenting of seeds and the intrusion of transgenic seeds in our lands”.

One year later, together with various allies, La Via Campesina launched the Global Campaign in Defense of Seeds, as part of the activities before the 2002 World Food Summit. There we declared seeds to be the “common heritage of humanity” and the foundation of Food Sovereignty, and we declared ourselves to be in permanent campaign for the defense of peasant seeds. Our proposal was that each organization, community, peasant family or person who wanted to participate in the countryside and in the city, could work in the defense, care, production and dissemination of peasant seeds. We always said that the seeds should be kept alive on the land, cultivated, and remembered in the food, in the festivals, in the markets. They should walk with the people and be shared under the commitment to take proper care of them.

At the Third World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre in January 2003, La Via Campesina raised the banner of Food Sovereignty even more strongly and we deployed our campaign by directly appealing to social movements around the world to commit themselves to the defense of peasant seeds. We called to promote and stimulate the free exchange of seeds, to support local conservation efforts, to promote peasant fairs to share knowledge, to exchange seeds and agroecological products, and to energize local and regional markets.

We also committed to developing diverse actions to recover the historical memory and ancestral culture of seed management, promoting urban and rural ecological agriculture that reproduces the miracle of having more food and seeds and of better quality. At the same time, we plan to carry out various actions to reject the production of seeds and transgenic crops.

Another crucial step was a long and painful debate around our slogan “Seeds; Shared Heritage of Humanity”. Shortly after we launched our campaign, we found that representatives of Monsanto were happy: if seeds were the heritage of humanity, then they too had rights and we should share seeds with them!
We returned to our debate and after much reflection and discussion, we concluded that seeds are not a heritage of humanity, but our heritage, that of the peasant and indigenous peoples. It was us who created them, diversified them, protected them and conserved them over time, and who then gave them to the service of humanity. We did not, however give them to the service of just any person, and even less of any company. Whoever receives and uses our seeds has the obligation to care for them, keep them alive, multiply them, respect and preserve their history, as well as sharing them with others who care for them and not allowing them to be used for anything other than the well-being of the people and the care of Mother Earth.

From that point forward, our campaign was defined as “Peasant Seeds, Heritage of Peoples in the Service of Humanity”, which was adopted as a worldwide campaign of La Via Campesina at our International Conference in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 2004.

The debate, reflection and action have not stopped since then. Each La Via Campesina Conference or regional meeting, or the thousands of actions taken at the national and local level have all driven and deepened our defense of the seeds. It is an action that allows the participation of anybody; young people, girls and boys, old men and women, from any walk of life, although women do play a central role. This is because traditionally they are the main caretakers of the seeds, because of their intimate link with food and in many occasions with the daily fight against hunger. Conserving seeds also gives women greater levels of autonomy.

As La Via Campesina, we have had important specific meetings on seeds in Paraguay, Bali, France and Cuba. In the VII International Conference we committed ourselves to a worldwide action part of the Campaign that we have called “Adopt a Seed,” which was inspired by the beautiful work done by the Korean Peasant Women’s Association or KPWA seeking to recover thousands of peasant seeds and put them back in the hands of the peasantry. It has been a collective effort that has allowed us to identify principles,
objectives and ways of working. These are elements that we must continue to perfect, making them ever richer and more complex, so that they help us to better protect our seeds, our agriculture, our way of life and our irreplaceable work of feeding ourselves and feeding humanity.

The following is a summary of the agreements and lessons we have reached on this path, with the aim of placing the struggle for seeds at the heart of the social, political and economic struggles that we take part in throughout the world.
Campaign
Principles

Seeds are not appropriable
They must at all times maintain their character of collective heritage. In this regard, there are vital duties which must be upheld, and which should be prioritized even above the right to enjoy them. The Campaign, therefore, opposes the privatization of seeds, genetic manipulation, intellectual property and all forms of appropriation of life.

The protection of seeds must be entrusted to the peasants
Our campaign must be conducted from our organizations, without ever losing sight of the peasant’s vision, styles, dreams, methods and hopes. We must adapt it to each place, culture and circumstance. It is collective work that must reflect all our wealth and diversity and in which women have played and will continue to play a fundamental and predominant role.

Agroecology needs peasant seeds, and peasant seeds need agroecology
Agroecology-based peasant agriculture needs our seeds, and our seeds need agroecologically based peasant agriculture; one cannot progress without the other, just as there is no food sovereignty without sovereignty over seeds, and vice versa.

The campaign is broad, diverse and should be multiplied
Our actions must be diverse, adapted to local conditions, and must incorporate knowledge, festivals, forms of work, of eating, of exchange, of political action. It must reach beyond La Via Campesina, articulating with other organizations and social sectors.

In order to preserve the seeds, we have to make people in the field see the importance and usefulness of local seeds, their plasticity. We also have to produce with them, to show that they give us economic benefits and that they are not a burden. And then we have to disseminate this information to the whole of society, reaching both the cities and consumers.”

Jeongyeol Kim (Korean Women Peasant’s Association, Korea)
Campaign Lines of Action

Permanent mobilization
We must mobilize locally, nationally and internationally against laws that legalize the privatization of our seeds and criminalize our work in caring for and conserving them, whether those laws are UPOV, patents, certifications or any other name given to them that is sought to be imposed through World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), WTO or FTAs.

We must resist the transnationals’ campaign, which uses international mechanisms and national legislation to steal peasant seeds, criminalize their use and replace them in each country with industrial seeds that are genetically modified, patented and thirsty for pesticides. La Via Campesina concentrates its efforts within the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), the FAO, the UN, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and against the Free Trade Agreements in order to promote farmers’ rights, Food Sovereignty and Peasant Agroecology.

Stand in Resistance
We must also resist the privatization of national and international germplasm banks. We must “liberate” the seeds held in public and private seed banks. We cannot stop our resistance against GMOs, Terminator seeds, or other tricks of industrial agriculture like golden rice or “fortified” crops.

Local Meetings and Common Projects
We need to organize and promote local meetings that allow us to exchange and share knowledge, especially from the older people to young people, so that the knowledge about the production, multiplication and improvement of seeds that has been handed down by so many generations, peoples, and wise men and women is not lost.
Our collective work can take many forms. What happens most commonly is the celebration of exchanges of seeds and knowledge in communities, villages, localities and, of course, in all of the La Via Campesina meetings. Another way is to establish forms of collective seed storage at the local level, which we have called peasant seedbeds, community barns, seed houses, among others. It has also been particularly useful to many organizations to establish community and family fields for reproduction, selection and multiplication of seeds, as well as food production based on the seeds we care for. Recovering foods and methods of at-home processing have helped to turn conservation into a source of well-being and enjoyment. Experience says that the more varied our strategies are, the greater our chances of success and continuity; if any unforeseen event or aggression prevents us from continuing with one strategy, the others allow us to move forward.

**Promote our own Peoples’ Knowledge and Culture**

We must disseminate among our own organizations materials that allow us to inform and explain the importance of conserving our own seeds and biodiversity, and not depending on modern, GMO or hybrid seeds. We must also emphasize that our work and our seeds are a source of pride, and that we are especially proud of what we do. We cannot forget the festivities, commemorations, ceremonies and celebrations, both traditional and new. Peasant seeds can provide healthy and tasty food, with special and unique flavors and colors. More than that though, they are a source of pride, dignity, joy and admiration for the immense work and wisdom that the people of the countryside have created and gathered for centuries, and which we wish to continue adding to for centuries to come.

**Make Use of the UNDROP as a Tool in the Struggle**

Today we have the United Nations Declaration on Peasant Rights which recognizes our unrestricted right to seeds. It is an instrument that it took 17 years for us to bring to fruition; we need to be familiar with it and incorporate it into every struggle we wage in the defense of seeds and food sovereignty.

> It is important to link seed conservation to food production, so that conservation is not an additional burden. Women are very active in our conservation activities and this increases their levels of autonomy."

*Alimata Traore (National Coordination of Farmers’ Organizations – Mali)*
Virtual Shigra
(additional tools)

Read:

Global Action to Adopt a Seed: Explainer

Nyéléni Bulletin #38: Peasant Seeds, the Heart of the Struggle for Food Sovereignty

Seed Laws that Criminalise Farmers: Resistance and Fightback

Infographic: Stop seed laws that criminalise farmers & defend local seeds!

Watch:

Why Is It So Important to Respect Peasants’ Rights to Seeds?

Seeds of Liberty

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 lvcweb@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.