



# Seeds in Peasant and Indigenous Culture, for Food Sovereignty of the Peoples

La Via Campesina: building shared knowledge  
on Peasant Seeds





**Seeds in Peasant and Indigenous Culture, for Food Sovereignty of the Peoples**

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Training Module N°3

Created by La Via Campesina

Illustrations: Sophie Holin / La Via Campesina

Bagnolet, May, 2022

# La Via Campesina: building shared knowledge on Peasant Seeds

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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.”

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- 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 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;
- **Seeds in Peasant and Indigenous Culture, for Food Sovereignty of the Peoples**
- History of the domestication and diversification of seeds;
- International mechanisms and organisms.

*Shigra*: Palabra en idioma quechua que significa "bolsa tejida a punto de red". Ancestralmente, los pueblos andinos han utilizado la shigra para llevar o guardar alimentos, plantas, semillas, entre otros.

# Seeds in Peasant and Indigenous Culture, for Food Sovereignty of the Peoples

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## Training Module N°3

### Module Objective:

Reflect collectively on the value of seeds in the cultures of peasant and indigenous peoples.

### 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.

# Seeds in Peasant and Indigenous Culture, for Food Sovereignty of the Peoples

In 1989, the U.S. National Academy of Sciences published a book entitled *"The Lost Crops of the Incas. Little known crops with potential to be cultivated worldwide"*. It describes more than 100 crops from all over the Americas that, according to the authors, were at that time little known and underutilized. Opening the book was a major surprise: almost without exception, each of the supposedly "little-known" crops was a common part of the popular diet and especially of the diet of rural communities in many regions of Latin America.

The authors of the book were not ignorant people. They were all considered world-class experts. The book was also approved by the Board of Governors of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States, an institution that presents itself as being made up of "distinguished scholars, committed to scientific research," and "a group of people who have been trained in the field. Among them would have been more than 500 Nobel Prize winners. And yet, the book was a monument to the ignorance of how the people of the countryside and the popular sectors of Latin America were fed.

But the book also symbolizes another tragedy: several of the crops identified there later became export crops and are no longer available for popular consumption. They have become expensive and difficult to cook. Furthermore, they have lost their nutritional richness, and original flavor, and the traditional varieties have been lost altogether.

The above situation is just one example among many that have occurred around the world and reflect the racist, colonial and patriarchal values of those who encourage and enforce such appropriation and commodification of crops. Local crops, biodiversity and uses are ignored or disregarded, and replaced with those appreciated by colonial powers or modernity. Sometimes these goods are "rediscovered",

and then taken over and turned into elite food or goods for a privileged few, which means that they are out of reach of the majority of the population. Along the way, we have lost taste, nutrition, health, freedom, knowledge and noble materials and we have gained famine, hunger, malnutrition, disease, dependence, pollutants and unsuitable materials. We now have fewer opportunities to enjoy the immense wealth that the people of the countryside discovered and created during their history.

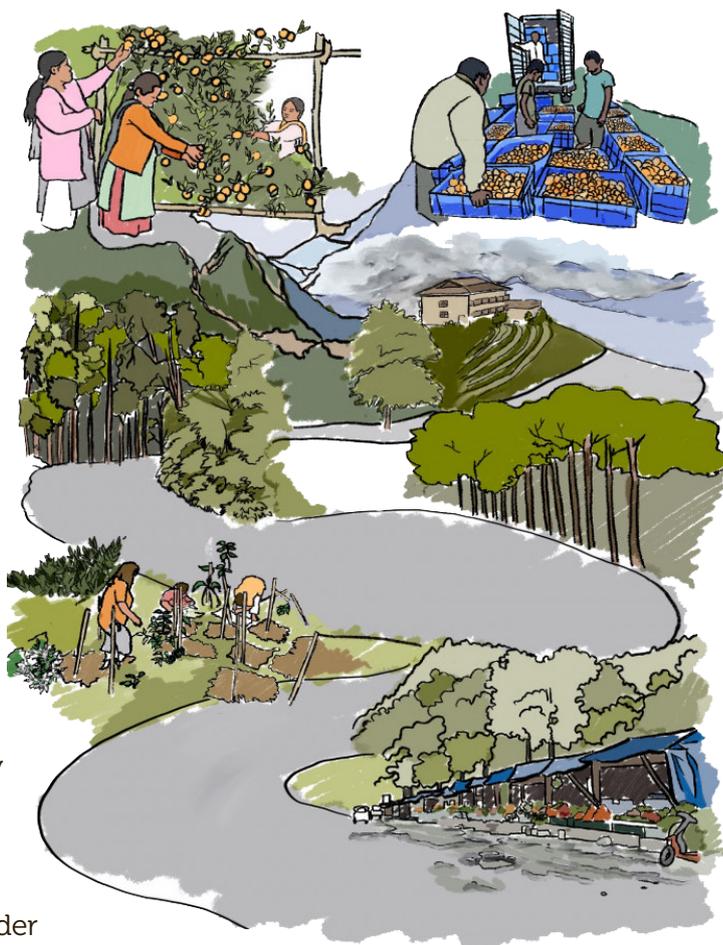
When La Via Campesina was formed and told the world years ago that we want to continue being peasants, we set ourselves the task of defending, conserving and recovering everything that allows us to be, live and produce according to our needs and our own definitions. A fundamental part of our path is now and will continue to be to defend and recover the seeds that made it possible in the first place.



# How do seeds relate to our ways of being, living and producing?

## 1. In the agriculture we practice

Although we share many similarities, there is no doubt that different peoples have developed different ways of farming, hunting, gathering and fishing. The extraordinary thing about this creation has been that, through the use of local diversity, it has adapted and made the most of local characteristics and what that locality provides to meet human needs. Originally, they were different species on each continent and in each region. They were species such as taro (malanga), rice, banana and yam in Asia; yam, rice, millet, sorghum and oil palm in Africa; potatoes, maize and cassava in the Americas, various cereals in Europe and the Middle East. And in each place, some kind of legume: beans, lentils, peas, chickpeas, broad beans, etc. Each of these crops was combined with several others in a particular way. Just to name a few examples: the traditional rice fields were simultaneously diverse gardens in paddies. Corn - one of the mega-monocultures of today - was accompanied by beans, peppers and squash. Wheat and cereals grew under the vines, which in turn grew under the olive trees. Other species that many people adopted or domesticated were canes and vines. These were different across the continents; the role of bamboo in Asia was fulfilled by the *guadua*-type bamboo in America. The peoples of Africa, America and South Asia independently domesticated cotton, and where there was no cotton there was flax or hemp. The fruit trees give us another plethora of examples of diversity, each used and planted in different ways. The important thing is that the different customs reflected local soil and climate conditions, local topography, the tools available, the forms of social organization and the taste preferences of the people. And although life may not have always been easy, all the colonial writers reported that they found the people well fed, healthy and proud.



With the colonial processes and the traffic of slaves from Africa, the differences between regions and continents were diminished, because the crops and wild plants traveled with people. Nevertheless, the different forms of production remained important. Modernity has sought to end that, especially since the Green Revolution.

## 2. In healthy food



The work of preserving seeds teaches us quickly. When the families who preserve seeds, taste the food produced from peasant seeds, they immediately notice the difference with those on the market, the different, really better, taste. And there they fall in love with the seed, it becomes part of the family. That's why we chose the expression "Adopt a Seed".

**Jeongyeol Kim (Korean Women Peasant's Association, Korea)**



Eating well is not an easy task, nor one that can be done at random. Modern science tells us that we need more than 30 vitamins and minerals, different types of proteins and fats, different types of fibers, antioxidant and anti-inflammatory compounds, and others. There is no food that contains all that, and there are essential elements that are scarce. Added to that is the current problem that many foods are contaminated with pesticides and other toxic elements.

Throughout the world, different peoples and cultures of the countryside have managed to develop extremely diverse crops, ways of harvesting and styles of eating. Each people discovered and invented uses for leaves, stems, fruits, seeds, roots, and cultivated, wild or semi-cultivated plants. They discovered and invented uses for bred or hunted animals, algae, mushrooms, insects and

all kinds of foods, be they salted, pickled, fermented, in syrup, dried, etc. Even people whose diet has been described as not very diverse, such as the Inuit, have actually used all the diversity available in their environment to stay healthy.

What ties all this together? That there is no traditional food system that has not proven to be balanced, nutritious and adequate to the conditions in which the people who created it live or have lived. Moreover, the combinations of foods not only gave special flavors, but also ensured optimal nutrition.

Eating a legume with some other type of grain and herbs allows to obtain a high value protein. This is a combination that can be seen all over the world. The many local crops of starch-rich plants (yams, cassava, taro, sweet potatoes, potatoes, sorghum and cereals, among others) have for centuries not only provided energy, but also proteins, vitamins and minerals. They also had healing, antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties, at levels far beyond those of modern varieties. Wild vegetables are universally present, as are aromatic herbs, and these provide mainly fiber, vitamins, minerals and protection against infection and inflammation, as well as taste. These benefits are even greater when such plants are seasoned, cooked briefly, fermented, etc. through local practices. In many different types of cultures algae and mushrooms have also been incorporated, as a highly nutritious supplement with almost no known disadvantages, which is especially helpful in times of shortage.

Seasonings put a distinctive stamp on food and reflects the preferences of each people, as well as adding scarce nutrients and protection against food decomposition and diseases. Breeding, hunting or fishing of local animals has allowed access to meats with better levels and combinations of fats, proteins and vitamins than any of the modern breeds. The different fats and oils (from traditional palm, pork, olive, lard, fish, and many others) possess a wealth of essential nutrients that no modern industrial oil can provide.

We could carry on, giving hundreds more examples. The important thing is that the foods, and the ways of processing them were not invented at random, or as a fluke result by combining what was available to the people. They were established in order to guarantee health and secure food for the whole year. The women were, and still are in charge of tasting, growing and creating different foods until they hit the nail on the head.

And the basis of their work is in seeds and diversity.

Modernity has normalized our dependence on the same dozen crops, but peasant food is characterized by the incorporation of a high number of species.

All the major traditional crops (such as rice, corn, sorghum, lentils, beans, potatoes, yams, cassava, plantains, sweet potatoes) come in hundreds of varieties, each with different uses, ways of being processed, nutritional benefits, colors and flavors. Each of these varieties was created by farming communities, who cared for and improved their seeds, and then spread them throughout a region or even the world, where the process was continued and new varieties were created and re-created.

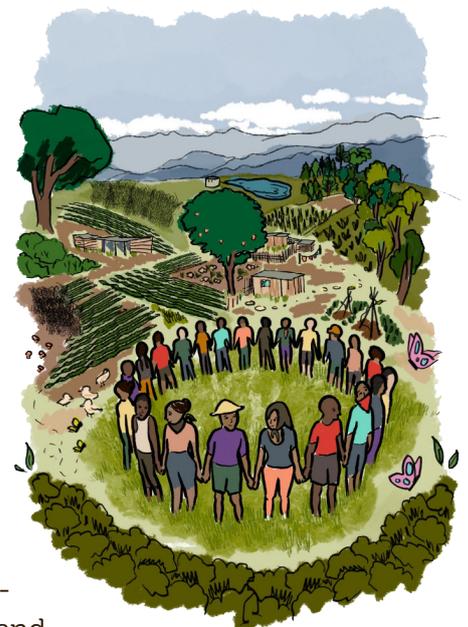


### 3. In the care of nature

Daily contact with Nature or Mother Earth has taught peasant and indigenous peoples that she is both generous and delicate. Just as she gives us goods, it is necessary to take care of her to give continuity to life, and that task falls on us. We do this not by using agrochemicals, but by promoting diversity and plants that are protective, repellent or that act against pests and diseases. We take care of the soil when we grow legumes which refuel it with nutrients, or when we plant trees and bushes that provide shade and organic matter, or when we turn the harvest residue and manure into fertilizer. We take care of the water when we protect springs with trees and vines. Each of these acts of care needs a certain type of seed or plant.

Another way to take care of nature is to adjust to the local area and respect the seasonal changes. Producing certain crops or having access to their fruits throughout the year, as is encouraged by the agro-industrial system, requires the use of agro-toxins, chemical fertilizers and plastics, in addition to increasing dependency on monocultures for export.

And that is part of the agricultural system that today is at the root of climate change and health crises that we are facing. We farmers have our own ways of stretching the seasons without breaking the cycles, and for that, once again, we need different seeds and varieties. We need to do staggered plantings to get earlier or later harvests, to eat immediately, or to process and store for times of scarcity.



For centuries, respect for seasonality was also the basis for cooperative ties and time management in each territory. For example, around the world the slaughter of animals has been a time of gathering, because consumption had to be immediate, or because processing required many hands. Planting, harvesting and storage processes have typically been moments of collective work and celebration, because they require a great deal of labor and must be done at precise moments.

#### 4. In good living, life cycles and longevity



Eating is one of the most basic needs of all living beings, but we humans have also made it a source of joy, enjoyment, pleasure and, above all, a time to share and communicate. There are historians and philosophers who tell us that it was eating together that created the strongest bonds between us and which first led us to form groups, and for these communities to finally become peoples. There are even theories that humans developed language because they were eating together. It is not surprising then that meals are part of all our celebrations, ceremonies and solemn moments, and even of our religious beliefs.

The plants we care for do not only end up on our plate. They also provide us with the fundamental elements that allow us to produce and live. Vegetable fibers give us the textiles that dress and shelter us, the hammocks where we rest, the

baskets we use to carry and store our crops, the nets for fishing and hunting, the ropes for construction and dragging things, the waterproof material for the roofs, the ligament for the mud in construction. Wood gave us lasting fire, and still to this day provides us with tools, the plow, storage, houses and other structures, boats, carriages, musical instruments and toys. The fruits and seeds, the leaves, roots and barks give us dyes, soaps, disinfectants, skin protectors, insect repellents, and materials for pickling, painting or proofing things against decomposition. Flowers give us scent, color, beauty and joy. Not to mention that there would be no medicine in the world if we couldn't count on the thousands and thousands of protective plants we have around us.

It is not just by chance that people from all corners of the world have seen plants as a link to celebration, the spiritual and the sacred. Nor is it a coincidence that important or special plants for certain peoples have been or continue to be present at feasts, banquets, rites, religious ceremonies and solemn moments. Just look at corn, cassava, quinoa, amaranth and potatoes in the Americas, or coffee in Ethiopia, or adzuki beans in parts of Southeast Asia, or oil palms, rice and sorghum in Africa, or yam and taro in Oceania, or rice, spices and the lotus in Asia, or wheat in the entire Mediterranean basin, to name just a few.

Similarly, it is not by chance that the celebrations are not merely a moment of merriment. As well as being times for gratitude, they allow us to mark the calendar that guides us in the right times to cultivate and produce.

It is a common fact that the great traditional festivals around the world are all linked to important moments in agriculture, sowing and harvesting in particular, but also the equinoxes and solstices that mark new cycles. The celebrations have been a time to share and guarantee continuity to our production, and the seeds have played a crucial role in this; in many cultures grandmothers give seeds to their granddaughters at the time of their weddings. Even local markets were initially part of that mixture of celebration and exchange (the word "feria" [market] originally comes from the word "fiesta" [party]), and the farmer's markets do retain much of that spirit to this day.

# Without seeds and our own territories, there is no life

What has enabled the world's peasant and indigenous peoples to discover, improve and multiply all this wealth and diversity? It's the freedom to experiment, test, learn and create collectively, relying on their own knowledge and freely adopting what seems useful from what other peoples knew and did. And to maintain this freedom, it is necessary to have access to a land and its natural assets, as well as to treasure the seeds that will allow life to continue to be reproduced.

This is why food sovereignty is not just about food. One of the greatest pillars of food sovereignty is seeds, but it also requires access to water, to land, to the sea, and the freedom to exchange, distribute and market, to maintain one's own culture and all one's own ways of living and producing.

Every time we lose the use of a plant or a certain variety, we are in danger of losing a part of a way of living, celebrating, producing, consuming and sharing. Of losing a part of what make us people, gives us independence, freedom, security and health, and allows us to live in a dignified and meaningful way.



## The privileged classes also know this

Privileged classes throughout history have known this too. . When the ancient Romans and Greeks told their stories, they said that the first thing the armies did in case of war was to burn the crops of the people they attacked or invaded. So did the military commands of the Persian Empire, the French and American armies in Vietnam, the colonial powers in Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. Since the year one thousand, the feudal lords denied the peasant peoples of Europe access to the forests. The colonial powers declared themselves owners of the land and the forests across the continents, and monopolized or reduced access to them, expelling, killing and enslaving millions. Various traditional crops were demonized, despised or even banned. The emergence of strong social and anti-colonial movements forced such practices to be disguised as “soft” measures during the second half of the 20th century. The education system and technical assistance provided worked to make the immense work of women invisible, and to instill contempt and substitutions for the crops, food, medicines and local biodiversity that modernity and “civilization” determined to be unworthy of cultivation.



But it did not turn out the way they had hoped. Until the 1950s, the vast majority of the world's peasant and indigenous peoples continued to rebel, maintaining their own ways of living and producing, with their own seeds and food, their own medicines and their abundant biodiversity. The Green Revolution was then introduced, which ordered the abandonment of seeds and knowledge of their own, relegating women to non-productive domestic work and living in accordance with modernity. It was a change that advanced mainly in the industrialized countries, but not in the rest of the world. In



the 1970s, with the entry of neoliberalism and free trade, big capital concluded that it was necessary to strike at the heart of everything, and the idea of privatizing seeds took hold. Just as centuries ago access to land, territories and forests was prohibited and criminalized, today they are seeking to prohibit and criminalize our access to seeds. At first, this was presented as an “offer” that very few countries “accepted”. With the creation of the World Trade Organization and the advance of free trade agreements, the invitation became an obligation that every day looks more and more like a new form of servitude.

**To struggle for the defense of our seeds and the biodiversity of our territories is to fight for our right to continue being peasants and enjoy a healthy, dignified and happy life!**

# Virtual *Shigra*

(additional tools)

## Read:

[Our Seeds, Our Future](#)

[Rice is Life, Culture and Dignity](#)

[Seed Laws that Criminalise Farmers: Resistance and Fightback](#)

## Watch:

[Sow to Resist](#)

[Seeds: Commons or Corporate Property?](#)

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](mailto: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](http://www.viacampesina.org) and suscribe to recieve newsletters and make donations.

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