

## **“SOVEREIGNTY”**

**Speaker: Paola Laini / young farm worker based in northern Italy. Member of the Italian Rural Association and of the Youth Articulation of La Via Campesina.**

Warm greetings to you all and thanks for inviting La Via Campesina to take part in this Opening Ceremony. I hope I can contribute to make this space energizing and motivational, in a spirit of collaboration and exchange with you all.

I would like to bring to our table the notion of “sovereignty”, more specifically of Food Sovereignty.

La Via Campesina defines Food Sovereignty as “the right of people, Countries or State Unions to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries.” The concept of Food Sovereignty – today largely used by social movements, academics and some national governments – was coined by La Via Campesina in 1996 and presented to a broader audience during the World Food Summit in the same year as a counter narrative to neo-liberalism.

Food Sovereignty is about the freedom to decide, for yourself, your family, your community, your territory, your country the food you want to eat, the hands and hearts who grew it, the mouths who will eat it, the seeds and how they will germinate, in which waters and in which soils.

We must defend this freedom, this Right, and we must defend Food Sovereignty against any form of co-optation and grabbing. Food Sovereignty resonates with Justice and International Solidarity. Food Sovereignty resonates with People’s voices, angry voices that shout to end all wars, to stop all Free Trade Agreement, to smash imperialism, to take agriculture out of WTO, to have Agrarian Reform, access to land and territories, a new trade framework based on food sovereignty and solidarity, the protection of peasants’ rights and agroecology!

To defend Food Sovereignty we need everyone’s voices. Not only farmers, but also agricultural and food workers, researchers, consumers, movements which fight for social and ecological justice. And there, at the very front line of our endless march, we embrace minorities of all kinds. Because the transformation that we struggle for is based on care and equity, so the ones which now speak little or nothing, will be speaking first.

La Via Campesina has been cooperating with ORFC for several years in this spirit of alliance-building and we are here once again to reiterate our full commitment and welcome new people to join the global movement for Food Sovereignty. Almost 30 years after the creation of the concept of Food Sovereignty, the movement has launched a process to deepen and widen this concept and invited global movements to articulate an intersectional convergence towards joint proposals for system change. This process will continue this year in the upcoming Nyéléni Global Forum.

The time is right. Globally, we are experiencing more and more criminalisation and repression of any form of dissent, freedom, identity and autonomy. The rise of extreme right-wing parties and of corporate power translates into a rise in People’s oppression. All this is a severe threat to Food Sovereignty worldwide.

Why are Governments so afraid of People's Sovereignty? I am tormented by this question but the answer is closer to me than I think.

The thought, image, sound or memory of People fighting to defend their rights, or the rights of somebody else, brings me to tears. Not only People protesting in the street, but People continuing to do what they do despite complete denial.

A comrade from ARI, the farmers' organisation which I am part of in Italy, has recently been in Palestine with a small delegation of La Via Campesina. When she returned, she shared a message that I would like to share with you all:

“The Palestinian people that I had the chance to meet are the most peasant people I have ever met. They cultivate at the risk of their lives and health, they cultivate even if water and land are taken away from them. If they have a square metre, they plant a tree; if they don't, they cultivate on terraces and windowsills. If they cannot do even that, they draw olive trees, vines and corn on walls”.

This is why Governments are afraid of People's Sovereignty, because of its force which is destructive and reproductive at the same time. Because People's Sovereignty is autonomous and resilient and the strongest solution to overcome any crisis. Because People's Sovereignty connects rather than dividing people and finds in diversity – human and ecological – its best strategy.

My message to you: Do not stand alone. Connect to People, peasants and farmers in your territory, your communities, movements big and small. Dare autonomy and when you think something is unjust, say it. And say it loud! With the consciousness that our fragile bodies, bombed bodies, wrecked and broken bodies, beaten and raped, are all yours, are all mine.

Globalise the struggle, globalise hope!