

LA VIA CAMPESINA 20 YEARS ON: RESOURCES FOR RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

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INTRODUCTION

The road of struggles and campaigns for rights and justice stretches many centuries back. The path has been long and rugged, littered with limited but significant milestones of successes. Just as importantly, it abounds in key lessons for contemporary social movements. The last seven decades have witnessed the rise of social movements, initially to fight against colonial injustices, mostly in the global south, ushering political independence under majority rule, while in the global north movements formed to fight against racial injustices. The spaces that social movements occupied was once limited to national boundaries, but global solidarity in various forms has been the key to the achievement of an at least partial realisation and enjoyment of rights and access to justice.

The character of social movements changed in the neoliberal era, when Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAPs) were implemented, under the tutelage of the Bretton Woods institutions, causing untold suffering of people across national boundaries. This led to the formation of regional social movements, some of which grew and became global. Various social movements employed or relied on a range of resources in their fight for justice and rights.

These resources have included material and non-material resources, and had a bearing on the longevity and impact of social movements. Financial resources, because of their nature, tend towards ephemerality, both in the purpose and effectiveness of movements. The funding of social movements by donors, in general, led to quick decline, and a shift from a breadth of focus to a single focus, as donors determined both the sustainability and focus of social movements, leading to a delinking between a movement's leadership and its constituencies.

The capture of social movements by funders and elites led to the formation of new kinds of social movements, led by the people affected, and with very limited reliance on funding, from carefully selected donors, whose funding supports the agenda of the movements. One such movement that has grown globally is the international peasant movement, La Via Campesina, formed in opposition to the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) agenda of trade liberalisation under the umbrella of the promotion of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs).

BIRTH OF A GIANT IN 1993

Before the birth of La Via Campesina, various new and diverse forms of rural activism and social organisation had emerged, to forge common ground and solidarity to fight against neoliberalism. These carved out an autonomous space, independent of those who had paternalistically claimed to represent them, such as the church, conservative political parties and existing civil society organisations (CSOs). La Via Campesina emerged

during this period and morphed from a local peasant movement to a regional one, and then grew to be what it is today, an international peasant movement bringing together more than 164 organisations in over 73 countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. Its constituency numbers over 200 million peasants, small and medium-sized producers, landless people, rural workers and indigenous people from around the world.

La Via Campesina, unlike many CSOs, established important criteria for building its membership and setting the principles for funding (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010). It does not accept into membership organisations that are not true, grassroots-based peasant organisations. It made a decision not to accept funding resources with compromising conditions attached, nor to permit any form of external interference in its internal decisions, thus guaranteeing its independence and autonomy (Rosset and Martinez 2005, cited by Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010). This has allowed La Via Campesina to be a strong, bottom-up and independent movement, led by poor people. Its agenda is defined internally during international conferences, which are organised every four years, with decisions taken by consensus or voting. In contrast, La Via Campesina's participation in policy spaces is more confrontational, engaging in protest and aggressive debate.

La Via Campesina is anchored in promoting food sovereignty and advocating for sustainable, small-scale, peasant agriculture as a means of promoting social justice and dignity. The concept of food sovereignty has proved to be one within which humanity can find an enabling and unrestricted space to promote social justice and dignity, in a world that is highly centralised, and where power is concentrated in a few transnational corporations (TNCs). Food sovereignty is a tool

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being used by consumers and food producers to move towards a “food democracy” of “co-designed food systems...” where people “...participate in shaping them, to recapture them,” (De Schutter 2015 p1). It has created a space to rebuild the human relations lost over decades as a result of globalised food systems, and also to redress the ecological crisis of the 21st century. The food sovereignty concept seeks the construction of new rights and the transformation of society as a whole (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010).

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A FIGHT AGAINST MONOPOLY CAPITALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Farmer and peasant organisations coined the concept of food sovereignty as an alternative to food security in 1996. They considered the concept of food security to be weak, as it lacked fundamental definitions about where food is produced, who produces it and how they produce it, and thus played to the free trade agenda of the WTO, favouring TNCs, the architects of monopoly capitalism.

The rise in the embrace of food sovereignty comes in resistance to developed country governments and their TNCs, which are on the offensive in pursuit of profit maximisation, impoverishing the majority of the world's population as they do so. They are increasingly using FTAs to drive the displacement, expulsion and

disappearance of peasants by promoting a capitalist production that is heavily reliant on agrochemicals, fossil energy and exclusionary marketing practices, under the guise of promoting development. The truth is that FTAs only serve the interests of TNCs and offer a set of conditions, measures and rules to protect their investments. As a consequence, global social and economic inequality has reached alarming levels, such that over a billion people are considered to be living in dire poverty.

Continents, regional economic blocs and individual countries are now trapped in a crippling FTA web, including through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the African, Caribbean and Pacific agreement with the European Union (EU/ACP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in Southeast Asia, and Economic Cooperation Agreements (ECAs). As we speak, particularly aggressive versions of FTA, in the form of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TIPP) and Comprehensive Trade and Economic Agreement (CETA) are being finalised between the EU and the United States and Canada. These will arm TNCs with new, lethal tools - the Investor-State Dispute Resolution and the Regulatory Cooperation Council - to manipulate regulations, norms and public policies to maximise profits. FTAs are enforcing the implementation of Trade Related Intellectual Rights (TRIPs) and other repressive laws, such as UPOV '91 (the International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants), which criminalises many peasant seeds.

States are fast losing the power to protect their own citizens and environments. For example, the Common Market for East and Southern Africa's (COMESA) seed market policy generally intends to promote the free

and easy movement of 'corporate certified' seeds within the region, thereby allowing more penetration of traditional agriculture by 'terminator seeds', which do not produce seeds that germinate. This will create dependency on, and more profits for, agribusiness. This destructive monopoly by a few TNCs is on the rise, and many products of labour or nature are being turned into commodities.

The corporate world, particularly under globalisation and in the context of climate change, is abrogating human rights. The current corporate profit driven model has shown us that it does not work, and we need to move away from the current model of production, which is based on fossil energy use and toxic chemicals, and which promotes land, water and forest grabbing by TNCs. We thus need a system change if we are to promote and protect human rights. The localisation of food production and promotion of local industries through food sovereignty will bring about social justice, and an end to the monopoly of the TNCs.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A DYNAMIC AND LIVING CONCEPT BUILT FROM BELOW TO FIGHT FOR RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

Industrially produced food from TNCs uses pesticides and other harmful agro-chemicals, and relies mostly

on fossil energy, and is therefore unhealthy. Food produced locally, by peasant and family farms, organically or agroecologically, is better, as it is healthier, provides local livelihoods, sustains agro-biodiversity and mirrors local culture and religion. This is how we build food sovereignty from below (Mpofu 2014).

Food sovereignty is now an alternative paradigm for how we can relate with nature and other people, and guarantee the survival of humanity. It prioritises local food systems and markets, access to and control over productive resources, such as land, water and seeds, and recognises peasant rights and protection against industrial agriculture. Only through food sovereignty can a genuine agrarian reform be attainable and land grabbing be guarded against. Real solutions to the current economic and ecological crises are found in food sovereignty.

The potential strength of the peasantries lies in their capacity to establish and secure food sovereignty. They hold the potential to drive social and economic transformation, hinged on agriculture, to anchor sustainable development, rolling back neoliberal laws that criminalise and destroy peasants. Food sovereignty stops the opening of our borders to cheap, imported, unhealthy food through free trade and investment agreements. It calls for policies to support farmer-led research on agroecology and the recovery of traditional farmer seeds. The struggle to keep indigenous seeds in Africa, for example, has been sustained by traditional knowledge, and is now being taken up by organised movements (although some campaigns wrongly promote food sovereignty through the use of unsustainable industrial agricultural methods, such as fertilisers, pesticides and other chemicals, and machinery driven by fossil-based fuels).

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Looking ahead, we need to promote sustainable peasant production methods based on food sovereignty principles. We need to adopt practices such as agroecology and many other traditional farming ways, which have ensured the right to food and supported development for all over the centuries. Food sovereignty is empowering people to self-determine their course of development within their local con-

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A FIGHT FOR RIGHTS AND JUSTICE FROM BELOW IN INTERNATIONAL POLICY SPACES

La Via Campesina's growth and resilience over the last 20 years could be attributed to many factors, chief among which is the concept of food sovereignty, as a unifying and rallying ideology. Following the frequent waves and shocks in global food markets, and the regular food price spikes, particularly from mid-2000s, the need for and embrace of food sovereignty in policies has grown at national, regional and international levels.

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text. It offers a starting point to empower people to enjoy and realise full human rights. Thus food sovereignty offers a strong tool to tame and regulate the corporate world.

Thus, food sovereignty is being used as a framework for intense lobbying for peasant's rights by La Via Campesina and our allies, in Geneva and in Rome (La Via Campesina 2014). The concept shapes engagement by La Via Campesina in debates in the public

policy spaces, such as the Committee for Food Security (CFS) through the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM), the Responsible Agriculture Investment (RAI) at the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and engagement with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). In Geneva, the push by La Via Campesina, using the various strands of food sovereignty, has yielded a majority vote in support of a peasant rights declaration process at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Also in Geneva, the campaign against TNCs has opened space for a process to craft an internationally binding instrument to regulate TNCs.

These gains reflect the growing importance of the food sovereignty movement in national, regional and international policy debates, the strengthening of alliances for food sovereignty, the enhanced confidence of the movement, and the deepening of the crises that it is addressing. Social movements are also increasingly aware that realising food sovereignty requires radically different knowledge from that on offer today in mainstream institutions, such as the universities, policy think tanks, governments and corporations.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: CREATING DIALOGUE BETWEEN A DIVER- SITY OF ACTORS

In 2007, in Mali, global movements of women, environmentalists, unions, indigenous people and others

joined La Via Campesina in the World Forum for Food Sovereignty. The outcome of the dialogue significantly broadened the food sovereignty movement, beyond dialogue among farmers, and into many sectors.

La Via Campesina appreciates and embraces the importance of creating spaces for inter-regional and cross-cultural dialogue and mutual learning, and has been taking advantage of its diversity to develop horizontal networks for knowledge creation (Nyeleni 2014). This is part of its strategy to build alliances with other actors to pressure international institutions such as the World Bank, WTO, FAO and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), among others. The movement has initiated an important internal self-study research process to identify, document and analyse, in order to draw lessons to strengthen internal processes and structures. This is important in strengthening the cohesion of its many networks across the world.

Sustainable peasant production methods are also being documented to contribute study materials, based on members' own experiences, to the over 40 peasant agroecology schools and numerous political training schools that are part of La Via Campesina (La Via Campesina 2014).

The other aim of documentation is to support campaigning directed at public opinion and policy makers, with data that prove that alternatives exist, that they work, and that they should be supported by better public policies.

Scholars and activists are engaging in critical dialogue and working together to challenge policy and governance. The involvement of experts with links to the

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food sovereignty movement in the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE), and also the wider work of the CFS, has led to increased networking and collaboration between scholars and activists (Nyeleni 2014).

As the number and range of collaborations with researchers grow, there is greater awareness of the need to develop new and appropriate research methodologies in cases where co-inquirers are rooted in different knowledge systems. As opportunities for research and collaboration between different constituencies grow, it becomes important to share experiences and draw lessons from these. Thus, face to face encounters across cultures, worldviews and knowledge systems are becoming more frequent.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AS A TOOL FOR SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION: GENDER EQUALITY AND EQUITY

La Via Campesina is a movement that recognises the full equality and value of both women and men. La Via Campesina guarantees that peasant women and men in the movement share responsibilities equally in seeking structural change, and in working to strengthen open and democratic processes in our international structure.

La Via Campesina has transformed over the years, and women are now playing a leading role in the movement. This makes La Via Campesina a unique movement, in the history of both peasant and farmer movements, and also among social movements and international organisations. This is critical in the international campaign against violence against women, as it allows women to shape and contribute fully to struggles, and craft initiatives towards the full realisation and enjoyment of rights as equals.

This gender parity in all spaces and organs of debate, discussion, analysis and decision-making in the movement is important for helping to strengthen exchange, coordination and solidarity with and among women across the world. Women play a central role in agriculture in food production, and have a special relationship with land, life and seeds. La Via Campesina's internal structure is creating new gender relations, to be mirrored in its struggles to eradicate violence against women.

CONCLUSION

The effectiveness and sustainability of La Via Campesina can largely be attributed to its organisational structure, internal democratic participation processes and the concept of food sovereignty, as key resources for fighting for rights and justice, and offering an alternative to global food markets. Its strategy and tactics of mass mobilisation, including by weaving and forging strategic alliances with likeminded social movements and CSOs willing to play supportive, but not directive, roles, are also crucial. This has enabled La Via Campesina to remain entrenched locally, while at the

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same time flexing its muscles globally, both at protest events in and policy dialogue spaces. The principle of not accepting funding from institutions supporting neoliberalism is also key in keeping La Via Campesina self-determined and autonomous, and being able to define its struggles without external influence.

Food sovereignty sustains the strategic role of peasant production in fighting hunger, and deepens dialogue, building solidarity against adversity and cooperation against competition, and building alliances across national borders. Food sovereignty has created an urgency to develop alternative food systems that allow people to democratise and re-localise, rather than be ruled by market imperatives.

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