



Contributing Writer

La Vía Campesina

Food Sovereignty: Why the Rights of Family Farmers Matter

Even in today's high-tech world, almost half of the global population is peasants or, in our U.S. context, small-scale family farmers. The majority of people in the world still depend upon food produced by peasants. Small-scale agriculture is not just an economic activity — for many people, it is the foundation of life itself. This is why, in order to protect human life, it is utterly important to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of peasants.

Food Sovereignty and Sustainable Peasant Agriculture: The Peasant Way and the People's Solution

La Vía Campesina, an international peasants movement, promotes and defends food sovereignty and sustainable, agro-ecological, peasant-based production. These are among the most powerful responses to the current food, poverty and climate crises.

Sustainable peasant agriculture has been a priority for La Vía Campesina since 2000 when, at its 3rd International Conference, the organization determined that:

“Regarding sustainable peasant agriculture, we are convinced of the necessity of putting forward an alternative agricultural model instead of the large-scale industrial model. The industrial model does not mean ‘development’ but on the contrary: dependence, increased poverty and the destruction of nature. We are convinced that the system rooted in peasant-based sustainable agriculture is economically viable, socially sustainable and ecologically sound.”*

*La Vía Campesina, press release from October 4, 2000, Bangalore, India, “Important Debates in the 3rd International Conference of the Vía Campesina”

At a global level, we are confronted by the inter-related climate and food price crises which largely share the same underlying causes. The climate crisis is partially driven by the globalized, corporate-led food system which generates 50% of all greenhouse gas emissions. The food price crisis has both long- and short-term causes which overlap broadly with the causes of the climate crisis. The fact that the same corporate-led, globalized model of large-scale industrial farming that produces exports for distant markets, rather than food for local people, is behind both crises, actually means that the same set of solutions can address both the climate and food price crises. These solutions can be loosely grouped under the rubric of “food sovereignty,” the alternative paradigm developed since 1996 by the peasant and family farm organizations that belong to La Vía Campesina.

The Globalized Food System Violates Peasant Rights

The violation of peasant rights has increased since the implementation of neoliberal policies promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), and other global institutions and governments in the North and the South. The WTO, IMF and FTAs force the opening of markets and prevent countries from protecting and supporting their domes-

ing of healthy products produced by peasants through the application of legislated sanitation barriers. The IMF has implemented Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), leading to massive cuts in support for agriculture and social services.^① Countries have been forced to privatize state companies and to dismantle support mechanisms in the agricultural sector.

Many national and international policies directly or indirectly give priority to large TNCs for food



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tic agriculture. They push for deregulation in the agriculture sector. Free trade policies have allowed Transnational Corporations (TNCs), supported by the governments and subsidies of developed countries, to engage in dumping practices that undermine local production and local markets.

As a result, cheap subsidized food floods local markets, thus forcing peasants out of business.

The introduction of biotechnologies, such as the production of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the unsafe use of growth hormones in meat production that have been pushed by transnational biotech and agribusiness, are also supported through mechanisms of the WTO and some national governments. Meanwhile, these same governments often prohibit the market-

production and trade. TNCs also practice bio-piracy and destroy genetic resources and biodiversity cultivated and defended by peasants and indigenous people. These policies taken together have dismantled peasant agriculture and caused multiple global food and climate problems.

The violation of peasant rights has now reached an unprecedented level, with news of farmer arrests and assassinations around the world reaching the Vía Campesina head office on a daily basis. A new offensive on resources such as land, forests and water by the financial sector seeking profitable investments is accelerating the destruction of family farmers' territories and livelihoods. This offensive includes land-grabbing for agro-industrial mega-projects, speculative investment and development of extractive industries.^② Sud-

denly, the commercialization and monetization of all natural resources has been renamed “environmental services” within the new framework of “green capitalism.”

Peasants Seek to Uphold and Protect their Rights

Facing these new realities, peasants — both women and men — are struggling to survive. All over the world, thousands of peasant leaders have been arrested because they are fighting to protect their rights and livelihood. They are brought to court by unfair judicial systems, there are increasing incidents of massacres and extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and detention, and political persecution and harassment are common.



Photo Credit: The Center for Media and Democracy

While peasants work hard to ensure the sustainability of seeds and food, the violation of peasant rights undermines the world’s capacity to feed itself. The International Human Rights framework, which includes thematic instruments that address the rights to food, housing, water and health, as well as human rights defenders, indigenous peoples, racism and racial discrimina-

tion, women’s rights and the mechanisms of the Human Rights Council, is fully applicable to the struggle of peasants.

Toward an International Convention on the Rights of Peasants in the United Nations

La Vía Campesina values the central importance of the UN Human Rights Council and its Advisory Committee. La Vía Campesina ratified a proposal for the International Convention on the Rights of Peasants (ICRP) during the 5th International Conference celebrated by the international peasant movement in October of 2008 in Mozambique.^③

Since 2008, La Vía Campesina, along with its allies, has been working with the UN Human Rights mechanisms in Geneva. In August of 2008, in light of the food crisis, the first session of the Advisory Committee adopted a resolution in which the problems of hunger and the food crisis were analyzed over a longer term. The Advisory Committee also defined the problem of discrimination against peasants, and defined the rights and roles of peasants.

Progress at the UN Human Rights Council

It is with great satisfaction that La Vía Campesina and its member organization in Switzerland, the peasant union Uniterre, announced that the United Nations has decided to better protect the rights of farmers and peasants around the world. On September 27, 2012, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution promoting the human rights of peasants and other people living in rural areas.^④

Through this resolution, the Council recognized the need for a new international legal instrument that can take the form of a United Nations declaration. It aims to bring together in a single document the specific rights of peasant farmers and to integrate new rights, such as those to land, seeds, the means of production and information, in rural areas. This is not only in the interest of farmers

alone, as it also responds to a global necessity in the world struggle against hunger, poverty and discrimination.

The Council engaged in this process in response to the 2007–2008 global food crisis. Noting that 80% of people suffering from hunger live in rural areas, and that 50% of them are peasants, the Council determined that particular attention should be paid to them. By protecting their fundamental rights, it expects to reduce hunger in the world.

La Vía Campesina welcomed the collaboration of various countries from Latin America, Asia and Africa, which made the adoption of the resolution possible. However, the peasant movement

deplores the negative vote of certain European Union states (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Spain and Italy) and the United States, who opposed the establishment of specific protections for farmers and peasants. These governments, under pressure from

some powerful lobbies, including large economic groups, speculators, agribusiness and extractive industries, did not dare to support their farmers. Instead they ignored the basic rights and general interests of their own citizens in favor of those economic players who violate the rights of family farmers around the world.

Public Policies Need to Support Food Sovereignty and Peasant Rights

Real shifts in public policy are needed. Achieving such shifts will require lobbying and campaigning by La Vía Campesina organizations and their allies at the national, regional and global levels. This outreach work will be based on making the real achievements of sustainable peasant production and the defense and propagation of peasant seeds more visible. La Vía Campesina will engage in work on these issues in each of its nine regions, and invites its consumer allies in the U.S. to help change the policies of their government that negatively impact all people across the globe.



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① **Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)** are economic policies for developing countries that have been promoted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) since the early 1980s through the provision of loans conditional upon the adoption of such policies. SAPs often require the restriction or elimination of certain government programs, including healthcare, schooling and other social programs.

② **Land grabs** are the purchase of vast tracts of land in developing countries by wealthier, food-insecure nations and private investors. They have become a widespread phenomenon, with foreign interests seeking or securing 37–49 million acres of farmland between 2006 and mid-2009. (Source: Oakland Institute.)

③ Proposal for the **International Convention on the Rights of Peasants (ICRP)** during the 5th International Conference celebrated by the international peasant movement in October of 2008 in Mozambique. (See the document here: <http://viacampesina.net/downloads/PDF/EN-3.pdf>.)

④ September 27, 2012 UN Human Rights Council resolution **“Promoting the human rights of peasants and other people living in rural areas.”** (See the document here: http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/21/L.23.)