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Commentary. La Via Campesina

The revolt of the peasants



Paul Nicholson

La Via Campesina

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Editor's note

Next year, 2014, has been declared by the UN General Assembly to be the year of family farming. The decision was made after a period of intelligent and resourceful pressure. This came notably from La Via Campesina (literally, 'The Way of the Peasant'). Founded 20 years ago in 1993, it now worldwide represents almost 150 organisations which themselves represent around 150,000 small, family and co-operative farmers and growers, together with many million supporters. Recognition by the UN is itself a remarkable step. La Via Campesina, like Greenpeace, is a militant movement. It has played a lead part in disrupting and frustrating official summits on world trade, starting with that held in Seattle in 1999, and uses direct action in protests against corporate control of food systems, impact on climate change, land-grabbing, seed ownership, and against 'structural adjustment' and other policies that threaten rural livelihoods.

Readers can judge for themselves why, how and in what ways the work of La Via Campesina is relevant to public health nutrition, in the interview that follows with Paul Nicholson, one of its leaders. The point is perhaps well made in one of the pictures below that illustrates this commentary and the work and methods of La Via Campesina. Food comes from the land, and nutrition comes from food.

Next month on 26-30 March, La Via Campesina holds its 6 th Assembly in Tunisia, in association with the World Social Forum.

Introduction



Paul Nicholson (left) at the Rio+20 environmental summit in Rio de Janeiro, 2012 (left); and (right) a cartoon encapsulating La Via Campesina's attitude

Paul Nicholson is a small-scale farmer and milk producer in the Basque country of Spain. In 1986 he was elected president of *Euskal Herriko Nekazarien Elkatasun* (The Basque Union of Livestock Breeders and Small Farmers), at the time when Spain joined the European Common Market.

In the 1980s the Basque Union highlighted the crisis in small-farmer agriculture and emphasised the need for that model, as opposed to specialisation, concentration of production, and the reduction of the number of farmers. It then helped to create the European Small-Farmers Coordination, and then La Vía Campesina, in which Paul Nicholson played a leading role, which he continues to do. He has been a member of the international coordinating commission of La Vía Campesina since the late 1990s.

La Vía Campesina **The world crisis of capitalism**



A radical La Vía Campesina poster (left), and (right) demonstrations of its members against corporate land-grabbing are taking place worldwide

The interview that follows with Paul Nicholson (PN) was conducted by Florian Rochat (FR), Michel Buisson (MB), and Julie Duchatel (JD). It has been updated in places, and includes additional boxed text. We' and 'our' as used by Paul Nicholson refer to La Vía Campesina.

PN The food, climatic and financial crisis we are going through is obviously a crisis of capitalism. It did not start in Europe. It concerns the whole world. The 'structural adjustment' programmes imposed by the international financial institutions in the 1980s and 1990s are the same 'remedies' as the system is now prescribing in Europe. The present European context is similar to that of Latin

America in the 1990s and Asia in the 2000s. This international and financial crisis also concerns the functioning of democracy.

FR *Is this your own analysis or do you share it with La Via Campesina?*

PN In 2008, our Declaration of Maputo already clarified that it was a crisis of capitalism and not a sectoral crisis (see Box 1). This crisis also directly affects social organisations, as in Mexico, but principally agricultural organisations. It urges us to rethink ways of working with new types of alliances.

Box 1

Transnational corporations and 'free trade'

Extract from the 2008 Maputo Declaration. In the current global context we are confronting the convergence of the food crisis, the climate crisis, the energy crisis and the financial crisis. These crises have common origins in the capitalist system and more recently in the unrestrained deregulation in various spheres of economic activity, as part of the neo-liberal model, which gives priority to business and profit.

In the rural zones of the world, we have seen a ferocious offensive of capital and of transnational corporations to take over land and natural assets (such as water, forests, minerals, biodiversity, land), that translates into a privatising war to steal the territories and assets of peasants and indigenous peoples.

This war uses false pretexts and deliberately erroneous arguments, for example to claim that agrofuels are a solution for the climactic and energy crises, when the truth is exactly the opposite. Whenever peoples exercise their rights and resist this generalised pillage, or when they are obliged to join migrant flows, the response is always more criminalisation, more repression, more political prisoners, more assassinations, more walls of shame and more military bases.

Multinational corporations and international finance capital are our most important common enemies, and as such, we have to bring our struggle to them more directly. They are the ones behind the other enemies of peasants, like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, and the 'free trade' agreements and 'economic partnership' agreements, neoliberal governments, as well as aggressive economic expansionism, imperialism and militarism. Now is also the time to redouble our struggle against 'free trade' agreements and 'economic partnership' agreements, and against the World Trade Organization, but this time more clearly indicating the central role played by the transnational corporations.

MB *Agrocapitalism remains aggressive, for example through the ongoing process of land-grabbing. It is strengthening its power in the food processing sector and in trade relations and it is using ideology to its own advantage. What is your view?*

PN The process of total privatisation of common goods is evident, as is the process of taking control over decisions at a national level. One of the crucial challenges is to know how to counter-attack the power of the transnational corporations, politically and ideologically, including at the international level, as witness their infiltration of the United Nations and the European Commission.

The social and political crises

But let's go back to the impact on social organisations. For example, Mexico is a country with a very strong tradition of social mobilisation. But today there is a process of disarticulation and the construction of new types of movements and alliances where social agents, like the indigenous peoples, the environmentalists, the organisations of migrants, the small farmers, and so on, not only call for their struggles to be made visible, but also propose whole different ways of operating.

There is a clear crisis in the vertical decision-making process of organisations and executive bodies of all types, and also in the way democracy is practised throughout the world. La Via Campesina, on the basis of its 20 year history, is an alternative to this way of working. Maybe it has been able to adopt this new sensitivity because it does not have structures or political traditions which have become bureaucratic or vertical. The crisis of capitalism has led to a crisis within the traditional political parties and social organisations. So we are on the threshold of a whole new organisational vision.

It is very worrying that political parties lack legitimacy in the eyes of young people because of their failure as representatives, their inadequate ideas and projects, and their inability to listen to criticism. One cannot deny citizens' demands for participation in political issues. The anti-Wall Street protest movement clearly reflected the position of a segment of society which does not feel represented in any conventional structure.

MB *So we should be at a point of history conducive to La Via Campesina and to what it represents, particularly the food and ecological questions which you brought up to start with?*

PN In our first year we studied the old model of the Left's social organisation,

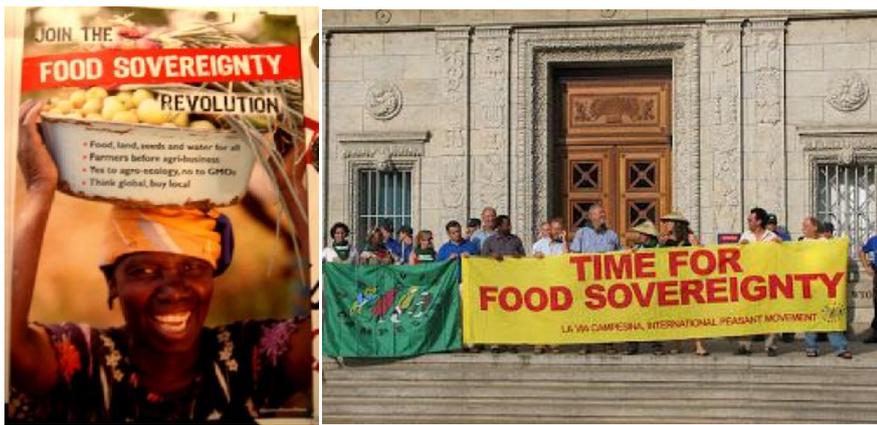
which is the most traditional and vertical, based on the executive, and rejected this way of doing things. La Via Campesina is a movement of organisations, not a confederation or other such-like grouping. It was well thought out. For example, there remains a strong feeling of rejection about any decision-making centre superseding a whole traditional international structure.

Today it is the cores of the local, national and regional organisations of La Via Campesina that are being strengthened, not the international structure. The international operational secretariat changes countries every four to eight years, with all the inefficiency and difficulties that this creates, and this is in order to affirm that we do not have a strong international structure.

FR *Has this new vision transformed La Via Campesina member organisations?*

PN Most of the organisations are new and do not have this problem, in contrast to certain Northern, older organisations. But the struggle for food sovereignty, which is common to all our organisations, requires a different strategy of alliances right from the local level, with horizontal decision-making in one's own organisation. Food sovereignty is clearly a new democratic demand of citizens.

La Via Campesina **The fight for food sovereignty**



Food sovereignty. The revolutionary concept that is uniting all those who work on the land worldwide, and La Via Campesina's urgent call to action

MB *Why is it important to recall that food sovereignty corresponds to a 'concept in action'?*

PN It is 'practice in action' which has given hope to numerous movements, organised or not. La Via Campesina is not an intellectual-type movement but one that reacts to its environment. The first document on food sovereignty in 1966 must be re-read in the context of that period. It is a very open document with an ethical perspective and it constitutes a reaction to the effects of globalisation, without any historical reference.

The concept of food sovereignty already clearly appears as universal, community based. Every time there is a conference or a forum on food sovereignty, organisations ask us to create a follow-up committee, but we refuse, because food sovereignty is dynamic, it's a process. Since 1996, the principle has made great progress and it is obvious that food sovereignty has become a social construction based on local realities. This has nothing to do with an intellectual academic approach. It is very important to remember this.

It's true that the term 'food sovereignty', in English, or in French as *souveraineté*, can be difficult to understand because of the cultural and historical context that this word can imply. But in Spanish, the term *soberanía* does not imply anything elitist or monarchist. It is linked to the democratic reality. Nevertheless, I think that we have won this battle of words and meaning in the three languages. As I said before, to change the balance of power, there must be grassroots social movements that adopt food sovereignty as a change-inducing and alternative principle to the neoliberal model. The Declaration of Nyéléni in 2007 was an important step forward. It has become a reference for local organisations even if this is not necessarily the case at the international institutional level. (See Box 2).

MB *But how do you interpret the last sentence 'Now is the time for food sovereignty!' 'which figures at the end of the Nyéléni Declaration because, as you say rightly, food sovereignty is a dynamic process of social construction which does not fall into your lap, but has to be achieved'?*

PN This sentence figured on a banner hung up in front of the World Trade Organization when the failure of the 2005-2006 negotiations was announced. It tells us that the alternative to the food crisis is food sovereignty. It's inspiring. The aim is indeed to develop a powerful international movement and that is the perspective to be adopted in the various forums. What is crucial is mobilisation.

Box 2

Food sovereignty

Extract from the 2007 Nyéléni Declaration. Most of us are food producers and are ready, able and willing to feed all the world's peoples. Our heritage as food producers is critical to the future of humanity.

This is specially so in the case of women and indigenous peoples who are historical creators of knowledge about food and agriculture and are devalued. But this heritage and our capacities to produce healthy, good and abundant food are being threatened and undermined by neo-liberalism and global capitalism. Food sovereignty gives us the hope and power to preserve, recover and build on our food producing knowledge and capacity.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users.

Food sovereignty gives priority to local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations

Food sovereignty as a UN Convention

MB From there, how do we go forward? Would one way to progress be to make food sovereignty a collective human right inscribed in a UN instrument (a declaration or Convention)? This could include all the conditions related to the rights of peoples to be self-sufficient in agriculture and food whilst respecting a cooperative model at the international level.

FR *Do you think that formalising the right to food sovereignty at the UN could help to build the alliance with social movements at the local, regional and international level?*

PN It is difficult to say because, conversely, how can we mobilise around that? The priorities of the peasant organisations and of La Via Campesina today are more concrete, like land-grabbing.

MB *Yes, but all these concrete struggles could be assembled under the banner of the struggle for the right to food sovereignty. One of the advantages of this approach is to occupy public space, like to be more visible at the United Nations.*

PN Yes, UN recognition of food sovereignty could constitute an umbrella for all these mobilisations. Social movements' participation at the international level is important, particularly at a time when the UN is losing power. So is possible increased participation, for instance with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, at the Committee on World Food Security.

The UN can certainly be a showcase for denouncing, for example, the activities of transnational corporations, or for mobilisation. But the way the UN works means that representatives have to be present continuously; it is a permanent effort and a heavy task. We are seeking solutions. If there is too great a danger of bureaucracy, we will adopt other approaches.

We must see if we are capable of tackling such objectives and putting organisational effort to achieving them. We must evaluate the input needed and compare that with expected results. La Via Campesina is a movement that has been built up from grassroots, so this type of decision will be the outcome of a thorough discussion.

I have a more strategic vision and consider a direct dialogue with our governments at the national level as more accessible. Everyone's priority is to stop the worsening food crisis in all countries, and in difficult political conditions. Today the situation is worse than in 1993, with unprecedented economic conditions, the very rapid disappearance of small farmer agriculture in the North and in the South, violence set off by industrial agriculture, and so on; but with a strong La Via Campesina and good strategic positioning.

At this point in time, we are concentrating on concrete struggles like land-grabbing, but it is obvious that we will reach a certain limit. Then it will be time to study proposals like a Declaration or Convention on the right to food sovereignty.

The need for solidarity

MB How are the alternatives being developed today?

PN Think of the three levels, international, regional and local, of food sovereignty before speaking of the development of alternatives. After Nyeléni, the principle of food sovereignty created a great response in many parts of the world in very different political and social forms, in a dynamic manner and without any political leadership.

Today, we can see a positive use of food sovereignty on the part of social movements, but its misuse by certain governments. It has become a well-known concept, but there is a real danger of losing its transformative sense. We must be watchful. We must also be careful that it is not just limited to access to healthy local products. We must insist that food sovereignty is intended to bring about change in the economic and social model.

The demand has reached the international level. When La Via Campesina is invited to Food and Agriculture Organization sessions, it is to speak about food sovereignty. It is the same at the United Nations. In Europe, we are demanding a policy based on food sovereignty and in solidarity with the rest of the world, in opposition to the present European policy based on competition. This is the result of much work at the local level, explaining and spreading the principle of food sovereignty which grew out of the small farmer movement and then reached urban networks. La Via Campesina contributed to this flow from a perspective that is agrarian and also is rooted in society and citizens' concerns. This is fundamental.

A new social and political order

To the surprise of many people, food and the democratic control of the food process has regained importance, and this has contributed to a change of paradigm in the context of the crisis of capitalism.

At the national level, organisations are adopting food sovereignty as a central theme, as can be seen in Ecuador, France, Italy and Canada. The proposals of the Canadian Food Sovereignty Coalition are very interesting. They interpret food sovereignty from a perspective of solidarity. This is due to the fact that urban grassroots movements were fully integrated and this generated a more social approach than what we can find in Europe which is rather more elitist. This coalition has produced

some well-developed proposals on the control of production, the production model and on land management and use. In the United States too, the food sovereignty platform is based on the demand of the urban poor for healthy, affordable and accessible food. (See Box 3).

So there is an uncoordinated, horizontal network which gives visibility to a national proposal with the help of different concerned sectors of society. Numerous networks share the fear of losing the transformative values of food sovereignty, which is why we have to progress now. It's time for food sovereignty!

Box 3

Making salt

Extract from the US Social Forum Resolution, Detroit, 2011. Over a half-century ago, Mahatma Gandhi led a multitude of Indians to the sea to make salt, in defiance of the British Empire's monopoly on this resource critical to people's diet. The action catalyzed the movement for Indian independence and was the beginning of the end for Britain's rule over India.

The act of 'making salt' has since been repeated many times in many forms by people's movements seeking liberation, justice and sovereignty: Cesar Chavez, Nelson Mandela, and the Zapatistas are just a few of the most prominent examples. Our food movement, one that spans the globe, seeks food sovereignty from the monopolies that dominate our food systems with the complicity of our governments. We are powerful, creative, committed and diverse. It is our time to make salt.

A movement for food sovereignty – the people's democratic control of the food system, the right of all people to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems – is building from every corner of the globe.

Our work to build a better food system in the United States is inextricably linked to the struggle for workers' rights, immigrant's rights, women's rights, the fight to dismantle racism in our communities, and the struggle for sovereignty in indigenous communities. In order to create a better food system, we must break up corporate control of our seeds, land, water and natural resources.

Because at a time of record harvests and record profits we have over one billion hungry people on the planet; because poverty is the root cause of hunger; because the world's oceans are being polluted and plundered, because industrial agriculture

contributes one third of all greenhouse gas emissions, because increasing inequality, poverty, hunger, a global land grab, and environmental destruction are threatening the livelihoods of family farmers, farm workers, fisher-folk, and marginalized communities worldwide; and because community based food systems and agro-ecological farming can cool the planet, build resilience to climate change, and eliminate poverty:

We commit to re-building local food economies in our own communities, to dismantling structural racism, to democratizing land access, to building opportunities for the leadership of our youth, and to working towards food sovereignty in partnership with social movements around the world;

We call on others in the US to demand an end to the global land grab, to end both corporate and military land occupations, to demand fairer trade, aid and investment policies, land reform, and support for sustainable peasant and community agriculture and sustainable community fisheries;

We endorse actions that include: the liberation of land and water resources for the production of food and sustainable livelihoods; the creation of new structures for cooperative ownership of land and food production, processing and distribution; the integration of labor rights, immigrant's rights and food justice; the valuing of women as primary food providers, and the denunciation of false solutions and false partnerships addressing climate change, hunger and economic development;

We demand a world in which everyone has control over their food and no one has to put food in their mouth that hurts people or the environment.

MB *How are these values shared theoretically and practically by the main partners?*

PN La Via Campesina has no intention of 'owning' food sovereignty. It is a universal alternative. The dynamic is not planned, it is intuitive, a new way of working. It can even be unpredictable, in the positive sense of the word. The academic world harbours good research teams like that of the Peasant Studies Review. Current studies focus on follow-up on local public policies to try to understand what food sovereignty could be in practice. These are intended for local or national governments. Others aim at understanding what are the mechanisms of globalisation that prevent the management of imports and exports, prices or access to land, quality, and so on. So there is considerable progress in research and more theoretical thinking.

We are not yet informed about everything that is produced at the local level. There is no compilation of what is happening today. But it all facilitates the development of national platforms or coalitions which give legitimacy to local initiatives.

La Via Campesina **Rational agriculture and climate change**



India, 2012 (left), and Haiti 2010 (right). La Via Campesina demonstrations against corporate ownership of genetically modified and of hybrid seeds

FR *You said that we all are now in financial and food crisis. But what importance should be given to land access, a central issue in agriculture, but also where there are much sought-after subterranean natural resources?*

PN *It is central. Many of our organisations demand energy sovereignty as a right of the people. We defend the sustainable use of these resources by the local populations. The development model destroys and excludes small-farmer agriculture and its social function. But scientific studies show that the agro-ecological model captures and stores carbon and that local agriculture feeds the human population. That is why we say we are the solution against global warming.*

FR *Javiera Rulli refers to the Brazilian experience in agroecology and considers that this is more than an agricultural technique, that it can even become a philosophy, that it takes root in everyday life and is relayed and discussed in ever wider circles. All these practices complete the definition of agroecology. What is your vision of agroecology?*

PN Agroecology is the small farmer response to the productivist model, a proposition that includes a social vision linked to the local economy and local employment, as well as a cultural and political vision. Agroecology is widely used as a response to the neoliberal production model and its technological systems. It is of great political value and needs a different type of political training, such as that proposed by the 'peasant to peasant' method. So it's a response from the grassroots to intensive agriculture, it's a small farmer response.

It is also considered as an alternative to the economic crisis. Among other things, agroecology is small farmer organisations' response to certification, including biological certification. There is no more money to buy fertilisers, seeds, and so on, hence the accent on a different production model which is more sustainable, also economically. It arouses great interest, for example in Africa where we have organised two big seminars on agroecology, with good participation. There is a strong demand for an independent production model, not necessarily 100 per cent certifiable, especially in a context of direct conflict with agrobusiness.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, and governments of the global North, propose biological certification as a solution for small farmers. However, we can now observe the growth of large-scale organic farms owned by big transnational companies. Hence, organic farming can be a threat for small farmers, because of the cost of certification, the control of markets and the loss of independence that it implies. Today, for example, to be an organic producer, you have to use certified grains and thus buy them from certified organic producers, from small (therefore, private) companies but also from the agrobusiness's transnational companies. Biological certification does not allow farmers to use their own seeds.

FR *Javiera Rulli also raises the question of self-certification on the basis of criteria discussed with consumers' movements and not controlled by third-party institutions, but based on a relationship of trust. How do you perceive this?*

PN This debate has created enormous tensions among and within consumer groups and peasant organisations. Some stand for community agriculture with a participative type of certification and others call for a standard certification. Today the organic agricultural model has become a reassuring mode of production for consumers, but transnational corporations are trying to recuperate it, causing competition and lower prices for products, working in the same way as for 'normal' agriculture, like with the same distribution channels. Faced with this, we must act by defending a social small-farmer model and social agriculture. That is why links

between consumers, citizen movements and small farmers are necessary. The debate on the climate is also important in this context.

So let's talk about a type of agriculture which is different from the neoliberal model: agroecological agriculture. This demand for more independent production, more linked to local markets, based on local resources and the defence of what is local, is also present in Africa and Asia.

FR The term itself is not important, what interests me most is the debate on the term and its actual content because this grows from practice. It is not worth giving a strict definition to begin with. It's a process of elaboration that never finishes.

PN When the term 'food sovereignty' first appeared, it was rejected by intellectuals and others because of the word 'sovereignty'. Agroecology is going to establish itself, whatever its name. I think that 'agroecology' describes all the components of the social model we are discussing. The usurpation of organic agriculture has caused it to lose the essence of the social and economic impact it was supposed to convey.

MB So, for you, agroecology is a social model for the future?

PN Yes, for me it's another term for alternative small farmer agriculture which is capable of opposing all those technicians who advocate fertilisers, hybrid seeds, the green revolution, and so on. It's organised agroecology, a power relationship in the face of globalisation.

A very positive experience is that of the agroecological school of Josué de Castro, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, where the students organise their classes, the institution's budget, and work on the school farm to pay for their courses. It is on-going ideological education. Our priority is to lead and encourage the whole process, train people, for example support the 'peasant to peasant' network in Central America.

A new trade deal?

FR A whole social movement was built up from the slogan 'Agriculture out of WTO, WTO out of agriculture'. However, some people consider, on the contrary, that the stalemate at WTO is an opportunity to demand a renegotiation of the agreement on agriculture. What do you think?

PN This possibility is not easy to envisage. The question is to know whether there should be control regulations or not. Is it better to have bad control regulations or none? The World Trade Organization is clearly an instrument of market liberalisation and globalisation. We cannot change that objective. Within La Via Campesina there is no doubt on that point. I do not think, for example, that the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) are going to negotiate a better agreement. The assessment of the World Trade Organization that was supposed to be undertaken ten years after the original Marrakesh agreement that set it up, has not even been done. I do not see how the organisation could progress or change.

With all the process of market deregulation and delegitimisation of institutional democracy, one of the problems is to know where to confront transnational corporations and where the decisions are taken. At the G20? After or before summits? Today, the UN is not our enemy, but the World Trade Organization, the instrument of neoliberal policies, is our enemy. It is easier for us to concentrate on fighting against WTO.

PN La Via Campesina is a grassroots movement. Our constitution does not allow for some higher body to decide everything. For example, the campaign concerning violence against women came from the local level, was finalised at the international level, and then returned to the grassroots. The debate is about the model, but of course there are differences between the small farmer and the medium-sized farmer. At present, the relocation of market gardening is very fast and it destroys networks. For instance, I have in mind the production of asparagus which goes from Peru to China or Vietnam and is then labelled as of European origin. They are the same companies that put the producers of each country in a situation of competition.

We are victims of the agro-industrial model, which makes it difficult to rationalise our relations. Wine is another good example. Today, European producers use machines to harvest, using less manpower composed of mainly seasonal migrants, whereas in the South of Europe, this manpower is still used. Northern Europe obviously criticises the inhuman employment conditions of the migrant workers but, on the other hand, these countries have destroyed jobs with the mechanisation of harvests. The price battle results in the workers being the first victims, then the small farmers, and so on.

MB. You are very clear about the general contradictions between various producers, but are we going to add to the present contradictions? The examples of harvesting machinery or migrants are very good, as is that of the transition in terms of the jobs of dockers, chemical industry workers, and so

on. Does not the change of system resulting from the crisis mentioned earlier carry with it contradictions which we are not capable of evaluating fully?

PN At this moment Almeria (Andalucia) is in a terminal crisis. The transnational corporations have signed agreements with the King of Morocco who has given them land, and Senegal is competing with Morocco, destroying the local tomato market. It's an implacable rationale. In the capitalist system there will always be someone to work more and for less wages and that's terrible. But nothing is static, the situation of the migrant workers in Almeria has improved considerably and there is more sensitivity about an environmentally-friendly production model and the management of markets. Small farmers are still in despair about Morocco acquiring markets that are decided by the large-scale Spanish owners.

But within La Via Campesina, these conflicts between Northern and Southern small farmers have never existed. For example, in the 1990s, when right-wing French farmers' movements burned trucks full of tomatoes coming from Spain, this did not cause conflict between the French and Spanish agricultural and livestock farmers organizations, both of which are members of La Via Campesina.

The enemy was identified very early on, it is neoliberalism. And to quote Ibrahim Coulibaly, founder of the National Coordination of Small Farmer Organisations of Mali, 'If small farming disappears in Europe, it will also disappear in Africa'. Our European coordination is opposed to financial aid for agricultural export. Subsidies are acceptable, but those linked with exports are rejected. We have formulated a platform through internal debate and there have not been North or South positions but common ideas and a general consensus.

Farmers and workers

FR *I am struck by the wide range of issues tackled by your small farmer organisations. This does not seem to be the case, or is no longer is the case, with workers' movements. Do you envisage maintaining a critical relationship with wage-earning workers' unions when that is possible?*

PN We have a very broad concept of strategies and the need for alliances and a vision which does not revolve only around prices, contrary to other agricultural organisations or trade unions, for which the salary is the central issue. We have discussed all this with a view to change. There are no conflicts between us and trade unions but sometimes the gap is so big that there is no dialogue. In the Basque country, for example, we maintain relations with the main workers' trade unions and

we have defined a very clear anti-capitalist policy. This dialogue is a priority even if it is difficult. In other countries, like Brazil, it is always small farmer organisations that take the initiative.

Proposals on issues and solutions generally come from the rural world. Even in Europe, the small farmer organisations are fairly small, but the counter-proposals to the policies of the European Union come from our organisations, who have discussed European policies in a global fashion, and not merely the price aspect of agricultural policy.

MB Yes, this is obvious for example in France, where it is difficult to win over the working class trade unions on the basic issues. There have been linkages on subjects such as genetically modified organisms and the patentability of life-forms, but on other themes linkages have only been possible with individual working class people or intellectuals who are themselves working with small farmers, not with the left-wing social structures as a whole.

PN To my mind, the big debate that is missing is on alliances and how alliances allow for development of a wider vision. Moreover, it is not just about symbolic alliances, like adding an organisation's logo at the bottom of a tract but about promoting mass awareness which takes into account the analysis of each partner in these debates.

FR If I understand correctly, the meaning of La Via Campesina's struggle is now much better known in towns even if it is still viewed as a minority issue. With this concern for building alliances and unity within your small-farmer organisations, is there work on training and information-sharing, including broader communication, with other sectors of society?

PN I think so, but it is not easy. In the Basque country, for example, we hosted a visit of the Small Farmers Movement of Brazil and the Korean Peasants League and organised meetings with trade unions.

But one of the characteristics of our organisations is to be a main player in the development of alliances. At the beginning, food sovereignty developed as a way to protect small farmers. Today it is perceived as a political right of citizens. This is clear in the fight against genetically modified organisms, which incorporates environmental, democratic and citizen concerns.

Another theme which unites small farmers' and urban alliances is food with, for example, the growth of markets without intermediaries and the emphasis on the

quality of products. Water is another such uniting theme. There is more sensitivity nowadays about the urban/rural relationship which is fundamental to building alliances.

MB This also works in the other direction: small farmers give input for discussion in urban circles, but the questioning of the dominant model is based on small farmers' living conditions.

PN Indeed. We have seen that in the North, for example in Canada, consumers' associations are helping young people who want to use alternative agricultural methods or are looking for land to set up farms or market gardens. It's an interesting two-way process.

Urban agroecology

JD You said earlier that one of your key strategies is to strengthen the alliances between the rural and urban sectors. How can this materialise?

PN For the small farmer organisations, it is urgent to consolidate this dialogue. One of the main priorities is to take action with retail shops and to provide information on original prices and the retail prices. In the framework of food sovereignty, it is also urgent to strengthen our message to the urban movements, not only towards consumers; however, it is often difficult to find urban contact persons. We try to identify them via platforms. In many countries, urban or peri-urban agriculture is becoming important in the food sovereignty strategy.

Peri-urban agriculture is not only market gardening; it will become a very valuable basis for local food. For this reason, this local situation can have an impact on the use of the land, the question of access to land, and so on. These movements are important potential allies. For example, the urban or peri-urban gardeners are often more sensitive to the question of seeds than the big grain farmers. Cooperating with these actors is also easier for practical reasons such as meeting times, less travel.

In certain countries like Argentina, the role of the peri-urban agricultural networks in Buenos Aires or Rosario during the financial crisis at the beginning of this century turned out to be crucial. It is still the case, even with the improved economic situation. In Argentina, there is a lot of tension between the growing of genetically-modified soya and maize and farming methods close to food sovereignty. And peri-urban agriculture plays a role.

MB How do you deal with the different activist approaches, some of which are very radical, as can be the case with Latin America?

PN I am not so sure that Latin American activism is so different... It is true that the thirty or so years of training in the theology of liberation, amongst other factors, have resulted in very strong and dynamic communication skills, but the Asian and African analyses are also very radical.

MB We very much admire your unique capacity of handling this diversity, which is its strength!

PN Yes, but educational methods are important. Our way of working is based on numerous discussions, on careful listening and on exchanges between small farmer delegations of different countries, allowing the members to acquire new knowledge. These exchanges are an essential training method, also for future leaders.

For example, when we had representatives from Brazil here, they were shocked by the situation of agriculture and considered it worse than in their home country! They joined in a rally against a bank account seizure. They were surprised because they thought that European small farmers were rich, whereas this is common practice here every day. So it was a very positive visit which will allow them to sharpen their analysis and develop alternatives.

FR You insisted on the fact that your international coordinating committee is not a central committee but, in this democratic structure, how would you define the action programme?

PN It arises from a process of collecting messages, of alliance strategies, concrete actions and campaigns.

MB One contradiction that has been resolved, is to gather together small farmers from different environments with specifically local characteristics (immersed in their weather, in their land, and so on) who have succeeded in building an international movement, while working-class organisations, internationalist by nature, have trouble doing so.

PN I also admire this. There are obviously organisational difficulties at the local level, but when we meet at the international level, there is strong reciprocal respect and confidence which allows us to approach difficulties more easily.

La Via Campesina **The feminine principle**



Cancún, Mexico, 2010, and the spirit of Pachamama, Bolivia, 2010. Climate change meetings with La Via Campesina involving the feminine principle

PN The use of the word *mística* to convey our struggle has been rejected by many Europeans who consider themselves more rational. *La mística* in Spanish ('mysticism' in English) is a term used to designate a set of practices, using ceremonies and drama, which aim to pay homage to values like, for example, Mother Earth, or Pachamama.

We have constructed our unity on emotion and the sense of class. We begin our assemblies with ceremonies, and the Europeans are gradually getting used to this. For communication, emotion is fundamental; it is comprehensible in all languages, as is *La mística*.

JD *It is also noteworthy that your policies and actions must be based on equality between men and women, even though that is not so obvious for all cultures and backgrounds and for the small farmer environment generally.*

PN Yes, it is impressive how African women have adopted the small farmer issue. And there will be progress in training men and women in this regard. The question of violence against women will be more difficult for us to deal with, because it is not a rule to be put in the statutes; it implies a change of mentality in the farms, on sharing domestic work, and so on, including in northern Europe. It's not a cultural question, but one of patriarchal society which permeates all countries. However, the campaign against violence worked better at the local level than at the international level.

Over the last 15 years, the advancement of women in La Via Campesina is very visible at all levels, both in terms of numbers and quality of participation, even if much remains to be done. Also, the system of representation with one man/one woman works well as does systematically organising women's caucuses before each big meeting. It ensures that women are well prepared and have the opportunity to exchange views beforehand.

La Via Campesina **Working with other organisations**



Manila, 2012 (left). Farmers protesting against landholders. Cancun, 2010 (right). La Via Campesina marchers with Latin heroes , on climate change

JD You said that the struggle for food sovereignty requires a different strategy of alliances. How does La Via Campesina consider agreements with non-governmental organisations, including those concerned with national and international development?

Our alliances must be based on strategic agreements and political objectives. We have high-priority relations with for example the Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration, with Genetic Resources Action International, and with the FoodFirst Information and Action Network. There must first be a relationship of unconditional confidence, respecting the independence of each party. Support can take different forms: organisation, research, introduction to institutions.

In December 1999, after the failure of the WTO Summit in Seattle and the first large-scale demonstration of the global justice movement, everyone agreed on the need to create alliances. It's not always easy. The World Social Forums have developed spaces for development, dialogue and exchange, even leading to alliances

on struggles such as against genetically modified organisms. These are often action-oriented. Strengthening more discussion-based alliances has been more difficult.

Another problem is how to work together. Organisational interests can break the dynamics, as can different cultures. It is an exhausting task. For a movement like ours, the follow-up of the World Social Forum requires the constant sacrifice of senior management, journeys, participation in quadri-lingual meetings.

On the way we work, the example of the construction of the food sovereignty forum at Nyeléni is very interesting. We initiated the debates in an original manner, without a historical hypothesis on how to do such things. In 2005 we brought to the fore the need to build a forum on food sovereignty not with a view to debating, but in order to consolidate a vision of food sovereignty as a change agent against the capitalist backdrop and also to build up strategic positions.

We considered that the 'classical' World Social Forum was not a suitable space because only those who can pay their travel costs can participate. Our objective was to organise a closed forum where the persons and organizations that should be present would actually be there, their organizations being responsible for their representatives' travel costs. A steering committee was set up with major players such as fisherfolk, environmentalists, the World March of Women, immigrants, La Via Campesina, and local and regional organisations.

We worked together on the methodology and objectives, in a horizontal, but very organised, manner. This forum was criticised because it was closed and because we enforced quotas: the development non-government organisations only represented, I think, 5 per cent of the participants, the peasant organisations 35 per cent. But this engendered a dialogue between the different players. In this way, for example, nomads and sedentary cattle-breeders were able to discuss their conflicts. The idea was to clearly define what we mean by food sovereignty and our objectives for action. It was successful, but in a closed context.

The Nyeléni Declaration has become the main platform in the world of all the citizen movements. We decided not to have this meeting in a hotel, but to build a village – Nyéleni – to reflect the real situation of the majority of the world population. In this way, we were able to build alliances based on agreements concerning strategies.

The non-government organisations only contributed, if I am not mistaken, up to 10

per cent of the total budget for the organisation of the Forum. Some had proposed more funds but on condition that they could send their own small farmers; that was refused. Autonomy is of utmost importance for us

FR *I find the term 'priority relations' with non-government organisations clearer and more appropriate than that of 'alliances' which corresponds more to strategic relations between social movements, like the World March of Women, which represent people who are living in a social situation, unlike NGOs. The issue of building alliances seems fundamental, including knowing how to build a 'people's camp', it was said and is still said, against the power of capital and States.*

PN When building alliances, LVC tends to choose organisations for practical reasons and to save energy, without considering whether they are minority structures or not. We establish alliances mainly at the local level and with 'real' social players, so as to be able to build actions around concrete local issues, like at Cancún in December 2010, or at Durban in November 2011. In Durban, we did not form alliances with big non-government organisations, but with local movements of South African Blacks who are struggling in their national context, like the Movement of Landless People. At Cancún we were with the indigenous peoples at the forum on environmental impact and not with the non-government organisations, who were gathered in a much bigger and more visible space.

We came in for some criticism, but who has the proposals and holds power? One cannot parachute down into a country and intervene at point blank range. You must have crystal-clear messages – against Kyoto and the 'good carbons market' for example). If we stay with all the non-government organisations, our position will no longer be as clear, we will lose it.

Being in the minority allows us to exert more influence than if we were all lumped together. History proves it: in 1993, we were the only social movement to express publicly, refusal of the Marrakesh agreement. We were not afraid of being in the minority. Also, when we presented the concept of food sovereignty, it was first rejected by a number of agricultural 'specialists', including development NGOs.

FR *The term 'minority' is perhaps not appropriate because, in terms of representation, La Via Campesina is clearly ahead of all the NGOs taken together.*

PN That's true. Our legitimacy in debates is more and more recognised, but it is not easy because the other organisations have means, an appropriate dialogue, and concentrate on one theme, and so on. If we consider that the subject is important

and that the adopted position is good, we see no problem in promoting it on our own. In time, if we are right, this will strengthen our legitimacy.

JD We understand your strategy of a so-called 'minority position' and the constant awareness of NGO attempts to recuperate La Via Campesina, but what are you missing today?

PN We need strong partners at the international level. When, for example, the UN organises a meeting, local organisations can spearhead the struggle. For instance, during the Hong Kong World Trade Organisation summit in 2005, it was mainly the Filipino and Indonesian migrant organisations that provided the logistics and internal information that we needed to get organised. The international reference for these organisations was La Via Campesina, not a trade union.

During the Durban 2001 World Conference against Racism and Racial Discrimination, our representatives did not stay in hotels with the NGOs who had already prepared their speeches, but settled in with the local organisations that have the capacity to mobilise and explain their situation on the spot. That is why it is important to reinforce local organisations. What's more, from a practical viewpoint, one cannot send an army of activists to each meeting!

The global crises

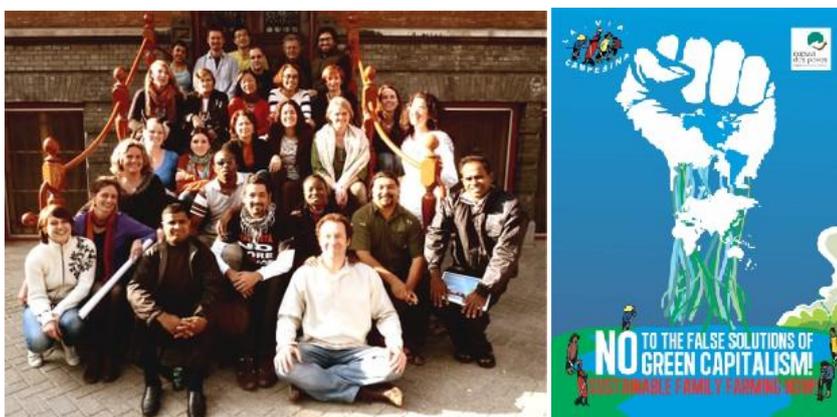
JD Could we come back to the impact of the global crises on non-government organisations and their relations with La Via Campesina?

PN Cooperation will clearly change as public financial resources become rarer or run out. In Spain, development cooperation is due to decrease by 60-70 per cent. Cooperation will become more closely linked to the interests of national or transnational companies. We can already see strong competition between NGOs to capture funds. Many of them will disappear, some absorbed by large NGOs. This will be problematic for organisations close to us who will have to face great pressure from donors wanting to influence their ideology.

At the same time, US or other Western private foundations will occupy the place left vacant by public cooperation, but they will impose more conditions, immediate results, and so on. And that will have an impact on social movements. If they have an ideological weakness and funding is scarce, they could redefine their demands and perspectives to the liking of the NGOs co-opted by donors. It will be true for Africa, as well as for Latin America and Asia.

This harnessing of the social movement is a matter for concern, as is the bureaucratisation of fundraising processes which will have a demobilising effect. In response to all this, we have started a training programme with our member organisations to alert them to the dangers that these foundations represent, and also to elaborate financial strategies. It is moreover important in countries where governments switch to the Left, to launch rapid campaigns to redirect international cooperation to a more solidarity-oriented and open approach.

La Via Campesina **The way ahead**



Workshop on food sovereignty created by young people (left), and (right) the need to continue to challenge 'green capitalism'. Two future priorities

PN Faced with the financial crisis and the emerging new cooperation model, it is also important for us to develop some financial self-sufficiency through member subscriptions, identifying donors, contributions from the general public for specific actions and strengthening the autonomy of local organisations.

JD *What are La Via Campesina's next priority struggles?*

PN The solutions to the crisis reside in food sovereignty: understanding it and applying it. This is linked to the work with allies according to their economic and cultural situation. It would be good if one day researchers identified the common points developed by food sovereignty platforms. We must regulate markets, prices,

and the control of supplies, exports and imports, in order to have a transparent picture of production. This basic demand is shared by all.

Another demand is the capacity to elaborate national agricultural and food policies which respond to the country's needs, protect and develop a small-farming agricultural model with all the necessary political instruments, including the local market. This demand is found in Africa and Asia as well as in Europe.

We must also imagine, examine, develop and promote technologies in the field of agroecology, with the aim of satisfying needs, not the production paradigm.

FR. Concerning these alternative proposals, are there any plans for dialogue with research so that different directions may be explored?

PN This is a strong concern. But numerous university budgets are financed by transnational corporations. An action-oriented public debate could be held on this theme. It is not possible to develop an agricultural policy based on industrialisation while trying to safeguard small-farmer agriculture. There is a need to change the economic, productive and consumer mind-set.

Another approach that allows for a broad consensus is access to land and seeds, farms for young people, and gender equality. In Europe, the theme of young people will be one of the issues for the small-farmer model – and also for the industrial model, because even big farmers' children do not want to do the same work as their parents. There is also sensitivity about the redistribution of land and much interest in the issue of seeds.

We are radically opposed to genetically modified organisms, to Terminator, and to the 'zombie' technology. The struggle against genetically modified trees, which is pure madness, is going to be very important.

Transnational corporate control over, for instance, processing, marketing and land-grabbing is provoking a general demand for public management. It's time to develop concrete strategies to fight the transnationals, but it's not easy with the danger of militarisation – private armies used by certain corporations – leading to more and more repression. The International Declaration/Convention on Peasants' Rights will be very important in the face of growing repression. Many peasant organisations will use the declaration to strengthen their arguments and to defend themselves.

FR *On all these issues, is there agreement on action? I am struck by the fact that, despite La Via Campesina's development and the appeal of food sovereignty, the concrete situation is worsening.*

PN Challenging green capitalism will be a major item. Behind this new adaptation of capitalism, the private ownership of all goods of common interest remains. This constitutes a direct attack on the small farmer agricultural model.

Social movements are essential

FR *Do you see any countries emerging that might be potentially strong allies to enforce your strategies?*

PN I cannot see a group of countries able to confront major decisions. We can find countries that support certain demands coming out of the lobby around the Convention/Declaration on Peasants' Rights. But in a World Trade Organization general assembly, for example, it would be more difficult to find countries opposing this institution's functioning.

Moreover, if a government is to take autonomous decisions at the international level, it must have the massive support of the social movement; it cannot be the responsibility of a civil servant or a minister or a president. It is very important to take this into account, because when a more progressive leader arrives on the scene, many social movements become less active.

To have a national president as an ally does not mean gaining power. Permanent public awareness work and action are necessary to support a government with a more social and grassroots strategy. On the international level, if we want to build up a block of countries in favour of our strategy, it is essential to mobilise social movements within the country and also outside.

We need social movements that are independent of political parties. For example, in Brazil, when Lula came into power as president, a large number of trade union leaders joined him, undermining a large part of the social movement. In Bolivia there was a lack of well-trained political leaders, and nearly all the social movement leaders joined the Evo Morales government, decapitating those movements and endangering possible future independent struggles. Consolidating a strong, independent social movement must be the priority. Our objective is clearly to apply pressure from the base of the social movements. That is and will be decisive in the fight for food sovereignty. This is crucial.

La Via Campesina **Recognition within the UN System**



Henry Saragih of La Via Campesina, seen speaking at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (left) and (right) addressing a meeting in Jakarta

Extract from a statement by Henry Saragih from Indonesia, who was named general co-ordinator of La Via Campesina in 2004.

Peasants and small farmers make up half of the world population and grow at least 70 per cent of the world's food. This group includes small-scale farmers, pastoralists, landless people, peasant fishers and indigenous people all around the world. However, despite the importance of this group, its contribution is far from being recognised. Rural people have very little visibility on the public scene, and 'peasants', in most places, are looked down on and often considered 'ignorant', 'backward' or 'underdeveloped'.

This contempt goes hand in hand with the 'free market' policies in force for more than three decades that have banked – or placed a bet – on the disappearance of peasants' agriculture, to be displaced by large agribusiness corporations and international trade.

The most recent session of the UN Human Rights Council show how the word 'peasant' remains politically sensitive. Under pressure from some European countries, the use of the expression 'rights of peasants' was replaced by the less threatening 'rights of people working in rural areas'. They seem to fear giving too much political weight to a large number of people whose trade has largely remained outside the capitalist economy.

However, over the last two decades, peasants, landless people and family farmers have organised themselves to reclaim their right to protect their livelihoods, to defend small-scale agriculture, and to have their voices heard at international level. The international farmers' movement La Via Campesina was created in 1993, uniting at global level national organisations and unions that had been active for years in their own country or region.

'One of the most important things that we have learned while building of our movement has been our ability to rebuild our pride of being peasants', Paul Nicholson, a Basque farmer, one of the founders of the movement (interviewed above) has explained. 'Now we are proud to be recognised by major institutions such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and the UN human right councils'.

With the start of the food crisis in 2007 and the increasing number of hungry people in the world, the tide has started to turn. The blind promise that agribusiness would feed the world appeared to be a fiction, and more and more people, governments and institutions are recognising that there will be no solution to the current crisis without the participation of small-scale farmers.

The climate crisis also reveals the limitations of the agro-industrial mode of production, which is extremely fuel hungry and destroys soils and nature. Sustainable agriculture and local food markets, on the other hand, show a remarkably positive impact on climate. Thousands of peasants and those who advocate on their behalf are still oppressed, intimidated, arrested and killed as they struggle for land, food, economic opportunity and human rights – even though they are the very same men and women who are feeding the world.

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