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La Vía Campesina: the birth and evolution of a transnational social movement

María Elena Martínez-Torres and Peter M. Rosset

The origin and evolution of the transnational peasant movement La Vía Campesina is analysed through five evolutionary stages. In the 1980s the withdrawal of the state from rural areas simultaneously weakened corporatist and clientelist control over rural organisations, even as conditions worsened in the countryside. This gave rise to a new generation of more autonomous peasant organisations, who saw the origins of their similar problems as largely coming from beyond the national borders of weakened nation-states. A transnational social movement defending peasant life, La Vía Campesina emerged out of these autonomous organisations, first in Latin America, and then at a global scale, during the 1980s and early 1990s (phase 1). Subsequent stages saw leaders of peasant organisations take their place at the table in international debates (1992–1999, phase 2), muscling aside other actors who sought to speak on their behalf; take on a leadership role in global struggles (2000–2003, phase 3); and engage in internal strengthening (2004–2008, phase 4). More recently (late 2008–present, phase 5) the movement has taken on gender issues more squarely and defined itself more clearly in opposition to transnational corporations. Particular emphasis is given to La Vía Campesina's fight to gain legitimacy for the *food sovereignty* paradigm, to its internal structure, and to the ways in which the (re)construction of a shared peasant identity is a key glue that holds the struggle together despite widely different internal cultures, creating a true *peasant internationalism*.

Keywords: La Vía Campesina; food sovereignty; peasant movement

The most systematic and comprehensive organic and living alternative to existing hegemonies comes not from the ivory towers or the factories but from the fields.
– Rajeev Patel (2006, 90)

Globalize the Struggle! Globalize Hope! – La Vía Campesina

The peasantry: disappear or transnationalise?

Analysts have long predicted the demise and disappearance of the peasantry as an inevitable result of the penetration of agriculture by capitalism (Kaustky 1899, Hobsbawm 1994). Nevertheless, peasant communities have not only refused to disappear (albeit with a lot of out-migration), but in recent years peasants have

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organised in a sophisticated, transnational way to respond to the neoliberal phase of late capitalism (Kearney 1996).¹

Over the past 20 to 30 years in rural areas of the world, as neoliberal economic policies began cutting back, and in many cases eliminating, the institutions that supported peasant and family agriculture, the legitimacy of national government policies, political parties, and international financial institutions was eroded in the eyes of peasants and family farmers. The assertion of rights and other demands for change by rural peoples – such as the assertion of the right to land, the right of rural peoples to produce, and the right to continue to exist as such – have been the points of unity of peasants in the world.

In the neoliberal era, supranational corporations and institutions dictating neoliberal policies have negatively affected most sectors of society. One of the consequences of this is that class or cultural differences are no longer the barrier they once were for transnational collective action. In fact, rural organisations and peasantries around the world share the same global problems even though they confront different local and national realities. They have globalised their struggles from below, by forming *La Vía Campesina*² (literally, ‘the peasant way’). In doing so, they have envisioned a simultaneously new and old ‘agrarian trajectory that would reintegrate food production and nature as an alternative culture of modernity’ (McMichael 2006, 416).

La Vía Campesina is considered by many to be the most important transnational social movement in the world (Borras 2004, McMichael 2006, Patel 2005, 2006, Edelman 2005, Martínez Torres and Rosset 2008, Borras and Franco 2009). In contrast with other sectors –workers’ unions, professionals, women, environmentalists, etc. – peasants and family farmers have been able to build a structured, representative, and legitimate movement, with a common identity, that links social struggles on five continents. It has been identified as being among the grassroots movements that are ‘the most innovative actors in setting agendas for political and social policies’ (Yúdice 1998, 353).

La Vía Campesina has aspired to develop its space so that farmer organisations from the North and South could engage each other as equals, and it has been successful at this to a large extent. In bridging the ‘global divide’ between actors from Northern and Southern countries (Smith 2002), the peasant movement is creating what has been called the ‘Farmers’ International, a living example of a new relationship between North and South’ (Bové 2001, 96). *La Vía Campesina* can be thought of as ‘the international peasant movement’, analogous to the ‘international environmental movement’, or ‘the international women’s movement’, though *Vía Campesina* has a tighter, more formal coordination than either of those two examples. It is also an autonomous (independent from political parties, governments, religious institutions, or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), though not all of its members are completely so) and pluralistic movement (Desmarais 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005, Borras and Franco 2009).

¹In this paper we use *campesino* and peasant interchangeably. For many *Vía Campesina* organisations in Latin America, peasant is distinguished from ‘family farmer’, where for the former the principal goal of the family is to reproduce itself through a combination of production for auto-consumption and for the market, while the principal goal of the latter is to make money, like a small business. The members of *La Vía Campesina* in Northern countries tend to be family farmers or farm workers.

²See <http://www.viacampesina.org> for a general background.

La Vía Campesina today is the leading network of grassroots organisations with presence in the anti-globalisation or ‘*altermundista*’ (‘another world’) movement, as manifested in protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), in the World Social Forum (WSF) process, in its scathing critiques of World Bank land policies, and in its ability to force the novel concept of *food sovereignty* into common usage (Vía Campesina 2004, Rosset 2006a, 2006b, McMichael 2006, Patel 2005, 2006). Its member organisations have even helped topple national governments, as in Ecuador in 2000 and Bolivia in 2003 (Edelman 2005, 337), or defended them, as in Honduras in 2009.

How has such a movement arisen? What key issues and challenges have been addressed in the bridging of so many diverse cultural divides? Looking at the history of La Vía Campesina, we identify five phases in its birth and evolution which help us answer these questions. The first phase took place during the 1980s up to 1992. Here several national rural movements felt the impact of similar global policies on local and national conditions. The second phase (1992–1999) was marked by the consolidation of continental networks in Latin America and the birth and structuring of La Vía Campesina as a global movement. The third phase (2000–2004) essentially consisted of becoming a key player on the international stage. The fourth phase (2004–2008) was marked by growth and internal strengthening, including setting up of regional secretariats, and the fifth, and current, phase (late 2008–present) responds to recent changes in the world and reflects a maturing political-economic analysis.

Phase one (1980s–1992): setting the stage and the birth of a transnational movement
Changing contexts: the state and peasant organisations

In order to understand the rise of La Vía Campesina, we must first examine the transformation of the nation-state and its role in rural areas, particularly but not exclusively in the Third World, and as exemplified in Latin America. It is the changing nature of state intervention in recent decades that generated significant new challenges for rural peoples. In coping with and confronting states, peasants formed a new generation of organisations that have moved toward the international stage. The neoliberal model forced a restructuring of state–society relations, and it was in this space that new forms of social movements that are more autonomous, horizontal, and more based on collective identities rather than just social class began to flourish (Alvarez *et al.* 1998).

The period of Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) marked Latin American and other Third World states from the period of the World Wars through the 1970s. This strategy was geared toward supplying domestic markets from national production. It was made possible, at least partially, by political alliances in each country between the fraction of the capitalist class that produces for national markets and the population (the middle and working classes, and to a lesser extent, the peasantry) that would need purchasing power to consume these products (de Janvry 1981). The state in this period had a mixed attitude toward peasant food producers in that it wanted to support them to feed urban workers, but do so with low crop prices (‘cheap food policies’), with mixed results that essentially maintained rural poverty. As in Latin America, Asian and African states intervened in domestic food markets in a similar fashion. Thus this ‘developmentalist’ state, to a greater or lesser extent in different countries, provided public services to rural areas that supported domestic food production and peasant agriculture.

Under such a state, political parties were able to capture enough resources, either by winning elections or by negotiating quotas of power when in minority positions, to provide political patronage to supporters via favoritism in the distribution of resources and services. For rural areas this meant that each urban-based political party was able to create and maintain a national peasant organisation by channelling state resources to that organisation. Under this *corporatist* arrangement in Latin America, for example (Klarén 1986), parties across the political spectrum, from communist to social democratic to Christian Democrat, were all able to maintain their corresponding peasant organisations. In fact these urban-based parties offered no real proposals of great interest to rural communities, as all of them adhered, more or less, to the philosophy that rural economic surpluses from agriculture must be extracted and transferred to urban areas in order to subsidise industrialisation. This often maintains rural poverty. But they were able to buy the loyalty of their rural organisations by channelling state resources to them. Part of their social base, frustrated by the lack of structural changes that truly addressed poverty, joined armed revolutionary movements (Seligson 1996).

The non-revolutionary peasant organisations were often political machines to serve urban electoral interests, and their leadership was typically *clientelistic* in nature (Fox 1994, Petras and Veltmeyer 2002). Leadership skills were based on the ability to carry out negotiations with cronies in political parties and government offices in exchange for maintaining social peace and delivering votes, rather than being based on having an ideologically clear analysis or on the ability to mobilise large masses of people in the streets. Their organisations subordinated the objective interests of their members in broad-based structural change that might favour rural and peasant interests to the urban interests of their political parties in maintaining the status quo.

Much of this was to change. While some of these organisations disappeared under military dictatorships, which could not stand even such politically tame movements, many more faded away or changed fundamentally under the neoliberal budget-cutting policies mandated by structural adjustment in the 1970s and 1980s. As states were radically downsized, their services (ranging from credit to extension and price supports) dried up, and political parties no longer had much of value to maintain corporatist and clientelistic peasant organisations. Conditions for peasant farmers went from bad to worse in Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Rosset 1997, Conroy *et al.* 1996, Petras and Veltmeyer 2002, Rau 1991, Jayne and Jones 1997, Seshamani 1998, Gulati and Narayanan 2003).

As political parties and their domesticated organisations became increasingly irrelevant for rural peoples, a new generation of peasant organisations came to the fore. The older organisations either disappeared altogether or became mere shells of their former selves, having leaders but few followers, or they mutated into the new style of organisations. These new organisations, either born from the older ones or founded virtually from scratch (sometimes with former members of armed guerrilla movements in their leadership), were typically founded on principles of *autonomy* from political parties, government offices, the church, and NGOs (see Foley 1995, for example).

To a greater or lesser extent these new organisations rejected the clientelism and corporatism of their forebears and refused to be subordinated to urban interests. These organisations called for a mixture of restoring improved versions of the state services cut back by neoliberalism and structural changes, such as agrarian reform and support for national markets, to favour peasant agriculture. They were, and

remain, much more radical than the earlier generation of corporatist organisations, though it would be a gross exaggeration to say that they have eradicated clientelistic behaviours and attitudes, which vary from country to country and organisation to organisation (Petras and Veltmeyer 2002). A reality is that within La Vía Campesina is the fact that some member organisations retain corporatist and clientelist behaviours, weakening their ability to act against governments.³ The internal education programme that La Vía Campesina is now launching is designed in part to address this challenge. But most La Vía Campesina affiliated organisations, born in the age of the minimalist state, soon found that national problems could not be solved by just appealing to, or pressuring, weak national governments (Desmarais 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005). The challenges of confronting a global order stacked against peasants led to a joint struggle by both organisations that are clearly anti-systemic in outlook (Wallerstein 2002) and organisations that, if things were not *so* bad, would probably be content to work within the system (Rosset 2007).

In the 1980s and 1990s the greatest problem peasant organisations faced was the rapid decline of crop and livestock prices, largely due to globalisation, felt through market-opening under structural adjustment and free trade agreements like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), WTO, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), as well as the budget-cutting and free market conditionality forced on their governments by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Conroy *et al.* 1996, Lappé *et al.* 1998, Rosset 2006a, McMichael 2008). This came on top of the displacement that had already occurred under World Bank, USAID, and Green Revolution-driven, forced-pace ‘modernization’ in the immediately preceding period of time. The organisations developed a political analysis that identified transnational corporations and international finance capital as driving forces behind the WTO, World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and free trade agreements, and it therefore became imperative to organise themselves at a supra- or transnational level. If your real enemy is beyond your national borders and is also the real enemy of your peers in other countries, then you must join forces with those peers to fight your common enemy (Desmarais 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005, McMichael 2008). They were at least in part able to do this learning and formulate a counter-hegemonic discourse because they were in contact with each other across international borders, especially in Latin America. Seeing that organisations in different countries faced the same problems led them to seek common causes and identify common enemies.

500 years of resistance: the central role of Latin America

In the past I have felt that La Vía Campesina (LVC) was very Latin American, although we are starting to overcome that. But LVC is now much more open to the inclusion of movements from other regions. In fact, it is an understandable organizational life cycle issue. The LVC began in Latin America, so it was very Latin American at the beginning. But as it grows and matures, it is becoming less Latin American. This is normal.
– African peasant leader⁴

³See, for example, Borras (2008), Borras and Franco (2009), and various papers in the *Journal of Agrarian Change* special double issue (vol. 8, 2 and 3) edited by Borras, Edelman, and Kay (2008) for varying points of view on these and other contradictions.

⁴Interviewed by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005).

The birth of La Vía Campesina as a global peasant movement was foreshadowed in Latin America by the founding of one of its direct forebears, the *Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo* (Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations, or CLOC) in the early 1990s (CLOC 1994). This is not surprising since Latin America is the region of the world with the most unequal distribution of land and income, and the region that particularly experienced a sharp decline of living standards during the ‘lost decade’ of the 1980s as neoliberal policies hit Latin America.

Throughout the 1980s Latin America was undergoing a continent-wide process of peasant civil society networking. This began with the Continental Conference on Agrarian Reform and Peasant Movements held in Managua in 1981, which brought together revolutionary peasant organisations, national peasant organisations, and independent peasant organisations, beginning a process of exchanges of experiences that led to an embryonic Latin American peasant movement (Sevilla Guzmán and Martínez-Alier 2006). Continental peasant meetings then took place every year until 1989, when a similar process was begun in Colombia in preparation for the ‘500 Years of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, Peasant and Popular Resistance Continental Campaign’. As part of this Campaign, continental conferences were then held every year until 1992 (Edelman 2003).

Drawing on the powerful symbolism of the quincentennial of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas, and in opposition to the big celebrations planned by governments, the Declaration of Quito after a ‘500 Years of Indian Resistance’ meeting in 1990 outlined the basis of what was becoming a transnational peasant movement. The participants expressed a collective concern for the destruction of nature, with what Stefano Varese (1996, 60) calls the ‘moral management of the cosmos’ or ‘moral ecology’:

We do not own nature ... it is not a commodity ... it is an integral part of our life; it is our past, present, and future. We believe that this meaning of humanity and of the environment is not only valid for our communities of Indoamerican people. We believe that this form of life is an option and a light for the people of the world oppressed by a system which dominates people and nature. (Declaration of Quito, quoted in Varese 1996, 69)

According to Varese, the ‘ecological cosmology of rural communities, based essentially on the notion and practice of individual usufruct of collective property and the primacy of use value, resisted (with different degrees of success) the intrusion of a cosmology based on exchange value that corresponded to the capitalist market economy’ (Varese 1996, 62). Harkening back to the ‘moral economy’ of James Scott (1977), Varese argues that even while indigenous and peasant families participate in capitalist market relations that are external to their communities, they maintain and reproduce non-capitalist relations on the inside. In this moral economy, community economic relations are based on the logic of reciprocity and production for subsistence. In fact, Marc Edelman (2005) argues that the transnational peasant movement is bringing the ‘moral economy’ directly into the global debate over the future of agriculture, counter-posing it to the dominant ‘market economy’ paradigm.

Denouncing the ‘domination and exploitation suffered by our continent since the arrival of the invaders’ (CLOC 1997, 30), the 500 Years Campaign brought together organisations of indigenous people, peasants, workers, students, youth, teachers,

unions, academics, women, and popular urban sectors, who questioned 'official' versions of Latin American history that virtually ignored resistance to the Conquest. The Campaign made a culturally and ethnically diverse Latin American identity visible and generated pride in the continued resistance of peoples to conquest. Many of the Latin American movements were involved in struggles to establish rights: rights to livelihood, to one's body, to land, and 'rights to have human rights', even those individual rights already established as universal rights in government constitutions (Pasuk 1999, 4–5). Movement struggles in Latin America have increasingly insisted that collective/social rights must be part of a revised citizenship compact.

It is common that movements of poor and marginalised people have as their first goal to 'recover their dignity and status as citizens and even as human beings' (Alvarez *et al.* 1998, 5). The Campaign helped create a deep project of constructing new collective identities and unity along the axis of the peoples' right to self-determination and strengthened oppressed peoples' trust in their own intellectual, moral, and political capacity to fight for and exercise this right. At the same time it affirmed the cultural validity of the point of view of 'the oppressed', in contraposition to dominant or official viewpoints (Girardi 1994). This view was also reinforced by the 'preferential option for the poor' advanced by the progressive section of the Catholic Church and by those who believed in and promoted liberation theology throughout Latin America (Berryman 1987). Latin American social movements were fighting for the democratisation of society as a whole, and that was to include an assault on the cultural practices that 500 years had embodied in social relations of exclusion and inequality (Dagnino 1998, 47). Rooted in Latin America, where mixed times and cultures, pre-modern, modern, and post-modern, are experienced, these social movements 'confront authoritarian culture through a resignifying of notions as rights, public and private spaces, forms of sociability, ethics, equality and difference, and so on' (Alvarez *et al.* 1998, 10).

One very important outcome of the efforts in the Campaign to articulate different sectors at a continental level was the decision in 1991 and 1992 by Latin American rural organisations to coordinate struggles for land and against the then-new neoliberal model, by founding the CLOC (Doula 2000, 366). The broad and overwhelming nature of the challenge that neoliberalism presented to all rural sectors meant that the CLOC was able to bring together groups whose sometimes diverging interests at the local level had historically kept them apart, like landless people, farm workers and farmers, or indigenous and non-indigenous peasants.⁵

Forty-seven organisations (peasants, indigenous people, farm workers, and rural women) from 19 countries founded this transnational alliance,⁶ structured in five regions (North, Central, Caribbean, Andean, and Southern Cone), with a collective leadership composed of two rotating representatives from each region, an International Secretariat, and an issue-based or 'thematic' division of work (Doula

⁵Many of these organisations had been able to overcome their geographical and institutional distance from the state (Davis 1999) partly by having national offices in capital cities.

⁶Lins Ribeiro (1998, 326) makes the distinction between global and transnational: 'I consider globalization mostly as a historical economic process directly related to the expansion of capitalism ... creates the economic and technological basis that makes possible the existence of transnationalism ... [where] politics and ideology are [its] privileged realms'.

2000, 367). Collective and rotating leadership is a characteristic of major contemporary Latin American social movements, such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil, the Zapatistas in Mexico, and indigenous people in Ecuador, and likely contributes to their strength by reducing the individualistic, personalistic, and clientelistic leadership that had weakened earlier generations of peasant organisations, albeit perhaps at some cost to 'efficiency' as prioritised by 'old left' and neoliberal institutions alike. By opening a transnational space, the CLOC was a 'scaling up' of Latin American movements (Fox 1994), who were then able to gain political influence and legitimate their claims through the simultaneous mobilisation of actors at local, national, and international scales of social action (Perreault 2003, 100).

While Latin Americans were building the CLOC, peasant and family farm organisations in India, Europe, and North America were also coming to the conclusion that transnational struggle was needed to confront neoliberalism. While 200,000 peasants from across India held the 'Seed Satyagraha'⁷ rally in Delhi against the patenting of seeds by multinational corporations under GATT (Shiva 1993), 30,000 farmers from across Europe marched against the GATT ministerial in Brussels (Edelman 2003, 203), even as North American family farm organisations began building international connections with farmer groups in other countries (Desmarais 2007).

National movements against neoliberal policies were cresting as they reached national borders, and they overflowed into rapidly jelling transnational networks that became a transnational movement.⁸ While social movements are not limited to the activities of formal organisations, formal organisations 'tend to emerge on the crest of the movement', argued Piven and Cloward (1978). Thus it was in 1992, when peasant and family farmer organisations from Central America, the Caribbean, North America, and Europe met in Managua, Nicaragua, during the Second Congress of the Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (National Union of Farmers and Cattle Ranchers, or UNAG) that the idea of *Vía Campesina* was hatched (Edelman, 1998).⁹ *La Vía Campesina* was born as the wave of peasant dissatisfaction and movements 'crested' into the international sphere, and they hooked up with each other as a transnational social movement, or *globalization from below* (Edelman 2001, 304).

Participants in this meeting analysed and discussed the impact of neoliberal policies on agriculture and rural communities. Farmer and peasant leaders developed a 'common frame of meaning' (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 7) in which the

⁷The 'Seed Satyagraha' is a movement by Indian farmers in Chhattisgarh to assert their rights over their indigenous varieties of paddy seeds. The rally was organised in December 2002 to stop Syngenta, a Swiss-based agribusiness multinational corporation, from entering into an agreement with Indira Gandhi Krishi Vishwavidyalaya (IGKV) to take over all the paddy varieties held in the university's gene bank.

⁸Fox (2000) makes a clear distinction between networks as spaces for exchange of information and ideas, and coalitions in which organisations agree on specific actions. Transnational movement organisations share meanings that are socially constructed through joint actions and not only by shared intentions.

⁹Marc Edelman has written extensively on the Asociación de Organizaciones Campesinas Centroamericanas para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo (Association of Central American Peasant Organizations for Cooperation and Development, ASOCODE), a key peasant coalition ancestor of CLOC and *Vía Campesina*. This early history has also been thoroughly reviewed by Desmarais (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005, 2007).

brutal consequences of this model based on free trade, low prices, and industrial agriculture – greater impoverishment and marginalisation in the countryside – were found to be totally unacceptable. They agreed that an alternative model was desperately needed, and peasants themselves, they felt, must be at the heart of developing the rural and food policies which invariably impact rural communities (see Desmarais 2003b, McMichael 2006, Patel 2005, 2006, Webster 2004).

As a follow-up to the Managua initiative, more than 70 peasant and farm leaders from around the world met in Mons, Belgium, in May of 1993. It was at this conference that peasant and farm organisations worldwide formally committed to work collectively to defend their rights in the context of trade liberalisation, as producers of the world's food, and became the First International Conference of La Via Campesina (Desmarais 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005). Participants agreed on a mission statement and organisational structure and defined a very general policy framework to protect the rights and interests of farming families (in 1993, the International Operating Secretariat was located in Honduras). La Via Campesina essentially adopted the structure of the CLOC at a global level, with an International Coordinating Commission (ICC), made up of regional coordinators from each of regions (later, this would be revised to have two from each region, male and female). By 2008, the regions in Via Campesina were North America (includes Mexico), South America, Central America, the Caribbean, Europe, South Asia, East and Southeast Asia, and more recently two regions in Africa. A powerful 'founder effect' can be noted in that Latin American presence is represented by four of the regions. Although Latin American member organisations offered that the name could be translated into each language, for example to 'the Farmer Way' or 'The Peasant Way' in English, organisations from other continents insisted on keeping 'La Via Campesina', in part in tribute to the Latin American role, and in part because they 'liked the sound'.

Phase two (1992–1999): taking their place at the table

Before La Via Campesina came along, many organizations who were on the front lines of struggle in their countries were not recognized or respected. LVC has provided them with a space where they gain international (and national) respect, respect from other social movements, from institutions, and where they have greatly increased their self-esteem. – La Via Campesina staff member¹⁰

La Via Campesina has provided a space, and allies who are our peers, to form a network and jointly analyze our issues and problems, and develop new concepts like food sovereignty. – Asian peasant leader¹¹

La Via Campesina is at least partially responding to a politics of representation that all too often left peasant voices out. The privatisation trend of neoliberalism in the 1980s affected foreign assistance and funding policies of international donors, who increasingly cut aid to governments and passed it instead to NGOs (see Conroy *et al.* 1996). Donors thus

encouraged the growth of organizations that were able to make claims to represent a constituency in the Global South. The ability of these organizations to deliver 'the

¹⁰Based on the interview by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2005).

¹¹Based on the interview by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2005).

peasantry' in order to comply with the structures of 'accountability', 'transparency' and 'participation' that have emerged in response to the criticisms received by these international financial institutions, is the key to the survival of these NGOs. (Patel 2006, 78–9)

This tendency of NGOs to speak 'on behalf of peasants' led one *Vía Campesina* leader to state in 1996 that, 'To date, in all global debates on agrarian policy, the peasant movement has been absent: we have not had a voice. The main reason for the very existence of the *Vía Campesina* is to be that voice and to speak out for the creation of a more just society' (Paul Nicholson, cited in Desmarais 2002, 96).

It is for this reason that *La Vía Campesina* from the very beginning clearly staked out its differences from NGOs and will not allow the membership of organisations that are not true, grassroots-based peasant organisations.¹² It has also staked out its differences from foundations and aid agencies, refusing to accept resources that come with compromising conditions attached, nor permitting any kind of external interference in its internal decisions, thus guaranteeing the independence and autonomy which are so critical to maintain (Rosset and Martínez 2005).

The political style of *La Vía Campesina* is that of a poor peoples' movement: people who have been pushed to the edge of extinction by dominant power in their countries and in the world, people who have usually not been taken into account, who have been 'fooled too many times' by smooth-talking politicians and NGOs, people who were never invited to sit at the table and had to 'elbow their way' into the seat they now occupy. Like most social movements, they have a deep distrust, based on bitter experience, of methods that channel and 'calm' dissent: that is, of 'conflict resolution', 'stakeholder dialog', World Bank 'consultations' and 'participation', etc. (Rosset and Martínez 2005).

In this phase, peasants 'muscle' their way to the table through the vehicle of *La Vía Campesina* wherever key debates or negotiations take place that affect the future of rural communities, whether at international summits, trade negotiations, civil society gatherings, etc. They take their seat at the table in their own name, pushing aside NGOs and others who had previously 'spoken on behalf' of rural peoples, with the clear message that, 'we are here and we can speak for ourselves'. In this period few alliances are made, as *La Vía Campesina* is young and inexperienced, while NGOs are old and stronger in this arena, and the most critical step is to assert one's existence and most basic right to a voice of one's own. At their first Conference, *La Vía Campesina* defines itself as a *peasant movement* and as a *political space* for peasant organisations, chooses its name, and makes the critical decision to be *autonomous of the NGOs* that in the past had so often 'managed' peasant organisations.

The typical story in the typical country is that when rural people reach a certain level of anger, protest, and mass mobilisation, the authorities offer to negotiate, to form joint study commissions, and in general to engage in other forms of conflict resolution. The usual result is that the moment of mobilisation passes, the momentum is lost, and the demands are never met nor the promises kept. Piven

¹²See Borras (2008) and various papers in the *Journal of Agrarian Change* special double issue, volume 8, nos 2 and 3, edited by Borras, Edelman and Kay (2008) for varying points of view on this position.

and Cloward (1978) found, in general, that poor peoples' organisations are most effective at achieving their demands when they are most confrontational, and least effective when they take more conciliatory positions and invest their energies in dialogue. Thus it should come as no surprise that La Vía Campesina tends to be more confrontational than other international actors on rural issues and tends to engage in protest and aggressive debate. This is most clearly demonstrated by their militant opposition to the WTO. To date a combination of La Vía Campesina-led street protests and the stubborn refusal of many governments to give in to the US and European Union has kept the WTO stymied.

The accountability of leaders in a social movement is downward to the membership or base, and decisions are typically taken by consensus or at least democratically. Social movements have few staff relative to their membership base, which typically is huge. Social movements most often have relatively little external funding compared to their size and impact. Perhaps their most important feature is that social movements have mobilisation capacity: that is, they can put people in the streets for a protest, a march, or fill large halls for a convention or congress (Rosset and Martínez 2005).

In contrast, NGOs are small, finite organisations, generally composed only of staff with a Board of Trustees and in some rare cases a non-active 'membership'. They are upwardly accountable to their Board and external funders, but not downward to a membership or even to the constituency whose interests they 'serve'. Typically they are heavily funded from external sources, relative to their staff size and impact. NGOs are usually project-based, and their goals are typically easily-measurable technical goals (i.e. delivering potable water to x number of villagers), rather than political goals. NGOs typically do not have mobilisation capacity – to achieve that, they must ally themselves with social movements. Because La Vía Campesina is composed of 'peer' groups, it has largely avoided the tension that occurs in many transnational networks where 'old colonial patterns may be replicated in the relation between Northern-dominated nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and local grassroots organizations in the South' (Stahler-Sholk *et al.* 2008).¹³

During this phase, the dynamism and political significance of La Vía Campesina were demonstrated at the Second Conference in Tlaxcala, Mexico (April 1996), in which La Vía Campesina ratified itself as a *movement*, not just a mere 'coordination', consolidated its *regional structure*, identified the *gender* issue as critical to its internal functioning, and developed the seminal concept of *food sovereignty*, which is discussed below.¹⁴ La Vía Campesina began to make a 'splash' at prominent anti-globalisation protests in this period, such as in Seattle during the 1999 WTO protests. And, after the Tlaxcala conference, the Latin American women members of the CLOC, at their first women's assembly, demanded that women occupy 50 percent of all spaces of representation (CLOC 1998). This demand was included in the final declaration of the CLOC congress that took place in Brasilia in 1997, and was then taken to the Third International Conference of La Vía Campesina in Bangalore in 2000, where it also was adopted.

¹³See also Smith (2002) and Fox and Brown (1998), for discussion of this risk, or Alvarez (1998), for the case of the women's movement and INCITE! (2007) on the contradictions between the logic of NGOs and radical activism.

¹⁴See also Rosset (2003, 2006a, 2006b), for a discussion of food sovereignty.

Not just at the table, but with a good proposal

Century-long debates over the persistence of the peasantry have puzzled analysts of the agrarian question. The conception of the peasantry as essentially pre-capitalist (Bernstein 2003, McLaughlin 1998), and therefore all the associated attributes of 'antiquated', 'out of touch with the times', etc., create a cognitive dissonance precisely when rural societies are proposing an alternative way of experiencing modernity (Patel 2006, McMichael 2006, Desmarais 2002). The Food Sovereignty proposal of La Vía Campesina embodies the construction of new rights and the transformation of society as a whole. La Vía Campesina works on many issues, but perhaps its central goal is to defend peasant life by constructing, proposing and defending this alternative model of food and agriculture (called *Peoples' Food Sovereignty* by La Vía Campesina).¹⁵ The concept of food sovereignty was brought to the public debate by La Vía Campesina during the World Food Summit in 1996, as an alternative paradigm to frame issues about food and agriculture. Since that time the concept has gained tremendous popularity and echo in civil society sectors of nations both North and South and has been developed into a holistic and internally coherent alternative framework (Vía Campesina n.d., Desmarais 2002, Vía Campesina 2003, Rosset 2003, McMichael 2004).

Dominant neoliberal viewpoints see food and farming as about little more than producing interchangeable products for trade (Rosset 2006a). In contrast, food sovereignty argues that food and farming are about much more than trade and that production for local and national markets is more important than production for export from the perspectives of broad-based and inclusive local and national economic development, for addressing poverty and hunger, preserving rural life, economies and environments, and for managing natural resources in a sustainable fashion.

La Vía Campesina argues that every country and people must have the right and the ability to define their own food, farming, and agricultural policies, that they need to have the right to protect domestic markets and to have public sector budgets for agriculture that may include subsidies which do not lead to excessive production, exports, dumping, and damage to other countries. They believe that low prices are the worst force that farmers face everywhere in the world, and therefore that we need to effectively ban dumping, apply anti-monopoly rules nationally and globally, effectively regulate overproduction in the large agroexport countries, and eliminate the kinds of direct and in-direct, open and hidden subsidies that enforce low prices and overproduction. In other words, that we need to move from mechanisms that enforce low prices to those that would promote fair prices for farmers and consumers alike. This alternative model also includes agrarian reform, with limits on maximum farm size, equitable local control over resources like seeds, land, water, and forests, and is opposed to patenting seeds (Rosset 2006a, Rosset and Martínez 2007). Central pillars in the fight of La Vía Campesina for food sovereignty include its *Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform* (Borras 2004, Monsalve Suárez 2006, Vía Campesina 2004) and its campaign *Seeds: Patrimony of Rural Peoples in the Service of Humanity* (Welch 2005), both led by Latin American members (agrarian reform out of Honduras, and seeds out of Chile).

¹⁵See <http://www.viacampesina.org> for background.

Food sovereignty is a concept coined by actively appropriating and inventing language. On the one hand, ‘discussion over the use of words often seems like nit-picking, [and] language seems to be irrelevant to “real” struggles. Yet the power to interpret, [and] the active appropriation and invention of language, are crucial tools for emergent movements seeking visibility and recognition for the views and actions’ (Franco 1998 cited in Alvarez *et al.* 1998, 7). It has indeed had this effect, as the term has been picked up around the world. Food sovereignty offers a sophisticated attempt at developing a ‘grounded, localized and yet international humanism around the food system. The call is an active attempt to incite context-specific transformation within a context of universal (and defensibly humanist) principles of dignity, individual and community sovereignty, and self-determination’ (Patel 2005, 81). As Phillip McMichael (2006, 42) has written, this campesino politics ‘reasserts the right to farm as a social act of stewardship of the land and food redistribution against the destabilising and exclusionary impacts of the neoliberal model’.

Phase three (2000–2003): taking on a leadership role

The most important thing we gained from La Vía Campesina was learning how to be a peasant organization, how to be a ‘movement’ as opposed to an ‘NGO that helps peasants’. Before we knew about the LVC it felt like something wasn’t right, but the only examples we had were the State and the NGOs, we had no other models. We had a lot of internal debate, but we were lost. We were emulating NGOs, writing project proposals and administering them, but that just couldn’t be what we were all about. It wasn’t until we received a visit from the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) that we began to glimpse another role, we began to realize that to defend peasant interests as the government turned neoliberal, we had to position ourselves politically as a movement. It started to become more clear to us what we had to do. OK, so now we knew what we had to do, but still none of us knew how. Then around the year 2000 we began to participate in LVC meetings, and in 2002 we went to the LVC peasant forum at the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre. It was a revelation to us to participate in the nightly LVC meetings during the WSF, as all the LVC representatives there would discuss and debrief the day, and plan our collective strategy for the following day. What was at stake? What did we want to achieve? How would we do it? Who would do what? Wow! This is what it meant to be a movement, to be an international movement! – African peasant leader¹⁶

This phase starts with La Vía Campesina’s Third Conference in Bangalore, India (September/October 2000). La Vía Campesina launches a strategy of building *alliances* with other actors to pressure international institutions like the World Bank, the WTO, IMF, and the United Nations, especially the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), on certain policies. Following up on the gender issue, a rule is adopted requiring *gender parity* of representation at all levels of La Vía Campesina. This decision makes La Vía Campesina the only known transnational rural movement with gender parity at the highest level of representation.

As the strength of La Vía Campesina grows by leaps and bounds, actors ranging from the NGOs to the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), the UN, and governments come to recognise their leadership on rural issues. In this phase, La Vía Campesina became stronger than most other civil society actors, and began to build

¹⁶Interviewed by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005).

alliances from a position of leadership and strength. The example of this is the lead role played by La Vía Campesina in the civil society forums, lobbying, and protest that helped lead to the collapse of the WTO Ministerial in Cancún, Mexico, in September 2003 (Rosset 2006a; see discussion below). During this phase La Vía Campesina had to confront tactics by international organisations, like the World Bank, trying to coopt the movement by offering to fly in leaders in expensive dialogues. In response, La Vía Campesina developed the position that with 'clear enemies' like the World Bank and the WTO it would not dialogue, just demonstrate resolute opposition. On the other hand, dialogue was permitted with actors like the FAO, because these actors might conceivably be alternative spaces to the World Bank and the WTO for determining agricultural and trade policies.

World trade negotiations geared toward agreements and treaties for 'trade liberalisation' have been taking place continually since 1986, with the inauguration of the Uruguay Round of negotiations in the framework of the GATT, which became the WTO in 1995. Together with the enactment of the NAFTA in 1994, and the numerous bilateral and regional free trade agreements signed since, these constitute the framework for today's anti-peasant 'corporate food regime', characterised until recent commodity price swings by low prices to farmers, the global homogenisation of unhealthy food consumption patterns, emphasis on large-scale agroexport production to the detriment of peasant agriculture, widespread privatisation, and the growing corporate control over all aspects of food production, processing, and marketing (McMichael 2004). 'Dumping' has been one of the most injurious aspects of this food regime. Dumping is the export of products to Third World countries at prices below the cost of production. When foreign products enter a local market at prices below the cost of production, local farmers cannot compete and are driven off the land and into deepening poverty. Dumping is what is driving millions of peasants off the land throughout the Third World and into urban slums and international migratory streams. It causes the low crop prices that make earning a livelihood off the land increasingly impossible. Dumping is typically a product of agricultural policies in major food exporting countries (primarily the US and the European Union) that drive down farm prices, with compensatory subsidies for larger, wealthier farmers, in which giant trading corporations like Cargill and Archer-Daniels-Midland can buy cheap, export to other countries, undercut local farmers there, and capture ever growing market segments in those countries (Rosset 2006a). In 2002, a typical year before the recent world food price crisis, the price of US exports lagged 43 percent below cost of production for wheat, 25 percent for soybeans, 13 percent for maize, 61 percent for cotton, and 35 percent for rice (Ritchie *et al.* 2004). This hurt farmers worldwide. Nor do US or European family farmers benefit from their nations' low price exports. Chronically low crop and livestock prices, coupled with subsidies that go to larger, corporate farms, leave family farmers in the North without either a price or a subsidy that can cover their living expenses and farm loans, leading to massive farmer bankruptcies. As a result, family farms have been rapidly disappearing in the United States and Europe (Rosset 2006a). The fact that these policies hurt farmers in the North and farmers in the South both forms the objective basis for global collective action by La Vía Campesina and is the reason why family farmers from the North and peasants from the South came to the conclusion, in exchanges with each other, that they had common interests (Rosset 2006a).

In human terms, this has meant the cultural, and in many cases, literal, death of peasant farmers, as was dramatised in Cancún, Mexico in 2003, at La Vía Campesina's protests against WTO negotiations taking place in that city. On 10 September 2003, Lee Kyung Hae climbed up upon the police barricades surrounding the site of the WTO negotiations with a sign bearing the now famous slogan 'WTO Kills Farmers'. Mr Lee was a peasant leader from South Korea who came to Cancún to march side-by-side with Mexican peasants protesting the devastating impacts of trade liberalisation. He made the supreme sacrifice that day by giving his life in protest when he stabbed himself with a knife to the heart (Rosset 2006a). Mr Lee had founded a cooperative and a farmer's association in Korea, had been a state legislator, and had been recognised by the government of Korea and by the United Nations as an outstanding farmer. Yet he lost his land, as did millions of other Korean farmers, after his government signed the GATT in 1992, which later became the WTO. This trade liberalisation agreement opened the Korean market to a flood of very cheaply priced food imports, which cut the bottom out of the market for Korean farmers. Their income plunged, and many committed suicide when they realised that, due to low crop prices that could not cover the payments on their crop loans, they would be the first in their family history to lose the farm inherited from their ancestors to bankruptcy. They could not live with that shame (Rosset 2006a). Korea is not the only country to be faced with an epidemic of farmer suicides, which have in fact reached epidemic proportions in recent years among peasants and family farmers around the world, from Iowa to India to Mexico (Robbins 1986, Sengupta 2006, Cuarto Poder 2005, Rosset 2006a).

Death is in fact a recurring theme, and reality, of the peasant struggle in Latin America and the world. It is both the deaths from hunger-related illnesses in impoverished rural areas and the deaths from the on-going criminalisation and repression of peasant struggles. Whether it is the murder of organised indigenous peoples, peasants, and farm workers in Honduras in 2003 (COCOCH-CNTC 2003, Weinberg 2003) or the 1996 massacre of members of the MST in El Dorado dos Carajás, Brazil, the killings of peasant activists further underscore this life and death nature of struggle, and this paradoxically gives greater strength and determination to the struggle. The massacre in Brazil is remembered by La Vía Campesina every 17 April as the *International Day of Peasant Struggle*. La Vía Campesina sees the battle against free trade as a life or death struggle, and their militancy against the WTO and against bilateral and regional trades agreements has been demonstrated in recent years during the 1999, 2003, and 2005 WTO Ministerials in Seattle, Cancun, and Hong Kong, respectively, and the 2002 FTAA Negotiations in Quito (see Rosset 2006a).

The political tactics of La Vía Campesina are more 'outside' than 'inside', and more protest than lobby, though La Vía Campesina does sometimes engage in coordinated inside-outside strategies with its allies and does lobby. When La Vía Campesina addresses an issue or 'takes on' an institution (like the FAO, for example), the strategy is typically to occupy and defend political space, and then rapidly move the debate out of the merely 'technical' realm and onto a moral terrain of 'right and wrong'. This has proven to be an effective strategy for shifting the terms of the debate on many of the issues that La Vía Campesina addresses (Rosset and Martínez 2005).

Phase four (2004–2008): deepening and internal strengthening

In 1993 there was no communication among the world's peasant organizations, little knowledge of larger realities, little reflection, and much less any common strategies. Yet, in the first 10 years, we have achieved a good understanding of the global terrain for peasant struggle, we now have the basis for forward progress, and the principle leaders of our organizations know what is going on in the world. There must be some 300 leaders around the world that know each other well and know the issues. Not just 10, but at least 300. This is a real accumulation of forces. – European peasant leader¹⁷

We need to emphasize internal training now. We must create the conditions under which there are ever more people (cadre) with the skills and capacity to intervene in the reality they are confronted with. We need to strengthen our organizations at the local level. We need to promote organizational processes. We need to develop a plan to strengthen the organizing capacity of our member organizations. We already have training schools, schools of political 'formation,' as with the MST, Central America, and the Latin American women's school. We need to spread this. To develop our capacity to mobilize. This effort should build an internal culture of mobilization. We need to train cadre at all levels of our organizations. Right now many of organizations are weak because they have few skilled cadre at the local and regional levels, they have few 'batters' who can step to the plate. – Latin American peasant leader¹⁸

The *mística* and use of our symbols (hats, bandannas, flags, bags, etc.) are very important to create a sense of cohesiveness among people from such diverse and different cultures who do not speak common languages. It makes us feel part of the same family. – North American family farm leader¹⁹

La Vía Campesina realises that the external political space it has occupied at the international level is disproportionately large compared to its own degree of internal political and organisational development, that in some sense it has been more successful than expected, and has gotten ahead of itself. Thus the decision is made to focus on catching up internally, giving extra effort to internal training for member organisations, on strengthening operational mechanisms, and on building regional secretariats to insure sustained regional and local engagement. This is a critical challenge, as some organisations are much weaker than others. At the Fourth Conference held in Itaici, near São Paulo, Brazil, in June 2004, additional emphasis was placed on working on the internal mechanisms of the movement, and on strengthening its member organisations. Many new members were added, especially from Asia, but also notably from Africa. The already existing International Coordinating Committee is further consolidated, the decision is made to rotate the International Operational Secretariat from Honduras to Indonesia, a qualitative step forward is taken with the role of the *mística* (shared ceremonies or performances that build cross-cultural peasant solidarity) as a sort of social glue inside La Vía Campesina, and the decision is taken to emphasize internal political and leadership training to strengthen the member organisations.

The structure of La Vía Campesina is defined during La Vía Campesina International Conferences. The International Conference is La Vía Campesina's highest decision-making entity, where representatives of the member organisations engage in collective analysis and policy development, as well as negotiation and

¹⁷Interviewed by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005).

¹⁸Interviewed by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005).

¹⁹Interviewed by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005).

consensus-building processes. The International Conference takes place every three or four years and defines the political direction and strategies of La Vía Campesina, as well as the internal functioning of the movement (Rosset and Martínez 2005). The International Coordinating Committee (ICC) meets two times a year, during which compliance with the International Conference agreements is evaluated and analysis is made of the situation in the individual regions. In addition, the ICC engages in a collective analysis of what is occurring in agriculture at the global level and defines plans for joint action and advocacy at the international level. The International Operative Secretariat, which is currently based in Jakarta, Indonesia, is in charge of coordinating actions and implementing the agreements reached at the Conference and at the ICC meetings (Rosset and Martínez 2005).

The work of La Vía Campesina is carried out and coordinated through a series of issue-based International Working Commissions. A commission, with a man and a woman peasant leader as elected representatives from each of the nine regions, coordinates the work of the Vía Campesina on each issue group. The current commissions are: (i) Agrarian Reform, (ii) Food Sovereignty and Trade, (iii) Biodiversity and Genetic Resources, (iv) Climate Change and Peasant Agriculture, (v) Human Rights, (vi) Sustainable Peasant Agriculture, (vii) Migration and Farm Workers, (viii) Women and Gender Parity, (ix) Education and Training, and (x) Youth. In addition, the Vía Campesina has campaigns that address some of the issues: (i) the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform, (ii) Seeds: Heritage of Rural Peoples in the Service of Humanity, (iii) the Campaign to End All Forms of Violence Against Women, and (iv) The Campaign for an International Charter of Peasant Rights.

La Vía Campesina currently has 148 member organisations in 69 countries,²⁰ with a substantial number of additional organisations in the ‘getting to know you’ stage of the process prior to becoming formal members. It would be fair to say the La Vía Campesina organisations represent some 500 million rural families worldwide. The members come from the ranks of organisations of peasant farmers, family farmers, rural workers, the landless, indigenous people, artisan fisher folk, and rural women and youth. It is a transnational social movement with a high degree of ‘density’ and ‘cohesion’ (to use the concepts by Fox 2000), made up of national or regional peasant organisations, in which each member organisation has its own social base or constituency which participates in its internal decisions and actions and to whom that organisation is accountable.²¹

The decision-making process of La Vía Campesina is officially by consultation and consensus. It is comparatively respectful of the autonomy of member organisations, though there is a good deal of lobbying fellow members to adopt particular positions. These positions are in principle created by articulating the concerns of the base within each national organisation, bringing them to table in La Vía Campesina, and having a dialogue to reach common positions (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005). This is a slow process, especially as peasant organisations, in contrast to NGOs, do not respond quickly, yet time has shown that this method

²⁰La Vía Campesina: International Peasant Movement: Our Members. Available from: http://www.viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=71 [Accessed 30 September 2009].

²¹Fox (2000, 5–7) characterises transnational movement organisations as those who have high horizontal exchange between participants (cohesion) and social subjects present in more than one country (density).

builds the strong basis of trust that is so important for collective action (Rosset and Martínez 2005, Desmarais 2005). By taking the time to build consensus among members, La Vía Campesina has avoided the severe internal splits that have crippled many other transnational political alliances and coalitions (see Fox and Brown 1998, for examples), though differences and internal struggles do exist.

Some of the issues that La Vía Campesina has had to face internally are the multitude of different languages spoken by their members and representatives and the even greater level of cultural diversity. Without the dedicated labour of dozens of mostly unpaid volunteer interpreters and translators such a transnational social movement would not be possible. A Vía Campesina conference is like a ‘peasant United Nations’, with ‘official’ (through headsets) simultaneous interpretation in four official languages – English, Spanish, French and Portuguese – plus side interpretation into languages as diverse as Hindi, Nepali, Tamil, Bahasa, Thai, Korean and Japanese. The role of translation and the militancy of interpreters in making transnational movements possible is a little studied but crucial aspect of their development and functioning.

The issue of unity in diversity at the cultural level is also crucial. It is remarkable in today’s world that a movement can be coordinated by a Muslim, and incorporate Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and members of many other religions, together with radical Marxist and social democratic atheists, all scarcely without raising an eyebrow internally. The *mística* plays a key role in making this possible. All La Vía Campesina meetings begin with a *mística* using powerful imagery and symbols – typically seeds, soil, water, fire – to create a strong sense of collective belonging and commitment (see Issa 2008).

The attempt to (re)create, maintain, and strengthen a peasant identity is a key cultural ‘glue’ that helps hold La Vía Campesina together. There is a conscious sense of building a ‘farmer pride’. In speeches at La Vía Campesina meetings, it is common to hear phrases like ‘farmer is one of the most important professions in any society, at least as important as doctors and far more important than lawyers’. Or, ‘a country could survive without lawyers, but how could it survive without farmers? What would people eat?’ Or, ‘survival of peasant farmers is not something that just concerns rural areas, it is a matter that concerns all of society’. There is a strong feeling that peasants are ‘for humanity’ (Patel 2005, 2006), yet have long been excluded from the cultural projects of most countries (Davis 1999, 617).

Phase five (late 2008–contemporary): gender, capitalism, and transnational corporations

We have accomplished this through a bottom up, not a top down, process. The local struggles already existed (thousands of them), what La Vía Campesina has done is give them a body of common analysis, and linked them with each other. What all this adds up to is the strengthening of universal demands and struggle. – European peasant leader²²

We need help in our organization from the LVC on the topic of gender and rural women. Traditionally, women have played a key part in rural society, but we need training on how to improve the role of women in the movement. – African peasant leader²³

²²Interviewed by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005).

²³Interviewed by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005).

The Fifth Conference was held in Maputo, Mozambique, in October of 2008, in the midst of the global food, financial, environmental, climate, and energy crises, which taken together represent the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. For the first time La Via Campesina defined capitalism as the ultimate source of the problems facing the rural world and identified Transnational Corporations (TNCs) as the worst enemy of peasants and farmers around the world (Vía Campesina 2008, Desmarais and Hernandez Navarro 2009). A commitment was made to launch an anti-TNC campaign on the scale of the earlier struggle against the WTO. Thirty-nine new organisations, especially from Africa, were added as members. The movement also took a major step forward in its nuanced perception of gender issues and in its level of commitment to resolving them:

One issue was very clear in this Fifth Conference, that all the forms of violence that women face in our societies – among them physical, economic, social, cultural and macho violence, and violence based on differences of power – are also present in rural communities, and as a result, in our organizations. This, in addition to being a principal source of injustice, also limits the success of our struggles. We recognize the intimate relationships between capitalism, patriarchy, machismo and neo-liberalism, in detriment to the women peasants and farmers of the world. All of us together, women and men of La Via Campesina, make a responsible commitment to build new and better human relationships among us, as a necessary part of the construction of the new societies to which we aspire. For this reason during this Fifth Conference we decided to break the silence on these issues, and are launching the World Campaign ‘For an End to Violence Against Women’. We commit ourselves anew, with greater strength, to the goal of achieving that complex but necessary true gender parity in all spaces and organs of debate, discussion, analysis and decision-making in La Via Campesina, and to strengthen the exchange, coordination and solidarity among the women of our regions. We recognize the central role of women in agriculture for food self-sufficiency, and the special relationship of women with the land, with life and with seeds. In addition, we women have been and are a guiding part of the construction of Vía Campesina from its beginning. If we do not eradicate violence towards women within our movement, we will not advance in our struggles, and if we do not create new gender relations, we will not be able to build a new society. (Vía Campesina 2008)

For some time, special emphasis has been put on making the gender parity of representation at all levels of La Via Campesina a reality, working through the formation of an international women’s commission in all regions and all countries. The fact that the ICC has a man and a woman representative from each region, as do other commissions, has led some member organisations, such as the MST in Brazil, to make similar changes to their internal structure (see Desmarais 2003a, Vía Campesina 2006, and Monsalve Suárez 2006 for discussion of gender in La Via Campesina). This is a positive ‘spin-off’ effect that international organising can have at the national level. Nevertheless, as the excerpt from the Maputo declaration reveals, policy is one thing, but reality can be harder to achieve (i.e. women have the same number of slots as men, but in practice miss far more meetings than do male delegates, for a variety of reasons ranging from issues with home and family to power differentials in national organisations). Thus it was necessary to re-commit in Maputo, ‘with greater strength, to the goal of achieving that *complex but necessary true gender parity* in all spaces and organs of debate, discussion, analysis and decision-making’ (Vía Campesina 2008).

A step forward in the construction of the food sovereignty model during this phase is the work in alliances to link peasant struggles to other sectors, such as

workers, the urban informal sector, environmental and women's and indigenous rights movements. In February 2007 at the Nyeleni Forum for Food Sovereignty organised by La Vía Campesina in Mali, representatives of all these sectors participated. According to La Vía Campesina, we are facing a historic clash between two models of economic, social, and cultural development for the rural world. The contrast between the dominant model, based on agroexports, neoliberal economic policies, and free trade, versus the food sovereignty model, could not be more stark (see Table 1). On virtually every issue related to food, agriculture, and rural life, the positions are contrary. Where one model sees family farmers as a quaint but inefficient anachronism that should disappear with development (unless some farmers stay on as Disneyland-like attractions for bucolic rural tourism), the other sees them as the basis of local economies, as the internal market that enabled today's industrial economic powerhouses like the US, Japan, China, and South Korea to get off the ground in times past (Rosset 1999).

As for hunger, one model sees boosting exports from the giant plantations of the wealthy as the way to generate the foreign exchange needed to import cheap food for the hungry, while the other sees the conversion of farmland that once belonged to family farmers, peasants, and indigenous peoples to export cropping as precisely the key driving force behind the growth of hunger and immiseration in rural areas. Finally, while the dominant model is based on chemical-intensive large-scale monoculture with genetically modified crops (GMOs), the food sovereignty model sees these industrial farming practices as eventually destroying the land for future generations and counter-poses a mixture of traditional knowledge and sustainable, agroecologically-based farming practices. Overall, this is why the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) of Brazil, a Via Campesina member, says that 'the enemy is the model' and the goal of the struggle is '*mudança do modelo*', or a transition of models. They argue that while agrarian reform is a critical piece in this transition, it is not enough. To be successful, it must be imbedded with a larger policy emphasis on food sovereignty.

The contemporary period has also been marked by the 2007–2008 world food price crisis, which saw agricultural markets shift from a long period of low and declining crop prices to a short period of very high commodity prices, followed by a drop and shift into a period of high price volatility. While this might seem to challenge the original basis of the food sovereignty concept, this in fact has not been the case. An examination of the causes of the recent crisis show that it is just the new face of the old long-term crisis and that food sovereignty is just as relevant. Under the new circumstances, La Vía Campesina posits food sovereignty as protection for countries against both downward price swings, which hurt farmers, and upward swings, which hurt consumers and largely fail to benefit peasant and family farmers (see Rosset 2008, Rosset 2009a, Rosset 2009b).

In the thematic area of struggle that La Vía Campesina calls 'sustainable peasant agriculture', the promotion of agroecological farming practices, considered a pillar of food sovereignty, takes centre stage. Organisations that are members of La Vía Campesina find that the issue of production technology is made ideological, is politicised, and they feel the challenge to promote practices among their members that are consistent with the perspective of a 'struggle between models'. Thus we find many member organisations with internal programmes that actively promote the transition from conventional, chemical-intensive to more ecological farming. In

Table 1. Dominant model versus food sovereignty model.

Issue	Dominant model	Food sovereignty
Trade	Free trade in everything	Food and agriculture exempt from trade agreements
Production priority	Agroexports	Food for local markets
Crop prices	'What the market dictates' (leave the mechanisms that create both low crop prices and speculative food price hikes intact)	Fair prices that cover costs of production and allow farmers and farm workers a life with dignity
Market access	Access to foreign markets	Access to local markets; an end to the displacement of farmers from their own markets by agribusiness
Subsidies	While prohibited in the Third World, many subsidies are allowed in the US and Europe, but are paid only to the largest farmers	Subsidies are ok that do not damage other countries via dumping (i.e. grant subsidies only to <i>family</i> farmers for direct marketing, price/income support, soil conservation, conversion to sustainable farming, research, etc.)
Food	Chiefly a commodity; in practice, this means processed, contaminated food that is full of fat, sugar, high fructose corn syrup and toxic residues	A human right: specifically, should be healthy, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and locally produced
Being able to produce	An option for the economically efficient	A right of rural peoples
Hunger	Due to low productivity	Problem of access and distribution due to poverty and inequality
Food security	Achieved by importing food	Greatest when food production is in the hands of the hungry, or when produced locally
Control over productive resources (land, water, forests)	Privatised	Local, community controlled
Access to land	Via the market	Via genuine agrarian reform
Seeds	Patentable commodity	Common heritage of humanity, held in trust by rural communities and cultures; 'no patents on life'
Rural credit and investment	From private banks and corporations	From the public sector, designed to support family agriculture
Dumping	Not an issue	Must be prohibited
Monopoly	Not an issue	The root of most problems
Overproduction	No such thing, by definition	Drives prices down and farmers into poverty; we need supply management policies in US and EU

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Issue	Dominant model	Food sovereignty
Farming technology	Industrial, monoculture, Green Revolution, chemical-intensive; uses GMOs	Agroecology, sustainable farming methods, no GMOs
Farmers	Anachronism; the inefficient will disappear	Guardians of culture and crop germplasm; stewards of productive resources; repositories of knowledge; internal market and building block of broad-based, inclusive economic development
Urban consumers	Workers to be paid as little as possible	Need living wages
Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)	The wave of the future	Bad for health and the environment; an unnecessary technology
Another world (alternatives)	Not possible/not of interest	Possible and amply demonstrated

Source: Rosset (2003).

recent years La Vía Campesina has built its own international university for the sons and daughters of peasant farmers, where they learn a mix of agroecology and organising skills. The *Instituto Universitario Latinoamericano de Agroecología 'Paulo Freire'* (IALA) functions in Barinas, Venezuela, on the basis of an agreement signed by President Chávez and La Vía Campesina. In July of 2009 peasant leaders from all continents and regions gathered in Málaga, Spain, for the meeting of La Vía Campesina's International Working Group on Sustainable Peasant Agriculture. They agreed to 'thicken' internal networking by creating continental networks in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa of the agroecology trainers and programmes inside La Vía Campesina member organisations. These networks are to synergise efforts of these programmes through exchanges of pedagogical methods, educational materials, and trainers and through cross-visits.

Conclusions: a peasant internationalism

No national organization is strong without international engagement, this also gives legitimacy. We realize that farmers face the same problems everywhere, not just us, so even a small organization feels part of something bigger, like part of a family. It has helped position us as the alternative. – North American peasant leader²⁴

La Vía Campesina is an international alliance of peasant and family farmer organisations from the Americas (North, Central, South America, and the Caribbean), Asia (East, Southeast, and South), Europe, and Africa. It groups nationally or regionally-based organisations to struggle together on common issues at the international level, and the autonomy of these member organisations is carefully respected. La Vía Campesina is also a transnational social movement, with

²⁴Interviewed by the authors in 2005 (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2005).

roots in Latin America, that has been able to create an international peasant discourse and identity in tune with the times, without trying to build a political party structure. Today La Vía Campesina is an international reference point for rural issues and problems, for social movements, for the construction of proposals, mediated by the legitimacy and trust forged through its years of struggle. It is a new space of 'citizenship' (Borras and Franco 2009).

La Vía Campesina has been built from the bottom up and is independent of governments, funders, political parties, NGOs, and non-peasant special interests. The agenda of La Vía Campesina is defined by La Vía Campesina and not by any other actors. It has built up and shown its strength in mobilisations and non-violent but radical direct actions, opposing the real powers in the world as an alternative, democratic, and mass-based peasant power base.

La Vía Campesina is a movement that takes positions of collective defiance (Piven and Cloward 1978) toward the World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Bank, while also putting forth consistent and coherent alternative proposals which result from peasant reality and are shared by organisations from the great variety of situations in which peasants from different countries find themselves. These global proposals have created a true peasant internationalism, rather than a discourse of North-South confrontation.

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