



Demanding Food Sovereignty: *La Vía Campesina* and the Global Food Movement

Exiger la souveraineté alimentaire: La Vía Campesina et le mouvement alimentaire mondial

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Abstract: The global crises emerging from the current neoliberal capitalist system – including, but not limited to the global food crisis – have sparked a growing number of counter-movements, seeking systemic structural change and a shift away from market-centrism and profit maximization to a world wherein the wellbeing of community, humans, and the environment is championed. This paper argues that the global food movement, including what may be the largest social movement in the world, *La Vía Campesina*, is one such movement that has emerged from within civil society to tackle the problems arising from neoliberalism. By redefining basic humans rights (challenging the current discourse), including the adoption of the principle of food sovereignty, *La Vía Campesina* seeks to achieve broader social, cultural, economic, and political transformations, beginning from the ground up, and providing hope that another world is possible.

Résumé: Les crises mondiales qui émergent à même le système capitaliste néolibéral actuel - y compris, mais non limité à la crise alimentaire mondiale - ont suscité un nombre croissant de contre-mouvements. Ceux-ci demandent le changement structurel et systémique ainsi qu'un abandon du système centré sur le marché et la maximisation du profit dans un monde où le bien-être des communautés, des humains et de l'environnement est défendu. Cet article soutient que le mouvement alimentaire mondial, notamment ce qui est souvent perçu comme le plus grand mouvement social dans le monde *La Vía Campesina*, émerge au sein de la société civile pour répondre aux problèmes posés par le néolibéralisme. En redéfinissant les droits fondamentaux de la personne (contester le discours actuel), y compris l'adoption du principe de souveraineté alimentaire, *La Vía Campesina* cherche à atteindre de plus larges transformations sociales, culturelles, économiques et politiques, en commençant par le bas et procurant l'espoir qu'un autre monde est possible.



Food sovereignty describes food as a basic human right, insisting that all peoples have the right “to produce [their] own basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity.”¹ This essay will examine the current food crisis, and the mobilization of a specific global food rights movement – *La Vía Campesina* – in response to policies of neoliberal capitalism that are partly (if not mostly) responsible for the crisis. I will argue that transnational movements such as *La Vía Campesina* have the potential to offer an alternate, more egalitarian system to that currently perpetuated and exacerbated by neoliberal capitalism, by redefining basic human rights (challenging the current discourse) and shifting away from the market-centrism of the current system to one where humans and nature are valued and respected. *La Vía Campesina* does just this with respect to considering food as a basic human right, and, together with other movements tackling contrasting issues, can form a network for another possible world. This essay will begin by briefly contextualizing the global food crisis within the current corporate food regime. I will then differentiate between food *security* and food *sovereignty*, the latter of which is pursued by the global food rights movement. Finally, I will examine the global food rights regime through *La Vía Campesina*, the “largest and most significant agricultural social movement in the world”.²

¹ Quoted in Annette-Aurélien Desmarais, “The Vía Campesina: Consolidating an International Peasant and Farm Movement,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 29, 2 (2002): 104.

² *Ibid.*, 103.



The Current Food Crisis and the Corporate Food Regime

In the Declaration of Maputo, *La Vía Campesina* speaks to the convergence of several crises – food, climate, energy and financial – as originating out of neoliberal policies of deregulation, which champion large corporate interests and profits.³ This has allowed transnational corporations to “take over land and natural assets [...] that translates into a privatizing war to steal the territories and assets of peasants and indigenous peoples”.⁴ Giménez and Shattuck frame their analysis of the current global food crisis within the corporate food regime, which they claim is responsible for “a recent spike in both food prices and global hunger”.⁵ McMichael adds that the rise in food prices and the food rioting that ensued has turned the public (and academic) eye toward the foundations of our current agricultural and food system, along with its dependence on fossil fuels.⁶

In order to understand the current global food crisis, one must first characterize the current corporate food regime, which, driven by neoliberalism, is centered on the market (monopolies) and maximization of profits. Neoliberalism has led to mass corporatization, meaning increasing concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few transnational corporations (TNCs), the genetic modification and patenting of organic materials, as well as the depletion of

³ Peter Rosset, “Agrofuels, Food Sovereignty, and the Contemporary Food Crisis,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 29, 3 (2009): 189.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eric Holt Giménez and Annie Shattuck, “Food Crises, Food Regimes and Food Movements: Rumbblings of Reform or Tides of Transformation?” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, 1 (2011): 110.

⁶ Philip McMichael, “A Food Regime Genealogy,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, 1 (2009): 139.



natural resources worldwide.⁷ The paradox of the current global food crisis, which is said to have begun in 2008, is that hunger rose to record levels, while “the world’s major agrifoods corporations” received “record global harvests as well as record profits”.⁸ This demonstrates the system of inequality perpetuated by neoliberal capitalism: while claiming its policies are good for the world because of unprecedented amounts of wealth, the system fails to mention that there is an increasing inequality gap along with a decrease in the standard of living of most of the world’s population.⁹

Furthermore, the response of big agribusiness to the massive food riots that followed was to propose increased implementation of tactics championed by neoliberal capitalism, a system that is in part (if not mostly) responsible for the crisis in the first place. These tactics include “more genetically modified crops, more biofuel crops, more ‘free’ trade”.¹⁰ While these tactics would actually be detrimental to our health, the environment, and the global food system, mainstream media (perpetuating the current hegemonic system) “regurgitated these responses to the public, upholding the message that hunger could be solved through a one-size-fits-all approach of boosted agricultural production and quick market fixes”.¹¹ The global food movement was unwilling to accept these neoliberal approaches to ‘solving’ hunger, as they understood that it would simply perpetuate the current system of inequality and exploitation. As the food crisis is

⁷ Giménez and Shattuck, “Food Crises, Food Regimes and Food Movements,” 109.

⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁹ Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius, and Mary Kaldor, “Introducing Global Civil Society,” in *Global Civil Society*, ed. Helmut Anheier et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

¹⁰ Christina Schiavoni, “The Global Struggle for Food Sovereignty: From Nyéléni to New York,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, 3 (2009): 682.

¹¹ Ibid., 682.



intertwined with the other global crises today, civil society groups (and some institutions and governments) have recognized the need for wider, systemic *structural* change – a social transformation.¹² As Wittman argues, “it is within this framework that food sovereignty has relevance”.¹³

Defining Food Sovereignty: Food as a Human Right

Raj Patel explains that the concept of food sovereignty is somewhat ambiguous, due to the plethora of definitions that exist in today’s literature, some overlapping, some contradictory. He attempts to develop a more comprehensive definition by first contrasting it with the more traditional concept of *food security*.¹⁴ Patel cites the UN Food and Agricultural Organization’s (FAO) 2001 definition of the latter as follows:

Food security [is] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.¹⁵

This definition was formulated by politicians, activists and NGOs as an expansion from their original definition in 1974, which was concerned with “adequate world food supplies ... to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices”.¹⁶ The latter definition, created purely by states without input from civil society, demonstrates the focus on political

¹² Giménez and Shattuck, “Food Crises, Food Regimes and Food Movements,” 116.

¹³ Hannah Wittman, “Interview: Paul Nicholson, La Vía Campesina,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, 3 (2009): 676.

¹⁴ Raj Patel, “What does Food Sovereignty Look Like?” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, 3 (2009): 663.

¹⁵ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 664.

¹⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*



economy and the market, as befitted the 1970s and the expansion of neoliberal globalization. Patel argues that the world in the early 2000s was (and still is) dominated by US-style neoliberal capitalism, a system that has rendered institutions that fight world hunger, such as the FAO, “increasingly irrelevant and cosmetic in the decision making around hunger policy”.¹⁷ Put differently, this reformulated definition, while more inclusive, holds very little (if any) power for enforcement. Driven by the market, the mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism are not concerned with people’s overall wellbeing (including access to food), if this pursuit conflicts with the maximization of profits.

Patel argues that despite the challenges brought about by this system, the move to include “a whole nexus of concerns around nutrition, social control and public health” in the expanded food security definition was largely due to *La Vía Campesina*’s promotion of the concept of *food sovereignty* during the 1996 World Food Summit.¹⁸ Through this concept, it sought to “develop a comprehensive alternative proposal for restructuring food production and consumption at the local, national and global level”.¹⁹ The movement believed that it was necessary to highlight states’ social and political responsibility to ensuring the food security of their people. Patel cites *La Vía Campesina* as follows:

Long-term food security depends on those who produce food and care for the natural environment. As the stewards of food producing resources we hold the following principles as the necessary foundation for achieving food security [...] Food is a basic human right. This right can only be realized in a system where food sovereignty is guaranteed. *Food sovereignty is the right of each*

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Patel, “What does Food Sovereignty Look Like?” 664-665.

¹⁹ Rosset, “Agrofuels, Food Sovereignty, and the Contemporary Food Crisis,” 190.



*nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security.*²⁰

This quote demonstrates the clear distinction from the 1974 definition of food security, and began a critical discussion about the relations of power with regard to the food system. They argue that food as a human right should be an extension of Article 25, Paragraph 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights²¹, and should include, not only the access to food, but also “the right of democratic control over food and food-producing resources”.²² *La Vía Campesina* was also strategic in situating the call for food sovereignty within the human rights discourse, making it difficult for ‘liberal governments’ – built on principles of rights and democracy – to ignore.²³

While the World Trade Organization (WTO) tends to use a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to ‘solving’ or addressing the food crisis, food sovereignty employs the exact opposite, claiming local adaptability, so that every area and people should have the right to determine how, where, and what they grow, so long as it does not infringe on those same rights afforded to others. In the case of the market, this allows countries control over their own policies regarding agriculture and food, as well as protecting their domestic markets, something which has become increasingly difficult for some countries due to the ‘free market’ and

²⁰ Quoted in Patel, “What does Food Sovereignty Look Like?” 665.

²¹ This paragraph states: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, *including food*, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control”. United Nations. “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” December 10, 1948. Accessed March 25, 2012. <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>. Emphasis Added.

²² Giménez and Shattuck, “Food Crises, Food Regimes and Food Movements,” 128.

²³ Patel, “What does Food Sovereignty Look Like?” 665.



liberalization.²⁴

Food sovereignty has been widely developed throughout the last decade, with many organizations and movements adopting and spreading its principles. Six guiding principles of food sovereignty were developed at the Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty held in Sélingué, Mali, and attended by “over 500 social movement leaders from nearly 100 countries,” including representatives of, among others, *La Vía Campesina*, the World March of Women, the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers, Friends of the Earth International. These principles were: “Focuses on food for people; values food providers; localizes food systems; puts control locally; builds knowledge and skills; and, works with nature”.²⁵

Finally, the related principle of agroecology has also been adopted by *La Vía Campesina* and other groups in the global food movement. This principle is based on sustainable agricultural practices that have “respect for and [are] in equilibrium with nature, local cultures, and traditional farming knowledge”.²⁶ Rosset argues that “ecological farming systems can be more productive, can better resist drought and other manifestations of climate change, and are more economically sustainable because they use less fossil fuel”.²⁷ On top of this, the methods advocated and employed by big corporations and agribusiness – such as monoculture production, the use of chemical pesticides, and GMOs (genetically modified organisms) – are detrimental to the environment and human

²⁴ Rosset, “Agrofuels, Food Sovereignty, and the Contemporary Food Crisis,” 190; Schiavoni, “The Global Struggle for Food Sovereignty,” 682.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 685.

²⁶ Rosset, “Agrofuels, Food Sovereignty, and the Contemporary Food Crisis,” 192.

²⁷ *Ibid.*



health.²⁸ Adopting agroecology principles, including more localized production, will not only be beneficial to health, ecosystems, and livelihood, but will also decrease the world's current dependence on huge amounts of fossil fuels in the transport of our food. To this end, agroecology and food sovereignty are crucial in remaking nature-society relations and working toward worldwide social transformation.²⁹

La Via Campesina's Fight for Food Sovereignty

Rural life and livelihood has greatly suffered over the past few decades due to the inequities of the neoliberal capitalist system (with its structural adjustment programs, regional and global trade agreements, and supranational corporations). In April 1992, as a reaction to these types of policies, representatives from farm organizations across Central America, the Caribbean, Europe, Canada, and the USA, with a shared goal of challenging these policies, met in Managua, Nicaragua to discuss how they would challenge the inequalities of the system as a whole.³⁰ This culminated in the Managua Declaration, which led to the official creation of *La Vía Campesina* one year later.³¹

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hannah Wittman, "Reworking the Metabolic Rift: La Vía Campesina, Agrarian Citizenship, and Food Sovereignty," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, 4 (2009): 816; Giménez and Shattuck, "Food Crises, Food Regimes and Food Movements," 128-9; Patel, "What does Food Sovereignty Look Like?" 669.

³⁰ Sofía Monsalve Suárez, "Gender and Land," in *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform*, ed. Peter Rosset et al. (New York: Food First Books, 2006), 192; Rajeev Patel, "Transgressing Rights: La Vía Campesina's Call for Food Sovereignty," *Feminist Economics* 13, 1 (2007): 89.

³¹ Desmarais, "The Vía Campesina," 95.



According to Martínez-Torres and Rosset, this grassroots movement “envisioned a simultaneously new and old ‘agrarian trajectory that would reintegrate food production and nature as an alternative culture of modernity’,” and may now be the “most important transnational social movement in the world”.³² It is composed of 148 farmers’ organizations across 69 countries in Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Africa, and is “independent of governments, funders, political parties, NGOs, and non-peasant special interests”.³³ In less than two decades, *La Vía Campesina* has employed non-violent actions and mass mobilizations to defy the system and policies of neoliberal institutions such as the WTO and the World Bank. Its massive and worldwide peasant base strives to offer an alternative conception of the world, and “[puts] forth consistent and coherent alternative proposals which result from peasant reality and are shared by organizations from the great variety of situations in which peasants from different countries find themselves”.³⁴

La Vía Campesina has become a space or platform where farmers and peasants can organize to engage in discussions regarding their shared goals and concerns, on an understanding of equality. According to Patel, this allows “different peasant groups with progressive political visions to meet, combine, and join forces against institutions that its membership sees as furthering neoliberal

³² María Elena Martínez-Torres and Peter M. Rosset, “La Vía Campesina: The Birth and Evolution of a Transnational Social Movement,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37, 1 (2010): 150.

³³ Giménez and Shattuck, “Food Crises, Food Regimes and Food Movements,” 129; Patel, “Transgressing Rights,” 89; Martínez-Torres and Rosset, “La Vía Campesina,” 150; 171.

³⁴ Martínez-Torres and Rosset, “La Vía Campesina,” 171.



agricultural politics, such as the World Trade Organization”.³⁵ This has been an attempt on the part of the movement to bridge the divide between North and South, celebrating its plurality and “true peasant internationalism”.³⁶

In addition, Suárez argues that *La Vía Campesina* has placed great importance on the active participation of women, and that gender issues are addressed during their gatherings. The movement has also made a point of including the voices of indigenous peoples, understanding the value of traditional knowledge in remaking nature-society relations.³⁷ Suárez mentions that feminist movements, as well as indigenous groups, openly question the notions of *universality* and *equality*, especially with respect to the human rights discourse. She acknowledges that while these are social constructions, and much work still needs to be done in deconstructing and changing the discourse, it would serve *La Vía Campesina* and the global food movement to use the platforms within the existing human rights regime to further its cause.³⁸

In its participation in seeking another possible world that is not burdened with the exploitation and inequality with which the neoliberal capitalist system is wrought, *La Vía Campesina* adopts a different structure than typical organizations: it purposefully does not have a “policy-making secretariat,” so that there is no “sovereign authority dictating what any member organization or country can do”.³⁹ The precondition for *La Vía Campesina* membership, however, is the acceptance of *La Vía Campesina*’s principles, including food sovereignty.

³⁵ Patel, “Transgressing Rights,” 89.

³⁶ Martínez-Torres and Rosset, “La Vía Campesina,” 150; 171.

³⁷ Suárez, “Gender and Land,” 194.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

³⁹ Patel, “What does Food Sovereignty Look Like?” 669.



Conclusion

The deep entrenchment of the current neoliberal capitalist system is overwhelming when seeking an alternative. However, the crises emerging from this system, including but not limited to the global food crisis, has sparked a growing number of counter-movements, searching for a social transformation into a world based not on the market, but on the wellbeing of community, humans, and the environment. This paper argues that the global food movement, including what may be the largest social movement in the world, *La Vía Campesina*, is one such movement that has emerged from within civil society to tackle the problems arising from the current system, and, through mobilization and non-violent action, has been proposing viable alternatives. This is not just a movement about food, but rather a movement seeking to achieve broader social, cultural, economic, and political transformations, beginning from the ground up. In an interview, Paul Nicholson, one of the founding members of *La Vía Campesina*, admitted that while “clearly this is not going to happen overnight ... it is a process of accumulation of forces and realities coming together from the citizens of the entire planet.”⁴⁰ However, the increasing number of crises affecting most (if not all) of the world’s population today will result in a critical mass of people who will no longer stand for the inequalities of the neoliberal capitalist system, and together, will tip the scales toward the transformation into a more equitable world.

⁴⁰ Wittman, “Interview,” 678-679.