

Voices From Maputo: La Vía Campesina's Fifth International Conference

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We are the men and women of the land. We are those who produce food for the world. We have the right to continue being peasants and family farmers, and to shoulder the responsibility of continuing to feed our peoples. We care for seeds, which are life, and for us the act of producing food is an act of love. Humanity depends on us, and we refuse to disappear. —“Declaration of Maputo: V International Conference of La Vía Campesina, October 19–22, 2008”

In October, more than 500 peasant leaders from 57 countries and five continents arrived in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. As the credit, food, and financial crises were colliding and shaking the international economic architecture, representatives from La Vía Campesina gathered to participate in the transnational peasant movement's Fifth International Conference, as well as its Third Women's Assembly and Second Youth Assembly. On the agenda: a collective effort to analyze skyrocketing global food prices, which pushed another 40 million people worldwide into hunger in 2008, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).¹

“We've never lived a crisis like the present one. And we did not create it,” said Rafael Alegría, a peasant leader from Honduras and member of La Vía Campesina's International Coordinating Commission (ICC), the movement's key decision-making body. In its Declaration of Maputo, La Vía Campesina considers “the convergence of the food crisis, the climate crisis, the energy crisis, and the financial crisis” to be the product of the decades-old profit-driven neoliberal capitalist system. The global food crisis, in this analysis, results from a combination of diverse factors, including decades of destructive rural policies, financial speculation in food markets, and national governments' support for the frantic production of agro-fuels.

For years, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and more recently the World Trade Organization, pressured governments to deregulate their national financial systems and to substantially reduce their investment in food production for national consumption in favor of production for export. As a result, the institutions that ensure orderly marketing, sound management of supplies, and redistributive agrarian reform, which had been established as a result of decades of struggle, were all but dismantled. This restructuring of agriculture expanded large-scale production and facilitated the entry of transnational corporations into various links of the food chain through privatization, trade liberalization, and the dismantling of support programs for peasant and small-scale production.

“For more than 20 years, governments washed their hands of agriculture as they abandoned public agricultural policies, dismantled financial systems, and destroyed the peasant economy,” Alegría says. “Now we are living the consequences of abandoning small and medium-scale farmers, who have been substituted by transnational companies.”

Paul Nicholson, a Basque farmer and former member of the ICC, worried that the food crisis would lower the price of agricultural commodities while keeping production costs the same. “This will bring ruin to many involved in peasant agriculture,” he said. “The principal beneficiaries will be those who control the food chain, and these are the transnationals.”

La Vía Campesina has extracted some key lessons from the crisis: First, the deregulated market and free trade will not solve the problems; on the contrary, they will only aggravate the situation. Second, peasants and small farmers, unlike speculators and large-scale traders, will not benefit from high food prices. Third, those who have and will suffer the most from the increase in food prices are agricultural workers, the landless, and poor urban consumers. Fourth, the crisis offers the world an opportunity to embrace La Vía Campesina’s longtime goal of “food sovereignty,” which, the movement maintains, is the only solution “that responds effectively to all of the dimensions of the crisis.”²

Food sovereignty, according to La Vía Campesina, is a prerequisite to realizing the human right to food; it entails “peoples’ right to define their agricultural and food policy,” and includes peasants’ and small-scale farmers’ “right to produce our own food in our own territory.”³ In this context, food and food-producing resources like land, seeds, and water are more than just commodities, and financial speculation has absolutely no place in the food system.

Moreover, food sovereignty demands the “protection and re-nationalization of national food markets, the promotion of local circuits of production and consumption . . . the defense of the territories of indigenous peoples, and comprehensive agrarian reform.” Equally important, food sovereignty involves the active participation of those who produce and consume food in determining policies, and establishing agriculture systems that do not include patented life-forms, pesticides, genetically modified organisms, agro-fuels, and the presence of multinational corporations.

Conference delegates also stressed that ecologically sensitive production systems rooted in peasant and indigenous knowledge that produce for local consumption—a key principle of food sovereignty—can help resolve not only the food but also the environmental crisis. Local peasant production helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions by significantly reducing transportation over long distances and the high energy costs of industrial agriculture.

But perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of food sovereignty is that it forces us to rethink our relationships with food, agriculture, the environment, and one another. Food sovereignty is not just a question of who produces food, where it is produced, under what conditions, and at what scale. It also challenges us to fundamentally alter social relations, cultures, and politics—the very basis of modern societies.

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Also on the agenda at Maputo was the issue of women's participation in the Vía Campesina movement. Generally, agricultural politics at the local, national, and international levels is still a very male-dominated affair, and the path to gender equality is long and winding. When La Vía Campesina was first constituted in 1993, women represented only about a fifth of the delegates. They urged the newly established international peasant movement to proactively tackle gender equality—a demand that was stressed especially by Camila Choquetilla, a representative from Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas de Bolivia. Consequently, the declaration issued at Mons, Belgium, did recognize the critical role that women play in rural organizations and agricultural production, and voiced a commitment to strive for women's equal rights to resources and the need for equal participation.

Three years later, the Second International Conference held in Tlaxcala, Mexico, elected only one woman to the ICC. Recognizing these highly skewed gender dynamics, the conference formed a special committee, the International Women's Commission, whose mandate included developing strategies, mechanisms, and a plan of action to ensure women's equal participation and representation at all levels of the movement.

One of the main activities of the women's commission has been to organize women's meetings immediately prior to key Vía Campesina gatherings, which has been an especially successful strategy that helps ensure women's greater participation and has increased their representation within the movement. In 2000, for example, just prior to its Third International Conference held in Bangalore, India, La Vía Campesina organized the First International Women's Assembly, which increased women's representation among conference delegates to 43%. Although the Bangalore conference fell short of full gender parity, it did take some important steps in that direction. Also in Bangalore, La Vía Campesina unanimously agreed to a major structural change, doubling the ICC membership to include two regional coordinators, one man and one woman, from each of its regions. Today, the ICC is made up of 10 women and nine men because both of the regional coordinators from the South American region are women.

Finally, the Bangalore Conference approved a position paper that provided a gender analysis of neoliberal agriculture. "Rural women produce much of the food that feeds families and local communities," it declared, noting that rural women "are doubly discounted and disadvantaged" by neoliberal restructuring. The position paper also elaborated some key principles and commitments that reflected the particular roles, positions, needs, and interests of women. Importantly, it stressed a gender perspective that includes class and ethnicity and the need to strengthen the International Women's Commission to continue its work on behalf of gender parity at all levels of the movement.

All of these developments have helped women gain significant space within La Vía Campesina. In Maputo women represented 46% of the conference delegates, and they are visibly more active in Vía Campesina decision-making and actions, while the

movement's official positions reflect more of a gender analysis. This was particularly evident in the declaration of the Third Women's Assembly, which argued that the violence of the corporate-led neoliberal model of agriculture cannot be separated from violence against women, and thus, food sovereignty also means ending violence against women. The declaration went beyond blaming such violence on forces outside of peasant communities, like the military or paramilitaries, and pointed also to violence within those communities themselves. "If we do not eradicate violence towards women within our movement," the declaration reads, "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."

Consequently, the Fifth Conference officially launched an international Campaign for an End to Violence Against Women. "[A]ll 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," the Maputo declarations states. "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 peasant and farmers of the world."

This will be a huge challenge for the movement, given that violence against women is not an issue that many of the male-dominated Vía Campesina organizations ever discuss. Just how successful can an international movement be at tackling such a local issue? Paul Nicholson, former ICC member for the European region puts it like this:

"Violence against women will now be taken up by national organizations, clearly. But it is going to be very, very difficult and complex because we're not just talking about a formal campaign against violence. We're talking about changing traditional family relationships and the need to develop a new type of relationship—men and women, both at the family and the organizational level. This will be difficult for many organizations. But it is absolutely necessary."

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The fifth international conference made other strong commitments as well. Perhaps more than ever, it clearly pointed to transnational corporations and international financial capital as the key enemies. João Pedro Stedile, a leader with the Landless Worker's Movement of Brazil, explained in his presentation that peasants oppose not only plantation owners, hoarders, and intermediaries but also, in the new era of the globalized economy, large agro-food corporations. "Peasants, who in the past were accustomed to only fighting against large landowners and plantation owners," he said, "have now transformed themselves into a principal actor against large transnational capital."

In its struggle against the expansion of the power and control of transnational corporations and financial capital, La Vía Campesina asserts that food sovereignty is only possible by working in alliance with many other social movements and organizations that share a similar vision. To solidify plans for collaboration and cooperation the Maputo

gathering included a two-day Assembly With Allies, which brought together people representing movements of environmentalists, women, indigenous peoples, urban-based groups, pastoralists, migrants, fisherfolk, and some international non-governmental organizations. In many ways, this assembly allowed La Vía Campesina to continue building on the work initiated at the Nyéléni International Forum on Food Sovereignty (held February 2007 in Mali), which solidified a broad and global food sovereignty movement.

Since La Vía Campesina first introduced food sovereignty into the international arena at the World Food Summit in 1996, the concept quickly gained momentum and is now the driving force of numerous rural and urban movements around the world. Nepal has integrated it into its national constitution; Bolivia, Venezuela, and Mali are exploring how it can form the basis of national policies; students and youth groups are organizing conferences and workshops to explore the idea. For example, recent reports by Jean Ziegler, the former United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food to the UN Commission on Human Rights, advocates food sovereignty as a means of ensuring the human right to food and food security.⁴ Following the 2002 World Food Summit, the FAO formally recognized the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, a global network of non-governmental organizations and social movements, as its main civil society interlocutor for follow-up to the World Food Summit. The FAO also supported the IPC's participation in a series of FAO Regional Conferences.

For La Vía Campesina, one thing is clear: The corporate-led neoliberal model that declared war on peasant agriculture is now in crisis, and this represents an important political moment. Not only are peasants refusing to be disappeared, they are at the center of resistance and they are gaining strength. The Fifth International Conference integrated 39 new member organizations, further consolidated itself by establishing two regions in Africa, clearly identified the enemy, expanded its definition of food sovereignty to include eliminating violence against women, and reinforced collaborative ties with key sectors and movements.

Finally, the Maputo conference confirmed the importance of cohesion within La Vía Campesina: "[O]ne of our greatest strengths is our ability to unite different cultures and ways of thinking in one single movement," read the Maputo declaration. "La Vía Campesina represents a common commitment to resist, and to struggle for life and for peasant and family farm agriculture." Food sovereignty is the unifying force of La Vía Campesina, and as the declaration made clear, it is an idea whose time has come.

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1. FAO Newsroom, "Number of Hungry People Rises to 963 Million," December 8, 2008, available at fao.org/news.

2. These lessons are explained in "An Answer to the Global Food Crisis: Peasants and Small Farmers Can Feed the World!" La Vía Campesina, Jakarta, April 24, 2008, available at viacampesina.org.

3. Position of La Vía Campesina on Food Sovereignty, "The Right to Produce and Access to Land," presented at the World Food Summit (November 13–17, 1996, Rome) and "What Is Food Sovereignty?" both available at viacampesina.org.

4. Jean Ziegler, "Report by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food: Mission to Brazil," United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 59th Session, January 3, 2003; "Report Submitted by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler, in Accordance With Commission on Human Rights Resolution 2003/25," United Nations commission on Human Rights, 60th Session, February 9, 2004.

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