La Via Campesina: Peasants cite ‘food sovereignty’ to denounce science-based farming improvements

La Via Campesina, which translates literally to “the peasants way” and is also known as the International Peasants Movement, was founded in 1993 in Mons, Belgium, by a group of small-scale producers representing four continents — Europe, Asia, North America, and Africa. It has grown into a large an international movement compromised of peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world.

La Via Campesina believes that poverty and hunger are not caused by food scarcity, but by social injustice. It is arguably most known for coining the term “food sovereignty” which it debuted at the 1996 World Food Day in Rome, Italy. From its website:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.

Food sovereignty, according to a declaration made during a 2008 summit, is also about prioritizing local and national economies and empowering small scale food production such as family farms, “artisanal” fishing, pastoralist-led grazing and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. It has become a strong rallying cry around the world for those who are looking to remove corporation influences from agriculture and from the food supply.

However, it has also been used to argue against the successes of the Green Revolution on the grounds that it went against the best interest of peasants. The Green Revolution, which was led by Nobel Peace Prize winning scientist Norman Borlaug, refers to developments in plant breeding between the 1960s and 1980s that improved yields from major cereal crops, particularly wheat and rice, and other staple crops. Borlaug is credited with saving over a billion people from starvation. La Via Campesina sees the Borlaug’s legacy as an attempt to push western principles on other countries and peasants, and in general the Green Revolution’s goals are not seen as being inline with the goals of food sovereignty, from the La Via Campesina site:

The Green Revolution fully ignored the role of democratic policy, which avoids ecological and social costs while ensuring that food production and food producers remain vital to their society and culture. From the perspective of family farmers and peasants who revere Food Sovereignty, sustainable, democratic foods that respect ecology, culture and diversity of economic opportunity offer a lot more than just improving the equality, quantity or availability of food for current and future generations.

This outlook has led today to La Via Campesina speaking out frequently against the Gates Foundation for
Bill and Melinda’s philanthropic working around the world and in particular Africa. Dena Hoff the North American coordinator of La Via Campesina, said of the Gate’s Foundations work:

Foundations, however well meaning, should not be setting food and agricultural policies for any nation of peoples. Democracy demands the informed participation of civil society to determine what is in the best interest of each nation’s population...

However, the Gates Foundation has long been credited for working with nations and without corporate influence. For example, its recent work on a biofortified banana that was created to help with vitamin A deficiency in Africa was made in conjunction with local and national governments in Uganda and not corporations. The Gates Foundation has been instrumental in removing corporate ties to golden rice and has worked to make golden rice available to countries looking to grow the enhanced crop.

Campaigns/Activities

La Via Campesina does not believe the western way of agriculture that relies of fertilizers, weed killers, and modified crops are beneficial for farmers. In particular it has consistently campaigned against GMOs which it sees as a mechanism for corporations to have control of food sovereignty. It in particular campaigns against contract farming and the use of agricultural chemicals, which it sees as unnecessary and harmful to the environment and farmers.

It has been particularly active in Mexico, where the government has been debating the adoption of and testing GMOs. In November of 2012, Alberto Gomez, of Via Campesina Mexico, noted about his country’s potential adoption of GMOs:
For the past twenty years, the Mexican Government has been jeopardizing our food sovereignty by opening agriculture to free trade, flooding us with cheap, low quality maize and leaving thousands of peasants in poverty. Now they want to poison us with GM maize. We won’t allow it.

In January of 2013, La Via Campesina staged a hunger strike in Mexico to protest against the testing of GMO corn by the Mexican government, the strike was ultimately unsuccessful as testing of the crops is still ongoing.

La Va Campesina has been very outspoken against land grabbing — the buying or leasing of large pieces of land in developing countries, by domestic and transnational companies, governments, and individuals — and free trade. It has also been very vocal in supporting women around the world, particularly women in farming and it has spoken out frequently about stopping violence against women. Chapters are very active around the world on International Women’s Day (March 8).

**Criticisms**

Many scholars have argued against La Via Campesina’s central tenant, food sovereignty for a variety of reasons. Sociologist Harry Berstein, the former editor of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and an emeritus professor of development studies at the University of London, has criticized food sovereignty for assuming the needs of all peasants are the same. He explained this in 2014 at a conference at Yale University:

Philipp Aerni, director of the Center for Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability at the University of Zurich has been critical of the food sovereignty’s conflation of innovation and technology with corporations. In a 2012 paper published in *African Technology Development Forum Journal* he explained:

> The Food Sovereignty movement still has a chance to avoid being remembered as just another ‘let them eat cake movement’ if it is able to separate science from politics. Sustainable
agro-ecosystem management practices are important, but so are investment in user-friendly new agricultural technologies, product innovation, rural infrastructures and post harvest technologies…[F]ood sovereignty activists should collaborate with innovative companies rather than simply denouncing them as representatives of ‘the corporate regime.’

Aerni believes that if the movement is to be apart of progressing the peasants movement, its solutions for the future must adapt:

The movement could either become an obstacle to future food security, if it sticks to its ideology-based and confrontational rhetoric, or part of the solution, if it decides to extend collaboration beyond like-minded groups and engage in joint pragmatic action.

Affiliations

Via Campesina is based on the decentralization of power between nine regions. The coordination among the regions is taken up by the International Coordinating Committee which is composed of one woman and one man for every region, elected by the member organizations in the respective regions. The international secretariat rotates according to the collective decision made every four years by the International Conference. It was first in Belgium (1993-1996), then in Honduras (1997-2004) and in Indonesia until 2013. Since september 2013, the secretariat is based in Harare, Zimbawe.

Via Campesina claims broad membership alliances and the following campaigns and initiatives are noted in their 2012 “Combat Monsanto” report.

- **France**: A French member of La Via Campesina, La Confédération Paysanne farmers’ union, is the second largest union in the country. It is highly critical of the agricultural model used over the past four decades which has led to overproduction, public health crises, the deterioration of natural resources and soils, regional and international inequalities, and the decline of the farmer population. Other environmental organizations, such as Greenpeace France (which started its anti-GM campaign in 1996) and Friends of the Earth France/Les Amis de la Terre, have also raised concerns about the total lack of transparency in the food chain with regard to cross-contamination from pollen in open GM fields… The Voluntary Reapers or ‘Faucheurs Volontaires’ are a group of self-organized non-violent French activists that have led several direct actions to ‘neutralise’ field tests set up by GM corporations and, to a lesser extent, unauthorized fields cultivated by pro-GM farmers. Jose Bové has been an important actor in the movement and a spokesman for the anti-GM activists, although this organization does not recognize any leadership as such. The Voluntary Reapers act openly and unmasked, and it claims responsibility for all their actions, sometimes turning themselves in to the police… Combat Monsanto: In France in 2008, a network of NGOs teamed up to form the Combat Monsanto coalition and organize a massive campaign to expose and challenge Monsanto’s systematic propaganda and harmful practices. Friends of the Earth France, ATTAC, Greenpeace, and other organizations make up Combat Monsanto, which aims to share information and promote coordinated actions and campaigns against Monsanto’s human rights and environmental abuses…
Another important initiative that has helped to raise awareness in France over the last decade is Inf’OGM, an organization dedicated to monitoring and providing critical information on GMOs globally… a French campaign called Sowing Biodiversity (Semons la biodiversité), was launched in 2008 by the network Peasant Seeds (Réseau Semence Paysanne).

- **Spain**: Via Campesina claims to helped coordinate and organize various GM-free declarations and protests.

- **Germany**: In 2005, La Via Campesina Germany and Friends of the Earth Germany initiated a grassroots movement to promote GMO-free regions… A movement for food sovereignty is being organized across Europe, inspired by the 2007 International Nyeleni Forum for Food Sovereignty in Mali. More than 400 farmers, environmentalists, consumers and activists took part in a European food sovereignty conference in Austria in August 2011.

- **India**: Via Campesina with board member Vandana Shiva takes credit for enacting a ban on Bt-Brinjal (eggplant) in India. The Monsanto Quit India working with Greenpeace, the Tamil Nadu Farmers’ Association, Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) and the Bhartiya Kissan Union plan to organize days of action.

- **Brazil**: In 2011 La Via Campesina’s Landless Farmers’ Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra) and other social movements protested against the excessive use of pesticides in Brazil. During this period, along with various other civil society organizations, it launched the ‘Permanent Campaign against Pesticides and for Life’… Via Campesina claims that a local MST leader Valmir Mota d’Oliviera was murdered by armed guard employed by Syngenta in 2007.

- **Peru**: Via Campesina takes credit for a 2011 ten-year moratorium on GMOs in Peru.

- **Argentina**: Via Campesina is behind campaigns claiming glyphosate and GMOs are responsible for birth defects and cancer killing children rolling out victims like Viviana Peralta who claims her newborn died from exposure to pesticides.

- **Haiti**: An initiative of Papaye Peasant Movement (MPP) led by Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, a member of La Via Campesina, to oppose Monsanto and demand food sovereignty resulted in rejection of U.S. food and seed aid to Haiti in 2010.

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5 Mtandao wa Vikundi vya Wakulima Tanzania (MVIWATA)/Tanzanian Network of Farmers’ Groups, Tanzania
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4 Coordination Togolese des Organisations Paysannes (CTOP), Togo
5 Concertation Nationale des Organsations Paysannes en Producteurs Agricoles du Congo (CNOP-Congo), Brazzaville, Congo
6 Cadre National de Concertation des Organisations paysannes et de Producteurs Agricoles de la Guinée Bissau, Guinée Bissau
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7 National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), USA

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3 Consejo Asesor Indígena (CAI), Argentina
5 Movimiento Nacional Campesino e Indígena (MNCI), Argentina, http://mnci.org.ar/
6 Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas de Bolivia “Bartolina Sisa” (FNMCB), Bolivia, www.bartolinasisa.org
7 Confederación Sindical Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB), Bolivia, http://www.csutcb.org/
8 Confederación sindical de comunidades interculturales de Bolivia, Bolivia, http://www.cscbbol.org/
9 Movimiento de Trabajadores sin Tierra (MST), Bolivia, http://www.mstbolivia.org/
10 Movimento dos Trabalhadores sem Terra (MST), Brasil, www.mst.org.br
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5 Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), Philippines
6 Movimentu Kamponezes Timor Leste (MOKATIL), Timor Leste
7 Korean Peasant League (KPL), South Korea
8 Borneo Indigenous Peoples Movement (PANGGAU), Malaysia
9 Vietnam National Farmers Union (VNFU), Vietnam
10 Nouminren (Japan Family Farmers Movement), Japan
11 Northern Peasant Federation (NPF), Thailand
12 Farmer and Nature Network (FNN), Cambodia
13 Taiwan Farmers Union, Taiwan
14 Union of Agriculture Workers Committees (UAWC), Palestina

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2 All Nepal Peasants’ Federation (ANPFA), Nepal
3 Nepal Agricultural Labor Association, Nepal
4 Nepal National Fish Farmers Association, Nepal
5 Nepal National Peasants Women’s Association, Nepal
6 Bangladesh Adivasi Samithy (BAS), Bangladesh
7 Bangladesh Kishani Sabha (BKS), Bangladesh
8 Bangladesh Krishok Federation (BKF), Bangladesh
9 Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), Madhya Pradesh, India
10 Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), Maharashtra, India
11 Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), New Delhi, India
12 Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), Punjab, India
13 Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), Rajasthan, India
14 Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), Uttaranchal, India
15 Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), Uttar Pradesh, India
16 Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha (KRRS), India
17 Kerala Coconut Farmers Association, India
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2 Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC), Nicaragua
3 UPA NACIONAL, Costa Rica
4 Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores Agropecuarios (ANTA), El Salvador
5 Mesa Nacional Campesina de Costa Rica (MNC-CR), Costa Rica
6 COMITÉ DE UNIDAD CAMPESINA-CUC, Guatemala
7 Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina (CONIC), Guatemala
8 Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala: CONAVIGUA Guatemala
9 Unión Nacional de Productores Agropecuarios Costarricense (UNAG), Costa Rica
10 Mesa Agropecuaria y Forestal (MAF), Nicaragua
11 Federación de Cooperativas de la Reforma Agraria Región Central (FECORACEN de R.L.), El Salvador
12 Unión Nacional de Trabajadores Agropecuarios (UNATA), El Salvador
13 Asociación de Veteranos de la Guerrilla Salvadoreña (AVEGSAL), El Salvador
14 Fundación de Promotora de Cooperativas (FUNPROCOP), El Salvador
15 Federación Nacional de Asociaciones de Cooperativas de Producción Agropecuarias (FENACOPAZ), El Salvador
16 Movimiento Vida y Equipad Campesina (MVEC), El Salvador
17 Asociación y agropecuaria y Pesquera de la Cuencia del Lago Ilogango (APRIL), El Salvador
18 Unión Campesina Panameña (UCP), Panama
19 Integrantes de la UCP
20 Unión Indígena y Campesina (UIC)
21 CLOCLESANA/ Organización Campesina contra los Embalses y la Minería de cocle y colón
22 EMBALSES/ Organización Campesina CIOCESANA 15 de Mayo
23 Central Nacional de Trabajadores del Campo (CNTC), Honduras
24 Consejo para el Des. Integral de la Mujer Campesina (CODIMCA), Honduras
25 Unión Campesina e Indígena de Honduras (UCIH), Honduras
26 Asociación para el Desarrollo Rural de Honduras (ADROH), Honduras
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6 Federacion de Campesinos Independientes Mamá Tingó (FECAIMAT), Dominican Rep.
7 Movimiento de Campesinos Trabajadores “Las Comunidades Unidas (MCCU), Dominican Rep.
8 Asociacion Central de Agricultores Luz y Esperanza de Nagua (ACALEN), Dominican Rep.
9 Confederacion de Organizaciones Campesinas y Barrales del Sur (RETOÑO), Dominican Rep.
10 Federacion de Caficultores del Sur (FEDECARES), Dominican Rep.
11 Federacion de Productores del Bosque Seco (FEPROBOSUR), Dominican Rep.
12 Association of Caribbean Farmers Windward Islands (WINFA)

- Cane Farmers Association, Grenada
- WINFA Dominica Local Branch Dominica
- National Farmers Association St. Lucia
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4 Arbeitsgemeinschaft Bäuerliche Landwirtschaft (ABL), Germany
5 Associazione Rurale Italiana (ARI), Italy
6 Federation Unie de Groupements d’Eleveurs et d’Agriculteurs (FUGEA), Belgium
7 Confederaçao Nacional da Agricultura (CNA), Portugal
8 Confédération Nationale des Syndicats d’Exploitants Familiaux (MODEF), France
9 Confederation Paysanne, France
10 Nordbruk, Sweden
11 Norsk Bonde – Og Smabrukarlag (NBS), Norway
12 Österreichische Berg- und Kleinbaüer -Innen Vereinigung, Austria
13 Sindicato Labrego Galego (SLG), Spain
14 Euskal Herriko nekazarien Elkartasuna (EHNE-Bizkaia), Bask Country, Spain
15 Uniterre Switzerland
16 Mouvement d’Action Paysanne-MAP, Belgium
17 Mouvement International de Jeunesse Agricole Rurale Catholique- (MIJARC-Europe), Belgium
18 Frie Boender, Denmark
19 Associazione Italiana per l’Agricoltura Biologica (AIAB), Italy
20 Nederlandse Akkerbouw Vakbond (NAV), Netherland
21 L’Autre Syndicat, Switzerland
22 New Agricultural Movement of Greece, Greece
23 Eco Ruralis, Romania
24 Esvy Ry, Finland
25 Associazione Lavoratori Produttori Agroalimentari (ALPA), Italy
26 Land Workers Alliance, UK
27 Scottish Crofting Federation, Scotland/UK

Resources

- La Via Campesina’s Facebook Page
- La Via Campesina’s TV Channel
- La Via Campesina’s website