



La Via Campesina:

The 'Peasants' Way' to Changing the System, not the Climate

Nora McKeon

Rome Three University and Terra Nuova

nora.mckeon@fastwebnet.it



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The term “peasant,” tainted with a dated and pejorative aura, has lost the sense of attachment to the countryside that its Latin derivation connoted. Yet it is precisely from this rootedness in specific territories around the world that are suffering the effects of the Anthropocene and its neoliberal handmaidens that the peasant-led food sovereignty movement derives its capacity to advocate “climate justice” with such force.

From Marginalization to Mobilization

Today’s rural activists are re-appropriating the appellation “peasant.” They stress its modernity in terms of the culture and values it embodies and the approach to agricultural production it practices, which are more environment-friendly and equitable than the industrial agriculture model often equated with “progress.” Karen Pederson, past-president of the National Farmers Union of Canada observed:

Historically, we were peasants, then when that term came to mean “backward” we became “farmers”. In these days “farmer” has the

connotation of inefficiency and we are strongly encouraged to be more modern, to see ourselves as entrepreneurs. I am reclaiming the term peasant because it stands for the kind of agriculture and rural communities we are striving to build. (2009:5)

According to some official estimates there are 1.2 to 1.7 billion peasant farmers worldwide, but a more accurate estimate would probably be double that amount, including livestock keepers, nomadic pastoralists, fishers and forest-keepers and urban gardeners (ETC 2009:26).¹ Peasants make up almost half of the world's population, provide at least 70% of the world's food (ETC 2009:1) and are responsible for the bulk of all investment in agriculture (FAO 2012). Their marginalization, despite the fundamental roles they play, is the result of processes determined by powerful political and economic interests, supported by discursive legitimations, which have been theorized by Friedmann and McMichael (1989) as "food regimes." Centered first on the British Empire (1870-1930s) and successively on the United States (1950s-1970s), food regimes refer to "the political structuring of world capitalism, and its organization of agricultures to provision labor and/or consumers in such a way as to reduce wage costs and enhance commercial profits" (McMichael 2013: 8).

From the 1980s on, the neoliberal structural adjustment policies imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund reduced developing country governments' policy space and support services for agriculture while opening up their markets and placing local peasant producers into unfair competition with the products of subsidized industrial agriculture coming from abroad. The advent of the World Trade Organization in 1995 added the final touch. Globalization has systematically undermined the peasants' livelihoods while promoting market penetration and concentration on the part of the agribusiness and retail corporations that now control the world's food system.² "Farmers unable to meet certification requirements or compete with cheap grain flows face displacement and dispossession, exacerbating world hunger. It is this fundamental contradiction, in a now *global* food regime, that defines the corporate food regime" which has stepped into the command position with the decline of U.S. hegemony (McMichael 2013:60).

¹ Even this more inclusive grouping leaves out some important sectors of the rural poor who share many interests with peasant producers, particular agricultural/migrant workers.

² By the time of the 2007 food price crisis ten corporations controlled 67% of the global commercial seed market while the top ten giant grocery retailers, the most powerful actors in the agro-industrial food chain, accounted for 40% of the retail sales of the top 100 world-wide (ETC 2008).

Peasant organization for engagement in global politics has emerged in direct reaction to these developments. The largest and best known movement, La Via Campesina (LVC), grew out of a long history of agrarian movements particularly in Latin America and Europe. The decision to establish La Via Campesina as a global network in 1993 was triggered by the Uruguay Round of the GATT and the realization that “agricultural policies would henceforth be determined globally and it was essential for small farmers to be able to defend their interests at that level.”³ LVC membership has always included peasant organizations from both the north and the south, acknowledging the world-system nature of the challenge. The network now describes itself as a grassroots mass movement made up of 164 member organizations from 73 countries in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe, representing some 200 million peasants, landless, rural women and youth, indigenous peoples and agricultural workers.

Food Sovereignty: An Anti-Systemic Paradigm

Food sovereignty emerged as an anti-systemic concept intended to combat the corporate food regime and the neoliberal frame of food security that sustained it. The latter was predicated on increasing productivity per plant/animal, making food available through formal markets and imports, counting on economic growth to improve incomes and employment and – along the way – reducing popular pressure for agrarian reform. In this logic peasant-based production was irremediably backward and inefficient. LVC first spoke of “food sovereignty” at its second International Conference held in Mexico in April 1996 (LVC 1996). Seven months later, the term debuted on the world scene at the NGO forum held in parallel to the FAO World Food Summit in Rome. By the time of the successive World Food Summit, in 2002, food sovereignty was brandished by the parallel civil society assembly as an alternative paradigm to the market-driven analysis that had dominated development discourse and action for over two decades. The Political Statement delivered to the plenary of the official Summit spelled out the ground that the paradigm was understood to cover:

- *Placing priority on food production for domestic and local markets based on peasant and family farmer diversified and agroecologically based production systems...*
- *Ensuring fair prices for farmers, which means the power to protect internal markets....*

³ Interviews with LVC leaders, reported in McKeon and Kalafatic (2009: 3). See also Desmarais (2007).

- *Peoples' access to land, water, forests, fishing areas and other productive resources...*
- *Recognition and promotion of women's role in food production...*
- *Community control over productive resources, as opposed to corporate ownership of land, water, and genetic and other resources...*
- *Protecting seeds, the basis of food and life itself, for the free exchange and use of farmers...*
- *Public investment in support of the productive activities of families and communities geared toward empowerment, local control and production of food for people and local markets...*
- *Primacy of peoples' and communities' rights to food and food production, over trade concerns... (IPC 2002, emphasis in original).*

In February 2007 a global encounter on food sovereignty held in Mali brought together over 500 delegates from local movements and struggles in all regions to build a common understanding of what the concept entails (Mulvany 2007). Since then it has continued to spread from its original peasant base to involve other rural and urban constituencies and to progressively deepen the practice and analysis of its various dimensions (Desmarais 2007; Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe 2012). Food sovereignty has been described by an historical leader of LVC as “a vision for changing society... It is the right of citizens to determine food and agricultural policies and to decide what and how to produce and who produces.” (Nicholson 2011: 11). Far from being an abstraction, it grows out of practices adopted by peasant and indigenous producers and communities around the world.

Engaging with Global Intergovernmental Forums

Although grassroots struggle and practice is the humus of food sovereignty, engagement with global governance institutions is considered to be an important part of LVC's strategy towards the realization of systemic change. Engagement can be defensive and/or proactive, depending on the institution. The decidedly unreformable WTO and International Financial Institutions have been targets of LVC denunciation and outside mobilization from the outset. The UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), on the contrary, has been seen as a hopeful alternative intergovernmental policy forum because of its more democratic governance (with universal membership and a one county-one vote decision-making process), its specific focus on food and

agriculture with a strong normative role, its mission to eliminate hunger and its relative openness to engagement with civil society and rural people's organizations.

Following the 2002 World Food Summit LVC and other rural social movements established an autonomous network, the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), to carry forward their platform by opening up political space for rural movements in global FAO forums and coaching them in how to occupy it effectively (McKeon 2009; Colombo and Onorati 2013). The experience they had accumulated over the successive decade allowed the movement's members to take advantage of the political opportunity offered by the food price crisis of 2007-2008 by helping to design an unprecedented global policy forum – the reformed Committee on World Food Security – in which social movement organizations participate on the same footing as governments and are winning not insignificant discursive battles against the dominant industrial agriculture and corporate food system frames (McKeon 2015a).

La Via Campesina and Climate Justice

LVC was a relative latecomer to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations. During the Bali Conference of the Parties (COP) in 2007, some civil society actors expressed their dissatisfaction with the dominant NGO approaches in the UNFCCC, which did not fundamentally challenge the systemic causes of climate change. The climate justice movement that emerged from these discussions, in contrast, is skeptical of international institutions and focuses instead on decentralized solutions that address needs of communities. It unequivocally opposes carbon markets and other market-led approaches, which it dubs “false solutions” (Hadden 2015). The resulting Climate Justice Now! (CJN) platform made a particular effort to involve mass organizations like LVC because of their broad grassroots membership. LVC's decision to engage in the run-up to the Copenhagen COP in 2009 was facilitated by the participation in CJN of some of its long-standing allies on trade issues. The conviction on the part of some Latin American members that potential alliances with ALBA countries could offer possibilities for influencing the outcome also played a role. LVC's underlying motivation for taking up climate change as an issue was the hope that the food sovereignty platform and peasant agroecological agriculture would be recognized as a way to help “cool the planet.” Industrial agriculture and the corporate food system generate over 50% of greenhouse gas emissions (GRAIN 2011).

The ALBA connection did pay off in Copenhagen, and in 2010 Evo Morales sponsored the [World Peoples' Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth](#), which consecrated a rich contribution of indigenous peoples' to the climate justice frame. The same year, however, Bolivia was the only one of the ALBA countries to take a strong position in the

Cancun COP. LVC's expectations of what could be obtained in the formal COP meetings diminished as a result, and more emphasis was placed on street action in collaboration with other social movements. The World Social Forums and Rio+20 in 2012 provided opportunities to work on these options (Smith 2014).

The establishment of an internal international collective on environmental and climate justice in 2013 made it possible for LVC to develop its own strategy and frame, following its consolidated practice of inclusive, horizontal consultation, and to feed them into the "Climate Space" that emerged from the 2013 World Social Forum in Tunis. LVC leaders were on the front line of denouncing Ban Ki-Moon's September 2014 Climate Summit and the UN-promoted Global Climate Smart Agriculture Alliance for pushing "the false solutions of the green economy, including dangerous techno-fixes and market-based solutions that will do more harm than good," in the words of LVC leader Carlos Marentes (Climate Space 2014). LVC's position paper ascribed these false solutions to "industrial capital's need for expansion" dictating an effort to "coopt traditional agricultural producers and production and insert them into the present industrial agriculture and food regime under the control of corporations" thereby increasing their vulnerability and indebtedness (LVC 2014a). The systemic nature of the "'green' structural adjustment projects" and their impact on other constituencies like workers was clearly recognized, along with the space that market-based "solutions" open up for financial speculation. "System change, not climate change" was the slogan here and at the COP 20 in Lima, Peru 3 months later, where LVC underscored the issues of forced migrations caused by the climate crisis and the displacement of peasants and indigenous people from their territories under cover of environmental service payments (LVC 2014b).

Moving from denunciation to proposition, LVC capably serves up the food sovereignty platform on a climatic platter. Transforming the world's industrialized, agro-export food system into one based on food sovereignty is the bottom line. Small-scale farmer and indigenous agriculture has the capacity to absorb, or avoid, up to 2/3 of the greenhouse gases released annually while ensuring food provision and a host of other social, economic and environmental benefits. This will require the full range of public policies and support on which LVC has helped to elaborate in other forums, ranging from agrarian reform to support for peasant agroecology, protection of local markets, public procurement and regulation of corporate (mis)behavior (LVC 2014b). This agenda will be taken to COP21 in Paris in December 2015, where LVC will have a strong presence alongside of its French member, Confédération Paysanne Francaise. A significant outcome is not expected from the negotiations, but social movements—unlike the more reform-oriented NGOs—are in it for the long haul, not the immediate effect. Mass movements like LVC, with real spaces in which people are building alternatives, are the main locus of solutions. Nonetheless, engagement in intergovernmental forums is important both to

exercise damage control against corporate efforts to forward their own agendas,⁴ and as occasions for sensitizing civil society organizations and the public at large to the food sovereignty platform.

Conclusion

As LVC moves toward the Paris COP it is facing many of the same open questions that the food sovereignty movement is addressing in its interface with other global forums like the Committee on World Food Security (McKeon 2015a, 2015b). How best to manage dynamic interactions among the multiple levels of governance in support of peoples' struggles? How to set specific priority issues within a systemic analysis and link engagement on them across the different forums in which they are addressed? How to translate "soft" normative advances into measures that effectively curb corporate power? How to build alliances with actors like reform-oriented NGOs or engaged academics in ways that multiply resources available to movements without weakening grassroots political and strategic control? How to conceive, in an anti-systemic perspective, the role of states,⁵ which are currently among the worst offenders in terms of advancing narrow and short-sighted objectives and yet remain a basic building block for accountability and defense of citizen's collective rights?

The present phase of multiple crisis offers strengthened opportunities for calling into question the dominant neoliberal logic and the exploitation of people and the planet it entails.⁶ Social movements are important actors in this process. Relations between these movements and the global institutions they target as one component of their struggles for system change are dynamic and interactive. They offer both opportunities for movements to gain leverage and exercise discursive and normative power as well as "iron cages" that may constrain and coopt them (Smith and Wiest 2012). Processes like those around climate change—including the UNFCCC negotiations—and food security and the right to food—with a focus on the Committee on World Food Security—are living laboratories for studying the dynamics of evolving global governance and drawing lessons to reinforce anti-systemic struggles.

⁴ LVC's Call for Action for COP21 notes that "TNCs have secured the political support of co-opted governments to get their interests inserted as bottom-line strategies into the agreements" (LVC 2015).

⁵ See Special issue on "[States and Social Movements in the World-System.](#)" *Journal of World-Systems Research* Vol. 21, No.1 (2015).

⁶ See "[The Global System since 2008: A Crisis of What?'](#)" *Journal of World-Systems Research* Vol 19, No. 2 (2013).

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