

FOODFIRST

United in the Vía Campesina

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I think that what really unites us is a fundamental commitment to humanism because the antithesis of this is individualism and materialism.... The common problems of land, production, technology, markets, ideological formation, training, poverty—all of these we have in common. But what also unites us are great aspirations. We are all convinced that the current structures of economic, political, and social power are unjust and exclusionary.

What unites us is a spirit of transformation and struggle to change these structures all over the world. We aspire to a better world, a more just world, a more humane world, a world where real equality and social justice exist. These aspirations and solidarity in rural struggles keep us united in the Vía Campesina.

—RAFAEL ALEGRIA, FORMER OPERATIONAL SECRETARIAT OF THE VÍA CAMPESINA

These words, spoken by a peasant leader from Honduras, tell us a lot about what is perhaps the most significant peasant and farm movement to have emerged in recent times, the Vía Campesina.¹ The Vía Campesina is an international farm movement that embraces organizations of peasants, small and medium-scale farmers, rural women, farm workers, and indigenous agrarian communities in Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Europe. Now in its twelfth year, the Vía Campesina continues to gather momentum. It currently includes 142 organizations from 56 countries.

This backgrounder offers a glimpse into this dynamic farm movement, which has carved a unique space and created a tangible presence in the international arena. What is the Vía Campesina all about? Why are so many organizations attracted to the Vía Campesina? How does the movement function? By exploring some of these questions we get a better sense of the Vía Campesina.

When and How Was the Vía Campesina Formed?

The Vía Campesina was formally constituted in 1993 during a conference held in Mons, Belgium, when a group of 46 farm leaders gathered to define a progressive alternative to the further liberalization of agriculture and food reflected in the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). However, the historical roots of the Vía Campesina actually stretch much further.

Throughout the 1980s, rural organizations in the North and South engaged in numerous North/South and South/South organizational exchanges. Here, farm leaders concentrated on learning what was happening in each others' countries as a result of structural adjustment programs and regional free trade agreements, how national governments were altering rural structures and programs, how farming peoples were organizing, what kinds of strategies they used, what issues they faced, and what kinds of alternatives they were building. These exchanges were critical to building strong ties of understanding, trust, friendship, and solidarity—all essential ingredients for the consolidation of a transnational movement.

Through the Vía Campesina, farm leaders were quick to identify the threat farming families everywhere faced: their livelihoods, their way of life—indeed, their very mode of existence—were all at stake. Confronting local and global forces aimed at driving them off the land, rural peoples engaged

in a collective analysis to find an alternative model to a brutal globalization that was creating greater impoverishment and marginalization in the countryside. Peasants themselves had to be at the heart of developing rural and food policies.*

What Does the Vía Campesina Do?

The main goal of the Vía Campesina is to build a peasant-based alternative model of agriculture. To reach this goal, Vía Campesina organizations work together to:

- Organize exchanges of information, experiences, and strategies
- Develop linkages among farm organizations
- Build solidarity and unity among farm organizations
- Strengthen the participation of women at all levels of farm organizations
- Articulate joint positions and policies
- Engage in collective action

Since its inception, farming peoples around the world have marched together in the streets of Paris, Geneva, Seattle, Rome, Genoa, Porto Alegre, and Quebec City, among other cities. With its members chanting slogans, wearing dark green caps and kerchiefs and white t-shirts, and waving green flags decorated with the movement's logo, the Vía Campesina has become an increasingly visible actor and audible voice of radical opposition to the globalization of a neoliberal and corporate model of agriculture.

This resistance took an extreme turn on September 10, 2003—the first day of the Fifth Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) held in Cancún, Mexico—with the tragic death of the Korean farm leader, Lee Kyung Hae. Lee, along with 120 other Koreans, had joined the Vía Campesina delegation in Cancún in an effort to get the WTO out of agriculture. Wearing a sign that read “WTO kills farmers,” Lee walked up to the high wire fence that had been built to “protect” trade negotiators from protestors and stabbed himself to death.³

This ultimate and tragic act of resistance symbolized what the Vía Campesina had been saying all along: liberalization of agriculture is a war on peasants that decimates rural communities and destroys farming families. The Vía Campesina has since declared September 10 an International Day of Protest Against the WTO. On that day, organizations worldwide mobilize for food sovereignty.

But the Vía Campesina does more than provide progressive farm organizations with a much-needed international presence and voice. It is necessarily also deeply involved at the local level. As Doris Hernandez, former technical assistant to the Vía Campesina stresses, the movement “cannot and must not only exist out there in cyberspace. The Vía Campesina exists because of its local and national organizations, so our work must also be grounded here locally.”⁴ Thus, the Vía Campesina helps strengthen local struggles for greater access to and control over productive resources such as land, credit, seeds, and water; it also helps marginalized peoples have a greater say in defining community and national agriculture policies.

For example, when the tsunami hit some coastal areas of Asia on December 26, 2004, the Vía Campesina quickly responded by launching an international fund-raising campaign. A crucial component of this campaign is that the Vía Campesina—led by the Federation of Indonesian Peasant Unions (FSPI), the new Operational Secretariat of the Vía Campesina based in Jakarta—is distributing resources directly to local organizations of fisherfolk and peasant families so that they can define their own priorities concerning relief and reconstruction.

The Vía Campesina focuses its work on seven key issues affecting peasants and farmers everywhere: the need for genuine agrarian reform, food sovereignty and trade liberalization, biodiversity and genetic resources, gender relations in the countryside, sustainable peasant agriculture, migration and migrant farm workers' rights, and human rights. Work in the area of human rights now includes

developing a Charter of Peasant Rights through the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. With the integration of the USA-based Border Farm Workers Project, which is closely allied with organizations from other continents, the Vía Campesina will also be paying more attention to migration and the rights of migrant farm workers.

Where and How Does the Vía Campesina Work?

The Vía Campesina is based in eight regions of the world. It is experiencing rapid expansion; between 2000 and 2004 the number of organizations in the Vía Campesina grew by 41 percent. During the movement's Fourth International Conference held in Itaici, Brazil in June 2004, forty-one organizations joined. Half of these are peasant organizations based in Asia, where the majority of the world's peasants live. More recently, the NOUMINREN (Japanese Family Farmers' Movement) was accepted into the Vía Campesina.⁶

For the Vía Campesina, a peasant-based agricultural model is central to social, economic, and political processes that are based on the principles of social justice, environmental sustainability, and respect for cultural diversity. This involves—among other things—inclusive, equitable, participatory, and democratic decisionmaking mechanisms and structures. While demanding that external bodies exhibit these principles and practices, the Vía Campesina demonstrates by example.

The key policy decision making body of the Vía Campesina is the International Conference, which is organized every three or four years. To date, the Vía Campesina international conferences have been held in Mons, Belgium (1993), Tlaxcala, Mexico (1996), Bangalore, India (2000) and Itaici, Brazil (2004). These gatherings are critical spaces for cultural exchanges, internal debate, renewing friendship and solidarity ties, and defining collective positions and strategies.

In efforts to reach gender equality, the Vía Campesina has taken concrete steps: women of the Vía Campesina organize a “Women's Assembly” just prior to the International Conferences, and in 1996 the movement transformed its leadership structure to guarantee gender parity. Acutely aware of the need to integrate youth into the movement, the Vía Campesina held its first International Youth Assembly in July 2004; this will now be a permanent feature of the International Conferences. To ensure that the global policy positions and actions of the Vía Campesina continue to be rooted in local realities, the Vía Campesina also regularly holds conferences in each of the eight regions. Finally, a sixteen-member International Coordinating Commission (ICC)—made up of two representatives (one man and one woman) from each of the eight regions—meets every six months to coordinate the implementation of decisions made by the International Conferences.

Why Are So Many Organizations Joining the Vía Campesina?

Prior to the consolidation of the Vía Campesina, two social actors largely dominated the international civil society space where discussions of food and agriculture took place: nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP). Rural organizations now belonging to the Vía Campesina did not feel that either of these adequately represented the interests of the most marginalized in the countryside. Consequently, they successfully distanced themselves from the (often) paternalistic embrace of NGOs and the more conservative and mainstream IFAP to carve a peasant space in the international arena and to fill that space with peasant voices voicing peasant demands.

The IFAP and the Vía Campesina have fundamentally different positions and strategies vis-à-vis agriculture and food policy. While the IFAP sees potential in the liberalization of agricultural trade and the wide use of agrobiotechnology to ensure food and resources for the world's six billion people, the Vía Campesina is adamantly opposed to these directions. Having directly experienced the devastating impacts of these policies, Vía Campesina organizations argue that the eradication of rural poverty and the survival of family farms are only possible through a radically different approach, that

of *food sovereignty*. In this concept, food is considered a basic human right, and thus all peoples must have “the right to define their own agricultural and food policy” to ensure domestic food security and the well-being of farming populations. In the Vía Campesina’s words, food sovereignty means that peoples have the “right to produce our own food in our own territory” in ways that protect and enhance the environment and peoples’ cultural values.⁷

While the IFAP engages in consultation and negotiation with the major international institutions (such as the WTO, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank (WB)) that are increasingly responsible for developing global agricultural policies, the Vía Campesina takes a more radical stance. In efforts to delegitimize these institutions and shift public opinion, the Vía Campesina marches in the streets to demand that the “WTO get out of agriculture” and that national governments promote the viable alternative of people’s food sovereignty. While rejecting genetically modified organisms as a solution to world hunger, the Vía Campesina launched its Global Seeds Campaign, which involves the age-old cultural practices of saving, cultivating, and exchanging farmers’ seeds.

In the words of Fred Tait, former Vice-President of the National Farmers Union–Canada, the Vía Campesina is clearly gaining ground: “When I look across my fields at the end of the day I now know I am not alone.” The Vía Campesina is living proof that “another agriculture” is not only “possible” but that it is actually being practiced and is successfully linking peoples from different parts of the world. Given the powerful forces at play it is crucial that the Vía Campesina remain a cohesive international movement of rural peoples who envision a better world, a movement that embraces cultural diversity just as it cultivates biological diversity, a movement that is succeeding in globalizing local struggles while at the same time localizing global struggles.

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**In this backgrounder the word “peasant,” when used to describe Vía Campesina’s constituency, comprehends many occupational groups including landless agricultural workers, fishers, small-scale farmers, and others.*

Notes

1 This backgrounder is drawn from my doctoral research entitled “The Vía Campesina: Peasants Resisting Global-ization.” Sections of the dissertation were revised and published as the following articles:

Desmarais, Annette Aurélie. Forthcoming. “The Power of Peasants: Reflections on the Meanings of the Vía Campesina.” *Journal of Rural Studies*.

Desmarais, Annette Aurélie. 2004. “The Vía Campesina: Peasant Women on the Frontiers of Food Sovereignty.” *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 23(1): 140– 145.

Desmarais, Annette Aurélie. 2003. “The WTO ...will meet somewhere, sometime. And we will be there!” Part of a series entitled *VOICES: The Rise of Nongovernmental Voices in Multilateral Organizations*. North-South Institute: Ottawa. Available online at http://www.nsi-ins.ca/english/pdf/Voices_WTO_Desmarais.pdf.

Desmarais, Annette Aurélie. 2002. “The Vía Campesina: Consolidating an International Peasant and Farm Movement,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 29(2): 91– 124.

For other articles on the Vía Campesina see:

Patel, Rajeev. 2005. “International Agrarian Restructuring and the Practical Ethics of Peasant Movement Solidarity.” Centre for Civil Society Occasional Paper Series, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Borras, Saturnino M. 2004. “La Vía Campesina: An Evolving Transnational Social Movement.” Briefing Series No 6, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam. Available online at <http://www.tni.org/reports/newpol/campesina.pdf>.

Edelman, Marc. 2003. “Transnational Peasant and Farmer Movements and Networks.” In M. Kaldor, H. Anheier, and M. Glasius (eds.), *Global Civil Society Yearbook 2003*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 185–220.

2 This list of strategies is adapted from a short document entitled “Backgrounder on the Vía Campesina” prepared for distribution at the Fourth International Conference of the Vía Campesina.

3 The events surrounding the WTO’s Fifth Ministerial were covered in detail by *La Jornada*, September 10–15, 2003. These articles can be accessed at www.jornada.unam.mx.

4 Cited from Desmarais "The Power of Peasants: Reflections on the Meanings of the *Vía Campesina*," *Journal of Rural Studies*, (forthcoming).

5 The massacre occurred on the eve of the *Vía Campesina*'s Second International Conference held in Tlaxcala, Mexico. Those killed were members of Brazil's *Movimento Sem Terra* (MST), the *Vía Campesina*'s Regional Coordinator for South America, while they were marching to the state capital (Belém) to demand resolution of a land dispute.

6 The NOUMINREN's membership was approved at the Southeast and East Asia Regional meeting held in Dili, Timor-Leste on May 16–19, 2005. NOUMINREN is now considered a provisional member and formal integration into the *Vía Campesina* will occur at the next International Conference of the *Vía Campesina*, scheduled for 2008.

7 The *Vía Campesina* first introduced the concept of food sovereignty at the World Food Summit in 1996 in a document entitled "The Right to Produce and Access to Land." It further defined the concept in the position paper "Food Sovereignty and International Trade," which was approved at the Third International Conference of the *Vía Campesina* in 2000. Since then the *Vía Campesina* has worked with other social movements, nongovernmental organizations, and research institutions involved in the Agri-Trade Network to elaborate a more detailed discussion found in "The World Is Not for Sale: Priority to Peoples' Food Sovereignty." This document is available on line at <http://www.peoplesfoodsovereignty.org/>. Peter Rosset provides an excellent overview of food sovereignty in the Fall 2003 Food First *Backgrounder*, "Food Sovereignty: Global Rallying Cry of Farmer Movements" Vol. 9, No. 4.