

Introduction to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants: A Legal Instrument for Achieving Food Sovereignty in Canada and Internationally

By the NFU's International Programs Committee (IPC)

In 2023 the NFU adopted a policy calling on Canada to adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP).¹

WHAT IS A UNITED NATIONS (UN) DECLARATION?

UN Declarations such as the UNDROP, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, are important but non-binding documents adopted through votes by the 193 member state UN General Assembly. They are roadmaps for national governments implementing human rights on specific issues. UN Declarations are non-binding, so social movements and civil society groups must struggle to put the declarations into effect.

WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF THE UNDROP?

Beginning in 2003, La Via Campesina (LVC) and our allies drafted and lobbied for the UNDROP at the UN. While LVC focuses on grassroots direct action and advocacy, it has also entered the UN arena as a prominent global social movement to champion food sovereignty. After 17 years of negotiations and struggle, LVC successfully brought the UNDROP to the Human Rights Council, and eventually the General Assembly. 121 States voted in favour (8 declined, 54 abstained). Canada abstained.

WHO IS A PEASANT?

In the Declaration, a peasant is “any person who engages or who seeks to engage, alone, or in association with others or as a community, in small-scale agricultural production for subsistence and/or for the market, and who relies significantly, though not necessarily exclusively, on family or household labour and other non-monetized ways of organizing labour, and who has a special dependency on and attachment to the land.” Peasants include family farmers, small-scale farmers, and farmworkers. They are found in virtually all countries around the world. Peasants grow a significant amount of the world's food and are intimately connected to the land they steward. By this definition, peasants are ‘people of the land’, as former NFU President, Nettie Wiebe, has described them.

The UNDROP seeks to protect peasants who are routinely and sometimes violently undermined by the corporate, globalized food system. As neoliberal trade agreements, the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, war and conflict, and other interlinked crises, make peasants more vulnerable to exploitation, dispossession, extreme crop and livelihood loss, forced migration, violence, and criminalization, the legal protections outlined within the UNDROP are crucial to peasant rights and struggles for food sovereignty.

WHAT IS THE UNDROP AND WHY IS IT RELEVANT IN CANADA?

The UNDROP advocates for the rights of peasants. Despite Canada's abstention during its vote, it is relevant within the Canadian legal system because it is considered international law. There are many articles in the Declaration that directly relate to farmer's and farmworker's livelihoods - many of whom the Canadian

¹ The UNDROP is available to read here: <https://shorturl.at/5iOm1>

government turns its back on in favour of corporate interests. Here are just two of the 28 rights enshrined in the Declaration that may be relevant to Canadian farmers and farmworkers:

Article 4. Women's and gender rights	Article 14. Rights of Farmworkers	Article 19. Rights to Seed
<i>Article 4 states that peasant women and others working in rural areas have a right to live free from discrimination and violence, and to have equal access to the highest standard of physical and mental health. The NFU stands for these values and against violence against women, especially Indigenous women, and gender diverse people.</i>	<i>Article 14 states that peasants, including temporary, seasonal, and migrant workers, have the right to work in safe and healthy working conditions. Migrant farmworkers and their allies in Canada, including the NFU, are calling for these rights to be respected and for permanent resident status to remedy unjust labour and living conditions.</i>	<i>Article 19 calls for the right to seed sovereignty to be enshrined in national policies. In Canada, public seed breeding programs and farmer's right to save seed have been under threat from corporate-government collusion for years, requiring a shift to rights-based seed policy to ensure farmer's livelihoods and biodiversity are protected.</i>

WHAT IS CANADA'S POSITION ON the UNDROP?

At the 2018 vote on the UNDROP, Canada abstained. Our government erroneously believes that the UNDROP does not apply to 'developed' countries. Like many other Global North countries, Canada fails to acknowledge that the challenges of farmworkers and small-and-medium scale farmers in Canada are similar to those of our counterparts in other countries. Underlying this failure is the Canadian government's commitment to neoliberal policies that limit recognition of collective rights and, instead, champion the rights of individuals understood in competitive market terms (e.g. privatization, wealth accumulation). In addition, many of the Canadian government's foreign policies have deep implications for peasants around the world. For example, our free trade policies and reliance on 'cheap' imports and food dumping are undermining peasant markets in the Global South. And when the operations of Canadian mining companies dispossess peasants and Indigenous Peoples from their lands and pollute local environments, this also compromises the rights of peasants.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO ADVANCE PEASANT RIGHTS?

As a founding member of La Via Campesina, we have an opportunity to use the UNDROP to advance food sovereignty and the work of the NFU, here in Canada and globally. Here's what we can do:

- At events or at your kitchen table, spread the word about the rights and values enshrined in UNDROP by initiating conversation about it with other farmers and farmworkers.
- Ask difficult questions, such as: which of these rights are being violated for me, or for my neighbor? How can we hold the government accountable to respect and implement these new rights?
- Attend and spread the word about NFU and LVC events and campaigns about the UNDROP.
- Connect existing NFU advocacy efforts with articles in the Declaration - where do they meet?
- Ask your elected officials whether they are familiar with the UNDROP - if not, give them a copy of the Declaration and explain why it's relevant to farmers and farmworkers here.
- Join the International Programs Committee to get involved with UNDROP advocacy! Contact ipccordinator@nfu.ca.

END

Removed: WHERE IS THE ACCOUNTABILITY?

UN Declarations are non-binding, so when member states adopt them, there is no binding mechanism to ensure they implement them. Instead, the social advocacy groups are often burdened with the ongoing struggle to put declarations into effect.

The UN facilitates “soft” accountability mechanisms, including what are known as special procedures. In October 2023, the Human Rights Council established a special procedure called the UN Working Group on UNDROP to promote the implementation of the Declaration. The Working Group is composed of five independent experts - including members and allies of La Via Campesina - who hold three year terms with a mandate to embark on country visits to compile violations of peasants rights and offer recommendations for implementation of the UNDROP into national policy frameworks.