

La Vía Campesina

Globalizing Peasants

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About seven years ago while looking for an appropriate graduate school I had an interesting discussion with an anthropologist who, after hearing about my intent to study a global peasant movement, looked at me askance and said, “But peasants no longer exist!” She then proceeded to provide me with numerous academic sources indicating just that.¹ I found this encounter quite disconcerting because I had been working for about ten years with people from around the world who called themselves peasants. In fact, for years I had heard numerous comments similar to the following one made by Marcel Carreon Mundo (2000), a Mexican peasant leader, during my interview with him: “A campesino comes from the countryside. There have always been campesinos. What did not exist before were investors, industrialists, political parties, etc. Campesinos have always existed and they will always exist. They will never be abolished.” My interaction with the anthropologist reaffirmed my desire and commitment to document and analyze the formation, consolidation, and functioning of the transnational peasant movement called La Vía Campesina.²

My interest in researching peasants is both personal and political. I was a farmer for about fourteen years in Saskatchewan, Canada, but it was not until I was in Nicaragua, teaching preventative maintenance of farm machinery to members of agricultural cooperatives, that I began to understand the importance of farmers being organized.³ When I returned to Canada, I was hired to work with the Canadian National Farmers Union (NFU) to facilitate the building of linkages between the NFU and its counterparts around the world. In this capacity, I have worked as technical support to La Vía Campesina since its inception in 1993. My motive in conducting research on and with La Vía Campesina is to support and accompany the movement in its efforts for social change. An important contribution in this

process is to privilege the experiences, voices, and visions of peasants, rural women, and farmers themselves, which I aim to do in this chapter.

The chapter begins with a brief introduction to La Vía Campesina, followed by an examination of the factors that contributed to the rise, consolidation, and global articulation of this growing rural movement. The discussion then addresses two key elements of Vía Campesina's resistance to neoliberal globalization: the successful building of unity within diversity, and the deeply political act of articulating a peasant identity.

What Is La Vía Campesina?

Formally constituted in 1993, La Vía Campesina is a transnational movement that embraces organizations of peasants, small- and medium-scale farmers, rural women, farmworkers, and indigenous agrarian communities based in the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Africa. The movement is the most important global rural social movement to have emerged in recent times, and it continues to gain momentum.

Whenever and wherever global institutions meet to discuss agricultural and food issues, La Vía Campesina is now there. At ministerial conferences of the World Trade Organization (WTO), meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and gatherings of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Social Forum, among others, the presence of Vía Campesina has not gone unnoticed.⁴

Since La Vía Campesina's inception, farming peoples around the world have marched together in the streets of Paris, Geneva, Seattle, Rome, Genoa, Porto Alegre, Quebec City, Jakarta, and Hong Kong, among other cities. With its members wearing dark green caps, *pañuelos* (handkerchiefs), and white t-shirts, waving green flags all decorated with its brightly colored logo, and energetically chanting slogans, La Vía Campesina has become an increasingly visible actor of radical opposition to the globalization of a neoliberal and corporate model of agriculture (Desmarais 2005).

This resistance took an extreme turn on September 10, 2003—the first day of the Fifth Ministerial Conference of the WTO, held in Cancún, Mexico—with the tragic death of the Korean farm leader, Lee Kyung Hae. Lee, along with another 120 Koreans, had joined La Vía Campesina's delegation in Cancún in efforts to get the WTO out of agriculture. Wearing a sign that said “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.

This ultimate and tragic act of resistance symbolized what La Vía Campesina had been saying all along: liberalization of agriculture is a war on peasants; it decimates rural communities and destroys farming families. Lee’s desperate cry for change subsequently helped strengthen La Vía Campesina as it has since declared September 10 an International Day of Protest against the WTO. On that day, organizations in many countries mobilize for food sovereignty. Clearly, Lee’s death has not been in vain.

The growing visibility of La Vía Campesina as a key actor, strongly rooted in local communities while at the same time increasingly engaged and more skillful on the international stage, has attracted the attention of many rural organizations in search of alternatives. Initially, when the movement was first formed in 1993 it brought together 46 organizations from 5 world regions. By 2000, when the Third International Conference was held in Bangalore, India, 101 organizations were members. During the movement’s Fourth International Conference, held in Itaici, Brazil in June 2004, 42 additional organizations joined La Vía Campesina (Desmarais 2007). Nearly half of these are peasant organizations based in Asia, where the majority of the world’s peasants live. Shortly after the Fourth International Conference the Central American region formally dissolved ASOCODE (the Central American Association of Peasant Organizations for Cooperation and Development, a regional organization that had existed prior to La Vía Campesina) and created a new regional entity called Vía Campesina Centroamericana, which now embraces 26 organizations. Thus in 2007 La Vía Campesina had on the order of 149 member organizations from 56 countries. As table 1.1 illustrates, the International Coordinating Committee of La Vía Campesina consists of 2 organizations from each of 8 world regions.⁵

Origins of La Vía Campesina

Clearly, La Vía Campesina is filling an important void. To better understand this rural movement let us consider why La Vía Campesina was formed and how it succeeded in consolidating itself as a transnational movement. Here, Alberto Gómez (interview, 2000), one of the regional coordinators for La Vía Campesina, highlights the driving force that pushed peasants and farmers to work together across borders:

Table 1.1. International Coordinating Committee of La Vía Campesina, 2007

Region	No. of Members	Representatives	
North America	11	UNORCA (Mexico)	Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas
Central America	26	NFFC (USA)	National Family Farm Coalition
		COCOCH (Honduras)	Consejo Coordinador de Organizaciones Campesinas de Honduras
Caribbean	11	ATC (Nicaragua)	Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo
		ANAP (Cuba)	Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños
South America	30	CONAMUCA (Dominican Republic)	Confederación Nacional de Mujeres del Campo
		MST (Brazil)	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra
Europe	23	FNMCB-BS (Bolivia)	Federación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas de Bolivia "Bartolina Sisa"
		CPE (Belgium)	Coordinadora Campesina Europea
East/ Southeast Asia	23	FSPI (Indonesia)	Federation of Indonesia Peasant Union
South Asia	20	KWFA (Korea)	Korean Women's Peasant Association
		KRRS (India)	Karnataka Rajya Ryota Sangha
Africa	5	BKF (Bangladesh)	Bangladesh Krishok Federation
		UNAC (Mozambique)	União Nacional de Camponeses
		CNOP (Mali)	Coordination National de Organizations Paysannes
Total	149		

Source: Compiled by the author from a list of member organizations in the draft conference proceedings of the Fourth International Conference of La Vía Campesina held in Brazil in 2004.

Globalization is affecting us in distinct ways, our lives and our patrimony. Globalization is a global offensive against the countryside; it is a global offensive against small producers and family farmers that are not in the logic of an "efficient" countryside, an industrialized countryside. It is a global advancement against peasants' and small producers' visions for resource management, conservation of biodiversity, and all of these issues. . . . We are all facing the same enemies in this globalization. And, all of these have first and last names, they are the big companies, the transnationals. So, there are different circumstances, but we are facing the same global tendency driven by the governments of the richest countries for the benefit of the large transnationals.