GRASSROOTS VOICES
Linking farmers’ movements for advocacy and practice

Eric Holt-Giménez, Guest Editor

Introduction

Eric Holt-Giménez

Over the last few decades two, often distinct, movements have emerged which focus on advocacy for smallholder farmers. First there are peasant organisations and federations focusing primarily on new agrarian advocacy, such as Vía Campesina, and second there are groups made up of smallholders working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that focus primarily on developing sustainable agriculture, such as Campesino a Campesino (Farmer to Farmer) of Latin America, Participatory Land Use Management (PELUM) in Africa, or the Farmer Field Schools in Asia. While sometimes involving the same people in the same places, they have often remained separate. Drawing on a range of experiences from across the world, this Grassroots Voices section asks why, and what opportunities there are for greater synergies and interactions, if causes and objectives are similar.

The political and institutional origins of these movements are different, and this has at times led to contradictory, competitive, and even adversarial relations, particularly between NGOs implementing programmes in the interests of farmers, and farmer’s organisations interested in implementing their own programmes. Nonetheless, at both the farm and the international level, there is clear objective synergy between the agrarian demands of today’s peasant organisations, and the needs of the growing base of smallholders practicing sustainable agriculture as a means of survival.

Agrarian advocacy: the peasant road

In 1993 farm leaders from around the world gathered in Mons, Belgium for a conference on policy research put on by a Dutch NGO allied with the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), an international farm federation dominated by large-scale, northern farmers. What emerged instead was an international peasant movement: La Via Campesina. The emergence of an international peasant-led farmer federation signified both a break with conventional federations run by large producers and with NGOs typically concerned with peasant agricultural production. The Mons declaration asserted the right of small farmers to...
make a living in the countryside, the right of all people to healthy food, and the right of nations to define their own agricultural polices (Desmarais 2007).

Since its inception, Via Campesina’s main objective has been to halt neoliberalism and construct alternative food systems based on food sovereignty. It was formed with organisations mostly from the Americas and Europe, but has since expanded to include more than 150 rural social movements from over 79 countries, including 12 countries in Africa and scores of organisations in South and East Asia. Unlike its large farmer counterpart IFAP, Via Campesina is made up almost entirely of marginalised groups: landless workers, small farmers, sharecroppers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, and the peri-urban poor.

La Via Campesina has been remarkably successful in creating the political space in which to advance its platform of food sovereignty, getting the World Trade Organisation (WTO) out of agriculture, women’s rights, sustainable agriculture, a ban on genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and redistributive agrarian reform. The movement was instrumental in organising protests at WTO ministerial meetings from Seattle to Hong Kong. Via Campesina played the lead role in the FAO International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 2006, and mounted successful resistance campaigns to the World Bank’s market-led land reform programmes.

La Via Campesina has also been among the most vocal critics of institutional responses to the global food crisis. At the High Level Task force meeting on the food crisis in Madrid, Spain, Via Campesina released a declaration demanding that solutions to the food crisis be completely independent of the institutions responsible for creating the crisis in the first place (i.e. the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), etc.). The declaration re-affirmed the call for food sovereignty, demanded an end to land grabs for industrial agrofuel and foreign food production, and called on the international community to reject the (new) Green Revolution and instead support the findings of the United Nation’s (UN) International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). This seminal assessment, sponsored by five UN agencies and the World Bank and authored by over 400 scientists and development experts from more than 80 countries, concluded that there is an urgent need to increase and strengthen further research and adoption of locally appropriate and democratically controlled agro-ecological methods of production, relying on local expertise, local germplasm, and farmer-managed, local seed systems (see Holt-Giménez et al. 2009).

Agrarian practice: agroecological transformations

Farmers helping their brothers, so that they can help themselves… to find solutions and not be dependent on a technician or on the bank: that is Campesino a Campesino.

Argelio González, Santa Lucía, Nicaragua, 1991

The quote above is the farmer’s definition of Latin America’s 30-year farmer-led movement for sustainable agriculture. El Movimiento Campesino a Campesino, or the Farmer to Farmer Movement, is made up of hundreds of thousands of peasant-technicians (promotores) farming and working in over a dozen countries. Campesino a Campesino began with a series of rural projects among the indigenous smallholders of the ecologically fragile hillsides of the Guatemalan...
Highlands in the early 1970s. Sponsored by progressive NGOs, Mayan peasants developed a method for agricultural improvement using relatively simple methods of small-scale experimentation combined with farmer-led workshops to share their discoveries. Because they were producing at relatively low levels, they concentrated on overcoming the most commonly limiting factors of production in peasant agriculture, i.e. soil and water. By adding organic matter to soils, and by implementing soil and water conservation techniques, they frequently obtained yield increases of 100–400 percent. Rapid, recognisable results helped build enthusiasm among farmers and led to the realisation that they could improve their own agriculture – without running the risks, causing the environmental damage, or developing the financial dependency associated with the Green Revolution. Initial methods of composting, soil and water conservation, and seed selection soon developed into a sophisticated ‘basket’ of sustainable technologies and agroecological management approaches that included green manures, crop diversification, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), biological weed control, reforestation, and agrobiodiversity management at farm and watershed scales (see Holt-Giménez 2006).

The effective, low-cost methods for farmer-generated technologies and farmer-to-farmer knowledge transfer were quickly picked up by NGOs working in agricultural development. The failures of the Green Revolution to improve smallholder livelihoods in Central America, and the region’s revolutionary uprisings and counterrevolutionary conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s combined to create both the need and the means for the growth of what became the Campesino a Campesino movement. As credit, seeds, extension services, and markets continually failed the peasantry, smallholders turned to NGOs rather than governments to meet their agricultural needs. The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s exacerbated the conditions of the peasantry. In response, the Campesino a Campesino movement grew, spreading through NGOs to hundreds of thousands of smallholders across the Americas (Bröt fur die Welt 2006). Though the movement was routinely dismissed by the international agricultural research centres for ‘lacking science’ and making unverified claims of sustainability, in Central America following Hurricane Mitch (1998), some 2000 promotores (farmer-technicians) from Campesino a Campesino carried out scientific research to prove that their farms were significantly more resilient and sustainable than those of their conventional neighbours (Holt-Giménez 2001).

One of Campesino a Campesino’s most dramatic success stories has been in Cuba, where its farmer-driven agroecological practices helped the country transform much of its agriculture from high external input, large-scale systems to smaller, low-input, organic systems. This conversion was instrumental in helping Cuba overcome its food crisis during the Special Period following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Cuban Campesino a Campesino Agroecology Movement (MACAC) was implemented through ANAP, the national association of small farmers. The MACAC grew in a structural environment in which Cuba’s numerous agricultural research stations and agricultural universities worked to develop bio-fertilizers, integrated pest management, and other techniques for low external-input agriculture. Reforms were enacted to scale down collectives and cooperatives, placing greater control over farming and marketing directly into the hands of smallholders. Rural and urban farmers were provided easy access to land, credit, and markets (Funes et al. 2002). In eight years, the Campesino a Campesino movement of Cuba grew to over 100,000 smallholders. It had taken the movement nearly twenty years in Mexico and Central America to grow to that size (Holt-Giménez 1996).
The farmer to farmer agricultural development methods have been fairly universalised among NGOs working in agro-ecological development, leading to highly successful farmer-generated agroecological practices worldwide (as well as a fair amount of methodological co-optation on the part of international agricultural research centres). The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) developed in Madagascar has raised yields to as high as eight tons/ha and spread to a million farmers in over two dozen countries (Uphoff 2000). A survey of 45 sustainable agriculture projects in 17 African countries covering some 730,000 households revealed that agroecological approaches substantially improved food production and household food security. In 95 percent of these projects, cereal yields improved by 50 to 100 percent (Pretty et al. 2003). A study of organic agriculture on the continent showed that small-scale, modern, organic agriculture was widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, contributing significantly to improved yields, incomes, and environmental services (Pretty et al. 2008). Over 170 African organisations from nine countries in East and Southern Africa belong to Participatory Land Use Management (PELUM), a network that has been sharing agroecological knowledge in East and South Africa for thirteen years (http://www.pelum.net/). For twenty years, the Center for Low External Input Sustainable Agriculture (LEISA), has documented hundreds of agroecological alternatives that successfully overcome many of the limiting factors in African agriculture and elsewhere in the Global South (http://www.leisa.info/).

The divide between practitioners and advocates

I think we should not fall into the trap of seeing the development of agroecology by just looking at the physical aspects of the farm or just at the economics. We as NGOs have a problem with our social position in which we are serving as a dike and often an obstacle to processes of agency within the people and greater local organization. . . . Agroecology is not just a collection of practices. Agroecology is a way of life . . . We can’t have an agroecological change without a campesino movement. We NGOs can accompany them, but we can’t do it. We promote projects, and projects have a short life. They are unsustainable. (Nelda Sánchez, Mesoamerican Information System for Sustainable Agriculture)

Though the farmer-to-farmer-NGO partnership has been highly effective in supporting local projects and developing sustainable practices on the ground, unlike Via Campesina, it has done little to address the need for an enabling policy context for sustainable agriculture. Given the unfavourable structural conditions, agroecological practices have not scaled up nationally to become the rule rather the exception (Holt-Giménez 1996). Despite far-flung farmer-to-farmer networks linked by hundreds of NGOs, farmers in these movements have generally not lobbied, pressured, taken direct action, or otherwise organised in favour of sustainable agriculture in a significant way. The farmers of PELUM in West Africa excel in agroecological farming but until recently were largely uninvolved in policy advocacy. The renowned Farmer Field Schools of Asia have revolutionised Integrated Pest Management and pioneered participatory plant breeding, but have not been a political force in preserving agrobiodiversity or defending farmer’s rights.

Ironically, the strength of these farmer to farmer networks – i.e. their capacity to generate farmer’s agroecological knowledge in a horizontal, widespread, and decentralised fashion – is also a political weakness. On one hand, there are no coordinating bodies within these networks capable of mobilising farmers for social pressure, advocacy, or political action. On the other, their effectiveness at developing
sustainable agriculture at the local level has kept its promoters focused on improving agroecological practices rather than addressing the political and economic conditions for sustainable agriculture.

While the potential synergies between a global peasant federation advocating food sovereignty and far-flung smallholder movements practicing agroecology may seem obvious, efforts to bring agrarian advocacy to farmer-to-farmer networks have run up against the historical distrust between development NGOs implementing sustainable agriculture projects and the peasant organisations that make up the new agrarian movements. Aside from having assumed many of the tasks previously expected of the state, NGOs have become an institutional means to advance social and political agendas within the disputed political terrain of civil society. Within the institutional landscape of agricultural development some NGOs are enrolled either directly or indirectly in the neoliberal project. Others are simply doing what they do best and tend to look out for their own programmes. But others are deeply concerned that advancing the practices of sustainable agriculture without addressing the conditions for sustainability will ultimately end in failure. These NGOs are potential links to vast informal networks of smallholders who are committed to transforming agriculture. Over the last thirty years the farmers in these networks have demonstrated their capacity to share information and knowledge. Their commitment to agroecological agriculture has resulted in a body of agrarian demands specific to sustainable peasant agriculture. It is now common among these farmers to hear the term food sovereignty. However, because most of these farmers do not belong to the farmer organisations that make up Via Campesina, there are few, if any, avenues for them to exercise this commitment politically.

Overview

In the following articles seven prominent agrarian advocates and long-time agroecological practitioners directly address the challenges of integrating these two trends in contemporary peasant movements. Renowned expert Roland Bunch, author of the seminal people-centred development handbook *Two Ears of Corn* (1982), asks, ‘Can promoters of development and activists for land reform unite?’ Bunch points to the imperative of sustainably productive land reforms in the face of the separate and often conflicting agendas of land reform organisations and organisations for agricultural improvement in Guatemala, a country in which both struggles have experienced emblematic successes as well as devastating failures.

Jorge Irán Vázquez, a veteran of Central America’s *Campesino a Campesino* movement, writes of the differences between agrarian activists and sustainable farmers in Nicaragua, and of the tragic failures of the Nicaraguan land reform cooperatives as the result of their inability to integrate the goals of sustainable production and land reform. However, he also identifies a successful experience of agrarian/productive convergence at the municipal level in the Nicaraguan Department of Matagalpa, where sustainable agricultural *promotores* mobilise to protect their native seeds through integrated peasant-based policies.

John Wilson from Zimbabwe, who helped establish the Participatory Ecological Land Use Management Network (PELUM), describes the widespread rise of agroecological approaches in East and Southern Africa in response to the failure of state-led, industrial, and conventional projects for agricultural development. The influence of smallholder movements and the growing threat of GMOs led many
members of PELUM to engage in more agrarian advocacy as well as agroecological capacity building and resulted in the formation of a new regional farmer’s network – ESAFF (East and Southern African Farmers’ Forum). The tensions between advocacy and practice persist, however, even as practice-oriented NGOs and agrarian advocacy groups begin to see themselves as part of a larger movement to develop civil society.

In an interview with Eric Holt-Giménez, Alberto Gómez, an agrarian militant from Mexico’s UNORCA (National Union of Peasant Organizations) and member of the coordinating body of La Vía Campesina, speaks frankly about the urgent need for many peasant organisations to renew themselves in the face of the agrarian crisis. Gomez argues that leaders and advocates within the peasant organisations must double their efforts to reach out to women, fishers, pastoralists, rural youth, environmentalists, and urban labour groups at the grassroots. He cautiously advises establishing alliances with ‘respectful’ NGOs, specifying the importance of peasant autonomy in these relationships.

Michel Pimbert and Bary Boukary share an experience-in-progress in which peasant advocacy organisations and NGO practitioners have converged around a common agenda for democratising agricultural research. Both advocates and practitioners are dissatisfied with conventional research systems that do not allow farmers a say in setting priorities, framing agendas, developing methods, or analysing and implementing the results of agricultural research. Pimbert and Boukary relate the process and share case studies of ‘citizen juries’ formed by farm leaders, progressive researchers, and NGO technicians to evaluate, deliberate, and publicly pronounce on equity and sustainability of conventional research systems and initiatives.

Farmer-activist Cathleen Kneen brings a northern perspective to the conversation, and looks at the People’s Food Policy Project in Canada, an experience that has brought together a broad array of organisations in the food movement. While the Canadian National Farmer’s Union (NFU) is a member of Vía Campesina, family farmers in Canada do not consider themselves as ‘peasants’. The widespread penetration of industrial agriculture into family farming has driven most of these farmers into export-led production models. The consumer-based Canadian food security movement, the organic movement, indigenous movements, and the growing urban farming movements have carried out on-the-ground activities to counter the growing deterioration of the food system, and are converging around a platform of food sovereignty. The People’s Food Policy Project builds alliances between these movements and the NFU to collectively change the food system.

References
Roland Bunch

For far too long, agricultural development promoters and land reform activists have gone their own ways, each of them trying to solve the problem of smallholder poverty by themselves. By doing so, each of us is trying, as the popular expression goes, to walk with only one leg. Yet the impossibility of each group’s succeeding alone is every day more apparent.

The need for unity

The argument that development organisations need to work also to support land reform is fairly straightforward: virtually no farmer with less than a quarter of a hectare of land can properly feed and educate his or her children, no matter how productive the farm becomes. And in most cases, of course, the amount of land needed to produce a decent living standard is far more than a quarter of a hectare. Farmer families are finding more and more ways to produce ‘off-farm’ income, but far too often these are nothing more than desperate forays into a labour market that already pays indecently low wages. That development work has not succeeded in making things better is patently evident in the fact that after four decades of development efforts across the developing world, we have as many poor today as we did forty years ago.

The argument that land reform organisations need to work also to support agricultural development is equally strong, but somewhat more complex. Probably the starkest evidence can be seen in what we might call the lack of sustainability of
land reforms. In Latin America, far too many of even fairly successful land reforms have eventually failed. In Mexico, where over 60 years ago most of the nation’s agricultural land was given to farmers’ organisations called ejidos, a significant part of that land has been sold since the law allowed ejidatarios to sell land about 15 years ago. More recently, a significant portion of the land awarded to smallholder farmers during land reforms in Honduras in the 1970s and in Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1980s, has been sold back to the large landowners. Decades of arduous work has gone up in smoke. Even worse, the possibility of future land reforms has been decreased because many of those who previously favoured land reform are now asking, ‘Why should we work and struggle for the landless to get land if they are just going to sell it back to the rich?’

Of course, conservative governments in Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador have created political and economic conditions under which the beneficiaries of land reform were at a disadvantage, but even if that had not happened, most of them would have sold their land eventually.

These long-term failures can be contrasted with the experience of one township in Guatemalan called San Martin Jilotepeque. Long one of the poorest townships in the Guatemalan highlands, San Martin had around 15,000 smallholder farmers averaging about one third of a hectare each, surrounded by huge landholdings measured in the hundreds of hectares. A development programme in San Martin (with which I worked for a year and a half) taught thousands of San Martin’s smallholder farmers how to raise their yields to levels between five and ten times their earlier harvests. The programme also bought a couple of large landholdings and sold them, at market rates, to smallholder farmers, with payment after each harvest. But what is most important is that since then, other smallholder farmers by the hundreds have been buying land from the rich landowners. The last time I visited San Martin, I happened to pass a dozen of the old hacienda houses and was told that all the land but a few acres around these old, rambling houses had been sold, acre by acre, to smallholder farmers. The contrast between San Martin and what has happened in Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua could hardly be greater. But why the difference?

Quite simply, in a competitive economic system, those who can produce more value on a piece of land will, over the long haul, come to own it. In most of Mesoamerica, large landholders can produce far more value on each hectare of land than most of the land reform beneficiaries can. Thus it behooves the smallholder to accept a price for his or her land that he could never make in ten to twenty years by farming the land, and it behooves the future landowner to offer that price because he can recoup it in four or five years. On the other hand, in San Martin, the villagers produce far better than the landowners. Thus, they can recoup the money they spend to buy the land in three to five years, whereas the large landowners would not make that much money from the land in ten years.

Can we only learn from failures? Are there not successes that show that development plus land reform can succeed? In fact, there are. The most dramatic cases of poverty-reduction in the world – those of China and Vietnam, with five hundred million people pulled up out of poverty between them – used precisely such a system, instituting major land reforms and then working hard to increase smallholder productivity. Japan, South Korea, and Israel would be other economic success stories in which some kind of land distribution was followed by intense efforts to increase the new landowners’ productivity, to the benefit of the rural poor as well as the entire economy.
The difficulty of achieving that unity

Nevertheless, though the need for both groups to work together is obvious and tremendously important, the effort to work with each other is not going to be easy.

Unfortunately, each group has operated very differently for decades. Agricultural development is usually seen as a process of farmers’ adopting technologies that will increase their yields. Organisation of the participants can be almost nonexistent, training and experimenting with technologies are the main activities, and the organisations promoting development generally try to maintain good relationships with as many other organisations in the country as is possible, including government agencies. Too often, politics is seen as being totally divorced from development.

Land reform activism is usually seen as a process of applying political pressure on governments to convince them of the need to redistribute land. Since the main activity is political activism that runs counter to the interests of the rich and powerful, strong organisations are essential, a certain level of secrecy is usually needed, conflictive relations with the government and the powerful are usually a necessity, and farming technology is seen as irrelevant to the effort. Thus, these organisations and their methods are totally different.

Very frequently, organisations that promote development see land reform activists as needlessly confrontational, as uselessly impatient, as the cause of needless violence and repression, and as people involved in a political process that is dirty and often largely hopeless. The land reform activists, however, look at promoters of development as also working at a hopeless effort that cannot succeed, as people who mistakenly think that every problem can be solved with a technology, as Pollyannas who delude themselves into thinking it is possible to make an omelet without cracking eggs, and, sometimes, as cowards who are afraid of taking the bull by the horns and doing what is necessary to bring real benefits to the smallholder farmers. Thus each group uses a different process to achieve different aims, and usually has little respect for the other group’s work. And both kinds of groups often compete for the same dollars from international donors. Thus, efforts to bring the two sides together often founder because of these differences and attitudes.

Interestingly, because the smallholder farmers and the landless usually desire both to obtain more land and to learn how to make it produce better, they often want to profit from both kinds of groups. But this makes the leaders of each group even more fearful of spanning the gap, because they each fear losing ‘their villagers’ to the other group. For instance, once activists have obtained land for their farmers, they sometimes fear that their farmers will become more interested in agricultural development, yet they know that to maintain political pressure on the government for more land, or to maintain the land already obtained, they will need the strong support of these farmers. They will sometimes, therefore, discourage their members from participating in development efforts. By the same token, employees of development organisations know their participants want land, and they often fear they will lose hard-won participants to activist organisations.

How can unity be achieved?

Our experience tells us there may be no simple answer. Certainly, each kind of organisation must first plainly admit that we do not have the total answer to the
problem. After that, a dialog between the personnel of both kinds of organisations would be useful. Visiting the results of each others’ successful work can often help each group understand the thinking and activities of the others.

Each group must deal honestly with the fears of the other. Each one should find ways to prevent their activities from alienating group members from the other group. Promoters should offer to train the political activists in the most important farming technologies, while activists must teach development organisations how to protect themselves from government repression. Where repression is particularly heavy, we may just have to admit that development organisations cannot get involved in activism, but find ways that their knowledge and teaching methods are learned by the personnel of activist organisations so they can and will train their groups in agriculture once they have obtained land.

Most of all, we must all admit that our goals of benefiting the villagers are much the same, and that we both will be walking with only one leg if we do not cooperate and collaborate with those working on the other side of the issue.

Roland Bunch has worked internationally in smallholder food production at the grassroots level for 38 years. He was the Central American Area Representative and worldwide Coordinator for Sustainable Agriculture for World Neighbors for 14 years. For another 12 years, he founded and coordinated COSECHA, a Honduran NGO and international consulting organisation that focused its work on the relationship between food production and the environment. Roland initiated the farmer-to-farmer extension system and the small-scale farmer experimentation methodology, now known as ‘participatory technology development’ (PTD), in 1968. These are described in *Two ears of corn, a guide to people-centered agricultural development*, published in 1982. Available in ten languages and with total sales of about 65,000 copies, it is the all-time best-seller ever written on agricultural extension in developing nations. Email: rolanbunchw@yahoo.com

**Two peasant-farmer movements, one ambition**

Jorge Irán Vasquez

In Nicaragua, there is a difference between the agrarian activist sector and those known as sustainable farmers; one of the reasons is the different origins of each of these sectors: the so-called agrarian activists or farm advocacy leaders have a rights-based motivation, while sustainable or agro-ecological farmers centre their objectives and tasks on purely productive techniques of agriculture as an alternative to conventional agriculture. Demands made by agrarian activists are usually politically pressing. In contrast, agro-ecological advocates promote more gradual processes, like learning and traineeship, while confronting the conventional agriculture model for farming activity, which refuses to change despite the alternative changes made on the farms of thousands of smallholder families. Another element to consider in the nature of these movements is the role of foreign aid in the agendas and processes that agro-ecological advocates promote. The agro-ecological movement in Nicaragua owes its development to the protagonism of the different NGO actors and farm organisations involved. The farmer to farmer network (CaC) is one of the initiatives that contribute to the movement, one that became well established in Nicaragua toward the end of the 1980s.
For over two decades, the CaC has made significant contributions to the Nicaraguan agro-ecological movement by cultivating farmer networks that encourage an alternative approach to farming and ranching. They have promoted a revaluation of local knowledge and have constantly maintained a highly-trained pool of promotores (peasant farmer-experts), who promote agroecological development in thousands of Nicaraguan communities.

Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that PCAC arose as a project of the National Nicaraguan Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG), they have not yet been able to incorporate their demands into UNAG’s agrarian agenda. These agroecological demands have been marginalised, creating a vacuum. The failure to incorporate agroecology with an agrarian vision has led some agro-ecological promotores to make erroneous decisions about their farms, especially those who received land under the Sandinista agrarian reform of the 1980s. In the 1990s under the Chamorro government, the parcelisation and sale of farmland belonging to agricultural cooperatives established during the agrarian reform were sold to agricultural businessmen. This led to agrarian issues being de-prioritised within the UNAG partly because the political situation was difficult to control. Moreover, the majority of food cooperatives that emerged during the agrarian reform fell apart mainly because of the failure to see the importance in combining both agro-ecological and agrarian concerns. Cooperatives failed to understand the importance of both defending and conserving their land.

Today’s farmer-led agro-ecological movement has a more defined profile and is gaining territory throughout the country. As part of this movement, the CaC has evolved; it began as a pilot project for soil and water conservation that opened the way to farmer participation, rural participation, local knowledge, capacity-building, and later, gradually incorporated a diversity of alternative technologies as well as educational methodologies, pioneering Nicaraguan sustainable agriculture, and serves as a progressive milestone for not only rural development organisations but also for educational institutions.

As a byproduct of this process, the advocates of the CaC offer a new role for peasant farmers in multiple settings, all the while assuming responsibility for local development and local change. To be part of a union like UNAG that provides space for political power is to facilitate conditions for merging ecological and social justice issues. This is how aspects such as management and advocacy in public policy evolve into task work for agro-ecological advocates of the CaC. Finally, we have reached a point where we find ourselves, for the last several years, as promoters closely linked to the mayoral office, municipal initiatives, and commissions within committee groups for civic development. This allows municipalities to include high priority issues related to agro-ecology on their agendas, which firmly directs the unification of specific interests voiced by organisations of a given territory.

One emblematic and representative case is that of the San Ramon municipality, Department of Matagalpa, where there are commissions under the Council for Municipal Development (CDM); one of these is the commission of the environment, whose coordinator is the city’s CaC representative. Consequently, one can target a range of topics – such as the protection of water springs, deforestation, forest reserves, conservation, and the protection of native and creolised seeds – as improvement for local biodiversity and as a high priority topic on the municipal agenda. Also achieved was the consolidation of a block of twelve NGOs and unions present in San Ramon, where agro-ecological promoters assumed a much more
militant and active role. In 2008 these organisations and unions converged to carry out a municipal study that recognised native and creolised seeds in San Ramon. This allowed them to consolidate a network of community seed banks and one municipal seed bank. This illustrates that in this example of CaC’s role in the Nicaraguan agro-ecological movement, peasant-farmer leaders have moved themselves into local decision-making positions, which has a major territorial impact since community participation and action are on the right track to solving pressing agro-ecological problems.

One initiative that began to transform the way agriculture and community participation were practiced in development is by way of simplicity and efficiency. This takes the form of utilising their own resources, convincing others to participate in the movement by sharing existing practices from one farmer to another, and continually evolving in the field where local decision-making is practiced. This is how biodiversity conservation, such as the recovery of native and creolised seeds, with the assisting arm of municipalities and local organisations, has spread. This makes it clear why in 2008 San Ramon launched the first municipal order in Nicaragua that declared San Ramon (Matagalpa) a ‘Territory Free of Transgenics’. This action entails more than just a jurisdiction against the introduction of transgenics in the municipality, but more importantly, it commits the mayor’s office and its representatives to support the conservation and protection of their own resources in honour of preserving ‘National Genetic Wealth’. This decree not only continues to impact the municipality and organisations where it exists, but it also becomes a model to be used in other municipalities, organisations, and local and national networks. The campaign, ‘Seeds of Identity’, has become a model for action in six other municipalities in Nicaragua. In addition, the decree has been transformed into a demand made for the agro-ecological movement by smallholder peasant farmers, who, as history shows us, simply wish to protect and conserve their local seeds.

Consequentially, a joint effort with governmental institutions hopes to initiate a seed study in two municipalities of the Department of Matagalpa (San Dionisio and San Ramon), where there is strong CaC presence. Their goal is to identify native and local seed varieties and increase their reproduction to make them available to governmental programmes that distribute seeds for agriculture to poor rural families. This proposal is on the track of fortifying methods of food sovereignty while making good use of native seed resources that are often underestimated in local agro biodiversity.

The topic of biodiversity, particularly the recovery of native and creolised seeds, within the larger spectrum of the agro-ecological movement in Nicaragua, is moving into an arena of development that requires greater articulation and cohesion with the movement of agrarian activists. Since the topic of food sovereignty is common to both movements, and since agrarian activists defend the demands of sustainable peasant-farmers, it is not only possible to create a foundation in which both can support each other symbiotically, but such a platform is necessary in order for each movement to combat its own deeply-rooted problems. Likewise, to encourage both movements through their organisations would fashion a complementary and mutual relationship.

Another possible result of such a convergence is the inclusion of any issues relevant to agriculture. This means that proposals encouraged by sustainable peasant-farmers should combine sustainable agriculture with agrarian issues, and in a manner in which the promotion of local capacity and exchange of knowledge will
contribute to the formation of a single strategic vision for both movements. Activists of either movement will recognise and stress the use of successful methods responsible for the achievement of this synergy. The fact that both movements share common interests such as the defense of land itself leads us to believe that it is possible for them to converge.

In order to achieve convergence between the two movements, internal strength is vital. The legal and political climates need to be conducive to agro-ecological initiatives in order for such initiatives to have any effect. The CaC network conceived a formulaic process by which policy and participation of peasant-farmer networks could work together to stimulate sustainable agriculture. Although this process has not been presented to the national assembly, it would be convenient if the CaC could return to an agrarian-focused agenda as well as one focused on inclusivity and integrity.

The government could actually link land title programmes to rural families so as to determine what it is that contributes to the success of sustainable management of government-awarded land. This should be established into a political decree that in turn can obtain support in the development of farmer network and NGO policy – both of which are clearly bound together – towards the grander promotion of agro-ecology.

It is a strategic matter for both visionaries to unite: agro ecology and agrarian-rights advocates. Should they unite, they can achieve an intersection of human interests. To reach this point requires a deep understanding of this fusion which necessitates a solid relationship between unions, NGOs, government, and the greater public community.

Jorge Irán Vasquez is the Director of the Farmer to Farmer Programme (Programa Campesino a Campesino) of the National Farmer’s and Rancher’s Union of Nicaragua (UNAG). Trained in forestry and agroecology, Jorge has been with Campesino a Campesino since its inception in Nicaragua in 1987. He has been instrumental in introducing various national programmes for farmer-led sustainable agriculture in Nicaragua and Central America, including, the Seed Identities Campaign (Semillas de Identidad), and Equity and Democratic Participation. Email: jorgeiranus@yahoo.com

Creating movement and momentum – a reflective piece on NGO sustainable agriculture support to farmers in east and southern Africa

John Wilson

I work as a facilitator in east and southern Africa and this contribution is very much my personal reflection and not the reflection of any organisation. It is based on my various experiences in the growth and development of sustainable agriculture as a recognised practice in the region, first as a small farmer myself, then as coordinator of a new centre promoting ecologically-sound agriculture in Zimbabwe, then as the first coordinator of the PELUM Association, then as a ‘mentor’ working individually with sustainable agriculture NGOs in the region as well as facilitating a number of joint workshops on various themes with both NGOs and farmers.
Experiences from Zimbabwe

When Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, the new government turned its attention to farmers living in Communal areas – until then they were known as Tribal Trust Lands by the settler government. Zimbabwe’s road system had largely been established to serve the white commercial farmers. Inputs efficiently reached these farmers and their produce moved easily to the market – tobacco, maize, cotton, cattle, coffee, groundnuts, and tea to name the main crops. White Rhodesian farmers were cash crop businessmen, not food farmers, and theirs were industrialised, commercial businesses. Within this narrow framework they were successful and contributed significantly to the Rhodesian economy. Their reward was to have substantial support from the government in terms of the infrastructure, credit, input supplies, and advisory services, which included research geared towards their needs.

The newly elected Zimbabwean Government of 1980 rightly felt that this kind of support should go to small-scale farmers living in the communal areas. Apart from the question of justice in the use of government finances, that was, after all, their constituency. By the end of the 1980s, the small scale farming sector was producing a large proportion of the country’s maize and the term ‘breadbasket of southern Africa’ slipped easily off many people’s tongues; and it still does, though now only as a distant memory.

During the late 1980s there were a few people in Zimbabwe who began to question the wisdom of the government’s policy of transferring industrial agricultural practices to small-scale farmers. They questioned its appropriateness and, particularly, how sustainable it was. Some began, in a small and unobtrusive manner, to promote various sustainable agricultural practices. Their arguments were that the world of farming and community development was/is a highly complex one and that simplified, mechanistic solutions were not suitable, however seductive the short-term success might be. Indeed, one can trace much of the problem of hunger today in Zimbabwe back to the policies of the 1980s.

Sustainable agriculture initiatives

All over east and southern Africa during the mid to late 1980s, initiatives to promote sustainable agriculture sprang up. In Kenya there was the Kenyan Institute for Organic Farming, Manor House Agricultural College, Baraka College, SACDEP, the Organic Farming Outreach Programme to name a few. In Uganda Environmental Alert, RUCID, and Kulika pioneered sustainable agriculture. In Zimbabwe it was organisations like Fambidzanai, Silvera House, Chikukwa Ecological Land Use Trust, Nyahode Union Learning Centre, the Zimbabwe Women’s Bureau, Jekesa Pfungwa, and the Association of Zimbabwe Traditional Environmental Conservationists. All of these organisations and initiatives recognised the inappropriateness of industrial agriculture for rural communities.

Early in the 1990s an initiative began which aimed to link the work of these different organisations, tying them into the participatory ways of working with farmers that began to arise at the same time. Both these social and ecological approaches based themselves on a much more holistic understanding of people and ecology, compared to the machine-like understanding of the conventional ways of working with communities and farmers. These approaches also recognised and appreciated indigenous knowledge, practices, and systems. Conventional
development approaches saw most things indigenous as backward and badly needing reform and modernisation. The initiators of the linking process wanted to make use of the creative ideas from some of the alternative approaches, while keeping the big picture, the big goal, in mind and without becoming too taken by any one approach, technique, or practice.

The PELUM Association

In November 1995, participants from 25 east and southern African NGOs working with small-scale farmers launched the PELUM Association. They celebrated and dreamt of a better world for African small-scale farmers and playing their part as NGOs in contributing to this. They were aware at the same time that they were still very much on the periphery of a world bent on pushing industrial agriculture in Africa.

For the next 13 years, the PELUM Association grew its roots, with member organisations sharing and learning on a range of topics. At the same time early board members put in lots of work to establish Country Working Groups (CWGs) in each of the participating countries. Each CWG forged its own way forward with its own focus, some countries more active than others.

While the initial focus was on providing a good adult education service in sustainable agriculture practices to the farmers they were working with, some of the NGOs began to see that their work was more than this. PELUM-Tanzania led the way in the region in terms of becoming involved with influencing policy. This was no doubt due to their close relationship with MVIWATA, the small-scale farmers’ movement for sustainable agriculture in Tanzania. PELUM-Kenya, with the threat of GMOs looming and in partnership with the Africa Biodiversity Network, led the way in lobbying against GMOs. At a regional level, PELUM Association policy shifted its focus towards advocacy as well as capacity building. PELUM as an association of local NGOs working with small-scale farmers began to participate in various advocacy-related forums both in the region and internationally.

In 2002 the PELUM Association enabled 200 farmers from across the region to attend the World Summit on Sustainable Development. These farmers initiated the East and Southern African Farmers’ Forum (ESAFF) as a farmers’ voice in the region. PELUM and ESAFF work closely together, with ESAFF challenging PELUM on a number of issues. ESAFF has enabled PELUM and its members to define its role more clearly, recognising that the most effective advocacy comes from farmers themselves and not NGOs on behalf of farmers.

From educational service to advocacy

In 2003 I was part of an evaluation team for the PELUM Association. What clearly came into view was the tension in the NGO members between the development of sustainable agricultural practices with farmers and the need and potential for the association to be more involved in shifting policies, and thus addressing the agrarian conditions for sustainability. Many of the organisations still saw the association mostly as a source of capacity building for themselves.

This tension remains very real today. I see this in the strategic thinking and planning work that I do with a number of community-based NGOs, most of whom are members of PELUM. Many of these organisations have been started by
individuals who have had some kind of sustainable agriculture training, via organisations like Manor House and Kulika. These individuals and their organisations generally have a passion for the practice of sustainable agriculture and have a good rapport with the farmers with whom they work. However, they do not really see themselves as part of a much bigger movement which is about change at all levels of society. And when they do begin to see this they struggle to see their part in this process and to see how they can play this part.

As alluded to above, the issue of GMOs has galvanised a nationwide response amongst NGOs in Kenya. But this has not yet translated itself into a wider political awareness of the issues at play in today’s world. Part of this is to do with the struggle these NGOs have with being strategic. They see the need to link with others in order to share knowledge, but they do not see that together they are players in a power struggle. And where they do see it, they struggle to embed this in their practice in various ways. To some extent this is linked with their newness as organisations and the relative youthfulness of civil society as a whole in the region, more so in some countries than others.

‘We in the region badly need to develop more of a culture of engagement and discussion and debate about all critical issues’, is a point I heard at a recent workshop. I agree completely. And I think slowly NGOs are beginning to see this. It comes back to the old point that working for a civil society organisation should be much more than a job; it should be a calling as a participant in world affairs. We need a strong effort to vitalise this kind of culture in NGOs. Sometimes we lose sight of this as we worry about our own survival and delivering the outputs for our next project proposal, let alone the outcomes and impact.

Farmers’ organisations and advocacy

Farmers, too, perhaps more than NGOs, need to develop a culture of engagement, discussion, and debate about such issues. They need to have access to these issues and they need forums in which they look at implications and responses. In a world inundated with information at some levels, not nearly enough information about critical issues is reaching small-scale farmers in east and southern Africa.

One encouraging sign and opportunity is the emphasis by NGOs on farmer to farmer learning. However, the challenge now is to embed ongoing learning within communities of farmers, so that the learning continues independent of NGOs. All too often NGOs see farmer to farmer learning as another extension method where farmer-trainers are the new extensionists. How can NGOs facilitate communities to establish their own learning culture where farmers keep learning from each other, keep experimenting, keep meeting to discuss and stay in touch with issues of the day?

In many cases, out of the work of much NGO effort have come farmers’ organisations. There is widespread realisation of the importance of farmers being well organised. How the organisations come about can be critical. All too often NGOs start these organisations and they become overly attached to the NGO concerned and are not really rooted amongst the farmers. I think some of this relates to the pressure on NGOs to have impact, based on the funding requirements. But it is also to do with a lack of awareness of organisational development about farmers’ organisations by both NGOs and farmers running the organisations. I have come across very little in-depth understanding around the development of farmers’ organisations. All too often very basic training is considered enough.
Conclusion
I have traced how spontaneous and isolated initiatives have arisen in east and southern Africa to promote sustainable agriculture. Many of these initiatives stay linked via the PELUM Association. The focus has always been to offer farmers an alternative agriculture, based on small scale farmers’ own situation and practices, to the non-sustainable approach of industrial agriculture. During the last couple of decades many farmers in rural communities, working closely with NGOs, have established a good foundation for the widespread uptake of an ecologically and economically regenerative agriculture that largely revolves around the development and spread of knowledge amongst farmers themselves.

Slowly but surely the NGOs, most of whom are members of the PELUM Association, are beginning to see themselves as part of a much bigger movement, recognising the importance of being aware and up to date with critical issues and policies. Turning this awareness into effective practice is more difficult. This relates to their own organisational development. There needs to be more emphasis in my opinion on taking time to reflect on ‘our identity and our role as an NGO’ and in finding practical ways in which this identity can continually relate daily, weekly, monthly to bigger processes to transform agriculture and rural development. Sustainable agriculture NGOs must see that not only are they working at the local level with various farming communities but they are also part of something much bigger. They need to live and breathe and practice these two dimensions together. They also need to see their work very much as part of a process in which farmers consciously, day by day, take more of a lead in their learning and their own advocacy efforts.

One cannot write an article like this without saying something about the unprogressive role of many of the international NGOs and their negative effect on the development of local civil society. I am referring in particular here to those international NGOs that continue to implement projects on the ground. Of course there are exceptions, but in my moving around I often see such organisations operating in isolation and undermining the work of local NGOs with some of their practices and approaches and even from their very size and operations. In order to have a strong voice the in-country (and regional) civil society sector needs to keep developing its coherence and stance. Very often the work of international NGOs does not contribute usefully to this and often undermines and distorts it.

The process of NGOs realising that they are part of a bigger social movement requires closer and closer collaboration with farmers’ umbrella organisations like ESAFF, which I mentioned earlier; and Via Campesina, which began in Latin America and is gradually taking root in Africa; and ROPPA (Le Réseau des organisations paysannes et de producteurs de l’Afrique de l’Ouest), which is growing up in francophone west Africa. I think this collaboration is a big challenge for the NGOs in particular. NGOs took the plunge and the lead to initiate the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices. Things have moved on so that this promotion is happening. It is now time for NGOs to start to take more of a back-seat, while they enable farmers’ organisations to be at the forefront of promoting change. This requires lots of soul-searching and role exploration and dialogue between NGOs and the farmers’ organisations. Together, farmers’ organisations and NGOs need to explore the vision for where they are going, including their relationship, what the blockages are, and how these can be overcome. This is about the development of civil society in Africa, not about the implementation of projects. This requires both
NGOs and the farmers’ organisations to take a lead and forge a powerful partnership through open and frank dialogue. I see a big opportunity here as farmers’ organisations continue to rise up and as NGOs in east and southern Africa mature and become clearer about their identity.

John Wilson is a freerange facilitator working to strengthen local civil society in the field of sustainable agriculture in a variety of ways. His passion is to assist local civil society to keep linking what they are doing into the bigger picture; his is a vision of a web of civil society at all levels creating effective adult education systems for farmers, which very much includes community-based learning, and carrying out effective advocacy through powerful linkages that start at the grassroots. In the past he helped set up Fambidzanai Centre and then went on to join others in setting up the PELUM (Participatory Ecological Land Use Management) Association, a regional set up across east and southern Africa.
Email: spiritvaults@yahoo.co.uk

Democratising research for food sovereignty in West Africa
Michel P. Pimbert and Bary Boukary

At both the global and local levels, contestations over knowledge – and who controls its production – are integral to the struggles of sustainable agriculture networks and social movements that promote food sovereignty (Pimbert 2009).

In West Africa – and Mali in particular – there is strong evidence for a growing convergence and shared vision between practice-oriented sustainable agriculture networks and advocacy-oriented organisations in the food sovereignty movement. This is no doubt helped by the fact that both members of advocacy-oriented and practice-oriented organisations involved in this initiative are deeply aware of the strategic importance of food and agricultural research – what agricultural research does and does not do, who controls it, and how pressures to privatise research are impacting on farmers, human well-being, and the environment.

This coming together of different hearts and minds is also being facilitated by the participatory process and co-inquiry in which these different actors are directly engaged. As discussed below, the ways of working and the actual design of the farmer/citizen deliberations on the transformation of agricultural research are allowing shared understandings and joint actions to emerge, bringing together movements for advocacy and practice.

An inclusive and plural process
A conscious effort has been made to include members of both advocacy and practitioner oriented movements in all key aspects of this participatory process. A multi-actor steering group has been set up to coordinate and design the overall process of citizen deliberations on agricultural research in West Africa. The epicentre of these activities is in Mali where the steering group is currently composed of representatives of 15 organisations from all sectors (government, academia, producer organisations, small scale private sector, civil society, and media). Sustainable agriculture organisations like the Malian organic farming network (Movemen
biologique Malien – MOBIOM) thus work with representatives of advocacy-oriented peasant organisations like the CNOP (Coordination Nationale des Organisations paysannes du Mali). The Steering Group also includes representatives of anti-globalisation groups who co-organised the World Social Forum in Bamako, in 2006, e.g. Institut de Recherche et de Promotion des Alternatives en Développement (IRPAD).

The Steering Group meets regularly and reflects in an on-going way on methodological options, tools, constraints, opportunities, results, and consequences, and adjusts activities as appropriate. The method of choice is 'participatory action research', i.e. a cycle of reflection-action-reflection controlled and decided by the Steering Group and farmers themselves (who are now becoming increasingly involved in this co-inquiry). In their first meeting, Steering Group members decided to re-name ‘their’ process as ‘Democratising Agricultural Research for Food Sovereignty’. The ease with which this convergence occurred between representatives of sustainable agriculture and agrarian reform movements was no doubt influenced by the outcomes of the 2007 International Forum on Food Sovereignty held in Nyeleni, in Mali.1 The Malian Government’s adoption of ‘food sovereignty’ in its national agricultural policy (Loi d’Orientation Agricole) also encouraged the Steering Group to legitimately ask – ‘if food sovereignty is the national goal then how does agricultural research need to be re-oriented or transformed?’

Both advocacy and practice oriented members of the Steering Group were closely involved in the highly sensitive choice of the independent oversight panel members. The main role of this oversight panel is to ensure that the entire deliberative process is broadly credible, representative, trustworthy, fair, and not captured by any interest group or perspective. Such safeguards are needed where the political stakes in the outcome of this way of knowing are high.

About 1000 farmers are now being recruited as possible candidates for the jury panels. The selection process is based on clear criteria to ensure proper representation of different socio-professional groups of food providers and gender balance. Jurors are drawn from different agro-ecological zones in Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Benin. The steering committee will subsequently screen candidates to ensure that about 50 farmers/food processors are finally selected for two citizens’ juries planned for January–February 2010. Based on a technique known as ‘snowballing’ (Atkinson and Flint 2001) the jury selection process relies on names provided by both advocacy based organisations and farmer led sustainable agriculture networks, as well as other organisations (e.g. consumer groups and public research institutes) represented on the Steering Group. It is hoped that the jury selection process itself will thus enable further joint ownership and convergence between agrarian reform advocates and practitioners of sustainable agriculture.

Both practice-oriented sustainable agriculture and advocacy-based peasant organisations closely identify with the citizens’ jury on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali (see Figure 1).

The so called ‘ECID de Sikasso’ succeeded in strengthening advocacy based and practitioner-oriented social movements engaged in the struggle against the biotech industry and corporate-led agriculture. It is indeed striking how often members of the Steering Group refer with pride and excitement to ‘l’ECID de Sikasso’, seeing

1For more information, see www.nyeleni.org.
In January 2006, the local government of Sikasso in Mali hosted the Citizens’ Space for Democratic Deliberation on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali. Organised in the second most economically important region of Mali, this ECID (l’Espace Citoyen d’Interpellation Démocratique), or citizens’ jury, was an unprecedented event in West Africa. The ECID was designed to allow ordinary farmers, both men and women, to make policy recommendations after considering expert evidence from different sources. Its main objective was to create a safe space for communication and action in which small, medium, and large-scale farmers could • better understand GMOs, their risks and advantages
• confront different viewpoints and cross-examine expert witnesses, both in favour of and against GMOs and the industrialisation of agriculture
• formulate recommendations for policies on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali.

The citizens’ jury on GMOs was organised by the government (the Regional Assembly) of Sikasso, with methodological support from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in London and the Réseau Interdisciplinaire Biocarburant in Geneva. A steering committee made up of representatives of 15 local, national, and international institutions (government, civil society, research, farmer organisations…) was responsible for the design, organisation, and facilitation of this deliberative process.

The citizens’ jury focused on farmers/producers of the Sikasso region, which is home to about 1.6 million people. A region-wide selection process in seven districts of Sikasso identified 45 farmers as jurors. This selection was done with the support of local organisations and structures, on the basis of a pre-selection of 290 farmers from all districts. Clear and transparent criteria helped ensure a fair representation of the diverse types of farmers in the region (e.g. small vs. medium-sized farms, women vs. men). The citizens’ jury allowed the jurors to cross-examine 14 international witnesses representing a broad range of views on this controversial issue. These included biotech scientists, agencies such as the FAO, and farmers from South Africa and India with first-hand experience of growing GM crops. In January 2006, the 45 farmers voted against introducing genetically-modified crops in Mali. The farmers’ verdict included the following statements:

• ‘As the number of small-scale producers in Mali represents 98 percent of the farming population and as crop genetic modification is only viable for large-scale producers – who represent only two percent of the farming population – this new technology should not be introduced.’
• ‘Considering that the technology of organic cotton cultivation is already used in Mali, and given that it is highly viable in terms of women’s participation, availability of a market, and minimum guaranteed price, the cultivation of Bt cotton should not be encouraged; instead it should be stopped.’
• ‘Women farmers should instead be given the technical training needed to produce organic sesame and cotton’.
• ‘Farmers should be directly involved in agricultural research. Research on GMOs should never be carried out in the name of Malian farmers because – we farmers – do not want GMOs.’
• ‘Research programmes must focus on improving and adding value to traditional crop varieties instead of working on transgenic crops’.
• ‘Strategies are needed to promote organic farming which is based on local resources and local produce’.
• ‘Birama Kone, a small farmer on the jury, said: ‘GM crops are associated with the kind of farming that marginalises the mutual help and co-operation among farmers and our social and cultural life’.

Overall, the ECID has succeeded in politicising an issue of global importance and has allowed marginalised voices to question the dominant discourse in favour of GM crops and the industrialisation of agriculture. Seven local radio stations ensured that the entire deliberative process — cross-examination of expert evidence, deliberations, the jurors’ verdict and recommendations — was broadcast live throughout the seven districts that make up the Sikasso region. Radio broadcasts were also heard in villages of neighbouring Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso – reaching a total of at least 1.7 million listeners.

In terms of impacts, the approval of national legislation needed for the introduction of GM crops in Mali was delayed. This is widely seen as a direct result of this jury’s recommendations. Similarly, a key political debate in June 2006 on GMOs and the future of Malian agriculture was held in the National Assembly and is widely seen as a direct outcome of the citizens’ jury process. However, the powerful nature of some of the global actors involved (e.g. USAID, the World Bank, Monsanto, and Syngenta) means that they increasingly look for new ways of avoiding the constraints of national legislation, for example, by supporting high level meetings and encouraging country governments to harmonise biosafety policies and intellectual property right laws for the entire West African region.


Figure 1. A citizens’ space for democratic deliberation on GMOs and the future of farming in Mali.
Open framing of issues for deliberation
The methodological approach seeks to facilitate the participatory design of alternative, farmer-led, and citizen-controlled agricultural research for food sovereignty. The choice of entry points and framing of issues for the citizen deliberations is done by Steering Group members and through consultations at the grassroots. The way issues for discussion are framed, and by whom, is critical for the quality and validity of the process. At the time of writing, the exact framing of topics for debate is still open ended. However, a consensus exists on the broad outline of topics for the two citizens’ juries planned in early 2010, and for the choice of specialist witnesses invited to give evidence and be cross examined by the farmer panels.

The first farmer/citizens’ jury will focus on the ‘Governance of Agricultural Research’, and will address topics such as funding of research, the way scientists carry out their work, how technologies are introduced and disseminated in rural areas, and institutional innovations that can ensure greater citizen control over upstream strategic research priorities. The second farmer/citizens’ jury will focus on how social and technical knowledge needs to be transformed to achieve food sovereignty. The themes relevant to West African farmers are discussions on agro-ecological approaches, seed management, and plant breeding science. Deliberation will also focus on property rights (e.g. collective versus individual rights over land) and rethinking economic research that underpins neoliberal food and farming policies. This choice of events and issues for public scrutiny thus closely reflects the concerns of both agrarian change movements and sustainable agriculture movements. Hopefully, this should increase the likelihood of greater convergence between these two movements.

A focus on experiential learning for change
The experiential learning built into the ways of working of the Steering Group has also been extended to a wider set of actors with the creation of a West African multi-stakeholder learning group. This now includes representatives from 24 African organisations. Invited individuals are ‘governance-connected’, drawn from divergent interests, institutions, and sectors. Learning group members include representatives of peasant organisations advocating agrarian changes, such as the ROPPA (Le Réseau des organisations paysannes et de producteurs de l’Afrique de l’Ouest), as well as practitioner-oriented groups promoting sustainable use of natural resources, e.g. artisanal fisherfolk (Association des Pécheurs Résidents du Mali – APRAM). But it also includes representatives of National Agricultural Research Systems such as the Centre National de la Recherche Agronomique (CNRA), and the Steering Group has invited the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) to join this learning group.
The learning group has no powers whatsoever to influence the design of the farmer deliberations. Instead, this diverse platform allows interested parties to learn from both the process and outcomes of the citizen deliberations on the transformation of agricultural research. The learning group is based on the idea that good decisions can be made when they are based on engagement, dialogue, learning, and pragmatic choices. It provides a group of selected individuals an informal and moderated space within which experiential learning, discussions, and decisions can take place. It is hoped that by encouraging a participatory dynamic of experiential learning new convergences will emerge among organisations associated with this initiative.

For example, the presence of ‘governance-connected’ members on the learning group may help link formal decision-making bodies and processes with the safe spaces in which expert and elite knowledge on agricultural research is put under public scrutiny. Similarly, it is hoped that the presence of federations of advocacy-based peasant organisations on the learning group will amplify the voices of West African farmers and link their policy recommendations to global social movements. This convergence between actors at local and international levels will be essential to building the necessary countervailing power to contest, transform, and democratise national and international agricultural research for food sovereignty.

Reversing gender biases and prejudice against farmers

Inevitably such a participatory dynamic is non-linear and messy, with many contradictory ebbs and flows. Relationships and conflicts between different actors within and between advocacy and practice-based organisations constantly need to be worked with/through to build the trust required for joint, large scale transformation. There are two recurring problems here.

First, the patriarchal attitudes and/or a lack of gender sensitivity shown by some farmer leaders. ‘We do not need to include women in the citizens’ juries because they are not farmers’. This astonishing comment was made by a senior member of one of the key peasant organisations in Mali, the AOPP (Association des organisations professionnelles paysannes). As a result, the AOPP stalled the preparatory process of the Citizens’ Jury on GMOs and the future of farming (Figure 1). It took two months of discussions and negotiations among Steering Group members to convince this senior member of the AOPP that women do play a major role not only in food preparation but also in the production of food, usually by farming small plots of land. In late July 2009, one of the heads of the AOPP threatened to remove his organisation from the Steering Group of the ‘Democratising Agricultural Research’ process because he was unhappy that the Convergence of Rural Women for Food Sovereignty had been formally accepted as a new member of the Steering Group. This decision was reversed very recently – but only after a month of intense discussion and argument with some other members of the Steering Group.

Secondly, some peasant leaders and radical intellectuals often have doubts about the ability of ordinary farmers to understand complex issues and come up with the ‘right’ or ‘politically correct’ verdict in a citizens’ jury. All too often it is only after actually experiencing a citizens’ jury in action that such key figures in food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture movements feel safe ‘to let go of their fears
and power’ and trust ordinary farmers to act as rational citizens. This kind of ‘mind flip’ is reflected in a comment made by a well known national peasant leader who was a specialist witness in the ‘ECID de Sikasso’ (Figure 1): ‘One thing I discovered was that before going I thought I knew everything in the rural world because I am an intellectual and a farmer; but I realised that the truth is with the people who deal with farming. It has been a humbling truth – I learnt a lot from this process and I realised I didn’t know anything. The people who know are the farmers and they’ve never been to school’.

Questions about the deliberative competence of ‘ordinary’ farmers regularly surface in the preparatory process for the citizen deliberations on agricultural research. However, there is evidence that the Steering Group is collectively developing a more mature understanding of what it takes to nurture and reclaim active forms of citizenship. Often repeated comments now include: ‘This is really a school to learn about democratic practice and citizenship’ and ‘Deep down we are all discovering how a more direct democracy can re-invigorate political life in our society.’ Commenting on the emancipatory quality of the process now unfolding in West Africa one of the members of the independent oversight panel said, ‘This is the sort of process that has been the missing link in bringing together local perspectives on farming and campaigners working for change at national and international levels’.

Time will tell if these practices and insights encourage less prescriptive modes of advocacy in favour of more bottom up, deliberative processes that allow previously marginalised men and women to control the governance of agricultural research and directly participate in its transformation for food sovereignty. Meanwhile, it is clear that these efforts to democratise agricultural research are already encouraging new ways of working, alliances, and convergence between practice-oriented sustainable agriculture networks and advocacy-oriented peasant organisations in West Africa.

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Dr Michel P. Pimbert is the Director of the Sustainable Agriculture, Biodiversity and Livelihoods Programme at the UK-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED www.iied.org). Trained as an agro-ecologist his work now focuses on food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture, the political ecology of natural resources and biodiversity management, as well as action research and deliberative democratic processes. He is the global coordinator of the ‘Democratising agriculture research’ initiative described here. Email: michel.pimbert@iied.org
Interview with Alberto Gómez

Alberto Gómez Flores is the National Coordinator for the National Union of Autonomous Regional Farmer Organizations (UNORCA) in Mexico, and North American regional Coordinator for Via Campesina. He grew up on a Mexican ejido and engaged in land struggles from an early age. He has been instrumental in advancing the cause of food sovereignty in Latin America and North America.

Email: albertogomez@unorca.org.mx

EHG: We have spoken about the differences between groups working in the countryside, practicing sustainable agriculture and agroecology on the one hand, and peasant organisations such as Via Campesina with an agenda for structural changes (changes that could also create favourable conditions for sustainable agriculture) on the other. These distinct groups have had difficulty converging. They have lacked coordination and at times viewed one another with suspicion.

AG: I do not think this is exclusive to Mexico; I think this occurs in many countries. From the emergence of these organisations, there has been an organisational problem, and it has not been corrected. An organisation that fails to adjust itself and strengthen its decision-making processes is bound to create a rift between the national leadership and the priorities and concerns of the grassroots. I think this issue is finally being addressed; it is one of the most urgent tasks of the peasant movement. The restructuring of peasant organisations, including re-framing their founding documents and approaches and repositioning their basic principles, is critical in a changing world that requires us to have stronger, broad-based organisations with informed and organised constituencies. This is a momentous task. And where organisational structures are strengthened and deepened, there will be opportunities for information and for Via Campesina’s international approaches to go beyond national structures and reach the local level.

EHG: Why isn’t this information reaching local leaders now?

AG: Often it is because of the organisations’ agenda and priorities. These organisations are engaged in other struggles; they are negotiating with governments over legislation, for example. This is not always the case, but many organisations lack sufficient communication at their various levels, down to the grassroots. This is something we need to act on. People at the grassroots need to be trained and informed in order to be fully committed and engaged in the struggle.

So that is one aspect. Another, from the perspective of Via Campesina and its member organisation – and we cannot do this alone – is the challenge of creating greater coordination and alliances, for example, with the indigenous peoples’ movement, currently very active in Latin America. We have to unite with the efforts...
of fisherfolk, of women, of youth, to both incorporate their struggles and promote their autonomous organisation. I believe this is critical.

We do not see a strong labour movement today, acting at the international or even national level. There is a crisis in the urban labour movements. For example, in Mexico, 25 years ago there were millions of workers affiliated with unions. They were unions controlled by the state, but at least they had mechanisms through which to express themselves. Now only 10 percent of workers in Mexico are unionised and within this minority, very few are actively fighting for their workers. So today we do not see a very strong labour movement.

Therefore, it is also critical to open up spaces for integrating these groups, urban labour groups, which is another aspect of strategic alliance-building. It is strategically important that our message reach the city, the consumers. Somehow when we began our campaign, ‘El Campo no Aguanta Mas!’ (The Countryside Can’t Take Anymore) we were able to utilise the media. This allowed us to reach urban consumers. Also, the surveys that were carried out showing, for example, that 70 percent of people considered the role of peasants in producing the food we consume to be very important. Another statistic showed that 68 percent of people thought it was necessary to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement because it was affecting peasant production and because they did not trust the quality of imported foods. So, it is important to find ways to reach and have an impact on the urban population. When we carry out a protest or activity, we always try, if it is in the city, to avoid closing streets, obstructing traffic, or affecting third parties. Because this makes us look bad, and instead of winning people over we pit them against us. So when we do road blockades we try to inconvenience people as little as possible.

I think there is a movement now – not only in Mexico but in many countries – made up of collectives, NGOs, people concerned about the environment or food issues. This movement is progressing not with the intention of creating large organisations, but many small groups wanting, for example, to buy a bag of coffee directly from those who produce it. And with the current global crisis, people in the city and the countryside alike are increasingly expressing their resistance. This makes it urgent for organisations to develop numerous means of communication, to open up spaces, to amplify our discussion of alternatives in the face of the serious problems affecting humanity.

If a group of young people, for example, is politicised and willing to distribute flyers in some communities, we bring them on board. But we do not work with political parties because they are hopeless. They are in crisis, too. The parties have turned into job placement agencies. We do not see much hope in them.

EHG: I want to ask you specifically about the NGOs that work with the same producers with which Via Campesina and the peasant movements work. Many of those organisations do agro-ecological work. Although many Via Campesina organisations do ecology work as well, the overwhelming majority of the work in sustainable agriculture is being carried out by the NGOs. What is Via Campesina’s strategy for reaching out to these people?

AG: There are many different kinds of NGOs. We like the ones that are organised, systematic, hard-working, and respectful. But we do not like when they speak in our name or use our efforts or our results to raise funds for themselves. Nevertheless, we have had good work experiences, because there is complementarity there. As peasant organisations, we are good at planning, at being imaginative, but when it comes time
to translate our vision into concrete approaches, we turn to technical advisors. These days, it is getting more and more difficult for each organisation to have its own team of technicians. So, we turn to NGOs, whose expertise has helped us tremendously. There are NGOs that come in offering resources for projects, but Via Campesina and other peasant organisations are not beggars. We have our own ideas so we tell them what we want to do. If it coincides with what they are offering, then we will work together.

I think that in the face of this agricultural crisis, we have to form alliances with technicians or with NGOs that complement our activities. In other words, our struggle is not only in the political arena, in movement-building, it’s also about building local alternatives. It is about creating a different context for agriculture and peasant life. In this sense, there is complementarity. There are very good, selfless NGOs that have helped, including producing educational videos, for example, to explain GMOs. They have also helped us to convert conventional coffee plantations into organic coffee. So yes, I think there are many respectful and respected NGOs. If we have a good relationship, with clearly defined agreements, and they do not claim to speak for us, then we can complement each other.

**EHG:** What would we have to do to promote this convergence and what are the obstacles we have to overcome in doing so?

**AG:** Among our organisations in Mexico such as UNORCA, autonomy is central, not only autonomy from the state, political parties or economic agents, but autonomy in terms of our own organisations and our national bodies. This also applies to our relationship to NGOs. We have to agree to function autonomously. It is also crucial that NGOs not speak for us. At several events, I have heard NGOs speaking in the name of so-and-so, about their experiences and positions. They should leave that to local leaders, or representatives chosen by the organisation itself. Above all, I believe that it is possible to open spaces where Via Campesina and other peasant organisations can promote our agenda and overcome these challenges. We will have to see which points we share and where we can work together, in which regions, countries and localities we can collaborate. I think it is time to combine our efforts. There have also been NGOs that are technically very efficient but politically uninformed, so we have accompanied them, and encouraged them to take clear positions. We are not the same. We are a broad-based peasant movement. The NGOs are groups of professionals with lots of goodwill, information and training, who have gone through the universities. So, we need to respect each other.

**EHG:** You had mentioned that many peasant organisations are rhetorical, that they have lost their base. Is UNORCA making an effort to reach the grassroots? What have Via Campesina and UNORCA done in this respect?

**AG:** It would be incorrect to assume that we have strong organisations. There is a crisis; many organisations are nothing but shells. There is a lot of individual interest, even political ambition on the part of many leaders. They want to become politicians or acquire resources to maintain a certain lifestyle as representatives of an organisation. Yes, the crisis has touched UNORCA also, so we are choosing to build spaces in the different regions. We are bringing the analysis and positions of Via Campesina down to the regional level, with its distinct dynamics, and merging them to produce a common agenda. This is what we did in an international meeting in La Huasteca, Veracruz, recently.
We also did this in an international meeting of young people in the north, Guerrero. In two days they explained what Via Campesina is, what GMOs are; they explained how to organise community brigades, hold assemblies, and teach kids about Via Campesina. We are going to have another international meeting in October, I think it will be in Oaxaca this time, and another event in November before the Food Crisis and Food Sovereignty Summit, either in Michoacán or Guerrero.

In December we will have a meeting on global climate change, with regional leaders from Via Campesina, but we are especially interested in seeing the movements and organizations that are not part of Via and that are not represented at the national level, to open up spaces and build bridges, because if we stay isolated in our crisis-ridden organizations, nothing is going to happen. We need to build solidarity and link up with what is out there, what is being accomplished. That is going to be very productive. Then in the coming year in a national event, we are going to bring together regional and national leaders from many different places... and that is really going to change things.

Zacatecas, México, Universidad de Zacatecas, 14 August, 2009.

Mobilisation and convergence in a wealthy northern country

Cathleen Kneen

As a Canadian, I was very impressed some years ago by a photo in the newspaper of more than 200,000 farmers in India cheering their leader burning the Dunkel Draft. Not only would it be almost impossible to assemble such a crowd here, I doubt that more than a dozen or two would have any idea of what the Dunkel Draft was. Indeed, only a minority of farmers in Canada are aware of the national and international policies which are ceding power over our seeds to transnational corporations.

In this context, how can we think about food sovereignty and solidarity with the global movements of peasants and small-holders? To address this question I want to first paint a broad picture of farming in Canada and then look at the social movements that relate to farming and food, and a new project – the People’s Food Policy Project – that is bringing them together to work for food sovereignty.

Canadian farming

Although there is active farming in every one of the ten provinces and, to a lesser extent, the northern territories of Canada, the dominant image of agriculture in both the popular imagination and the thinking of policy-makers is the grain-growing areas of the western Prairies. Farms there are measured in sections (640 acres or 259 hectares) and large farms can literally stretch for miles. Even in the more intensively farmed areas of the country, a small farm which might be expected to earn a living for the farm family is several hundred acres. Although the National Farmers Union is a founding member of La Via Campesina, Canadian farmers do not see themselves as ‘peasants’, and there is certainly no ‘peasant movement’; nor is there much sense of solidarity between farmers and the farm workers, often migrant workers from
Mexico, who have replaced the labour which was once provided by extended farm families.

Not only are farms very large by the standards of most of the world, but both agriculture and fisheries are deeply industrial, capital-intensive, and export-oriented. Indeed, since John Cabot discovered the fishery off the coast of Newfoundland in 1497, the settlement of Canada was based on export of fish, furs, and grain to the colonial powers in Europe. This export commodity orientation continues to this day in Federal agriculture policy, reality notwithstanding. The fur trade has pretty well vanished. The northern cod on the east coast, where the early explorers could scoop up fish ‘in a basket’, has collapsed as a result of the industrialisation of the fisheries, and the sockeye salmon on the west coast, a major source of employment as well as great cultural and spiritual importance for the indigenous peoples there, is facing collapse, most likely as a result of the establishment of fish farms at the mouth of the spawning rivers. Meanwhile capital-intensive agriculture across the country is in crisis, with many farmers surviving only on increased debt and off-farm income.

The result of policies to increase farm (and fishing boat) size and capital intensiveness has been a mass exodus of farmers and fishermen. A major export of the fishing communities in the Maritimes is people. Across the country, less than one percent of the population remains in agriculture, and of those perhaps three-quarters are deeply embedded in the industrial model. The dominant organisations that speak for these farmers (or purport to speak for them) think in terms of ‘business’ and refer to their sectors as ‘industries’, betraying their sense of identity with the corporate sector. The government has waged a ceaseless campaign against real farm organising, for example by dismantling the Canadian Wheat Board while promoting the individualist ideology of the so-called farm organisations that proclaim that individual farmers can cut a better deal with Cargill.

The Union de Producteurs Agricoles (UPA) in the province of Quebec uses the language of food sovereignty but neither the UPA nor its English counterpart, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, express any critique of the industrial-export model. However, there are smaller farm organisations that have a different analysis, such as the National Farmers Union, the Union Paysanne, and some alliances of organic farmers that are playing an important role in the development of a movement for food security and food sovereignty.

The rise of Canada’s food movements

The first public manifestation of a food movement in Canada was the People’s Food Commission (PFC) of 1977–1980. This was a time of dramatic rises in food prices, which the government was using to drive a wedge between farmers and consumers. The PFC was designed to counter this effort by exposing the realities of food production to consumers, and the realities of urban poverty to food producers. It held hearings in more than 70 communities across the country where volunteer Commissioners heard submissions from farmers, fishers, workers (unionised and not), housewives, artists, academics, health workers, and many others. The PFC’s final report, entitled The Land of Milk and Money, published in 1980, wove their insights into a structural analysis of the food system and exposed government policies and the rising power of the corporate sector in the food system, along with
their effects on both food producers and city-dwellers. The first food bank in Canada was created in 1981, with the understanding that it was to be a temporary measure to address the current food crisis and would probably close its doors within a year. Now more than 700,000 Canadians (out of a population of about 33 million) go to food banks every month, the outcome of neoliberal policies of downloading government responsibilities onto ‘the community’, which have increased both the extent and the influence of food banks as they are institutionalised as the answer to hunger. People of good will are kept so busy trying to deal with the increasing demand that the role of charitable feeding operations as the overflow mechanism for the industrial food system remains invisible.

The organic farming movement has been present in Canada since the 1960s but only really grew into public consciousness in the past 15–20 years, as a result of rising concerns about degradation and contamination of soil and water, and more recently, health concerns related to pesticides used in agriculture. From its beginnings, organic farming in Canada has been based in a direct relationship between the farmers and their customers, whose commitment to the health of the environment as well as themselves has enabled the organic movement to thrive. With the recent rise in diseases which can be linked to both diet and environment, such as asthma, allergies, and cancer, the organic market has seen an influx of consumers who are prepared to pay a premium for food that they see as health-giving. As the market for organic foods increased, however, new profit opportunities emerged. The growth of businesses (some of them quite large) processing organic food products and importing organic foods not produced in Canada changed the face of the organic sector and led to increased distance between the organic grower and the organic consumer. The transformation of organic standards from farmer-controlled peer review to a national standard regulated by the Federal government to facilitate export and import has also engendered considerable disenchantedment with ‘organics’ and fed the development of a strong ‘eat local’ movement, again among both food providers and consumers. (These two movements are not, of course, in opposition, despite attempts by the agrifood industry to use the media to pit one against the other).

At the same time, premium prices for organic produce, and the direct-sales infrastructure of farmers’ markets and programmes that deliver a weekly box of produce direct to the consumer, have encouraged young people to see farming as a viable option. The result is a surge in smallholder farmers who typically have a great deal of post-secondary education but no farm background. They have generally taken up farming ‘to make a difference’ but like the workers in the food banks, this approach has been deeply affected by the corrosive individualism that is the hallmark of neoliberalism. The recent ‘locavore’ movement, for example, has roots in the notion that the only power consumers have is at the check-out till. A good example is the motto ‘You can change the world, one mouthful at a time.’ This approach is obviously the diametric opposite to solidarity.

Indeed, the question of premium prices – creating a system that provides healthy, organic, local, artisanal food for the wealthy and highly-processed, cheap foods for the poor – is now raising its head in the local food movement as it previously did in the organic movement.

There is another important thread in the tapestry of social movements related to food. Since the mid-1980s, a variety of community programmes have emerged
which encourage people to work together to increase their food self-reliance and skills. The first collective kitchens in Canada, for example, started in 1986 in Montreal, and shortly thereafter in other parts of the country. Community gardens have been established across the country in communities as small as Dog Creek, BC, and as large as Toronto. The ‘Good Food Box’, a programme which uses volunteer labour to provide a box of low-cost, high-quality produce for poor people, was pioneered by FoodShare in Toronto and has been replicated across the country in cities, towns, and villages. Many of these initiatives have been started or supported by local health workers concerned about the ‘epidemic of obesity’ and the rapid increase in diet-related chronic diseases such as diabetes, particularly among poor and marginalised populations. (In the large cities – Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal – there are large immigrant communities who are somewhat involved in food initiatives, but in the rest of the country the most visible minorities are Indigenous.) Some food banks have also begun gardens and other programmes to increase food self-reliance among their clients and a couple have transformed themselves into ‘community food centres’. Parent groups have come together to lobby for changes in school meals and to remove junk food and vending machines from their schools.

This work has gone hand-in-hand with attempts to develop progressive food policies at the municipal and provincial levels. Since the formation of the Toronto Food Policy Council in 1991, there has been a growing movement to push for food policies, often enshrined in a ‘food charter’. The provincial food security networks define food security broadly, to include a local food system which can ensure a basic diet for the population and a living wage for food providers while protecting, if not actually enhancing, the environment upon which it depends. However, until the creation of Food Secure Canada in 2006 there was no national forum to enable any coordination or sharing of ideas, and frequently there was considerable animosity between the charitable providers of food and people engaged in the business of growing, harvesting, processing, and distributing food. Nor was there much communication between the movement in Québec, where food security work is more developed, and the rest of the country (where most people do not understand French).

The creation of Food Secure Canada was thus a triumph of goodwill, as the people working to address hunger, those concerned with health and environment, and food providers agreed to work together. However, there is an ongoing tension within the organisation between those who see the need to include as many people as possible in the interests of gaining some political traction, and those who want to pursue the programme (and integrity) of food sovereignty as an alliance of the marginalised.

From its inception, Food Secure Canada has sought to include Indigenous peoples, for two reasons. One is the commitment to building analysis and action from the perspective of the most marginalised. Confined to reserves of poor land, cut off from their traditional territories and food supplies (which have been contaminated with heavy metals such as mercury and other toxins), and without access to healthy food, Indigenous people in Canada are among the poorest and least healthy in the country, with soaring rates of diabetes and social problems, especially among the youth. We understand this situation to be a result of consistent attempts by successive governments at cultural genocide of these Nations, including the imposition of elected leaders (as opposed to the continuing
The tradition of hereditary chiefs) which are the source of ongoing tensions in many Nations.

**The turn towards food sovereignty**

For decades First Nations have engaged in treaty negotiations and sometimes also direct action to reclaim their lands and proclaim their sovereignty as nations within Canada. In recent years, traditional groups within these Indigenous communities have been working to reclaim their culture and Food Secure Canada looks to these people – who can lay claim to food systems that have been viable for thousands of years – for leadership in developing food sovereignty in the contemporary context.

Several Canadian authors have described Canada as a Metis (‘halfbreed’) nation. Certainly, the early European settlers survived only because of their alliances with the Indigenous peoples. When they married native women, they ‘married up’ into these nations, acquiring not just survival skills but their philosophy of living in relationship with the land and its creatures. This is the diametric opposite of the European Enlightenment attitude towards the ‘other’, which has engendered the corrosive individualism from which we currently suffer and that is expressed equally in the rhetoric of fear issuing from right-wing governments and in the crowded shopping malls. In seeking leadership from traditional elements within First Nations, the food movement in Canada is rediscovering this heritage and its political attitudes, rooted in respect, willingness to live with difference, and a profound understanding of interdependence.

This has been particularly important in the current work of the People’s Food Policy Project. Based in the structural analysis of the People’s Food Commission, in its first few months the project has added to the ‘Six Pillars’ of food sovereignty developed at the International Forum for Food Sovereignty at Nyeleni in 2007 the concept of food as sacred, along with the traditional means by which people acquire food. This reverential attitude is consciously opposed to the utilitarian approach that underlies the productionist model which sees land, animals, water, and plants as ‘natural resources’ to be appropriated and used for solely human purposes.

The convergence for food sovereignty in Canada, then, involves some farm and fishery organisations, urban initiatives for food self-reliance, Indigenous movements for cultural survival, and broad-based groups engaged in analysis and action on environment and health issues. The challenge that faces us in Canada, as I indicated at the beginning, is mobilisation. While it might seem natural to look to the National Farmers Union in this regard, their role is limited by the small and scattered constituency of farmers. Clearly, given the realities described above, it is the non-farm population that needs to be mobilised if the paradigm is to change. So the most important role of the NFU in this convergence is probably the clear analysis and critique of neoliberalism and its attendant agricultural policies which they provide, along with their understanding and commitment to global solidarity. Their documentation in these areas is an important resource in overcoming the barrage of neoliberal propaganda rained upon the general population.

Similarly, in terms of practice-oriented sustainable agriculture, organic farmers have traditionally taken leadership, for example in pushing beyond the organic standards for public policies opposing GMOs. Recently a group of farmers in
Saskatchewan tried to take the biotechnology corporations to court for contamination of their crops to the point where it is now impossible to certify organic canola in most of the Prairies. The court refused to grant them the status as a 'class' required to pursue the case, but their initiative did serve to inform and educate a broad constituency about the depth of corporate control of food crops – and was only possible with financial as well as moral support from a broad urban constituency.

The young farmers encouraged by decent prices for organic produce mentioned earlier are another important element in this convergence, as they are well aware of the straitjacket of corporate control and many (though, sadly, not all) of them also have an idealistic commitment to change for social justice. Although traditional farmers may dismiss them as ‘hobbyists’ or ‘gardeners’ they are in fact changing the face of agriculture. Meetings of the large, industrial-oriented farm organisations are still dominated by men in jackets and ties; but the farmers who attend meetings to organise local direct markets, or to provide information and mutual support regarding organic methods, are increasingly young and female. (Of course there has been female leadership in the National Farmers Union since its inception; it is the gender balance of people who describe themselves as ‘farmers’ that is shifting).

However, despite these positive developments, in Canada neither progressive farm organisations nor smallholder farmers are in a position to mobilise – at least, not on their own. Their strength is in the direct relationships they have built with urban-based groups, including but by no means limited to their own customers and the NGOs who are campaigning on environment and health issues.

The People’s Food Project: building alliances for food sovereignty

The key to mobilisation is to overcome the debilitating effects of the ideology of individualism discussed above, which is reinforced by the built environment designed to protect privacy and limit social interaction (e.g. the preponderance of the private automobile and lack of public transit), and the constant propaganda in the press engendering a general atmosphere of fear and blaming the victims of social policies that impoverish and malnourish people for their poverty and illness. What is needed is a way for people to see beyond the facade that is presented as reality to the structures and policies that prop it up.

The People’s Food Policy Project is designed to do precisely that. It aims at forming an alliance among progressive farm groups, trade unions, academics, and faith-based groups; Indigenous groups reclaiming their cultures and languages; and NGOs working both internationally and domestically. This project builds on the local organising that is already going on in the multiplicity of food self-reliance projects in both rural and urban areas, and its method is to overcome the ‘individual’ by starting with the personal. People are encouraged to examine the barriers to the food security projects they are engaged in, and to tease out the policies that support or have erected those barriers. As they identify the policy framework they are able to stop blaming themselves for what they have seen as their own failures, whether the loss of a farm or the inability to feed their children adequately. They can then begin to think in terms of policies that will actually support food sovereignty, which the project will collate and synthesise into a national food sovereignty policy platform.

At the same time, the project aims to support the practice of food sovereignty, understood as the many and varied initiatives to localise the food system, place
control locally, and honour the knowledge, skills, and cultures which different peoples bring to food self-reliance. With the support of partners who work overseas with peasant and smallholder groups, including the NFU and a variety of NGOs, the project emphasises that food sovereignty is a global project; and with the involvement of Indigenous activists, it embeds food sovereignty in respectful relationships among humans and the natural elements which provide our food.

This two-pronged approach also helps groups engaged in charity to engage in the discourse and encourages those who are working with anti-poverty, urban agriculture, and municipal policy groups to move beyond the all-consuming work of feeding the hungry to participating in a collective campaign to change the food system. In this way it holds the potential to harness the social and economic power of the well-heeled consumers of local and organic foods as it provides avenues for engagement beyond shopping.

The project is small and underfunded in relation to its ambitious mandate. Its importance lies in its potential to align the critical elements in Canada at the juncture of advocacy and practice: food providers, urban self-reliance groups, marginalised peoples, Indigenous, NGOs, and the well-to-do – to reframe the collective understanding of the food system, its structure, and how it must be changed to serve its true function. It is a two year project aiming to produce a policy platform by early 2010, engage in cross-sectoral national dialogue, and formally announce the platform and begin advocacy at the Food Secure Canada Assembly in November 2010. The relationships it is building, however, will continue and hold the potential to radically re-align the food system in Canada.

**Integrating advocacy and practice: cultivating convergence**

Eric Holt-Giménez

In the face of the food crisis and what is seen by some as a renewed, neoliberal assault in the form of a ‘new’ Green Revolution, peasant movements and farmer-to-farmer networks appear to be moving closer together. For example, African farmers’ organisations and their allies have met in Mali, Bonn, and Senegal to advance African Agroecological Alternatives to the Green Revolution (2007, 2008). Following the Rome food crisis meeting, Via Campesina met in Mozambique where they signed a declaration for a smallholder solution to the food crisis (2008). When PELUM brought over 300 farmer leaders together in Johannesburg to speak on their own
behalf at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the Eastern and Southern Africa Farmers Forum was founded.

These developments and others suggest that the international call for food sovereignty is beginning to taking root in specific consumer and smallholder initiatives to confront the food and farm crisis. New mixes of advocacy and practice across borders and sectors and between institutions are being forged on a daily basis. These developments have the potential for bringing together the extensive local networks for agroecological practice with the transnational advocacy organisations. If the two currents merge into a broad-based movement capable of generating massive social pressure, they could provide the necessary political impetus in favour of food sovereignty.

Ultimately, to end world hunger, the monopolistic industrial agrifoods complex will have to be replaced with agroecological and redistributive food systems. It is too early to tell whether or not the fledgling trend of convergence signals a new stage of integration between the main currents of peasant advocacy and smallholder agroecological practice. Nonetheless, the seeds of convergence have been sown. Successfully cultivating this trend may well determine the outcome of both the global food crisis and the international showdown over the world’s food systems.