

Today's Peasant Movement – Sophisticated, Threatened, and Our Best Hope for Survival

[Carol Schachet](#) | [Commondreams](#) | Jan 28th 2014



(Image: La Via Campesina)

The term *peasant* often conjures up images of medieval serfs out of touch with the ways of the world around them. Such thinking is out of date. Today, peasants proudly and powerfully put forward effective strategies to feed the planet and limit the damages wrought by industrial agriculture. What's more, they understand the connections between complex trade and economic systems, champion the rights of women, and even stand up for the rights of gay men and lesbians.

These are not your great ancestors' peasants.

"A peasant is a scientist. The amount and quality of knowledge we have been developing and practicing for centuries is highly useful and appropriate," said [Maxwell Munetsi](#), a farmer from Zimbabwe and a member of the Via Campesina.

The [Via Campesina](#) is perhaps the largest social movement in the world, consisting of more than 250 million farmers and small producers from over 70 nations. At the top of the Via's agenda is supporting peasant agriculture, which in today's era of globalization also means seeking agrarian reform, challenging neoliberalism and corporate-friendly trade agreements, and working to stop climate disruption.

“Peasant organizations today – from Haiti to Brazil to Mali to Indonesia – are tremendously sophisticated in their political analysis, not just their impressive knowledge of seeds, natural pesticides and fertilizers and sustainable agricultural practices,” says Nikhil Aziz, Executive Director of Grassroots International.

“In fact,” Aziz continues, “the methods used by peasant farmers out-produce the far more destructive and costly practices of industrial agriculture. They can grow more food, at less cost, and actually help cool the planet. Meanwhile the massive plantations planted with seeds from Monsanto and other agrochemical giants and flooded with toxics produce less food, create more greenhouse gases and literally are making the farmers, consumers and planet sick.”

A global assessment spearheaded by the United Nations and including the World Bank and the United Nations Environment Program agree. Their 2008 report (the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, or [IAASTD](#) for short) concludes that small-scale agriculture produces more food at less cost to the farmer and the environment than does industrial agriculture.

The conclusion of the IAASTD Report comes as no surprise to Carlos Hernandez. When a member of [UNOSJO](#) (the Union of Organizations of the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca, a Grassroots International partner) first reached out to Carlos, he was unconvinced.

“UNOSJO told us we did not have to rely on chemical fertilizers and pesticides. I was hesitant, thinking that buying fertilizers was a faster way to get results,” Carlos said. “I was hesitant for two years, until 2004 when I was motivated to make the organic fertilizer. In 2005, for the first time, I used the organic fertilizer [in a small plot of land].”

Seeing is believing – and soon Carlos switched completely to agroecological methods that included heirloom seeds, natural fertilizers and pesticides, and intercropping. All of those techniques rely on the farmers' knowledge. To succeed, farmers need to learn new and sustainable methods, share their knowledge, adapt to changing climate conditions, and maneuver politically at a time when global policies favor massive corporate agriculture and chemical giants.

The change in Carlos' life is profound. Now he and his family have healthy food to eat and to sell at local farmers' markets, they can afford to send all their children to school, and he is eager to share his expertise with others.

Carlos and other peasant farmers are part of a movement for food sovereignty – the right of peoples and communities to control the seeds they plant and the food they grow and consume in an ecologically sustainable and culturally appropriate way. This is the central concept of peasant agriculture, and it offers the potential to boost our global food system and protect the planet from climate disruption.

“Not only do peasant farmers feed communities, they also cool the planet and protect Mother Nature,” explains Via Campesina a [statement](#) on International Peasant Day last year saying. “Unlike agribusiness, peasants do not treat food as a commodity for speculation profiting out of hunger. They do not patent nature for profit, keeping it out of the hands of the common man and woman. They share their knowledge and seeds, so everyone can have food to eat.”

Food is central to our culture and our civilization, which is precisely the analysis that the small producers – farmers, fishers and foresters – of the Via Campesina bring. As long as corporations control the food system in order to produce short-term profit, our collective lives are in danger. Systems of injustice that uphold the corporate food system include trade agreements, water privatization schemes, land grabs and

gender inequality. These are the connections that peasants like Carlos see every day.

For instance, more than 60 percent of the world's farmers are women, yet women cannot own land in many nations. To confront this institutional violence against women, as well as domestic violence, the Via launched the [Global Campaign to End Violence Against Women](#) in 2008. The movement conducted trainings at the grassroots and also required co-gender leadership at all levels, including the highest level. Farmers are also calling for a dismantling of the World Trade Organization and its manipulation of food commodity structures.

The success of peasants means success for all of us, because they are leading the way in feeding the world, counteracting greenhouse gas emissions and other environmentally toxic poisons, conserving water and biodiversity and expanding social and economic justice. The peasant movement chant of "Globalize the struggle, globalize the hope" is a roadmap toward a sustainable, dignified future.

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Carol Schachet, MDiv, is Director of Development and Communications at [Grassroots International](#) and a longtime organizer. Her writings have appeared in the Resist Newsletter, Ecology Today, Insights and community journals.

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