

Reply: solidarity

Re-examining the “agrarian movement-NGO” solidarity relations discourse

Saturnino M. Borras Jr

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During the past two decades, nation-states in developing countries have been transformed by a triple “squeeze”: globalization, (partial) decentralization, and the privatization of some of their functions (Fox 2001). Although central states remain important, they have been transformed. Different actors have contested the scope, pace and direction of the transformation, including its agrarian restructuring component. The changing international–national–local linkages that structure the terms under which people accept or resist corporate-controlled global politics and economics present both threats and opportunities for the world’s rural population. The co-existence of threats and opportunities has prompted many rural social movements to both localize further, in response to state decentralization, and to internationalize, in response to globalization. The seemingly contradictory social–political pressures of globalization and decentralization that are transforming the nation-state are also changing rural social movements. More horizontal solidarity linkages and “polycentric” rural social movements are emerging and struggling to construct coherent structures for the coordination of greater vertical integration. La Via Campesina is the largest and most politically coherent of all current transnational agrarian movements (TAMs).

Via Campesina is an international movement of poor peasants and small farmers from both the global south and north. Initiated by Central, South and North American peasant and farmers’ movements and European farmers’ groups, Via Campesina was formally launched in 1993. Existing transnational activist networks located in peasant movements and nongovernmental funding agencies in the North facilitated the contacts between key national peasant movements that emerged primarily in the 1980s. By 2008, Via Campesina represented more than 150

S. M. Borras Jr (✉)
Canada Research Chair in International Development Studies at Saint Mary’s University, Halifax,
Nova Scotia, Canada
e-mail: sborras@smu.ca

sub-national, rural, social movement organizations from 56 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Western Europe, Asia and Africa.

The building of transnational agrarian solidarity discussed in this essay is *new* in at least three ways. *First*, in the early 1990s, before the existence of Via Campesina, the only global solidarity linkage that claimed representation of the world's rural poor was the International Federation of Agricultural Producers, or IFAP, an organization of middle and rich farmers mainly based in the North. Unlike IFAP, whose politics tended to be conservative, the Via Campesina represented the solidarity of poor peasants and small farmers with class and political interests different from IFAP. The international solidarity represented by Via Campesina was thus new.¹

Second, the scale of Via Campesina's transnational movement or network and the scope of its political work are unprecedented, despite the fact that it remains absent or thin in many regions of the world. The movement's use of the latest communications technology (internet, email, electronic conferences) is new in the agrarian movement world. Moreover, the Via Campesina's issue-framing and demand-making perspective has been consciously "rights-based" and linked to socio-economic and cultural rights as well as "global citizenship rights," something that did not previously exist in any systematic way in the agrarian movement world.²

Third, a similar NGO-based global advocacy framework on behalf of poor peasants and small farmers existed before the organization of Via Campesina. When Via Campesina organized, it therefore quickly defined its identity (i.e., "people of the land") and class composition (i.e., poor peasants and small farmers), clarified its claims of direct representation, and declared that intermediary NGOs should stop representing poor peasants and small farmers. The demand that NGOs stop speaking on behalf of peasants and farmers emerged from the popular saying, "not about us without us." This article concerns the third dimension of contemporary solidarity involving agrarian movements, and it focuses on Via Campesina.

The importance of "movement-NGO" solidarity

Questions about solidarity relations between agrarian movements and allies are not new. They are problematized in the long, rich history of agrarian studies. The classic formulation of the "agrarian question" is broadly about linkages, relations *and* solidarity between peasants and other classes and sectors. Past studies about solidarity have touched on alliances between agrarian movements and workers, agrarian movements and political parties, and agrarian movements and middle classes and other forces.

However, NGOs are distinct from trade unions, political parties and the generic middle classes. By NGOs, we mean non-state groups engaged in issues that broadly

¹ This issue has been substantially discussed elsewhere by some scholars (e.g., Edelman 2003; Desmarais 2007; Borras et al. 2008), and will not be elaborated in this paper.

² These issues have been addressed elsewhere (e.g., Borras and Franco forthcoming).

reflect the range of concerns articulated by “global justice movements.” It is a narrow definition, but appropriate for the purpose of this article. These NGOs can be based in the South and receive funds from abroad, or they can be donor NGOs based in the North. The scope of their work is local, national or international. Both types of NGOs have seen an unprecedented rise in number and political influence during the past 25 years. In most places, the expansion of NGOs has coincided, complemented, competed and conflicted with the growth and political influence of TAMs. There is a significant gap in the literature about the contentious relationship between TAMs and NGOs. Building on previous scholarship (see, e.g., Desmarais 2007; Tadem 1996; Biekart and Jelsma 1994; Edelman 2003), this essay will contribute to filling the gap.

Agrarian movement-NGO solidarity has been critical for contemporary TAMs in a number of ways. *First*, NGOs have played a central role in the contemporary emergence of an autonomous agrarian movement. Most of the subnational agrarian movements associated with Via Campesina today are “post-political party movements.” In other words, these agrarian movements represent a new, autonomous generation that has rejected any type of “transmission belt” relationship with political parties (Communist or leftist-electoral parties); the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) exemplifies this kind of autonomy. Yet localized agrarian movements have needed logistical resources, political cover and support to extend their capacity to mobilize, and radical NGOs provided this support. The Brazilian Land Pastoral Commission (CPT) of the Catholic Church and European church-based NGOs, such as Bread for the World and Miserior, exemplify these types of radical NGOs. It is difficult to imagine how the MST could have gained so much ground during its formative years in the 1980s without this support. Such relationships are not limited to the MST. If we take a closer look at the history of the Federation of Indonesian Peasant Unions (FSPI), which hosts the global operational secretariat of Via Campesina, the same profile emerges: a network of NGOs founded and run by middle-class student activists provided critical support, including, for example, the current General Secretary of Via Campesina, Henry Saragih (formerly of the Medan-based NGO Yayasan Sintesa).

Second, NGOs facilitated earlier cross-border contacts between subnational movements. Such cross-border linkages required huge logistical resources, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, when electronic communications and cheap transportation were still uncommon. Cross-border meetings between agrarian movements in the seventies and eighties marked the beginning of what would become full-blown TAMs. European NGOs provided key logistical resources for such encounters, and they connected partners and counterparts with similar political perspectives from different countries. For example, Brazil’s MST, the Peasant Movement of the Philippines (KMP) and the German farmers’ movement (ABL)—all founding members of Via Campesina—became acquainted through an initiative of a Protestant church-based association with counter-part funds from Bread for the World. There are, of course, also examples of farmer-to-farmer encounters, such as the Canadian National Farmers’ Union (NFU,) which endeavored to forge cross-border solidarity linkages. Nevertheless, these examples are rare, and on most

occasions, they have had some support from NGO donors (see Edelman 2003; Desmarais 2007).

Third, NGOs funded and continue to fund subnational and transnational agrarian movements. Via Campesina and its regional coordinating hubs are no exception. Yet the number of salaried professionals in these movements is usually dramatically less than their NGO counterparts. Via Campesina's global secretariat has a skeletal staff that consists of a handful of underpaid employees and unpaid volunteers, and it requires significant external financing to support its staff and international activities, such as the meetings of its international coordinating commission and its regular world assembly. However, unlike many NGOs that advocate issues favoured by donors, Via Campesina usually sets the agenda and issues around which funding arrangements are made. Via Campesina is very selective in engaging with donor NGOs; indeed, only a handful of NGOs have been "privileged" to become institutional funders of Via Campesina. The Via Campesina's bottom line principle in choosing donors is the existence of "solidarity relations," i.e., relations that are not defined within a narrow project or funding relation. These solidarity-based relations govern Via Campesina's engagement with the Dutch Inter-Church Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO) and Oxfam-Novib, to offer two examples. Without the support of these NGOs, Via Campesina could neither maintain its lean staff nor carry out its regular institutional work of maintaining and consolidating its global movement and launching campaigns.

Fourth, Many radical think tanks and research and advocacy networks provide research and political support to TAMs. For example, the Land Research and Action Network (LRAN) and the Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN) are two global NGOs that have been working very closely with Via Campesina on its global campaign for agrarian reform. The Friends of the Earth works with Via Campesina on climate change and agrofuels, while the Focus on the Global South works with Via Campesina on trade issues.

In short, NGOs have played, and continue to play, a critical role in the emergence, maintenance and consolidation of TAMs and their global campaigns. The various ways that NGOs have supported TAMs are concrete illustrations of recent solidarity relations between movements and NGOs. Unfortunately, in the dominant discourse of TAMs and some of their sympathizers in the academic community, negative stories about NGO-TAM relations overshadow the complexity and nuance in actual movement-NGO relations.

Tensions and contradictions in the discourse between movements and NGOs

The former Central American Peasant Coalition (ASOCODE) influenced Via Campesina's discourse on NGOs. ASOCODE was a pillar in the founding of Via Campesina, and it was famous for articulating what was perhaps the first systematic TAM critique of NGOs. In fact, ASOCODE built its platform on the self-appointed task of taking back the "voice" of peasant movements from the NGOs and asserting that peasants could represent themselves. Wilson Campos, a Costa Rican activist who was the leader of ASOCODE in the 1990s and a founding leader of Via

Campesina, exclaimed and explained: “There are simply too many NGOs in Central America acting on behalf of the peasants. (...) Besides, too much money is being wasted on setting up all these organisations and paying salaries” (Biekart and Jelsma 1994, p. 20). Campos elaborated: “We farmers can speak up for ourselves. Already too many people have been taking advantage of us, without us getting any the wiser of it” (Campos 1994, p. 215). Ironically, ASOCODE became what it rejected: a bureaucratized organization, with lots of salaried staff and officials, an NGO, and by the end of the 1990s, ASOCODE had dissipated (see Edelman 2008).

For its part, Via Campesina’s defining moment as a global agrarian movement distinct and autonomous from NGOs came in 1993–1994 when it decisively rejected a Dutch NGOs attempt to control the organizational and political orientation of Via Campesina. The NGO, which had assisted in the formation of Via Campesina, did not want agrarian activists to form a global movement with a formal organizational structure. It preferred that they become a loosely organized global “forum” with a secretariat tied to the NGO. And when, in the 1990s, Via Campesina barged into the global state–civil society interface terrain, it found out that either IFAP or NGOs occupied the spaces for representing poor peasants and small farmers in global fora and institutions. Via Campesina challenged these dominant players and partly dislodged them from some of these spaces, while simultaneously creating its own autonomous space.

The discourse about movement-NGO relations departs from several assumptions popular among movement activists. *First*, NGOs do not and cannot represent the rural poor; only movements represent the rural poor. *Second*, NGOs are led by middle-class intellectuals; agrarian movements are led by poor peasants themselves. *Third*, NGOs are bureaucratic and undemocratic; movements are non-bureaucratic and democratic. *Fourth*, NGOs have funds; movements do not have funds. *Fifth*, NGOs are paternalistic; agrarian movements are not. *Sixth*, NGOs are generally conservative and do not engage in direct actions, while movements are radical and employ direct actions. Not all components of this discourse are articulated together and explicitly expressed at all times. On most occasions, they are stated separately and implicitly.

These broad depictions of the differences between TAMs and NGOs have found significant support among many global justice movement groups, activists, and some radical academics. It is not difficult to find concrete examples to illustrate the charges made by some agrarian movements against NGOs (see, e.g., Petras and Veltmeyer 2001). It is, however, equally important to look into the silences, tensions and contradictions in this discourse.

It is true that movements always clarify that there are exceptional NGOs with which they can work; similarly, Via Campesina readily admits that not all agrarian movements have a significant base and are representative. Although this position is an important step toward a better understanding of movement-NGO solidarity, it demands more nuanced analysis. *First*, in some settings where agrarian movements were quite underdeveloped, NGOs had to take some transitional role in direct organizing work, representation and mobilization. This was and is the case in South Africa. During the post-apartheid transition after 1994, the NGO National Land Coalition (NLC) assumed the representation of the rural poor in state–civil society

interactions, but by 2000, the NLC had directly facilitated the birth of a movement, the Landless People's Movement (LPM). The LPM became a high profile Via Campesina member. For various reasons, the NLC collapsed, and soon after that the LPM imploded. To fill the political vacuum, several NGOs came together to launch ALARM (Alliance of Land and Agrarian Reform Movements). Organizationally, ALARM is more of an NGO than an agrarian movement, although it has a political orientation and other features similar to a movement, and along with the remnants of the LPM leadership, it works closely with Via Campesina even though it is not a formal member.

Second although most NGOs are run by middle-class intellectuals, there are NGOs with staff who are the sons and daughters of peasants and workers. These employees constitute the field staff. They are directly engaged with the rural poor in the villages, and they are involved in framing issues and making demands in the context of movement building. Meanwhile, it is easy to find agrarian movements that are inserted into radical TAMs and networks that are actually run and led by middle-class professionals. The case of the Via Campesina member Karnataka State Farmer's Association (KRRS) in India is a good illustration (Assadi 1994), although there are many other examples across continents.

Third not all agrarian movements can fully represent all the diverse classes and groups in society. Joao Pedro Stedile, leader of the MST, has admitted that despite the MST's huge success relative to any other contemporary agrarian movement, the group has organized only a small percentage of the landless population in Brazil (Stedile 2007). In other cases, strong movements represent not poor peasants but the middle and rich farmers, creating class-based tensions within broader agrarian movements, as in the case of KRRS in India.

Fourth not all NGOs are bureaucratic and undemocratic, and not all agrarian movements are non-bureaucratic and democratic. There are countless NGOs that minimize bureaucracy and that are democratic, including many NGOs that Via Campesina works with at the local, national and international levels. Moreover, not all NGOs are well-funded, and not all agrarian movements are without funds. Meanwhile, there are many agrarian movements that are bureaucratic, undemocratic and over-funded. And in many cases, NGOs provide critical funds for agrarian movements. *Fifth*, there are NGOs that are not paternalistic, while there are agrarian movements, especially their national, elite leaderships that are paternalistic. And there are NGOs that engage in radical direct action, while there are plenty of agrarian movements that do not. In short, the political differences between NGOs and movements are not straightforward and cannot be reduced to organizational forms.

Concluding remarks

The tension in the official discourse of agrarian movements is thus illustrated most concretely by the fact that TAMs do maintain close solidarity links and work quite closely with NGOs. One has only to think about the comradely relationships of Via Campesina with LRAM, FIAN, ICCO, Oxfam-Novib, Focus on the Global South,

and Friends of the Earth. These NGOs are run by middle-class intellectuals; they do not have grassroots members to represent; and they are well funded. Thus, the sweeping generalizations about “movement-NGO” solidarity relations tend to be problematic when critically examined against empirical evidence. But it is critical to note that the demands of agrarian movements, especially by Via Campesina, for their own autonomous voice and spaces for representation have been crucial in clarifying the kind of solidarity that is acceptable to both movements and NGOs.

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