



La Vía Campesina

An Evolving Transnational Social Movement



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Introduction

Neo-liberalism has been perceived as a strategic threat to their lives and livelihoods by many landless and land-poor peasants, wage labourers and small farmers in southern and northern countries.¹ The perception and/or actual experience of this threat has provoked many organisations in the marginalised rural sectors to forge a transnational movement organisation: *La Vía Campesina*, to defend and struggle for the *peasant way* of life and livelihood. It is arguably both a 'movement', being more 'amorphous', as well as an 'organisation' with certain degree of formal associational coherence and rules to provide the necessary face to the broader rural social movement it represents. Initiated by Central, Southern and Northern American peasant and farmers' movements and European farmers' groups, *Vía Campesina* was formally launched in 1993.

Today, *Vía Campesina* unites more than a hundred national and sub-national organisations from Latin America, North America, Asia, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe opposed to neo-liberalism and advocating a pro-poor, sustainable, rights-based rural development and greater democratisation. It is an ideologically autonomous and pluralist coalition. It is both an *actor* and an *arena of action*. Claiming global and popular representation, although the American and European groups have remained the most numerous within it, *Vía Campesina* has emerged as a major *actor* in the current popular transnational struggles against neo-liberalism, demanding accountability from inter-governmental agencies, resisting and opposing corporate control over natural resources and technology, and advocating food sovereignty, among other issues. It has figured prominently in politically contentious campaigns such as those against the WTO, global corporate giants such as McDonalds, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) along with the transnational companies that promote them, such as Monsanto.

Scholars, policymakers and activists alike have struggled to fully understand the processes and institutions unfolding in the transnational public arena. There is an emerging scholarly and activist literature about transnational networks and/or movements, many of which relate in some way to rural issues. Nevertheless, there are very few written analyses and studies of transnational rural social movements.² The experience of the emerging transnational rural social movement, which *Vía Campesina* represents, is rich and complex. Focusing on the global campaign for agrarian reform, this paper hopes to make a further contribution. It will look at four broadly distinct but interrelated aspects of *Vía Campesina's* development, namely, i) agendas and aims, ii) alliances, rival movements and the question of autonomy, iii) strategies and forms of collective actions, and iv) representativity and accountability. In each case, the current *Vía Campesina* situation is presented, positions clarified, dilemmas identified, and challenges put forward.

¹ I am very grateful to Annette Desmarais, Sofia Monsalve, Fiona Dove, Armin Paasch and Jennifer Franco for their frank, very critical, incisive but constructive comments and suggestions that saved this paper from embarrassing mistakes and improved the over all quality of the paper. I also and thank Daniel Chavez and Brid Brennan for their encouragement to write this paper. However, the final analysis and all the remaining errors and shortcomings in this version are mine. Some parts of Section 3 are lifted from the author's forthcoming article in the *Journal of Development Studies*.

² For *Vía Campesina*, the first and most authoritative studies are those carried out and published by the Canadian activist-scholar Annette Desmarais (2002; 2003a; 2003b), wherein she explained comprehensively the origins, platforms, and organisational structures and processes of *Vía Campesina*. See Desmarais (2002; 2003a; 2003b). See Marc Edelman (2003).

Neo-liberalism and the Emergence of Transnational Rural Social Movements

Contemporary nation states are experiencing simultaneous triple squeeze: 'from above' through 'globalisation' where some regulatory powers of the nation state have been increasingly ceded to international regulatory institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank; 'from below' through the generally partial decentralisation of political, fiscal and administrative powers of the central state to its local counterparts; and 'from the sides' through privatisation of some of its functions (Fox, 2001).

Amidst such processes, and despite the recent changes, central states remain important players in local, national and international politics and economy, albeit profoundly transformed. The scope, pace, direction and extent of this transformation are contested by different actors who ally with and/or compete against each other at the different levels of politics and economy. The contested nature of this transformation process is, arguably, largely responsible for the highly uneven and varied outcomes of globalisation, decentralisation and privatisation policies, with various impacts on different social classes and groups from one society to another.³

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The rural sector globally is perhaps the most profoundly affected by these processes. The neo-liberal world market orientation of trade and its corresponding technological and fiscal policies have far-reaching actual and potential impacts (mostly adverse) on the lives and livelihoods of poor peasants and small farmers. The state's partial withdrawal from its traditional obligations to the rural poor and the waves of privatisation that affect poor people's control over natural resources and access to basic utilities have also left many poor peasants and small farmers exposed to the harshness of market forces dominated by the global corporate giants. Finally, the decentralisation of state power in most developing countries has also profoundly impacted on the institutional terrain within which the rural poor engage the state and the elite.

Thus, the changed and changing international-national-local institutions that structure the rules through which poor people assimilate into or resist the corporate-controlled global politics and economy have presented both threats and opportunities to the world's rural population. The co-existence of both threats and opportunities has encouraged and provoked national rural social movements to further localise (in response to state decentralisation), and at the same time to internationalise (in response to globalisation) their movements, advocacy and lobby works, and collective actions, while holding on to their national characters. One result of this adjustment is the emergence of 'polycentric' rural social movements⁴ that struggle to construct more coherent coordinative structures for greater vertical integration, at the same time⁵. The (seemingly) contradictory directions of the political processes of globalisation and decentralisation affecting the state are thus also internalised by the political-organisational

³ In the context of Latin America, refer to Robert Gwynne and Cristóbal Kay (2004). For a global perspective, refer to Deborah Bryceson, Cristóbal Kay and Jos Mooij (eds.) (2000).

⁴ 'Polycentric' here is loosely defined as 'coordinative networks with several centres of power' located at different levels: international, regional, national and local

⁵ See Fox (2001).

processes of rural social movements.⁶ These political and organisational processes, like those that confront nation states, are highly dynamic and result in varied and uneven outcomes institutionally, geographically, and temporally.

It is from this perspective that recently emerged transnational rural social movements, and their possible political and organisational trajectories, can be better seen and understood. Transnational networks and/or social movements are not new, although transnational networks or movements of peasants and small farmers are, in general.⁷ There is only one known transnational network of farmers that has existed for some decades now: the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP). Founded in 1946 by associations of small to big farmers mainly from developed countries, IFAP has become the mainstream sector organisation for agriculture in general that has claimed and made official representation to inter-governmental agencies and in agribusiness circuits. Neo-liberal policy changes generally did not and will not necessarily adversely affect many of its constituents, at least not financially. In fact, many have and will benefit from the pro-market global policy reforms and WTO trade rules⁸. Since the late 1980s, however, IFAP has also recruited or allowed entry of some organisations of poor peasants from developing countries. While not an homogeneous network economically, its politics do tend to be dominated by its economically and financially powerful members. It has thus seen neo-liberalism principally as an opportunity, essentially supports such policies although advocating some operational and administrative revisions to their rules.⁹ The perception of opportunity has encouraged IFAP and its members to become even more active in transnational advocacy and lobby work.

On most occasions, Vía Campesina's positions on contentious issues and forms of collective actions have differed fundamentally from its mainstream counterpart. Vía Campesina has emerged as an important alternative voice of poor peasants and small farmers, largely but not yet completely, eroding the traditional hegemonic claim of IFAP. At the same time, Vía Campesina has emerged as an important *arena* of actions, debate and exchanges between different national and sub-national peasant and farmers' groups. It is this dual character of both actor and arena of actions that has shaped Vía Campesina as an important 'institution'¹⁰ of and for national and local peasant movements, and an interesting but complex entity for other transnational social movements, NGO networks and international agencies to comprehend and deal with.

Neo-liberal Land Policies

Land remains key to poor rural peoples' capacity and autonomy in constructing, securing and maintaining sustainable livelihoods, defending their cultural identity, exercising their civil, economic, social, cultural, political rights and pushing for greater democratisation more generally. Land does not only have monetary value; it also entails political power. To the world's rural poor, land has multiple dimensions:

⁶ For a broadly related recent study, refer to Krishna Ghimire (ed.) (forthcoming).

⁷ For relevant general discussion, see Edelman (2003); Biekart (2001).

⁸ See Desmarais (2003a: 19).

⁹ Desmarais (2003a: 18) explains that after internal debates within IFAP, it "ultimately took a pro-liberalization stance."

¹⁰ Defined in this context broadly and loosely as a body of 'rules' that mediate between diverse actors and between actors and existing structures.

economic, political, social, cultural, and spiritual. Despite the series of land reforms initiated by most governments in developing countries over the most part of the past century, ownership of and/or effective control over land resources has remained generally concentrated in the hands of a few landed elites.

At the outset of global neo-liberalism in the late 1970s, land reform was stricken off development policy agendas for various reasons, including the prioritisation of debt repayments for many countries. The few but dramatic land-based political conflicts of the 1990s have revived land reform on mainstream policy agendas. The neo-liberal quest for the 'most efficient allocation and use of land resources' has also crucially contributed to this policy revival, however. Neo-liberal economists, especially those based in the land policy unit of the World Bank, believe that economically efficient and competitive farms must be created and consolidated if the aims of global neo-liberal economic policies are to be realized. There are various ways through which this goal can be achieved, depending on the type of pre-existing agrarian structures. First, is to carry out massive privatisation and systematic (individual) private titling of public/communal lands in order to make use of the capital 'sleeping' in the form of land. While most countries of Africa have been and will be affected by this initiative, this policy also applies in many upland and indigenous communities of Latin America and Asia. Second, is to privatize and parcel out state and collective farms in 'transitional economies', such as those in Eastern Europe. The first two broad policies are directed towards non-private lands. The succeeding ones are directed towards private lands. Third, is to promote share tenancy or land rental arrangements as a way to maximize the efficiency potential of land resources. This option means that pre-existing laws that prohibit ownership of land beyond a certain farm size and prohibit share tenancy have to be abolished. These three broad policy prescriptions are founded on the neo-liberal assumption that individual private land-owners will use clear legal land titles as collateral to secure bank loans, thereby increasing capital inflow in the countryside, which would in turn stimulate capital accumulation, and so reduce poverty (see World Bank, 2003).

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The fourth policy prescription is most controversial because it involves private landholdings and calls for a stop to conventional state-led approaches to land reform. The main neo-liberal policy toward private farms is to promote share tenancy arrangement, and only in circumstances where there are 'willing sellers' and 'willing buyers' should land sales be allowed. The neo-liberal 'land reform' that rests on the 'willing seller-willing buyer' principle has features quite opposite to those of the conventional state-led land reforms (see Table 1). This policy, more popularly known as Market-Led Agrarian Reform (MLAR) is a voluntary land reform whereby landlords are paid 100 percent spot-cash for 100 percent market value of the land¹¹. It is considered a demand-driven approach insofar as only those who explicitly demand land and only the lands being demanded are included in the programme. Proponents assert that MLAR will stimulate, rather than undermine, land markets. This market reform measure is expected to result in increased amounts of land being made available for purchase by different types of producers. Withdrawal of subsidy (from large farmers), land titling, progressive land taxation, land sales and rental liberalisation, and better market information systems are among the policy requirements deemed crucial for the MLAR to be effective.

The model is constructed such that a 'self-selection' process is undertaken among prospective buyers to

¹¹ See Klaus Deininger (1999).

determine the beneficiary, who is thus deemed the most economically efficient producer. The MLAR model offers a flexible loan-grant financing scheme. Each beneficiary is given a fixed sum to spend as follows: the portion used to buy land is considered a loan and must be fully repaid by the beneficiary, including interest at commercial rates. The remainder is given to the beneficiary as a grant to be used for farm development projects post-land transfer. This mechanism is thought to be key to reducing the cost of land because peasants are expected to go for the smallest loan and biggest grant portion, thus getting the best bargain for their money. It also thought to be key to speeding up farm development.

The MLAR model requires farm plans *before* land purchase, and thus claims that farm development is assured because no land shall be purchased without viable plans that emphasise diversified commercial farming, including joint venture arrangements with investors. Further, the policy adopts a decentralised method of implementation in order to speed up transactions and make them transparent and accountable. Beneficiaries must spend a portion of the grant on a privatised and decentralised extension service that, the argument goes, is efficient, since there is more direct accountability between beneficiaries and service providers. Furthermore, widespread credit and investments are expected to become available because banks will honour, as collateral for loans, the land title generated by an outright sale.

Monetarily, the MLAR model is thought to be much cheaper than state-led agrarian reforms primarily because it needs no huge, expensive government bureaucracies, land prices are lower, and beneficiaries shoulder 100 percent of the land cost. The model requires national governments to bankroll the initial phase of the programme, but in the long term, private banks should take over the programme's primary financing (see Table 1 for key features of MLAR).



Table 1: Key Features of State- and Market-Led Approaches Based on the Pro-Market Explanations and Claims

Issues	State-Led	Market-Led
-----Getting Access to Land-----		
acquisition method	coercive; cash-bonds payments at below market price, and so land-lords oppose it resulting in policy failure	voluntary; 100% cash payment based on 100% market value of land, and so landlords will not oppose
beneficiaries	supply-driven; beneficiaries state-selected and so includes economically non-efficient and non-competitive households	demand-driven; self-selected and includes only households that are economically efficient
implementation method	statist-centralised; transparency and and so accountability - low degree	privatised-decentralised; and so accountability - high degree
pace & nature	protracted; politically & legally contentious	quick; politically & legally non-contentious
land prices	higher	lower
land markets	land reform: cause of/aggravates land market distortions; progressive land tax & land titling programme not required	land reform: cause & effect of land market stimulation; progressive land tax & titling programme required
-----Post-Land Transfer Farm & Beneficiary Development-----		
programme sequence; extension service	farm developments plans after land redistribution. protracted, uncertain & anaemic post-land transfer dev't; extension service statist-centralised = inefficient	farm development plans before, pace of dev't & redistribution. quick, certain & dynamic post-land transfer dev't. extension service privatised- decentralized = efficient
credit & investments	low credit supply & low investments	increased credit & investments
exit options	none	ample
-----Financing-----		
mechanism	state "universal" subsidies; sovereign guarantee; beneficiaries pay subsidized land price; "dole-out" mentality among beneficiaries	flexible loan-grant mechanism; co-sharing of risks; beneficiaries shoulder full cost of land; farm dev't cost given via grant
cost of reform	high	low

Lifted from Borras (2003a; 2003b)¹²

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The MLAR model has been implemented to varying degrees in many countries including Brazil (since 1998), Colombia (since 1994 until 2003) and South Africa (since 1995). The model, however, has seen different versions when adopted at the national level. Moreover, proponents have contradictory claims about the initial outcomes of implementation. These fall into three main groups:

- 1) direct references by MLAR proponents to various problems and failures, although they are quick to point out that such problems are operational and administrative in nature
- 2) critical views and reminders from scholars who are generally supportive of the MLAR model and experiment
- 3) a few critical works arguing that the problems in MLAR implementation in Brazil, Colombia and South Africa are fundamental in nature.

In sum, the neo-liberal land policies have different faces in different settings, but can be grouped into four broad types: privatisation and individual titling of public and communal lands, privatisation and parcelling out of state and collective farms in transitional economies, promotion of share tenancy arrangements, and implementation of the market-led agrarian reform. These four policy prescriptions, in fact, aspire to homogenise property rights in the world today, i.e. privatised-individualised, aimed at instigating private capital accumulation in the rural economy. It treats land simply as a factor of economic production. Amidst the emergence of neo-liberal land policies, Vía Campesina began to mount a more coherent and consistent transnational campaign on agrarian reform.

Agendas and Aims

The agendas and aims of Vía Campesina (as an actor) broadly reflect its member organisations. Vía Campesina is more than the sum total of the different agendas and goals of its member associations. Its agendas and aims are products of internal negotiations among the different member organisations (Vía Campesina as arena of action). They are part of the shaping and reshaping of the collective identity of Vía Campesina. Vía Campesina has a highly heterogeneous membership, ranging from small dairy farmers in Germany to landless peasants in Brazil, from farm surplus-producing farmers in Karnataka (India) to land-poor peasants in Mexico, from farm workers in Nicaragua to rice farmers in South Korea. The ideological persuasions of its member organisations vary too, from those coming from the communist party-based frameworks to those of the anarcho-syndicalist tradition, from those of broadly liberal provenance to those arising from environmental activism. Despite the seemingly great differences among these groups in terms of their world views, political agendas and methods of work, there are important unifying commonalities. The most significant is that all of these organisations more or less represent sectors in society that are economically and politically marginalised in their own national or sub-national context, as well as internationally. Marginalisation of landless and land-poor peasants is being exacerbated by neo-liberalism in both the global south and in the north. This decisively differentiates Vía Campesina (and its politics) from its mainstream rival, IFAP, although IFAP also has some members that represent poorer rural sectors.

It was the threat provoked by neo-liberalism that has galvanised different national and sub-national peasant and farmers' groups to establish their own transnational network and movement. As João Pedro Stedile of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* (MST, Movement of the Landless) of Brazil

explains: "If capital has become international and uses international methods, peasant movements must also internationalize their forms of struggle and develop new and creative ways to confront a common enemy." (Stedile, 2004: 16). Despite its heterogeneity, or perhaps because of it, Vía Campesina members have constructed and rallied around common agendas and aims under the broad banner of the struggle against neo-liberalism and by way of developing and asserting an alternative framework: "Vía Campesina's alternative to neo-liberalism is food sovereignty¹³, based on a model of peasant agriculture, genuine agrarian reform, fair trade, respect for peasant rights, full and representative participation of women, and social justice." (La Vía Campesina, 2004: 46-47). José Bové of the French Confederation Paysanne explains further:

"For the people of the South, food sovereignty means the right to protect themselves against imports. For us, it means fighting against export aid and against intensive farming. There's no contradiction there at all... Of course there are different points of view in Vía Campesina – it's the exchange of opinions and experiences that makes it such a fantastic network for training and debate. It's a real farmers' International, a living example of a new relationship between North and South." (Bové, 2001: 96).

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The agenda of Vía Campesina is both to defeat the forces of neo-liberalism and to develop an alternative. This explains Vía Campesina's confrontational stance vis-à-vis international financial institutions perceived to be the key tools of neo-liberalism. For Vía Campesina, "the goal is to delegitimize these institutions and decrease their influence. Vía Campesina does not engage in dialogue or consultative processes with these institutions as these efforts do not bring any positive changes and would contribute to their legitimization. There, the Vía Campesina's key issues (food sovereignty, agrarian reform, etc.) should be dealt with in an alternative, democratic framework. We have yet to further develop this alternative framework." (Vía Campesina, 2000a). Moreover, reforming the WTO is, for Vía Campesina, not a viable strategy, "because its very purpose, practices, and policies are so fundamentally flawed". At the same time, Vía Campesina is not calling for its abolition. Vía Campesina's position is to demand a reduction in the powers of WTO by taking agriculture out of its jurisdiction, and place it under the UN. This is a compromise position reached in consideration of the different, competing positions among its members. As Desmarais (2003a: 22-23) explains:

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"Initially, the Vía Campesina position straddled the reformist and radical perspectives. Some Vía Campesina organisations, like the KRRS from India, clamoured for the abolition of the WTO. Others, like the Canadian NFU and the Union Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autonomas (UNORCA) of Mexico, felt that an international trade regulatory system was necessary to counter the skewed power relations and conditions enshrined in regional trade agreements like NAFTA. Still others, like the Confederation Paysanne, believed that the Vía Campesina should work to reform the WTO to ensure that it complied with international human rights conventions. In the end, the Vía Campesina position was a compromise: rather than calling for the complete disbanding of the WTO, the Vía Campesina demanded a reduction in its powers by taking agriculture out its jurisdiction and placing it under the auspices of the UN – albeit a changed, democratic, and transparent UN."

¹³ Food sovereignty is defined as 'the right to produce food on one's own territory'

Box 1:

In July 2000, peasant activists and their allies, coordinated worldwide by *La Vía Campesina* and the Foodfirst Information and Action Network (FIAN) gathered in Honduras to discuss the prospects of redistributive land reform in the era of globalisation, as well as to examine the World Bank's MLAR policy model. The organisations which took part in this forum adopted a political stand against MLAR, a position that would guide the policy positions and collective actions by their network members across continents in subsequent years. It is relevant to quote parts of their official declaration at length:

“Land provides the base for all human life. Land, appropriately called Mother Earth by the natives of the Americas, feeds us: men, women, boys and girls; and we are deeply bound to her... We therefore reject the ideology that only considers land as merchandise. We observe with concern that the dominant agrarian policies, implemented within the framework of neo-liberalism, increasingly attempts to subject Agrarian Reform to the mechanics of the land market. We see that the states and international organisations implement policies that end up privatising the Agrarian Reform process, which in many countries have resulted in counter agrarian reforms and a scandalizing re-concentration of land ownership within a few hands. We also observe that international financial institutions, particularly the World Bank, promote a model called ‘market-assisted agrarian reform’ that according to our experiences threatens and substitutes existing Agrarian Reform programmes. The neo-liberal dogma, in essence, contradicts the basic principle of Agrarian Reform. According to its defenders, land is no longer for those who work it; but is kept for those who own the capital to buy it. The application of this principle systematically excludes landless peasants from participating in economic development, and deepens the already existing poverty. We wish to assert that, when governments fail to keep their commitment to agrarian reform and just allow the market to govern the distribution of land, they violate the human rights of peasant families who need access to land to fulfil their right to feed themselves as well as other economic, social and cultural human rights...”

(Vía Campesina, ‘Declaration of the International Meeting of the Landless in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, July 2000)



It remains to be seen, however, whether the inclination toward the UN will remain within the Vía Campesina amidst emerging disillusionment on the part of some groups within Vía Campesina regarding the recent general performance of the UN.¹⁴

¹⁴ Refer, for example, to the recent anti-UN sentiment in the La Vía Campesina 4th International Assembly Declaration, 19 July 2004 (www.viacampesina.org).

The competing agendas and aims of different Vía Campesina members partly illustrated above are less complicated when it comes to the advocacy for land reform. Land is the most visible and concrete unifying factor for all the members of Vía Campesina. The perspective, agendas and aims of the Vía Campesina on this issue is summarised in Box 1.

A few months after the Vía Campesina and FIAN Honduras Declaration of July 2000, Vía Campesina further defined in stricter manner its fundamental view on the land question:

“Agrarian reform has to start with a broad process of distribution of land ownership... Ownership of land is to be submitted to the criteria that only those that work the land, depend on it and live there with their families, have the right to land. Land is a good of nature that needs to be used for the welfare of all. Land is not, and cannot, be a marketable good that can be obtained in whatever quantity by those that have the financial means. We defend the principle of the maximum size of the social ownership of the land per family in relation to the reality in each country... We defend the social ownership of the land. So that families have the right to use it for the survival and in a beneficial way for society. They cannot use it for commercial purposes. There should be no speculation and it should be prohibited that capitalist enterprises (industries, traders, financial institutions) can obtain large amounts of land” (Vía Campesina, 2000b).

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Two years after the Honduras declaration, and systematisation of the initial results of preliminary empirical assessments of the implementation of the World Bank’s pro-market ‘land reform’ in selected countries, Vía Campesina joined several other organisations in further denouncing neo-liberal land policies and demanding their immediate halting (see Box 2 for an extended citation on their joint statement).

Finally and recently, Vía Campesina has further strengthened its land agenda. In April 2004, Vía Campesina formally petitioned the United Nations Human Rights Commission to adopt a declaration on ‘peasant rights’ in which democratic control over land resources is made paramount.¹⁵ In 2003, there was also a Vía Campesina-FIAN conference on ‘Agrarian Reform and Gender’ held in Cochabamba, Bolivia. In that conference, Vía Campesina made clear its position on this contentious issue: that past land reforms had generally discriminated against women, and thus calls for new land reforms that guarantee the distinct rights of women over land resources (Vía Campesina-FIAN, 2003).

¹⁵ Vía Campesina, Press release, 05 April 2004. Refer also the joint FIAN-Vía Campesina April 17th Press Release.

Box 2:

In part, the joint declaration of the conference which was held in Washington D.C. in April 2002, goes:

“Alarmed by the intensity with which the land policies promoted by the World Bank and other international cooperation agencies are depriving the poorest rural people of their means of livelihood, we have analyzed various aspects of these policies in light of our own testimonies and experiences. We have found that the Bank imposes the same programmes on innumerable countries, without regard for their history, local realities and customs of production and land use. Due to their impact, we conclude that the World Bank’s land policies basically seek to make land into a commodity, and in the end, place it at the service of the interests of international trade and transnational corporations. These policies are not the agrarian reform that social movements have demanded throughout their historic struggle, and therefore will not lead to substantial improvements in the living standards of the poor, nor will they lead to full development. By their nature land markets do not help the needy, the poor. Markets respond to money not to human needs...”

“So-called ‘market-based land reform’... is another attempt to evade the true redistribution of landed property and creates more problems than it solves. Our experiences in countries like South Africa, Brazil, Colombia and Guatemala indicate that these programmes, by their very nature, will never be able to create conditions to overcome the landlessness of millions of families. The programmes have excluded the poorest of the poor not meeting required preconditions and traditionally marginalised groups like rural women, and cannot be applied to indigenous communities. The land which is offered for sale is of the poorest quality, and landowners typically take advantage of these programmes to get rid of marginal lands or those far removed from market centres. In other cases the land offered comes from medium or small landowners in bankruptcy due to the freedom of imports, and as a result the programmes do not have redistributive effects, leaving large landed estates intact. The non-integrated nature of the programmes means that the productive projects of the beneficiaries fail, because they often lack the resources needed for food security, working capital, basic services and technical assistance. In all of the countries analyzed..., the great majority of the beneficiaries are behind in the payment of their credits. So, massive indebtedness and the abandonment or the loss of the land to pay off the loan will end up intensifying the poverty of the few beneficiary families. In addition to inviting corruption and political clientilism, these programmes have been used to undercut agrarian reform policies based on the expropriation or forfeiture of land held by large landowners, and to distract, undermine, divide, and curb the movements of landless peasants...”

“We demand... the immediate end of [the World Bank’s] current land policies and their



replacement with policies based on the right to land and food; [and] the publication of all the documents and information available on the projects.”

‘Final Declaration: Land for those who work it, not just for those who can buy it’, signed by several organisations including *Vía Campesina* (see Barros, Sauer and Schwartzman, eds., 2003).

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The discussion above reveals at least five sub-components in the agendas and aims of *Vía Campesina* on the land question, namely to, frustrate the neo-liberal agenda of pro-market land policies, struggle for a more progressive, even revolutionary, land reform, maximise opportunities for actual land reform gains within existing reformist policies, exchange among different national movements experiences related to forms of organisation and collective actions as well as political strategies address the question of legitimacy and accountability of international development and financial institutions (amongst others, WB, IMF, WTO, FAO). The first and second points seem to be the most high profile and unifying agendas for *Vía Campesina*, and stem largely from the members’ reaction to the threats from neo-liberalism. The first and second agendas are broad principles and frameworks, which do not inherently invite contentious and controversial differences among *Vía Campesina* member organisations. Moreover, the fourth and fifth agendas are relatively less contentious too. The third matter has tended to receive relatively less systematic and explicit attention within the movement in some countries, but not much discord or disunity is discernible in this regard either. It does, however, have the potential to become a fault-line within *Vía Campesina*. The potential divisive impact of maximising opportunities may stem, to a lesser degree, from different views on existing state-led land reforms; and, to a greater degree, from the different views on neo-liberal land policies, internationally and nationally.

Contemporary state-led land reform programme in the Philippines, for example, is arguably more progressive relative to post-1980 liberal land reforms in other developing countries in terms of its potential scope (types and quantity of lands and peasant households). Brazilian state-led land reform, on the other hand, is constrained by a constitutional provision that limits the scope of land reform in relation to less productive land. While there are many legal loopholes within the Philippine land reform law, it has expanded the formal coverage of legal rights accorded to peasants. Conflict-ridden state-social interactions determine the outcomes of struggles for control over land from one estate to another, resulting in modest and uneven, but significant, outcomes in land redistribution over time.¹⁶ This legal institutional framework has mobilised landless peasants in the Philippines to claim land rights, and has encouraged peasant organisations to launch more systematic claim-making actions, such as UNORKA (*Pambansang Ugnayan ng Nagsasariling Lokal na mga Samahang Mamamayan sa Kanayunan*, National Coordination of Autonomous Local Rural People’s Organisations), a group seeking membership of *Vía*

¹⁶ For a general comparative perspective on legal coverage of land reform laws in Brazil and the Philippines, see Peter Houtzager and Jennifer Franco (2003). See also: <www.makinglaw.org>.

Campesina.¹⁷ The same legal institutional framework, however, is considered ‘pro-landlord and anti-peasant’ by KMP (Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas, Peasant Movement of the Philippines), a member organisation of Via Campesina, which thus works to undermine it and block implementation. This is one of the fundamental differences between KMP and UNORKA. If and when UNORKA is admitted into Via Campesina, the KMP-UNORKA differences on land reform, among other matters, will be internalised within Via Campesina. It is likely that similar cases may emerge within and between other national movements within Via Campesina.

The more serious threat, however, is the possibility of the divisive potential of the neo-liberal land policies reaching the ranks of the Via Campesina members – i.e. that some member organisations (or sections within them) may, for various reasons, work within the parameters of the neo-liberal policies being peddled by international agencies in attractive project packages complete with generous funding assistance.¹⁸ This issue will be discussed further below.

On the issue of consolidating common agendas and aims, the key challenges to Via Campesina are how to strengthen its opposition to neo-liberal land policies and how to promote a more coherent alternative (in response to the threats). At the same time, it may also be useful to dare to explore the terrain of potential and actual opportunities mainly, though not solely, lying in existing reformist land policies, such as those in Brazil and the Philippines. The relatively positive recent developments in legal institutional frameworks for land issues in a few countries, such as the relatively successful (at least for the time being) recent opposition to external impositions of neo-liberal land policy reforms on pre-existing land laws in Mozambique, should be carefully examined by Via Campesina at the transnational level, with a view to actions that could maximise initial opportunities and further pry open preliminary reformist openings at different levels of the polity. The Via Campesina agenda could also be broadened and strengthened by carrying out a global mapping of all existing land reform laws kept dormant by national governments, which could assist national movements to revive co-ordinated actions around such pre-existing land laws. Dormant land reforms are not dead. They are potential nodes around which future peasant actions could gravitate, as the South Asian land reform scholar Ronald Herring (2003) has pointed out.



¹⁷ See Jennifer Franco (2004).

¹⁸ See Ghimire (forthcoming) for a general discussion on this issue, and for some empirical case studies.

Alliances, rival movements and the issue of autonomy

Vía Campesina warns against projecting the struggles for land as an exclusive need of peasants, instead underscoring the need to frame the struggle within a solution to the problems of the wider society, and thus framing the need for broader coalitions. The overarching framework of Vía Campesina on the issues of alliances and autonomy is clarified in some of its recent policy statements. Vía Campesina explains: “We live in a complex, integrated world where there are many players and agendas. We do not have a choice as to whether we interact with others who are engaged in our arena – but we have a choice on how we work to effect the changes we desire” (Vía Campesina, 2000a). It elaborates:

“Our efforts to defend peasant agriculture/culture and rural areas cannot succeed without cooperation with others. Where we share objectives and can join forces over particular issues with another organisation the Vía Campesina should enter into strategic alliances. Such alliances must be politically useful, carefully articulated in a formal agreement with a specified timeline and mutually agreeable... The Vía Campesina must have autonomy to determine the space it will occupy with the objective of securing a large enough space to effectively influence the event” (Vía Campesina, 2000a).

It also notes that while international contestations demand alliances at that level, coalitions are also required and/or have emerged from local and national conditions (Vía Campesina, 2000a).

Vía Campesina is well known for its strong, sometimes zealous, commitment to independence or autonomy from external actors, whether state or non-state, especially NGOs. While this is their official discourse, there are contradictions and dilemmas in real life, largely reflective of its heterogeneous character. Below this question is examined by looking at Vía Campesina’s advocacy on land issues from three angles: i) interactions with non-state actors and the issue of autonomy, ii) interaction with state actors and the issue of autonomy, and iii) rival movements.

i) interactions with non-state actors and the issue of autonomy

Vía Campesina puts a premium on alliances with politically like-minded social movements. At the moment, the extent of inter-movement or inter-network networking remains highly uneven, preliminary and tentative, although Vía Campesina aims to explore future collaboration with other rural-based international social movements (indigenous peoples, rural women, fisherfolk). On this front, there is not much contention within Vía Campesina.

The more contentious issue related to alliance building concerns NGOs. As Desmarais explains: “[the Vía Campesina] sought to distance itself from the paternalistic embrace of well-intentioned NGOs. In so doing, it forced NGOs working at the international level to come to grips with critical issues of representation, interlocution, accountability, and legitimacy” (Desmarais, 2003a: 27). This principle of autonomy that has guided Vía Campesina in its largely conflict-ridden relationship with NGOs has led to some unpleasant ‘misunderstandings’, such as the incident during the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996 when the Vía Campesina refused to sign the joint NGO statement. To date, Vía Campesina works directly only with a few select NGOs, such as Friends of the Earth, while exploring the possibility of working with a few others. Vía Campesina explains that its work with NGOs and people’s organisations “must be



undertaken in responsible ways. The terms of collaboration must be agreed on in advance. And the Vía Campesina must do what it can to ensure that the credibility and trust of our peasant movement is not jeopardized by failure on our part to fulfil our undertakings” (Vía Campesina, 2000a).

It is perhaps on the land struggle front that the most solid alliance of Vía Campesina with an NGO network has been achieved. During the past five years, an alliance with the Foodfirst Information and Action Network (FIAN) has been established, developed and consolidated. FIAN is an international NGO with its international secretariat in Heidelberg, Germany. It organises itself into sections for co-ordination in several countries. Its individual members usually come from activist and human rights NGOs and people’s organisations, as well as the academe. FIAN is a human rights NGO that struggles for the promotion of the right to food, a right which in turn requires the right to control over productive assets, especially land. In 1999, FIAN and Vía Campesina agreed to organize and establish a joint international campaign on land reform, the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform. It has steadily emerged since as an important player in the global policy debate over neo-liberal land policies and the promotion of a rights-based approach to land reform. A relatively high degree of mutual trust has been established between the two networks, albeit with some ‘birth pains’¹⁹.

Unintentionally, the Vía Campesina-FIAN joint campaign has revealed for Vía Campesina some problems regarding its constituency and alliance work. FIAN has been working on land and food issues since the 1980s and has been able to build a relatively significant and well-respected constituency linked in national and sub-national FIAN sections. FIAN brought its constituency into the alliance it has forged with Vía Campesina, though some of the peasant organisations that the FIAN network has been working with are not members of Vía Campesina. In some key instances, Vía Campesina members from their own countries have blocked the entry into Vía Campesina of some of the organisations that FIAN has been working with. This has, for example, been a problem in South Asia where FIAN has a relatively vibrant network. The key Vía Campesina member in India is the Karnataka State Farmers Association (KRRS). KRRS had a strong tendency to exclude other movements in the region, and/or perhaps other organisations have been reluctant to join due to KRRS’s key position within Vía Campesina (This may change, however, beginning August 2004 because sixteen peasant organisations from South Asia were eventually admitted to Vía Campesina during its Fourth International Assembly in July 2004).²⁰ FIAN, thus, has continued to carry out land reform campaigns in co-ordination with organisations that are both members and non-members of Vía Campesina. While this should be viewed as a welcome complement to Vía Campesina struggles, it has not always been perceived as such by some key actors.

Going back to the issue of political interaction with non-state actors, Vía Campesina is correct in pointing out the interlinked international-national-local dimensions that have a bearing on Vía Campesina’s efforts to forge alliances. Other international networks of non-state actors have their own constituencies, some overlap with Vía Campesina, others represent interests that run counter, while still others have ideological and political stand-points which contradict Vía Campesina and/or its members. Some of

¹⁹ This alliance has also been supported by the recently formed Land Research and Action Network (LRAN), an international network of activist researchers and NGOs working on the issues of agrarian reform and peasant movements. Focus on the Global South based in Thailand and Rede Social based in Brazil are among the members of the coordinating committee of LRAN.

²⁰ For a background on the various important peasant movements (including the KRRS) in India in the 1980s onward, and their different class, ideological and political provenance, refer to Tom Brass (1995).

these networks respect Vía Campesina's demand for autonomy, while others may seek to undermine it. The difficult challenge for Vía Campesina is how to seek and forge alliances or political interactions which advance both its short-term and strategic interests and influence the terms of interactions, while preserving its autonomy in the process. This may not be an easy task, but it is not impossible to accomplish.

ii) interactions with state actors and the issue of autonomy

In general, Vía Campesina categorically rejects the possibility of 'partnership' with international financial institutions (World Bank, IMF, WTO) with the intention of pushing for significant reforms on the grounds that these are deemed adversaries, being key tools of neo-liberalism. Vía Campesina also tends to downplay the importance of closely interacting with other inter-governmental organisations. There used to be only one exception highlighted in Vía Campesina discourse: the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Vía Campesina explained that it has been engaging FAO to "*struggle for positive change in an institution that could become a counter reference to WTO*" Vía Campesina (2000a). Furthermore, Vía Campesina has clarified that: "*Vía Campesina's position differs from the general focus of the FAO. We have a dialogue with the FAO as a body of the United Nations and work with the FAO in a regional and international process to obtain positive results. The FAO's doors are open to civil society and we feel that it is important to occupy this space, at this time. However, we must be constantly alert to the possibility of manipulation and instrumentalization by the institution and we should develop means to avoid this*" (Vía Campesina, 2004). Vía Campesina has also maintained a degree of openness in working with some UN system organisations, but is yet to actually develop this front. Concern to preserve its autonomy, as well as limitations in logistical and human resources, are among the reasons for Vía Campesina's unwillingness, caution, or inability to interact with these international institutions.

While the strong stance of Vía Campesina against international financial institutions on the one hand, and its decision to engage FAO on the other, has been understandable, the implicit underlying assumptions and fundamental framework are somewhat problematic. It tends to treat international governmental institutions as homogeneous entities. This position is, in general, less problematic when the institutions concerned are those that are almost always, and in general, act as tools of neo-liberalism and against poor peasants and small farmers. This is the case, for example, with the IMF and WTO. It is problematic, however, when the same approach is used in Vía Campesina's relationship with other agencies that demonstrate erratic positions and actions, revealing their heterogeneous character. It has difficulty explaining erratic, or even internally conflicted, positions and actions of and/or within these agencies over time. Thus, one can imagine the frustration and disappointment of Vía Campesina when the FAO came out openly endorsing GMOs in May 2004. Outraged, Vía Campesina protested:

"FAO promotes GMOs as solution for the world hunger, a slap in the face of those who defend food sovereignty. Is the FAO being taken over by Monsanto, Syngenta and other corporate interests?... FAO has sold itself out to Monsanto... Vía Campesina demands a public retraction by FAO regarding this issue... Otherwise, we believe that further dialogue is useless because it makes civil society accessory to a policy of introduction of GMOs, a technology in which we see no solution at all and against which we will have to increase our struggle and resistance" (Vía Campesina Press Release, 21 May 2004).



But FAO, or more precisely, some of its key officials, has also been quite 'friendly' to neo-liberalism in general. Some key officials within it have been supportive of the World Bank's neo-liberal land policies, yet Vía Campesina has not reacted in the same way it did recently on the issue of GMOs. Perhaps this incident raises the issue of the need to further develop the conceptual and practical-political framework for relating with international development institutions – or with some groups within these institutions.

These agencies are comprised of various actors that have different and, at times, conflicting and competing agendas, some of which may support Vía Campesina's agendas at different times, others not. The FAO incident also reveals that these institutions, like states, are arenas of political contestation; they rarely act as single actor entities. These institutions are shaped and reshaped by actors within and actors without in politically dynamic processes, with highly uneven and varied outcomes across time and from one geographic space to another.²¹ Some institutions, and programmes within them, are doubtless more dominated by neo-liberals. As such, Vía Campesina's decision to launch campaigns aimed at de-legitimising these institutions may be the best option. Others, such as the FAO and UNDP, are perhaps less dominated by anti-reform actors, allowing or tolerating pro-reform actors, broadly defined here as those tolerant or even supportive of transnational social mobilizations from below and their demands. The challenge for transnational social movements such as Vía Campesina is how to continue to engage with pro-reform actors *within* these institutions rather than the institution as a whole, so as to create cleavages within these agencies, isolating the anti-reform actors, while winning over, expanding and consolidating the ranks of pro-reform actors, and supporting the latter in their struggle against the anti-reform forces within their agencies and in other intergovernmental entities.

iii) rival movements

The struggle for a pro-poor, pro-peasant and pro-small family farmer struggle for agriculture is also 'a struggle over meanings.' The World Bank, for example, continues to claim that its market-based land reform is 'pro-poor', while Vía Campesina and FIAN protest it is not. There are many other concepts that have become the object of extended hegemonic struggle: participation, consultation, civil society, transparency, accountability, and so on. It is in this context that Vía Campesina's positioning vis-à-vis its rival movements, such as IFAP, can be seen in a better light. While Vía Campesina claims to be the voice of the marginalised rural sectors, for example, IFAP claims the same. It says: "*IFAP is the only world body gathering together nationally representative general farmers organisations,*" with the deliberate use of the words 'the only' perhaps aimed at pre-empting competing claims from challengers (see <www.ifap.org>). Moreover, IFAP raises broadly similar issues to those raised by Vía Campesina - sustainable agriculture, fairer trade, land reform, and accountability in international institutions. At a glance, significant differences in the positions of IFAP and Vía Campesina may not be apparent. It is in the subtleties of the discourses that important differences are revealed. The case of the International Land Coalition (ILC) illustrates this point.

Organized in 1995, the ILC "*is a global alliance of intergovernmental, governmental and civil-society organisations. The Coalition works together with the rural poor to increase their secure access to natural resources, especially land, and to enable them to participate directly in policy and decision-making*

²¹ For conceptual insights with specific reference to the World Bank, see Jonathan Fox (2000).

processes that affect their livelihoods at local, national, regional and international levels” (International Land Coalition, ‘Mission Statement’ <www.landcoalition.org>). Its secretariat is hosted by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in Rome. Among the intergovernmental organisations that are members and major funders of this coalition are the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IaDB), European Commission, FAO, and the World Food Programme (WFP). IFAD is among its founding organisations. ILC has also recruited several NGOs and farmers’ organisations in different countries. Some of these organisations are members of Vía Campesina, such as the Central American coalition of peasant organisations, ASOCODE (*Asociación de Organizaciones Campesinas Centroamericanas para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo*). Other organisations are led by activists who are individual members of FIAN, such as IMSE (Institute for Motivating Self-Employment) in India headed by Biplab Halim.

The difference between Vía Campesina and the ILC on the issue of land is fundamental: the Vía Campesina takes on neo-liberal land policies as presenting a threat to the peasantry, while the ILC, or at least its leadership and secretariat, considers it an opportunity. Thus, while Vía Campesina condemns the World Bank and what it perceives as manipulative policy-making processes, the ILC praises the Bank’s land policies in substance and process. Reacting to the Bank’s finalised land policy research report in 2003, Bruce Moore, ILC’s director, says:

“This policy research report is a significant contribution to the knowledge and experience that can guide policies and programmes for poverty-reducing growth. It has emerged from a participatory process that serves as an example to others in its efforts to consider the wide range of views and opinions that can inform effective land policy development. The report will be a critical resource for governments, civil society, and international organisations that must seize this moment when land has reappeared on the development agenda” (see <www.worldbank.org/landpolicy>).

Within ILC, there may be major problems with the official positions taken by its leaders vis-à-vis some of its members in terms of whether these are commonly shared positions and views. Another related problematic issue here is the fact that while the ILC is an inter-governmental-non-governmental coalition created, funded and run by inter-governmental agencies, it is almost always presented as a ‘civil society’ organisation. Whether deliberately or not, this neatly feeds into the need of international financial institutions for formalities with regard to requisite consultation with civil society groups.

The emergence in the land policy arena of a rival movement competing with Vía Campesina in trying to control the nature, content, process, and direction of the global discourse on land policies has made the challenge for a more sophisticated alliance building effort even more complex and demanding for Vía Campesina. While there may be a basis for confronting ILC with regard to its rather confusing claims, positions and actions, for example, the Vía Campesina seems to have been restrained in doing so perhaps partly due to the fact that several members of ILC are also members of Vía Campesina, or are headed by individuals who are also within the network of FIAN, and/or are allies of Vía Campesina members, or perhaps Vía Campesina simply deems ILC to be an insignificant actor. Thus, except for the pointed comment on the ILC’s ‘common platform’ on land policies issued by Vía Campesina during the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) in South Africa in 2002, Vía Campesina has never really directly contested ILC’s claims, positions and actions.



Meanwhile, the experience of ILC also shows some problematic notions of formalistic, mainstream coalition-building that seems to be founded on the principle of 'conflict-free interaction between different actors'. The ILC is a coalition of state and societal actors, and it involves formal institutions. This is ILC's greatest weakness and inherent contradiction because it necessarily includes anti-reform forces within some agencies, as well as agencies and banks that have interests and priorities that may run counter to those of the rural poor. Such formalistic and 'conflict-free' coalitions are hardly able to go beyond the parameters imposed upon them by the more influential coalition partners, usually those who have control over funds. The challenge for Vía Campesina is to challenge ILC in the terrain of coalition work within international development institutions, and to construct institutional bridges that could connect Vía Campesina and its members with pro-reform actors within these international NGOs and intergovernmental agencies. This could increase the reach of pro-reform actors' political influence, and would weaken both adversaries and potential or actual challengers or rival movements.

Strategies and Forms of Collective Actions

Vía Campaign explains that: "to create a significant impact, we should... carry out our coordinated actions and mobilizations at the global level... Mobilization is still our principal strategy" (Vía Campesina, 2004: 48). When and how to use mobilisation, and in the service of what broader political strategy, is a question that seems yet to be fully resolved within Vía Campesina. It explains that:

"there are a multitude of ways of engaging with others to defend our interests. The two ends of the spectrum are: i) to mobilize and demonstrate in opposition to the policies and institutions that are hostile to our interests in order to prevent or change them, and ii) to negotiate and collaborate in order to influence policy changes. Many variations on these methods are possible – and necessary. The history, political context, culture are issues all have to be taken into account. Mass demonstrations, boycotts and direct action have been and continue to be very effective strategies in certain contexts and at specific political moments. In other venues, where there is space to negotiate, cooperation and collaboration are the most effective ways of creating positive changes" (Vía Campesina, 2004: 22).

Vía Campesina recommends that "[it] should seek to achieve its goals by using the most effective non-violent strategies available, ranging from refusal to participate and direct action to full cooperation and negotiations" (Ibid, p. 23.; see also Desmarais, 2003a: 23). Internationalising collective actions is not easy. Vía Campesina asks itself the following difficult questions: "What is the best way to carry our coordinated mobilisation at the international level? Organisational styles differ in Bolivia, Mexico, India, and Brazil. Should we find a common form or style of mobilisation or should each organisation make its own decisions?". Furthermore, it asks the questions: "Should we place increased emphasis on the 1st April as a common day of action, or strengthen collective mobilisation during events such as the WTO Ministerial Conference in Cancún? Are there other possible forms of co-ordinating action and mobilisation at the international level?" (Vía Campesina, 2004: 49). Vía Campesina hopes to continue the discussion on these issues in the future.

The political strategy adopted by Vía Campesina is highly pragmatic and flexible, again reflective of the process and outcomes of internal negotiation. Strategies of: i) outright opposition to neo-liberalism, ii)



negotiation and collaboration on selected issues with selected agencies and institutions for possible reformist gains, and iii) a combination of the two. While in official discourse, these strategies appear to be separate, competing or even conflicting, in reality, however, they tend to be inseparably linked. This strategy holds a lot of promise for Vía Campesina's ability and autonomy to manoeuvre with or against different actors on different contentious issues. The two ideal-type strategies when combined in real life may, in fact, be more powerful. For example, a track record of having the capacity to carry out oppositional mobilisations can make Vía Campesina a much more effective actor in any negotiation for reforms vis-à-vis international agencies which might not want to become target of Vía Campesina's mobilisations. Negotiations without the threat or actual use of mobilisation always prove less effective. The strategy that combines the two ideal-types will necessarily bring Vía Campesina to interface with other actors - state and societal - that at other times it may pledge not to engage with.

The political strategy fits well with the requirements of a transnational movement against neo-liberal land policies and for pro-poor agrarian reform. Vía Campesina and FIAN have employed this strategy relatively effectively during the past few years to expose the non-redistributive nature of neo-liberal land policies and the undemocratic processes of the World Bank in promoting such policies. Vía Campesina has been confrontational with the World Bank and refused to participate in the global electronic consultations launched by the Bank in 2001 and 2003, though the Bank itself did not invite Vía Campesina to its regional consultations.²² The most visible and important transnational action carried out by Vía Campesina on the issue of land policies thus far is its conference-cum-confrontation with the World Bank in Washington DC in April 2002. Unfortunately, there has been no 'WTO style' mobilization against the WB and neo-liberal land policies so far (If and when such an action occurs, it is likely to increase the global awareness on the profoundly negative impact of neo-liberal land policies on millions of rural poor people and put major obstacles in the way of implementation of these policies). The Vía Campesina-FIAN joint campaign has also engaged in long-running critical debate and engagement with the German government in the hope of indirectly influencing the Bank, without much success. Recently, it has also started to critically engage the European Union, Commission and Parliament on the EU's initiative to develop a 'Land Policy Guideline for Developing Countries,' partly, though arguably not fully, influenced by the World Bank.²³

The challenge for Vía Campesina is how to fully employ its political strategy to critically engage different inter-governmental organisations on land reform, such as the FAO, UNDP, and European Commission and Parliament. As stressed earlier, these institutions are comprised of a range of actors with different agendas and motivations, some are pro-reform while others not. Most of these actors are latent allies or adversaries, and the only way to identify them as such is to critically engage the institutions within which they are embedded. Finally, it is also a great challenge for Vía Campesina to be able to launch collective actions simultaneously at all levels where the processes of globalisation and decentralisation occur – international, regional, national and local. The Vía Campesina-FIAN campaign has carried out useful actions, such as regular fact finding missions to several countries where struggles for land have

²² For the most complete and most coherent position of the Vía Campesina and FIAN on the World Bank's neo-liberal land and rural development policies, see Vía Campesina-FIAN (2004). See also Armin Paasch (2003).

²³ For a nuanced critique of the EU's draft Land Policy Guideline, refer to the paper prepared and presented by Sofia Monsalve (coordinator of the Vía Campesina-FIAN global agrarian reform campaign) at the international conference sponsored by the Left Coalition of the European Parliament in April 2004.

been intensifying; electronic 'quick reaction' responses to pressing developments; international and regional conferences; action-oriented research; and continual sharing and exchange of information and documents – all made possible largely by the emergence of relatively cheaper and faster communication and transportation technologies and services (and the northern NGOs that provide Vía Campesina and its members with the required resources and logistics). The 'urgent action' and 'letter writing campaign' within the 'Emergency Network' campaign of Vía Campesina-FIAN have also proved effective complementary initiatives to national and local peasant actions. Exchange of experiences and capacity building are other important fields of undertaking. These developments have contributed enormously to decreasing the traditional distance (geographic and institutional) between poor peasants and centres of national and global (state and non-state) powers. This recent development has greatly extended the political reach of the otherwise dispersed and unco-ordinated, and thus relatively easily isolated and defeated, local-national peasant movements.

Representativity and Accountability

The issue of representativity²⁴ and accountability within social movements is a difficult issue to analyse, particularly at the interlinked local, national, regional and international levels. Nevertheless, representativity and accountability are permanent themes debated and sought internally, and promoted and demanded externally. Two of the most difficult challenges faced by coalitions of highly heterogeneous associations is how to fully represent the diverse, and at times conflicting, interests of their constituencies, and how to remain accountable through delivering on the victories promised, or through remaining true to the claims made. The issue of representativity and accountability are matters of degree. They should not be viewed as 'either/or' i.e. either representative/accountable or not. These are dynamic concepts negotiated and renegotiated among different actors over time.

Vía Campesina represents a large population of economically, culturally, and ideologically diverse rural peoples and organisations across continents: from rice farmers of Indonesia under the Federation of Indonesian Peasants' Union (FSPI) to small family farms of Canada within the National Farmers' Union (NFU), from subsistence farmers in Mozambique under the banner of *União Nacional de Camponeses* (UNAC, Peasants National Union) to farm workers in Andalucia organized by the *Sindicato Obrero del Campo* (SOC), from the coca farmers of Bolivia under the organisation of *Consejo Andino de Productores de Coca* to the family farmers of Europe under the coalition of European Farmers' Co-ordination (CPE), from organic farmers in Vermont under the organisation of Rural Vermont (which is a member association of the National Family Farm Coalition, or NFFC, of the USA) to plantation workers belonging to the Association of Caribbean Farmers' Organisations (WINFA). "*Much of the Vía Campesina's success*", according to Desmarais "*is due to the fact that it is balancing – with great care and effort – the diverse interests of its membership as it openly deals with issues such as gender, race, class, culture and North/South relations, which could potentially cause divisions*" (Desmarais, 2003a: 98).

While Vía Campesina represents a diverse and huge section of the rural world, the challenge of expand-

²⁴ Here, 'representativity' loosely pertains to the ability of associations or movements to carry the interests, issues and demands of the sectors or groups of people they want or claim to represent in the platforms of transnational social movements

ing its actual constituency remains. This can be done in a variety of ways, including making the rules for new membership as flexible as possible in order to facilitate the entry of all organisations that identify with the ideology and politics of *Vía Campesina*. It could also target associations that have, for various reasons, joined *Vía Campesina*'s rival movements. Moreover, some organisations may not even know *Vía Campesina*; still others do not belong to any of these organisations, but instead may belong to local groups that in turn may have working relationships with NGOs that have their own local-national-regional-international networks and thus may claim legitimate and real representation as well. The great majority of marginalised rural people, of course, remain outside formal organisations. While it is important for the cause of poor peasants and small farmers that *Vía Campesina* advocates positions that favour the marginalised social classes and groups more generally, it is important to be critically aware of the gap between the groups of peasants and farmers within the transnational reach of the *Vía Campesina* movement, and the greater number of rural people that are not. A key challenge to *Vía Campesina* and its member organisations is to continuously seek to increase actual representativity, to be as inclusive as possible, while carefully tracing the contours of the different, sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing, channels and mechanisms of representation involving the same marginalised rural sectors of the world. This is also relevant to the 'NGO-PO discourse' of *Vía Campesina*, where *Vía Campesina* as a peasants'/people's organisation ('PO') claims representation of poor peasants and small farmers, and warns NGOs to refrain from claiming the same. The logic that seems to underpin such an argument is that 'POs' represent peasants and farmers, 'NGOs' do not and cannot. The issue of representation thus tends to be reduced to the form of organisation. Representation and accountability within peasant organisations, however, has not been automatic and permanent. There are many PO leaders who misrepresent their members and who are not accountable to their organisation. Meanwhile, there are also some NGOs that do have legitimate claim to and structures of representation vis-à-vis some poor peasants and farmers. In fact, at the local level in most developing countries, POs tend to rely on partnerships with NGOs for organising work, especially during the earlier phase of organisation-building process. It is particularly in this intermediate phase that NGOs and POs may overlap in representation, and not all such relationships are paternalistic or amount to misrepresentation. It is important that *Vía Campesina* continues to assert its distinct character as a 'PO' different from 'NGOs', and remains constantly vigilant in its dealing with NGOs. At the same time, however, *Vía Campesina* should also be wary of PO leaders/leadership who may not be truly representative of and accountable to their local-national groups either. The complex NGO-PO dynamic is captured perhaps best in the FIAN-*Vía Campesina* joint campaign – in a positive perspective. FIAN is an NGO, but it certainly has its own clear constituency and legitimate claim to representation distinct from that of *Vía Campesina*'s. An NGO-PO coalition, the FIAN-*Vía Campesina* joint campaign has been sustained partly because it rests on a mutual respect between the two actors, and unity on a common framework for agrarian reform struggle. Such PO-NGO relationships in the specific context of land struggles is not as smooth in many national settings, however. Take the case of South Africa's Landless People's Movement (LPM) and the National Land Committee (NLC) as the former endeavours to construct its own collective identity, to develop its capacity, and struggle to assert its autonomy.

Organisational structures are important mechanisms in promoting (or not) representativity and accountability within a movement, and between a movement and other actors. In this regard, the *Vía Campesina* has identified the general assembly as its highest policy-making body with the power to chart *Vía Campesina*'s general principles, broad campaigns, and decisions on admission of new members. In between assemblies, power lies with the International Coordinating Commission (ICC) composed of rep-



representatives of the seven regions within Vía Campesina. Recently, Vía Campesina decided to double the number of the ICC members by requiring each region to send two members to the ICC (one male, one female) as part of Vía Campesina's internal gender policy. Below the ICC are the various regional coordinative groups. Vía Campesina thus gives importance to the nature of organisational structures. It explains that "*Peasants have become important actors in the world struggle against neo-liberalism, and Vía Campesina, as an international movement, has successfully resisted bureaucratisation and hierarchical organisational structure, in favour of an organisational model that emphasizes localities and regions*" (Vía Campesina, 2004: 45). Desmarais (2003a:28) further explains that "*these representational structure and consultative processes heighten the legitimacy of the Vía Campesina as an authentic representative of peasants and farmers' interests in the international arena. However, it also makes decision-making a more convoluted and time-consuming endeavour...*"

Despite the laudable decisions taken by the Vía Campesina with regard to structures for democratic representation and accountability, there remain important problems and dilemmas. Organisations and movements at the local and national levels are constantly faced with the never-ending processes of organisational and political ebbs and flows. These ups and downs in the life cycles of organisations and movements are caused by both internal and external factors, all of which are highly dynamic. Depending on how they react to internal and external factors, some organisations thus become strong, others weak; some old ones disappear, some new ones emerge; some expand, others contract; some consolidate ranks, others split; some are ideologically pluralist, others not. The dilemma faced by a large transnational coalition like Vía Campesina is how to capture and respond to these highly dynamic and ever-changing constitutions of national and local movements in order to remain organisationally robust, as representative as possible, and as accountable as required. This issue of dynamic changes in the nature and influence of movements also directly affects Vía Campesina's regional co-ordinative groups (e.g. the flow and ebb of Central America's ASOCODE²⁵), and the way these regional co-ordinative networks confront the matter within their constituency. It is most problematic if dynamic changes occur within regional, national and local member networks and movements while the formal organisational mechanisms and rules of a transnational movement, such as Vía Campesina's, remain static and thus unable to respond to such changes in a timely and proper manner. This issue is likely to confront Vía Campesina soon.

Furthermore, Vía Campesina and its structures of representation are likely to be transformed quite profoundly in the coming few years. For a decade now, movements from the Americas and Europe have been relatively dominant in Vía Campesina. The basis for this has been straightforward: it has been in these regions where Vía Campesina member national movements and Vía Campesina regional co-ordinative networks are most numerous and coherent. This relative American-European dominance is thus not due to any sectarian machination. It is most likely to change, however, and change will come from a convergence of factors. For one, sixteen peasant organisations from South Asia, mostly from India, became members of Vía Campesina in July 2004 on the occasion of its Fourth International Assembly held in Brazil. It will be interesting to see what the impact on Vía Campesina will be of the entry of many peasant movements from this region, especially considering the class and ideological provenance of these movements. Moreover, seven organisations from Africa were admitted as members as well. Those that come from Africa are a mix in terms of ideology and politics: those relatively autonomous from the

²⁵For a background on ASOCODE, see, e.g. Marc Edelman (1998).

state like Mozambique's UNAC; groups that are trying to become more autonomous from the state and with left ideological influences such as South Africa's LPM; national coalitions that include both official government-initiated organisations and autonomous groups such as the CNCR (*Conseil National de Concertation et de Cooperation des Ruraux*) of Senegal.

This recent reconfiguration within *Vía Campesina* will likely broaden and deepen the land agenda within *Vía Campesina*. For one, the entry of African groups will complicate, though enrich, the land issue as the unique African context will increasingly impact on the official *Vía Campesina* agenda. The land question in Africa is unique in many ways partly due to the preponderance of a variety of non-private modes of property rights on this continent. Meanwhile, the increasing maturation of other regional co-ordination centres, especially that of Southeast and East Asia, currently coordinated by Indonesia's FSPI, will also impact on the overall make-up of *Vía Campesina*. Moreover, the transfer of the International Secretariat of *Vía Campesina* from Honduras to Indonesia (to be hosted by FSPI) from August 2004 may also contribute towards strengthening the Asian organisations and co-ordination, and may also give them and their issues a higher profile internationally. Furthermore, the combination of an expanded European Union, with the entry of ten new countries since May 2004, and its current Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), is also expected to impact on the future organisational constitution and perhaps even political direction of *Vía Campesina* in this region (CPE plus other non-CPE *Vía Campesina* member organisations). The land issue from the particular perspective of transitional economies from Central and Eastern Europe is also likely to further complicate, but again enrich, the land question/s as addressed within *Vía Campesina*. If the first decade of *Vía Campesina* has essentially been American/European-dominated, its next decade is most likely to witness its transformation into a truly global movement, with the massive entry of movements from Asia, Africa, and, possibly, Central/Eastern Europe.

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Finally, representativity and accountability can also be considered from the perspective of whether the movement has delivered what it promised its members and the general public. A brief discussion on this issue is warranted. Despite conditions of *Vía Campesina* member organisations at the national level being uneven, and the logistical and human resource limitations of the joint FIAN-*Vía Campesina* global campaign for agrarian reform relative to the gigantic task of confronting the upsurge of neo-liberal land policies, the FIAN-*Vía Campesina* transnational campaign has gained grounds on several fronts, some of which are discussed here. First, to a significant extent, it has been able to construct an anti-neo-liberal land policy pole around which progressive peasant movements could identify locally, nationally and internationally – formally and informally. This opposition pole is important in terms of collective identity formation among peasant groups with regards to the neo-liberal policy model on land resources. Second, and closely linked to the first, is that the joint FIAN-*Vía Campesina* campaign has been able to construct an alternative rallying point for agrarian reform to a significant extent: that is, one that is founded on the human (economic, social, cultural and political) rights of peasants. Again, it has contributed, and will continue to contribute, towards the formation of collective identity among poor peasants, and is likely to profoundly transform the terms of the ideological and policy discourse on agrarian reform in the years to come. Third, despite all the limitations of the FIAN-*Vía Campesina* campaign, by questioning both the substance and process of neo-liberal land policies, it has forced the World Bank and other international institutions to revise or recast its neo-liberal land policies, if only superficially and tentatively. Fourth, the transnational nature of the *Vía Campesina*-FIAN campaign on agrarian reform has partially eroded the traditional monopoly of the World Bank and other international institutions on

access to and control over key information related to land and peasantry in different national and international locations. The exchange of information and experiences among different national Vía Campesina members has equipped them with the information necessary to directly challenge and confront the WB and other international institutions on several controversial issues. For example, the WB used to boast the success of its market-led agrarian reform in Colombia, Brazil and South Africa – until the Vía Campesina-FIAN network members in these countries, armed with empirical data, challenged the WB's claims. The recent expansion of Vía Campesina in Africa and Asia is likely to strengthen further the transnational campaign on agrarian reform, and is likely to push the WB into a more politically defensive position.

Concluding Remarks

It is expected that Vía Campesina will continue to be an important *actor* and *arena* of action for peasant movements across continents. The co-existence of threats to the lives and livelihoods of marginalised rural groups as well as the available and emerging political opportunities brought largely by the dynamic processes of the global reconfiguration of state and state-building will continue to provide the most crucial context for and object of Vía Campesina's political contestations at the interlinked international, regional, national and local levels. The extent to which Vía Campesina will continue to be an important arena of actions, debates and exchanges between national and sub-national movements will depend largely on its capacity to maintain its autonomy and pluralist ideological framework, as well as its capacity to develop organisational structures able to respond to the ever-changing dynamics of regional, national and local movements. Vía Campesina's capacity to mobilise its own subjective forces and forge broad alliances with pro-reform state and non-state actors at international, regional, national and local political levels will determine whether it will continue to be an important actor in the global campaign against neo-liberal land policies and in advocacy of truly pro-poor agrarian reforms.

In closing, it is relevant to quote what Stephen Baranyi, Carmen Diana Deere and Manuel Morales (2004) have observed in Latin America in the context of contemporary neo-liberal land policies and the opposition mounted by Vía Campesina. They said:

"Indeed, while there is an urgent need to understand how the building blocks of market-oriented reforms can work better, there is considerable skepticism in many countries, particularly among social movements but also among certain governments, about whether these can be made to work from a pro-poor perspective. One should not underestimate the impact that the Global Campaign for Land Reform headed by Vía Campesina might eventually have on international policy debates in this regard."



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Useful Websites:

Vía Campesina: www.viacampesina.org

Foodfirst Information and Action Network (FIAN): www.fian.org

Land Research and Action Network (LRAN): www.landaction.org

International Land Coalition: www.landcoalition.org

International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP): www.ifap.org

World Bank Land Policy Unit: www.worldbank.org/landpolicy/



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Vía Campesina unites more than a hundred national and sub-national organisations from Latin America, North America, Asia, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe opposed to neo-liberalism and advocating a pro-poor, sustainable, rights-based rural development and greater democratisation. It is an ideologically autonomous and pluralist coalition. It is both an actor and an arena of action. Claiming global and popular representation, Vía Campesina has emerged as a major actor in the current popular transnational struggles against neo-liberalism, demanding accountability from inter-governmental agencies, resisting and opposing corporate control over natural resources and technology, and advocating food sovereignty, among other issues. It has figured prominently in politically contentious campaigns such as those against the WTO, global corporate giants such as McDonalds, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) along with the transnational companies that promote them, such as Monsanto.

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Focusing on the global campaign for agrarian reform, this paper looks at four broadly distinct but interrelated aspects of Vía Campesina's development; namely, (i) agendas and aims, (ii) alliances, rival movements and the question of autonomy, (iii) strategies and forms of collective actions, and (iv) representativity and accountability. In each case, the current Vía Campesina situation is presented, positions clarified, dilemmas identified, and challenges put forward.

Founded in 1974, TNI is an international network of activists and scholars committed to critical analyses of the global problems of today and tomorrow. It aims to provide intellectual support to those movements concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable and environmentally sustainable direction.

The TNI New Politics Project aims at stimulating innovative thinking on questions of participatory democracy and progressive governance, and the identities and roles of social movements, civic coalitions and political parties operating from local to global levels in forging new democratic politics and policies. The project intends to develop an alternative political vision to that offered by mainstream political and development theories, while drawing lessons from and attempting to go beyond traditional social democratic and left models.

The project's distinctive starting point is a belief that, at this time of history, the vital innovations lie in practical experiments and experience. In a situation where no inherited orthodoxy provides adequate tools of strategic analysis, the only way to develop these tools is through interrogating, comparing and reflecting on the trials, errors and achievements of experience. This requires a systematic and international process. The programme hopes to stimulate such a process and in so doing to develop a truly global fellowship of committed and creative thinkers and activists.

The project supports writing from the front line of political innovation and arranges for these to be translated and published in a wide range of publications and through the Internet. It also organises seminars and workshops, and collaborates with other research centres, universities and civic organisations engaged in similar initiatives across the world.