


mechanism for controlling the movement. They reproduced an old tactic for maintaining control – putting in charge a man chosen from among the people. And today these new agents of the ruling class not only enjoy huge power, but they have also imposed the idea that they have to “defend the space they have won for the people” among the powerful. It is a difficult situation because, although people at the grassroots despise these agents, they are dominated by them. A new system of patronage has been created, which is supported by various development agencies.

However, I think that we have a great capacity to fight back. Many people who practise subsistence agriculture or have been evicted from their land or are fighting the takeover of their land by national or transnational companies are resisting. Once we manage to recreate our own perspective and reject the idea that the only way forward is through negotiation, then we can rebuild political awareness, and advance. We can talk then about new alliances, such as between the towns and the countryside, which was something that we almost achieved in the past, though it wasn't consolidated. 



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Today, we all are fighting against the corporate regime. It is as if our rights are under siege by this. There is a battle between people's power and corporate power. Who is more powerful? It ought to be people. It was so in the past and it will be so in the future, no doubt at all. But for the time being, we are in an era of corporate control. Rights are inherently vested in the people. Nobody grants them rights. They possess them by the very fact of being human, and they are basic to a person's survival with dignity. For example, once a human being is born he or she has a right to decent survival (food, shelter, education and health). However, these basic rights are either being denied or not being respected. There is a crisis of life and living. People are dying of hunger, not because there is no food, but because they do not have access to food.

It is the urge to make profits that is violating and denying people's rights by many different means. One such instrument is “Intellectual Property Rights”. Who makes these? For whose benefit? It is very clear that they are being imposed by the corporate regime, which is making profit out of it, converting even knowledge into property. We do not need to ape those so-called “rights” which enable “property” values to be imposed on our commonly held resources and knowledge. We should not allow them to control our commons. On the contrary, we have to defend our commons

to defeat the corporate regime. And the people will win; and, once they win, they will win forever. It may take time and there might be many failures, yet, despite the repeated setbacks, ultimately the people will win and they will restore their rights as they understand them.


Our rights are the old rights

We are pushing back those elements that are trying to snatch away our rights. We are not developing alternatives but protecting our old way of life. People say, for example, that “food sovereignty” is an alternative programme to neo-liberal economic policy. But that is the wrong way of thinking about it: food sovereignty was there, is there, and will be there. The neo-liberal policy is the new policy that is being pushed as an alternative to food sovereignty. This should be our starting point and the way we understand it.

For me there are two different kinds of collective rights. One kind concerns property. Land reforms have been undertaken with collectiveness in mind. But when land is collectivised, no tiller feels that he or she is the owner and thus responsible for production. So productivity decreases and the state ends up by handing back ownership to the peasantry. But there are areas where collective rights are appropriate. Building a nation, for example, needs collective effort. Fighting the corporate regime will also require collective effort.



Meanwhile, what should we do in the current situation? Our responsibility is to work with people and share the truth. For example, food sovereignty for a European and food sovereignty for me, a peasant working in a rural area, mean different things. For generations we have been defending what amounts to food sovereignty, but we have been referring to it in other ways. We have been demanding land reform, the right to food, shelter, education, safe water, and so on. These

are our old demands. We have had to reformulate those demands in a new situation where neo-liberal economic “reforms” are taking place. So, when we are organising our people, we should explain that we are not inventing new demands but merely expressing in a new way what we have long been demanding. We are struggling to protect our customs, ethics and culture, everything that people have been practising traditionally. And people will understand this. 

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CLARK PETERU

Customary rights pertain to the way that a society has traditionally lived. In contrast, modern rights, as crystallised in various UN conventions and as adopted in the written constitutions of many Pacific Island Countries (PICs), provide a measure of individual freedoms and entitlements not fully articulated in, and in some cases antithetical to, customary rights. Nevertheless, these two types of rights exist side by side. While at the macro-level the 14 independent PICs function according to the Westminster model of law and government, people still live according to their traditional way of life.

Inevitably, traditional patterns of living are pervaded deeply by global influences. A hybrid lifestyle has developed, which appeals to younger and older generations alike. People are more materially prosperous than at any time previously, are better educated and are either healthier or have access to better health care. The cash economy and liberal thinking have engendered an individualistic streak in people. This has led to an increasing assertion and exercise of individual rights.

As a result, taking Samoa as an example, village control over people's lives has weakened, although extended family relationships remain strong. People still regard their relationships as more important than property and, for the time being, community relationships as more important than individual rights. Sharing and reciprocity are a fundamental part of island life. Traditional compensation (ceremonial delivery of valued cultural artefacts, coupled with money and goods) for tattooists, traditional house builders and canoe builders is

still strong, but the cash component is becoming more dominant. Traditional healers operating for commercial gain are unheard of, whereas it is common for fishermen to take payment.

The bulk of land in almost all PICs remains under customary control. Use, exploitation, transfer, and so on, are determined according to customary rules. So too is conservation. Customary control of land has long been heavily criticised by outsiders as an impediment to development. There is often insufficient capital or incentive for local owners to start up a business venture, and overseas investors seldom commit to a business unless the land is freehold or is secure over the long term. With PICs anxious to increase economic growth there is strong pressure to convert customary land to freehold tenure. Thankfully, there is overwhelmingly resistance to this. Land is more than just earth to Pacific islanders, as it defines their institutions and their identities.

Bioprospecting in PICs has given rise to novel questions regarding the commercial value of biodiversity and associated traditional knowledge. While there will be tabu (holy or sacred) areas and sacred knowledge that will be beyond commercial exploitation, the notion of receiving benefits from biodiversity and associated traditional knowledge has met with general acceptance.

Yet there may be a certain naivety regarding such transactions, and with growing awareness a measure of resistance may develop. In the immediate term, however, the primary focus has been in informing both resource owners and knowledge holders and ensuring that their interests are protected. 