

Valentina Hemmeler Maïga works for the peasant farmers' association in Switzerland, Uniterre, which is a member of La Via Campesina. She is responsible for Uniterre's food sovereignty campaign.

Valentina Hemmeler Maïga



A Farida Khbar

Benny Haerlin

Carlos Correa

David Quist

E Johnson Ekpere

Francisca Rodriguez

German Velez

Hope Shand

Ibrahim Ouedraogo

Jack Kloppenburg

K Joseph Eve

Tell us a bit about your life. What explains your commitment to the fight for food sovereignty?

I was born in Geneva in 1973. I'm married and I have a little boy. I don't come from a farming family. In fact, I've spent most of my life in cities. I began to be interested in the relationship between North and South when I was 15, and I made several trips to West Africa. I would say that it was mainly in Africa that I learned about agriculture and its importance. When I left secondary school, I decided to study agronomy at the Polytechnic in Zurich. My aim was to get a relatively broad-based education and then a job that would give me the opportunity to travel abroad. But my life took a new turn during my studies. It was then that I discovered Swiss agriculture in its all its complexity, and I became aware of just how important it was that it survive and go on developing. I had a work placement on a highly diversified organic farm, and I decided that it was perhaps more useful and effective to work in Switzerland, in a situation that I really understood and where I could advance the cause of farming both at home and abroad.

Once I had finished my studies I became a member and supporter of the peasant farmers' association, Uniterre. I took part in several activities organised by Uniterre, in particular developing the concept of food sovereignty for the Geneva region and helping to mobilise support for the idea on the fringes of the WTO negotiations. In 2005 an opportunity came up at the Uniterre secretariat and I had no hesitation in applying for a permanent staff position with the association. Knowing the organisation as I did, and aware of its links with farmers' associations that were members of La Via Campesina, this was a dream job for me. I started work in January 2006. It is not a mainstream organisation but one which is incredibly active on various fronts, both

national and international. Since the mid-1990s Uniterre has been spearheading the campaign for food sovereignty in Switzerland, and because of my background I was given responsibility for this area. My job has been to raise awareness amongst the various stakeholders in Switzerland about the concept of food sovereignty whilst strengthening our international relationships in this area.

What does food sovereignty mean to you?

For me, food sovereignty is a real alternative to the neoliberal dogma that tries to make the various world economies compete with each other to the benefit of the middlemen, whether these are transnational firms or national intermediaries such as the major retailers. It is an opportunity for a region or a country to define its own agricultural and food policy and to stop dumping food on third-world countries. Food sovereignty makes it possible to have a kind of agriculture that concentrates primarily on local production, produces high-quality food and responds to the expectations of our societies whilst generating profits for both farmers and agricultural workers. It is a political concept that should guarantee that farmers have access to land, loans, seeds and other natural resources. It means that, if necessary, national governments should be able to protect their agriculture from cut-price imports, which inevitably destroy local markets. By providing protection of this kind, it becomes possible to pay prices for agricultural products that cover the costs of production. At the same time, it means that farmers no longer need to rely on any kind of export subsidy in order to make a living.

Food sovereignty is about implementing an agricultural and food policy that involves all citizens, with the guarantee of a real social debate



about the roles, rights and responsibilities both of people working in the agricultural sector and those who benefit from it, namely consumers and citizens. They must be able to have access to healthy, culturally appropriate food that is free of GMOs. This political concept needs to be applied both in the South and in the North. From my point of view, this is the only real way forward. This is why we are thinking of launching a popular initiative that would establish food sovereignty as a fundamental part of the Swiss Constitution. In doing this we would be responding to the expectations of La Via Campesina, which at the movement's international conference in Mozambique in October 2008 made this one of its priorities.

During the last 50 years the food industry in Europe has become increasingly concentrated. What can be done in these conditions to build a strong popular movement to defend food sovereignty?

It is true that most people in Europe buy most of their food from supermarkets. In the beginning, these were cooperatives whose aim was to act as a sales outlet and a link between farmers and the consumers. Over the years, however, they have expanded their role considerably. Over the last 15 years in Switzerland, production prices have fallen by 25 per cent whilst consumer prices have increased by 8–15 per cent. There is absolutely no doubt that the middlemen have made a lot of money. On top of that, they act as a lobbying group to push for the conclusion of free-trade agreements. By demonstrating that it is possible to create new forms of production, marketing and consumption, I think we will manage to build a popular movement. This is what we are doing with our pilot projects, which are bringing producers and consumers together through local contracts.

Some large firms, such as Nestlé and Syngenta, are based in Switzerland. Many people rely on these companies for their jobs. Isn't it difficult to mobilise support in Switzerland against the domination of food companies such as these?


It's true that firms like Nestlé or Novartis, just like the major banks, are part of our "national heritage". They are to some extent "sacred cows", and for a long time a significant section of the population took a dim view of challenging these symbols. But these companies have not been entirely free from scandal. Nestlé, for example, hired a surveillance firm to spy on anti-globalisation movements in Switzerland. Their "moles" infiltrated groups such as Attac, which were preparing to mobilise support against the G8 and which were gathering evidence on the Swiss firm's actions abroad. It was called "Nestlégate" in the press and many citizens were shocked. As far as Syngenta is concerned, there

was a huge media campaign about paraquat, a herbicide that is banned in Switzerland but that the company was still selling in a number of countries in the South. It's fair to say that the Swiss firm's image was tarnished by the affair. And then, in 2007, a Brazilian security firm hired by Syngenta assassinated a militant from the MST [Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement]. The story attracted a lot of media coverage and questions were raised in our parliament. I don't think we will ever get as many people out on to the street against these multinationals as they do in Brazil or India, but it is none the less possible to campaign in various innovative ways against the way our national firms are behaving abroad.

Last year we experienced a global food crisis with very marked fluctuations in the prices of agricultural products. Do you think that Europeans have become more aware of the importance of food sovereignty as a result?

Yes, without question. The level of awareness has increased right across society. The positions Uniterre has taken have been widely covered in the media. We have taken part in a large number of media and community debates on the theme of food sovereignty and the food crisis. I think we need to use this time to promote the idea of food sovereignty. We're not talking about going back to state-controlled agriculture or promoting self-sufficiency, but about choosing a new way that is designed to benefit people rather than the shareholders of multinational firms. The fact that the latter have benefited significantly from the crisis by increasing their profits proves – if proof were still needed – that they are the only winners in the current monopoly situation.

We have heard that at the European level La Via Campesina has reorganised itself. What do these changes involve?

Uniterre is a founding member of the European Farmers Coordination (CPE). In June 2008 this was enlarged to become the European Coordination Via Campesina, an umbrella group of 25 organisations. All the European members of La Via Campesina are part of the organisation. Clearly that will strengthen the movement. It is important because we need to define at an international level the problems that are specific to Europe, such as getting young people established in farming, the need for agricultural policies that create a fairer relationship between production and producers, the influence of the major retailers, Europe's role in free-trade agreements, and so on. I think the Coordination also has a key role to play in disseminating the concept of food sovereignty in Europe. 

- L**axmanma
- M**lorenzo gulas Hurtado
- N**diogou Fall
- O**Sharif mar
- P**João Pedro Stédile
- Q**Darrin Qualman 
- R**amón Vera
- S**Daycha Iriratira
- T**im Lang
- U**rich Oslender
- V**alentina Hemmeler Maiga