

# Twenty years of fighting for seeds and food sovereignty

GRAIN

A twentieth anniversary invites reflection. Reflection on where we came from, the path we have travelled, and the challenges ahead. Without pretending to provide a full analysis, we present below some discussion on this. In the process, we have talked to many of the people who have accompanied us over the last two decades, and asked them about the paths that they have taken, and for their reflections on the struggle for a better food system and a better world. Some of their responses are included in the text and accompanying boxes.

**W**hen we set up GRAIN back in 1990, we were keen to influence the international fora that were drawing up agreements around seeds and biodiversity. We often found ourselves at the FAO in Rome, where governments were negotiating an agreement on the rules of the game for conserving and exchanging seeds and benefiting from seed diversity. Those were also the days when the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was taking shape, which was eventually signed into existence in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit. Just before that, we were deeply involved in the campaign against the patenting of

life forms, and organised a major conference at the European parliament to denounce the plans of the European Commission to create a piece of legislation that would permit this. At the same time, we participated in a three-year “multi-stakeholder” dialogue, organised by the Keystone Foundation, which got us to sit at the table with other NGOs, government officials and people from the seed and biotechnology industries and from agricultural research institutes, trying to find some consensus on how to save and use the world’s agricultural biodiversity.

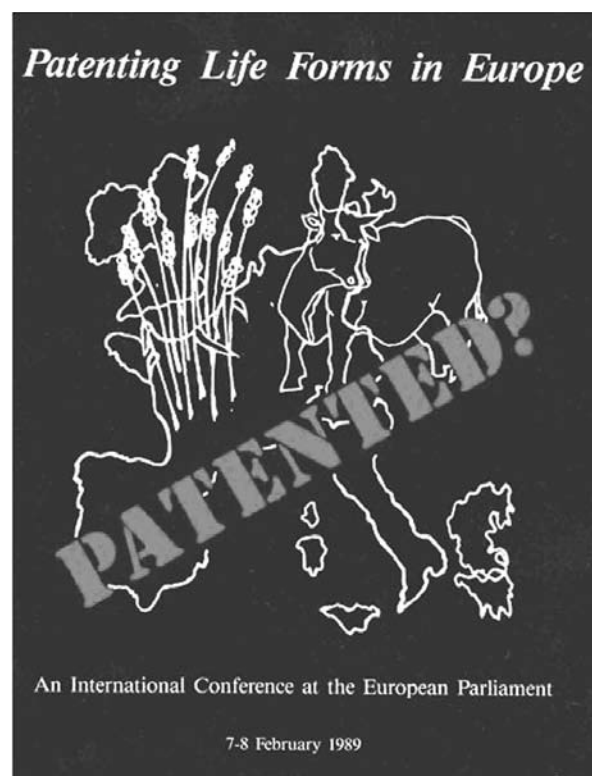
What was driving us then? We were concerned about the increasing concentration in the global seed industry, which was then being taken over by transnational agrochemical and pharmaceutical corporations, leading to an ever stronger push for monocultures and uniform seeds all over the world.

## Food sovereignty

“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples, countries, and state unions to define their agricultural and food policy without the dumping of agricultural commodities into foreign countries. Food sovereignty organises food production and consumption according to the needs of local communities, giving priority to production for local consumption. Food sovereignty includes the right to protect and regulate national agricultural and livestock production and to shield the domestic market from the dumping of agricultural surpluses and low-price imports from other countries. Landless people, peasants, and small farmers must get access to land, water, and seed, as well as productive resources and adequate public services. Food sovereignty and sustainability are a higher priority than trade policies.” (Via Campesina, The International Peasant’s Voice: [www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org))

We were worried about emerging new technologies, such as genetic engineering, that would push diversity further towards extinction and tighten the corporate grip on farmers and the global food system. We were alarmed by legislation being proposed in a number of industrialised countries that would allow for the patenting of life forms and the privatisation of the very building blocks of life. And we noticed that the institutional response to the rapid decline of agricultural biodiversity was limited to collecting seeds from farmers' fields and storing them away in genebanks.

The panorama around us was bleak and the fight fierce, but we thought we could achieve something by lobbying governments and delegates to stop these developments and to support instead the contribution and role of small farmers. Judging from the growing debate around genetic engineering, the massive participation of civil society in the 1992 Earth Summit, and the subsequent meetings of the CBD and other environmental fora, this optimism was shared by many. But, as the 1990s evolved, a cruder reality became apparent. Increasingly, the shaping of agriculture and food production, and the role of transnational corporations in it, were defined elsewhere: in corporate boardrooms and in trade ministries. The 1990s were also the decade of the establishment and rise of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), where, shielded from the critical eyes of civil society organisations, a ruthless neoliberal trade agenda was being forced upon the world, especially on "developing" countries that still had some level of market protection. More economic growth and international trade at any cost had become the central dogma of all policies. And no treaty or agreement related to environmental or agricultural issues was allowed to interfere with this vital concern.



**Programme cover for the conference at the European Parliament, 7–8 February 1989, which GRAIN organised.**

Then came Seattle in 1999. The confrontation between governments trying to push the world further down the neoliberal route with a new WTO agreement, and social movements taking to the streets to stop them, had a powerful impact on both the WTO and on the people and organisations fighting for a better world. The WTO never fully recovered from the blow, and the industrialised countries, in response, started signing bilateral or regional trade agreements instead, to secure their interests. To the social movements and NGOs involved in fighting the neoliberal corporate agenda came the realisation that we could actually win by having a clear, radical and coherent line of analysis and action.

### **Another world is possible**

Often hidden from view, and unexposed at international fora, were the organisations and movements that were quietly resisting and building at the local level. The importance of these experiences became forcefully clear to GRAIN when we got ourselves involved in the "Growing Diversity" project.<sup>1</sup> During a three-year period (2000–2003), this project worked with hundreds of organisations around the world to discuss, analyse and document the experiences of groups working at the local level to build local food and agricultural systems based on biodiversity. A massive amount of evidence came out of this project that an agriculture different from



**Farmers stop health ministry officials slaughtering their pigs at a pig-farming centre near Cairo, Egypt, in April 2009. The government had ordered a massive cull of swine throughout the country because of swine flu.**

<sup>1</sup> See: [www.grain.org/gd](http://www.grain.org/gd)



*GRAIN's founding staff, Henk Hobbelink and Renée Vellvé, in 1987*

the one being promoted by the industrial powers and corporations was not only possible, but also more productive, more sustainable, and better for the farmers and communities involved. It became clear to us that the work at local level of organisations and communities resisting the neoliberal onslaught while developing strong alternatives was the backbone of any struggle to bring this other world into being.

There was another development in the first decade of the present century that started strongly influencing agendas around agriculture and food systems. This was the emergence of the call for food sovereignty and the growing presence and maturity of small-farmer organisations such as Via Campesina. Via Campesina was created in 1993, and erupted on the international stage at the global civil society forum held parallel to the 1996 world food summit in Rome, where it launched food sovereignty as the alternative framework for a global world food system. Food sovereignty articulates the prioritisation of food policies oriented towards the needs of local communities and local markets, and based on local knowledge and agro-ecological production systems (see Box: “Food Sovereignty” on page 4). For the first time, the global movement for a different food system had a concept and an action agenda that connected all the dots, brought together local and international struggles, and formed a basis for building alliances between different social movements and NGOs. In the decade that followed, many more groups and movements started to use food sovereignty as their framework for action, and this framework was articulated and further elaborated in numerous international and regional fora. The movement received a tremendous boost at the global food sovereignty forum held in Nyeleni, Mali, in 2007, at which organisations representing small farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, women and youth joined with NGOs and groups from the environmental movement to further articulate a common action agenda for the future.

In the late 1990s, GRAIN embarked on an ambitious and radical decentralisation process that would bring us much closer to regional and local realities and struggles, and transform us into a truly international collective (see Box: “A brief history of GRAIN”). This process transformed GRAIN’s agenda as well. The increased exposure to local struggles and social movements made us realise that we could not limit our work to the issue-oriented agenda of agricultural biodiversity, and we gradually broadened our focus to deal with the wider food system. As a result, we were able to produce new analysis and fresh thinking on issues such as agrofuels, hybrid rice, bird flu, swine fever, the food crisis, climate change and land grabbing, and connect them with the struggles for food sovereignty. At the same time, we strengthened and deepened our relationship with – and support role to – groups in Africa, Asia and

## A brief history of GRAIN

GRAIN’s work goes back to the early 1980s, when a number of activists around the world started drawing attention to the dramatic erosion of genetic diversity – the very cornerstone of agriculture. Our work began as research, advocacy and lobbying under the umbrella of a coalition of mostly European development organisations. The work soon expanded into a larger programme and network that eventually needed its own independent base. In 1990 Genetic Resources Action International, or GRAIN for short, was legally established as an independent non-profit foundation.

In the second part of the 1990s, GRAIN reached an important turning point. We realised that we needed to connect more with the real alternatives being developed on the ground in the South. Around the world, and at the local level, many groups had begun to rescue local seeds and traditional knowledge, and to build and defend sustainable, biodiversity-based food systems under the control of local communities, while turning their back on the laboratory-developed “solutions” that had only got farmers deeper into trouble. In a radical organisational shift, GRAIN embarked on a decentralisation process that brought us into closer contact with realities on the ground in the South and in direct collaboration with partners working at that level. At the same time, we brought a number of those partners into our governing body and started regionalising our staff pool.

By the turn of the century, GRAIN had transformed itself from a mostly Europe-based information and lobbying group into a dynamic, truly international collective – functioning as one coherent organisation – that was linking and connecting with local realities in the South as well as with developments at the global level. In that process, GRAIN’s agenda shifted markedly, away from lobbying and advocacy, and towards directly supporting and collaborating with social movements, while retaining our key strength in independent research and analysis.

Latin America. "Think globally, act locally" became GRAIN's very way of working.

Seedling,  
May 1988



## Lessons learnt and challenges ahead

As explained in detail in another article in this Seedling, the past 20 years have witnessed a tremendous increase in the dominance and control that huge transnational corporations exercise over the global food system. In essence, the entire neoliberal globalisation process has been an exercise in handing over that control to them, and it has created tremendous inequity, human suffering and environmental damage in the process. As a result, we are now faced with well over one billion people going hungry every day, massive environmental destruction, and a climate crisis that we won't be able to stop unless profound changes are implemented.

The challenges we face today are enormous. As the ever worsening and interconnected financial, food and climate crises are clearly showing us, the current neoliberal development model is beyond repair. At the same time, never before in history have we been faced with such powerful interests that want us to continue on the current destructive path. The matter lies beyond the question of what kind of economic development model to follow, or which seeds to use and which pesticides to avoid. It has become a matter of survival, for all of us. Below we highlight a number of reflections on issues that, from our perspective, we have to deal with, if we are to be successful.

## Surviving in a hostile world

There is no point in denying that, despite the growing struggles of social movements, the world for most people has become a worse place to live in than it was 20 years ago. We would argue that the same is true for most other species as well. Several decades of the ruthless imposition of a neoliberal corporate agenda have left us with an aggressive policy environment, with a tremendous loss of democratic spaces at all levels: locally, nationally and internationally. While 20 years ago many of us were involved in all kinds of dialogues and roundtables, today it sometimes feels as if there is no one left to talk to up there. Many states have largely become

## "Disillusion in government"

Maryam Mayet

Mariam Mayet grew up during the apartheid struggle in South Africa. After being involved in different NGOs in the 1990s, she set up the African Centre for Biosafety, with which she has since sustained a tireless effort to fight GMOs in Africa and to promote instead the use of local seeds.

"Over the last decades there has been a profound change across the world in the food system, over who owns it and controls it. During this time there has been a radical shift in power from ever weaker nation-states to corporations. In South Africa, we were not plugged into global movements but we experienced huge disillusionment with our government because it did not change the agenda but started implementing neoliberal economic policies and privatising. Over the years one has learnt to understand much more profoundly the nature of the struggle, the nature of ownership and big capital. Once you understood what is at stake, you know where you stand and can take a very clear position.

The problems have become more complex and there is a lot of apathy because people feel overwhelmed by the scale and level of corporate intrusion, the insidiousness of it. These corporate powers are extremely well-funded and are implementing their agenda with military precision.

Issues like genomics, IPRs, patenting, are all galloping into the future, without us being able to take stock and consider the impacts.

There are examples of grassroots resistance that have been inspiring – shining examples of where we should be going. But in South Africa the anti-apartheid struggle was largely urban-based, and we do not have many examples of rural struggle. But we know that we will be successful only if we build up our internal capacity

and work in networks. We realise that engaging with the multilateral system has been counter-productive and has pulled us away from the real struggles. We are aware that we should not have engaged in that as much as we did. It is local struggles that are important, that we need to keep building up, little by little, and doing the right thing every day. We have been deeply disillusioned, and we feel a great urgency to change things. There is also much anxiety. We keep asking ourselves: what more can I do?

If we are to move forward, relationships between NGOs, movements and communities must be allowed to unfold, we must provide ongoing support to the communities, and we must train farmer leaders. As in the trade unions, communities need to take ownership of the issues. We often want quick-fix solutions, without allowing communities enough time to process and to take ownership of the issues, and not taking enough time to make sure that we support the real struggles. We have to learn from this.

In Africa humanity is profound, and the joy and celebration of humanity is deep-seated. As a movement in Africa we care about the heritage of Africa. To me it has been an honour to be part of that movement. I have learnt a lot from others, and to me it has been a journey to fulfil my destiny. My hope is that something will get through to people, that I can set an example for my son and the next generation."

## "We need relationships, not domination"

Diamantino Nhampossa

Diamantino Nhampossa is executive coordinator of Mozambique's National Farmers Union, UNAC. UNAC is member of Via Campesina, and currently serves as its regional coordination office for Southern, East and Central Africa.

"UNAC was formed in the late 1980s, when Mozambique shifted from a centrally planned to a market economy. The country was pressured by the international powers and institutions to implement structural adjustment programmes, and to dismantle state institutions and policies that supported farmers. UNAC was set up to address this problem.

After liberation, there were still many farmers involved in politics during the early 1980s, and politics was strongly linked to the liberation movement. It was seen as part of the class struggle. But since then all ideologies have been swept away, and the thinking now is very market-oriented. And there is no ideology in the market. At the same time, there has been a huge impoverishment of Africa and a new class has developed that has benefited from the World Bank restructuring processes. The movements, trade unions and farmers' organisations have become very weak, often co-opted by government. They have very little space of their own, where their voices are recognised.

In the last five years I see a new resurgence of the peasant movement, coming from the very poor farmers. The extreme suffering of the peasants in rural areas has led to a new way of struggle. It is now a new age for the movements. Commercial farmers have taken up the all the space, so that there is very little room for small farmers. Small and big farmers have some common

issues, such as access to markets, but on most other issues (land, for example) their social and ecological perspectives differ quite a lot. They do not have the same views on GMOs, fertilisers, pesticides. The debt issue has a much bigger impact on small farmers than on larger ones. Commercial farmers also want to control the land and to push small farmers off it, which often leads to conflict. Commercial farmers do not understand how to manage land sustainably.

The biggest mistake made by Africa was to accept Structural Adjustment Programmes, because through these the region lost its vision of becoming a Sovereign Africa. Once we accepted conditions on foreign aid and loans, we were saying that Africa could not walk by itself. We need to redefine help/assistance – we need solidarity, not a big boss telling us what to do. We need relationships, not domination. Since 1987, since independence, we are not moving forward, things are getting worse. Mozambique is now dependent on foreign aid for almost 50% of its national budget. We will remain poor if we keep looking to the outside for help.

Social movements must remain independent and draw their political power from the people. They should be challenging and very vocal, and focus on the basic rights of farmers. They should not stay at the periphery but engage with the core of policy, and transform policies in order to promote the radical transformation of society."

☛ instruments to implement a full-blown corporate privatisation agenda, and many public institutions have turned into mere servants of that same agenda. When we entered the 21st century, we were promised by world leaders that this would be the century of democratisation, of human rights, of the environment, of ending hunger – but already it has become perfectly clear that we are heading in exactly the opposite direction. This often leaves us in a very hostile environment, with increased repression against those that speak out, the criminalisation of those who mobilise, and the silencing of those who denounce.

Aziz Choudry, a long-time activist and researcher, formerly the organiser of GATT Watchdog and currently Assistant Professor at the University of McGill in Montreal, who has been collaborating with GRAIN in numerous activities countering free trade regimes, points to the importance of historical memory and the need to retain the knowledge of struggles from the past.

*"The anti-globalisation struggles, which emerged as people came to understand how, through the Uruguay round of GATT, there was a move to impose a comprehensive package of rules on the planet to serve corporations, followed in a long history of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles. The WTO and the subsequent advance of bilateral trade and investment agreements are just the latest*

*tool serving the same agenda. So we need to see our struggle within this longer and larger history of resistance, and to look more to past struggles for guidance."*

For Aziz, given the comprehensive nature of the threats we all face, the cross-fertilisation of ideas and the dialogue between people coming from different contexts and mobilised around different issues, become all the more important.

*"Activism is bound to always face lots of contradictions and ambiguities, but this should not be a barrier to building more linkages. There is a clear need to build alliances that respect people's different situations and world views. The most significant and effective struggles are happening in movements that are grounded in local contexts but connected to global perspectives. This is difficult, non-glamorous movement building work that, incrementally, is creating spaces where power can be challenged. We rarely hear about these struggles, but they are where hope for the future lies."*

Brewster Kneen, another long-standing author and activist – and for many years part of GRAIN's Board of Directors – agrees. He adds:

*"A big challenge we have lies in how we deal with the state. The state is a relatively recent*

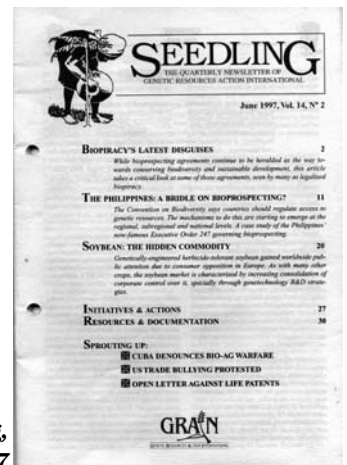
construction, and we do not have to accept it as a given. It can be very debilitating when people's movements define themselves in reference to the state. These movements need to be constructed on their own terms. We need to question the authority of the state. What we do should be based on what we feel we have a moral responsibility to do, not what the state tells us we can or cannot do. This is a strange land but we have to venture out from our traditional territory."

Many others that we have talked to have reached similar conclusions. Today we live in a world where a lot of traditional pillars and forces with which we thought we could build a better world have been eroded or corrupted. The way to deal with this is to construct our own terms of reference, to learn from our history, and to build alliances and dialogues across different issues and realities.

### ***Following or setting the international agenda?***

In the past 20 years, the most interesting, promising and mobilising concepts and advances have emerged when social movements have decided to look at things from their own perspectives rather than within frameworks set by the powerful. We can recite a long list of negotiations that we enthusiastically got involved in because we felt that we could achieve some positive results, but in which we got trapped in endless debates, where we saw our proposals being stripped of their essential meaning and corrupted into empty promises. At the FAO we argued for "Farmers' Rights" to challenge the privatisation of seeds and genes, and to promote the notion that rural communities are the starting point for seed saving and crop improvement. We ended up with a

**Seedling,  
June 1997**



Treaty that allows the patenting of genes, is mostly focused on managing gene banks, and – as lip service – might financially support a few projects that involve on-farm management of plant genetic resources. At the Biodiversity Convention we challenged "biopiracy", and urged the recognition of local communities in the management of biodiversity. We got "benefit-sharing regimes" that do nothing about the monopoly control that corporations obtain on the biodiversity collected from the forests and are essentially about regulating who gets paid for what when genetic resources change hands. They do little to protect local communities from the continuous undermining of their territorial integrity and the biodiversity that they manage, and indeed justify the "business as usual" approach. In the words of Erna Bennett, commenting on the role of NGOs in intergovernmental negotiations, in an article in *Seedling* in 2002: "playing the game by the enemy's rules has achieved nothing but to show us how we

## **"We need to globalise the struggles"**

**Piengporn Panutampon**

Piengporn "Chiu" Panutampon has been a key figure in Thailand's vibrant social movement. Over the years, she has been an integral part of several civil society groups and has been involved with the struggles of various sectors – health, labour, farmers, fisherfolk – gaining an invaluable insight into, and assessment of, Thailand's burgeoning social movement.

"In the 1990s, globalisation made our world more complicated in the social, political, and economic spheres. It has given birth to new actors, forces and power structures. We're no longer just talking of multinational corporations from the West, because in Asia we have seen an explosion of capital and the emergence of regional TNCs, like Charoen Pokphand in Thailand. This expansion of capital pervades all spheres of life, making capital more difficult to confront.

One of our most important achievements has been to raise the level of consciousness and debate among the people on issues that concern them. Whether it's primary health care or GMOs or FTAs. Our strong growth in terms of sharing information and analysis – making sure that it reaches the people, gets understood, and triggers collective reflection and action – is something we can proudly claim we have contributed to.

Yet at the same time, we acknowledge that we cannot

compete with the overpowering influence of a capitalist economy. The impacts of globalisation on people's cultures and values have been drastic; there is so much emphasis on catching up with the capitalist economy by satisfying individualistic needs and tendencies. Consumerism has become the norm. People are interested only in getting rich so that they can conform to that norm. We have failed to beat it. We didn't pay enough attention to organising the people against capitalism. So economic progress has become the central measure of our quality of life. The value of sharing and the culture of taking responsibility for others have been eroded.

We need to globalise the struggles. We cannot fight FTAs just in Thailand. They have to be fought in every corner of the world. But how do we get ourselves more organised? That is the biggest challenge, and a very difficult one."



*Tent set up in street protests against land grabbing, held outside the FAO meeting in Rome, Italy, November 2009*

got to where we are. But it has not shown us how to get out.”

In contrast, we at GRAIN have learned by experience that, when movements clearly define their own perspectives, strategies and time-lines, much more interesting things tend to happen. We have already referred to the growing movement against the WTO, which maintained a clear and radical stand against the neoliberal development model. We have also mentioned the food sovereignty initiative, which

allowed people to see the fuller picture of the kind of food system that has to be built. It helped to dissolve apparent conflicts of interest – between farmers in the North and in the South, between producers and consumers, between farmers and pastoralists, and so on – by clearly pointing out where the real source of the problem lies. It helped to build alliances between different social movements, and had a strong mobilising effect. It showed that another food system is possible. All these processes are increasingly difficult for those in power to ignore, or to manipulate.

### **NGOs or movements?**

One of the more encouraging developments in the past two decades has been the surging, maturing and growth of social movements involved in the struggle for a different food system. Although voices critical of the high-tech, Green Revolution approach had been surfacing in the 1970s and 1980s, the dominant thinking twenty years ago was still that the solution to hunger lay in increasing food production by deploying better technology. Among the dominant class, this remains the thinking today. But social movements have begun to articulate a coherent analysis and vision of what is wrong with the current approach, and what should be done to create a food system that feeds people and doesn't throw them off the land. It implies a clear stand against the corporate-controlled production model and a strong vision for a kind of agriculture that is oriented towards local needs, and controlled by local communities.

## **“Challenging TNC control over the food system”**

**Cris Panerio**

Cris Panerio is regional coordinator of MASIPAG, and has been with the organisation since 1994. MASIPAG is a national network of small farmers in the Philippines, widely known for its successful work on farmer-led research and crop improvement initiatives, involving the conservation and the management of the country's rice biodiversity.

“In the 1990s, the failure of the Green Revolution became more pronounced. Everyone was looking for practical alternatives that work. They saw MASIPAG as a viable one. But there was little appreciation of how the “trial farm” strategy that we use starts the process of regaining farmers' control over the rice seeds, something that we lost massively during the Green Revolution. It is the foundation of farmer-led, on-farm rice breeding that MASIPAG has been promoting, and where farmers choose rice selections that are adapted to their local conditions. Since then, MASIPAG has expanded to another important crop – maize – and in the past four years has started with the conservation and improvement of native chickens.

We are promoting diversified and integrated farming systems to build resilience among farmers, especially in the face of global warming. There are now several agricultural universities and local government units that are not only supportive of MASIPAG, but also even promote MASIPAG as a framework for agricultural development. But the official policies of the government continue to push the monoculture Green Revolution strategies.

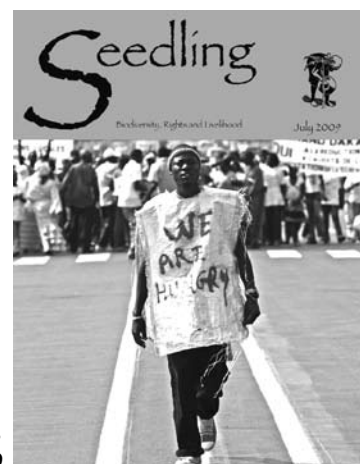
The problems of the county remain – it's the same poverty caused by social injustice, an economy dominated by foreign

interests, and a government subservient to it. But there is hope in programmes like MASIPAG, which is a direct response to TNCs' control of the global food system. It has actually put a face, substance and process to concepts like “food security” and made the word “alternative” concrete.

As a movement in itself, one of MASIPAG's greatest achievements has been to develop farmer leaders who can articulate the needs, problems and aspirations of the farming sector. Helping to raise their political awareness was central to that. Farmers are now able to engage with the government and assert themselves on issues like hybrids, GMOs, and so on with concrete alternatives. Not only did they gain confidence in themselves but also the active support of local governments, other NGOs, and academia in going about the farmer-led process of agricultural and community development. While in the old days farmers were merely “beneficiaries” of development packages, now they are active participants and their inputs are recognised. Farmers, previously impoverished by poor agricultural practices and policies, have been able to regain their dignity as human beings.”

The relationship between NGOs that have participated in governmental negotiation processes, with sectoral, issue-oriented agendas to achieve progress within the possibilities that these processes offer, and the social movements that have argued for radical change has not always been easy. One example is the tension between those trying to make the WTO more transparent, and those who want to get rid of the WTO altogether. Another example is the (non-)participation in the mushrooming multi-stakeholder dialogues that have sprouted up in the past decade, such as the “roundtables” on sustainable soya, sustainable oilpalm, sustainable biofuels, and so on. These bring together industry groups and some NGOs to draw up criteria and certification schemes to promote the sustainable cultivation of these crops. Others, GRAIN among them, have denounced these as processes that seek to justify the status quo, fail to tackle the real problems and fail to provide any solutions. Yet another example is the different strategies around climate change: Via Campesina recently felt itself obliged to “distance itself from certain ‘self-convened’ groups, and those who say they speak on behalf of social movements but who in reality are representing the views of their NGO”.

Antonio Onorati, one of GRAIN’s founding Board members, and a tireless fighter to create more institutional and political space for social movements in institutions such as the FAO, calls this the danger of “self-referential NGOs”.



**Seedling,  
July 2009**

*“Back in 1990 civil society presence at governmental negotiating fora was dominated by NGOs coming with position papers and participating in debates. Well-intentioned people talking to well-intentioned diplomats who were willing to listen to our discourse and perhaps incorporate some of it into their official positions. Over time, quite a number of these groups have increasingly become self-referential – setting their strategies and objectives in isolation – and thus become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. If we are to achieve anything at places where governments get together and negotiate,*

## **“We articulated a continental and a global movement”**

**Itelvina Masioli**

Itelvina Masioli works for the Movimento dos Sem Terra (MST), the landless farmers movement in Brazil. She is also member of the coordinating group of CLOC, Latin America’s small farmers’ movement, and of Via Campesina.

“I think that many things have changed over the last 20 years, some for the good and some for the bad. From the point of view of the offensive of the neoliberal model, of the offensive of transnationals and the transnationalisation of capital in agriculture, there have been a lot of changes. Land has become more concentrated; the expelling of people from the countryside has occurred – and continues to occur – in a very marked way; transnationals are controlling the whole agricultural process, from seeds to commerce. In general, the situation is tougher, because poverty has increased in the countryside, neoliberal policies have had an impact, and more people in the countryside depend on hand-outs. In places like Brazil slave labour has increased and there has been a growth in contamination, monoculture, and everything else that the model implies.

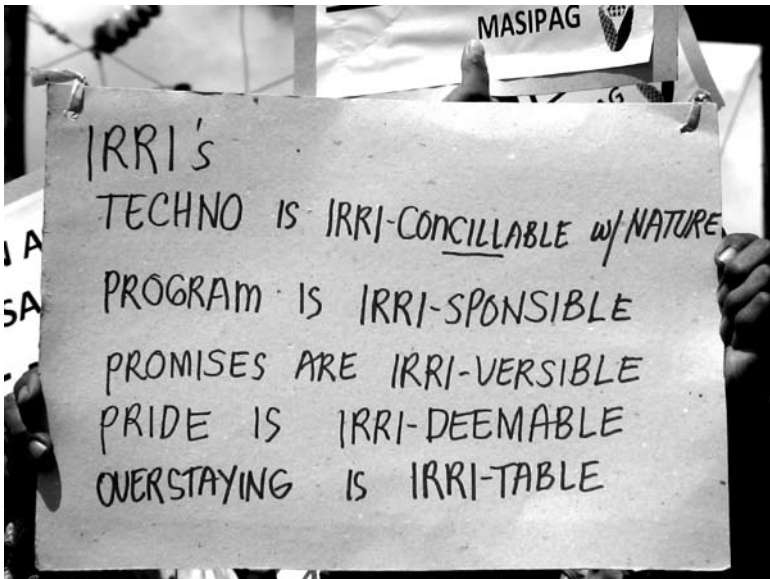
But, on the other hand, in these 20 years the peasant movement has grown. Today we can say that we have built a continental movement, which is CLOC, and a global movement, which is Via Campesina. Without any doubt we can say that this is the main strength we have accumulated in the last 20 years. We have succeeded in turning the struggle in the countryside, the struggle for land, and the struggle for agrarian reform, for

native seeds and for local markets, which were once exclusively peasant struggles, into struggles that involve the whole of society. Confronted with all the crises in capital, we have strengthened our historic demands, like the ones for agrarian reform, for sovereignty, for defence of land and life. Today it has become clear that what is largely responsible for all the disasters and impoverishment is the capitalist model, and there is widespread talk about the need to change the production and consumption model.

The debate and the historic demands of the peasantry have become politicised, and they have become issues that involve the very survival of humanity. This has meant that the struggle, which 20 years ago was undertaken only by the peasantry, has moved to the centre of political debate, when one talks about the need for social change and for building another humanity. What was once a solely peasant debate is today at the centre of the debate involving the whole of society.

It seems to me that this is a hugely important advance that we have made in the last 20 years, this capacity to articulate a continental and international movement. And, at the same time, as a class we have made our historic demands available for everyone in the construction of a popular project for society and for agriculture.”





**Placard at protest outside the Philippines headquarters of the International Rice Research Institute, on the occasion of IRRI's 50th anniversary, April 2010**

we need first to get them to recognise social movements as a representative force negotiating for its own interests. This is what we have been fighting for in the past decade at the FAO and elsewhere.”

Aziz Choudry identifies the problem of compartmentalisation that many NGOs tend towards, focusing on specific issues in which they are specialised.

*“We need to inoculate ourselves against this. Grassroots, radical movements tend to look at issues broadly, look at the connections and focus on the underlying causes of problems. Many NGOs fall into a technical discourse and do not challenge things being framed within the dominant language. For example, some NGOs look at how to improve IPR laws, while for many indigenous people the issue is about a fundamental contradiction between Western legalistic approaches and world views that cannot accept such things as the patenting of life. A major problem is that often such NGOs take up a lot of political space and are ‘able to marshall political power’. Actually, many NGOs have, in fact, benefited quite well from neo-liberal globalisation, as they’ve stepped in to fill the void left from the roll-back of the state.”*

We tend to agree. For independent groups such as GRAIN to be able to continue to play a meaningful role, it is crucial to be in constant active collaboration with social movements, accompanying their processes and understanding their priorities. This does not mean uncritically following their agendas, as we are also part of the debates and learning processes of the movement. But it does imply, from

our own autonomy, constructing relationships in which a constant dialogue on priorities and strategies informs our own thinking and actions.

### ***Movement building, alternatives and alliances***

What has become very clear over the past decades is how help, however well intentioned, can become a dependency trap, rather than a push in the right direction. Gathuru Mburu, of the Kenyan Institute for Culture and Ecology, and also the African Biodiversity Network, puts it this way:

*“Now I understand better that solutions will not come from outside Africa. We need to change our mindset because we are much too dependent on help and ideas from outside. The solutions we are looking for are under our noses, very close, but we keep on looking to the outside. This dependency blocks our minds to the solutions and capacity we have at our doorstep. If anything, we need support for African solutions. Over the years our knowledge has been devalued, our agriculture classified as unproductive, and our people as uneducated. Our focus should now be on working with communities so that they can chart their own destiny, make their own decisions, with or without support. We could have done better – often we didn’t empower communities to do their own advocacy work, rather we tried to do it on their behalf. We ignored their capacity to handle their own local situation. If we had understood the importance of local knowledge and local struggles earlier, we could have forestalled many things that have happened in the meantime.”*

Or, in the words of Diamantino Nhampossa of the Mozambique small farmers union UNAC:

*“We need to redefine help: we need solidarity, not someone telling us what to do. We need relationships, not domination.” (see Box, p. 8)*

A factor that, ironically, has sometimes undermined the movement building and the formulation of a clear, holistic and integral alternative to the industrial food system has been the imagined desire to come up with measurable results within the time-frame of project periods. On many occasions this project mentality has done more harm than good. As a result, we now have many interesting initiatives, ranging from local seed banks and organic gardens to community biogas production schemes and local credit facilities. But as many of them are disconnected from a wider struggle and vision of the role of rural communities in society, they hardly challenge the expansion of the industrial food system. So here is another goal for us to meet: we have to become more effective in building a social force that challenges the industrial food system across

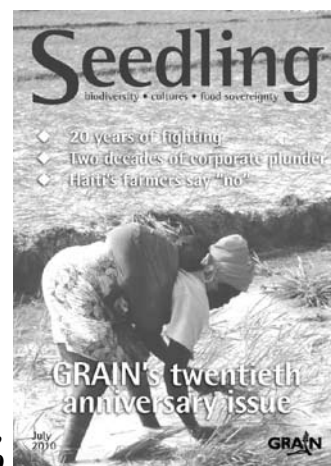
the board, while at the same time guaranteeing livelihoods so that local communities can survive.

It is here that Antonio Onorati sees the strength of rural social movements and small farmer organisations:

*“Compared to social movements in urban areas, like trade unions among industrial workers, the rural movements actually have a pretty clear idea about the alternative society that they want to build. They have no choice; they have to resist to survive, and in that process they start organising or reviving alternative structures, local markets, seed exchange systems, chemical-free agriculture, direct links with consumers, and so on. Unavoidably, these lead them to clash with the production models that Monsanto, the World Bank and WTO are pushing for.”*

In that sense, the food sovereignty agenda is one that not only denounces, but also provides solutions. For us at GRAIN, if we have learned one thing in the past 20 years, it is about the central importance of supporting and participating in processes that are clearly aimed at creating an autonomous framework from which alternatives can be built and action taken. The struggle for food sovereignty is one of these. This does not mean that there should not be any

relationship with, or involvement in, governmental processes. But such relations have to be built from our own strength, and oriented towards creating political space for putting our own agenda on the table rather than running after the agendas of those in power.



Seedling,  
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## Two decades: some reflections from Latin America

The past twenty years of globalisation have greatly transformed people's struggles in Latin America. Today, the region is a laboratory of spaces of reflection derived from the exchange of many diverse experiences. People are more aware of the struggles of others, and this knowledge has fostered a holistic approach, involving new and renewed strategies for organising and resisting. Some of the most significant changes include:

1. An emphasis on horizontal exchange: wounds and dreams are shared directly among localities, regions, and countries.
2. An urgency to understand the whole panorama of how corporations and governments operate together to produce successive and related impacts, devastations, crises and catastrophes.
3. An understanding of regions beyond geography, taking into consideration the constant migration and movement of people and, despite this reality, the urgency of building communities.
4. A realisation that money from governments and other agencies for projects inevitably leads to debts and bondage.
5. A reticence about the concept of "development" and, instead, an enthusiasm for workshops, assemblies, seminars and encounters where experiences are shared and where people can themselves identify causes, sources, problems, obstacles and interconnections.
6. A determination by indigenous peoples to exercise autonomous control over their territories.
7. An awareness among communities that to approach projects in isolation cannot solve their problems, because such an approach does not challenge the larger context, and thus entrenches dominant powers.
8. A recognition of how linking with other processes of resistance in other regions or countries brings valuable knowledge for local struggles.
9. An acceptance of complexity, of our complex world (as opposed to a linear world), as a basis for thinking and understanding.
10. A daring conviction that rural people (specifically peasants and indigenous peoples) are the most informed about the whole panoply of attacks and actions because they face them completely and without filters.
11. A growing alliance, which has emerged organically, between large segments of the indigenous peoples' and peasants' movements with ecological movements and segments of small-farmers' movements, to honour, defend and expand the space that peasants occupy when they produce their own food: the liberty that comes from living at the fringes of the system, and the long-term advantages of staying that way.
12. A crucial contribution from many young people surveying cyberspace for any information pertinent to the struggles of social movements – information that exposes the links between corporations and the political class, the dirty work of the operators, the finances and functions of programmes and agencies, and information that, when presented in regional and national workshops and encounters, whether about biodiversity, maize, water, land certification, ecological reserves, or environmental services, enables a holistic view of connections and horizons.