



The global struggle for peasants seeds; a struggle for our future

Peasant seeds, and seed diversity are at the root of food sovereignty

As countless farmers, farmworkers, urban growers, and consumers across the globe celebrated the International Day of Action for Food Sovereignty in October, an overwhelming number are celebrating seeds as pillar for food sovereignty. After all, according to ETC Group, [80-90% of seeds](#) are sourced outside of commercial markets, that is to say through peasant seed systems, and farm-saved seeds. In the [new publication, Our Seeds Our Future](#) La Via Campesina chronicles ten experiences of peasant seed selection, saving, improvement, and re-use. These experiences in recovering and reproducing knowledge to improve peasant agricultural food production are mirrored by multitudes more in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

The experiences spotlighted in the publication are examples of true food sovereignty in action, in contrast to monoculture and industrial farming methods that, as stated in a recent [UNCTAD report](#), are not providing sufficient affordable food where needed while causing mounting environmental damage.

This marks a critical moment for the future of the planet's seed diversity. While industry pursues legal and institutional battles to further control and monopolize global seed supplies, the evidence is growing in support of diversified peasant seeds and agroecology as fundamental to producing healthy food while mitigating environmental and climate impacts.

Seed Industry seeks to patent and monopolize the planet's seed diversity

Despite recent political stalemates that shut down the U.S. Government for almost two weeks, the Obama administration is quietly pushing forward with trade deals across the globe. Many of these trade agreements include specific conditions regarding seeds and intellectual property rights which pose a direct threat to people's seed and food sovereignty. At the same time the government paralysis has allowed farmer and consumer advocates more time to push for the suspension of language previously slipped into the continuing resolution on the budget that would have protected seed industry corporations from US Department of Agriculture review and any legal action attempted against them. In a short-term victory, advocates were able to obtain removal of the so-called Monsanto Protection Act in the United States.

As trade negotiations advance, Colombian farmers have been [mobilizing in Bogotá](#) since August in opposition to the renewal of the U.S.- Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which has displaced thousands of small-scale farmers. In partial response to the protests, Resolution 9.70 - a precondition of the 2010 FTA - has been suspended for a period of two years. This law criminalized peasant seed saving, selecting and exchanging, giving the state the right to destroy non-compliant seeds. The resolution gave preferential market access to U.S. and European seed companies, by requiring farmers to use certain industrial seeds to qualify for government credit and support programs. In 2011, the Colombian government confiscated and destroyed over [70 tons](#) of peasant rice seed.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, where a 10-year moratorium on GMO corn was lifted in 2009, a federal judge recently [ordered temporary suspension](#) of granting any further permissions for genetically modified (GMO) corn planting and commercialization while potential health and environmental impacts are assessed. However, previously permitted GMO crop experimentations will continue despite public protest and [farmer-led hunger strikes](#). The battle over seeds is being fought on legal turf in a similar fashion across the globe, where so-called "Monsanto Laws" are proposing *either* to lift previously instated GMO and terminator bans (i.e. [Brazil](#)), *or* to override constitutional safeguards against GMO

seeds and industry-led seed certification processes (i.e. Ecuador, [Chile](#), Bolivia, Paraguay, [India](#), Canada...). Such attempts in the [U.S.](#) and [Brazil](#) have been stalled as a result of public opposition, but the proposals remain on the table for eventual decisions. In Brazil's case, social movements rallied international support in another temporary victory to remove a bill from consideration, which would have lifted the long-time ban on terminator seeds.

Such seed laws being drafted around the world are an application of the UPOV91¹ Convention, which in the practice has used the legal framework of property rights including "protection" of genetic material to the service of privatization and monopolization of seed and plant varieties. UPOV91 has also been applied through certification and registration laws which criminalize non-commercial seeds. This in effect give companies sole rights over genetic material, failing to recognize farmers' rights to save, exchange, and produce seeds. Another element of the UPOV91 is the push toward seed 'uniformity' through registration and certification requirements, as opposed to promoting seed diversity.

In Africa, as GRAIN reports, [80% of all seeds](#) are still peasant seeds. But the impetus for a new Green Revolution using hybrid and GMO seeds as an anchor is gaining ground through an attempt to harmonize seed trade regulations throughout the continent. The road for seed industrialization in Africa was paved by CGIAR² using public funds to finance the green revolution in Africa. While the Green Revolution has clearly failed to abate hunger in Africa, the privately funded Alliance of a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)³ continues to push for industrial seed, pesticide and fertilizer use as the basis for agricultural production.

Registration laws [recently approved](#) in September 2013 in the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA) will create a mandatory seed registration system, allowing marketing of private sector seeds while outlawing the sale of peasant varieties. Like registration systems already implemented in Europe, and those being pushed in Latin America, seeds must be considered "uniform, stable, and genetically distinct" to qualify and be traded or sold.

In addition, African regional institutions such as the African Regional Intellectual Property Office (ARIPO) and the South African Development Community (SADC) have also developed draft intellectual property frameworks that only grant proprietary rights to the private sector varieties, while criminalizing peasants who save, re-use, and exchange seeds. African peasant organizations as well as the African Food Sovereignty Alliance have [denounced](#) these frameworks as mechanisms to facilitate the corporate control of African seeds and undermine seed sovereignty. In general, the green revolution model of agricultural production makes farmers dependent on expensive seed, pesticide and fertilizer inputs which are biologically unsustainable for the soil. Recent reports claim that crop yields based on this model have already reached their maximum limit of output, and will continue to decrease on a scale of diminishing returns⁴.

¹ "UPOV" is the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants. "UPOV91" is the 1991 revision of the UPOV Convention originally adopted in Paris in 1961.

² "CIGAR", the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, brought together Green Revolution institutes. According to the World Bank (2004) CIGAR invested 40-45% of its budget in Africa for over 25 years. See also Holt-Gimenez, Rosset, Altieri, 2006: Food First Policy Brief No.12: Ten Reasons Why the Rockefeller and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations' Alliance for Another Green Revolution Will Not Solve the Problems of Poverty and Hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa.

³ See: <http://www.agra.org>

⁴ Kemp, Benedict, 2003. Cited in: Less Hunger through More Ecology http://www.ke.boell.org/downloads/Less_Hunger_through_mroe_ecology.pdf. Additional reports which document the impacts of genetic engineering and pesticides on soil erosion and the environment are cited in the [IAASTD Report](#), 2009.

Peasant seed systems at the root of food sovereignty and sustainability

Meanwhile, however, the resilience of agriculture based on peasant seed saving coupled with agroecology is evidenced more and more frequently. As documented in the case of Mozambique, and others highlighted in *Our Seeds Our Future*, sustainable peasant agricultural practices, in lieu of dependence on expensive commercial seeds for commodity crops, is ensuring food sovereignty for peasants across Africa and the globe. Trainings and exchanges between farmers described throughout the publication strengthen and multiply these experiences. In just one season of planting and harvesting, over 200 Mozambique farmers participated in a learning exchange program between local seed savers and peasant seed savers from Brazil. Also this year, young farmers in the Indian province of Bihar [made headlines](#) for breaking world records in rice and potato yield per/hectare without using pesticides or GMOs hosted a delegation of international farmers to share techniques and lessons learned.

The agricultural universities and government authorities in India were shocked and even questioned the results coming out of Bihar. But peasants around the world took it as another sign of changing tides. “Farmers have repeatedly proved that we have better solutions and methods for farming than can come from purchasing seed and chemical inputs from corporations. Peasant seeds are at the root of food sovereignty; they produce healthier food, sustainably,” said Via Campesina coordinator Elizabeth Mpofo, of Zimsoff, Zimbabwe. “Also, in the face of climate change, diverse seeds systems are what we need to have resilient agriculture, but most of all, peasant seeds are part of a system of production which promotes justice instead of inequality and hunger.” In Mpofo’s organization, over 10,000 members have organized in cooperatives which are producing food crops free of pesticides and GMOs. They recently hosted a continental seed seminar in November 2013, where peasant representatives from East, South Central, and Western Africa analyzed the challenges peasants face as a result of new seed laws, as well as next steps to strengthening peasant seed systems in Africa.

Concrete work to strengthen peasant seed systems globally is already underway; a few of which are documented in this LVC publication. The aforementioned experience in Mozambique, being carried out by the National Farmers Union of Mozambique (UNAC) and the Small Producers Movement (MPA) of Brazil, has led to the establishment of eleven (and counting) community farms dedicated to peasant seed recovery, production and exchange of knowledge. The seeds are produced to sufficient scale to allow access for the area farmers to plant in their own fields.

The Korean Peasant Women Association undertook a two-year long process to inventory and rediscover native seeds in North and South Korea, through a process of seed exchange and field investigations. They now have two 1,000 square meter plots of land dedicated solely to the production of native seeds. In addition, they have established a decentralized network of families across the country who are individually responsible for the protection of specific seeds recovered both domestically and within the broader region of South and South East Asia.

In Mexico, amidst an onslaught of GMO and hybrid corn dumping from the United States and South Africa, the Purépecha indigenous peoples of the state of Michoacán, declared a GMO-free zone in the community of San Francisco Pichátaro. Since 2004, they have been strengthening farmer knowledge within their community and to five additional communities to use native maize varieties, liberating themselves from dependence on contaminated varieties. Since 2005 when the initial 10-hectare farm for native maize cultivation was established, the community has recovered 6 native corn varieties in the San Francisco community alone. They have also established a system for participatory seed-breeding, and marketing of organic produce for local consumption.

In northern countries farmers are being charged royalties or even sued for the use of any industry-patented genetic material (i.e. the famous case of [Percy Schmeiser](#)). This occurs even if the seeds were never obtained from any patent holder, or if farmers fields are involuntarily contaminated by GMO seeds.

However, many farmers are finding ways to protect their rights; such as in the case of the AbL (Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft) peasant organization in Germany, whose original 1600 members were sued for refusing to register and report information demanded by the seed industry breeders. In 2001 the highest German court ruled in favor of the farmers. The organization has now grown to 40,000 farmers who, in unity, are able to protect farmers rights to on-farm seed saving and production without sharing the information with private seed companies or paying royalties for what they insist should be public knowledge.

In the marked conflict of interest between corporate concentration of seeds, and a biodiverse, peasant seed-based agriculture, two paradigms for agricultural development diverge. The continued corporate monopolization of seeds is essential to an industrial model of agriculture, which as [ETC Group reports](#), uses 70% of the world's agricultural resources to produce 30% of the world's food, while creating more than of half of global greenhouse gas omissions. On the other hand, peasant agriculture, based on vibrant and diverse peasant seed systems, uses only 30% of our agricultural resources while producing 70% of the world's food.

At a recent [conference on food sovereignty](#) at Yale University, discussion of the role of peasants in combatting global hunger emerged repeatedly. Could they produce enough, without GMOs? Paul Nicholson, a farmer from the Basque country answered: “the question is no longer whether we can feed the world. We have answered that question. We are doing that even in as we are undermined by an industry-driven model of production. So why do we still have hunger? Hunger is a social problem we must decide to resolve, and we must start by choosing peasant seeds as the basis for food sovereignty.”

Indeed, the cases highlighted in *Our Seeds, Our Future* offer a plentitude of lessons learned. Each experience tells us that farmers are not only safeguarding traditional knowledge, but they are creating new knowledge and new techniques for improving seeds and agroecological production. They are creating solutions to their own production challenges; avoiding dependence on purchased inputs, combatting soil erosion and actually improving yields by using peasant seeds. In so doing, peasants ensure their own livelihoods while also tackling the global challenges which the Green Revolution and the so-called “Green Economy” have yet to impact with the use of millions in investments - especially the hunger and climate crises. These experiences also teach us that while the current corporate-driven agenda is to diminish and monopolize the planet's seed diversity, increased seed diversity is absolutely necessary to strengthening sustainable agricultural systems and food sovereignty. In this way, we also see in this small collection of “good practices” a distinct commonality which extends beyond the breadth of the publication, to many other peasant organizations taking action to reclaim seed sovereignty.

Find out more! :

[Read the new publication *Our Seeds Our Future*](#)

[La Via Campesina TV](#)