

Declaration of the Mesoamerican Meeting in Defence of Maize

Between 10 and 14 April 2024, we held the Mesoamerican Meeting in Defence of Maize in Costa Rica. Peasant farmers travelled from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Colombia and Ecuador. The latter two are countries that, in botanical, geographical, historical and anthropological terms, are not included in Mesoamerica, which runs down from the middle of Mexico through all of Central America and no further. But that didn't matter to us.

What mattered was agricultural similarity between *milpas*¹ and *chacras*², an affinity that was made all the more obvious during this gathering. These are communities that maintain a close relationship with nature, one that has prevailed for almost ten thousand years of peasant farming, and whose livelihoods are built on the strength of these sacred ties.

There was an easy synergy, and the resonances and ideas that emerged have been brought together in an analysis document that we hope will enrich our conversations and the ways we practise our autonomy.

Seeds are our memory: sowing our ancestral maize is a political issue

Faced with a widespread climate of violence and a desire for subjugation among corporations, governments and international organisations, the people and communities that identify with milpas and chacras, we assert our autonomy and our own forms of self-government. The devastation, the dispossession, the imposition, the forced exile of young people, girls and boys due to the planned stripping of our regions, compel us to speak out with strength as we envisage our lives ahead of us.

Once again, we assert that defending maize (the *milpa*, the *chacra*) necessarily means respecting the self-determination and autonomy of indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant communities and peoples.

Once again, we reject any experimental, pilot or commercial sowing programmes, as well as the distribution, storage or commercialisation of genetically modified organisms (including transgenics, gene-edited products and those who promote them and other forms of synthetic biology, anywhere in the country or the rest of the world).

Food sovereignty and autonomy will always be rooted in respect for the collective right to hold, save, exchange and freely sow native seeds without the imposition of any form of state, federal or corporate control (be it registration, certification, inventories, seed banks, catalogues of varieties, patents, designations of origin or plant breeders' rights, whether individual or collective, or the phytosanitary measures imposed by FTAs).

“Living well in harmony with the environment” requires conditions that allow for free and autonomous food production on a local, regional and national level and respect for our land – land now endangered by mining, hydroelectric, oil, road and environmental services projects, “conservation” programmes, monocultures and agro-industrial greenhouses filled with agrottoxins, the privatisation of our water sources, unbridled industrialisation and urbanisation, and an official environmental policy of people-free conservation.

1 In agricultural terms, a *milpa* is a field for growing food crops and a crop-growing system used throughout Mesoamerica.

2 *Chacra* is a Quechua term used in the Andes to denominate a small plot of land which produces food.

We reject the privatisation measures of the self-appointed Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) and its laws that seek to regulate who sows, grows, harvests and shares native and creole seeds and varieties.

We reject Free Trade Agreements as instruments of subjugation of national sovereignty to the interests of transnational corporations and as lobbying mechanisms for the adoption of UPOV and legislation that prevents the free exchange and use of seeds.

We reject the Technical Regulations on the Biosafety of Living Modified Organisms (LMOs) for Agricultural and Livestock Use (known as the Central American Regulation), which threatens the sovereignty of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador and promotes the transfer of genetically modified organisms with their cohort of agrochemicals that put the lives of our people at risk, and the research, trials and trade of transgenic seeds.

We would like to share the following points for public consideration:

1. We celebrate what is ours and make it central to discussions. We assert life, our communality (that responsibility we all share) and hope, a hope that is keen and in no way complacent, but one that opens up avenues of daily life, care and practices of autonomy – something that, like the *milpa* or *chacra*, is also sown, grown and harvested time after time. Celebrating what is ours makes us recognise and respect diversity in all its forms and interactions, provided that there is reciprocal respect based on the coexistence of humankind and biodiversity.
2. We open up more and more spaces for intergenerational, formal and informal conversation, places for people and collectives to come together to imagine and reflect, sharing data, information, narratives, experiences, stories, emotions and affection. Let us extend our links and our communication, let us hold conversations between indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant communities from different regions and let us promote the opening of community radio stations in all possible enclaves.
3. We defend our spirit and our shared creativity: experimenting, observing and improving our practices by recovering, championing and promoting our rural knowledge, be it ancestral or new, related and relevant to our conditions and circumstances.
4. We affirm our own forms of organisation, the importance of our assemblies, which in many places are the highest form of horizontal governance where decisions are made by consensus.
5. When it comes to making decisions on common goods and areas, we will assert our right to have autonomous authorities or mechanisms, such as *ejidos* and farming communities, indigenous reserves, community councils, peasant reserve zones, mayoral services, town councils and traditional, municipal or cantonal authorities in our shared land, all of which shall maintain their diversity according to their country and region.
6. We propose our own policy documents, agreed upon by assemblies, which can increase autonomy. These may relate to farming or municipal/cantonal issues, and promote our own forms of responsibility, work and organisation.
7. We continue to openly save, share and reproduce our own seeds and that makes us strong, because sowing them is the best way to protect them. Defending them allows us to maintain our land – our lifeline. Seeds are our memory. Today, sowing our seeds is a political act.
8. We want to redefine peasant farming, which maintains a respectful relationship with nature. Agroecology emerges from this ancestral peasant agriculture as a tool of memory and comparison, alongside modern organic farming.
9. We reject the imposition and introduction into our space of foreign seeds or technologies, on which we lack reliable information based on facts gathered by organisations or communities and our own close networks.

10. We need to care for the health of our soil, water and air and encourage others to respect them. Let us demand the protection of pesticide-free land. We will protect our land by pushing for a transition towards banning agrotoxins and any other poisons that threaten the lives of our children, our forests and our water sources.
11. We want to rebuild our strength and our skills, our memory and our history. We want to weave knowledge throughout our community spheres, forming a basis for our potential training projects: to undertake participatory, relevant research and diagnoses that give us an in-depth awareness and understanding of our land, so that we can defend every corner and every relationship within it. May our training and education projects be based on the collective construction of knowledge. We no longer want to perpetuate colonialism. Let us develop training materials in Spanish and in different languages of the continent, strengthening ties between elders and the young generations.
12. Let us encourage greater diversity in our food and ensure that vital crops of nutritional and historical value are not lost. Let us diversify our production. Let us promote our gastronomic knowledge and reclaim the kitchen as a space of creativity, imagination and resistance.
13. Let us re-establish the link between seed guardianship and midwifery, offering fulfilment to the guardians of future life.
14. After many setbacks, we are breaking free from the circuits of capital, because money despairs when it can no longer fool us. Let us instead promote cooperative shops and local markets that, more than a purely commercial exchange, represent an intense exchange of knowledge. Let us take back our own economy.
15. Let us turn our attention to what has made us strong and what keeps us fighting today. Let us recognise the importance of reciprocity and the responsibility it entails. It is crucial that, in addition to our own food systems, we take back our own systems of health and healing, and our ways of delivering justice.
16. Let us protect and defend our common goods and spaces (forests, seeds, water, knowledge, our own education, systems of social balance and others).
17. We derive clarity from focusing on the care taken daily by women and men, girls and boys, young and old alike as they attend to the tasks that allow us to recognise, overcome, repair, rest, heal, maintain, obtain; to our deepest needs, including our own food production in what we know as food sovereignty. Let us promote our ways of working together (be it *minga*, *pasamanos*, *tequio*, *faena* or *manovuelta*).
18. We seek to build strategic alliances to amplify the processes we are developing in the communities, ones we hope will become systematic, with a place for everyone. (With communities and organisations but also with civil society, foundations, courts of conscience. Sometimes we need to work to raise awareness.)
19. We have to achieve international legal safeguards, but also national safeguards against the privatisation of native seed varieties, which means protecting our land.
20. Wherever possible, let us seek influence and alliance with local governments. At this level of proximity, it is easier and more transparent to make our proposals and demands heard; knowing one another allows us to act together.
21. Let us promote the actions of people and communities in their entirety, because this makes it easier to understand the complexity of all that can further our autonomy and self-determination.

Colombia, *Alianza por la Agro-biodiversidad*, *Grupo Semillas* **Costa Rica**, *Arari Plantas y Salud*, *Fundación Sol de Vida*, *Red de Mujeres Rurales*, *Red de Coordinación en Biodiversidad*, *Finca Lecanto*, *Red Bancos de Semillas*, *Mujeres por el Bien Común*, University of Costa Rica

(UCR) Socio-Environmental Kiosk (, *Talamanca por la Vida y por la Tierra*, Coecoceiba Friends of the Earth , Timanaste Association, Finca Aire Fresco, Biriteca Agroecológica Collective, *Semillas Libres Costa Rica*, *Movimiento Agroecológico Costarricense*. **Ecuador:** Kawsay Foundation , *Coordinadora Nacional Campesina Eloy Alfaro – CLOC*, La Troja Manaba Political School, Acción Ecológica. **El Salvador:** *Federación de Cooperativas de la Reforma Agraria Región Central-CLOC-Vía Campesina*. **Guatemala:** *Red Nacional por la Defensa de la Soberanía Alimentaria en Guatemala – REDSAG*. **Honduras:** *Asociación Nacional de Fomento de la Agricultura Ecológica – Anafae*. **Mexico:** *Red en Defensa del Maíz: Colectivo por la Autonomía-COA*, *Semillas Colibrí*, *Desarrollo Económico y Social de los Mexicanos Indígenas-DESMI*, *Unión de Organizaciones de la Sierra Juárez de Oaxaca-UNOSJO*, Ojarasca. **Nicaragua:** *Semillas de Identidad* -South Pacific Network. **Regional:** GRAIN, *Colectivo de Semillas de América Latina*, *Alianza Biodiversidad*.

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