
Via Campesina: Food Sovereignty as the peoples' alternative to destructive agribusiness

Via Campesina is an international and intercultural movement that coordinates national and regional organisations of small farmers, peasants, rural women, landless peasants, agricultural workers, indigenous peoples, migrants, fisherfolk and men and women who work in artisan activities.

This autonomous, multicultural, multi-ethnic and pluralist movement primarily works for changes in agricultural production, in consumption habits, in the role of women, education, health, environment etc. The central themes of La Via Campesina have been enriched through the cosmic vision of indigenous peoples, which preserves the mother earth against natural disasters, global warming and the ecological crisis provoked by unabated unrestrained capitalism.

The organisation has been pushing the concept of food sovereignty up to the point that it is now part of the mainstream discussion on agricultural and food policies. Food sovereignty is the right of peoples and governments to choose the way food is produced and consumed in order to respect our livelihoods, as well as the policies that support this choice.

However, agriculture and food production are presently dominated by transnational corporations whose industrial production pattern seeks the complete vertical integration and full domination and control over food and agriculture from the seed to the plate in order to take in huge profits. This exploits workers, concentrates economic and political power, and destroys rural communities.

Food sovereignty demands that food should not be marketed as a mere commodity in order to obtain economic and political advantages and neither should the base of food production –biodiversity, land and water- be destroyed, degraded, used or appropriated at the expense of other people or other nations. A genuine agrarian reform should guarantee everyone the right to work on the land, and democratize its ownership, giving priority to family, social and cooperative forms of agriculture.

In the face of the present drama of global warming false solutions such as agrofuels produced from monocultures –including tree plantations– that undermine food sovereignty are being promoted.

Indeed, industrial agriculture is a major contributor to global warming and climate change by: transporting food all around the world, imposing industrial forms of production (mechanization, intensification, use of agrochemicals, monoculture...), destroying biodiversity and its capacity to capture carbon, converting land and forests into non-agricultural areas, transforming agriculture from an energy producer into an energy consumer.

The agrofuel “package” comes wrapped in the agribusiness model imposed by the transnational corporations who see this as yet another opportunity to increase their profits and control, while at the same time destroying peasants' livelihoods.

The basic inputs needed in order to produce agrofuels on a grand scale is the existence of three factors in abundance: land, water, and sun. So, corporations immediately turned to the southern

hemisphere, especially to those countries near the tropics and those that have abundant land. In many countries this expansion of area cultivated by agrofuels has taken over areas dedicated to food and also to dairy cattle. The possibility of earning a lot of money has allured foreign capitals to buy land and expand large scale monocultures in Southern countries –including the “green deserts” of eucalyptus and pines in Brazil, Uruguay, Ecuador, Chile, South Africa, Swaziland, Thailand and others, the oil palm plantations in Colombia, Cameroon, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, etc.- thus bringing a huge concentration of property and a process of de-nationalization of land ownership.

In relation to the environment, the monoculture form of production based on agrotoxics is going to seriously affect the environment, destroy the existing biodiversity, affect rainfall, and also add to climate warming. Either the “first generation” of agrofuels based on the different forms of sugar from crops or the “second generation” based on cellulose from wood –including genetically modified trees which pose an additional risk to the environment– increase corporate control and destroy existing biodiversity, contributing to the imbalance and to global warming.

Apart from bringing about greater environmental problems for the producing countries, industrial agrofuel production will revive colonial plantation systems, bring back slave work and seriously increase the use of agrochemicals, as well as contribute to deforestation and biodiversity destruction. Intensive agrofuel production is not a solution to global warming; neither will it solve the global crisis in the agricultural sector. The impacts will again be felt most seriously in developing countries, as industrialized countries will not be able to cover their agrofuel demand and will need to import huge amounts from the South.

Vía Campesina believes that solutions to the current crisis have to emerge from organized social actors that are developing modes of production, trade and consumption based on justice, solidarity and healthy communities. No technological fix will solve the current global environmental and social disaster.

A set of true solutions should include:

- * Sustainable small-scale farming, which is labor-intensive and requires little energy use, can actually contribute to stop and reverse the effects of climate change.
- * A true agrarian reform, that strengthens small-scale farming, promotes the production of food as the primary use of land, and regards food as a basic human right that should not be treated as a commodity.
- * Local food production will stop the unnecessary transportation of food and ensure that what reaches our tables is safe, fresh and nutritious.
- * Changing consumption and production patterns which promote waste and unnecessary consumption by a minority of humankind, while hundreds of millions still suffer hunger and deprivation.

Therefore, Vía Campesina demands:

- * The complete dismantling of agribusiness companies: they are stealing the land of small producers, producing junk food and creating environmental disasters.
- * The replacement of industrialized agriculture and animal production by small-scale sustainable

agriculture supported by genuine agrarian reform programs.

- * The banning of all forms of technologies such as genetic manipulation that endanger natural resources.

- * The promotion of sane and sustainable energy policies. That includes consuming less energy and decentralized energy instead of promoting large-scale agrofuel production as is currently the case.

- * The implementation of agricultural and trade policies at local, national and international levels supporting sustainable agriculture and local food consumption. This includes the ban on the kinds of subsidies that lead to the dumping of cheap food on markets.

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