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Diálogo de saberes in La Vía Campesina: food sovereignty and agroecology

María Elena Martínez-Torres and Peter M. Rosset

The transnational rural social movement La Vía Campesina has been critically sustained and shaped by the encounter and *diálogo de saberes* (dialog among different knowledges and ways of knowing) between different rural cultures (East, West, North and South; peasant, indigenous, farmer, pastoralist and rural proletarian, etc.) that takes place within it, in the context of the increasingly politicized confrontation with neoliberal reality and agribusiness in the most recent phase of capital expansion. This dialog among the ‘absences’ left out by the dominant monoculture of ideas has produced important ‘emergences’ that range from mobilizing frames for collective action – like the *food sovereignty* framework – to social methodologies for the spread of *agroecology* among peasant families.

Keywords: *diálogo de saberes*; rural social movements; La Vía Campesina; food sovereignty; agroecology; epistemology

Introduction

In the last 20 years we have seen the coming together of rural social movements and rural organizations from all over the world to form La Vía Campesina (LVC). LVC is a transnational social movement composed of national, regional and continental movements and organizations of peasant and family farmers, indigenous people, landless peasants, farm workers, rural women and rural youth, representing some 200 million families worldwide (Desmarais 2007, Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2008, 2010). Each component movement (i.e. the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations [CLOC], or Vía Campesina Thailand) and individual member organization comes to this global constellation with its own history, its own culture, and its own constellation of relationships with organizations inside and outside of LVC at the local, provincial, national and international level. LVC is not a single movement or organization, but rather is a constellation composed of many rural movements and organizations.

In this sense, LVC is a global ‘space of encounter’ among different rural and peasant cultures, different epistemologies and hermeneutics, whether East and West, North and South, landed and landless, farmer, pastoralist and farm worker, indigenous and non-indigenous, women, men, elders and youth, and Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Animist, Mayan, Christian and Atheist (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010, Rosset 2013). Representatives of this immense diversity come together to exchange, dialog, discuss, debate, analyze, strategize, build consensus around collective readings of reality, and agree on collective actions and campaigns with national, regional, continental or global scope.

Within this diversity there are many differences to work out, but it is remarkable that LVC has lasted 20 years without succumbing to internal fragmentation, as have many

previous transnational alliances and movements (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). How has this been possible? We argue that the process called *diálogo de saberes* in Spanish (Leff 2004), which roughly translates to ‘dialog among different knowledges and ways of knowing’, is key to the durability of the LVC constellation. It is a process whereby different visions and cosmovisions are shared on a horizontal, equal-footing basis. Part of it can be thought of a peasant/indigenous way of solving or avoiding conflicts, because there isn’t one knowledge to be imposed on others.

This process of dialog happens on multiple levels, for example inside each member organization, and with its own constellation of relationships from the local to the international level (inside and outside of LVC), and then also when they come together as LVC. While there are differences, debates and conflicts, the latter are typically tabled for later consideration when tensions have abated. Organizations take mutual inspiration from the experiences and visions of others. In particular, *diálogo de saberes* is how LVC grows and builds areas of internal consensus, which are often new, ‘emergent’ proposals and ideas. As a recent LVC declaration put it, ‘We ... have grown in our struggle, thanks to the exchange among cultures, to our processes, our victories and our setbacks, and to the diversity of our peoples’ (LVC 2012).

It is our contention that the process of *diálogo de saberes* (DS) has also accelerated the recent shift toward the promotion of *agroecology* as an alternative to the so-called Green Revolution in many contemporary rural social movements that once argued for increased industrial farming inputs and machinery for their members (Altieri and Toledo 2011, Rosset *et al.* 2011). In this essay we describe this phenomenon in the historically specific context of La Vía Campesina.

The history of this evolution passes through the construction and elaboration of the *food sovereignty* framework by LVC, and has been critically molded by the ongoing internal encounter of DS. This encounter and dialog has been shaped by the increasingly politicized confrontation with neoliberal reality and agribusiness in its most recent phase of capitalist expansion (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010, Rosset 2013). In this process, member organizations have been informed by their experiences with *movement forms* of agroecology (i.e. *campesino-a-campesino* or farmer-to-farmer processes) and with their growing number of agroecology and political leadership peasant training schools in the Americas, Africa and Asia.

In an earlier paper (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012), we situated the rise of agroecology in LVC in the context of territorial disputes with Capital and agribusiness (Fernandes 2008a, 2008b, 2009), addressing the roles played in the current global disputes over natural resources by both *agroecology-as-farming* and *agroecology-as-framing*, as elements in the (re)construction of peasant territories. We saw this as re-peasantization through agroecology (in the sense of van der Ploeg 2008, 2010). In this paper we draw on the work of Enrique Leff (2004, 2011), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2009, 2010) and agroecology pedagogues from an LVC member movement, the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil (MST), to explain the roles of DS in collective construction of mobilizing frames for resistance (Benford and Snow 2000) and for promoting on-the-ground, agroecology-as-farming (Tardin 2006, Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010, Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). It is perhaps ironic that post-modern analysis helps us understand mobilization for quintessentially modernist goals, like the physical occupation and transformation of material territory.

Diálogo de saberes (DS)

In today’s world, formal, instrumental and economic rationality are used as tools for domination, control, ‘efficiency’ and economization, generating what Boaventura de Sousa

Santos has called ‘monocultures of knowledge’ (Santos 2009, 2010). In the same vein, Enrique Leff (2004, 15) argues that ‘theories and scientific disciplines construct paradigms that create epistemological obstacles to the integration of knowledges outside their disciplines ... Since metaphysics, dominant thinking has reified the world, enclosing it with rigid concepts and categories.’¹ In contrast, *diálogo de saberes* (DS) begins with the recognition, recovery and valorization of autochthonous, local and/or traditional knowledges, all of which contribute their experiences (Leff 2011). These knowledges are called ‘absences’ by Santos (2009, 2010) – left out of the dominant monoculture, and from the dialogs among the absences come ‘emergences’. According to Leff:

Diálogo de saberes is an opening and a call to subaltern knowledges, especially to those that sustained traditional cultures and today resignify their identities and position themselves in a dialog of resistance to the dominant culture that imposes its supreme knowledge. DS is a dialog with interlocutors that have been stripped of their own words and memory, traditional knowledges that have been buried by the imposition of modernity, and the dialog becomes an investigation, an exegesis, an hermeneutics of erased texts; it is a therapeutic politics to return the words and the meaning of languages whose flow has been blocked (Leff 2004, 26).

Leff (2004, 24) concludes: ‘meaning in the world, is reactivated in a potent movement unleashed through the *diálogo de saberes*, which is the exact opposite of the desire to fix the [unchanging] meaning of concepts in dictionaries and glossaries ... In *diálogo de saberes*, beings and knowledges from outside the time and space of positivist knowledge relate with one another’ (Emphasis added).

We believe that LVC is a space where an enormous DS takes place, which puts the (re) appropriation and sharing of knowledges (the *absences* of Santos) into play. This leads to emergent discourses (the *emergences* of Santos) that question the dominion of mercantile and objectivizing rationality, the commodification of nature and economization of the world. In contrast to a totalitarian and uniform dominant world view, in the dialog of the absences the movements and organizations are constantly creating new, emergent knowledges and collective readings of reality (Santos 2009, 2010, Calle Collado *et al.* 2011, Sevilla Guzmán 2013). These come from dialog among the veritable ‘ecology of knowledges’ that exist among excluded peoples, and that are closely linked to and identified with their specific territories (Santos 2009, 2010, Cárdenas Grajales 2010).

Rosset (2013, 724) describes the evolution of LVC’s positioning on land and territory, in an example of what we are here calling DS:

The inherent differences across this diversity have over time led to confrontation and debate, usually resolved in expanded visions and evolving collective constructions. The encounter with other rural cultures and actors outside of LVC has also profoundly affected thinking and visions ... [I]n March of 2006 [for] the first time ... LVC really engaged with the nonpeasant peer actors who share the rural territories that are contested in struggles for agrarian reform and the defense of land and territory. Of particular note was the encounter of LVC with groups of nomadic pastoralists, fisher folk and indigenous peoples. The collective analysis that was produced included a call to re-envision agrarian reform from a territorial perspective, such that the distribution of land to peasants would no longer mean a truncation of the rights of pastoralists to seasonal grazing areas, fisher folk to fishing sites, and of forest dwellers to forests.

¹This and similar quotations have been translated from Spanish by the authors.

In this sense, and for the purpose of our discussion, we will define *diálogo de saberes* (DS) as:

A collective construction of emergent meaning based on dialog between people with different historically specific experiences, cosmovisions, and ways of knowing, particularly when faced with new collective challenges in a changing world. Such dialog is based on exchange among differences and on collective reflection, often leading to emergent re-contextualization and re-signification of knowledges and meanings related to histories, traditions, territorialities, experiences, processes and actions. The new collective understandings, meanings and knowledges may form the basis for collective actions of resistance and construction of new processes.²

Leff (2004) distinguishes DS from concertations or stakeholder mediations where the goal and the outcome reflect some kind of compromise(d) solution, whose ‘mid-point position’ reflects the geometry of power (Massey 1991). We described in Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2010) how LVC rejects this kind of process, where they would be forced to find a mid-point with completely unacceptable positions. Through DS, even when grassroots groups dialog with intellectuals or scientists, ‘new theoretical and political discourses are invented that interweave, hybridize, mimic, and confront each other in a dialog between communities and academy, between theory and praxis, between indigenous and scientific knowledge’ (Leff 2004, 16).

In LVC, DS is both what we argue is a basic though non-explicit underlying process, and, in the case of CLOC South America, an explicit methodology³. In what they call *diálogo de saberes en el encuentro de culturas* (‘DS in the encounter between cultures’), the Brazilian and other South American organizations in LVC are using a somewhat formal methodology based on Freire’s (1984) dialogic methods for recognizing the different cultures and cosmovisions present in a given territory, and facilitating a process by which they collectively construct their understanding and positions (Tardin 2006, Toná 2009, do Nascimento 2010, Guhur 2010). The method is ‘capable of creating horizontal relationships between technicians and peasants, between peasants and peasants, and between them and the society as a whole, based on philosophies, politics, techniques and methodologies that go hand in hand with emancipation and liberation’ (Tardin, 2006, 1–2). It is based on a horizontal dialog between peers who have different knowledges and cosmovisions. They share their life histories, and engage in collective exercises to characterize the surrounding environment and space, to collect information (data) about the reality in that space, to systematically analyze that information and, using Freirian generating questions (Freire 1984), to move toward collective intervention to transform the reality, followed by a new sequence of reflection.

It is not a mere average or mid-point position that typically emerges from this kind of DS, but rather ‘notions of development, biodiversity, territory, and autonomy emerge to configure strategies that mobilize social actions that legitimize rights which reinvent identities associated with the social re-appropriation of nature’ (Leff 2004, 26). These are the emergences of Santos (2009, 2010), and many times serve as internal mobilizing frames (Benford and Snow 2000).

²Elaborated by the authors.

³In fact one could argue that La Vía Campesina itself is an emergence from the dialog among the absences (peasant, popular and indigenous peoples’ organizations) that took place around the 500 Years of Resistance Campaign in the early 1990s, and through meetings of organizations in Managua, Mons and Tlaxcala, as described by Desmarais (2007), Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2010) and Rosset (2013).

From the DS inside LVC, and between LVC and other rural peoples (Rosset 2013), as well as with intellectuals and scientists, have come a series of emergent and mobilizing new ideas and processes. These range from emergent ways to understand changes in historical contexts, new processes to collectively transform reality in material territories, and new shared interpretive frames for internal mobilization and for the battle of ideas in the larger public imagination. Sevilla Guzmán (2013) and Calle Collado *et al.* (2011) have placed food sovereignty and new visions of agroecology among these ‘emergences’ from contemporary social movement dialogs.

DS and food sovereignty

Long-term trends toward consolidation in the global food system have been accelerated by recent decades of neoliberal policies – characterized by deregulation, privatization, cut-backs of essential services, open markets and free trade – and have led to a centralized pattern based on corporate producers of inputs, processors and trading companies, with production that is de-contextualized and de-linked from the specificities of local ecosystems and social relations (van der Ploeg 2008).

In support of this system, agribusiness, the World Bank, governments, finance banks, think tanks and elite universities create and put forth a framing language of efficiency, productivity, economies of scale, trade liberalization, free markets and ‘feeding the world’, all of which are purported to build *food security* (Rosset 2003, Borlaug 2007). This helps to build the consensus needed in society to gain control over territories and (re)configure them for the needs of industrial agriculture and profit-taking (Nisbet and Huger 2007, Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). This kind of unifying, economic and ‘scientific’ rational is divorced from a social commitment to solve real problems of real people and the real environment (Guiso 2000), and imposes a knowledge monoculture that annuls diverse local and traditional knowledges, transforming these into what Santos (2009) calls ‘absences’ (Sevilla Guzmán 2013).

The food security discourse was challenged in the 1990s because, while it speaks to everyone’s right to food, it says nothing about who produces what, how it is produced or where it is produced (Rosset 2003, Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). Thus the US government and transnational corporations (TNCs) could argue that food for the poor and hungry in the South should be sourced from where it has the lowest price per unit (i.e. industrial agriculture in the North), via ‘one size fits all free trade policies’, even as dumping that same food in South markets would undercut peasant farmers and increase the ranks of the poor and hungry (Rosset 2003).

A grand process of DS inside of, and led by, LVC led to the emergence of *food sovereignty* as a common framework that would allow diversity and take the specificity of each different place into account (i.e. the right of all countries and peoples to define their own policies). When farmer and peasant leaders from the Americas, Asia and Europe⁴ met each other at the beginning of the 1990s, they discovered both their true diversity and the fact that they had common problems and common enemies from beyond national borders, and that they needed to struggle together. They found that they all had severe doubts concerning the concept of food security (Rosset 2003), and through a process of dialog over several years developed food

⁴African organizations joined later.

sovereignty as a banner for joint struggle (Desmarais 2007, Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010, Rosset 2011). The framework emerged from those ongoing internal dialogs in the early 1990s, and was further elaborated at the International Forum for Food Sovereignty hosted by LVC in Nyéléni, Mali,⁵ in 2007, to which LVC invited sister international movements of indigenous people, fisher folk, women, environmentalists, scholars, consumers and trade unions for a giant DS. Food sovereignty was defined there as:

The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations ... There [must be] genuine and integral agrarian reform that guarantees peasants full rights to land, defends and recovers the territories of indigenous peoples, ensures fishing communities' access and control over their fishing areas and eco-systems, honors access and control by pastoral communities over pastoral lands and migratory routes ... (Nyéléni Declaration 2007).

Among the clear outcomes of the grand DS that was Nyéléni were the broadening of the concept⁶ to address the concerns not just of farmers but also of fisherfolk, pastoralists, consumers and others, and the addition of issues of inequality and oppression among people. Wittman *et al.* (2010, 7) affirm that it effectively moved food sovereignty beyond the perspective of producers and production. They also highlight that the forum was able to construct a vision of food sovereignty where food is integral to local cultures, closes the gap between production and consumption, is based on local knowledge, and seeks to democratize the food system. It also helped solidify national and international coalitions beyond LVC. They conclude that: 'after Nyéléni, there was no doubt that we were now talking about a global food sovereignty movement that clearly understood the challenges ahead' (*ibid.*). Key pillars in the construction of food sovereignty for LVC have been, as reaffirmed in Nyéléni, agrarian reform and the defense of land and territory (Rosset 2013), the defense of national and local markets (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010), and agroecology (LVC 2010).

⁵See <http://www.nyeleni.org> for information on this event

⁶It may not be strictly correct to call food sovereignty a 'concept' or a 'paradigm', because it is an evolving process, framework or 'joint banner of struggle' with definitions that change over time as alliances are expanded and new actors are brought into the giant DS inside the food sovereignty movement.

DS and agroecology

While other actors came to agroecology from other angles (i.e. environmentalism, pest resistance to pesticides, consumer health, etc.),⁷ LVC came to agroecology through the food sovereignty DS and through its internal dialog on land and territory (i.e. the *agrarian question*). A recent special *Grassroots voices* section of this journal (Rosset 2013) reviews the evolution of thinking over the past 20 years in LVC concerning agrarian reform, land and territory. This is also a process of DS, as described by Indonesian peasant leader Indra Lubis (cited in Rosset 2013, 758):

It's quite important to see the experiences of those in Latin America, in Asia, in Africa, to learn from each other and exchange our strong spirits. LVC has a very successful methodology of working among peasants, among the landless, among small farmers, using the exchange of experiences to build unity across the diversity of national peasant organizations.

The ongoing DS on land and territory is key to understanding the emergence of agroecology, as this seems to be the result of dialogs among accumulated experiences with both the food sovereignty framework, and with concrete struggles for land and territory:

The growing concern for the Mother Earth inside LVC has in turn resonated with a questioning of why we want land and territory and how we use it; in other words, 'Land for what?', or 'Territory for what?' While many organizations in the early years of their struggles called for more credit, subsidized agrochemicals and machinery for peasants, that is becoming less true ... Typically, agrarian movements that gained land through occupations and/or land reform from the State obtained poor quality, degraded land; land in which soil compaction and degradation are such that chemical fertilizers have little impact on productivity. This is land that can only be restored by agroecological practices to recover soil organic matter, fertility and functional biodiversity. Furthermore, many in the agrarian movements inside LVC, like the MST (Landless Workers' Movement of Brazil), began to ask what it means to bring 'the model of agribusiness into our own house'. By that they refer to the natural tendency of landless peasants, who had previously been farm workers for agribusiness, to copy the dominant technological model of production once acquiring their own land. Yet ... reproducing the agribusiness model on one's own land – by using purchased chemicals, commercial seeds, heavy machinery, etc. – will also reproduce the forces of exclusion and the destruction of nature that define the larger conflict ... Thanks to the gradual working out of this logic, and to the hard experiences of trying to compete with agribusiness on their terrain – that of industrial agriculture where who wins the competition is who has access to more capital, which is demonstrably not peasants who have recently acquired land – we can say today that, based

⁷In many cases, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and academics came to 'formal' agroecology before the large peasant organizations that belong to LVC. Eric Holt-Giménez (2009) thus referred to a divide between practitioners of agroecology supported by NGOs and advocates for agroecology within social movements. Rosset et al. (2011, 121) affirmed that this is changing. In some cases because of a certain 'territoriality' expressed by agroecology NGOs toward social movements whom they perceived as 'latecomers', the LVC agroecology process began relatively, though not completely, autonomously of NGOs. However the DS that began inside LVC has recently been opening toward many other actors in the world of agroecology, such as the Latin American Scientific Society for Agroecology (SOCLA), and can be seen, for example, in the participation of LVC-Brazil in the National Agroecology Articulation (ANA). The Global Agroecology Encounter of LVC (2012 in Thailand) recommended that similar processes of articulation be developed in Africa, Asia and Europe (LVC 2013a, 77). This historical sequence of being closed at first, and then opening up to alliances, follows the general pattern of LVC relationships with NGOs that we described in Martínez-Torres and Rosset (2010).

on LVC's series of agroecology encounters over the past five years, almost all LVC organizations now promote some mixture of agroecology and traditional peasant agriculture rather than the Green Revolution (Rosset 2013, 727).

What these processes of DS did was to essentially provoke reflection about, and call into question, a latent tendency of peasants and family farmers to apply elements of the dominant model of industrial agriculture on their own farms. From the beginning of its approach to the subject, LVC has seen agroecology as a technicism of little transcendence if divorced from food sovereignty and territory, which are the larger frames that gives it meaning (LVC 2013a). In a book written by, and largely for, LVC, Machín Sosa *et al.* (2013, 30) note that: 'for the social movements that compose La Vía Campesina, the concept of agroecology goes beyond ecological and productive principles. Other social, cultural, and political goals are incorporated into the agroecological vision'. In the words of a South Korean delegate from LVC: 'Agroecology without food sovereignty is a mere technicism. And food sovereignty without agroecology is hollow discourse'.⁸

The last five years have been a period of rapid development of an agroecology process inside LVC, in part as a product of an intense DS inside LVC facilitated by its Sustainable Peasant Agriculture Commission (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012, LVC 2013a). Part of the process has consisted of holding regional and continental 'Encounters of Agroecology Trainers'. These have been held in the Americas (2009 in Barinas, Venezuela, and 2011 in Chimaltenango, Guatemala), Asia (2010 in Colombo, Sri Lanka), Southern, Central and Eastern Africa (2011 in Shashe, Masvingo, Zimbabwe), West Africa (2011 in Techiman, Ghana) and Europe (2012 in Durango, Basque Country), as well as the first Global Encounter of Peasant Seed Farmers (2011 in Bali, Indonesia), and the First Global Agroecology Encounter (2012 in Surin, Thailand), culminating with the launching of the 'agroecology village' at the VI International Conference of LVC (2013 in Jakarta, Indonesia). The declarations from some of these meetings illustrate the growing place of agroecology in LVC (see LVC 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2013a, 2013b for examples).

This process has served several important purposes so far. One has been to help LVC itself to collectively realize the sheer quantity of ongoing experiences with agroecology, sustainable peasant agriculture and peasant seeds systems that are currently underway inside member organizations at the national and regional levels. The vast majority of organizations either already have some sort of internal program to promote agroecology and peasant seeds, or they are currently discussing how to create one. Another purpose these encounters have served is to elaborate detailed work plans to support these ongoing experiences and to link them with one another in an horizontal exchange and learning process. It also has been the space to collectively construct a shared vision of what agroecology means to LVC; in other words, the philosophy, political content and rationale that links organizations in this work.

In 2009, LVC defined what it called 'sustainable peasant agriculture' as follows:

The defense of the peasant-based model of sustainable agriculture is a basic issue for us. Peasant based production is not the 'alternative'. It is the model of production through which the world has been fed for thousands of years, and it still is the dominant model of

⁸Comment made by a Via Campesina participant at the First Global Agroecology Encounter of LVC (November 6–12, 2012, Surin, Thailand 2012).

food production. More than half of the population of the world works in the peasant agriculture sector, and the vast majority of the world's population depends on peasant based food production. This model, the peasant way ('la Vía Campesina'), is the best way forward to feed the world in the future, to serve the needs of our people, to protect the environment and to maintain our natural assets or common goods. Peasant based sustainable production is not just about being 'organic'. Peasant based sustainable production is socially just, respects the identity and knowledge of communities, prioritizes local and domestic markets, and strengthens the autonomy of people and communities ... It is diverse, based on family farming and peasant agriculture. Production is developed and renewed based on the cultural roots of peasants and family farmers, men and women ... Agroecological production methods, based on the notion of obtaining good quality food products without negatively affecting the environment, and while enhancing the conservation of soil fertility on the basis of a correct use of natural resources, and the smallest possible quantity of industrial chemicals, are part of it. Agroecology requires technological development that is based on both traditional and indigenous knowledge (LVC 2013a, 9–12).

By 2012, a lot of political debate and DS between different (cosmo)visions led to a new statement, that read in part:

As women, men, elders and youth, peasants, indigenous people, landless laborers, pastoralists and other rural peoples, we are struggling to defend and to recover our land and territories to preserve our way of life, our communities, and our culture. We are also defending and recovering our territories because the agroecological peasant agriculture we will practice in them is a basic building block in the construction of food sovereignty and is the first line in our defense of the Mother Earth. We are committed to producing food for people; the people of our communities, peoples and nations, rather than biomass for cellulose or agrofuels or exports to other countries. The indigenous people among us, and all of our rural traditions and cultures, teach respect for the Mother Earth, and we commit to recovering our ancestral farming knowledge and appropriating elements of agroecology (which in fact is largely derived from our accumulated knowledge) so that we may produce in harmony with, and take good care of, our Mother Earth. Ours is the 'model of life', of farms with farmers, of rural communities with families, of countrysides with trees and forests, mountains, lakes, rivers and coasts, and it stands in stark opposition to the corporate 'model of death', of agriculture without farmers and families, of industrial monoculture, of rural areas without trees, of green deserts, and of wastelands poisoned with agrottoxics and transgenics. We are actively confronting capital and agribusiness, disputing land and territory with them. When we control territory, we seek to practice agroecological peasant agriculture based on peasant seed systems in it, which is demonstrably better for the Mother Earth in that it helps to Cool the Planet, and it has been shown to be more productive per unit area than industrial monoculture, offering the potential to feed the world with safe and healthy, locally produced food, while guaranteeing a life with dignity for ourselves and future generations of rural peoples. Food sovereignty based on agroecological peasant agriculture offers solutions to the food, climate, and other crises of capitalism that confront humanity... (LVC 2013a, 69–70).

The language is much more influenced by indigenous cosmovisions and by the intensifying territorial dispute and need to differentiate peasant territories from those of agribusiness and extractive industries (Fernandes 2008a, 2008b, 2009, Fernandes *et al.* 2010, Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). Once again, we can call this an 'emergence' from the dialog among the 'absences', to use the language of Santos (2009, 2010).

A key and very illustrative point during the ongoing DS over agroecology – which contributed mightily to the evolution of the concept – was the 1st Continental Encounter of Agroecology Trainers of LVC in the Americas, that was held in 2009 on the campus of the 'Paulo Freire' Agricultural University Institute (IALA 'Paulo Freire'), created jointly by LVC and the government of Venezuela in Barinas, to give agroecology and political training to the daughters and sons of peasants and indigenous people. There a debate took

place, in which three emblematic rural visions that coexist in LVC in Latin America confronted each other in the attempt to advance in the collective construction of a peasant agroecology, a debate which became a DS, which eventually produced emergent positions.

DS between peasant, indigenous and rural proletarian visions of agroecology

The organizations that belong to LVC and CLOC in Latin America can be loosely grouped into three crude and highly stylized – for the sake of argument – categories based on the mobilizing identity frame that these use in their struggles. Their positions and identities are more tendencies along a continuum, but we simplify here for explanatory clarity. The most common are those organizations that use a *peasant* identity, thus focusing organizing efforts on people grouped by a mode of production or way of making their living. Even if such a peasant organization has mostly indigenous peasants as its membership base, it still typically organizes around ‘farmer’ issues of access to land, crop and livestock prices, subsidies, credit, etc.⁹ Organizations that use a more *indigenous* identity typically organize around the defense of territory, autonomy, culture, community, language, etc.¹⁰ Organizations that use a rural proletarian identity typically organize the landless to occupy land and/or organize rural labors into trade union formations.¹¹ The latter two types tend to be more radically anti-systemic than the conventional peasant organizations, while the proletarians are the most overtly ideological.

During the encounter that took place in Venezuela, it became clear that each of these kinds of organizations perceived agroecology very differently. The indigenous organizations saw it as a synonym for highly diversified traditional farming systems on small plots of land, with practices, like planting dates, informed by traditional calendars based on the cosmos, passed down from the ancestors over millennia. The peasant organizations emphasized the family as the basic unit of organization in rural areas, and gave many examples of the *campesino-a-campesino* (farmer-to-farmer) methodology for spreading agroecology. The indigenous organizations responded that in their world, the community is the basic unit, and that rather than farmer-to-farmer methods that abstract a single family from their community and encourage them to make individual decisions, agroecology needs to be discussed in the community assembly. For the proletarians, on the other hand, whose basic organizing unit is the collective (of workers, of families, of militants), agroecology should be informed by science and knowledge transmitted in classrooms, where young people are trained as technicians to help their collectives of families transition to ecological farming, which would be practiced on large areas, possibly by collectivized families and workers. In other words, each type of organization had a remarkably different utopian vision, basic unit of organization and method of transmitting knowledge, as we show schematically in [Table 1](#).

⁹Examples of this type of organization would be the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (UNORCA) in Mexico and National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) of Cuba.

¹⁰Examples of this type of organization would be the National Indigenous and Peasant Coordination (CONIC) of Guatemala and the Bartolina Sisa National Confederation of Peasant, Indigenous and Native Women of Bolivia (CNMCIQB-BS).

¹¹Examples of these kinds of organizations would be the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) of Brazil and the Rural Workers’ Association (ATC) of Nicaragua.

Table 1. Peasant, indigenous and proletarian organizations, and agroecology.

Identity frame	Unit of organization	Transmission of knowledge	Emblematic struggles	Sources of affinity with agroecology
Indigenous	Community	Coded in cultural traditions	Defense of territory and construction of autonomy	Indigenous cosmovision and care for the Mother Earth
Peasant	Family	Experiential, farmer-to-farmer	Access to land, prices, subsidies, credit	Lower production costs, self-provisioning combined with marketing
Proletarian	Collective	Classrooms and technical assistance	Land occupations, strikes, transformation of the economic model	Socialist ideology, dispute with Capital

Despite sometimes intense debate and even raised voices on a few occasions, the delegates to the encounter, and thus these knowledges, were able to dialog with each other, and also with ‘scientific’ and ‘expert’ opinion in the form of technical staff and academic allies who were invited, creating what Guiso (2000) calls a collective hermeneutics.

The meeting was able to come up with elements of a new vision of agroecology, including a broad range of positions to be defended by LVC within this evolving framework (i.e. ‘respect for the Mother Earth and Nature’), and those elements of other more technocentric visions that were to be rejected (i.e. ‘the separation of human beings from Nature’).¹²

Two issues could not be resolved, that of ‘agroecology as an instrument of struggle for socialism’, and ‘the concept of scale in agroecological production’ (LVC 2013a, 20). The issue of scale refers to the small family plot versus large collective settlement as different utopian visions of the indigenous and proletarian organizations, respectively. The difficulty in achieving consensus around the idea of socialism arose because some indigenous delegates felt that ‘already existing socialism’ had in the past not necessarily been hospitable for indigenous people. In the words of an indigenous leader who participated in the encounter, responding to the words of a leader from a proletarian organization:

Your *cosmovision* of historical materialism is an interesting one, and we could learn a lot from it. But first you must accept that is in fact a cosmovision, one among many, and that you can also learn from our cosmovisions. If you accept that, we can have a horizontal dialog.¹³

He went on to say:

We might agree to the idea of socialism as a goal, but first we need a debate about what we mean by socialism. Do we mean something like the communal and cooperative traditions of indigenous peoples? In that case, we might agree. Or do we mean certain examples of socialism in the past, where it did not go so well for us?

¹²The full list of positions to be defended or rejection can be found in LVC (2013a, 19–24).

¹³Author’s notes from the encounter.

He then invited all the delegates to table the question of socialism in the construction of a collective vision of agroecology until the 2nd Continental Encounter, to be held two years later in Guatemala. Everyone agreed, and the organizers of the 2nd Encounter were tasked to organize a series of roundtable discussions between Marxist and Mayan intellectuals on historical materialism, indigenous cosmovision and agroecology, which effectively took place in 2011. The following is an extract from the declaration of that second encounter:

We believe in agroecology as a tool in the construction of another way to produce and reproduce life. It is part of a socialist project, a partnership between workers and grassroots organizations, both rural and urban. It should promote the emancipation of workers, peasants, indigenous peoples and afro-descendants. True agroecology, however, cannot coexist in the context of the capitalist system. We affirm that agroecology is based on ancestral knowledge and practices, building knowledge through dialog and respect for different knowledges [*diálogo de saberes*] and processes, as well as the exchange of experiences and use of appropriate technologies to produce healthy foods that meet the needs of humankind and preserves harmony with *Pachamama* (the Mother Earth). We as La Vía Campesina, a multicultural network of organizations and movements, will continue to recognize and strengthen the exchange of experiences and knowledge among peasants, family farmers, indigenous peoples and afro-descendants, spreading and multiplying our training and education programs ‘from Farmer-to-Farmer’ (‘campesino a campesino’), through both open, formal and informal education spaces as well as in community-based and territorial processes. We recognize the fact that this meeting has been held on Mayan territory, where the *campesino-to-campesino* movement began, based on a process that builds unity, erases borders and creates horizontal and comprehensive exchanges of experiences and knowledge. We understand that there are no standardized methods or recipes in Agroecology, but rather principles that unite us, such as organization, training and mobilization. Our quest to understand our world in relation to time, to its creative energies and forces and to our historical memories (of agriculture and humanity) is complemented by a historical materialist and dialectical interpretation of reality. Together we seek to develop our political and ideological understanding through a dialog among our cosmovisions to achieve structural change in Society, thus liberating us and achieving *buen vivir* (the indigenous concept of ‘living well’ in harmony with the Mother Earth) for our peoples (LVC 2013a, 47–8).

In other words, after a process of DS that was spread over two years and two continental encounters, a consensus was reached inside CLOC/LVC in *Latin America* that indeed recognizes historical materialism and diverse indigenous and other cosmovisions as equals.¹⁴ These are issues and differences that literally broke other movements and alliances in the past, yet the praxis of DS has allowed LVC to move forward and gradually extend the area of consensus. Here we should be clear that the area of consensus in this case, and in general from processes of DS, is consensus around emergences, and not merely a midpoint between binomials.

This highlights an aspect we consider to be a crucial contribution of DS to the ability of LVC to survive for so long without major splits. We might call it a peasant, indigenous or community way of resolving conflicts. Barkin *et al.* (2009, 40) defined it as a ‘new communitarian rurality’, because it also includes a renewed emphasis on cooperation and strengthening rural communities. Since the founding of LVC, each time we have observed

¹⁴This particular consensus so far only extends to the Americas; it is worth noting that the declaration and new position statement produced a year later at the global agroecology encounter in Thailand contain no reference to socialism or historical materialism, though both express anti-capitalism (LVC 2013a, 54–78).

potentially divisive disputes, they have been tabled for discussion at a later time. Sometimes they are tabled for years, while they gradually work themselves out in the background, or until emotions are calmed. When they are taken up again later, the impasse is typically resolved by the emergence of something new, which extends the core area of consensus a little bit farther. With so many issues to address, no single issue can be allowed to shatter the space of dialog. The internal culture is such that the members do not push any given contradiction to the point of rupture. The space of LVC, like all human spaces, has power rifts, but these are downplayed. Time passes, and then issues are retaken. While things are heated, no resolution is attempted. This has created a 'safe space' to the point that organizations that cannot be together in the same room inside their home country can actually participate in a civil DS beyond their national borders in LVC meetings.

Agroecology as farming in La Vía Campesina

As discussed above, one reason why the organizations, movements and families that make up LVC are taking agroecology more and more seriously is that when land is acquired through struggle (through, for example land occupations, or via policy victories in favor of land redistribution), it is often degraded land. And when producers have used industrial farming practices, they have themselves incurred significant degradation. Faced with this reality, they are finding ways to manage or recover soils and agroecosystems that have been severely degraded by chemicals, machines, excessive mechanization and the loss of functional biodiversity caused by the indiscriminate use of Green Revolution technologies. Severe degradation means that even the ability to mask underlying causes with ever higher doses of chemical fertilizers and pesticides is limited, and the cost of doing so is becoming prohibitive, as prices of petroleum-derived farm inputs have soared in recent years. This situation has paved the way to adopt agroecological principles and practices as alternatives for small farmers (LVC 2010, Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012).

The route of transition towards agroecology as a form of agricultural production is a difficult one in multiple aspects. The loss of knowledge is one, the demobilizing nature of top-down extension is another, and the stacked deck in favor of the industrial agriculture model is another (Rosset *et al.* 2011). DS has been a way to break through those barriers.

The fact that agroecology is based on applying principles in ways that depend on local realities means that the local knowledge and ingenuity of farmers must necessarily take a front seat, as farmers cannot blindly follow pesticide and fertilizer recommendations prescribed on a recipe basis by extension agents or salesmen. DS is proving to be the way in which both the mobilizing frame is constructed and the transformation of farming practice is achieved. DS is important to the latter as peasants most overcome the 'de-skilling' that took place when the Green Revolution essentially replaced peasant knowledge with the 'mental monoculture' of step-by-step formulae and 'recipes' imposed by agricultural extension agencies and agrochemical company sales staff (Freire 1970, 1973, Rosset *et al.* 2011, Martínez-Torres 2012).

Emphasis on the struggle for autonomy is echoed time and again, as organizations and families stress the advantages offered by agroecology in terms of building relative autonomy from input and credit markets (by using on-farm resources rather than purchased inputs), from food markets (greater self-provisioning through mixing subsistence and market crops), and even by redirecting outputs toward local and ecological or organic markets where farmers have more influence and control (and thus greater autonomy from

global markets). In other words, in LVC, agroecology is part of what van der Ploeg (2008, 2010) calls *re-peasantization* (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012).

A form of DS that has become a central methodology for promoting farmer innovation and horizontal sharing and learning is the *campesino-a-campesino* (farmer-to-farmer, or peasant-to-peasant) methodology (Holt-Giménez 2006, Rosset *et al.* 2011). While farmers innovating and sharing goes back to time immemorial, the contemporary and formalized version was developed locally in Guatemala and spread through Mesoamerica beginning in the 1970s. *Campesino a campesino* (CAC) is a social process methodology, that is based on farmer-promoters who have innovated new solutions to problems that are common among many farmers or have recovered/recovered older traditional solutions, and who use their own farms as their classrooms to share them with their peers. Dialog takes place when visiting the farm of a peer, seeing, touching, feeling, even tasting an alternative practice as it is actually functioning on that farm, allowing peasants to imagine and translate it into their own vision. Later, on their own farm, they may test it out and/or adapt it in their own way, with their own creativity, sometimes recreating the practice but sometimes coming up with completely new practices/solutions.

In Cuba, for example, this methodology has allowed an LVC member organization, the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP), to build a movement that in a bit more than a decade has helped about one half of the nations' peasants to transition to ecological farming. LVC has prioritized the documentation and socialization of this experience (Rosset *et al.* 2011, Machín Sosa *et al.* 2013), and exchange visits by peasants from other countries and continents to learn firsthand from it (LVC 2013c). Thus, a farmer-to-farmer agroecology process has been transformed into a 'farmer organization-to-farmer organization' process. Of course, no other organization can or would blindly copy the Cuban example because the reality of each country is different, but rather it is taken as an important input or contribution to a larger process of DS. This farmer organization-to-farmer organization DS process, built on exchange visits and documentation and sharing of experiences, is how those organizations that are new to agroecology learn from those with more experience.

The DS on agroecology inside LVC has increasingly been organized on a systematic basis. The first step has been to use the agroecology encounters to collectively identify, and then launch processes to self-study, document, analyze and horizontally share, the lessons of the best cases of agroecology inside the movement. Products of these processes can include written studies and videos, and but also more targeted exchange visits. An example is the Zero Budget Natural Farming movement (ZBNF) in Southern India. At the First Continental Encounter of Agroecology Trainers in LVC in Asia, held in Sri Lanka in 2010, delegates from India made what seemed to be extravagant claims about this grassroots agroecological movement that had grown rapidly in the southern state of Karnataka (Babu 2008, Palekar n.d.). The ZBNF movement is partially a response to the acute indebtedness in which many India peasants find themselves.¹⁵ The debt is due to the high production costs of conventional Green Revolution-style farming, as translated into budgets for bank credit, and is the underlying cause of the well-known epidemic of farmer suicides (Mohanty 2005).

¹⁵ZBNF is a movement that started independently from LVC. As it grew, however, it increasingly drew in large numbers of peasant families that belong to the Karnataka State Farmers' Association (KRRS), which is a member of LVC. KRRS soon began to champion ZBNF.

The idea of ZBNF is to use agroecological practices based totally on resources found on the farm, like mulching, organic amendments and diversification, to break the stranglehold of debt on farming households by purchasing zero off-farm inputs. According to LVC farmer leaders in South Asia, several hundred thousand peasant families had joined the movement, and were routinely harvesting more with much lower costs than when they had earlier used conventional farming practices. At the Encounter, delegates from East and Southeast Asia were openly skeptical of these claims, to which the Indian delegates responded by extending an invitation to all of the LVC organizations in Asia to send delegates on a farmer organization-to-farmer organization exchange visit to Karnataka. They also offered to head up a process by which an Indian and foreign LVC team would study and document the ZBNF movement. The exchange visit subsequently took place, and by 2013 at the Global Agroecology Encounter in Thailand, delegates from several other Asian countries reported on growing experiments with variants of ZBNF in their countries, as a result of the exchange and DS process. The South Asia region of LVC has now opened an international peasant agroecology training school based on ZBNF methods, with local ZBNF farmers as part of the teaching staff, using farmer-to-farmer methodology.

Zimbabwe is an emblematic case for LVC that brings together the resolution of a long-standing territorial dispute (between dispossessed black peasants and white colonist farmers) through land reform driven by land occupations, DS, agroecology and the construction of food sovereignty. The Zimbabwe Organic Smallholder Farmer's Forum (ZIMSOFF) is a recent member of LVC, yet they now host the International Operative Secretariat (IOS) that just moved there from Jakarta. Their president, Elizabeth Mpfu, who is an emerging global leader in LVC, is an agroecology promoter from Shashe in the Masvingo agrarian reform cluster. Before founding ZIMSOFF she was a leader in the Association of Zimbabwe Traditional Environmental Conservationists (AZTREC). AZTREC was (and is) a national alliance of demobilized liberation fighters ('war veterans') who were promised but never received land, traditional spiritual leaders and traditional indigenous authorities. All had struggled together in the war of liberation, but had been partially left out of the new Zimbabwe, due the failure to deliver on land reform, and by the imposition of modern state structures that left traditional authorities powerless and ignored indigenous culture. The very idea of AZTREC was to promote a DS between disposed peasants, traditional indigenous authorities and spirit healers, to recover traditional farming knowledge and use it as building block for 'endogenous development' to be constructed through the struggle to recover lost land and by practicing ecological farming (Rosset 2013). AZTREC was instrumental in planning the nationwide wave of land occupations that led to the government's often maligned but basically misunderstood and ultimately successful national land reform program (see Scoones *et al.* 2010, Cliffe *et al.* 2011, Moyo 2011).

The First Encounter of Agroecology Trainers in the Africa 1 Region of LVC¹⁶ was held in Shashe in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe, in 2011. Shashe is an intentional community created by formerly landless peasants from AZTREC who engaged in a two-year land occupation before being awarded the land by the land reform. A cluster of families in the community are committed to practicing and promoting agroecological farming, and set up the Shashe Endogenous Development Training Centre. At this center they hosted the encounter of LVC organizations from Southern, Central and Eastern Africa in which all

¹⁶'Africa 1' denotes one of the nine regions in the geographical organization of LVC, and is composed of peasant organizations from Southern, Eastern and Central Africa.

participants were able 'to witness first hand the successful combination of agrarian reform with organic farming and agroecology carried out by local small-holder farming families' (LVC 2011a).

LVC has since decided to create four new international peasant agroecology training schools in Africa. One will be at the Shashe center, and the other schools will be in Mali, Niger and Mozambique. With these new schools, LVC will have more than 40 peasant agroecology and political training schools in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Europe (see Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012 for further discussion). These schools are slated to play a key role over the coming time period in facilitating the DS-based agroecology process inside LVC in the various regions of the world (LVC 2013a, 76–8).

Conclusions

Diálogo de saberes in LVC has been a grand dialog of absences from the dominant monoculture of ideas. Through the process of DS, LVC has been able to avoid fragmentation and create emergent mobilizing frames like food sovereignty, construct its own evolving vision of agroecology, and generate territorial processes also based on DS to disseminate agroecological farming practices. To quote Enrique Leff (2004, 23):

The true potential of DS is not in the generation of 'consensus' among perspectives that erases difference through 'rational' communication and negotiation among 'interests', but rather its capacity to produce dialectical synthesis. DS is real communication between beings constituted and differentiated by their knowledges ... a Pleiad of cultural beings constituted by their own identities, each with their 'denominations of origin', yet at the same time these are reinvented as they differentiate themselves (by resisting and desisting) from the unitary global thought and identity. This encounter between beings in the ideology of knowledges is the spark that ignites human creativity, where cultural diversity leads to discursive innovation and the hybridization of rationalities and meanings that produce branching processes that weave together diverse pathways of thought and [collective] action.

Above all, the shared vision that is emerging through ongoing DS is making agroecology into a socially activating tool for the transformation of rural realities through collective action, and is a key building block in the construction of food sovereignty. In the 'Jakarta Call' issued at the VI International Conference held in June of 2013, LVC called agroecology 'our option for today and for the future' (LVC 2013b). In the agroecology booklet prepared for the conference, the new challenges facing agroecology were summarized in a call for the movement to defend the vision built through DS:

One of our tasks has been to come to a common understanding of what agroecology and agroecological peasant agriculture mean to us. This is particularly important now because agroecology itself is under dispute by corporations, governments and the World Bank, with the scientists and intellectuals who knowingly or unwittingly work for them. This neoliberal attempt to co-opt agroecology can be seen in government 'organic agriculture' programs that promote monoculture-based organic exports for niche markets, and subsidize companies to produce organic inputs that are even more expensive than the agrottoxics whose costs led to the debt-trap so many rural families find themselves in. It can also be seen in the so-called 'climate smart agriculture' of the World Bank that, similar to REDD (Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) for forests, would allow TNCs to become the owners of the soil carbon in peasant fields, dictating the production practices to be permitted, all as a pretext to allow large corporate polluters to keep polluting and heating the planet. We believe that the origin of agroecology lies in the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of rural peoples, organized in a dialog among different kinds of knowledge ('*diálogo de saberes*') to produce the 'science', movement, and practice of agroecology. Like seeds,

then, agroecology is a heritage of rural peoples, and we place it at the service of humanity and Mother Earth, free of charge or patents. It is 'ours', and it is not for sale. And we intend to defend what we mean by agroecology, and by agroecological peasant agriculture, from all attempts at cooptation (LVC 2013, 70).

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