

# **“Seeking answers from below to the contemporary crisis of democracy: Food sovereignty and peoples’ sovereignty.”**

## **Application for support for the organization of strategic convergence**

### **Purpose and goals**

The past decade has witnessed an impressive expansion of local food movements in all regions. For all their diversity, they share the common objective of building decision-making processes and sustainable and equitable food systems from the bottom up. How can initiatives of this kind strengthen their impact and scale out and up? This proposal will address two important conditions for their success: understanding the evolutions underway in the **global context** in which they operate in order to take them into account and building **convergence** with other community-based movements that are striving for peoples’ sovereignty starting from other entry points.

Two parallel developments affect contemporary democracy in the context of neoliberal globalization. Firstly, **nation-state sovereignty has been undermined** by economic and political constraints while effective democratic global governance mechanisms have not been put in place. The absence or weakness of global democratic mechanisms, along with increasing global interdependence, has the most serious impacts on the most powerless people.

Secondly, **economic powers are increasingly capturing – or privatizing – democratic institutions** at national levels and the mechanisms of “global governance”. The outcomes of this dynamic are toxic for democracy since they generate inequality; concentration of power; and expansion of economic control over livelihoods, food, health, education, justice, housing, land and medicines. The privatization of democracy has disrupted the equilibrium whereby popular sectors could represent their demands to the State and achieve a reasonable degree of satisfaction. At the same time, recent electoral expressions of popular sectors’ dissatisfaction with political processes are intensifying the threats to peoples’ rights and contributing to a **culture of hate** that undermines democratic values.

The current crisis in democracy is one of the most profound stressors to the capacity of societies to adapt and grow in the direction of increasing economic inclusion. The institutions that people have trusted to serve their needs are being hollowed out by budgetary cuts, attacks on the media and free exchange of ideas, betrayal of the Social Contract, and promulgation of false assertions that the poorest in society will benefit from nationalist and corporatist policies. **By better understanding the factors leading to this crisis, sharing ideas of how to move forward, and building stronger alliances with other social movements and analysts, participants in the conference will be positioned to work more effectively for revitalized democracies that allow the voices of currently marginalized people to be heard.** There is great potential for advancing the right to political participation, as well as economic, social and cultural rights that are being violated through co-optation by economic powers of spaces that public policy should occupy.

The activities proposed here will explore these issues through a) **careful preparation** for engagement between social movement/civil society and academic activists, b) an **open dialogue** between representatives of these groups, and c) **follow-up strategies** identified in the open dialogue. The three activities will address three sets of questions:

#### 1) Changes in the world order and their impact on democracy

Changes in world order and power that have evolved under the umbrella of “neoliberal globalization” have shaken liberal democracies and the pillars of capitalist economies, undermining communities’ resilience and increasing inequalities within and among nation-states. How are they affecting democracy? What are

the implications of structural changes of contemporary capitalism for the analysis of social classes and other social categories? What scenarios are likely to emerge from the global expansion of investment, pressing against planetary and ecological limits? What changes in inter-state power are underway with neoliberalism and the extension of corporate power, the decline of US hegemony, the rise of extreme right populism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism? What will be the implications for the achievement of human rights?

## 2) Peoples' sovereignty and the future for democracy

**The idea of peoples' sovereignty (in economic, ecological, and political dimensions) as a basis for a renewed idea and practice of democracy** is a key element of the debate. What are the limitations of our inherited institutions and territorial borders in terms of expressing new forms of peoples' sovereignty from the bottom up? What new approaches are best suited to governing the future economic, political, and ecological dimensions of peoples' relations to each other and with nature?

## 3) Strategy moving forward

The workshop will engage in a transversal discussion seeking convergence and coherence among the explanatory frames, values and visions that are expressed in social movement practices and in their struggles and campaigns on different issues and in different regions. What **cracks in capitalist regimes provide space for the development of alternatives and for alliances** among those seeking to build societies based on equity and well-living? How can the experiences and proposals of social movements provide answers to the challenges democracy is facing today? Which different actors/sectors need to be involved, and how can diverse actors learn to work together in a more synergetic fashion? It is expected that the process will contribute to social movements' political strategies in these areas in particular:

- **Resisting commodification and recovering the commons**
- **Regulating corporate power**
- **Reclaiming democracy from below**

## **How the workshop fits into wider agenda of the work of the organizers.**

The process is co-organized by two groups of actors - social movement/civil society activists and activist scholars. It will advance their agendas by engaging with some of the big questions that both groups are asking about the impacts of how the world order is changing today and how to strategize more effectively in this complex context. Their contributions to the dialogue will be mutually enriching, with the social movements sharing their direct understanding of the dynamics of local struggles and the construction of alternative visions, and the academics their analytical frameworks and their geographically and historically comparative insights.

The networks of social movements and civil society organizations involved in this process represent a wide variety of campaigns, struggles and initiatives around the world and a range of constituencies, including peasant producers, artisanal fishers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, workers, slum dwellers, consumers, health workers, communities building local food councils and those fighting against extractive industries, land, water, seed, resource grabbing and other forms of corporate violence. Over the past decade horizontal networking among these movements has intensified and they have built up their strength to address global policy forums, particularly those to which they have the most access like the UN Committee on World Food Security and the UN Human Rights Council. The food sovereignty movement is the most extensive of these networks, and its experience needs to be shared and connected with the others.

Indeed, in the global context described in the preceding section, the specific claims and struggles of movements in different parts of the world have been subjected to similar impacts, and so they are linked one to the other even when they are not in direct communication. For this reason, understanding the nature of the transformations that are taking place in the world context is an important step to start moving collectively towards the emergence of new concepts and experiences of democracy that could

enhance peoples' sovereignty and their capacity to obtain positive responses to their legitimate claims. The outcome of the discussions will make an input to autonomous social movement strategizing/decision-making processes and contribute to strengthening their campaigns-struggles by enriching their knowledge, understanding and analysis of the dynamics at play in the world today and their capacity for action.

On their side, the academics represent a range of different disciplines and geographical perspectives. What they have in common is a commitment to use their knowledge and analytical capacities to promote changes in the world order in the direction of more equitable and sustainable societies in which human rights are realized, and to do so in partnership with social movements and communities which are on the front line of the struggles. For the academic participants the dialogue is a welcome opportunity to deepen their understanding of the movements' strategies for change and how academics might enrich their analysis. The aim is co-production of knowledge among scholar and social movement activists through interaction of analytic and research knowledge with concrete political struggles and experiences. At the same time, the workshop should help to clarify the different roles of the two groups of actors and how they can work together in the future in mutually supportive and respectful ways.

In summary, the activists involved in developing this proposal are seeking some answers and help in assessing the new – dangerous – developments of contemporary global economy-capitalism, motivated by the need to develop contemporary ways of describing the world that also help to mobilize people together. They want to discuss this with other social movement activists and leaders, as well as with engaged scholars and researchers. On their side, the scholar activists want to listen to social movements describe their struggles and strategies, learn about them and contribute to the development of common understandings of the contemporary world, as well as strategies and actions, towards changing it accordingly.

## **Process and tentative programme/agenda of the workshop**

The process will include several months of exchange among all the participants to identify and begin to work together on the issues and experiences that will be further discussed during the three-day workshop. Systematizing and developing concepts together in a shared process among social movement activists and scholar-activists will involve:

- 1: Sharing assessments of the problem.
- 2: Engaging in sharing of empirical experiences.
- 3: Facilitating access to action/strategies repertoires built together.
- 4: debating main available counterhegemonic paradigms and policy experiences.
5. Common brain storming on strategies/convergences and governance.

The programme/agenda of the workshop will be finalized during the preparatory process. Generally speaking it will adhere to the three sets of questions described in the section on 'Purpose and goals of the conference'. It will also be aligned as well with the dual objectives of co-producing knowledge/understanding through interaction between the experiences and analytical insights of social movements and academics and of clarifying how the two groups of actors can best work together in the future on a shared agenda. Details of the programme for each day will be developed by working groups including people from both categories of participants during the preparatory period. The different issues may be introduced by brief communications from both social movements and academics intended to help frame and 'kick-start' the discussion. Smaller groups may be formed to examine specific questions in greater depth, reporting back to the whole group at the end of the day. Following Days 1 and 2 small reporting teams will prepare a synthesis of the discussions to be shared with the entire group at the beginning of the next day's opening session. A final, forward-looking synthesis which proposes a strategy

for future work will be shared and discussed at the close of Day 3.

**Day 1: Changes in the world order and their impact on democracy and governance**

This day will set the overall context by describing the current threats to democracy as experienced in communities around the world and analyzing the global trends behind them. At the same time, it will start to identify contradictions in the currently dominant world order that provide spaces for the development of new democratic alternatives.

**Day 2: Peoples' sovereignty and the future for democracy and governance**

This day will shift the focus to look at specific experiences of social movements that prefigure the idea and practice of peoples' sovereignty. It will discuss the challenges for generalizing these practices and their implications for the institutions currently in place at all levels and for dominant ideas of how to conceive of and govern 'territories'. Particular attention will be given to experiences of building local food movements that re-connect rural/urban spaces and citizens/local authorities.

**Day 3: Strategy moving forward.**

Building on the outcomes of the previous dialogues, this day will address questions that condition the way forward. What are the knots that need to be untied, the opportunities to be seized, the spaces to privilege? What different kinds of actors need to be involved? How can participants in this meeting work together across different sectors to undertake complementary tasks in a synergetic way?

## **Outputs, audiences, dissemination strategy**

### **Immediate outputs**

The planned outputs associated with this workshop include a synthesis paper targeted specifically to social movements will be translated into Spanish and French for broader diffusion. Other effective communication tools such as short video messages will be identified during the preparatory process. The workshop will also lead to the preparation of a special forum in an academic journal and an edited book. The forum will appear in the academic journal *Globalizations* and will include short and highly accessible commentaries from both social movement and academic participants. These commentaries will be preceded by a short, accessible, concise synthesis paper clarifying the effects of globalization on democracy and the realization of human rights, and the possible role of peoples' sovereignty in reclaiming democracy. The co-edited book will be comprised of an extended version of these commentaries, including contributions from additional participants and will include longer, more in-depth reflections. It will appear in the "Rethinking Globalizations" book series published by Routledge press. One of the workshop participants is the editor of the journal and a co-editor of the "Rethinking Globalizations" book series.

### **Longer term outputs**

As both categories of participants work with multiple networks, we envision an expansion of learning in many directions in the longer term. In particular, however, we hope that the preparation and holding of the workshop will help build a strong, trust-based working relationship between social movements and academics, going far beyond the joint publication of articles. Social activists and scholars all defend their autonomy, so agreement on specific initiatives and forms of collaboration will have to be the result of a process, not a foregone conclusion. The workshop will discuss and recommend strategies by which scholar activists can engage more directly with communities and work together with social movements on the ground, and on the basis of the rules agreed with social movements. The group aims to identify future outreach and research activities that may lead to an application for additional research funding to support this collaboration moving forward.

## Targeted audiences

The outputs will be targeted primarily to social movement and academic audiences, and they are also likely to be of interest to an informed general audience. The *Globalizations* special forum will be published as open access articles. The free access to these articles is important for social movement audiences, in particular to the short synthesis paper, as well as the general public, who do not have access to academic journals that reside behind a pay wall. Social movements/civil society will be able to use the outputs in their diversified reflection and training initiatives. The online *Globalizations* forum will be useful for teaching purposes and will serve the purpose of informing students and academics about the important discussions that took place during the workshop, and thus will open new research avenues for additional scholars. The academic audience can also delve more deeply into the theoretical and case specific material through the edited book.

## Dissemination strategy

We will disseminate information about the *Globalizations* forum (especially the short, accessible synthesis paper) and accompanying edited book via social media (Websites, Twitter, Facebook, etc.), as well as through our own social movement and academic networks. These include, for example, Mov Socs Assembly of the World Social Forum, the Stop Corporate Impunity Campaign, Climate Justice, the Right to Food and Nutrition Watch on the social movement side. On the academic side, we will disseminate outputs via the international associations such as the International Studies Association, International Sociological Association, and the American Association of Geographers, as well as academic listserves for research on themes of economic justice and democracy. The meeting also will discuss strategies on how activists can reach affected communities, and engage with social movements and provide direct support, and these means of dissemination also will be pursued.

A total of 32 participants has been requested. It is intended to seek geographic and gender balance. Of the total it is foreseen that 2/3 be from social movements/civil society and 1/3 from the academic world.

## Preparatory group

	First name	Surname	Nationality	Title + Affiliation
1	Flavio	Valente	Brazil	FIAN International
2	Gonzalo	Berrón	Argentina	Rede Brasileira pela Integracao do Povos/Transnational Institute/ Vigência
3	Baba	Aye	Nigeria	Public Services International
4	Carsten	Pedersen	South Africa	Masifundise
5	Barry	Gills	UK	University of Helsinki
6	Molly	Anderson	US	Middlebury College
7	Harriet	Friedmann	Canada	University of Toronto
8	Jennifer	Clapp	Canada	University of Waterloo
9	Jan Aart	Scholte	UK	University of Gothenburg
10	Nora	McKeon	US	International University College
11	Tchenna	Maso	Brazil	MAB/ LVC