

Draft Concept Note for the Helsinki Dialogue – 18 – 21 October 2020
For discussion and comments

1. Background

The impetus to build a people's sovereignty dialogue emerged from multiple discussions in different venues in which social movements and their allies convene. It reflected the growing realization that a convergence among these spaces and movements is essential to overcome a silo approach to battling corporate capture and defending democracy and people's rights. Chief among these venues were the Committee on World Food Security, the only global intergovernmental policy forum in which concerned social movements are full participants, and the UN Human Rights Council, the negotiation space for the Binding Treaty on Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and the Declaration of Peasants. In 2017 several of the participants in this arena convened the first tele-meetings and agreed to plan a face-to-face encounter. This gave rise to a series of planning meetings involving around 40 people from movements in the global south and representatives from CSOs and academia. The planning process itself provided opportunities for sharing experiences across regions and constituencies and was crucial to build momentum and give shape to the agenda of what became the Siena workshop. This workshop, convened on 22-25 October 2018, was attended by 25 participants from social movements, CSOs and academia. The report of the Siena workshop is available at <https://peoples-sovereignty-lab.org/en/info/i35/People%E2%80%99s-Sovereignty-process.html>.

Outcomes of the Siena Workshop included:

- Participants from across the world shared experiences and deepened their understanding of the inter-relations and contemporary challenges related to corporate capture of resources and territories; the governance crisis resulting from failing democracies; and climate crisis.
- They shared achievements and lessons on 'struggles from below'; strategies of resistance and advocacy; and strategies for mobilization and building political power.
- Issues and themes key to building different narratives and approaches were identified for deeper discussion.
- Decisions taken at the workshop included:
 - Develop and further strengthen the space – which took on the name of the People's Sovereignty network to underline that it was not a new entity but a space and tool for existing movements and organizations and their campaigns;
 - Develop a web-platform for sharing of experiences and struggles;
 - Compile a series of articles written by movement leaders together with academics and CSO representatives on key issues that had emerged from the discussions;
 - Capture testimony by front-line movement leaders in a series of recorded interviews;
 - Plan a follow-up workshop to take the dialogue forward and deepen the collective understanding of 'strategies from below' and building democracies.

Since Siena the participants have continued to exchange news about their struggles and campaigns through a vibrant WhatsApp list. The larger group of some 40 people involved in the process has 'met' through internet calls and emailed updates. Collectively, they have taken decisions on how to carry out follow-up activities that were suggested at the workshop. Each of these is conducted by a group of volunteers that is open to others who wish to join. For additional information on post Siena Workshop activities see the link provided above.

In October 2019, several of the people involved in the Siena process and the ongoing dialogue planned and hosted two simultaneous side-events: 1) in Rome at the 46th plenary session of the Committee on World Food Security and 2) in Geneva at the 5th Session of the Open-ended working group on the Binding Treaty process on TNCs and human rights in the UN Human Rights Council. The events served to inform more movement leaders and CSOs about the process. Some 70 people participated and a number of these showed interest in becoming involved. Following these side-events, work started on planning the forthcoming Dialogue in Helsinki, one of the activities decided in Siena.

2. The political context and the relevance of the Helsinki Dialogue

The threats to democracy and the sustained resistances and responses of people's sovereignty arise in the context of increasingly authoritarian governments; militarization of State repression and criminalisation of social movements; natural resource extractivism; land-grabs and water-grabs in the context of growing food insecurity; resource conflicts and wars; intensifying climate crisis; massive forced displacements of affected communities and the most vulnerable peoples; creation of "zones with rights and zones without rights" - the exodus of migrant and refugee peoples.

In the midst of these multiple crises and the accelerated pace of change, social movements are challenged to address the constant changing political and economic conditions at various levels (local to global). They are challenged to address immediate impacts – defend frontline activists, leaders and communities; build convergence between movements; reclaim democracy from below and renew and adapt strategies that can ensure access for fulfilment of fundamental human rights and lay the basis for longer term transformative transitions. CSOs and academia play an important role as support organisations to the social movements in this process.

Corporations have advanced their political influence in the UN system through the normalisation of multistakeholder mechanisms (among others the SDGs processes) and are configuring a strategy of capture of global governance. The signing of a partnership agreement between the UN and the World Economic Forum in June 2019 is a particularly disturbing signal since it gives the corporate membership of the WEF unprecedented and privileged access to UN spaces and processes. The UN Secretary General's decision to organize a Summit on Food Systems in collaboration with the WEF threatens replacing the inclusive and legitimate Committee on World Food Security with an illegitimate 'multi-stakeholder' food governance architecture led by agri-food corporations and aimed at promoting a high tech and finance-based future of food (https://peoples-sovereignty-lab.org/en/campaign_and_solidarity_struggles/i2/Denouncing-the-Strategic-Partnership-Agreement-between-WEF-and-the-UN.html).

At country level TNCs have pursued their commercial interests through foreign direct investments and take-over of land, and ocean territories and mineral resources, and at the same time are deepening their political influence at local to national levels. In some countries, this ongoing accumulation of capital and political power by corporations goes hand-in-hand with authoritarianism and the failure of democratic states to provide people with full access to fundamental human rights (food, health, housing, education, etc). The process is relentless and can lead to the dismantling of the democratic state.

One of the main insights of the Siena process was the resilience and diversity of struggles from below in an era of intense repression and growing authoritarianism. At the same time, this fight-back from below is fragile, can be isolated, and often lacks strong organisational foundation. Transformative social change demands that social movements be well-organised with clear political and resistance strategies and well-articulated solutions rooted in a strong mass base.

The Siena workshop provided opportunities for social movement leaders and activists to share experiences and lessons on solutions and strategies from below and build the reflection from these. Now in the face of the conjuncture of intensifying multiple crises, it is a constant challenge for social movements to simultaneously deepen and broaden their presence and influence, and this will be specifically addressed at the Helsinki workshop. This encounter provides an opportune moment to advance mutual learning and generation of new knowledge hewn from movements' experiences and struggles in order to advance the struggle for a just transition based on peoples' sovereignty.

The methodology of Siena will be applied to the Helsinki Dialogue including: fully participatory involvement as equals - social movements, civil society organisations and academe; cross-sectoral (i.e.,

combining multiple struggles and knowledge fields); focus on the direct experience of people who are living and resisting in conditions of crisis and rights violations.

3. Next steps in planning for Helsinki

The collective preparation process will start six months before the encounter. Following the methodology of the Siena process, it will include a dynamic inter-action with the on-going post-Siena activities, particularly using the instrument of the People's Sovereignty Web Lab, as well as dedicated on-line meetings (zoom, skype etc). This collective preparation will involve:

- Agreeing on objectives and outcomes.
- Developing a detailed programme.
- Building momentum and buy-in in order for participants to come prepared and motivated.
- Agreeing on the methodology to be adopted and ensuring key roles and responsibilities are assigned and shared among social movement, CSO and academic activists.
- Finalising articles produced by movement leaders together with CSO representatives and academics for the *Globalizations* Special Forum on 'on 'Reclaiming democracy from below: from the contemporary state capitalist system to peoples' sovereignty' so they can feed into the workshop dialogue.
- Finalising a series of video-interviews with social movement leaders, which can also inform the workshop dialogue.
- Agreeing on and assigning responsibility for other preparatory activities.
- Agreeing to a list of participants taking the principles mentioned below into account.

Based on the wrap-up discussion in Siena it has been suggested that the Helsinki Dialogue might seek to achieve the following outcomes, which need to be updated and reaffirmed:

- Focussed debate on strategies for democracy and people's sovereignty:
Updating our collective understanding of how have democracy and people's sovereignty are being impacted by neoliberalism and other economic and political factors?
How does a people's sovereignty approach present a counter-strategy at different levels and how can it contribute to re-inventing a participatory and responsive democracy?
- Building new narratives:
Examining how people's local experiences of resistance and construction can constitute elements of a narrative that counters the neo-liberal capitalist paradigm, like pieces of an emerging mosaic. Dimensions elaborated in the *Globalizations* Special Forum and the recorded interviews will be complemented by other experiences and strategies contributed by participants in the Helsinki dialogue.
- Promoting convergence initiatives:
Identifying networking that is taking place among social movements globally and regionally and building links among such initiatives was highlighted during the discussions in Siena. The mapping that will take place in the Helsinki dialogue session will feed into the Peoples' Sovereignty Lab.
- Expanding the network of engaged scholars/activists working with social movements.

If adequate resources can be mobilized it is hoped that the workshop can be attended by some 40 persons from social movements, CSOs, academia, and interpreters. Selection of participants will respect the following criteria applied at Siena:

- equal geographical participation
- 50% youth (under 35) participation
- gender equity

It is understood that representatives from CSOs in Europe and Academe will cover their own travel costs. It is hoped that the workshop can be convened in 3 languages (French, Spanish and English).

One of the strengths of the Siena workshop was the fact that it was the culmination of a thorough, inclusive planning process with regular tele-meetings which involved most of the workshop participants as well as others who for one reason or another were not able to come to Siena. This not only shaped the agenda but also ensured all participants came well prepared, with a clear understanding of purpose, expected outputs, and division of task, roles and responsibilities and a common sense of ownership of the process. The planning of the Helsinki workshop will follow the same principle of participation and collaboration and this will facilitate the nominations of movements and participants.