

La Vía Campesina and Academia: A Snapshot

Brem-Wilson, J & Nicholson, P

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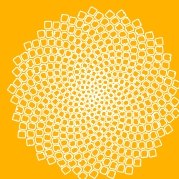
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Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

The People's Knowledge Editorial Collective



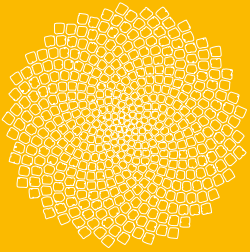
Reclaiming
**Diversity &
Citizenship**

Everyday Experts explains how knowledge built up through first-hand experience can help solve the crisis in the food system. It brings together fifty-seven activists, farmers, practitioners, researchers and community organisers from around the world to take a critical look at attempts to improve the dialogue between people whose knowledge has been marginalised in the past and others who are recognised as professional experts.

Using a combination of stories, poems, photos and videos, the contributors demonstrate how people's knowledge can transform the food system towards greater social and environmental justice. Many of the chapters also explore the challenges of using action and participatory approaches to research.

The chapters share new insights, analysis and stories that can expand our imagination of a future that encompasses:

- making dialogue among people with different ways of understanding the world central to all decision-making
- the re-affirmation of Indigenous, local, traditional and other knowledge systems
- a blurring of the divide between professional expertise and expertise that is derived from experience
- transformed relationships amongst ourselves and with the Earth to confront inequality and the environmental crisis



The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

To read any of the 28 chapters in this book freely available to download, please visit:

www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts

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food system

Cover photos:

(left): Field teaching by Farmer Research Team members about planting methods, Lobi area. Photo taken by C. Hickey, December 2014. Used with the permission of project participants.

(right): The Coventry Men's Shed participatory video project exploring "What's Eating Coventry" and unpacks social justice issues related to food in the city of Coventry. More information at www.peoplesknowledge.org

Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

The People's Knowledge Editorial Collective*:

Colin Anderson

Christabel Buchanan

Marina Chang

Javier Sanchez Rodriguez

Tom Wakeford

*Listed in alphabetical order. This book was a collective endeavour and work and responsibility was shared evenly amongst the editorial team. All chapters have been peer reviewed by a minimum of two reviewers and revised accordingly as a part of a non-blind open peer review process.

Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

Published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) is driving innovative, transdisciplinary research on the understanding and development of socially just and resilient food and water systems internationally. Unique to this University Research Centre is the incorporation of citizen-generated knowledge - the participation of farmers, water users and other citizens in transdisciplinary research, using holistic approaches which cross many disciplinary boundaries among the humanities as well as the natural and social sciences.

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR)
Coventry University
Ryton Gardens, Wolston Lane
Coventry, CV8 3LG
United Kingdom

E-mail: CAWROffice@coventry.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 2477 651 601

Web: <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/areas-of-research/agroecology-water-resilience/>

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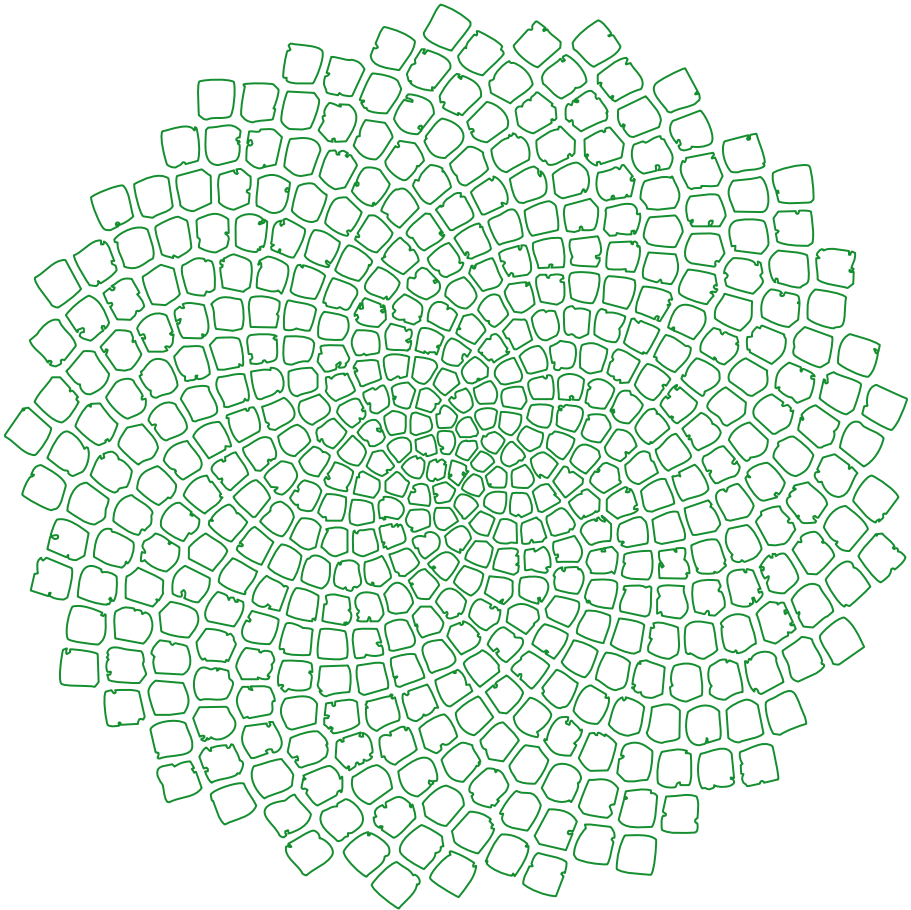
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Professor Michel Pimbert is the coordinator and editor in chief of the *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series*.

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La Vía Campesina and academia: a snapshot

Josh Brem-Wilson and Paul Nicholson

Geographical location: Various

Chapter highlights: This chapter offers a unique insight into how La Vía Campesina's relationships with researchers inside and outside of academia are understood and perceived by movement actors at the movement–researcher interface.

It relays how La Vía Campesina's relations with academics have undergone a profound shift since the movement's early years.

It communicates the importance of solidarity to successful collaborations between movement actors and academic researchers.

It captures the fact that, for La Vía Campesina, the majority of its energy invested in knowledge activities is directed towards the autonomous development of training-, education- and research-capacity, with La Vía Campesina's member organisations leading the way.

Keywords: La Vía Campesina, solidarity research, academic–social movement relations.

9.1 Introduction

Between 2008 and 2010 Josh Brem-Wilson conducted collaborative research with the global social movement La Vía Campesina as part of his doctoral research. This experience was deeply formative for him, establishing the foundations of his research agenda (Brem-Wilson 2015) and his commitment to participatory or 'solidarity' research (Brem-Wilson 2014). The first part of this chapter focuses on the actors on the other side of that experience. It provides a snapshot of the perspectives of movement participants on La Vía Campesina's relationships and experiences with academics. It is based on an iterative writing process between Josh and four-term member of La Vía Campesina's International Coordination Committee and Basque farmer Paul Nicholson, supported by insights from the movement's technical support staff Nico Verhagen and Xarles Iturbe. All quotations are Paul Nicholson's, drawn from

a series of discussions with Josh during winter 2015/16. In the second part of the chapter, Josh provides a researcher's perspective, reflecting upon his experiences of collaborating and attempting to collaborate with activists from La Vía Campesina and other movements.

We have to create another logic. We have to generate another science. Not an anti-science, not an anti-technology, but we have to develop our own science, our own technology, our own knowledge, based on food sovereignty and agroecology.

A contemporary snapshot of La Vía Campesina and its member organisations would reveal a movement enjoying active and ongoing relations with a wide range of researchers, both inside and outside the university system, with whom it collaborates in a myriad of different ways. These include working on funding bids for joint research projects, shaping the curricula of progressive institutions that want to offer courses of relevance to the peasant struggle, generating concrete inputs for La Via Campesina's activism, and more. It would also reveal a movement autonomously attending to its own knowledge interests, perhaps most significantly through the creation of an international network of agroecology schools and peasant universities. Examples from Brazil, India, Paraguay and beyond, often bearing the imprint of Frierean critical pedagogy, show a commitment to dissolving traditional university hierarchies, bringing peasant education and training needs to the fore and providing education programmes that attempt to equip current and future activists with the tools they need to realise the movement's food sovereignty vision.

We don't like being objects. We are the subject and, as the subject, we have to have that role also, of being the subject and not the object of interest.

To those familiar only with its early history, this contemporary picture might seem quite surprising. One key event from the movement's early years – indeed, from the time when it was launched – was a meeting in Mons, Belgium in 1993. This was organised by actors from a Dutch non-governmental organisation (NGO) who wanted to create an international farmer-driven participatory research project. This would include a range of rural actors with diverging and contradictory interests, including both large-scale industrial producers and small-scale family farmers in the same space. The goal of this project, conceived originally by the organisers following dialogue with some farmers' organisations, was to carry out research focusing on agricultural policies. However, for the vast majority of the 46 progressive international farmer leaders assembled for the network's inaugural meeting, this was insufficient. Through previous encounters via organisational exchanges and participation in shared meetings, they had developed momentum towards establishing an international peasant and farmer *movement*, in part to project a 'peasant voice' into international food and agricultural policy debates. This difference in perspective provoked resistance from the organisers, who responded inflexibly by attempting to persist with their original vision. The founder members of La Vía

Campesina were not deterred, however, and the movement was born. It emerged, in other words, from a conflict between small-scale farmers and researchers over who had the right to define the interests of progressive rural peoples and envision mechanisms to promote those interests; the farmers themselves, or a supposedly 'well-intentioned' research actor.¹

I think what's important is to understand that we, as Via Campesina, distrust the university, generally speaking, because it considers that it's the principle ideological instrument, of putting up, of strengthening the neoliberal model in society.

Some 22 years later, the contemporary La Vía Campesina still maintains a high degree of distrust towards institutionalised research, seeing the university, for instance, as a key instrument in the promotion of the neoliberal and capitalist project. But since that inauspicious early encounter, the movement has gone on to develop positive relations with many *individual* academics, many of whom it regards as being located in a somewhat porous space between activism and the academy. Moreover, a number of research-active NGOs working on various issues, from climate change to biodiversity and peasant rights, are key La Vía Campesina allies, providing the movement with valuable inputs and *evidence* in support of its activism.

In part, this shift in relations can be explained by two parallel sets of dynamics. On the one hand, as the movement consolidated itself and emerged from its early years with a strong sense of its own identity and interests, this made it easier to shift into collaborative postures with other actors (e.g. NGOs and academics) with whom previously, based on historical experience, it preferred to maintain a distance. At the same time, attitudes of individuals *within* the academy towards La Vía Campesina were changing, resulting in growing engagement with and support for food sovereignty amongst these actors. From the movement's perspective, this initial shift in attitudes amongst academics to their activism was visible in two clear waves. The first involved individuals with very strong movement links migrating *into the academy* and taking their commitment to the movement and its struggles with them.² These individuals were at the vanguard of the academic interest in La Vía Campesina, and helped to build confidence within the movement regarding the possibility of positive movement-academic relations. The second wave reflected a growing enthusiasm towards the movement and food sovereignty amongst *established academics*, whose research perhaps had aligned historically with the positions and struggles that La Vía Campesina had emerged to defend and promote. To La Vía Campesina activists – emerging and existing in a space of radical marginalisation – these were surprising developments, and communicated to the movement that individual academics could be a source of support.

1 See: Annette Desmarais, (1997) *La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 74-103 for a fuller account of this episode.

2 Such as Annette Desmarais, Jun Borras, and Nettie Wiebe. Whilst the latter attained her PhD before La Vía Campesina's emergence, she took up her post as professor of church and society at St. Andrew's College in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan only after her work as a rural leader.

Today, it would not be inaccurate to say that there has been an explosion in the amount of academic and researcher interest being directed towards La Vía Campesina and its issues. This is reflected in part in the number of journal articles, book chapters and other outputs addressing the movement and its activities, and food sovereignty in general. This growth can be tracked by the fact that when co-author Josh began his PhD in 2006, it was difficult to locate academic material on food sovereignty. Now it is virtually impossible to keep up with it. The trend is also reflected in the number of requests for access received by La Vía Campesina from doctoral researchers, with those having to negotiate these requests describing themselves as being 'swamped' by their volume. Perhaps nowhere though is the growth of academic attention in La Vía Campesina and food sovereignty more visible than in the two food sovereignty colloquiums hosted at Yale, 2013, and the International Institute of Social Studies, the Hague in 2014. Attended by many hundreds of academics, students, and movement and civil society activists, these generated over 90 articles on a diverse range of food-sovereignty-related topics, from peasant rights and the role of gender in food sovereignty to the relationship between food sovereignty and specific crops, and much more.

Generally, insiders within La Vía Campesina at the movement–research interface differentiate between four groups of researchers with whom the movement has relations. In the first group are research-active NGOs that are very close to the movement, and whose work supports and inputs directly into La Vía Campesina's activism on an ongoing basis. Crucially, this support includes providing *evidence* for La Vía Campesina's positions and arguments. The membership of this first group varies according to the issues being addressed (e.g. peasant rights, climate change and seeds), and the location of the struggle (e.g. Rome, Geneva and New York). In the second group are academically-positioned researchers who maintain active contact with the movement, who enjoy a high degree of movement trust and who, through dialogue and collaboration, seek to ensure that their research agendas support La Vía Campesina's work. La Vía Campesina's relations with this group might sometimes involve joint delivery or implementation of research projects. In the third group are academics who, although politically close to the movement, pursue autonomous research agendas. These individuals do not necessarily seek to actively develop joint research priorities with the movement, but their work is aligned broadly with movement goals and can be of use. The final group comprises the wider research community that is aware of and following La Vía Campesina and is potentially interested in learning more about and engaging with it, but that for the moment takes a mostly passive role.

From the perspective of La Vía Campesina, therefore, academically positioned researchers can support their activities in different ways. They can be engaged directly with the movement, discussing and seeking to tailor research outcomes to movement needs. Or they can be more distant, although still providing valuable, indirect support on the *issues* of importance to La Vía Campesina and its allies in the wider food

sovereignty movement. Whatever the degree of its engagement with researchers, the movement attaches a high priority to ensuring that these relationships unfold in a spirit of autonomy and solidarity.

For La Vía Campesina, autonomy in this context means a number of different things. Primarily, it means freedom of choice for the movement to participate in research or not, and to define its own interests and needs. For academics, it might mean freedom to develop autonomous and even critical analyses of La Vía Campesina and its issues. Indeed, from the movement's perspective, such critical feedback is vital. Conducted in a spirit of solidarity, which might affect *how* an academic chooses to share his or her insights, such critical friendship can be an important aid to the movement's development. Autonomy also means acknowledging the distinctive identities of academics on the one hand, and the movement on the other. Respecting this difference, for example, means that at no time at all does an academic acquire the right to speak 'on behalf' of La Vía Campesina.

There's no common rule, but I think everybody has an understanding of there must be confidence, there must be autonomy, there must be solidarity, and that of course isn't given through a signing of a document, it's given through common experience.

Despite the breadth of contact between La Vía Campesina activists and researchers, La Vía Campesina's engagements with academics have largely been a matter of *personal relations*, proceeding on a case-by-case basis. These personal contacts are the foundations of the movement-academic relationship, and have been key to promoting the confidence that such collaborations require. Through its extensive encounters with academics, the movement has acquired an appreciation of the importance of academics being *embedded* within the movement, in contrast to the researcher who does two or three interviews with a movement representative, and then is never seen again. This distinction speaks to the extent to which the researcher aligns their objectives with the movement interests, understands movement positions and key dynamics, and seeks to generate research outcomes that may be of use to the movement. Such embeddedness may involve non-glamorous tasks including writing press releases, rapporteurship at meetings, copy-editing reports, and so on.³ It is of course important to recognise that the possibilities and trajectories of La Vía Campesina's and its member organisations' relations with academics vary considerably from location to location, from one country or region to another. For example, in India, La Vía Campesina member organisations receive virtually no support from the formal university sphere, while in the Basque country, they have been able to shape the content of a university curriculum.

It is possible to imagine a spectrum of ways in which the movement's interactions with academics could be potentially structured. At one end would be informal and ad

³ Thanks to Laura Valencia, La Vía Campesina South Asia Secretariat, for emphasising this point.

hoc individual relationships founded upon *implicit* principles of solidarity, autonomy and mutual respect. At the other end would be more formal relations, perhaps codified explicitly via research protocols and similar instruments. It is clear that until now the movement has exhibited a preference for the former over the latter. This, coupled with the fact that the movement has not allocated dedicated capacity in the form of staff or leadership time to its relationships with academics, means that on occasion it is not always clear to movement insiders or allies who is responsible for representing La Vía Campesina positions to academics. It also means that there have been times when La Vía Campesina has lost control over important artefacts from its history, which have been shared with a researcher, only for the individual to subsequently claim patrimony over and deny the movement access to this artefact. The movement is also aware that for some researchers, at least, the temptation is there to instrumentalise their relationship with La Vía Campesina in the pursuit of questions that are not of shared relevance, or as a source of publishable content.

Vía Campesina is very conscious that we have a certain responsibility with our allies. With our academic allies too, and there is a mutual relationship, and mutual support.

Of greater significance to La Vía Campesina however, is the fact that its lack of dedicated organisational capacity for relations with researchers means that it is not in a position to *direct* the activities of its research allies, and is limited to largely *reacting* to their proposals and initiatives. This is a source of frustration, as the movement is aware that it would benefit from supporting analysis to strengthen its positions. However, while La Vía Campesina's historical experiences with researchers does include some positive cases, these have not on the whole left the movement with a clear sense that increasing its organisational capacity in this area is a high priority. For example, even when a strong collaborative commitment is present, the ways that academics work often pose great difficulties for movement actors, who have neither the time nor capacity to negotiate the specialist language and dense information flows that are typically a feature of such processes. And even when the movement has successfully participated in the joint formulation of research objectives with academic researchers, the rather slow rhythm at which academics work at (as they negotiate what are regarded as more immediate priorities like producing PhD chapters, teaching or writing articles) means that by the time that any promised outputs emerge (if they do at all), the movement has often moved on to new issues and challenges. And when they do come, the format of outputs or educational materials produced by researchers is often inappropriate for the movement, being either too long, too scholarly, or only produced in one of the movement's three working languages. Finally, the existence of inter-academic competition – as clear to La Vía Campesina as it is to the academics themselves – also makes the movement wonder about the degree to which its relationships with academic researchers can be truly optimised.

[P]eople have come and started doctoral thesis with us and who have remained in the movement. And many others who have done the thesis, we haven't received what they've studied on us, we don't know what they've done, and we don't see them again.

Looking forwards, while La Vía Campesina maintains an ongoing wariness towards the development of a research protocol and the 'bureaucratisation' of its relationship with researchers, it has contemplated various ways in which it can use these relationships to better promote its knowledge interests. These reflections have included the possibility of organisational innovations to better align researcher activity with movement priorities and capacity, although for the moment no concrete action is underway. Some movement insiders argue that the movement is still very young and, looking at the historical trajectory of its relations with academics, suggest that it is perhaps only a matter of time before these relations do indeed become a matter of organisational and leadership priority.

Vía Campesina is developing a different agenda.

It is absolutely crucial, however, to recognise that La Vía Campesina's engagements with academics are just one small part of its overall knowledge-based activities undertaken in pursuit of its food sovereignty vision. This vision places the needs and capacities of rural and other peoples at its core, a commitment that shapes the building and undertaking of research, training and education programmes from the farm up. By far the greater part of the energy expended by La Vía Campesina and its member organisations in pursuit of this vision is channelled towards their *autonomous* activities, from farming organisations engaging in research on climate change, to international *campesino-a-campesino* (farmer-to-farmer) exchange programmes sharing agroecological and related farming practices,⁴ to the creation of an international network of agroecology schools and peasant universities. Whilst an exhaustive census has yet to be conducted, it is estimated that there are approximately 70 of La Vía Campesina's peasant universities and agroecology schools located in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Europe and Canada⁵. The most emblematic of these are the Instituto Agroecológico Latino Americano (IALAs) located in Venezuela (IALA Paulo Freire) Paraguay (IALA Guaraní) Brazil (IALA Amazonas) and Chile (IALA de Mujeres). Another example is Amritha Bhoomi, the La Vía Campesina Agroecology School for South Asia. These schools and institutions provide a mixture of formal and informal training, and seek to address both the *political* and *technical* aspects of food sovereignty and agroecological production.

Through all of these activities, La Vía Campesina and its members are developing a distinctive agenda, differentiating themselves from the productivist, capitalist

4 The *campesino a campesino*, or farmer to farmer knowledge exchange process has a long history outside of La Vía Campesina but has in recent years been a focus of movement attention, particular via the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP), La Vía Campesina's member organisation in Cuba (see: Rosset *et al.* 2011, Holt-Giménez 2006).

5 We would like to thank Peter Rosset for this information.

orientation that the movement sees as dominating the mainstream university system. And by far the greatest part of this activity is being conducted by La Vía Campesina's *member organisations*, with women and gender issues often pushed to the fore. And it is at the membership level, again, where relations with academics are being most nurtured, developed and maintained. Indeed, it is predominantly from its *members* that La Vía Campesina's innovative and knowledge-training practices emerge. Given that La Vía Campesina is a member-driven, rather than top-down, centralised entity, this should come as no surprise.

Looking ahead, La Vía Campesina activists identify the need for a range of training to help guide its future work. This includes supporting the movement's inter-generational leadership transition in a way that preserves the movement's historical memory; preparing peasant and rural representatives for participation in the challenging context of international food and agricultural policymaking; and exploring novel organisational forms to enable knowledge transmission amongst its diverse membership, particularly its youth. Given the widespread and continued presence of gender violence in the rural world, a gender perspective, the demand for which is being led by La Vía Campesina's women activists, will be crucial in all of these activities.

The women have developed their own training schools, and there too, women academics are very important. Because it's a question of empowerment, not only on the issue of women, but in the whole organisational perspective.

9.2 Collaborating with La Vía Campesina: a researcher's perspective

I identify myself as located across the second and third categories used by La Vía Campesina to understand their relations with researchers (identified above). I have undertaken research for La Vía Campesina in the past, the focus of which has been explicitly defined with movement actors, and which sought to generate outcomes in support of La Vía Campesina's activism in the transnational policy sphere (Brem-Wilson 2014, p.121-123). And whilst I maintain an ongoing dialogue with the movement, and am committed to developing projects and mechanisms that support its work, I have also developed an *autonomous* research agenda. Though I have independently conceived the focus and design of this work, it is heavily informed by and seeks to concretely support the ongoing struggle of La Vía Campesina (and other actors from the food sovereignty movement representing marginal and resource-poor communities) seeking voice in transnational policymaking.

My collaboration with La Vía Campesina, however, did not get off to the smoothest of starts. Not long after the commencement of my scholarship-funded PhD in September 2006, although a movement outsider, I wrote confidently to La Vía Campesina, announcing to them my plans to look at their relationship with the World Trade Organization, and requesting access to the movement and its spaces. Their

subsequent rejection of this proposal came as a shock, and posed a fundamental existential challenge to my PhD (and by extension my career aspirations). Over time, however, I came to appreciate the huge inconsistency between my values and political commitments (committed to valorising the subject-hood of La Vía Campesina and other marginalised non-elites) and my research practice (seeking to impose a pre-defined research project upon them). Following this insight, with encouragement from Annette Desmarais – who was acting as my liaison with La Vía Campesina – I re-engaged with the movement, but this time in a spirit of open dialogue, stating my desire to identify with the movement a mutually agreeable area of research. This time the exchange was productive, and in May 2008 I began a research project for them.

The purpose of this project was to help increase La Vía Campesina's understanding of United Nations (UN) food governance by conducting an analysis of the institutions and actors that constituted this complex space. Over time, this was narrowed down to focus upon just one institution: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The execution of this project involved me doing independent research, seeking to answer a number of questions of importance to La Vía Campesina, and checking in regularly to provide updates and seek clarification and guidance from my counterpart in the movement, Technical Support to the La Vía Campesina's International Operational Secretariat, Nico Verhagen. It also involved me being absolutely transparent about my PhD research objectives, and Nico and I being very clear that I understood La Vía Campesina's key positions on a number of issues, and what therefore their expectations for global food governance were. The project lasted approximately 18 months (although with the generation of outputs continuing for much longer) and resulted in the production of a number of briefing papers for La Vía Campesina and their allies, and a training session for La Vía Campesina leaders in 2010.

As well as being of some practical benefit to La Vía Campesina, the project had a profound impact upon my development as a researcher. Firstly, as already stated, it allowed me to recognise the importance of maintaining coherence between my political commitments and my research practice, something I have aspired to achieve and continue reflecting upon ever since. Secondly, it enabled me to obtain an understanding of the field of global food governance (or transnational food and agricultural policymaking) that would not have been accessible otherwise. By entering into this field of relations along the trajectory defined by La Vía Campesina and their research interests, I was able to appreciate the inherently contested nature of transnational food and agriculture policymaking, and the new democratic possibilities that were emerging as a result of the encounter between transnationally active social movements representing marginal peoples (such as La Vía Campesina) and UN food governance. In my PhD and since, I theorised these developments as embodying the properties of a nascent transnational public sphere (Brem-Wilson 2011, 2016). The collaboration with La Vía Campesina, in other words, had a *methodological* value, being an important part of a political ethnography the insights of which have shaped

my subsequent research trajectory. The current focus of my research, for example, upon the challenges facing social movement activists from La Vía Campesina and elsewhere seeking to participate effectively in transnational policymaking, builds directly upon the insights I obtained during my doctoral research.

At the conclusion of this project I did not conduct an explicit evaluation. I regret this now, as it would have been very useful for me to identify whether the outputs that I produced for La Vía Campesina did provide any practical benefit, and how my counterpart in the movement, Nico, experienced the collaboration. Informally I knew that he and others in the movement were very happy with the process and its outcomes, as was I, but this was not systematically captured and that was an oversight. Such an evaluation, for example, would have sought to make explicit the theory of change that informed my commitment to doing research, not just *on*, but *with* and *for* La Vía Campesina, the types of impact I expected to follow from that, and whether in practice these were visible or not. I believe this type of evaluation is absolutely vital to scholar-activists' attempts to understand the meaning of the support that they can and do provide to social movements, and the factors that enable and constrain it. I regard the fact that I did not do this at the end of my PhD therefore as a real missed opportunity.

However, as I have said, it was the case that Nico and others in the movement were generally happy with the process and outcomes of our collaboration and, in a context where they had experienced difficulties when working with researchers in the past, I regarded this as important. With this partly in mind, at the conclusion of the PhD, I began to reflect seriously upon the factors that had enabled this collaboration (Brem-Wilson 2014).⁶ Some of these were structural, and included me doing a PhD and therefore having the time to invest in the fairly lengthy process of establishing agreement with La Vía Campesina on the focus and terms of a collaborative research project. The fact that I had a scholarship (with substantial fieldwork allowance), moreover, meant that I had the freedom and confidence to 'follow the dialogue'. I was confident, in other words, that whatever we decided to focus upon, I had the resources to cope with it. An enabling supervisor who did not just encourage my methodology, but who was able and willing to protect me from the demands of institutional progress monitoring (which were largely incompatible with an inductive ethnography of this nature, where the research question comes very late into the process), was another very important part of the structural context.

Crucially, I also identified the presence of a number of methodological principles that I had been unconsciously adhering to, and that retrospectively I could see had played a very important role in the collaboration. For example, *actively identifying* with the movement enabled me to access their situated knowledge of their subject position and the field of relations within which they were positioned. This was crucial to helping me understand the democratic project inherent within their mobilisation.

⁶ These reflections represent a condensed version of the reflections presented in Brem-Wilson. (2014).

Given the amount of time and the number of documents, interviews, meetings and writing I engaged with to obtain it, I am certain it would have been impossible for me to arrive at this perspective via a more 'aloof' research posture.

Likewise, *dialogue* (with the movement at all stages of the research process) and *reciprocity* (reciprocating for the access afforded to me by the movement by firstly conducting a research product for them and secondly fulfilling the role of rapporteur at the civil society meetings I attended) were also both highly important. These allowed me to establish and maintain the trust of the movement and ensure that my presence as a researcher generated practical benefits for La Vía Campesina and their allies.

Theoretical openness (conducting the research without any preconceived ideas about what I was observing and experiencing) meant that when I did come to theory, I was theorising from the 'bottom-up'. This again was vital to me being able to recognise the democratic project implicit within La Vía Campesina's mobilisation, and the meaning of their contestation within transnational food and agricultural policy making.

The final methodological principle I identified as enabling my collaboration with La Vía Campesina was *reflexivity*. As well as the struggle to ensure coherence between my values and research practice, this referred to my ongoing efforts during the research process to interrogate and understand my own positionality, seeking to make explicit the biases and assumptions that affected how I understood, or did not understand, La Vía Campesina and their struggle. It also involved maintaining the awareness that, as a researcher, I had to be careful to not overstep the terms of my participation in the meetings and spaces into which I had been admitted. For example, although I often had things to say on the topics under discussion, because I was there as a researcher (and not, for example, as a representative of a constituency or organisation affected by the issues under discussion), I was absolutely clear that when attending meetings, I had no speaking rights. Therefore, unless it was a context in which I was explicitly requested to make a contribution, I never attempted to speak. This made my participation in these meetings non-obtrusive for the other participants, something that was recognised at the time by the actors in those spaces and again, contrasted with their past experiences with other researchers.⁷

It is important to note, however, that the capacity and self-awareness of La Vía Campesina were two fundamentally important factors that enabled our collaboration. When I contacted them, La Vía Campesina had: a) a clear idea of what they wanted researched; and b) a full-time staff person they could allocate as my counterpart during the research project. This is in part a function of La Vía Campesina's status as a movement active at the transnational level, where a high degree of organisational

⁷ There was one occasion though when I didn't quite get this right. This occurred at a meeting during which my status was blurred because I had been called upon to make a number of interventions in relation to the research project I had conducted for La Vía Campesina, and another issue upon which I had relevant insights. Perhaps carried away by this speaking opportunity, in a breakout session later I continued talking, and it was only when I noticed the tense expression on the face of the meeting convenor I realised I had overstepped the mark. I stopped talking, and during the break apologised and we cleared the air.

structure is required just to exist. However, as I have learned through other attempted collaborations with social movement activists, these attributes are not shared universally. Indeed, I have attempted to form collaborations with other groups and some of these did not go anywhere, predominantly because they lacked the ability to stay in the dialogue, or did not have a particularly well-developed sense of their knowledge interests (and therefore, what they wanted researching). As is captured in the first part of this chapter, La Vía Campesina themselves also struggle to generate the capacity required to fully express themselves in their collaborations with solidarity researchers (from academia and elsewhere).

In the past I have tended to expect that the movements and activists I am attempting to collaborate with should have their own autonomous capacity and a predefined sense of their knowledge interests, but now I am increasingly wondering if this may be somehow the responsibility of solidarity researchers also. That is, I am wondering if it is *our* responsibility to support movements and movement activists to define and promote their knowledge interests through the provision of processes and spaces for reflection. For a significant number of my colleagues at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, the provision of such spaces has been a key part of their work. I am lucky therefore that as I continue learning and reflecting upon my attempts to collaborate effectively with social movements such as La Vía Campesina and others, I can benefit from the prior experience of my colleagues. Indeed, being located in a centre where the commitment to collaboration with social movements and other non-elite food system actors runs very deep, means that I enjoy a degree of institutional support that is quite atypical. Of course, this doesn't neutralise the question of how to raise the funds required to support this kind of work, an issue about which, on its own, I am sure many chapters and articles could be dedicated.

9.3 Acknowledgements

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9.4 References and further reading

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