



SEMILLAS NATIVAS Y CRIOLLAS

Patrimonio de los pueblos al servicio de la humanidad!



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editorial

peasant seeds, the heart of the struggle for food sovereignty

In 2018 the United Nations (UN) adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants, recognising at the highest level of international governance the strategic role played by the peasants of the world. The Declaration complements the measures and policies required for the UN Decade of Family Farming (2019-2028), and for the implementation of Article 9 of the ITPGRFA (International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture). It highlights the role of peasant seeds in achieving Food Sovereignty, and in developing agrarian policies which favour peasant farmers.

These policy instruments make it clear that it is vital to guarantee the right of peoples to “Maintain, control, protect and develop their own seeds and traditional knowledge”. One of the specific actions launched by La Via Campesina 20 years ago was the Global Campaign for “Peasant Seeds, a Heritage of Peoples in the Service of Humanity”, which seeks to move beyond the rural environment and involve and bring together other grass-roots sectors in this affirmation of their way of life.

In this edition of the newsletter we are inviting you to return to the debate on Peasant seeds - the heart of the struggle for Food Sovereignty, which guarantee full Peasant Rights. We are sharing a series of articles which seek to raise awareness and improve organisation for Peasant Seeds in all territories, and providing information about how to join the “Adopt a Seed” action. You will also find testimonies of the actions of resistance people are engaged in to keep peasant seeds in the hands of those who feed populations in a fair and healthy way.

La Via Campesina and GRAIN

one does not sell
the earth upon which
the people walk

Tashunka Witko, 1840 –1877

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who we are

In the last years hundreds of organisations and movements have been engaged in struggles, activities, and various kinds of work to defend and promote the right of people to Food Sovereignty around the world. Many of these organisations were present in the *International Nyéléni Forum 2007* and feel part of a broader **Food Sovereignty Movement**, that considers the Nyéléni 2007 declaration as its political platform. **The Nyéléni Newsletter wants to be the voice of this international movement.**

Organisations involved: AFSA, Bröt für die Welt, FIAN, Focus on the Global South, Food First, Friends of the Earth International, GRAIN, Grassroots International, IPC for Food Sovereignty, La Via Campesina, Marcha Mundial de las Mujeres, More and Better Network, Oxfam Solidarity, Real World Radio, The World Forum Of Fish Harvesters & Fish Workers, TNI, VSFJusticia Alimentaria Global, WhyHunger, World Forum of Fisher People.

now is time for
food sovereignty!

Adopt a seed¹, action for life

On 16th October 2018, La Vía Campesina relaunched the Global Campaign “Peasant Seeds, a Heritage of Peoples in the Service of Humanity” and called for action to “Adopt a Seed” in this context.
How to get involved?

We want every peasant or community to commit to adopting a seed variety, from any culture. Choose the one which sparks the most interest, because of its identity or territory, or its part in the affirmation of peasant life and culture. Each participant must become a guardian of that seed, guaranteeing its propagation. The idea is to create a wide network of peasant seeds, to recover seeds and extend production, towards Peoples’ Food Sovereignty.

As a result of this action we want to see thousands of communities improving biodiversity, recovering seed varieties, and thus guaranteeing Food Sovereignty and productive capacity. This is an action for life, to stop multinationals appropriating peasant seeds and reducing our autonomy and biodiversity, without peasant seeds, peasant farming becomes hostage to the multinationals!

You can start with your community and invite more people - the key is to take the first step! We would like to know about your community and the seed variety recovered.

Write to us at lcweb@viacampesina.org

Our Peasant Seeds

Peasant seeds are of immense value. They mean we have autonomy over our resources and decision making, because if we have seeds, we decide when and how to plant them.

Seeds are the link which ensures the continuation of peasant farming and production of healthy food for workers and consumers. We shall only achieve Food Sovereignty if seeds are protected by peasants, communities and the peoples of the world.

By extending this action we guarantee the right to quality food for the countryside and the city!

1 - Global Action #Adoptaseed
<https://viacampesina.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/11/Flyer-to-Print-1-EN-converted-compressed.pdf>

Global Campaign “Peasant seeds a heritage of peoples in the service of humanity”, a way to promote Food Sovereignty

Peasants’ seeds are a heritage of peoples in the service of humanity. Seed is life, the basis of global food production, essential for peasants to produce healthy and culturally appropriate food and crucial for consumers and citizens who seek to find healthy and diversified food. Seed is part of peasant culture and is our heritage, allowing us to resist, maintain our ancestral wisdom and defend our peasant identity.

However, under the pretext of “improving” seed productivity, agribusiness has created a neo-liberal seed system that has homogenized, impoverished and monopolized seeds, causing the loss of three-quarters of seed diversity and annihilating a diversity that it took people – thanks to the work of peasants – 10000 years to generate.

Three companies, Monsanto-Bayer, Syngenta-ChemChina and Dupont-Dow, control more than 50% of the world’s commercial seeds – increasingly genetically modified seeds to resist herbicides and produce insecticides. Under the impetus of the WTO (World Trade Organisation), the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund), and through free trade agreements and laws protecting seed and breeders’ rights, such as UPOV (Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants) model laws, this seed system only allows the circulation of its own seeds, criminalizing the saving, exchange, utilization, donation and sale of local farmer seeds. The situation is such that peasants have lost control over local seeds, are criminalised for the use and exchange of their seeds heritage, and often subjected to raids and seizure of their seeds. Biodiversity is endangered by the use of chemical fertilizers, hybrid seeds and genetically modified organisms – including the consequences of the new breeding techniques – developed by multinational companies. Citizens have difficulty accessing healthy, diversified and culturally appropriate food.

La Via Campesina and its allies are fighting to change the situation. As part of its Global Campaign “Peasant Seeds a heritage of peoples in the service of humanity”, launched in Rome in 2001, La Via Campesina and its member organizations have carried out training, education, mutual support and seeds exchange. The peasant movements continue to fight for national laws and international treaties to guarantee the rights of farmers to save, use, exchange, sell and protect their seeds against biopiracy and genetic contamination, we write books on the history of seeds, carry out studies and mapping. La Via Campesina’s network of agroecology schools around the world, also organize peasants’ seed exchange fairs. Thereby, the global campaign promotes the recovery of traditional systems for the conservation, maintenance and exchange of local seeds and the inalienable collective rights of peasants over their seeds.

In October 16, 2018, on the occasion of the World Day of Action for Food Sovereignty of Peoples and Against Multinationals, La Via Campesina stepped up this campaign by calling for coordinated the action called “Adopt a Seed”¹. The movement is calling on every peasant, peasant family or community to engage in the adoption of a variety of plant, to become the guardian of this seed, ensuring its propagation, reproduction and distribution and to engage in the collective defence of their rights to use, exchange, sell and protect them.

So far, in Brazil, Palestine, Paraguay, India, Thailand, Zimbabwe, South Korea, Indonesia, Canada and several other countries – through direct actions and seed fairs – peasants have engaged in conserving native varieties and teaching others about agroecology.

Without seeds, there is no agriculture; without agriculture, there is no food; and without food, there are no peoples!

1 - For more information check Box 1 of this edition.

box 2

Struggle for seed rights: Emerging threats to the Seed Treaty

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (Seed Treaty) was adopted in 2001 and entered into force 15 years ago. It is the only global multilateral governance mandatory instrument that recognizes farmers' collective rights to their seeds. The treaty facilitates and regulates the access to the seeds -the common heritage of humanity- stored in public gene banks connected to the Multilateral System and guarantees their availability for future generations.

The Treaty, though it is an unbalanced and unstable compromise, reflects power relations and worldviews of: (1) seed industry requiring facilitated access to peasant seeds while promising to share monetary and non-monetary benefits; and (2) peasant farmers demanding guarantee for their collective rights to save, use and exchange seeds and for future generations. The industry not only has failed by far to uphold the promise to share benefits, it is also strengthening plant variety protection laws that violate farmers' rights. Thus, in 2013 Contracting Parties decided to set up a working group to improve the functioning of the Multilateral System¹ and a mandatory Standard Material Transfer Agreement (SMTA)² to access to the PGRFA (plant genetic resources for food and agriculture).

New emerging threats

Recent technological revolution in genomics made the sequence of genetic information of seeds very easy and affordable for everyone. Advanced biotechnology today is able to create new seeds just using the digital sequence information (DSI) acquired by physical seeds. This new technology disrupts the link between material (germplasm) and its derived outcomes³. The creation of new population or varieties using only DSI, which will be then patented, will increase the cases of biopiracy and will significantly limit farmers' rights on their seeds. It is the easiest way to accelerate the erosion of biodiversity and threatens our future.

The Multilateral System of the Treaty is now inadequate in response to genetic technology at the disposal of the industry. Its scope is not well defined and it is not clear now if DSI have to be considered under the rules of the SMTA or if PGRFA as defined in the text of the Treaty does not include DSI. If there will be no quick decisions or at least discussions on the issue, industry will freely access to genetic sequences information as much as it can, profiting this lack of regulations.

DSI poses new challenges also to social movements, who need to devise newer strategies to counter this new form of capture. For now, it is clear that the biggest beneficiary of "common heritage of humanity" in gene banks is the seed industry. Most developed countries are complicit in this new threat as they work hand in glove with the industry to appropriate existing plant genetic resources for agriculture and food through patents. However, an efficient Multilateral System and an effective SMTA would benefit peasants that want to dynamically manage their biodiversity.

La Via Campesina and allies have rejected and denounced the industry's new attempts to push synthetic biology and genomics to circumvent Seed Treaty regulation and contravene article 9 of the Seed Treaty on right of farmers to save, use, exchange and sell their seeds. Not only in the Treaty, but also in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), in its Protocols and in the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, we strongly denounce this strategy of the industry, which now appears clear to developing countries and other organizations.

We recall the Contracting Parties of the Treaty and other decision-making spaces to intervene and consider private intellectual property regimes' obligations as part of economic rights, while respecting the effective implementation of farmers' rights that belong to the sphere of human rights. There are two broad ways to prevent the appropriation of all agricultural diversity and control of the food chain by a few transnational corporations: (1) ensure preeminence of peasants' rights over the rights of breeders and patent holders and (2) uphold the right of peoples to define for themselves what they need to guarantee their food sovereignty.

Negotiations in the last Governing Body of the Treaty showed that the block of industrialized countries don't want to discuss the issue, but just to postpone it, threatening the multilateralism that characterize the UN System – especially USA that was chairing the session and biased the procedures for discussion. Now there will be the possibility to discuss this issue in the CBD, and La Via Campesina and its allies will put a lot of pressure to defend the rights of small scale family farmers and of future generations.

1 - Check the explanation of Multilateral System here: <http://www.fao.org/plant-treaty/areas-of-work/the-multilateral-system/overview/en/>

2 - The Standard Material Transfer Agreement is a mandatory model for parties wishing to provide and receive material under the Multilateral System. <http://www.fao.org/plant-treaty/areas-of-work/the-multilateral-system/the-smta/en/>

3 - Dematerialization.

box 3

Peasants Rights and our struggle for seeds

The Article 19 of the UNDROP¹ recognize the right of peasants and other people working in rural areas to maintain, control, protect and develop their own seeds and traditional knowledge. In accordance to the same Article, peasants and other people working in rural areas have the rights: (1) to the protection of traditional knowledge; (2) to equitably participate in sharing the benefits arising from the utilization of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture (PGRFA); (3) to participate in the making of decisions on matters relating to the conservation and sustainable use of PGRFA; (4) to save, use, exchange and sell their farm-saved seed or propagating material.

In addition, UNDROP calls upon the States to ensure that seeds of sufficient quality and quantity are available to peasants at the most suitable time for planting and at an affordable price. Peasants need to have autonomy over their own seeds or other locally available seeds of crops and species that they wish to grow.

According to the Declaration, States are responsible to take appropriate measures to support peasant seed systems and promote the use of peasant seeds and agro-biodiversity, ensuring that agricultural research and development integrates the needs of peasants and other people working in rural areas. This means that peasants must be included in the definition of priorities and the undertaking of research and development; their experience has to be taken into account.

Finally, UNDROP recalls States to ensure that seed policies, plant variety protection and other intellectual property laws, certification schemes and seed marketing laws, respect and take into account the rights, needs and realities of peasants and other people working in rural areas.

1 - UNDROP – UN Declaration for the Rights of Peasants and Other People working in Rural Areas was formally adopted by the UN General Assembly in December, 2018.

Voice from the field 1

A local seed house spearheads the struggle for Food Sovereignty

Union of Agricultural Work Committees, Palestine

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, a local seed house has been reclaiming seeds and biodiversity as commons and public goods since the early 2000s.

The local seed house is probably one of the most significant contributions in helping Palestinian farmers and consumers achieve food sovereignty. Established in Hebron, in 2003, by the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), the house is the first and only of its kind in Palestine. The house saves, protects, preserves, stores and reproduces 45 varieties of local vegetable and field crop seeds from 12 plant families, many of which risked extinction. Among them are corn, barley, wheat, cauliflower, turnip, cowpeas, eggplant, squash, okra, bitter melon and snake cucumber seeds. All of these seeds come directly from Palestinian farmers and undergo a two-year verification process before being stored and made available to other farmers.

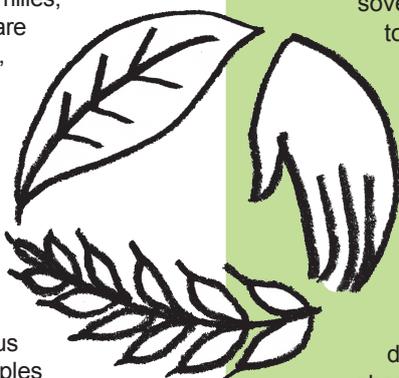
The house is equipped with four units: an entry unit, a test laboratory, a drying unit and a storage unit where seeds are stored for a maximum of five years. To protect this enormous genetic heritage from catastrophic events, samples of these seeds are also stored for the long term at sub-zero temperatures. After documenting the seeds' performance in the field, such as germination percentage, seedling growth and flowering, UAWC provides these seeds for free to Palestinian peasants for at least two seasons annually.

This contributes to increasing the farmers' revenues. In addition, these seeds help farmers fight against the effects of water grabbing by the Israeli occupation, as well as global warming, since they are drought-resistant and require no irrigation. As opposed to the hybrid seed varieties sold by Israeli and multinational companies like Bayer-Monsanto, the local seeds are fertilized with animal manure and require no chemical pesticides or glyphosate-based weed killers.

"We used to have to buy seeds from Israeli companies at high costs," said Mahmoud Abu Kharatabel, a long-time farmer and member of UAWC. "But today, because of UAWC's seed bank, many of us are able to plant with between 90 and 95 percent local seeds," he said with pride.

The local seed house works with key farmers like Abu Kharatabel through a three-step process. Once the farmers receive the seeds, plant them and harvest, they divide the newly produced seeds into three groups. The first group is intended for their needs in the current season. The second group has to be stored and planted again in the upcoming season. And the third group is returned to the local bank in order to benefit other farmers and keep building seed sovereignty in Palestine.

"When farmers have their own seeds and can reproduce them, it means they can choose what to plant and when to plant," explained Do'aZayed, UAWC's seed bank coordinator. "And that's why we established this local seed house." She then summarized: "Seed sovereignty is the first step to achieving food sovereignty".



Voice from the field 2

Safeguarding also means being able to experiment

Niagui Community, Senegal

Mangroves grow along several kilometres of the bank of the river Casamance. Mariama Sonko shows us the wooden structures where the Diola farmers in the Ziguinchor region raise oysters on strings¹, one of the ways in which they preserve their way of life and food sovereignty. This is the Niagui community in Senegal, on the Atlantic coast of Africa. We are in the savanna, covered with trees, bushes and swamps.

The Niagui people are very involved in their food sovereignty, and have seeds which allow them to sow their own food. Mariama Sonko is a member of the community who is carrying on the tradition of taking care of the seeds. She shows us rows of clay pots of various sizes along the adobe walls of a house in one community neighbourhood: "The clay regulates the temperature, which is essential for preserving the seeds. We make special pots, and by keeping them in those we can exchange them more easily. We women make the pots and lids and write different phrases on the sides, to help us think about the seeds and how important they are".

Mariama Sonko clarifies that the idea is not to promote seed banks, "because the most important thing is to preserve 'active' seeds for the long term, that is the seeds which are in the fields all the time and are exchanged between each harvest at sowing time. The rice variety "brikissa" is the one most sown in the region, and is exchanged all the time; it takes about 50 days to sow". She continues with great pride: "it was one of those women that in the city they call 'illiterate' who started to rebuild the traditional varieties. She understood that the conventional commercial 'improved' varieties were eroding our traditional seeds, which are much more resistant and adaptable to humidity and the vagaries of the climate. It is we women who pass on our knowledge, how to safeguard our seeds, from generation to generation. It comes from believing in ourselves.

Conventional seeds do not allow people to observe, calculate or experiment, because they come with precise instructions which leave us no options. We are talking about around twenty varieties of rice, and also sorghum, maize and millet. We don't want to centralise the safeguarding work. We encourage autonomy, because conditions are changing, the soil is becoming less fertile, there's a lack of rain and there's demand for seeds. We are keeping up our practices, but conditions are changing".

1 - In the mangroves, farmers grow oysters on strings woven on to frames.

in the spotlight 2



The call for action to “Adopt a seed” reaches across the world

Peasants’ seeds are a heritage of peoples in the service of humanity. This is what the International Peasants’ Movement believes, as well as being the name of the campaign launched by La Via Campesina (LVC) to protect and preserve peasants’ seeds. Under the auspices of this campaign, LVC has launched the call for action to “Adopt a seed” several times and in several regions of the world, calling for peasants and their families to exchange and propagate peasants’ seeds.

On the World Day of Action for Food Sovereignty, on 16 October 2018, LVC launched an appeal to its member organisations and alliances and to all peasant families, to get involved in the “Adopt a seed” action (for more info read Box 1). The first event took place in Brazil with the Small Farmers Movement (MPA), one of its member organisations.

The world exchange was held between 29 August and 4 September 2018, when a delegation from LVC travelled 1,700 km across Brazil, visiting peasant families. The delegates, from Korea, Costa Rica, Palestine, Switzerland and Zimbabwe, represented organisations already involved in conserving seeds in their own countries. During this international exchange, the LVC delegates looked carefully at the MPA’s experience in the states of Sergipe and Bahia in northeast Brazil. They also visited the “seed houses” established to stock peasant communities’ seeds. These are overseen by the “seed central office” which stocks all the seeds in the area and also serves as a place for training and farming production. Information was given and discussions were held on seed laws as well as agroecological

practices and representations of rural art and culture.

As well as being the International Day of Action for People’s Food Sovereignty, 16 October 2019 was also the date when an international peasants’ seeds exchange took place in Palestine. This was organised by the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC) and La Via Campesina. Farmers from all four corners of the globe came to take part in the exchange: Honduras, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, South Africa, Colombia, the Netherlands, Mozambique, Germany and the United States. The UAWC has a wealth of experience in preserving peasants’ seeds, having established its first seed house 17 years ago in Hebron. The house has enabled several seed varieties to be saved from extinction, and has stood up to Israeli occupation which imposed hybrid seeds sold by Bayer-Monsanto. All the seeds from the UAWC bank come from peasants and undergo a two-year verification process in an internal laboratory before being redistributed to the peasants (for more read Voice from the Field 1).

LVC’s next international seed exchange will take place in Korea in 2020. Seed exchange fairs are organised in several regions of the world by members of the movement and alliances. The “adopt a seed” action is one of solidarity, resistance and mysticism which should be replicated throughout the world in order to preserve peasants’ seeds, which are the ground rock of our agriculture and our lives.

box 4 Outlawing our seeds in Latin America

Latin American governments are looking to standardise seeds in law. Mexico, Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Paraguay and Venezuela have proposed and discussed seed laws. Many of these are being resisted by communities, organisations and peoples. These laws religiously follow the guidelines laid down by the big seed transnationals: Bayer-Monsanto, Corteva-Agriscience, ChemChina (Syngenta) and Vilmorin&Cie-Limograin. United Nations agencies such as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Conference on Trade and Development and the World Intellectual Property Organization are large bodies which promote these regulations, draw up model laws and teach governments how to implement them.

Marketing laws define the criteria which must be met for seeds to come on to the market. They can only be marketed if they are of a variety which meets three important requirements: they must be “distinct”, “uniform” and “stable”.

Intellectual property laws are regulations which recognise that a person or entity, or a seed company, is the exclusive owner of a seed with particular characteristics, and has the legal right to stop other people or entities using, producing, exchanging or selling it. There are two main “intellectual property” systems for seeds: patents, and Plant Variety Protection, which confers rights

on whoever “obtains” a variety, even if it goes back thousands of years in its present form.

Trade and investment agreements are tools used by companies to force governments to adopt and promote corporate rights over seeds.

These laws seek to outlaw the way peasants’ and indigenous people’s local systems use, exchange, produce and improve local varieties. They allow companies to define national policies on seeds, research, and agriculture. This creates a certification and oversight system controlled by private corporations. It forces communities and peoples to accept standards set by the transnationals, and to be scrutinised by private bodies if they wish to continue to exchange “legal” seeds. It delays, minimises or eliminates any concern for preserving agricultural diversity. It aims to standardise seed use and exchange traditions, which date back thousands of years. It imposes industrial standards on agriculture, facilitating seed privatisation. It seeks to qualify and classify all seeds, even local and native ones, so that corporate ownership of seeds is respected. In this way, whoever produces seeds will be monitored, no matter what seed they produce or how they exchange it.

The mission of the seed

A seed of life came in the arms of the north wind,
Born of a large and fleshy fruit,
Of gigantic buds of dreams and struggle!
Burned women, murdered women,
Women resisting, women conquering their rights.
Seeds multiply, resurrecting utopia in each step,
Returning to the land of this immense world.

Today, the seeds are you and me,
Ready, waiting to fall into our mother's lap - earth,
Listen ... you're begging for it!
Every patch of soil is a mouth crying out for justice!
Who can stand the silence of unproductive land?
A living cemetery of hope, sowing hatred and exclusion.

The seeds are you and me
And the plow - our organization - has already made grooves in the ground,
Let us sleep upon the earth,
Let her tell us the secret of the mission
We will feel the rain: another partner joining the fight
Let the dream and commitment grow within us!
And when it's too big and we can no longer hold it in,
We will burst and be seeds no more!

We will be militants, that as plants grow and find
A great red sun shining on high - the new society!
And we will feel its kiss on our mouth.
Then we will be plants no more but become fruits!
And we will feed ourselves with our struggle, with our conquests,
We ourselves and those we love
And until the day we will die, as ripe fruits

And these fruits will fall like tears, touching the earth, and become seeds.
And so eternally ...
Until the day when there is no more the cursed hoe or sickle of domination,
Threatening the buds of the earth.
On that day, you will hear a great sigh of relief, followed by a birth:
We will eat,
We will celebrate
We will dance with our harps and guitars!
And we will sing with the voice of the heart!

Because our eyes, full of tenderness, will finally be able to see,
The seed - our mission - transformed into harvest!

(original poem in spanish by Daniel Salvado)

to read, listen, watch and share

- *Seeds in Resistance*, 2018, <https://www.grain.org/en/article/6173-seeds-in-resistance-comic>
- *Seed Stories, Fighting Against the Privatisation of Life*, 2018 - <https://viacampesina.org/en/publication-seed-stories-fighting-against-the-privatisation-of-life/>
- *Sow to resist*, LVC VII Conference, 2017 (video in French) - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIUdgOZ2R6w&feature=emb_logo
- *Global Action to Adopt a Seed: Explainer*, LVC, 2018 - <https://viacampesina.org/en/global-action-to-adopt-a-seed-explainer/>
- *Seeds savers guide*, 2017 (in Spanish) - <http://www.semillas.org.co/es/publicaciones/gua-para-semilleros-y-semilleras>
- *From Seed to Seed*, a website with educational films on vegetable seed production: www.diyseeds.org
- La Via Campesina Agroecology Training Schools and Processes - <https://viacampesina.org/en/schools/>

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