“A Beautiful Picture of Chaos”: La Vía Campesina and the Convergence of Food Sovereignty and Climate Justice

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Geography and Collaborative Program in Environmental Studies

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Abstract

La Vía Campesina is an international network of peasant farmers that, since 1996, has promoted the concept of food sovereignty. More recently, this collection of over 160 groups worldwide has been connecting this concept with climate justice issues. Drawing on interviews conducted during the 2012 People’s Summit that took place in Rio de Janeiro, and an analysis of the network’s documents, I consider its work in relation to its member organizations and a broader movement tackling the systemic issues that are driving a range of social, economic and ecological crises. I contend that, while many of Vía Campesina’s proposals will require the establishment of intricate processes and systems depending on the geographic, political and cultural context in question, the network is demonstrating that its radical critiques, proposals and decision-making processes may help contribute to a larger counter-hegemonic narrative as a force to counteract global capitalism.
Acknowledgements

It is almost impossible to put into words how thankful I am to the people who have helped me develop and complete this project over the last two years. The Department of Geography is full of staff, faculty and students who have provided me with administrative, intellectual and emotional support.

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I am also thankful for the brilliant course instructors I had throughout the Master’s program — both in the Department of Geography and at the School of the Environment — and also for my friends in the University of Toronto Political Ecology/Economy Working Group. Amy Buitenhuis, Katia Snukal, Beth Denaburg and Joel Fridman, you have been unbelievably awesome study partners and I cannot express how fun you have made my MA experience while also helping me to keep on track. Adelante!

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Finally, I must express my sincere gratitude to the research participants who generously shared their time and thoughtful comments with me… and to the many farmers whom I have never met but who grew the food and drink that sustained me while I carried out my research and wrote this thesis. I started my Master’s degree interested in climate change and social justice and I am incredibly thankful that this led me to understand the integral role that food systems play in the fight for system change.
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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AoA    Agreement on Agriculture
CLOC   Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo
COP    Conference of Parties (to the UNFCC; as opposed to the COP to the UN Convention on Biodiversity)
CSO    Civil Society Organization
FAO    Food and Agriculture Organization (of the United Nations)
GHG    Greenhouse Gas
GM(O)  Genetically Modified (Organism)
ICC    International Coordinating Committee (of La Vía Campesina)
IFAP   International Federation of Agricultural Producers
IMF    International Monetary Fund
IPCC   Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
MST    Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers Movement)
NFU    National Farmers Union (Canada)
NGO    Non-Governmental Organization
REDD   Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries
REDD+  “REDD+” goes beyond deforestation and forest degradation, and includes the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks’ (UN-REDD Programme 2009).
Rio+20  The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (that took place in Rio de Janeiro in June, 2012)
UNEP   United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCC  United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WTO    World Trade Organization
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1

Introduction

Industrialized countries and the industrialization of agriculture are the biggest sources of global warming gases, but it is farmers and rural communities — and especially small farmers and rural communities in developing countries — that are among the first to suffer from climate change. Changing weather patterns bring unknown pests along with unusual droughts, floods and storms, destroying crops, farmlands, farm stock and farmers’ houses.

- La Vía Campesina (‘Cooling’ 2009: 1)

1.1 A convergence of crises

Sitting in a large open-sided tent in Rio de Janeiro’s Flamengo Park with a La Vía Campesina member from South Africa, a food justice activist from Detroit, Michigan, and several other allies from places as diverse as Colombia and Sweden, I suddenly realized that I was in a privileged position in terms of my research. We were working on a document on the solutions that food sovereignty has to offer and this document was to contribute to the final declaration of the People’s Summit, a gathering of thousands taking place to counter the June 2012 United Nations’ Rio+20 conference. The document in our hands had been seemingly hastily translated into English from Portuguese and Spanish, and so our task was in part to check for grammatical errors, but it was also to discuss and improve the ideas being presented.

My feeling of privilege came from being able to engage and participate in processes that parallel those that take place at the international conferences of La Vía Campesina, the worldwide movement of peasants and small-scale farmers, and also because I was able to observe members of this movement articulate their conceptions of climate justice — the topic at the heart of my research. Being at the summit also gave me the chance to
understand the range of passionate emotions that issues surrounding food sovereignty and climate justice evoke.

I witnessed the unflinching anger of farmers whose livelihoods have been undermined by land grabbing or climate-related stresses; I heard the desperation of participants who may see their homes destroyed to make way for energy mega-projects;¹ and I also could feel the near-euphoric hopefulness of young people who, after a day of thoughtful deliberation, rallied in the streets and danced as if their vision for a better future had already been realized. Of course, I was also privileged to be participating in the People’s Summit in the sense that I was there to observe and learn, rather than being there because I am at significant risk of personally being harmed by the consequences of climate change or the increasing commodification of nature—unlike most peasant farmers and other participants.

My aim in this chapter is to provide some background context as to how such issues and emotions have cumulated in a movement for climate justice, a concept that highlights the unevenness of the impacts of climate change on different communities around the world. I will also discuss how and why La Vía Campesina, as an international peasants’ organization, has taken up this issue, bridging matters relating to food systems and ecological sustainability in both practical and conceptual ways. I will then articulate, in the final section of this chapter, the questions that I explore throughout this document—the answers to which I hope will lead to a better understanding of the potential for social movements to tackle such a complex topic as climate justice. As implied in the paragraphs above, I am particularly interested in the ways in which groups develop and work towards solutions to the problems arising from climate change.

To begin with, it is worth noting that the activists and civil society members who gathered at the People’s Summit in Rio de Janeiro are representative of a cross-section of global society that understands climate change to be much more real in its material consequences than many mainstream discourses on the subject bring to mind. It may be

¹ Such as the controversial Belo Monte dam in Pará, Brazil, which would be the world’s third largest dam in terms of capacity. The dam threatens to displace over 20,000 people, flood huge swaths of rainforest, emit over 11 million metric tons of greenhouse gases and cause the possible extinction of hundreds of species in this biologically diverse region (see MAB 2012).
significant, for example, that the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere recently passed 400 parts per million and that we have already raised the average temperature of the planet approximately 0.8 degrees Celsius, with another 4 to 5 degree increase expected by the end of the century (Lazare 2013; McKibben 2012); but such abstract statistics stand in stark contrast with the glaring fact that lives are already being lost as a result of droughts, floods and tropical storms tied to global climate change.

Outside of the discourses that focus on technical data and policy debates, the people and networks that make up the growing climate justice movement agree that we are in the midst of a global environmental catastrophe. They are aware of the evidence that the impacts of climate change, the loss of species due to desertification and land degradation, food shortages, and freshwater scarcity are all more apparent now than they were in 1992 when the United Nations first convened its supposedly momentous ‘Earth Summit’ in Rio de Janeiro (UNEP 2011a: 14). Of particular importance to this movement is the cruel reality that the world’s most disadvantaged groups are already experiencing the worst of the devastating consequences of these environmental problems—problems that leave community members vulnerable to effects such as disease, severe malnutrition and homelessness (Angus 2010; IBON 2012; Patz et al. 2007). In total, an astonishing 99 per cent of the estimated 350,000 climate-related deaths that occur each year take place in the global south (DARA 2012).

The wicked perversion in this of course is that the residents of the global south contributed relatively little to the causes of climate change in the first place. The poorest communities in the poorest countries are facing the brunt of this environmental chaos despite the fact that they played virtually no part in the release of over 75 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions that have made their way into the atmosphere since the advent of the industrial revolution (RoB 2009). This discrepancy is central to the concept of climate justice, yet there is much more to say.

Traditionally-disadvantaged groups are also facing dire spin-off effects that are associated with many of the so-called ‘solutions’ to the climate change. These range from carbon offsetting programs to the REDD initiatives, which stands for Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries. Efforts in the
name of advancing such market-based solutions have been shown in many instances to further climate injustices as they have resulted in, for example, residents being evicted from their homes, water sources being poisoned by pesticides, and rural people being refused access to farmland and forests that had long been managed by the communities involved (Miller 2012; Wong 2012). To make matters worse, these so-called solutions are distracting decision-makers and the general public from the kind of changes that could truly combat climate change.²

The striking contrast between the articulation of potential solutions to the world’s ecological crises presented at the UN Rio+20 conference and the concurrent People’s Summit was remarkable. At the former, climate change and other environmental catastrophes were chalked up to a “misallocation of capital”—echoing Nicholas Stern’s suggestion that these catastrophes are part of the biggest “market failure” the world has ever seen (Stern 2009). The conference was therefore largely focused on expanding the Green Economy, a concept that had been developing for several years. Although UN negotiators were only able to agree upon a weak document by the end of the Rio+20 meetings, ‘green capitalism’ nonetheless gained new traction through the establishment of discourses and relationships that will be likely to “[smooth] the way for private interests and finance capital to use environmental protection as a rationale for new forms of enclosure and the development of new ‘environmental financial services’ that can be traded on an ‘open market’” (MacDonald and Corson 2012).³

It is not a coincidence that such a push to bridge financial mechanisms and ecological reparation took place in 2012. The climate crisis and related environmental problems was, and is, converging with another unprecedented crisis; namely the economic upheaval that is connected to the aftermath of the ‘Great Recession’—or what some are calling a crisis of

² At the same time, additional distractions are being caused by ‘geo-engineering’ and other ‘techno-fixes’ that are both unproven and unpredictable. “Examples include genetically modified algal fuel, capturing CO2 for underground storage, launching mirrors into space, discovering reliable nuclear fusion, turning food crops into agro-fuels, dumping iron in the oceans and spraying sulphates in the sky” (Chivers 2009: 205).

³ In the words of Tim Wirth, a former US senator and now the head of Ted Turner’s UN Foundation: “Public-private partnerships are the dominant theme here in Rio, …The official document is less important” (quoted in MacDonald and Corson 2012).
capitalism itself (Chandrasekhar 2012; Harvey 2010; Streeck 2011). The ongoing fallout from the 2008 financial crisis has reached global proportions: nations of the global north continue to flounder with long-term unemployment and increasing income inequality; several countries within the European Union have almost seen their financial woes lead to bankruptcy (see Halfon 2012); and new global powers including China and India are dealing with relatively sluggish economies (O’Riordan et al. 2012).

At the same time, private capital is largely tied up, with investors wary of risking huge sums on financial opportunities that do not appear to hold promise. Yet, as Karl Marx and countless subsequent theorists have posited, economic stagnation is not an option for capitalism. It must expand continuously (see Hoffman 2011: 13; Roberts 2008). This offers one explanation as to why the current financial crisis is colliding with the environmental crisis. If markets in ecosystem services such as offsetting programs can be shown to be safe havens for investment, whether or not they lead to effective environmental solutions may be immaterial to the financial elites of the world.

Indeed, for those feeling the harshest impacts of climate change, it is unfortunate that virtually no evidence exists to support the notion that investments in the name of ‘green capitalism’ will lead to environmental progress. To date, the European Union’s emissions trading scheme (ETS), for example, has been shown to provide energy companies with billions of euros in profits while ultimately failing to reduce emissions (Hoffman 2011: 12). Similarly, carbon trading and offsetting have so far presented vast opportunities for capital accumulation but have otherwise been described as a ‘shell-game’ lacking in accountability and environmental integrity (Shapiro 2010). To make matters worse, similarly to the climate crisis, the world’s most disadvantaged people are not poised to benefit from these new forms of green capitalism and are instead being put at risk of dispossession by many such schemes. It is no wonder that the solutions discussed at the People’s Summit, while physically only several kilometres distant from the Rio+20 conference, seemed worlds apart from those being tabled by UN negotiators.
1.2 Food and climate: 'The forgotten link'\

That Vía Campesina would play a significant role in organizing an environmentally-focused counter summit during the Rio+20 negotiations speaks to the important connections that movements have recognized link food systems and climate change. The relationship between crises in food production and runaway greenhouse gas emissions has been increasingly researched and articulated over the last several years, with activist groups progressively showing interest in these issues. Vía Campesina has been one of the key groups that have demonstrated this shift. In her 2007 monograph, *La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants*, Annette Aurélie Desmarais discusses the birth of this social movement and the parallel development of the concept of food sovereignty. The aim of this thesis is to pick up where that book left off, with a specific analysis of Vía Campesina’s work on the topic of climate justice—a coordinated effort that coincidentally began in earnest in 2007 (Lang 2012).

The network was formed in 1993 following discussions among peasant farmers’ groups who were increasingly outraged by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its policies that were proving to favour large corporate agricultural organizations at the expense of small-scale farmers (Desmarais 2007). They were also dissatisfied with the “more reformist or conformist farm movement” including the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), which seemed to be too willing to compromise with the WTO and other similar global bodies (Desmarais 2007: 25). After a series of preliminary meetings, representatives of 55 groups came together in Mons, Belgium to establish the structure and launch a new global network: La Vía Campesina—which is Spanish for the ‘peasant way’ or ‘peasant road’ (Desmarais 2007; Friedmann 2005).

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4 The research group GRAIN (2011) suggests that many studies focus narrowly on agriculture’s connection with climate change, but overlook greenhouse gas emissions associated with food systems more broadly. Similarly, the ‘food miles’ from production to consumption can often be overemphasized at the expense of other food-climate connections.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Countries Represented</th>
<th>No. of Countries</th>
<th>No. of Org’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa 1</td>
<td>Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa 2</td>
<td>Congo-Brazzaville, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>Canada (2), Mexico, United States (4)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>Costa Rica (3), El Salvador (8), Guatemala (3), Honduras (6), Nicaragua (2), Panama (3)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South America</td>
<td>Argentina (5), Bolivia (4), Brazil (7), Chile (4), Colombia (3), Ecuador (5), Paraguay (6), Peru (3), Uruguay, Venezuela (2)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic (7), Grenada, Haiti (3), Puerto Rico, St. Lucia, St. Vincent</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-east and East Asia</td>
<td>Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Palestine, Philippines (2), South Korea (2), Taiwan, Thailand (2), Timor-Leste, Vietnam</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
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<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Austria, Belgium (3), Denmark, Finland, France (2), Germany, Greece, Italy (3), Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Scotland/UK (2), Spain and The Basque Country (4), Sweden, Switzerland (2), Turkey</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>74</strong></td>
<td><strong>165</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1-1: Countries and regions represented by La Vía Campesina’s member organizations (LVC ‘Our Members’ 2013). Number of member organizations per country is shown in brackets.

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5 Since their last international conference in Jakarta in June 2013, Vía Campesina has in fact claimed to represent 183 organizations in 88 countries (see ‘Jakarta Call’ 2013), but the information for this table was gathered from its actual list of member organizations that was updated online following the conference.
As reflected in Table 1-1, Vía Campesina now has over 160 member organizations that hail from more than 70 countries around the world. In total, the network represents an estimated 200 million farmers worldwide, from Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas (LVC ‘Organisation’ 2011). However, as noted by Desmarais (2002: 103):

[It] is not size that matters. More importantly, the Vía Campesina offers a whole range of rural social actors and progressive organizations the opportunity for full engagement in analysis, policy development, advocacy and in some cases direct action on key issues related to food sovereignty. These forms of engagement take place both regionally and globally. The network’s International Coordinating Committee (ICC) carries out ongoing political, logistical and organizational work and approximately every four years Vía Campesina holds an international conference in which groups from around the world come together to discuss issues, approve new member organizations, and agree upon plans of action. The ICC includes a male and female representative from each of its nine regions. These individuals represent the member organizations belonging to their respective geographic areas in the years intervening the international conferences, and also support ongoing regional interactions and organizing.

Each region also has a secretariat that is hosted by a local member organization, while the International Operational Secretariat rotates periodically between continents. As indicated in Table 1-2, the network’s international conferences rotate geographically as well, in an attempt not to favour any one region. Vía Campesina’s ability to steadily grow and attract new member organizations since its inception can at least in part be attributed to its horizontal decision-making structure and its apparent ability to prioritize constructive debates and provide opportunities for diverse voices to be represented. As indicated by François Dufour, a leader of the French Vía Campesina group Confédération Paysanne, “What holds for Santiago or Bamako, doesn’t necessarily hold for Rome or Paris, [but the] exchange of opinions and experiences makes this a wonderful network for training and debate” (quoted in Desmarais 2007: 33).

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6 “A regular rotation of the IOS helps the movement to strengthen its functioning, maintaining a decentralized way of working and sharing responsibilities among continents and regions” (LVC, ‘IOS’ 2013).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International Conferences</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>International Operational Secretariat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangalore, India</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>São Paolo, Brazil</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Indonesia (2005 – 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maputo, Mozambique</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jakarta, Indonesia</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Zimbabwe (From 2014)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1-2: La Vía Campesina’s international conferences and rotating operational secretariat.

While Vía Campesina’s processes of exchange relating to climate justice advocacy will be discussed in subsequent chapters, it is important to note that, even before this became a key issue for the network, it had already demonstrated an ability to represent farmers from incredibly diverse geographic, cultural, political, and economic settings. In the first several years of its development, Vía Campesina consistently stood up for the needs of small-scale farmers through a range of forums. These forums included confrontations with the WTO, an organization that seemed to be in constant opposition to these needs, and in relation to the operations of global bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Desmarais 2007). Perhaps the most concrete indication of Vía Campesina’s success in representing the perspectives of small-scale farmers though, has been the development and promotion of the concept of food sovereignty, which is now a well-known counterpoint to the limited notion of food security,\(^7\) including in academic discussions (see, for example, Wittman et al. 2010 & 2011).

\(^7\) Food security has been defined by the FAO as “a situation that exists when all people at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (quoted in Patel 2010: 187). The term does not focus on the modes of food production, nor the question as to who has agency and power within food systems.
As outlined by Vía Campesina, food sovereignty includes:

- “the defense of a food system that brings healthy food to local populations and provides livelihoods to local communities;
- the promotion of [the] peasant-based agroecological model of food production primarily for local markets that will sustain food supplies, equitably and sustainably, now and for future generations;
- the recognition of the right of women and men peasants worldwide, who currently feed 70% of the world's peoples, to have a dignified life without [the] threat of criminalization;
- ensuring their access to natural wealth—land, water, seed, livestock breeds—needed for agroecological food production;
- the rejection of corporate agribusiness, the neoliberal model of agriculture and the instruments and commercial pressures that support it.” (‘Support the Fight’ 2012)

As Vía Campesina celebrates its twentieth anniversary, the network can reflect on its success in promoting food sovereignty. At this point it is not only being discussed by a range of actors, but governments of countries such as Mali, Ecuador, Nepal, Bolivia, Senegal and Venezuela have even introduced this concept through national legislative frameworks (Wittman et al. 2009: 8). In addition, food sovereignty incorporates very practical principles, such as those connected to the above-mentioned ‘agroecological model of food production.’

Agroecology “involves understanding the complex interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment in agricultural systems and is premised on the fact that ecosystems and agricultural systems are context- and site-specific” (Akram-Lodhi 2013: 168). The focus of this type of farming is to pay attention to the biological components in an ‘agroecosystem’ that can be harnessed to maximize soil fertility and productive yields, while doing so in a sustainable manner from environmental, cultural and biodiversity perspectives (Altieri 2010). While peasant farmers have practiced agroecological methods for generations, and are continuing to improve these methods in context-specific ways, it is important to note that food sovereignty was developed as a response to relatively recent trends in global food systems—including the increasing corporatization and neoliberalization of agriculture and food trade.

Food sovereignty and agroecology have also become ever more important points of discussion as the connections between the climate crisis and global food systems have been
better studied and understood. Vía Campesina members have become well aware, for instance, that agriculture is being profoundly affected by climate change and that this trend is only likely to intensify in the coming years. Of course, as with environmental crises generally, these impacts are not distributed evenly around the globe.

In many countries at higher latitudes, such as Canada, the changing climate has been shown to contribute to some unpredictable weather patterns and may pose future risks in terms of pest infestations, but predictions have also been made for longer growing seasons and generally improved farming conditions (FAO 2009: 2). On the other hand, many countries in the vicinity of the tropics have already seen crop and livestock productivity drop considerably (Ibid. and IAASTD 2009: 48). Longer and more intense droughts have been observed since the 1970s and rainfall patterns have generally become less and less predictable (IAASTD 2009: 47). As one farmer from Zimbabwe recounts:

In 1992 we experienced a massive drought and were forced to rely on external food aid that year. In 1994 we were surprised to see another drought hit our region and, in 1996, it happened yet again. Now we observe that rainfall patterns have changed dramatically. The part of Zimbabwe I am from can go for two years with virtually no rain. In other regions of the country, farmers may go for four years without enough rain to grow a single crop.\(^8\)

Drought is particularly harmful to some key crops that are sensitive to heat stress, such as corn, which saw a 20 per cent drop in productivity after extreme temperatures hit Europe in 2003 (IAASTD 2009: 49). In the United States, the prolonged drought of 2012 drove the price of corn up 60 per cent, which had drastic impacts on underdeveloped countries around the world that rely on food imports (Crocker 2012).

The pattern of increasingly frequent and severe droughts is not the only reason many farmers are already speaking of ‘climate chaos.’ Various regions around the world are experiencing impacts differentially, with some experiencing an overabundance of rain that leaves crops rotting. Others see floods due to melting glaciers or tropical storms, the latter which can cause soil salinization and leave huge swaths of land entirely useless from an agricultural perspective (FAO 2009: 3). Still other farmers see encroaching desertification and different forms of water stress that can undermine irrigation systems via, for example,

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\(^8\) M. R. Mutamba, personal communication, November 17, 2012.
the drying up of aquifers. In some areas, wild fires already affect an estimated 350 million hectares of land each year (GRAIN 2009: 4). To put it broadly:

> Climate change negatively affects the basic elements of food production, such as soil, water and biodiversity… Many parts of the world already face serious deterioration of [these] production systems and the number of hungry people is now estimated to be more than a billion. This represents one sixth of the earth’s population, the highest level in human history. (FAO 2009: 1–2)

These are alarming statistics made more so when one considers that the world’s population is expected to reach 9 billion by 2050, with much of the expansion concentrated among the poorest segments of the population. And, to make matters worse, forecasts for future changes in agricultural output are devastatingly grim. One comprehensive study posits that by 2080 global yields will decrease by nearly 16 per cent due to climate change, an estimate that does not take into account droughts, floods and other disasters that can affect farm output (GRAIN 2011: 3–4). In developing countries, this will mean a drop of 21 per cent in agricultural yields, with Africa’s continental output alone predicted to decline nearly 28 per cent (Ibid.). All of this is to stress, in the words of a recent UN agency report, the extent to which agriculture is dependent on the climate (IAASTD 2009: 46).

Yet the climate is also very much dependent on agriculture, as farming practices have been shown to contribute to the release of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in significant ways. For example, converting land (including forests) into areas used to grow crops or allow animals to graze releases carbon that has been stored in vegetation and soils (Ibid.). Fossil fuel-powered farm machinery and irrigation pumps also release carbon dioxide, as does the production of fertilizers and pesticides. Nitrous oxide, another GHG, is released through nitrogen fertilizer applications, and methane is released through the decomposition of livestock excrement and other agricultural wastes (Ibid.). Analyses such as these tend to suggest that agriculture contributes 11 to 15 per cent of global emissions (GRAIN 2011: 2).

However, when we look at our planetary food system more holistically, the percentages are much higher. Taking into account land degradation that occurs due to crop cultivation that is used to feed animals, along with several other relevant factors, we are provided with the following breakdown:
Agricultural production: 11 – 15%
Land-use change and deforestation: 15 – 18%
Processing, transport, packaging and retail: 15 – 20%
Waste: 3 – 4%

Total: 44 – 57%

The research behind these astounding figures points to the fact that the global industrial food system is much more of a driver of climate change than traditional farming and consumption practices. When drawing these connections, critics point to the industrial system’s reliance on chemical fertilizers, its promotion of commodity crops (which are often grown in monocultural plantations), and the manner in which food is typically packaged, refrigerated and/or shipped long distances before reaching its final destination (GRAIN 2011). While farming practices alone do not define a food system’s contributions to climate change, note that:

Although Canadian agriculture [for example] is said to account for only 6 per cent of the country’s overall GHG emissions, this works out to 1.6 tonnes of GHG per Canadian, whereas in India, where agriculture is much more important to the national economy, per capita GHG emissions from all sources are only 1.4 tonnes, and only 0.4 tonnes [of this is] from agriculture. (GRAIN 2009: 4; emphasis added)

Clearly, small-scale farmers around the world have a vested interest in seeing a more sustainable food system prioritized in various political and economic decision-making forums. Vía Campesina brought forward its conceptions of food sovereignty to the debates and discussions in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 as its member organizations are being affected by the impacts of climate change, and also because they are convinced that they can help contribute to reducing worldwide greenhouse gas emissions. This was not, however, the first UN summit at which the network organized around environmental issues. I will now provide an overview as to how Vía Campesina has come to play a key role in contributing to the climate justice movement.

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GRAIN, 2011.
1.3 The movement for climate justice

The first ever climate justice summit took place in November 2000 in The Hague, Netherlands (Karliner 2000). It is said to have been the first time a diverse group of grassroots activists from around the world converged to speak about the on-the-ground impacts of climate change and related issues of justice (Ibid.). The organizers of the summit held it in parallel to the Sixth Conference of the Parties (COP6) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), just as subsequent ‘counter-summits’ have done. Interestingly, among the modest delegation of approximately 500 people who attended that first summit was a strong contingent from the U.S. environmental justice movement (Ibid.).

This is a movement that had been growing in size and influence, especially in North America but more generally throughout the world, for well over a decade prior to the initial climate justice gathering in The Hague (Harvey 1996: Ch. 13; Agyeman et al. 2003). The contribution of environmental justice activists is noteworthy in that they helped spark a new discourse about ecological issues by putting inequality at the top of the agenda and placing the survival of marginalized people at the centre of the movement’s concerns (Harvey 1996: Ch. 15). This focus on issues of justice stood in sharp contrast to other environmental discourses, such as those centred on ‘environmental management’ or ‘ecological modernization,’ and others that saw private property rights as the route to sustainability. With its emphasis on morality and fairness as key themes, the environmental justice movement was not shy to raise thorny issues such as ‘environmental racism’ and the need to right historical wrongs of this nature (Merchant 2003; Pulido 1996). Indeed, in the United States the movement grew significantly by linking with civil rights advocates, and by connecting with networks working on disparate campaigns, from those related to occupational health issues, to native land struggles and solidarity efforts with communities in the global south (Agyeman et al. 2003; Faber and McCarthy 2003; McGurty 1997).

Thus, by the time the climate justice movement came into being in any recognizable way, not only was environmental justice a well-established framework being used to address local issues, but the movement had also come to incorporate significant
transnational campaigns. These were built on a recognition of the interrelatedness of environmental, health and economic issues that transcend nations’ borders (Adeola 2000; Carruthers 2008; Holifield et al. 2009; Schlosberg 2004). Specific examples of transnational issues being addressed at that time still remain the focus of campaigns today, including those that take mining companies to task for ecological and social damages, and those that challenge the multinational corporations shirking responsibility for the clean up of hazardous waste and contaminated water sources that they caused, especially in the global south (see Martinez-Alier 2003; Rajan 2001; Watts 2000).

While such transnational efforts focused on environmental issues likely acted as a springboard for the climate justice movement, it must not be forgotten that a broader anti-globalization (or ‘alter-globalization’) initiative was also emerging by the year 2000 (della Porta et al. 2006; Klein 2001). For approximately a decade, activists from around the world had taken their passionate concerns about the social and environmental effects of free trade agreements, global corporate domination and neo-imperialism to transnational economic summits, where representatives of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, or G7/G8 countries met. Perhaps the best known protests to take place were those that coincided with the November 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings in Seattle, where direct action efforts shut down official meetings, activists clashed with police amidst smashed storefront windows, and hundreds were arrested.

While Vía Campesina did not have a presence at the first climate justice summit held during the COP6 meetings, the network certainly engaged in anti-globalization discourses and protests (including those that took place in Seattle) before beginning a concerted campaign related to climate change. These small-scale farmers were outraged by the ways in which corporations were increasingly controlling the inputs needed for food production, with international bodies like the IMF and WTO supporting these trends through their promotion of export-oriented and technology-dependent agriculture. I will discuss these trends in more detail in Chapter 2, but I mention them here to highlight the interconnectedness of these movements, and also because global economic currents certainly contributed to Vía Campesina’s interest in climate justice, apart from the physical challenges associated with global warming.
Tuned in to the ways in which financial markets were increasingly used as a tool for dealing with environmental crises, farmers had been caught up in front-line struggles to protect their livelihoods as carbon trading and offsetting programs took hold. Such schemes gained headway after the Kyoto Protocol was signed in 1997, in many cases pushing already marginalized people to the side in the name of correcting climate change. These market-based programs can involve, for example, the sponsoring of a eucalyptus plantation in an underdeveloped country by a polluting corporation in a wealthy northern country. As eucalyptus trees grow quite quickly they can be seen as a carbon sink, or they can be cut down, burned and converted into charcoal as an ostensibly fossil-fuel free energy supply. It has been documented that efforts such as these rest on highly dubious scientific grounds in terms of the net environmental benefits, and they also can require evicting local people from fertile farmland and/or polluting water supplies because of the pesticide-intensive approach taken to grow eucalyptus (Miller 2012; Wong 2012).

As another illustration of these trends, a Vía Campesina representative in Rio de Janeiro related the following story of a community in Jambi Province, Indonesia, facing the harsh realities of being caught on the wrong side of a REDD initiative. The local people had already been evicted in the 1980s from the wooded area that they had held as their traditional land for thousands of years due to a government-approved logging concession. By 2007, the company involved had cleared out the entire area and left, providing the displaced community an opportunity to return to their land and reestablish themselves there. They grew coffee, rice and vegetables and built schools and houses—an entire village—only to find that in 2008 the Indonesian government had signed a REDD agreement that would see trees re-planted in this area. Again, the local people were violently displaced; the village was emptied out and the school and houses were burned to the ground (Interview 8).

While this example from Indonesia “has all of the elements of what you could call ‘climate injustice’” (Interview 8), it was an accumulation of such forms of dispossession in geographic locations around the world that lead Vía Campesina’s member organizations to take an interest in climate justice. Coincidentally, however, it was in Bali, Indonesia in 2007 that the network first coordinated a presence at a UN climate change conference. In
the lead up to, and following, that conference (COP13), Vía Campesina began to develop its position on the relationship between food systems and climate justice (Lang 2012; cf. Bello 2007). The network subsequently published a paper that claimed in its title, “Small Scale Sustainable Farmers are Cooling Down the Earth” (‘Cooling’ 2009), a document that I will discuss in later chapters.

Since COP13 in Bali, Vía Campesina began to play a notable role in organizing or participating in counter-summits that coincide with UN conferences on climate change, including at the subsequent COPs in Poznan, Poland in 2008 and in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2009 (Lang 2012; LVC ‘Press Kit’ 2013; Russell et al. 2012). The network was also well-represented at the April 2010 World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth that took place in Cochabamba, Bolivia (see WPCCC 2010). This was an open and participatory summit that was organized as a response to the failure of COP15 several months prior, and was supported by Bolivia’s president Evo Morales.10 Vía Campesina reported that approximately 3300 of its members attended the conference, with about ten per cent of those members having travelled from beyond Bolivia’s borders (‘Post-Cochabamba’ 2010).

The network helped move forward the proposals that were generated in Cochabamba in the lead up to the subsequent UN conference of parties in Cancún (COP16, in late 2010) (LVC ‘Post-Cochabamba’ 2010; Russell et al. 2012). These proposals included “an equitable distribution of atmospheric space, a recognition of Indigenous Peoples’ and climate migrants’ rights, a proposal to recognize and defend Mother Earth’s rights, a proposal for a climate justice court, and the proposal for 6% of the GDP of developed countries to be used to address climate change-related issues” (Russell et al. 2012: 24). The network also put out a call for ‘Thousands of Cancúns’ to take place worldwide, asking allies to organize protests to “reject the false and market solutions … [and] to create thousands of solutions to confront climate change” (perhaps knowing that activists may have been unwilling to travel to the COP in Mexico after being disenchanted in Denmark) (LVC ‘Cancúns’ 2010; Russell et al. 2012). This global call resulted in rallies, workshops

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10 One of the founders of Vía Campesina, Morales became Bolivia’s first indigenous president in 2006.
and direct actions in countries as far-flung as "Bangladesh, Korea, Canada, France, Honduras and Turkey," to name just a few (Russell et al. 2012: 25).

Ultimately, the UN processes in Cancún in 2010 led to disappointment for Vía Campesina and its allies, as did the following conference in Durban in 2011, but despite this the network has remained militant in its climate change advocacy, drawing thousands of members to the People’s Summit in Rio. Vía Campesina’s fervent interest in the issue is also evident in the fact that the network boldly states in its most recent publications that “Food sovereignty now appears as one of the most powerful responses to the current food, poverty and climate crises” (‘Voice’ 2011; emphasis added).

1.4 “Globalize the Struggle! Globalize the Hope!”

Not only has Vía Campesina’s interest in climate justice grown in recent years, but the movement working on this issue has also expanded significantly. Whereas the first summit under the climate justice banner attracted only 500 participants, during COP17 in 2011 a single rally drew an estimated 12,000 activists (CSC 2011). In addition, hundreds attended the ‘People’s Space’ counter-summit in Durban, tens of thousands of people attended a concert in the name of climate justice, and solidarity rallies took place worldwide (see 350.org 2011; Global Climate Campaign 2011). As described by Russell et al. (2012), this momentum was built on the counter-summits that took place in Copenhagen during 2009’s COP15 and in Cancún during the COP16 in 2010.11

At the same time, countless grassroots groups and civil society organizations have engaged in climate justice debates in addition to La Vía Campesina; to name just a few: The Climate Action Network International, Climate Justice Now, The Durban Group for Climate Justice, The Indigenous Environmental Network, The Global Call for Climate

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11 Interestingly, COP18 in Doha had to be restrained from a social movement perspective as the government of Qatar had never historically allowed for public protests to take place. They permitted a one-day rally during the two-week conference which certainly drew a smaller crowd than at previous COPs, but this can be attributed more to the restrictive political atmosphere than a loss of interest in climate justice; during the Rio+20 conference earlier in the year, thousands of activists participated in a ‘People’s Summit’ and one rally reportedly drew 80,000 people to the streets of Rio de Janeiro (see Ferreira 2012).
Action, and Friends of the Earth. The consistent feature shared by most climate justice
groups is an understanding

that the mainstream focus on ‘sustainability’ tends to have a limited agenda: a consumerist, carbon-
footprint-reducing, green lifestyles agenda that all too often turns a blind eye to the environmental
injustices and health disparities facing low income and poor communities around the world. (Di
Chiro 2011: 233)

As a further contrast in terms of the difference between climate justice activists and
mainstream environmental organizations, consider the ‘system change, not climate change’
slogan that was popularized during the COP15 in Copenhagen. This slogan points to an
appreciation of the fundamental changes required to reduce greenhouse gases quickly and
substantially enough to avoid causing further undue suffering among marginalized people
globally.

Vía Campesina is certainly one of the groups that have taken up this ‘system change’
discourse wholeheartedly. The network is not shy in the slightest about including critical
structural analyses in their publications and position statements on climate change. These
documents often feature inflammatory language and include condemnations of the ‘false
solutions’ associated with the Green Economy, as well as demands for countries at UN
conferences to “stop trying to save capitalism” (see LVC ‘Rio+20’ 2012, ‘International
Campaign’ 2012, ‘Durban’ 2011). In addition, the network’s call to “Globalize the
Struggle! Globalize the Hope” reflects a sentiment that system change must not only
involve taking a radical approach to addressing relevant issues at local or national levels,
but also dealing with broader economic and structural issues transnationally (see LVC

Unlike many civil society organizations (CSOs), Vía Campesina’s worldwide reach
allows it to envision such system change from a global perspective.12 With approximately
200 million farmers belonging to member organizations in over 70 countries, it has been
said that Vía Campesina itself is in fact the largest social movement in the world (Akram-

12 As pointed out by Desmarais (2007: 21), the term CSO itself is limited and can cause more
confusion than clarification; she notes that terms like ‘global civil society’ tend to “lump into one
category all non-state actors—NGOs, professional organizations, research institutions, ethnic
movements, human rights groups, peasant organizations, feminist organizations, and urban
community self-help groups, among others.”
Lodhi 2013: 151; Patel 2007: 16). These farmers, the majority of whom are based in the global south, are therefore uniquely poised to not only palpably understand the severity of the climate crisis, but also to be motivated to develop the diverse solutions that may be captured within the discourse of system change. As reflected in Vía Campesina’s call to ‘globalize the hope,’ the network is certainly interested in discussing alternatives to, and not just protesting, environmentally and socially destructive practices connected to food systems and economic ‘development.’

Given the distinctive features of this international collection of small-scale farmers, it is apparent that significant attention is being paid to the campaigns it undertakes and the alternatives it is presenting. As noted by Desmarais and Nicholson, “In many countries La Vía Campesina is now the reference point for alternative social movements seeking radical change” (LVC ‘Open Book’ 2013, Ch. 10: 7). Similarly, Rosset claims that the network represents “the most important transnational social movement in the contemporary world. They are the leading edge of resistance against neoliberal economic globalization” (quoted in Desmarais 2007: i). As much weight as Vía Campesina carries, however, the network’s campaigns and proposals must be considered in the context of the broader climate justice movement. As indicated above, there are an increasing number of organizations around the world taking up this banner—organizations that are extremely diverse and therefore undoubtedly have different conceptions of what ‘system change, not climate change’ may mean in practice.

Vía Campesina is in a position to form strategic alliances and coordinate with such diverse organizations, each of which operates in relation to the cultural and political environments that surround them. Of course, the network’s member organizations are also situated in such diverse environments, and may have varying ideas as to the forms of advocacy that will hold the most chances of success in terms of both transforming food systems and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Extensive dialogues and debates can therefore be expected to take place, both within Vía Campesina and between the network and others in the climate justice movement, before collective actions (from media releases to political organizing) may be agreed upon. And while Vía Campesina has taken an overtly anti-capitalist stance in its organizing, the network and its members will very likely
continually run up against groups that are more likely to favour strategic compromises or reformist approaches.

At the same time, it is worth asking what lies beneath the radical discourse that Vía Campesina has espoused in relation to its climate justice work. To quote David Harvey, “there is [often] a long and arduous road to travel to take [a] movement beyond the phase of rhetorical flourishes, media successes, and symbolic politics, into a world of strong coherent political organizing and practical revolutionary action” (1996: 402).

To that end, this thesis will therefore tackle the following interconnected questions: What does system change look like for La Vía Campesina and how has the network established climate justice proposals with which its diverse member organizations can identify? At the same time, to what extent are these proposals radical (beneath the rhetoric) and geared towards ‘practical revolutionary action’? The first question is important given the connection between a movement’s ability to build momentum and the degree to which solidarity is established by actors within the movement agreeing on relevant solutions being presented. The second question is important in that the more practical proposals are, the more they are likely to be taken up by actors both within and outside of the movement—a key consideration if transformative change is hoped for on the climate justice front.

My hope is that exploring the answers to these questions will not only prove to be relevant for those interested in Vía Campesina or food sovereignty, but also for academics and activists working on the topics of climate justice and/or social movements more generally. While much has been written about food sovereignty and climate justice as separate issues, there is certainly a dearth of research that connects these concepts, especially with regards to social movements working towards transformative societal change.

As I will demonstrate, Vía Campesina is exhibiting the value of connecting local struggles and organizing strategies with a broader political agenda. They are informing their diverse views as to what widespread social change should entail by building on
practical initiatives and alliances at various scales, while resisting the temptation to present an oversimplified perspective as to what alternatives to capitalism should look like.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss a number of key theories regarding social movements that provide a framework through which to tackle the research questions outlined above. In doing so, I will also refer to relevant literature that points to the structural causes of the problems that small-scale farmers are experiencing. Taking into account considerations related to geographic scale and cultural issues will also provide a lens through which to critically analyze the stance that Vía Campesina has taken regarding climate justice. I will then discuss, in Chapter 3, how I developed a methodological framework through which to explore my research questions, which included my trip to Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 to participate in the People’s Summit during the United Nations’ Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). As I will explain, this trip generated several interviews with representatives of Vía Campesina’s member organizations and ICC, while also providing an opportunity to observe the network participating within the context of the movement working towards system change.

I will discuss the results of these experiences, combined with an analysis of relevant documents that Vía Campesina has published regarding its climate justice efforts, in Chapter 4. This will involve an in-depth analysis of how members of this network see the concept of food sovereignty connecting with efforts to combat climate change, along with a description of the processes that Vía Campesina works through internally in order to speak to these issues. In Chapter 5, I will discuss how these proposals and solutions connect to the notion of system change, and I will analyze Vía Campesina’s approaches to simultaneously maintain solidarity and tackle a host of complex issues that range from food production and trade to energy generation and broad consumption patterns.

Finally, I will conclude in Chapter 6 with some thoughts regarding what activists and academics who are concerned with the intersection of issues like food sovereignty and climate justice may learn from Vía Campesina in terms of the network’s successes and its opportunities moving forward. This will include a summary of both the strengths and apparent tensions that lie in their efforts to speak out about food systems and climate change with one voice; a voice emerging from diverse political and geographic contexts.
and complex processes of exchange that one research participant described as “a beautiful picture of chaos.”
Social Movements and the Politics of Nature

The impacts of climate change are steadily worsening, leading to harvest failures, destruction of habitats and homes, hunger and famine and loss of lives. The future of humanity and the planet is in critical danger... [We] have the real solutions to the climate crisis and we call on all governments to heed them before it is too late.

...Through building social movements and mobilizing popular struggles for social change the world's people will overcome the close alliance between governments and multinational corporations that is strangling the world.

...Globalize the struggle, Globalize the hope!

- La Vía Campesina (Durban' 2011)

2.1 The political ecology of the climate and food crises

The general framework that I use as a lens through which to analyze Vía Campesina’s struggles for climate justice and food sovereignty is that of political ecology. As Robbins notes (2012: 14 – 16), this framework has been defined by many different scholars, but a key thread that runs through interpretations of political ecology is an understanding that “The systems that govern use, overuse, degradation, and recovery of the environment are structured into a larger social engine, which revolves around the control of nature and labor” (Ibid: 59). Questions of power and influence are therefore crucial to assessing the ways in which ecological change and social change are tied together, with some people and groups benefitting from these processes while others lose out. In other words, “No explanation of environmental change is complete ...without serious attention to who profits from changes in control over resources, and without exploring who takes what from whom” (Ibid.).

In this chapter I will therefore discuss the political and historical context in which Vía Campesina is operating so as to provide some perspective regarding the enormity of the
challenges that this network of small-scale farmers is facing. I will also review a few key theories that are helpful in understanding social movements in terms of their potential for success— theories that are especially pertinent with regards to Vía Campesina’s hope for global societal change as a means of dealing with the current climate and food system crises. This will include an overview of several logistical, political and cultural questions that need to be taken into account given the scope of such an ambitious struggle for transformative change.

To begin with an account of the political ecology of climate justice, it is helpful to remember the direct connection between climate change and industrialism under capitalism. As renowned scientists around the world have illustrated, the increase in greenhouse gases that we are very much aware of today began in the late eighteenth century, coinciding with humans’ technological ability to generate power from fossil fuels such as coal (Pachauri and Reisinger 2007). The spread of the industrial revolution from Britain to mainland Europe and then to North America set a small collection of countries apart from much of the rest of the world.

Yet the increase in prosperity that those countries witnessed was certainly problematic and a key example of uneven development (Smith 2010). Capitalist industrialism was very much fuelled by the resources of countries that would soon be left behind as wealthier countries appropriated their cotton, sugar cane and other crops, minerals, and labour (see Federici 2004; Mintz 1985; Weis 2007: Ch. 3). By the mid-twentieth century, capitalism (and imperialist endeavours undertaken by numerous countries) had expanded to include oil extraction as a key element in expanding these forms of industrial development (Chomsky 1977; Foster et al. 2010: Ch. 5, 15; Mitchell 2009; Zalik 2008).

As Bond (2012) and other authors have pointed out, these processes of industrial development have lead to a ’climate debt’ that the wealthy countries of the world owe to those that are underdeveloped13 (see also Angus 2010; Giddens 2011; Sandberg and Sandberg 2010; Vanderheiden 2008). This concept encapsulates the notion that the poorer countries of the world are now faced with a situation in which they would require huge

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13 For a specific discussion of underdevelopment, see Frank (1989). I use the term to imply a deliberate act that sets ‘developed’ countries apart from others.
investments in order to develop in a sustainable manner, as a means of compensating for a problem to which they did not contribute. More progressive definitions of climate debt include an appreciation of the historical role of industrial capitalism in that this debt has been accumulated “on account of resource plundering, environmental damages, and the free occupation of environmental space to deposit wastes, such as greenhouse gases, from the industrial countries” (Acción Ecológica, quoted in Bond 2012: 117).

The climate debt concept has been at the centre of heated debates in the international policy arena in recent years. Yet, while United Nations conferences have included discussions of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities’ and climate adaptation funds to acknowledge the divergent development paths that nations have taken over the last two centuries, wealthy countries have largely balked at any commitments that they feel would minimize their economic competitiveness in any way. The lobbyists representing the fossil fuel industry have no doubt played a part in resisting international agreements that would initiate a transition to a renewable energy and conservation-based economy, as doing so would mean corporations would need to write off $27 trillion in assets linked to oil and gas reserves (McKibben 2012).

Firm greenhouse gas reduction targets have thus been avoided or abandoned and financial schemes such as carbon trading have been established as preferred topics of discussion for both governments and private sector players. Given the lack of political will among global elites to help compensate for the uneven distribution of the impacts of climate change, we not only get a sense of the injustice of the situation but also the “degree to which [the] solutions parallel, and do not challenge, the regime of accumulation that produced the climate crisis in the first place” (Robbins 2012: 249).

The capitalist economic imperative for endless growth and expansion also provides a rationale for individualistic strategies to reduce greenhouse gases, from buying hybrid cars to changing to compact fluorescent lightbulbs or otherwise ‘shopping sustainably.’ The idea of responsible citizens as ethical consumers simultaneously benefits corporations who profit from such exchanges, while relieving governments of the political pressure to strive

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14 See Vanderheiden, 2008: 11-17, 63-65.
towards more substantial legislative or structural efforts to tackle climate change. This focus on individuals’ carbon footprints also represents an agenda that significantly depoliticizes the issue, while distracting from more meaningful solutions that may challenge the power structures perpetuating the status quo (Ibid: 250).

With international climate negotiations largely fixed in an ongoing deadlock, and attention to the structural causes of climate change being diverted towards green consumerism and other strategies that prop up a capitalist ‘regime of accumulation,’ it is easy to get a sense of the depth of the problems confronting any groups who would advocate for ‘system change, not climate change.’

Yet for Vía Campesina the challenges at hand are also linked to the relationship between capitalism and food systems. Friedmann and McMichael’s concept of ‘food regimes’ is a tremendously useful way in which to frame the changes that have occurred in food production and distribution systems since the advent of industrialization (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Friedmann 2005; McMichael 2009; see also Fairbairn 2010). These food regimes, outlined in Table 2-1, capture the ways in which nation-state policies and global processes have influenced the development of industrial agriculture—and vice versa.

The first food regime describes the colonial era, wherein European powers exerted their influence on countries that were compelled to supply them with agricultural commodities—from spices and textiles to tobacco and coffee. During the second, post-war, food regime, the United States ascended as a global power, with increasingly capital-intensive agriculture producing never-before-seen quantities of meat as well as grain surpluses. In the midst of countries decolonizing, the U.S. lead efforts to exert control over what would otherwise have been independent nations, through food dumping and related policies shrouded under the guise of ‘development.’ Finally, as alluded to above, in the last few decades we have seen the emergence of a corporate food regime, which has involved the increasing enclosure of agricultural commons through processes of privatization, export-oriented agriculture and neoliberal trade (Ibid.).

15 Several other authors have commented on these themes as well, describing capitalism’s interventions in modern agriculture and the roles that large multinational corporations and trade
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<th>Food Regime</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
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<td>Colonial-Diasporic</td>
<td>1870 – 1914</td>
<td>International free trade between European colonial powers and settler colonies; European nations supplied with cheap grain, meat and tropical commodities from colonies; Collapse of regime with the failure of the gold standard and the decline of free trade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-war / Mercantile-Industrial</td>
<td>1946 – 1973</td>
<td>Rise of U.S. hegemony, state support for food production and the protection of national markets; Dumping of U.S. grain surpluses in countries of the global south under the guise of food aid; “Development project” undertaken by less developed countries attempting to follow the pattern of mercantilist policies set out by the U.S. and others; this lead to rapid urbanization and an increase of food importation by southern countries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate / Corporate-environmental</td>
<td>1980s – present</td>
<td>Agriculture and finance increasingly international in scope; “Globalization project” characterized by neoliberal trade agreements and the transfer of powers from states to transnational corporations; Industrialization of agriculture and the spread of export-oriented practices, with farmers increasingly dependent on agrifood corporations for inputs; Dismantling of welfare state programs and the dispossession and displacement of peasant populations; “Green capitalism” and the co-optation of food activists’ demands through neoliberal frameworks.</td>
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Table 2-1: Friedmann and McMichael’s concept of ‘food regimes’ (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Friedmann 2005; McMichael 2009; see also Fairbairn 2010).

agreements have played in these processes (e.g. Weis 2007; Wittman et al. 2010, 2011). It must also be noted that Friedmann (2005) and McMichael (2009) do not necessarily agree on the extent to which a third food regime has been established. I would argue that it has.
Throughout these historical periods, we can see how capitalism has increasingly infiltrated the agricultural sector. Several authors have discussed the process of ‘enclosing commons’ as central to capitalist development, with *commons* referring not only to lands that are managed communally, but to other resources as well. Historical examples include the slave trade as well as the ways in which legislative frameworks were established in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to convert commons to private property (DeAngelis 2001; Thompson 1975). Marx called these processes ‘primitive accumulation’ and used the term to describe the ways in which producers were separated from the means of production, thereby becoming ‘proletarianized’ and having to sell their labour to earn a wage (Kamenka 1983).

Interestingly, agriculture is a sector that in many ways resists commodification due to the fact that land is ‘fixed’ and that labour arrangements in this sector present significant challenges to capital but, as Kloppenburg (2004) points out, such enclosures have occurred nonetheless. He demonstrates how off-farm inputs such as machinery and agrochemicals have come to make up a significant portion of what goes into making contemporary agriculture function. This separation of farmers from ownership of, and control over, the means of production has arguably rendered them ‘propertied labourers’ and the commodification of seeds and their germ plasm (the genetic information encoded in the seed) has played a huge role in this process as well\(^\text{16}\) (Ibid.; see also Desmarais 2007: Ch. 2; Qualman 2011; Shiva 2005).

The generations of farmers represented by Vía Campesina’s member organizations have therefore been caught up in these trends since long before the network was formed in 1993. The twentieth century was particularly challenging for agricultural producers, while nation-states and, eventually, many corporations were in large part defined through these food regimes, benefiting economically and politically from the flows of international trade and the increasing commodification of food, seeds and land. The push for the use of

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\(^{16}\) Kloppenburg illustrates how relevant state resources in the US were essentially at the beck and call of private enterprise. This included germplasm research and seed distribution processes that ultimately resulted in the industry reaping the profits of the publicly funded breakthrough in corn hybridization in the late 1930s. Of significance is the political and legal maneuvering that lead to this hybrid corn being produced for private gain to such a vast extent (while the alternative method that would resist commodification—‘population improvement’—was left aside).
patented pesticides and fertilizers since the Green Revolution was also a notable feature of this period.

At the same time, small-scale farmers found themselves taking on increasingly unmanageable debts, with those in the global south being particularly trapped by neoliberal reforms, such as the international trade arrangements pushed by the IMF, the World Bank and, more recently, through the WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) that came into effect beginning in 1995 (WTO 2013). These debts came about in the context of farmers being compelled, in the name of productivity, to focus on export-oriented agriculture—featuring ‘cash crops’ that favoured a monocultural, chemical and pesticide-intensive approach (Desmarais 2007: Ch. 2). As a result, many ended up paying huge sums for external inputs such as fertilizers and seeds, while receiving little or no state support. As a demonstration of how tragic this was for agricultural producers in unsustainable financial situations, from 1997 to 2005 over 25,000 Indian farmers committed suicide by drinking chemical pesticides (Desmarais 2007: 66).

Over the last several decades farmers—and food insecure people generally—have also increasingly been affected by the ways in which food is being treated as a commodity. With investors speculating on the prices of agricultural produce, everything from oranges to pork bellies has been traded on stock markets, in many cases leading to vast fluctuations in the exchange value of such items.\(^{17}\) From Vía Campesina’s perspective:

> International financial speculation [played] a major role in food price increases [that began in] 2007. Due to the financial crisis in the USA, speculators started to move from financial products to raw materials, including agricultural products. This directly [affected] prices in the domestic markets as many countries are increasingly dependent on food imports... [But,] while speculators and large traders do benefit from the current crises, most peasants and farmers do not benefit from the higher prices... Companies ruthlessly exploit [the] situation, accepting that increasing numbers of people go hungry as they do not have the money to buy the available food. (‘Policy’ 2009: 86 - 89)

Vía Campesina’s position here is not overstated in the slightest. Global agribusiness companies reaped enormous profits in 2008, just as the food crisis was making front-page news around the world. And, while commodity speculators distinctly benefited from the

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\(^{17}\) In fact, it is widely believed that soaring food prices played an important role in sparking the civil unrest that culminated in the Arab Spring in Northern Africa in 2011 (Kaufman 2011).
shortage of food supplies, more than 100 million people were pushed into hunger as food prices spiked by an average of 85 per cent (PFPP 2011: 6). This trend hit many parts of the global south particularly hard, where “people spend up to 80% of their income on food [and such price increases represented] the difference between eating and not eating” (Ibid.).

It must be noted however that such crises are not limited to the sporadic economic downturns of capitalism that grab the attention of wealthier residents of the global north. Numerous authors have documented that there are enough calories being produced on Earth to feed every one of its 7 billion inhabitants, and yet approximately 1 billion of those people remain hungry or malnourished (Holt-Giménez 2013; Patel 2007). This demonstrates the extent to which the global food system is not plagued by technical problems but by political ones. As with the climate debate, control over agricultural resources is managed and manipulated by a handful of elites, while those without power or influence suffer. In joining the movement working on system change, Vía Campesina clearly has its work cut out.

2.2 “Viva la lucha!”: Movement from below

In addition to providing a framework through which to understand the problems associated with the global food system, the concept of food regimes also leads to a useful discussion of the social movements that respond to these problems. Friedmann and McMichael (1989) note that, in between each of the periods in which dominant food regimes are recognizable, there has been a period of transition and crisis in which social movements have played a part in contesting and re-shaping global agricultural production systems. Importantly, while groups have mobilized during these periods and drawn attention to the contradictions and increasing tensions caused by the dominant regime, these tensions have clearly not been resolved as capital has managed to contain or diffuse these movements’ efforts—with new regimes that are still problematic taking the place of the old.
As the climate crisis is converging with that of the current food regime, it is therefore worth questioning whether a coordinated movement may be able to push for more profound transformative change. To date, most of the academic work that has analyzed Vía Campesina’s potential as a global network has focused on their role in challenging the current food regime, with Friedmann (2005) drawing attention to the ways in which they are naming and framing the problems associated with this regime, and presenting alternative solutions. For McMichael (2006) Vía Campesina is part of a “global agrarian resistance” that is “[seeking] to survive and transcend the crisis of the neoliberal project” and to counter the corporate food regime. Less, however, has been written on the network’s role in advocating for climate justice and system change.

While he does not discuss Vía Campesina specifically, in his recent book on the politics of climate justice Patrick Bond (2012) argues that the social movements working on this issue demonstrate more dynamism and innovative thinking than the ‘top down’ bureaucratic structures that seem to be fraught with paralysis and far too easily influenced by corporate lobbying. He blames this paralysis in part on elites’ “loyal adherence to systemic power” and their “excessive enthusiasm for mainstream climate management strategies that do not work under contemporary conditions of climate-crisis capitalism” (Ibid: 76-77; emphasis in original). I would suggest that Vía Campesina has a crucial role to play in the ‘movement below’ that makes up the struggle for climate justice as its members are on the front lines of the crises that connect food system issues and climate change. They are well aware of the political stakes and therefore compelled to be dynamic and innovative in responding to these crises in ways that move beyond mainstream strategies.

Agriculture can therefore been described as a battleground on which climate justice struggles will take place (Weis 2007). With this sector a key target of the green economy (UNEP 2011b: 39-40), and an intensifying push to commodify natural resources such as land, water and the atmosphere (see MacDonald and Corson 2012; Roberts 2008: 544), not only are livelihoods at stake, but lives are as well. In many countries of the global south, ongoing conflicts over such resources are particularly apparent, with ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (to use Harvey’s term; 2003) in some cases leading to paramilitaries murdering peasant farmers and fisherfolk that mobilize against corporate interests. As I
mentioned in Chapter 1, these conflicts are often spurred or exacerbated by carbon offsetting projects and the like.

That an international movement of peasant farmers should play a significant role in responding to not only food system issues but also to crises that link climate change and capitalism is certainly worth noting. The term ‘peasant’ itself has been seen as contentious, often being used pejoratively, but more generally as a catch-all for smallholders—“rural cultivators practicing intensive, permanent, diversified agriculture on relatively small farms” (Netting quoted in Robbins 2012: 59). Also used as a descriptor of economic arrangements, ‘peasant’ is a term that “stresses households that make their living from the land, partly integrated into broader-scale markets and partly rooted in subsistence production, with no wage workers, dependent on family and extended kin for farm labor” (Robbins 2012: 59).

With this definition in mind, Vía Campesina in fact represents millions of farmers that fit into a category that several prominent authors once predicted would disappear altogether. As far back as the 1890s, following on preliminary works by Marx and Engels on what came to be known as ‘the agrarian question,’ Lenin [1967(1899)] and Kautsky [1988(1899)] argued that small-scale farmers would be increasingly pulled into market relations due to the destruction of ‘peasant industry,’ meaning that peasants would be forced to purchase inputs and tools needed for agriculture from larger-scale industrial enterprises. The need to engage in capitalist exchange would thus encourage peasants to increase surplus yields that could then be sold through markets, pulling them into cycles of competition, profit maximization and a need to push soils (and labour) to their limits (Akram-Lodhi 2013; cf. Bernstein 2004, 2006; Brookfield and Parsons 2007). As noted by Isakson (2009: 729), “although they allowed for some qualifications, Lenin and Kautsky’s general premise [was] that the infiltration of capitalist markets into rural areas [would] unleash a process that [would] likely result in the dissolution of the peasantry, bifurcating it into a rural bourgeois landowning class and a landless proletariat” and, as such, these authors “were primarily interested in the revolutionary potential of peasant farmers – would they ally with capital or labour in class conflicts […]?”
Kloppenburg’s (2004) analysis demonstrates that, to an extent, these prophecies were accurate, although the intrusion of capitalist relations into agriculture has certainly been geographically uneven. In Canada, for example, the number of farms fell by 72 per cent between 1941 and 2011, while the average size of farms increased steadily over that period. Qualman (2011) illustrates how Canadian farmers have seen their incomes stagnate in recent decades, with many leaving the agricultural sector in droves, while enormous profits have been recorded by the companies that have managed to control the inputs to farming—including fuel for machinery, fertilizers, chemicals and seeds. Similar trends have been observed in the U.S. and in Europe.

Yet, in contrast to this, Vía Campesina cites statistics compiled by the ETC Group (2009) to assert that peasants continue to make up almost half of the world’s population (approximately 43 per cent), while providing at least 70 per cent of the world’s food. In addition to the 1.5 billion peasants on 380 million farms, the network contends, there are also 190 million pastoralists, well over 100 million peasant fisherfolk, 800 million growing urban gardens, and 410 million “gathering the hidden harvest of our forests and savannas” (‘Feed the World’ 2010). And, while many of these peasants reside in the global south, the term ‘peasant,’ has also been accepted by small-scale farmers in northern countries such as Canada—farmers who are proud to contribute to a reclamation of this language and a rebuttal of the prediction that agrarian capitalism would inevitably cause peasants to disappear (Desmarais 2007: Ch.1, 195 – 198).

We can therefore consider the ‘revolutionary potential of peasant farmers’ in relation to an international movement that is very much alive, as demonstrated by the spirited cry of ‘Viva la lucha!’ (‘Long live the struggle!’) that is often heard at Vía Campesina gatherings. Yet in order to assess the struggles of a people that continues to be faced with enormous structural and political pressures, it is worth reviewing the perspectives of

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18 In 1941 Canada had 732,832 farms, while in 2011 there were 205,730. The average area in acres during those years increased from 237 to 778 (Statistics Canada 2012).
19 Canada lost nearly 18,000 farms between 2001 and 2006 alone (PFPP 2011: 5).
20 While there is certainly diversity among Vía Campesina’s member organizations, the political beliefs and agricultural methodology of farmers’ groups play a significant role in decisions that take place at the network’s international conferences as to whether to approve the membership of specific organizations.
theorists who offer insight into the factors that often contribute to successful social movements.

To begin with, writers who have taken to analyzing social movements have certainly paid attention to the dynamics and structures of the networks in question that are attempting to ‘act contentiously’ in order to bring about social change (Tarrow 2011). Della Porta et al. (2006) and Keck and Sikkink (1998) have focused in particular on transnational networks and have therefore contributed to the numerous modes of analysis that can be applied to assessing the functioning of social movements. To cite a few examples, networks can be compared in terms of their organizational structures, decision-making processes, resources, ability to mobilize around specific issues, and the modes of communication (from print to social media) that help the various actors connect (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Also of importance are the strategies or ‘action repertoires’ that networks within social movements employ in order to realize their goals. Given the broad scope and reach of many social movements, these repertoires can be diverse, and debates within networks about which of them may be most effective can certainly be heated. For example, during many anti-globalization protests of the late 1990s and early 2000s, actions at various summits ranged from theatrical performances and the use of puppets and music to create an atmosphere of celebration, to tactics carried out by segments of the movement that included the destruction of property (della Porta et al. 2006: Ch. 5). There are also debates within social movements about the effectiveness of repertoires such as labour strikes, demonstrations, Internet-based campaigns and participation in electoral politics (Ibid.; see also Tarrow 2011: Ch. 6 and 8). All told, the various action repertoires that are ultimately chosen within a social movement seem to have as significant an impact on their chances of success as the decision-making processes and organizational elements mentioned above. Although the modes of analysis specific to action repertoires are not the central focus of this study of Vía Campesina, they are certainly important and will be mentioned in subsequent chapters.

Another property of social movements that can influence their longevity and chances for success relates to the ‘framing’ processes that are established within and between
networks and actors involved. These processes can be crucial to a movement’s ability to establish a sense of purpose, internal solidarity and a collective identity (della Porta et al. 2006: Ch. 3; Tarrow 2011: Ch. 7). Drawing on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, David Snow (2004) has noted that, for a social movement, framing particular problems and positive alternatives can involve developing an important awareness that may stand distinctly apart from existing (mainstream) interpretive frames.

Framing also involves mobilizing beliefs and ideas in such a way that actors within networks will be inspired to take collective action, therefore it is more elaborate than simply establishing rhetoric and discourses (della Porta et al. 2006; Snow 2004). Developing ‘master frames’ is a part of these processes, in terms of establishing common ground among disparate networks despite their unique approaches and interests. In other words, this ‘meaning work’ that contributes to a social movement’s collective identity can help the actors or networks involved articulate their challenges and goals in a unifying manner and still allow room for diversity within a movement. For such an enormous and dispersed group as Vía Campesina, these are particularly important considerations, as the network has consistently tried to maintain “unity within diversity” (Desmarais 2007: 27).

Snow and Benford (1988) outline three dimensions of the framing processes involved in this meaning work: the diagnostic, which considers the problem at hand and its causes; the prognostic, which looks at proposed solutions or alternatives; and the motivational, which involves a call to action to correct the identified problem. Vía Campesina certainly seems to have a firm grasp of the diagnostic elements of the climate crisis. It is, however, tremendously important for movements to go beyond discussing the framing of problems and to substantively discuss the alternatives and solutions for which they would advocate. In Chapter 3, I will therefore explore the extent to which Vía Campesina seems to do this in its deliberations, such as those that took place at the People’s Summit in Rio de Janeiro. I will then go on to discuss the specifics of the network’s framing of ‘prognoses,’ which is arguably the most challenging frame to develop from a logistical and intellectual standpoint. These framing processes are further complicated in Vía Campesina’s case by the scope of the end goal that is implied in their anti-capitalist rhetoric and calls for system change.
2.3 Assessing ‘system change’

Thus far I have outlined the theoretical frameworks that will help us consider the political and historical context in which Vía Campesina is operating, as well as the characteristics of social movements that can help them maintain solidarity and build momentum. There are also a number of perspectives that need to be considered in relation to the network’s establishment of climate justice proposals that are both practical and revolutionary.

One such perspective is that of David Harvey in his discussion of ‘militant particularism’ (1996: Ch. 1). Drawing on the work of Raymond Williams, Harvey outlines how groups working towards social change are often strictly focussed on localized or issue-specific campaigns as these struggles are usually the most concrete in their ability to speak to the material needs and emotional loyalties of actors involved. The problem that arises with militant particularism is when political engagement relies on “ideals forged out of the affirmative experience of solidarities in one place [that] get generalized and universalized as a working model of a new form of society that will benefit all of humanity” (Harvey 1996: 32). Transformative social change, however, needs to take into account the geographic, political, economic and cultural sensitivities of different places. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution, no panacea.

The need for social movements to avoid such pitfalls is relevant to a study of Vía Campesina in two senses. Firstly, the diversity of the contexts in which the network’s member organizations are situated means that groups may have their own, potentially conflicting, interpretations of concepts such as food sovereignty and climate justice. Given the reach of the corporate food regime and the scope of the climate crisis, the task for Vía Campesina will therefore involve moving beyond localized or national struggles, while at the same time balancing the autonomous decisions of member organizations along with circumstances in which strategic coordination may need to take place. In other words, the practicality of the network’s proposals should be assessed not by their uniformity but rather by their complementarity across geographic scales and space (see also Harvey 2000). To what degree do such proposals avoid contradictions, even if they are diverse?
Secondly, in advocating for climate justice and system change, Vía Campesina will need to move beyond militant particularism in the sense that the solutions it proposes in relation to food sovereignty are part of a much broader struggle, despite the significant quantities of greenhouse gases associated with the global food system. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, groups around the world that are connecting climate issues and the need for system change are working on a wide range of campaigns—from those related to extractive industries and energy systems to those that focus on general production, consumption and trade practices. In this context, focusing solely on food issues could be seen as particularist, hence the need for Vía Campesina to link its specific interests to general interests—and vice versa.

In working towards climate justice amongst other groups undertaking such broad efforts beneath the same banner, Vía Campesina can therefore be seen as part of a ‘movement of movements’ (della Porta et al. 2006; cf. Klein 2001b). This includes academics, scientists, activists and diverse environmental networks situated worldwide. Each of these individuals and groups operates in relation to the media and business institutions, cultural milieus, and political structures that surround them, and it is important to therefore appreciate the complexity that can be involved in having such actors come together to agree upon solutions or work towards coordinated actions for the sake of climate justice and system change.

Writers such as Escobar (2008) and DeLanda (2006) would thus have us view Vía Campesina as a component of a vast ‘assemblage’ that is collectively working on these issues. Assemblages are collections of various actors and groups—or ‘nodes’—all of which are historically grounded and situated in relation to the complex systems and dialectical processes that surround them. Such a view of social movements is also relevant in analyzing a network with member organizations in diverse political and cultural contexts around the world. Vía Campesina can therefore been seen as an assemblage itself, while also representing a node in the larger assemblage that is advocating for climate justice and system change. Escobar in fact employs the Spanish word redes rather than ‘networks’ as it “conveys more powerfully the idea that life and movements are ineluctably produced in and through relations in a dynamic fashion” (2008: 26). ‘Assemblages’ is a better
translation, he notes, therefore when I refer to Vía Campesina as a ‘network’ throughout this thesis I do so merely for the sake of simplicity with this important point in mind.

The concept of assemblages lends itself not only to the ways in which articulations of climate justice and system change may be formulated, but also the complexity involved with actors striving to implement these visions in specific institutional and cultural contexts. Where and how should system change take place? Vía Campesina has pointed to the fact that international organizations like the United Nations have drastically failed to establish meaningful legislative commitments that would see greenhouse gas emissions substantially reduced and the concerns of those confronted with the worst threats of climate change addressed. In fact, the network co-authored a statement in early 2012 about the “corporate capture” of UN processes that has rendered it impossible for civil society and farmers groups to be represented and influence climate negotiations (‘Corporate Capture’ 2012). While the statement includes several concrete proposals that would limit the sway of corporate lobbyists over climate negotiations and improve democratic integrity within the UN, there is no evidence that such proposals are about to be implemented, and this international body is certainly in no position to oversee the dissolution of capitalism altogether.

When analyzing Vía Campesina’s vision for dealing with a global problem like climate change, it is therefore helpful to look at the various jurisdictional or institutional contexts towards which specific proposals are geared. This can include an assessment of the practicality for such proposals to be implemented at various scales. If municipal, regional or national governments are more likely to have the frameworks in place to introduce legislation that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions, Vía Campesina and its member organizations may therefore need to focus on creating change at those scales, with due consideration given to the dynamic political and cultural relations that influence relevant decision-making processes. In this way governments themselves can be seen as assemblages and/or nodes of larger assemblages. This perspective can help us appreciate the complexity that is therefore involved in trying to develop proposals for system change that are complementary across various geographic scales and spaces. As observed by
Swyngedouw (1997: 160), “The politics of scale are surely messy, but they ought to take centre stage in any successful emancipatory political strategy.”

2.4 The culture of social transformation

Interestingly, emancipatory political strategies that are revolutionary in scope have historically taken place at the level of the nation-state, although various forms of coordination have taken place between countries to support both capitalist [see Polanyi 2001(1944)] and socialist (see Kozloff 2008; Priestland 2009) endeavours. What must be remembered is that, while government regulations and international agreements may significantly steer political and economic patterns of development, social and cultural circumstances play a significant role in determining the conditions under which groups will be motivated to rally for societal change [Polanyi 2001(1944); cf. Block 2003; Prudham 2007].

For Via Campesina, it is particularly important to consider the ‘extra-economic’ contexts in which its member organizations and its climate justice allies are embedded, as these circumstances will play a significant role in determining what groups see as possible and appropriate with regards to system change. Within both the food movement and the climate movement, for example, there is evidence of actors and groups that support a wide range of fairly divergent initiatives—from reformist measures that would generally perpetuate neoliberal capitalism to more progressive and radical responses.

In much of the global north, with regards to the food movement specifically, there seems to be a cultural appetite for market-based reforms such as fair trade and organic labelling, agricultural ‘development’ initiatives and the like, with more progressive actors

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21 Including with regards to the so-called ‘self-regulating market.’ Polanyi [2001(1944)] demonstrated that regulations and other institutional reforms are in fact required to sustain a ‘laissez-faire’ economy. In this sense, state intervention is entirely necessary in order for neoliberal capitalism to function.

22 As Prudham cautions however, the economic and extra-economic are terms that do not neatly describe “formally distinct realms,” although the distinction can remain useful in understanding the ways in which “what are generally received as economic processes necessarily rely upon processes not generally seen as economic” (2007: 413).
leaning toward food justice efforts, tighter market regulations and stronger social safety nets (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Similarly, the socially dominant range of climate change responses in many such countries tends to span only from green consumerism and the promotion of cap-and-trade programs to supporting political parties that favour a shift toward renewable energy sources (see Wainwright and Mann 2013). More radical responses are often marginalized or left for movements of the global south to take up. At the same time, many innovative forms of resistance will be at risk of being co-opted—though green capitalism or other such strategies. As Friedmann argues, “In the wings, capital is ever ready to appropriate what works” (2005: 251).

These trends point to the extent to which neoliberal capitalist hegemony has become firmly entrenched in many countries, taking on social and cultural dimensions as opposed to those that are strictly political or economic in nature. Antonio Gramsci used the concept of hegemony to highlight how powerful groups can make use of social institutions and cultural forms to influence society and gain popular consent without resorting to physical coercion (Gramsci 1971; cf. Burawoy 2003; Forgacs 1989). He opposed a strict economistic interpretation of socialist thought and crude Marxist understandings that only took class interests into account with regards to political struggle.

Writing from prison after having been incarcerated by Mussolini’s fascist regime in 1926, Gramsci made detailed observations about how dominant political groups make use of popular culture, the media and religious and educational institutions to maintain widespread support. He discussed the role of both ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’ intellectuals in these processes, with the former referring to those defined as such by their profession (literary scholars, scientists, etc.) and the latter using their intellectual powers to further their class interests (Gramsci 1971: 5-23). In this sense, organic intellectuals can, for example, be established from within the ranks of the working class, taking as their goal the substitution of the dominant hegemony with an alternative, anti-capitalist ideology. This

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25 While the global north/global south dichotomy provides a useful conceptual framework, I do not mean to suggest that these represent distinct binaries. There are of course many nations that fall into a ‘middle zone’ such as the BASIC countries, as well as vast forms of inequality in both wealthier and poorer nations.
has been described as ‘counter-hegemony’ although the term was not one that Gramsci himself used (Forgacs 1989).

The work of organic intellectuals is therefore particularly important for groups that would benefit from radical social change but do not have the means or desire to accomplish such change through the use of force. Gramsci (1971) thus noted that these intellectuals would contribute to a ‘war of position,’ which he often equated with a ‘passive revolution,’ as opposed to a ‘war of manoeuvre’ involving actual physical combat. It must be noted that such an intellectual endeavour requires more than simply confronting one philosophy or ideology with another. To establish a new narrative in society, capitalist relations would need to be challenged on multiple fronts, including through social institutions and the complex processes of forming alliances (Ibid.).

These processes, which Gramsci felt would be crucial to establishing a ‘new historical phase,’ suggest that a network like Vía Campesina, or the broader climate justice assemblage, must therefore move beyond creating connections with activists currently participating in social movement struggles. It is noteworthy that Gramsci had much to say about the role of peasants in their potential for contributing to efforts to establish an anti-capitalist hegemony. He was writing in a period in which historical conditions had lead to a fairly distinct divide between the interests of city dwellers and “the demands of the countryside” (Ibid: 91), as well as a geographic north-south divide in Italy, with the north generally industrialized and the south still mostly rural. Gramsci in fact “had a favorable view of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry compared to other Marxist thinkers [but] nonetheless, he saw the peasantry as lacking the leadership, organizational capacity, and autonomous activity needed to challenge ruling class hegemony” (Karriem 2015: 156). Thus, while he did not see peasants as ‘elaborating’ their own organic intellectuals or demonstrating the wherewithal to create their own political parties (Gramsci 1971: 6, 75), Gramsci saw the peasantry as being capable of maximizing forms of ‘everyday resistance’ that would see them leverage cultural and political gains within the openings created by the limitations of dominant coercive control (Robbins 2012: 62).

Regardless of the extent to which Gramsci’s observations on peasants may or may not still be relevant in the contemporary moment, what is particularly important in a
discussion of Vía Campesina’s efforts is that system change needs to be about more than farmers’ interests and food issues. I indicated as much above in covering Harvey’s theories regarding militant particularism, but Gramsci’s ideas further suggest that the movement of movements working toward climate justice and societal transformation will also need to determine how to form alliances with diverse categories of workers and other social groups. In the context of widely dominant neoliberal capitalist hegemony, Vía Campesina will therefore need to take into account the ways in which the “masses …[are] temporarily ensnared against their real material interests and position in the structure of social relations… [with many workers] both dependent on and exploited by the capitalist system” (Hall 1988: 43-44; emphasis in original).

System change may therefore require, for example, climate justice advocates like Vía Campesina to seek potential allies among workers in extractive industries and on large-scale farms, employees of progressive (as opposed to radical) NGOs, and so on. In Stuart Hall’s words, “What is required here is to understand how, under different concrete conditions, the perceptions and conceptions of the dominated classes can, equally cogently and plausibly, be organized, now into the reformist, now into the revolutionary discourse” (1988: 46; emphasis in original). These are certainly tall orders for a social movement of any scope and size, but Vía Campesina has regularly played a role in the movement that insists that ‘another world is possible’ (see Klein 2001b), in direct contradiction to the claim put forward by the likes of Margaret Thatcher that ‘there is no alternative’ to the unfolding of neoliberal capitalism (Hall 1988).24

24 As Hall observes, Thatcherism and the ‘TINA’ philosophy was effective in the 1980s at convincing potential labour/liberal voters to support the Right with the understanding that the “British economy and the whole industrial structure were too weak …to generate the huge surpluses required both to sustain the capital accumulation and profitability …and cream off enough to finance the welfare state, high wages, and improved conditions for the less well-off—the only terms on which the historic [post-war] compromise could operate” (1988: 37; emphasis in original).
The People’s Summit and People’s Organizing

…[The] green economy is nothing more than a green mask for capitalism. It is also a new mechanism to appropriate our forests, rivers, land…our territories! … Investment capital now seeks new markets through the “green economy;” securing the natural resources of the world as primary inputs and commodities for industrial production, as carbon sinks or even for speculation. This is being demonstrated by increasing land grabs globally, for crop production for both export and agrofuels… We reject the “Green Economy” as it is pushed now in the Rio+20 process.

- La Vía Campesina (‘Reclaiming our Future’ 2012)

3.1 Activist research: solidarity and reflexivity

Fist-sized splotches of red paint splattered against the exterior wall of Vale’s headquarters in downtown Rio de Janeiro, representing the blood of peasants that the international mining company had been responsible for spilling in recent years. Several dozen activists were throwing eggs that had been filled with the paint at Vale’s towering building, from among a crowd of thousands of Vía Campesina members and supporters who had marched together for the demonstration from the People’s Summit in Flamengo Park. The symbolic act of covering the company’s headquarters in ‘blood’ was the finale for the evening, which had also featured fiery speeches blasting through large speakers mounted on a truck, denouncing Vale for its human rights violations and environmentally destructive practices.

As I indicated at the outset of Chapter 1, participating in the People’s Summit exposed me to a range of fervent emotions as well as processes that I would have been unable to observe had I been constrained to only study Vía Campesina’s work on climate justice by doing secondary research while at home in Toronto. Simply reviewing the network’s
publications and online materials would certainly not have provided me with the same impression of the energy behind this movement.

In this chapter I will therefore expand on my experiences in Rio and discuss the methods I used to critically analyze Vía Campesina’s work on the topic of climate justice, but I will do so in a reflexive manner so as to situate myself in relation to the research I carried out. The aim here is to also outline my methodology, or the rationale for the approach that I took, that lead to the analysis that will follow. I will discuss the interviews that I conducted, the documents that I reviewed, and the scope within which I was compelled to work for logistical reasons, as well as some of the observations I made while attending the People’s Summit.

To begin with, it is important to note some biases that I carried with me into this research project. Admittedly, I am inclined to stand in solidarity with any social movement apparently bridging the gap between issues of climate change and social justice. This is in part because of the growing evidence of the impacts of global warming that are disproportionately affecting some of the world’s least privileged people, but also because of the apparent power of social movements to push beyond the limits of mainstream climate change discourses. Until recently, the focus of these discourses in U.S. and Canadian contexts has been almost entirely on either (1) the individualized efforts to reduce carbon footprints that I mentioned in Chapter 2, such as those that take the form of green consumerism, or (2) UN-lead global governance processes that have largely resulted in disappointing outcomes for anyone hoping for meaningful progress on climate change, with the COP15 that took place in Copenhagen perhaps being the quintessential instance of this trend. These types of responses to a systemic challenge as widespread and complex as climate change can easily lead to inertia, as they often leave people feeling overwhelmed, hopeless and/or guilty (Easterbrook 2013).

The ‘system change, not climate change’ slogan that was popularized in 2009 in the streets of Copenhagen presents a unique alternative to the mainstream responses that offer only modest proposals for dealing with such a significant problem. Fortunately, the spirit of this motto seems to have been taken up by social movements in North America since 2011. This has been demonstrated by the caliber of debates that have surrounded the
Occupy movement, the Quebec student movement, \(^{25}\) Idle No More, and mass organizing that has been done to prevent the construction of pipelines to transport diluted tar sands bitumen (‘dilbit’) out of Alberta. Many of these debates have centred on questioning the logic of colonial and capitalist systems and whether there are not other forms of organizing societies in a more socially equitable and environmentally sustainable way.

Personally, I have been involved in organizing work surrounding the Line 9 pipeline in Ontario. This is an issue that has brought together diverse groups who oppose the proposal of oil and gas company Enbridge to pump tar sands bitumen west to east through a pipeline that was built for conventional oil in 1976. Communities are rallying behind this effort because of the local risks (including the obvious potential health and environmental consequences that a pipeline rupture represents) and the global risks (as this project would likely lead to the exportation of this landlocked oil and the associated increase in both tar sands extraction and carbon emissions), and because they believe alternatives exist to such dangerous practices.\(^{26}\)

As activist scholars would argue however, standing in solidarity with the subjects of your research will not necessarily detract from the quality of your analysis, though it is important to be clear about your purpose and reflexive in terms of your engagement with the evidence at hand (see Hale 2008; Speed 2008). As Harvey (1984) points out, while it is key for academics to maintain scientific integrity, this does not necessarily mean subscribing to the positivist notion that research can be fully objective. It is either a façade or a demonstration of a lack of self-awareness to claim to be a neutral observer in carrying out research, be it in the social or physical sciences. Similarly, Hale (2008) argues that it is quite possible to maintain methodological rigour while upholding a political stance on a given topic. Objections to activist scholarship, he notes, are often “encapsulated in three powerful words: positivism, objectivity, and rigor” yet these expressions of disapproval can often be countered through “deconstructive moves: against positivism as an apology for Western imperial reason; against objectivity as a smoke screen for alignment with the

\(^{25}\) Also known as the ‘Maple Spring,’ this student movement was about much more than tuition issues. Organizers in Quebec used the threat of a massive hike in school fees to mobilize a response to broader austerity measures.

\(^{26}\) See NoLine9.ca for further details.
powerful; [and] against methodological rigor as a fetishization of data in the absence of critical scrutiny of underlying social categories and precepts” (2008: 8).

Therefore, with this in mind, in order to effectively perform an analysis of Vía Campesina in the context of climate justice organizing, I have attempted to keep my subjective position top of mind, validating the group’s efforts whenever appropriate while also providing a critical perspective on the tensions and complexities that arise with work of this kind. Ultimately, an honest assessment of a social movement that includes thoughtful critique will be more useful to it (directly or indirectly) than simply championing the cause. As mentioned previously, Vía Campesina stands apart from many groups working on the topic of climate justice due to its geographical reach and influence, as well as the direct connection that its members have to climate issues. Therefore, despite the challenges the network may face, it may well be poised to inform similarly ambitious social movement actors on the potential successes that can be achieved through practical steps taken to organize effectively on a multifaceted global issue.

3.2 Notes on methods

The People’s Summit that took place from June 15 to 22, 2012 certainly brought together a diverse collection of actors working on issues related to climate justice and system change. Tens of thousands of people from around the world converged for the summit’s frenzy of workshops, assemblies and plenary sessions that ran along 2.5 kilometres of Rio’s ‘Aterro do Flamengo,’ a park on the shore of the Guanabara Bay. Open-air tents, pavilions and clusters of temporary booths filled the length of this stretch of green space, with dozens of activities taking place at any given time. According to Vía Campesina, thousands of its members from Brazil and hundreds of its members from elsewhere in Latin America and around the world participated in the People’s Summit (‘Rio+20’ 2012), therefore the network was certainly well-represented among the attendees.

Throughout this intensive week of events, I was able to connect with Vía Campesina members both formally and informally. The less formal encounters included those I had
through participating in workshops and other sessions that either featured allies of the network or were attended by members themselves who participated in discussions. I also marched in the spirited demonstration against Vale described above, which in fact was just a preview of the summit’s main mobilization that took place two days later, when several tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Rio, waving banners, playing drums and other instruments, dancing, and—for those with access to microphones—delivering additional explosive monologues on the topic of environmental justice.

In combination, the opportunity to take part in the diverse workshops and events during the People’s Summit provided me with an insight into Vía Campesina’s organizational culture, the dialogues in which its members are instrumental, and its various alliances that contribute to the network’s complexity as an assemblage. I would characterize my involvement as a researcher at the summit as ‘micro-ethnography’ due to the fact that I did not have the chance to engage in longer-term participant observation (see Bryman et al. 2009: Ch. 9). My approach was generally inductive in nature, as I was open to observing first-hand how Vía Campesina and its members work on topics related to climate justice, as opposed to making an effort to validate a pre-formed hypothesis.

In conducting interviews, I attempted to connect with people that represented the diversity of Vía Campesina, geographically and in terms of their role either within the network or as a representative of one of its partner organizations. This is illustrated in Table 3-1. In total I met with ten Vía Campesina representatives who were either staff, farmers from member organizations, or individuals who sit on the network’s International Coordinating Committee (ICC); and I met with three representatives of partner NGOs. Some interviews took place by Skype or email following the People’s Summit for logistical reasons, but most were conducted in Rio.

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27 Such as Miguel Altieri, an academic who studies agroecology; Patrick Mooney of the ETC Group; Anna Carolina, a lawyer who has worked with the MST; and Vandana Shiva who spoke about ‘seed sovereignty’ and also co-lead side events at the UN conference with Vía Campesina representatives.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Reference Number</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Language in which interview was conducted</th>
<th>Role / Link to VC</th>
<th>Contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (MPA)</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Member org.</td>
<td>IP / E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Frente Nacional Campesina Ezequiel Zamora (FNCEZ)</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Member org.</td>
<td>IP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Agricultores y Ganaderos (COAG) * and European Coordination Vía Campesina</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Member org. / ICC Rep.</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Unión Campesina Panameña (UCP)</td>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Member org. (CLOC VC)</td>
<td>IP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC) * and CLOC VC *29</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Member org.</td>
<td>IP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Scottish Crofting Federation</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Member org.</td>
<td>IP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Vía Campesina (South Asia)</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Technical staff</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>National Farmer’s Union (NFU)</td>
<td>Canada: Saskatchewan</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Member org. / Former ICC Rep.</td>
<td>IP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Coordination Nationale des Organisations Paysannes (CNOP)</td>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Member org. / ICC Rep.</td>
<td>IP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Solidaridad Suecia-América Latina (SAL)</td>
<td>Sweden / Ecuador</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>NGO working directly with VC groups</td>
<td>IP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>ENDA Tiers-Monde</td>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>NGO that partners with VC</td>
<td>S / IP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>IBON International</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>NGO that has partnered with VC</td>
<td>IP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-1: Interviews conducted with Vía Campesina members and representatives of partner organizations

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28 Legend: IP = In Person | S = Skype | E = Email | P = Phone
29 CLOC = La Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo (The Latin-American Coordination of Rural Organizations)
These interviews were semi-structured, as I combined the initial interview guide that I had developed with questions that were informed by my observations of the People’s Summit. There were certainly advantages to having had participated in the summit, in terms of building rapport and being able to ask educated questions. Of course, several challenges also arose, such the task of carrying out a fluid and efficient conversation in the case of the interviews that were translated. Ultimately, however, I found all of the interviews to be incredibly useful in grounding the other research that I carried out, such as my analysis of Vía Campesina’s various documents.

After completing and transcribing the interviews, I used the same coding scheme to classify and highlight themes within both the transcripts and the publications and other documents that I reviewed (see Table 3-2). The software NVivo proved to be a very helpful tool in this regard; it allowed me to identify (including through keyword searches) and track trends and topics within the vast amount of information that Vía Campesina and its member organizations have disseminated, in addition to the 13 transcripts that I had on hand.

The documents that I undertook to analyze included emails and e-newsletters that Vía Campesina distributed between the Fall of 2011 and the Summer of 2013,30 plus webpages, press releases and reports relevant to climate change that were available through viacampesina.org. In addition, my results were also informed by the network’s increasing social media presence. This includes a website called Vía Campesina TV that was launched in March 2013, and a review of their Facebook and Twitter activity — communications efforts they started in June 2010 and February 2011 respectively. In total, my analysis included over 200 Vía Campesina documents31, a number that could have been overwhelmingly larger if I spoke Spanish or Portuguese as my analysis focused on data that had been written in, or translated to, English.32

30 A period that included COP17 in Durban, South Africa, the Rio+20 conference, COP18 in Doha, Qatar, and Vía Campesina’s sixth international conference.
31 This included 103 emails/e-newsletters, 65 publications/reports, and 59 website documents.
32 Only in a few instances did I rely on additional documents or videos that were only available in French, La Vía Campesina’s fourth dominant language (as per Rosset, 2005).
## Coding Scheme: Interviews and Documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnosis:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capitalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate injustices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land grabbing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats to lives / livelihoods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prognosis:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food sovereignty &amp; agroecology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption / food miles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System change, energy systems &amp; trade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action repertoires; Motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity; Collective identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-2: Coding scheme used to analyze interview transcripts and documents

### 3.3 Notes on scope

In his 2005 report to the Norwegian Development Fund, Peter Rosset raises an important point to be considered in terms of the prospect of evaluating a social movement like Vía Campesina. He had been tasked with determining how Vía Campesina would be assessed regarding the expenditure of money provided by the Fund to support the network in its efforts to advance food sovereignty and agrarian reform, with a particular focus on African initiatives. Rosset established a methodology that was based on the understanding that a social movement cannot be evaluated in the same way that an NGO, for example, would be; Vía Campesina has political goals, not technical ones, and its work is not project-based in nature. This meant that qualitative results would likely be much more meaningful (and available) than quantitative outcomes, in part because a social movement such as this is geared toward serving its members rather than external
stakeholders. As participants in Rosset’s study agreed, Vía Campesina could only ever truly be ‘evaluated’ by its members (2005: 1).

The same observation can be applied in the specific case of the movement’s work on climate justice. This research project is unable to assess, for example, whether Vía Campesina’s claims about the contributions that food sovereignty could make to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are valid, although studies have been done to analyze (and support) specific aspects of these claims (Altieri 1999, 2010; Martinez-Alier 2011; NWAEG 2009; Rosset 1999, 2011). What is more relevant here are the processes undertaken by Vía Campesina to develop its positions on climate justice, and the potential for the practical implementation of the network’s proposed solutions. Speaking to interviewees certainly provided meaningful insights into the strengths and challenges associated with Vía Campesina’s stances on climate justice, but it was out of scope for this research project to attempt to provide a statistically significant survey of the views of the network’s members around the world.33

Another notable constraint to this project’s methods was the fact that the interviews and observations taken at the People’s Summit were geographically skewed. Although I was able to speak with Vía Campesina representatives from a diversity of countries, the participants at the summit were clearly most highly representative of Latin American countries for the simple reason that it was more affordable and logistically feasible for them to travel to Rio de Janeiro. As reflected in Table 1-1, a total of 45 per cent of Vía Campesina’s member organizations are based in Latin American countries, however it is obviously important to hear the perspectives of the remaining 55 per cent based elsewhere. To some degree, my analysis of Vía Campesina’s documents from around the world helped compensate for this bias, but it would be worth questioning whether I would have been

33 A possible research design could have involved an approach similar to the one undertaken by della Porta et al. in their study of European anti-globalization social movement actors and their stances on various systemic problems, counter-proposals and action repertoires (2006). The researchers in that case compared relevant documents across a broad range of groups and conducted surveys to gage degrees of agreement and disagreement among the actors that converged during various protests. Such an approach was beyond the scope of this study due to the time and resource limitations that accompany a research project of this nature, but even a more lengthy and comprehensive analysis does not change the fact that many of the concepts and themes explored through this thesis are difficult, if not impossible, to measure.
left with the same impressions of the network had I visited a similar summit in Tanzania, Thailand or Turkey. With these comments on the scope of this research project in mind, I must note that in the discussion that follows, I have attempted to highlight the common threads that run through Vía Campesina’s documents on climate change as they relate to the interviews I conducted. There are such broad and complex issues that arise in an analysis of food systems and climate change—from energy systems and consumption to electoral politics—that it is important to discuss these themes holistically in terms of how they interconnect, while acknowledging that it is not possible to fully explore any of them. I attempt to assess the relevant climate justice proposals in terms of how diverse member organizations contribute to their formation and the extent to which those proposals are geared towards practical implementation, while not presuming to ‘evaluate’ Vía Campesina as a social movement.

3.4 Alliances and connective conversations

As indicated above, thousands of Vía Campesina members converged in Rio de Janeiro for the June 2012 events. This included not only those belonging to member organizations but also technical staff and regional representatives of the International Coordinating Committee (ICC), some of whom were involved in the Rio+20 conference despite Vía Campesina’s skepticism about the integrity of UN negotiation processes. The network thus carried out an ‘inside-outside’ strategy in Rio.

The ‘inside’ portion of this strategy involved participating in ‘side events’ at the UN gathering, and having representatives contribute to debates as part of the ‘Farmers Major

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34 Interestingly, several people that I spoke to at the People’s Summit in Rio expressed a feeling of being excluded from some of the proceedings because they spoke only English or French (despite interpretation services that were available at some events). Rosset noted in his 2005 study that since many members do not speak one of Vía Campesina’s four dominant languages, he reached out to research participants from South Korea and Thailand to broaden the scope of his analysis.

35 This included organizing a side event on Food Sovereignty and Agroecology and participating in others on topics such as: technology and climate solutions, sustainable agriculture and food systems, and relevant women’s issues.
Group’ that ostensibly was able to participate in the negotiation processes that lead to the final Rio+20 document, *The Future We Want* (see UNCSD 2012). It became apparent through these processes that negotiators representing national delegations could simply veto any contentious proposals raised by the various ‘major groups’ (Interview 8; Martins 2012) and that the side events did not influence the outcome of the conference. As a former Vía Campesina ICC member explained to me, they felt it would be better to participate in the Rio+20 processes rather than boycotting them and having industrial agribusiness be the sole voice of farmers at the conference: “…Farmers have, in large measure, credibility in those venues... They have no power, but they have legitimacy and are well-thought of publicly. So it’s important that they’re not misrepresented by one voice only” (Interview 8).

A statement put out by Vía Campesina following the UN conference claimed that the proceedings reaffirmed that governments remain “puppets of corporations” (‘Rio+20’ 2012). It is no surprise then that the ‘outside’ portion of the network’s strategy in Rio de Janeiro—namely, their participation in the People’s Summit—was where they focused most of their energy and resources.

The summit provided an opportunity to observe Vía Campesina in the context of a movement of movements working toward climate justice and system change. Hundreds of civil society organizations, trade unions and NGOs came from around the world to participate, having responded to a ‘global call’ that could be found on the summit’s website. Vía Campesina was however one of the key planning bodies, among a group of twenty organizations—many of which were based in Brazil, although they collectively had an international reach (see LVC ‘Organizing Committee’ 2012). Vía Campesina had significant influence in deciding how the summit would be organized from a procedural standpoint, and also weighed in on how available funds should be allocated. For example, Vía Campesina was able to successfully convince the larger planning committee that money would be better spent subsidizing farmers and other participants who could not

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36 Other major groups include: Business and Industry; Children and Youth; Indigenous Peoples; Local Authorities; NGOs; Scientific and Technological Community; Women; Workers and Trade Unions (UNCSD 2012).

37 See http://cupuladospovos.org.br/en/
otherwise afford to travel to the summit, rather than establishing an expensive media campaign (Interview 8).

While the People’s Summit was not strictly a climate justice gathering, this was certainly a central theme. As reflected in Table 3-3, virtually all of the workshops, plenary sessions and assemblies related in some way either to this issue specifically or to system change more broadly. One Vía Campesina representative who had helped with organizing the summit stressed the need for these processes to be oriented around a holistic approach:

We have known from the beginning that culture, agriculture and politics are integrated. [You] can’t pull one piece out and do anything effective on that [issue] if you’re not also aware of—and intentional about—the implications elsewhere …It’s an integrated discussion …What we’re doing is articulating the interrelatedness of …the food system with who we are, how we live, where we are […] and of] the future of biological and ecological systems. So, in this discourse …we’re very adamant that it is all woven together and [that you can’t just do] climate analysis without seeing what’s happening to people, how to relate it, how we are eating, and how we are living within our ecological context. (Interview 8)

In that light, approximately 750 workshops were held in total at the summit, on topics ranging from ‘energy sovereignty’ and ‘climate jobs’ to ‘the right to the city’ (the latter of which featured a discussion about sustainability within urban areas along with specific waste, water and energy issues).

Overall, the intention was for organizers of these diverse workshops to compile a summary of proposals that would be discussed in the thematic plenary sessions. At each of these plenary sessions, participants then had the opportunity to expand on the ideas that had been conveyed at the autonomously run workshops and assign the points raised to the appropriate assembly that would summarize the problems, solutions and potential campaigns presented. Vía Campesina and its regional members, for example, ran workshops on topics such as ‘GMOs: The False Solutions and the Resistance Movement’ and ‘Facing Environmental, Food and Economic Crises: Women’s Experiences and Initiatives.’ Ideas from these workshops fed into the plenary session on food sovereignty, which in turn informed each of the three assemblies.
### Table 3-3: Thematic plenary sessions and concluding assemblies of the People’s Summit, Rio de Janeiro, June 15 – 22, 2012. The full name of the summit was ‘The People’s Summit for Social and Environmental Justice: Against Commodification of Life and Nature and in Defence of the Commons’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plenary Sessions</th>
<th>Assemblies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plenary 1  Rights for Social and Environmental Justice</td>
<td>Assembly 1 Structural Causes and False Solutions (Denunciation of structural causes and new forms of expanded capital accumulation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plenary 2  Defence of Common Goods Against Commodification</td>
<td>Assembly 2 Our Solutions (…and new paradigms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plenary 3  Food Sovereignty</td>
<td>Assembly 3 Agenda for Campaigns and Actions(^{38}) (that well-articulate the process of anti-capitalist mobilizations after Rio+20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plenary 4  Energy and Extractive Industries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plenary 5  Work: For Another Economy and New Paradigms for Society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coordinating all of these activities was evidently no easy feat. To add to the summit’s complexity, larger workshops and all of the plenaries and assemblies were simultaneously translated between Portuguese, Spanish and English, with sound booths, professional translators and headsets all on hand. Smaller workshops were either unilingual or were translated on an ad-hoc basis. The number of logistical and technical hurdles involved with these processes certainly lent credence to the parallel observation that Vía

\(^{38}\) Directly translated from Spanish/Portuguese, this reads Agenda for Campaigns and ‘Fights’ or ‘Struggles.’
Campesina’s international conferences were “a beautiful picture of chaos” (Interview 9). Especially during the first couple of days of the People’s Summit, workshops were inexplicably cancelled or rescheduled, tents were still being constructed, and technical glitches were common.

The 'beauty' in these processes, however, was that despite linguistic, cultural or political differences, participants generally demonstrated an impressive amount of patience and open-mindedness as they shared ideas and carried out debates. Both the organizers of the summit and the participants seemed to put forward a great effort to ensure that the proceedings would be inclusive and democratic. In this sense the People’s Summit stood in stark contrast to the UN’s Rio+20 conference, where countless barriers to meaningful participation were in place. That said however, there were multiple civil society organizations and NGOs who, like Vía Campesina, carried out an ‘inside-outside’ strategy. This meant that the range of actors and networks in Rio de Janeiro, whether progressive or radical, had multiple forums in which to share ideas and potentially form or strengthen alliances.

IBON International is an example of one NGO whose representatives divided their time and energy between Rio+20 and the People’s Summit. This organization worked in partnership with Vía Campesina for several years when the network was first promoting the concept of food sovereignty, with IBON also helping to establish the People’s Coalition on Food Sovereignty—a network of international grassroots groups and peasant organizations that remains active today39 (Interview 13). Interestingly, IBON has also put out its own ‘primer’ on system change: a 34-page document that concisely argues that “only with a radical shift in the way our economic and social systems are organized” can the relationship between humankind and nature “be reset onto a sustainable path” (IBON 2012b). The document has much to say about the role of social movements in bringing about system change, and I was struck by the fact that the International Director of the organization conveyed to me that he feels that NGOs such as IBON should be “at the service” of social movements, as opposed to working in their own interests or according to their own institutional constraints (Interview 13).

39 See www.foodsov.org
Certainly, not all international NGOs will take such an approach, as many are in fact geared solely toward more reformist endeavours (see Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011), but there were numerous sentiments similar to those conveyed by IBON’s director that were expressed at the People’s Summit. One example came from a session on alternative development paradigms, where Miguel Altieri, an academic who studies agroecology and has backed Vía Campesina’s claims about food sovereignty’s prospects with scientific research, was speaking as part of a panel. He indicated that scientists and NGOs need to facilitate the processes that will help bring about the radical economic and social changes required to confront environmental challenges, not steer the agenda. “We cannot be politically neutral,” Altieri said with conviction, “and we must realize that there is no reason to have any hope in the traditional institutions [to take the lead on such radical change].”

On the whole then, the sentiment that seemed to be carried through the People’s Summit was that the diverse actors and networks that participated were playing a role in contributing to this movement of movements for social and environmental justice, not merely observing it, and certainly not competing with it. From labour and faith groups to NGOs and peasant organizations like Vía Campesina, the impression conveyed was that this movement would at least have the potential to move beyond the various instances of militant particularism that may be driving these actors and networks. This was illustrated by both the scope and caliber of the discussions taking place as well as the democratic and inclusive processes driving them forward, but it must also be noted that the alliance building that was apparent at the summit also indicated that this may be a movement with the capacity to help establish a broad counter-hegemonic narrative in society.

Throughout the summit, for example, it was demonstrated that Vía Campesina had direct connections with research groups, NGOs, legal organizations, academics, unions, and scientists—most of whom travelled from around the world to converge in Rio. In this sense, even though the summit was limited to a week of events and therefore may have seemed fleeting, the informal and formal alliances that are built and solidified through thousands of interactions occurring in one place can certainly have longer lasting impacts in terms of knowledge sharing and future collaboration.
For Vía Campesina, there seemed to be a direct relationship between forming such alliances and being part of a holistic conversation about system change. As one representative indicated on the day following the final assembly of the People’s Summit:

Our evaluation yesterday among the ICC was that this has been a very positive, politically strong set of actions and statements …and we were engaged in a lot of alliance building. I mean, nobody thinks one group of people is going to solve this. If we haven’t got a broad social understanding and a social stance here then we’re not going to be able to hold back the corporate onslaught marauding around the world destroying this, that and everything. (Interview 8)

Other representatives indicated that, apart from Vía Campesina’s successes of this sort on the whole, they also felt that a great deal of useful networking and collaboration also took place for individuals and for member organizations.⁴⁰

Of course, not every discussion and interaction that took place at the People’s Summit lead to complete agreement and harmony. In fact, as a reflection of the openness of the summit, the organizers hosted a “Dialogue on the Green Economy” one evening that (predictably) lead to a heated debate as Achim Steiner, the Executive Director of the UNEP, was invited to speak about the concepts that were making the rounds at the Rio+20 conference such as ‘payments for ecosystem services’ and ‘nature as capital’—concepts that his organization was helping to promote.

Generally, however, a feeling of cooperation and collaboration dominated the week’s events. In fact, from the intimate workshops to the mass rallies, the summit seemed to be a cultural experience as much as a political one. In one particularly notable display of solidarity, hundreds of Vía Campesina members concluded a session on food sovereignty one evening by standing arm-in-arm, singing and waving flags—a palpably spiritual gesture. Authors such as Wolford (2010: 87-88) have commented on the importance of such gatherings, known as mística (mysticism), to the movement on the whole. Drawing on the tradition of liberation theology, it is felt that such symbolic gestures help unite and mobilize activists (Ibid.).

More generally, some Vía Campesina members reflected on the fact that the experiences at the summit can be simultaneously culturally and politically eye-opening,

⁴⁰ Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7.
especially for those coming from places where they may not be exposed to such holistic and radical discourses (Interviews 1, 3, 6, 8). As one Canadian farmer indicated:

We live in a dominant culture that is so committed to a Western style mindset—not only Western clothes, but Western thinking …about innovation, about dis-integrated work places, living spaces, family life …a dis-integrated view to how we think about who we are. And that’s such a dominant view that it’s very hard for us to let go of that. It’s harder in some ways, for example, for us in industrialized countries to imagine what food sovereignty looks like [or how we could] achieve food sovereignty... And so [these experiences are both] very complex and very necessary. (Interview 8).

In this way, generally progressive individuals and groups who attended may have found many of the more radical themes and ideas that wound their way into the summit’s ‘Final Declaration’ to be rather enlightening: establishing “sovereign control over the commons,” ending “the global north’s militarization of the global south” and scaling up alternatives “as a counter-hegemonic and transformative project” are just a few examples of phrases that would not typically be bandied about in mainstream discussions about social and environmental justice (LVC ‘Final Declaration’ 2012).

3.5 Diagnosing climate injustice

As demonstrated by the dynamics of the ‘people’s organizing’ that took place in Rio de Janeiro, the development of Vía Campesina’s understanding of climate justice and system change does not take place in a vacuum. There are integrated conversations that take place amongst the diverse nodes of the vast assemblage that is working collectively on these issues. In the next chapter I will discuss the specific proposals relating to system change that Vía Campesina has established both internally, such as those that highlight the need for food sovereignty, and those that the network has developed or endorsed as part of the broader climate justice movement. Before doing so, however, it is important to look at the ‘diagnostic’ element of Vía Campesina’s ‘meaning work.’

Arguably, it is easier for groups to talk about problems as they establish internal cohesiveness rather than engaging in the ‘prognosis’ of alternatives and proposals that can help address the situation at hand. Following the People’s Summit, in fact, some Vía Campesina representatives expressed a degree of dissatisfaction that throughout the
week’s activities there was a disproportionate amount of time spent discussing the problems peasant farmers and others are facing, rather than exploring and expanding on potential solutions (Interviews 6, 10). One Vía Campesina representative from Mali, for example, indicated that he was somewhat exasperated by this trend given that, prior to the summit, he already had a firm understanding of the growing corporate control of agriculture as well as the related environmental stresses this causes (Interview 10). Another farmer from Scotland put it this way:

In the plenaries at the Cúpula [dos Povos, the People’s Summit,] there was a lot of repetition of ‘these bad capitalists,’ you know? …A lot of restating ‘We hate. We hate. We hate.’ …What I’m really excited about [though, is] acknowledging all of the concerns we have, and then moving as quickly as possible from those concerns onto ‘What are the solutions?’—and making connections.

…Mobilization is good, but …what is it that you’re doing with the energy and the power that you have? …We need to spend more time ‘mobilizing for’ instead of ‘mobilizing against.’ (Interview 6)

While these are certainly valid observations, it must also be noted that others at the summit, including Vía Campesina members, felt that exploring the depths of the problems at hand—as well as their root causes—was crucial to developing an agreement among groups that system change is required along with a range of robust and radical solutions (Interviews 3, 4, 7, 8). As one peasant from Panama indicated:

When we discuss, as Vía Campesina, that we have the same problems in Africa, in Asia, in South America, in Canada, in the Caribbean, we learn that the [capitalist] system of production, and [approach] to life is not the solution. We realize that the solutions need to involve changing agriculture, changing consumption, changing energy systems, and more. (Interview 4)

And, similarly, another member conveyed that, in properly diagnosing the problems at hand, Vía Campesina was attempting to help people open up to the substantial changes that are required—people, for example, who would focus on discouraging the drinking of bottled water or on ending fossil fuel subsidies as the extent of their work towards establishing a more sustainable society:

So the Vía Campesina position alerts them to the fact that this is a broad and deep re-visioning of what we need to do and who we need to be in the world. …And that’s important. It isn’t that there’s a shortage of goodwill; it’s often that there’s a lack of a sense of how compromised we are ecologically and politically already, and so it’s a call to be more radical… to be clear about what’s on the line here. (Interview 8)
Collectively, these quotations reflect the importance for Vía Campesina of understanding the structural causes of the problems associated with the climate injustices that its member organizations are facing. On the topic of climate change, the network’s framing of the situation at hand was clear in the discussions that took place at the People’s Summit, just as they are well-articulated in their many documents and reports. Vía Campesina and its members diagnose the situation with which they are confronted on three fronts: challenges to production such as drought and other climatic variations; ‘false solutions’ to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions; and corporate agriculture in the context of broader capitalist development.

Regarding the first point, these small-scale farmers are clear that climate change is not a distant prospect. Farm production is being affected in various ways depending on the region, but the common thread that ties Vía Campesina members’ experiences together is that weather is becoming increasingly erratic and seasons less predictable.41 The place-based specifics of these experiences range from flooding in the Canadian prairies to drought that is becomingly increasingly common—in Spain, in Brazil, in Mali and many places in between. As one Panamanian farmer described:

With climate change you get different temperatures in different areas… Before you knew exactly when the rains were going to come. You could say, ‘In April we’re going to start planting,’ but now you have to wait until June in some cases. Similarly, whereas before the rains fell until January, now in December it’s almost dry… The cycles are no longer the same and we don’t know how to predict what will happen. So our planting time is totally thrown off. (Interview 4)

While these changes are often the most severe in the global south, which farmers from the north certainly acknowledge, Vía Campesina producers seem to be united by the increasingly challenging circumstances under which they must strive to “make the microcosm of their farms work.”42

Similarly, though the impacts are unevenly distributed, members consistently point to capitalist development as the root cause behind both industrial greenhouse gas emissions and the false solutions that are furthering climate injustices. In addition to the Indonesian

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41 Interviews 1, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10.
42 Personal communication with an Ottawa, Ontario area-based member of the National Farmers Union (NFU), October 23, 2012.
example of land-grabbing that was described in Chapter 1, Vía Campesina members offer countless stories of carbon trading and REDD initiatives that have pushed peasant farmers off their land. In many cases, agrofuel production is behind these injustices, generating “food to feed cars while so many are starving,” while at the same time increasing agrochemical use, contributing to deforestation, and reducing biodiversity (‘Cooling’ 2009: 5). Not only does agrofuel production appear to do virtually nothing to reduce humanity’s dependency on fossil fuels, but the practice of growing crops for this purpose has also drastically reduced the water supplies available to farmers in certain locales as well. One Vía Campesina member from Guatemala described how massive amounts of water have been diverted by agribusiness companies to grow sugarcane in monoculture plantations for agrofuel use (Interviews 5, 8).

At the People’s Summit, there was much discussion of the ways in which carbon trading schemes and the associated privatization of natural resources are “death-dealing” to communities (Interview 8), and it became clear that with the outcome of the UN conference, governments chose to prioritize “green capitalism [while] renouncing the needs of the citizens of the planet… This was essentially an attack on humanity,” said a European member of Vía Campesina’s ICC, “…Nothing less” (Interview 3). A review of the network’s email and web updates supports the notion that not only are livelihoods at stake, but lives are as well: in the last two years 10 farmer-activists have apparently been murdered for their role in community organizing geared towards resisting the commodification of their lands and resources. At the same time, countless others have experienced violence and threats of harm or assassination recently, with specific examples cited from Honduras, Paraguay, Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, India and the Philippines (see also ‘Violations’ 2006; cf. Borras Jr. 2007, 2008).

Also ubiquitous in Vía Campesina’s discussions and documents are references to the problems associated with the proliferation of capitalist agriculture and how its signature

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44 See also Wittman et al. (2010: Ch. 5 & 6) regarding the social and environmental impacts of agrofuel production.
45 Murders cited by Vía Campesina have occurred in Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Guatemala and Honduras. See also Torrez (2011).
tactics—from the corporate peddling of agrochemicals and GM seeds to the promotion of neoliberal trade agreements—are having devastating impacts on farmers worldwide. The network and its members use different terms to describe these problems depending on the circumstances, but they are evidently steadfast in their opposition to capitalist food systems and development models. As one peasant farmer from Central America put it, “Our best lands are being given over to monoculture, to produce watermelons so that we can provide the capitalist countries with dessert” (Interview 4).

Critiques among Vía Campesina groups of consumption patterns in wealthy countries go beyond food consumption, however. There is a widespread understanding that capitalist development generally is contributing to climate change, which ties together consumer culture, energy consumption, and corporate lobbying or direct influence over electoral politics. As small-scale farmers, Vía Campesina’s members therefore find themselves being squeezed by more than just capitalist agriculture: they are in the midst of struggles with corporations pushing mega-projects such as hydro-electric dams, huge urban developments and mining ventures, all of which can displace farmers and lead to the destruction and/or poisoning of local environments.

The depth of Vía Campesina’s analysis of the structural causes that connect environmental changes to food systems is thus an important aspect of the framing processes that help the network respond to the problem of climate change. However, as noted above, once a movement establishes a firm grasp of the interconnecting problems it is faced with, it must then move on to the ‘prognostic’ element of the ‘meaning work’ required to both maintain solidarity and gain momentum (della Porta et al. 2006; Snow, 2004). I will now turn to a discussion of the solutions that Vía Campesina proposes with regards to climate justice, as well as the processes involved with arriving at those proposals and alternative frameworks.

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46 Interviews 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10.
47 Interviews 1, 3, 4, 5, 9.
Peasant Farmers Cooling the Earth

[It] is time to radically change the industrial way to produce, transform, trade and consume food and agricultural products… Small-scale farming and local food consumption will reverse the actual devastation and support millions of farming families. Agriculture can also contribute to cooling down the earth by using farm practices that store CO$_2$ and reduce considerably the use of energy on farms.

- La Vía Campesina (‘Cooling’ 2009: 3)

4.1 Decisions for 200 million

One of the questions that social movement theorists have realized is key to bringing together a network of diverse groups is not just what solutions they agree on, but how those solutions are developed as part of the movement’s framing processes (della Porta et al. 2006; Tarrow 2011). This is particularly important for a network like Vía Campesina, which has critiqued the United Nations’ negotiations pertaining to food and environmental issues as essentially unrepresentative and unaccountable to anyone but corporations (‘Corporate Capture’ 2012; ‘Final Declaration’ 2012). $^{48}$

The issues of representation and ‘procedural justice’ are particularly important with regards to climate change decision-making at the international level given the enormous discrepancies among global stakeholders in terms of the potential threats of climate change and the associated power imbalances among those stakeholders (see Vanderheiden

As indicated in previous chapters, Vía Campesina members do not see UN efforts to allow farmers and civil society organizations opportunities to have their voices heard through these negotiation processes as holding any legitimacy or integrity. They would therefore likely agree with Ribot’s assertion that “Rights and participation are worthless without accountability. Without accountability you don’t have true representation but rather a benign dictatorship” (Personal communication, June 25, 2012; see also Ribot 2007).

Like the attempts to be inclusive and non-hierarchical that were demonstrated at the People’s Summit, Vía Campesina’s internal processes of representation therefore also stand in stark contrast to the UN’s version of ‘participation.’ Given the importance of these processes, I will review the ways in which decisions are made regarding the network’s climate change proposals before discussing the specifics of those proposals and their relation to Vía Campesina’s work on system change.

It must first be said that, with regards to developing its positions on climate justice, the network appears to be consistent in standing by its overall horizontal and open approach to representation. This involves an exchange of ideas between the grassroots members of Vía Campesina and their regional representatives. The latter—the members who make up the International Coordinating Committee (ICC)—decided the political position of Vía Campesina’s global campaign on climate change, but did so with input from member organizations. Furthermore, the nine regional groups work autonomously on specific campaigns according to their needs and plans (Interview 7). To elaborate, in the words of a staff member from South Asia:

All the movements here agree with [Vía Campesina’s] position on climate change; I have not come across any opposition or differences. The solutions are created by a bottom-up process of consultation, discussion and participation, and are not something that is imposed. We also have

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49 Fraser (2000), Ribot (2007), Schlosberg (2004) and Young (1990) also stress the importance for marginalized groups to be recognized and participate in environmental decision-making processes that are pertinent to their well-being.

50 Interviews 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9.
many regional discussions to create our own responses, which feed into the Vía Campesina position building process. (Interview 7)  

Similar sentiments were expressed by farmers from other regions, who indicated for example that: “It’s a two-way street. We’re engaged in an ongoing dialogue… a dialectical process” (Interview 1), and that “Vía Campesina doesn’t need intellectuals to propose ideas and to investigate solutions. These come from communities... [from the] people who are in the struggle—the campesinos and indigenous people… in each region” (Interview 4).

A significant feature of these processes that lend them integrity is the fact that it is elected farmers—one man and one woman from each region—who represent the grassroots movements via the ICC. In addition, it is not only at the international conferences that take place every few years where these opportunities for exchange take place; Vía Campesina regional representatives regularly engage in dialogue with member organizations through meetings, conference calls and the like (Interviews 7, 9). There is also technical staff in each region that facilitates these processes although “there is a distinction between paid/voluntary staff and the political leadership. The staff is there to provide technical help and other support, but all decisions are taken by the representatives of mass peasant organizations” (Interview 7).

One example of a ‘bottom-up’ movement of ideas regarding climate change comes from Brazil’s Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (MPA). Using the term alimergia, a combination of the Portuguese words for food and energy, the MPA discusses the concept of ‘energy sovereignty’ through which farmers can produce and control their own small-scale energy projects that would be geared toward local consumption. They discuss possibilities involving wind and solar, as well as biogas or biomass projects that would be

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51 This reflects Desmarais’ (2007: 30) observation that, “On key issues the consultation process goes beyond the ICC, because each regional co-ordinator must reflect the needs, concerns, and decisions of the organizations within his or her region.”

52 Desmarais (2007) effectively describes the internal struggles that took place in Vía Campesina’s early years to ensure that women were equitably represented in these processes. At the 2015 international conference it was clear that this momentum continues, with the women’s assembly re-launching their ‘Stop Violence Against Women’ campaign and renewing their “commitment to building new gender relations within La Vía Campesina” (‘Women’s Assembly’ 2015).

53 Small Farmers Movement
much smaller and more sustainable than the aforementioned agrofuel mega-projects.\(^{54}\) “It was our movement that brought forward these ideas, including the notion of producing bio-energy while producing food at the same time, to Vía Campesina,” explained an MPA representative (Interview 1). As will be described below, these proposals now form a plank of the network’s position on climate change.

Of course, the ICC also plays a role in disseminating information out to its member organizations, outlining “philosophies that [member organizations] can use, adapt and implement” (Interview 1). The committee also works on globally coordinated campaigns, as was demonstrated in 2010 when Vía Campesina put out its call for “Thousands of Cancún for climate justice” that was mentioned in Chapter 1. This call resulted in all of the regional groups organizing actions in their respective areas (Interview 7). The network’s member organizations are often also active in exchanging information horizontally—from group to group—in terms of production practices and political education.\(^{55}\) The former can integrate technical discussions such as, for example, how to increase crop yields or milk production using agroecological methods, and the latter is key to the development of a shared understanding of systemic causes and potential responses to neoliberal trade and the corporate food regime. In Latin America, this type of political education is called formation\(^{56}\) —a word that encapsulates the kind of practical training that holds praxis as a goal, so that theoretical knowledge about capitalist modes of production, trade and consumption can inform concrete organizing at community and national levels (Interviews 1, 2, 11; see also Larrabure 2013; LVC ‘Climate’ 2009; Wittman 2009: 817).

Participation in horizontal information sharing and formation varies, of course, from group to group and from region to region, just as not all of the 200 million members that are formally part of Vía Campesina’s network will get involved in decision-making processes. It is evident though that space is made for those who do want to express their opinions or propose positions that the network might adopt. A member of the ICC provided this description of the international meetings that take place:

\(^{54}\) See www.mpabrasil.org.br for more information.
\(^{55}\) For more on the ‘campesino a campesino’ methodology see LVC ‘Policy’ 2009: 186, and Holt-Giménez 1996.
\(^{56}\) ‘Formación’ in Spanish (for-ma-secoha), or ‘formação’ in Portuguese.
Vía Campesina to me is a beautiful picture of chaos in a sense. You’ve got multiple languages, multiple cultures, multiple countries represented… multiple realities. And you bring it all together often in really inadequate situations, where we have our technical support people who are struggling with ridiculous conditions and insecure power supply, and we have volunteer translators… [But] the technical people do what they need to do and then the meeting just comes together… [We] have a process and it’s very democratic and people are courageous and will speak out if they don’t feel the process is reflecting gender equity, for example, or is not fair. [These meetings] go on deep into the night until everybody’s had their say, and then the documents are reviewed by everybody… These are consensus documents… and if something is not reflected in the document there’s a very good rationale for why it’s not reflected in the document. (Interview 9)

This quotation provides an indication of the enormous amount of time and energy that must be put into the challenging process of ensuring that voices of peasant farmers from diverse contexts are incorporated into Vía Campesina’s documents and practical agendas. Yet the efforts seem to bear fruit, as expressed by another representative who said that in fact, “The consensus and conflict resolution process of Vía Campesina is the most important thing for the internal cohesion of the movement, and the main reason why there is such strong solidarity within the movement” (Interview 7). She explained that there are disagreements on some issues from time to time, but that these debates are resolved through consensus processes that ensure there are “no fundamental differences in the principles that Vía Campesina has promoted or the policies that are recommended, simply because they are collectively created.”

As an example of this degree of solidarity, the final declaration that came out of People’s Summit seemed to garner unanimous support from Vía Campesina participants. Perhaps such widespread support was easier to establish among the small-scale farmers in attendance in Rio de Janeiro because the network had already developed its proposals that connect food sovereignty to climate justice, making it easier for these positions to be integrated into the broader discussions on social and environmental justice and system change. In fact, since 2009 Vía Campesina members have been standing by their publication, *Small Scale Sustainable Farmers are Cooling Down the Earth* (‘Cooling’ 2009). This 24-page document stands as the network’s high-level response to the climate crisis, outlining the ways in which a new agroecologically-based food system might help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Major themes covered in the report include food production, consumption and trade. The next three sections in this chapter will discuss each of these in turn, supplementing the information outlined in ‘Cooling Down the Earth’
with anecdotes and examples gathered through interviews and the document analysis that I described in Chapter 3.

4.2 Production: “Climate justice is in our hands”

Through their international campaign on climate change, Vía Campesina has much to say about the potential for agroecological farming methods to both feed humanity and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, this focus on production practices seems to be a much more practical subject of relevance to Vía Campesina’s members, rather than discussing ‘climate justice’ in the abstract. “There’s a lot of difficulty using this [latter] kind of language,” explained a European member of the ICC, “because for small-scale agricultural producers these are terms that sound foreign... academic. It’s easier though, when speaking with peasant farmers to talk about using fewer petrochemicals, or about producing food that can be shipped over fewer kilometres... It’s easier to talk about composting” (Interview 3). This sentiment was echoed by farmers from other regions, who stressed that production methods are a much more concrete way in which to understand and address the differential impacts of climate change, and that farmers largely view this connection between food systems and environmental issues in a holistic sense: “For us it’s all related. If campesinos are fighting to access a piece of land... they’re going to reforest the land and produce goods from it, and at the same time they will eat. They won’t use chemicals and will protect the land. It’s a way to live. It’s all interconnected” (Interview 5).

Specific proposals to combat climate change that Vía Campesina has put forward then, include:

• Rebuilding soil fertility to capture and store carbon dioxide
• Farming with a diversity of animals integrated with crop production
• Opting for farms that integrate forest cover instead of the monocultural plantations that typically necessitate deforestation, and

57 LVC ‘Copenhagen’ 2009.
58 Interviews 2, 4, 5, 8, 11.
• Focusing more on producing food for people to eat, as opposed to for livestock or agrofuels (Summarized from ‘Cooling’ 2009)

These points are laid out in the ‘Cooling Down the Earth’ document mentioned above, and are backed by data from the non-profit research group GRAIN. The proposals demonstrate the interconnection between agricultural production and related issues such as land-use and deforestation.

The issue of soil fertility is central to these proposals, and Vía Campesina suggests that 20 to 35 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions could be reduced or offset through concerted efforts to restore the health of organic matter in soils back to pre-industrial conditions (2009: 14-15). This would involve relying more on the “millions of plants, bacteria, fungi, insects and other living organisms” that can generate productive soil, rather than on chemical fertilizers (Ibid.). Such efforts are touted as a way to increase the amount of carbon dioxide that can be sequestered in soils and, similarly, Vía Campesina cites research that indicates that using nitrogen-fixing plants and/or organic agriculture instead of nitrogen fertilizers can reduce both energy use on farms and the amount of nitrous oxide ($N_2O$) in the atmosphere, “the third most significant greenhouse gas” (2009: 4 – 7).

Integrating livestock operations with crop production, rather than continuing with industrial agriculture’s massive ‘confined animal feeding operations,’ can also help reduce nitrous oxide and methane ($CH_4$) levels according to this research (2009: 22). Vía Campesina estimates that, in total, 5 to 9 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions would be reduced by measures that would eliminate manure heaps and slurry lagoons, render long-distance transportation of industrial feed and frozen meat unnecessary, and reduce the amount of methane generated by cows, pigs and goats by improving natural feeding techniques (2009: 16). Supporting diversified systems that would integrate forest cover would also cut down on approximately 15 to 18 per cent of global emissions, an effort that would compliment focusing on food production rather than monocultural plantations of crops that are geared towards either agrofuels or animal feed as an end product (2009: 17).
It is important to note that such proposals involving agroecological farming methods do not represent a step backward, or a return to outdated agricultural practices, as one might assume. On the one hand, most peasant and small-scale farmers have never changed the majority of their techniques: “The solutions have been in process and implemented over hundreds—or thousands—of years,” explains a member of Canada’s National Farmers’ Union (NFU), “Some of [Vía Campesina’s] members, since time immemorial, have been farming in [their regions] and the soils remain fertile, the woods remain viable, and the cycles of life continue to be healthy.” Similarly, Vía Campesina exclaims in one of its publications that, “Peasant based production is not the ‘alternative’! …It is the model of production through which the world has been fed for thousands of years and it still is the dominant model of food production” (‘Policy’ 2009: 182). These sentiments support Lohmann’s assertion that climate change may be addressed much more effectively by transferring low-tech solutions out of the global south rather than disseminating high-tech solutions from the global north (2009: 1070).

On the other hand, in terms of these farming practices not representing a step backward, it is clear that peasants are continually striving to improve their techniques and share best practices in an effort to improve yields and make the most out of agroecological methods. These forms of knowledge transfer take place between farming communities, from rural to urban areas, and between Vía Campesina organizations from different countries (Interviews 1, 2, 6, 9). In addition, some of this knowledge transfer revolves around not only mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, but also ensuring that farms can adapt to environmental changes—or are “climate-chaos ready,” as one farmer put it (Interview 9).

Specific techniques to build resilience on farms include methods to capture rain water, plant crops that are naturally drought-resistant depending on the region’s climate, and ensuring that a wide variety of crops are planted in case unfavourable weather conditions arise unexpectedly (Interviews 1, 9). As one farmer from Ontario explained:
We grow about 50 different crops on our 200-acre farm. We have 12 acres under vegetables and then we have all of our different grains and soybeans. Most of what we do is successful but the thing about biodiversity and agriculture is that, when you have a particularly wet spring or summer you’re going to lose some of your crop, but while some may die, others will thrive in that condition, so you’re not going to lose everything (Interview 9).

This stands in sharp contrast to monocultural plantations where the limited crop diversity can spell disaster under poor climatic conditions. Clearly, the more biologically diverse production methods will take considerable expertise and organizational efforts, and that is the reason Vía Campesina’s member organizations benefit from the exchange of ideas that can help them with climate change adaptation.

In statements pertaining to the connections between agroecological practices and climate change mitigation and adaptation, Vía Campesina also asserts that small-scale farmers can feed the planet at the same time as helping to ‘cool’ it. The network approximates that 70 per cent of humanity relies on food from peasant and family farmers like those that make up its membership, so it is quick to dismiss claims that industrial agriculture is needed because it is more productive (‘Feed the World’ 2010). Academics and research groups have backed up these claims, including the UN Environment Programme in its International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, the IAASTD (2009; see also ETC Group 2009).

At the same time, Vía Campesina points out that, because small-scale farming is more labour intensive, these forms of production can also help with the widespread unemployment problems that are plaguing nations around the world. This is certainly a claim that can be problematized as easily as it can be romanticized, however; agricultural work is physically demanding and attracting people to ‘toil in the soil’ can bring with it socio-cultural challenges that will vary from region to region. Nonetheless, given the significant number of peasant farmers that remain engaged in forms of agroecological production, Vía Campesina can be taken literally when they proclaim that “climate justice is in our hands” (‘Copenhagen’ 2009).
4.3 Consumption: “Fair distribution of necessary goods”\textsuperscript{59}

In connecting the concepts of food sovereignty and climate justice in relation to consumption, Vía Campesina demonstrates its consistency in looking at these issues from a holistic perspective. Of concern to the network and its member organizations is not only consumption with regards to the food system, but general patterns of consumerism that have an impact on energy usage and environmental degradation. Proposals regarding consumption practices that Vía Campesina suggests will reduce greenhouse gas emissions include specific practices such as:

- Supporting local markets and eating more in season\textsuperscript{60}
- Reducing unnecessary waste in the food system
- Cutting excessive meat consumption, and
- Conserving energy and focusing on alternative and decentralized forms of energy generation. (Summarized from ‘Cooling’ 2009)

The first point here is not surprising given the focus that mainstream discourses have put on connecting ‘food miles’ to climate change. In one of the first books written for a popular audience on the topic of global warming, Bill McKibben drew attention to this issue when he argued—by way of a concrete example—that the consumption of oranges in northern latitudes, or apples in the tropics, may be beyond the realm of sustainability (McKibben 1989: 190-191). Of course, this theme has since been taken up by numerous other authors including, notably, Smith and MacKinnon in their 2007 publication, The 100-Mile Diet; and several regional initiatives have emerged in this spirit, such as Scotland’s ‘Fife diet’\textsuperscript{61} (Interview 6).

Vía Campesina quotes research that suggests that 10 to 12 per cent of global emissions could be reduced if “most food was sold through local markets and people relied on fresh food as their basis of nutrition” (‘Cooling’ 2009: 16). This would include: reducing emissions linked to transporting food around the world and associated periods of

\textsuperscript{59} “Fair and just distribution of food and necessary goods, as well as reducing unnecessary consumption should be core aspects of new development patterns” (LVC ‘Cooling’ 2009: 7-8).
\textsuperscript{60} The specific concept of increasing seasonal eating comes from Interviews 8 & 9 and from LVC ‘Land concentration’ 2013: 42.
\textsuperscript{61} See www.fifediet.co.uk
refrigeration, cutting down on and simplifying food packaging, and focusing on domestic food processing (Ibid.). An emphasis on local, agroecological food production would also result in less transportation of the inputs to global production, such as the chemical fertilizers and petroleum products upon which industrial agricultural systems are dependent (‘Cooling’ 2009: 21-22). As an example of the benefits of producing food locally, Uniterre, a Swiss member organization of Vía Campesina, published findings that one kilogram of asparagus imported from Mexico requires 5 litres of oil to travel by plane the nearly 12,000 km to Switzerland, whereas one kilogram of locally grown asparagus would require only 0.3 litres of oil to reach the end consumer (‘Cooling’ 2009: 3).

“I’m not against having an avocado or an orange,” said one family farmer from Ontario. “I like the occasional grapefruit as well, but to me we need to start looking at those things as treats... not as essential parts of our diets” (Interview 9). Several other Vía Campesina members expressed this sentiment, while also suggesting that eating in season would likely result in people eating more healthily by diversifying their diets, and that these efforts could be supplemented by domestic food preservation techniques such as canning, dehydrating and fermenting (Interviews 6, 8, 9). Understandably, in the global north this may require a significant learning curve for the vast majority of citizens who rely on both fresh and processed food from supermarkets. In addition, as one farmer from the Canadian prairies suggests, it will be “harder in some ways for us to imagine what food sovereignty looks like because we come out of a colonial history where we’ve already ‘eaten’ parts of the world for generations. We’ve transformed agriculture in other places to afford us coffee, tea, bananas and so on” (Interview 8).

Such shifts in consumption regarding eating habits would no doubt raise a number of challenging political questions, just as would Vía Campesina’s proposal to cut excessive meat consumption as part of tackling climate change. Several studies support the claim that the ‘meatification’ of diets around the world is contributing significantly to greenhouse gas emissions—especially when that meat comes out of industrial agricultural practices—but tough choices would need to be made to determine what ought to be considered ‘excessive’ in terms of the consumption of not only meat, but everything from oranges to coffee as well wherever those foods are not available locally (Holt-Giménez
2013; Weis 2007). The potential challenges associated with implementing proposals of this nature will be discussed in Chapter 5 but, in the meantime, let us take note that Vía Campesina’s awareness of the connections between consumption and climate change are not limited to the food system.

As indicated above, initiatives that allow small-scale farmers to generate their own energy are being experimented with by member organizations such as the MPA in Brazil. To date these projects are demonstrating their potential as alternatives to mega-projects such as those reliant on damming rivers or extracting fossil fuels that often displace communities and cause significant carbon dioxide emissions (Interviews 1, 2). Vía Campesina calls for these forms of decentralized projects as an example of “sane and sustainable energy policies” but the network is also keen to see consumption reduced in general (‘Cooling’ 2009: 9). One peasant farmer, referring both to his home country and to the wealthy nations of the global north, asserted that:

In both Panama and elsewhere, consumption is an ideology. The capitalist system disseminates this ideology through various forms of communication, including television and movies — through propaganda essentially — and this system puts value on people for what they have, not who they really are. (Interview 4)

Similarly, a Scottish farmer suggested that sustainable lifestyles will only be realized when a system is in place that does not produce the “status anxiety that drives consumerism” (Interview 6). “It’s not that these are consumers who have bad will,” said another farmer, “It’s that they have no information on what the real environmental costs of these consumption patterns are” (Interview 8).

On this same topic, a document co-authored by Vía Campesina members argues that:

As hundreds of millions of people enter society of mass consumption and pursue the lifestyle exported by American capitalism as an ideal of happiness, they are demanding increasing amounts of flashy goods, manufactured according to the logic of planned obsolescence, private use, waste, and disposability. And they are consuming more and more resources: energy, raw materials, food, and environmental services. This kind of growth is feeding new and future crises — fuel, raw materials, and food crises — and accelerating greenhouse-gas emissions and global warming. (‘Another Future’ 2012)

In highlighting the ability of unbridled consumerism to contribute to climate change, Vía Campesina aligns itself with many writers and activist organizations who argue that
curbing these patterns—especially with regard to the “bloated ecological footprints” of the global north—is of the utmost importance (Rees and Westra 2003; see also Blanco 2009; Foster et al. 2010: Ch. 16). Solutions to the climate crisis will emerge through developing modes of consumption “based on justice, solidarity and healthy communities,” states Vía Campesina in ‘Cooling Down the Earth’ (2009: 7).

4.4 Trade: “Our planet is not for sale!”

Closely connected to these issues of consumption are the systems of global trade that play a critical role in determining what and how food ends up being transported around the world. Vía Campesina argues for:

- Prioritizing local and national economies and markets
- Banning subsidies that encourage food dumping
- Promoting policies that allow for food systems based on fresh food and nutrition as opposed to highly-packaged and processed foods, and
- Eliminating redundant trade. (Summarized from ‘Cooling’ 2009 and interviews 1-10)

Many of Vía Campesina’s positions on trade issues have not changed since they started speaking out against the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Agriculture and other bilateral or multilateral trade agreements from a standpoint of justice for small-scale farmers (see Desmarais 2007). In recent years, however, the network is connecting these trade issues to climate change discourses, arguing that such agreements not only compromise local sovereignty but are also devastatingly unsustainable.

Food dumping is one of practices that results from the neoliberal trade agreements that Vía Campesina would like to see abolished. It involves selling agricultural goods at prices below what it costs to produce them, and is often the result of subsidies that distort economic flows (Wittman et al. 2010: 203). Examples of dumping can involve any number

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62 Quotation from a call to action that Vía Campesina distributed prior to COP17 in Durban, South Africa (‘Mobilization’ 2011).
of products, from dairy and grains to pork and silk, and occurs between countries regardless of whether they are situated in the global north or the global south (Ibid.).

However, food dumping is just one result of irrational trade policies. Referring to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in Europe, one farmer commented how such agreements result in “problematic incentives where you’ve got people growing corn in one place, feeding it to pigs in another, and sending the pigs somewhere else to be slaughtered and consumed” (Interview 6).\textsuperscript{63} Examples of countries ‘swapping food’ also abound. One study of food trading patterns, for example, showed that in one year the UK imported 126 million litres of milk while simultaneously exporting 270 million litres (Cutler and Bryan 2007: 142).\textsuperscript{64} Such patterns sharply contrast with food systems that would rely on local inputs and local consumption, where countries would also focus their trade priorities on importing food that they cannot produce themselves.

A farmer from Ontario argued that food sovereignty would involve the development of “appropriate trade policies” that result in “more infrastructure to bring the food producer and the eater much closer together” (Interview 9). She explained that this would mean going in the opposite direction to that being taken by Canada’s Conservative government in terms of its bilateral trade agreements (in addition to its agricultural policies that focus on the biotechnology industry; Interview 9). ‘Appropriate trade policies’ can also be set in contrast to ‘redundant trade’ which is another way of referring to situations wherein the process of swapping food occurs (Interview 9). Via Campesina’s preference is thus for “local markets and other short marketing channels” (‘Cooling’ 2009: 19), but does not deny transnational trade altogether. In the words of another Canadian farmer:

\begin{quote}
Food sovereignty doesn’t mean an end to the trade in food [but that] the control over markets and food systems are locally-based. We in Saskatchewan, for example, have the capacity to grow a lot of grain. We’re never going to eat all of the lentils and wheat that we grow in this province. So, the possibility of exporting the excess in an orderly way is a possibility. This is not ‘food dumping.’ This is not a subsidized trash of somebody else’s market, because they also are sovereign and have the right to [decline our wheat if they can grow their own]. We can’t grow our own bananas in Saskatchewan so there’s a very good possibility that in places where they can grow bananas they
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{63} A similar example regarding Swedish farmers was cited in Interview 11.
\textsuperscript{64} For similar research findings, see the FAO’s statistics website at:

http://faostat3.fao.org/home/
may agree, without interrupting their ecological sustainability, and without turning all of their best territory into banana [plantations] for export, that the excess production can be eaten elsewhere (Interview 8).

Sifting through the alternative forms of trade that can be deemed ‘appropriate,’ therefore requires political discussions about who controls food systems. As a member of Vía Campesina’s ICC from Spain explains, food sovereignty is a radical departure from neoliberal trade regimes: “Everybody has the right to say what they want to produce, how they will produce it, how it will be distributed and what price it will be sold at... This is not a mathematical formula. Everybody has to do this and we need to work this out in our own local regions to decide how our food system will operate” (Interview 3).

It is evident that such conversations and democratic practices would need to take place both within sovereign nations and between countries, with the more localized variations on food policies (based on fresh, nutritious food as advocated for by Vía Campesina) being a point of departure for subsequent negotiations. In one policy document, the network specifically suggests that the regulation of international trade in agricultural products could be approached at the level of “regional integration… a relevant scale [at which] to organize trade and rules between countries” (‘Policy’ 2009: 146). Of course, extensive procedural changes would need to take place in countries around the world in order to realize truly representative processes through which farmers and eaters could have their say in what shape a transformed food trade system would take.

This would not only be a bureaucratic challenge, but a political one. There are significant powerful interests, including multinational corporations, that would almost certainly raise objections if, for example, people in Ontario decided to only consume local grapes and not import grapes from Chile. Such decisions would not only have an impact on the bottom lines of corporate agribusinesses, but also those of supermarkets, and of transportation and energy companies (Interview 8). Similarly, steering away from the societal consumption of processed, junk and fast foods would upset the trends that have seen increasingly enormous profits being made by the well-known representatives of corporate food: from Kraft and McDonald’s to Monsanto (see Albritton 2009; Qualman 2011; Roberts 2009).
Vía Campesina is clearly aware of the power relations it is contesting by advocating for food sovereignty and climate justice. In the ‘Cooling Down the Earth’ document the network is unequivocal in stating that a sustainable food system will “[put] the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations,” and this is reflected in Vía Campesina’s specific demands on these topics, as seen in Table 4-1 (2009: 8). In addition, as was demonstrated at the People’s Summit, the network appreciates not only the political implications of its proposals relating to the intersecting issues of food and climate, but also to those that speak of system change more holistically.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>La Vía Campesina’s demands:</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. The complete dismantling of agribusiness companies: they are stealing the land of small producers, producing junk food and creating environmental disasters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The replacement of industrialized agriculture and animal production by small-scale sustainable agriculture supported by genuine agrarian reform programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The banning of all forms of genetic use restriction technologies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The promotion of sane and sustainable energy policies. That includes consuming less energy and decentralized energy instead of promoting large-scale agrofuel production as is currently the case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The implementation of agricultural and trade policies at local, national and international levels supporting sustainable agriculture and local food consumption. This includes the ban on the kinds of subsidies that lead to the dumping of cheap food on markets.</td>
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For the livelihoods of billions of small producers around the world,
For people’s health and the planet’s survival:
We demand food sovereignty and we are committed to struggle to achieve it collectively.

Table 4-1: La Vía Campesina’s demands for a food system that will ‘cool down the Earth’ (2009: 8 – 9)
4.5 La Vía Campesina and System Change

For Vía Campesina, it is clear that food sovereignty, as it intersects with climate justice, cannot be contained within conversations about food and agriculture. The network’s interest in consumption patterns, trade and energy policies, and democratic processes clearly reflect this fact. With this in mind, I will now discuss how Vía Campesina views food sovereignty as connecting with system change, as well as the range of opportunities that the network has to participate in the movement of movements working on issues related to climate justice.

In line with the general sentiments conveyed at the People’s Summit regarding the need for system change, Vía Campesina and its members have exclaimed on numerous occasions that food sovereignty is incompatible with capitalism (Interviews 1, 3, 4, 7, 11; see also ‘Rio+20’ 2012). The use of rhetoric supports the notion that Vía Campesina is interested in much more than the establishment of a new food regime— to return to Friedmann and McMichael’s concept— but rather a societal transformation in at least the 74 countries in which its member organizations operate, if not across the world. These aspirations then may be akin to the hopes for a ‘new historical phase’ that Gramsci felt could arise out of widespread hegemonic struggles.

“Can you have food sovereignty in a capitalist system…? No. Absolutely not. It's not possible,” explained a Vía Campesina representative from Spain:

The whole system is export-oriented… [It] works on shipping the dietary wants from Holland to Canada and vice-versa, for example. …These systems are impeding the rights of people and their abilities to realize policies around local food, local eating, and they are therefore impeding food sovereignty. …In order to stop climate change we really need to change the social model, as well as commerce and the economic model. Therefore, we need to change politics. (Interview 3)

A Vía Campesina staff member from India also expressed such sentiments in terms of food sovereignty and the capitalist system being contradictory to each other: “Capitalism seeks to privatize nature and exploit it for profit, while food sovereignty seeks to have community control for natures and human well-being. All the major resources like land, biodiversity and water need to be commonly controlled according to food sovereignty and to be privatized in capitalism” (Interview 7). In line with this, a member of a Vía
Campesina organization from Brazil indicated that the network’s struggle is therefore a “struggle for the structural transformation of society in terms of the material basis of production. We need a model that will support the needs of society as opposed to one based on the exploitation of people and the environment and the exchange of consumer goods” (Interview 1, emphasis added).

These quotations reflect the extent to which Vía Campesina is connecting specific, material, place-based practices and issues with more general critiques and strategies for change. However, with regards to the network’s overarching critique of capitalism, Vía Campesina does not propose a specific political-economic system that should replace capitalism, understanding evidently that its member organizations have diverse views on this.

Many peasant farmers’ organizations at the People’s Summit, for example, seemed to agree with the late Hugo Chávez’s claim that socialism is the only way to save the planet: “[Of that] I don’t have the least doubt,” he said, “[and] capitalism is the road to hell, to the destruction of the world” (Chávez 2009). Along these lines, in speaking on behalf of his peasant farmers’ organization, one Brazilian activist explained that:

In developing various proposals and alternatives that integrate the production of food and the protection of the environment, we are clear about the need for another model that will preserve nature and allow for the full development of society. That system, we believe, is socialism.

(Interview 1)

In Latin America, there are in fact many other member organizations who appear to be overtly socialist, however, as one Vía Campesina ally explained: “Globally [the network has not] agreed that socialism is the answer, which is why local groups like CLOC maintain their structure apart from Vía Campesina. It allows them to sustain the radical

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65 Chávez made these remarks at COP15, the 2009 UN climate change conference in Copenhagen: “[To] paraphrase ...the great Karl Marx, a spectre is haunting the streets of Copenhagen ...Capitalism is the spectre, [though] almost nobody wants to mention it. ...I have been reading some of the slogans painted on the streets... “Don’t change the climate, change the system.” And I take it onboard for us. Let’s not change the climate, let’s change the system! And consequently we will begin to save the planet” (Chávez 2009).

66 The Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo (CLOC) has been defined “as an anticapitalist, socialist organization” trying to have a role “in mobilizing against the hegemonic power, the pillage and exploitation of capital” (Radio Mundo Real 2012).
nature of their struggle, in line with their belief that socialism is the larger objective” (Interview 11).

In terms of the ‘radical nature’ of these struggles, however, various Vía Campesina members articulated the difficulty in adopting socialism as a banner under which they would advocate for system change. As one farmer from Spain indicated:

This is not an easy question to resolve because, in Europe, the socialists [and social democrats] have been doing the same thing as capitalists… When it comes to their economic policies, they are giving those who already control the economy the right to do whatever they would like with the marketplace. …In the last four decades, the imposition of the neoliberal model—that Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher put forward—has really been dictating how economies should be run. (Interview 3)

The dismay behind this comment echoes the concept of transformismo (‘transformismo’) that Gramsci used in discussing the way in which many Italian political parties on the Left had historically done an about-face once they were in power (1971: 58 fvd). The risks of such contradictions and tensions arising for social movements that engage in partisan politics may be a key reason as to why Vía Campesina has eschewed naming a system that should replace capitalism.

One farmer mentioned the fact that Scotland, her home, gets joked about as being “the last communist country in Europe,” because there remain communal forms of property ownership such as ‘crofts,’ where people look after livestock through ‘communal grazing’ on small parcels of land (Interview 6). In this context, she stressed the importance therefore of defining the political and economic systems in question, whether it is capitalism or another that should replace capitalism. It is much more useful, she conveyed, to talk about specifics, such as how you would replace a society driven by consumerism with one in which resources—from minerals in the ground to products like pacemakers—get distributed according to people’s needs, regardless of their location or level of wealth (Interview 6).

The need to engage in conversations about the specifics of system change only emphasizes the usefulness of the type of alliance forming and debate that took place at the People’s Summit in Rio. Through such forums Vía Campesina brings to the table its specific proposals regarding food sovereignty that connect to broader themes such as
climate justice in practical ways, yet the network also appears to be eager to engage as a node of the larger assemblage advocating for widespread societal transformation.

In addition to the People’s Summit, Vía Campesina’s members, staff and ICC representatives have been participating in international meetings of this nature on an increasingly regular basis. The network’s role in the movement of movements has been solidified through their participation in gatherings such as the 2010 ‘World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth’ in Cochabamba, a number of counter-summits to UN COPs (as discussed in Chapter 1), as well as World Social Forums.

As one of twenty groups facilitating the ‘Climate Space’ at the 2013 World Social Forum in Tunisia, for example, Vía Campesina helped produce a culminating statement that explicitly described a vision of system change. Beyond the expected proposals related to food systems, this statement called for:

- a ban on all new exploration and exploitation of oil, tar sands, shale oil, coal, uranium, and natural gas
- economic strategies that create ‘climate jobs’ in such sectors as renewable energy, agriculture, public transportation and building retrofits
- comprehensive recycling and composting programs
- clean and accessible public transport infrastructure that is adaptive to local, non-combustion energy sources
- the local production and consumption of durable goods to satisfy the fundamental needs of people, and
- a dismantling of the war industry and military infrastructure

(Excerpts adapted from ‘Climate Space’ 2013).

Such a statement demonstrates that Vía Campesina not only has twenty years of experience working with diverse member organizations with different visions and needs, but also increasingly solidifying connections with CSOs and coalitions from around the world with expertise on a wide range of issues. The People’s Summit in Rio de Janeiro, therefore, cannot be seen as an exceptional instance of such participation and

With a range of actors and networks in this broad movement, Vía Campesina is working to establish food sovereignty in a broader context. Through these various discussions of system change, groups are expressing the details of their visions for alternative forms of globalization, more socially just economic models, templates for increasing democratic engagement in society, and so on. While it is not possible to explore the details of such diverse visions here, and while resource and time limitations will prevent many aspects of these solutions from finding their way into collaborative documents that are generated at these international forums, it is through such conversations and alliances that Vía Campesina and its associates are coming to understand they diverse ways in which system change should come about.

One of Vía Campesina’s ICC representatives was very articulate in describing the connection between the network’s efforts to mobilize and those of the broader movement of movements:

A central idea for us is to unify all of these [efforts] so that we can start making [systemic change] happen. …We distinguish two lines of the struggle: The first consists of the grouping together of all of the social movements who share our analysis and think along the same lines as Vía Campesina. We want to present our solutions to the UN, to the FAO and to [like-minded] organizations and social movements. …This is going to be very long and difficult, yet we’re bringing together unions, academics, environmentalists and others in a common struggle, trying to move in a similar direction and make some headway. The second part of the struggle is in our hands. [This involves] the localized efforts [for food sovereignty] …toward a more direct relationship between producers and consumers, for localized campaigns for seed sovereignty, for concrete victories for farmers in their specific locations.

Nowhere else, in Rio de Janeiro or since the People’s Summit, have I heard such a concise expression of the ways in which Vía Campesina is advocating for both profound changes with regards to food systems and a larger campaign for system change, and the fact that these efforts may run in parallel at times while converging at others.
Thousands of Solutions to Climate Change

We, La Vía Campesina, call rural and urban organizations and social movements to transform and build a new society based on food sovereignty and justice. …As people of the land we are vital actors not only in the construction of a distinct agricultural model, but also in building a fair, diverse and egalitarian world. We feed humanity and care for nature. Future generations depend on us to protect the earth. Today, more than ever another world is necessary. The destruction of our world, through overexploitation and dispossession of people and the appropriation of natural resources is resulting in the current climate crisis and deep inequalities, which endanger human kind and life itself.

- La Vía Campesina (‘Jakarta Call’ 2013)

5.1 Solidarity and struggle

Vía Campesina’s most recent international conference, which saw representatives from its member organizations around the world gather in Jakarta, Indonesia, took place in June 2013. It would seem that they had much to celebrate there, while also having many reasons to redouble their commitment to their long-term struggles for food sovereignty and climate justice.

In terms of a cause for celebration, while it is impossible to make conclusive claims based on my research about the opinions of 200 million farmers, it certainly seems that the network can be confident that has developed a set of proposals regarding climate justice that appear to have resounding support among its member organizations. While not every Vía Campesina member can either attend international gatherings such as the People’s Summit, or take the time away from their farm to participate in discussions about the network’s public documents and press releases, the evidence at hand suggests that there is a great deal of solidarity with regards to the positions that bridge food sovereignty and
climate justice outlined in the last chapter. Much of this seems to do with the fact that the relevant proposals are largely generated from the grassroots base of this international network—substantiating Vía Campesina’s statement that “The small farmers, peasants, and indigenous agriculturalists from the four corners of the Earth hold in their hands thousands of solutions to climate change,” and that the role of the network has therefore been to “support the people’s solutions to defend life and Mother Earth” (quoted in Di Chiro 2011: 232, emphasis in original).

In addition to this, the network can be commended for having promoted the concept of food sovereignty to the point where civil society organizations (CSOs) and academics around the world are discussing its principles and, in many cases, advocating for their implementation. This includes numerous research groups and scientists who have backed up Vía Campesina in their efforts to link food sovereignty and climate justice. Some of these proponents have analyzed specific claims on the potential for agroecological farming to improve soils’ ability to sequester carbon (see Altieri 1999, 2010; IAASTD 2009) and to increase the ‘Energy Return on Energy Invested’ (EROI) through such production methods (Martínez-Alier 2011), while others have supported Vía Campesina’s claims regarding the potential for localized systems to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (NWAEG 2009; Rosset 1999, 2011). Olivier De Schutter, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, has gone to the extent of asserting that:

To feed 9 billion people in 2050, we urgently need to adopt the most efficient farming techniques available. Today’s scientific evidence demonstrates that agroecological methods outperform the use of chemical fertilizers in boosting food production where the hungry live -- especially in unfavorable environments. (Quoted in PFPP 2011: 7)

From dealing with interconnecting issues ranging from hunger to climate chaos, Vía Campesina’s proposals have clearly gained traction (see also Reardon and Pérez 2010). In the context of the global movement of movements that is working towards system

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67 Institutions like the World Bank, the WTO and the FAO have also acknowledged that Vía Campesina has had an influence on the work that they do, perhaps tempering the influence of corporations on those organizations’ varied initiatives (Rosset 2005). Wittman (2009: 817) describes how Vía Campesina was successful in lobbying the UN Convention on Biological Diversity to uphold a moratorium on Terminator seeds in 2006. In addition, the network “has succeeded in putting the rights of peasants on the agenda of the [UN’s] Human Rights Council and [is now calling] on national governments to realize these rights” (LVC, ‘Jakarta Call’ 2013).
change, food sovereignty has also been featured as a prominent component of discussions on climate justice, as well as social and environmental justice more broadly. In a statement released following their international meeting in Jakarta, Vía Campesina emphasized that one of the network’s key strengths is its ability to make these connections with groups working on a range of issues from around the world: “In our courageous struggles for food sovereignty we continue to build essential strategic alliances with social movements, including workers, urban organizations, immigrants, groups resisting mega-dams and the mining industry, among others” (‘Jakarta Call’ 2013). This comment is certainly credible, as was demonstrated at the People’s Summit and as is evident by the network’s participation in counter-summits of this nature at least once a year.

Vía Campesina has thus demonstrated that, in relation to a broader movement of movements, it is dedicated to advancing the ‘thousands of solutions to climate change’ that its member organizations have helped to develop, along with thousands of others that cover a wide range of interconnecting issues. This echoes Raj Patel’s prediction that “climate change, if we are successful in fighting it, will be killed by a thousand cuts… There will be no magic bullet” (Patel 2009: 162).

To be sure though, the fight against climate change is far from being won, and this is why Vía Campesina members must redouble their efforts. Just as the corporate food regime continues to be firmly entrenched on a global scale, the fossil fuel industry and the elites that benefit from the unsustainable capitalist modes of production continue to block meaningful progress toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, there is an ongoing risk that the efforts of social movements working for system change will be co-opted or diverted through the machinations of ‘green capitalism’ (Fairbairn 2010; Friedmann 2005) and the realization of concepts like ‘green growth’ (MacDonald and Corson 2012).

As Wainwright and Mann (2013) argue, capitalist political and institutional approaches are currently leading the race to respond to the climate crisis and the associated threats of food scarcity. Alternatives to these approaches are possible, and they may take revolutionary, state-centred, or anti-capitalist forms—or some combination of these—but in any case some very robust decision-making processes will need to be
established in order to address the ways in which such alternatives may be implemented, especially in the context of global problems and independent nation-states (Ibid.).

The remainder of this chapter will therefore discuss the unresolved questions that are apparent in terms of the potential for thousands of solutions to climate change—and thousands of proposals for system change—to be implemented in diverse geographic, political and cultural milieus around the world, as well as through coordinated efforts. This thesis, of course, is unable to answer these myriad and complex questions, but raising them is certainly worthwhile in terms of pushing an understanding of system change forward.

5.2 Radicalism as ‘the only way to save the planet’

One of the questions raised throughout this thesis concerns the extent to which Vía Campesina’s proposals regarding climate justice and system change are radical. In light of Lenin and Kautsky’s ‘agrarian question’ as to whether peasants may or may not contribute to a revolution, it appears that they are at the very least committed to trying. This is not likely to be an armed revolution—or a ‘war of manoeuvre’ to use Gramsci’s term—but rather a passive revolution that has been sparked by the relentless oppression of small-scale farmers.

As Vía Campesina wrote recently: “The destruction of our world, through overexploitation and dispossession of people and the appropriation of natural resources is resulting in the current climate crisis and deep inequalities which endanger human kind and life itself. …We [therefore] demand climate justice now” (‘Jakarta Call’ 2013). The statement goes on to indicate that the network is committed to “keep fighting permanently against transnational corporations” and to stop the “false solutions of the green economy [that] are worsening the situation,” in addition to struggling for women’s rights, demilitarization and more (Ibid.).

Vía Campesina’s proposals are thus radical in the sense that they have developed them in relation to their in-depth analysis of the structural causes that lay behind the very
material problems that its member organizations and allies are facing. The network is connecting practical issues with a systemic critique of capitalism, in the midst of ongoing conversations with diverse social movement actors from around the world about the types of solutions that should inform local struggles. In this light, Vía Campesina is helping to show that groups and individuals who are concerned about the social, economic and environmental crises at hand do not need to put all of their faith in either governmental institutions or mainstream NGOs and charities to solve complex problems like climate change. Social movements have role to play. Similarly, the movement of movements to which Vía Campesina is contributing seems to reject outright the forms of green consumerism and green capitalism that serve as a distraction to the more effective and fundamental solutions that need to be realized.

The other radical aspect of Vía Campesina’s work to bridge food sovereignty, climate justice and system change relates to the network’s commitment to democracy and inclusive forms of representation. Through their internal processes and engagement with allies in forums such as the People’s Summit, Vía Campesina’s representatives have demonstrated a dedication to a ‘prefigurative politics’—not only proclaiming that ‘another world is possible’ but also acting within their means to start “forming the structure of [a] new society within the shell of the old” (IWW, n.d.).

This is tremendously important as it reflects that people of all stripes will need to participate in system change, rather than leaving the tough decisions to the elites while ‘citizen consumers’ continue shopping responsibly, voting, donating to worthy causes and so on. In the current context in which neoliberal capitalist hegemony dominates, Vía Campesina’s demonstration that truly democratic, inclusive and non-hierarchical approaches are feasible can certainly be seen as revolutionary.68

That said, there are evidently many decisions that need to be made with regards to implementing concepts like food sovereignty and climate justice in specific places and contexts. In the next section of this chapter I will discuss examples of such looming

68 As proclaimed in the recent World Social Forum statement that Vía Campesina co-authored: “We must build a movement that is based on the daily life of people that guarantees democracy at all stages of societies” (‘Climate Space’ 2013).
decisions and the attendant tensions that will potentially need to be resolved. First though, I wish to briefly argue that, with regards to their proposals on system change, Vía Campesina is displaying both wisdom and foresight in not stipulating a specific system that should replace capitalism (e.g. socialism).

In preferring that its member organizations work through specific issues regarding their own climate mitigation and food system-related objectives, the network is not just making a pragmatic decision that will help with maintaining solidarity in the face of challenging political debates. It is also much more practical for a social movement of this size to suggest that its member organizations autonomously weave through the intricacies of implementing system change, while sharing stories of success or lessons that may be transferrable and/or working in collaboration as appropriate.

For the different nodes of the Vía Campesina’s network to heuristically connect food sovereignty, climate justice and system change in their respective contexts, it is safe to assume that rather challenging questions will arise that preclude looking at either capitalism, socialism, or any other system as ‘totalities’ (see DeLanda 2006; Escobar 2008; cf. Gibson-Graham 2005, 2006). Such debates will require Vía Campesina’s members to resist ‘essentializing’ these systems in a general way. Not only does the term socialism capture its variants (e.g. democratic socialism, syndicalism, and anarchism), as does capitalism (e.g. state or Keynesian capitalism, free-market and corporate varieties), but these systems also take on widely different forms depending on the geographic, institutional and cultural contexts in which they are situated. As indicated in Chapter 4, while some Vía Campesina member organizations endorse socialism wholeheartedly, others are situated in contexts wherein the differences between socialist and capitalist politicians are hard to discern.

69 In addition, these systems have taken on different forms depending on the historical period in question and, as such, given that capitalism has continually developed over the course of five centuries, it would not be surprising to expect its replacement might take on unpredictable and varied forms over time.

70 On the other hand, socialism’s history has been rife with examples of centrally planned economies that exclude meaningful participation and representation, policies that focus on growth that have been environmentally destructive, and even famines (see Ackerman 2012; Aerni 2011; Morales 2009), all of which are completely counter to what Vía Campesina seems to hope for.
Thus, Vía Campesina can certainly be radical without classifying itself as a socialist movement. When discussing system change, the network is therefore poised to not to allow terminology to impede progress on working through specific issues. As an example of the complexity of the issues at hand, consider the actions of certain governments that appear to be categorically ‘socialist,’ such as the nationalizing of oil and gas companies that Bolivia and Venezuela have recently undertaken (Fuentes 2013; McKibben 2012; Valencia 2013). These countries are also allowing companies and industries to continue operating as profit-oriented corporations, while also relying on the ongoing exploitation of fossil fuels to generate funds that can be put towards social programs, reducing poverty, and the like (Larrabure 2013; Valencia 2013). As a case in point, two years before Chávez’s death in March of 2013, he met with “a consortium of international players” at Venezuela’s state-run oil company and signed an agreement to develop the Orinoco tar sands, which hold deposits larger than Alberta’s (McKibben 2012; cf. Bond 2012: 203 and Larrabure 2013).

Nevertheless, amidst such contradictions and tensions, the Venezuelan government has also shown support for food sovereignty initiatives in the last several years, including by establishing a university centred on the study of agroecology, and by striving to reduce the country’s dependence on imported food (Interviews 1, 2; see also Camacaro and Schiavoni 2009). This support has also been demonstrated by government programs that provide groups of small farmers with access to productive land (Interview 2), and so-called ‘socialist enterprises’ that offer farmers “agricultural technology and technical assistance at below market prices” (Larrabure 2013).

Yet the questions and contradictions highlighted above are certainly relevant to Vía Campesina and its member organizations—including those outside Venezuela—as they work towards system change. Despite the importance of social movements in initiating change and demonstrating their prefigurative politics, engagement with state legislative processes, partisan politics and electoral campaigns are often inevitable in driving

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71 Harvey (1996) also discusses the fact that ‘militancy’ is also often erroneously equated with socialist struggles.
72 Examples in this vein can also be evoked with regards to China’s ‘socialist market economy’ (see Akram-Lodhi 2015: 31).
73 It remains to be seen to what extent the Venezuelan government will continue with Chávez’s priorities under his successor, Nicolás Maduro.
transformative change in society. While this research project has not been geared toward assessing the extent to which Vía Campesina’s member organizations are engaging in ‘action repertoires’ along these lines, IBON International’s advice to social movements working toward system change is worth noting:

…More social movements must actively engage governments, corporations, and other institutions of governance at the national level—exerting oppositional and pressure politics to attain policy reforms while actively promoting concrete alternatives that the people can already start constructing from the ground up …Social movements must realize that they cannot hope to reform the crises-ridden capitalist system simply by putting in place piece-by-piece improvements… Rather, [they] must be prepared to merge and scale up their efforts at system change by directly addressing the question of state power and control of entire national economies. (IBON 2012: 34)

With this in mind, rather than prescribing to an essentialized ideology like socialism, it seems best that Vía Campesina’s gear its strategic efforts toward pushing for system change through issue-specific campaigns and debates—engaging with state structures regularly, but judiciously—while maintaining its radical critique and goals.

5.3 Agrarian citizenship

To date, Vía Campesina seems to have done an impressive job connecting local and regional issues related to climate change with its international campaigns—and vice versa. In terms of hammering out the specific details as to how food sovereignty may be implemented in diverse geographic and legislative contexts however, the network and its member organizations will have many decisions to make. This will require further developing reified production, consumption and trade practices that offer alternatives to the specific unjust and unsustainable methods currently being perpetuated within capitalist systems. I will relate some examples here with reference to Vía Campesina’s proposals that were outlined in Chapter 4.

The proposal to prioritize local or national markets, as one example, will be accompanied by numerous decisions relevant to the geographic context in which such conversations would take place. In Ontario, this would involve defining what is meant by local and what importance is to be given to national markets: Consider the fact that prioritizing a food system that entailed sending produce to Toronto from British Colombia
would be much more carbon intensive than if that food had originated in New York State. Similarly, if a focus on local food meant farming tomatoes or cucumbers in greenhouses well outside of the region’s natural growing season, this could also be counter-productive from a climate-mitigation standpoint due to the energy required to run such operations in cold weather.

The prioritization of local and national markets also raises questions about trade. As indicated, Vía Campesina does not promote an end to trade but rather fairer trading systems that respect countries’ notions of food sovereignty over corporate interests. To continue with the geographically-specific example of Ontario, decisions would then need to be made that address to what extent food that can never be grown locally, like tropical fruit, would be imported. As noted by Desrochers and Shimizu (2012), the diversity offered by the global food system certainly provides benefits to eaters around the world in terms of taste, health and culture. Therefore, balancing the physical, social and economic needs of people in different regions while establishing approaches to trade that are sustainable and fair will no doubt entail political decisions both within and between countries.

Vía Campesina’s suggestion that excessive meat consumption must be reigned in provides another example that merits further reflection. Such a proposal ties together production, consumption and trade issues as the network is arguing that we should not only reverse the ‘meatification’ of diets globally, but also focus on local consumption and agroecological practices of raising livestock (such as rearing grass-fed cattle through high-intensity rotational grazing). The meat that ends up on people’s dinner plates will therefore entail some fairly complicated decisions be made about both how much meat would be considered excessive, what certification and labelling practices might be required, and where the meat would come from (presumably Canadians would no longer import beef from New Zealand, even if it were produced sustainably).

To settle such matters democratically (i.e. without infringing on people’s rights and freedoms) and with an eye on relevant social justice issues (e.g. as stipulations on production, consumption and trade could raise food prices), the implementation of Vía Campesina’s proposals would prompt the establishment of numerous processes and
systems. In doing so, however, the network’s own practices of non-hierarchical decision-making and representation could be taken as a model for working through these issues democratically. Activities such as the regional consultations, consensus-based discussions, and the fluid exchange of ideas that Vía Campesina encourages can certainly be applied to contexts beyond the realm of social movements. Transferring the examples set by the network to society-at-large though, would need to involve not only those already engaged in state legislative processes but also farmers, consumers and others with a stake in contributing to the discussion.

As Patel points out, “Even between …producers and consumers in the food system, power is systematically unevenly distributed,” but, he suggests, this tension may be resolved in part by people’s claiming of a “right to shape food policy” rather than leaving such decisions to a privileged elite (2010: 190; emphasis in original). In this regard, Wittman (2009) argues that Vía Campesina may inspire the application of ‘agrarian citizenship.’ Agrarian citizenship is “a concept that encompasses the political and material rights and practices of rural dwellers” (Wittman 2009: 806). It is centred on a vision of food producers working with other stakeholders through fair processes of representation to ensure political demands are met that will help close the ‘metabolic rift’—the separation of society and nature through the unsustainable and unjust use of ecological resources (Ibid.). It must be stressed, however, that it is not only farmers or rural dwellers that should be involved in decisions to establish food systems that do not alienate people or plunder nature through short-term compartmentalized thinking.74

To their credit, Vía Campesina representatives have stressed the importance of establishing “consumer–producer relationships [that will lead] to a different agricultural model,” to quote Paul Nicholson, a former ICC representative from the Basque Country (quoted in Wittman 2009: 814). Similarly, a member of a peasant farmer organization from Brazil indicated that, “Agroecology and the production of healthy food is at the centre of the dialogue between farmers and consumers, including city-dwellers. Change in

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74 An increase in ‘collective awareness’ among consumers that overcomes commodity fetishism in food systems will, for example, be key to more extensive struggles to challenge sustainable and fair modes of production in agriculture, trade practices, etc. (see Goodman and DuPuis 2002).
terms of the current modes of development will only come if we join together [in these conversations]” (Interview 1).

As implied above, it will not be possible to restrict these conversations to the topics typically covered in food systems debates. In some countries, such as Brazil and Venezuela for example, participatory democracy frameworks are already being experimented with in terms of the realization of food sovereignty (Larrabure 2013; cf. Wittman 2009); what remains to be seen though, is how such decision-making practices will effectively connect overlapping issues related to food and climate change in the context of ambitious struggles for system change.

5.4 Towards militant globalism

Anticipating the specific issues related to production, consumption and trade that Vía Campesina’s member organizations will need to help work through (in their respective social and political contexts) recalls Harvey’s comments about militant particularism. In connecting food sovereignty and climate justice through collaborate efforts and proposals such as those outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, the network seems to be moving beyond militant particularism in two senses.

Firstly, Vía Campesina is not imposing what it sees as solutions on its member organizations. The network’s internal procedures for debate and discussion prevent specific localized ideas or priorities from being universalized or foisted on other groups regardless of geographic, cultural and other sensitivities. In contrast, the forms of regional and international consultation that Vía Campesina facilitates are more geared at an open process of dialectical sharing, with proposals that the network adopts regarding food and climate issues being broad enough to be adapted within local contexts. As was stated following their conference in Jakarta:

La Vía Campesina is committed to giving visibility to all of the local struggles around the world, ensuring that these are understood from international perspectives and integrated into a global movement for food sovereignty, social change and self-determination for the peoples of the world. (‘Jakarta Call’ 2013)
Thus, the second sense in which Vía Campesina is moving beyond militant particularism relates to the global movement for social change mentioned here. Rather than promoting food sovereignty as if it were an isolated campaign, the network is engaging with key actors and movements that are helping them to situate proposals related to food sovereignty within broader discussions of climate justice and system change.

This approach likely comes naturally for Vía Campesina because it bases its global efforts on the lived experiences of the farmers within its member organizations. As I have discussed, these farmers do not limit their concerns to those associated with food and agriculture because they are varying dealing with the impacts of development projects, carbon offsetting and REDD initiatives, unfair trade regimes, mining and fossil fuel extractive ventures that threaten to push them off their lands or poison their territories, and more. For years Vía Campesina members have observed first-hand the social, environmental and economic effects of free trade agreements and the erosion of state sovereignty due to global neoliberal capitalism. They have witnessed how these trends have eroded the ability of countries to both prioritize the well-being of their citizens and protect ecosystems within their borders (Desmarais 2007; LVC ‘Open Book’ 2013: Ch. 10).

In their efforts to ‘globalize the struggle,’ Vía Campesina therefore seems eager to include the needs of strategic allies working on issues that may seem to be—on the surface at least—only loosely connected to food systems. Of course, the empirical research gathered through this study does not allow for a full exploration of the range of issues that are being advanced by the movement for system change, just as this study cannot gage how realistic it will be for the actors and networks involved to accomplish the goals about which they have demonstrated an intense passion in forums like the People’s Summit. It is worth mentioning, however, that issues of scale and complementarity that can be raised in relation to militant particularism are important to consider when assessing the potential for the climate justice proposals of Vía Campesina and its allies to be implemented.

As indicated above, Vía Campesina certainly recognizes that the root causes of a global problem like climate change demand responses that move beyond both the local and the national scale (see Baer 2012; Sharzer 2012). The examples discussed in the previous
section pertaining to production, consumption and trade proposals, however, point to the fact that the (potentially competing) demands of a range of stakeholders from various jurisdictions will inevitably be advanced if democratic processes are put in place to effectively address food and climate issues. That Vía Campesina is working within a movement of movements that is collectively taking on a range of campaigns—from those for renewable energy and public transportation to others that push for women’s rights or demilitarization—only adds complexity to the tasks at hand.

Many proposals associated with such campaigns could of course be implemented in local or national contexts. However, ensuring that the results of these diverse campaigns are complimentary to those implemented in other places and at other scales, will require an incredible amount of sophistication and coordination. Given that not only social movement actors will be involved in realizing the demands associated with such campaigns, the allocation of resources (i.e. time, money, etc.) to particularist priorities is just one risk that will need to be mitigated.

Harvey speaks of the need for “new combinations of both old and new forms of militant particularism” (1996: 41), that could contribute to a radical societal transformation. Perhaps these ‘new combinations’ of militant particularism could lead to a militant globalism in which Vía Campesina and its allies advocate specific proposals for the alternative forms of globalization that they would like to see implemented, while continuously collaborating to try to avoid potential tensions and competing interests. This would involve conceptualizing how system change could take place internationally without specific place-based proposals contradicting each other with respect to national sovereignty and the democratic engagement of communities at local and regional levels. Throughout these processes, tensions would need to be resolved in terms of balancing the autonomous needs of networks like Vía Campesina and its member organizations along with the efforts toward coordinated collective actions among a range of social movements and political actors (see Amin 2013).

75 Michal Osterweil refers to this notion as “place-based globalism” (referenced in Gibson-Graham 2006: Introduction). The word ‘militant’ in this case does not imply that violent actions are required to bring about system change, but rather an assertive and dedicated activism that is geared toward more radical solutions rather than limited reforms.
To provide just one example to help ground these observations, consider a country like Venezuela that is taking steps that support food sovereignty while simultaneously continuing with oil development projects. In advancing proposals related to climate justice, Vía Campesina has co-authored documents that call for a moratorium on any new fossil fuel extraction initiatives (see ‘Climate Space’ 2013; ‘Final Declaration’ 2012), however ‘petro-socialist’ nations like Venezuela have based their economies on the profits provided by such initiatives (Bond 2012: 203). The demands of people and movements related to poverty reduction or universal education and health care, for example, have therefore at least in part been met through the funding streams provided by oil projects.

Therefore, in pushing for alternative energy projects, reduced consumption and other proposals related to food sovereignty and the ‘thousands of solutions to climate change,’ Vía Campesina and its allies could strive to coordinate such campaigns with those related to people’s basic needs. Ensuring new economic benefits are realized to replace those generated by fossil fuel ventures would be a challenging but important task to undertake as part of this process. On the topic of scale, collaborative efforts in such a scenario could be geared towards achieving a high degree of complementarity between, for example, localized urban farming projects, regional initiatives to convert monocultural plantations (such as those used for agrofuels) to agroecological food production, and fair international agreements with trading partners that would see their imports of fossil fuels reduced by a petro-socialist country’s effort to transition to a sustainable economy.

As Vía Campesina wrote recently, “Today, more than ever another world is necessary,” therefore sorting through such complexities that would be associated with “[building] a new society based on food sovereignty and justice” is an important challenge to continue to take on; and it is a challenge that will require the continued formation of alliances and ongoing strategic collaboration with not only its member organizations from around the world, but also with diverse movements, institutions and other actors.

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76 LVC, ‘Jakarta Call’ 2013.
5.5 Counter-hegemony and system change

In working through the dynamics of their intersecting efforts related to food sovereignty and system change, Vía Campesina appears to be keenly aware of the fact that they are engaged in a cultural project as much as a political one. The final declaration that the network helped produce at the People’s Summit reflects this awareness:

The real alternatives are to be found in our people, our history, our customs, knowledge, practices and systems of production, which we must maintain, improve and scale up as a counter-hegemonic and transformative project. ('Final Declaration' 2012; emphasis added).

The fact that Vía Campesina sees itself as contributing to a distinctly counter-hegemonic project runs counter to Gramsci’s expectation that peasants would not generate their own organic intellectuals. While he was certainly correct to imply that farmers’ daily work is not expressly intellectual as it is more “weighted …towards muscular-nervous efforts” (Gramsci 1971: 9), a great number of Vía Campesina’s members are, on the other hand, clearly engaging in ongoing and collaborative discussions that connect the intricacies of food sovereignty, climate justice and system change. These peasants are thus working through the practical and theoretical matters that will help them move forward their interests, while demonstrating that they are not solely motivated according to delineated class or sectoral issues.

It was not within the scope of this project to discern which individuals within Vía Campesina’s network may be taking on the role of organic intellectuals more so than others, or the extent to which they are succeeding in this role, but it is evident that the representatives of the ICC and the various member organizations are at least striving toward broad counter-hegemonic goals. In discussing Brazil’s Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (the MST),77 Vía Campesina’s largest constituent group, Abdurazack Karriem supports this analysis. After relating the ways in which the MST contributes to political training, leadership initiatives and media exercises (such as circulating educational notebooks and a monthly newspaper) as part of the group’s “ideological struggles,” he concludes by suggesting that, if he were alive today, Gramsci may agree that:

77 Landless Rural Workers Movement
"[The] subaltern [peasant] element … is [now] an historical person, a protagonist … necessarily active and taking the initiative" in making history and, in the process, modifying relationships between men and women and society and nature. (Karriem 2013: 157)

Vía Campesina’s interest in seeing political education take place throughout the network, such as through the activity of formation discussed in the previous chapter, is clearly part of its counter-hegemonic project. Formation is important in this sense in that it helps members share and expand on their knowledge base around practical and technical issues related to agroecological food production, while connecting these issues to political organizing and the development of a systemic critique of the social and environmental problems with which they are faced. To elaborate on the forums through which formation can take place, in Vía Campesina’s words:

One’s formative process should create itself on top of a foundation that has been developed in different moments and in unique ways: from … roles in meetings and assemblies, to demonstrations, conferences, individual forums, courses, exchanges [and] workshop visits. It does not only consist of educational courses alone. (‘Policy’ 2009: 176)

Elsewhere, Vía Campesina has stressed that its ability to contribute to “cultural, political, ideological and technical training” around the world is central to the network’s successes and, as such, “We are multiplying our schools, educational experiences and communications instruments with our bases” (‘Jakarta Call’ 2013).

It is important to remember, however, that Vía Campesina’s political education and counter-hegemonic endeavours are reaching beyond its base of small-scale farmers. As was demonstrated at the People’s Summit, the network is keen to contribute to more inclusive dialogues to ensure that these are being carried out in a way that politicizes the issues and does not shy away from radical critiques and proposals. In addition, apart from international gatherings, the MST is demonstrating that efforts are underway to contribute to formation and political organizing by involving groups beyond the limits of Vía Campesina’s member organizations; from Brazil, the group is sending ‘brigades’ of its members for such purposes to countries as diverse as Palestine and China (Interview 11). There is even a ‘Friends of the MST’ group based out of Chicago, Illinois that is working “to build solidarity and educate the public in the US and English-speaking world in order to raise the international profile of the MST” (FMST, n.d.).
Within the context of Vía Campesina’s global network, the MST is a good example of the member organizations that are engaged in innovative and often militant forms of mobilization. The group has been known for staging land occupations—wielding machetes in mass numbers in aggressive encounters with the local establishment—in order to reclaim productive farmland to be managed communally (see Wolford 2010). Examples of such ‘action repertoires,’ along with the forms of political education captured by Vía Campesina’s formation activities, can contribute to counter-hegemonic narratives in another sense: they can help progressive groups in countries or regions where capitalist hegemony is dominant to understand the important and radical changes that are required to address social and environmental issues, in addition to the role that social movements can play in bringing about these changes.

One research participant effectively highlighted the need for such counter-hegemonic narratives in the context of system change. Having moved from her home country of Sweden to work in partnership with Vía Campesina member organizations in Nicaragua and Ecuador, she has seen the contrast between reformist, progressive and radical actors and networks first-hand:

We’re so colonized mentally [in the north]. We’re programmed to accept the power structures… [whereas in] Latin America there is a history of movement-based uprisings. That’s part of the reason we need to learn from them. For example, I was in a seminar about the new financial architecture of the BancoSur78 and they were discussing how they would respect the principles of food sovereignty within that architecture. They invited a member of the opposition from the European parliament [and, though he would support such an initiative in principle,] he couldn’t even think about trying to do the same thing at home since they argue for months there about tiny details of legislative reforms—fighting, for example, over one or two sentences in a document on how to regulate speculation in the food system. (Interview 11)

Vía Campesina’s efforts to engage both farmers and others in political education and organizing may therefore contribute to a spreading awareness of the potential for social movements to contribute to societal transformation, which can include changing the political parties in power at various levels of government (see Kozloff 2008; Prevost et al. 2012). Creating such an awareness may also lead to an appreciation that activism can

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78 BancoSur, the ‘Bank of the South,’ is an initiative of Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay and is geared towards lending funds within the Americas as an alternative to the World Bank and the IMF.
involve much more than signing petitions, writing letters to political representatives and shopping responsibly.

Accomplishing cultural shifts such as these would mark an important victory for Vía Campesina in its struggle to establish effective counter-hegemonic narratives as part of system change. The fact that the network is developing both practical and conceptual proposals that are not limited to issues related to food and agricultural systems is an indicator that this struggle is well underway. As another example of such conceptual proposals, Vía Campesina has covered topics ranging from new ways that societies should measure progress and well-being, \(^{79}\) to the ‘just transition’ that is needed to help workers employed in fossil fuel industries move to more sustainable jobs as we shift toward energy conservation and renewable power generation (‘Final Declaration’ 2012; cf. Newell and Mulvaney 2015). \(^{80}\) The network has even promoted a conceptual apparatus that would challenge the deeply ingrained cultural norms that posit humans (or society more generally) as separate from nature: “We must go beyond the anthropocentric model,” Vía Campesina wrote in a statement during the COP16 in Cancún, Mexico. “We must rebuild the cosmo-vision of our peoples, based on a holistic view of the relationship between the cosmos, Mother Earth, the air, the water and all living beings” (quoted in Di Chiro 2011: 232). \(^{81}\)

As noted above, Vía Campesina will need to continue to engage in ongoing and challenging debates to determine how food sovereignty and climate justice may come

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\(^{79}\) “Buen vivir” (or ‘living well’) is a concept that Vía Campesina has supported that looks at progress in terms of the well-being of people as opposed to focusing on economistic measures, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). See Acosta (2009) and Gutiérrez Escobar (2011) regarding the connections between this concept, food sovereignty and climate justice.

\(^{80}\) To return to Hall’s (1988: 44) notion that workers may be “both dependent on and exploited by the capitalist system,” a just transition is an important concept given the infrastructure in place around the world that sees many workers’ livelihoods caught up in fossil fuel industries and other sectors dependent on over-consuming the world’s resources. Workers may be well aware of the ecologically devastating consequences of their work, but very likely carry on with such unsustainable employment because it helps them feed their family and put a roof over their head.

\(^{81}\) Similarly, in the ‘Jakarta Call’ (2013), Vía Campesina proclaimed: “We are building new relationships between human beings and nature based on solidarity, cooperation and complementarity. At the heart of our struggle is an ethic of life.” Extensive literature has discussed the practical problems associated with the dichotomized modes of thinking that separate humans and nature (see Harvey 1996: 120-131; Smith 2010).
together in distinct cultural and political contexts through specific place-based campaigns that are sensitive to issues of scale and complementarity. Vía Campesina may not have an endless supply of financial and other resources to contribute to an ambitious project like system change. Indeed, as one member of the ICC explained, the network is often “working on an absolute shoestring budget,” with many people helping out “pro bono” (Interview 9). Despite this though, Vía Campesina certainly appears to be lending a great deal of support to the movement of movements that has taken up the system change project—through their established processes of representation, their tools for political education and the presence of their vast network of 200 million farmers in over 70 countries.

In addition, Vía Campesina seems to have a grasp on the challenges that lie ahead, which suggests that the network will be able to build on their momentum to date in practical and grounded ways. As an illustration of this, in the lead up to their sixth international conference in Jakarta, Vía Campesina released an ‘Open Book,’ an online document featuring chapters by a range of contributors that not only celebrates the successes the network has achieved but also acknowledges the struggles to come. One chapter that provides an astute political analysis of the movement outlines numerous questions and tensions that parallel those raised in this thesis. For example:

- How can La Vía Campesina successfully give visibility to all of the local struggles and ensure that these are understood within an international perspective?

- How can La Vía Campesina express the model of society that we are defending? That is, how can La Vía Campesina give visibility to all of the practical initiatives that are functioning outside of the capitalist market and demonstrate how these are effectively creating new foundations for new societies?

- How can La Vía Campesina help strengthen the global movement as a counterforce to global capitalism? How can La Vía Campesina continue to build and strengthen alliances at the local, national and global levels to mobilize for food sovereignty as the solution and for recognition that peasants do feed the world and cool the planet? (Excerpts from Desmarais and Nicholson in LVC ‘Open Book’ 2013: 8-9)

Ultimately, while much of this remains to be resolved, Vía Campesina’s contributions are captured within these questions themselves: As I have demonstrated, the network is striving to continuously connect local struggles and organizing strategies with a broader
political agenda. They are informing their diverse views as to what the ‘foundations for new societies’ will entail by building on practical initiatives and alliances at various scales, thereby resisting the temptation to present an oversimplified or essentialized perspective as to what the ‘counterforce to global capitalism’ should look like.

In this sense, Vía Campesina’s ‘counter-hegemonic and transformative project’ may indeed contribute to replacing the suggestion that ‘there is no alternative’ to neoliberal capitalism with a reasoned and cogent argument that ‘another world is possible.’ Needless to say, it will not be easy to definitively establish such narratives in diverse contexts—and to win the ‘war of position’ associated with Vía Campesina’s ambitions. The network will need to continue sharing both its systemic critique of the social and environmental crises being felt globally, as well as its proposals related to food sovereignty and climate justice that may help bring about that ‘other world’ that it has indicated is desperately needed. System change may not be an easy task at all, but who is to say that it is not possible?

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Conclusion

6.1 Re-imagining the end of the world

“It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism,” Jameson once wrote (quoted in Wainwright and Mann 2013: 15). Difficult as it may be, La Vía Campesina seems to be doing both. On the one hand, the network and its member organizations are imagining the end of the world, not in a distant, apocalyptic sense, but in the sense that they are witnessing first-hand the drastic social and environmental consequences associated with climate change, the ‘false solutions’ being implemented through green capitalism, and the increasing entrenchment of industrialized agriculture and the corporate food regime. On the other hand, Vía Campesina is imagining the end of capitalism through exchanges with member organizations in the network and others in the climate justice movement—exchanges that have contributed to a systemic critique of the problems they are experiencing and also, therefore, a determination to develop solutions to these problems that are far-reaching and transformative.

Since approximately 2007, the network has been active in linking the concepts of food sovereignty and climate justice, as there is a direct connection between the unsustainable food system that is in place globally and the associated release of a minimum of 44 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions (GRAIN 2011). In addition, small-scale farmers are a significant constituency of those disproportionately facing the worst effects of climate change. They are effectively seeing the ‘end of the world’ in the form of depleted soils, flooded fields, forced migrations, and deforested areas that have made way for monocultural crop plantations—many of which are being used for fuel rather than for food.
Collectively, initiatives like carbon offsetting and REDD programs are contributing to new forms of enclosure, with peasant farmers often finding themselves at the losing end of a battle over land as investors scurry to capture property rights that for them will mean a safe place to park their capital. Confronted by processes advanced in the name of ‘green growth,’ Vía Campesina’s members are therefore confronted with not only the geophysical effects of climate change but also the impacts of increasingly institutionalized neoliberal capitalist responses to the concurrent economic and environmental crises. Small-scale farmers are thus being profoundly affected by such responses—which have more to do with supporting capitalist regimes of accumulation than dealing with the climate crisis—while also being consistently reminded of the brutality of the current global food regime. The pressures for peasants either to engage in export-oriented agricultural methods driven by patented pesticides and GM seeds, or to make way for large-scale, fossil fuel-intensive monocultural farms, are sometimes impossible to overcome.

That Vía Campesina’s members are painfully aware of the political ecology of the situation in which they find themselves is fairly evident. They are fully cognizant of capitalism’s role in the converging climate and food crises, and to the fact that they are compelled to fight to retain the resources upon which their lives and livelihoods depend—from land and water to the atmosphere that is steadily being commodified. Understanding the root causes of the problems at hand, however, seems to be assisting Vía Campesina to respond in sophisticated and politically astute ways.

As demonstrated at the 2012 People’s Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the network is working within a larger movement for climate justice to show that structural issues are at the heart of the ecological devastation that the world is witnessing, and reallocating capital or correcting ‘market failures’ by paying for ecosystem services will do nothing to resolve those issues. Instead, Vía Campesina is helping to point out, thousands of solutions to climate change that will create fundamental social change are required. The breadth and depth of conversations that took place in the workshops and plenaries at the People’s Summit provide an indication of the ways in which Vía Campesina is engaging in ‘meaning work’ and framing processes, along with a range of allies and social movements, to develop
an understanding and articulation of the system change that is needed to tackle climate chaos and social injustice.

At international gatherings like the World Social Forums and counter-summits to the annual UNFCCC conferences, Vía Campesina members are engaging in regular conversations of this sort; and even if not every idea presented at these frenzied and sometimes disorganized meetings is captured in the conclusive documents that are produced, these forums nevertheless provide important avenues for both exchange and the building of potentially long-lasting alliances between groups and networks.

Internally, Vía Campesina is working through elaborate processes to develop and promote specific proposals that bridge notions of food sovereignty and climate justice. Through regional discussions, horizontal conversations between member organizations, and international conferences in which grassroots propositions are heard and debated, the network is demonstrating that democratic processes of representation and decision-making may be as important to establishing widespread solidarity as the solutions that are agreed upon themselves. The International Coordinating Committee (ICC) of Vía Campesina is thus able to move forward with these proposals, carry out political and logistical work, and coordinate specific campaigns in support of the network’s member organizations around the world.

Advancing the idea that peasant farmers can help ‘cool the earth’ is, as a result, making headway. Academics and research groups have backed up many of Vía Campesina’s specific claims, such as the ability for agroecological production methods to help sequester carbon and reduce energy expenditures. Other proposals developed by the network that link food sovereignty and climate justice, point to specific ways that system change may be brought about. These include favouring local and national food systems, reducing excessive meat consumption, and establishing fair and appropriate trade policies that would support these proposals while recognizing countries’ right to govern themselves accordingly.

That Vía Campesina does not subscribe to a specific ‘essentialized’ view of a system that should replace capitalism in the push for food sovereignty makes sense. The details
need to be sifted through democratically and without subscribing to one overarching ideology. This will involve continuing to work with allies of the network to situate their food-related climate justice proposals with diverse ideas as to how system change may come about—from banning new fossil fuel extraction projects to dismantling military infrastructure and phasing out unnecessary consumption.

While such proposals for societal transformation may seem to be painted in fairly broad strokes, it is key to remember that the debates and discussions in which Vía Campesina is engaging—both internally and with other nodes in the movement of movements—are much more thorough than I have been able to explore through this study. The network’s members and allies may not have all of the answers as to how the ‘end of capitalism’ may be brought about, but they certainly seem to be imagining it happening in methodical ways. As Wainwright and Mann observe, ending capitalism “cannot come via acts of imagination alone—but neither can it emerge without them” (2013: 15). Vía Campesina seems committed to continuing to form alliances and work internally to pair its systemic critiques of the causes of climate injustice with practical solutions that will help lead to radical societal transformation in specific places and political contexts.

6.2 The labour of system change

As indicated in the preceding chapter, Vía Campesina is clearly well aware of the conceptual and logistical hurdles that must still be overcome, especially with regards to helping to address the systemic causes of the food-related, climate and economic crises confronting people around the world. Significant questions remain in terms of how this diverse movement of peasants that stretches across the globe and intermingles with a range of other social actors will come to resolve these matters. Accomplishing the tasks that are laid out for Vía Campesina will undoubtedly take a great deal of time and resources. Strengthening alliances at various scales ‘as a counterforce to global capitalism’ and helping to create the ‘foundations for new societies’ are no small feats. In order to demonstrate that, behind the fierce rhetoric, the network has practical alternatives that
can both contribute to a sustainable food regime and help address the systemic causes of the climate crisis, Vía Campesina is set up for a long-term struggle.

Admirably, the network does seem to be giving visibility to the local struggles of its member organizations, in addition to the practical alternatives that they put forward. The processes of exchange that are made possible through Vía Campesina’s regional and international discussions—and through the types of political education represented by formation—are also helping to ensure that local struggles are being understood within an international perspective. However, determining the extent to which these efforts need to move further in order to ramp up the success of Vía Campesina and its member organizations would require additional research.

My investigation has suggested that the network is mindful of the perils of militant particularism and therefore eager to move beyond localized struggles and issue-specific conversations about food and agriculture. By engaging with other actors and networks in the movement for system change, Vía Campesina shows that a militant globalism is in fact needed to help deal with the far-reaching problems associated with climate change. The narratives being developed at international gatherings like the People’s Summit suggest that many peasant farmers are therefore connecting proposals related to food systems with many others. These include proposals that may need to be implemented at different scales—from the local (e.g. transit plans) or the national (e.g. energy conservation initiatives) to the regional (e.g. alternative trade agreements).

Moving forward on a range of campaigns related to such diverse issues may not be easy if Vía Campesina and its allies hope to maintain a degree of complementarity between proposals that are being implemented in different places and across scales. Yet this may be exactly what is required if system change is to be brought about in any meaningful way. With its defined structure, decision-making processes, and technical staff in place, Vía Campesina seems to have much to offer to help ‘strengthen the global movement’ that hopes to counter capitalism. As noted previously, the network does not however have an endless supply of money, time and other resources that will help them advance this movement.
The question of time as a resource is also very relevant in that, as small-scale farmers, the network’s members and ICC representatives must spend time away from their families and their farms in order to carry out the organizational work associated with moving forward on these issues in earnest. Significant personal sacrifices are certainly in order therefore as individuals remove themselves from daily agricultural operations and demonstrate their commitment to helping Vía Campesina work towards its objective of ‘feeding the world and cooling the planet.’ This can mean, for example, attending meetings and conferences away from home, or working horizontally with other member organizations to develop campaigns or share agroecological farming practices.

The fact that Vía Campesina has in recent years expanded its mandate to include not only food sovereignty but also climate justice and system change only adds complexity and enormity to the tasks at hand. An interesting potential direction for further research will therefore be to explore the labour involved with working towards ‘system change.’ This could include an analysis of the ways in which networks like Vía Campesina’s may work collaboratively to coordinate the many campaigns associated with implementing food sovereignty, countering climate injustices and so on. As discussed, the resources that the movement of movements may be able to muster are stacked up against those wielded by powerful corporate and political groups that stand to benefit from the status quo. Lobbying efforts, marketing and other strategies will continue to push for a focus on would-be solutions through green consumerism and green growth instead of having governments and communities act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in any substantial way. ‘Blue washing,’ wherein the reputation of the UN is used as a cover to advance elite interests, is also a looming threat (LVC ‘Corporate Capture’ 2012).

The question of labouring for system change is also noteworthy in the sense that Vía Campesina will need to dedicate time and resources to sorting through the specific details of implementing many of its proposals. As I have argued, numerous processes and systems will need to be put in place in order to democratically and fairly resolve tensions that may arise with various campaigns, such as those geared toward changing consumption patterns and prioritizing local and national food systems. Doing so will inevitably involve engaging more than just farmers, if people are to demand a right to shape food policies through
processes that evoke the concept of ‘agrarian citizenship.’ With each of Vía Campesina’s member organizations representing a node in an assemblage of institutions, cultural practices, political groups and socio-economic conditions, campaigns that effectively bridge food sovereignty and climate justice in place-based contexts will therefore require significant work.

The labour of system change also draws in themes related to the specific action repertoires that Vía Campesina may employ as its members work on these campaigns. Engaging both peasant farmers and non-members will require determining not just what kinds of changes to struggle for in food systems and beyond, but also how to struggle for those changes. The network has to date maintained a non-violent approach, and it also contends that certain tactics—such as lobbying and advocating through traditional channels—are not worth pursuing (‘Open Book’ 2013: Ch. 3). At the same time, working effectively within the context of state structures and legislative environments will necessitate engaging with institutions that will likely resist radical changes. Vía Campesina will therefore need to be creative and strategic in determining when and where to undertake more traditional forms of organizing and when and where to consider ‘acting contentiously’ by using potentially disruptive actions that may have more of an impact (see Tarrow 2011).82

In order to strive in solidarity with like-minded actors and movements around the world for system change, Vía Campesina’s members and staff will evidently need to muster significant resources to continue to articulate their visions of food sovereignty and climate justice and to determine how those visions will become a reality.

82 In additional to organizational work, there are many other labour-related issues connected to the topic of system change. Perhaps most notably is the challenging matter of how Vía Campesina may be able to support a ‘just transition’ for workers whose jobs are caught up in extractive industries, industrial agriculture and the like. Expanding on agroecological production methods will certainly require more on-farm labour, as the network has acknowledged, but what groups in increasingly urbanized societies will be motivated to transition to this form of work? As migrant farm workers in North America have experienced, agricultural labour can be tremendously hard and, under the current system, exploitative in terms of compensation, worker safety and job security.
6.3 An idea whose time has arrived

A famous quotation by French novelist Victor Hugo has been varyingly paraphrased including, in one article referring to food sovereignty, as “There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has arrived” (Navarro and Desmarais 2009: 12). Perhaps the power of food sovereignty rests in part in the fact that Vía Campesina has promoted it as a holistic concept that relates to a range of other issues: biodiversity, trade, water access, agrarian reform, human rights, migration, women’s issues and more. Small-scale farmers that make up the network are drawn to the idea in large part because it speaks to—and was developed based on—their lived experiences. In addition, they have the autonomy to define how food sovereignty would be implemented in their unique political, economic and cultural contexts. Vía Campesina is not suggesting that the network as a whole, or anyone else, should impose top-down definitions as to what it means to farmers and consumers to have agency over their food systems. Instead the network promotes “unity within diversity” (Desmarais 2007: 27). As one farmer from Saskatchewan who is a former member of Vía Campesina’s ICC has written, “Every [person] who eats has a stake in the food system” (Wiebe and Wipf 2011: 17), and as such, people should have the opportunity to contribute to developing the food policies and systems that affect them.

Climate justice is also a powerful idea. It has drawn together social movements from around the world that are working on a wide-range of interconnected issues—issues that, when analyzed collectively, can help address the systemic causes of environmentally catastrophic trends and the refusal of powerful actors to tackle them in a meaningful way. In addition, just as food is central as a “biological necessity and cultural linchpin of human social life” (Guthman 2002: 295), the climate is also central to life on earth. In the last few decades there has been a dramatically increasing awareness that our modes of production that depend on the Earth’s resources can lead to unintended consequences, from flooded neighbourhoods to drought-stricken fields, climate change can take lives either quickly or painfully slowly …through water-borne diseases, malnutrition or any number of side

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83 The original quote, “On résiste à l’invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l’invasion des idées” literally translates to “One resists the invasion of armies; one does not resist the invasion of ideas.” [Victor Hugo, *Histoire d’un Crime* (1877)]

effects. It is forcing people to migrate like never before and it is having dramatic impacts in the global south, where livelihoods are also being squeezed by the so-called solutions to climate change. Climate justice may seem like an academic concept, but it is informed by the concrete experiences of those people facing the worst effects of global warming—people who would likely agree that it is an idea whose time has also come.

Vía Campesina’s proposals that bridge food sovereignty and climate justice are radical in the sense that they target the systemic causes that lay at the root of such drastic and widespread problems. They are also radical in that they have been developed in consultation with thousands of members and allies worldwide, demonstrating that truly democratic and inclusive forms of representation and collaboration are possible. In fact, these forms of non-hierarchical organizing and dialogue may very well inform the many decision-making processes that will need to be established in order to implement system change in diverse contexts. In this sense, Vía Campesina is showcasing a model that has the potential to be adopted not only by social movements and activist groups, but also by institutions and actors in society at large.

In addition to Vía Campesina’s decision-making processes, their efforts to form alliances—with a broad range of networks, labour groups, academics and others—are also noteworthy. Through such alliances, this collection of peasant farmers is showing their potential to contribute to revolutionary change, even if it is a ‘passive revolution’ or a ‘war of position’ that is taking place. Their efforts toward political education, leadership training and mass communication strategies are contributing to counter-hegemonic narratives that are at once keeping the issues related to food and climate issues politicized, while also demonstrating that behind Vía Campesina’s radical critiques and proposals there is a movement that has a role to play in system change. With their allies, the network can therefore help progressives see that there are alternatives to, for example, working solely on issue-specific campaigns or engaging in the often fruitless task of lobbying UN negotiators.

Of course, in striving to help establish counter-hegemonic narratives while also pushing specific campaigns related to food sovereignty and climate justice, Vía Campesina’s members have much work to do and many decisions to make. By connecting
these concepts and taking on the ambitious goal of system change, they have undoubtedly added an extra dose of ‘chaos’ into the ‘beauty’ of its internal deliberations and horizontal organizing. Implementing the network’s specific proposals, in conjunction with a movement of movements that supports the powerful ideas behind food sovereignty and climate justice, will require tremendous effort, organizational prowess and a continued commitment to the radical imagination Vía Campesina has displayed.

Yet, as Neil Smith wrote, “It may not be too optimistic to begin again to encourage a revolutionary imaginary” (2010: 266). The strength of a network that has built solidarity over twenty years among member organizations from around the world that now number more than 160, gives cause for such optimism. Appropriately, Vía Campesina confidently indicates in one declaration: “Our struggle is historic, dynamic and uncompromising.”

Perhaps many would be surprised if the route to radical change on food and climate issues did not come from politicians, scientists, academics or charismatic leaders of non-governmental organizations. But perhaps the way forward is ‘the peasant way.’ Only time will tell.

85 From the year 2000 Bangalore Declaration, quoted in ‘Open Book’ (2013: Ch. 10: 2).
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La Vía Campesina (LVC): See below for list of select documents.

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Statistics Canada (2012) Table 004-0001: Census of Agriculture, number and area of farms and farmland area by tenure, Canada and provinces, every 5 years. [CANSIM (database)]


La Vía Campesina: Select Documents


86 Contributions to paper included interventions from numerous groups and movements in addition to Vía Campesina.
87 Statement co-signed with 9 other international/regional groups, plus 61 national organizations.


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88 Document co-signed with the 18 movements and organizations that co-facilitated the Climate Space.

89 Joint civil society statement, co-signed with Friends of the Earth International, Corporate Europe Observatory, Jubilee South/Americas, Peace and Justice in Latin America/SERPAJ-AL, Polaris Institute, The Council of Canadians, The Transnational Institute, Third World Network, World March of Women.

90 Document co-authored with various CSOs.


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91 Published by the Transnational Institute (TNI) for European Coordination Via Campesina and Hands off the Land network.

92 Report co-authored with Friends of the Earth International and Combat Monsanto.


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