

# Victory in hard-fought struggle in defense of the human rights of peasants

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## **UN resolution hints at a new international instrument to promote and protect the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas.**

The United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a landmark resolution hinting at a new instrument for the rights of the world's estimated 1.2 billion peasants and other people working in rural areas. The resolution (A/HRC/21/L23) is monumental in light of peasants' key role for food production—and also in the wake of contemporary challenges such as growing conflicts over land, water, and also food prices and climate crises.

The UN Human Rights Council resolution was approved on September 27, after 23 Member States voted in favour, 15 abstained and nine voted against the text[1].

The resolution is based on the report of the Advisory Committee of the UN Human Rights Council entitled "Final study of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on the advancement of the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas" (A/HRC/19/75). This study was adopted by this body on the right to food in the 19<sup>th</sup> session of UN Human Rights Council (March 2012). In this session, the resolution on the right to food was adopted by consensus.

This has been a long and hard-fought struggle of La Via Campesina to break the discrimination against peasants and to bring alternatives to the table at the UN to be used as part of the UN mandate. The UN set a standard for the promotion and protection of peasants' human rights. The rights of peasants resolution follow in the spirit of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In article 1, it gives a definition of a peasant and other people working in rural areas. It reaffirms their rights to life and to an adequate standard of living (art. 3); their right to freedoms of association, opinion and expression (art. 12) and their right to have access to justice (art. 13). In addition, it recognizes new rights that could reinforce their protection against discrimination. These include the right to land and territory (art. 4); the right to seeds and traditional agricultural knowledge and practice (art. 5); the right to means of agricultural production (art. 6); the right to information and agricultural technology (art. 7); the freedom to determine prices and markets for agricultural production (art. 8); the right to the protection of local agricultural values (art. 9); the right to biological diversity (art. 10); and the right to preserve the environment (art. 11).

The outcry for this recognition and further protection of the rights of peasants has been a bottom-up process. This process began in Indonesia 12 years ago when a member of La Via Campesina, Serikat Petani Indonesia (SPI) brought the initiative to the regional and international level. The Declaration of the Rights of Peasants-Women and Men was produced during the International Conference of Peasants Rights in 2008 in Jakarta. After consultation with its members worldwide, La Via Campesina brought the initiative to the UN.

With the adoption of this resolution, the UN recognises that hunger cannot be addressed without peasants. Peasants play a key role in resolving hunger, poverty and problems linked with climate. This resolution recognises that the UN should engage in a process of deliberation among nations, and with peasants and other people working in rural areas.

Moreover, the UN also set specific tasks for national governments to establish programs and policies to promote food sovereignty, to improve rural livelihood, and to protect peasants. National governments are recognised as legally responsible actors in human rights protection, especially concerning food, and the livelihood and peasants. If there are extraterritorial actors who bring about the above mentioned problem, the nation state is the first actor to respond.

Finally, the resolution also meant that now the UN recognises peasants—and other people working in rural areas as actors and parties with human rights to defend. The complete recognition covers smallholder farmers, agricultural workers, indigenous people, peasant women and landless people worldwide, fisher communities, the different groups working in rural areas, and in particular peasant farmers, small landholders, landless workers, fisher-folk, hunters and gatherers.

Henry Saragih, General Coordinator of La Via Campesina said, “The importance of this resolution for peasants and, more broadly, for the human rights agenda, cannot be underestimated. By adopting the resolution, we are also taking another major step forward towards the promotion and protection of the rights of peasants—and human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.”

But he warned that, “Even with this progress, peasants still face marginalization, extreme poverty and other violations. We are often criminalized, and represent the second most vulnerable group when it came to the danger of being killed for our activities in the defence of human rights, land rights and natural resources. Moreover, peasants face particular problems in terms of access to justice to protect them from acts that violate their basic rights and this leads to situations of generalized impunity.”

Ambassador Angelica Llanos from Bolivia said in her speech delivering the resolution in the Council, “Hunger, like poverty, was indeed still predominantly a rural problem and in the rural population it was those who produced food who suffered disproportionately, particularly in developing countries. The Advisory Committee concluded in its final study that existing international human rights instruments remained insufficient to fully protect the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas.”

The Plurinational Republic of Bolivia delivered a first ever process for resolution and the follow-up for special protection for peasants in human rights mechanisms— working together with South Africa, Ecuador, and Cuba as a core group for this process.

Finally, the resolution stipulated that the UN Human Rights Council took the decision to establish an open-ended intergovernmental Working Group with the mandate of negotiating, finalizing and submitting to the Human Rights Council a draft United Nations declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas on the basis of the draft submitted by the Advisory Committee. La Via Campesina welcomes the resolution and shares with this core group their determination to develop the protection mechanism. The International Peasant Movement will continue to garner international cooperation with States, civil society and all relevant stakeholders to contribute actively and constructively to this initiative.

It is indeed a small victory for peasants all across the world. The struggle continues.

**La Via Campesina**

[1] Total votes: In favor (23): Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chile, China, Congo, Costa Rica, Cuba, Djibouti, Ecuador, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Peru, Philippines, Russian Federation, Thailand, Uganda, Uruguay.

Abstain (15): Botswana, Jordania, Kuwait, Libya, Maldives, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Nigeria, Norway, Qatar, Republic of Moldova, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Switzerland.

No (9): Austria, Belgium, Hungary, Italy, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Spain, United States

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