

Resisting Tyranny: Struggling for Seed Sovereignty in Latin America

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The Latin America Seeds Collective has just released a 40-minute film ([“Seeds: Common or Corporate Property?”](#)) which documents the resistance of peasant farmers to the corporate takeover of their agriculture.

The film describes how seed has been central to agriculture for 10,000 years. Farmers have been saving, exchanging and developing seeds for millennia. Seeds have been handed down from generation to generation. Peasant farmers have been the custodians of seeds, knowledge and land.

This is how it was until the 20th century when corporations [took these seeds](#), hybridised them, genetically modified them, patented them and fashioned them to serve the needs of industrial agriculture with its monocultures and chemical inputs.

To serve the interests of these corporations by marginalising indigenous agriculture, a number of treaties and agreement over breeders’ rights and intellectual property have been enacted to prevent peasant farmers from freely improving, sharing or replanting their traditional seeds. Since this began, thousands of seed varieties have been lost and corporate seeds have increasingly dominated agriculture.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that globally just 20 cultivated plant species account for 90 percent of all the plant-based food consumed by humans. This narrow genetic base of the global food system has put food security at serious risk.

To move farmers away from using native seeds and to get them to plant corporate seeds, the film describes how seed ‘certification’ rules and laws are brought into being by national governments on behalf of commercial seed giants like Monsanto. In Costa Rica, the battle to overturn restrictions on seeds was lost with the signing of a free trade agreement with the US, although this flouted the country’s seed biodiversity laws.

Seed laws in Brazil created a corporate property regime for seeds which effectively marginalised all indigenous seeds that were locally adapted over generations. This regime attempted to stop farmers from using or breeding their own seeds.

It was an attempt to privatise seed. The privatisation of something that is a common heritage. The privatisation and appropriation of inter-generational knowledge embodied by seeds whose germplasm is ‘tweaked’ ([or stolen](#)) by corporations who then claim ownership.

In the film, an interviewee claims that if corporate seeds end up in a peasants' field, the corporation can take the entire crop. It is a way of getting rid of the small farmer as agribusiness corporations strive to take control of the entire global food chain.

However, the film is as much about resistance as it is about corporate imperialism. No matter how well organised small farmers become, they might not be able to win the battle on their own. The struggle has to be taken to cities to raise awareness among consumers about how food is being appropriated by transnational corporations without their consent or knowledge. Without involving consumers, they become an [ignorant link](#) which merely serves to perpetuate the chain of corporate control.

The film moves from country to country in South America to highlight how farmers and social movements are fighting back to regain or retain control. Corporate control over seeds is also an attack on the survival of communities and their traditions. Seeds are integral to identity because in rural communities, people are acutely aware that they are 'all children of the seed'. Their lives have been tied to planting, harvesting, seeds, soil and the seasons for thousands of years.

Corporate control is also an attack on biodiversity and – as we see the world over – [on the integrity of](#) soil, water, food, diets and health as well as on the integrity of international institutions, governments and officials which have too often been [corrupted](#) by powerful transnational corporations.

The film highlights the fight back against the 'Monsanto law' (GM corn) in Guatemala. It shows how movements are resisting regulations and seed certification laws designed to eradicate traditional seeds by allowing only 'stable', 'uniform' and 'novel' seeds on the market (read corporate seeds). These are the only 'regulated' seeds allowed: registered and certified. It is a cynical way of eradicating indigenous farming practices at the behest of corporations.

As part of the resistance, farmers are organising seed exchanges, seed fairs, public markets and seed banks. They want to ensure that seeds for different altitudes, different soils and different nutritional needs remain available.

In Brazil, the film describes how previous governments supported peasant agriculture and agroecology by developing supply chains with public sector schools and hospitals (Food Acquisition Programme). This secured good prices and brought farmers together. It came about by social movements applying pressure on the government to act.

The federal government also brought native seeds and distributed them to farmers across the country, which was important for combatting the advance of the corporations as many farmers had lost access to native seeds.

Governments are under immense pressure via lop-sided trade deals, strings-attached loans and corporate-backed seed regimes to comply with the demands of agribusiness conglomerates and to fit in with their supply chains. However, when farmers organise into effective social movements, administrators are compelled to take on board the needs of local cultivators.

It indicates what can be achieved when policy makers support traditional cultivators. And it is essential that they do because, unlike industrial agriculture, peasant farmers throughout

the world [have been genuine custodians](#) of both seed, the environment and the land.

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