



Agrarian South Network Research Bulletin

January — February 2022

"Resistance and Global South Solidarity"

1. Subin Dennis:
*India's farmers emerge
triumphant*

2. Cira Pascual Marquina and
Chris Gilbert :
*Highland Resistance: How
Venezuela's "Che Guevara
Commune" Confronts the
Crisis*

3. Max Ajl in conversation
with Habib Ayeub on Food
Sovereignty and the Environ-
ment

Editorial Board:

Lyn Ossome (Chief), Damián Lobos, Freedom Mazwi, Manish Kumar

EDITORIAL***Resistance and Global South Solidarity***

Sanctions against Venezuela, repressive anti-farmer legislations in India, and imperialist attacks on national and food sovereignty: these are the backdrops against which this issue of the Bulletin delves into the places and forms of resistance waged by the world's peasant and farming population in their struggles for survival.

Since 2017, the US sanctions have had a devastating impact on Venezuelan society, leading to fuel shortages that have gravely affected campesinos. We reprint in this issue, first-hand accounts of the impact of the US sanctions on a coffee and cocoa growing commune in the Venezuelan Andes. Far from being passive during the crisis, the Che Guevara Commune has developed a range of creative responses to these difficulties as they emerge, demonstrating that communes can provide a popular, sovereign solution to the crisis – an alternative to capitalist capitulation. Among the social questions to which such communal organizing seem to respond is how to marshal the resources of the people and of the land towards survival of whole communities, and the political question regarding what the building blocks of socialist futures might look like and what forms these might take in practical terms.

Also reprint with permission, a critical interview with Habib Ayeb and Max Ajl, in which Ayeb elaborates in great detail the questions and challenges which require a response if we are to cross the neoliberal threshold towards food sovereignty in the current contexts of crisis across the developing world. At its core is the centrality of sustainable agro-ecology 'as a political alternative,' which must be understood in tandem with the sovereignty and defense of nations. In this sense, the separation between city and countryside is reflective in part, of the urban left's subjugation to modernity with its twin question of development that continues to evolve at the expense of the peasantry. But what is the cost of the current development model whose ends are so unjustifiably narrow? As Ayeb poignantly enquires, what does it mean to develop a country by increasing the number of poor people? He reiterates the importance of thinking these questions from *here*, from our own local and engaged vantage points.

In India, an inspiring year-long protest action by farmers have resulted in the recapitulation of the neoliberal state and victory, if only intermittent, given capitalism's voracious appetite for accumulation and dispossession. Subin

Dennis's original contribution recounts the historic struggle of farmers in India from 2020-2021 against three farm laws that threatened to bring agriculture under corporate control, and their ultimate victory, both of which constituted one of the most significant events on record since the country's independence. The questions that the farmers' agitation have raised are

intimately related to the pursuit of neoliberal policies in India during the past three decades – policies that have adversely impacted the availability of credit for farmers.

Together, all three contributions highlight how struggles around food, and the solidarities that sustain them, remain central in thinking livable futures for most of the world's poor and working people.

Enquiries, responses and submissions may be sent to the editors at:

agrariansouthresearchbulletin@gmail.com

India's farmers emerge triumphant

Subin Dennis*

The victory of the farmers' struggle of 2020-2021 in India would go down in the annals of history as one of the most significant events on record since the country's independence. On 29 November 2021, the Parliament of India voted¹ to repeal the three farm laws against which a massive farmers' agitation had been raging in the country since November 2020. The repeal followed the announcement² by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 19 November 2021 that the laws would be withdrawn. Subsequently, on 9 December, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM; United Farmers Front), a coalition of more than 500 farmers' organisations which was leading the struggle, suspended³ the agitation after the government formally accepted the main demands of the farmers.

The three farm laws⁴ were major reform measures that the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of India had pursued adamantly, and yet it was forced to climb down, which amounted to a major setback to the ruling party and its parent organisation, the fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

The immense pressure created by the agitation, and the fear of the BJP that

farmers' outrage would have a serious and adverse impact on its chances in the upcoming legislative assembly elections in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Punjab forced the hand of the BJP to effect this change of tack.

The three farm laws

The first few decades after India won independence from British colonial rule saw policies being put in place to support peasant agriculture. A system of minimum support prices and public procurement was an important component of these policies. This system entailed the government declaring a minimum support price (MSP) for several major crops, and then procuring these crops from farmers at the declared MSP or slightly higher prices. At the same time, to protect the general population from shortages and runaway inflation, a public distribution system was put in place to provide a minimum quantity of food to the public at subsidised prices.

Most states in India have regulated wholesale markets where farmers can sell their produce. The purpose of these markets, which function under the supervision of state governments, is to prevent farmers from being exploited by traders, and to ensure

* Subin Dennis is an economist and researcher at Tricontinental Research, New Delhi.

remunerative prices and timely payments to the farmers. These markets are the places from where the government procures major crops as mentioned earlier.

The three farm laws that triggered the farmers' agitation were passed by the Parliament of India in September 2020. These were (1) the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; (2) the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, and (3) the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act (ECA), 2020.

The first⁵ of the three laws sought to make regulated markets irrelevant. Once the regulated markets and their infrastructure are weakened, a government that wants to weaken the system of procurement will find the task much easier. With procurement by government undermined, the safety net for crop prices would also vanish. This would then allow corporates to coerce farmers into entering into unfavourable contracts, which was to be facilitated by the second farm law. The third law would have increased the dominance of big private players even more, as it sought to remove restrictions on private players stockpiling essential commodities like cereals, pulses, and potatoes.

In short, the three farm laws threatened to bring agriculture under corporate control. The farmers —

particularly those in the states where the system of regulated markets have been strong — immediately understood the dangers that the three laws posed for their livelihoods. They had already seen what had happened in the state of Bihar, which did away with regulated markets in 2006, resulting in crop prices becoming more volatile, and in farmers ending up receiving prices below MSP for crops such as rice⁶, wheat, and maize⁷. They did not want this experience to be replicated everywhere else.

Fight to the finish

When farmers' protests against the laws broke out in Punjab, Haryana, and several other parts of the country, these were mostly ignored by the Union government and the mainstream press. Hence the farmers decided to march to the national capital. The police tried to stop them, but some farmers used tractors to break down the barricades, and others used alternative routes to reach the Delhi border.

Four places on the outskirts of Delhi became the main venues of the agitation. These were Singhu and Tikri at the Delhi-Haryana border, Ghazipur at the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border, and Shahjahanpur at the Haryana-Rajasthan border, about 80 km from the Delhi-Haryana border. Singhu and Tikri were the main protest sites for farmers from Punjab and Haryana; Ghazipur was where farmers from Western Uttar Pradesh

congregated; and Shahjahanpur was the protest venue for farmers from Rajasthan. But right from the beginning, protest actions⁸ and campaigns⁹ were taking place across the country, giving the agitation an all-India character.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about the agitation was that the farmers fought to the finish, waging a protracted battle, refusing to withdraw the agitation until their demands were met. Many protests by various sections of the working people during the neoliberal era have been stonewalled by successive Indian governments, which chose to wear down the protesters using the greater power of attrition that the state wields. But not this time.

Staying power

Conscious that the government is not likely to concede their demands immediately, the agitating farmers came ready for the long haul. They brought along trucks and tractor-trolleys to store food grains, pulses and other essential supplies. They set up encampments with trolleys and tents at the protest sites. Farmers took turns to stay at protest sites and to stay at home to tend to crops. They set up community kitchens¹⁰ and washrooms at the protest sites. Food grains, vegetables, milk, and other essential supplies were sent regularly from the villages.

Extreme weather, and the malicious propaganda that the BJP government

unleashed against the protestors — branding them as "Khalistanis"¹¹ (Sikh secessionists), "anti-nationals"¹², and "terrorists"¹³ — did not deter the farmers.

More than 700 protesting farmers lost their lives¹⁴ during the course of the agitation, many of them succumbing to harsh weather conditions at the protest sites. Four farmers and a journalist were killed in Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttar Pradesh, on 3 October 2021, when a convoy of vehicles associated with a union minister belonging to the BJP and his son ran over the protestors. Such sacrifices and repression that they had to endure did not break the determination of the farmers.

An important factor that made it possible for the agitation to be sustained for such a long time was the unity of broad social classes. All sections of the peasantry and agricultural workers came together¹⁵ in the agitation. Poor and middle farmers constituted the majority of the protesting farmers; but sections of rich farmers also joined. Such wide-ranging unity was crucial in enabling the mobilisation of the resources necessary for a prolonged struggle. Religious organisations and charitable organisations also pitched in to run community kitchens, medical camps, and shelters at the protest sites. In Punjab, where the mobilisation was the most powerful, the agitation had become one that almost the entire society had taken up.

Organisation

The unity of major farmers' organisations has been crucial in making an agitation of such scale and duration possible.

The weakening of state support¹⁶ to peasant agriculture in India during the neoliberal era has resulted in more than 400,000 farmers¹⁷ taking their own lives since 1995. Protests against the policies that led to this catastrophe have intensified in the past few years. The communist-led All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS; All India Peasant Union), for instance, raised the slogan¹⁸ “No to suicide; Unite to fight”¹⁹, and worked to build an “issue-based unity” among farmers' organisations when it comes to fighting against the neoliberal assault on farmers' livelihoods. It played a major role in the formation of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC; All India Farmers' Struggle Coordination Committee), a coalition of more than 200 farmers' organisations, in 2017, after six farmers were killed in police firing at Mandsaur in the BJP-ruled state of Madhya Pradesh.

The AIKSCC and other organisations such as the Kirti Kisan Union and various factions of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) became the core of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) which led the farmers' agitation from November 2020 onwards. Farmers' organisations which are

part of the SKM campaigned in villages to mobilise farmers and agricultural workers. The role of the BKU factions were particularly important in Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh, while the AIKS played a major role in mobilising people in Rajasthan and Haryana, and in organising protests in most other states, including Maharashtra, Kerala, and West Bengal.

The agitation was also supported by the Joint Platform of Central Trade Unions in India. The farmers' march to Delhi on 26 November 2020 itself coincided with the general strike by workers in India on the same day. The three country-wide shutdown calls by farmers' organisations – on 8 December 2020, 26 March 2021, and 27 September 2021 – were supported by workers' trade unions.

Religious harmony, democratisation

Participants and leaders of the farmers' agitation have repeatedly stressed how the struggle has contributed to healing²⁰ the fractured bonds between Hindus and Muslims in regions such as Muzaffarnagar in Western Uttar Pradesh, which had been ravaged by riots in 2013. This has been an important success for class-based mobilisation that cut across religious communities. Sustaining this, however, would require continued political campaigns²¹. Whipping up religious strife has been a very important political tactic for the Hindu supremacist RSS-BJP, and as long as

the agitation was going on, this tactic wasn't working to their satisfaction. As the developments in the weeks since the suspension of the agitation show,²² the RSS-BJP are now back in their element, trying to stir up tensions between Hindus and Muslims.

The agitation also saw the participation of large numbers of women²³ in regions where feudal culture rules the roost. Many such women were becoming part of such movements and farmers' organisations for the first time. It became an avenue for them to be active in the public sphere; many of them gave speeches, wrote and performed songs, and mobilised people.

Wearing a veil is a widespread custom among Hindu women in the deeply conservative milieu of many regions of North India, and several women participants of the farmers' agitation discarded their veils during the struggle.

Thus, the farmers' agitation has been an important step forward in the arduous struggle to democratise society itself.

Battles ahead

While the SKM has suspended the agitation on the borders of Delhi, it has made it clear that the farmers' struggle is not over. It did not end the agitation immediately after the repeal of the three farm laws, but instead waited for the government to accept its other

major demands as well. These included the withdrawal of about 48,000 cases²⁴ that were filed against protesting farmers, and providing compensation to the kin of farmers who died at the protests, both of which the government has conceded.

The toughest pending demand — which the farmers' organisations consider exceedingly important — is to secure the minimum support price (MSP) as a legal entitlement for all farmers. The government has agreed to set up a committee to discuss the issue. The SKM has said that while the current agitation has been suspended, the struggle for the enactment of a law for MSP would continue.

Most crucially, the farmers' agitation squarely identified the RSS²⁵ and the big corporates²⁶ which have gained out of neoliberal policies as people's enemies. Boycott of the products and outlets of corporate majors Reliance and Adani²⁷, and combatting the RSS's politics of dividing people by sowing religious hatred were integral elements of the agitation.

The question of political power has become a matter of debate among farmers' organisations in the context of the upcoming legislative assembly elections in states like Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. The laws that the farmers fought against came from the political executive, and there is every possibility of such laws and policies being

foisted on the farmers in the future as well. Whether the interests of farmers and other sections of the working people are protected by policy makers depends, to a large extent, on the kind of political formations that come to power at the centre and in the states. The approach of the farmers' organisations that were part of the agitation has become an important factor in the assembly elections. Some farmers' organisations have decided to contest the elections in Punjab²⁸, while other organisations disagree with this move²⁹. The outcome of these tactics would be keenly awaited.

The questions that the farmers' agitation have raised are intimately related to the pursuit of neoliberal policies in India during the past three decades. These policies have, for example, adversely impacted the

availability of credit for farmers. The privatisation of public sector banks would further worsen the situation, since public sector banks have been vital channels to provide loans to farmers and other small producers on a priority basis. Hence the fight against privatisation is an integral part of the fight against policies that harm farmers' interests.

The farmers' organisations and workers' trade unions intend to carry forward the gains made — in particular, the class-based unity forged — during the agitation. If successful, these efforts will have far-reaching ramifications for the battles against privatisation, anti-worker laws, fuel price hikes, and other neoliberal policies that have hit the working people of India hard during the past three decades.

¹ Haq, Zia, and Smriti Kak Ramachandran, "Bill to repeal farm laws passed in Lok Sabha", Hindustan Times, 29 November 2021: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bill-to-repeal-farm-laws-passed-in-parliament-101638170546104.html>

² Sharma, Harikrishna, "PM Narendra Modi says sorry, announces repeal of three farm laws", The Indian Express, 20 November 2021: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/three-farm-laws-repealed-pm-modi-7630405/>

³ Samyukta Kisan Morcha, Press Bulletin, 9 December 2021: <https://twitter.com/Kisanektamorcha/status/1468892261312204800>

⁴ Dennis, Subin, "India's Farmer Revolt", Tribune Magazine, 14 December 2020: <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/12/indias-popular-revolt>

⁵ Rawal, Vikas, Suvidya Patel, and Jesim Pais, "Political Economy of Agricultural Market Reforms: Analysis of the Farming Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020", 10

October 2020: <https://vikalp.ind.in/2020/10/political-economy-of-agricultural-market-reforms-analysis-of-the-farming-produce-trade-and-commerce-promotion-and-facilitation-act-2020/>

⁶ Manoj, CK, "Bihar scrapped APMC Act, mandi system 14 years ago; here's what it did to farmers", Down To Earth, 7 December 2020: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/agriculture/bihar-scrapped-apmc-act-mandi-system-14-years-ago-here-s-what-it-did-to-farmers-74534>

⁷ Himanshu, "Lessons from Bihar's abolition of its APMC system for farmers", Mint, 24 September 2020: <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/lessons-from-bihar-s-abolition-of-its-apmc-system-for-farmers-11600962615201.html>

⁸ Chakraborty, Sandip, "West Bengal Farmers Line up Protest Programmes Across Districts", Newslick, 12 January 2021: <https://www.newslick.in/West-Bengal-Farmers-Line-Protest-Programmes-Across-Districts>

⁹ TNM Editorial, "Kerala farmers start indefinite protest in solidarity with farmers agitating in Delhi", The NewsMinute, 13 December 2020: <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/kerala-farmers-start-indefinite-protest-solidarity-farmers-agitating-delhi-139521>

¹⁰ Gupta, Kanika, "I come here for the food", People's Archive of Rural India, 14 December 2020: <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/i-come-here-for-the-food/>

¹¹ Pandey, Neelam, "BJP alleges Khalistani agenda behind farmer protests, says Congress playing with fire", ThePrint, 27 November 2020: <https://theprint.in/politics/bjp-alleges-khalistani-agenda-behind-farmer-protests-says-congress-playing-with-fire/553292/>

¹² "Anti-national elements leading farmers' protest: Himachal BJP vice-president", Hindustan Times, 14 December 2020: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/anti-national-elements-leading-farmers-protest-himachal-bjp-vice-president/story-c8rY3ELVsoqyKCFjc7SUPM.html>

¹³ PTI, "Terrorists sitting at farmers' protest sites, says BJP MP; kicks up row in Rajasthan", The New Indian Express, 20 January 2021: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/jan/20/terrorists-sitting-at-farmers-protest-sites-says-bjp-mp-kicks-up-row-in-rajasthan-2252803.html>

¹⁴ Gupta, Shubhangi, "Deaths of 700 farmers could've been prevented had...': BJP leader slams Centre", Hindustan Times, 24 November 2021: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/deaths-of-700-farmers-could-ve-been-prevented-had-bjp-leader-slams-centre-101637747582116.html>

¹⁵ Jigeesh, AM: "SKM is required even more than before" (Interview with Ashok Dhawale), The Hindu BusinessLine, 9 December 2021: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/skm-is-required-even-more-than-before/article37917552.ece>

¹⁶ Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, "The Farmers' Revolt in India", *Dossier no. 41*: <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-41-india-agriculture/>

¹⁷ Kaushal, Ravi, "Bharat Bandh Will Bring Together all Sections Against BJP's Corporate Communalism: Dhawale", Newslick, 24 September 2021: <https://www.newslick.in/bharat-bandh-will-bring-together-all-sections-against-bjps-corporate-communalism-ashok-dhawale>

-
- ¹⁸ All India Kisan Sabha, "Kisan Sangharsh Rally Sends Warning To Anti-Peasant Narendra Modi Government", Newsclick, 25 November 2016: <https://www.newsclick.in/kisan-sangharsh-rally-sends-warning-anti-peasant-narendra-modi-government>
- ¹⁹ "No To Suicide, Unite to Fight' – Farmers' Organisation Gearing-up Against Modi Regime", All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS in News), 4 November 2016: <https://kisansabha.org/aiks/aiks-in-news/no-to-suicide-unite-to-fight-farmers-organisation-gearing-up-against-modi-regime/>
- ²⁰ Jafri, Abdul Alim, "Muzaffarnagar: Farmers' Movement Unites Muslims, Jats Again After 2013 Riots", Newsclick, 6 September 2021: <https://www.newsclick.in/muzaffarnagar-farmers-movement-unites-muslims-jats-2013-riots>
- ²¹ Karat, Brinda: "Haryana Chief Minister's Deceit In Handling The "Namaz" Issue", NDTV, 13 December 2021: <https://www.ndtv.com/opinion/haryana-chief-ministers-deceit-in-handling-the-namaaz-issue-2648573>
- ²² Verma, Nalin, "BJP Is Playing the Communal Card Again in UP by Stoking Fear and Prejudice", 27 January 2022: <https://thewire.in/communalism/bjp-is-playing-the-communal-card-again-in-up-by-stoking-fear-and-prejudice>
- ²³ Das, Arित्रy, "Sadda Haq, Aithe Rakh: Women Farmers at Singhu Border Refuse to Back Down", Newsclick, 18 February 2021: <https://www.newsclick.in/Sadda-Haq-Aithe-Rakh-Women-Farmers-at-Singhu-Border-Refuse-to-Back-Down>
- ²⁴ Jigeesh, AM, "Farmers disperse after 13-month protest against farm reform laws", The Hindu BusinessLine, 9 December 2021: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/farmers-disperse-after-13-month-protest-against-farm-reform-laws/article37917820.ece>
- ²⁵ Ranjan, Satyendra, "Farmers' Protest: A Roadmap for the Opposition", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 56, Issue No. 18, 01 May, 2021: <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/farmers-protest-roadmap-opposition>
- ²⁶ Singh, Bhasha, "It's the Power of Unions That's Made Farmers Challenge Modi Govt", Newsclick, 27 December 2020: <https://www.newsclick.in/power-of-unions-challenge-Modi-Govt>
- ²⁷ Agencies, "Farmers vow to boycott Adani, Ambani products", Mumbai Mirror, 10 December 2020: <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/news/india/farmers-vow-to-boycott-adani-ambani-products/articleshow/79650356.cms>
- ²⁸ Rajewal, Balbir Singh, "To Save Punjab and fix the wrong done to farmers, we need executive power", *Times of India*, January 28, 2022.
- ²⁹ Ugrahan, Joginder Singh, "Fight them, don't join them. Entering politics can put our credibility at stake", *Times of India*, January 28, 2022.

Highland Resistance: How Venezuela’s “Che Guevara Commune” Confronts the Crisis
First-hand accounts of the impact of the US sanctions on a coffee and cocoa growing
commune in the Venezuelan Andes.

Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert¹

The Che Guevara Commune lies on the fertile hillsides that rise up from the shores of Lake Maracaibo in western Venezuela. Historically this has been a cocoa-growing region but in more recent years coffee, sugar cane, and pineapple have also become important cash crops. It is a region of great domestic and international migration, and many of the communards have roots in neighboring Colombia, belonging to families that fled political persecution or simply sought a better life in Venezuela.

Through hard work, focused on two productive activities – a lowland cocoa-processing plant (the Che Guevara EPS) and a highland coffee cooperative called Colinas del Mirador (Colimir) – these communards have built a sociopolitical project that has survived all kinds of adversity.

A short flight to Merida’s El Vigia airport and a two-hour drive along the Panamerican Highway brought us to this well-kept commune centered in the village of Mesa Julia (Tucaní township). Our main interest was to see how this commune, with a far-reaching reputation worthy of the revolutionary name it bears, has dealt with the US sanctions and the overall crisis that Venezuela is facing. However, we also

wanted to learn about their approach to communal construction in general and the longstanding project of a socialist transition in the besieged¹ country.

History of the Che Guevara Commune

Sited on lower foothills of the Andes, the Che Guevara Commune has become well-known for its resilience and productive capacity. Here two committed communards outline the commune’s history, structure, and its key projects.

Ernesto Cruz: We began to work on building the Che Guevara Commune around 2010-2011. At that time, there were ten communal councils involved. After the death of Comandante Chávez in 2013, we managed to register the commune through Fundacomunal [state institution that administers communes].

My aunt, Olga Veracruz, who was politically formed in the midst of the war in Colombia, was the one who proposed calling the commune “Che Guevara.” She is now rather old, but for many years she was very

¹ Excerpt from the dossier published by Venezuelanalysis.com. Special thanks to Comrade Lucas Koerner.

active here. She promoted the organization of communal councils and later the commune.

Olga was a student of Marxism, arranging study groups with local women, and was the force behind a local newspaper with a leftist vision. She left her mark on this commune, proposing that Che Guevara's conception of solidarity should be a guiding principle for us. That is why we call ourselves the “Che Guevara” Commune.

When the commune was finally registered, we developed several projects, including housing construction. During those early years, we also began to design the project that would become the Che Guevara EPS [Social Property Enterprise], which is a cocoa processing plant.

Zulai Montilla: The Che Guevara Commune is located in the highlands of the Tucaní municipality, in the Sur del Lago region [Mérida state]. The area has a farming tradition: coffee and cocoa are the main crops grown here, but people also grow plantain and pineapple.

The commune's territory is home to 1562 families, distributed among fourteen communal councils. Each council chooses a spokesperson who will participate in the commune's parliament. The parliament

monitors the commune's initiatives and projects. Above the parliament is the assembly, which is the commune's highest self-government body and the space for making the most fundamental decisions. Anyone who lives in the commune's territory can participate in the assembly, with equal voice and vote.

There are two active production units in the commune's territory: the Che Guevara EPS, where cocoa is processed, and the Colinas del Mirador Cooperative [Colimir], to process coffee. Both units have a spokesperson in the communal parliament.

Impact of the imperialist blockade and the crisis of capitalism

Since 2017, the US sanctionsⁱⁱ have had a devastating impact on Venezuelan society. The workers at the Che Guevara Commune explain the blockade's effects on their lives and on their productive projects.

Douglas Mendoza: The blockade has been hard on us. Here, in the highlands, access to fuel is fundamental. How can a coffee or cocoa farmer take the crop to market if there is no gasoline or if it costs three dollars a liter? Fuel shortages have hurt *campesinos* very much.

In the last few years, numerous people migrated to Colombia to find work: many

sold everything and left the country. Often the older family members remain here and receive a small remittance from relatives abroad. Some people also travel for seasonal work and then come back.

Ernesto Cruz: In the last few months commerce in Tucaní is recovering a little, but there is still not enough work for everybody. At the moment we are seeing a new wave of migration. People are moving toward Caracas, where the service economy is recovering: young people from the area are going to the capital to work in restaurants or retail.

The migration situation should not be surprising: a small cocoa farmer can earn about \$500 from a harvest and that is hardly enough to live on. There are few incentives for young people to stay in the area. This has an impact on the population, which is getting more sparse and older.

Zulai Montilla: The commercialization of chocolate is very difficult these days. Selling our production is not easy, due to the pandemic and the gas shortages. Two years ago, we had customers coming from Trujillo and Táchira [neighboring states] to buy chocolate, but the fuel shortages mean this is no longer profitable.

As for supplies, fortunately, we have been able to get what we need: cocoa, powdered milk, and sugar. However, it has been hard to get packaging materials to offer a good presentation of our products. We are now working on that angle, and I'm sure that we will improve little by little.

The main problem we have is power outages, because molded chocolate needs refrigeration. If the temperature rises a bonbon or chocolate bar loses its shine and texture, and we have to restart the process. We have to put the chocolate in a bain-marie, then we take it to the mill, and finally we mold it again.

All this impacts our production. Still, we have not stopped: we go through hell and high water to meet our commitments, but we manage. We are fighting to stay on our feet, and we hope to come out stronger.

Marta Botello: One of our problems is that we don't have access to fertilizers and herbicides, and that makes production yields drop. When the "coffee leaf rust" fungus appears here, we have no way to fight it. Four years ago, we could still buy the chemicals we needed from Agropatria [state distributor of agricultural inputs], but now their store has closed.

In spite of everything, we are still fighting. This land is very fertile, and fortunately my children are still here – they haven't left.

Creativity and innovation in the face of the blockade

Far from being passive during the crisis, the Cbe Guevara Commune has developed a range of creative responses to difficulties as they emerge, demonstrating that communes can provide a popular, sovereign solution to the crisis – an alternative to capitalist capitulation.

TECHNOLOGICAL SHIFT

Johandri Paredes: In the last few months we took an important step to overcome our dependence on diesel fuel in the coffee processing plant. Before we depended exclusively on diesel to run the coffee dryers, but now we burn the coffee chaff itself. That is our fuel! This has been an important leap because it gives us autonomy. In addition, it represents a transition to an environmentally sustainable fuel.

We made the shift to burning coffee chaff with the support of the government's Federal Council. They helped us purchase the machinery from Colombia.

Pastora Ruiz de Macaneo: Agricultural inputs are very hard to find these days, but we have also learned to produce

natural fertilizers. We use the cocoa bean hull to make compost and we apply it to our greenhouse soils.

We are also experimenting with mucilage – which is the slimy material surrounding cocoa beans – to make organic fertilizer. This fertilizer will be sprayed directly on the plants. For now, we are still in the research and experimentation phase.

Luis Miguel Guerrero: In recent years, the electrical system has been very unstable in this area and our drying and toasting machinery needs electricity. Diesel is also hard to come by, so when there is a blackout lasting several days, we cannot keep our generator running.

A few months ago we began working on a solar dryer. Basically, the coffee is sun-dried underneath a greenhouse tarp which absorbs the sunlight but isolates and protects the coffee. The tarp forms a small wind tunnel with a fan on one end and a controlled opening on the other. At night we turn on incandescent light bulbs, which also dry the coffee but use little electricity compared to our industrial dryer.

Of course, the process is slower than that of an industrial coffee dryer. It takes 12 hours to dry 800 kilos of coffee in an

industrial dryer, whereas this way we can only dry some 300 kilos in ten days.

The solar dryer project came about because we had a three-day blackout a few months ago. Everything stopped working, and we decided that we had to do something about it, so we built the solar dryer. We did it ourselves and we are very happy with it. In fact, we are now preparing to build a second unit.

Felipe Vanegaz Quintero: In recent years, we decided to diversify. Sugar cane grows in the area, so we are building a “trapiche” sugar mill and it will be running soon. We also have a carpentry shop and two collective plots of land, where we grow sugarcane and coffee. The idea is to advance slowly and sustainably.

Ernesto Cruz: Here we cannot install a bio-combustible generation plant as in Colimir because cocoa roasting requires control, but we are exploring alternatives. We want to install a biogas plant that recycles the waste we produce at the EPS, including the cocoa hull. This would reduce our dependence on the electrical grid.

COOKING GAS

Marta Botello: For a long time there was no bottled gas and we had to go back to

cooking on hearths, which meant that we had to collect wood, kindle the fire, etc.

Our mothers and grandmothers used to cook with *guamo*, a bush that grows fast and provides shade for coffee and cocoa, but it is also good for cooking. So we started doing the same thing.

Organization has been very important in finding solutions to the problems we face. On the one hand, the commune is managing the cooking gas distribution now, and is doing it very well. On the other hand, here, in the community, we are looking for solutions to solve our problems.

For example, whenever there is a problem with a power line in a neighborhood, we knock on the door of someone in the community who knows about electrical circuits. Since we all have empty pockets, the neighbors get together to compensate for the labor in kind, with one of us offering a can of sardines, another gives a kilo of rice, another provides beans or coffee...

Regulo Duarte: As the spokesperson for communal gas management, I can tell you that last year was very difficult. However now, in spite of the limited availability of cooking gas, we have been able to ensure a good distribution. Every family in the commune

now receives two small gas cylinders every two or three months.

Ernesto Cruz: After the “gas blackout,” which lasted for a year or so, there was an attempt to privatize gas distribution. Fortunately, many people voiced their concerns. Because they denounced the corruption at the PDVSA Gas headquarters and problems at the distribution plants, they managed to halt the privatization.

Right now, the commune is responsible for gas distribution. We divide the territory of the commune into sectors and rotate the distribution so that people get two cylinders every three months. That means people are not cooking with firewood anymore.

SECURITY

Felipe Vanegaz Quintero: Around 2017, we began to face another problem: people stealing crops from producers in the area. It was not large-scale organized crime, but small-time criminals lifting crops. They would do it at night or while it was raining, and would take large amounts of coffee or cocoa.

We had to develop a security plan, and we can say now that crop theft is no longer a problem. You can see here the importance of organization. However, in the low altitude zone, which is outside the commune's territory, organized crime continues to operate: merchants and truck drivers have to pay for “protection” from gangs on a regular basis.

Daniel Zambrano: During the most difficult period of the crisis, we had to strengthen our defense mechanisms. At night people would come and steal coffee or cocoa crops, or they would take our chickens.

That is why we decided to bolster security in the territory. Since then we have strengthened internal communication mechanisms, built ties with the Bolivarian militia, and prepared ourselves to defend the territory.

Fortunately, these defense mechanisms are working well, and there are almost no thefts now in the commune. Of course, that doesn't mean that there aren't problems here: sometimes conflicts between neighbors or producers emerge, and the security committee has to intervene there as well!

ⁱ <https://venezuelanalysis.com/images/15295>

ⁱⁱ <https://venezuelanalysis.com/sanctions-kill>

Max Ajl in conversation with Habib Ayeb¹ on Food Sovereignty and the Environment

Max: Habib, you have made many films and written at length about food sovereignty in Tunisia and in Egypt. Can you start by telling us how you see the conversation around food sovereignty in this part of the world?

Habib: In recent years, the issue of food sovereignty has begun to appear in academic and non-academic debates, and in research as well – although more tentatively – in all the countries of the region. That said, the issue of food and thus agriculture has always been important, both in academic research and public debate, as well as the academy, political institutions, and elsewhere. During the 1970s and 1980s, in Tunisia and throughout what was called the Third World, we spoke mainly of food self-sufficiency. This was, in a way, and at that time, a watchword of the left – a left that was modernist, developmentalist and statist.

If I'm not mistaken, I believe that the concept of food self-sufficiency dates from the late 1940s with the wave of decolonization, which began after the Second World War, and probably also dates to the great famines which

claimed millions of lives in India and other areas of the South. Furthermore, many states, particularly those governed by the state-socialist regimes that had acquired political independence during the 1950s and 1960s, had initiated Green Revolution policies. These had the aim of achieving food self-sufficiency to strengthen political independence, in a Cold War context wherein food was already used as a weapon and a means of pressure in the context of the confrontation between the USSR and the Western bloc. It is in this context that the experiences of agrarian reforms and agricultural co-operatives in Tunisia (from 1962), in Egypt (from 1953) and in many other countries had proliferated. But almost all of these experiments ended in failure or were aborted by liberal counter-reforms, which were adopted everywhere beginning in the 1980s amidst the victory of liberalism, the USSR's disappearance, and the development of a global food regime, and its corollary: the global market for agricultural products and particularly cereals.

¹ Habib Ayeb is a professor of geography at Université Paris 8 and film-maker. This interview was transcribed by Nada Trigui. Habib Ayeb is a founder member of the NGO Observatory of Food Sovereignty and Environment (OSAE) and Max Ajl is a sociologist, activist and an editor at Jadaliyya and Viewpoint. The interview was conducted on March 4, 2018, in Tunis, Tunisia. The interview was conducted on March 4, 2018, in Tunis, Tunisia.

It is at this point that the concept of food security, based on the idea of comparative advantage began to gradually dominate. It would appear for the first time in the official Tunisian texts in the sixth Five Year Plan of the early 1980s, in which the formula of food self-sufficiency would give way to that of food security. From then on, agricultural policies would favour agricultural export products with a high added value, whose revenues would then underwrite the import of basic food products.

Paradoxically, agricultural issues, food issues, and rural issues writ large would gradually disappear from academic agendas. There was a sharp reduction in funding for research on the rural world, and instead it went first, to the urban research profile, but also to examine civil society and political organizations. It was not until 2007/2008 and the great food crisis that agricultural and food issues, and furthermore the peasant question with its sociological dimension, would reappear in public debates focused on these matters. It was during the same period that the concept of food sovereignty, proposed by Via Campesina in 1996, would appear in Arab countries and to a much lesser extent in research. Even today, many use the food sovereignty frame to talk about food security, even while the two concepts are radically opposed, even incompatible.

“the urban left subjugated by modernity have developed a sort of disregard for the peasantry, which they consider as a brake and an obstacle to development. We know that this is not new – already Marx, in his day, had little regard for the peasant world”

In Egypt, I participated in many discussions on issues of food security and sovereignty. We were, with some other friends and colleagues, including the anthropologist Reem Saad, responsible for helping to initiate the first discussions around the specific theme of food sovereignty. We organized workshops, research seminars, and other activities, too, more oriented towards civil society and the media. We also organized two seminars in Damascus, in Syria, in 2008 and some others in Tunisia between 2007 and 2011. Concerning Syria, it should be noted that it is one of the very few countries in the South that did not suffer from the food crisis of 2007 and 2008, because the Syrian state has always thought, amidst a particularly hostile and explosive geopolitical context, that the food issue was part of its national defense strategy. Thus, agricultural policies before 2011 (and even after, with the difficulties that we can imagine) always aimed at a level of cereal production sufficient to cover basic needs. The lesson of the embargo imposed on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq after the war of Kuwait was well-learned by Damascus.

From 2011 on, spaces and opportunities for debate would greatly expand, touching upon a multitude of topics and diverse themes – even if the rural world, and more specifically, agricultural and food topics, remain relatively marginalized, or often forgotten. Nevertheless, the issue of food sovereignty has seen some fairly significant actions and initiatives. In Egypt, the principle of food sovereignty was enshrined in the first post-Mubarak constitution (2012). In Beirut, there was an attempt to form an Arab Network for Food Sovereignty. In Gaza, food sovereignty is a strong demand to which the Israeli embargo gives shape and consistency. And then in North Africa, public discussions and various activities around food sovereignty began in 2012-2013. It must be noted that throughout the region, there is still a kind of confusion around concepts, slogans, and even demands and claims. If the notion of food sovereignty begins to spread there is then a risk of trivialization and misuse of the expression, which may occur – it has happened with other concepts, including that of sustainable development which has been totally emptied of any real meaning.

One puzzle I have come across while doing my research on food sovereignty – and I mean the narrow meaning, or the specific use of the term, as

it has become linked to Via Campesina – is that there are very few regional social movements that are tied to Via Campesina. There is one in Morocco, there is one in Tunisia. And there is the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, which is the regional coordinator, and has been a part of Via Campesina, I think since 2003, since the second Intifada. This is the part of the world where Via Campesina has entered least – or has the fewest links. Why do you think this might be the case?

It is difficult to explain. Without being categorical, it seems to me that this is largely due to the paradoxical absence of direct relations between the city and the countryside which go beyond the marketing of agricultural products, an exchange which does not necessarily bring the two areas into continuous contact. Between the countryside, especially the peasants and agricultural workers who live and/or work there, and the city, including the ordinary inhabitants, the intellectuals, the activists and the trade unionists' communication and exchanges are relatively limited. The former does not necessarily have access to the city, whose codes they do not know, and the latter do not understand the countryside, and stigmatize its inhabitants. In the city, the word *fellah* (peasant) has become an insult.

When the Egyptian government carried out its agrarian counter-reform in 1992 by adopting the so-called 96/92 law which completely liberalized the land market, and which resulted in a massive rise in the price of agricultural land, overnight about a million peasant families, former tenants, found themselves without land to work and therefore without income. In response to an attempt at resistance, the government reacted with great brutality from its police, leaving about 150 dead, not counting the dozens of wounded and imprisoned. Astonishingly, these events in the Egyptian campaign did not provoke any rush of solidarity from urban political and intellectual elites, with the exception of a few activists and NGOs, already more or less engaged in the peasant milieu, who tried to organize some demonstrations and support activities. Today, I tend to think that these isolated and repressed peasant movements of the mid-1990s were the first fruits of the revolutionary processes that ended the Mubarak regime in early 2011.

Few people in the area know about Via Campesina. Even amongst those people who, by a kind of mimicry, use the expression food sovereignty, know nothing about Via Campesina and the history of this concept. In itself, this is a real political problem that further aggravates the invisibility of rural and peasant

populations and widens the rift between the city and the countryside, thereby limiting relations to exchanges of products and services through closed circuits.

I wonder if some of the separation you talk about between the city and the countryside is also because, speaking generally here, with exceptions such as Yemen, it's been a very modernizing left. Whereas in Asia you had Maoism, and in Latin America you had liberation theology, Christian-based communities, and you had all these ideologies and forms of organizing that were much more centered on the world and the culture of the countryside. Whereas in North Africa it's generally been, or rather there has been an embrace of a modern/traditional dichotomy.

Yes, sure. Compared to North Africa specifically, I think not only does the city not know the countryside, but additionally, the urban lefts subjugated by modernity have developed a sort of disregard for the peasantry, which they consider as a brake and an obstacle to development. We know that this is not new. Already Marx, in his day, had little regard for the peasant world which, surprisingly, he had never tried to understand.

Generally, the Maghreb left, excepting a few generally unorganized intellectuals, reject

the idea of rural social classes. I have the impression that this rejection is more a reflection of the contempt towards the peasantry than the output of a serious work of reflection and conceptualization. But this is an issue that deserves a real dispassionate debate.

“It is the privilege of social scientists who choose to be physically and intellectually close to their objects of research and their interlocutors in the field. That’s what has always interested me”

Let’s take the example of the considerable difference between the history as it has been constructed and told – storytelling – of Mohamed Bouazizi and the real story, which is much more interesting, because it is linked to the stories of many peasants in Sidi Bouzid, and their sense of being robbed, dispossessed, marginalized and impoverished [Mohammed Bouazizi was the Tunisian street vendor whose immolation in Sidi Bouzid, a city in Tunisia’s Center-West, has often been heralded as the spark that lit the Arab Spring]. We know today that Mohamed Bouazizi, whom almost nobody knew outside his immediate circles, was not an unemployed graduate as had been claimed, and that he had not been slapped by the policewoman. Yet this false story had been disseminated and used to mobilize as much as possible against the Ben Ali regime. We understand the reasons and the

political objectives of this invented history and we can even accede to such a use. For in any case, no one can deny its formidable effectiveness since it allowed Tunisians to bring down a true dictatorship, while the real story probably could not have done so.

However, I continue to think that despite its undeniable effectiveness and its historical importance, Bouazizi’s constructed history has dispossessed the peasants of Sidi Bouzid and the rest of the country of their stories of struggles and resistance, stories with which the real history of Bouazizi fits perfectly. The popular understanding of the Tunisian revolution stems from a false history, and constitutes in fact a denial of truth, and a marked contempt, albeit unconscious, for peasants, their functions, their roles and finally their resistance. It is in fact a blatant expression of the opposition of the urban middle class and in particular the Tunisian left to any idea of rural social classes. The debate on rural social classes, opened a good thirty years ago, deserves to be revived and enriched. I have already published¹ on the relationship between the peasants of Sidi Bouzid, Bouazizi and the revolution.

I also wonder if somehow there is a link between the fact that in Tunisia you have actually an incredibly rich tradition of Marxist intellectuals in the academy that

wrote about the countryside. So, like **Hafedh Sethom, Slaheddine el-Amami, to some extent Azzam Mahjoub, Habib Attia, who all, of course, wrote under the dictatorships. Some of them helped with the planning process in the 1970s, but they could not possibly be linked to any form of left that was actually organizing otherwise they would lose their job and livelihood. So, this made it harder to have a convergence between an activist left and the academic left especially on this question of the countryside.**

Yeah definitely, at least in Tunisia. I don't know about Morocco or Algeria. Have you encountered attempts to converge between the Marxist researchers of the time, such as the ones you just mentioned, and the left-wing activists of the time? I do not know any. I must admit that it would have been extremely dangerous for anyone at the time of Bourguiba or Ben Ali, which must be a part of the explanation for the absence of convergences. One could imagine a birth of peasant or pro-peasant unions. But knowing a little about the political context of postcolonial Tunisia, characterized by a dictatorship that has closed all political spaces and the suffocating hegemony of organizations, such as UTAP (Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fishery) and the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour

Union), related through a system of alliances to the existing political power structure and its single party, it is very difficult to imagine political initiatives to create independent organizations.

In fact, it would be unfair to reproach Marxist scholars under dictatorship for not engaging politically. They did a great deal of observation, documentation and analysis in an extremely difficult context. They have left us with materials that have proven to be rich and indispensable for understanding current agricultural and food policies and the evolution of these policies during the last decades. Anyone who does not know the work of Amami, Sethom, or others cannot understand current agricultural issues and their ecological, economic, social and political dimensions. Those who ignore these valuable materials produced and accumulated during this relatively long period cannot understand what happened between December 17, 2010 and January 14, 2011. It is extremely important to recall these facts especially since very few contemporary academics could present a record as rich and politically useful as their predecessors.

Even when they proposed it, it was often just a proposal – they might write in their work that a specific programme ‘rests on the activity of the peasants’ but this was

a dead letter. Imagine someone going to the countryside and trying to organize the peasants! For all we know there were such attempts, but we don't know what happened to the people who tried to do these things. Even to take Brazil which is supposedly a democracy it's known that the MST (Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement) militants are assassinated all the time by the landowners.

And it's still the case in many other countries.

And this has been in the post-democratic period in Brazil. So, imagine in Tunisia ...

Something like this also happened in Egypt, where the pro-peasant activist Salah Hussein – who was the husband of Shahenda Maklad, also a great pro-peasant activist who died in June 2016 - was murdered in 1966 in Kamshish, his village, which was located in the Nile Delta. He was killed because with Shahenda and the small peasants he had won a political battle against the big landowners of the Delta who were trying to avoid the agrarian reform initiated in the early 1950s by Nasser.

In Tunisia Ahmed Ben Salah would never have allowed anyone to resist his policies. He would have used every means to prevent any resistance. This is the main

explanation for the absence of trade unions and farmers' organizations before 2011 and even since the end of the dictatorship. This also explains why 'committed' researchers did not get involved directly on the ground with the farmers.

If we can shift gears a little bit. How do you see your cultural work, your films contributing to the Tunisian debate or collective discourse around food sovereignty? How do you see the contributions of all the films? Because you make a lot of films *Green Mirage, Fellahin, Gabes Labes*, and most recently *Couscous* which was shown at the **ROAPE workshop in Accra in 2017.**

When I first began making films, I did not plan to work on food sovereignty, it came much later. I had in mind work on questions of access to resources – land rights, water rights, environmental rights.

The first film, On the Banks of the Nile: Sharing Water was made in 2003, at a time when, after 15 or 20 years of work on water, I realized that the real problem was not water but farmers and other water-users access to water resources. It was conditions of access that could, at least partially, explain complex social and political situations. Access to water is a precondition for biological life. But it is also social and therefore political.

So, as I often say, ‘came out of the water to see the peasants, to understand the different mechanisms and questions they face, including those related to water access. The main objective was to contribute to the ongoing discussion, and to bear witness to the peasants’ difficulties, as well as their social conditions.

“Documentary films seemed to me an excellent tool of communication and interchange with a public which is very broad compared to academia. Watching a documentary takes an incomparably shorter time than reading a book, or even a scholarly article”

Of course, all this was not by chance. I did not find myself accidentally lost along Egypt’s Nile Valley. I have done nothing, so to speak, by chance, during my career. My research activities have always focused on subjects which I considered, at the moment of my engagement, as causes to be defended. It’s my way of engaging. I am not in any political party or movement. I am somewhere in the radical left and that suffices for me as an affiliation.

As far as film-making was concerned, I had felt the need to get out of my role as a researcher publishing for a relatively limited number of more or less specialized publications and readers, and to address those and those who are not necessarily in academia or the university environment. Documentary

films seemed to me an excellent tool of communication and interchange with a public which was very broad compared to academia. Watching a documentary takes an incomparably shorter time than reading a book, or even a scholarly article.

I take advantage of what I believe I know to provoke debate. Water was my specialty. Rural issues too. This knowledge and experience allowed me to have special and close relations with the agricultural world, including peasants and all manner of farmers, and therefore with their living spaces and/or work. These relationships have allowed me to observe the rural space, the activities which go on there, their living and working conditions, the changes underway, as well as ways of organizing rural and agricultural populations. It is, moreover, the privilege of social scientists who choose to be physically and intellectually close to their objects of research and their interlocutors in the field. That’s what has always interested me. In any case that’s what inspired me in my film *Green Mirages* (Mirages Verts) that I made in 2012 with my friend, the Egyptian director Nadia Kamel. Basically, I try to do what I can do, using available and accessible means and by mobilizing the 3 or 4 things that I think I know and understand.

I tried to film in Tunisia in 2007 but I quickly realized that the camera represented for

the Ben Ali regime a weapon of mass destruction and, in a sense, I agree with this idea. It's terrible what you can do with a camera. In any case, I quickly gave up the idea and I did not take out my camera again until much later for *Green Mirages* which I shot almost entirely in my village, Demmer, in the country's southeast, where there is no visible police presence.

You were a little protected.

I have a kind of protection that comes from my family's history, and a bit from my current status as an academic. People have their own perceptions. They do not necessarily see you as you are in reality, but as they want to see you.

"The film only lasts 45 minutes, but the whole session lasted more than 4 hours. It is there that I understood that engaged films always find their public, and systematically incite debate. That's exactly what I'm looking for"

In any case, we were able to make the film without too much difficulty. The film criticizes dominant development models, by showing how they are complicit in the destruction and disappearance of an extremely rich local ensemble of know-how, of techniques and technologies, developed over time, through generation after generation, by local populations to adapt to local conditions

and/or protect themselves against the various hazards of natural or non-natural origins, had a success beyond what we could imagine. Demmer is a rocky village perched above the arid mountains of the southeast of the country. It is an open-air museum exhibiting hydraulic skills composed of both physical management of the water through hydraulic engineering (harvest, storage, dikes, earthworks ...) and social water management, composed of an extremely rich and complex ensemble of mechanisms for conflict resolution between resource users. Thanks to these riches, Demmer has been able to withstand for centuries the worst conditions, whether permanent or contingent, but could not resist the modern models of development that dispossess people of their last tools of defense and survival.

Okay so you were able to show it in Tunis, as well.

Yes, especially in protected areas like universities. I remember a screening at the University in Tunis in front of dozens of viewers, both teachers and students. The ensuing discussion was one of the richest and most rewarding that I have had since I started making documentaries. The film only lasts 45 minutes, but the whole session lasted more than 4 hours. It is there that I understood that engaged films always find their publics, and

systematically incite debate. That’s exactly what I’m looking for.

Before we talk a little bit about Gabès Labess, can you give a little more sense of what the reaction Green Mirages was like from the students?

The questions and comments of the students who were present at the screening that I was just talking about went beyond the bounds of a strictly academic context. They intervened as citizens who ask questions of substance concerning the choice of agricultural policies, the location of hydraulics, and the immediate or long-term consequences of these policies on the environment. Some commented on the film in technical and artistic terms. Some questions related to my career, my choices and my commitments. An academic who makes movies was something relatively unusual for them and intrigued them. But the most important questions and comments were about development models and their actual or potential consequences. Some questioned me on the substance of my speech and asked me the question that I often heard then and I still hear today, ‘... But sir, you want us to live like our grandparents?’ In fact, I really like this question because it opposes, or juxtaposes, a certain representation of what is modern and what is old or traditional and forces us to re-

pose the recurring question: What is modernity?

“Why this race? Running forever behind development? Why don’t we think more about the very notion of developing? For whom, for what? For growth rates? What is development? What does it mean to develop a country by increasing the number of poor people?”

During the same discussion, there was another recurring question: ‘How to develop the country so as to resist global competition, without technological modernization?’ I answered with a series of questions, as I often do: ‘Why this race? Running forever behind development? Why don’t we think more about the very notion of developing? For whom, for what? For growth rates? What is development? What does it mean to develop a country by increasing the number of poor people?’ It is interesting to ask these questions, because people had not considered them.

I told them that Sidi Bouzid was the region that received the most investment between 1990 and 2011. The leading region. It is a region that had an extensive semi-pastoral farming system, and it became in less than 30 years the premier agricultural region of the country. At the same time Sidi Bouzid had been a ‘moderately poor’ region, in a sense, and I put that in quotation marks, and it is now the

fourth poorest region in the country. This is the development which people desire. Regueb, which is part of Sidi Bouzid, looks like California. Regueb is a perfect technical success, an exemplar of the Californian model. The problem is that the local population does not benefit. These are people from Sfax and the Sahel who get rich in Sidi Bouzid, not the people of Sidi Bouzid. Hence the link with the story of Mohamed Bouazizi.

Moving onto Egypt there was a larger opening for freedom of expression in Egypt, relative to Tunisia. For example, I was shocked when I heard in Egypt there was a Center for Socialist Studies.

I worked there for a few years. I did interviews in the Egyptian media, including on TV, where I spoke exactly as I speak to you now and in Egyptian, and on national channels. I did an interview about an hour long, about my book *Water in the Middle East* (published in Arabic in Egypt). In Tunisia it would have been just impossible!

But I think that if I did something in all my militant and professional life, which had a totally unexpected effect, it was my documentary *Gabès Labès*, made in 2014. It's a bit crazy. Something has happened, which is largely related more to the new political context than to the film itself. I really like this movie. For once, for the first time, there was a film

addressing the issue of the environment by placing that issue alongside the dominant development models. I think that *Gabès Labès* favoured forms of mobilization that did not exist before.

And you showed *Gabès Labès* in Gabès many times?

Yes, the first screening was in Gabès. In the Cultural Center of Chenini. The Oasis of Chenini, which is a part of Gabès. The first screening was just incredible. I was really very surprised. Over 200 people came. That means there were people waiting, not for my film itself, exactly, because nobody knew me, but they wanted something about the environment. There was demand on the environment, on the environmental issue.

The screening took place as part of a small festival, 'Lights and Color of the Oasis' which is still held in February. It is useful for people to know that I received death threats just before this first screening. I imagine it came from people in the factories – bosses or perhaps people who were naturally afraid for their livelihoods. However, I think that it must have been bosses and businessmen; that seems to me more likely.

It seems that since 2014 people are really beginning to reject the type of environmentally damaging development

model, even though there isn't yet an articulated alternative.

Now people are really debating the question of development models. Sometimes the debate is very rich, and sometimes it's more of a provocation or challenge. Today, the debate is unquestionably touching on fundamental questions: 'What do we do with water?', 'What do we do with the earth?', 'What do we do with our natural resources?', 'What do we do with oil?', 'What do we do with phosphate?'...The demonstrations in El Kamour, the strikes around the phosphate in Kasserine, Redeyef and so forth. The movements around the environment in Gabès, Sfax and Kerkennah. Closing chemical plants, shutting down the road, stopping the oil pipeline – these are actions. But what is behind them? I think there we find the debate on the development model. When the people of El Kamour say 'We want our share of oil revenues', they are speaking of development models.

I've been in Tunis while you have been distributing and showing Couscous, which touches on food sovereignty. Even if it does not explicitly put forth a different development model, it nevertheless centers a different form of development as something people need to look at. Do you

think this is part of why people are so receptive?

Yes, that explains at least part of the good reception of Couscous. The film does not directly address the issue of development models, but it says that there is something that does not work in the current system. The peasants who appear in the film say so clearly, and they go further by explaining the causes of the various difficulties they encounter. By giving the floor to female and male peasants who express themselves with great clarity and precision and exhibit a real political awareness of the complex mechanisms which explain their difficulties, the film speaks directly to people, beyond their educations, opinions, social backgrounds and trades. This is why they are very receptive both to the film and to the central idea it conveys, the idea of food sovereignty as a political alternative and as a fundamental requirement.

The advantage for the movie Couscous has been that the debate had already been opened. The movie came as an additional document to enrich the debate and cast upon it a specific kind of light. There were already people sitting around the table, discussing, and I brought them something new. What surprised me most has been the overall positive reaction to the film. The debate is constantly revived, as it expands, as new people of diverse

social origins engage for the first time. Recently, a journalist I interviewed said, ‘What, for you, is a *fellab*? How is it useful to society?’ These two questions can be considered extremely simple, or even simplistic. Their significance stems from the fact that many people thought they had already been bypassed, considering farmers part of the past, and that their contemporary usefulness is almost nil. The film says the opposite and it’s always productive to shake up frozen ideas.

Politically, people have started to know me since 2014. They know that I make movies. Some subscribe to my blog, which has about four thousand subscribers, of whom more than 90 percent are probably Tunisian. So, when I announce a new movie, it’s known pretty quickly. Of course, my name attracts people, and I am very happy. But I also think that those who already knew my other films came to see *Couscous* with a fairly positive preconception. That, in part, explains why the movie *Couscous* received a much wider reception than the other films.

The film is not yet available online. People have seen it in theaters during the Carthage Film Days: three screenings, three different rooms, three full rooms. One must note that Tunis’s theaters average around 400 seats. During that event there was also radio, TV, the press, and of course social networks

and electronic newspapers which, in fact, offered coverage to *Couscous*, whereas the other films had not benefited from such visibility. It makes a fundamental difference.

Obviously, the movie *Couscous* did not initiate the debates on food sovereignty. There have already been many other events and actions around this broad issue whether they have occurred under the concept of food sovereignty or not. But it seems to me that the film has given some visibility and some new impetus to these discussions. It’s the magic of cinema that escapes the director completely.

I know you’ve shown the film to not just general audience but also agricultural schools in certain places. Can you talk a little bit about the Q&A sessions, the reception to the film both in general but also especially how the agricultural and agronomy students have reacted to it?

It is exciting to discuss food sovereignty and agricultural policies with agronomy students. Some students say to me, ‘But, sir, how would we be useful, with the training we have, if the current model is not good?’ These are young people who are in the process of obtaining their engineering degrees and who have a fairly solid technical background. They are generally even more challenged when I provoke them deliberately by suggesting that a large portion of the

problems we are debating is due to the work of the experts who design the policies which are adopted, and who know nothing outside their specialties.

If you ask experts what to do to solve the problem of lack of water somewhere, they are likely to answer that it is necessary to build a dam or dig a borehole. A technical answer to a political problem. This is what students learn in Tunisian agricultural schools. Therefore, their reactions to my provocation are related to their current and future social status and their schooling. But as I went through these schools, too, from high school to engineering school, I could talk to agronomy students, using their languages and their tools.

“I say to these future technicians that the problem comes from our training and that we must question not only our individual training, but the whole system that trains future decision-makers. I tell them that I had to re-educate myself”

So, to answer their questions about their future and their roles after school, when they have the engineering degree in their pocket, I tell them a bit about my state of mind at the end of my studies, where they are today. I tell them that if, when I left engineering school, I was given the keys to the Ministry of Agriculture, I would have erased everything old to create something beautiful, modern,

impressive with big modern machinery, chemical fertilizers, pesticides. I would have installed a new California on Tunisian soil. It is this dream of technical modernity that I learned at school without any perspective and without any analytical ability to think otherwise. In these schools, the social sciences were totally absent, and this is obviously not a coincidence. The function of these schools in Tunisia is to train technicians, not citizens. Unfortunately, this model is becoming widespread and affecting the entire education system, including in many countries of the North with specializations increasingly narrow and closed to any other knowledge. So, I say to these future technicians that the problem comes from our training and that we must question not only our individual training, but the whole system that trains future decision-makers. I tell them that I had to re-educate myself to free myself from the training that the engineering school had imposed on me.

Do you discuss agro-ecology with them?

Yes of course. When I went to these schools – and I have done three so far – I initially went with the idea of not addressing technical issues because they know more than me and that would prevent productive discussion. I just wanted to tell them this: ‘Listen! You have been deprived of tools for

reflection, you have been deprived of social sciences, political science, history, debates on the model of development, debates on liberalism, and basic knowledge about the major currents of thoughts: What is capitalism? What is Marxism? What is right? ...' This is knowledge that is needed in order to have the foundation to better analyze and appreciate the situations that they will inevitably encounter in their professional life and, if necessary, bring the right answers. My challenge was to tell them that we cannot answer the big questions and the big current challenges concerning development and ecological problems by having a strictly technical approach and without calling on other knowledges and especially the social sciences.

Have any of these students, that you know of, returned to the debates from the 1980s? I know the Arab world in general and Tunisia especially had an exceptionally rich debate about alternative technologies, particularly in the agricultural sector, which were less energy intense and less polluting – has this happened, or perhaps it is something that will develop in the future?

These debates, which you mention, date from the 1970s and 1980s at a time when rural studies were still relatively important and where the discussion focused on the choices

between the development of agriculture or the orientation towards what was called industrializing industry, the economic liberalization which occurred from the mid-1980s contributed to the extinction of these debates. As a result, rural research gradually gave way to urban research. The debate simply changed. But I have seen the return of these debates since the food crisis of 2007-2008.

I recently received a letter from a young student who is about to finish her studies as an agricultural engineer at a Tunisian school. She wants to undertake a doctoral thesis on 'the evolution of agricultural technologies and their perceptions by small Tunisian farmers.' Roughly, she is posing the question of whether and how small Tunisian farmers adapt to new agricultural technologies and to what extent they adopt them. This specific question was asked by another student during the debate we had in their school. I remember answering that a small farmer can die if – to replace a plow he has just broken – he does not find the right plow suited to his terrain and his own material and social conditions. He can disappear simply because without the good plow, he cannot work his land. I added that the issue of adaptability and adaptation is a complex issue that does not just answer financial or technical criteria.

Another question that often comes up, and not only in agronomy schools, is 'Can small farmers feed humanity?' This is a very serious question that cannot be answered with a simple 'Yes.' The world's population has reached seven to eight billion people. Can small farmers feed them?

Obviously my answer is yes. But for that the peasants must be able to control the market and production. In other words, it will be necessary to leave the current dominant model. It will be necessary to change everything that now exists and move to a peasant agricultural model whose objective is to feed humanity instead of the enrichment of some. In short, we must take our leave from this liberal and capitalist agriculture to return to peasant agriculture. Today the peasantry no longer live exclusively from the land, their work and their functions are devalued, and they are increasingly marginalized and progressively excluded from the agricultural sector. In these circumstances, no one can say that the peasants alone can ensure the sufficient food for all humanity. It's just not possible.

And it is almost impossible to imagine a neoliberal or even state-capitalist regime to be interested in devolving power to the poorest people in society.

Or even feeding people. They don't care.

They care about neither. Technically it is possible to shift the existing system, but we can't see it. So maybe this leads to the last question. Habib, now you have an organization, the Observatory of Food Sovereignty and Environment (OSAE), what kind of work is it doing, how do you see it contributing to the debate around food sovereignty, and how do you see it moving forward?

I was at the founding of the Observatory of Food Sovereignty and Environment OSAE, but I am not alone since we are four founding members (Nada Trigui, Amine Slem, Adnen Ben Haj and myself) and therefore accountable for the association. I think that the debates since 2011 have been too political, and do not usually rely on accurate and verifiable knowledge and data.

In addition, social science research on issues such as food sovereignty, peasant issues and the environment is very limited and poor. The few researchers working on these subjects publish in foreign languages and rarely in Arabic and even less in local dialects. As a result, they are seldom read and discussed since people do not know them, and they do not know their work, which is almost never discussed publicly outside research

environments and associated spaces. But important debates need a certain amount of knowledge and analysis based on research. Otherwise, we are no longer in a real debate, but immersed in sterile and unproductive chatter. If you do not do research, people cannot know things. And if they cannot know, they cannot debate from a solid foundation.

Our idea, and it is, perhaps, the novelty of OSAE, is to be a structure that aims at debate and proposals based on research, and verifiable and verified information. Secondly, perhaps advocacy activities and support for peasants and those engaged in the struggle against the destruction of the environment, nature and natural resources. But that will be a second stage.

We want to start by forming a solid research nucleus, which examines these current issues of food sovereignty in relation to law, justice, the environment, and social conditions. So OSAE is primarily a committed civic research organization. Therein lies its contribution. As far as I know, it is alone in working on the rural world and which aims to put forth a new reading of its situation and its problems, and to advocate new discourses

based on the research and analysis produced by members of OSAE or by others who wish to collaborate with us. Research at first, training of researchers, information, and invitations to debate are our agenda for the current and future moments. In a second step, once we are more settled, we will intervene on the ground with actions more directly engaged with farmers, consumers, young people and, of course, civil society.

There is also a question of sovereignty here. There is a real problem which we have not as yet discussed. The majority of those who contribute to and set the boundaries of political debates around food sovereignty, including in the social sciences, are composed of foreign or *foreignized* actors. People who are from here, but totally disconnected from realities and local communities. They live elsewhere. They work elsewhere. They think elsewhere. Some do excellent work but from the North, and with questions, problems, analytical tools and readings from the North. My dream for OSAE is to initiate a research programme which thinks from here, without, of course, cutting itself off from those who think from their own fields, specialties, and problematics.

ⁱ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03056244.2011.604250>

