

30 YEARS  
SUPPORTING

# THE STRUGGLE FOR THE RIGHT TO FOOD & NUTRITION



## Rural Peoples

*Mobilizing Against the Dispossession of the Commons*

### Who are the rural peoples ...?

Rural peoples are those who live off artisanal or small-scale agriculture, livestock raising, pastoralism, fishing, forestry, hunting and gathering, and handicrafts related to agriculture or a related occupation in a rural area. Rural peoples are also salaried workers, regardless of their legal status, for plantations and large farms as well as agro-industrial enterprises. They are also migrant workers living seasonally and their identities are as fluid and variegated as the rural landscapes they inhabit. The ecosystems and climates they live in and the economic, socio-political and cultural relationships they have with the urban world also determine their specificity.

### What are their rights?

Core international human rights treaties provide significant protection to the rights of rural peoples and the indivisibility of their rights, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (articles 11, 12 and 13), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (articles 6, 9, 14, 19, 21 and 22), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (article 14).

Besides these core instruments, there are other binding instruments such as relevant Conventions of the International Labor Organization, the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, the Convention on the Eradication of Racial Discrimination and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, amongst others. In addition, a series of soft-law instruments also reaffirm the rights of the rural world and aim for further protection.

These include the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, relevant General Comments of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as well as guidelines and principles developed by the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council and in other UN fora such as the Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests.

### ...and their right to food?

The General Comment 12 of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that the core content of the right to food covers, inter alia, the availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture. Availability refers to the possibilities either “for feeding oneself directly from productive land or other natural resources”, or for well-functioning distribution, processing and market systems that can move food from the site of production to where it is needed in accordance with demand (paragraph 12).

This implies that seeds, plants and animals are as indispensable as land and water for feeding oneself. Therefore, States parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have the obligation to respect, protect and fulfil access to and use of nature so that people are able to feed themselves in dignity.



## Current challenges

Rural peoples are being increasingly dispossessed of their natural commons. While their access to and control over natural resources is increasingly limited, their environments are being polluted and destroyed.

As a result, they cannot maintain and develop their territorial economies, earn an income which allows them to live in dignity. This leads them to suffer disproportionately from hunger and malnutrition.

In addition, they are often arbitrarily detained, harassed, easily criminalized, and even killed for defending their rights. The alarming number of killings and acts of violence vis-à-vis rural peoples that defend their commons (as human rights defenders) shows that current laws and mechanisms at national and international levels are insufficient. Only in 2015, more than three people were killed every week defending their land, forests and rivers against destructive industries.

As echoed by the [Right to Food and Nutrition Watch 2016](#), 'Keeping Seeds in People's Hands', the right to seeds are also under threat. Peasant seeds systems, which have fed most world population for centuries, are endangered by the imposition of intellectual property rights and patents. Peasants' rights to save, use, exchange and sell seed have been increasingly neglected by states in order to advance a corporate agenda.

## Required approaches

Although the existing framework addresses various aspects of the rights of the rural world, critical short-comings remain. The norms and standards protecting the rights of rural peoples are dispersed and appear fragmented in a good number of treaties and soft-law instruments, which are at times invisible.

Public awareness of this framework is limited and consequently the implementation of these standards remains merely piecemeal with disastrous consequences. In addition, serious gaps in implementing and interpreting the existing human rights standards make the recognition of new rights, such as the right to land and to seeds and agricultural biodiversity, necessary.

By the same token, due to the increasing acts of violence, there is a need for coordinated 'warning systems' to support rural peoples that are being harassed, criminalized, and imprisoned for defending the commons.

On that note, processes, such as the current drafting of a UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Living in Rural Areas, are a crucial step in this direction and more valid than ever before.

## What comes next?

The next series will look into the challenges children face to meet their human right to food and nutrition.

Want to know more?

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