



Declaration from Asia Pacific Towards Nyeleni 2025

12 June 2024

From 9 to 12 June in Sri Lanka, 60 representatives from 12 countries and from more than 20 global and regional social movements and civil society organisations, across Asia and the Pacific came together to reflect on the progress made for food sovereignty and agroecology since the historic Declaration of Nyeleni (Mali, 2007), and the Nyeleni Declaration on Agroecology (2015) and to work towards a third Nyeleni global forum to be held in 2025. The Nyeleni process we are undertaking is at a time of unprecedented corporate capture of governance all the way to the United Nations, which has ceded its role to corporations and allowed the World Economic Forum to run first, the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021, and now the annual World Food Forum, supplanting legitimate spaces for multilateral decision making. We reject multistakeholderism and demand a return of governance spaces with self-determined democratic participation of civil society by our grassroots movements. We represent diverse organizations of national, regional and international movements of small-scale food producers, including peasants, Indigenous Peoples, fisherfolk, landless, family farmers, rural workers, plantation workers, pastoralists, forest dwellers, women, youth, gender diverse, urban poor, homeless, domestic workers, street vendors, unorganized labour etc. Together, the people we represent globally produce 70% of the food consumed by humanity. We were joined in Sri Lanka by invited allies from other key global movements for health, debt justice, climate justice, social and solidarity economy, labour, and gender diversities, who are engaging together in the Nyeleni process.

We stand in solidarity with the oppressed and with victims of historic and ongoing injustice, today especially with the Palestinian people. We strongly condemn the Israeli genocide in Gaza, added to the 17 years of siege that had already made 65% of Gazans food insecure. Food is a basic human right and should never be weaponised. We extend our solidarity to all people suffering under violence from authoritarian and illegitimate states, including the peoples of Syria, Venezuela, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Sudan, Niger, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. Until all people are free of tyranny, none of us are free.

The gathering in Negombo, Sri Lanka began, as food sovereignty always must, by standing with comrades on the ground and hearing grassroots stories of the struggle of the farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists and Indigenous Peoples, including focused interventions from the women and youth. From the national to the household level, we learned of the adverse impact of the IMF. Most recently, a series of neoliberal policy reforms have been imposed on the people of Sri Lanka with devastating effects on local communities, small farmers, small-scale fisher communities, landless workers and larger toiling masses across the country. We reject systems of debt at all levels, from the crushing World Bank loans in many Asia and Pacific countries to the equally unjust interest rates on so-called micro-finance extended to rural people and smallholders, which have led to the suicide of more than 200 Sri Lankan women unable to service repayments. Like the suicides of lakhs of Indian smallholders over the past decades, farmers unable to repay debts after conversion to cash crops made them reliant on increasingly expensive inputs, these deaths are completely avoidable. No debt should be repaid with a life ever, anywhere. Micro-finance is a deadly false solution. Furthermore, sovereign debt with exorbitant interest conditions have driven unjustly high rates of inflation which have left many Sri Lankans with no choice but to diminish their daily nourishment from three to two meals.

In the face of these struggles, we have heard countless stories of resistance, as struggle is our only weapon. We have heard stories of solidarity amongst the fisher women of Matara, who collectively have defeated post-tsunami disaster capitalist tourism developments that sought to bar access to their traditional fisheries. These women have brought down literal walls through their determined collective action. Nearby, smallholders have been inundated by near-constant floods since a mega-infrastructure project to install a salinity barrier against rising sea levels left rainwater with nowhere to go. Unable to work the paddies, the farmers have been diversifying their crops to produce for local markets, while working together to force the government to amend the scheme to once again let the Nilwala River flow to her rightful home in the sea. Such mega-infrastructure projects, especially big dams, are driving Indigenous Peoples, fishers, and rural communities from their traditional lands in places as diverse as Pakistan, India, the Philippines and Malaysia as entire valleys are flooded in the name of so-called progress. In India, the mighty farmers' movement forced a dictatorial government to bow down in front of farmers. In all the countries represented, the strength of solidarity, collective action, and unity was visible as peoples' movements came together to fight for a better world.

Such unity has never been more critical. As more public resentment has accumulated, right wing populism and authoritarian governments have emerged in the region, bringing with them an escalating repression of rights to expression, assembly and protest, and unlawful crackdowns on journalists, activists, human rights defenders and social movement leaders, and the escalating trend of criminalization of dissent. Shrinking civic spaces and a proliferation of Free Trade Agreements is contributing to more oligarchies and corporate capture, nowhere more so than in cases of land and water grabbing, devastating rural communities and turning once-sovereign rice producing countries from Southeast and East Asia into net rice importers. Meanwhile, villages across the region with biodiverse forms of food production converting to commodity

monoculture end up exposed to global capital and corporate accumulation processes. While neoliberal and corrupt governments claim that highly productive lands from Indonesia to Hawaii are unable to sustain their peoples, the real root of most countries' increasing dependence on imports is, of course, the aggressive export agenda of others in the region such as Australia, India and China; a morally bankrupt heritage of colonial aid and so-called development that serves mostly corporate, not peoples', interests; and corporate tourism. Rural areas and captured natural resources and commons have been exoticised and displayed for a corporatised tourism industry at the cost of their depletion, and the alienation of such commons (forest, river, lake, sea and mountains) from the collective access of communities.

People living in rural and forest areas and in close relationships with the land and oceans are amongst the first impacted by the climate crisis. From the mass deaths of pastoralists' animals in Mongolia due to one of the harshest winters on record, to catastrophic flooding in Pakistan, devastating earthquake in Nepal, and extreme heat and droughts in India and SouthEast Asia, peasants, pastoralists, fisherfolk and Indigenous Peoples are some of the most exposed to the climate crisis, even as they have done least to create it. On the contrary, food sovereignty and agroecology are a real solution to the climate crisis - and not Climate Smart Agriculture - helping to heal our relationships with nature, nurture and repair ecosystems, and build resilient and sustainable livelihoods. However, these solutions are rarely recognised for what they are - the financialisation of nature - and our movements instead face added dispossession and violence as a result of green grabbing and blue grabbing for renewable energy, mineral extraction, or misguided environmental and conservation projects.

Carbon - a building block of life - continues to be captured by corporations in the latest round of land grabbing. Carbon markets, perhaps the most egregious false solution (packaged as Nature-based solutions and net-zero emissions) promoted to address the ravages of capitalism - with more capitalism - are on the rise, joined now by biodiversity markets in Australia, as are energy projects to feed the ever-ravenous beast of industrial agriculture. While net loss in forests globally reduced from 6.2 million hectares per annum between 2000 and 2010 to 4.7 million between 2010 and 2020, deforestation rates are much higher - the FAO estimates that 10 million hectares of forest are cut down each year. The more than 5 million hectare difference in 'net' loss underscores the false solution of REDD+, as some of the world's remaining primary forests are sacrificed for temporary plantations, which contribute to biodiversity destruction in the name of short-lived carbon sequestration. Such a scale of deforestation is also a result of alienating forest from communities and the capitalist idea that considers forest as 'resource' rather than commons. This also affects food sovereignty as it restricts communities' foraging. This kind of colonial conservation that denies communities access to their ancestral territories is only likely to deepen and intensify with the implementation of the 30X30 Agenda (a land sparing approach that entrenches the colonial concept of the separability of humans and nature), adopted in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework at COP15. It is the people, local communities, who can protect forests.

Always morphing to find another market, capital is now capturing data as farmers sign up for carbon farming apps, handing over seed and soil data in hopes of a small return, unaware that they have compromised their privacy and become contract carbon farmers in the new frontier of digital agriculture. Like many generations of technology before them, these tools are designed to benefit industrial and financial capital, not the farmers to whom they are marketed. Without ownership and control of their own data, technologies and tools, farmers face plunder and exploitation from big tech companies. Technological sovereignty means the development of tools owned and controlled by peasants, pastoralists, fishers and indigenous people, and must start by valorising the technologies of agroecology, including seeds, as well as indigenous and traditional knowledge, which are often dismissed in favour of high-tech solutions such as GMOs and gene edited products.

Carbon markets have also joined the ranks of other forms of ocean grabbing, while another false solution, the Blue Economy, is constituted by capitalist ideologies reimaged underwater, leaving fisherfolk bereft of access to traditional fisheries or the fish that used to richly inhabit them. Aquaculture and mariculture are false solutions, promoted by many governments and the FAO in Asia and the Pacific through green/blue revolution and 'feed the world' and blue transformation narratives. In fact what they are proposing is factory farming in the sea, with the same devastating impacts on marine ecosystems as their land counterparts. As with all factory farming, it is a system of over-production built on the exploitation of ecosystems and of human and more-than-human lives, with frequent human rights abuses in production and processing facilities. As elsewhere, export orientations in aquaculture and mariculture are designed to feed those who can afford it from middle class and wealthy societies around the world rather than local fishing communities in Thailand, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, or Sri Lanka, fueling the profits of elites instead of sustaining the livelihoods of local fisherfolk. Alongside aquaculture and mariculture, marine spatial planning, the corporatisation of fishing, and the sidelining of customary rights, lead to or legitimate the dispossession and displacement of small-scale fishers. Coastlines are devastated by such colonial development, displacing local communities and destroying natural ecosystems and sand dunes that protect land from tsunami, for the sake of extensive port and tourist business developments.

The rise of ultra-processed foods (UPF) in the region fuels a significant increase in devastating non-communicable diseases, mental health issues, and hunger. From production to consumption, UPF exemplifies the destructive forces of colonial capitalism. From oil palm plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia to the wheat and canola fields of Australia, UPF is manufactured from resource-intensive monocultures of crops and factory-farmed animals all grown to produce non-nourishing foods for the profit of elites. UPF destroys everything in its destructive path – the traditional lands of Indigenous Peoples and peasants first, and people's health and lives next. Promotion of fortified food is also a false solution promoted by the very elites who have destroyed local communities' ability to grow or access nutritious traditional foods.

But where there is oppression, there is also a strengthening of community organising and solidarity, and a flourishing of resistance against the latest waves of extractive, patriarchal, colonial capitalism. We heard from Hawaiian, Māori, Dalit, Filipino, Sri Lankan, Australian and many more comrades that land is mother, land is life, land is food, but that today, land is also politics. We assert what we feel and what Indigenous Peoples and peasants have known since the beginning of time, that we belong to the earth, it does not belong to us. Our Hawaiian sister shared images, words, songs and feelings of her ancestral lands and waters, starting from the bottom of the sea, stretching to the sky and then back to the earth where we humans are bound. She reminded us that decisions about what we take and what we give back must be based on what is there, its health, and who and how many parts of the ecosystem rely on a given aspect of nature. We work for people and planet, not profit, and deeply feel and act on our obligation to protect Nature.

While we hold these principles of a life made in common with nature dear to our hearts and our activism, we still have unlearning and relearning to do, as we, too, have long lived in patriarchal, colonial capitalist societies, no matter where we sit within them socioeconomically or culturally. Patriarchy is not a person - it is a structure - and men, women and people of other genders must constantly reflect on the ways it has shaped our experiences and responses to the world around us, especially expressions of power and control. While we reject the blame of individuals as unproductive and non-transformational, we take responsibility for our actions even as we assert our rights and the rights of others. Collective processes give us an opportunity to reflect, learn, and strengthen our collective solidarity and accountability to each other.

As movements united in our global struggles for food sovereignty, we draw inspiration from the year-long struggle led by India's farmers, that has demonstrated what the resilience, unity and solidarity among working people can achieve even in the face of great adversities. The Farmers Movement in India has inspired millions around the world who are fighting for justice, democracy and solidarity. The farmers held their ground in the face of threats, intimidation and relentless propaganda, and forced the Indian government to repeal the Farm Bills, thus reversing the reforms for corporatisation of agriculture. This was one of the most spectacular victories of united peasantry against the combined assault of corporate power and the state in recent history, showing that determined struggle can defeat the mightiest of forces.

Collectively, we have many emancipatory examples of peoples working for food sovereignty and agroecology across our region, including agroecology schools and many other forms of horizontal knowledge sharing, land sharing and landback to Indigenous and dalit peoples, land occupations, ownership and control over seed saving and sharing, the defence of traditional fishing rights and territories, solidarity economies such as community-supported agriculture (CSA), and the inclusion of food sovereignty in the Constitution of Nepal. We expose corruption and abuse of power through National Green Tribunals in India, Rights of Nature Tribunals in Australia, and Blue Economy Tribunals conducted by the World Forum of Fisher People.

We collectively assert that all proposals and strategies for transformational change of food and agriculture systems should apply emancipatory political, technical, economic, organisational, methodological, pedagogical, and philosophical principles of agroecology to our organising, and they should always prioritise participation of youth, women and gender diverse people. Real solutions to the multiple crises caused by patriarchal colonial capitalism must:

- Question & transform structures, instead of reproducing them
- Cultivate autonomy, not dependency
- Prioritise use value, not exchange value
- Organise collectively, not through individualised projects
- Build horizontal processes, not hierarchies
- Build capacity to struggle and transform
- Act based on culture and relationalism, not productivism

The struggle for food sovereignty is about knowledge, territory and sovereignty, asserting rights as enshrined in the UNDROP and UNDRIP, which require a profound restructuring of who holds, uses, and shares power and knowledge in agri-food systems, and puts control of the means of production back in the hands of Indigenous Peoples, dalit, landless, peasants and local communities, starting with land, our mother.