

BACKGROUND



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Peasants feed the world

Peasants, or small-scale farmers¹, are a crucial link in our global food chain. Influential studies indicate that peasant farmers produce about 30 per cent of the world's food supply.² Other research suggests as much as 70-80 per cent of the world depends on the labour of peasant farmers.³ Small-scale agriculture is an essential piece of the global food system, especially (though not only) for people in the Global South.

Despite their indispensable role in feeding people, peasant farmers face unique challenges. A family might tend to a familiar area of land for generations, but without holding a legal land title, they could be forced off the land to make way for a lumber project. A group of farmers might suddenly discover their lands are poisoned by waste from a nearby gold mine,

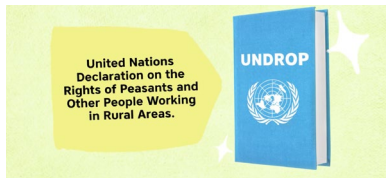
but without financial resources they are unable to hold the mine accountable in court. A region long known for growing a particular crop might find that increased flooding or drought caused by climate change means local farmers need to change what they plant and how, adapting to conditions caused primarily by wealthier countries halfway around the world.

But peasants are not passive victims of forces beyond their control. On the contrary, they have organized powerful labour unions, social movements and relationships of solidarity capable of achieving real gains. One of the most significant gains is the United Nations **Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas**, or UNDROP, adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2018.

¹ In English, "peasant" is sometimes used as an insult or offensive term. We have used it here, however, because peasant communities and movements themselves continue to use this term in English, and because there is in fact nothing offensive about being a peasant. To be a peasant is to be a person tied to the land in a unique and deep way. Similar words in other languages are *paysan* in French, *campesino* in Spanish, and *camponês* in Portuguese.

² <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1398060/>

³ <https://www.etcgroup.org/content/backgrounder-small-scale-farmers-and-peasants-still-feed-world>



UNDROP : An international tool for peasants' rights

Its full title might be a mouthful, but UNDROP is more than a stuffy official document. Outlining the conditions, concerns, rights and aspirations of peasants around the world, UNDROP is a powerful declaration that challenges the countries of the world to strive for and guarantee justice for peasants. Reading the articles in UNDROP calls to mind the work of so many of Development and Peace — Caritas Canada's partners in the Global South.

For example, article 25 says that peasants "have the right to adequate training suited to the specific agroecological, sociocultural and economic environments in which they find themselves." Our friends at **PAYOPAYO** in Indonesia provide this kind of training, empowering farmers and offering young people a future in peasant communities.

Similarly, article 26 says peasants "have the right to enjoy their own culture and to pursue freely their cultural development, without interference or any form of discrimination. They also have the right to maintain, express, control, protect and develop their traditional and local knowledge, such as ways of life, methods of production or technology, or customs and tradition." In Bolivia, our partner **Fundación NUNA** is supporting Indigenous communities in agriculture and community life, enabling them to decide for themselves what development looks like.

UNDROP also affirms that peasants have the right to a clean and healthy environment. Article 18 says states must abide by international climate agreements, and they need to involve peasants in "the design and implementation of national and local climate change adaptation and mitigation policies, including through the use of practices and traditional knowledge." States also have an obligation to ensure waste and hazardous materials aren't stored or

deposited on peasant land, and that they need to cooperate to address environmental problems that might cross borders. In Nigeria, the **Health of Mother Earth Foundation** (HOMEF) defends the rights of farmers, especially those whose land and crops are being ruined by the oil industry, in clear violation of rights identified in UNDROP.

Many of the articles in UNDROP echo the themes and principles we find in Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Several sections of Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* affirm the importance of small-scale farmers and the need for states and communities to defend their way of life (94, 129, 134, 146, 180).⁴ UNDROP and CST both treat human dignity as the fundamental foundation for considering the rights of people.

When UNDROP was adopted by the United Nations in 2018, Canada abstained from the vote, signaling it was not ready to affirm the rights and responsibilities outlined in the declaration. Since UNDROP is not a binding piece of international law, states are not required to abide by it. But that doesn't mean it's useless. In fact, Canadian human rights lawyers cited it in their intervention in an Ontario Superior Court of Justice case related to migrant workers' living conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. UNDROP is thus an important tool for developing legal decisions even in states that didn't vote for it. And while thinking of peasants might bring our mind to the Global South, the National Farmers Union in Canada has also been connecting the dots between UNDROP and farmers around the world, including here in Canada.⁵

Peasant struggles encourage a global sense of solidarity, and UNDROP provides a global framework for translating that solidarity into binding laws and regulations.

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

⁵ <https://viacampesina.org/en/when-undrop-was-adopted-in-2018-canada-abstained-but-the-country-among-the-first-to-use-it-in-a-case-on-migrant-workers-rights-says-jessie/>



What happens when Canadian companies harm peasants?

While UNDROP provides an internationally agreed-upon framework for naming and defending the rights of peasants around the world, Canada does not currently have strong regulations that hold corporations accountable for violating those rights abroad.

When Canadian companies begin a project in the Global South, they can take advantage of weak legal systems that don't respect human rights or the environment. Countries in the Global South looking for economic growth and capital often feel they need to weaken their regulations to attract foreign investments. That means ordinary people, like those living in peasant communities, are left without a voice or a path to justice when a Canadian company causes harm.

From 2021-2022, Development and Peace — Caritas Canada joined others calling for a mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence (mHREDD) law. Such a law would require Canadian companies to assess the environmental and human rights impacts of their projects and authentically consult local communities before they begin work. It would also provide communities outside of Canada an avenue to seek justice in Canadian courts when they are harmed by a Canadian company. A due diligence law would be a huge step in bringing Canada's regulations closer to the vision of justice we find in UNDROP and Catholic Social Teaching.

Such a law would also help Canada catch up to regulations in the European Union. On April 24, 2024, the EU voted to adopt its own due diligence law, after years of campaigning from European organizations like CIDSE, a Catholic civil society network that includes Development and Peace — Caritas Canada. While this law still has gaps when it comes to corporate responsibility, it

represents a significant step forward among states in the Global North to require companies to respect human rights and the environment. Without its own similar or, indeed, better law Canada is not only failing to be a leader in economic and ecological justice—it is falling behind other countries in the North.

In a 2023 response to a petition campaign calling for mHREDD, the minister of labour clearly stated that the "Government of Canada is committed to upholding human rights as well as labour and environmental standards," and that the Minister "remains committed to introducing legislation to eradicate forced labour from Canadian supply chains, while also ensuring that Canadian businesses operating abroad do not contribute to human rights abuses."⁶ Former Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan Jr. also talked about this legislation using the language of "due diligence."⁷ These commitments are reiterated in the Government's 2024 budget and the labour minister's mandate letter.⁸

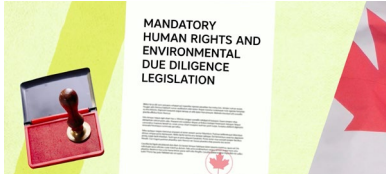
While we are encouraged that the Government is prioritizing forced labour in Canadian supply chains, we are also concerned that the Government is reducing the issue of due diligence to the issue of forced labour. A law that truly requires Canadian companies to do their due diligence with respect to human rights and the environment would include abolishing forced labour, but it would also include a lot more, like the rights described in UNDROP.

So far, the government has not yet stated what, exactly, will be in its proposed legislation, what it will really cover and how it might set up mechanisms to hold Canadian companies accountable when they are responsible for injustices.

⁶ [Petition 441-01253 - Petitions \(noscommunes.ca\)](https://www.noscommunes.ca/petitions/441-01253)

⁷ https://www.thestar.com/politics/law-combating-modern-slavery-and-child-labour-a-priority-minister/article_ca487f2d-c0b6-5aae-a484-065210705f66.html

⁸ [Chapter 7: Protecting Canadians and Defending Democracy | Budget de 2024 \(canada.ca\)](#) ; [Minister of Labour Mandate Letter \(pm.gc.ca\)](#)



How Canadians can help

That is why this year, Development and Peace — Caritas Canada is inviting members and the public to tell the government exactly what we want to see in a due diligence law. Inspired by the resilience and creativity of peasants and peasant movements, we will not settle for a law that leaves loopholes for exploitation, land grabbing and environmental destruction.

To remind the Canadian government what due diligence truly means, members will invite people across Canada to sign action cards outlining exactly what the law should contain. These cards will provide a powerful symbol of how many Canadians believe Canada's companies should respect human rights and the environment. They will also provide members an opportunity to once again meet and explain to their Members of Parliament the importance of getting justice for peasants, what due diligence means, and how Canada needs to catch up to international declarations like UNDROP and legislation in the EU.

Members are also invited to explore the chains of labour and value that get food from seeds to their plates. Where do your bananas come from? Can you find the farm that grew the coffee you brew or buy each morning? What injustices are present in the systems of food and distribution that make our lives possible, and how can Canada do better?

During the Share Lent season of our *Reaping our Rights* campaign, members learned how our partners in Indonesia, Bolivia and Nigeria are celebrating and defending peasant communities. This fall, we can stand together with those partners by demanding that the Canadian government build an economy based on justice and solidarity, ensuring that the problems peasants face are no longer caused or multiplied by Canadian companies.

Sign the letter, join the campaign or find out more at devp.org/act



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