



# The Reassurance of the Unknown: A Conversation with Nettie Wiebe

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## Abstract

What knowledges and ways of knowing are considered valid in the context of global food governance? What is the relation between the prominence that is given to science and technology in the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit and the attempt to redefine food systems? What are the issues with the capturing and privatization of knowledge that people of the land have been passing over from generations to generations? These are some of the questions that are discussed in this thought-provoking conversation in which Nettie Wiebe shares her insights and experiences as a long-standing women peasant farm leader.

**Keywords** Knowledge · Authority of science · Hope · Life-giving food systems · Peasant · *La Via Campesina*

Nettie Wiebe was in between two loads of harvest on her Saskatchewan farm in the prairie region of Canada, when we spoke about agriculture, power, knowledge and technology in early September 2021. The weather conditions of the past summer have been devastating for farmers in Saskatchewan. The extreme weather during the short growing season in this semi-arid region—8 weeks of temperatures over 30 degrees Celsius without rain—affects the yields of the crops. The oat grains that are harvested on the day of our conversation are light and thin and won't make for porridge oats, but they will feed the small cattle herd on the organic family farm in winter. In addition to grains, pulse crops (lentils and peas) grow on the fields that Nettie Wiebe, her husband and son tend together.

The work of organic farmer, family farm union leader and philosopher Nettie Wiebe defies simple categorization. She has always farmed, has a PhD in philosophy, has raised four kids and has decades of experience in farmers' unions. As president of the National Farmers Union (NFU) in Canada in the 1990s, she was one of the co-founders of *La Via Campesina*. This was at the moment of the last round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations

on international trade and the resulting establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) that henceforth shaped agricultural policies around the world. The stakes thus were high for agricultural policies and for men and women peasants from all over the world. It is in that context that peasant leaders from Central America, the Caribbean, South America, Canada and Europe got together in Managua and decided to 'strengthen their links ... and construct an alternative model'.<sup>1</sup>

The rest is history. Almost three decades later, the need for social movements to organize globally around trade agreements, climate change, and the decline of agricultural and other biodiversity is widely accepted among peasant movements. Today *La Via Campesina* brings together millions of peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, rural women and youth, indigenous peoples, migrant and agricultural workers from around the world and is at the forefront of countermobilizations around the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) to try to protect small-scale agriculture and local communities.<sup>2</sup>

Nettie Wiebe's multifaceted identity within and beyond that struggle reflects her concern about some of the larger hierarchies, categorizations and separations of Modernity that shape (and are shaped by) global food systems. Interspersed during our conversation about pluralizing knowledges in shaping how problems are understood and solutions

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<sup>1</sup> <https://viacampesina.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/05/EN-14.pdf>, accessed 24 September 2021.

<sup>2</sup> <https://viacampesina.org/en/>; <https://www.foodsystems4people.org>, accessed 24 September 2021.



are forged are reflections about decisions being taken in corporate boardrooms far away from the fields and kitchens where food is grown and prepared, about evidence and respect, about humility and arrogance, about life-making and life-destruction.

## Whose Knowledges and Values Count

*BVD:* In the context of the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit, a lot of importance is given to science and technology and the growing pressures to see scientific and technological advances as whatever corporate interests produce. The UNFSS however is part of a broader context, mindset and interests that come with it. From your experience, could you share some observations about whose knowledges and ways of knowing are considered valid in that broader context and in the UNFSS processes?

*NW:* Let me situate myself. I think about and experience this as a woman living and working in patriarchal structures where women play a key role in growing and preparing food—but are given little say in determining food policy and research structures. The UNFSS replicates those patterns.

Regarding the knowledges and experiences around food systems, I have always been persuaded that the experience of women in the protection of life-giving food systems and communities is crucial, because of our location in our households and our communities. In Europe and North America, despite decades of feminist critique on the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic work, these spaces of unpaid reproductive labour, where life-making is happening, still remain very much the domain of women. But the boardrooms and other venues where that nurturing and caring domestic role is being reshaped, constricted and exploited are not. Therefore, it has been very difficult, actually almost impossible, for women to translate the primacy, the values and the importance of the work in the household, in the kitchens, fields and gardens and in the communities into those venues. That is the feminist struggle and has always been part of our work.

In relation to the 2021 UNFSS, and looking at the prominent discourse around women, it is manifestly clear in the corridors of power that women, their roles and their voices are important. While one could be glad with the naming of women and the emphasis of women as key actors of food systems, I find it obnoxious the way women are instrumentalized and being celebrated in manners that overlay all of the really pernicious things underneath. For example, the strategic appointment of a woman from Africa as the Special Emissary to the Food Systems Summit not only gives a good impression, it also effectively masks against key criticism around an issue where there is great vulnerability. As it happens, I truly believe that there is some unease

and vulnerability in how women have been systematically disadvantaged in food systems, from the kitchen into the fields, from the markets to the processing plants and onto the fishing boats. The appointment of women as spokespersons and their strong apparent presence, creates confusion. I do think that it is also quite pernicious, as it is yet another way of using women. It does not change anything in how women, their roles and their knowledges are valued. Nor does it address the fact that women's empowerment does not equal to integrating them successfully into current agricultural value chains or boardrooms. In the women's constituency of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism<sup>3</sup> (CSM) we work quite hard to get across that we do not share such assumptions about women's empowerment. Instead, we do think that small-scale producers and agricultural workers, food workers, landless people and indigenous people across the board, male and female, are ill-served by adapting to this corporate agenda. As women farmers we are thus not interested in making us equally ill-served, but we are interested in expanding our agency and defining what we actually consider a healthy sustainable food system.

*BVD:* One of the observations that civil society has been vocal about is that the UNFSS processes not only seek to redefine global food systems governance, but also to reframe the whole assessment of food systems in terms of science, technology, and innovation. The assumption is that science, technology and innovation per definition lead to better, more sustainable food systems. This comes with specific proposals for gene editing and digitalization, and the idea that whom-ever is not going that route, will be left behind. How do you see the relation between the prominence that is given to science and technology and the attempt to redefine food systems?

*NW:* The discussion around Science at the UNFSS today reminds me of an experience we have had with the National Farmers Union in the early 2000s around the introduction of genetically modified (GM) cereals in the fields in Canada.<sup>4</sup> When the Farmers Union and other farmers were opposed to the initiative of cultivating GM wheat in Canada, a controversy emerged around what constituted 'evidence-based' knowledge. The GMO promoters' assumption was

<sup>3</sup> The CSM was created in 2010 in response to the fundamental decision of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security to give a particular voice and space to those most affected by food insecurity and malnutrition, who are at the same time the most important contributors to food security and nutrition worldwide. The Women's Working Group is the CSM space of policy articulation and convergence of women and LGBTI movements and organizations, <https://www.csm4cfs.org/policy-working-groups/women/>, accessed 30 September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nfu.ca/cereals-canadas-irresponsible-gm-wheat-policy/>, accessed 30 September 2021.



that the farmers were just 'emotional' in their opposition, whereas their proposal was 'evidence-based'.

At the time, we organized a survey among the main clients of the Canadian wheat board, which were the key buyers of Canadian wheat back then. Overwhelmingly, those buyers expressed that they would not buy Canadian wheat if it was contaminated with GMOs. We thus brought evidence that the introduction of GMO wheat in Canadian fields had unacceptable risks. This evidence, however, was not considered to be evidence. Evidence had to be narrowed down to scientific, physical science evidence.

Regarding the use of the term 'science' in the UNFSS context, something similar is happening. What is considered 'acceptable' knowledge has been narrowed to include only a certain narrow definition of science. While scientific methods can be used in many domains of gathering evidence and testing theories against the information that has been collected, in the UNFSS context, we are confronted with the narrowing down of what counts as knowledge to certain scientific fields. Similarly, innovation is very narrowly defined as technical innovation. Innovation, that, for example, gathers evidence that planting Cosmos flowers in the middle of my garden has a certain beneficial effect on other plants in its surroundings, is not considered innovative. Though, with enough resources, one could gather that sort of evidence and test that proposition year after year. Nevertheless, that kind of innovation would not count as innovation because it does not fall in that narrow range of what this particular viewpoint or group of people considers innovative.

The reason for that, I believe, is that there is a huge amount of investment and an enormous power in redefining what, at least in Western societies, is considered as normative. This gives rise to an authority of science that goes unquestioned. The power of that authority is so deep-rooted that it is puzzling to me. For example, when talking with farmers, you often get into conversations that show how critical they are about corporate concentration. They are critical of the fact that we, as farmers, are always price takers. Or about the cost of new technologies, about the fact that machinery has become so expensive and that you cannot fix your tractors anymore. But very seldom do you come to the place where all this gets gathered and people say, 'you know what, we are against this kind of innovation, we don't like these efficiencies and technological sophistications'. It is as if the advertised advantages are overriding their own experience-based critiques.

Although as farmers, we don't actually like some of the obvious outcomes of this technological trajectory, I believe that it is hard for us to imagine a future that actually changes that trajectory. Even though the negative outcomes are becoming more and more obvious. For example, in the prairie region where I live, the concentration of land, and the dependence on a few corporations for inputs and

increasingly for seeds and the expenses that come with that are described positively as 'investment'. Whereas for us, farmers, mostly this investment is a debt load.

It is in overcoming the difficulty of imagining alternatives, that I think agroecology is really important; it allows us to imagine different production systems. In our context in Canada, this is still an industrial production system, but it helps to move away from that single-minded idea that everything new is better, that more sophisticated technologies are somehow more efficient. If anything, agroecology allows us to imagine that not following in the race of bigger, newer, more sophisticated high-tech innovations is not backwards, but forwards in a different direction.

*BVD:* This points to a real battle about the power to frame the questions, and therefore the solutions that come with the power of framing the questions. How do you see that?

*NW:* Yes, an important asymmetry of power for me is the question of who decides which are the important research areas. Who shapes the questions for research and development? For example, and staying with the example of GMOs, I live in an area where since 1996, we've had GM canola. At the time this was introduced here, I was a farmers' leader and I never went to a single farmers' meeting where any farmer asked for this kind of research in finding ways to deal with weeds or improving their conditions. The question was not shaped *by* the farmers, the question and the area of research was shaped *for* them. And because the question was shaped *for* them, so was the solution. Both were in the hands of scientists and their corporate funders whose interests were served with such ways forward.

When the GM canola was introduced into our area, we who live here, know that it is a windy area. As people that farm here, we also know that when it is windy, cross pollination occurs. This meant that we knew beforehand that GMO traits would proliferate throughout our environments. As a result, when this eventually happened, and while GMO promoters claimed that they were adding a new tool to our toolbox with the GM crops, they actually took out some of the basic tools we needed as organic farmers. We can no longer grow organic canola at all, because all of the seed stock is contaminated.

Moreover, the GM canola itself was part of the larger project of production systems based on monocultures that erases any living organism that may interfere with the production. Of course, amongst farmers, we had discussions on how to deal with weeds and insects but GMOs were not part of the proposals. And then, all of a sudden, GMOs with the accompanying chemical *Roundup*, were the only answer.

The problem is therefore, I believe, not only who has formulated the question, but also how did it end up being a question that has only one answer, only one way to go? In the case at hand, the question was framed in a context of monocultures and productivism. GM canola was sold to



farmers as something that would improve their management, that would make them more efficient. With just one pass with the sprayer, the crop would remain in the field while everything else would be gone. For us, people that take care of the land and are actually in the fields, the ‘one pass efficiency argument’ does not strike us as a key advantage. But the argument does make sense when one wants to get bigger and control more and more land. Or, when one is forced to grow in order to survive, then that proposal does make sense.

This example shows that the way the innovations are shaped is not so much in the hands of farmers, as it is in the hands of those who see that taking innovation in a given direction creates huge captive markets for certain of their products, and who have the power to steer research and development. This approach to innovation, to me, highlights the lack of respect for farmers. We who have lived out here and farmed and grown food in these contexts, for 1000 s of years in some areas, have tremendous knowledge of those places and have built systems of production that are not respected.

It is not that we don't need research. Farming needs research. But the way in which progress is defined renders our knowledge of food production, of seeds and of our environments outdated and unscientific. This is a real condemnation against farmers and peasants and this is particularly so in the case of women. Our knowledge of farming and biological systems is deemed to be completely irrelevant. This is a huge omission, as I believe that the very complex interrelationship between and within biological systems need to be understood deeply from the perspective of lived experience and gathered knowledge. The current scientific environment not only ignores that, it denigrates and disrespects such knowledges.

*BVD:* How do you explain that disrespect?

*NW:* I always maintain that one of the reasons why farmers are so vulnerable to these corporate science-based innovations and product lines is that with the Industrial Revolution, our social position as farmers became diminished, and in fact, denigrated. Think of the word ‘peasant’ in English. When you call someone else a peasant, that is an insult. When you call yourself a peasant, and I do this, you get a nervous, polite, or ‘you’re so humble’ kind of a response.

This is really instructive in terms of the mindset of peasant farmers. As peasants or people of the land, we don't claim what we know. Over time, peasants have been made to believe that they are retrograde; it has undermined their own sense of valuing what they know. Because as farmers, we have to fight for even saying ‘we are here, we are who we are, and that should be honoured’, it becomes hard to say to people with so much more money, power and scientists backing them up, ‘we know something here, that is invaluable and needs to be honoured’. When I think for example of the cattle people in our neighbourhood, in a practical

way, they know so much. They have a deep understanding of how cattle work, of how to move them and take care of them. Sometimes I say to them, ‘I can't believe you can do that. How did you know that?’ But they themselves would never stand up in a public meeting and say, ‘you know what, we know something about cattle, which you guys who own these big feedlots and run these processing plants need to take account of because we know something here that you guys may not know’. They would never claim that publicly.

## Living the Web of Life

*BVD:* Recently you were in a panel around the corporate capture of science where Cecilia Rikap was talking about knowledge as a cumulative process.<sup>5</sup> She argued that the ‘privatization of knowledge is endangering society at large’. What is your view on the capturing and privatization of knowledge that has been passed over from generations to generations?

*NW:* I think that we have already lost a great deal of what we need to know about natural systems, growing food and living within natural systems because we have emptied out the countryside.

When I became the first woman to be the president of the National Farmers Union, I used to say that the union could not just be about how to make a living in the countryside, but that the bigger question had to be about how to actually live there. That question requires a different set of knowledges, a different set of values. It is not just about the price of barley, it is about the neighbourhoods we live in, culturally and ecologically, and the services and care that they need. This requires exchange about what we know about our place and how to live there. And I think that's one of the things that we are losing. It is also one of the gifts of Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge of how to live within a web of life, within a context without destroying it, exploiting it, poisoning it.

That's a kind of knowledge that we cannot lose entirely and still remain viable as humans. The fact that we cannot lose it, is part of what drives me in my defence of small-scale farming and rural communities. I do think we have rights and that we should be accorded dignity, but I also think that the learning of how to live, and knowing how to live in a natural context is going to be a necessary kind of knowledge for everybody to survive. Does that mean that everybody has to live in the countryside? I would love it if more people would live in the countryside and be part

<sup>5</sup> ‘Dialogue on UNFSS and the Corporate Capture of Science’ 26 July 2021, watch the session here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWpeYxRAGxM>, accessed 27 September 2021.



of small-scale food production units. I think that would be a step in the right direction, but it's also honouring and knowing how to live there, instead of dismissing, discounting it and trying to 'move them on'. The idea of having farmers 'move on' is one of the really offensive parts of 'innovation'. A lot of innovation is about having farmers moving on and moving out of small-scale, so called 'inefficient' subsistence agriculture and artisanal fisheries. This narrow drive for efficiency is not only a death knell for small-scale agriculture, but, I believe, the death knell for the environment as well.

There are so many technologies that teach us how to exploit the environment, but there are certainly none of them that teach us how human beings successfully live without destroying the environment. When I am looking at my inbox and the industry views that come in through a number of listservs, and given my mindset, it's almost a cartoon. Except that it is real life. It is the view of what corporate investors see as, and say about, being successful. Almost without fail, it is about new technologies, new processing of foodstuffs, new sourcing, more environmentally sourced foodstuffs; it is all about high tech and even higher marketing strategies.

All these technologies are framed as sustainable, because the industry hears loud and clear the critique about the food industry and how wasteful and toxic it is. All sorts of propaganda are moved in to re-describe processes of innovation to make consumers think that they are moving in the direction of sustainability. But not a single one is addressing how we live successfully and are integrated into the webs of life in the long term. How do we do that? And that's a complex question.

This is not just a question of technology. It is hardly a question of technology and mostly a question of values, of understanding and knowledge. Thinking about soils, I am blown away sometimes by how arrogant the discussion is about what is actually going on underground. There are billions of micro-organisms at work underground in inter-related ways that we are profoundly ignorant about. My son recently said, 'you know, we know about soils, more or less what seventeenth century chemists knew about the periodic table. What these chemists knew about the elements, that's approximately where we are on soils now'. I believe that makes so much sense. When you drive across fields that are sprayed with Roundup, not only do you not see any weeds, the soil is even and packed. You only see the crop. No gophers, no underground creatures, no moles. The complex and interrelatedness of root systems, worms, microbes of healthy soil are not there. When you kill off one range of it with a powerful chemical, then all kinds of other things collapse, of course. What did we think would happen?

*BVD:* We have talked a lot about how high-tech science and innovation proposals are failing to address difficult questions around how to live. Would you like to offer some of

your ideas about knowledges and knowledges of people of the land as part of the web of life?

*NW:* I'm always very careful with that question. I have nothing to teach anyone, I can't predict and don't prescribe. But here's what I think is important.

I believe that what is the underlying current of the amazing and wonderful resistance of *la Vía Campesina* and others battling the corporate global takeover of trade, is that we will walk different paths, where we work with and across huge differences, overwhelming differences. Paths where we work in solidarity to make possible and to protect worlds that are life giving and not death dealing. We don't just tolerate diversity, we cherish it. It seems to me that nobody can say 'this is what the world needs to do' and devise a single prescription to apply everywhere. That kind of arrogance actually undermines the diversity and the possibility of life, it is a trap that I would not go near. Nonetheless, what I do know is how I can live here and I'm always trying to do better and better here.

The hopeful thing is that there are millions of others who are doing that too. As part of our *political strategy*, we work in solidarity and we name what we refuse, we name some of the death dealers. As part of our *hopeful strategy*, we work in our own communities, context, minds, to do what we can not to be destructive. In fact, a lot is being said about enhancing diversity, which is important, but I really think that the first line is 'stop destroying so much'.

I mentioned earlier how dreadfully dry it has been here this summer. When I walked around, the grass was brown and crisp, the air was hot and oppressive and everything was struggling. Then, about ten days ago, we had an inch of rain, and now there is new life everywhere. This is astonishing! The beans planted in my garden, which I thought were dead, suddenly are sending up new shoots and new flowers. And two days ago, I picked green beans again for the first time since early July. What this signals to me, as someone who is living here and watching carefully, is a force of life.

This makes me believe that, yes, the corporate oppression is evil, but the sources of life are so deep-seated and so powerful. So, when there is a rain, when there's an opening, we will bloom again. We will be up for it again.

This is a metaphor, but it is a reality as well and makes me hopeful. For many years, the first part of *la Vía Campesina's* slogan has been 'globalize the struggle', because that is what the WTO forced us into. The other half of that slogan is 'globalize hope'. To me, that seems as real and as palatable as the struggle. Often, it is more real, because it goes on, and on, and on. Sometimes, one can go home and not struggle, but the processes of regeneration go on, and on. I think that for us, as activists, or for us who care about a future, it is healthy to acknowledge that even when we are not here, even when things look really dry, bleak and impossible, the forces of life are even deeper and even more diverse than we can



imagine. That is why I am quite cross when hearing arrogant proclamations about what we all know. What we don't know is amazingly large.

Who could have guessed that the roots of trees in the forest speak to each other? In many ways, we know so little and, for me, that is not an insult. On the contrary, it is reassuring and humbling. And because we know so little, we should be careful with hugely powerful technologies. Such an enormous harm can be done by knowing so little and being so arrogant. A lot of these powerful technologies, in

my view, are an expression of arrogance. They're certainly not a response to what the vast majority of people are asking for. They are hugely profitable for some, and enormously arrogant responses to ... to what?

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