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# Food Sovereignty: turning the global food system upside down

GRAIN

**W**hen last February France's president, Jacques Chirac, toured a number of countries in Francophone Africa, he talked a lot about agriculture. Stopping over in Dakar, Senegal, and talking at a seminar where he had the attentive ear of six other heads of state from the region and hundreds of farmers representatives, he called for a reorientation of agricultural development along the lines of food sovereignty. For him, that implies that agriculture should receive a special treatment in the debate on globalisation, local traditions should be respected, and that the development level of each country should be taken into account. However, at the same seminar, he fervently argued that the EU's current farm policies – widely criticised for dumping exports, taxing imports and undermining small-holder agriculture in the EU and elsewhere – should not be seen as the enemy of poor countries and farmers. Apply food sovereignty, but leave the

global food system untouched?

A few months before Chirac went to Africa, GRAIN held its annual a staff meeting in a small village close to Tangail in Bangladesh. Our host was UBINIG, a grassroots NGO that has as its main objective to promote 'Nayakrishi Andolon', which literally means 'new agricultural movement'. Nayakrishi farming avoids the use of external inputs, uses a tremendously diverse base of local seeds, and most of all considers the growing of food as an integral part of their culture, their self reliance, and the sovereignty of local communities. It also produces more food than any of the industrial agriculture methods that are being pushed upon the country.

The villagers that hosted our meeting insisted on showing us their 'Community Seed Wealth Centre'. The centre is stunning. A bewildering amount of clay pots and glass bottles contain the



*“Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, pastoral, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies.”*

From: *Food Sovereignty: A Right For All*, Political Statement of the NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty. Rome, June 2002

seeds of hundreds of different varieties of dozens of different crops. But the women in charge of the seed centre patiently explained that this is just the tip of the iceberg of the seed network that they are part of. Hundreds of communities in many different parts of the country use the seeds every season, keep them safe in their homesteads, and a sophisticated exchange and monitoring network of the villagers ensures that at any point in time thousands of different seed varieties are being grown and kept alive, somewhere. At some point in the discussions, someone asked the question what they understand by food sovereignty. One of the women pointed to the seed centre behind her, smiled, and simply said: ‘this’.

At the heart of food sovereignty is local autonomy. The UBINIG women feel strongly that the loss of seed from the household also means the loss of the women’s power. Dependence on the outside market for seeds makes them redundant and powerless, and displaces them from the control of the heart of the agricultural system. What is true for the survival of women as farmers, is also true for the survival of peasant agriculture as a whole. The neo-liberal globalisation agenda pushes for an agriculture in which the billions of today’s peasant farmers have no place, and in which the global corporations - with the active support of government elites North and South - control the food chain all the way from agricultural inputs and the growing of the crops, to the distribution, processing and selling of food across the world. This is the very vision of agriculture that the concept of food sovereignty challenges.

### **Food sovereignty in context**

The concept of Food Sovereignty was first launched by Via Campesina at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome. Since then, it has been discussed and developed further at many subsequent gatherings.

In 2001, the ‘World Forum on Food Sovereignty’ was held in Cuba and a year later, at the NGO/CSO Forum on Food Sovereignty held alongside the second World Food Summit in Rome, the concept was further discussed and elaborated.

Many different actors (from social movement to governments) have appropriated the concept and it is now widely used. In a way, food sovereignty’s ‘success’ as a new discourse, has also been part of its problem as different people now use it for very different purposes resulting in a situation where it is fast being emptied of its original contents and meaning. Chirac’s understanding of the concept quoted at the beginning of this article is just one example of this.

Food sovereignty has its roots in life and struggle of peasant farmers, fishermen and indigenous peoples. Different from many other terms invented by intellectuals, policy makers and bureaucrats, food sovereignty springs from the peasant struggles as a need to create a strong, radical and inclusive discourse about local realities and needs that can be heard and understood globally.

In a way, the concept was developed as a reaction to the increasing (mis)use of ‘food security’. The mainstream definition of food security, endorsed at Food Summits and other high level conferences, talks about everybody having enough good food to eat each day. But it doesn’t talk about where the food comes from, who produces it, how under which conditions it has been grown. This allows the food exporters, North and South, to argue that the best way for poor countries to achieve food security is to import cheap food from them, rather than trying to produce it themselves. This, as already is becoming painfully evident everywhere, make those countries more dependent on the international market, forces peasant farmers that can’t compete with the subsidised imports off their lands, and leaves them looking in the cities for jobs



that don't exist. Food security, understood this way, just contributes to more poverty, marginalisation and hunger.

The thinking behind food sovereignty contrasts this neo-liberal approach that believes that international trade will solve the world's food problem, with a focus on local autonomy, local markets and community action. Perhaps, then, the first issue to stress is that food sovereignty is a process of peoples' resistance and its conceptualisation can not be carried out outside the dynamics of the social movements that are central in these struggles.

### The local space first

The first space in which peasants identified the transformative power of food sovereignty was, of course, the local space. This is where the farmers have their roots, and where the seeds that they sow grow their roots. It is here where food sovereignty acquires its most central dimension. It is also at this level that strategies and actions are formulated and developed; from the fight against pesticides by the women in Paraguay, to the seed networks in France, Spain and Italy and from the peasant cooperatives' initiatives in Uganda, to the rescuing of traditional medicine by the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. It is in the spaces where local communities are creating autonomy based on their own needs, beliefs and timelines that food sovereignty acquires real meaning. It also acquires a common understanding that allows peasant communities from different parts of the world to appreciate - and identify themselves with - each others struggles.

Therefore, when farmers of MOCASE put themselves in between the bulldozers and their fields to stop large landowners from taking their land in order to plant soybean monocultures, they know that they are not only defending their livelihoods, but also that they are **resisting a development** model in which peasant farmers have no place what so ever.

MOCASE stands for 'Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero' and is a farmers movement from the province of Santiago del Estero in Argentina. It was formed in 1990 to defend local farmers against the increasing aggression from large soybean farmers destroying their livelihoods. Asked about food sovereignty, they say:

*"For MOCASE, food sovereignty is the right to produce and eat what we want. Our strategy is to strengthen*

*our own production and consumption models based on self-sufficiency, production of our own food that we produce in our gardens, and the cultivation of cotton and maize. We protect our own culture passed on from our ancestors, the animals, the chickens, the different types of goats, and the geese. Santiago del Estero is a region with low requirements, and the mountains are our only source for food."*

Traditional agricultural systems have developed based on principles of cooperation, integration and dialogue with nature. This in turn has led to highly complex agro-ecological systems. Such farmers are custodians of thousands of years of research and creation that has made such an extraordinary biodiversity-based agriculture possible. This agricultural biodiversity and culture is today vigorously defended by peasant organisations in the name of a unique heritage and food production for billions of people on the earth today and in the future.

This is in stark contrast with modern industrial agriculture. Such systems are based on greed, exclusion, and destruction, and can be seen by vast monocultures dependent on a few species and varieties and impervious to local cultures and people.

### The broader dimensions

Food sovereignty is a solid alternative to the current mainstream thinking on food production. The struggle for food sovereignty incorporates such wide ranging issues as land reform, territorial control, local markets, biodiversity, autonomy, cooperation, debt, health, and many other issues that are of central importance to be able to produce food locally.

Land reform in particular is an important component of food sovereignty; a radical redistribution of land, particularly amongst the poorest and those without access to land. The Brazilian 'Movimiento de los Sin Tierra' (Brazilian Landless Movement) is a good example of how food sovereignty is intrinsically linked with the social struggle of the millions of rural people that have been thrown off their lands and urban poor that have never had access to land and who now search for the path to recuperate their identity by claiming back land. One of the major bottlenecks of local food production is the unequal distribution of land. In many countries of the world 20% of the landowners control 80% of the land – and such land is often used to produce export commodities rather than locally available food. Similarly, the



enforcement of the rights of indigenous peoples to their territories is an indispensable requisite to move towards food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty also brings together peasants and farmers from the North and South, an artificial distinction promoted by many. For example, the farmers' seed networks in France are as much about food sovereignty as the struggle of the women led seed wealth centres in Bangladesh. Or in the words of Jose Bové, a peasant farmer leader from France: *"For the people in the South, food sovereignty means the right to protect themselves against imports. For us, it means fighting against export aid and against intensive farming. There is no contradiction there at all".*

Perhaps even more importantly, food sovereignty allows different movements that traditionally too often have been played out against each other, to come together in their struggles. The peasants, the landless, the fisherfolk, the pastoralist, indigenous peoples... are increasingly coming together and are developing a common understanding of

common aims and actions.

Food sovereignty has also come to the millions of city dwellers that are fighting for survival in the big cities. Production of food in family or community gardens not only brings wholesome food, that industrial agriculture is often unable to deliver, but also a level of dignity, cooperation and independence.

All of these people are fighting for something more than Jacques Chirac's interpretation of food sovereignty in Senegal. Unlike for Chirac, food sovereignty implies that the global food system should be turned upside down. It has been peasants, fisherfolk, pastoralists and indigenous peoples that have fed the world since millennia - to achieve a world without hunger a world where all have access to nutritious locally produced food, they need to take centre stage again.

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## Going Further

- Michael Windfuhr and Jennie Jonsén, 2005, *Food Sovereignty: Towards democracy in localized food systems*, FIAN-International. Available from: ITDG Publishing, Bourton Hall, Bourton-on-Dunsmore, Rugby, Warwickshire, CV23 9QZ, UK, Tel +44 1926 634501, Fax +44 1926 634502, Email: orders@itpubs.org.uk, Website: <http://www.itpubs.org.uk>

*"In this paper, Michael Windfuhr shows how the Food Sovereignty policy framework starts by placing the perspective and needs of the majority at the heart of the global food policy agenda. It also embraces not only the control of production and markets, but also the Right to Food, people's access to and control over land, water and genetic resources, and the use of environmentally sustainable approaches to production. What emerges is a persuasive and highly political argument for refocusing the control of food production and consumption within democratic processes rooted in localised food systems."* - From the preface by Patrick Mulvany (ITDG)

- Via Campesina, position paper, 'What is food sovereignty?' [http://www.viacampesina.org/art\\_english.php3?id\\_article=216](http://www.viacampesina.org/art_english.php3?id_article=216)
- Peter Rosset 'Food Sovereignty: global rallying cry of farmer movements'. Food First Backgrounder, Food First, Fall 2003. <http://www.foodfirst.org/pubs/backgrdrs/2003/f03v9n4.html>
- "Food Sovereignty: A Right For All Political Statement of the NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty". Rome, June 2002. <http://www.foodsovereignty.org>