

“Food Sovereignty,” in Immanuel Ness (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009) <http://www.revolutionprotestencyclopedia.com/public/>.

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## 1. Origins and definitions of food sovereignty:

Food Sovereignty is an alternative model for agriculture and trade first introduced in Rome at the World Food Summit in 1996 by a transnational movement of peasants and small farmers called the Via Campesina (Peasant Way). Via Campesina was formed in 1993 by a group of farm leaders from various countries to address the escalating agrarian crisis experienced by small farmers, peasants, fisher folk, pastoralists and landless laborers in food production from around the world. Initially a concept that critics dismissed as utopian, food sovereignty is increasingly promoted and supported by social movements, non-profit organizations, academics, consumer groups, the former UN Rapporteur on the Right to Food, as well as several regional and national governments.

The fundamental premise of food sovereignty is that food is more than a commodity to be traded on world markets; it is a basic human right, inscribed in international law. For the right to food to be realized, peoples, communities and nations must have the autonomy to determine their own food and agriculture policies, ones that are socially, culturally and environmentally appropriate to their unique circumstances (Via Campesina, 1996). Food sovereignty advocates are not against all international trade. They are against “free trade” policies, such as those enshrined in NAFTA in 1994, and in the Agreement on Agriculture of the Uruguay Round, activated with the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, and multiple bilateral treaties and Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) (<http://www.fightingftas.org>, <http://www.bilaterals.org>). These trade agreements override or dismantle national policies, such as supply management, price floors, food security reserves and even health standards that are needed by governments in order to guarantee the right to food.

## 2. Background history:

The Via Campesina has been a strong presence in recent years at anti-globalization events, G-8 meetings, WTO ministerials and NGO forums on food and agriculture. More than a decade of dialogue about hunger, poverty, world trade, rural displacement, agrarian reform and peasant’s rights has taken place between Via

Campesina members, international NGOs, and other members of civil society, resulting in the dissemination of the food sovereignty platform in a further proliferation of texts, conferences, websites, blogs, theatrical performances, tribunals, caravans, marches and other actions related to promoting food sovereignty at local, regional and global levels. One of the most recent international gatherings was a parallel civil society forum held in conjunction with the High Level Conference on World Food Security in June 2008 at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome. The alternative forum, organized by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty ((IPC) was called Terra Preta: Forum on the Food Crisis, Climate Change, Agrofuels and Food Sovereignty (<http://www.foodsovereignty.org/new/>).

Another important international gathering for food sovereignty was held in the village of Nyéléni in Mali in 2007. Via Campesina worked with members of other major global civil society groups including the IPC, the Food Sovereignty Network (<http://www.peoplesfoodsovereignty.org>) the World March of Women; the two international forums of fisher people; and ROPPA, a network of farmers and producers organizations of West Africa (<http://www.roppa.info>). The Nyéléni web site is an important resource for information about food sovereignty (<http://www.nyeleni2007.org>).

### 3. The principles of food sovereignty:

From 1996 onward the Via Campesina's platform for food sovereignty has encompassed a varying number of principles, some of the most basic ones include the following: food is a basic human right; food is first and foremost a source of nutrition for people and only secondarily an item for trade; food sovereignty entails the proper stewardship of natural resources based on both the practice of agroecology as well as traditions of peasant knowledge; real agrarian reform is necessary to accomplish food sovereignty; the corporate control of multinationals over food and agriculture, which has been supported by the WTO, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB), must be curtailed and new trade conventions created; biopiracy, the patenting of life forms, and the use of Terminator Technology must be prohibited; gender equity must be upheld in all practices and policies related to food production; all people have a right to be free of violence and oppression and the ongoing displacement of rural peoples must stop; and finally, small-scale agriculturalists and other traditional food producers, like fishermen and nomadic herdsman, indigenous people, and rural women, must have a strong voice in determining agricultural policies at all levels. (Via Campesina, 1996; Desfilhes, 2001). Later definitions of food sovereignty have also stressed the importance of access for all people, especially women and marginalized groups, to productive resources, such as land, water, and traditional practices, like seed saving (IPC, 2004). The Via Campesina and other groups in the food sovereignty movement also call for the democratic creation of an International Commission on Sustainable Agriculture and Food Sovereignty as well as an independent dispute

settlement mechanism to be tied to an international Court of Justice to enforce the prohibition against “dumping.”

According to Windfuhr and Jonsen in an extensive 2005 report on food sovereignty by the Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN) most of the analyses about the need for food sovereignty written in the last twelve years converge, but policy proposals about enacting it, diverge. This is to be expected since food sovereignty is not a top down concept, to be imposed by one group on another; it is a flexible, grass roots, participative model based on the principles listed above.

#### 4. Current dimensions of food sovereignty:

Food sovereignty is gaining considerable traction as a policy platform. Several national governments, including Mali, Bolivia, Nepal and Venezuela have embraced the concept and some have written it into their constitutions. Recently the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) released a series of reports based on four years of research, jointly sponsored by the World Bank, farmers’ organizations and agribusiness and biotech firms (who eventually pulled out). The findings confirm that the type of production that food sovereignty promotes -- sustainable, small-scale, based on techniques of agro ecology, adapted to local and needs and conditions -- is the way forward for world agriculture in this age of climate change, hunger and vanishing resources (<http://www.agassessment.org/> and <http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/007979.html>).

#### 5. Conclusion:

In June 2008, twelve years after the Via Campesina first introduced the idea of food sovereignty at the FAO, an emergency meeting of the High Level Conference on World Food Security, mentioned above, was held at the FAO. Attended by several head’s of state, this high profile meeting was convened to discuss factors in the current world food crisis – ever rising food prices for consumers, growing demand for biofuels, the addition this year of one million hungry people to the ranks of the 854 million already lacking adequate food, the outbreak of food riots around the globe, and the potential destabilization of thirty four national governments. This official meeting on World Food Security, previously one of the few multilateral arenas in which Via Campesina has consistently engaged in dialogue, ignored both the IAASTD report about the way forward for agriculture and the joint statements on food sovereignty produced by the Via Campesina and a multitude of civil society allies at the Terra Preta parallel forum. The official summit concluded that the dominant paradigm of neo-liberal, corporate, agro industrial agriculture based on trade liberalization, chemical inputs and the “silver bullet” of biotechnology would somehow be able to feed rapidly growing number of hungry people in the world. Food sovereignty advocates disagree.

The current global model of corporate, export-oriented, oil dependent, industrial agriculture and the food sovereignty model, based on small scale, sustainable, healthy, local, food production cannot peacefully coexist; the first is intent upon destroying the second. Food sovereignty is more than a program or policy; it represents a paradigm change. As an organizing principle, food sovereignty delineates two paradigms, the past and the future. The old paradigm is associated with industrial rationality, with corporate profit as the ultimate good; the new paradigm is associated with access to the commons, with sustainability and freedom from hunger as the ultimate goods.

SEE ALSO: VIA CAMPESINA AND PEASANT STRUGGLES; FOOD RIOTS

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