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40 Years of dialogue on food sovereignty: A review and a look ahead

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ABSTRACT

We review the evolution of the food sovereignty movement from its Green Revolution origins centered on food self-sufficiency to current dialogue focused on reduced use of transgenic crops, supporting small-scale agriculture, eschewing trade liberalization, and promoting agroecology principles. We discuss food sovereignty in the context of a "right to food" as has been put forward by the United Nations. We review food sovereignty discourse to assess what it contributes to key aspects of global food security. We conclude that, while food sovereignty has promise as a normative concept, it is unlikely to be implemented in any substantive way in the near future. Forces affecting the future of food including rapid population growth, upward food price trends, globalization, and institutional path dependence in global food and agricultural input markets are formidable adversaries.

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1. Introduction

Food sovereignty is "the right of each nation or region to maintain and develop their capacity to produce basic food crops with corresponding productive and cultural diversity" (Altieri, 2009). Over the last 40 years, the concept of food sovereignty has evolved from focusing on single-crop food self-sufficiency to community-driven food policies aiming to influence and change the structure of food and agricultural input markets in local, national, and global contexts. The overarching theme of the contemporary food sovereignty literature is a grand shift away from large-scale farming and agricultural processing to smaller and more localized systems. Food sovereignty focuses on a sort of industrial detox—creating a local food economy that replaces export-and-import driven global food markets and the policies that enable them. In particular, priority is placed on shifting power away from corporations, especially those that produce transgenic crops, focus on monoculture production systems, and benefit from agricultural subsidies. Food sovereignty has been hailed by its proponents as the only way to address the long-term food crisis (Miller, 2008; Rosset, 2008, 2009), as well as having "transformative potential" (Fairbairn, 2012).

This paper reviews the development and growth of food sovereignty since the 1960s and discusses what the food sovereignty movement can contribute to the goal of global food security. We review the inception of the concept under the early terminology of "food self-sufficiency" and its evolution into food sovereignty. We then turn to recent developments within the food sovereignty movement, with examples from numerous regions, communities, and stakeholders. In Section 3, we place the contributions of food sovereignty in the policy dialogue on food security and consider what role food sovereignty plays with respect to attaining global food security objectives, including improved food availability, access, safety, and sustainability. We then consider the question of how food sovereignty is operationalized and measured. In the final section, we discuss the future of food sovereignty as a concept, movement, and analytical tool.

2. Chronology

In Madeleine Fairbairn's comprehensive chapter titled *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting Food, Nature and Community*, she traces the roots of the current food sovereignty movement to the 1947 "right to food" post-war food regime that stemmed from the UN Commission on Human Rights (Fairbairn, 2010). This early conceptualization of the right to food eventually evolved to a Cold War "right to freedom from hunger" (Eide, 1996). The early foundations of food sovereignty developed in the context of the Green Revolution of the 1960s, which allowed new regions to prosper through agricultural intensification as well as feed their citizens by employing modern plant breeding, pesticides, and irrigation to dramatically increase yields. With its limited scope, the Green Revolution barely touched the farming communities of Africa, while high-yielding modern varieties of rice and wheat

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brought expansive growth in the agricultural sector throughout Asia and Latin America (Evenson and Gollin, 2003).

While less-discussed in modern interpretations of food sovereignty, the expression of choice from the Green Revolution era of the 1960s through the 1980s was "food self-sufficiency," a seemingly impossible, zero-import objective—even for countries focused on a single staple crop (Barker and Hayami, 1976; Burmeister and Choi, 2011). Researchers promulgated food self-sufficiency as best attained through "improvement in physical and institutional infrastructure such as irrigation and research-extension systems" (Barker and Hayami, 1976) even though self-sufficiency has been shown to be economically desirable only for particular foods (Cheng, 1987). Some countries, like the United Kingdom, have long relied on imported goods and would require major shifts in the price of food imports for increased self-sufficiency (Fallows and Wheelock, 1982).

Iran enacted one of the most striking nationally-driven policy experiments with food self-sufficiency. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, wheat self-sufficiency became a major goal for the country, but its bread subsidy reform was a failure due to wheat "lost" in transit, storage, and processing (Amid, 2007). By the early 2000s, 20 years after its move to reduce wheat imports, Iran had not achieved wheat self-sufficiency, even with consistent growth. Policy failure was not due to poor agricultural performance; major factors included control over wheat production and failed distributive policies. Overall, even though self-sufficiency was of interest to Arab countries in the late 1970s, the relative importance of agriculture declined but still remained vital, even with the possibility that food self-sufficiency would be unattainable (El-Sherbini and Sinha, 1978).

Other countries also experimented with food self-sufficiency, even as optimism regarding high-yielding seed varieties and other conventional Green Revolution technologies declined (Evenson, 1974). Sudan attempted wheat self-sufficiency in Gezira at the expense of its cotton crops, but found reduced employment opportunities (Hassan et al., 2000). Zimbabwe made maize self-sufficiency an explicit policy goal, but in a landlocked county with high marketing costs, prices needed for food self-sufficiency are typically above import parity prices. Pricing policies with the goal of self-sufficiency come at the expense of overall higher prices or compulsory subsidies, which benefit only a small set of wealthy farmers (Jayne and Rukuni, 1993). China experienced fewer production controls and price increases alongside a decline in grain imports in the mid-1980s. While food self-sufficiency was considered an attainable goal for the nation, it failed to come to fruition (Yang and Tyers, 1989). Mexico, once self-sufficient in food, was no longer categorized as such as of 1987; it could not "supply its population from domestic production with basic foodstuffs in sufficient quantities to achieve minimum nutritional standards" (Barkin, 1987).

Paradoxically, changes in soil and water systems in countries participating in and affected by the Green Revolution, combined with policies aimed at achieving self-sufficiency in staple food crops, essentially led to the modern food sovereignty movement (Matson et al., 1997). Contemporary food sovereignty is characterized by a shift in focus away from monocropping, down-scaling of agricultural production, and a strong focus on agroecology. Food sovereignty supporters are often concerned with negative outcomes related to industrial agriculture and single-crop specialization (Issaoui-Mansouri, 2012).

In 1993, La Via Campesina (LVC) formed during the Uruguay Round of the GATT negotiations that concluded in a multilateral trade agreement lacking in substantive input from developing countries. LVC is the most well-known food sovereignty organization, with branches made up of small- and medium-scale farmers and producers, of men and women, of various races and ethnicities across the world. Now headquartered in Jakarta, the organization has spent much of the last two decades defending the right for individuals to save seeds, but also promoting local control of land, pesticide-free farming, the equality and value of women in agriculture, and agroecology. Overall, LVC recognizes food as a basic human right and fights for agrarian reform, natural resource protection, a reorganization of food trade, an end to hunger, and general democratic control of food. After announcing the call for "food sovereignty" at the World Food Summit in 1996, its group of supporters remains prominent (La Via Campesina, 2011). At its 20th anniversary conference in June 2013, it claimed representation of "more than 200 million peasants, small-scale producers, landless, women, youth, indigenous, migrants, and farm and food workers, from 183 organizations and 88 countries" (Call of the VI Conference of La Via Campesina, 2013). LVC, in addition to Brazil's Landless Peasant Movement and the European Union's Good Food March, provide an important forum for people who are not content with the current food system (Akram-Lodhi, 2013).

The Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty is considered a "turning point for the global food sovereignty movement;" its standards and ideals were formally established at that point (Wittman et al., 2010). Roughly 500 people from more than 80 countries gathered in Mali, including peasants, fisher-folk, indigenous peoples, migrant workers, environmentalists, youth, and family farmers. This forum defined, with the intention to promote, the 7 themes of food sovereignty: local markets and international trade; local knowledge and technology; access and control of natural resources; sharing territories; conflicts, occupation, and disasters; social conditions and forced migration; and production models (Nyeleni Synthesis Report, 2007). The themes are elaborated in Table 1.

Table 1
Themes of food sovereignty.
Source: Nyeleni Synthesis Report, 2007.

Theme	Explanation
Local markets and international trade	Construct new mechanisms for fair trade (as opposed to free trade), including local, transparent production processes and fair prices
Local knowledge and technology	Make knowledge and experience from small, indigenous producers a "central element in strengthening local food systems"
Access and control of natural resources	Implement agrarian reform that keeps land in the hands of local communities long committed to sustainable practices
Sharing territories	Define territories to include indigenous and nomadic peoples; strengthen organizations and alliances to ensure the "peaceful coexistence of diverse communities"
Conflicts, occupation, and disasters	Rebuild communities suffering from disaster and conflict with the assistance and leadership of those affected
Social conditions and forced migration	Strengthen organizations dedicated to migrants and their respective movements at the local level; increase knowledge of forced migration
Production models	Move towards a "solidarity economy" where local production and consumption are key elements; decrease industrial production and increase small-scale low-energy production methods

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