

Food Sovereignty: A Holistic View

Devarati Roy Chowdhury

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science. University of Delhi.

Abstract

This paper attempts to identify and assess some of the key elements that 'frame' Food Sovereignty to give a holistic understanding. Food Sovereignty emerged in part as a mobilization in resistance to the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture and its imposition of multilateral disciplines on domestic agriculture policy. At end, this paper formulates how Food Sovereignty is different from Food Security and how it has the potential to be the foundation of an alternative food system that can transcend the deep-seated social, economic and ecological contradictions of the global food economy.

Keywords: Food Sovereignty, Transnational Social Movements, Neo Liberalism, Globalization, Alter-globalization, Food Security.

Introduction

Food sovereignty as a movement is a relatively new transnational social movement and advocated network of peasants, farmers, fisher folk, and other peoples dependent on agricultural production for their livelihoods. The movement originated in the Americas and Europe and expanded quickly to Asia, and later to Africa and other parts of the world (Holt-Giménez 2010, p.204) ^[1]. Food sovereignty emerged as a political movement when La Via Campesina (LVC) used the term to assert itself as an international voice for peasant organizations at the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996. In just fifteen years, the movement has become a leading transnational agrarian movement (TAM) of peasant organizations, lead in large part by LVC. As of 2010, food sovereignty represented primarily marginalized rural people from over 150 social movements and 79 countries, including 12 African countries and several countries in South and East Asia (Holt-Giménez 2010) ^[2]. The movement has become a pivotal force in working to safeguard the rights, dignity and livelihoods of millions of the most vulnerable persons and communities across the world.

LVC introduced the concept of food sovereignty in 1996 as an alternative to the expansion of capitalist agricultural production and neoliberal globalization of agricultural markets. The emergence of LVC coincided with the birth of the WTO and the coming into force of the Uruguay Round as Agreement on Agriculture (AoA). Under the banner of food sovereignty, LVC members articulated their rejection of the WTO and all it stood for. "WTO out of agriculture" was their slogan. They did not choose the perhaps more obvious slogan: "agriculture out of the WTO" (Burnett and Murphy 2013) ^[3]. The slogan was an assertion that agriculture was their space, as producers, and they would dictate how the space should be managed. LVC was not just articulating a critique of the Uruguay Round's rules and asserting that globalization should not dictate domestic agricultural policies. The organization's wider point was to assert the primacy of agriculture and the damage that the logic of the WTO agreements would cause to the sector. LVC found itself in solidarity with the wider

organization of social movements in the "alter-globalization" movement.

1. Food Sovereignty As a Movement

The conceptual definition of food sovereignty has evolved over the years. Via Campesina defined food sovereignty at its inception as "the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity" and "the right to produce our own food in our own territory" (Desmarais 2007, 34) ^[4]. The organization later added "the right of people to define their agricultural and food policy" to the definition (Desmarais 2007, 34) ^[5]. The movement and the concept became more formalized at the 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty (Nyéléni 2007) ^[6] in Mali, with the final declaration containing what is the most commonly recognized definition of food sovereignty today: Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (Nyéléni 2007) ^[7].

In another definition, 'food Sovereignty' is conceived as 'the right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments...as a critical alternative to the dominant neoliberal model for agriculture and trade' (Wittman 2009 and Wittman *et al.* 2010, 2) ^[8,9].

2. Issues involved with Food Sovereignty

Accordingly, rather than center its politics in peasant claims alone, the movement chose a political target with a broader, conjunctural theme: the 'food security' claims of a privatizing trade regime. 'Food sovereignty' politicized this naturalized claim for market rationality in global food provisioning by counterposing a historic claim for food self-reliance as a sovereign right of peoples: in effect challenging the operating principles of the food regime. Three issues stem from this strategic intervention. First, food sovereignty is centered on the 'right to food.' Second, food sovereignty drew attention to the deceit of feeding the world with the claim of providing

food security through a marketplace in which only a minority of the world's population participates. And third, food sovereignty's politicization of agri-food policy includes demands for a democratic resolution to the question of food security, anticipating a broader political alliance focusing on ecological and public health (Lang and Heasman 2004) ^[10].

The 'food sovereignty' initiative thus outlined a critique of the institutional structuring of the current, corporate food regime at the same time as it reformulated conditions necessary to food security – rooted in a restatement of the social contract appropriate to an era of ecological crisis. Hannah Wittman's term 'agrarian citizenship' (2009) captures part of this sensibility – problematizing modernity's urban bias, as reproduced in Mike Davis' notion of the Ark-like responsibility of the metropolis in combating climate change (Davis 2010, Ajl 2013) ^[11, 12, 13].

It was first developed to challenge the neoliberal globalization being promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO), the influence of food sovereignty has grown in large part because it offers a different way of thinking about how the world food system could be organized; it offers an alternative to the corporate food regime and its manifest failings.

3. Food Sovereignty and Food Security

Food sovereignty is thus a concept that is an clear alternative to the concept of food security, because food security says nothing about the terms and conditions by which food is produced, and it is, to them, vital to know what food is produced, who grows food, where and how that food is produced, the scale of food production, as well as the environmental and health impacts of food production (Patel 2006, 2013) ^[14, 15]. Food security says nothing about the inequitable structures and policies that have destroyed livelihoods and the environment, and thus produced food insecurity (Patel and McMichael 2009) ^[16]. By way of contrast, food sovereignty offers an idea which is an alternative to the greater vertical integration of agriculture and its domination by global agro-food transnational corporations, which is seen by many advocates to exploit peasants and workers and undemocratically concentrate economic and political power (Friedmann 1993) ^[17]. Rather, advocates of food sovereignty argue that the food system needs to be predicated upon a decentralized agriculture, where production, processing, distribution and consumption are controlled by people and their communities. In this way, food sovereignty offers a vision of an alternative food system, and this vision has, in less than 20 years, grown into a global movement.

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