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Food Sovereignty and Autonomous Local Systems

Throughout the world, a growing number of initiatives aim to reconnect producers and consumers through short food chains and local food systems. According to a recent study commissioned by the European Union,¹ short food chains generate many social and economic benefits throughout Europe. They create a sense of community and of “living together” by building trust and social bonds. They generate jobs and strengthen local economies because a higher share of value added is retained by producers.

But despite their current role in meeting human needs and sustaining diverse ecologies, local food systems—and the organizations that govern them—are threatened by two main trends. The first is the global restructuring of agri-food systems, with a few transnational corporations gaining monopoly control over different links in the food chain. This undermines local people’s capacity for autonomy and self-determination.² The second threat is the modernist development agenda which aims to reduce the number of people engaged in food production and instead encourages them to get jobs in the largely urban-based manufacturing and service sectors—regardless of the social and ecological costs of increasingly job-less growth in these sectors.

The food sovereignty movement has emerged as a reaction to this situation. Relocalizing and regenerating autonomous food systems—with, for, and by citizens—is a key challenge for the food sovereignty movement. Reclaiming such spaces for autonomy and well-being depends on strengthening the positive features of local food systems and on large-scale citizen action grounded in an alternative theory of social change. “Food sovereignty” thus emphasizes:

- 1 *Short Food Supply Chains and Local Food Systems in the EU: A State of Play of Their Socio-Economic Characteristics*, JRC Scientific and Policy Report by the European Commission. <http://ftp.jrc.es/EURdoc/JRC80420.pdf>
- 2 The loss of autonomy and self-determination is a direct consequence of the expansion of the industrial model of development rooted in commodity production. An important mechanism in this process is what Ivan Illich has termed “radical monopoly”: “the substitution of an industrial product or a professional service for a useful activity in which people engage or would like to engage,” leading to the deterioration of autonomous systems and modes of production. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973).

“the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets . . . Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to food and to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.”³

The emerging food sovereignty policy framework identifies the need for several mutually supportive national and international policies to strengthen the autonomy and resilience of more localized food systems. It recognizes that there are many local food systems throughout the world, particularly in developing countries. Indeed, most of the world’s food is grown, collected, and harvested by over 2.5 billion small-scale farmers, pastoralists, forest dwellers, artisanal fisherfolk, and urban farmers. This food is primarily sold, processed, resold, and consumed locally, with many people deriving their incomes and livelihoods through work and activities at different points along the food chain—from seed to plate.

In the face of the organized power of science, business, and mainstream politics, the concept of food sovereignty, and the struggle to achieve it, brings together farmers, citizens, indigenous peoples, pastoralists, and all kinds of rural and urban groups from both the South and the North. Transformation for food sovereignty partly depends on strengthening the local organizations of these food providers and on citizens reclaiming power over their lives in at least five interrelated areas, which are discussed here.

Access to Land and Seeds

The entry into farming by prospective farmers—most of them young people—has become a problem with high land prices and an increasingly speculative land market. In Europe for example, land ownership is highly unequal. There are some 12 million farms in the EU, but the large farms (100 hectares and above) which only represent 3 percent of the total number of farms, control 50 percent of all farmed land.⁴ A wide-

³ La Via Campesina, <http://www.viacampesina.org>.

⁴ European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) and Hands-Off the Land (HOTL), *Land Concentration, Land Grabbing and People’s Struggles in Europe*, http://www.eurovia.org/IMG/pdf/FINAL_17_avril_14h_HOTL-ECVC-Executive-Summary-.pdf.

spread political process is required to reverse the concentration of land ownership in Europe and other continents where similar inequities prevail.

In the meantime, it is inspiring that a number of citizens' initiatives are removing land from the commodity market and enabling farmers to enter or stay in farming. For example Terre de Liens in France has acquired over 2,000 hectares of farmland since 2007, which it holds in perpetuity for the sake of current and future generations.⁵ Land is then lent to farmers who farm organically. Almost all these farms market their products through short food webs that create jobs and wealth in the local economy.

Food sovereignty also depends on unrestricted access to a diverse range of non-proprietary seeds in order to develop biodiversity-rich farming systems that are resilient to change. But seed regulations as well as Plant Breeders Rights in many countries currently induce uniformity in farming landscapes by restricting the free exchange of seeds between farmers. Although seed companies hugely benefit from these laws, this greatly hampers society's ability to develop more genetically diverse agroforestry, intercropping, and mixed farming systems that are needed to adapt to climate change. Policy reversals are urgently needed to liberate seeds from corporate control and strengthen farmers' rights to save, use, and freely exchange diverse seeds.

Models of Production

Transformation for food sovereignty requires a fundamental shift from linear, throughput industrial models of production to circular systems that mimic natural ecosystems to reduce both external inputs and waste. At the farm level, this requires developing alternatives to monocultures and reducing farmers' dependence on suppliers of off-farm inputs and the food retailers. By combining farmers' local experiential knowledge with the modern science of ecology, agroecology provides the basis for designing such agricultural systems by harnessing biodiversity and other locally available resources. Dependency on external markets for inputs and ecological footprints are reduced by encouraging functional designs that generate their own soil fertility, crop protection, pollination, and water management to yield quality foods and other farm products.

5 "Chiffres clefs," Terre de Liens, last modified 2013, <http://www.terredeliens.org/-un-mouvement-trois-piliers->.

Greenhouse gas emissions can be high for short chains and local food systems that deliver unprocessed seasonal foods when key inputs, such as electricity and fuel, are sourced from a considerable distance from the farm. As with the farm level, an alternative here is to develop productive systems that minimize external inputs, pollution, and waste (as well as risk, dependency, and costs) by adopting a circular metabolism that is inspired by nature. There are two key design principles here that both reflect the natural world. The first is that natural systems are based on cycles, for example water, nitrogen, and carbon. Secondly, there is very little waste in natural ecosystems. The “waste” of one species is food for another, or is converted into a useful form by natural processes and cycles.

So a major challenge for the food sovereignty movement is to find new ways of re-integrating food and energy production with water and waste management in locally embedded circular economy models.⁶ The overall focus is on “doing more with less”; widespread recycling and reuse; diversity and multi-functionality, and the ecological clustering of industries, as well as the relocalization of production and consumption. This includes a shift from large-scale, centralized electricity generation to small-scale, decentralized renewable energy systems. This is how centralized and specialized global food supply can be replaced by decentralized food webs—from house clusters, municipalities, and whole cities, to peri-urban belts linked with nearby farm lands and the wider countryside.

This ecosystem-analog approach can enhance farmers’ and citizens’ direct control over the means of production and decisions on what to produce, and how. It provides the material basis for local food sovereignty and resilient food systems throughout the world.

Transforming Knowledge and Ways of Knowing

Farmers who want to grow their crops and rear their animals using organic methods and agroecological approaches often need knowledge that is very different from what is currently offered by the formal agricultural research system. More generally, the

⁶ Andy Jones, Michel Pimbert, and Janice Jiggins, *Virtuous Circles: Values, Systems, Sustainability* (London: IIED and IUCN CEESP, 2012).

development of circular systems that combine food and energy production with water and waste management requires radically different knowledge from what is available in public and private sector research and disciplinary-based university departments.

The whole process of transforming knowledge and ways of knowing for food sovereignty should lead to the democratization of research, diverse forms of co-inquiry based on a specialist and non-specialist knowledge, a blurring of the boundaries between scientific, citizen, and indigenous knowledge systems, expansion of horizontal networks of farmers and citizens for autonomous learning and action, and more transparent oversight.

Claiming Citizens' Rights to Participate in Policy-making

Organized efforts by citizens are necessary to ensure changes in research priorities, policies, and public investments for local food systems and alternative food networks. For example, funds are required to build the infrastructure of decentralized food systems: local abattoirs, mills, community food processing units, equipment for distributed micro-generation of renewable energy, and systems for water recycling and purification. Global, uniform standards for food and safety need to be replaced by a diversity of locally evolved food standards that meet food and safety requirements. Local food, energy, and water procurement schemes also need to be introduced to ensure that wealth and jobs stay in the local economy.

All this requires “a mass re-politicization of food politics, through a call for people to figure out for themselves what they want the right to food to mean in their communities, bearing in mind the community’s needs, climate, geography, food preferences, social mix and history.”⁷ More direct democracy and citizen engagement in framing food policies and public investments can be encouraged by strengthening civil society and local organizations, using methods for deliberative and inclusive processes to link local voices into national and international policy making, expanding information democracy and citizen-controlled media, nurturing active forms of citizenship, and learning from the rich history of direct democracy.⁸ Federations of local organizations and peoples’ assemblies linking

7 Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (London: Portobello Books, 2007).

8 Michel P. Pimbert, *Towards Food Sovereignty: Reclaiming Autonomous Food Systems* (London: IIED, RCC and CAWR, 2011).

villages, towns, neighborhoods, local economies, and ecological units can also act as a significant counter-power to the state and transnational corporations.

Deepening Democracy

There is a need for economic arrangements that offer enough material security and time for citizens (both men and women) to exercise their right to participate in shaping policies for the public good and to develop autonomous food systems. Only with some material security and time can people be “empowered” to think about what type of policies they would like to see and how they can contribute to them. Leveling the economic playing field for democratic participation calls for radical and mutually reinforcing structural reforms, including: 1) the introduction of a guaranteed and unconditional minimum income for all; 2) the relocalization of plural economies that combine both market oriented activities with non monetary forms of economic exchange based on barter, reciprocity, gift relations, and solidarity; 3) a generalized reduction of time spent in wage-work and a more equitable sharing of jobs between men and women; 4) a tax on financial speculations, to fund the regeneration of local economies and ecologies; and 5) a shift from the increasingly corporate controlled, globalized, centralized, and linear systems we use to produce and distribute food to more decentralized and relocalized circular systems that combine sustainable food and energy production with water and waste management in a diversity of urban and rural settings.

Conclusion

Over a century ago in *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*, Kropotkin presented his vision of a decentralized anarchist communist society “of integrated, combined labor... where each worker works both in the field and in the workshop,” and each region “produces and itself consumes most of its own agricultural and manufactured produce.” At “the gates of your fields and gardens,” there will be a “countless variety of workshops and factories... required to satisfy the infinite diversity of tastes... into which men, women and children will not be driven by hunger, but will be attracted by the desire of finding an activity suited to their tastes.”⁹

9 P. Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops: Or Industry Combined with Agriculture and Brain Work with Manual Work* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1912).

In many ways, “food sovereignty” echoes this earlier vision of how society could be organized for equity, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Given the threats of climate change, peak oil, loss of biological and cultural diversity, water scarcity, food crisis, as well as steeply rising unemployment and poverty, there is an urgent need for such a fundamental transformation throughout the world.