

Food Sovereignty: A Strategy for Environmental Justice

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Abstract

Dominant approaches to rural development have proven unable to confront the structural challenges posed by a system where progress itself generates hunger and increasing environmental damage. This article places its accent on the direct action of communities to organize themselves to satisfy their food and other basic needs and those of their regions with self-help strategies that could be applied in both rural and urban areas. While generally applicable, this focus draws its inspiration from the experience of *La Via Campesina*, the largest social organization in the world, with chapters in more than 80 countries and 200 million members.

The food sovereignty approach offers a forward-looking strategy to social mobilization, confronting the scourge of rural disintegration while also addressing the pressing issue of environmental balance. It proposes to direct political and social actions to the collective organization of communities to promote local mobilization and cooperation within and among communities, on a regional as well as on a much broader geographic scale. It functions by integrating experts into a well-proven farmer-to-farmer approach for the exchange of information and materials conducive to improving productivity and promoting diversity in accordance with local customs while also creating possibilities for improving the quality of foods being produced and their nutritional impact. Most organizations promoting food sovereignty consider agroecology to be the most effective approach to organizing production, emphasizing the use of locally available inputs and technologies as well as a diversity of cropping systems adapted to local conditions.

Keywords: food sovereignty; ecosystem conservation; environmental justice; social metabolism; *La Vía Campesina*

JEL Codes: O13, O33, O44, P48, Q01, Q15, Q57

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Introduction

Food Sovereignty (FS) offers an effective strategy to promote environmental justice¹ by empowering the producers to confront the strictures of traditional policies in order to promote rural development. As presently practiced and promoted around the world, FS is a strategy grounded in the collective actions of producers who organize to promote their own welfare and assure appropriate techniques for cultivating the land and organizing local, regional, and national markets that facilitate the exchanges among the communities. In this short paper, we propose that the organizations presently advocating the implementation of a FS approach to rural development offer many conceptual and practical lessons that are apposite to discussions of “Food and Justice.”

I. An Epistemological Beginning

Our starting point involves a questioning of the dominant ontology that asserts the need for large-scale industrialized agriculture and international trade to feed the world’s burgeoning population. Advocates lending support to small-scale organized peasant agriculture point out that this “obiter dictum” ignores reality: 70 percent of humanity’s food needs are presently met by local and regional producers (Pollan 2013).

This wide-spread fallacy is grounded in a series of assumptions common in orthodox economic thinking that take as their point of departure the methodological individualism so engrained in economic (and social) analysis since the XIX century. In this view, individual producers, whether they are large commercial enterprises or yeoman farmers, all make autonomous individual decisions based on their evaluation of market forces and the availability of resources. The profit-maximizing entrepreneur of this approach would separate the producers from their input supplies and from the consumers. Technologies would be ‘freely’ available and selected on the basis of the isolated decisions of well-informed participants in the market place.

This well-ordered market economy in which atomistic players interact in a harmonious way is not supposed to present any problems for each of the participants. The epistemological model presupposes that each of the participants has access to the necessary resources to implement their production in an efficient way, implicitly accepting the notion that they will also take into account and respect the needs of the ecosystems on which their production depends. Furthermore, the model also suggests that preexisting or developing inequalities among people are not somehow the product of their own collective heritage, but rather a product of their individual accomplishments; there is no place for structural limitations based on gender, ethnicity or other socio-cultural characteristics (such as class) that might influence the possibilities for each participant’s advancement.

This inherited system of analysis also presupposes the ability of the marketplace, that wonderful ahistorical institution that is so needed by all societies, to accurately determine the appropriate

¹ In this discussion we use the expression “environmental justice” to refer to the satisfaction of basic needs for an entire population (community, region, nation) (social justice) along with respect for conserving and rehabilitating (if necessary) the ecosystems within which this population lives (ecosystem balance). The concept is discussed at length in Barkin and Lemus (2016).

prices for all the elements required in the production process as well as for all the resulting products. This has become particularly important in recent times because of our “new-found” recognition of the significance of planetary (natural) resources in production, their finite availability, and the extraordinary efforts that are (would be) required to assure the correct disposal of the detritus left over from the production processes. Recently, it has become clearer than ever that this is an extraordinary supposition, on which rests the whole structure of the claims of efficiency and equilibrium.

A final supposition is related to the question of time. Much economic analysis supposes that the processes it analyzes occur instantaneously. Further, this characteristic also involves the facile dismissal of accumulated knowledge and technological developments of past epochs, since new inventions are presumed to be more appropriate for confronting the challenges of present day systems. This facet of economic analysis also deliberately and systematically dismisses the possible consideration of benefits for future generations and the implications of using or misusing resources and ecosystems that might be essential for the continuation of life as we know it today.

The implications of this epistemology for the food system are quite far-reaching. On the one hand, they contributed to the development of a whole package of industrialized paradigms applied to different agricultural production and environmental systems, most notably the implementation of various green-revolution technologies to seed development. On the other hand, they led to the supposition that any exploitative techniques that might lead to the impoverishment of the natural systems could be compensated by the application of newly formulated inputs to replace nutrients or eliminate biological threats that might generate limits for increasing productivity. Even more daring, they made the assumption that “man-made” forms of inputs might substitute for their natural forerunners as gene manipulation technologies have facilitated the production of “transgenic” products in both agricultural and livestock systems; recent research is demonstrating that alternative production forms, such as organic farming and agroecology can do the job better (Reganold and Wachter 2016, Alteri and Toledo 2011).

II. The Foundations of a System of Justice

The basic tenets for a system of environmental justice can be readily identified. At a minimum, these require assuring all members of the society the satisfaction of their (socially defined) basic needs; in today’s world, this requires providing not only for the basic sustenance of the society, but also attending to the institutional requirements that guarantee the ability of all people to participate in the community’s governance, in the conservation and transmission of its culture, and to attend to the requirements to assure their health and other dimensions of their well-being. Of course, in an operative social system, these elements must be accompanied by a commitment to conserve the ecosystems on which they depend, and, if necessary, the rehabilitation of those that have deteriorated or been damaged by previous generations.

The translation of these seemingly simple conditions into a set of operative mechanisms for social organization has proved elusive in many contemporary nation-states. The progressive advances of inequality in most societies along with the advancing deterioration of the environment have tragically affected the poorer strata of society. These negative impacts are exacerbated by other social phenomena that divide modern societies by ethnic, class and racial characteristics, creating

profound social differences that sometimes lead to violent conflict and almost always contribute to a collective abuse of the environment.

These institutional features of modern societies are having important effects on the ability of most countries around the world to assure the basic nutritional needs of their populations. In today's world, there is no question that there is enough food available globally to feed the population, and yet a considerable proportion is hungry and an even larger segment is poorly nourished. Social Justice, then, is directly related to the institutional nexus in which it is embedded.

III. Food Sovereignty: An Alternative to Food Security

The proposal for a FS program involves an important shift from the prevailing public policy approach that is oriented towards food security. Although there is a large literature attempting to define the terms with many people strongly invested in their differences, for the present essay, suffice it to characterize the two and then explore the implications of the second concept for social policy and political development.²

The FAO provides this “useful workable definition:”

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Household food security is the application of this concept to the family level, with individuals within households as the focus of concern (FAO 2001, Ch. 2, p. 1).

This definition is useful in that it emphasizes an important characteristic: the availability of food to satisfy human needs, regardless of how it is procured. This is important because the issue is directly related to the question of the liberalization of world trade and international capital markets as well as the powerful influence of the principal corporate interests involved in global trade in grains (Morgan 1979).

Food Sovereignty, on the other hand, not only focuses its concerns on the availability of food, in the sense, described above, but also encompasses a number of other crucial matters that are directly related to the way food is produced, and who and where it is produced. Although the expression has a long history in public policy, for our purposes we will focus on its development as a political goal and organizing program by *La Via Campesina* since the mid-1990s:

Food sovereignty is different from food security in both approach and politics. Food security does not distinguish where food comes from, or the conditions under which it is produced and distributed. National food security targets are often met by sourcing food produced under environmentally destructive and exploitative conditions, and supported by subsidies and policies *that destroy local food producers but benefit agribusiness corporations.* *Food sovereignty* emphasizes ecologically appropriate production, distribution and consumption, social-economic justice and local food systems as ways to tackle hunger and poverty and guarantee sustainable food security for all peoples. It advocates trade and investment that serve the collective aspirations of society. It promotes community control of productive resources; agrarian reform and tenure security for small-

² A comprehensive review of the evolution of the use of these concepts in the academic literature and in some facets of practice is available in Edelman (2014).

scale producers; agro-ecology; biodiversity; local knowledge; the rights of peasants, women, indigenous peoples and workers; social protection and climate justice (Nyéléni Newsletter 2013).

For purposes of the present article, the key to understanding the importance of delineating the differences is their differing impacts on *justice*. The operative difference between the two is the emphasis on the conditions of production, the processes, and the impacts that this production has on the environment and on the people involved. By emphasizing process and impacts, the FS approach places its emphasis on the ways in which food systems promote a dynamic integration of communities with an all-inclusive concern for the relationship between producers, production, and the ecosystems within which they function.

IV. Food Sovereignty: Building Food Systems that Strengthen Community, Promote Good Nutrition, and Protect the Environment

Although the academic discussions of FS have pointed to numerous limitations of the way in which the concept is currently used, in this paper I wish to stress its importance as an organizing tool and political platform for implementing a program that offers a meaningful alternative to the inability of the international community to meet its quite laudable declarations to eliminate hunger on a global scale (Millennium –2000-2015– and Sustainable –2015-2030 – Development Goals).³

The basic argument of those supporting FS is that it offers an effective alternative to the official approach to rural development to assure environmental justice. Since its formal creation in 1996, *La Via Campesina* is systematically advancing a definition of FS that clearly established an agenda for its practical work and political advocacy in regional and international fora. At its 2007 meeting in Nyéléni, Mali, it defined six pillars of food sovereignty:

1. Focuses on food for the people by: a) placing people's need for food at the centre of policies; and b) insisting that food is more than just a commodity.
2. Values food providers by: a) supporting sustainable livelihoods; and b) respecting the work of all food providers.
3. Localizes food systems by: a) reducing the distance between suppliers and consumers; b) rejecting dumping and inappropriate food aid; and c) resisting dependence on remote and unaccountable corporations.
4. Places control at a local level by: a) placing control in the hands of local food suppliers; b) recognizing the need to inhabit and share territories; and c) rejecting the privatization of natural resources.
5. Promotes knowledge and skills by: a) building on traditional knowledge; b) using research to support and pass on this knowledge to future generations; and c) rejecting technologies that undermine local food systems.
6. Works with nature by: a) maximizing the contributions of ecosystems; b) improving resilience; and c) rejecting energy intensive, monocultural, industrialized and destructive production methods (<http://www.nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/31Mar2007NyeleniSynthesisReport-en.pdf>).

³ UNDP: "The SDGs aim to end all forms of hunger and malnutrition by 2030, making sure all people – especially children – have access to sufficient and nutritious food all year round. This involves promoting sustainable agricultural practices: supporting small-scale farmers and allowing equal access to land, technology and markets. It also requires international cooperation to ensure investment in infrastructure and technology to improve agricultural productivity. Together with the other goals set out here, we can end hunger by 2030."

These pillars continue to define the objectives and work program of *La Vía Campesina*. What is particularly notable about its activity over the past 20 years is its continuing ability to develop techniques and institutions that contribute to this program by deepening and expanding its scope of action. Perhaps one of the most important areas of activity has been its continuing exploration of the possibilities of **agroecology** to contribute to their output objectives by expanding the gamut of products to which this paradigm is being applied while also exploring its potential in an ever-widening circle of agroecological settings. A second tool that has played an ever increasing role in the consolidation of the organization's ability to incorporate more members and improve the viability of each of its constituent groups is the *peasant-to-peasant school* program; this "institution" serves as a means of transmitting knowledge and improving skills while building solidarity within individual organizations across regions and the globe.

In the terms of the call for discussion on the matter of "Food and Justice" by the W.E.A., this program differs dramatically from the frame of reference of the "Call for Papers." The proposal discussed in the present contribution assumes that to overcome the problem of provisioning of food, there must be a significantly reduced emphasis on "capitalist" markets (be they local, regional, national or international) as institutions for allocating resources and providing signals for production. In their place, emphasis is focused on self-provisioning and exchanges within regional settings for overcoming the barriers to assuring the adequate dietary needs, especially of the most food "insecure" segments of the population.

An important facet of this alternative focus is the empowering of farming communities to take a major role in ordering food provisioning. This involves concern for production and distribution as well as accepting responsibility for ecosystem health. Thus, there is an explicit devolution of powers to institutions that can coordinate production and distribution – including assuring adequate supplies for all social groups within their area of influence.

The concept of FS being discussed does not consider as central the matter of foods above the basic nutritional standards. It is addressing the needs of the considerable proportion of the world's population that presently does not have access to an adequate diet. In doing so, however, it would seem that a considerable amount of attention and planning must be devoted to supplying the food needs of considerable segments of the population who are not and frequently cannot become agricultural producers themselves.

V. Food Sovereignty: An Alternative Industrial Agriculture

By placing "Justice" at the center of the discussion, an analysis of the food system bares the extraordinary contradictions that make it virtually impossible to attend the pressing needs of significant sectors of the population, in almost all parts of the world, even in some of the wealthiest countries. The inequalities inherent in the capitalist market are at the heart of the inability of the present system to assure a production model and distribution mechanisms that take into account the vast majority's needs. These inequalities are accompanied by technological developments that are incompatible with environmental balance and universal provisioning. The prevailing model contributes to aggravating impoverishment by channeling resources from local groups to control by powerful interests, further accelerating the process of the global concentration of wealth. This

transfer is occurring on a global scale, documented and criticized by numerous scholars who also lament the intensifying violence accompanying the process (Borras *et al.* 2012).

There are very few outstanding examples of governmental programs that are successfully attending the challenges of assuring minimum diets for ‘disadvantaged’ social sectors.⁴ These successes are generally attributed to an explicit commitment to an inclusive model of social development and the deliberate participation of the ‘target’ populations in the design and implementation of these programs, assuring the basic nutritional needs of those systematically left behind or excluded by the market. To the well-known achievements of public sector programs in northern European countries can be added the less well understood achievements of the Cuban revolution (Alteri and Funes 2012; Wilson 2013), and the “Zero Hunger” Program of the Workers’ Party in Brazil, initiated during the presidency of Luis Ignacio da Silva and continued (Ansell 2016, Morton 2015). In China there are also important movements stimulating food sovereignty activities initiated by peasant organizations often collaborating with local governments in response to unfavorable economic developments and a grassroots realization of their importance for creating new possibilities for autonomous strategies to improve local well-being (van der Ploeg and Ye 2016, Wen *et al.* 2012).

Social groups and political organizations are also involved in a variety of approaches to promote FS. This is exemplified by the on-going efforts of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance to identify groups around the world engaged in activities to promote production consistent with the goals of the Nyéléni Declaration, discussed above. For nine years, it has recognized significant successes in this area, with the Farmworkers Association of Florida and the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, based in Durban, South Africa, being the recipients in 2016 (see its website, mentioned in the bibliography).

As suggested above, however, *La Vía Campesina* (LVC) best encompasses the principles of FS enumerated above. It is a transnational social movement that clearly articulates the significance of food sovereignty for community and regional well-being. Composed of national, regional, and continental movements and organizations of peasant and family farmers, indigenous people, landless peasants, farm workers, rural women, and rural youth, representing some 200 million families worldwide (Desmarais 2007, Martinez-Torres & Rosset 2008 & 2010), this remarkable grouping is composed of many rural movements and organizations. As “a global space of convergence and encounter among different rural and peasant cultures, different epistemologies and hermeneutics... [it has evolved over 20 years through] a process called *Diálogo de Saberes* (DS) in Spanish (Leff 2004), which roughly translates to ‘dialog among different knowledges and ways of knowing,’ [that] is key to the convergence and persistence [of significant diversity]. It is a process where different visions and cosmovisions are shared on a horizontal, equal footing basis. Part of it can be thought of a peasant/indigenous way of solving or avoiding conflicts, because there isn’t one knowledge to be imposed on others” (Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2014, 138-139).

FS evolved as a uniting force for bringing this broad coalition together. It offers a common framework that allows for diversity in formulating productive strategies that take into account the specificities of each locale while creating a broad framework within which common problems could be addressed as part of a united effort of self-defense (against neoliberal policies promoting

⁴ In this section, I am not considering the many creative and often successful programs currently in operation in many European countries (and perhaps elsewhere).

intensive mono-cropping) and innovation to explore a variety of approaches to satisfy local and regional needs with environmentally sustainable techniques.

As LVC developed its practices to promote FS, its members discovered that food production offered an insufficient platform for organizing and strengthening its local structures: they quickly discovered that some internal problems of inequality and oppression within their communities were creating obstacles for their advance. It became necessary to directly confront these inherited patterns of discrimination and individual protagonisms in order to fully mobilize the productive potential within their communities and regions. The discussions in regional and international fora rapidly moved beyond the subject of food production and producers to democratize the food system, emphasizing the centrality of food in local cultures and the significance of local knowledge of foods and their preparation in integrating the relationship between production and consumption. In this context, a renewed emphasis was placed on agroecology as an epistemological cornerstone of productive strategies that highlighted the intimate relationship between social production of food and the care of the ecosystems on which it depends.

VI. Food Sovereignty: A Strategy for Environmental Justice

FS offers a different point of departure for discussing the relationship between food and justice. By proposing the direct participation of producers in the design of the productive system, in the availability and diversity of foodstuff, and the care of their ecosystems, it transforms the character of this basic element in human existence. Although it does not necessarily remove all food from the marketplace, it proposes to alter the ways in which it is produced and the social relations between farmers and society (consumers).

Since the producers themselves manage the production system, it is necessarily defined by their territorial limits. Firmly anchored in their communities, its dynamics are defined by the collective actions of these producers. It is conceptually a productive model grounded in processes of collective decision-making and collective processes of learning and transmission of knowledge about the production process. The conceptual production model, agroecology, is continually being modified to adapt to changing conditions and new information about production and ecology, is part of this inherently collective process. To reinforce and extend the dynamics of knowledge production, the widespread implementation of *peasant-to-peasant schools*, involving exchange of information about techniques, technology, inputs, markets and consumption further deepens the collective social relations that are a fundamental feature of the FS model.

This collaborative model of training, production, and environmental management is also an important contributing feature explaining why it is also an epistemology that systematically promotes environmental justice. With broad collective participation and direct connections with the consumers, there is a constant feedback process that contributes to social interactions that promote collaboration and equality. The collective processes of implementing the FS strategy inherently limit the ability for individuals to resort to exploitative processes to extract “rents” from community efforts.

This short presentation cannot do “justice” to the complex and diverse social, cultural, political, and geographic elements that are currently at play in extending this strategy across the globe. Rather it is intended to open the discussion of the need to look beyond the State and the market to identify social institutions and processes being managed by local communities that are providing structures of cooperation to improve well-being and environmental conservation.

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