



Food Sovereignty as an Emerging Concept

KHEIRA ISSAOUI-MANSOURI

ABSTRACT. Food sovereignty is a concept introduced in 1996 by a peasant network called Via Campesina during the World Food Summit hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. In the past ten years, food sovereignty has grown in popularity and the concept is now used by many nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and grassroots organizations from industrialized, developing, and underdeveloped countries. This article draws on interviews with seventeen activists and professionals who work regularly with the concept of food sovereignty to examine their interpretation of said concept and the way they think it should be put into practice.

KEYWORDS. food sovereignty · local agriculture · global food system · food policy · social movements · collective action

INTRODUCTION

More than three years have passed since the world experienced a global food crisis sparked by a dramatic inflation in prices of commodities such as rice, wheat, and soybean. At the time, the shocking outcomes of the crisis (riots, deaths, and political instability in twenty-two countries) were all over the news. Since then, other issues have overshadowed the crisis, and the subject is no longer on the mass media agenda. The food crisis has become one issue among many others, and people do not really think about it anymore. But for food experts, it is only a matter of time before another similar and perhaps worse crisis bursts out (FAO 2009a, 1; De Schutter 2010, 4). Essentially, the food system is as volatile, dangerous, and unpredictable as it was in 2007 because no concrete action has been taken to fix the problem. Put simply, what we have learned from the food crisis—just as for the financial crisis—led to no new policy. This inaction has prompted many citizens to ask a simple yet important question: is doing the same thing and expecting a different result a good strategy to tackle the issue?

The modern food system has been called into question long before 2007. For more than thirty years now, many public interest groups,

grassroots organizations, and NGOs have been claiming that the food system has led to major issues and inequities. As early as in the late 1970s, the Canadian grassroots organization People's Food Commission published a report highlighting the weaknesses of intensive agriculture, an issue that reappeared on the agenda a few years ago (Rousseau 2009). However, until the 1990s, the critics of the food system, like the People's Food Commission, remained spread out and weak.

At the FAO World Food Summit of 1996, a peasant network called Via Campesina introduced the concept of "food sovereignty" as a reliable alternative to the current food system. Fifteen years later, the notion is still being used and continues to evolve through the different groups that make use of it. Furthermore, the themes of food and agriculture are increasingly debated in international organizations and NGOs, thereby drawing attention to food sovereignty. Food and agriculture are gaining exposure in small and big nonprofit organizations like GRAIN, Oxfam, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; in alter-globalization forums such as the World Social Forum; and even in mainstream television programs like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

WHAT IS "FOOD SOVEREIGNTY"?

The "food sovereignty movement" aims to restrain corporate and supranational controls over the global food system while empowering citizens, farmers, and states to rebuild the broken system. The notion builds its rationale on the idea that food is not an ordinary commodity (i.e., manufacturing goods, as television sets or pencils) and should not be treated like one. Definitions of food sovereignty vary from group to group. However, there are some areas of convergence as well as frictions within the movement that can help in grasping the most important aspects of the notion.

Proponents of food sovereignty all agree that the notion has been created in reaction to the current food system, which was established after World War II and is now being controlled by supranational trade organizations—such as the World Trade Organization (WTO)—and multinational corporations. Proponents are decrying mechanisms of the food system that are creating inequities and issues all around the world.

For example, advocates of food sovereignty highlight that the modern food system gives a disproportionate advantage to industrialized states. Industrialized countries heavily subsidize their farmers while

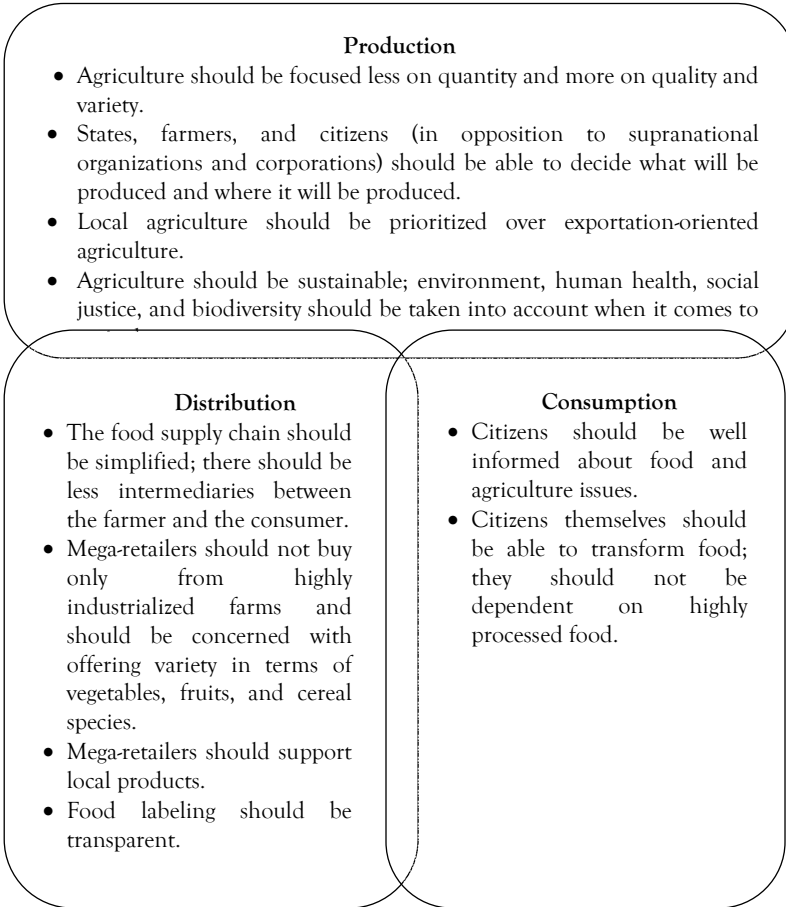


Figure 1. Food sovereignty: A concept and its segments.

non-industrialized countries are unable to counterbalance with similar investment, creating a structurally unfair system for small farmers of underdeveloped states (Chiasson 2009). Furthermore, small farmers in general (from industrialized and underdeveloped countries) seem to be disadvantaged by the food system since they are put in competition with mega-farms from around the world, most of which are producing in a completely different environment (different climates, soils, fertilizers, technologies). Also, advocates of food sovereignty criticize supranational trade organizations for having an excessive and increasing power over states in the area of agriculture (Paré 2009). Several citizen groups are

claiming that supranational trade regulations are mostly favoring food corporations while harming small-scale farmers.

Proponents of food sovereignty also stress that a vast majority of scientists believe that the rate of loss of biodiversity is greater now than at any time in history. Many groups believe that the food system, characterized by intensive agricultural practices, is linked to this dramatic loss (FAO 2009b). Advocates maintain that in addition to being harmful to biodiversity, intensive agriculture appears to be correlated with the degradation of the environment and human health.

Food sovereignty supporters draw an unambiguous conclusion from this information: the modern food system is a failure, and reforming it should be a top priority. As a response to the failed system, they put forward solutions that pertain to various dimensions of the food system.

In terms of *production*, advocates stress that food products should not be subjected to international trade agreements like regular goods are. Because having access to food is an essential need, food should be in another category of goods (Décary-Gilardieu 2009). They believe that international trade agreements tend to back quantity (mass production at the lowest price) at the expense of quality. Yet, proponents of food sovereignty assert that agriculture should be focused less on quantity and more on quality and variety. In a “food sovereignty system,” biodiversity, environment, social justice, and human health are top priorities when it comes to growing and transforming food. The questions of quantity and efficiency come next. In other words, within a “food sovereignty paradigm,” food would not be subjected to free trade rules; it would rather be recognized as a singular good that is subjected to its own “rules of the game.”

Food sovereignty advocates are also expressing their disapproval of the increasing power of supranational organizations and multinational corporations¹ over the food market. They claim that decisions regarding what will be grown and where it will be grown should not be taken at the supranational level by organizations like the WTO, or controlled by transnational corporations such as Cargill or Monsanto. They argue that those decisions should be taken at a local level. However, a key question remains: to whom should this power be given? Who should be considered the “lower level”: states, citizens, farmers? Advocates are split on this question; we will come back to this matter later when we address the internal dissensions affecting the food sovereignty movement.

Another main concern for food sovereignty supporters is the negative outcomes stemming from industrial agriculture. They maintain that industrial agriculture leads to highly specialized food production for the sake of productivity, yet this specialization increases food insecurity for millions of citizens. In several underdeveloped countries, thousands of lands are used for industrial agriculture rather than for subsistence agriculture (Fall 2009). A country can thus be import-dependent on a highly consumed good like rice, and when prices suddenly rise, local needs are unmet. Food sovereignty advocates think that priority should be given to agricultural production that targets local food needs in local markets (subsistence agriculture) because it helps increase food security. Additionally, advocates allege that local agriculture is less harmful to the environment because it uses less transportation and energy (Hautecoeur 2009). However, all groups within the food sovereignty movement emphasize that they are not asking for food autarky, which is neither achievable nor desirable. In sum, food sovereignty advocates are asking for a sustainable and green food system that is controlled at a lower level of decision making than it is now.

In terms of food *distribution*, the movement puts forward many alternatives to the actual system. Building on the same rationale that prompts them to push a locally oriented agriculture, advocates request a simplified food supply chain,² with fewer intermediaries between the farmer and the consumer. This simplification of the food supply chain can take different forms that we will describe in the last section of the present article, which deals with how to put food sovereignty into practice.

The movement is also targeting the excessive influence of mega retail corporations,³ which are almost exclusively doing business with highly industrialized farms. Advocates say that this relationship between “big fishes” is threatening biodiversity because those farms usually grow standardized crops, which reduce the variety of vegetables, cereals, and fruits that one can find on the market.⁴ To reverse this dangerous trend, it is essential to implement policies that protect and foster small-scale farming.

Another key issue for the movement is food labeling. Consumer organizations are pushing for a transparent labeling system that would allow people to easily spot key information on food: where it comes from and whether it is genetically modified or not (Décary-Gilardeau 2009). Furthermore, proponents would like retailers to showcase and

promote local food in their stores so that people are empowered to buy products that benefit their community.

We just addressed the questions of food production and distribution; the last dimension is food *consumption*. For many advocates, although consumption comes at the very end of the food chain, it is a critical arena of intervention in favor of food sovereignty. As a matter of fact, consumption implies a powerful actor of the food chain: the consumer. Food sovereignty supporters are fully aware that they need consumer support to carry out sustainable food policies. Citizens have to be aware of what is at stake when it comes to food. They also need to know how to use their power as consumers; informed citizens will be well positioned to buy and consume food that is grown and transformed in a sustainable way, near where they live.

From the point of view of the food sovereignty movement, consumers, especially those from industrialized countries, are increasingly and dangerously becoming dependent on highly processed food, and this trend should be stopped. Advocates are pointing out the fact that individuals dependent on highly processed food are also generally unable to transform food themselves (i.e., cutting, cooking, baking, and seasoning food) and are therefore less inclined to buy organic and unprocessed food. Incidentally, citizens should be educated and encouraged to cook and be independent of highly processed food (Marquis 2009).

In sum, we observed that food sovereignty is a holistic concept that involves different segments of the food supply chain. However, this description is incomplete; food sovereignty has other dimensions. But our intention here was to categorize general concerns shared by food sovereignty advocates and better comprehend their claims—not to give an extensive and detailed description of the notion. In the next section, we will address the internal dissensions that split advocates of food sovereignty.

FROM INTERNAL DISSENSIONS TO FUTURE PROGRESSES

As mentioned earlier, the majority of food sovereignty supporters concur that the food system is fostering agricultural practices that are harmful to biodiversity, human health, environment, and social justice. They also agree that corporations and the WTO are too powerful and assert that the entire food system needs a drastic reform. According to them, this reform should transfer the balance of power from corporations and the WTO to a “lower level” of decision making.

But to whom should this power be given? In other words, who should be considered the “lower level”: states, citizens, or farmers?

On the one hand, some advocates maintain that the state should be considered as the “lower level”—meaning, governments should get additional power with regard to food policy. According to this group, the democratic state, by its very nature, is accountable for implementing policies that reflect citizens’ interests. Besides, the government has the authority to carry out policies, and to regulate and enforce the law. Therefore, any efficient policy promoting food sovereignty principles would have to be implemented at the state level; otherwise, it would be too weak to have a noteworthy impact on society (Paré 2009). On the other hand, several proponents assert that the political process by which the state listens to its citizens is broken (Sheedy 2009; Kuyek 2009). Based on this assertion, this other group believes that the government is unable to reflect people’s interests and concerns. As a result, it is irrelevant to give increasing power to the state. Rather, this power should be redistributed to farmers and communities, at a lower level of decision making. In other words, both groups are calling for a redistribution of power, but the latter thinks that bottom-up solutions are needed while the former believes in the top-down approach.

The use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is also an issue that divides the movement. For the majority of advocates, food sovereignty and GMOs are strongly incompatible (Sheedy 2009; Kuyek 2009; Samaké 2009). This first group argues that people who produce GMOs are scientists who are never in contact with small farmers. Therefore, GMOs are reducing farmers’ control over their seeds. Furthermore, once farmers use GMOs, they become dependent on many other products (pesticide, fertilizer), which also diminishes their power over land. Advocates say that since food sovereignty is about transferring power to a lower level of decision making, GMOs are intrinsically incompatible with the notion because powerful corporations are controlling them (Kuyek 2009). For this group of proponents, GMOs are also hazardous because we know very little about their effects on human health. GMOs have been added to our diet only recently, and we do not know how human metabolism will cope with this change (Samaké 2009).

However, according to other advocates of food sovereignty, “fear of the unknown” is not a good enough reason to reject GMOs (Beaudoin 2009). For this other group of proponents, GMOs should not be put aside in the food sovereignty equation because the technology produces better plants that are resistant to herbicide and

contain better nutritional components, at a lower cost than traditional breeding methods that are time-consuming and not as effective. For this other group of advocates, GMOs have fostered notable innovations that we cannot set aside, especially since the global population is expected to boom in the next twenty years. For instance, in the sub-Saharan region of Sahel, GMOs have increased food security in many countries that were formerly poorly productive because of severe droughts (Fall 2009). Thanks to the GMO technology, some rice producers have been able to double their productivity within a short time. In sum, this other group of proponents is asking: given the fact that GMOs are reducing food insecurity in many regions, how can we put them aside in the food sovereignty equation?

Like many other social movements, the food sovereignty movement has internal issues to tackle. But beyond those dissensions lies a vast array of projects that are being carried out around the world.

PUTTING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY INTO PRACTICE

Food sovereignty programs run the gamut from state policies to local projects. In France, a state policy forbids cheese makers to build their factories more than thirty kilometers away from a milk transformation center. As a result of this law, the government creates small hubs of cheese makers, fosters the development of many small producers of cheese, and limits the transportation of milk—three outcomes that are consistent with the food sovereignty mind-set. Furthermore, the French state encourages schools and hospitals to shop directly from farmers and food processors in their region. Thanks to this policy, institutions and farmers developed strong bonds, they use less energy for food transportation, and farmers have a more stable income. Those two public policies enhance local economy, the environment, and social bonds (Girouard 2009).

State policies are also implemented in underdeveloped countries. Fifteen years ago, the state of Guinea imported 95 percent of its potato needs. After close negotiations between importers, the government, and farmers, the three decided that the country would henceforth import potatoes only when it is unable to produce them, which is approximately six months a year. The policy has been a real success, and Guineans are now consuming their own potatoes for half a year in addition to having developed an economic sector that was hitherto nonexistent. This example gives a good idea of a well-crafted state-level

policy that does not harm the economy and yet is beneficial to local farmers (Beaudoin 2009).

But states are not the only actors who can carry out food sovereignty policies. Throughout the past twenty years, NGOs have implemented many projects that are consistent with the mind-set of the notion. The Canadian-based NGO USC, which works almost exclusively in the area of agriculture, has a program called “Seeds of Survival” that aims at “promot[ing] long-term food security for marginal farming communities in developing countries” (USC Canada 2010). Their program creates a bridge between local farmers and scientists and encourages them to “work . . . in tandem to produce more reliable seeds and seed storage that could easily be used” by farmers (*ibid.*). Thanks to this program, small-scale farmers in Ethiopia, Mali, and other underdeveloped countries can now protect and trade their seeds (Latrémouille 2009). This type of program is a good example of a fruitful collaboration between traditional knowledge and science that benefits small-scale farmers of underdeveloped countries.

Small-scale farmers of many western states now reach out to consumers more directly than they did in the past. In several industrialized countries, citizens can now buy vegetables, fruits, and meat directly from the local farmers surrounding their area. The food can be delivered to customers’ houses (through “Community Supported Agriculture” [CSA] programs) or sold at the farmers’ market. Throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe, these types of programs are expanding and growing. In Québec, the local NGO Équiterre has a very successful CSA program. Customers pay for their “local and organic baskets” in advance and get seasonal products weekly, delivered at home. This type of initiative reduces the food chain and allows farmers to have a stable income source.

At an even smaller yet exciting scale, the Montréal-based NGO Alternatives has a “Rooftop Garden Project” that empowers “urban residents to produce their own food, green their neighborhoods, and build healthy communities” (Alternatives 2010) through rooftop gardening. Besides being environmentally friendly, rooftop gardening enables urban residents to consume organic and local vegetables at a very low cost (Hautecoeur 2009). The program also raises awareness of food- and agriculture-related issues because those who take part in a rooftop project end up being more cautious about what they eat, a process Alternatives calls “awareness through action.”

These examples of food sovereignty programs show that an idea does not need to be implemented at the national level to be put into

practice. Food sovereignty advocates, beyond their dissensions, are already putting into practice food sovereignty principles through concrete and effective projects.

But besides the requests, projects, and campaigns, important questions remain for the advocates of food sovereignty: how are they going to strengthen their movement? What kind of action should be prioritized? Should the movement be “strategy-oriented”—that is, would it target external actors, such as corporations, governments, and international organizations, in order to foster change? (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004, 266). Or, should the movement rely on “identity-oriented” actions—that is, would it focus on building a “food sovereignty identity” and culture to encourage internal initiatives? (Weber, Heinze, and DeSoucey 2008). Should the movement be a part of the broader global justice movement or should it develop its own frames and agenda? How different is the food sovereignty movement from other similar movements such as the Alternative Agrifood Movement (AAM)? In other words, now that the movement has grown and can count on many organizations and activists to push its agenda, a whole new set of challenges arises, and these challenges (thrive, adapt, build alliances) are qualitatively different from the ones a movement encounters at the beginning of its life (push a cause, develop an appealing frame, recruit activists).✿

NOTES

1. For example, Cargill, Monsanto, Kraft Food, Sara Lee Corporation, CornProducts International, Bonduelle, Nestlé.
2. The food supply chain includes the following segments: primary production, processing, manufacturing, transportation, distribution, retail.
3. For example, Wal-Mart Stores, Kroger Co., Cosco Wholesale Corp., Carrefour, Safeway, Loblaw Cos., 7-Eleven.
4. When we speak of “variety,” we are not referring to the different brands (e.g., variety of salad dressing) one can found at grocery stores because those are clearly increasing; rather, we are referring to the different species of vegetables, cereals, and fruits available on the food market.

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KHEIRA ISSAOUI-MANSOURI earned a master's degree in political science from the Université de Montréal in Québec, Canada. She has a strong interest in social movements, NGOs, and collaboration between businesses and nonprofit organizations. She currently resides in the United States and works for the Québec Government Office in Chicago.