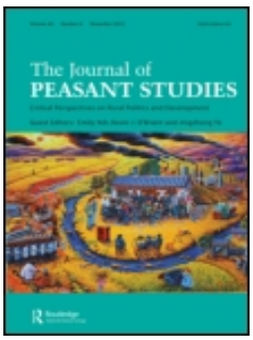

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Raj Patel Guest Editor

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GRASSROOTS VOICES

Food sovereignty

Raj Patel, Guest Editor

What does food sovereignty look like?

Raj Patel

Hannah Arendt observed that the first right, above all others, is the right to have rights. In many ways, Via Campesina's call for food sovereignty is precisely about invoking a right to have rights over food. But it's unclear quite how to cash out these ideas. This Grassroots Voices section examines some of the difficulties involved in parlaying the right to have rights about food systems into practical solutions.

The etymology of *food sovereignty*

There is, among those who use the term, a strong sense that while 'food sovereignty' might be hard to define, it is the sort of thing one knows when one sees. This is a little unsatisfactory, and this section marks an attempt to put a little more flesh on the concept's bones, beyond the widely agreed notion that food sovereignty isn't what we have at the moment. Before introducing the papers that make up the rest of this section, it is worth looking at the etymology of the term 'food sovereignty'.

It is, admittedly, the first instinct of an uninspired scholar to head toward definitions. I have, far more frequently than I'd care to remember, plundered the Oxford English Dictionary for an authoritative statement of terms against which I then tilted. The problem with food sovereignty is, however, a reverse one. Food sovereignty is, if anything, over defined. There are so many versions of the concept, it is hard to know exactly what it means. The proliferation of overlapping definitions is, however, a symptom of food sovereignty itself, woven into the fabric of food sovereignty by necessity. Since food sovereignty is a call for peoples' rights to shape and craft food policy, it can hardly be surprising that this right is not used to explore and expand the covering political philosophy. The result of this exploration has sometimes muddled and masked some difficult contradictions within the notion of food sovereignty, and these are contradictions worth exploring.

Before going into those definitions and contradictions, though, it is worth contrasting food sovereignty with the concept against which it has traditionally been ranged – food security. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United

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Nations (FAO) has done a fine job of tracking the evolution of 'food security' (see FAO 2003), but it is useful to be reminded that the first official definition in 1974 of 'food security' was

> the availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices. (United Nations 1975 cited in FAO 2003)

The utility of the term in 1974 derived from its political economic context, in the midst of the Sahelian famine, at the zenith of demands for a New International Economic Order, and the peak of Third Worldist power, which had already succeeded in establishing the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) as a bastion of commodity price stabilisation (Rajagopal 2000). In such a context, when states were the sole authors of the definition, and when there was a technocratic faith in the ability of states to redistribute resources if the resources could only be made available, it made sense to talk about sufficient world supplies, and for the primary concern of the term's authors to lie in price stabilisation. Compare the language and priorities reflected in the early 1970s definition to this more recent one:

> Food security [is] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (FAO 2001 cited in FAO 2003)

The source for this definition was *The State of Food Insecurity 2001*, and herein lies some of the tale in the widening gyre of 'food security'. The definition in 2001 was altogether more sweeping. While it marked the success of activists and the NGO and policymaking community to both enlarge the community of authors of such statements to include non-state actors and to shift the discussion away from production issues toward broader social concerns, it was also an intervention in a very different world and series of debates. No longer was there a Non-Aligned Movement. Nor was there, at least in the world of state-level diplomacy, the possibility of an alternative to US-style neoliberal capitalism. It was an intervention at a time when neoliberal triumphalism could be seen in the break away from a commitment to the full meeting of human rights, to the watered down Millennium Development Goals, which provided, under the mantle of 'realistically achievable goals', a much more elastic time frame for the achievement of goals that were intended by the authors of such goals to be delivered with all due haste. The early 2000s was also a time when the institutions originally created to fight hunger, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, were looking increasingly irrelevant and cosmetic in the decision making around hunger policy. The expansion of the definition of food security in 2001, in other words, was both a cause and consequence of its increasing irrelevance as a guiding concept in the shaping of international food production and consumption priorities.

While harsh, this assessment is not unreasonable. The terms on which food is, or is not, made available by the international community has been taken away from institutions that might be oriented by concerns of 'food security', and given to the market, which is guided by an altogether different calculus. It is, then, possible to tell a coherent story of the evolution of 'food security' by using the term as a mirror of international political economy. But that story is not one in which capital is dominant – 'food security' moved from being simply about producing and distributing food, to a whole nexus of concerns around nutrition, social control,

and public health. In no small part, that broadening was a direct result of the leadership taken by Via Campesina to introduce at the World Food Summit in 1996 the idea of 'food sovereignty', a term that was very specifically intended as a foil to the prevailing notions of food security. The understanding of food security in 1996, as reflected in the declaration of the UN World Food Summit, was this:

> Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (FAO 1996 cited in FAO 2003)

Critically, the definition of food security avoided discussing the social control of the food system. As far as the terms of food security go, it is entirely possible for people to be food secure in prison or under a dictatorship. From a state perspective, the absence of specification about how food security should come about was diplomatic good sense – to introduce language that committed member states to particular internal political arrangements would have made the task of agreeing on a definition considerably more difficult. But having been at the whip end of structural adjustment and other policies that had had the effect of 'depeasantising' rural areas under the banner of increasing food security by increasing efficiency (Araghi 1995), Via Campesina's position was that a discussion of internal political arrangements was a necessary part of the substance of food security. Indeed, food sovereignty was declared a logical precondition for the existence of food security:

> Long-term food security depends on those who produce food and care for the natural environment. As the stewards of food producing resources we hold the following principles as the necessary foundation for achieving food security.... Food is a basic human right. This right can only be realized in a system where food sovereignty is guaranteed. *Food sovereignty is the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity*. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security. (Via Campesina 1996; emphasis added)

To raise questions about the context of food security, and therefore to pose questions about the relations of power that characterise decisions about how food security should be attained, was shrewd. The first exposition of food sovereignty recognised this *ab initio*, that the power politics of the food system needed very explicitly to feature in the discussion. In the context of an international meeting, at a time of unquestioned US hegemony, and given states' reluctance to discuss the means through which food security was to be achieved, it made sense to deploy language to which states had already committed themselves. Thus, the language of food sovereignty inserts itself into international discourse by making claims on rights and democracy, the cornerstones of liberal governance.

Big tents and rights-talk

The outlines of food sovereignty have been well rehearsed elsewhere (McMichael 2008, Rosset 2003, Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005). The common denominator in these accounts is the notion that the politics of food security is something that requires direct democratic participation, an end to the dumping of food and the wider use of food as a weapon of policy, comprehensive agrarian reform, and a respect for life, seed, and land. But as the exponents of food sovereignty, myself included, have begun to explore what this might mean, things have started to look increasingly odd.

The term has changed over time, just like 'food security', but while it is possible to write an account of the evolution of 'food security' with reference to changing international politics, it is much harder to make coherent the changes with 'food sovereignty'. From the core of the 1996 definition, italicised above, consider this one, written six years later:

> Food sovereignty is 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; and to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production. (Peoples Food Sovereignty Network 2002)

It is a cautious definition, talking about the right to define food policy, sensitive to the question of whether trade might belong in a world with food sovereignty. Perhaps most clearly, it is a definition written in committee. The diversity of opinions, positions, issues, and politics bursts through in the text – from the broad need for sustainable development objectives to the specific needs of fishing villages to manage aquatic resources. This is an important strength. Food sovereignty is a big tent, and the definition reflects that very well indeed.

The idea of a 'big tent' politics is that disparate groups can recognise themselves in the enunciation of a particular programme. But at the core of this programme needs to lay an internally consistent set of ideas.[1] It is a core that has never fully been made explicit, which might explain why in more recent definitions of food sovereignty, increasing levels of inconsistency can be found. Consider this statement, from Via Campesina's Nyéléni Declaration, reprinted in full later in this section:

> 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. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations. (Via Campesina 2007)

The contradictions in this are a little more fatal.[2] The phrase 'those who produce, distribute and consume food' refers, unfortunately, to everyone, including the

[1]See Michaels (2008), for instance, on the politics of 'big tent' diversity being perfectly compatible with the neoliberal project.
[2]In using this term, I refer to Mao's typology of contradiction (Mao 1967).

transnational corporations rejected in the second half of the sentence. There is also a glossing-over of one of the key distinctions in agrarian capitalism – that between farm owner and farmworker. To harmonise these two groups' interests is a far less tractable effort than the authors of the declaration might hope. Finally, but perhaps most contradictory, is the emphasis of 'new social relations' in the same paragraph as family farming, when the family is one of the oldest factories for patriarchy.

There are, of course, ways to smooth out some of these wrinkles – one might interpret 'those who produce, distribute and consume food' as natural rather than legal people. Corporations are not flesh and blood, and while they might be given equal rights as humans, there are growing calls for the privilege to be revoked (Bakan 2004). Even if one accepts this definitional footwork, we remain with the problem that even between human producers and consumers in the food system, power and control over the means of production is systematically unevenly distributed.

One way to balance these disparities is through the explicit introduction of rights-based language. To talk of a *right* to shape food policy is to contrast it with a *privilege*. The modern food system has been architected by a handful of privileged people. Food sovereignty insists that this is illegitimate, because the design of our social system is not the privilege of the few, but the right of all. By summoning this language, food sovereignty demands that such rights be respected, protected, and fulfilled, as evinced through twin obligations of conduct and result (Balakrishnan and Elson 2008). It offers a way of fencing off particular entitlements, by setting up systems of duty and obligation.

Hannah Arendt and the right to have rights

Hannah Arendt is perhaps the most appropriate theorist to bring to bear here, not least because in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, she makes an observation about rights strikingly similar to those motivating food sovereignty:

> ... people deprived of human rights ... are deprived, not of the right freedom, but of the right to action, not of the right to think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion. ... We become aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerge who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation. (Arendt 1967, 177)

Although referring to European Jewish refugees in the wake of World War II, her argument about how humans are rendered unable to effect change in the world around them by being excised from the state could also describe the contemporary context of food politics. Well, perhaps with the caveat that the political situation has *never* been favourable to those who produce food – its new global context merely compounds a millennia-old disenfranchisement.

But despite its apparent applicability, the language of rights does not come cheap, and it might not be well suited to the idea of food sovereignty. Central to the idea of rights is the idea that a state is ultimately responsible for guaranteeing the rights over its territory, because it is sovereign over it. As I have written elsewhere (Patel 2006), this understanding of the agency required for rights to proceed is something that Jeremy Bentham (2002, 330) has put rather directly: 'Natural rights is simple nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense, – nonsense

upon stilts'. The argument that Bentham makes is simple – rights cannot be summoned out of thin air. For rights to mean anything at all, they need a guarantor, responsible for implementing a concomitant system of duties and obligations. Bentham, in other words, was pointing out that the mere declaration of a right does not mean that it is met – in his far more elegant terms, 'wants are not means; hunger is not bread' (Bentham 2002, 330). I have also argued elsewhere that one of the most radical moments in the definition of food sovereignty is the layering of different jurisdictions over which rights can be exercised. When the call is for, variously, nations, peoples, regions, and states to craft their own agrarian policy, there is a concomitant call for spaces of sovereignty. Food sovereignty has its own geographies, one determined by specific histories and contours of resistance. To demand a space of food sovereignty is to demand specific arrangements to govern territory and space. At the end of the day, the power of rights-talk is that rights imply a particular burden on a specified entity – the state. In blowing apart the notion that the state has a paramount authority, by pointing to the multivalent hierarchies of power and control that exist within the world food system, food sovereignty paradoxically displaces one sovereign, but remains silent about the others. To talk of a right to anything, after all, summons up a number of preconditions which food sovereignty, because of its radical character, undermines.

That there might be, in breach of Westphalian notions of state sovereignty, a class of people who were not covered by the territory of the state was a concern that troubled Arendt. Hence her analytical (and personal) interest in refugees, people stripped of nation-state membership, and people who were thus denied the ability to call on a state government's power to deliver and protect their rights. Yet, as Bentham suggests, talk of rights that exist simply because one is *human*, as Arendt argues for, is talk without substance. For who will guarantee the rights, for example, of those without a country? Who, for instance, guarantees the human rights of Palestinians, a people with a nation but no state?

Building on Arendt's work, Seyla Benhabib offers one of the more thoughtful extensions of the idea of human rights, in the tradition of Habermas. Benhabib discusses the notion of a 'right to rights' helpfully (Benhabib 2002). Without rehearsing her arguments, she ultimately makes the case for a Kantian politics of cosmopolitan federalism and moral universalism (Benhabib 2004). It is useful to see that the ideas of multiple 'democratic attachments' (Benhabib's term) can be attached to a longer tradition of political theory. But while expanding the conceptual resources available to discuss the existence of multiple and competing sovereignties, the Kantian call for cosmopolitan federalism and moral universalism looks very different under Benhabib's interpretation than advocates of food sovereignty might wish. For Benhabib, a good if imperfect working example of the kind of multiple and overlapping juridical sovereignties that are necessary to deal with the new political conjuncture is the European Union (Benhabib 2005). Within the EU, a citizen can appeal to government at municipal, regional, national, and Europe-wide levels, with each successive level trumping the ones below it. And, indeed, this looks like a very un-Westphalian system of rights provision. The cosmopolitan federalism element, with overlapping geographies over which one might claim rights, looks familiar in the definitions of food sovereignty.

But there is a problem. The European Union, despite its multi-faceted sovereignties, is not a place characterised by food sovereignty. Although, compared

with the United States, it offers comparatively better prospects for small-scale farmers, its Common Agricultural Policy is the subject of scathing critique from within Europe by members of Via Campesina. Such subsidies that do reach small scale farmers are crumbs from the table of a larger division of spoils between agribusinesses, and the fact that such crumbs are more plentiful in the EU than elsewhere does not, according to La Via Campesina, signal a democratic or accountable system. This is clearest in looking at the EU's Economic Partnership Arrangements, which violate the basic terms of food sovereignty in the Global South. This suggests that it is insufficient to consider only the structures that might guarantee the rights that constitute food sovereignty – it is also vital to consider the substantive policies, process, and politics that go to make up food sovereignty. In other words, a simple appeal to rights-talk cannot avoid tough questions around the substance and priority of those rights. In other words, while food sovereignty might be achieved through cosmopolitan federalism, if we are to understand what it looks like, we will need also to look at the second part of Benhabib's dyad – to moral universalism. Food sovereignty's multiple geographies have, despite their variety, a few core principles – and they are ones that derive from the politics through which Via Campesina was forged.

The trace of partial universality in Via Campesina

The history of Via Campesina has been well documented elsewhere (Desmarais 2007), but one of the central features that characterises the organisation is the in-principle absence of a policy-making secretariat. Integral to the functioning of Via Campesina is the absence of a sovereign authority dictating what any member organisation or country can do. This suspicion of policies imposed from above is unsurprising within Via Campesina, an organisation forged in resistance to autocratic and unaccountable policy making, largely carried out by the World Bank together with local elites. Yet no organisation can be a part of Via Campesina without subscribing to the organisation's principles. These principles provide the preconditions for participation in Via Campesina's politics, and it is not surprising that the principles should find their analogue in the definition of food sovereignty. Another return to the definitions shows that there are a number of preconditions before food sovereignty can be achieved. Bear in mind, of course, that food sovereignty itself is a precondition for food security. Yet before any of this can be attained, there are a number of non-negotiable elements, preconditions, if you will, for the preconditions for food security to exist.

The Nyéléni Declaration suggests that there are a range of conditions that are necessary for food sovereignty to obtain, such as a living wage, tenure security and security of housing, cultural rights, and an end to the dumping of goods below the cost of production, disaster capitalism (Klein 2007), colonialism, imperialism, and Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), in the service of a future where, among other things, 'agrarian reform revitalises inter-dependence between consumers and producers' (Via Campesina 2007). Specifically, these changes include a commitment to women's rights, not merely over property but over a full spectrum of social, physical and economic goods.

It is here, I suggest, that we can use a feminist analysis to open a discussion around food sovereignty, specifically around the prioritisation of rights. Under neoliberalism, as Monsalve evocatively suggests (2006, 187), women's rights have become a Trojan Horse; the project of 'giving rights to women' has been conscripted

to spread a particular economic agenda founded on the primacy of *individual private property* rights. Other rights, such as those to education, healthcare, social assistance, and public investment derive, if at all, as rights secondary to individual private property. While women's rights to property are unarguably important, the attainment of these rights cannot be understood as a sufficient means to 'level the playing field for women' – in a country with equal rights to property for all, the fact that some have more resources than others, and therefore are able to command more property than others, reflects underlying, and persistent, inequalities in power that make the ability to trade property much less substantive than its neoliberal promoters would argue. This is no mere armchair theorising on my part. These conclusions were reached independently by members of Via Campesina at their fifth international conference in Maputo in 2008, at which a new slogan emerged: 'food sovereignty is about an end to violence against women'.

This base inequality in power is one that food sovereignty, sometimes explicitly, seeks to address. And it is here, in challenging deep inequalities of power, that I argue we see the core of food sovereignty. There is, at the heart of food sovereignty, a radical egalitarianism in the call for a multi-faceted series of 'democratic attachments'. Claims around food sovereignty address the need for social change such that the capacity to shape food policy can be exercised at all appropriate levels. To make those rights substantive requires more than a sophisticated series of juridical sovereignties. To make the right to shape food policy meaningful is to require that *everyone* be able substantively to engage with those policies. But the prerequisites for this are a society in which the equality-distorting effects of sexism, patriarchy, racism, and class power have been eradicated. Activities that instantiate this kind of radical 'moral universalism' are the necessary precursor to the formal 'cosmopolitan federalism' that the language of rights summons. And it is by these activities that we shall know food sovereignty.

Conclusion

The canvas on which inequalities of power need to be tackled is vast. It might be argued that in taking this aggressively egalitarian view, I have opened up the project of food sovereignty so wide that it becomes everything and nothing. In my defence, I would like to call on the Tanzanian political theorist, lawyer, and activist, Issa Shivji. In *Not Yet Democracy* (1998), his brilliant analysis of land reform in Tanzania, he addresses the question of what it will take for Tanzania to become a fully functioning democracy. He sees land reform as one of the central issues, and argues forcefully that for the franchise to be meaningful, resources need to be distributed as equally as the right to vote. In a poignant introduction to the book, he talks about how his daughters will grow up in a country that contains only the most cosmetic features of democracy, and that their ability to be full and active citizens will be circumscribed, because of the government's refusal to address the tough questions of resource distribution. Shivji's point is one that applies to the logic of food sovereignty, because both he and food sovereignty advocates are concerned, at the end of the day, with democracy. Egalitarianism, then, is not something that happens as a consequence of the politics of food sovereignty. It is a prerequisite to have the democratic conversation about food policy in the first place.

In taking this line, it looks like I am violating the first rule of food sovereignty. The genesis of the concept was designed precisely to prevent the kind

of pinning-down of interpretation that I attempt in this essay. But my interpretation does not pre-empt others, nor does it set in stone a particular political programme. In making my interpretation, I am merely identifying and making explicit some of the commitments that are already implicit in the definition of food sovereignty. If we talk about food sovereignty, we talk about rights, and if we do that, we must talk about ways to ensure that those rights are met, across a range of geographies, by everyone, in substantive and meaningful ways. In taking this line, I am clear that I come down on one side of a broader series of debates on the tension between individual and collective human rights, arguing that in cases where group rights threaten individual ones, individual ones ought to trump.

This is not likely to be an interpretation that goes down agreeably among all stakeholders. In taking this egalitarianism seriously, several important social relations need to be addressed. Via Campesina has already identified the home as one such locus of social relations; what else can it mean when food sovereignty calls for women's rights to be respected than that the patriarchal traditions that characterise every household and every culture must, without exception, undergo transformation. The relations between farmers and farmworkers, too, are ones that are characterised by structural inequalities in power. Quite how Via Campesina members address this is not my place to say, and that is as well, because I am very far from sure about the answer. But the fact that the question needs to be addressed is, to my mind, clear. Although the individual democratic movements within Via Campesina come at these issues from different starting points, traditions, and politics, it seems to me that the questions about power, complicity, and the profundity of a commitment to egalitarianism are ones that, by dint of their commitment to food sovereignty, the movements will ultimately have to address.

It is a challenge, as the papers in this special Grassroots Voices section demonstrate, that many have already taken up. To begin the discussion, we reproduce the Nyéléni Declaration on Food Sovereignty, which is followed by Hannah Wittman's interview with Paul Nicholson, one of the leading thinkers in Via Campesina. In this dialogue, Nicholson explains the philosophy of food sovereignty, strongly emphasising its democratic, procedural character. Food sovereignty is not something that can be forged by one person alone, nor, as Nicholson notes, can it be brought about exclusively by peasants, particularly in contexts where peasants form the political and social minority. This is explored further by Christina Schiavoni's account both of the Nyéléni Forum and the applications of food sovereignty not in rural Africa, but in urban New York City. Asking activists and workers in a range of community gardens about food sovereignty, she points to the rich potential that food sovereignty has for urban contexts in the Global North. Marcia Ishii-Eiteman adds further nuance and scope to food sovereignty by showing how a group of natural and social scientists who were tasked with tackling the future of global agriculture arrived at conclusions strikingly similar to those articulated by the peasants at the Nyéléni Forum. In recognising the ecological costs of industrial farming and the need for locally flexible policy in order to tackle future food crises, the International Agricultural Assessment of Knowledge, Science, and Technology for Development offers a rich and valuable complement to the political foundations of food sovereignty built by peasant groups. Finally, Rodgers Msachi, Laifolo Dakishoni, and Rachel Bezner Kerr present a concrete case study of moves toward food sovereignty in Malawi. The report of their experiences in developing the Soils, Food, and Healthy Communities project in northern Malawi shows the extent to

which food sovereignty is simultaneously about farming technology, democratic policymaking, public health, the environment, and gender, but also how the *process* of increasing food sovereignty is integral to its achievement. Together, these papers offer practical wisdom and analysis from activists in North America, Europe, and Africa, reminding us of the past contributions to justice and food sovereignty, as well as of the contributions that are yet to come, from the world's most organic intellectuals.

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Nyéléni Declaration on Food Sovereignty
27 February 2007, Nyéléni Village, Sélingué, Mali

Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty, Nyéléni 2007

We, more than 500 representatives from more than 80 countries, of organizations of peasants/family farmers, artisanal fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, landless peoples, rural workers, migrants, pastoralists, forest communities, women, youth, consumers and environmental and urban movements have gathered together in the village of Nyéléni in Sélingué, Mali to strengthen a global movement for food sovereignty. We are doing this, brick by brick, as we live here in huts constructed by hand in the local tradition, and eat food that is produced and prepared by the Sélingué community. We give our collective endeavor the name 'Nyéléni' as a tribute to and inspiration from a legendary Malian peasant woman who farmed and fed her peoples well.

Most of us are food producers and are ready, able and willing to feed all the world's peoples. Our heritage as food producers is critical to the future of humanity. This is specially so in the case of women and indigenous peoples who are historical creators of knowledge about food and agriculture and are devalued. But this heritage and our capacities to produce healthy, good and abundant food are being threatened and undermined by neo-liberalism and global capitalism. Food sovereignty gives us the hope and power to preserve, recover and build on our food producing knowledge and capacity. 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. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries

systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal – fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.

In Nyéléni, through numerous debates and interactions, we are deepening our collective understanding of food sovereignty and learning about the realities of the struggles of our respective movements to retain autonomy and regain our powers. We now understand better the tools we need to build our movement and advance our collective vision.

What are we fighting for?

A world where . . .

. . . all peoples, nations and states are able to determine their own food producing systems and policies that provide every one of us with good quality, adequate, affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food;
. . . there is recognition and respect of women's roles and rights in food production, and representation of women in all decision making bodies;
. . . all peoples in each of our countries are able to live with dignity, earn a living wage for their labour and have the opportunity to remain in their homes, if they so choose;
. . . food sovereignty is considered a basic human right, recognised and implemented by communities, peoples, states and international bodies;
. . . we are able to conserve and rehabilitate rural environments, fish populations, landscapes and food traditions based on ecologically sustainable management of land, soils, water, seas, seeds, livestock and all other biodiversity;
. . . we value, recognize and respect our diversity of traditional knowledge, food, language and culture, and the way we organise and express ourselves;
. . . there is genuine and integral agrarian reform that guarantees peasants full rights to land, defends and recovers the territories of indigenous peoples, ensures fishing communities' access and control over their fishing areas and eco-systems, honours access and control by pastoral communities over pastoral lands and migratory routes, assures decent jobs with fair remuneration and labour rights for all, and a future for young people in the countryside; where agrarian reform revitalises interdependence between producers and consumers, ensures community survival, social and economic justice, ecological sustainability, and respect for local autonomy and governance with equal rights for women and men . . . where agrarian reform guarantees rights to territory and self-determination for our peoples;
. . . we share our lands and territories peacefully and fairly among our peoples, be we peasants, indigenous peoples, artisanal fishers, pastoralists, or others;
. . . in the case of natural and human-created disasters and conflict-recovery situations, food sovereignty acts as a form of 'insurance' that strengthens local

> recovery efforts and mitigates negative impacts . . . where we remember that communities affected by disasters are not helpless, and where strong local organization for self-help is the key to recovery;
> . . . peoples' power to make decisions about their material, natural and spiritual heritage are defended;
> . . . all peoples have the right to defend their territories from the actions of transnational corporations;

What are we fighting against?

Imperialism, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism and patriarchy, and all systems that impoverish life, resources and eco-systems, and the agents that promote the above such as international financial institutions, the World Trade Organization, free trade agreements, transnational corporations, and governments that are antagonistic to their peoples;

The dumping of food at prices below the cost of production in the global economy;

The domination of our food and food producing systems by corporations that place profits before people, health and the environment;

Technologies and practices that undercut our future food producing capacities, damage the environment and put our health at risk. These include transgenic crops and animals, terminator technology, industrial aquaculture and destructive fishing practices, the so-called White Revolution of industrial dairy practices, the so-called 'old' and 'new' Green Revolutions, and the 'Green Deserts' of industrial bio-fuel monocultures and other plantations;

The privatisation and commodification of food, basic and public services, knowledge, land, water, seeds, livestock and our natural heritage;

Development projects/models and extractive industries that displace people and destroy our environments and natural heritage;

Wars, conflicts, occupations, economic blockades, famines, forced displacement of peoples and confiscation of their lands, and all forces and governments that cause and support these;

Post disaster and conflict reconstruction programmes that destroy our environments and capacities;

The criminalization of all those who struggle to protect and defend our rights;

Food aid that disguises dumping, introduces GMOs into local environments and food systems and creates new colonialism patterns;

The internationalisation and globalisation of paternalistic and patriarchal values, that marginalise women, and diverse agricultural, indigenous, pastoral and fisher communities around the world.

What can and will we do about it?

Just as we are working with the local community in Sélingué to create a meeting space at Nyéléni, we are committed to building our collective movement for food sovereignty by forging alliances, supporting each others' struggles and extending our solidarity, strengths, and creativity to peoples all over the world who are committed to food sovereignty. Every struggle, in any part of the world for food sovereignty, is our struggle. We have arrived at a number of collective actions to share our vision of food sovereignty with all peoples of this world, which are elaborated in our synthesis document. We will implement these actions in our respective local areas and regions, in our own movements and jointly in solidarity with other movements. We will share our vision and action agenda for food sovereignty with others who are not able to be with us here in Nyéléni so that the spirit of Nyéléni permeates across the world and becomes a powerful force to make food sovereignty a reality for peoples all over the world.

Finally, we give our unconditional and unwavering support to the peasant movements of Mali and ROPPA in their demands that food sovereignty become a reality in Mali and by extension in all of Africa.

Now is the time for food sovereignty!

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Interview: Paul Nicholson, La Vía Campesina

Hannah Wittman

Paul Nicholson, 61, a former dairy farmer from the village of Ispastan in the coastal Bizkaia province of the Basque Country, is one of the founding members of the international peasant coalition La Vía Campesina. He served on its International Coordinating Committee from 1993 to 2008 as the representative of the European Farmers Coordination (CPE). From 1993 to 1996, the CPE acted as the first administrative seat of La Vía Campesina. Nicholson is also a member of the Euskal Herriko Nekazarien Elkartasuna (EHNE), an agricultural union of farmers and ranchers in the Basque country. With 14 other families, Paul is now part of an autonomous agricultural food processing cooperative specialising in cider, jams, and fruit and vegetable preserves. As a small dairy farmer for over 20 years, Paul worked with a small cooperative selling milk directly to a network of consumers. Political and food activism currently play a major role in Paul's family and professional life. His wife, a social worker, is currently involved in organising a community-supported agriculture network in their community, while his two daughters are involved in local social movements. I spoke to Paul Nicholson in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, where he had just participated in an international workshop on the Theory and Praxis of Food Sovereignty. We discussed the history of peasant organising in Europe, modern conceptions of the

peasantry, and the current struggle for food sovereignty and an international Charter for Peasants Rights.[3]

HW: Tell me about peasant organising in the Basque country.
PN: It came out of the social and democratic struggles against the Franco regime, leading towards an autonomous and independent social organisation. ENHE was legalised at the end of the 1970s, and today has 6500 members. It's a principal organisation in the Basque Country. In the Basque Country, just four percent of the population is campesino. We are re-structuring our livelihood strategies to survive within the framework of a non-competitive, non-liberal agrarian political economy. We try to mobilise and bring together a campesino voice in the Basque Country and to develop proposals, particularly in two areas. One has to do with alliances within the local market, where we work on consumer–producer relationships leading to a different agricultural model. Secondly, we defend peasant agriculture. We are mostly small farmers, and we have a cultural role to play in the country, which gives us a dimension beyond simply the economic. So, we struggle in our relationship to the Basque and provincial governments, who think about agriculture solely in terms of competitiveness. It's a struggle, in fact, between an industrial model of agriculture and a peasant model.

HW: How did you, and EHNE, get involved in the international peasant movement?
PN: For more than 15 years, EHNE has understood the importance of politics at the international level, of how neoliberal policies and globalisation have affected family agriculture. Together with other organisations in Europe, we saw the necessity, as a maximum priority, of helping to consolidate the campesino voice at the national level, as well as in Europe, and at the international level. We created a European articulation with a more global vision, in which we had to defend our interests and values within the European framework. We developed a political campaign based on the principles of solidarity for a peasant model of agriculture. And with that we confronted the agro-export model of the European Union. We began to have dialogues with many organisations at the international level, and little by little, we brought together organisations from other continents to form what is now La Vía Campesina. The first steps were very simple. First was the desire to be a voice and to represent the campesino reality in a context where NGOs had taken over that voice. We also wanted to be the protagonists of our own present condition and responsible for our own future, to be our own people, responsible for our own reality. We articulated a horizontal movement that would take political action. For example, we challenged the WTO Agreement on Agriculture from the beginning, and we directly confronted neoliberalism. Little by little, we have been constructing a movement that in terms of its organisation has continued to be autonomous, independent, and horizontal. It's a movement from below.

The modern peasantry

HW: At the IV International Conference of La Vía Campesina in Brazil, you discussed the need to work towards the defense of a peasant culture, and as you also said, La Vía Campesina is a movement of diverse cultures. What is your vision of a peasant identity

[3]The following is translated from Spanish by HW.

or culture, in terms of unity in diversity? What can we say about a modern peasant culture?
PN: One of the principal characteristics of La Vía Campesina is its social and cultural cohesion, within a comprehension of diversity. It is not a question of seeking out differences in order to synthesise or explain them. It is that the word 'campesino' has a clear meaning in the Latin American context and the word 'peasant' has a reality in the context of India, for example, that it doesn't have in England or the United States or Canada. We call our movement La Vía Campesina, understanding that it is a *process* of peasant culture, a peasant 'way'. The debate isn't in the word 'farmer' or 'peasant'. The debate is much more about the process of cohesion, and we have achieved this through what we call the 'mística', which is an oral expression of our cultural and social reality. It's amazing how we have achieved a sensibility of these diverse cultures, in a common base. This common base is that we understand that the crisis of rural family agriculture is the same all over the world. The causes are the same, whether it be in Wisconsin or São Paulo. The reality is the same, and the same neoliberal, or more plainly, capitalist policies have caused this crisis. So, in the face of this reality, we say that we are globalising the struggle and globalising hope. This is a reality that is internally very visible within La Vía Campesina. Anybody can speak to this in the name of La Vía Campesina and represent a farmer in Castilla and a landless campesino in Bolivia at the same time.

HW: Then it is the current political/economic conjuncture that is defining a modern concept of the peasantry, as opposed to any kind of ethnic or national characteristic.
PN: Exactly. It is very clear that within La Vía Campesina, we have a principle objective of cohesion that allows us to struggle against agricultural models. We understand that we need to transform society in order to achieve social, economic, and cultural conditions that are adequate for the peasantry, from a bottom-up perspective.

A campaign for peasant rights

HW: La Vía Campesina is working on a campaign advocating a UN Convention for Peasants' Rights. Tell us about this campaign.
PN: We see the need for a Charter or Convention on Peasants' Rights that identifies particular peasants' rights as having universal value for peasants from the North and South. This would be a universal expression of rights, in the same manner as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There is a convention on women's rights, one for children, for indigenous peoples. It should be the same for peasants because not only should these rights be upheld all over the world, but they also are held in a different way in each place. And here, individual rights are placed, in their neoliberal conception, before collective, social, economic, and cultural rights.

La Vía Campesina has launched a convention on peasants' rights that is based on the concept of peoples' food sovereignty and on other principle points that we want to be approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations. We have support, within the United Nations, from people like Jean Zeigler, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. This convention would specify the rights

associated with food sovereignty and would specify cultural, collective, and individual rights, including the role and rights of women. It is a convention that we think farmers and fishers, as comprising over half the planet's inhabitants, need to have. It is also a mobilisation strategy. It is not simply beginning a very complicated administrative process in the United Nations; it is a process, too, to identify our rights and to give them meaning for national organisations in their negotiations and in their relationship with power. We want to legitimise, in a very visible way, what we are talking about. What rights? The right to land, the right to seeds, to water, to biodiversity, for a relation to food in productive models. It is a proposal for struggle.

HW: The draft convention mentions individual rights and collective rights. How does La Vía Campesina navigate the relationship between individual and collective rights, particularly around things like property, land, seeds, and material goods?
PN: We have certainly defended the concept of 'patrimony of humanity' when it comes to seeds, water, and for land, also. We come from a culture where traditional agrarian tenure has been based on the principle of 'land for those who work it'. This is also a position where we incorporate indigenous visions of territoriality, in terms of use and management of natural resources. And, yes, we hold collective rights above an individual ownership model for land. We position ourselves against patents. We consider that seeds are patrimony at the service of humanity, and we believe that you can't patent life, and that you shouldn't patent life. Biodiversity is also patrimony of the people, at the service of humanity. For land, for example, there is a collective right and this is not only for campesinos and campesinas. It is a usufruct right. We have a common good, and it must be protected and defended. The use of the land for food production must have priority. But urban society also has the right to have houses. One thing is the right to collective use and management of territory, and another thing is to have the right to use a particular piece of land.

HW: So individual rights in this framework are very much embedded in and protected by collective rights. In terms of principal strategies for strengthening peasant rights, where do you see peasants' rights being enforced, and at what level would this take place? How would this idea be carried out in practice?
PN: The Convention on Peasant Rights would be a universal charter, but really it is a strategic vision for social mobilisation around these rights. It is clear that a formal declaration won't resolve anything. But this recognition can give us instruments to use in our dialogue with governments. It can also be a reference at the international level, but it is more than that. It is a re-assertion of our mobilisations, and part of a global strategy – at the local level it's certainly not the only strategy.

Food sovereignty

HW: You have talked about food sovereignty as both a goal and a process. What are some of the most important elements of that process?
PN: The proposal for food sovereignty is the principal alternative to the neoliberal model. Clearly this is not going to happen overnight. It is a process of accumulation of forces and realities coming together from the citizens of the entire planet. Food sovereignty is not just resistances, as there are thousands of resistances, but also proposals that come from social movements, and not just

peasant movements. From environmental movements, among others, come many initiatives that develop proposals of recuperation, of rights, of policies. This is also an autonomous and independent process. There is no central committee, and food sovereignty is not the patrimony of any particular organisation. It's not La Vía Campesina's project, or even just a peasants' project. It is a proposal, based on principles of struggle and objectives, coming from social movements, not from institutions or organisations. It is being constructed from the local level, and we're going to continue accumulating strength towards a national force and an international expression. Here, the concept of alliances has to be reconsidered. Many organisations and movements have worked on new forms of strategic alliances in the last ten years. What's clear now for La Vía Campesina is that we must differentiate between spaces of reflection and debate, and spaces of organic articulation of these strategies.

HW: And are some of these alliances outside of the peasant movement?
PN: Of course. We were talking about one of the spaces, for example, around the World Social Forums, where many disparate movements have gone. Given the definition and nature of this space, it is difficult to build very concrete strategies. The Forums remain as spaces of reflection and for elaboration of very general proposals. But we must continue building much more organic and concrete alliances. This is what happened in the process of Nyéléni [2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty in Mali], where organisations and movements from all over the world and from different sectors and positions built a process of dialogue among the different, and sometimes antagonistic, parties, to build a defined strategy for food sovereignty. Our positioning is that allied platforms for building food sovereignty must be developed now from the local level, building new proposals and resisting those points of aggression that are the most acute in each place, in each region, in order to expand the international alliance. It is not a peasant alliance, we're actually talking about sharing strategies and objectives. This means that each one must take on the objectives of the rest. The peasant movement has to take on the basic demands for fisher food sovereignty by fisher folk, and for workers as well as for women, and environmentalists. It is a dialogue that isn't easy because, without doubt, we carry with us a culture of elaborating our demands within certain sectors, without a more global vision. It can be conflictual. Dialogue between consumers and farmers isn't always easy, but at least there is a dialogue.

There is another important element that is very visible now. This is the combination of the energy crisis, the food crisis, the crisis of climate change, the financial crisis. This isn't any kind of partial crisis, but rather a crisis of the entire economic and social model. We have to propose a social transformation. It is within this framework that food sovereignty has relevance. But the processes in each continent, in each country, are very different. The objective is not to homogenise these processes. It is clear that the velocity and temporality in each region are very different. But there are regions and countries in the world where institutions are taking on the necessity of food sovereignty and are asking for peasant support for how to apply policies of food sovereignty. This is very new. The co-relation of forces is changing and our discourse has increasing capacity every day. There are some countries where this co-relation of forces is making it possible, like in Bolivia, with Evo Morales, or Nepal, or Ecuador. In Ecuador, La Vía Campesina has participated in the elaboration of the new constitution.

HW: There is a sense in some policy circles that for food sovereignty to occur on a regional scale or larger, small family farmer production will have to be scaled up in order to feed urban populations currently living on imports. This scaling up could involve getting more farmers on the land through land reform, which is the model advocated by La Vía Campesina, or, following the neoliberal prescription, consolidating smaller farms into larger enterprises. How could a scaled-up peasant agriculture avoid becoming yet another corporate agriculture? What kind of scaling-up would be appropriate for a food sovereignty model?

PN: When it is said that small scale family agriculture feeds the world, this is true. There is a figure that says that 10 percent of the world food production is for export. That is to say, 90 percent of food is produced and consumed domestically. In the Northern hemisphere, there is a social perception that the large food chains feed society, and that is not the case. It is the small-scale farmers that actually have control of the food system, of information, and of food culture. Facing this, in the entire world but especially in the Northern hemisphere of US, Canada, Europe, impressive associations of critical consumers and producers are being developed. In France, for example, there are 3000 producer-consumer associations. And in Canada and the United States, where there is a common problem of reduced numbers of farmers, there is an enormous demand from citizens to have control over what they eat, how it is produced, who produces it. They are demanding a new type, a new model of farmer, one that isn't trained in a productivist model.

This is a big problem, to construct, or identify, the new farmers. This means a new and distinct kind of training and education, and also signifies that citizen movements must participate not only in sharing information, but also in the struggle for land to facilitate young people, young men and women entering directly into the sector. But in many cases, we are starting from concrete situations where the farmers who are more tied to corporations have enormous difficulties in understanding their social role. This is a reality. But I believe that one of the effects of these [producer–consumer] associations is to support the new farmers, who are increasingly coming from urban areas. In Europe, for example, many farming men and women now make a living based on the local market. They have a much better chance of survival than those farmers who depend on the transnationals for their inputs and sales. This is a very clear reality. To overcome this, urban social movements must come together with peasant movements to develop a new type of agriculture and training that dignifies the profession, in order to excite young people.

HW: What role could theory, or for that matter ideology, possibly play in the construction of food sovereignty?

PN: We are working based on the present situation and at the same time we are analysing what has happened in reality and proposing alternatives. These alternatives are being constructed all over the world. This for me is extraordinary because our steps have been, in many cases, intuitive. They have been the result of much debate, and we are doing many things for the first time, in new and unique ways.

We are in a unique process and a period of construction that cannot be replicated. We are just starting to have a base of real experiences that is enough to conduct a scientific investigation of what has been happening and where we are. The future will depend on the very dynamics of today's social movements, in their ability

to function in an autonomous and independent manner. But it is necessary that we have this research because we are proceeding extremely rapidly and unpredictably. We have to move forward making sure that our decisions and declarations are made well. This requires long debates and reflection because decisions have to be made deliberately. Consensus is fundamental, and short-term opportunities, for us, normally aren't useful. We have a long-term vision and this means that our declarations and principles require lots of discussion. For this reason, the internal process within La Vía Campesina is very important. It has to be based on debate and bringing together our strengths. We have to have strength and cohesion.

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The global struggle for food sovereignty: from Nyéléni to New York

Christina Schiavoni

In the spring of 2008, when the food crisis, long in the making, burst into public light, agribusinesses and other corporate interests were quick to respond. Practically licking their chops, they offered up a host of prescriptions to feed the hungry – more genetically modified crops, more biofuel crops, more 'free' trade. The mainstream media regurgitated these responses to the public, upholding the message that hunger could be solved through a one-size-fits-all approach of boosted agricultural production and quick market fixes.

What the media failed to mention, however, was a very different sort of response arising from the trenches – and from the fields and waterways – a united call for food sovereignty coming from the millions of people actually responsible for feeding the world, represented by the international peasants' movement La Vía Campesina and its allies. Food sovereignty, briefly put, is the right of people to determine their own food and agricultural policies.[4] It involves restoring control over food access and food production from large corporations and international financial institutions back to individual nations/tribes/peoples – and ultimately to those who produce the food and those who eat it. This concept flies in the face of what Vía Campesina calls the 'failure as usual' approach trumpeted by the media and agribusinesses, in that it puts those most affected by food and agricultural policies at the center of decision-making. And contrary to the one-size-fits-all mentality, food sovereignty, by its very definition, is locally adaptable.

So how does this work? How can a concept unify millions of people around the world while being versatile enough to adapt to vastly different cultures and

[4]For a full definition of food sovereignty, as defined by the participants of the Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty, see http://viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=282&Itemid=38.

conditions? To explore this question, we begin in Sélingué, Mali, where the first-ever global forum on food sovereignty took place in February of 2007, setting a common framework and a collective vision for a growing global movement. We will then make our way to New York City to see how food sovereignty is at play at the local level in a place as different as it is possible to imagine from Sélingué.

It takes a (global) village...

The Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty was named for a legendary thirteenth century Malian peasant woman who lived under the curse of being an only child and who fought patriarchy by beating men at their own agricultural game, becoming a renowned farmer and cultivator, and putting boastful male farmers to shame. The forum named after her was no less legendary, hosting a unique convergence of people and cultures, and movements – La Vía Campesina, the World March of Women, the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers, Friends of the Earth International, and more. The situating of this convergence in Mali, an African country which in many ways exemplifies the hopes and challenges of the food sovereignty movement, was far from accidental. Nor was it an accident that the forum was held not in an airless convention center, but in the countryside – in a special village literally built, earthen brick by earthen brick, by the hands of peasants.

Against this backdrop, over 500 social movement leaders from nearly 100 countries gathered in Sélingué, Mali. They came together across continents, cultures, and language, united by a common sense of urgency, as well as a solidarity and kinship that comes only from shared struggle. The energy at Nyéléni was palpable, with djembe drumming pulsing through the air, interspersed with fragments of conversations in French, English, Spanish, and the local Bambara, among many other languages. Multicolored flags of farmers' organisations and other movements fluttered from every available surface. The people were equally colourful and vibrant, most wearing the traditional dress of their respective homelands – saris, turbans, wraps, and beads.

Many stories, one struggle

Each person came with a story. There were the Palestinian farmers who were organising their communities and distributing baskets of local food to refugees, even as a wall sliced through their farms and cut off their already limited water sources. There were the Korean farmers who had led a successful local food campaign, only to find their efforts undercut by WTO trade rules, and who were now aligning themselves with consumer movements to amplify their voices. There were the women fisherfolk from Thailand who had formed their own cooperative to protect themselves against high interest rates, sell products into the local market, and fight against bad government policies. There was the young Zapotec man from Mexico who said, 'When we talk about food sovereignty, we must talk about *people*. The indigenous want to be recognized as people with rights.' There was the farmer from Iraq who spoke of the devastating impacts of war. There was the woman pastoralist from Niger who asserted that, 'Africa wants to feed itself, above all, from its own cuisine'. These stories and countless others painted a picture of survival and resistance against all odds.

These stories also revealed the amazing diversity of people present at Nyéléni and spoke to the importance of inclusion within the movement for food sovereignty. This was not just inclusion in a symbolic sense, but in recognition of the critical roles that women, indigenous peoples, and other marginalised groups play in producing food, saving seeds, preserving biodiversity, and ensuring the survival of future generations. Those most excluded and devalued by the predominant global food system are the celebrated heroes, the Nyélénis, of the food sovereignty movement. The importance of diversity and inclusion as prerequisites for food sovereignty was captured by these words on a banner hanging in the main meeting area:

- For an agriculture with peasants
- For fishing with fisherfolk
- For livestock with pastoralists
- For territories with indigenous people
- For wholesome food for all consumers
- For labor with workers' rights
- For a future with youth in the countryside
- For food sovereignty with women
- For a healthy environment for all

Building a movement

As one of the organisers said on the opening day of the forum, 'We're building a movement here and now. This is an organic process with no corporate sponsorship'. Participants took these words to heart as they worked, over the course of five days, by sector (e.g., farmers/peasants, fisherfolk, pastoralists, workers and migrants), as well as by thematic group (e.g., local markets and international trade, access and control over resources, local knowledge and technology) and, towards the end, by region, to chart a way forward as a more unified movement. Through a highly democratic process, they arrived at a comprehensive draft of a food sovereignty declaration and an action agenda to serve as a framework and a springboard for both immediate and longer-term actions. In powerful terms, the declaration laid out what the movement is fighting for, what it is fighting against, and what it can and must do. This final component, which addressed collective actions to achieve food sovereignty, was further expanded upon in the accompanying action agenda.[5]

One particularly meaningful line of the declaration states that 'any struggle for food sovereignty in any part of the world is our struggle'. The forum recognised the importance of solidarity and that the ambitious goals laid forth will only be achieved through supporting each other's struggles. For instance, if the food sovereignty movement is to take a stand against the World Trade Organization and its commoditisation of agriculture, then so too must the movement take a stand against bilateral free trade agreements which pose the same threats (e.g., the US-Korea and US-Peru free trade agreements, which were under negotiation at the time). If the movement is to reject factory farming, the planting of transgenic crops, and the patenting of life forms, then it must lend its solidarity and assistance to

[5]The Declaration is reprinted earlier in this Grassroots Voices section.

communities who are struggling directly against these and any other forms of corporate domination. There was a common understanding that the planting of transgenic seeds in one village has repercussions far beyond where those seeds have been planted. Everyone committed to add their numbers, voices, and strength to each other's struggles, recognising that those struggles are part of their own.

Another output of Nyéléni was the development of these six guiding principles of food sovereignty:

- Focuses on food for people
- Values food providers
- Localises food systems
- Puts control locally
- Builds knowledge and skills
- Works with nature

These guiding principles, along with the declaration and other outputs of Nyéléni, provided necessary cohesion for the food sovereignty movement, while leaving ample room for interpretation and local adaptation. One point that was reinforced throughout the forum is that while it is critical to have a common framework, there is no single path or prescription for achieving food sovereignty. It is the task of individual regions, nations, and communities to determine what food sovereignty means to them based on their own unique set of circumstances. As one participant pointed out, while it is important to define food sovereignty in a way that is understandable to the public, the most powerful way of communicating the message of food sovereignty is by *doing* – for instance, by engaging citizens directly in food system transformation.

To this end, the final sessions of Nyéléni consisted of regional meetings in which participants worked to develop specific actions to take back home. Before the closing, everyone came together as a whole to share regional priorities, which ranged from a campaign to protect traditional wheat varieties in western and central Asia; to days of action against the North American Free Trade Agreement; to a call for a moratorium on Economic Partnership Agreements in Africa; to direct actions against GMOs and corporate agriculture in south Asia; to campaigns against agrofuels (the preferred term for industrial-scale biofuels) and much, much more. Participants appreciated getting a sense of what others were planning in order to be better prepared to support one another's actions moving forward.

Bringing it home

While Nyéléni was an accomplishment in and of itself, there was general agreement there that the bulk of the work – the real organising, education, public outreach, and follow-through on the action agenda – remained to be done at the regional level. Here in the United States, the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) and the Border Agricultural Workers Project, both members of La Vía Campesina and present at Nyéléni, have been leading the charge, together with other farmer and farmworker groups and their allies. NFFC in particular, through its events, publications, and policy work, has made important headway in bringing the message

of food sovereignty into the consciousness of groups working on food and agricultural issues in the US.

Yet the US is still far from having a full-fledged food sovereignty movement, though the need now is greater than ever. Indeed, if the food and financial crises are teaching us anything, it is that we need systems in place to buffer communities from the uncertainties of the marketplace, to build resiliency against economic and environmental threats, and to ensure that basic needs are met at all times. With the economic crisis sending record numbers of people to food banks and entitlement programs, it would seem that food sovereignty suddenly has the potential to move out from the fringes and into the public arena, providing a viable framework urgently needed to tackle these and other issues.

This is not going to happen, however, unless advocates of food sovereignty get organised and more united in our efforts. This will require building new alliances. The farmer and farmworker groups have done a heroic job of calling for food sovereignty, but cannot do it alone. The US simply does not have the same 'peasant' base as many other countries, at least not in the traditional sense. But what we do have are major urban hubs, where a movement for *food justice* is already spreading throughout communities who are grappling with hunger as well as obesity and other life-threatening diet-related health problems. These communities, predominantly low-income and predominantly communities of colour, are calling attention to the health disparities and unequal food access they face. They are taking matters into their own hands, building upon their own community assets, their culinary traditions, and their cultural knowledge to find ways to grow, access, and provide healthy food.

Despite the differences between rural and urban contexts, the parallels between these struggles and the struggles represented at Nyéléni are striking.[6] And it is important to note that many of the urban farmers and food justice advocates themselves have rural roots, whether from communities of the southern US, or Asia, Africa, or Latin America and the Caribbean. Clearly, these are critical allies for any food sovereignty movement in the US and must be recognised as such.

Pounding the pavement

Unlikely as it may seem, New York City (NYC), with its population of eight million, is proving to be particularly fertile ground for a food sovereignty movement. Throughout the city, from Brooklyn to the Bronx, community gardens and urban farms have been a vital tool for renewing the fabric of marginalised neighbourhoods and providing fresh food where it is otherwise scarce. Many of these gardens and farms originated as abandoned lots that had been surrendered to drug dealing and waste disposal. Yet once reclaimed by communities as productive urban oases, these spaces face a new struggle to retain their agricultural use, as surrounding property values rise from the newly-revived attention of developers. Over the past several decades, many of NYC's community gardeners have had to fight to stay on their land and keep farming, sometimes right up until their last beanstalk has been bulldozed to the ground. Some of these spaces have been tragically lost, others saved,

[6]It is important to note, however, that there was a small 'urban movements/consumers' sector represented at Nyéléni. And while the majority of food justice work in the US is centered on urban hubs, rural and indigenous communities are also part of this movement.

and still others remain in limbo as the struggle over land and resources for growing food continues in New York City.

During a September 2007 exchange between leaders of NYC's urban agriculture movement and Vía Campesina representatives from six different countries of the Americas, the local hosts and international visitors alike were quick to recognise the parallels between their struggles.[7] That exchange and subsequent ones have revealed that for those who have struggled against great odds for the right to grow food to feed their communities in NYC, the meaning of food sovereignty is not at all difficult to grasp. In fact, there are some New Yorkers who have already embraced the concept of food sovereignty and have even adopted the term and use it in their work. For Yonnette Fleming, a community leader, gardener, and self-described 'builder' in Brooklyn, the concept of food sovereignty resonates far more than that of 'food security'. For Fleming, food sovereignty is 'the overarching right of people to have sovereign control over their own, culturally appropriate food'. 'There's a valuing of ancestry that's inherent in the concept of food sovereignty', says Fleming, 'and a valuing of the land. Most people here in New York City don't have access to land, and lots of decisions over land use exclude the actual *people* most impacted by the decisions'.

Fleming has incorporated food sovereignty into her community education and outreach work, helping her fellow gardeners at the Hattie Carthen Community Garden in Brooklyn understand that, despite the local nature of their work, 'they're part of something bigger. We all belong to a family of farming people'. To make this as tangible as possible, Fleming has hosted exchanges between international farmers and local community members at her community garden. She has them exchange stories of their favourite food traditions while taking part in an interactive cooking demonstration; then, after sharing a homemade meal of local, seasonal foods, they join hands in a circle to share reflections and to give thanks to Mother Earth for providing the food. Fleming explains the humanising impact of experiences such as these, levelling and transcendent at the same time, on the visitors and community members: 'Everyone can find their common ground around food'.

Another important component of food sovereignty for Fleming, who is originally from Guyana, is reclaiming and celebrating food traditions: 'You know how every culture has a special dish that can be made by no less than twenty people?' These are the dishes that are celebrated at an annual 'International Food and Music Festival' that she started in the garden several years back. Originally purely for celebration and fun, the festival has evolved to incorporate education and activism components, including a tent dedicated to food sovereignty and food justice. Fleming also notes that celebrating food traditions means celebrating the role of women in preserving them and adds that the valuing of women, 'many of whom still don't have a voice', is another important component of food sovereignty for her.

Food sovereignty is an equally important concept for Reverend DeVanie Jackson of the Brooklyn Rescue Mission. In addition to running a food pantry, she and her husband run a community farm, which they view not only as a means of providing much-needed fresh food, but as a tool for building food sovereignty at the community level, 'putting power in people's hands – the ability to see it, taste it and touch it'. According to Rev. Jackson, 'People have a right to eat things they're

[7]For video documentation of this exchange, see http://revolucionalimentaria.wordpress.com/2009/04/13/farmer-exchange-nyc-907/

accustomed to eating. This process for us has been about respecting the community and learning to grow for it'.

Rev. Jackson has also taken part in exchanges with international farmer leaders, including hosting a visit to her farm, in addition to participating in meetings on sustainable development at the United Nations. At a recent meeting in NYC with Henry Saragih and Fausto Torres of Vía Campesina, she shared the following:

> As a person of color, it is easy to be marginalized. I am encouraged by the *campesinos*, when I hear the work they are doing to fight against hunger and for human rights, which isn't as big [of a movement] here, but is big and powerful elsewhere. Here, people are dying, suffering quietly in neighborhoods, in homes. They die because they don't eat good food. People of color are being marginalized, told to 'let someone else speak for you, set policy for you'. We can't own our land, and we have to get others to come in and protect our land from developers. It is inspirational to see people stand up for their own rights.

At another time, she added,

> We've found all these people around the world who are like us, and they validate the work we're doing here. Food sovereignty is an important concept for our community. It's so easy for people to get caught up in their own world and to accept things as they are. The message of food sovereignty tells us, 'Yeah, we don't have it [control over our food], but we have the power to change it'. Food sovereignty is a wake-up call for us.

Rev. Jackson echoes the sentiments voiced at Nyéléni that food sovereignty is going to look different in different communities. This is even the case from community to community in Brooklyn, she explains. 'The models that exist are all so very different from one another; they're tailor-made to whatever each community needs'. She is also quick to point out the commonalities she sees:

> In this city and elsewhere, we have to fight for land. People here and around the world are fighting for their political right to grow their own food – and to access seeds, water, and markets. Food sovereignty is a concept, coming from the people, for building local power – the local ability to grow food, sell it, access it, and buy it.[8]

Rev. DeVanie Jackson, Yonnette Fleming, and others demonstrate the ability of communities to use food sovereignty as a powerful framework for addressing their own unique needs, even in a major metropolis such as New York City. In fact, food sovereignty was a major theme of the Brooklyn Food Conference, a grassroots endeavour that drew upwards of 3000 people in May 2009 to demand a better food system and work together to build one.[9] This indicates that the food sovereignty movement may very well have more untapped allies, and hence far more power, than it even realises. Grassroots movements around food and farming in New York City – and their counterparts throughout the world – show us that in the midst of the current food crisis, communities already have many of their own homegrown solutions at their fingertips, and these solutions require our recognition, validation, and support. And as communities are recognising that they are not alone in their struggles, but are part of a global movement that has continued to grow and strengthen since the Declaration of Nyéléni, they are sending a clear message to the Monsantos, Bunges, and ADMs: *Not so fast!*

[8]As this article is going to print, the Bed-Stuy Farm run by the Brooklyn Rescue Mission is under very real threat of being lost to development and efforts are underway to save it. For further information, see www.brooklynrescuemission.org.

[9]For information on the Brooklyn Food Conference, see www.brooklynfoodconference.org.

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Food sovereignty and the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development[10]

Marcia Ishii-Eiteman

Definitions of food sovereignty have evolved rapidly over the past decade, with La Vía Campesina in the forefront of civil society's articulation of its central principles. What emerges most consistently from these definitions is a determined focus on rights, in particular the rights of peoples and nations to define their own food, agricultural, and trade systems and policies so as to achieve locally and culturally appropriate, socially just, and environmentally sustainable development objectives (Vía Campesina 1996, 2007, Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, IIED 2009).

What might this mean in practice? Contributions to the debate over how best to achieve food sovereignty can sometimes come from surprising places. The UN-led International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) provides a comprehensive analysis of how existing and emerging agricultural systems, policies, investments, and institutional arrangements can hinder or facilitate progress towards equitable and sustainable development.[11] Many of the IAASTD's suggested policy options include approaches, mechanisms, and innovations that could be considered useful and relevant to the implementation of a food sovereignty agenda.

The IAASTD assessed agricultural knowledge, science, and technology (AKST) for their contributions – actual and potential, positive and negative – towards equitable and sustainable development. Co-sponsored by the UN Environment and Development Programmes, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank and other institutions,[12] and led by the World Bank's Chief Scientist, Robert Watson, the IAASTD represents five years of planning, rigorous research, and analysis, conducted by over 400 scientists and development experts from more than 80 countries drawn from multiple disciplines and sectors, including biological, physical and social scientists, public and private sector actors, and civil society

[10]This paper is based on remarks given by the author at the conference, 'International Governance Responses to the Food Crisis', convened by the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Waterloo, Canada on 4–5 December 2008.

[11]The full IAASTD Report includes a Global and five sub-Global reports and their respective Summaries for Decision Makers as well as a Synthesis Report, including an Executive Summary. Summaries and Issue Briefs are available at: http://www.agassessment.org

[12]The assessment was sponsored by five United Nations agencies, the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility (GEF). The five UN agencies included the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Development Program (UNDP), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Health Organization (WHO).

representatives. Their findings underwent two public external reviews, in which a similarly broad range of experts participated (over 1000 individuals contributed). At the conclusion of the final intergovernmental plenary in Johannesburg, South Africa in April 2008, 95 percent of participating governments formally approved the IAASTD report.[13] All participating governments agreed that the IAASTD represented 'a constructive initiative and important contribution that all governments need to take forward' (IAASTD 2009a, vii).

Like the IAASTD's antecedents, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA), the IAASTD provides the most comprehensive and authoritative evidence-based assessment to date of a particular topic, in this case agriculture's impact on the planet's future, encompassing both its physical and social dimensions. Whereas the subject matter of the IPCC and MA were relatively circumscribed in scope, the IAASTD – by virtue of the complexity and multifunctionality of agriculture (with its many biological, ecological, social, economic, cultural, and political facets) – demanded a broad array of expertise, with contributions from diverse professional, cultural, and ontological worldviews. Whereas reports authored by a small number of authors from like-minded organisations may be written in a seamless and seemingly coherent singular voice, such reports tend to closely reflect their authors' (and sponsoring organisations) shared biases and pre-analytic assumptions about the world. In contrast, the IAASTD injected into the debate a far wider array of voices, perspectives, and sources of empirical evidence than typically admitted in conventional policy-making circles. The conflicting views that inevitably emerged revealed that there are multiple historical explanations and narratives; analysing why and how certain narratives have nevertheless consistently been privileged over others required the IAASTD to unpack the politics of food and agriculture. In doing so, it repeatedly returned to issues of equity, power, and influence.

A second unique feature of the IAASTD is its explicitly normative framework: the IAASTD's mandate was to identify the options and development pathways which, based on assessment of empirical evidence, were considered most likely to lead to the desired outcomes of reduced poverty and hunger, improved health and rural livelihoods, and more equitable and socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable development. Where there were perceived or actual 'tradeoffs', i.e. when implementation of a particular course of action or policy advanced one set of goals but undermined another, the distributional effects of unequal gains and losses across different sectors of society were assessed and made explicit. Thus, the IAASTD examined not only the direct impacts of AKST on sustainable development goals, but also how those effects are mediated through social and geographic imbalances in power, influence, and access to resources among different groups of actors, states, and institutional arrangements.

Finally, the IAASTD introduced to the world of assessments a path-breaking institutional innovation in governance: a multistakeholder Advisory Bureau, in which civil society – broadly defined to include representatives from the private

[13]Fifty-eight governments approved and accepted the reports. Only the United States, Canada, and Australia declined to do so, objecting primarily to the IAASTD report's findings on the impacts of trade liberalisation and its assessment of modern biotechnology's potential contribution to equitable and sustainable development goals.

sector, research institutions, farmers' groups, and non-governmental organisations – shared with governments, not only in the research, authorship, and review process, but also in decision-making and oversight of the collectively agreed-upon process.

It is worth noting that the IAASTD may well also be one of the first such assessments that attempted to bring in the experience and knowledge of community groups, small farmers' organisations, and those working directly with them. This effort in turn raised the issue of presenting broad, representative experience (moving beyond the individual and anecdotal cases) and of documentation. Much grassroots experience and knowledge tends to be documented in local languages, reported in newsletters such as ILEIA (rather than in peer-reviewed science journals), or measured and analysed in project-related documentation and consultants' reports not generally accessed beyond the donor, local, and central government communities. Where studied in depth and with methodological rigour, this knowledge may be located largely within Masters and PhD theses, with much of the findings remaining unpublished. The IAASTD recognised the validity of this vast body of empirical evidence, although accessing it with variable resources and time constraints proved extremely difficult. On the other hand, the scientific and academic representation of food sovereignty and all this implies remains fragmented among numerous journals that are not widely read beyond the source discipline. Thus, feeding into the IAASTD process the grassroots experience, analyses, and pertinent options for action was not an easy task; at the very least, the IAASTD has opened wide the door for further consideration of ways and means to achieve a better integration of grassroots experience in future assessments of this kind.

These attributes of the IAASTD – its deeply multidimensional subject matter, its normative mandate, and its diverse, multistakeholder authorship and oversight – may well be responsible for what to many observers was an astonishing outcome: an assessment that delved into much more than the contribution of a particular technology to production or to economic growth (the narrower scope originally suggested by the World Bank), but that instead explored agriculture's relationship to such cross-cutting issues as health, education, climate change, trade, indigenous knowledge, formal science (agroecology, modern biotechnology, etc.), gender, food security, access to resources, rights – and even, albeit briefly, food sovereignty.

The IAASTD and food sovereignty

The IAASTD defined food sovereignty simply as 'the right of peoples and sovereign states to democratically determine their own agricultural and food policies' (IAASTD 2009b, 5). The report includes a brief history and analysis of the food sovereignty movement, its significance within social and environmental justice movements, and its increasing relevance to states and international agencies grappling with their responsibilities and obligations to protect and fulfill every individual's right to food, nutrition, and livelihood security (Armbrecht *et al.* 2009, Dreyfus *et al.* 2009, Nivia *et al.* 2009). The IAASTD presents the rights-based approach that is embedded in food sovereignty as 'an explicitly moral enterprise that stands in contrast to the economic processes of market-driven globalization', noting that 'this implies a radical shift from the existing hierarchical and increasingly corporate-controlled research system to an approach that devolves more responsibility and decision-making power to farmers, indigenous peoples, food workers, consumers and citizens for the production of social and ecological knowledge'

(Dreyfus *et al*. 2009, 114). Examples of countries that have formulated agricultural policies around the right to food and protection of cultural heritage are identified (Norway, Mali, Brazil).

Necessarily, the report stops short of calling on nations to take steps to assure their own and respect others' food sovereignty. The understated approach was a necessity: by its own carefully defined principles and procedures, the IAASTD was prohibited from making any policy recommendations; the report was to be 'policy relevant' but in no way 'policy prescriptive'. A close look at the substance of the IAASTD's key findings, however, suggests that many of them are indeed consistent with the underlying principles of food sovereignty and can be usefully drawn on in devising a rights-based approach to the fair governance of food and agricultural systems.

IAASTD key finding: business as usual is not an option

The IAASTD's most salient conclusion is in fact an imperative. The report found that today's intertwined crises in climate, energy, water, and food demand immediate change (McIntyre *et al*. 2009). While agricultural technological innovations in the twentieth century contributed to impressive yield gains, their success was largely shaped by immense investments in agriculture, and an array of institutional and policy supports (Dreyfus *et al*. 2009, Hendrickson *et al*. 2009, Leakey *et al*. 2009). At the same time, the technological contributions of the 'Green Revolution' and industrialised agriculture have had unsustainably high environmental and social costs including natural resource degradation, salinisation and desertification, rising water scarcity, chemical pollution, and loss of biodiversity due to both the concentration of germplasm (e.g., seeds) in the private sector and failure to properly value *in situ* conservation. People have benefited unevenly from yield gains of the past decades, with benefits accruing disproportionately to better resourced groups in society and transnational corporations over the most vulnerable members of society (IAASTD 2009a, 32). As a result, inequalities in agriculture, sometimes even created by agricultural policies and practices, have deepened over the past several decades (McIntyre *et al*. 2009, 24–5).

In assessing existing institutional arrangements, the IAASTD found that corporate concentration within the food and agribusiness industries, along with vertical integration of the food system, have had negative consequences for health, environment, and social equity (McIntyre *et al*. 2009, Dreyfus *et al*. 2009, Hendrickson *et al*. 2009, Lefort *et al*. 2009, Lutman *et al*. 2009). The evidence demonstrates, furthermore, that trade liberalisation that opens developing country markets to international competition too quickly or too extensively has often harmed the poorest countries, peoples, and their environments, and poses a serious threat to food security (Nathan *et al*. 2009, Izac *et al*. 2009, 452–7).

In identifying 'options for the future', the IAASTD highlighted the need for increased research and investments in agriculture, guided by broadly-agreed upon ecological, social, and economic goals and informed by comprehensive, transparent, and participatory assessment of scientific contributions and technological innovations by multiple stakeholders (McIntyre *et al*. 2009). The IAASTD warned that reliance on technological solutions alone is unlikely to reduce hunger or poverty or to advance equitable and sustainable development (Dreyfus *et al*. 2009). Continuing with a heavily technocentric approach could exacerbate current conditions of poverty and inequity, in part because such an approach tends to concentrate power

and privilege a narrow set of world views at the expense of pertinent local knowledge and socio-cultural and political specificities. However, the latter are crucial contributors to agricultural systems that are sustainable and productive at the local level (Bajaj *et al*. 2009). More fundamental and ultimately effective change, suggests the IAASTD, may emerge from new political, social, economic, and cultural approaches to the institutions that shape not only the development of new technologies but also the evolution of our food and agricultural systems, intellectual rights frameworks, and international trade (IAASTD 2009c).

IAASTD key policy direction: reorient towards sustainability

The IAASTD lays out a comprehensive set of social, environmental, and economic policy options to reorient local and global food systems towards greater social equity and sustainability. In brief, these include

- Strengthening the small-scale farm sector;
- Rebalancing power in food systems through, for example, revitalising local and regional food systems and more closely regulating globalised food systems to ensure public good outcomes;
- Building local and national capacity in biodiverse, ecologically resilient farming to cope with increasing environmental stresses;
- Mobilising public and private sector investments towards equitable and sustainable development (with concomitant strengthening of corporate accountability mechanisms); and
- Establishing supportive institutions (rules, norms, regulations, etc.) and new, transparent, democratically governed institutional arrangements to accomplish these goals.

Support small-scale farmers and vibrant local and regional food systems

The IAASTD states that establishing equitable and sustainable development in the future requires prioritising the needs of women and small-scale farmers now (Bajaj *et al*. 2009, Gana *et al*. 2009, Izac *et al*. 2009, McIntyre *et al*. 2009). Institutional and policy options to accomplish this include increasing public investments in rural areas and strengthening farmers', women's, indigenous, and other community-based organisations; providing technical assistance to farmers in adjusting to and mitigating climate change and other environmental stresses and system shocks (for example through integrated natural resource management and agroecologically-based extension and education programs); and encouraging equitable and participatory farmer-scientist partnerships to respond more appropriately to farmers' immediate and emerging challenges (exemplified by farmer field schools, participatory plant breeding, and plant health clinics in Central America). Small-scale farmers – and women in particular – also need secure access to productive resources (e.g., land, water, and seeds), information, credit, and marketing infrastructure, as well as fair trade arrangements and supportive market conditions.

The IAASTD observes that intellectual property laws currently tend to benefit patent holders – typically corporate product manufacturers – rather than the rural communities that have developed genetic resources over millennia (Armbrecht *et al*. 2009, 179–80, Dreyfus *et al*. 2009, 87–99, Heinemann *et al*. 2009, Izac *et al*.

2009, 475–81, Lefort *et al*. 2009, 258–64). Revising these laws can prevent misappropriation of indigenous, women's, and local people's knowledge. Revision of intellectual property laws towards a more equitable system that recognises farmers' rights to save and exchange seed can begin to address equity goals and genetic resource and biodiversity issues (Armbrecht *et al*. 2009, 179–80, Heinemann *et al*. 2009, Izac *et al*. 2009, 475–81, Lefort *et al*. 2009, 258–64, Wen *et al*. 2009, 82–91). New agreements are needed that can more fairly resolve tensions between vulnerable groups holding traditional knowledge, producing community-based innovations, and possessing individual and communal rights on the one hand, and powerful private sector interests making corporate ownership claims on DNA, germplasm, seeds, and other biological forms – natural or synthetic – on the other.

Strengthening local and regional food systems offers a compelling pathway towards rebalancing power and achieving more equitable as well as energy-efficient food production and distribution (Armbrecht *et al*. 2009, Chauvet *et al*. 2009, Izac *et al*. 2009, 459–66, Lefort *et al*. 2009, Nivia *et al*. 2009). Promising approaches to accomplishing this include establishment of representative democratic local and state food policy councils that enable broad participation in setting food policies (as in Canada, India, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and United States); encouragement of urban and peri-urban agriculture (cf. municipalities in Brazil, China, Cuba, Kenya, India, Uganda, Venezuela, Vietnam); and localisation or regionalisation of food processing and procurement (for example by schools, hospitals, restaurants, city agencies, etc.). Similarly, relying as much as possible on national or regional resources for emergency food distribution systems, as an alternative to internationally-sourced food aid, can both reduce energy costs and support local and regional agricultural sectors.

Support multifunctional, biodiverse, agroecological farming

The IAASTD affirms that agriculture is multifunctional, providing goods and services that reflect the interconnectedness of agriculture's multiple dimensions and roles, i.e. not only producing commodities but also directly affecting livelihoods, community health and well-being, ecosystem function and services, landscape amenities, and cultural heritages (IAASTD 2009b, 4, McIntyre *et al*. 2009, 18, Leakey *et al*. 2009, 146).[14] Thus institutions (rules, agreements, regulations, etc.) and institutional arrangements (actors, organisations, etc.) need to be closely assessed for their contributions, both positive and negative, to these multiple functions of agriculture and reformulated as necessary to ensure that public interest and sustainable natural and agricultural resource management goals are met.

The emerging consensus reflected in the IAASTD is that the success of future agriculture will be determined largely by our capacity to adapt to expected and unexpected shocks to the system. Food system impact analyses will thus increasingly need to take account of global water, energy, and climate footprints or 'foodprints'. The central scientific and technical challenge facing agriculture today, according to the IAASTD, is shifting towards improved and sustainable production based on long-term

[14]Examples and detailed discussion of multifunctionality, the role of agroecology, organic agriculture, and integrated natural resource management-based production can be found in Bajaj *et al*. 2009, Devare *et al*. 2009, 160, 169–70, Dreyfus *et al*. 2009, IAASTD 2009d, Gurib-Fakim *et al*. 2009, Leakey *et al*. 2009, McIntyre *et al*. 2009, Nivia *et al*. 2009, Wen *et al*. 2009, 100–1.

agroecosystem health and ecological resilience in the face of these stresses. The IAASTD therefore calls for an increase and strengthening of investments in the agroecological sciences (IAASTD 2009d, 6) and suggests governments consider establishing national frameworks for the implementation of agroecological production.

Specific steps that can build local and national capacity in agroecology include increasing investments in agroecological research, extension, and education and providing professional and financial incentives to facilitate institutional redirection of resources towards agroecological sciences, integrated natural resource management approaches, and interdisciplinary, farmer-participatory research programs. The IAASTD also suggests democratising decision-making processes for scientific research and innovation. This reflects the understanding that increased and meaningful participation by small-scale farmers, women, indigenous communities, and other vulnerable groups in problem-identification, priority and direction-setting, participatory research, resource allocation, analysis, and interpretation of findings is an effective way to improve the quality and relevance of science.

Payment incentive programmes can encourage practices that increase agrobiodiversity, while taxes on health and environmental harms can help reduce reliance on chemical inputs, fossil fuels, and water- or energy-intensive production (Beintema *et al*. 2009, 535–41, Izac *et al*. 2009, 459–64). The IAASTD also recognises the importance of minimising environmental harms caused by agricultural activities through environmental regulation and the ratification and implementation of regional and international environmental agreements (e.g., on synthetic pesticides, water resources, biodiversity, climate change, etc.).[15]

Establish equitable trade, market-based incentives and full-cost accounting

The IAASTD considers the establishment of equitable regional and global trade arrangements and local and regional markets that meet the needs of small-scale farmers critically important to advancing development and sustainability goals (IAASTD 2009e, Izac *et al*. 2009, 452–66, Nathan *et al*. 2009, Wen *et al*. 2009).The IAASTD concludes that preserving national policy flexibility, by according special and differential treatment to developing countries, can go far towards improving Southern countries' and peoples' ability to benefit from agricultural trade, pursue food security goals, and minimise dislocations from trade liberalisation. Providing Southern countries with preferential (non-reciprocal) access to Northern markets for commodities important to domestic food and livelihood security, and removing escalating import tariffs for processed commodities, are options that can enable developing countries to export their processed products and thus gain a fair share of value-added benefits. The IAASTD's critique of unrestricted trade liberalisation and its identification of options to establish more equitable trade arrangements are at odds with prevailing economic orthodoxy, as often espoused by the World Bank and World Trade Organization, but they are consonant with the founding principles of food sovereignty.

The approaches presented by the IAASTD necessarily require improving the quality and transparency of governance in agricultural trade, including strengthening developing country capacities in trade analysis and negotiation. Developing and providing improved tools for assessing social, environmental, and economic

[15]See Dreyfus *et al*. (2009), Izac *et al*. (2009).

tradeoffs in proposed trade agreements – such as Strategic Impact Assessments – is an essential step towards accomplishing this goal (Izac *et al.* 2009, 466–7).

Short-term measures to reverse loss of small-scale family farmers include stabilisation of commodity prices, for example, through re-establishment of price bands, strategic grain reserves, and other supply management mechanisms. By reducing volatility in food prices, these measures can also encourage farmers to invest in longer-term resource-conserving strategies that support ecological resilience and hence environmental components of food sovereignty goals.

Public policy options to re-orient food systems towards sustainability include provision of financial incentives, e.g., payments for eco-system services and for organic transitions along with credit, crop insurance, and tax exemptions for sustainable practices (Izac *et al.* 2009, 459–66). Public investment in local agro-processing and marketing infrastructure enables value-addition and creates off-farm rural jobs. Public policy initiatives can facilitate direct farmer-to-consumer sales (i.e., by providing infrastructure for urban farmers' markets, for example). Other promising options include encouraging geographic, fair trade, and sustainable production labels; enacting laws that support consumers' right to know about the economic, environmental, and social conditions behind production and distribution; and ensuring availability of affordable third-party certification. Unsustainable practices can be reduced by levying taxes on health and environmental harms (e.g., the polluter pays principle) and carbon and energy taxes based on greenhouse gas emissions analyses and whole-system energy budgets.

Significantly, the IAASTD also highlighted the importance of developing and implementing full-cost accounting measures that include the full array of health, energy, and environmental costs – or in economic terms, the 'externalities' in a system (an unfortunate but persistent misnomer, in that these costs are anything but 'external' to the system). This ensures a more accurate reading of the true costs of food and agricultural industries (IAASTD 2009c). Calculating the full costs of a cropping system that relies on synthetic chemical use, for example, would necessarily include quantification of medical treatment, public health costs, and reduced labour capacity associated with pesticide poisoning, as well as environmental costs of groundwater contamination and diminished ecosystem services (pollination, natural biological control, etc.). Full-cost accounting is increasingly recognised as essential good economic practice to better inform agricultural policy decisions with a more comprehensive assessment of the social, economic, and environmental costs of different production systems. Gradually, national 'Green Accounts' and local 'total material flow estimates' are beginning to inform public policy formation. Sweden, for example, has based its national food and agricultural policy in part on the findings of a full-cost analysis of the energy, environmental, and other ecosystem service costs embedded in its food system. As a result, Sweden aims to increase the proportion of its productive land devoted to organic farming and organic food procurement by public agencies to 20 and 25 percent, respectively, by 2010. This type of cost analysis continues to inform Sweden's policy decisions, as it strives to transition towards a carbon-neutral economy (Johanssen 2008).

Public vs. private sector contributions and obligations

The impact of public policies and investments can be substantially strengthened through appropriate mobilisation of the private sector. Rewarding private investment

in safe, sustainable, and locally appropriate crops, seed systems, technologies, in situ reserves, and food markets (through tax breaks, etc.) can stimulate private sector engagement.

At the same time, the public sector has a responsibility to ensure that impacts of private investments actually benefit the health and food security of all. Public institutional arrangements can initiate competitive bidding for public funding based on an enterprise's proven capacity to meet public interest goals. They can also establish and enforce codes of conduct to prevent conflict of interest and strengthen corporate accountability both to shareholders and to the public, where public-private partnerships are concerned (IAASTD 2009a, 7–8). Implementation of anti-trust and competition regulations can begin to counter some of the adverse effects associated with increasing concentration and vertical integration of the global food system (Izac *et al*. 2009, 465–6, Hendrickson *et al*. 2009). However, for the public sector to be effective, it must improve and mobilise meaningful civil society participation in the process.

The IAASTD observed that transnational buyers (trading companies, agrifood processors, input manufacturers) typically dominate globalised food chains (Dreyfus *et al*. 2009, Hendrickson *et al*. 2009). As a result, primary producers capture only a fraction of the international price of a traded commodity. Building countervailing negotiating power, for example, through new institutional arrangements such as farmer co-ops and networks, provides important ways for resource-poor farmers to increase their share of 'value-added' or 'value-captured'. Establishment of mechanisms for local rural enterprises to increase their share of value-added (for example, through local agro-processing facilities) can also be effective (Izac *et al*. 2009, 459–62, 481–2).

The right to food

The IAASTD shares a great deal of its policy analysis and findings with other documents produced recently in the international system, not least because of an approach geared toward respecting human rights. The promotion of human rights internationally has created new and fortuitous synergies across the spectrum of international reports. The right to food is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and several subsequent International Covenants and Guidelines. The UN Human Rights Council Report (HRCR) of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food presents a human rights framework that can be usefully applied to the design and prioritisation of policies affecting food security and the right to food, with particular attention to the obligations of states (OHCHR 2008). As the report outlines, the central question for sustainable food systems in human rights terms is, '*Who will produce food, how, and for whose benefit?*'

Within a rights-based framework, the right to food and design of a supporting social system is not perceived as the privilege of the few, but is recognised as the right of all. States and international agencies are obligated to respect, protect, and fulfil the right to food. These responsibilities include the obligation to ensure that no violations of rights occur, that private actors are controlled as necessary, and that states and other actors cooperate internationally to address structural impediments to fulfilling the right to food.

Respecting, protecting, and fulfilling the human right to food requires establishing a broad array of political, institutional, economic, social, environmental, and cultural

conditions to ensure the democratic governance and maintenance of equitable and sustainable food and agricultural systems. Ultimately, the HRCR concludes that the right to food can only be realised where the conditions enabling food sovereignty are guaranteed. What might these conditions look like? Although not explicitly framed as a rights-based assessment, the IAASTD goes far in beginning to answer precisely these questions. Where the HRCR has identified obligations, the IAASTD provides a comprehensive array of 'best options' with which to establish more democratic, fair, and sustainable food and agricultural systems.

High priorities for action include strengthening farmers' organisations, supporting the small-scale farm sector, recognising local and indigenous knowledge and the value of integrating formal and informal scientific processes, increasing investments in agroecological farming, creating more equitable and transparent trade agreements, and increasing local participation – particularly by women, indigenous peoples, community groups, farmers' and farmworkers' organisations – in policy-formation and other decision-making processes. In taking these steps – affirms the IAASTD – we can begin to reverse the structural inequities within and between countries, increase rural communities' access to and control over resources, and pave the way towards local and national food sovereignty. Many examples of successful approaches already exist in the world but are rarely adequately supported by prevailing national and international policy and trade environments. Implementing the IAASTD and HCRC's respective options and recommendations for a sustainable future requires governments, international agencies, and the United Nations to recognise their obligations to respect the human right to food and to take decisive action in setting a new course for food and agriculture that fulfills the promise of food sovereignty.

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Soils, food and healthy communities: working towards food sovereignty in Malawi[16]

Rodgers Msachi, Laifolo Dakishoni and Rachel Bezner Kerr

Introduction

Most people in Malawi are peasant farmers, growing maize, beans, groundnuts, and other crops for subsistence, along with cash crops such as tobacco, on small plots of land. Peasant farmers in northern Malawi have come to rely on commercial fertilizer to grow enough maize, their primary staple food. This reliance began during the Banda government after colonialism. Farmers were told to 'modernise' by growing hybrid maize and applying fertilizer. The government subsidised fertilizer, produced and distributed hybrid maize seeds, and encouraged 'modern' farming methods. Many farmers partially endorsed these methods, and in doing so they lost knowledge

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about their indigenous ways to maintain soil fertility, such as crop rotation and fallow periods.

Rising debt in the 1980s led to the imposition of structural adjustment programmes, which in turn meant the reduction and eventually elimination of fertilizer subsidies, along with programs that produced and distributed seed, and the closure of many rural depots that sold smallholder crops. Peasant farmers began to experience a crisis in farming: fertilizer prices rose dramatically and seeds became expensive. Farming families found it difficult to get adequate yields from their fields, and their food supplies went down.

This paper tells the story of an effort by farmers in northern Malawi to use local, organic methods to increase food availability and family nutrition. Along the way we also addressed some gender inequalities, built community seed supplies, and strengthened farmer leadership. We understand food sovereignty to mean that we, as peasant farmers in Malawi, have the right to produce and eat our own food, that we have control over how we grow food, and are able to grow food without having to rely on other people, organisations, or governments for handouts. We also understand that food sovereignty means building on local, traditional knowledge, in consultation with scientific knowledge, using participatory methods and respecting ecological diversity. Finally, food sovereignty to us also promotes an equal society, one in which women and men and different members of a community have a say in decision-making over food.

How we began

Ekwendeni Hospital, based in northern Malawi, has monthly mobile clinics, serving over 100 villages in the area with over 70,000 people. Nurses at these clinics began to observe, during the late 1990s, high rates of malnutrition in the rural areas, and there were increasing numbers of children admitted to the Nutrition Rehabilitation Unit at the hospital with severe malnutrition. In an effort to understand the causes of the high rates of malnutrition, the community nurse who ran these clinics, Esther Lupafya, along with the third author, conducted interviews with families who had admitted their children into the hospital. They heard many stories of families unable to afford any fertilizer, planting maize and getting very poor yields. They began to investigate alternatives to commercial fertilizer for smallholder farmers, and found published research about intercropping legumes to improve soil fertility in Malawi (Snapp *et al.* 1998). They met with village leaders, discussed the issue with hospital staff, spoke to agricultural scientists, and decided to initiate a pilot project to test whether edible, intercropped legumes (e.g. pigeonpea, groundnut) could be used as a viable alternative to commercial fertilizer. This is how the Soils, Food and Healthy Communities (SFHC) project began.

Our early years

We did not begin with a vision of food sovereignty, nor did we know if what we were going to do would have any success. Initially, we envisioned a participatory pilot project in one or two villages, in which farmers would receive a small amount of legume seed to test these options on-farm, just on 10 by 10 metre plots. We would then measure, with farmers, to find out if the use of these legumes had any effect on soil fertility, food security, and child health. In each village to join, people were

selected by their fellow villagers to be members of the 'Farmer Research Team' who would learn about these legume intercrops, try them out in their own fields, and teach others about what they had been doing. They would also manage 'village plots', which would demonstrate all the different legume options to interested farmers. The 30-member Farmer Research Team also helped to conduct research and assess whether we were having any positive effects (Bezner Kerr and Chirwa 2004).

The first year, we began in seven villages with 183 farmers. When farmers first heard the idea of an alternative to fertilizer, they were sceptical, but interested in learning more. Some spoke about 'going back to the old ways' and others saw this approach as a new kind of technology, but many people wanted to find ways to improve their children's nutrition and increase food supplies. The first year there were many struggles. Some farmers expected to get allowances to work with the project, because that is how other development projects had worked, and when they didn't receive allowances they left. Other farmers didn't bother planting the legumes, they just ate the seeds. The lone staff person had to walk to the villages because we didn't have a vehicle. There was a lot of suspicion and scepticism about whether these legumes would really work, and farmers at first didn't like the Farmer Research Team visiting their fields – they were suspected of witchcraft. But some farmers tried the legumes out, they planted them, and they buried the crop residue. We had field days to invite other farmers to see the crops for themselves. After the first year, when farmers began to see that that they could gain another crop, such as groundnuts, and at the same time improve their fields, many more joined. The following year even more farmers joined, because farmers actually saw the results in maize yields, and because we had severe famine that year. After three years, we had over 1000 farmers who had joined us, and they were expanding the area devoted to legumes. In 2005, we visited over 150 farmers to find out if they had expanded their legume area beyond the '10 by 10 metres' and found on average their legume plots were over 900 square metres greater than their original plots (Bezner Kerr *et al.* 2007a). As of 2008, over 6000 farmers had received legume seed and training and participated in different farmer activities.

What we have achieved

This is our fertilizer: village crop residue promotion days

After a few years, we noticed that many of the farmers were still not burying the crop residue, and if they did, it was usually just before planting, when the plants had lost most of their nitrogen, so they weren't really improving the soils. We decided to investigate why this was the case. We learned that it was usually women who were expected to bury the crop residue. Generally speaking, women harvest legumes in northern Malawi – usually the mother, her daughters-in-law, and maybe her sisters-in-law go to the fields as a group at harvest time and uproot the groundnuts, pile them up, and then sit in a circle and remove the pods from the roots. We were suggesting that people bury the green residue just after harvest, which would mean re-spreading the residue and burying it. That meant that either women had an additional task to do during the busy harvest season, or they would have to ask men to do this task. It wasn't always easy for women to ask men to take on an additional job! We decided to promote crop residue burial as an important task, to improve soil fertility, and to encourage men to take on this task, since women had many more

responsibilities compared to men. We organised 'crop residue burial promotion days' where members of the Farmer Research Team would go to a village and publicly bury the crop residue in the village plots, inviting village members to participate and teaching them about the importance of burying crop residue early. After carrying out many residue promotion days in different villages, we then wanted to learn if our efforts had any effect. We visited over 100 farms just after harvest to see for ourselves if farmers were burying the residue, and we found that 70 percent of participating farmers buried crop residue in 2005, compared to just 15 percent in 2000 (Bezner Kerr *et al*. 2007a). We think that our active efforts to promote this job as a 'male task' are making this difference. We also think that farmers are starting to appreciate the residues as an alternative to fertilizer. Many farmers, when asked in interviews we conducted in 2007 if they had applied *fertilizer*, said yes, they had buried *legume residue* in their fields! It takes about three years before farmers find a noticeable difference in their soils, but when they do, they report improved, darker soils with greater water retention and improved maize yields, and are able to reduce the amount of fertilizer they apply to their crops.

In the last three years the Government of Malawi has decided to distribute free fertilizer (one 50 kg bag per household). We wondered if farmers would decide to not use the residues if there was free fertilizer available, so we surveyed 200 farmers in 2008, to learn if they had done so, and found that 85 percent of participating farmers had grown legumes and buried crop residue that year (Bonatsos *et al*. 2008). At the same time, project farmers reported on average applying half the amount of fertilizer (2.5 bags) compared to non-participating households (5.5 bags) in the area, while more project households reported better maize yields. As one participating farmer said to us: 'I have seen my maize grow taller with residue. My soils have changed to better because my maize is growing taller than in the past. We farmers know that we cannot rely on the government for assistance. Next year, the new president might say, "I won't give you fertilizer, but flour"'. As the head of the Farmer Research Team said, 'Fertilizer on its own doesn't add fertility to the soil, but the food for the soil is residue and manure. That is the area where we need to intensify our teaching'. If our soils are fertile, we will truly have food sovereignty.

Family cooperation

Food sovereignty starts in the home, and begins with our children. One of the major goals of our work was to improve child nutrition. We knew that one reason our children were dying or getting sick was because they lacked enough nutritious food. The first few years we were excited by farmers' reports of increased harvest of groundnuts, soyabeans, and pigeonpeas. Then in one of our early workshops we learned from participating women farmers that even if they had a good harvest, sometimes their husbands took the harvest and sold it on the market, using the money for beer. This finding provoked a vigorous discussion about who was 'in charge' of the harvest and what it should be used for, with some men invoking the 'head of the household' as a reason to misuse the funds. Women also told us that often they had too many tasks, from food preparation and caring for the sick to agricultural activities and laundry, leaving them little time to look after young children. Some farmers were shocked to discover that young children needed to be fed more frequently than older children, because of their smaller stomachs. We also found that often grandmothers were encouraging mothers to introduce watery

porridge to infants before six months, which had negative effects on child growth (Bezner Kerr *et al*. 2007b, Bezner Kerr *et al*. 2008).

We began a 'Nutrition Research Team', made up of women and men of different ages and food security status, to visit people in their homes and encourage them to feed young children more frequently, to have diverse diets, to share household resources fairly, and to breastfeed babies exclusively for six months. This team of farmers focused on those families who had children admitted to the hospital for severe malnutrition. We also began hosting 'recipe days' to encourage sharing of local recipes, and to encourage men to take a more active interest in the care of young children. We called this 'family cooperation'. At the recipe days people make different local meals and present their recipes to one another. Some of the recipes are with legumes, but others are those foods that might have been forgotten or little known. In the hungry season we share recipes that are made during this lean period. The first time we held a recipe day, only three men attended – the three leaders of the Farmer Research Team! The most recent recipe day we had over 80 people in attendance, 18 of whom were men, who actively made recipes and presented them to the group. We have found that promoting men's role in looking after their children has been one effective way to change gender roles. There has been considerable resistance to these ideas, but most men want their children to be healthy, which has given them a major incentive. Key male leaders in the villages have also played an important role in promoting this kind of change.

We measured children's weight and height over a six-year period, and with the help of other researchers, have found a significant, positive effect on child growth for those farmers actively involved in the project. The villages that have been the most involved show the greatest effect on child growth (Bezner Kerr *et al*. under review). These findings support our own observations: that there are fewer children going to hospital for malnutrition now.

Three years ago we began a new activity, to try to address some of the more sensitive issues, such as men selling groundnuts for beer, or mothers-in-law criticizing their daughters-in-law for not doing enough work. We held intergenerational monthly discussion groups, called Agriculture and Nutrition Discussion Groups, in which small groups of men and women discussed different topics identified by the Farmer Research Team. The groups are facilitated by community members trained in participatory facilitation skills. One month they might discuss ways to store seed effectively without insecticides, another month they might focus on good recipes for young children. These groups have been very effective at generating local ideas and discussions for improving children's nutrition and our food security. One group noted, for example, that they no longer grow indigenous grains such as sorghum and millet, which are more drought tolerant. They visited some farmers in central Malawi who are still growing sorghum, got some seed from them, and are now trying sorghum. We asked a graduate student to do an evaluation of the effects of the discussion groups, and she found that farmers reported improved nutrition and food security, increased knowledge about ways to improve nutrition and food security, and improved gender relations (Satzinger *et al*., under review). Women reported that their husbands consulted with them more often about what crops to grow, and what to do with the crops, and men indicated that they tried to help out with more of the household tasks. There also was an increased sense of community after having participated in the discussion groups; as one younger man noted, 'There is oneness in the people. They work together, they understand each

other, and they help each other. So I look upon that as a very positive change' (Satzinger and Shumba 2006, 13).

Building community knowledge and strength

Over the years we have done much more than just distribute seed and do some training on legume intercrops. The project has managed to build capacity within our communities, in a way that enables us to make our own decisions about what to do. The participating farmers have established an Ekwendeni Farmers Association and built a Community Seed Bank, which is run and managed by ourselves. The seeds come from farmers who join the project; after the first year's harvest they have to 'pay back' their seed loans with double the original amount. In 2008, we collected 6065 kg of soyabeans and groundnuts from farmers and distributed these seeds to 1207 farmers who were short of legume seeds. In this way we are improving the long term food sovereignty of our villages. The involvement of village headmen and the strong leadership of the Farmer Research Team have motivated communities to participate in our work.

There has been a lot of knowledge exchange, through farmer exchange visits, recipe days, and Agriculture and Nutrition Discussion Groups. The community is producing food for children and families locally. The legumes are eaten, adding important protein, vitamins, oil, and energy to our diets. Both men and women of food insecure families are involved in managing the project. The intercropping of legumes has reduced the dependence on fertilizer, since those farmers who bury the crop residue are now using less fertilizer, and in some cases, do not use any at all.

Food sovereignty in our future

When we reviewed the Nyéléni principles of food sovereignty, we knew that we were working towards food sovereignty, but had not reached it. There are many barriers and challenges, both within our communities and outside them. We find it difficult to maintain farmer enthusiasm if there is a drought year and many crops fail. We also feel undermined by well-meaning organisations that give out allowances and free fertilizer and hybrid seed to farmers. There are many internal disputes about how to make sure all farmers benefit from what we are doing, what our priorities should be, how decisions should be made, and how to fund the work that we do. Many families are AIDS-affected, and the legume options are not always possible for these families. We are now increasingly worried about climate change and the implications for our farming practices. There are many other challenges we could add to our list, but we are also hopeful. As one farmer, who is HIV positive, said in talking about these legumes, 'I am growing about two acres. It has increased – in the past I grew a small portion because of lack of fertilizer. Now with residues I have the courage to grow a larger area'. We also have the courage and hope to continue to build food sovereignty in our little corner of the world.

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Rodgers Msachi joined the SFHC project as a participating farmer and Farmer Research Team member in 2000. His passion and dedication impressed the office staff, and in 2005 he became the project's Community Promoter. He enjoys interacting with the participating farmers in the villages on a daily basis, and takes pride in their successes, strongly feeling that farmers can lead the way in addressing poverty and food security in Malawi. He points out that it is evident that the quality of their soils has improved because of their hard work.

Laifolo Dakishoni started working with the Soils, Food and Healthy Communities project in November 2001. He studied at the Malawi College of Accounting, where he earned a diploma in accounting. His interest in farmer leadership, participation, and potential drove him to become more involved. Since 2001 he has enjoyed being part of the project's evolution, and has been greatly motivated by the farmers' eagerness to learn and try new things.

Rachel Bezner Kerr has been working with the Soils, Food and Healthy Communities project for nine years, and has been inspired by the farmers' determination and innovation. She did her doctoral research with the SFHC project on the social relations around seeds. She works at the University of Western Ontario in the Department of Geography, in London, Ontario Canada. She loves gardening with her daughters Carmen and Miriam and her husband Wayne.

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