

Food Sovereignty and the Foodgrains Bank



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The term ‘food sovereignty’ is becoming increasingly common in food/agriculture policy discussions – particularly those originating from Europe, Latin America, parts of Africa and South Asia and Southeast Asia. In fact, it is only in the English-speaking countries that food sovereignty has not been widely discussed. The purpose of this paper is to examine the meaning of this term and the potential impacts of a food sovereignty orientation on the global search to end hunger. This paper is intended to promote discussion among our members.

What difference would Food Sovereignty make in working to end hunger?

END HUNGER 

**Canadian
Foodgrains
Bank**
A Christian Response
to Hunger

Where did it come from?

Food sovereignty was first introduced by the international small-holder farmers' organization, La Via Campesina (LVC) in 1996 at the World Food Summit. La Via Campesina was founded a few years earlier by an initiative from Latin American farmers groups. In Latin America the damaging effects of subsidized US food exports and US food aid had become a life and death issue for many small-holder farmers. While it was US policies in that region that drove Central American peasants to organize, it was the global moves to liberalize agricultural markets with the completion of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) that drew international attention to the negative impacts of what was termed 'food dumping' (the importation of food at below the local cost of production, often through subsidization by exporters). And it was the WTO's principal of 'free trade' with the loss of local and national decision making which was the main target of the new term 'food sovereignty'.

Why has it appeared?

Free trade or liberalized trade is based on the economic theory that 'everyone' is better off if each economic unit (in the case of the WTO – country) specializes in the production of that which it can produce cheaper than others. The unrestricted trade in these items will then yield the greatest 'global welfare'. It is acknowledged that, in the short term, there will be winners and losers but that those who are 'losers' will re-employ themselves in something else where they have a greater 'comparative advantage'. Thus, some Kenyan farmers should grow flowers because they can do it all year round while American farmers should grow corn because (with generous government subsidies) they have the most productive technological system for doing so and are able to sell it cheaper than others.

The reality is that international trade is never ideal. In fact, the 'imperfections' in international trade are so serious that many maintain that 'broken' free trade does more harm than good. The imperfections often mentioned include;

1. Vastly unequal systems of government agricultural subsidies.
2. Highly oligopolistic (concentrated) markets for farm inputs and farm products. These behave as the very opposite of the ideal of free markets in encouraging uncompetitive markets at best and price fixing at worst.

But the defenders of food sovereignty also insist that food and agricultural products are qualitatively different than manufactured goods. They insist that food and agriculture have a particular qualitative value in the life of society that means that they should be considered more than simply commodities. Chief among these differences in many developing countries is the fact that their production forms the foundation for the livelihoods of the majority of the population. Furthermore the system of agricultural production underpins entire cultural systems and local ecologies. Vital economic, environmental and social issues are tied up with the fate of agriculture.

What does Food Sovereignty mean?

Food Sovereignty seeks to establish an alternative perspective on the organization of the food system – one that does not start with the assumptions of free trade (although it still embraces trade in agriculture – but not as the primary objective) and strengthens the role of local decision making on food and agriculture policy.

There is often confusion between Food Sovereignty and the more common term, food security. Food security refers to a condition where everyone has access at all times to sufficient safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active healthy life. Food sovereignty focuses on the nature of the food system established to meet the goal of food security.

As defined by the People's Food Sovereignty Network, a LVC-inspired coalition of many thousands of members, in 2003,

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; 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 food, to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.

More recently, a major meeting at Nyelini, Mali in 2007 set out six pillars of Food Sovereignty:

1. **Policy Priority on Food for People** – providing food for everyone should be the first priority of the food system. In this, it underlines the Human Right to Adequate Food as the starting point for food policy.
2. **Special Status for Food Providers** – rather than consider agricultural and fisheries livelihoods as jobs interchangeable with other jobs, Food Sovereignty attaches special value to food producers, especially women, peasants and small-holder farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fisherfolk, forest dwellers, indigenous people and agricultural and fisheries workers.
3. **Stronger Links between Food Producers and Food Consumers** – seeks to bring producers and consumers closer together (both physically and socially). This is seen as a way to counter the growing control of food trading, processing and retailing sectors by a small number of trans-national companies and the lack of any relationship between food producers and the non-producers who buy their food.
4. **Localized Control of Food and Agriculture Policies** – Food Sovereignty places decisions about the food system, especially whether to produce or import various foods, how to produce these foods and what technologies to utilize, at the local level. However, it is unclear what scale is considered 'local'.
5. **Central Role of Local Knowledge** – in reaction to the externally driven adoption of outside technology common over the past decades, Food Sovereignty seeks to always start with local knowledge and understanding and place new technologies, when appropriate, within this framework. This may include an explicit rejection of agricultural biotechnology.

6. **Biodiversity-based Low External Input Agricultural Systems** – seeks agricultural and fishery systems that preserve and improve ecosystem function by avoiding reliance on single seed varieties or breeds and increasing resilience to climate change through reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving soil quality through organic methods.

The ‘content’ of Food Sovereignty is evolving. From its origins as a reaction to the impact of free trade and the introduction of agricultural biotechnology, it has begun to take on a broader critique of the modern food system and to work towards more clearly defined alternatives. With the complexity of the current food systems and the society that they support, the task of clearly defining an alternative or alternatives is an ongoing task which generates considerable controversy among the supporters of the current system.

Key Elements of Food Sovereignty

Given the evolving nature of the collection of principles making up Food Sovereignty, it may be more appropriate to ask, “Which elements of Food Sovereignty should the Foodgrains Bank support, which should we reject and what principles need more clarification?” The following discussion considers the six principles from the Nyelini Conference held in November 2007.

Priority of Food for People

In many ways our existing commitment to the Human Right to Adequate Food is linked quite closely to this principle. However, it has further structural implications including:

- **Foodgrains vs Feedgrains** – large areas of arable land are given over to the production of feed crops for animals, often at the expense of food crops. In Canada approximately 9 million hectares were planted in 2007 to feed crops such as barley, feed wheat, soybeans and maize. It takes an average of 4-5 kg of feedgrains to produce a single kg of animal weight. If the current low global stocks of foodgrains persist, it raises questions about the use of so much land to grow feedgrains.
- **Foodgrains vs Biofuels** – the strong mandates for the production of ethanol and biodiesel in the US and EU has spurred a rapid increase in maize and canola planting in Canada. Much of this has been at the expense of wheat acreage – most of which would have been for export as foodgrains. The American and European biofuel mandates has been identified by the International Food Policy Research Institute as accounting for more than 30% of the food commodity price inflation over the past six years. This principle would challenge the switching from foodgrains production to biofuel feedstock production as it inevitably has an effect on foodgrains production.

The Foodgrains Bank policy briefs have noted that some increase in food commodity prices has been essential to ensure the economic viability of farming both in Canada and in developing countries. Sustainable agricultural livelihoods are a key element in long term solutions to food insecurity. Arguably, if food commodity production had been given a blanket priority over both feedgrains and biofuel feedstock production, the necessary price increases would not have taken place. It becomes then a question of degree. Policies and activities which offer small-holder farmers stable adequate prices for their crops and animals need to be carefully balanced with the importance of an affordable food supply for non-producer consumers such as the urban poor. Increasingly this rural-urban food price question is complicated by the growing presence of powerful farm input suppliers and food retailers

which end up capturing more of the market price of foods leaving less for the primary producers.

Special Status for Food Providers

For all human beings, our food undoubtedly has a special status not enjoyed by other material items. It is essential for our survival. Food Sovereignty argues that, therefore, the providers of food are in a special category of workers as their skills are vital for our survival.

The implication of this principle is that policies which force food providers to abandon their activities should be proscribed. These policies can be domestic policies or international policies, in particular trade policies. The supporters of Food Sovereignty point out that international trade policies can destroy the local market for foods through the import of cheaper substitutes, particularly the so-called 'market access' obligations inherent in many trade deals. However, export-dependent food producers in places like Canada and New Zealand (which must pay for all its imports with the returns from agricultural exports) insist that they have a right to be allowed to compete in local markets in other countries, even if it will put local food providers out of business.

This is a particularly difficult issue for the Foodgrains Bank. Among our supporters there are those whose livelihoods depend on exporting agricultural products and, to avoid flooding the international market and causing prices to drop, they want that market to be as large as possible. As a result, in the current WTO trade negotiations, Canadian agricultural negotiators have worked hard to reduce protection for food producers in developing countries and to open markets in developing countries as much as possible. There are other Canadian food producers who, like many developing country farmers, depend upon keeping imported competing products out of the Canadian market (e.g. dairy and poultry producers).

Given the Foodgrains Bank's mission to end hunger and the fact that most hungry farmers are producing for the local market, our bias should be towards ensuring that international trade policies do not damage the local markets. Healthy well-functioning local markets are vital to protecting and strengthening the livelihoods of hungry farmers. Similarly, we should support national policies which aim to achieve this goal. However, raising the protection of small-holder farmers to an absolute right, as is done by some Food Sovereignty supporters, raises other problems. The sovereignty of one sector cannot be an absolute priority over all other sectors if a society is to achieve a balance that is economically, environmentally and socially sustainable.

Stronger Links between Food Producers and Food Consumers

Strengthening the linkage between food producers and food consumers is important. It can strengthen assurances about food safety and environmental stewardship and allows food consumers to understand how their food is produced. It also recognizes the critical and necessary dependence that exists between food providers and food consumers.

In Canada where much of the diet is made up of highly processed foods, the primary link that most consumers make is to the brand name of the product and not to the producers who provided the raw materials. Furthermore, given the complexity of the modern system in Canada, the scope for direct links between food consumers and food producers is quite limited. It is important to note that, even in Canada, however, there is a growing interest by food consumers to strengthen their links to primary food producers as shown by the expansion of farmers markets and community shared agriculture schemes.

Until recently most developing countries had less complex food systems. Food consumers often purchased their food directly from food producers and this interaction was an important social interaction. Increasingly, however, large food marketing enterprises are setting themselves up between food consumers and food producers. The potential for severing the linkage between food consumers and food producers threatens to further marginalize the food producers.

Given that strong links between consumers and producers tends to favour local production for local consumption and a larger share of the food prices for primary producers and that this in turn supports rural development, there is a strong case for the Foodgrains Bank to support this principle.

Localized Control of Food and Agricultural Policies

Behind this principle is the all too common fact that in many countries food policies are developed by the urban elite or, worse, imposed from outside either through the policies of lending institutions like the IMF and World Bank or the trade rules of the World Trade Organization. The principle insists that these decisions should be made 'more locally'. However, the meaning of 'local' is not clearly defined. Sometimes it is local community, sometimes national, sometimes regional and sometimes agroecological and crossing national boundaries. Given the growing urbanization in all countries and the 'globalization' of the diets of many urban dwellers, food systems everywhere are becoming more globally integrated. This globalization and concerns about food safety is driving increasing regulation which is often only feasible at the national level. The ability of national level food and agricultural policies to serve the interests of smallholder farmers then relies on effective democratic governance to ensure that these producers have an effective voice in determining policy.

Regardless of the level of 'local' however, there is a strong case for placing the priority on 'more local' in the setting of food and agriculture policy. Currently, in many developing countries important food related policies are now being made outside the country, often against widespread protests from those who are poor and hungry, often by those who rely on agriculture for their livelihood.

Central Role for Local Knowledge

The focus on the importance of local knowledge seems to draw from two separate concerns. The first is the growing privatization of knowledge which then relies upon the market to 'distribute' new ideas. Those that have money have access while those that don't have money are denied access. This problem goes further because it removes the farmer's traditional independence by making her dependent upon the supply of essential inputs (e.g. seeds, agricultural chemicals, etc) from outside, often multinational, sources.

The second concern relates to the inherent value of local knowledge which, at its best, reflects ways of knowing which have been developed over many generations. Local knowledge is therefore often the basis for effective solutions to specific problems, even if external ideas are grafted onto it. Such locally grounded approaches may be the best option for coping with the uncertainties of climate change. Finally, new solutions to problems are more likely to last when people are able to solve their own problems using their own resources.

For all of these reasons, there is a strong case for the Foodgrains Bank to support this principle.

Biodiversity-based Low External Input Agricultural Systems

The principle of utilizing context specific approaches based on biodiversity draws on the ecological principle that greater complexity and diversity results in greater stability and adaptability. Practically speaking, this can mean avoiding the problem of relying on a single crop variety or a single animal breed which can be susceptible to devastating diseases. In addition, there is strong evidence that much higher yields of total edible crops can be achieved by inter-cropping rather than mono-cropping.

The second part of this principle is the minimization of the reliance on external inputs (e.g. fossil fuel based fertilizers, expensive (and often toxic) chemicals, privately controlled seeds, etc.) Such agricultural systems replace these inputs with local labour and often sophisticated techniques, usually highly adapted to the local setting. In this way, local farmers retain much greater control of their livelihoods. Such approaches also hold the potential of freeing farming systems from reliance on increasingly expensive and greenhouse gas-linked fossil fuel based inputs as well as providing environmental services such as reduced erosion and less water contamination.

There is a strong case for supporting such approaches. They offer the potential of important solutions to the need for sustainable agricultural systems.

It should also be noted that very significant proportions of the current food supply are dependent upon the use of fossil-fuel based fertilizers. Some argue that the global human population has risen to current levels in part because these inputs have resulted in large yield increases. Others argue that new agro-ecological approaches offer the possibility of reducing this dependency while proving that these methods, too, can substantially increase the yields of small-scale farmers. This debate is particularly active in efforts to increase agricultural production and strengthen agricultural livelihoods in Africa

Food Sovereignty and Food Security

In some debates the two terms, food sovereignty and food security, are claimed to be competing concepts used to define a just food system. Others see food security as an objective and food sovereignty as one way to achieve this objective. At minimum, the two terms direct the debate towards different but related problems – food security towards the problem of hunger and the access to food; food sovereignty towards the structure of food systems, particularly the place of food providers in that system.

The Foodgrains Bank with its mission of ‘ending hunger’ is more centrally concerned with food security, although our concern about human dignity goes beyond the simple concept of access. However, as the majority of hungry people globally are found in rural areas and mostly with agricultural livelihoods, we cannot ignore the debate about how these people are to end their hunger and food insecurity.

The Implications of Food Sovereignty for the Foodgrains Bank

Food Sovereignty as a ‘policy package’ poses several challenges for the Foodgrains Bank.

- **Critique of International Food Aid** – many of the supporters of Food Sovereignty reject international food aid, primarily because of the threat it can pose to local agricultural markets. In many cases, this is based on food aid policies such as the

selling of food aid on local markets (monetization), a practice abandoned by the Foodgrains Bank a decade ago. In others, it is the wish to remove the dependence of some hungry people on food given from outside. While all Christians should support moves to enable everyone to gain their food from their own efforts, we believe that sharing food with those who are hungry is an important Christian responsibility, although like any help it must be done in a way that protects both dignity and local livelihoods. This will generate continuing tensions with some of the supporters of Food Sovereignty.

- **Critique of the Priority on Export-Oriented Agriculture** – Food Sovereignty reasserts the importance of local production to meet local needs. In the context of the past two decades when export-oriented agriculture alone has been strongly promoted through various international policies, this critique is understandable. However, the Foodgrains Bank is the creation of farmers who are part of this model. And it is very likely that the existence of export-oriented agriculture in places like Canada is going to be an essential component of any global food security system in the future when the risk of regional crop failures is expected to increase. The Foodgrains Bank should recognize and support policies and activities encouraging local production for local consumption but resist rejecting the value and importance of export-oriented agriculture in appropriate settings.
- **Critique of Industrial Agriculture** – Food Sovereignty challenges ‘modern agriculture’ in two areas – its locus of power and its impact on the environment. The increasing use of industrial technology and the concentration of the industries providing that technology have meant that farmers have increasingly lost their independence, one of the most highly valued virtues. With the loss of independence has tended come a loss of power as well. The locus of power in the modern food system has moved to the providers of agricultural technology and its inputs as well as the processors and retailers. At the same time, the increasing standardization and the use of high energy (mostly fossil fuel based) inputs required by the modern food system have had increasingly obvious negative impacts on the environment. These environmental effects are also drawing urban audiences into the debate about industrial agriculture. The disempowering of food providers and the threat to sustainability are both important issues linked to hunger. While it may be uncomfortable for many of our rural supporters, it would be unwise to dodge an issue so closely linked to ending hunger.

Despite these challenges, the merits of Food Sovereignty can direct our attention in policy advocacy and field programming towards:

1. **A continuing commitment to support the Human Right to Adequate Food (Food for People)** – in our policy and public engagement work we must continue to engage debates on trade policy, biofuel development and feed vs. food to the extent that these issues threaten to deprive people of adequate food. In our programming we should continue to emphasize the dignity of all persons, particularly those dependent on food aid, and the importance of ensuring good nutrition, particularly for children.
2. **Strengthening the Influence of Small Food Providers (farmers, fishers, pastoralists)** – members should be encouraged to support activities that strengthen the voice of small food producers in debates about their national food and agriculture policies.

3. **Advocate for Policies that Encourage Decision Making at the Lowest Practical Level** – this has been a strong focus of Foodgrains Bank work on international trade policies where we have sought to support provisions that allow national governments the flexibility to moderate import levels for the purposes of encouraging rural development and the domestic production of food for the local market. There are many other areas where this principle applies.
4. **Promote Agricultural Methods that are based on Local Knowledge** – while not excluding the potential of modern agricultural technology, members should be encouraged to support activities that are soundly rooted in local understandings. This is particularly important in considering the role of externally introduced new innovations.
5. **Promote Agricultural Methods that Restore and Enhance the Fruitfulness of the Land** – the health of the land (including water and climate) is essential to ending hunger. Biodiversity is both a sign of and a promoter of healthy land. The use of pollution-causing inputs (e.g. greenhouse gas from chemical fertilizers, toxic chemicals, etc) may reduce the long term fruitfulness of the land. Members should be encouraged to support activities that restore the land (e.g. soil fertility activities, small scale irrigation, erosion prevention, etc) and to avoid activities that will undermine long term agricultural productivity.

Next Steps

1. **Food Sovereignty Workshop** – because Food Sovereignty is receiving so much attention by Southern civil society organizations, including some of the local partners of Foodgrains Bank members, we propose that the Foodgrains Bank membership host a workshop on food sovereignty where we invite representatives of southern partners who are advocating food sovereignty. The purpose of this workshop would be to learn more about the practical implications of food sovereignty for responding to those who are poor and hungry. Local partners UBINIG in Bangladesh and MOLAR in Sri Lanka are among these southern partners.
2. **Critical Reflection and Deliberative Dialogues** – based on the outcome of this workshop, the Public Policy Working Group will decide whether or not to request the Foodgrains Bank Public Engagement staff to develop a deliberative dialogue on food sovereignty for use with Foodgrains Bank constituents.
3. **Implications for Foodgrains Bank Policy** – if appropriate, there will be further discussions about possible food sovereignty implications for Foodgrains Bank policies.