EVAN CORNISH FOUNDATION

Food Sovereignty:

Why it matters and how we can support it

Registered Charity Number 1112703

Contents

Boxes and Figures:

1. Introduction to Food Sovereignty

"*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*."[1]

Food Sovereignty goes beyond food security; focusing on food being sustainably and ethically produced and distributed, and for people to have control over this process.

The current challenges of hunger, food insecurity and growing inequality have complex origins. From colonisation to *subtle monopoly capitalisation*, poorer countries see their land used to provide food, fodder and fuel for richer countries. These countries are locked into trade deals that dispossess them of their own land, leaving them unable to address food poverty in their own population.

Rather than dealing with such symptoms, Food Sovereignty addresses the causes. When people have true sovereignty over their food, the following systemic problems are also addressed:

a) Food security
b) Poverty
c) Environmental crises
d) Inequalities of power

In striving to achieve Food Sovereignty, we acknowledge the intrinsic relationship between these issues, and are aware it is not possible to address these problems in isolation.

A. Food Security

Short-term food security (see definition in Box 1) focuses on people having access to food, for example through food banks, international food aid or food sold at artificially low prices. These methods just treat the symptom and do not address the core issue of why people are hungry or malnourished. Furthermore, these systems are fragile and vulnerable to political whim, and do not guarantee people sustained, long-term access to food. Donor withdrawal has seen food banks run dry and financial crises have caused the shelf price of food to radically increase over night.

"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."

Box 1. The United Nations´ Food and Agriculture Organisation´s (UN FAO) 2001 definition of food security.

One of the key principles of Food Sovereignty is that everybody has a basic right to food. Food, therefore, should not be a commodity to be speculated on and sold only to the highest bidder (e.g. markets on the other side of the world, while local people suffer

[1] Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty, Nyéléni 2007

food shortages). Equally the use of the land on which food is grown should not be open to the highest bidder, for example to biofuel companies. Approaching food security through the lens of Food Sovereignty demands longevity of access to sustainable and ethically-sourced food. In other words, it looks to move to better food systems rather than provide relief from, the ongoing failures of the current systems.

Box 2. Conventional 'Solutions' to Food Insecurity: Food Aid

Historically, food aid and international intervention has been framed as the solution to food security. Food *aid*, when not given as emergency relief, can be hugely destructive; a political weapon and a commercial enterprise. The dumping of below-market price food on poorer nations - in the form of free, subsidised or cheap food - undercuts native producers and can devastate local economies, putting local producers out of business. The resultant lack of local production in turn reduces that community´s ability to feed itself and increases dependence on imported food.

Food aid is rarely given unconditionally as actual free aid. Instead it often comes as a low-interest loan, bound up with certain conditions, such as future trade agreements or policy amendments. For example, in 2002 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) offered famine-stricken Zimbabwe $50 million of food on the condition that it is used to purchase genetically modified (GM) maize. Accepting GM crops as food aid makes it more difficult for countries to resist the advances of the agricultural biotechnology industry later, which usually coincides with the loss of farmer independence and Food Sovereignty.

In 1986 Haiti was almost self-sufficient in its main staple crop – rice – importing just 7,000 tonnes annually. Later that decade Haiti complied with the free trade policies advocated by international lending agencies to lift tariffs on rice imports. This coincided with the USA´s 1985 Farm Bill, which saw heavy state subsidisation of rice (40% of US rice farmers´ profits coming from government subsidies). Lack of import tariffs on rice meant vast quantities of "cheap" North American rice flooded the Haitian market, undercutting local farmers and putting them out of business. By 1996 Haiti was importing 196,000 tonnes of rice (at the cost of $100 million a year) with negligible national production. The import of cheap rice – supposedly to alleviate food poverty in the country – has left Haiti dependent on foreign rice and at the whim of rising world grain prices.

Box 3. Conventional "Solutions" to Food Insecurity: Agricultural Industrialisation

Another common approach to food insecurity is the promotion of "modern agricultural techniques" and agribusiness. Advocates claim that farmers, by gaining access to modern agriculture machinery, chemicals and genetically modified seeds, will be able to increase yields, meaning there will be more food and less hunger. In reality however this is far from the truth.

To gain access to expensive modern agricultural machinery, farmers must take out loans – either privately or directly through the supplier –meaning they then become trapped in a cycle of debt. To keep using the equipment that their new mode of farming is dependent on, the supplier may demand that the farmer purchases upgrades or add-ons, thus perpetuating the debt.

The same is true of seeds. Traditionally, farmers would save some of the best seeds from each year´s crop to sow again the following year, and also to trade with and sell to other farmers. Modern, genetically modified seeds cannot be saved, thus necessitating the farmer to buy more each year. This lack of seed sovereignty means farmers are exposed to price fluctuations and can become further entrapped in debt. Furthermore, the lack of biodiversity in these new seed varieties - that are not adapted to local conditions - means that the seeds are at greater risk of failure due to pests, disease and climate change.

In the last two decades, almost 300,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide – many by drinking the pesticides they took out loans to buy – related to their financial insecurity.

One of the most topical examples of this approach is the G8-led ´New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition'. It is claimed that through financial aid from donor countries and big business investment in Africa´s agricultural sector, this scheme will lift 50 million people out of poverty by 2022. However, to receive this financial investment, participating African countries must change their land legislation, trade policy, taxation and seed laws to create an "enabling environment" for businesses and larger enterprises, rather than prioritising the needs of small-scale farmers or smaller enterprises working in the food system. One of the most controversial legal requisites is the adoption of strict intellectual property rights that could ban small-scale producers from developing, saving, re-using or trading seeds. On top of undermining farmers´ ability to sustain themselves and their communities, the promoted industrial, high-input model of agriculture has been proven to lead to vast environment destruction. Ten African countries and 50 multinational corporations are already signed up to the *New Alliance*.

B. Poverty

The UN defines extreme poverty as “a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services.” Food Sovereignty not only addresses basic human needs for food and for health; critically it also creates the potential for individuals and communities to generate income that enables them to alleviate other forms of poverty.

Box 4. Food Security without Food Sovereignty

When the focus is only on ensuring people have access to food - without taking the wider or longer-term impacts into account - it can appear that food security is achieved while the base for it is fatefully destabilised. Imagine a country where local food production is low: economic poverty denies farmers access to suitable equipment to grow, store and distribute their crops, and pressure to grow cash crops for export is mounting. One intervention to *resolve* this situation would be for a transnational corporation (TNC) to enter the picture– legally or otherwise – and turn vast swathes of this small-holder farmland into plantations of maize, palm or rubber. This would, in theory, boost the local economy; providing jobs and an income for the local people to buy their way out of poverty and afford a better diet… Or perhaps, as part of the agreement for the land-grab, a large quantity of imported, subsidised food is dumped in the local market to lower food prices so that everyone can afford to eat…

While this approach may provide food security for some in the short-term, the ability for those people to produce their own food in the long-term has been subverted. They are now at the mercy of the TNC and the international market: the TNC could fire its employees, or even pull out of the area altogether when the soil degrades, yields drop and the area is no longer profitable. Becoming dependent on imports to meet basic diet needs exposes people to price fluctuations and the impact of abstract occurrences on the other side of the world.

This is a dramatic example, but illustrates the risk of trying to achieve food security without focusing on Food Sovereignty. On a smaller scale, the same risk is apparent if communities become dependent on NGOs who are liable to pull out due to lack of funding or change in direction. Thus it is important that all work focuses on empowering communities to regain control and independence of their food source.

C. Environmental Crises

One of the many threats to food production is environmental degradation. Challenges that food producers are currently facing include soil erosion, desertification, climate change, the introduction and proliferation of non-native species and diseases, loss of biodiversity and reduced crop genetic diversity.

The resultant effects of these adverse conditions disproportionately affect the world´s poorest in two ways:

1. If conditions result in a low harvest and food prices increase, those with less money can´t afford to buy their way out of the situation;

2. Geographically, the extreme weather effects of climate change are experienced across the world´s poorest countries whilst the richest countries remain relatively unaffected.

Any advances towards a more socially and economically stable and sustainable food system could be undermined by the inability to actually produce food.

This highlights the need for food production to be sustainable environmentally, as well as socially and economically.

D. Inequalities of Power

Providing nutritious food for all involves a whole series of decisions and a range of participants. Over the past few decades the power to influence those decisions has been increasingly dominated by a small number of large actors. A few transnational corporations, through an on-going process of mergers and acquisitions, now dominate most areas of the food chain from land, seeds, production technologies, marketing and distribution. This dominance has accelerated as this concentration of power has heavily influenced trade policy, national policy, how new technologies have been adopted, and how the interests of TNCs have been prioritised over smaller more localised growers, farmers and more localised infrastructure.

This has led to increasing use of mono-cultural agriculture designed to serve large corporate markets with mass quantities of single crops. Specialist agricultural machinery and chemicals are often required, with farmers being forced to make upfront investments that lock them into debt. Placing ‘all their eggs in one basket’ can mean that drought or disease can see an entire crop fail leaving farmers further in debt. To make matters worse this technique has been shown to increase soil erosion and reduce biodiversity. These crops include biofuels for exports to richer countries rather than food crops.

This inequality of power over decisions in the food chain exacerbates the problems of environmental damage, food security and income inequality within poorer countries. To make matters worse international trade agreements make it difficult for local, regional and national governments to redress this imbalance as many policies aimed at small

holders and territorial markets could be considered to contravene World Trade Organisations rules.

Box 5. Seed Laws that Criminalise Farmers

Seeds are one of the irreplaceable pillars of food production. Almost all farming communities know how to save, store and share seeds. Millions of families and farming communities have worked to create hundreds of crops and thousands of varieties of these crops made to adapt to different conditions, climates and topographies. This is what has allowed farming to spread, grow and feed the world with a diversified diet.

Over the past several decades the role of seeds in food systems has changed. The development of global commodity chains and the unprecedented reliance upon export agriculture have accelerated the separation of plant breeding and seed production from farming itself. This has resulted in local or peasant seed varieties gradually being replaced by industrial varieties. In the last 20 years a new wave of seed laws, that move beyond a small number of mass-produced crops to cover nearly all crops grown, have been pushed in national and international policy. Where these laws are passed it makes it almost impossible for farmers to save and share seeds and makes them dependent on purchased seeds which often require the purchase of agrochemicals.

These new seed laws reinforce the more fundamental laws passed in countries around the world giving corporations ownership over lifeforms. Two of the types of seed laws are marketing laws and intellectual property laws. Marketing laws define the criteria that must be met in order for seeds to be put on the market, but these usually relate to how industrial seeds are developed, and exclude peasant seeds. For example, marketing laws typically require a 'value for cultivation and use', usually referring to a seed's yield under mono-cropping cultivation, dependent on a large amount of chemical fertilisers. In many of these laws 'marketing' is not restricted to monetary sales alone but includes free exchange, bartering, the transfer of seeds within networks or even just giving seeds as gifts. Intellectual property laws applied to seeds are regulations that recognise a person or an entity, most often a seed company, as the exclusive owner of seeds having specific characteristics. The owner then has the legal right to prevent others from using, producing, exchanging or selling them.

Farmers and peasants from around the world are mounting resistance to this latest phase of expanding corporate power in food systems at the expense of their communities. This social mobilisation seeks to block what inevitably have been identified as the "Monsanto laws". In some countries, counter-legal initiatives have been promoted that seek to protect localized food systems and farmer autonomy and in other countries, such as Chile, there have been successes in stopping new laws being passed. This resistance requires collective action over long periods. Via Campesina, the international face of this mobilization, states "perhaps the most important lesson to be learned is that this is a long battle. Our common experience has been that, after the short respite following the defeat of a seed law, business and government return to the fray".

2. What is Food Sovereignty and how is it a solution to these interrelated problems?

Food Sovereignty is an approach developed to address these four interconnected problems. It recognises that making substantial progress on any of these issues relies on addressing the others as well. For example, addressing food security in a meaningful ongoing way requires an approach that also reduces social and economic inequality, improves environmental security, and shifts power from a small number of financial interests to the people and communities.

The current global food system exacerbates the problems of food security, poverty, environmental crises and inequalities of power even when it is working 'well'. Food Sovereignty, in its purest form, must therefore focus on changing the current system altogether, instead of trying to improve existing policies.

2.1 It puts people before profit

Food Sovereignty "emphasises the right that all should have access to suitable food"[2]. It does not deny the role markets can and do play in the food chain but it firmly places these roles as serving people and communities. In this sense it is a reaction to the rise of the extremely powerful corporations and the trade deals that benefit them; deals that have forced people and communities to serve global markets that make extraordinary profits for a small number of corporations, usually from rich countries on the other side of the globe. Food Sovereignty is an essential precursor to real food security and includes "the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity" (Via Campesina 1996). This notion of social control and influence over the food system is central to food sovereignty.

2.2 It strengthens local and regional food economies

Food Sovereignty highlights the importance of localised food systems controlled by the producers themselves. One of the crucial elements of Food Sovereignty is that producers and consumers have autonomous control over local markets. Small holders are better remunerated and consumers do not have to pay more to enjoy a wide range of produce. Strengthening the links between food producers builds an appreciation of the value of local and seasonal foods and shortens the distribution chain. Localised food systems are inclusive; offering far more equal opportunities for women and older people. Critically, strong local food systems mean a greater proportion of wealth is retained within the local economy and circulates to create more benefits. Selling produce to global markets and importing a greater proportion of food means that a far higher proportion of wealth leaves the local economy. Local and regional markets also support solidarity and cooperation within food systems,

[2] Andreas Bieler: Global Corporations, Trade and Investment: Free Trade to Fair Trade? (Paper presented at the first meeting of the Futures Commission on Alternatives to Neoliberalism; Johannesburg/South Africa, 24 and 25 June 2013.)

for example through shared use of processing equipment or cooperative marketing and distribution. Beyond their important economic benefits local markets serve as important places for information sharing, community bonding and socialising.

2.3 It reduces corporate power

Food Sovereignty has to address the powerful interests that currently control food systems as well as offering the positive alternative described above. Food Sovereignty seeks to reverse the growth of corporate influence over public policy on food around the world, whether through trade liberalisation or direct influence over policy makers within countries. The inequalities of power in food systems were described above. Food Sovereignty demands not only that no more control of food systems is given away to corporations but that public bodies take back control to ensure that "people are in charge of their own destiny and are in a position to decide what to plant, allowing them to prioritise their own needs for food". Critical issues currently include: land grabbing, water privatisation, seed ownership, food dumping, intellectual property rights on living organisms, extensive biofuel production and trade rules that prevent public policy support for localised food systems.

2.4 It respects future generations

Food Sovereignty "defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation" (Nyeleni). Producing food in a way that works with, not against, the natural environment (agroecology) can give greater productivity. By conserving and not degrading the soil, agroecology ensures the possibility of future food production. Food Sovereignty promotes agro-ecological production and harvesting. These techniques optimise the use of local materials and knowledge, and minimise the use of external inputs. This way, producers are not subject to price fluctuations for basic materials; something that currently causes many producers to become trapped in debt.

3. How Food Sovereignty will be progressed: the Theory of Change

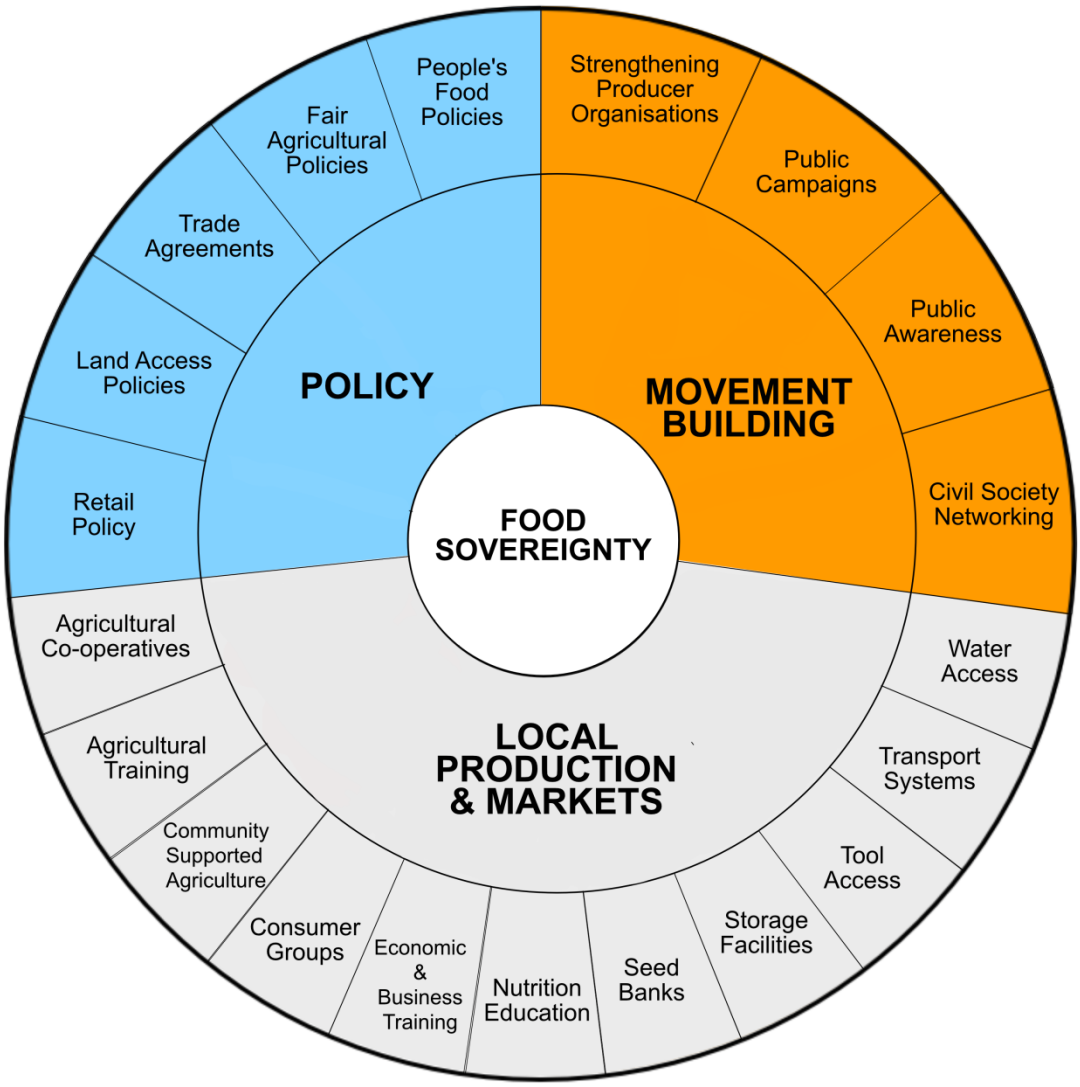
There are three main strategies to promoting Food Sovereignty: through **policy**, through **movement building**, and through improving **local production and markets** (see **Figure 1**).

It is crucial that progress is made in all three of these areas to create a resilient and just food system. Failure to resolve issues in one of these areas could undermine progress made in the other two.

For example, progress in increasing local food production and strengthening local markets could be thwarted if there are not policies in place to protect people´s land rights and prevent a multinational corporation turning their fields into a single large plantation. Alternatively, a strong, unified peasants´ movement that manages to get land, seed, water and market rights enshrined in law will not bring about Food

Sovereignty alone if there is not capacity to increase local production and marketing of food.

Figure 1. The three main strategy areas to work towards food sovereignty: local production and markets, movement building, and policy. The outer ring gives examples of tactics that can be used within each strategy. All three of these must be addressed to make genuine progress toward a more food sovereign world.



POLICY	
People´s Food Policies	…that legally enshrine the right of people to sustainable and ethical food
Fair Agricultural Policies	…that support small-scale, non-industrial farmers
Trade Agreements	…that protect local markets from being flooded with imports, whilst encouraging healthy trade
Land Access Policies	…that assist peasants to gain access to land to grow food and protect it from corporate land grabs
Retail Policy	…that ensures that farmers receive a fair price for their produce and protects them from aggressive marketing

MOVEMENT BUILDING	
Strengthening Producer Organisations	…that support local, national and international co-operation between food producers
Public Awareness	…that allows consumers to make informed choices about their interaction with the food system
Public Campaigns	…that encourage the public to get involved with demanding specific immediate actions, e.g. securing land access, promoting gender equality
Civil Society Networking	…that links actors in different sectors to form an effective and unified movement

LOCAL PRODUCTION & MARKETS	
Agricultural Training	…to share knowledge of how to produce food effectively and sustainably
Seed Banks	…to conserve and share locally adapted varieties and promote farmer co-operation
Tool Access	…to improve efficiency of production
Water Access	…wells, small-scale dams and irrigation systems secure water sources necessary for production
Agricultural Co-operatives	…that allow local producers to benefit from production, processing and marketing economies of scale while maintaining autonomy
Transport Systems	…that improve produce distribution and reduce waste
Storage Facilities	…that maintain produce between harvest and plate and reduce wastage
Consumer Groups	…that empower people to buy better food directly from the producers for a better price for all
Community Supported Agriculture	..that gives producers financial stability and consumers access to fresh local food regardless of economic wealth
Economic & Business Training	…to help small-scale producers better market their produce and sustainably manage their business
Nutrition Education	…that teaches people how to eat healthily using local, seasonal produce

4. Advancing Food Sovereignty: How ECF can fund change

Food Sovereignty is about systemic change in how food systems work. This means it is complex and long-term. The Evan Cornish Foundation is just one of many funders aiming to help Food Sovereignty develop. In contributing to advancing Food Sovereignty ECF will keep systemic change at the centre of decisions over which activities to fund.

We will do this in three ways:

1. We will support activities that further Food Sovereignty through any of the three strategies identified above: through policy, through movement building, and through improving local production and markets. This enables ECF to keep an informed overview on Food Sovereignty.

2. We will be particularly keen to support projects that integrate more than one of these strategies. Even in small-scale projects these different elements will be important and projects that are able to effectively make the linkages between these elements are often more likely to contribute to long-term change as well as meeting short-term objectives.

3. We will support projects that focus on achieving specific outcomes where the application also shows an awareness of how the work fits into the bigger movement towards Food Sovereignty. An awareness of the struggles in other strategy areas for Food Sovereignty can help to adapt actions and facilitate other groups´ work in these areas. For example, an organisation that works to secure community access to land could also empower oppressed women and challenge patriarchy by ensuring equal land rights for men and women rather than providing land to the first members of the community to step forward. Organisations that offer agricultural training could share awareness about relevant current policy and movements to improve this while also helping to network and link small-scale farmers.

We will review this holistic approach in one year to seek improvements for increasing co-operation and synergy between organisations working towards Food Sovereignty.

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For the Evan Cornish Foundation
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