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Food Sovereignty and the Right of Farmers



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Definition

Food sovereignty is the right of people 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. The concept was first framed by the international peasant movement La Vía Campesina at the World Food Summit in 1996.

Introduction

In international organization political panel and documents, the concept of right to food is often present. These last 20 years have seen another concept: food sovereignty, certainly including that of food safety, but focuses attention on every people's right to own his land and to

cultivate and distribute local produce. Food sovereignty has recently found full citizenship in Ecuador's and Bolivia's constitutions. Not casually these are two South American countries, where land possession has generated important political and social changes, with the hard and complex overcoming of grave injustice.

The concept of food sovereignty is fostered by many associations and nongovernmental organization. The most relevant is Via Campesina, an international movement gathering millions of peasants, farmers, women, natives, migrants, and land workers all over the world. Today it comprises about 150 local and national organizations in 70 countries of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, in all 200 million people. It fosters sustainable agriculture as a means for promoting social justice and dignity. It firmly opposes industrial agriculture led by multinationals and fights for free access to water and soil (Shattuck and Schiavoni 2018; Trauger 2018).

Vía Campesina and other organizations in civil society also have other objectives: ensure fair prices, by protecting internal markets from low-cost imports (commercial dumping); recognize and promote women role in controlling and producing food; support public investments fostering family and community in sustainable cultivations; grant protection to seeds that are the basis of food and life, banning seed patents; and adopt a moratorium delaying the growing genetically modified

organisms that lead to genetic contamination, thus endangering biodiversity (Desmarais et al. 2017; Garde and De Schutter 2017).

One key element is the diffusion of bio and sustainable farming. Switching from industrial to organic produce isn't simple for a series of economic, commercial, and cultural reasons. Anyway world market for organic products is widening the world over, and consumers appreciate them for their authenticity and healthiness. The prospect is to develop an agroecological system of production and distribution of food by respecting the environment, the landscape, and periodicity (Pérez-Vitoria 2010). The respect for agricultural ecosystem allows the defense of biodiversity. A sustainable agriculture must improve or preserve sustainable resources and reduce dependence from those nonrenewable; preserve or improve ecosystems diversity also for granting an adequate resilience; preserve or improve soil organic matter; prevent soil erosion; not use pesticides and fertilizers of synthetic origin, thus avoiding any contamination; safeguard human and animals health; employ and develop technologies based on the knowledge of biosystems; promote rural culture, vitality, and social organization; increment the number of farms, especially if family run; produce food of high nutritional quality and in sufficient quantities; allow farmers to live on their work and develop their potentials as human beings; employ decentralized systems for transforming, distributing, and selling products; create ethically pleasing farming systems; and keep and maintain life forms present in the cultivation context and their habitat. These principles achieve multifunctionality in agriculture, both considering the various productive processes and a better remuneration for small farmers.

These targets seem feasible at least in the mid-term but need movements like *Vía Campesina* and politicians' help to support the principles of food sovereignty at an institutional level, like it has already happened in Ecuador and Bolivia. There are many obstacles between the realization of a fair social justice and a full economic democracy (Wilson 2016; Trauger 2018).

Globalization hasn't improved the fate of emerging countries' agriculture, because global

markets have favored economism and a regime of intensive land exploitation, to meet the ever-increasing demand for produces and meat (Marsden 2013; Edelman 2017). In many countries the maximum agricultural output (China's rice and wheat in China, corn in the USA) has been reached, so soils are exhausted, and in the near future, they won't be able to assure the same performances. In some emerging countries, farmers have been dispossessed of their strips of land, which granted them sheer subsistence, in order to create large estates.

Water is also heavily exploited for agricultural and livestock farming, with a progressive reduction in water resources. Severe turmoil is happening where water is a scarce resource (Shiva 2002). Property of water sources becomes fundamental, and public institutions find it hard to distribute it to all farmers at reasonable prices. Water is a precious asset, now considered as the blue gold, but for now at international level, no procedure is foreseen in order to turn it into a public necessity and subtract it from the market dynamics (Shiva 2006). In the future there's the risk of commercial battles raging for water access, especially where rivers and lakes border more nations.

The ever-increasing international panel around these problems has led public opinion to reconsider the link between city and rural areas, welfare and life quality, the new local approach to food, the connection between North and South, and biologic and sustainable farming (Morin 2011). Global society becomes an important representative before supranational organizations that are to determine world economic and agricultural policies, as well as produce traceability and foresee the effect of climate changes (Pritchard 2013). These are decisive choices concerning the future of agriculture and hence the future of humanity, which cannot be influenced solely by economic, geopolitical, and financial factors but that must consider farmers and consumers' needs (Midgley 2013; Belasco 2008), in particular financialization of agriculture (Clapp 2012), one of the causes for the increase in price levels in 2007/2008 and 2010/2011 which sets a dramatic difference between real and virtual economy. A protocol constraining world stock exchange

market on agricultural produce is required, so as to avoid speculations afflicting whole nations, especially the emerging ones.

For the time being, though, the great demand for first-generation biofuels has led to a change in cultivated species to the advantage of monoculture, with a significant reduction of biodiversity and the loss of much knowledge on the territory. Besides the loss of essential foodstuffs for human consumption, we must add the loss of technical know-how, the art of growing plants and that of recipes based on typical produce. Orally passed-down agriculture risks disappearing and changing the identity of persons and populations (Carolan 2012). Biodiversity in all its dimensions, cultural, social, and agricultural, disappears along with a huge heritage.

Moreover we should evaluate the substantial increase of meat consumption in some emerging countries with the subsequent need for sufficiently vast land to allow animal farming. It becomes apparent why in the last decade land grabbing, consisting in the purchase of land in different parts of the world when national territory cannot satisfy all energetic and dietary needs, has become so intense (Clapp 2012). Sometimes this procedure was born out of sheer financial speculation. African countries are the main victims of this hunger for land, particularly Sudan and South Sudan, Congo, Mozambique, Liberia, and Sierra Leone which are the most fragile from a political and institutional point of view. No continent, nevertheless, can escape from this, and countries affected by consistent land grabbing are Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Brazil, and Ukraine. In reference to emerging countries, this is a sort of neocolonialism, fought by farmers and activists belonging to land movements, although with scarce success.

Pacts between local governments and the big industries, sovereign wealth funds, western countries, and emerging countries are often discussed in secrecy, so it becomes arduous to oppose them and create mass movements. Protests from locals are often late and are powerless toward property and exploitation rights. Rights are sacrificed for profit making, and a real food democracy is missing, a context where ecology is more valuable than economy. What is more, land grabbing hasn't got a high

cost, even because buyers agree to build the necessary infrastructures in exchange for land purchase or lease. These infrastructures are only advantageous for those who manage the land, and also economic growth is mainly enjoyed by foreign enterprises. Only in rare circumstances the intervention from the nations acquiring the land really promotes social and economic development in the territory. Probably awareness for this issue shall increase when land grabbing will affect the north of the world more significantly than it has done so far. Land purchase by multinationals and foreign sovereign wealth funds has already happened in Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, and recently also in France, Austria, and Switzerland. Solidarity among all nations experiencing losses of land and reduced farming possibility is necessary, to avoid any imposition from those foreign entities fostering economic and financial interests. The right to food sovereignty is paramount especially in emerging countries, where farming is still an important sector of their economies and people draw their cultural and social identities from the land (Morin 2011). The respect for farmers' dignity allows for a social and economic development of the territory, with programs of professional formation and instruction, the implementation of structures and services fitting local needs, and the modernization of working techniques according to a sustainable perspective. The right balance between tradition and innovation, technology, and naturality will be achieved, thus allowing the full implementation of the agricultural potentialities in the countries south of the world, 70% of which are importers of land products.

In the last few years also, ocean grabbing has begun, with operations of intense fishing, in the proximity of emerging countries. Agreements penalizing local fishermen are subscribed, with unstated catches, incursions in protected waters, and misappropriation of resources. There is a patent imbalance between the fishing capabilities of industrial fleets and the acceptable volumes for a sustainable catch. Ocean grabbing is far less known and discussed than land grabbing, but it is likewise alarming, since the sea represents one of the major reservoirs of animal proteins. We are witnessing a depletion of fish stocks due to

overfishing by industrial fleets, with a resulting impact over marine environment and sustainable fishery. Moreover large fishing fleets lead to a major waste of resources, through the elimination of part of the catch, while small operators tend to fully exploit it and throw back to sea only a negligible amount of small-size fishes or with little economical value but with good food properties. Also the sea needs particular attention because important facts concerning our health, including food sustainability and sovereignty, happen there.

Food Sovereignty in the Constitution of Ecuador

We have already seen that Ecuador and Bolivia have issued their constitutions including specific references to food sovereignty. We analyze in particular the Ecuadorian case that we have examined also following the thesis at the Università di Scienze Gastronomiche. The student, Claudia García, returned to Ecuador after graduating and is now dealing with sustainable agriculture. The study of Ecuador's reality is particularly interesting because the concept of food and nourishment is closely related to a specific idea of wellness pertaining to the indigenous population, which in Spanish translates as "buen vivir." Here we find a conception of food and lifestyle different from the current western model.

Daily routines in the Andes, such as cooking or farming, have an epistemological character since they are spaces of common interaction. *Pachamanka*, Andean method of cooking food covering it with earth, is closely related to food sovereignty. The methods for preparing and consuming food are the reflection of culture and environment within a certain context. The food system represents a relationship, both self-centered and related to the others, as a strategy for survival and individual and collective wellness.

Ecuador's new constitution (2008) includes the *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir* as a main principle. It declares a new relation with nature and states that nature is subject of rights and respect, a new horizon of coexistence and within a plurinational

democracy, a new model of economy based on solidarity and equity, and a new democracy based on reinforced citizens' participation. In this background food sovereignty, that is, the right to decide over one's food, becomes a multi-disciplinary strategic objective, a platform for developing public policies aiming at inverting the destructive logic of the dominant agro-industrial model and at reaching the *sumak kawsay* (Kreimer 2005; Acosta 2013).

Both *pachamanka* and food sovereignty are "cooking" spaces: of food and ideas. These food systems operate on the basis of communitarian reciprocity and represent two epistemological levels, not only for understanding but for "breeding" the *sumak kawsay*, well living.

In the Andean vision of the world, cooking has its own complex identity. The Andes are a mountain range with the most varied climates and micro-climates on earth, presenting a vast biodiversity. Human survival may seem easy in such favorable conditions; in reality it appears difficult and complex right because of the frequent climate changes. *Pachamanka* is a very ancient method of cooking – able to bake large quantities of food with small quantities of firewood – inside a hole in the ground with the aid of stones previously heated at high temperatures. Foodstuffs and stones are sealed with earth to prevent vapor from escaping. *Pachamanka* in *kichwa* language means "earth pot."

The origin and the use of this natural pot flourish in culturally strong areas, considered as pivots for the development of the continent: around the Titicaca lake in Bolivia and Peru, in the Cusco valley, in Mantaro, and in Arequipa. In Ecuador it is practiced in the highlands of Tungurahua, Imbabura, and Loja. *Pachamanka* is also common with the Mapuches, Guaranies, Aymaras, and Quechuas in Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay.

Society, in the Andean vision, doesn't only comprise a group of persons living together in a more or less organized community but also includes nonhuman entities, that is, nature as a whole: this is the community, "common-unity." Persons are not outside the network constituted by universe and by nature, and man doesn't occupy a privileged place. Everything comes out of two sources: *Pachata* meaning "father universe, energy

of cosmic force” and *Pachamama* the nature, “mother earth, energy or telluric forces.” In the Andean world, “everything is alive, everything hears, everything thinks and speaks and the plants, animals or stones are the transitional status through which all must pass”.

In a nature that is alive and full of energy, food is considered likewise and deservedly appreciated as such, at least with respect and affection, or else it could originate contrary effects: instead of nourishing it could cause illnesses. The vivid character of nature is revealed in the ancestral agricultural and dietary practices: in *pachamanka* to treat grains well means to use produce in full maturity, without interrupting the cooking process; otherwise they get hurt, and they weep and suffer.

The indigenous populations have established their principles of survival and coexistence in harmony with nature, living in a community where common practices are reciprocity, duality, and complementarity. In *pachamanka* all elements are complementary in their diversity of form and exist within an organic equilibrium, functional within the harmony of the whole. Fire and stone heating ensure that food is not corrupted by the negative energies of evil gods. They purify food and offer a positive contamination.

In the Andean world, individual well-being is not separated from mutual well-being. In *kichwa* language, for example, the equivalent for the word “health” is the very *sumak kawsay*. Health is not only related to the well-being of the human body, or personal well-being, but also to that of the surroundings, both material and spiritual, a well-being together with the totality.

The harmonic life or communitarian paradigm of *sumak kawsay* suggests to not consume more than the ecosystem can bear and to avoid wastes that cannot be safely absorbed. It also invites to recycle and reuse all that’s been already used and cannot be conceived without community. It contradicts the capitalistic logic, the monetization of life, the degeneration of human beings, and the vision of nature as a resource that can be exploited (Huanacuni Mamani 2010).

So economy is the form by which people decide to enter in relation with all existing entities, and, in this instance, its aim is not accumulation

but life equilibrium. Andean people start from the awareness that everything is intertwined and everybody has a complementary role. Everybody has the right to be in touch with mother earth, meaning that one gives and receives following one’s needs and responsibilities: nature is no longer seen as a factor of production but as an aspect of the social frame, and complementarity generates distribution in accordance with the needs of that particular moment (Huanacuni Mamani 2010). Hierarchies don’t exist but only complementary natural responsibilities, like a tree producing oxygen and absorbing carbon dioxide or the stones cooking foodstuffs, thanks to the heat produced by fire.

The indigenous populations with the request of multinationality, the farmers’ movement claiming land and water, and the constant mobilization for education and health have created a wide social and political mobilization that has led to deep changes.

The principal outcome of popular mobilization is the new Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008, born out of the will to translate the principles and the essence of communitarian well-being of *sumak kawsay* introducing new legal persons in accordance with the *buen vivir*. Within the Constitution nature becomes subject of rights: “Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes (art. 71).”

Following the acknowledgment of nature as subject of rights, others are inferred such as the following: access to water, national strategic asset for use by the public, and it is unalienable, not subject to a statute of limitations, immune from seizure, and essential for life (art. 12) and access to healthy, sufficient, and nutritional food, preferably produced locally (art. 13). These rights must grant the right of the population to live in a healthy and ecologically balanced environment where environmental conservation, the protection of ecosystems, biodiversity, the integrity of the country’s genetic asset, the prevention of environmental damage, and the recovery of degraded natural spaces are declared of public interest (art.

14). The State shall promote, in the public and private sectors, the use of environmentally clean technologies and of alternative sources of energy and shall forbid technologies, agents, agrochemicals, or organisms harmful to human health or ecosystems (art. 15).

The necessity for a redistribution of wealth is recognized and the vision of food sovereignty is inserted in the Constitution (art. 13).

Considering food sovereignty within the Constitution is an important step in acknowledging farmers' production as fundamental in rural development. Food sovereignty in the Constitution is a strategic objective and an obligation of the State in order to ensure that persons, communities, peoples, and nations achieve self-sufficiency with respect to healthy and culturally appropriate food on a permanent basis (art. 281).

It becomes the supervisor of agricultural policies and of recovery of the biodiversity, considering that besides accumulation of power and destruction of local economies, the damage that conventional agriculture represents toward biodiversity is relevant. It generates considerable damages of soil consumption due to monoculture and to the use of agrochemicals and toxic fertilizers and causes scarcity of water and loss of biodiversity.

In the *Ley Orgánica del Régimen de la Soberanía Alimentaria* (LORSA), approved in 2009, agroecology is fully endorsed as a means of food production able to contrast the actual crisis of the food system. The LORSA has the purpose of establishing the procedures by which the State fulfils his obligation and strategic objective of granting every person, community, and people self-sufficiency for healthy, nourishing, and culturally appropriate food on a permanent basis. "Food sovereignty is made up of all the connected rules and regulations, with the purpose of establishing public agro-food policies in order to develop the production and appropriate conservation, exchange, transformation, marketing and consumption of healthy and nourishing products" (LORSA, art 1).

Food sovereignty describes relations of aware and sustainable production, distribution, and consumption by interconnecting the agents involved in

the different phases. The experiences of communitarian economy are interesting examples of these dynamics. Many of them are born out of the social movement articulation and, at the same time, are the spring for new exchanges and articulations, creating a more systematic and diversified economy, in few words more communitarian.

Such is the case, for instance, of *Red Nacional Mar, Tierra y Canasta*, a network of 900 families in 18 Ecuadorean neighborhoods composed of groups of farmers, fishermen, and consumers, organized so to grant the ethical marketing of foodstuffs, through the "canasts comunitarias" or communitarian basket. The network is an interesting symbolic national agent because it deals with an agroecological production, a democratic distribution of food, and a healthy and responsible consumption, together with a constant and significant consideration of the effectiveness this fact has over public policies and with the national and international exchange experiences.

The network is also part of the *Movimiento de Economía Social y Solidal de Ecuador*, an organization implementing experiences of social economy in the country. It deals with the routines, abilities, and experiences within the different family activities concerning production, distribution, and consumption. These connected realities make clear the effort for a communitarian economy and for a food sovereignty whose objective is the community well-being.

The national campaign for food sovereignty *Come Sano, Seguro y Soberano* has been the result of the social diffusion of *sumak kawsay*. This public campaign has its origin in the collective interest to change conventional food system and represents a reinforced fight for a food sovereignty politically incorporated within the new Constitution. This campaign has had the opportunity to merge the different social movements involved in similar activities and to connect ideas so as to inform the citizens about the new rights and their responsibilities.

The well-being, in view of its communitarian nature, invites to political participation, and the new Constitution establishes that citizens, individually and collectively, shall participate as leading players in decisionmaking, planning, and

management of public affairs and in the people's monitoring of State institutions and society and their representatives in an ongoing process of building citizen power on the basis of the principles of equality, autonomy, public deliberation, respect for differences, monitoring by the public, solidarity, and interculturalism (art. 95). Food sovereignty is a principle around which every people builds his strategies and methods of food production, distribution, and consumption.

Nevertheless, this process of development has encountered some obstacles. With the intensive monoculture of cereals, like maize and rice, and forest palm oil plantations (along the coast and in the Amazon) cultivation is expanding towards the delicate Andean ecosystems (the *paramos*). There are projects for the introduction of agro-based biofuels in the south and along the coast of the country. The project of cultivating genetically modified plants is being discussed, bypassing the prohibition declared in the Constitution. In addition, prawn farming, which has caused the disappearing of 70% of mangrove forests along the country's littoral, has been granted by the law, without prohibiting the environment-endangering practices. The members of social movements see that signals in favor of agroecological family farming are not clear. Politicians' good intentions and declarations haven't always had a coherent effect on everyday life. Food sovereignty represents an opportunity for inverting the logic of conventional agro-food industry, but it needs a thorough attention from the communities and the constant endorsement from the institutions.

These difficulties of implementation don't reduce the historical importance of Ecuador's Constitution having introduced food sovereignty as one of the fundamental principles in its national economy, recognizing the value of territory and rural labor. In 2009 Bolivia's Constitution too has granted indigenous peasants rights. We shall see in the next years if this legislative model will be followed by other South American countries and if it will cross the continent boundaries. I think it's important to reflect on these crucial changes, on how to conceive the world of agriculture and its relation with the land.

Conclusions

The case of the new Constitution of Ecuador shows how in some countries the concept of food sovereignty is developing, both at the level of movements and associations and institutional. However, there is still a long way to cover in order to change the situations of difficulty and hardship that farmers and producers face in the daily exercise of their activity. The universal proclamation of the right to land is an important but difficult goal to reach. We need to overcome situations of privilege, consolidated interests, and very structured forms of power.

In this perspective, food sovereignty is a fundamental objective for goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals, established in September 2015 by the UN General Assembly. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes 17 SDGs, which should guide global political and economic choices in the coming years. Goal 2 sets the objectives of defeating hunger, achieving food security, improving nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture. It's evident that it's not possible to imagine the sustainability of agriculture without guaranteeing food sovereignty and peasants rights. With everyone's effort a positive result by 2020 is possible. All the world has feel involved in this task to ensure better living conditions for the most defenseless people and a true social justice in every country.

Also the citizens should participate in a virtuous process that sees them as critical and active consumers, able to distinguish between sustainable food and products that derive from the exploitation of human resources, animals, and nature. The movements and associations that fight for food sovereignty have the task of effectively representing the requests coming from the farming communities and of being proactive in influencing the agricultural and economic policies of the States. Public institutions and governments are called to profoundly change their actions for supporting and spreading sustainable agriculture practices and the universal affirmation of food sovereignty (Barkin 2018).

Cross-References

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