

Theme overview

Women and food sovereignty

Most of the world's food is grown, collected and harvested by over 2.5 billion small-scale farmers, pastoralists, forest dwellers and fisherfolk – more than half of whom are women. Women's knowledge and labour play a key role in sustaining the many diverse, local food systems that still exist today throughout the world, particularly in developing countries.

Michel Pimbert

Photo: Find your feet



Supporting women is supporting their families.

Many people derive their incomes and livelihoods from selling, processing and exchanging local food. Think of all the small food industries in every quarter of cities in countries in the South, and women serving lunch and dinner in their food stalls on every street corner. Localised food systems provide the foundations of people's nutrition, incomes, economies and culture throughout the world. They start at the household level and expand to neighbourhood, municipality and regions. Such food systems constitute a whole network of local organisations, each active in different sectors of the food chain: production, storage and distribution. Women make up most of the workforce of local food systems. They contribute decisively to food security and local economy.

Global developments at local level

Governments and global food industries make us believe that a new era is coming, in which big companies will produce food for everyone. The current political agenda is so dominant that the press, universities, schools and extension services all implicitly promote "free markets" as the only and best way for development. This implies that small-scale farming is outdated: small farmers will leave their villages and settle in cities, where they will find employment in industry or services, and they will buy their food from the local supermarket that sells food from all the continents. If a harvest fails in one global region, then another supplier will step in. This "food security" agenda promises bulk food production so that there will be enough food for all on the planet.

It is an interesting vision. But, do free markets provide the best food security? Free trade has been promoted in the past decades, and yet, last year, markets showed that they are not the stable food suppliers we were made to believe. In early 2008, investors started hoarding food, the price of rice peaked, and importing countries

were hardest hit. Local food prices doubled and the number of hungry people increased by almost 200 million worldwide.

Food prices in such a system may go up or down dramatically, pushing more and more people into poverty. These developments are out of the control of rural people and even of governments. This is more a threat to women than to men, for in most rural households, it is women who are responsible for putting food on the table every day.

Women and food: Some facts and figures

- Rural women are the main producers of the world's staple crops –rice, wheat, maize, sorghum and millets– which provide up to 90 percent of the rural poor's food intake.
- In Southeast Asia, women provide up to 90 percent of labour for rice cultivation.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, women produce up to 80 percent of basic foodstuffs both for household consumption and for sale.
- Women perform from 25 to 45 percent of agricultural field tasks in Colombia and Peru.
- Women constitute 53 percent of the agricultural labour in Egypt.
- Fewer than 10 percent of women farmers in India, Nepal and Thailand own land.
- An analysis of credit schemes in five African countries found that women received less than 10 percent of the credit awarded to male smallholders.
- Only 15 percent of the world's agricultural extension agents are women.

(Source: www.fao.org/gender/en/agrib4-e.htm)

The right to food and sustainable food production

Fortunately, free market development is not the only development option. There are other development models for the future of food and farming. Farmers, food workers, nomadic pastoralists and indigenous peoples have a role to play in a more reliable global food system. Especially if they are women.

The food sovereignty model is such an option. The concept of food sovereignty had already been under discussion for a few years when it was released at the International Conference of La Vía Campesina in Tlaxcala, Mexico, in April 1996. In the words of La Vía Campesina:

“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 (...). 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 and to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.”

During the 1996 World Food Summit, held in Rome, Italy, La Vía Campesina presented a set of mutually supportive principles that offered an alternative to the world trade policies and would realize the human right to food. Food sovereignty thus implies the right of individuals, peoples, communities and countries to:

- safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources;

Photo: Find your feet



Rajkishuri, Chandana and Kamla participate in a self-help group in Panchayat, India, and gain knowledge and self-confidence, which is crucial to voice their needs and interests in the community.

- define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food, land and water management policies which are ecologically, economically and socio-culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances;
- manage, use and control life-sustaining natural resources: land, waters, seeds, livestock breeds and wider agricultural biodiversity, unrestricted by intellectual property rights and free from genetically manipulated organisms;

Bartering for a diverse diet

Autonomous and sovereign food systems are not just an illusion. In fact, many examples already exist. People are very creative in combining opportunities and keeping control over their livelihoods. The chalayplasa in Peru is a network of local food markets based on bartering that has gained importance during the last decade. It is a response to imperfections of the cash economy and permits rural families to eat more types of food products than they can grow themselves.

Selling fruits and maize in the barter market.



Photo: IIED

The barter markets take place in the Lares valley in the southeastern Andes. The region is about 3600 km², encompassing some 30 communities, with more than 4000 people exchanging on the markets. There are three agro-ecological zones: the *yunga* (<2300 m above sea level), the *quechua* (2300-3500 m) and the *puna* (>3500 m). At the weekly market in Lares, *yunga* women bring up their fruit, coffee, yucca and coca, *quechua* women bring corn, pulses and vegetables and *puna* women offer potatoes, tubers, wool and meat. Altogether they trade more than five tonnes of food per week. Products are traded in the barter markets according to socially agreed measurements. Some products are exchanged one to one, such as potato and cassava. Others are traded by volume, as one or two handfuls of a product. Almost one third of the households' food comes from barter markets.

Barter markets have long existed in the region. Coca, wool, maize and transport facilities were traded. When the coca trade was prohibited in the 1970s and people were forced to participate in the cash economy, the “non-currency” economy still continued alongside it. Today, women in the Lares valley think barter markets are the second-best way to procure food, after subsistence farming.



Women are responsible for the bulk of work in food production. Their families profit directly from improvements in women's access to land and agricultural inputs.

- produce and harvest food in an ecologically sustainable manner, principally through low-external input and organic production as well as artisanal fisheries;
- choose their own level of self-reliance in food and develop autonomous food systems that reduce dependence on global markets and corporations; and
- protect and regulate domestic production and trade and prevent the dumping of food and unnecessary food aid in domestic markets.

The food sovereignty policy framework is elaborated by a global network of social movements and civil society organisations. These organisations aim to bring together indigenous people, pastoralists and other rural groups from both South and North and to give them a voice and influence in global developments. It is a citizens' response to the multiple social and environmental crises induced by modern food systems (McIntyre et al., 2008; Pimbert, 2009).

Food security, food sovereignty and political choices

The food sovereignty concept was developed as a reaction to the increasing (mis)use of "food security". Still, the two concepts are often confused.

The mainstream definition of food security, endorsed at food summits and other high level conferences, is concerned with everyone having enough good food to eat each day. But it does not talk about where the food comes from, who produces it, or the conditions under which it is grown. This allows food exporters to argue that the best way for poor countries to achieve food security is to subsidise and import cheap food or to receive it free as "food aid", rather than to produce it themselves. This makes countries more dependent on the international market, drives small-scale farmers, pastoralists and fisherfolk off their land and into cities, and ultimately worsens people's food security.

Food sovereignty promotes community autonomy, i.e., women and men determining for themselves just what seeds they plant, what animals they raise, what type of farming they carry out, what economic exchanges they engage in, and what they will ultimately eat for dinner. A political dimension comes in here: contrary to the rather technical concept of food security, food sovereignty points to the responsibilities of people and governments. They have to take into consideration the local consequences of macro political and economic processes.

The link between women and food sovereignty is evident. Women do the bulk of the labour in agricultural food production and commerce, as they are mostly responsible for providing their family with food. Their husbands may be more concerned with cash crops, as every household has its expenses (taxes, school fees, investments, etc.). Because of their close relation with subsistence farming, women have specific, but unrecognised, traditional knowledge of seeds, harvesting and storage techniques and traditional products. Most have no rights to access land and water and have little decision-making power.

Women speak up in the food sovereignty movement

Women have decisively shaped the concept of food sovereignty (Desmarais, 2007). They have established new spaces in male-dominated structures such as through La Vía Campesina's Women's Commission. Women have also influenced global policy debates. Just a few examples:

- *On the right to produce.* Women insist that farming peoples everywhere "have the right to produce our own food in our own country" and had a strong voice in La Vía Campesina's "Declaration of Rights of Peasants – Women and Men" (2009).
- *On agro-ecology.* Women emphasise the need to reduce the use of health-endangering chemicals (e.g., pesticides, antibiotics, growth hormones).
- *On property rights.* Women have systematically highlighted the inequitable control of land and other resources between men and women.
- *On democracy and citizens' voice in policy making.* Women stress that this is needed to realise equal access to land and ensure the positive impact of agricultural policies on their lives.

Readers of LEISA Magazine see that issues emphasised by women are of tremendous relevance for *all* food producers and consumers, not just for women.

How to promote women's roles and food sovereignty?

The food sovereignty agenda stipulates that it is not the market that should control food systems, but people and their democratic organisations and institutions. Food policy is too important to be left to corporate monopolies, agricultural professionals and economists alone. It must also be the domain of ordinary women and men. Food sovereignty implies greater citizen participation and more direct forms of democracy in the governance of food systems. Citizens, and especially women, must nurture the skills and processes needed for active civic engagement in public affairs. This is not an easy task. For example, local organisations play key roles in the reforms for food sovereignty; yet local organisations do not always create enough space for women. To reverse existing gender biases and discriminations, women will need to further strengthen their capacity for collective action and to be heard.

The food sovereignty movement is confronted with a well-organised network of people in science, business and mainstream politics. The network of family farmers, local food processors and women leaders needs to become politically stronger. It can form a movement interlinking villages, towns, neighbourhoods and ecological units, and function as a counter-power to promote deep systemic change in society. Such a movement can both oppose and link up with local government and state organisations as well as with large food companies – as long as they act on behalf of ordinary citizens. It can organise and co-ordinate new forms of citizen-controlled economic exchanges that combine both subsistence and market-oriented activities. The movement also needs to find ways to develop and share knowledge that is ecologically literate, gender sensitive, socially just and relevant to context. The whole process should lead to the democratisation of research and farmer-centred innovation systems, in which women play a key role in defining research priorities. Similarly, food sovereignty implies the implementation of radical agrarian reform and gender equitable redistribution of right of access to and use over resources, including land, water, forests, seeds and means of production. The notion of territory, collective rights and self-

determination must be at the heart of more gender-equitable agrarian reforms (Pimbert, 2009).

Many women and their networks are now engaged in these processes of transformation. They, and the men they work with, are generating hope and new solidarity as they globalise the struggle for food sovereignty.

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Food security and food sovereignty in Niger

In Niger, West Africa, 65 percent of the rural population regularly faces hunger. International organisations provide food aid and have established a system of food banks. Food is stored in poor villages, where people can sell their crops just after the harvest, and buy food at reasonable prices at the time of food shortages. In this way, people save a lot of money because food prices on local markets triple during the famine season. They have “food security” but remain dependent on foreign support – both to buy food from elsewhere, and to maintain the food-bank system.

When asking people what they would need to secure the production of their own food, the answer is clear. They need regular, reliable access to the same plot of land. Under the present system, traditional Chiefs rotate their plots so that farmers

cannot invest in the land they cultivate; therefore they cannot nurture the land. Some plots seem to be productive, but similar land next door seems to be less productive – so some land is underutilised.

Elsewhere in Niger, farmers planted 5 million hectares of trees because they were given the rights to plant, harvest and sell. In agro-forested areas, the land is shadier, more fertile, and as a result, children are better nourished. People can produce their own food and they can engage in the market if they wish to. People now rely on a more autonomous and locally controlled food system.