

## Introduction

### Noah Zerbe and Brian Dowd-Uribe

**Noah Zerbe** is associate professor and chair of politics at Humboldt State University.

**Brian Dowd-Uribe** has a PhD in Environmental Studies from the University of California, Santa Cruz. He has served as a Post-Doctoral Research Scientist at Columbia University's Center for Research on Environmental Decisions and is currently transitioning to a position of Assistant Professor at the University of Peace in Costa Rica.

In 1996, members of Via Campesina, the international movement of peasants, small farmers, landless people and agricultural workers, coined the term "food sovereignty," asserting the right of people to define their own food production systems. Via Campesina's assertion was codified by the 2002 World Food Summit Forum on Food Sovereignty, in which representatives of more than 400 farmers' organizations defined food sovereignty as,

The right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies. Food sovereignty means the primacy of people's and community's rights to food and food production, over trade concerns.

This right was further clarified with the Declaration of Nyéléni, issued by the Forum for Food Sovereignty meeting in Sélingué, Mali, 27 February 2007. The Declaration of Nyéléni asserts that

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

Food sovereignty represents a fundamental break from the traditional logic of food security. Food security deals only with the ability of individuals to access a certain amount of food each day. Food sovereignty, by contrast, asserts the broader rights of individuals and communities to determine what food they will eat as well as how and where that

food will be produced (Rosset, 2003). In a sense, then, food sovereignty represents an effort to reassert local control over our daily food choices, emphasizing the rights of communities and individuals to make meaningful choices.

An emphasis on local control of the food system starkly contrasts with prevailing trends in agricultural development. Over the past two decades, corporate control over the global food supply has expanded. International financial institutions, governments, corporations and philanthropic groups have intervened to redress perceived problems in African agriculture via the expanded use of new seed technologies, the integration of African food markets into the global economy, and the coordination of food policies within regions of Africa.

As noted in the ACAS Food Sovereignty Task Force statement in this special issue of the ACAS Bulletin, such interventions are deeply problematic. Each centers on the integration of the most prosperous African smallholders into global food markets best characterized as oligopolies. At nearly every stage of the production process, from the purchasing of farm inputs through the processing, distribution, and marketing of farm outputs, a handful of companies dominate the market. Four companies (ADM, Bunge, Cargill, and (Louis) Dreyfus, collectively referred to as the ABCD group), control between 75 and 90 percent of the global grain trade. Four seed firms (Monsanto, Dupont, Syngenta, and Limagrain) control half of all global seed sales. Six agrichemical firms (Dupont, Monsanto, Syngenta, Dow, Bayer, and BASF) control three-quarters of the global agrochemical market (Lawrence, 2011). Food sovereignty challenges the assertion of corporate control in agriculture. Such corporate control has been advanced through numerous avenues, most notably through the promotion of genetically modified seed and the expansion of intellectual property rights that usually accompanies them. Instead, food sovereignty emphasizes improving local production by smallholder farmers

using sustainable, low input methods like permaculture. And it prioritizes production for local consumption rather than for commodification on global markets. Above all, though, food sovereignty builds on the idea of local control over our food system, promoting alternatives to the global neoliberal food system that continues to leave nearly a billion people, including 240 million Africans, hungry and malnourished (FAO, 2011). The articles in this special issue of the ACAS Bulletin speak to a re-emerging food movement in Africa. As a whole, these articles trace the contours and tensions in the food sovereignty movement. In so doing they give a vivid portrait of a movement that presents an African alternative to the neoliberal vision of food security defined predominately in terms of market access.

In "Philanthropy and Sovereignty," Ashley Fent uses a critical feminist framework to engage with the work of the Gates Foundation's agricultural development programs in Africa. Specifically, Fent argues that the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) builds on a model of agricultural development that threatens rather than promotes food sovereignty on the continent. Her gendered analysis offers a powerful lens through which to understand the depolarization of agricultural development and farming technologies in Africa. The next two articles, Brian Dowd-Urube, Carla Roncoli, and Ben Orlove's "Water Grows Dry: Dry Season Framing, Food Sovereignty, and Integrated Water Resource Management in Burkina Faso," and Miriam Chaiken, J. Richard Dixon, and Agy Herminio's "Food Sovereignty and Safety Nets: NGOs in Northern Mozambique" both seek to ground the question of food sovereignty in specific case studies.

In the case of Burkina Faso, Dowd-Urube, Roncoli, and Orlove assert that specific state interventions intended to promote expanded access to irrigation have resulted in an increasing orientation towards market rather than subsistence production while simultaneously raising questions about the sustainability of production methods. This reveals

tensions in the food sovereignty movement on the role of markets and technologies in spurring greater food sovereignty. The article asks what is the appropriate level of market integration and technology adoption to promote food sovereignty. Moreover, this case study explores how the recent implementation of integrated water resource management can promote greater local control over water resources driving food production, though much progress remains to be achieved.

Chaiken, Dixon, and Herminio's analysis of the work of the NGO Save the Children in Northern Mozambique offers a more positive conclusion. There, interventions intended to promote food sovereignty, improve access to food, and increase overall local welfare following the country's protracted civil war had real effects. The article outlines some of the key findings from the success of the program. Yet the authors also note that contemporary developments threaten to undermine food sovereignty in the region. The cooptation of land and resources, particularly through resource extraction and land appropriation, threaten to undermine the progress made to date. William Moseley's "Famine Myths: Five Misunderstandings Related to the 2011 Hunger Crisis in the Horn of Africa" (reprinted in an updated format from *Dollars and Sense* magazine's March 2012 issue) similarly provides an analysis of the breakdown of food sovereignty. Using a case study from the 2011 crisis in Somalia, Moseley seeks to critically assess the misconceptions which often guide discussions of food crises and famines. He dismisses the myths that famines are caused by drought or overpopulation, and that a new green revolution could resolve the crisis. Instead, he advocates a solution that prioritizes local food sovereignty.

In "The Global Politics of Local Food," Noah Zerbe asks a slightly different question. Zerbe begins by offering an analysis of the general trends towards globalization and commodification of national food systems over the past thirty years, arguing that numerous emergent alternatives should be seen

largely as a response to the failures of this globalized system. He then examines several nascent alternatives in Durban, South Africa, but finds that despite a history of anti-neoliberal protest and social movements that emphasize decommodification, few efforts are underway to frame an alternative food system in food sovereignty terms.

Food sovereignty has the potential to unite local struggles for access to food, water, and land from around the world. The struggle for food sovereignty is the struggle for the future of African agriculture. Whether that future is one in which farmers rely on expensive inputs to produce specialized produce for sale on global markets as dictated by global markets while millions of their compatriots go hungry, or one in which communities control their own future and where addressing the challenges of hunger is a central aim of food and agricultural policy, depends on the degree to which food sovereignty is adopted as the organizing principle for production in Africa. It also depends on the degree to which the food sovereignty movement, and those sympathetic to the movement, engages those elements driving African agriculture towards greater corporate control.

### References

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