

# BACKGROUND

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## Food Sovereignty Global Rallying Cry of Farmer Movements

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*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; [and] 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 safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production.*

— STATEMENT ON PEOPLES' FOOD SOVEREIGNTY  
BY VIA CAMPESINA, ET AL.

**A**s corporate-driven economic globalization and runaway free trade policies devastate rural communities around the world, farmers' organizations are coming together around the rallying cry of food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty says that feeding a nation's people is an issue of national security—of sovereignty. If the people of a country must depend for their next meal on the vagaries of the global economy, on the goodwill of a superpower not to use food as a weapon, or on the unpredictability and high cost of long-distance shipping, that country is not secure in the sense of either national security or food security.

Food sovereignty goes beyond the concept of *food security*, which has been stripped of real meaning. Food security means that every child, woman, and man must have the certainty of having enough to eat each day; but the concept says nothing about where that food comes from or how it is produced. Thus Washington is able to argue that importing cheap food from the US is a better way for poor countries to achieve food security than producing it themselves. But massive imports of cheap, subsidized food undercut local farmers, driving them off their land. They swell the ranks of the hungry, and their food security is placed in the hands of the cash economy just as they migrate to urban slums where they cannot find living wage jobs. To achieve *genuine* food security, people in rural areas must have access to productive land and receive prices for their crops that allow them to make a decent living.

The only lasting way to eliminate hunger and reduce poverty is through local economic development. One way to achieve such development in rural areas is to create local circuits of production and consumption, where family farmers sell their



March for food sovereignty, Rome, 2002.

Photo: Massimo Vellaro

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produce and buy their necessities in local towns. Money circulates several times in the local economy, generating town employment and enabling farmers to make a living. In contrast, if what farmers produce is exported, fetching international market (low) prices, and most everything they buy is imported, all profits are extracted from the local economy and contribute only to distant economic development (i.e., on Wall Street). Thus food sovereignty, with its emphasis on local markets and economies, is essential to fighting hunger and poverty.

## A Clash of Models

According to Via Campesina, the international farmers' and peasants' movement, "food sovereignty gives priority of market access to local producers. *Liberalized agricultural trade, which gives access to markets on the basis of market power and low, often subsidized, prices, denies local producers access to their own markets.*" (2002; italics in original.) What Via Campesina and others say is that we face a clash of economic development models for the rural world. The contrasts between the dominant model, based on agroexports, neoliberal economic policies, and free trade,

versus the food sovereignty model, could not be more stark (see box). Where one model sees family farmers as an inefficient anachronism that should disappear with development, the other sees them as the basis of local economies and of national economic development—as the internal market that enabled today's industrial economic powerhouses like the US, Japan, China, and South Korea to get off the ground.

As for hunger, one model sees boosting exports from giant plantations as the way to generate the foreign exchange needed to import cheap food for the hungry—its

## Dominant Model versus Food Sovereignty Model

ISSUE	DOMINANT MODEL	FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MODEL
Trade	Free trade in everything	Food and agriculture exempt from trade agreements
Production priority	Agroexports	Food for local markets
Crop prices	"What the market dictates" (leave intact mechanisms that enforce low prices)	Fair prices that cover costs of production and allow farmers and farmworkers a life with dignity
Market access	Access to foreign markets	Access to local markets; an end to the displacement of farmers from their own markets by agribusiness
Subsidies	While prohibited in the Third World, many subsidies are allowed in the US and Europe—but are paid only to the largest farmers	Subsidies that do not damage other countries (via dumping) are okay; i.e., grant subsidies only to family farmers, for direct marketing, price/income support, soil conservation, conversion to sustainable farming, research, etc.
Food	Chiefly a commodity; in practice, this means processed, contaminated food that is full of fat, sugar, high fructose corn syrup, and toxic residues	A human right: specifically, should be healthy, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and locally produced
Being able to produce	An option for the economically efficient	A right of rural peoples
Hunger	Due to low productivity	A problem of access and distribution; due to poverty and inequality
Food security	Achieved by importing food from where it is cheapest	Greatest when food production is in the hands of the hungry, or when food is produced locally
Control over productive resources (land, water, forests)	Privatized	Local; community controlled
Access to land	Via the market	Via genuine agrarian reform; without access to land, the rest is meaningless
Seeds	A patentable commodity	A common heritage of humanity, held in trust by rural communities and cultures; "no patents on life"
Rural credit and investment	From private banks and corporations	From the public sector; designed to support family agriculture
Dumping	Not an issue	Must be prohibited
Monopoly	Not an issue	The root of most problems; monopolies must be broken up
Overproduction	No such thing, by definition	Drives prices down and farmers into poverty; we need supply management policies for US and EU
Genetically modified organisms (GMOs)	The wave of the future	Bad for health and the environment; an unnecessary technology
Farming technology	Industrial, monoculture, chemical-intensive; uses GMOs	Agroecological, sustainable farming methods, no GMOs
Farmers	Anachronisms; the inefficient will disappear	Guardians of culture and crop germplasm; stewards of productive resources; repositories of knowledge; internal market and building block of broad-based, inclusive economic development
Urban consumers	Workers to be paid as little as possible	Need living wages
Another world (alternatives)	Not possible/not of interest	Possible and amply demonstrated (see resources below)

adherents say export cropping also creates rural jobs and thus keeps more children from starving. The other sees the conversion of farmland that once belonged to family smallholders to export cropping, as the driving force behind the growth of hunger and immiseration in rural areas. Food sovereignty proponents point out that large-scale export cropping creates much lower levels of employment than family farming—and that the few jobs it creates are low-wage and precarious.

And while the dominant model is based on chemical-intensive, large-scale monoculture, with genetically modified (GM) crops, the food sovereignty model sees these industrial farming practices as destroying the land for future generations, and counterposes genuine agrarian reform and a mixture of traditional knowledge and sustainable, agroecologically based farming practices.

## Food Sovereignty, Trade Agreements, and Monopolies

Via Campesina and other adherents to the food sovereignty principle call for excluding food and agriculture from trade agreements like the World Trade Organization (WTO), North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and other regional and bilateral agreements. They see out-of-control trade liberalization as driving farmers off their land and as a principal obstacle to local economic development and food

sovereignty. The governments of large agroexport nations, in the North and in the South, continue to push for such agreements, though they may argue the details that determine the distribution of benefits among this relatively small sub-set of nations. These governments are all held hostage to varying degrees by their big agricultural exporters and by transnational agribusiness corporations. These corporations see food as a commodity to be bought and sold. Yet food implies the stewardship of productive resources; it is culture, farming, health—food is life itself.

The governments of large Third World agroexport nations correctly highlight one gross inequity in the global economy: the US and European Union subsidies and protection that make it hard for Third World elites to compete with First World elites in extracting wealth from everyone else. But their position in no way challenges the overall model. Rather it seeks to slightly increase the number who benefit from it, which would still be a tiny fraction of the world's population.

While Third World agroexporters demand greater market access for their exports in the North, family farmer and peasant organizations counter: “Access to markets? Yes! Access to local markets”—which means “no” to the opening of local markets to cheap, dumped food from abroad (Via Campesina, 2002). This food sovereignty position also says that subsidies per se are not the enemy. Their merit depends on how much the subsidies cost, who gets

them, and what they pay for. So subsidies paid only to large corporate producers in the North, leading to dumping and the destruction of rural livelihoods in the Third World, are bad. But subsidies paid to family farmers to keep them on the land and support vibrant rural economies, and subsidies that assist with soil conservation, the transition to sustainable farming practices, and direct marketing to local consumers, are good. The real enemy of farmers is low prices. And farm gate prices—what farmers receive—continue to drop even while consumer prices rise and rise. This is because the main force dictating low prices to farmers is the same one that dictates high prices to consumers: the monopoly control that corporations like Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Dreyfuss, Bunge, Nestlé, and others exert over the food system. That means that breaking up these monopolies by enforcing antitrust laws nationally and globally is a key step toward ensuring that farmers worldwide can earn a living on the land and consumers can have access to affordable, nutritious food.

Food sovereignty is a concept that should make sense to farmers and consumers in both Northern and Southern countries. We are all facing rural crises and a lack of affordable, nutritious, locally grown food. We must struggle together against global trade policies and in favor of real agrarian reform and more participatory, sustainable and locally controlled food systems everywhere. We must take back our food and our land.

## Suggested Resources

### Books and Articles

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Wright, Angus, and Wendy Wolford. 2003. *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil*. Oakland: Food First Books.

**Websites**

- Via Campesina, <http://www.viacampesina.org>
- Peoples Food Sovereignty: The Agriculture Trade Network, <http://www.peoplesfoodsovereignty.org/>
- Food First, <http://www.foodfirst.org>
- International NGO/CSO Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, <http://www.foodsovereignty.org>

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4

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