



Transforming our food system

The movement for food sovereignty

October 2011

WDM's campaign to curb speculation on food tackles one aspect of a broken food system. We're also helping to build a movement for a just global food system, inspired by activists in the global south.

Globally, we are now producing more food than ever before. But while 1.5 billion people are overweight, another billion people are suffering from chronic hunger. Small-scale farmers have suffered from prices falling below their costs of production due to unfair trade regimes, corporate concentration and the dismantling of state support.

"We used to grow only one crop and sell our harvest. The income was not sufficient even to settle the debts we had taken on. So we had a problem with getting enough food. We were really starving and malnourished."

A.A. Priyanthi, a peasant farmer describes her former farming practices in Katuwanayaya, southern Sri Lanka.

The industrial farming methods that produce our food also contribute to climate change, and the depletion and pollution of natural resources.

Fairer food

In considering what a just and sustainable food system might look like, we can draw on a framework developed by food producers and rural social movements around the

world. These include some of the World Development Movement's international campaigning allies in the global south, such as the global peasants' movement La Via Campesina (LVC).

Over the last fifteen years, these movements have developed a shared vision for a world that upholds the right to food, where people can define their own food and agriculture systems.

In 2007, more than 500 people gathered in Mali at the Nyeleni forum, named after a Malian peasant farmer legendary for developing crops to feed her people. They included peasants and family farmers, fisherfolk, landless people, rural workers, consumers and representatives of environmental and urban movements. This forum drew up a declaration setting out six principles of food sovereignty (see overleaf). These are universal principles which are designed to be translated into practice differently from place to place.

Five developing countries - Nepal, Mali, Senegal, Venezuela and Bolivia - have made food sovereignty official government policy.



Participants arrive at the camp built specially for the Food Sovereignty Forum in 2007, in Selingue, Mali.

Six principles: food sovereignty...

...focuses on food for people

The right to food which is healthy and culturally appropriate is the basic legal demand underpinning food sovereignty. Guaranteeing it requires policies which support diversified food production in each region and country. Food is not simply another commodity to be traded or speculated on for profit.

...values food providers

Many smallholder farmers suffer violence, marginalisation and racism from corporate landowners and governments. People are often pushed off their land by mining concerns or agribusiness. Agricultural workers can face severe exploitation and even bonded labour. Although women produce most of the food in the global south, their role and knowledge are often ignored, and their rights to resources and as workers are violated. Food sovereignty asserts food providers' right to live and work in dignity.

...localises food systems

Food must be seen primarily as sustenance for the community and only secondarily as something to be traded. Under food sovereignty, local and regional provision takes precedence over supplying distant markets, and export-orientated

agriculture is rejected. The 'free trade' policies which prevent developing countries from protecting their own agriculture, for example through subsidies and tariffs, are also inimical to food sovereignty.

... rejects corporate control

Food sovereignty requires that women and men who provide food have control of land and resources such as water and seeds, to be used and shared in socially and environmentally sustainable ways. Privatisation of such resources, for example through intellectual property rights regimes or commercial contracts, is explicitly rejected.

... builds knowledge and skills

Technologies, such as genetic engineering, that undermine food providers' ability to develop and pass on knowledge and skills needed for localised food systems are rejected. Instead, food sovereignty calls for appropriate research systems to support the development of agricultural knowledge and skills.

...works with nature

Food sovereignty requires production and distribution systems that protect natural resources and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, avoiding energy-intensive industrial methods that damage the environment and the health of those that inhabit it.

Food sovereignty in action

The principles show how progress towards food sovereignty can be made through action at the individual or local level. In recent years food movements have emerged in many developed countries including the UK, contributing to a more environmentally and socially sustainable food system.

For example, the burgeoning of urban food gardens, farmers' markets and educational programmes show that:

"there are more real activities of food sovereignty now running than ever before. All these new and alternative models of distribution are really seeds of food sovereignty ... no, more than seeds, they already have shoots."

Andrea Ferrante, chair of the Italian association for organic farming and a European coordinator of La Via Campesina.

Genuine food sovereignty also requires structural change at the national and international levels. For example, a just food system cannot be realised without a just international trading system. The influence of financial speculators must be scaled back dramatically. And we must put a stop to the policies promoted by international institutions such as the IMF and World Bank that favour huge corporations over small-scale producers.

Transforming livelihoods in Sri Lanka

"We were falling into an ever increasing debt trap. We had to spend lots of money on chemical inputs and seeds. And every year we had to increase the amount of chemicals we used in order to get a decent harvest. We felt that we were becoming slaves."

A.A. Priyanthi, a peasant farmer from Katuwanayaya, Sri Lanka, on the effects of dominant farming practices.

Then Priyanthi, along with just over half of the 42 families in Katuwanayaya, decided to take a different approach to farming.

"We decided to get away completely from chemical use and to adopt 'natural farming principles'. We developed soil conservation, water management, compost-making, and mixed crop farming. With natural farming, as you can see, there are hundreds of varieties in our garden."

"Food sovereignty is not, in fact, a new idea, but something we had earlier. For me, the basic element in this concept of food sovereignty is that it allows us to feel free once more."

Building food sovereignty in Europe

To catalyse food sovereignty in Europe and build on the Nyeleni Forum held four years earlier in Mali, 400 food providers and activists came together in Austria in August 2011. They spent a week sharing experiences, taking action and drawing up the Nyeleni Europe declaration.

Dan Iles, WDM's south-west mobiliser, took part in the forum and actions including a "market of a ideas". At this "pop up farmer's market with a political twist," delicious local produce was mingled with stalls offering taste tests, waste displays and interactive butter churning. These activities enabled people to engage with some of the ideas of food sovereignty – "contact between local producers and consumers, good tasting organic food and getting back in touch with the lost culture around food."

The Nyeleni Europe declaration reaffirmed the principles of food sovereignty and emphasised the democratic deficit in Europe's food system, stating that in order to achieve a true democracy, violence, corporate influence and gender inequalities must come to an end.

An Indian perspective

"Food sovereignty means to me the self respect which comes from self reliance in food production and distribution."

"They have their own historic struggle for rights in southern India. They have squatted some lands and claimed their rights over it. I was so impressed to see that about 4000 acres of land from the government corporations was reclaimed by the tribal communities in Kerala. 4000 families each gained one acre."

S. Kannaiyan, a member of the South Indian Coordination Committee of Farmers' Movements and Nyeleni delegate.

Reclaiming land in Brazil

After a long struggle, 400 families have made their homes in Itaituba, in a fertile, grain-growing area in south-west Brazil. In the 1980s groups of landless families from the region found that wealthy dairy farmers had illegally taken over a large piece of state-owned land in the 1960s. They



The Nyeleni Europe Food Sovereignty Forum gets underway in Krems, Austria, in August 2011. Over 400 participants came from 34 countries.

began to occupy the land and demand its expropriation. Soon they received the support of the Landless Workers' Movement, which helped them to organise makeshift camps and to regroup for further occupations after frequent evictions.

Finally, in 1992, the land was expropriated and given to the families as part of the government's agrarian reform programme.

At first, the families practised conventional agriculture, planting beans, wheat and maize. They bought their seeds, fertilisers and pesticides from company salesmen and sold their crops to middlemen, who paid them less than the market price. Their dream of owning a piece of land had come true, but they were just as poor as before.

They decided to diversify their crops, set up training courses in ecological agriculture, and begin a programme of environmental measures.

One of the inhabitants, Tiao Carvalho, aged 57, describes his experience:

"We wanted to produce food, not merchandise. It took time to transform the soil, full of pesticides, of poison, back to healthy soil. We used green fertilizer - animal manure and turnips which fix nitrogen."

Food sovereignty vs. food security: What's the difference?

Food sovereignty goes beyond the concept of food security that the big aid donors and neoliberal international institutions prefer. Food security simply aims to ensure that people have sufficient food to eat. It is not concerned about how this food is produced, nor the means by which people might attain this fundamental right. By contrast, food sovereignty requires not just that everyone is properly fed, but that the food system that feeds us is just and sustainable.

Photo: War on Want



A.A. Priyanthi, with her son, at work in Sri Lanka.

At first production fell, but then it began to pick up. Tiao and his wife Nazare acquired a cow and chickens. They began a small seed bank. Now they produce all their own food.

"We eat much better now, more healthily - one day I counted 26 different products - fruits, salad, herbs, vegetables, milk, eggs - all produced by ourselves."

Learn more and take action

News

Sign up for the Nyeleni newsletter, which focuses on aspects of food sovereignty such as women's rights, land and food prices.

www.nyeleni.org/?lang=en

Hear from food sovereignty activists

Read interviews with participants in the Nyeleni Forum and activists from small-scale farmers' movements in the global south.

www.wdm.org.uk/blog

Take action

Join the World Development Movement's campaigns against the root causes of injustice in the food system.

www.wdm.org.uk/food

Local food initiatives

Access resources on setting up a food co-op or community buying group.

www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk

People's Food Policy Project

Find out how thousands of people took part in creating a food policy for Canada from the bottom-up.

www.foodsecurecanada.org/the-peoples-food-policy-project

Films

Watch a selection of short films online, showcasing food sovereignty movements from Honduras to Detroit.

www.6billionways.org.uk/foodfilms

With thanks to Nyeleni delegates and Sue Branson, War on Want, for their contributions to the case studies.

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