



Thematic Section: Putting People Centre Stage

Food Sovereignty: A vital requirement for food security in the context of globalization

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ABSTRACT Francisco Menezes argues that food sovereignty reaffirms the rights of peoples to their autonomy, deciding what they wish to produce and consume. But this is not sufficient to guarantee food security, which should always be associated with social equity, ensuring access to good quality food for everyone that is nutritionally adequate and culturally appropriate.

KEYWORDS biodiversity; eating habits; embargo; food security; patenting; trade liberalization

Introduction

Food sovereignty is the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce the staple foods of its peoples, respecting their productive and cultural diversity.

Food security is the guarantee that everyone has permanent access to good quality food in sufficient quantities, based on healthy eating habits and without adversely affecting access to other essential needs nor the future food system, which should be implemented on sustainable bases.

From 1996 onwards, as the commercial globalization process spread worldwide and encouraged by the World Food Summit, discussions sprang up on the topic of food sovereignty.

In today's world, the food sovereignty of peoples is threatened by many different processes that affect countries, including trade deregulation and economic policies designed to usher in structural adjustments; trade regulations imposed by spheres outside the countries; the formation of regional blocs with varying levels of integration; the effects of an increasingly internationalized food crop system on family-based and peasant agricultural systems; the take-over of natural resources by transnational corporations; the destruction of national eating habits and culture through enforcing specific eating standards; and wielding food supplies as political and economic weapons through blockages and sanctions.

The idea of food sovereignty reaffirms the rights of peoples to their autonomy, deciding what they wish to produce and consume. But this is not sufficient to guarantee food security, which should always be associated with social equity, ensuring access to good quality food for everyone that is nutritionally adequate and culturally appropriate.

Food sovereignty in the context of globalization and trade liberalization

The notion of food sovereignty began to appear in 1996, during the World Food Summit held in Rome. In August that same year a large number of Mexican entities organized the *Foro Nacional por la Soberanía Alimentaria* in Mexico City, underscoring the need to preserve the nation's autonomy in terms of defining its food policy.

This Forum was held within a context where the Mexican government had increased its imports appreciably, particularly corn, subject to the logic of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), at the same time as it was discouraging domestic production of staple crops. Arguing that the country should take advantage of low international prices, particularly surplus US stocks, 40 percent of the nation's grain consumption – equivalent to 14 million tons – was supplied through imports, mainly from the USA.

The Mexico Forum reaffirmed the right and obligation of the nation to guarantee its food sovereignty as a top state priority, for reasons of national security. Similar processes appeared in other countries during the period prior to the Food Summit, faced by the effects of increasingly internationalized food systems fuelled by transnational enterprises, multinational financial institutions and the governments of the more developed countries.

During the WFS, a parallel event was attended by organizations and civil societies from all over the world; the issue of food sovereignty was a major issue in these discussions, based on the significant participation of Via Campesina in this event. That same year, Via Campesina firmed up its position as the leading international movement clustering many organizations and bringing together peasants, small farmers, agricultural labourers and

indigenous communities, including representatives from Brazil's Landless Peasants Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, MST).

This movement defined food sovereignty as: 'the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce the staple foods of its peoples, respecting productive and cultural diversity' (Via Campesina, 1996).

Taking this definition as a basis, it rebuts the trade deregulation process, together with economic policies ushering in structural adjustments that globalize hunger and poverty all over the world, destroying local production capacities and impoverishing rural societies to an increasing extent.

Initially, globalization appeared during the 1980s, in parallel to ballooning foreign debt among the developing countries and the simultaneous deployment of monetary stabilization and structural adjustment mechanisms urged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. With the completion of the Uruguay Round in 1994, the negative effects of these structural adjustment policies extended even further, particularly in the agricultural sector, bringing farm produce under the multilateral trade negotiations of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) and later the World Trade Organization (WTO) (ASOCODE, 1996: 4). Globalization then moved in to its second phase, with one of its leading characteristics being the inclusion of agriculture in the global regulation process.

Food is viewed as a commodity to be exchanged like any other product, and food security is seen as a result of specialization and the logic of comparative advantages (Watkins and Windfuhr, 1996: 25).

The process of globalizing the world food trade is taking place on the terms dictated by the Agreement on Agriculture drawn up by the WTO, which is based on three main aspects: easier market access through imports; less domestic support for agriculture; and export subsidies. These measures head up the list of obstacles to food sovereignty faced by the developing countries. Making this threat to food sovereignty even more alarming is the fact that the regulation of this trade lies beyond the control of the countries involved in it, as its reins are held firmly by spheres that are beyond their control.

Furthermore, this new international order has certain characteristics that extend the threat to food sovereignty for non-hegemonic nations. On the one hand, there is much uncertainty over the course of trade deregulation and protectionism under the aegis of the WTO. On the other, regional economic blocs are being set up with very different levels of integration and also different possibilities in terms of adopting food security and development strategies.

Initiatives undertaken at the Third World level have so far shown that the status of an 'outlying bloc' curtails the formulation and adoption of any sovereign supra-national policies agreed among its members. For instance, the Mercosur Southern Cone Common Market consists of one country (Brazil) with marked social inequalities and a sizeable proportion of its populace menaced by irregular or insufficient access to food, within an economic bloc that stands out as a major exporter of agricultural food products (Maluf and Menezes, 2001: 11).

In fact, Brazil is a significant case that warrants closer examination: although a major exporter of agricultural produce, over the past 10 years the gap between the value of its exports and imports has shrunk appreciably. Some products – such as wheat – take this trend to an extreme: in 1987 Brazil produced 83 percent of the 7.4 million tons of wheat it consumed at that time, but when subsidies for this crop were removed, these figures plummeted to under 20 percent of consumption today, making the country completely dependent on imports of this crop.

It is important to note that – rebutting the assertions frequently used to defend trade deregulation – mere exposure to international competition is not the best way to achieve higher production efficiency, due to 'spurious' components in this type of competition and the intrinsically exclusive nature of the dynamics of capitalist economies. Also noteworthy is the continuation of the practice of dumping by the industrialized countries, although in ways that are now legitimized by current trade rules. Subsidies channelled to farmers in these countries are designed to ensure that they receive prices that are higher than those on the domestic market (as is the case in Europe), so that when domestic prices are lower or equal to those on the

international market, exports can be shipped out at a lower price than the costs expressed in the prices received by the farmers at the levels in effect on the domestic market, without characterizing the process as dumping.

Countering the self-reliance approach

The approach based on self-reliance in terms of food is a concept that is currently propagated by the multilateral agencies as well as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which had been edging self-sufficiency to the sidelines since the WFS, while implicitly favouring the option of subjecting national production systems to competitive pressures as a way of spurring efficiency (also known as modernization). In fact, the WFS adopted the same logic as the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO: importing foods from the developed countries as the best way for the developing nations to achieve food security, ignoring the effects caused by variations in international price levels and the risks of becoming dependent on foods that are culturally inappropriate and the marginalization of the peasant sector (ASOCODE, 1996: 6). There is no doubt that Via Campesina and a number of analysts who support the concept of food sovereignty are reacting to this approach and returning to the attributes linked to the availability of food – sufficiency, stability, autonomy and sustainability – that were formerly urged strongly by the FAO, in its conceptual approach to the issue of food security (Schejtman, 1988).

Another point that should be examined covers the effects of the increasingly internationalized food crops system on family farms and peasants. The process of concentrating food crop production becomes even more severe, in parallel to land ownership, threatening agricultural activities even in production chains and regions where their presence is traditional.

Resisting biopiracy and patenting of genetic resources

A further aspect that is directly related to the concept of food sovereignty is resistance to the

take-over of natural resources, particularly land, water and seeds. Especially noteworthy here is the dispute over the use of genetic resources, as stressed by Via Campesina (1996): 'genetic resources are the outcome of millennia of evolution and belong to all humankind'. It adds: 'Patenting and retailing genetic resources by private companies should be banned' (Via Campesina, 1996).

This approach is becoming increasingly relevant, with the issues brought forward by technological development focused on Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and the threat to food sovereignty represented by control over the seeds sector held by a few transnational enterprises. From this standpoint, concerns arise over the take-over of genetic resources through schemes that range from biopiracy through to heavy pressures on countries sheltering large portions of the planet's genetic heritage. These pressures are particularly marked within the sphere of the WTO through negotiations over the TRIPS Agreement on intellectual property related to trade, which is designed to regulate global intellectual property covering these resources. This Agreement ignores the Convention on Biological Diversity signed during the Earth Summit held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, which stipulates that the traditional wisdom and knowledge of indigenous communities should be preserved, guaranteeing countries sovereign rights over resources within their territories.

No less threatening to the food sovereignty of people is the fact that transgenic foods are appearing in different countries in the guise of food aid. Recent allegations stated that some samples of food supplies originating in the USA and distributed through various Latin American programmes in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia and Ecuador were submitted to an independent laboratory in the USA – Genetic ID – that found high levels of transgenic soya beans and corn in these supplies. More disturbing still, food aid in these countries is addressed mainly to children and pregnant women. It is also important to recall that in the USA and Europe as well, many baby food companies ban the use of transgenic ingredients in their products.

Preserving people's nutritional culture

Preservation of the nutritional culture of each people also deserves consideration from the standpoint of protecting national food sovereignty. A country cannot guarantee its food sovereignty if it allows eating standards to be imposed that are not in keeping with its characteristics and traditions. At the moment, this threat is not limited only to more fragile nations less able to withstand the spread of globalization, but also looms over countries that play leading roles on the world stage.

In the course of its history, each society has built up (and continues to do so) a set of eating habits that constitutes a significant aspect of its cultural heritage (Bleil, 2001: 25). These nutritional choices and cooking habits have always been associated with each region and its local living conditions. Among all the items in any food chain, the many different types of cuisines best express the traditions and customs of its society.

Since the late 20th century, radical changes have been noted in national eating habits. Rapid urbanization and the processes triggered by globalization, including the logic of the 'comparative advantage', have forced products all over the world to blend and mix, destroying age-old eating habits.

The cultural, economic and social effects of these new eating standards are felt differently, varying by social class, although they extend throughout society. But the poorest groups are always the most vulnerable to this mass approach to nutrition. Lacking proper information, they are more severely affected by advertising and marketing strategies. In turn, small farmers find it hard to place their products, as they lack the same advertising resources and appeals deployed by the producers of the 'modern foods'.

By extending globalized eating standards to the masses at the scale on which this is occurring, yet another gateway is opened up for enterprises undermining the food sovereignty of peoples all over the world. Withstanding this attack demands certain initiatives. First, each society must be well aware of its own agricultural and nutritional history, ensuring that this heritage is properly appreciated. Each society should be able to

understand that its age-old customs safeguard its individual identity. Furthermore, it should be stressed that, thanks to these eating habits, cultures have been able to remain self-sufficient for many centuries with tighter control over the quality of their food products. Once these eating habits have been analysed as a cultural phenomenon, it will be possible to restore certain nutritional customs, even if completely neglected (Bleil, 2001: 26). Second, it is vital that rural societies – which best express this nutritional culture – should be acknowledged and preserved, supported by specific policies that enhance the value of their cultures, ensuring that they are sustainable in economic and social terms.

Food as a political and economic weapon

Finally, mention should be made of yet another situation challenging the food sovereignty of peoples, which is the recurring use of food as a political and economic weapon wielded by one nation against another. This consists of deploying mechanisms such as blockades, embargoes or even certain types of blackmail imposed by potential imperialists on countries opting for other economic models and political alignments. As stated in the Declaration of the NGO Forum addressed to the WFS in November 1996:

Neither food nor hunger may be used as a national or international political weapon. Access to food may not be refused to any nation whatsoever, nor to any ethnic or

social group for political, economic, religious reasons, or any other motives. Economic embargoes or international sanctions that affect populations are incompatible with food security. The embargoes currently in effect should be lifted.

It is true that these measures are proving increasingly less efficient in terms of achieving the submission that is their purpose, but the price paid by the affected populaces is extremely high. Additionally, they constitute a shameful attack on the sovereignty of the countries being punished, running counter to even the most elementary principles of fellowship in the international community.

Conclusion

In the current context of globalization, the idea of food sovereignty clearly reaffirms the rights of the peoples to their autonomy in deciding on the foods they wish to produce and consume. Consequently, efforts are underway to establish arrangements whereby food security takes higher priority in any situation than commercial objectives or other purposes related to the domination of one nation over another. But one provision should be noted: in itself, food sovereignty is not sufficient to guarantee food security, although it is acknowledged as a vital element. It must be stated here that food security and sovereignty should be compatible with social equity, guaranteeing access for all and the distribution of good quality food that is nutritionally adequate and culturally appropriate.

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