

Analysis & Investigation of Graduate Research Projects: Proseminar Series 2014



edited by Vanessa Mitchell and Jewelles A. Smith

Analysis & Investigation of Graduate Research

Projects: Proseminar Series 2014

May 2014

Centre for Social, Spatial and Economic Justice Press

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Analysis & Investigation of Graduate Research Projects: Proseminar Series 2014;
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Includes bibliographic references

Tattooing, traditional tattooing, Indigenous tattooing, personal narratives, art's based methods, narrative inquiry, intergenerational narratives, residential schools for disabled children, cultural safety, chaptikwl, Syilx, Indigenous epistemologies, new immigrants, Kelowna, health care services, mid-sized city, single mothers, housing, subsidy benchmarks, Nabit, orthography, alphabet design, Ghana, empowerment, Microcredit, ethnography, computer software analysis methods, cultural representations, Zapotec textiles, food and water security, Ktunaxa, Columbia River Treaty, agriculture, food sovereignty, global food security.

Front cover image by Jewelles Smith "It Began with a Wish" -oil on canvas

Back cover image by Jewelles Smith "Broken Home" -oil & mixed media on canvas

The Centre for Social, Spatial & Economic Justice Press
The University of British Columbia Okanagan, Kelowna, BC
ISBN 978-1-928091-01-1

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Reform and the Food Sovereignty Movement: Global food Security, Smallholder Intensification and Individual Agency

Logan Cochrane

Abstract

Locally defined and determined food systems that prioritize local needs, and visions of what is most appropriate, are advocated by the food sovereignty movement as being key to ensuring food security. Its proposed agrarian reform accepts trade under certain circumstances, such as during times of food deficit or the surplus after providing for domestic populations. Global food security necessitates that trade plays an important role in the agricultural system, as a majority of today's nations are net food importers. Many smallholders utilize markets as a means to reduce vulnerability and to diversify their income, and should be afforded this choice. What is emerging, particularly after the 2013 Jakarta Call, are policies that consider the importance of trade and how it can function for smallholders. As yet, these policies remain vague. This article outlines potential policy that supports global food security, smallholder intensification and individual agency.

In opposing neoliberal-driven corporatization, industrialization and globalization of agriculture, food and food systems the movement presents itself as the peoples' alternative. Neoliberal policy facilitates corporate control of food and food systems, which may negatively impact smallholders and food security. Shifts of this nature disproportionately benefit investors with financial capacity, resulting in competitive advantage over domestic and small- to mid-size operations. Imported goods, which may be subsidized, can undercut domestic production and result in unfair competition. Beyond markets, neoliberal shifts have resulted in less access to basic public goods, such as healthcare and education, negatively impacted equitable progress on human rights and fostered inequality.

Government can enact policy that supports smallholder agricultural intensification while regulating, and potentially limiting, the role of transnational corporations. Targeted import taxation, barriers and exemptions can foster domestic development. Regulation of foreign direct investment can encourage upstream production through incentives and disincentives, which can act as a supportive mechanism for smallholder intensification, rather than competition. Government involvement may include research on appropriate seed varieties for different agroecologies as well as subsidies of such.

Food insecurity can be addressed through social safety nets, which have not only been shown to be effective, but also successfully enacted by resource-constrained nations. Sufficient grain reserves can ensure supply in years of production deficits and help to stabilize prices. In addition to food security rights, reform of land rights can ensure tenure, reduce disputes, increase investment, enhance women's control of land and improve production.

Agricultural extension can improve food security, smallholder yield and household income. This has resulted in two to three fold yield increases and a doubling of farm profits with over one hundred thousand smallholders in East Africa. The result is improved individual food security, declining vulnerability and a net increase of food in the national market, with food gains at the individual smallholder level as well.

These policies, albeit less radical than some in the movement desire, protect and support smallholders, respect individual agency and move toward greater food security, locally and globally.

Background and Relevance

Locally defined and determined food systems that prioritize local needs, and visions of what is most appropriate, are advocated by the food sovereignty movement as key to ensuring food security. Many argue that food security can only be achieved through food sovereignty (e.g. Pimbert, 2008). Led by the non-governmental umbrella group La Via Campesina, the food sovereignty movement also resists and opposes corporate control of agriculture, food products and food systems (La Via Campesina, 2013). In prioritizing local food production and consumption, advocates of food sovereignty encourage domestic market protection and suggest that countries can control production in meeting those aims (La Via Campesina, 2011). Although specific policy has not been agreed upon, the movement seeks a reorganization of the food system to one that prioritizes self-sufficiency for defined locales.

Holt-Gimenez, founder of the Campesino a Campesino Movement and current Executive Director of Food First, co-authored an article that suggests what some of that policy might entail, including land redistribution, immigration reform and peasant-managed agricultural systems (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011). Pimbert, author of *Towards Food Sovereignty* (2008), also advocates land reform and redistribution, amongst a wide range of suggestions from increasing public funding to protective domestic safeguards and the regulation of total output to world markets. Others have questioned the principles and policies of the food sovereignty movement. Agarwal (2013) explores the potential for undemocratic outcomes emerging from increasing food sovereignty, Burnett and Murphy (2013) suggest the role of trade requires more analysis by the movement and Bernstein (2013) questions the premise that agroecological peasant-driven agriculture can provide sufficient surplus.

In opposing the neoliberal-driven corporatization, industrialization and globalization of agriculture, food and food systems the movement presents itself as the peoples' alternative. Food sovereignty is the process advocated by the movement to "stop the destructive neoliberal process" (La Via Campesina, 2011:1). Neoliberalism specifies direction with regard to fiscal policy, public spending, tax reform, interest rates, exchange rates, trade liberalization, foreign direct investment, privatization, deregulation and property rights (Williamson, 1990). Neoliberal policies have direct implications for how markets operate, but markets, including international trade, can function without, and beyond, neoliberal policy. Indeed, globalization does not necessitate neoliberal policy, rather it is one manifestation of policy within a globalized market.

Both the neoliberal agenda and the food sovereignty movement may not be proposing policy that will support those, largely rural, people that experience chronic hunger. The world has sufficient production of food (FAO, 2002), however chronic food insecurity persists. Increasing production will not result in improved access and equitable distribution. Since eighty percent of people that experience malnutrition and chronic hunger are located in rural areas disconnected from markets (Human Rights Council, 2010) the rise of corporatization must be understood within that context. This also applies to changes in diets, the use of biotechnology and a rise of agricultural land for biofuel production because the sphere of influence is often outside of this rural population. In many cases, these changes do not address poverty nor do they challenge inequality or improve food availability and access for the majority of those experiencing chronic hunger. That is not to suggest that these changes are unimportant, or that these factors do not have significant impacts upon food systems and agriculture. Indeed, they do. Rather, the impact of these changes need to be

contextualized so that appropriate policy and programs can be developed that are targeted and suited to the enhancement of food security for those experiencing chronic food insecurity.

Key Words

food sovereignty, global food security, agriculture

Challenges

Food sovereignty means local production for local consumption, based upon local needs and what is defined as appropriate. The definition of food security, when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life, is affected by the scale and metrics for which it is used. Clarity of terms and objectives within the debate facilitates for a discussion of the potential relationship that food sovereignty and food security have with one another. In some regards, increased food sovereignty for some may negatively impact food security for others. This position paper will focus upon three areas for consideration in this regard: vulnerability, individual agency and local and global considerations.

Regional and international markets support smallholders in a number of ways. Therefore, reducing the role and importance of trade and markets to a system that is primarily local may negatively affect smallholders, the group for whom the food sovereignty movement advocates. During times of regional food deficits, such as due to a lack of rainfall and therefore yield, regional and international markets help to ensure supply and stabilize prices. Smallholders may utilize regional and international markets as a means to reduce vulnerability and to diversify their income, such as through the addition of crops like cocoa and coffee, which are both commonly grown by smallholders. Individuals, communities and countries that are reliant upon agricultural trade for income and/or meeting food needs will disproportionately be negatively affected by such reform. In some ways, global food trade has resulted in increased vulnerability, such as volatile international prices (Cochrane et al, 2014). That said, on both local and national levels, global food trade has supported the reduction of vulnerability to food deficit and enabled smallholders to diversify their crops and income sources, which also reduces vulnerability (Abraham et al, 2014; Negash and Swinnen, 2013).

Smallholder farmers may find, as a result of increasing food sovereignty, that their agency is negatively impacted. Rather than promoting human rights, food sovereignty policy may dictate how farmers grow their crops (as per what the community defines as appropriate), what is grown (to prioritize local needs) and to whom the crops are sold (in opposition to corporate control). This is suggested by La Via Campesina when they state that countries have the right to “control production” (La Via Campesina, 2011:1), which has the potential to restrict individual agency and opportunity. The lack of consideration of smallholder agency is demonstrated in the presentation of urbanization trends as a “political choice”; leaving little space for individual agency that may fall outside of the dichotomy of neoliberal policy or food sovereignty (Pimbert, 2008). Smallholders have shown that diversification and use of international markets can support the reduction of poverty and improvement of income (Abraham et al, 2014; Negash and Swinnen, 2013). While abiding by legal parameters and environmental protection, smallholders should be granted the agency to decide what they grow and to whom their crop is sold. This will enable smallholders to take advantage of opportunities for income and crop diversification while respecting the knowledge and agency of smallholders.

The 131 net food-importing nations (Ng and Aksoy, 2008) could be negatively affected by a food system driven by food sovereignty policy reform, prioritizing local production and consumption first and foremost. Although, it would eliminate or erode the role of large companies in the food system it does not take into account the nearly one billion people who depend upon international markets for their food needs, a portion of the global population which may rise to over five billion people by 2050 (Fader et al, 2013). These individuals and nations rely upon trade for their food needs to be met, and a rise of food self-sufficiency driven policy may negatively impact their food security. Being a net food-importing nation is not desirable, as Pimbert (2008) rightly points out, but not all nations are in a position to meet their national nutritional needs domestically.

Alternatives

The food sovereignty movement “strongly opposes” corporate agriculture and its main goal is to establish food sovereignty and “stop the destructive neoliberal process” (La Via Campesina, 2011:1). Opposition to corporatization of agriculture, food and food systems is needed, and the movement rightly points to these processes as an area that requires reform. Neoliberal policies have had, and continue to have, negative impacts (Cooksey, 2004; Farmer, 2010; Prendergast, 1989). The liberalization of markets may benefit a few, often transnational corporations, as a result of their comparative advantage with regard to financial capacity compared to mid-sized domestic enterprise. This often negatively affects domestic producers as a result. Imports, which might be directly or indirectly subsidized elsewhere, may make domestically produced products uncompetitive, albeit unfairly so. Other neoliberal reform, such as reductions in public spending can negatively impact educational enrolment (Saadatmand et al, 2013), access to healthcare (Armada et al, 2001) declining quality of available information at central statistics agencies (Jerven, 2013), whose data is used to make appropriate and effective decisions with public funding, as well as a reduction of rural agricultural extension services. Even if macro-economic growth occurs, this negatively impacts equitable progress of human rights, access to basic goods and services and facilitates for increasing inequality.

The food sovereignty movement outlines the detrimental impacts of neoliberal-driven change, and suggests that locally defined and locally-driven food systems are the viable peoples’ alternative. Opposition to neoliberal policy in this piecemeal form will not address the other societal changes brought about by neoliberal influences. As detailed above, a food sovereignty-driven reformation may also negatively impact global food security, increase vulnerability and impinge upon individual agency. Between these two options are a group of alternative policies, approaches and programs that offer other potential direction targeted specifically for those, largely rural residents, experiencing chronic hunger. The discussion of these potentials is purposely non-prescriptive, as each manifestation needs to be tailored to the context within which it operates.

At the national level, government can enact policy that supports smallholder agricultural intensification while regulating, and potentially limiting, the role of transnational corporations. Taxation on selected goods as well as duty-free import of others allows for the facilitation of domestic growth and direction of development in a way that supports both improved food security and smallholder agricultural development. Regulation of foreign direct investment in agriculture, rather than opposition to it, can encourage upstream production through incentives and disincentives, which would act as a supportive mechanism for smallholder intensification, rather than competition to it. Government involvement may also include a national body that subsidizes improved seed varieties and conducts research to better understand what is most appropriate to the

agroecologies of the nation. Smallholder farmers can be empowered through access to information, which may be innovatively supported with rapidly expanding mobile networks, so as to ensure smallholders have access to market prices when selling their goods to traders.

Food insecurity can be addressed through social safety nets, which may be targeted to areas of chronic food insecurity and be mutually supportive of other 'pro-poor' initiatives, such as Food for Education, Food for Prescription, and Food for Work. These programs have not only been shown to be effective, but have also been successfully enacted by resource-constrained nations (Coll-Black et al, 2012). Sufficient national grain reserves can act as a mechanism to ensure supply in years of production deficit and help to stabilize prices (Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2012). In addition to food security rights, nations can enact reform of land rights. Governments that oppose privatization of land and private land sale, can implement land-use certification schemes to ensure tenure, reduce disputes, increase investment, enhance women's control of land and improve production (Deininger, Ali and Alemu, 2009; Holden, Deininger and Ghebru, 2011).

Lastly, and arguably most importantly, agricultural extension can improve food security through rural programming and extension services. The work being done by the non-governmental organization One Acre Fund, demonstrates how markets can be used for the betterment of smallholders. The organization currently works with over 130,000 small-scale farmers in East Africa by providing access to agricultural goods and products, providing training for improved farming practice and linking small-scale farmers to markets. This has resulted in two-to-three fold yield increases and a doubling of farm profits (Juma, 2011). The organization provides insurance and micro-loans, with a 98% repayment rate, enabling both the means (products and training) to increase yield as well as the incentive (connectivity to markets). As a result, individual food security has improved and vulnerability has declined. Beyond that work, rural extension services can provide veterinary support, such as immunizations, livestock training and research. When appropriately targeted, merging the needs of farmers with publicly-driven research and services can result in improvement of livelihood for those most impacted by poverty and chronic food insecurity.

Conclusion

Food sovereignty is advocated as the means to ensure food security, an answer to the increasing corporatization of agriculture, food and food systems. However, some of the suggested food sovereignty policy has the potential to increase global food insecurity, negatively affect smallholder agency and enhance vulnerabilities. Neoliberal policies, on the other hand, have not been shown to support human development in an equitable fashion. Although not prescriptive, this paper outlined a set of alternative possibilities that would achieve the objectives of the food sovereignty movement – namely improving food security, protecting human rights and countering corporatization – while maintaining individual agency, respecting smallholder knowledge and reducing vulnerability as well as increasing smallholder yield and income.

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