

# The concept of food sovereignty in relation to European Food Systems: importance, practical possibilities and challenges

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**Abstract:** Food sovereignty is a concept based on an idea of food security (a varied diet with diversified, nutritious and culturally appropriate food) for everybody including the right of people to define their own food and agriculture, to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives. In this paper we explore the concept of food sovereignty in relation to the current development of the European food systems with special emphasis on social food networks, and agricultural learning network building. Food sovereignty is often discussed in the Global South, e.g. Latin America, where the concept developed in strong popular movements. Which lessons can we learn from others, e.g. the so-called 'developing countries'? Danish and French cases will represent and contrast food system policies and social food and farmer networks in the North-Western European context. Based on this, we will discuss the special opportunities and challenges for reaching food sovereignty considering the current globalised world, challenged by financial and environmental crisis. Our agriculture has generally become increasingly industrialized and food systems increasingly controlled by major companies. This influences how feed and food is transported, stored, traded, consumed and wasted. Complex knowledge (including traditional) about agricultural systems and social relations in agriculture and food gets lost. The Common Agrarian Policies (CAP) influences the development of local alternatives farming systems and national food sovereignty. We will discuss the potential role and tendencies of alternative farming and food systems (e.g. organic, mixed farming with agro-ecological basis) based on cases where consumer-farmer networks increase common knowledge about food production, act and interact collectively for local social and political change by building food systems over which they as local communities can take ownership and control.

**Keywords:** food sovereignty, food community, knowledge systems, collective action

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## Introduction: food and farming in Europe

Food trade and markets in Europe are ruled by the same actors and mechanisms as is generally seen in the current globalised world food system, where food is generally controlled by major companies. At the same time, our agriculture has become increasingly industrialised, which in this context is characterised by specialisation, mechanisation, separation between working and free time of the employees, and directed towards distant markets. This influences how non-food (e.g. bio-energy crops),

feed and food is transported, stored, traded, consumed and wasted. It also influences how knowledge is built and exchanged, and complex knowledge (including traditional) about agricultural systems gets increasingly lost. Legislation and a growing audit culture is given the responsibility to ensure voice-less aspects of or connected to the farm, such as animal welfare and environment. Knowledge as well as research and practice are often closely related to products.

In this system of food and farming, the distance between people in the different stages of the farming and food chain has become huge. The people living on a certain area and whose descendants are dependent on the fertility, productivity and presence of diversified surroundings in that area, are far away from where the farm products go, and most people are far away from where their food is produced, and can therefore not feel responsible for e.g. exploiting an area. Where e.g. fisher communities hundred years ago would be directly affected by over-exploitation of the local sea or lake, and therefore balanced the fishing, this is not the case now. Fishing is done by industries which do not see how their future generations will be affected by their business and the sea become an area for which nobody has responsibility. A culture of 'taking as long as there is something' has been increasingly introduced, and the scale of fishing and farming has grown to huge amounts and very few people being able to 'produce' / take very much. Such mechanisms may explain parts of the current enormous food waste of 30-40 % of all produced food on a global scale: nobody is in control, nobody knows all the links in a chain, and there is complete split between environments where the food is produced and where it is consumed. At the same time, the system is partly justified (in the public debate) by the argument suggesting that the challenge of feeding the predicted 9 billion in 2050 is a question of production rather than e.g. distribution or changed consumption patterns.

In the light of the current global challenges related to environment, climate and population density, we see the above described disconnection in the food chain and the food system as a major threat and question how systems develop, in which people gain control and responsibility over the food systems and thereby also agricultural systems which heavily influence environment, plant and animal species, and human social life. We see food sovereignty as a concept which can offer a framework for a more fair food and agricultural systems through localised, diversified farming systems.

### **The concept of food sovereignty**

Food sovereignty is a concept based on an idea of food security (a varied diet with diversified, nutritious and culturally appropriate food) for everybody including the right of people to define their own food and agriculture, to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives.

Food sovereignty requires that priority be allocated to the domestic production of food and that a right to land be given to small farmers and their families. It is a vision of agrarian reform, with an emphasis on smallholder farming and the transformative power

of rural social movements, which has truly emerged 'from below' (Haroon Akram-Lodhi, 2007).

One of the major theorists who is mentioned in relation to food sovereignty is Hannah Arendt, who in her 'Origins of Totalitarianism' emphasizes peoples' right to have rights: that they should not only have the right to think, but the right to have an opinion, to act and to belong to a kind of organised community, among others. Others argue for this as well, bringing in both Kantian moral and other sovereignties.

*Via Campesina* (Rosset 2006) is an organisation which has a de-central structure with no central 'policy statement making office', but with a huge amount of member organisations which all agree to the basic principles of the organisation, and this is the food sovereignty principles, expressed among others in the Nyéléni Declaration (Nyéléni, 2007). They define food sovereignty basically in terms of seven principles:

- Food is a basic human right – everyone must have access to safe nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quality and quantity to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity. Each nation should declare that access to food is a constitutional right and guarantee the development of a primary sector to ensure the concrete realisation of this fundamental right.
- Agrarian reform is necessary; landless and farming people – especially women – should have ownership and control of the land where they work, and there should be no discrimination in land rights.
- Protecting Natural Resources: sustainable care and use of natural resources especially land, water, and seeds plus livestock breeds, and free of intellectual property rights.
- Reorganizing food trade – so that food is seen first and foremost as a source of nutrition and then an item of trade. National agricultural products should be prioritized, and food imports must not depress nor displace local production.
- Food sovereignty is guided towards ending the globalisation of hunger, and is undermined by speculative capital – regulation and taxation of speculative capital is needed.
- Food must not be used as a weapon, and everyone has the right to be free from violence.
- Democratic control – smallholder farmers must have direct influence on formulating agricultural policies, and everyone has the right to honest and accurate information and access to open democratic decision making.

### **The potential relevance of food sovereignty for in North and South**

Food sovereignty is often discussed in the Global South, e.g. Latin America, where the concept developed in strong popular movements, like e.g. *Via Campesina*, as described above (Rosset 2006). It is described as a movement for peasants, and even though 'peasants' in many contexts can be described as having a completely different life than just few decades ago, the relevance always seems bigger for people and communities with high levels of food insecurity: for these people, this is a struggle everyday for life. In many European countries, people seem food secure, but they are nevertheless reliant on the food import and the moving around of food on the global market and through very

few corporations benefitting from the price fluctuations, which they partly determines themselves.

### **Food sovereignty in Europe. The Common Agrarian Policies (CAP) of the EU**

Is it possible, and is it a contradiction or an opportunity to form a united Europe with sovereign food systems? A bird eye overlook of some features of The Common Agrarian Policies (CAP) could serve as a departure point to answer this question.

The CAP influences the development of local alternatives farming systems and thus the design and achievement of national food sovereignty. A brief historical analysis of the evolution of EU agrarian policies with some lessons to be learned from the application of CAP was made by Koning (2006).

From the point that policies implicit in the CAP regulate markets and standardise rules related to volume of production (e.g. milk quota) or even quality, we could easily imagine that patterns of food production, coming from the more small farmers, would also be altered.

Agrarian policies directly affects the structure and conservation of landscapes and thus of rural environment. Llausàs et al. (2009) stressed the needs to overcome the lack of integration of more socio-cultural criteria when designing agrarian policies, beginning of the statement that conservation of the landscapes we have inherited cannot be valued on the basis of merely reflecting on former owners, uses of the land and economic activity (Pinto-Correia et al., 2006, cited by Llausàs et al., 2009).

Moreover, the CAP has accentuated the 'modernization' in European farming systems, with aid to research in agronomy and laws e.g. on seeds that have helped to separate the peasant ever further from their traditional seeds (Bocci and Chable, 2009). And the seeds have become a business, the business of seed industries (Pistorius and van Wijk, 2000).

Protection of EU agriculture from the rest of the world has also enhanced unfair competitions at the international market level. CAP promotes uniformity not just regarding policies but also in possible predominance of product types. Nygård and Storstad (1998) underlined how the classic economic models are not able to explain the food preferences of different consumer groups in an era of various 'food scares', arguing that consumer concern about safe food, together with national or regional differences in food culture, taste and traditions, will limit the globalisation process. These authors also analyses how the globalisation of food markets is reflected in the marketing of various agricultural products.

Some policies, paradoxically trying to protect small farmers, have altered historical land uses at local level. For example, CAP has eventually stimulated the cropping of some prioritised crops by addressing advantageous subsidies. Even without interest in the final products, so even doesn't arriving to the harvest in most of the cases (i.e. production lost in the field), small farmers have been captivated. The use of significant amounts of land for cropping such privileged crops, brings implicit the abandon of others, generally

traditional, inducing crisis of product supplies at the local levels. There is a multitude of examples arguing in addition the lack of monitoring tools for evaluating the success of this policy at the basis of the system.

### **Opportunities and challenges for reaching food sovereignty in a European context**

Recently, in France, the *Alliance pour les paysans, les écologistes et les consommateurs* (<http://alliancepec.free.fr>) published a document entitled *On the way towards a new agricultural policy in the European Union*. This was signed by a multitude of organizations and institutions representing farmers, ecologists and consumers. They claimed for the abandonment by the EU of its strategy of conquest of the international markets and the economic and social dumping to protect the food sovereignty of countries. They asked also for the end the export of surpluses (harmful for small farmers of the South), to stop the productivity drift of the European agriculture and to favor a better remuneration for the producers by the sale of their products.

Social movements like this, and leader farmers, are contributing step by step to wake up the social conscience, first tool for advancing in food sovereignty proposals.

There are practical cases to exemplify this statement. At following we show two case studies from Denmark and France in order to illustrate and provoke the discussion.

#### **A Danish case: Aarhus Fødevarerfællesskaber (Aarhus Food Community; AFF)**

The food system in Denmark is increasingly under the control of supermarket chains which set the food agenda and determines prices. There are relatively few alternative shops or communities which are active and conscious in defining their own food systems. One of the recent examples is Aarhus Fødevarerfællesskaber (Aarhus Food Community; AFF), which will be used as a case. The movement was initiated in January 2011 as a local initiative among inhabitants of Aarhus. They developed a set of rules so that all members had a 3 hour duty every month, and could pre-order and pre-pay a bag of vegetables every week and then pick it on the following Wednesday 15-18. You cannot pay yourself out of the 3-hr-duty, because it is a part of the social network and the building of local knowledge, feeling of comfort and safety in the environment, and yielding something to get something, rather than 'paying yourself free'. The principles from the mission and vision of the movement are introduced below:

- 1) Grown and processed organically
- 2) Locally grown
- 3) Based on seasons
- 4) Distributed in ways which supports fair and direct trade
- 5) Environmentally friendly products and transport
- 6) Facilitate knowledge exchange, and disseminate knowledge about food
- 7) Is economically sound and healthy
- 8) Is transparent and support the confidence among everybody involved
- 9) Local/close and accessible – it is about daily good and healthy food
- 10) Is driven by a local, working community

#### **A French case: Réseau Semences Paysannes (French Peasant Seed Network, RSP)**

The myth of technical progress has imposed a dominant conception of 'plant improvement' accompanying an industrialization of agriculture and a division of labour where the farmers' interests are not necessarily those of the seed breeder.

To recognize the role of farmer in the *in situ* conservation of local seeds, what means a key step in supporting local agriculture with local adapted resources, France is one country where, thanks to the work of the French Peasant Seed Network (*Réseau Semences Paysannes* – RSP; <http://www.semencespaysannes.org>), there has been closer collaboration between *ex situ* and *in situ* conservation of varieties of local crops throughout its geography.

Members of RSP are farmers, consumers and scientists working together in order to reconsider the scientific, technical and legal aspects of seed production. New varieties are designated 'peasant varieties', a concept that encompasses two main aspects: the seed, the reproductive part of the plant linked to its *terroir*, and the variety, shaped by history and coevolved with farmers (Bocci and Chable, 2009).

Based on participatory plant breeding projects, which aim to broaden agro-biodiversity by creating so called new peasant varieties, these projects comes from old local varieties and landraces conserved in seed banks.

The French *Alliance pour les paysans, les écologistes et les consommateurs* publish in their website seven examples of successful projects in France implying consumers in activities of production, transformation and commercialisation of agricultural products and services (<http://alliancepec.free.fr>).

#### **Role and tendencies of alternative farming systems**

Promoting farming systems with agro-ecological basis (e.g. organic, mixed farming) is in consonance with the valorisation of local traditions, conservation of crops and animal breeds and, finally, with the enhancement of multifactor systems in the whole food production-consumption chain. Agro-ecological based farming systems converge with food sovereignty principles (Altieri, 2009) by supporting local initiatives, independently from global markets. There are a multitude of examples worldwide of the success of such environmentally friendly technologies, as alternative of Green Revolution style' industrial systems.

In Europe, organic or ecological farming movements face the power of the global monopolies of agricultural multinationals. The task is hard but not impossible. Governments continue to support multinational food chains based on the obsession of the productivism, paradigm which claims that increased production per man hour is necessary "to feed the increasing human population –estimated in 9 billion for 2050".

#### **General discussion**

The Danish case gives an example of a popular urban movement of people of all ages, who go together and start building up a food system which is based mainly on nearby sources of food. This means that they get fresh food, but even more important, they get

a connectedness with and consciousness about the food which they consume, a bond to the area in which they live and they form a social community, which gives them a framework for development of further ideas for collective action. They support some farmers and food producers in the area, and also give them both basis for reflections as well as practical reasons and economic foundation for selling their produce locally and shift focus to a more diversified, local production and marketing rather than e.g. a bigger buyer which also set some limits for e.g. size and shape of vegetables. Consumer-farmer networks will increase common knowledge about food production, and will act and interact collectively for local social and political change by building food systems over which they as local communities can take ownership and control.

In Europe, we can learn from some of the movement in the Global South which – like *Via Campesina* – advocates for peasants' rights to produce and market food locally. By creating and uniting in communities, awareness and potential influence on decisions in society is created, and power of the major food traders is reduced. In examples like the Danish AFF, the consumers and citizens take the power over their own food in a context, which not only is dominated by supermarkets and global trade, but also to a large extent is influenced by a complete lack of awareness among citizens, concerning the dependency on the food trade system created by corporate regime. In Denmark, the social security system will ensure that everybody is supported to make a living even under minimal conditions, and the food is at all times available on the shelves. Food security is there, but the population has no power at all over the food, which presents a big risk and seems very unsustainable. Self-created initiatives like 'AFF' give people the feeling of taking power over their own food, and it creates an increasing awareness of the risks in the global food system as well as issues like seasonality of food. The power over own food systems meet in many ways the concepts of food sovereignty, and it is as relevant in a place like Denmark, not because people lack food, but because people are very close to be food secure at all times of the year, but they lack connection to and control over the food they eat.

Local community initiatives in urban areas, like the Danish case, will also contribute to the creation of a world, which in total is more food secure for everybody, as well as giving everybody the control over food. In the world, 30-40% of all food is wasted, for several reasons. In North Europe, the supermarket chains, restaurants and household waste is enormous, and food is not valued enough. Food waste in a system like AFF will get minimal, because the system consists of a group of people who on weekly basis collect their orders and buy food based on this. This allows a gradual balancing and prediction of expected need in the constant communication with the producers who sell the food.

A discussion about 'How local is local?' is always relevant and can probably never be answered completely. Food sovereignty can be discussed both on local community, national and regional levels. It depends on the structures around the urban as well as the rural areas (in the Danish case), e.g. when certain types of food are produced in a certain region of the country and not in others (e.g. potatoes which are often produced

in the West of Jutland), some transport seems inevitable. In relation to the food sovereignty, it is not the transport or distance itself which determines 'local' but the contact which should be as close as possible between producers and consumers, and the control over the system, which should benefit both parts.

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