

Food sovereignty

Otto Hospes

Food sovereignty is an emerging concept in present-day debates on food security and trade liberalization. This policy brief consists of three parts. It first shows distinctive features of the concept of food sovereignty vis-à-vis the concepts of food security and the right to food. Then three major strengths and limitations of the concept are listed. Finally, three major points of attention are indicated that can strengthen the role of the concept in debates on food security and trade liberalization.

Food sovereignty, food security and the right to food

While food security is more of a technical concept and the right to food a legal one, food sovereignty is essentially a political concept. Food security is a goal. The two other concepts are more like a fundament or framework.

Food security has been defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as a situation that exists in which all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

The right to food is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It looks at food security into terms of rights and duties. The right to food is to remind policymakers that every individual has the right to feed himself or herself and that every state has three obligations to fulfill: to do no-harm to individuals and their access to food; to ensure that enterprises and individuals do not deprive individuals of their access to food; and to create a policy environment that enables individuals to feed themselves and to help them at times they cannot feed themselves.

The concept of food sovereignty was launched in 1996 at the World Food Summit in Rome by the global farmers' movement Via Campesina to counter large scale agricultural production and international agricultural trade liberalization. The concept is a protest against economic and political marginalization of small farmers. Food sovereignty challenges the mandates of international trade law and institutions that govern food trade. Farmer movements and NGOs have declared that individuals, communities and nations have the right to define their own agricultural, food, fishing and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances.





Three strong points

Three major strong points of the concept of food sovereignty can be distinguished:

- Food sovereignty addresses root causes of economic marginalization of small farmers. It draws the attention to possible linkages between globalization of food production and trade on the one hand and rural poverty and weak agricultural development on the other. Supporters of the concept argue that (alternative) food and agriculture policies should be based on analysis from the perspective of those facing hunger and rural poverty.
- Food sovereignty is also about political marginalization. Echoing Sen's thesis that hunger cannot exist in democracies, representatives of farmers' movements and NGOs emphasize that they need to have a say in international trade negotiations on behalf of small farmers and (other) rural poor. The food sovereignty concept re-defines the problem of lack of access to food into lack of political representation in a globalizing world.
- The concept of food sovereignty leads to the development of multi-level approaches to counter economic and political marginalization of small farmers. Food sovereignty is not only about protesting against, or reforming, the WTO but also about supporting local food systems and how the national government can develop a rights-based food and agriculture policy.

Three weak points

Three major weak points of food sovereignty can be distinguished:

- There is still a lack of clarity on practical implications and benefits of implementing food sovereignty as a development framework. It is unclear whose, and what level of, food security will be promoted when a greater emphasis is put on small farmer production and local food systems. Small farmers may benefit but landless labourers and urban consumers less so. A full reliance on small farmer production may endanger food security at the national level and contribute to erosion of food reserves at the global level.
- The concept of food sovereignty gives no attention to the implications of conflict of interest between individuals, communities and national governments as proposed food sovereigns. A fundamental question is whose rights are paramount to define own agricultural and food policies: those of individuals, communities or national governments? Food sovereignty is about redistribution of power, legitimacy and representation.

- The food sovereignty movement risks distancing itself from international policymaking when not considering potential benefits of agricultural trade liberalization and proposing to remove agriculture from the WTO negotiation table. The food sovereignty movement claims new policy space and room for national food policies but may put itself off-side at international negotiations tables.

Agenda

The concept of food sovereignty cannot be ignored because farmers' movements and NGOs have observed that trade liberalization has not ended rural poverty and that small farmers have had little to say about international trade agreements affecting their livelihoods.

However, at the same time several things need to be done for food sovereignty to play a serious role in the discussion on food security and trade liberalization as a concept and alternative policy framework:

- There is a need for greater conceptual and empirical understanding of effects of measures proposed by the food sovereignty movement on food security at different levels (individual, household, community, country, global) and for different categories of people (small farmers, landless laborers, urban poor) and countries (food importing, food exporting).
- Smallholder based food production explicitly should not be presented as a substitute for large-scale and export-led agriculture but as a complement.
- Those sympathetic to food sovereignty as a concept, often farmers' movements and NGOs, should seek and find allies within national governments and at WTO negotiations in order to (help) create policy spaces at different levels and negotiation tables.