

“Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, pastoral, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies.”

From: *Food Sovereignty: A Right For All*, Political Statement of the NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty. Rome, June 2002

Nyéléni – for food sovereignty

GRAIN



Nyéléni 2007 – World Forum on Food Sovereignty will be held in Mali on 23–27 February 2007. The meeting will bring together 600 delegates from five continents to reaffirm the right to food sovereignty and to begin an international drive to reverse the worldwide decline in local community production of food. The forum has been organised by an alliance of social movements – including Friends of the Earth International, Via Campesina, the World March of Women, the Network of Farmers’ and Producers’ Organisations of West Africa (ROPFA), the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF) and the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) – who took a deliberate decision to hold it in Africa (<http://nyeleni2007.org/>).

Rural Africa has been devastated by three decades of free trade and anti-peasant policies imposed on the continent’s governments by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade

Organisation (WTO), the United States and the European Union. Today thousands of rural and urban families suffer from hunger, despite the continent’s abundance of natural resources. But the fightback has begun. Mali, where the conference is to be held, is one of the first countries in the world to have made food sovereignty a national policy priority.

As becomes clear in our interviews with two leading activists – Mamadou Goïta from Mali, and P.V. Satheesh from India – different strategies are being adopted in different parts of the world in the fight for food sovereignty. Yet campaigners worldwide are united by the common goal of recovering for local people the right to decide what food they should cultivate and what methods they should use. Even though the way food sovereignty is implemented may vary widely, its successful practice is easy to identify (see boxes on Bangladesh and Peru on pages 16 and 17).

Nyéléni – the woman who put men to shame

Nyéléni is a symbol in West Africa. Her story is well-known and there are many songs in the region about her feats. She is famous because, in the masculine world of farming, she was a champion. Living many decades ago, she was an excellent farmer, an inspiring speaker and, most important of all, she railed against the male-dominated system that excluded women from key farming processes and allowed men to impose their will on the rest of the family. Not surprisingly, she became a symbol of women's resistance.

Nyéléni took part in the annual weeding contest, a competition from which women until then had been excluded. Lasting several days, it pitted the fittest men in the 16–45 age group against each other to find out who, using the traditional daba, could weed a field most quickly while doing the job to the highest standard. Nyéléni entered and won, carrying off the trophy, known as the ciwara. It was a great victory for women.

Mamadou Goïta

Mamadou Goïta, a social economist, is executive director of the Institute for Research and the Promotion of Alternatives in Development (IPAR) in Mali, West Africa.

When was the term 'food sovereignty' first coined?

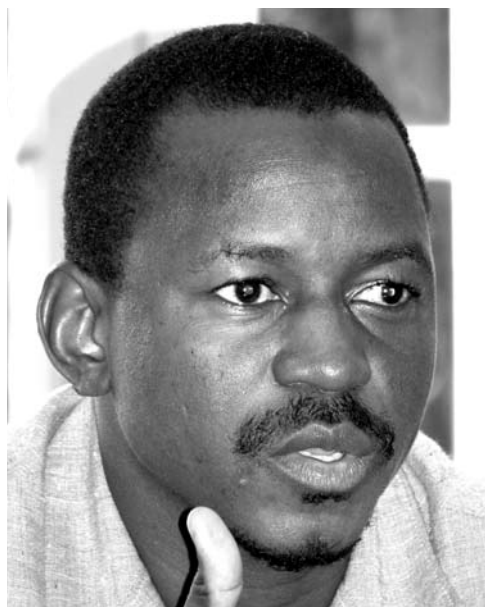
It has been used since 1996, when people for the first time realised they needed a new concept. We became aware that the term "food security", which we had used until then, was not adequate and that the international community was manipulating the term to fool us. We realised that the giant food corporations were taking advantage of the WTO negotiations on trade in food, and of all the talk about food aid, to gain control over food production worldwide and to make everyone dependent on them for food. In Mali we realised that the food we were eating was starting to come from all over the world – from western countries, from India, and so on. We realised that we were being hoodwinked, that we were being told that, just because we had enough food to eat, we had food security. But this was not the case. Corporations might even make food cheaper, but this did not mean that we had real food security. If there were to be a dispute with the country that was supplying us with food, the trade could stop. What would happen then? Our population could even go hungry. There is also the term "food sufficiency". We use this to describe a country that is self-sufficient in the production of food. But this term is not what we need either, for it isn't precise: it doesn't tell us whether the food is available to all the population or what kind of food is being produced.

Food security and self-sufficiency are technical terms. Small farmers felt they needed a broader concept that brought a political dimension to the discussion about food.

So how do you define food sovereignty?

Food sovereignty has two elements. First, it means the right of every person, of every group, of every nation, to choose what it eats. This is very important. To allow the population, on the basis of its cultural, spiritual and ethnic heritage, to choose what it wants to eat. And second it means that people have the right to decide freely how they will produce what they want to eat, without being influenced by other nations or outside institutions. They have the right to decide, according to their culture and their beliefs, with whom and in what way they will produce their food. And when I say food, I mean all the food we eat, both crops and animals. So food sovereignty enshrines our right to eat what we want to eat, to produce what we want to produce, and to do it in the way we want to do it. It is a deeply political concept and it has many dimensions.

The first dimension is the seed issue, which is related to research in our countries. In Africa the national research institutes belong today to multinational corporations or to bilateral bodies funded by multinational corporations. This means that we don't have any sovereignty over the type of research that is carried out. We can only do research into things that they want us to do research into, so seed research is not happening in areas we consider important. This has to change. The second



Mamadou Goïta



dimension is the question of land tenure, access to land. You cannot talk about food sovereignty unless those who produce food are involved in managing the land they work. They have to be fully involved in it, to build the fertility of their land. So the question of land tenure has to be settled in the process of constructing food sovereignty in a country. A third dimension is financial: how we are funding our farming in terms of access to credit and to other means of production? For farmers to be able to produce in a sustainable way – and sustainability is an integral aspect of food sovereignty – they need access to certain types of funds. Adequate funding is essential to food sovereignty.

All this is very important for a country like Mali, where more than 80 per cent of the population lives in the rural areas. Nearly all of this population lives from the land – cattle-rearing, fishing, crop farming and so on – and more than 97 per cent of these are small-scale farmers. So it is very important to be very clear about the kind of farming we are defending. Are we talking about small-scale production or industrial production? If it's the latter, we are excluding almost all the population. The second criterion is: who are we producing for? Are we producing export crops? This is what is happening in most countries in West Africa. Farmers are producing cash crops to have money in their pockets and no one cares about producing food for the local population. Take Benin, Burkina Faso, even Chad. In these countries the best-organised crop is cotton. The decision-makers are not putting money into staple foods such as maize, sorghum and millet. This is a choice they have made and this choice is against food sovereignty. It is giving priority not to food but to money-making.

Saving seeds, Indian style



Is it different in Mali?

In Mali it used to be like that but we are getting the government to change. Now our policy is being increasingly conducted by farmers' organisations. It's a process and we have a dialogue. Sometimes the government does what we want but at other times it refuses. If the government behaves wrongly, we denounce it. But if the government behaves well, we support it. Little by little the government is beginning to understand that it is important to listen to what we are saying. In this sense our democratic process is a success. It's not enough, for the process has to be strengthened, but at least we have made progress. Our strong card is to tell the government that it cannot construct a successful agricultural policy without involving farmers.

Are the farmers well organised?

Yes. The National Coordination of Farmers' Organisations (CNP) is strong. This is composed of all the main farmers' organisations in the country and it has a few people, like myself, who provide technical support, analysis and training. This allows the CNP to debate with the government on an informed basis and to come up with concrete proposals. So, at times, the government says, "OK, just tell us what you want to do, the methodology you want to use." So we help the Coordination to develop their methodology, particularly in the process of getting issues debated throughout the country.

We have done this on the recent farm policy law. We held debates throughout the country on land tenure issues, agricultural research, rural investment, credit schemes for rural areas, and so on. People debated everything at grass-roots level. All the ideas that came out of the debate were brought to regional level. We have eight regions in Mali. And then the issues were taken to national level. There they were debated with other groups in civil society. Then we prepared the first draft of the new law and a memorandum for farmers. We put in the memorandum the key things that we wanted to defend in law, and that is how the issue of food sovereignty was raised. It was decided that food sovereignty would be the key principle of our agricultural policy. I facilitated the workshop that decided this.

We gave the document we had prepared to the government but we didn't end the process there. We had allies in the National Assembly, who monitored what was happening. And, in fact, the government did not present to the Assembly the document we

had given them. They had taken out some things and put in others. Some deputies came to the CNP and asked for our original document and checked it against the Bill the government had presented, which we called the “genetically modified” copy of our document. In three days they found more than 300 alterations. They restored the original version and it was this document that was debated in the assembly. When the bill was put to the vote in mid-2006, over 100 farmers’ representatives from different regions went to the assembly, and the Bill was approved. Now we are working on the implementation of the new law.

Why was it decided to hold the conference on food sovereignty in Mali?

The decision was taken at international level.

There were many reasons. First of all, it is the first time a country has decided to put food sovereignty at the centre of its agricultural policy. We have a commitment from decision-makers to do this. We have shown that dialogue is possible. People are saying that they want to go to Mali and see how we have managed to do this. Second, Mali is an important space to debate Bt cotton, because the resistance is in this country. If you take all the West African countries, the main resistance is in Mali and, to a lesser extent, Benin. Mali is pushing the government to take a position against GMOs and it was in Mali that we held an international tribunal to debate the pros and cons of GMOs. We also organised the World Social Forum, where we hosted 21,000 people. So we have some capacity for holding meetings, though Nyéléni should be far smaller.

P.V. Satheesh

P.V. Satheesh is director of the Deccan Development Society, Andhra Pradesh, southern India.

How is food sovereignty different from food security?

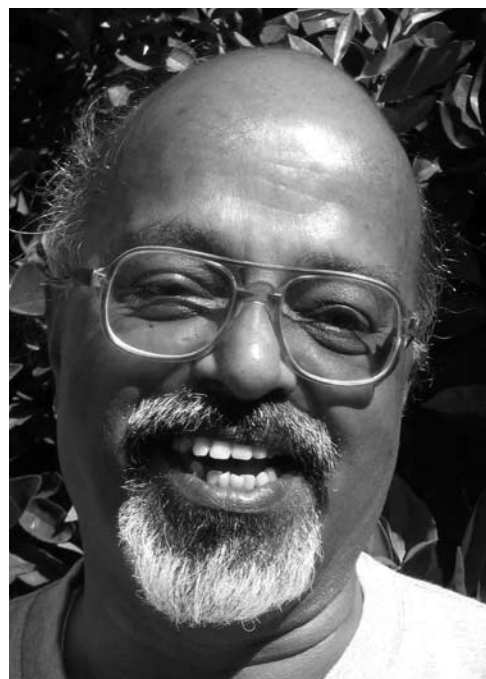
The whole of civil society was obsessed with food security for a very long time. It was a good obsession, because everybody knows that the poor are deprived of food and that they must have access to food. But, with this obsession, people forgot to ask how the food was produced and how they would have access to it. The food industry, the big corporations, realised that this oversight gave them an opening. But it was only in 1996, at the World Food Summit in Rome, when it was declared that trade could be a tool of food security, that alarm bells began ringing. We realised that we had made a great mistake and that we had allowed the food giants to hijack the term. This was not what we wanted. We needed a new term. So Via Campesina – I think it was them – coined the term ‘food sovereignty’.

Now for peasant communities, rural communities and indigenous communities, food sovereignty means the right to produce their own food, and not to obtain it from the big agro-giants in the supermarkets. It means asserting their right to their culture. To deny people their food is a political act. That is the way you suppress and subvert cultures, because food is an integral part of a people’s culture. So, if you don’t eat the food you are used to, and you are fed another kind of food just to fill

your belly, it’s an insult to your civilisation. I come from south Asia. We have a millennial history of producing our own food. And, if the United States, which is only a few centuries old, comes and tells us that we are inefficient in producing food, that they should produce it for us and that we should just produce cash crops, like cotton, tobacco, sugar cane and so on, then they are insulting our whole civilisation. And they are defending a false idea of efficiency, for transporting food over thousands of miles is a profoundly inefficient act, if you look at the real costs. If in the past century oil was the tool of neo-colonialism, then in this century food and seeds are its tools. So, considering all these aspects, food sovereignty has become the dominant issue for us today.

So families in India that you work with are practising food sovereignty, even if they don’t call it by that name?

It is in their genes to produce all the food they need. They never look for food outside their communities. I know hundreds of women who



P.V. Satheesh



Autonomous Research and Learning Networks in Bangladesh

Nayakrishi Andolan is a peasant movement in Bangladesh that includes more than 100,000 farmers supported by UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Institute, based in Dhaka). UBINIG and Nayakrishi Andolan are committed to building a Peasant World University, an institution capable of generating new, inclusive learning on agrarian livelihoods through horizontal networks that build on marginalised expressions of living knowledge. This living knowledge is located in farming practices, products, fields, landscapes, and in the villages made up of men and women, old and young, potters and farmers, artisans and healers, fishers and hunters, leaders and priests, storytellers and musicians.

Nayakrishi Andolan and UBINIG have combined to put into practice the art and science of learning by doing through a variety of interrelated knowledge-producing activities. These include systematic rethinking of agriculture as the art of generating and managing both cultivated and uncultivated ground, with innovative practices that go beyond the creation of new technology to include the discovery of complex ecological interactions embedded in everyday language and rural livelihoods. Rural people's living knowledge cannot be harnessed by the powers of writing and conventional thinking alone. Nayakrishi Andolan thus promotes innovation in language that captures the dynamics of oral culture as the medium of living knowledge. This approach has made it possible for the Nayakrishi Andolan to collect and preserve seeds of biodiversity, using oral culture to secure the collective memory of not only the properties of plants (edible wild plants, medicinals, crop varieties, and so on), but also the combinations of plants and other life forms that can contribute to ecological farming.

The institutional and organisational ramifications of learning innovations of this kind have been far-reaching. They include the creation of Nayakrishi Seed Networks, regional Natural Resource Auditing Committees, and also a network of Birth Attendants and Medicine Women. These are strong networks that contribute directly to biodiversity-based farming practices, which are steadily expanding because of their productive capacity and ability to meet various household needs. Seed huts act as spaces for the exchange of seed and knowledge and as living monographs of particular farming strategies. Field experiments based on these seed collections are organised by UBINIG Centres located in all the major ecological zones of Bangladesh, in cooperation with national scientists and plant breeders. These experiments allow farmers directly to test claims of the Green Revolution regarding the inherent inferiority of local seeds in comparison with the few varieties that make up the commercial seed system. They enhance the capacity of farmers to resist the monoculture imposed by techno-scientific and commercial paradigms of food production. The findings of these and other experiments are celebrated nationally and locally in biodiversity festivals linking the act of seed-saving to the spiritual practices of Bengal through poetry, song, and the living knowledge of wandering musicians. Last, the knowledge generated by the farmers of Nayakrishi Andolan and UBINIG is contributing to the development of a national discourse on ecological agriculture, and is informing debates on global issues from the perspective of peasants.

Source: Mazhar et al, 2006; <http://membres.lycos.fr/ubinig/about2.htm>

This is an edited extract from Michel Pimbert, "Transforming Knowledge and Ways of Knowing for Food Sovereignty and Bio-cultural Diversity", paper for Conference on Endogenous Development and Bio-Cultural Diversity, Geneva, Switzerland, 3-6 October 2006.



have never in their entire lives gone to the market to buy food. Take the village-level women's groups, or sanghams, that we have in the Medak district of Andhra Pradesh. They practise biodiversity-based agriculture, which emphasises the cultivation of coarse grains, such as sorghum and various kinds of millet, that have been grown in this region for centuries. As the land is rain-fed and extremely dry, these crops have adapted over generations to flourish in local conditions, without irrigation or chemical fertilisers, pesticides or herbicides. They are much more nutritious than polished white rice. These crops also provide a variety of materials to meet people's needs, such as stalks and husks to feed animals, dry systems to build fences, straw to thatch their huts and fibres to make ropes. These sangham women also use inter-cropping and rotation techniques to grow other crops – pulses, vegetables, fruit and medicinal plants. They are not

only preserving biodiversity but also enhancing it. As they don't use chemicals, there is also abundant "uncultivated food", such as plant greens, tubers and small animals. In fact, during times of duress, these uncultivated foods can provide between 40 and 90 per cent of people's food. But now there is an attempt to subvert this culture and make these people dependent on food from the market. It is this that communities are resisting.

Last year the world changed from being a predominantly rural society to a predominantly urban one. There are billions of people in the cities who need to be fed. Can these ecological systems of farming produce enough to feed all these people?

This is a question I'm always being asked: can we feed the world without the so-called benefits of the Green Revolution? Well, let's be clear. The

movement of people from rural to urban areas has destroyed rural systems and produced millions of deprived, brutalised people. The food sovereignty movement wants to reverse this and take people back to rural areas. Besides this, there is mounting evidence that yields under our systems are higher, sometimes 30–40 per cent higher, than under modern production systems. I have first-hand experience of what our communities have done in recent years. They have brought marginal land back into cultivation. They have produced food not only for themselves but also for the landless, the artisans, the people who are not cultivators in their communities. Very recently they have started doing what we call “hunger mapping”, and found out who are the really destitute in their communities and have started food kitchens for them. It’s not rich people who are doing this, but people with very low cash incomes who have gained enormous confidence through the food sovereignty process and believe that they can take care of everybody. The ecological production of food provides other

important benefits. It gives people health security, nutritional security, livelihood security. People’s knowledge plays an enormous role here. Take the Aztec kingdom. They classified their soil in 28 different ways, whereas modern science uses only 4–5 classifications. Traditional systems are very complex, very knowledge-based. Modern knowledge systems are simplistic in comparison. So we have a system that provides people with multiple security, as against this Green Revolution, which gives you neither health nor nutrition and destroys livelihoods. There are other advantages to our system too. If a community produces food in an ecological way, it doesn’t need to fight with anyone else, for it has multiple security. There are already conflicts over water between India and its neighbours, between different provinces and communities. So the moment you reject water-intensive, energy-intensive food production systems and come back to ecological modes of production, you are promoting peace. And peace itself solves a lot of other problems.



Barter markets in the Peruvian Andes

The valley of Lares–Yanatile in Cusco, Peru, is rich in biodiversity. It contains three different agro-ecological zones, at altitudes between 1,000 and 4,850 metres. Andean tubers and potatoes are grown in the highest zone, which is called the puna. Maize, legumes and vegetables occupy the middle area, known as the quechua. Fruit trees, coffee, coca and yucca grow in the lowest zone, the yunga. Every week a barter market is held in the quechua, where nearly 50 tonnes of goods are traded each market day – ten times the volume of food distributed by the National Programme of Food Assistance. Anyone can participate, and can trade any amount of any crop.

Women are key players in this non-monetary market, which is vital in ensuring that their families have enough food to eat, and that they have a balanced diet. The rainforest supplies vitamin C, potassium and sodium through fruit, such as citrus and bananas, that do not exist in the quechua and puna zones. These zones supply starches, mainly potatoes and corn, which provide desperately needed carbohydrates for the yunga. Principles of reciprocity and solidarity guide the economic exchange of a diversity of foods, ensuring that important needs of people and the land are met in culturally unique ways. Indeed, recent research has generated new evidence on the importance of Andean barter markets for:

- access to food security and nutrition by some of the poorest social groups in the Andes;
- conservation of agricultural biodiversity (genetic, species and ecosystem) through continued use and exchange of food crops in barter markets;
- maintenance of ecosystem services and landscape features in different agro-ecological belts along altitudinal gradients and at multiple scales;
- local, autonomous control of production and consumption – and, more specifically, control by women over key decisions that affect both local livelihoods and ecological processes.

A polycentric web of local organisations operating at different scales (from household to whole landscape) governs these forms of economic exchange and contributes to the adaptive management of environmental processes and natural resources. In addition to contributing to the food security of the poorest of the poor, this decentralised web of local organisations also enhances cultural, social and ecological resilience in the face of risk and uncertainty.

SOURCES: N. Marti (2005), “La multidimensionalidad de los sistemas de alimentación en los Andes peruanos: los chalayplasa del valle de Lares (Cusco)”, doctoral thesis, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona; and www.diversefoodsystems.org

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