

What is food sovereignty ?

Via Campesina

-- English - Position papers --

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What is food sovereignty ? Food sovereignty is the peoples', Countries' or State Unions' RIGHT to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries. Food sovereignty includes :

- prioritizing local agricultural production in order to feed the people, access of peasants and landless people to land, water, seeds, and credit. Hence the need for land reforms, for fighting against GMOs ((Genetically Modified Organisms), for free access to seeds, and for safeguarding water as a public good to be sustainably distributed.

- the right of farmers, peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced.

- the right of Countries to protect themselves from too low priced agricultural and food imports.

- agricultural prices linked to production costs : they can be achieved if the Countries or Unions of States are entitled to impose taxes on excessively cheap imports, if they commit themselves in favour of a sustainable farm production, and if they control production on the inner market so as to avoid structural surpluses.

- the populations taking part in the agricultural policy choices.

- the recognition of women farmers' rights, who play a major role in agricultural production and in food.

Where does the concept of food sovereignty come from ?

The concept of food sovereignty was developed by Via Campesina and brought to the public debate during the World Food Summit in 1996 and represents an alternative to neoliberal policies. Since then, that concept has become a major issue of the international agricultural debate, even within the United Nations bodies. It was the main theme of the NGO forum held in parallel to the FAO World Food Summit of June 2002.

Neoliberal policies are wrecking food sovereignty

Neo-liberal policies prioritize international trade, and not food for the people. They haven't contributed at all to hunger eradication in the world. On the contrary, they have increased the peoples' dependence on agricultural imports, and have strengthened the industrialization of agriculture, thus jeopardizing the genetic, cultural and environmental heritage of our planet, as well as our health. They have forced hundreds of millions of farmers to give up their traditional agricultural

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practices, to rural exodus or to emigration. International institutions such as IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank, and WTO (World Trade Organization) have implemented those policies dictated by the interests of large transnational companies and superpowers. International (WTO), regional (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas-FTAA) or bilateral " free" trade agreements of agricultural products actually allow those companies to control the globalized food market. WTO is a completely inadequate institution to deal with food and agriculture-related issues. Therefore Via Campesina wants WTO out of agriculture.

The plague of low prices imports : dumping ruins food production All over the world, low prices agricultural imports are destroying the local agricultural economy; take for instance European milk imported in India, American pork in the Caribbean, European Union meat and cereals in Africa, animal food in Europe, etc. Those products are exported at low prices thanks to dumping practices. The United States and the European Union had a new dumping practice ratified by WTO, which replaces export subsidies by a strong reduction of their agricultural prices combined with direct payments made by the State. To achieve food sovereignty, dumping must be stopped !

Food sovereignty includes fair trade Food sovereignty is not contrary to trade but to the priority given to exports : it allows to guarantee food security for the people, while trading with other regions specific products which make up diversity on our planet. Under the responsibility of United Nations (UN) this trade must be granted a new framework, which :

- prioritizes local and regional production before export,
- allows the Countries/Unions to protect themselves from too low priced imports,
- permits public aids to farmers, provided these are not intended directly or indirectly to export at low prices,
- guarantees stable agricultural prices at an international level through international agreements of supply management.

Access to international markets is not a solution for farmers The first problem for farmers is a lack of access to their own local market because the prices are too low for their products and the import dumping they are confronted with. The access to international markets affects only 10 % of the world production, which is being controlled by transnational companies and biggest agro-industrial companies. The example of the tropical products (coffee, bananas,...) is illustrating this clearly : they benefit nearly free access in the Northern countries and family farmers in the South are still no able to improve their situation.

Agricultural policies have to support sustainable family farm based agriculture in the North and the South. In order to be able to make their food sovereignty work,

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countries in the North and in the South have to be able to support their agriculture to guarantee the right to food of their populations, to preserve their environment, to develop sustainable agriculture and to protect themselves against dumping. They should also be able to support their agriculture to fulfill other public interests that can differ according to countries and their cultural traditions. But at present the United States and the European Union in particular abuse public support to reduce their internal market prices and to dump their surpluses on the international markets, destroying family farm based agriculture in the North and the South.

Alliances are fundamental For several years Via Campesina has played a major role in the development of international networks gathering social, environmental movements, development NGOs, consumers...From Seattle to Genoa and Porto Alegre, those networks develop proposals and strategies which are essential to put an end to neoliberal policies and to develop solidarity policies.

What can be done concretely ? Get in touch with Via Campesina member organizations in order to support local and national initiatives and actions such as land occupation, sustainable farm production initiatives, defence of local seeds, actions against GMOs and dumping, etc... It is also important to bring this debate into your organizations and into your governments and parliaments. On the international level, you can take part in the world peasant fight day on April 17.