

# Transforming our food system

## The movement for food sovereignty

October 2012



WDM's campaign to curb speculation on food tackles one aspect of a broken food system. We're also helping to build a movement for a just global food system, inspired by activists in the global south.

The global food system is in crisis. Globally we are now producing more food than ever before. But while 1.5 billion people are overweight, 870 million people are affected by chronic hunger. Small-scale farmers are suffering from prices falling below their costs of production due to unfair trade regimes, corporate concentration and the dismantling of state support.

The industrial farming methods that produce our food also contribute to climate change, and the depletion and pollution of natural resources.

### Fairer food

In considering what a just and sustainable food system might look like, we can draw on a framework developed by social movements around the world including the global peasants' movement La Via Campesina. Over the last 15 years, these movements have developed a shared vision for a world that upholds the right to food, where people can define their own food and agriculture systems.

In 2007, more than 500 people gathered in Mali at the Nyeleni forum, named after a Malian peasant farmer legendary for developing crops to feed her people. They included peasants and family farmers, fisherfolk, landless

### An Indian perspective

*"Food sovereignty means to me the self respect which comes from self reliance in food production and distribution. In southern India they have their own historic struggle for rights in southern India. They have squatted some lands and claimed their rights over it. I was so impressed to see that about 4000 acres of land from the government corporations was reclaimed by the tribal communities in Kerala. 4000 families each gained one acre."*

S. Kannaiyan, a member of the South Indian Co-ordination Committee of Farmers' Movements.

people, rural workers and representatives of environmental and urban movements. This forum drew up a declaration setting out six principles of food sovereignty (see overleaf). These are universal principles which are designed to be translated into practice differently from place to place.

Five countries - Nepal, Mali, Senegal, Venezuela and Bolivia - have made food sovereignty government policy.



Participants arrive at the camp built specially for the Nyeleni food sovereignty forum in 2007, in Selingue, Mali.

## Six principles: food sovereignty...

### ...focuses on food for people

The right to food which is healthy and culturally appropriate is the basic legal demand underpinning food sovereignty. Guaranteeing it requires policies which support diversified food production in each region and country. Food is not simply another commodity to be traded or speculated on for profit.

### ...values food providers

Many smallholder farmers suffer violence, marginalisation and racism from corporate landowners and governments. People are often pushed off their land by mining concerns or agribusiness. Agricultural workers can face severe exploitation and even bonded labour. Although women produce most of the food in the global south, their role and knowledge are often ignored, and their rights to resources and as workers are violated. Food sovereignty asserts food providers' right to live and work in dignity.

### ...localises food systems

Food must be seen primarily as sustenance for the community and only secondarily as something to be traded. Under food sovereignty, local and regional provision takes precedence over supplying distant markets, and export-orientated agriculture is rejected. The 'free trade' policies which prevent

developing countries from protecting their own agriculture, for example through subsidies and tariffs, are also inimical to food sovereignty.

### ... rejects corporate control

Food sovereignty requires that women and men who provide food have control of land and resources such as water and seeds, to be used and shared in socially and environmentally sustainable ways. Privatisation of such resources, for example through intellectual property rights regimes or commercial contracts, is explicitly rejected.

### ... builds knowledge and skills

Technologies, such as genetic engineering, that undermine food providers' ability to develop and pass on knowledge and skills needed for localised food systems are rejected. Instead, food sovereignty calls for appropriate research systems to support the development of agricultural knowledge and skills.

### ...works with nature

Food sovereignty requires production and distribution systems that protect natural resources and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, avoiding energy-intensive industrial methods that damage the environment and the health of those that inhabit it.

## **Food sovereignty in action**

The principles above show how progress towards food sovereignty can be made through action at the community or local level. In recent years food movements have emerged in many countries in the global north including the UK, contributing to a more environmentally and socially sustainable food system.

According to Andrea Ferrante, chair of the Italian association for organic farming, the burgeoning of urban food gardens, farmers' markets and educational programmes show that:

*"There are more real activities of food sovereignty now running than ever before. All these new and alternative models of distribution are really seeds of food sovereignty ... no, more than seeds, they already have shoots."*

However, food sovereignty also requires structural change at the national and international levels. For example, a just food system cannot be realised without a just international trading system. The influence of financial speculators must be scaled back dramatically. And we must end those policies, promoted by the likes of the IMF and World Bank, that favour huge corporations over small-scale producers.

## **Transforming livelihoods in Sri Lanka**

A.A. Priyanthi is a peasant farmer from Katuwanayaya, Sri Lanka. She says the effect of using conventional farming on her land was driving her family further into poverty:

*"We were falling into an ever increasing debt trap. We had to spend lots of money on chemical inputs and seeds. And every year we had to increase the amount of chemicals we used in order to get a decent harvest. We felt that we were becoming slaves."*



A.A. Priyanthi, with her son, at work in Sri Lanka.

Then Priyanthi, along with just over half of the 42 families in Katuwanayaya, decided to take a different approach to farming.

*"We decided to get away completely from chemical use and to adopt 'natural farming principles'. We developed soil conservation, water management, compost-making, and mixed crop farming. With natural farming, as you can see, there are hundreds of varieties in our garden."*

*"Food sovereignty is not, in fact, a new idea, but something we had earlier. For me, the basic element in this concept of food sovereignty is that it allows us to feel free once more."*

## Reclaiming land in Brazil

After a long struggle, 400 families have made their homes in Itaituba, in a fertile, grain-growing area in south-west Brazil. In the 1980s groups of landless families from the region found that wealthy dairy farmers had illegally taken over a large piece of state-owned land in the 1960s. They began to occupy the land and demand its expropriation. Soon they received the support of the Landless Workers' Movement, which helped them to organise makeshift camps and to regroup for further occupations after frequent evictions.

Finally, in 1992, the land was expropriated and given to the families as part of the government's agrarian reform programme.

At first, the families practised conventional agriculture, planting beans, wheat and maize. They bought their seeds, fertilisers and pesticides from company salesmen and sold their crops to middlemen, who paid them less than the market price. Their dream of owning a piece of land had come true, but they were just as poor as before.

They decided to diversify their crops, set up training courses in ecological agriculture, and begin a programme of environmental measures.

One of the inhabitants, Tiao Carvalho, aged 57, describes his experience:

*"We wanted to produce food, not merchandise. It took time to transform the soil, full of pesticides, of poison, back to healthy soil. We used green fertilizer - animal manure and turnips which fix nitrogen."*

At first production fell, but then it began to pick up. Tiao and his wife Nazare acquired a cow and chickens. They began a small seed bank. Now they produce all their own food.

*"We eat much better now, more healthily - one day I counted 26 different products - fruits, salad, herbs, vegetables, milk, eggs - all produced by ourselves."*

## Building food sovereignty in Europe

To catalyse food sovereignty in Europe and build on the Nyeleni Forum held four years earlier in Mali, 400 food providers and activists came together in Austria in August



The Nyeleni Europe Food Sovereignty Forum gets underway in Krems, Austria, in August 2011. Over 400 participants came from 34 countries.

2011. They spent a week sharing experiences, taking action and drawing up the Nyeleni Europe declaration.

WDM campaigner Dan Iles took part in the forum and related actions. These included a 'market of a ideas', which was a "pop-up farmer's market with a political twist". Stalls offered taste tests of local produce, waste displays and even interactive butter churning. These activities enabled people to engage with some of the ideas of food sovereignty: "Contact between local producers and consumers, good-tasting organic food and getting back in touch with the lost culture around food" were among the aims Dan reported.

The Nyeleni Europe declaration reaffirmed the principles of food sovereignty and emphasised the democratic deficit in Europe's food system, stating that in order to achieve a true democracy, violence, corporate influence and gender inequalities must come to an end.

## Food sovereignty versus food security: What's the difference?

Food sovereignty goes beyond the concept of food security that the big aid donors and neoliberal international institutions prefer. Food security simply aims to ensure that people have sufficient food to eat. It is not concerned about how this food is produced, nor the means by which people might attain this fundamental right.

By contrast, food sovereignty requires not just that everyone is properly fed, but that the food system that feeds us is just and sustainable.



Breakout groups make plans in the Organiclea greenhouse.

### Transforming Britain's food system

In 2012 WDM helped to co-ordinate the UK's first food sovereignty forum. Over 100 farmers, community gardeners, co-op workers and activists came together to start a new movement for food sovereignty in the UK.

Participants shared experiences and insights from local projects across the UK and were able to see their activities in the context of the global movement for food sovereignty. During the forum a range of working groups were formed to strengthen local food networks, organise future events and maintain international links.

Organiclea, the event hosts, said the event made *"picking through slug-damaged beans, on your knees, in the rain ... feel like vital work: part of a movement, a wider struggle."*

## Learn more and take action

### UK food sovereignty movement

Get involved with the movement in the UK.  
[www.foodsovereignty.org.uk](http://www.foodsovereignty.org.uk)

### Nyeleni newsletter

Sign up for the Nyeleni newsletter, each issue of which focuses on a different aspect of food sovereignty.  
[www.nyeleni.org](http://www.nyeleni.org)

### Find out more through WDM

For news, blogs and a longer briefing which answers some tricky questions about food sovereignty, check out the WDM website.

[www.wdm.org.uk/food](http://www.wdm.org.uk/food)

### Local food initiatives

Access resources on setting up a food co-op or community buying group.

[www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk](http://www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk)

### People's Food Policy Project

Find out how thousands of people took part in creating a food policy for Canada from the bottom up.

[www.foodsecurecanada.org/the-peoples-food-policy-project](http://www.foodsecurecanada.org/the-peoples-food-policy-project)

### Films

Watch a selection of short films online, showcasing food sovereignty movements from Honduras to Detroit.

[www.6billionways.org.uk/foodfilms](http://www.6billionways.org.uk/foodfilms)

## Take action

WDM takes action on the root causes of injustice in the food system. To find out more, take action online or join a local group, go to [www.wdm.org.uk](http://www.wdm.org.uk) or call 020 7820 4900.



**World  
Development  
Movement**

The World Development Movement campaigns against the root causes of poverty. Working in solidarity with activists around the world, we oppose injustice and challenge the policies and institutions which keep people poor.

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