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The Temptation of Nitrogen: FAO Guidance for Food Sovereignty in Nicaragua

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Abstract

In this paper I want to look at the type of governance without sovereign authority that the FAO is exercising on the ground in a poor agricultural country like Nicaragua, and how this governance relates to claims for food sovereignty on the national and local level. Although as a global development goal, feeding the world's hungry is relatively non contentious, this has not prevented the FAO from becoming deeply enmeshed in the complex web of politics, interests and passions linked with agricultural practice. The paper examines how the FAO became a controversial actor in national food politics bringing in the UN agenda and UN criteria when it drew up for the Nicaraguan parliament a draft law on national food security that contradicted the work on national food sovereignty that Nicaraguan civil society and policy-makers had accomplished over several years.

On the local level, it looks at two FAO programmes, the Food Facility Programme financed by the European Union in the South of Nicaragua, and the Special Programme for Food Security in the North. The first distributed large amounts of chemical fertilisers, along with seed varieties that only grow well with external inputs, the second attempted through the method of 'participatory diagnosing' to systematise alternative approaches to agriculture and fit them into the global programme for food security. Normative systems and diagnostic tools become, in this process, not only part of a system of constraints but are also treated and circulated as resources, which legitimise institutional interventions and impact on local farming practices and political structures of local self governance.

"One of the greatest transformations political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that, I wouldn't say exactly that sovereignty's old right—to take life or let live—was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the power to "make" live and "let" die. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die." (Foucault, Michel, 2003 Society has to be defended, p. 241 (New York:Picador)

On the international level, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) provides technical guidance in the highly controversial debate about how to feed the undernourished 1 billion people in the world. It also aims to provide a neutral forum, where contrary opinions, interests and projections for the world in crisis can meet and develop common solutions. From its headquarters in Rome, it claims the role of an 'objective' broker whose strength is based on 'competence' and 'knowledge', on its capacity to achieve consensus thanks to its capacity as an expert organisation that can claim superior normative authority (Müller 2011). In this paper I want to look at the type of governance without sovereign authority that the FAO is exercising on the ground in a poor agricultural country like Nicaragua, and how this governance relates to claims for food sovereignty on the national and local level.

The FAO can be encountered everywhere in Nicaragua, from the farmers' fields to government ministries intervening in the name of FAO's mandate of assuring a sufficient and healthy diet to Nicaraguans suffering from chronic or temporary food shortages. The FAO advised the Nicaraguan parliament on its law about food sovereignty and food security. It administers donations of the World Food Programme. It carries out the European Food Facility Programme in Nicaragua, promoting the Green Revolution package of input-responsive plant varieties, chemical fertilisers and pesticides in the poorest parts of the country. It elaborates small pilot projects in the frame of the Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS) in chosen villages, encouraging seed saving, agro-forestry, endorsing composting and production without chemical fertilisers.

Although as a global development goal, feeding the world's hungry is relatively non contentious, this has not prevented the FAO from becoming deeply enmeshed in the complex web of politics, interests and passions linked with agricultural practice. FAO publications, however, frame problems and conflicts in seemingly neutral ways and create a fiction of coherence and harmony. Instead of asking what mechanisms are responsible for making people go hungry in spite of the fact that a sufficient amount of food is produced in the world, or through what practices one social group makes another go hungry (Murray-Li 2007: 7), the FAO's approach to food security focuses on how the poor could be empowered to become

actors in the market in order to help themselves out of poverty and protect their own health and the environment. The FAO's technical and policy recommendations exert a type of power and knowledge that a 'scientific sacralisation' (Foucault 2001:188) seems to render neutral. It has, however, an effect on substantial economic interests and a direct impact on the livelihoods of people and on their environment. The FAO's mechanisms of governance not only govern people, but also interact with things, particularly living things such as seeds, plants and soils.

In this chapter I examine how this type of governance without sovereign authority that the FAO is exercising interrelates with practices of national and local food sovereignty. Food sovereignty, as the organizers of this conference defined it, is the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. To understand the concept of food sovereignty in the wider context of political theory, Foucault's distinction between sovereign and disciplinary power is useful. The theory of sovereignty as he defines it, is linked to a form of power that the sovereign exerts over the land and the products and riches of the land. The legal systems that have emerged in Europe in the 18th and 19th century and in Nicaragua in the 19th and 20th century have allowed for a democratization of sovereignty and the emergence of public law based on the principle of collective sovereignty (Foucault 2001: 189). At the same time, however, emerged a new 'mechanics' of disciplinary power that could not be transcribed in terms of sovereignty, and that was exercised by disciplining people so that they would act on their own accord, as they ought to act. This new type of power was instrumental for the emergence of global capitalism and the type of societies and productive systems that go with it.

When I wrote about the FAO as seen from headquarters (Müller 2011), I analysed it in terms of a *dispositif* (Foucault 1994), a term frequently translated into English as 'assemblage' or 'apparatus' that exercises this type of disciplinary power. The general objective of a *dispositif* is not socialisation, structural stability, equilibrium or the reduction of complexity, but 'the ordering of human multiplicities' (Foucault 1975: 218). The *dispositif* of the FAO continually draws in new actors as experts, interlocutors and opinion-givers, engaging them with forms of calculation, technical reasoning, human 'capacity-building' and with non-human objects and devices such as agricultural technologies.

At the national level, the FAO still attempts to draw as many actors as possible into its realm, but it also becomes a development actor among others, competing with other organisations, including national political organisations, for precedence. An anthropological approach to development allows us to look beyond the smooth surface of a global governance 'without sovereign authority'. It shows the conflicted nature of interactions, as local actors, unimpressed by the gloss of harmony (Müller 2013), reinterpret global policy models of good governance

(Mosse 2005: 13). In this paper I will analyse how the FAO's 'technical interventions' on the national level have political and material effects in a small, largely agricultural country that experiences in a particularly intense fashion most of the big problems that world agriculture faces today: rapid population growth, accelerated erosion of its fertile topsoil, extreme climatic variation and volatile prices for agricultural commodities. Since 1980 the Nicaraguan population has doubled and so has the amount of land put to agricultural use. The productivity per acre has thus not increased and the agricultural frontier is pushing into increasingly marginal lands while the population continues to grow rapidly. The problem is thus that production methods need to change to increase the output per acre and at the same time they need to avoid further environmental degradation. The question of how Nicaraguans are going to grow their food in the future, and with which techniques, is thus a central one. Also, Nicaragua is in the zone of hurricanes, which periodically devastate entire harvests and lead to periods of acute food shortage; indeed, global climate change has rendered agricultural cycles more unpredictable than ever. The problems have been exacerbated by the world food crisis of 2008 and soaring prices, which added urgency to already acute problems.

In the first part of the chapter I examine how the FAO became a controversial actor in national food politics 'clomping in like an elephant on the national level' (McKeon 2009: 141), bringing in the UN agenda and UN criteria when it drew up for the Nicaraguan parliament a draft law on national food security that contradicted the work on national food sovereignty that Nicaraguan civil society and policy-makers had accomplished over several years.

In the second part, I look at how the FAO acts as a development broker in the south of Nicaragua, carrying out the Food Facility Programme decided upon and financed by the European Union with the aim of combating rapidly and effectively the most pressing effects of the World Food Crisis of 2008. I will analyse the effects of the programme that distributed large amounts of chemical fertilisers, along with seed varieties that only grow well with external inputs, on local farming practices and political structures of local self governance.

In the third part I analyse how the FAO Special Programme for Food Security in the north of Nicaragua attempts through the method of 'participatory diagnosing' to systematise alternative approaches to agriculture and fit them into the global programme for food security. Normative systems and diagnostic tools become, in this process, not only part of a system of constraints but are also treated and circulated as resources, which legitimise institutional interventions.

Providing 'Technical Advice' on Nicaragua's Food Sovereignty Law

The FAO has the global mandate if not to solve, then at least to alleviate, the problem of providing sufficient and healthy food for the 1 billion people who suffer from chronic or temporary hunger. To solve the problem of hunger is part of the Millennium Goals that thus set

what seems like a moral imperative for intervention. In November 2004 the FAO Council adopted voluntary guidelines on the right to food with the objective of providing ‘practical guidance to States in their implementation of the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food’ (FAO 2005: iii). The guidelines are an attempt by governments to interpret on the international level the right to food that is inscribed in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) signed in 1966, and to recommend actions to be taken by individual governments (FAO 2005: i). These guidelines are part of an emerging guidelines culture (Larsen 2013). Guidelines have become one of the most prominent governance tools of international organisations. Guidelines allow actors to suggest and to recommend in contexts where constraint and obligation are impossible to impose but they nevertheless have concrete effects for national and international policy-making. They imply that the one who guides has the superior technical knowledge over the one who is guided. The guidelines for the right to food based on the ICESCR can thus claim a superior moral authority that stands beyond and above political interest. Guidelines are supposed to be technical, apolitical and moral at the same time.

Yet within the consensus on the global level that combating hunger is a priority, two internationally legitimated development paradigms coexist: one that promotes high-tech solutions, agro-chemicals, genetically modified seeds and production for the market, and another that encourages small scale agriculture, auto-consumption, agro-biodiversity and the preservation of soil fertility. While the first goes together with a discourse of urgency and speed, the other emphasises slowness and care (Adam 1998).

The publication in 2008 of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) report (McIntyre and Beverly 2008), which had been commissioned by the UN to advise countries on the best way of ridding the world of hunger, has not been able to solve the conflict between these two paradigms but has rather exacerbated them. The report, co-authored by 400 scientists, criticised the agro-industrial model, cautioned against GMOs (genetically modified organisms) and emphasised that traditional work-intensive farming practices could be as productive per acre farmed, if not more so, than forms of high-input agriculture which were costly and damaging to the environment. In its high degree of unanimity among scientists, the report can be compared to the fourth international assessment report on climate change (Pachauri and Reisinger 2007). To mark their dissent, agro-food corporations pulled out of the process in the last month of writing up and since then the IAASTD report is heralded not as a consensual but as an alternative discourse to the Green Revolution model in the international realm.

At the level of the FAO headquarters the confrontation between these two approaches is presented as a neutral technology debate for which the FAO offers a ‘forum’. In this ‘forum’

contrasting views are supposed to be expressed and a consensus achieved with regard to the common goal of feeding the hungry in the world. The FAO wants to offer in this forum a voice to peasant and environmental organisations advocating for alternative and critical approaches to the dominant paradigm of high-input chemical dependent agriculture, while it continues to cooperate with donor countries and foundations that promote Green Revolution varieties and biotechnology. By rendering conflicting political and economic interests technical, it attempts to provide a gloss of harmony and to produce coherent policy narratives (Müller 2011). This does not mean, however, that all of the FAO's staff share this position. Already in the 1970s members of staff went on strike – the first in UN history – to protest that FAO 'masqueraded' as a neutral technical forum while it was promoting Green Revolution technologies (McKeon 2009: 20). On the national level, and in actual practice, the masks fall when the FAO undertakes development projects in one or the other logic and becomes an actor, or rather it seems to behave as several actors with different agendas who nevertheless claim to pursue the same supreme goal of combating hunger.

The intervention of the FAO on the Nicaraguan Law on Food Sovereignty and Food Security shows the strength and also the paradoxical use that can be made of such a mechanism of international governance. In 2006, still under the liberal government of Enrique Bolanos, a law on food sovereignty and food security, elaborated by a commission composed of elected representatives and members of seventy-five national and twenty-five international NGOs was introduced into the Nicaraguan parliament.¹ The law contained several articles that attributed an important regulatory role to national government and were in contradiction with the usual recipes of structural adjustment promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The proposal stipulated concrete measures. They included: the development of improved seed from traditional varieties (Art. 5.1), the distribution of not only individual but also communal land titles (Art. 5.3), strict control on food imports and the refusal of genetically modified food aid (Art. 5.8), the establishment of state grain reserves and the possibility of national food price regulation (Art. 5.9), the shortening of the food chain between producer and consumer (Art. 5.10).

With the law on food sovereignty the Nicaraguan parliament wanted to establish an effective instrument that would attenuate the effects of international trade agreements and the world market. In the letter introducing the project of law (paragraph II), the members of the Special Committee for Poverty Reduction affirmed that Nicaragua's signing of international trade agreements had pushed consumerism without allowing for a strategy of food sovereignty that would guarantee food security. Defining the concept of food security the committee referred to

¹See:<http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/Diariodebate.nsf/1e91f0054ac77a85062572e50067fde4/a6843a78d5801a25062576b00070e67a?OpenDocument> (consulted 13 November 2012). Ley de soberanía y seguridad alimentaria y nutricional, Dictamen 5.10.2006, Managua: Nicaragua.

the Final Declaration of the World Forum on Food Sovereignty, convened by civil society organisations in Cuba in 2001 and not the FAO voluntary guidelines on the right to food:

Food security is the people's right to define their own policies and strategies for the sustainable production, distribution and consumption of food that guarantees the right to food for the entire population, on the basis of small and medium-sized production, respecting their own cultures and the diversity of peasant, fishing and indigenous forms of agricultural production, marketing and management of rural areas, in which women play a fundamental role.²

The emphasis that parliament placed on developing traditional seed varieties that were adapted to local conditions and able to grow without chemical inputs contrasted with the public plant breeding done by the Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria (INTA) that had so far focused on high-yield input-dependent varieties in its breeding programmes. It also antagonised foreign companies like Monsanto that have an aggressive presence in the Nicaraguan seed market. When Nicaragua, with the support of the FAO introduced the programme *Libra por Libra* in 2002, which urged farmers to exchange their traditional varieties of maize and beans for varieties that were higher yielding when they received sufficient chemical inputs, three of the six corn varieties distributed to the farmers came from the multinational corporation Monsanto. In contrast, by inscribing their commitment to supporting the improvement of traditional varieties in the food sovereignty law, the parliament affirmed its intention to increase Nicaragua's independence from imports of seeds and chemicals.

Inscribing the refusal of transgenic crops as food aid into the food sovereignty law, the parliament also directly attacked US interests, since the US insists that its food aid worldwide should be offered in kernel form and not be tested for GMOs.³ In Nicaragua, the World Food Programme distributes, among other crop varieties, corn from the US in kernel form that contains GMOs.⁴ Corn that is not milled not only enters the food chain but may also be used as seed. There were, in fact, many voices among both international aid workers and Nicaraguans who criticised the surreptitious way that transgenic corn was thus introduced into a country that did not authorise the cultivation of genetically modified corn varieties until 2012 when the biosecurity law was passed,⁵ and that possesses a rapidly dwindling wealth of traditional corn

² Available at:

<http://legislacion.asamblea.gob.ni/sileg/iniciativas.nsf/01c00d5076037b5b062572d00072bee8/caf29f2bb00d13dd06256886005796dc?OpenDocument&ExpandSection=3&TableRow=3.1> (accessed 9 April 2013).

³ See, for example, the controversies around food aid to Zimbabwe and Zambia. See:

<http://nicaraguaymasespanol.blogspot.fr/2012/02/transgenicos-ya-entraron-nicaragua.html> Ley 705: Ley Sobre Prevención de Riesgos Provenientes de Organismos Vivos Modificados por Medio de Biotecnología Molecular, 2012.

⁴ See: <http://nicaraguaymasespanol.blogspot.fr/2012/02/transgenicos-ya-entraron-nicaragua.html>

⁵ Ley 705: Ley Sobre Prevención de Riesgos Provenientes de Organismos Vivos Modificados por Medio de

varieties. Their justifiable fear was that food aid was being used as a Trojan Horse for the introduction of GMOs. Other aspects of the food sovereignty bill were equally unwelcome to transnational agrobusiness. The creation of state grain reserves and national food price regulations are controversial measures in international food policy-making which go against the credo of market liberalism and most conditions of structural adjustment programmes. In addition, inscribing the shortening of the food chain between producer and consumer into law posed a threat to the supermarket chains that, in Nicaragua, are almost exclusively owned by the US-based multinational WalMart.

On 7 June 2007, when the Sandinistas had already gained a relative majority in parliament, the food sovereignty law was passed by the National Assembly on its first reading in almost all points. However, it failed to pass its second reading because the Liberals refused to endorse the article prohibiting the import of transgenic food aid. At the demand of the liberal deputies the FAO then drafted a counter-proposal, which did away with all concrete measures, replacing them with vague formulations that came straight out of the voluntary guidelines. The counter-proposal provoked an outcry among the civil society organisations that had cooperated to create a draft law. In an interview Eduardo Vallecillo, coordinator of the government-commissioned Working Group on Food Sovereignty and Food Security (GISSAN) commented:

certain administrators of the FAO don't like the subject of food sovereignty.... There are the voluntary guidelines ... they are practically a format that the FAO has already established. To talk about food sovereignty is a concept that goes beyond the established model. It is something very new that has to do with the dignity of the people. We introduce this subject not as an isolated subject, but as a model for intervention.... The FAO says, many things that they eliminated from our proposal should be included in a bylaw. But past experiences, for example in Guatemala,⁶ tell us that this makes it unpredictable and often this instrument prevents a true application of the concept of sovereignty and food security. We want a law that sustains programs that really get to the people. (Trucchi 2007)

When challenged by civil society organisations over why the proposal had not been discussed with the working group beforehand, the director of FAO Nicaragua allegedly responded that she was providing technical assistance as requested by the National Assembly and that it was not her role to enter into a political debate. 'How can it be possible to solve a political problem with a technical law?' Vallecillo concluded (Trucchi 2007).

It took another two years before the law on food sovereignty was finally approved by

Biocología Molecular, 2012.

⁶ The Guatemalan law on food security was designed jointly by the government, civil society and the UN in 2005.

parliament. The name remained the same but the content was streamlined to fit with the FAO proposal. As a reward, the FAO commended the National Assembly of Nicaragua.⁷

As the example of the Nicaraguan law shows, the voluntary guidelines took on a life of their own that weakened their initial intent. As an albeit small area of common ground among a number of politically and ideologically diverse nation states, and as universally agreed minimum standard, the voluntary guidelines were a real achievement of international policy-making. However, the Voluntary Guidelines to support the Progressive Realisation of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security adopted by the 127th Session of the FAO Council in November 2004 had never been intended to replace national law-making. They were the baseline, and every state was supposed to do better than that and to decide on concrete measures and principles that would fill vague formulations such as Article 4.1: ‘States should take into account the shortcomings of market mechanisms in protecting the environment and public good’ (FAO 2005: 14).

Finally, the actual Food Sovereignty Law voted on 18 June 2009, was streamlined to fit with the FAO proposals. The provision of the draft law (Article 5.9) that the state should establish grain reserves and have the possibility to regulate prices was replaced by the vague formulation (Article 9.a) that the state should have ‘the right to define its own politics and sustainable strategies of food production, transformation, distribution and consumption ... without prejudice to the exercise of the right to free enterprise and trade’. Grain reserves and price fixing, attacked by all structural adjustment programmes, were thus off the table. Article 5.8 of the draft law that forbade receiving ‘food aid that contained genetically modified materials’ was replaced by Article 9.b: ‘Precaution. Guarantee the safety of the internal production of food, as well as of imports and donations, if they are damaging to production and human consumption.’ Before refusing food aid containing GMOs, Nicaragua was now supposed to prove that they were damaging to human health and the environment. What is more, the emphasis on free market and free enterprise in the final version of the law fell back even behind the careful formulations of the Voluntary Guidelines. The Voluntary Guidelines conceded in Article 4.1 that market mechanisms *could* have their shortcomings that the state *should* address (emphasis added). While the Voluntary Guidelines admitted that market mechanisms could fail and that state intervention might become imperative, the new Nicaraguan food sovereignty law subordinated ‘food sovereignty’ to the right of free enterprise and free trade (Art. 9.a).

⁷ The FAO commended the Nicaraguan National Assembly on 27 October 2009 for passing the food security and sovereignty law. The commendation was given during a special session of the Assembly on World Food Day. The FAO representative thanked the delegates for passing the law which, according to National Assembly President, had been before the body for two years. A cooperation accord between the FAO and Nicaragua was signed following the session. See: <http://www.nicanet.org/?p=857> (consulted 13 November 2012).

Was the FAO thus interfering directly in essential policy-making, thus the sovereignty, of the Nicaraguan parliament giving it a (neo)liberal spin? Governance by international organisations is more subtle than that. Although the FAO definitely ‘clomped like an elephant on the national level’ (McKeon 2009: 19) it did not intervene in the internal affairs of the Nicaraguan state without being invited to do so. As Gerhard Anders (2005) showed, even the IMF only suggests structural adjustment measures, if the national governments formally call them in to do so. National governments also use international policy guidance for their own purposes;⁸ for example, they may pass laws that are unpopular at home under the supposed pressure from international organisations. A food sovereignty law devoid of concrete measures may well have been in the short-term interest of the Nicaraguan government, absolving it from the legal obligation to intervene in volatile agro-food markets and confront foreign donors of food aid. Instead of being legally bound to take measures that would secure national control over the food system but antagonize foreign interests the government could act as a generous patron distributing gifts to the hungry population. After the defeat of the first version of the food sovereignty law, the new Sandinista government provided through the Productive Food Programme (Programa Productivo Alimentario), initiated in June 2007, thousands of smallholder families with productive assets, a favour it could hope they would reciprocate by voting for them in the next election. The defeat weakened the food sovereignty of the Nicaraguan state, but it may well have strengthened the government politically as it was able to use the distribution of food, agricultural credit, chemical fertilizer and seeds to keep itself in power.

What makes the FAO influential in receiver countries is not so much its claim to moral and technical superiority, but its broker role when donor countries launch larger agricultural development programmes. The FAO itself as an organisation has become, over the last twenty years, more and more dependent on donor countries as funding through the UN system has been constantly reduced. Losing part of its institutional autonomy, it has thus started to act as a ‘broker’ between food-exporting donor countries and food-insecure receiver countries. The funding of specific projects and programmes by donor countries has thus become vital to the authority and the survival of the FAO itself.

‘A Neutral Broker’: The Food Facility Programme

One of the programmes for which the FAO acted as a broker was the worldwide 1 billion euros European Food Facility Programme, decided on in December 2008, which distributed in twenty-seven countries for two years (summer 2009 to summer 2011) the Green Revolution package of high-yielding varieties and fertilisers according to a global methodology determined by the donor. It dedicated 3 million euros to Nicaragua to fulfil three objectives: increase productivity

⁸ Shalini Randeria calls it the ‘cunning state’.

of the farmers by 15 per cent, reduce post-harvest losses from 30 per cent to 14 per cent and improve the self-organisation of farmers as ‘entrepreneurs’ acting in the market.⁹ The discourse of urgency was complemented here by a rhetoric of empowering smallholder farmers to feed themselves and produce for the market. The programme was to be executed through legally constituted cooperatives growing staples like maize and beans and ready to accept new members. The programme was intended to empower cooperatives that had a weak organisational structure and that would need FAO’s technical and logistical assistance for setting up, accounting and commercialisation. The cooperatives were encouraged to sell for a low price or lend the donated high-yielding varieties and fertilisers to local producers and thereby create revolving funds (Interview with the first national programme coordinator, November 2009).

The director of FAO Nicaragua enthusiastically welcomed the programme; it was deployed in the poorest parts of Nicaragua, which, incidentally, also have the most precarious environmental conditions, including steep hills, too much or too little rain, and thus problems of erosion. Farmers in these areas have practised slash-and-burn agriculture, pushing the agricultural frontier to its limit. Productivity per acre has basically remained the same, or gone down, although many development projects by Nicaraguan governments, NGOs and the FAO itself have promoted the same package of technologies that the Food Facility Programme brought to the country. The director, a fervent advocate of Green Revolution varieties, explained the failures of previous projects in the old development idiom of peasant resistance to change. It was their ‘culture’ that prevented people taking advantage of simple economic incentives (Crewe and Harrison 1998: 1): ‘The traditional thinking of many peasants makes it difficult to make the step towards a new agriculture’ (Interview November 2009). He was persuaded that the problem of hunger in Nicaragua could be rapidly solved if only the Nicaraguan farmers, big and small, would adopt high-yielding varieties, purchase certified seed every year and use sufficient fertiliser. Also, the problem of erosion in hilly areas could be solved by cultivating with low soil disturbance using herbicides to kill weeds. The director of the FAO constructed the smallholder farmers as rural subjects who hardly ever acted as they should and who needed discipline and education for their own improvement.

In 2011, I was able to observe how the Food Facility Programme was evolving in practice and what effects it had on the ground in a village – let’s call it *la Quebrada* – where I had done fieldwork prior to the arrival of the programme from April to November 2009. In 2009 the farmers in this hilly and relatively dry part of Carazo felt the repercussions of the worldwide economic crisis. Young migrant workers had returned from work in Costa Rica or had been laid off by the *maquilladoras* in Nicaragua, and many mouths had to be fed. Among the families that

⁹ Interview with the FAO programme director, November 2009.

had a hard time feeding the additional mouths I sensed a certain defiance in spite of their obvious economic difficulties. Some of them told me that the economic crisis was out there and affected the rich countries more than it affected them. As they did not have anything, they also did not have anything to lose. Some of the older farmers even seemed glad rather than worried to see some of their children return to the land. As there was no cash to buy chemical fertilisers and herbicides, farmers talked about changing their production techniques to preserve the land for future generations. They explained that chemical fertilisers used in the past had burned the land, exacerbating the effects of the still frequent practice of burning the residue on fallow land before cultivation. Moreover, slash-and-burn cycles had become shorter and shorter as more and more people lived from the same piece of land, and as a result the soil had become eroded and was 'tired'. The policy 'Don't burn the land!' (No *quema!*) received legal backing from national and municipal government and became more widely accepted by the farmers. In 2009 some farmers used the then available family labour to weed the crops instead of buying herbicides, and became interested again in techniques of green manure that had been introduced twenty years earlier by associations close to the farmer self-help movement de Campesino a Campesino (Holt-Gimenez 2006). Also, traditional varieties of maize and beans became more popular choices for farmers. When I left the village in 2009, a small but active minority of farmers had decided to preserve and exchange their traditional varieties of maize and beans and to create a seed bank. It was in these circles that I heard for the first time Nicaraguan farmers use the term food sovereignty. They described it not as something they had ever attained, but as a tenuous condition constantly menaced by weather patterns, and rendered even more unpredictable by climate change, the exhaustion of the soils, the consumption demands of their youth, the interest demanded by bankers, and the corruption of private and state entrepreneurs. Food sovereignty for them was not a "right," but the result of practices that had to be constantly renewed, and were thus constantly imperiled.

When I came back in 2011 the Food Facility Programme had arrived in the village and not only the situation but also the discourse had changed considerably. Some of the farmers who had created the seed bank for traditional varieties in 2009 and who had experimented with green manure were now busy distributing fertiliser and Green Revolution varieties; they had also withdrawn from the activities of the agro-ecologically minded farmers' cooperative. Another cooperative that had been set up by ten of the wealthier farmers in 2007¹⁰ but had laid dormant most of the time since, had now become the centre selected by the FAO to distribute seeds and fertiliser and one grain bin for 8 quintales¹¹ to the farmers in the area and beyond. The first thing I saw when I arrived back in the village in 2011 was a solid storage shed with a

¹⁰ The members of this cooperative were: the richest farmer in the village, his wife who worked in Costa Rica, his mother and his son, a female farmer and her son, the head of the village council and his son, the head of the village council of a neighboring village and the son of a rather wealthy landowner in another village.

¹¹ One Nicaraguan quintal is the equivalent of 46 kg.

massive metal door and a huge lock that the FAO had built to store the seeds and fertilisers. Next to it were two drying beds with small roofs (2 x4 metres) big enough to dry 1 quintal of beans at a time. The shed was now empty but for three empty metal bins that could hold 30 quintales each. I was immediately told that an endless procession of ox carts, riders and small pick-up trucks had carried away hundreds of bags of fertilisers and seeds. ‘And what has remained for us?’ people in the village asked reproachfully. ‘Why did they give the seed and fertiliser away to people as far away as Nandaime?’ And ‘Who gave the right to this cooperative to sell seeds and fertilisers, if we have an elected village council (CPC), that could do the distribution?’¹²

The decision by the FAO to make a weak and malleable cooperative the carrier of the programme made the programme unaccountable to the elected village council. One of the declared objectives of the programme had been to select deliberately weak agricultural cooperatives and develop their governance structure, provide them with high-yielding seed varieties, fertilisers and technical assistance, and teach them how to administer their farms, and conserve and process their products. With this choice the FAO artificially constructed an organisational void on the village level, which it could fill with its own objectives and priorities. Instead of strengthening existing structures of local self-governance the programme ignored and weakened them. As a consequence, the FAO was able to enjoy autonomy from a village council that wanted first and foremost to defend the interests of the village. While the village council was left out of the distribution of fertiliser and seed, the municipality to which the village belonged happily accepted the programme as it alleviated pressure on the municipal budget, which the mayor used to spend in part on gifts of fertilisers for his electorate.

Were these farmers thus nothing but the playthings of these different conjunctures and interventions, with no strong ecological convictions of their own, adjusting their behavior to the opportunities that opened up for them? Many farmers who could not fall back on unpaid family labor and who had to pay farm hands explained that spraying herbicides was certainly not good for the soil but much cheaper than the cost of labor. When their children returned to the city (thus no longer helping in the fields and sending money instead), they returned to using herbicides. Further, nitrogen and other fertilizers, which were freely available, were like an offer one could not refuse, as it translated, if the conditions were right — that is, if it rained and stopped raining in time — into a higher yield. To return fertility to the land that was more intensively used, to feed the soil (and not only the plant) without chemicals, was a long-term

¹² The CPC (Consejo Popular Comunitario) was introduced by the new Sandinista government and had nine elected members who fulfilled various functions in the community being responsible for health, young people, education, water, etc.

project requiring work that many farmers were unable or unwilling to do. The temptation of nitrogen was hard to resist.

However, even when the farmers were swamped by the FAO project with freely available chemical fertilizers, not all of them took the offered package of Green Revolution varieties and chemical fertilizer at first. Some told me that they had seeded in 2010 into fertile ground that had not required nitrogen. Others took it and then sold it for a decent price. Others again used the chemical fertilizers but gave away the Green revolution varieties, and used the fertilizer on their traditional seed varieties.

There were various shortcomings in the execution of the programme, partly because of extremely unfavourable weather conditions, and partly because of organisational failures on the local, national and international level. Waiting for the 'improved' seeds and fertilisers to be distributed made the farmers, once again, dependent on centralised structures of aid and assistance which they had just started to overcome in the previous year. When the thousands of quintales of seeds and fertilisers finally arrived late for the first growing season in June 2010, a private auditing firm hired by the FAO made farmers wait even longer, checking the product, counting, recommending. In the first cultivation cycle of 2010 many farmers were thus unable to seed their crop at the right time. They paid 200 cordobas¹³ for the package of the first cultivation cycle and 250 cordobas for the second cycle and were supposed to give back 1 quintal of maize and 1 quintal of beans. However, torrential rains destroyed the bean harvest of 2010 and most farmers were unable to return any beans at the end of year. They also lost the maize harvest because the seeds of the ameliorated corn variety NB6 distributed through the programme were defective. Farmers did not know that the quality control of the distributed varieties was inadequate, took the chance of growing them without a germination test and lost. Many villagers were thus reluctant or unable in 2011 to pay even more, namely 600 cordobas, for their next package.¹⁴ As the members of the cooperative had to prove to the programme administrators that all the seed and fertiliser were distributed and nothing was left in the storage shed, they distributed them to people outside the programme area. As a result, the ten members of the cooperative accumulated, somewhat unintentionally, capital of 300,000 cordobas (US \$15,000).

The money accumulated through the programme brought into the open the ambiguity of the idea of good governance that the FAO had to offer: the money was privately held but should serve the common good. It should incite the entrepreneurial spirit of the members of the cooperative and improve the nutritional situation of the entire village population. One of the

¹³ The exchange rate was 20 cordobas to US\$1.

¹⁴ This would have been worth 4,000 cordobas on the open market.

ideas to use the money to the advantage of the entire community was to create a community grain board, where farmers could sell their grain at harvest time and where it would be stored until prices increased. The price advantage achieved by storing the grain would then be shared between the cooperative and the farmer member, after a fee for maintenance and storage was deducted that would be paid to the people looking after the stored grain. The idea had been discussed in the village even before the programme arrived. Such a structure would alleviate dependence on volatile prices and deceitful grain merchants. The new storage shed, the grain bins and the capital accumulated, all seemed ideal for realising the plan. The essential obstacle, however, was the governance structure introduced through the programme, which left it to the cooperative to dispose of the fund as they wished and did not make it mandatory to open up the membership. Most members agreed in principle to use the fund to buy up grain, but some disagreed with opening up the cooperative to new members and wished to keep all the profit made from distributing the grain for the members of the cooperative. When the programme finished and the FAO withdrew on 31 July 2012, no decision as to the use of the money had been taken. Most villagers observing the heated conflicts in the cooperative expected that the fund would simply be squandered and would not be used in the general interest.

At the national level, the programme encountered the typical problems of a short-term assistance project. As the coordinator hired for the two years of the programme duration expressed it:

Urgency! Urgency! Urgency is never a solution! I understand them, I understand all of them, but you will never solve the problem of poverty in this country with reactive programmes. Drought! Fshuuuu! All help! The drought finishes, already everything is gone! Floods!!! Bbbrrrr! Everybody!

Compared with programmes he executed for USAID, he thought that the FAO was slow and excessively bureaucratic. For any spending over US\$100,000 they needed to get the budgetary approval of the Headquarters in Rome, which involved writing dozens of letters. His initiative to get plastic tunnels fabricated, so that individual producers could store and dry freshly harvested beans and maize, met with innumerable bureaucratic obstacles. When the tunnels finally arrived in la Quebrada, the producers were not instructed how to use them and I saw the metal arches standing at harvest time without their plastic covers. Most villagers thought they were perfectly useless.

While the national programme coordinator insisted that the most tragic paradox was to have good productivity, bad commercialisation and a lot of post-harvest losses, he did not support local initiatives such as the community marketing board or a board at the municipal level which would have strengthened the position of the most fragile local producers in the local market. As he did not take the village or the municipal council into account he felt he would have to

manage it alone. ‘I alone with four thousand and some beneficiaries.... I am not superman! Impossible!’ Instead, he acted as an intermediary between the WalMart processing plant and some of the larger cooperatives supported by the programme that collected and cleaned in some regions the bean production of several smaller cooperatives. He took the buyer of WalMart to the cooperative so that he could instruct the administrators in the criteria of traceability and quality required by the multinational company and offer them fast cash.¹⁵ Structurally, the deal with WalMart lengthened and centralised the food chain instead of favouring local markets as the Food Facility Programme had promised.

The unfolding of the Food Facility Programme in Nicaragua resembles the development dramas that are unfolding in a similar fashion all over the world. The programme was undertaken in a well-meaning spirit of urgency and arrived from the outside – and top down – in a local community that did not ask for it, undermining local initiatives to improve local self-sufficiency and to reduce the purchase of chemical inputs. Ultimately, only the more privileged farmers profited from it, those who already had enough to eat. In spite of its shortcomings, the programme was heralded as a success by the mayor of the municipality and of course by the members of the cooperative. ‘I will defend the FAO wherever I go’, a dedicated and usually quite critical community leader told me after he had been invited by the FAO to fly to a regional meeting of programme beneficiaries in Guatemala. The programme successfully embedded itself into a network of reciprocal favours, which tied together the FAO, the national government, the municipality and the cooperative to the detriment of the local community and the poorest farmers, and it claimed that FAO was offering here an example of best practice, to be followed by other agencies.

‘Participatory Diagnosing’: The Special Programme for Food Security

In apparent contrast to this top-down intervention was the pilot project for the Special Programme for Food Security that FAO developed in a village in the north of Nicaragua: let’s call it el Guanacaste. The Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS), is one of the high-priority initiatives of the FAO which aims to help fulfil the agreements of the two World Summits on Food (in 1996 and 2002), and the commitments of the Millennium Declaration to reduce world hunger by half by 2015. Its implementation follows a dual approach: at the national level it supports and promotes policy and institutional reforms, such as the law on food sovereignty and food security that I analysed above. It also takes:

a territorial approach, with field activities to identify and promote best practices of agricultural production and marketing ... and activities to improve organisational capacity at the community level and the nutrition practices of the households to assist

¹⁵ I was unable to find out at what price the deal was concluded.

States in meeting their international commitments.¹⁶

The village el Guanacaste was one of the first where the methodology of the programme was to be tested and refined over two years, from 2008 to 2010.

The method, called participatory diagnosing, combined the expression of subjective desires with objective measures and was supposed to generate shared values and principles. The FAO extension agent in the north, who was responsible for the programme, explained to me in 2009 that he was teaching the inhabitants of el Guanacaste to discover their own necessities and to act on them. The method he employed was to convoke a meeting of the villagers and make them ‘dream’ together about the changes they would like to see: sufficient food, healthy children, fertile fields. Their ‘dreams’ were then checked against and reconciled with objective scientific measures of food deficiencies. To evaluate the efforts to improve nutrition, the FAO cooperated with the Ministry of Health to weigh and measure the village children periodically. As the FAO administrator responsible for the programme on the national level expressed it: ‘We are investing in human capital and informal leadership. We don’t want to ask, what do you *need*, but what do you *have*?’ (Interview April 2009). After collecting their ‘dreams’ the extension agent taught the villagers to establish nutrition charts and to translate their dream of sufficient tasty food into the need for proteins and vitamins. Together they decided that the villagers needed house gardens, for producing vegetables, goats to give milk to the undernourished children, a stock of high-yielding corn and bean varieties and bags of fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides, which were to become the foundation of a seed and fertiliser bank. They then designated a small number of families as the first beneficiaries of the programme and selected five promoters (for house gardens, goats, agro-forestry and ecological production methods and the seed bank) and one coordinator. The villagers who participated in producing the diagnosis should not primarily benefit from the programme. The FAO provided an initial stock of ‘improved’ seed varieties and chemical fertiliser, herbicides and pesticides for the seed and fertiliser bank, a goat for the families with undernourished small children, and vegetable seeds. The villagers were to give back after the harvest two bags of seeds for each one bag borrowed and pay the chemicals, and thus develop a collective capital fund.

The SPFS claimed to have arrived in the village in a void, in a place untouched by previous development projects: abandoned, poor, unorganised and helpless. The story was well supported by some of the villagers who used the SPFS to strengthen their economic and social position in the village. However, this version did not correspond to the reality. The village had a long history of agricultural and health projects, starting in the 1970s with the *escuela radiofonica*, a participatory educational radio program based on the methods of Paolo Freire, which promoted agro-ecological cultivation methods. Several farmers in the village had

¹⁶ See: http://www.pesacentroamerica.org/pesa_ca/que_es.php (consulted 24 May 2012).

contributed to these programmes. In the 1980s the village supported the Sandinistas and organised its own self-defence against the contra-revolutionary guerrillas controlling the area, and participated in the Sandinista land reform. A humanitarian NGO from Baltimore financed small projects then and continued to do so in the 1990s as well, when the village felt abandoned by the successive neoliberal governments because it continued to be a Sandinista stronghold. The NGO taught the villagers to build fuel-efficient stoves and provided them with rainwater cisterns. In 2004, the NGO from Baltimore joined a network of NGOs called Fedicamp, which promoted agro-ecological production using the methods of the Campesino a Campesino movement: nurseries for fruit trees, stone walls and plantations to retain the soil, dykes to channel rainwater and the conservation of seeds not only from population varieties of the main staple crops maize, beans and millet, but also from a wide range of local vegetables and fruits (pipian, chayote, hard squash, malanga, yucca, etc.). Fedicamp encouraged the farmers to cooperate with others in the village and to exchange fruit trees, vegetable seeds, seeds for green manure, medicinal herbs, etc. with farmers from other villages and regions. Their budget was extremely limited and they offered almost no hand-outs.

At first the two initiatives, SPFS and Fedicamp, existed side by side and some of the most active members of the village became promoters for both. Very soon, however, the limitations of the FAO project became apparent: some villagers were unable to fulfil their 'dream' of setting up gardens around their houses, because these were built on solid rock. The FAO extension agent brought them lorry tires to be put on wooden scaffoldings 150 cm above the ground, where they planted commercial varieties of tomatoes, peppers, carrots, beetroots and herbs during the dry season that had to be watered from wells. These cultivations were in constant danger of attack from the goats that had quickly reproduced themselves. The villagers were proud of their mini-gardens, and also of their goats, although the increasing numbers of roaming goats caused conflicts with the garden owners. Gardens and goats were shown to each of the many FAO delegations that visited the village. The FAO extension agent encouraged the villagers to sell their vegetables and goat meat at the market in the next town and to set up marketing plans for a production, which, however, was not even sufficient for auto-consumption. In the end, the villagers cooperated and sold their precious vegetables and goat meat at the local fairs set up by the FAO and the municipality. When I returned in 2011 there were virtually no goats left in the village. More than half the villagers who had taken seeds from the seed bank did not give them back and even more had been unable to pay for the chemicals and fertilisers. The villagers designated as promoters decided to stop distributing chemicals through the seed bank. Some of them wanted the FAO to bring them traditional corn and bean varieties from other villages that would need fewer chemical inputs to grow, rather than Green Revolution varieties: a wish that was not fulfilled.

In spite of these shortcomings the Special Programme for Food Security was ultimately a

success in the village of El Guanacaste. The success was based less on the attempts of the FAO to introduce 'informal leadership' and 'human capital', but on the strong organizational structure of the village — on its local sovereignty — toughened by years of defending itself in the civil war of the 1980s and of surviving with very little state support 16 years of neo-liberalism. Soon, the agro-ecological initiatives became mingled with the FAO project. The house gardens were at last able to thrive because the villagers astutely played the two organisations that competed with each other, asking FAO to provide them with fences to keep the goats and chickens out of the gardens they had developed with the Fedicamp. Some farmers learned from field trips with the Fedicamp to other villages to build raised beds on the rocky land around their houses and plant vegetables more efficiently. They started to produce different types of compost that they used to fill the raised beds and the lorry tyres. In their field plots, the farmers used increasingly both traditional and new agro-ecological methods to preserve soil fertility. They obtained material from FAO to build a storage shed to store the seeds from the FAO seed bank but also the traditional varieties that the other project had introduced. Both the FAO and the Fedicamp promoted agro-forestry, encouraging the farmers to leave some trees standing in the cultivated plots. However, while the FAO advised the farmers to stop growing maize, beans and millet in the same plot and to seed a single crop more densely, the Fedicamp promoted companion cropping and the use of green manure and cover crops. While the agricultural technicians of both organisations emphasised that they were in principle pursuing the same objectives, they never directly cooperated. The FAO did not acknowledge the work of Fedicamp and its impact upon the success of the programme. Its long-term involvement was simply officially ignored. As the agricultural advisor of Fedicamp put it:

We are representing continuity here. It is not that I want to be mean with respect to the programmes, but if you carry a heavy sack from the town to the village and somebody takes it from you at the village health centre and brings it here, who is going to get the praise? Not the one who carried it all the way from town ... (Interview October 2009)

Only the consistent and patient efforts of well-respected village leaders, who were coordinating not only the Food Security Programme but also collaborated actively with the Fedicamp, prevented the active members of the community from splitting into two groups: those that were 'with the FAO' and who jealously guarded, for example, the privilege of travelling in the FAO truck to meetings and fairs on the regional and national level, and those who were working with the Fedicamp and were invited to visit farming experiments in other communities. The leaders emphasized, that it was not so much that the SPFS was supporting *the villagers* but *the villagers* were supporting the programme allowing it to become a success. The agency was in *their* hands.

In spite of their divisions, most villagers appreciated the personal engagement of the FAO

extension agent, who would actually deliver what he had promised and who made sure that the materials he brought were put to good use. From his experience in el Guanacaste and other villages he produced a methodological guideline, which was to be used by other development projects. Several promotional films were made in the village and the diagnostic tools used here were put on the FAO website. What was presented as 'lived experience' and 'best practice' on websites and in promotional films was obviously a simplification. It showed some achievements in practices of soil conservation, and the collective effort to produce compost, but it presented it as a utopian fast track that makes believe that it is possible to evolve from hunger and malnutrition to market production of vegetables grown in lorry tyres in only two years. It seems that the FAO not only wants people to think and act in a certain way but also wants to present as *its* guidance the way people decided to organise anyway. For the FAO it seemed important not to surrender the field to others when practices became standardised. As farmers successfully adopted agro-ecological practices and shared them with others, it became important for the visibility of the organisation to have the FAO label put on it. To show a flourishing village had a strong publicity effect for the FAO.

What looks like an agro-ecological success story, as proof that local food sovereignty is possible, is in fact an on-going process. The publicity that the FAO gave to the community attracted new potential donors looking for a place where they could develop a successful project. Since 2009 the NGO Vision Mundial signed up most of the children of the village for sponsorships from Germany. The FAO guidelines were taken up and transformed by other organisations like Vision Mundial that, however, hardly consulted with the villagers on the projects they were going to implement. The controversies about production methods continues between on the one side farmers who count on external financial resources, mostly obtained from migrant work, in order to pay for herbicides and fertilisers and on the other those who want to use as much as possible local resources and invest their work in agro-ecological production methods. When the SPFS ended after only two years, it was immediately followed in 2011 by the government's CRISOL program offering fertilizer and farm credit to be paid back in kind. The program had an enormous response in the village leading to wild speculations as to the increase in yield they would obtain with the chemical fertilizer. Only a small minority of villagers preferred to stay away from it refusing to enter a potential spiral of debt.

Conclusion

Promoting agro-ecological production methods is an uphill battle in a country where chemical fertilisers and herbicides are not only promoted as best agricultural practice but are also used as tokens to buy voter support. The role that the FAO plays in this context is ambivalent. The FAO claims not to take sides in the global agricultural policy debate between agro-ecology and Green Revolution. On the local level, however, it tends to simplify the challenges faced by

farmers as they try to adapt their agricultural practices to population growth, erosion, variety loss, climate change, and dwindling fossil resources. The FAO continues to promote as a 'one size fits all' remedy the use of agro-chemicals and an extremely narrow range of Green Revolution varieties. The two FAO programmes distributed the same variety of maize and the same variety of beans in la Quebrada in the south of Nicaragua and in el Guanacaste in the north, in spite of the fact that participatory breeding programmes now exist in Northern Nicaragua that develop and improve traditional population varieties adapted to different local conditions without reducing their genetic diversity (Almekinders 2011).

If one looks at how the different methodologies are promoted by the FAO, one also has to look at the relative power and resources that the different initiatives have at their disposal. What are the conditions of possibility and impossibility of the FAO itself? The approach represented by the Food Facility Programme is omnipresent in the ministries and state organisations and can count on the support of the big agro-chemical corporations, which see the millions of small peasants as millions of potential small customers. Agro-ecological production methods only very slowly gain some influence among government extension agents and are mainly promoted by the Campesino a Campesino movement inside the Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (UNAG) and by small development NGOs that can, however, be found all over the country. These methods are work-intensive and their effects are not immediate. They thus require a considerable amount of diligence, care and will to experiment which are hard to reconcile with the short-term programmes that the FAO carries out.

FAO guidelines, programmes and projects directly affect the capacities of local and national actors in Nicaragua to follow their own agendas. When Nicaragua formulated its food sovereignty law the FAO became a potent political actor by proposing inter-nationally agreed voluntary guidelines for a legal blueprint to be used by the Liberal Party in order to weaken the legal frame that the Nicaragua parliament had elaborated to secure national food sovereignty. The FAO's claim to moral and technical superiority was thus used to protect the political agenda of liberalism (free trade, no grain stocks, introduction of patented transgenic varieties). On the local level, the FAO did not rely on existing governance structures, but preferred to assume an organisational void and a need to 'empower'. The FAO did not work through elected local community representatives; rather, they selected promoters and coordinators whose legitimacy came from the programme and the funds it distributed and who, arguably, the organisation could more easily control. The two programmes I observed in action thus had a divisive rather than an integrative effect where local self-government was weak.

To return to the discussion of the concept of food sovereignty, I would like to conclude that the emphasis that this term lays on the forms of sovereign power over the land and its products and riches is essential. Food sovereignty defines power not in a negative sense as domination

but in a positive sense as power to act. The will to act cannot be just the goodwill of the supposed steward of the land, the individual farmer, but depends on collective organization capable of bringing constantly into constructive discussion different worldviews and agricultural practices. I have shown in this paper that food sovereignty on the local and national level is never achieved once and for all but depends on the strategies and tactics of a wide variety of actors influenced by local politics but also by international politics, financial markets, prices. A fight for food sovereignty has thus to take place on all levels from the local to the global.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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