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## Food Sovereignty, Gender and Nutrition: Perspectives from Malawi

Rachel Bezner Kerr, Esther Lupafya  
and Lizzie Shumba

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## Abstract

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Issues of gender inequality and undernutrition are not always raised in discussions of food sovereignty. While *La Via Campesina* has noted the centrality of gender equality for achieving food sovereignty, including a recent discussion to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the concept, much of the advocacy and focus of those groups promoting food sovereignty has been on other large-scale political and economic factors that influence farmers' potential to produce food themselves, such as land grabs, climate change or international trade agreements. Despite important statements about gender equality, and attention to the ways in which peasant organizations are organized, there is less emphasis in food sovereignty literature on the myriad of ways in which gender inequality works against achieving food sovereignty at the household level, or how such inequality can work against improving child nutrition. In addition, much of the discussion about food sovereignty remains at the theoretical level, with little empirical research on linkages between food sovereignty approaches and outcomes for smallholder households' livelihood, health and wellbeing. In the nutrition literature there is ample attention to gender at the household level, and a plethora of empirical research on different nutrition educational approaches, but little attention to political and economic factors that influence child nutritional outcomes. This paper will examine the commonalities between the concept of food sovereignty and gender inequality through the lens of a farmer-to-farmer agroecology project in Malawi. We draw on over a decade of experience of smallholder farmers' efforts to use agroecological methods to improve food security, nutrition and land quality, using farmer-to-farmer educational methods. Our focus on child nutrition improvements led to increased attention to inequalities in decision-making and labour at the household and community level, and we developed several innovative educational strategies to address these inequalities. Many of these strategies focused on dialogue and problem-solving and drew on local concepts of traditional leadership and knowledge to foster change. We also paid attention to particular inequalities such as those experienced by youth or people infected with HIV/AIDS. Discussions about food sovereignty, or broader global patterns of international trade often seemed much more abstract to farmers struggling with food insecurity, HIV and child survival. Advocates of a food sovereignty approach in places like Malawi need to ground the discussion in the daily lived realities of smallholder farming families, including the difficult and complex issues related to gender, child nutrition and HIV. More empirical research and evidence is needed to provide greater substance to the arguments being made at the international level.

## Introduction: Food Sovereignty and Gender Justice

Advocates of a food sovereignty approach have long incorporated issues of gender inequality and other social inequalities into both its conceptualization and application (Desmarais 2007; Patel 2007). Vía Campesina, in both the organization and focus of their work, raised issues of gender inequality, patriarchy and the links between a neoliberal food system and women's inequality. Desmarais (2007: 161-181) described the struggles made by various organizations and individuals within Vía Campesina to foster women's leadership and to incorporate gender analysis into their policies, meetings and campaigns. Their International Coordinating Committee, after years of effort, now has an equal number of men and women from each region, and they hold regular women's workshops as well as International Women's Assembly every four years (Desmarais 2007). Their recent fourth Women's Assembly in Jakarta reiterated the centrality of gender justice to achieving food sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the focus of much of the writing around food sovereignty and advocacy work has been on large-scale political and economic issues such as agrarian reform, trade agreements, land grabs or privatization of genetic material (Desmarais 2007; Wittman et al. 2010). Discussions about radical and progressive social movements that mobilize around food sovereignty often mention gender inequality only in passing, rather than highlighting it as a crucial component (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Recent assessments of food sovereignty conclude that gender issues are still largely missing from both theoretical discussions and applications of food sovereignty in practice (Anderson and Bellows 2012). Patel (2012) argues that food sovereignty heuristically 'invites' a radical feminist analysis, due to the approach to power relations embedded in the concept. There are only a few empirical studies which apply gender analysis and the concept of food sovereignty in a particular context (Carney 2012, McMahon 2012). In her analysis of food insecurity in a southern California county amongst low-income Latino families, Carney (2012) suggests that understanding how gender inequality intersects with poverty, discrimination and low food security is central to using food sovereignty as an operational framework. The Canadian agri-food standards applied to meat production, McMahon (2012) argues, are insidiously gendered in the conception of both meat consumers and producers, in ways in which marginalize small-scale women meat producers in British Columbia. Taking food sovereignty seriously would mean addressing gender inequality that is structurally embedded in the agricultural standards system of governance. In this paper we consider linkages between the concept of food sovereignty and gender inequality by considering the experiences of a farmer-to-farmer agroecology project in Malawi.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/women-mainmenu-39/1450-women-of-via-campesina-international-manifesto>

## Background

This paper draws on a long-term research and development project based in northern Malawi, called the Soils, Food and Healthy Communities (SFHC) project. Malawi is a small landlocked country in south-eastern Africa, where the majority of people are smallholder farmers, growing maize as their primary staple, alongside groundnuts, beans, sweet potatoes and various cash crops, particularly tobacco. The late 1990s were difficult times for Malawian smallholder farmers, as structural adjustment policies meant that fertilizer subsidies were removed, credit availability declined, rural depots for farm sales were closed, and other agricultural extension supports declined. Farmers were increasingly finding that their costs outweighed what they could manage, and yields dropped. Hospitals coped with high levels of child malnutrition. In 1997, the first two authors did 55 in-depth interviews with families of children who were severely malnourished and had been admitted to hospital. They learned that smallholder farmers had little knowledge of alternatives to commercial fertilizers or crops to rely on, and as a consequence, with soils depleted of nutrients, and little ability to purchase fertilizer, their maize yields declined, and they had few food options for children. We also learned, however, that there were often crucial gender dimensions to their situation: some men were drinking heavily, spending the limited family resources on alcohol, and women also feared reprisal if they spoke out, with 44% reporting physical violence from spouses (Bezner Kerr 2005). So while the bigger political economy picture of structural adjustment, imposed by international financial institutions, was a key to understanding their families' dilemmas, addressing gender inequality was also crucial if food sovereignty was to be achieved.

As a follow-up to the study, the hospital and the first author explored alternative options to fertilizer, and learned that a considerable amount of on-farm research had been conducted on different organic options for smallholder farmers in Malawi (see for example Snapp et al. 1998). Farmers can intercrop edible grain or perennial legumes (e.g. pigeonpea, peanut and soyabean). The legumes fix nitrogen from the atmosphere, such that when the leaves and roots are incorporated directly into the soil they add nitrogen, other nutrients and organic matter. Farmers can harvest the edible grain, and then grow another crop in the improved soil the following year (e.g. maize). Although there had been some evidence for improvement in soil fertility, the link to improved food security or nutrition had not been established, and much of the research had been structured on-farm trials with a fair amount of research control. We decided to begin a pilot project to test these organic options under 'real life' conditions, and in 2000, a small group of staff and researchers approached 7 villages near the hospital and asked them to consider experimentation with various organic methods to improve food security, soil fertility, and ultimately child nutrition. A Farmer Research Team (FRT) was formed, initially made up of 18 men and 12 women from the 7 villages, comprising a range of ages, marital status and food security conditions. The FRT went on a field trip to central Malawi to learn

about the different legume options that they could test. They then developed their own on-farm experiments, and also taught other farmers who were interested in trying out these options. The first year, 183 farmers decided to test the legumes.

The story of what followed has been written up in several other publications (Bezner Kerr and Chirwa 2004; Bezner Kerr et al. 2012; Satzinger et al. 2009; Msachi et al. 2009, among others). While there were only a few farmers who initially tried out different legume options to improve soil fertility, over a few years the interest in these options increased, and thousands of farmers began testing the legume combinations (Bezner Kerr et al. 2007a). Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research and participatory workshops we identified conflicts between older women and younger women regarding early child care feeding practices which had negative impacts on child growth (Bezner Kerr et al. 2005; Bezner Kerr et al. 2007b). We developed discussion groups to address these issues, making efforts to be sensitive to cultural concepts and practices and power imbalances between hospital staff, researchers as well as intergenerational and gender differences (Bezner Kerr et al. 2008). Researchers working with the project were able to document improvements in nutrition (Bezner Kerr et al. 2010) and reduced reliance on fertilizer (Msachi et al. 2009) as well as other environmental benefits such as increased soil cover (Snapp et al. 2010).

Much of our emphasis was on farmer-to-farmer teaching, farmer experimentation and leadership. Farmers began to articulate an alternative agricultural vision for their communities, which they contrasted to the dominant neoliberal model of agriculture that relied on purchased fertilizers and seeds (Bezner Kerr 2010; Msachi et al. 2009). Farmers formed a farmer association, helped to build a community seed legume bank, managed all seed collection and distribution and took over more and more of the project management, eventually making up the majority of the project staff. At the time of writing, we recently began a new phase of our work, in which we are expanding in northern Malawi and starting work in central Malawi using this ‘farmer-to-farmer’ approach for our teaching.

In this article, we wish to highlight some of the challenges of taking a food sovereignty approach while paying attention to gender inequality. To do so, we will draw from in-depth interviews conducted in 2009, along with participant observation from the past thirteen years of working with smallholder farmers in this project.

## Methods

This paper uses several sources of data. First of all, we draw from a decade of working alongside smallholder farming households in northern Malawi with the SFHC project, in which

we have worked to build food sovereignty using agroecological methods (Msachi 2009). Through this work we have conducted over a dozen surveys of randomly selected participating households, conducted over 200 in-depth interviews with purposively selected households, and had opportunity to conduct extensive participant observation, as researchers, hospital staff and farmer leaders. In particular we are utilizing data from 2007 and 2009, which involved in-depth interviews to evaluate the long-term impacts of our work, as well as research on climate change adaptation.

In 2007 we designed a semi-structured interview to address the following research questions: 1) Is there any impact on food security from involvement in the project? 2) Are farmers using the legumes to improve soil fertility? 3) Who is involved in decision-making about crop use? 4) Who is involved in the agricultural activities in the household? And finally, do farmers note other benefits from the project? The interview was pre-tested with three farmers and adapted based on this pilot test. The respondents were sampled purposively by SFHC staff to represent a diverse range of the following criteria: marital status, different age groups, year joined the project, different regions of the catchment area, participation in the discussion groups and HIV infected (Table 1). The interviews were conducted in the farmers' homes, following informed consent, by the first and third author in the local language (Chitumbuka). The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and translated. Field notes were also taken during the interview. Following the semi-structured interview, the authors visited the fields of ten of the farmers who were interviewed, to verify what had been said and to make further observations about their farming practices.

In March 2009, 33 in-depth interviews were conducted by the first two authors with participating households, purposively selected based on maximum variation of different SFHC participants (e.g. gender, age, level of food security, region of Ekwendeni, health status, participation in SFHC). The interviews took place in the participants' home, and were carried out in pairs, one person asking question and the other taking notes. We designed the interview guide to assess changes in dietary diversity, child feeding practices, experiences of HIV-affected families with kitchen gardens, changes in gender relations and changes in community dynamics. The results were also compared to earlier research conducted by the SFHC team. The authors also observed various farmer educational activities and the Farmer Research Team (FRT) monthly meetings, and took notes based on these observations. A report was written up which summarized these findings and shared with the FRT and SFHC staff for feedback and discussion.

A participatory 3-day workshop was held in May 2009 to discuss the project results and to assess the way forward with 60 project participants. Workshop participants included FRT members from across the catchment area, as well as other project participants from a diverse

range of groups (e.g. highly food insecure, HIV positive, members of the ANDGs). The workshop was facilitated by the first and third author, who both have experience conducting participatory workshops. The workshop used small group activities and exercises to assess the effects of the project and potential activities for the future, for example a discussion of ‘challenges’ and ‘successes’ and dramas about challenges based on different activities in the project. In addition, research results from the last three years were shared and discussed.

An additional source of data is from a related study, linked to our ongoing work, which is focused on climate change adaptation, indigenous knowledge and farmer participatory research. As part of that study we wanted to understand farmers’ perceptions of and experiences with climate change, and how climate change ranked in relation to other concerns. We interviewed 25 respondents in August 2009, who were purposively selected for variation in age, gender and different agroecosystems in the hospital catchment area. Each interview took approximately one hour, and involved questions about farming practices, food security, household composition and their general concerns, including ranking these worries, using an approach from similar research conducted in West Africa (Tschakert 2007). An interview guide was used but was modified as questions and issues arose. There were questions about rainfall patterns, experiences during periods of drought, main worries (to get a sense of the importance of changing climate compared to other concerns) and crops grown in the region in the past. We took field notes during the interview sessions, and we also recorded the interview if we received permission from the participant. These recordings were translated and transcribed for comparison to field notes. The Non-Medical Research Ethics Board of Western University approved all of this research, and informed oral consent was obtained prior to all interviews. We read all the interview field notes and transcripts and created analytical and descriptive codes based on themes (Miles and Huberman 1994). We developed an argument drawing from these findings, and followed up with additional informal observations, as a means to validate and verify these initial conclusions.

## Results

### *Description of respondents*

In the first set of interviews conducted in 2007, 19 of the sample were women and 6 were men. Seventeen were married (2 in polygamous marriages) and 8 were widowed, 14 of the sample was between 30 and 49 years of age, 8 were over 50 years and 3 were under 30 years. Two of the sample were HIV positive. There were two or more respondents from each of the participating village areas in the hospital catchment area. Respondents had been involved in the project ranging from 3-7 years, with the majority (n=17) joining 4-5 years before the interview.

In the second set of in-depth interviews there were 15 men and 15 women, from 13 different village areas across the hospital catchment area. They ranged in age from 20 years to 70 years of age, with an average of 44 years of age. Twelve of the respondents had joined the project in the first 4 years, and the remainder had joined between 2004 and 2007. Seven of the respondents had an HIV positive family member in the household. Eighteen of the respondents had participated in the intergenerational discussion groups.

We interviewed 8 men and 17 women for the third set of in-depth interviews on climate change adaptation, three of whom were in polygamous marriages, six either divorced or widowed, and the remainder married with one partner. The oldest respondent was 90 years of age, and the youngest was 25 years of age, with most of the respondents between 30 and 55 years of age. The households lived in four different areas across the catchment area, which had precipitation rates ranging from as low as 289 mm/year to 1100 mm/year depending upon the year and the region in the catchment area.

All 83 of the participants interviewed relied on farming as their primary source of livelihood. There was a range of household socio-economic status and food security, with most households experiencing seasonal food shortages.

### *Gender differences in worries*

In the August 2009 interviews, we asked farmers to list 3 of their primary worries, and to rank them in the order of importance. This series of questions was asked in order to understand how climate change ranked in relation to other concerns that farmers have, and to understand differences in gender, age and other social or demographic characteristics that might influence their worries.

While the sample was a small, non-probability sampled group, there was a striking difference between men and women in relation to their primary worries. While there were common worries, such as lack of adequate food, high rates of poverty and related concerns (school fees, clothing, poor housing), in about half of all interviews with women, they listed high among their worries concerns about their husbands, including inadequate labor contributions to farming, lack of support, using financial resources for non-household use, infidelity and the related possibility of contracting HIV/AIDS. As one woman indicated:

“My main worry is my husband. I do all the farming... there is no peace at the house. My biggest worry is when he sells the farm harvest, because I worry, what am I going to feed my children? I don't even know where the money goes... I'm very worried because

nowadays life is difficult, and if he goes with other women, perhaps he'll bring sickness into the house."

*Interview 3, August 2009, 31 year old woman with 5 children.*

Another woman interviewed had only just returned from staying with her parents due to her husband's drinking and violent behavior. Despite intervention from the village leaders and his family, there had been no change:

"I have family problems. My husband used to drink beer a lot. In January he beat me... I had no choice, I had to go home. It was really hard to look after my crops. I just came back to weed the crops."

*Interview 6, August 19, 30 year old woman, 1 child.*

Even one confident women who played an important leadership role in her community, including important volunteer activities, expressed profound worries about her husband's behavior:

"I am worried about HIV/AIDS – are we going to survive? Sometimes my husband can want other women. It has happened before. Sometimes I say 'since you are doing this, you won't sleep with me, you have to get tested.' There are times I thought I should just leave."

*Interview 10, August 19, 2009, 34 year old woman.*

These findings suggest that while both men and women are concerned about food availability and poverty, gender dynamics play a profound role in women's daily worries and have crucial implications for questions of agrarian change, food sovereignty and equity. Nonetheless, as Razavi (2009:198) points out, while neoclassical economists distort gender relations, by assuming a 'unitary household', political economists of agrarian studies are largely silent about gender. Their focus is primarily on broader political and economic structures and processes that interact with household relations. Structural adjustment policies, for example, imposed in Malawi in the 1990s had profound impacts on gender roles and on the food production practices for smallholder farmers, through removal of health and other social services, fertilizer subsidies, rural depots for crop sales and other supports to smallholder farming families (Bezner Kerr 2005; Bryceson 2006). The recent agricultural subsidy program in Malawi, which reduced the cost of fertilizer and hybrid maize seeds but was not universally distributed, with young female-headed households and poor households less likely to receive the subsidies, compared to older male farmers, and wealthier farmers (United Nations 2013). The agricultural subsidy also helped to create an economic crisis, by increasing the national debt load, and

forcing the country into devaluation, which dramatically increased the cost of living (United Nations 2013). Rising prices have profound impacts on household food availability for poor households, who usually rely on market purchases once their own food stocks are depleted. Achieving food sovereignty is ultimately about power relations, and who controls food production and distribution (Patel 2012). Much of the lived experience of contesting power happens at the household level – over incomes, decision-making and labor use, through the daily tasks of growing food, caring for children, selling crops and so on (Razavi 2009; Agarwal 1994). Household contestations about the division of labor, what farming practices to use, how income is distributed, intersect with broader political and economic processes at work in a given place.

There are also important linkages between broader political-economic forces and gender household dynamics related to health and HIV/AIDS. Removal of health services had a greater impact on women's labor, since they were the primary caregivers, and also had profound implications for the rise of HIV/AIDS, as availability for antibiotic treatment of sexually-transmitted diseases declined, along with reduced family planning and health education programs. As notes by the quotations above, women also have to contend with unequal dynamics within marriage, with unfaithful spouses increasing their risk of contracting HIV (Mkandawire et al. 2013). Ensuring food sovereignty in part means finding agroecological solutions to food production that do not rely on expensive imports of fertilizer and seed, but also means addressing issues of gender inequality, such as domestic violence and unequal control over household resources.

### **Food Sovereignty, SFHC Work and Gender**

In the following section we draw from the statements about food sovereignty as outlined in La Vía Campesina's (LVC) original Position on Food Sovereignty that was presented at the World Food Summit in Rome in November 1996, as well as the subsequent People's Food Sovereignty Statement that was development at the World Forum on Food Sovereignty held in Cuba in 2001 and the NGO/CSO Forum on Food Sovereignty in Rome in 2002. Both of these statements are summarized in Wittman et al. (2010:197-207). We discuss our findings in relation to these statements and the gendered issues that have arisen in our work.

#### *1. Right to Food*

'Food is a basic human right. Everyone must have access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with

full human dignity.” (LVC Position on Food Sovereignty, cited in Wittman et al. 2010:197).

In both the 2007 and 2009 interviews, both men and women reported that the edible grain legume intercrops helped to improve their food security because they used these legumes as primary food, and their maize yields had increased. A number of farmers, when asked about food security changes, reported that there is a big change in terms of food security since they joined the project. They used different indicators to assess their food security status (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Farmer indicators used to assess food security (n=25, 2007 interviews)

Indicators that Farmer used to assess food security	Number of farmers who mentioned this indicator (%)
There are more types of crops and thus food (e.g. legumes) to eat at home.	20 (80%)
Increased maize yields and number of months with low food availability reduced	11 (44%)
Surplus harvest is enough to sell and buy other food, soap, other basic needs, sometimes school fees	10 (40%)
They do not have to prepare nsima (the main food staple) from maize husks	3 (12%)
They do not have to beg food from neighbours	1 (4%)

For example one younger woman said the following:

“We were having problems in food. Since we joined the project it has been improving. We didn’t know crop diversification. Now we grow a lot of crops.”

*Interview 4, February 6, 2007, younger married woman*

Our nutritional research documented improvements in child nutritional status (Bezner Kerr et al. 2010b), and during interviews farmers also reported changes in child nutrition, such as healthier, more energetic children. They observed that in the past their children were malnourished due to both a lack of food and parental knowledge on processing and utilization,

while now their children were healthier, which they attributed to a more diversified diet. Farmers also reported reduced illnesses in young children. One man, for example, whose daughter was five years old when he joined the project, said that she had been clinically assessed as malnourished at the hospital, but that she had improved her nutritional status after eating a lot of soya porridge.

Several respondents directly linked improvements in child nutritional status to changes in household relations. One middle-aged woman had seen many positive changes from the project, including improved health of her children. As she said:

“In the past my life was very poor as compared to today. We didn’t have much food or clothing. My children were very malnourished. Now with the coming of the project, I am now better. In the past, I couldn’t even have any soya, now I grow lots of soya and groundnuts. At the time my husband was a drunkard, I had many problems. Now my husband doesn’t drink, he grows lots of soya, everything is moving smoothly...Nowadays the period when I have food has increased, as compared to the past, it was lasting to January. Nowadays it sometimes finished in May, sometimes June.” (Interview #16, February 12, 2007, married middle-aged woman)

Other respondents also observed changes in the amount of conflict and excessive drinking in the household:

“My husband and I used to quarrel. Now we have enough food, we don’t quarrel. He used to leave me when there was nothing, go drinking with his friends. Now there is peace in our home...These legumes which we grow, we help each other. When we find money, we share together. Now these two years I have seen a great change. We don’t quarrel. He has stopped drinking beer... He used to beat me after drinking. He has truly changed. People can tell you... We work together and help our children together. Sometimes if he is busy, we will come together and work together. We sit down and say – how about if we sell a bit of this, a bit of that.” (Evaluation Interview 8, 2009, 50 year old woman farmer)

The changes in household relations, however, did not come simply from increasing food production. Rather, we made explicit attempts to address unequal gender relations within households, and to identify ways that household and extended family members could work to improve child nutrition. We developed discussion groups, in which men and women of different generations came together to discuss ways to improve agriculture and nutrition (Satzinger et al. 2009). Community members trained in participatory methods of discussion facilitated the

groups, and attempted to raise sensitive issues such as gender inequality, or conflicting views on child feeding, in safe, culturally appropriate and respectful ways. Topics were selected by the facilitators each month to reflect the agricultural season, and included opportunity for people to share ideas about what was working in their home. Our research suggests that these discussion groups played an important role in helping men and women to talk about alternative ways of caring for young children and organizing household responsibilities (Satzinger et al. 2009; Bezner Kerr 2008).

There were several other ways in which gender issues were highlighted (Bezner Kerr 2008). The project team decided to stipulate that all new villages select an equal number of men and women to become Farmer Research Team members. At annual field days where farmers showcased their crop achievements, the Farmer Research Team performed dramas to raise awareness about particular gender issues, such as misuse of household income from legume sales. The Farmer Research Team organized 'recipe days' as public events to encourage not only healthy eating but also more equitable gender relations around child care and feeding practices (Patel et al. unpublished data). All of these activities helped create new social norms around women's leadership, the focus on improved child nutrition, and more equitable household decision-making and division of labor.

## *II. Protecting Natural Resources*

"Food sovereignty entails the sustainable care and use of natural resources, especially land, water and seeds... Long-term sustainability demands a shift away from dependence on chemical inputs, on cash-crop monocultures and intensive, industrialized production models."

(LVC Position on Food Sovereignty, cited in Wittman et al. 2010:198)

Our qualitative interviews indicate that many farmers have an increased knowledge and awareness about the use of crop residues to improve land quality, and they have applied this knowledge and observed visible changes in their land and their crops. As one male farmer noted:

"I have been for many years farming in a garden which my grandfather was using and the soil was very poor, I was applying fertilizer but still I was having poor harvest and we were running out of food now and again. But since the SFHC project started the issue of burying residue and intercropping and crop rotation has improved the soil in my garden very much. Now I have enough food and we grow soya, groundnuts, maize and we are able to sell them and get money to buy domestic needs, including pigs and other items

in the house. We are even able to pay school fees for my daughter. We are able to eat good food, including meat and fish which we buy from the market. Our children are well looked after and healthy and they eat well... We have enough food throughout the year.”

(Evaluation Interview 16, May 5, 2009, 48 year old male farmer)

Farmers also noted learning other ways to improve soil fertility, for example through crop rotation and intercropping methods. Many farmers interviewed had not previously known how to grow some legumes, and did not know that these were nitrogen-fixing crops that could improve the soil. As one farmer said: “I have learnt how to grow mucuna and pigeonpea and grow a lot of soya, as we were not growing a lot of soya. I have been amazed, because once you bury the residue the soil gets black quickly and so fertile, something which I never knew.” (Evaluation Interview 18, 49 year old male farmer).

### *III. Freedom from Discrimination*

“Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations.” (La Vía Campesina 2007:1)

If food sovereignty includes the process of farmers shifting away from a dependence on chemical fertilizers, then at times farmers will need capacity-building, support and training to use more agroecological methods. However, these new methods often require more labor, a concern which touches both issues of class and gender. An issue raised during participatory workshops was that, since women usually were responsible for legume harvesting, they were often the ones expected to incorporate legume residue after harvest, adding to an already heavy workload (Bezner Kerr 2008). After several years of little success in changing farming practices, and learning about women’s views on the additional task, the Farmer Research Team decided to organize ‘Crop Residue Incorporation Days’ to not only encourage the early incorporation of legume residue to improve soil fertility, but to specifically encourage men to take on this task. These public events involved the FRT demonstrating crop residue incorporation, and talking about the impact that this activity could have on soil fertility in the long term. We documented significant increases in crop residue incorporation over time, shifting from less than 10% of households to over 70% by 2007 (Bezner Kerr et al. 2007b).

A total of 30 people interviewed were AIDS-affected households receiving legumes from the project. In general, the main benefits listed by these respondents have been improved strength and health. People who are HIV positive talk about having more energy, and getting sick less

often as a result of eating more legumes. One young woman, for example, noted a big change in her strength:

“Since I started growing soya I have seen that my life is changing for the better. I am on ARV treatment and I use soya for making porridge. I prepare porridge each morning and at 4 o’clock in the afternoon. Life is easy because I grow soya. It gives me strength.”  
[Evaluation Interview 12, 2009, 26 year old female farmer]

An older man who has been growing soya because of the project talked about changes to his strength and the number of times he became sick:

“I’m HIV positive, I used to often be sick. Now I’ve accepted to be HIV and now with the nutritious food from the legumes I can see the changes to my health...I was not like this. Because of what I am getting from groundnuts, soya porridge, my health is improving...In the past I’d be sick in January. Now I’m walking fine. In the past I was just eating nsima [maize porridge] with mphangwe [green leafy vegetables]. Now I can eat green leafy vegetables with groundnuts, maybe meals with soya, maybe groundnuts as a snack at different times of the day.” [Evaluation Interview 3, 54 year old male farmer]

Those farmers who were caring for family members that were HIV positive also noted improvements in food security, increased strength of family members and impacts on livelihoods from the agroecological, farmer-led approach. In some cases they had enough of a surplus that they were able to sell the legumes for other household uses, including transport costs to get the ARV medication at the hospital. Despite these positive effects, we also identified situations in which HIV/AIDS affected households were marginalized or their needs are not met by our approach. A consistent issue for HIV positive farmers and family members caring for HIV positive people was having adequate labor to farm – a problem which fell more heavily on women, since they are usually responsible for caring for sick household members and extended kin. Despite having access to ARVs, people who were HIV positive talked about falling sick, and becoming weak easily, which prevented them from growing as many crops or growing as large an area as they would like. In addition, the additional labour imposed on families with AIDS-affected households meant that they were not always able to utilize the crop residue or manage their farms as effectively, as one woman observed:

“I want to grow all these crops, but at the same time I’m taking care of a sick person, so it is a challenge. I have a sick person in the home who was also wanting to eat. You have to think about feeding her before going to the gardens, give her the medication, then go to my gardens. I can’t stay too long because I have to go back. Even at the garden I’m

not comfortable because of the patient. Then maybe I'd return, bathe and feed her.”  
(Evaluation Interview 13, 2009, 56 year old woman with HIV positive daughter in home)

In addition to their own health limitations, AIDS-affected households had not always benefitted from the agroecological training. This issue was discussed during a participatory workshop, and it was clear that the Farmer Research Team and SFHC staff had at times viewed the AIDS-affected farmers as a different type of beneficiary, receiving legumes largely for nutritional improvement rather than addressing soil fertility. AIDS affected households spoke about this social marginalization within their communities, and what appeared to be an unspoken assumption that they were not capable of farming due to their illness, and thus should not receive training.

## Discussion

There are other parts of the food sovereignty definition that have not been drawn out and linked to issues of gender inequality – in part because some of these sections do not easily lend themselves to gender analysis. There is still room within defining and theorizing food sovereignty for a deeper analytical link to gender and feminist theory (Anderson and Bellows 2012; Patel 2012). Another study of agroecological, farmer-to-farmer movements in Latin America that use a food sovereignty approach suggested that these approaches, in contrast to conventional systems, create more equitable family and community relations (Rosset et al. 2009: 183-84). They argue that, while under conventional systems men control the inputs and outputs, with agroecological systems women have more decision-making control and income from an increased variety of crops and production methods. There has been little evidence, however, to support these claims, nor has there been any critical analysis as to the gender implications of these shifts, for example, potential increases in women's labour with agroecological production systems. Rosset et al. (2009:184) also note that gender inequality remains a challenge, both in terms of household relationships and leadership within farmer organizations. In our work, we have found that it was crucial to make visible the gender relations that underpin changes in the production system, and to track how changes (agricultural, social) are being experienced at the household and community level and beyond.

Our findings point to the salience of feminist analysis to food sovereignty approaches. Razavi (2009) notes the importance of integrating a feminist analysis into the political economy of agrarian change, including attention to reproductive roles and attention to issues such as the cost of inputs, rather than a primary focus on land rights. She raises concerns that reifying the local can lead to overlooking oppressive relations at the community and household levels

(Razavi 2009: 199). Our findings that HIV affected households have been somewhat overlooked by the SFHC project, and that they have not been able to draw as many benefits from the legume systems, suggest the gendered and highly labor-intensive care responsibilities associated with HIV/AIDS are a crucial factor. Paying attention to reproductive labor – such as caring for young children or nursing sick family members – and understanding the social relations and processes embedded in that labor is one way to ensure that food sovereignty approaches lead to positive changes in social relations.

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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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