

Food Sovereignty



Internal Report on the Day of Dialogue on knowledge for
food sovereignty

January 25, 2014

The Hague, The Netherlands

Introduction

On January 24 more than 300 academics and activists from around the world came together at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague for the Colloquium Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue. The meeting was a follow up to the conference of the same name held at Yale University in September of 2013.

Dialogue was the focus of the day, with short talks followed by lively discussions. Keynote speakers like Elizabeth Mporu, general coordinator of Via Campesina, TNI Chairperson Susan George, and Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, opened the discussion with looks at the history and future of the Food Sovereignty movement, introductions to the threat posed to global food sovereignty by issues such as financialization, and the need to prioritize solutions that place peasants and peasant agriculture at the centre of building resilient, democratic global food systems.

Throughout the day academics and activists critiqued and explored Food Sovereignty, identifying strengths and weaknesses within the concept, teasing out the multiple roles the phrase plays, as an academic concept and a “banner for change,” and asking deep questions about how we can understand the global food system, and how we can change it.



The first gathering of the group

Jenny Franco and Pietje Vervest of TNI, Sofia Monsalve of FIAN, and Maryam Rahmanian of Cenesta, working in coordination with La Via Campesina, decided to take advantage of the presence of many key thinkers and actors to create a space where issues could be discussed in a different atmosphere, with methods that aimed to create a more open dialogue between a diversity of actors. This day was intended to

provide a safe space for deeper reflection on many of the issues raised on January 24th, and an opportunity to engage more personally with key challenges facing the Food Sovereignty movement today. The event was an invitation-only meeting of some seventy academics and activists with a shared history of alliance and collaboration. The organizers strove to create an open, vibrant space for frank discussion and used exercises like song, dance, and art to create a more dynamic and creative atmosphere.

Puzzling about Food Sovereignty

Before the start of the day of dialogue, participants were asked to share what was puzzling them and occupying their thoughts. This practice allowed participants to – for once – give value to their whole beings, integrating professional, intellectual, personal, physical, and

“Thinking about agricultural development I ask myself, ‘what makes The East different from The South?’”

family aspects into a whole. The range of questions submitted reflected this, and showed the need to approach movement-building using all of our wisdom, not only our “rational” or “academic” selves.

How do we reconcile our personal and political selves? How do we deal with changing families, personal struggles, and the political contexts of our lives? How do we work together and how does our work intersect with our lives? People also posed deep questions about

activism and the food sovereignty movement: what makes “the east” different from “the south” in agricultural development? How do

“I am puzzled for creating a way that scientists from the natural sciences understand what is food sovereignty..”

we develop links between people working on food sovereignty locally and internationally? How can we deepen and widen the Nyéléni process?

Beginning the day with these puzzles helped to set the tone for a day of creative, wholehearted exploration of the possibilities of Food Sovereignty, and to create a space where people could bring their whole selves to the table.

Ama tosa tosa!

Elizabeth Mpofo, General Coordinator of La Via Campesina, quickly got the crowd loosened up through a song-led name spelling exercise in which selected people were asked to spell their name out loud in between chants of *Ama tosa tosa* – an indigenous Zimbabwean term for using your brain and thinking hard. Participants were also asked to sign their name – not with their hands but using their whole bodies and most especially their bottoms!

Aside from waking everyone up, these games played an important role, helping to put all the participants on the same level and break down the tendency to situate academic knowledge “above” other ways of knowing. Exercises that recognize the body and valorize traditional knowledge help to create a space that challenges traditional power dynamics. This type of challenge is especially necessary when we, as activists, academics, farmers, and everything in between wish to come together to co-create knowledge and social change.



Discussions were thought provoking

Once participants were energized and ready to discuss, we split into three self-selected groups to discuss food sovereignty topics. With fifteen to twenty-five people in each group, a more in-depth and intimate discussion of specific themes was possible. The sessions were guided by a series of questions developed by the organizers; you can find these questions in the Appendix at the end of this report.

After a period for discussion, everyone reconvened into a plenary session to share some of the key findings and questions from each discussion group.

Work Group 1: Transforming the Food System

The first group discussed questions of discourse and strategy. They began by problematizing the framework of “the food system,” raising a concern that this language de-centralized food producers. They also discussed problems like how to re-capture the discourse of nutrition, which has been co-opted by corporate interests.

Finally, they discussed questions of voice and representation, and how to build a balanced movement that includes the voices of peasants and other actors, but uses scientific and other forms of research to advance their goals. The group talked about the importance of developing tools for participatory and peasant-led research that would allow peasants to record and make visible the value they produce. In particular they wondered if it would be possible to develop a tool based on Chayanov’s theory of peasant agriculture that would help to deepen peasants’ own understanding of how their farms operate and therefore allow them to engage in policy-making on a more informed basis.

In response to the questions provided, the group produced a second set of questions, and a list of needs, to help the Movement go forward:

Questions from the Group:

- What are the forms of relations between small farms and upstream and downstream (corporate) units that are beneficial to those small farmers?
- What forms of land tenure work against classical peasant class differentiation (and dispossession) and address gender and generational issues?
- How do we take nutrition as a concept and interest away from corporate-industrial interests and link it to food sovereignty movements?
- What language can we use for talking about “food systems” that doesn’t diminish the importance of farming?
- Can we imagine food processing that works with and for peasant producers?
- What knowledge do we need? What knowledge do we have that we need to get into the discourse more?

- How do we deal with (negative and positive) externalities with regards to both peasant and industrial farms? How do we make these more visible?
- What is the next step for agro-ecology schools? Processing and machinery?
- How do we tap into our wide array of scholar allies?

Needs:

- Strengthening processes like this Day of Dialogue, that create spaces for analysis, with a focus on developing processes rather than producing answers.
- Deepening power analyses of transnational corporations
- Identifying “cracks” in the system and opportunities where alternative visions can thrive – there is a need to get ahead of the dominant regime players who devote significant research energy to trend-watching and looking for opportunities.
- Increasing agro-ecological knowledge, particularly around economic factors like production costs, investment, and value-added opportunities.
- Thinking in “processes” rather than answers.
- Politicizing concrete work (like agro-ecology schools) to see it as resistance.
- Making peasant-based agro-ecological production visible: it is often underreported and obscured.
- Adding to agro-ecological knowledge, particularly with regards to costs, investments, value added.
- Ways to communicate on-field alternatives, sharing stories across languages and geographies.

Work Group 2: Strengthening the Food Sovereignty Movement

The second work group discussed the potential for collaboration with groups like farm workers and labour unions, the role of researchers and academics in the food sovereignty movement, strategies for engaging the next generation of activists, and obstacles facing the movement.

Some key themes emerged from the discussion.

Engaging Potential Allies: Who is not at the table?

Participants identified a range of potential allies, falling roughly into two categories: politicized or organized actors who share some goals related to food sovereignty but are not yet active allies, and non-politicized actors who have a material interest in food sovereignty but are not politically active in any existing movement.



Photo by Anna Hajdu- Ongoing discussions

Participants saw strong potential to build productive alliances with movements like the urban-based Food Justice movement in the United States, workers’ movements and unions including the contemporary “Fight for 15” struggle for a living wage for North American fast food workers, and a wide range of local initiatives. They also identified major challenges in reaching some potential allies like farm workers, urban youth, and large numbers of farmers.

While most participants agreed that the Food Sovereignty movement should retain a focus on the role of farmers, particularly peasant farmers, the need to politically engage a larger body of people and to build alliances with urban food movements, youths, and actors from other parts of the food system was a major theme.

Academics and Researchers: Beyond Informed Consent

The group discussed hopes, challenges, obstacles, and opportunities related to working with researchers in general and academics in particular. A number of difficulties were identified from personal experience: academic researchers’ other commitments, challenges funding or supporting research, and an inability

of researchers to respond to urgent needs for information were identified as obstacles to collaboration. Deeper structural concerns were also raised: the act of being researched can create an imbalance of power between activists and researchers, there are some real political risks incurred by publishing studies of internal movement politics, and there are good reasons to continue to challenge the notion that the academy holds a monopoly on knowledge creation.



Participants debated key concepts

However, while the importance of movement-embedded research was asserted, and while it was recognized that relationships between academic researchers and other actors must be entered into with caution and forethought, most participants also believed that academic research has the potential to make important contributions to advancing the movement, from providing factual support for policy advocacy, to helping actors to engage in self-reflexive processes.

Finally, participants also noted that a large and growing number of researchers are members of the movement, rather than external scholars to be recruited or rejected. Academics are increasingly politicized and engaged with food sovereignty while, at the same time, activists are increasingly entering academic institutions. These two processes are creating a growing body of organic intellectuals who are in a powerful, but complicated, position to contribute to the movement. In practical terms the group identified a need to strengthen both of these processes, creating opportunities for young scholars to be politicized and opening spaces within the academy for movement actors to speak for themselves.

Obstacles and Goals:

A number of obstacles were also identified. Lack of funding, in particular, emerged as an ongoing challenge. Group members argued that “the

revolution will not be funded” and the vested interests and political agendas of major funders, both public and philanthropic, as well as the agendas of some major charitable organizations, can make it more difficult for Food Sovereignty activists to access funding. At the same time it was recognized that some level of access to funds or finance is necessary to effectively grow the movement, and that allocation of public funds towards food sovereignty initiatives may be an important political goal.

Work Group 3: Governing for Food Sovereignty

The workshop began with an exercise in which participants were asked to physically locate themselves on the governance scale – from one end of the room to the other, representing the international and local levels respectively. At which level of governance – local, national, or international – are most of us active? Two observations stood out: i) an absence of participants in the workshop working primarily or exclusively at the grass-roots level and ii) the difficulty for many in pinning themselves to any one scale.

This raised the question as to whether there is an inherent bias when it comes to governance issues towards global governance frameworks that we need to address and correct. There was also a strong feeling that we need to think of governance in terms of a spectrum, in which bridging the different sites of governance is key, rather than rigid a scale.



And listened attentively to each other

The group then examined questions of governance raised by food sovereignty. The objective was to formulate and refine questions for further reflection and investigation.

The discussion led to the formulation of the following framing questions about governing for food sovereignty:

- How to engage with the state? Do we want to take back the state? Do we still believe in the nation-state? Or do we ultimately have to transcend the state system that introduces an inherent series of constraints on the possibilities for food sovereignty in practice?
- Where is the real decision-making power located? How do we deal with actors such as corporations that have other vectors of power? How to respond to the rise of private and privatised governance e.g. corporate social responsibility, self-certification schemes, public-private partnerships, multi-stakeholder dialogues etc.
- Should we work within existing governance structures or focus our efforts towards creating alternative governance structures? Is it always good to be inside governance structures e.g. New Alliance Steering Committee? How far do we compromise within governance structures in order to be included?
- What role do norms and values play in governing for food sovereignty? And what are the mechanisms for monitoring and accountability that need to be in place to ensure effective outcomes and realise food sovereignty in practice?



Groups split off to address topics

- Does the food sovereignty movement engage sufficiently with all relevant areas of governance e.g. trade issues?
- Do we have confidence in ‘big politics’?

Should we look more at small-scale governance structures e.g. municipalities?

- Who represents who when it comes to governing for food sovereignty? How is legitimate leadership defined?
- How do we better link/bridge different sites of governance?



And discussions were sometimes intense

- How does the food sovereignty movement define its priorities in the realm of governance? Are priorities set reactively/defensively or proactively? How to balance internal needs with the external environment?
- What is the role of visions and utopias in governing for food sovereignty?
- What do we do with the governance documents we produce and how do we evaluate our work within institutional settings? Has the food sovereignty movement been successful in setting the agenda in governance spaces e.g. the Committee on World Food Security? Can we use the Tenure Guidelines (TGs) as a continuous learning exercise and process of self-assessment? How do we set in place a process to evaluate the impact and implementation of the TGs in order to test our assumptions

Plenary

Following a delicious Indonesian lunch the groups reconvened to share their findings with each other. Each group appointed a spokesperson who provided a brief report, which, together with note-takers' records, formed the basis of the summaries presented here.

Visioning The Movement

Following the morning's intense discussion, the group undertook an exercise to engage more creatively and even playfully with the future of Food Sovereignty. Split into four groups based on age, participants drew their visions of the food sovereignty movement and the global food system 20-30 years in the future. After an hour the groups reunited to share their visions, revealing some interesting differences in perspective, approach, and apparent artistic ability.



Groups gathered to brainstorm their ideas



Some planned extensively...



And everyone relaxed and focussed on their creative process...



Some people came up with creative ways to draw



Splitting into groups by age produced some interesting contrasts



And each group went about things their own way





The "Council of Elders" presented first

The Groups Reconvened to Share Their Visions

The 55+ group, affectionately termed The Council of Elders, produced a series of abstract diagrams, engaging with some of the deep theoretical issues, including the question of who is in fact "sovereign" in food sovereignty, and representing a vision of a richly networked and diverse food system.

The 40 – 55 year old cohort produced a more playful shared piece, representing the thoughts of a future citizen, living in a world with a transformed food system, and contemplating the global catastrophe that had been averted by overhauling a corporate, environmentally destructive food system.

The group universally acknowledged that the 30-40 year olds had a near-monopoly on artistic talent, producing a spectacular mural. They used found materials and potent symbolism to represent a citizen of a hopeful future, connected to resilient nature and supportive communities, networked with other social movements, and balancing various demands for a well-rounded and fulfilling life.



And all groups were well received



Everyone acknowledged that the most artistic piece was created by the 30-40 age group, who presented an inspiring vision of the future

Finally, the 20-30 year old group presented the most pessimistic vision, focussing on challenges still to be overcome, and partially addressing the question of how the food system is most likely to look, rather than how they hoped it would look. Still, the youngest cohort ended with a hopeful vision of many different movements coming together “under one roof”, with urban and rural activists, DIY movements, arts, and community-based processes supporting each other to continue the work of building a strong and resilient movement, and a just and sustainable food system.

The exercise provided a welcome chance to look hopefully into the future, as well as a chance to contemplate apparent differences in generational approach. In the most general terms the groups showed a shift from concrete to abstract with increasing age. Also, several participants noted that, while the two eldest groups nominated representatives, the younger groups took a more direct-democratic approach, presenting their work collectively.

The exercise showed the varied strengths and diversity of contribution from individuals of different ages, highlighting the importance of inter-generational collaboration for building a robust and sustainable movement.



The “youth” group presented a vision of future movements united “under one roof”



.. and blended pessimism with optimism in their predictions for the future



Josh Brem-Wilson was carefully blindfolded ...



and crossed the "bridge with a little guidance.

Crossing the bridge blindfolded

As the Day of Dialogue was drawing to a close, there was time for one more exercise. After setting up a metaphorical bridge in the form of three juice packs and demonstrating how to cross it, Elizabeth Mpofu then asked for a brave volunteer to leave the room. Josh stepped up to the plate and obliged. When Josh returned, Elizabeth blindfolded him and asked him to cross the bridge. However, once the blindfold was in place, the three juice packs were removed and the bridge disappeared, as Josh was to discover much to his amusement after thinking he had successfully crossed.

What does this mean? The metaphor is open to interpretation, but serves to remind us that we may not always be facing the challenges that we predicted.

The day ended with participants feeling re-connected and committed to continue the discussion between activists and academics of the food sovereignty movement. It was almost time to leave, but not before Nora McKeon led the group in a rousing rendition of *Bella Ciao*!



The day concluded with a rousing rendition of "Bella Ciao" led by Nora McKeon.

Conclusion

The day concluded with participants feeling re-energized and re-connected to the strength and diversity of the food movement. We asked ourselves, “How can we change the world if we don’t change the way we hold meetings?”. This meeting suggested a direction for that change: “It was a wonderful day, full of creativity and fantasy. We broke boundaries. We will take this day with us in whatever we do.”

The transformative nature of the day came not only from what was said in the wide-ranging and intense discussions, or from the diversity and energy of the participants, but also from the opportunity to break out of traditional academic and professional models for communication, and bring joy and creativity into the room. In this discussion “we [...] used ways of communicating which can help us cross different worlds” and came together in a spirit of shared laughter and vision. Participants suggested that this reflected a broader shift going on in the movement: “We used to focus on the outputs of meetings, but now we are more focused on the process, building trust and then the outputs will come by themselves.”

We recognized there is still a great deal of work to do, on answering some of the questions laid out above (and in the Appendix), on honing in on specific information, and on building new tools and a stronger movement: “We need to deepen our thinking, so we need specific meetings on specific issues”. But those who attended this meeting felt that the session not only helped us to decide our priorities but also illustrated the importance of transformative processes and alternative ways of communicating, that help us to bring our whole selves to the table. Some even felt that this day represented a turning point in our collective history as a movement.

The way that we communicate with each other has a powerful influence on who will be heard and what will be done, so meetings like this, that go beyond the strictly professional or academic to enable deeper encounters and more personal discussions, are pivotal for building a robust movement and ultimately for growing a new kind of food system. At the end of the day, those who were there agreed: “the value of such a meeting is profound for such a movement”.

Appendix 1:

Each Working Group was presented with a set of questions to guide and inspire their discussion. These questions were distributed to participants in advance of the conference, but are included here for reference, frame their discussions and inspire ongoing dialogue.

Work Group 1: Transforming the Food System

What is a food system and what are its key elements?

Is food sovereignty addressing all important aspects of the food system?

Which aspects of the food system have been most elaborated by food sovereignty? Where do we stay there?

Which aspects of the food system have been less or not addressed at all by food sovereignty?

How are the different aspects of a food system connected (e.g. farming, farm income, food distribution systems, food prices, workers' wages, nutrition policies)? Are there tensions or trade-offs between the different aspects? How can these be addressed/resolved?

How does a food sovereignty based food system relate to the larger economy?

Which is the best strategy or way to struggle against the transnational companies that increasingly control the international food system and that co-opt governments and (parts of) international institutions?

How to elaborate steps forward beyond resistance in order to modify the current situation?

What are the key questions related to this theme? How could these questions be answered (what kinds of knowledge, what kinds of methodologies, and what kinds of alliances would be needed to answer the questions?)

Work Group 2: Strengthening the Food Sovereignty Movement

What is the most needed at this moment to strengthen the food sovereignty movement?

What are the key bottle-necks at the moment? Which are the obstacles for this alliance if any

Which kind of collaboration could be expected between the trade/labor unions and the food sovereignty movement?

What are key gender issues to be taken up by the food sovereignty movement, how can we strengthen the role of women and their organizations in the movement? What is the gender approach of food sovereignty? Which gender aspects have been addressed? Which not

Given the increasing feminization of agriculture, can food sovereignty continue building around concepts such as “family farm” and “local community”?

Besides farming, which are other sites of struggle for gender equality in the food system?

Taking in account that the generational transition is a key issue to be tackled by social movements. Which are the strategies and/or action-lines to ensure that the food sovereignty movement is stimulating for youth?

Do all peasants do the same way? Why do they choose to go for conventional farming or for agro-ecology, for local food markets or for international agricultural commodity markets?

Is food sovereignty relevant for farm workers? Which farm worker's issues have been addressed by food sovereignty? How to resolve the tension between farm workers and peasants?

What is the role that researchers or the academy itself should have/play in the frame of the food sovereignty movement in order to strengthen it?

What are the key questions related to this theme? How could these questions be answered

(what kinds of knowledge, what kinds of methodologies, and what kinds of alliances would be needed to answer the questions?)

Work Group 3: Governing for Food Sovereignty

Who is the sovereign in food sovereignty?

Which political entities (e.g. local govts, national govts, regional organizations, UN agencies) has food sovereignty addressed its claims to? Which results have been achieved?

Which political entities have been left out?

Can the state remain the main addressee/ guarantor of food sovereignty claims in times when states are heavily involved in deepening capitalism? What is the role of trade in food sovereignty?

What should be priority for the food sovereignty movement when looking to the global governance of food and agriculture?

Specifically, how could the presence and the influence of the food sovereignty movement be strengthened in CFS-FAO in Rome and/or in the Human Rights Council in Geneva?

Which other UN agencies are interesting for the food sovereignty movement to be explored?

What kind of presence should FTAs have in the political agenda of the food sovereignty movement?

Do we need a global common food sovereignty program and a global food sovereignty governance in order to face the massively concentrated powers of the corporate food system?

What are the key questions related to this theme? How could these questions be answered (what kinds of knowledge, what kinds of methodologies, and what kinds of alliances would be needed to answer the questions?)

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