

VEG-i-TRADE

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY REPORT

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Introduction

Food sovereignty has hitherto been about the well-being of small-holder farmers to meet the local food needs and protect them from dumping of foreign commodities and thereby destroying their livelihoods. The purpose of food sovereignty is to reduce and eventually prevent hunger and malnutrition as well as promoting rural development and environmental integrity. The concept can hardly be said to be meant for the rich over-subsidized farmers in the European Union and allied countries, and those engaged in large-scale agriculture as a business. The threat posed by big agro-business and capital to small-holder farmers in Europe and the Americas has led to an increasing number of them to adopt the concept, albeit not for the same reasons. To achieve world-wide sustainable agriculture and equitable food trade governance, the ideals embodied in the food sovereignty concept have to be applicable to all farmers, irrespective of location. This latter statement introduces a tangible dichotomy regarding rich and poor farmers but accepted in terms of fair play and inclusiveness.

The main objective of the food sovereignty task was to discuss the ethical implications of global trade in fresh produce in the light of EU food law. Sub-objectives were to communicate to stakeholders at a global level the implication of socio-cultural factors in the food safety policy formulation, to discuss conflicts of interest and cultural sensitivities, to communicate science-based information from work packages and to produce a concluding report.

As a discussion task, the approach adopted has been a set of lectures designed to bring all consortium members to a common understanding as what the concept of food sovereignty entails and means. It was not an easy task. For a task that is so comprehensive and embracing the whole project, it is a weakness that it was not a full work package and that it was only allocated a paltry four man-months of work.

From the first lecture at the project kick-off meeting in Murcia, Spain (2010) the general ethical considerations of the task in relation to Veg-i-Trade was delineated as; to create awareness, exchange best practices, ensure understanding and compliance, and to observe and discuss practices in other work packages. The ethical conduct expected of all was elaborated to incorporate effective communication, respect and humility. Our communication mode was to be deemed effective in our ability to send encoded messages in the form of visual imagery

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and the feelings intended when the message is sent. Furthermore, our communication must be deemed effective in our ability for two or more people to see the same visual and emotional pictures and to present a common solution to the inquiry.

With this background set, every consortium member was charged to be careful and flexible in their plans and to demonstrate ability as a conscientious leader at every level. Work package and task leaders were charged with promoting motivation and giving encouragement to project workers to show strength under pressure. They were to promote due diligence and optimism and encourage group learning.

By way of introduction to the topic of food sovereignty, the basic human needs of air, water, food and shelter were reiterated and the conclusion made that these are assured when living a life in tune with an ecologically balanced nature. The ethical dilemma revolving around the issues of food security and food safety arise when imbalance and non-equitable use of natural resources for human development arise. When this state of affairs is perceived as the norm without regard to the sustainability of the practices it embodies, a paradigm shift was necessary, that shift is what the food sovereignty concept entails.

The food sovereignty concept was therefore deemed as one of the major corner stones of VEG-i-TRADE ; that third or developing countries must meet their own needs before meeting the demands of others. The ethical dilemma of profit and social equity dictates that it does not make any human or economic sense to harvest and transport produce from great distances, only for the same produce to be declared unfit for human consumption while the producers themselves go hungry from lack of same. With the above pronouncement, the stage was set for the food sovereignty debate.

The Food Sovereignty Debate

At the second consortium meeting held in Ghent, 2011 the challenge of how the concept of food sovereignty could be operationalized and put into practice was addressed. The drivers of food sovereignty practice were listed as including, among others, the growing concern over health risks associated with food products; the close examination of sanitary and phyto-sanitary standards, and the effect of European food safety standards on developing countries'

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exports, considering the fact that harmonised EU standards are often more restrictive than agreed international standards (e.g. Codex).

Despite the standard arguments to justify why safety, quality of food and consumer health were such major concerns for EU member countries and the strong commitment to ensure compliance to these ideals, all agree that international trade and associated food safety standards and/or (imposed) quality assurance programs are barriers to third countries' participation in international trade.

Consequently, it was argued that national food safety regulation must be based on concerns regarding food quality criteria, appropriate to the preferences and needs of their citizens. Demanding that food exporting countries must meet EU food safety standards is a myopic approach and implies changes must be made in the traditional production practices and therefore raises ethical problems especially where poverty and undernourishment are rampant. Food cooking and eating habits differ and are culturally conditioned. It is natural that third countries meet their own requirements before exporting, and, in the event they choose to export, the importing countries must adapt the use of produce from them instead of making demands of compliance; for example, cooking sugar peas instead of eating them raw without washing as snacks.

As a way forward, it was agreed that food sovereignty issues were to be determined within each work package and examined in order to suggest ways to alleviate the problem for mutual benefit. In addition members were encouraged to come up with their personal reflections on food sovereignty. The outcome of this exercise is vividly captured in the booklet: "Reflections on Food Sovereignty – Safe food for all in a changing world" compiled and edited by Cudjoe and Korsten (2014).

The third consortium held in Oslo in 2011, served as a watershed for the food sovereignty debate. It became quite clear after Mr. Aksel Nærstad's perspectives on Food Sovereignty and International Trade that key project members disagree with the direction of the debate in the follow-up discussions that ensued after his lecture. It became evident that the debate must focus on the safety of the food supplied to EU and allied countries and that the discussion must not be skewed towards third countries and that it must not be political but "scientific". Yet the goal of the debate was to craft a 'discussion forum' regarding acceptable risk,

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sustainability in production, and long-term strategies for a fair international food trade. The forum discussions ended in disarray. However the temperature of the debate rose and ranged on in several email exchanges. One debater wrote and I quote: « We cannot ‘do science’ in a vacuum. Our mandate in the Veg-i-Trade insists that we look at the science within the context of food policy (that is, from a political perspective), rather than denies us this freedom. Food sovereignty has to be a thread that runs through each of the work packages, so that every scientific conclusion that is reached (based on the evidence derived by sound scientific principles) has to be examined through the looking glass of food sovereignty, with all the political baggage that carries with it». Strong words! To the assertion that the debate is skewed to the benefit of third countries came the reply: yes, but although it affects all countries, small-holder farmers from third countries are the ones who are also lacking enough to eat while they export their best produce, which more often than not ends up being wasted. Giving voice to the voiceless in the midst of strong multinational lobbyists is an empowerment role that scientists can no longer relegate only to activists or politicians!

After these heated exchanges, the project management team decided to allocate funds for an online questionnaire on food safety and standards and to take a practical look at food sovereignty using the South African mango chain as a case study. A further study was commissioned to look at food sovereignty issues in Kenya and Uganda. Meanwhile two food sovereignty indabas were organised at the University of Pretoria in March and August 2013 where the main tenets of the concept were further developed and consolidated as a preparation towards the Food Sovereignty Conference.

It is worthy to note that the defining approach to the sovereignty debate was encapsulated in the Veg-i-Trade project title: “*Impact of climate change and globalisation on safety of fresh produce - governing the supply chain of uncompromised food sovereignty.*”

All lectures given in connection with the food sovereignty task are available on the project’s web page.

Food safety standards and the food sovereignty debate

Some people are not at all enthused over the sole focusing on food safety standards as a means to eliciting and/or soliciting understanding of the food sovereignty concerns. Food

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sovereignty policy is an inclusive one and poses ethical challenges. All must be involved and none must be left behind. There is a considerable gap between EU's expectations and demands and what is expected of third countries' contributions in meeting the demands of food safety standards without considering the ethical implications. The global food situation is in a crisis. While the majority starves, some few are overstuffing (to their own detriment) and continue to waste considerable amounts of food. While food waste is more a preserve of the rich industrial countries and food loss including post-harvest losses is the curse of developing countries due to lack of modern horticultural knowledge and proper agronomic practices as well as competence in preservation and packaging technology. The industrial world is clever and continuously seeks ways to have access to enough healthy food that is safe and therefore builds up control systems to protect the health of its inhabitants. The total lack of understanding of modern concepts of food production in all its ramifications by the majority of small-holder farmers and how one expects them to make a living by exporting their products under stringent regulations is a dilemma. That there exist some key large farms in the developing countries, owned by large agric-business corporations as well as private individuals targeting the export market does not address the concerns of food sovereignty via food safety standards. The trickle-down approach to development is part of the problem. There is a general feeling that small-holder farmers that feed the majority of the world's population have any possibility, competence, capacity and knowledge to produce to meet the glorified demands of industrial countries. For this reason they will be more and more marginalized and reduced to abject poverty. Poverty alleviation is also one of the goals of food sovereignty.

Adhering to the standards necessary to access the export market, is, among others, a significant pressure in the competition. A key question is at what cost do farmers in developing countries meet the standards necessary for accessing global markets? This is not to suggest that competitive farmers remain competitive because they ruthlessly exploit workers and wreck the environment. The point is that there are possibly social, health and environmental costs incurred in meeting standards, and we might ask "who is paying for them?", i.e., how have they been externalized. This is why it is important to consider all the stakeholders - not only experts on standards, the farmers, corporations and policymakers, but also the landless rural and urban poor, who, at least in theory, are the overwhelming majority that supports our governing party. They may not exercise much real influence in global policymaking at the moment, nor have strong opinions about standards, wastage or

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globalization, but that is the point of food sovereignty; food sovereignty takes cognizance of stakeholders who are not naturally allocated political/economic space in global trade, but whose welfare is profoundly affected.

Food Sovereignty Conference and Group Work

In preparation towards the Food Sovereignty Conference, questions were designed for group discussions during the conference with the intention that upon discussion a summary of prioritised factors of importance that impact positively and negatively on food sovereignty would be reached. Three themes were developed and questions framed around them.

Under theme 1: The right to food, ethics of food trade and governance; the following questions were posed.

1. Which three words describe the most important barriers to ethical food trade governance?
2. What should be done to truly open up trade in a fair and a just way?
3. Why should trade be open and fair on the global level?

Under theme 2: Land and water rights and use - their impact on agriculture and the environment; the following questions were posed.

1. State two key challenges facing land and water rights and their use that governments must address to achieve sustainable agriculture that will impact positively on the environment.
2. Rural and small-scale farming is claimed to be sustainable because it maintains the bio-diversity of the land. Why is land degradation a common feature of rural poverty?
3. What should be the basis of land ownership and how does that impact positively or negatively on the well-being of a farming community?

Under theme 3: Tools for building capacity and knowledge among small-scale farmers, the following questions were posed.

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1. What type and form of capacity building would be most relevant and beneficial to small-scale farmers to help break the cycle of what is perceived as under-development?
2. What do YOU think will be the ONE thing small-scale farmers would like to see in agriculture?
3. Transparent and effective communication is a reciprocal process in win-win transactions. Are small-scale farmers free to take the decisions that affect their lives and livelihood in all types of democracies, and if not, why not?

Presentations at the Food Sovereignty Conference can be accessed at:

<http://web.up.ac.za/default.asp?ipkCategoryID=26385&sub=1&parentid=1436&subid=1558&ipklookid=11> or directly on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxo9YJKo7e2nT1GyCwVOflQ>

Summaries from Group Works

Firstly, decisions about food in general are often not a conscious action. It ought to involve consideration of health and welfare of our living environment underpinned by ethical principles of respect for wellbeing, autonomy and justice. Food has become a commodity that is traded and the concrete activity that guides this practice is termed food trade governance: the way the rules and actions are produced, sustained, and regulated either in a formal or informal way. Food trade governance has become associated with terms like fair trade, barriers to trade, import and export restrictions and bans, dumping, shifting food safety and quality standards and non-participatory governance structures. Agriculture in developing countries is characterized by low yields and post-harvest losses; the consequence is that rampant hunger, malnutrition and poverty is prevalent in rural and urban settings while the developed world is characterized by overflow and waste. Ways must be found to address post-harvest losses in developing countries in a comprehensive manner through knowledge sharing and capacity building while waste is eliminated through consumer education. Smallholders must capture a fair proportion of the value of their products and must not be relegated to subsistence farming, with little or no support.

Transparency in policy legislation, fair trading practices which eschew corruption and creation of win-win situations are some of the key solutions to barriers to ethical food trade governance. Furthermore, the creation of an enabling environment which involves fair pricing

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standard and an even global distribution of food would remove the greed practiced through price manipulation and the creation of artificial food shortages. In a multi-lateral system, consumer education fosters the moral obligation to trade fairly. While the encouragement of giving aid creates unnecessary dependency, fair trade will improve the nutritional basket of the world's people and thus provide a staple food right.

Secondly, knowledge-based management of natural resources of land and water and best practices are keys to sustainable agriculture. Land and water rights and use must be an issue for central governments to regulate for the overall equitable development and distribution for the benefit of its citizens.

Sustainable ecosystems demand a conscious awareness of geopolitical practices that set the agenda for the way we live and use nature's resources. Development of sustainable alternative energy systems would eventually wean us from fossil fuels and create the necessary resource use collaborations. Governments must provide security of tenure in terms of land and water use, considering the pressure an increasing populations place on these resources by creating a system of user-ownership ratio to make land and water available for those that would put them to productive use to serve the common good.

Thirdly, small scale farmers, all agree, produce 60-70% of the world's food yet poverty and hunger is their lot. That is a paradox and a grand fallacy. Some parts of rural Africa are, for example, dominated by long-lived traditions and cultures impacting on decisions at local and family levels. Assessing the right information to improve their condition and to benefit from existing improved farming practices has been a major challenge. This can be achieved by effective knowledge sharing and building the needed capacity to solve problems in the local environment. Maintaining the bio-diversity of the local environment pre-supposes an understanding of how agriculture is affected by the abiotic environment. Education tailored to solving local problems will also serve local needs.

Based on the discussions in plenum and through the project period we seem to reach the consensus that a paradigm shift is necessary in the current mode of agricultural production. We agree that present mode is not sustainable and that it is wasteful of resources. We are of the opinion that the accepted view of meeting standard requirements for efficient export oriented agricultural production create food insecurity. The situation in Uganda, Kenya and

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South Africa is illustrative of the need to change current practices in terms of trade ethics and governance, land and water rights. It is paradoxical that Kenya which has an export-oriented agriculture, and fulfills all the requirements of the so-called international or global standards is notably food insecure. Uganda, on the contrary, is food secure but does not seem to meet or fulfill any of those same standards' requirement. By adopting the small-scale farmers' mode of production , albeit improved, Uganda produces sufficient food to feed its people and to export the surplus to Kenya! South Africa is a special case. The country is food secure, yet over 13 million of her citizens do not have enough to eat and live in abject poverty and squalor. Resolving the small-scale farmer paradox of hunger in the midst of plenty is a task that **MUST BE DONE**. Training and capacity building to avoid loss of agricultural institutional memory is one of the key tools to achieve sustainable agriculture.

Re-definition of Human Priorities

Proper definition of the root causes of the problems encountered in the present agricultural system and who benefits from it would help to resolve the challenges facing us as a human collective. We know that BIG Agro-business benefits from the status quo. Collectively and for the sake of future generations, we must have the discussion on the role of agriculture and the type of human society we want and whether that society should be characterized by fairness and equality, freedom and justice and structured to resolve real human needs rather than money being the sole blueprint and determinant. We have to make hard choices; either to do away with small-scale farmers or support them or keep on supporting commercial/industrial farmers or phase them out. We must also answer hard questions like which farming method or mode best suits our future challenges in terms of population and environment. Which role should technology play and what kind of technology do we want and need and for whom and for what purpose must be intrinsic part of this discourse?

As a human collective we are at a point in our journey where clear sovereign choices and decisions must be made. According to Raj Patel (<http://rajpatel.org/2009/11/02/food-sovereignty-a-brief-introduction/>), food sovereignty is a call by a people who have systematically been excluded from the formulation of food policy and who have long been forced to live with the consequences of agrarian policy authored by those in cities with few, if any, links of accountability to those whose lives are wrecked by their ideas. Who, therefore, should make the decisions that affect other people's lives? The answer to this simple question lies with the

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people who will be affected by the decisions. They know best where the pressure is and by freely exercising their sovereign rights, they will also be able to design their own human values systems to resolve their needs.

Concluding Remarks

After four years of debates, talks and email exchanges regarding the concept of food sovereignty, project consortium members seem to understand the justification of being so uncompromising on the subject. It has been a journey that has taught many of us useful lessons along the way, both pleasurable and painful. That realisation has aided our awakening about our living environment. The message conveyed so far has to be distinguished from the messenger, although the methods adopted might appear confrontational. Nevertheless, it was designed to elicit the different perspectives around the subject. The critique challenges European cultural thought about the way this world is run and works. One must accept that there are different perspectives, and that one-size does not fit all. The different perspectives make us see a more holistic picture of the world we live in and serve as guide to make informed choices as free sovereign beings. An unjust world cannot be allowed to continue because it demotivates and kills human potential and therefore is not sustainable. This climate of an unjust world is what is changing and must change! The symptoms of this unsustainability is becoming self-evident and manifesting as global economic problems as more and more nations wake up to claim what is theirs. We cannot just use and deplete nature's resources and hope to innovate to achieve further economic growth. The underbelly of this rhetoric of progress and innovation fails to address the root causes of the problem – resource depletion and mortgaging of own future as a species.

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