

# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: THE IDEA'S ORIGINS AND DUBIOUS MERITS \*

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## Abstract

Contrasting with the current definition of food security – which focuses on economic access to food, generally through markets – food sovereignty stresses basic human rights to adequate nourishment. Many of its exponents also support food self-sufficiency. Experience in Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that agricultural protectionism, which often goes hand in hand with this self-sufficiency, actually causes more people to go hungry. By the same token, Chinese experience demonstrates that giving market forces freer rein raises incomes and reduces food insecurity. In light of the hunger alleviated by freer markets, food sovereignty, which sympathetic interpreters of the concept admit suffers from serious internal inconsistencies, holds little appeal as a recipe to eradicate poverty, malnutrition and hunger.

## Introduction

Safe to say, economists' familiarity with the idea of food sovereignty is cursory at best. This is partly because precise economic argumentation is not a strong suit of the relevant literature, which to date has been written by social scientists from other disciplines as well as non-academic advocates [1,2]. Moreover, this literature deals little with indicators such as food prices and numbers of people who cannot afford an adequate diet.

Contrary to the worst suspicions harbored by staunch defenders of free markets and trade, which most economists are, food sovereignty has not been designed to serve as a Trojan Horse for agricultural protectionism. A more serious problem, which at least a few sympathetic interpreters of the concept recognize in print, is its incoherence – incoherence that has the potential for creating economic malefaction. As one of the most well-regarded of these interpreters complains, food sovereignty is “over defined,” adding that there are “so many versions of the concept (that) it is hard to know exactly what it means.” Beyond observing that “food sovereignty is a call for people's rights to shape and craft

food policy,” Raj Patel notes the concept's “contradictions,” which he happens to find “worth exploring” [3].

No definitions are offered in the pages that follow. Instead, two recurring themes of the literature on food sovereignty – and its U.S. variant, community food security (CFS) – are noted at the beginning of the article, one being a basic human right not to suffer hunger and the other being agricultural self-sufficiency. Much of the article is about the progress that has been made by improving economic access to food – in large part thanks to greater reliance on market forces, rather than concentrating on rights and self-sufficiency. This discussion is followed by the challenges of actually achieving food sovereignty. To their credit, some of the idea's exponents have written honestly about these challenges.

## 1. Food Sovereignty versus Food Security

In a fundamental sense, the food sovereignty movement seeks to revive a formulation of food security that was widely accepted during the 1970s. This formulation has been superseded by an alternative conception that food sovereignty advocates find unsatisfactory, yet is accepted by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other multilateral agencies.

To understand the earlier definition of food security, an appreciation of prevailing currents of thought 40 years ago is useful. In the wake of spiking prices for petroleum, grain, and other commodities in the early 1970s, there was a crescendo in demands for a New International Economic Order. In addition, a “technocratic faith” in the capacity of national governments to allot resources, stabilize prices, and accomplish related tasks was widely shared [3]. Ideas about food security that date from the same period reflect these circumstances and intellectual tendencies. Also receiving much attention at the time was a basic human right to

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adequate nourishment, of the sort recognized in the International Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights agreed to by 145 governments in 1966.

The New International Economic Order and the technocratic faith that inspired it subsequently lost appeal – particularly after the early 1980s, when international attempts to stabilize world food prices by maintaining buffer stocks collapsed. For at least ten years now, the formulation of food security accepted by the FAO and other multilateral bodies has been that “all people at all times have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences” [4]. This formulation is largely silent about human rights to food. Instead, the focus is on access – especially access of the economic variety, which depends both on the earnings of food-insecure people and on the prices they pay for edible goods.

Advocates of food sovereignty are uncomfortable with this reorientation. The current definition of food security, Patel contends, reflects the “absence of an alternative to US-style neoliberal capitalism,” at least as far as governmental representatives in international negotiations and summits are concerned [3]. According to the same commentator, the signs that neoliberalism now dominate include a “break away from a commitment to the full meeting of human rights, leading to the *watered down* Millennium Development Goals” (emphasis added) [3].

Rights are likewise a primary concern of the U.S. exponents of Community Food Security (CFS), such as Patricia Allen [4]. Beyond decrying neoliberalism – or simply the “right,” as pro-market conservatism is commonly known in the United States and other affluent nations – Allen criticizes the state for having shed “its responsibilities for social welfare,” thereby weakening the rights and responsibilities that make up the country’s social contract.

There is another sense that CFS’s exponents, not to mention many around the world who subscribe to the idea of food sovereignty, are in tune with the FAO’s original formulation of food security, dating from the 1970s. To be specific, they call for agricultural self-sufficiency, which is entirely distinct from the self-reliance that a country enjoys by growing some of its own food efficiently and importing the rest using money earned by exporting non-agricultural goods in which it holds a comparative advantage. But whereas the FAO and other multilateral agencies these days generally avoid recommending self-sufficiency as a way for a country to achieve food security, advocates of CFS are now in favor of self-sufficiency at the sub-national level. Allen, for one, asserts that resolving the paradox of inadequate nourishment in the face of agricultural abundance in the United States requires better integration of local production and consumption, including greater food self-sufficiency within communities [5].

## 2. Free Markets and Food Security

For anyone familiar with the relevant economic literature, which draws on empirical investigation in a large number of settings, food self-sufficiency ought to hold little appeal. Reviewing available research more than two decades ago, the Director General of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) concluded not only that freer trade in farm products is rewarding for developing nations, but also that such a policy benefits impoverished and food-insecure people in rural areas. As he argued forcefully: “Agricultural commercialization raises the income of the rural poor, thus improving their food security” [6].

The soundness of this argument is readily apparent where a comparative advantage in agriculture exists. However, it also applies for the poorest of the rural poor in countries that find themselves importing more food in the wake of trade liberalization. Impoverished farmers, who tend to have tiny holdings, typically are net buyers of food, so they benefit as prices are driven down due to the availability of cheaper imports. Even worse off are rural households with no land at all and that lack the skills required for remunerative employment. This group may suffer a reduction in earnings as lower commodity prices reduce the demand for unskilled labor in the agricultural sector. But for most landless households, this reduction is outweighed by the gains coming their way because of cheaper food.

### 2.1 China’s Progress

The most convincing evidence in support of the claim that freer markets alleviate hunger is provided by the world’s most populous nation. At the time when the term, food insecurity, was becoming part of FAO’s lexicon, China not only had more poorly-fed people than any other country, but one of the highest incidences of food insecurity in the world as well. Within a few years after the death of Mao Tse-tung, whose policies cost the lives of tens of millions of his countrymen [7], Chinese peasants began experimenting with alternatives to collective agriculture, which had been imposed during Mao’s disastrous Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The peasants did not opt for community self-sufficiency. Instead, they undertook family farming, independent marketing of livestock and produce, and other individualistic “deviations” from rigid socialism. Even though these practices were illegal, communist authorities did not succeed at suppressing locally-instigated reforms entirely, as the old despot undoubtedly would have attempted. To the contrary, elements of the Household Responsibility System (HRS), as these reforms came to be known, started to be tolerated by the state in the early 1980s. The HRS soon spread from the countryside to urban areas and is largely responsible for China’s economic trajectory during the past 30 years [8].

When Chinese peasants began to challenge the system that Mao had imposed on them, global surveying of the

extent of undernourishment had barely begun. According to the earliest estimates, which date from the late 1960s and early 1970s, the highest incidence of food insecurity in the world was registered in China and neighboring lands. At 41 percent, and with 475 million people categorized as food-insecure, this regional incidence for East and Southeast Asia exceeded the corresponding shares for South Asia (238 million people; 33 percent of the population) and Sub-Saharan Africa (103 million people; 38 percent of the population) [9].

In no sense is the Chinese countryside today a paragon of unfettered capitalism; indeed, governmental meddling with market forces is still commonplace. But liberalization, partial though it is, has resulted in substantial progress. The improved economic access to food created by a combination of higher earnings, which have resulted largely because the move away from Mao's brand of doctrinaire communism has accelerated economic growth in China, and cheaper food, deriving from technological advances that have raised crop yields, has reduced the number of food-insecure people in East and Southeast Asia by more than half – to 219 million in 2003-2005. The incidence of food insecurity in the region is now little more than 10 percent [10].

The progress made in East and Southeast Asia explains why there are fewer undernourished people throughout the world today than there were 40 years ago. India and its neighbors in South Asia now have the largest food-insecure cohort, with 314 million, although the incidence (22 percent) is lower in the region than what it used to be [10]. These days, Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest incidence of food insecurity, at 29 percent, and 212 million people there go hungry regularly or often [10].

## 2.2 Continuing Food Insecurity South of the Sahara

Not coincidentally, governmental meddling with market forces in the food economy is worse in Sub-Saharan Africa than elsewhere in the developing world. True, nominal rates of assistance (NRAs) for agriculture, which summarize the aggregate impact on farm income of price controls, over-valued currencies, and other policies, have improved in recent decades, which is in line with global trends. In the early 1980s, for example, the NRA for Ghanaian agriculture, was -21.2 percent, which means that public policies caused farmers' earnings to be 21.2 percent lower than what they otherwise would have been. But two decades later, the same indicator was close to zero, which means that agriculture was neither penalized nor subsidized. On the other hand, penalization of the sector continues in a number of Sub-Saharan nations. Among these are Zambia, where the NRA worsened (from -2.7 percent in the early 1980s to -28.5 percent during the years immediately following the turn of the Twenty-First Century), and Zimbabwe (where the NRA deteriorated from -24.0 percent to -38.7 percent during the same two decades) [11]. Since government policy does much economic harm to farmers in these two nations, the comparative advantage that each has in agriculture is overwhelmed and far too many people go hungry.

Aside from policies that drive down farmers' earnings, and hence diminish incentives to produce crops and livestock, food insecurity south of the Sahara results from inadequate investment in the public goods needed to raise output and productivity in the countryside. Roads and related infrastructure are notoriously inadequate in rural areas. This diminishes the farm-gate value of agricultural commodities and also makes inputs more expensive for growers. This impact underlies the choice made by the vast majority of African farmers not to use any commercial fertilizer at all [12]. Thirty years ago, the average fertilizer application rate south of the Sahara was the lowest in the world, at 16 kilograms per hectare per annum. Since then, this annual rate has fallen, to a mere 12 kilograms per hectare [13].

There has been severe under-investment in dams, canals, pumping stations, etc. As a result, 4 percent of all farmland in Sub-Saharan Africa is irrigated, compared to 12 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 34 percent in the Middle East and North Africa, 37 percent in East and Southeast Asia, and 39 percent in South Asia. There are just three Sub-Saharan countries where more than one in ten hectares irrigated: Madagascar (31 percent), Swaziland (26 percent), and Sudan (11 percent) [13].

Support for agricultural research and development is also deficient, and not simply in financial terms. Aside from the Republic of South Africa, where a number of universities and other institutions are using biotechnology to improve crop and livestock varieties, genetic modification is seldom employed south of the Sahara. One reason why the region is not harnessing this approach – as Brazil, China, and India are doing – is opposition by anti-biotechnology campaigners, who are affiliated with the Food Sovereignty movement in affluent nations [1]. To be specific, these campaigners have made clear their intention to block agricultural imports from African nations that do not adopt regulations of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) based on an uncompromising interpretation of the precautionary principle. This stance has helped convince many Sub-Saharan nations not to use agricultural biotechnology [14, 15].

Sub-Saharan Africa is sometimes portrayed as hopeless, including by many who embrace the misguided policies responsible for much of the region's poor economic performance or are reluctant to criticize these policies. However, unrelenting pessimism is not warranted by any means. Consider the case of Kenya, where the NRA was -18.6 percent in the early 1980s but stood at 9.3 percent a decade ago [11]. Cereal yields have risen in the country, thanks to a doubling of the annual fertilizer application rate during the same period as well as a modest increase in irrigation [13]. Moreover, a sizable industry now exists to export fresh vegetables, cut flowers, and other goods worth up to \$500 million every year to Europe, which among other things has provided jobs to 250,000 rural dwellers. Local-food campaigners in Great Britain and other importing nations have complained about the energy

needed to fly Kenyan produce to market. However, their arguments have been refuted by economic studies that demonstrate that the energy-savings of growing fruit, vegetables, and flowers under the sunny skies of East Africa exceed the energy required for intercontinental air transport [16].

Between increased production of farm products for domestic markets and the expansion of foreign commerce, which has raised rural incomes, food security has improved in Kenya. Extremely poor people, whose daily earnings are under \$1.25 and who comprise practically all of the food-insecure cohort, make up at least 10 percent of the population in all but a handful of Sub-Saharan nations. Kenya, where the incidence of extreme poverty is little more than 6 percent, is one of the exceptions. Also, one in six five-year-olds is categorized as abnormally underweight in the country, which is low by regional standards. In contrast, one in every three citizens is extremely poor and nearly 25 percent of all five-year-olds are severely underweight in Zambia, which to repeat has been out of step with the global trend toward diminished penalization of the agricultural sector in recent years [11].

In much of Africa, rights to adequate nourishment are honored in the breach. However, the problem does not relate to humankind's inability to come up with a satisfactory definition of such rights. Neither will striving for greater food self-sufficiency reduce hunger south of the Sahara. Instead, food insecurity in the region is best understood in terms of the FAO's current definition, which focuses on economic access. Food security is best achieved by improving that access, both by diminishing governmental interference with market forces and by increasing investment in the agricultural sector's public goods – including investment in agricultural biotechnology, not to mention rural roads and other infrastructure.

### 3. Other Insights from Writings on Food Sovereignty?

The argument can be made, and many economists would make it, that the task of providing everyone with “access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences” [4] can be accomplished through a combination of market reforms and investment in public goods. Does the literature on food sovereignty convince the reader that anything else is needed?

Perhaps. Patel notes that the definition of food security that the FAO enunciated in 2001 largely dodged the issue of social control of the food system and that “a discussion of internal political arrangements was a necessary part of the substance of food security” [3]. While generally applauding this sentiment, he observes that the food sovereignty movement has yet to propose a core program, one made up of “an internally consistent set of ideas” [3].

General statements issued by the movement, Patel forthrightly continues, are not helpful. He quotes from the Nyéléni Declaration on Food Sovereignty, from 27

February 2007, which calls for respecting the rights of “those who produce, distribute, and consume food.” As he points out, this includes anyone and everyone, “including transnational corporations,” whose interests are not supposed to be taken into account according to another part of the same Declaration. The conclusion is reached that the “canvas on which inequalities of power need to be tackled is vast . . . (and) . . . the project of food sovereignty so wide that it becomes everything and nothing” [3].

In terms of a practical program, the scholarly literature about CFS is no more illuminating. After decrying the power of corporations, U.S. welfare reform during the 1990s, and so forth, Allen considers the practicalities of a “whole-systems approach to food security” at the local level. Like Patel, she is honest about the difficulties, conceding among other things that “geographical proximity does not overcome social and economic distance and *may increase it*” (emphasis added) [5]. In other words, differences in income, wealth, ethnicity, and so forth, which greatly trouble CFS advocates, are not necessarily less problematical in a confined community than in the broader marketplace, and might actually be worse. Besides, as Allen reminds us, relying more on local farm products, as community self-sufficiency requires, may be irreconcilable with the goal of providing food at affordable prices to the poor [5].

As noted in the introduction to this paper, food sovereignty is replete with contradictions. Commentators such as Patel who recognize these contradictions nevertheless consider them worth exploring. The same cannot be said of the more ardent supporters of food sovereignty poor [1,2, 17] who exhibit little inclination to admit the concept's flaws and rarely if ever ponder its internal inconsistencies.

These activists, it must be conceded, do modest harm in places that lack a comparative advantage in agriculture and also are affluent enough for food expenditures to be small relative to consumers' incomes and budgets. In such settings, which have served as an incubator for the food sovereignty movement and others like it, opposition does not have to be overcome from an agribusiness sector that is an important source of exports and foreign exchange. To the contrary, activists often are able to forge alliances with farmers who find foreign competition difficult to withstand. Moreover, the higher prices for food that are a direct result of greater agricultural self-sufficiency do not arouse much opposition since most consumers barely notice the change.

Switzerland is a good example of the fertile ground that exists for the food sovereignty movement, local-foods militancy, and the like due to a combination of internationally uncompetitive agriculture and affluence among a population with little economic stake in farming [18]. Such a country is in a position to implement the activists' program if the bounded tariffs on farm products it has agreed to in World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations exceed its actual tariffs. Of course, if a larger nation or the European Union as a whole has the same

opportunity and follows the same course, global agricultural trade ends up being distorted.

But the worst consequences occur if the activists' prescriptions are adopted in poorer parts of the world – where their knowledge of food and agricultural policy, not to mention awareness of the outcomes of previous attempts at self-sufficiency, is limited at best. In places like Sub-Saharan Africa, the cost of pursuing food sovereignty is measured in terms of the number of people needlessly going hungry.

#### 4. Conclusions

Since it was coined nearly 40 years ago, the term 'food security' has not had a fixed definition. In keeping with prevailing currents of thought during the 1970s, the original formulation reflected aspirations for a New International Economic Order as well as confidence in the abilities of governments to intervene in the food economy to the benefit of their citizens. In early discussions of food security, substantial attention was given to the basic human right to adequate nourishment. Also, belief in food self-sufficiency was widespread.

The definition of food security that has been in use for at least a decade now is quite different. This definition makes no mention of basic rights. In addition, the pitfalls of self-sufficiency are appreciated. Instead, economic access to food is the main concern. Moreover, free markets are widely regarded as widening this access. So is investment in agricultural research and development, including genetic modification of crops and livestock.

Along with U.S. adherents of CFS, the food sovereignty movement seeks to reintroduce the subject of social control over the food system in the debate over food security, for the sake of protecting rights they argue are abridged in the market economy. The movement's aim is not agricultural protectionism per se. However, the affinity of many food sovereignty advocates for self-sufficiency can have the practical effect of facilitating protectionism – even though the hobbling of agricultural markets contributes directly to food insecurity, as is easy to observe in many parts of Africa.

Food sovereignty is clearly not a viable alternative to food security, as we understand the term today.

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