Food Sovereignty and Women's rights.

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Women's rights have been severely curtailed by the industrialisation of agriculture. The Green Revolution of the 1960s exposed small and landless farmers across the South, especially in Asia, to a wide range of negative social and ecological conditions, and compounded the exploitation experienced by women under existing feudal and patriarchal systems. Subsequent trade liberalization policies imposed on developing countries have exacerbated the situation, putting small and landless farmers, especially women farmers, at risk in multiple ways. The current economic, ecological and food crises are now pushing women and their families to the limit, with the starkest impacts being felt by the poorest, hungriest households.

The Green Revolution effectively forced farmers in developing countries to accept a technological food production revolution, mechanising many systems of cultivation and food processing. This had significant negative impacts on people and communities dependent on traditional agricultural practices for both food and income, with women bearing the brunt of these impacts. This was felt particularly keenly in post-harvest processing jobs, with machines operated by men undertaking jobs — such as the de-husking, threshing and milling of rice – that were previously performed mainly by women.[1] This loss of access to food and financial resources, required to buy food and meet other household needs, contributed to declining food sovereignty at the household and community level. Food sovereignty is the preferred term here, over food security, as food sovereignty implies local control and sustainable production, independent of imports and agroindustry.

Subsequent neoliberal agricultural trade policies — which are ostensibly about liberalising trade in food and agricultural products — have, in reality, focused on supporting industrialised agricultural production by transnational corporations from the North, including by opening up many protected domestic markets in developing countries. In the food and agriculture sectors, this has had huge impacts, including on access to land resources, local food production, and the production of healthy food.[2] Liberalisation also includes the dismantling of state institutions and interventions in the food sector, including subsidies and price-setting,[3] all of which would previously have been in place to protect and promote food production security.

This opening up of developing countries' domestic markets, and a growing emphasis on producing food for export rather than domestic consumption, has also been forced on developing countries, through multilateral and bilateral trade liberalisation negotiations, and structural adjustment programmes. It has depressed the prices that many local farmers can earn from their labour, because of competition from cheap, subsidised imports from the North. It has also decreased land availability and food security, as land is given over to export-oriented agriculture.

For example, the North American Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, the US and Canada, which came into force in 1994, 'locked in' various liberalising reforms affecting peasant agriculture in Mexico. The Mexican government, anxious to increase exports to the US and Canada, agreed to the complete liberalisation of agriculture within 14 years. The overall result is that Mexico's imports of basic foodstuffs such as corn (including genetically modified corn)

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[1] http://www.fao.org/docrep/x0171e/x0171e04.htm
[2] More general information is available here: http://www.criticalcollective.org/publications/food/
[3] http://www.accordsdepeche.com/fichiers/docs/bibli_07/160.pdf

escalated dramatically, whilst Mexico exports a much smaller quantity of non-staple foodstuffs such as beef, fresh and canned fruit and vegetables, shrimp, beer and tequila. In other words, Mexico surrendered its ability to provide basic food products to its people and is now dependent on food imports. In addition, many small farms, unable to complete with cheap imports from the US, collapsed.[4] According to a study commissioned by the Mexican government, the number of agricultural households diminished from 2.3 million in 1992 to 575,000 in 2002.[5]

> *"Mexico's inability to compete with the US in the agrifood sector has spurred the recurrent migration of farm workers and threatens to eliminate the future generation of farmers."*[6]

Liberalisation in the agricultural sector has also had severe impacts on indigenous peoples, especially women, in Guatemala, since it has undermined the traditional system of 'milpa' agriculture, which is primarily used to produce corn, beans and squashes. Mayan women also cultivate medicinal plants, vegetables, fruit, aromatic and food herbs on their patios, and have done so for hundreds of years: they know how to collect all the nourishment needed by their families. Despite all this precious knowledge, however, 49.3% of children below five years old suffer from chronic malnutrition; of those, 69.5% of indigenous children suffer from malnutrition.

Over the last two decades, government policies have focused on promoting the more profitable cultivation of vegetables, with new technologies that have caused soil and water depletion and pollution. As with Mexico, this situation was locked in following the signing of the US-Central America Free Trade Agreement, commonly referred to as 'CAFTA,' in 2003. This reinforced the role of Guatemala as a producer of vegetables for export, and many producers, again motivated by the high profitability of cultivating vegetables, stopped growing corn and beans, the local staple foods. Indigenous people, especially indigenous women, have been heavily affected by this change, and have had to look for alternatives to provide the nourishment needed by their families.[7]

In the same way, neoliberal policies implemented by the International Monetary Fund in cooperation with Central American governments have also affected people's access to water. The worst affected have been women, who are directly involved in the use and management of scarce water resources. In Guatemala, for example, the San Pedro Carchà is a region rich in water: it rains for nine or ten months every year. As a result there is a tropical forest that provides wood, and coffee and cardamom are cultivated. However, on the back of this wave of structural adjustments and privatisations, governments sold the rivers to private firms. Even though some of the local communities, after years of fighting for their territories, have won their lands back, they still have no water. As a consequence, Q'eqchies women have to walk for four hours a day to collect two and a half litres of water. Paradoxically, they walk along the river, but they cannot get water from it. The only way to reach water is literally to dig down into the ground, to a depth of seven metres, risking their lives and their daughters' lives. The

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[4] http://www.bilaterals.org/spip.php?article15259

[5] [11] José Romero and Alicia Puyana, Diez años con el TLCAN, las experiencias del sector agropecuario mexicano [Ten Years of NAFTA: Experiences of the Agricultural Sector in Mexico] (Mexico: El Colegio de México), p. 227.

[6] http://www.bilaterals.org/spip.php?article15259

[7] http://wideplusnetwork.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/ec-alt-eng2012thirdenglish.pdf

women have sent many petitions to the local authorities, but their protests and needs have so far been ignored.[8]

Overall, the ongoing process of trade liberalisation has prised open so many national trade barriers that it has created a global economic system in which large corporations can trade and invest in many different countries much more freely than they could before. Typically these companies will be continually on the lookout for new and profitable markets, and cheaper ways of producing their food products.

This process now characterises milk production, for example, with a global battle underway between small producers of 'people's milk' and giant dairy and food transnationals like Nestlé and Danone. Small producers face the twin challenge of trying to compete with cheap imports of powdered milk in newly liberalised economies; and threats to ban their own unpasteurised product for being 'unsafe'.

According to Grain (2011):

> *"Corporate control over the world's milk supply has been accelerating in recent years alongside the globalisation of the industry. The twenty largest dairy companies now control over half the global ("organised") dairy market and process about a quarter of global milk production. Just one company, Nestlé, controls an estimated 5% of that global market, with sales of US$25.9 billion in 2009".*

Again, this changing dynamic has huge implications for women. With urban markets taking up more and more of the milk being produced by rural communities, there is a huge pressure to sell all available milk. Rural women are generally the main caretakers of all livestock, including milk-giving animals. They have to cut and carry huge amounts of fodder from farmlands, prepare the fodder for the animals and finally milk the animals. At least prior to liberalization, much of this milk was kept at home yielding many sources of nourishment from milk, to buttermilk, butter and butter oil. But with milk, yogurt and other milk byproducts having become a lucrative source for affluent urban markets, milk for rural consumption has become a scarce commodity.

Competition for land, already an issue under the Green Revolution and trade liberalization policies, has increased further with the advance of 'green economics'. This has included the proposed transition to using biofuels — more accurately known as agrofuels because of the industrial scale of production — to provide liquid fuel for transportation.

Demand for these fuels has increased competition for land and 'landgrabbing', including with respect to supposedly 'marginal' lands that biofuel producers argue are not used for producing food.[9] However, this is not the case. As FAO has acknowledged,[10] women in rural areas are likely to be hit hardest by the industrial scale production of biofuels, since marginal lands provide key subsistence functions to the rural poor. They are particularly important for women, who may not have access to more fertile agricultural lands. Furthermore, in countries

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[8] Sources: The geopolitics of food and water in Guatemala: scarcity in a country with abundance… Norma Maldonado y Anaite Roulet Economic Alternatives for Gender and Social Justice, Voices and Vision from Latin America, WIDE 2011, http://wideplusnetwork.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/ec-alt-eng2012thirdenglish.pdf

[9] For some specific examples of landgrabbing to grow biofuels in West Africa, see: http://www.cbd.int/doc/biofuel/Econexus%20Briefing%20AgrofuelsMarginalMyth.pdf

[10] "Gender and Equity Issues in Liquid Biofuels Production – Minimising the Risks to Maximise the Opportunities." Andrea Rossi and Yianna Lambrou, FAO, April 2008, quoted in http://www.cbd.int/doc/biofuel/Econexus%20Briefing%20AgrofuelsMarginalMyth.pdf

where agriculture is a key income-generating activity for women, such as Benin, the implications of the spread of biofuels feedstock monocultures such as oil palm and sugar cane[11] are bleak, with communities being forced from their territories. In general, women are the hardest hit by the new agrofuels phenomenon, as it hinders their ability to pursue traditional livelihoods.

> *"Waged agricultural workers do not own or rent the land on which they work, nor the tools and equipment they use. In these respects, they are a group distinct from farmers. Yet these workers remain invisible in terms of the goals, policies, programmes and activities to eliminate poverty and to strengthen the role of major civil society groups in promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development (SARD), world food security (WFS), and sustainable development (SD)."*[12]

CASE STUDY – Flower industry in Uganda

"In the cut flower industry, for example, data provided by the Ugandan National Union of Plantation and Agricultural Workers affirms that the majority of casual workers are women. Over 70% of this workforce is casually employed without job security and other benefits such as annual leave. The women workers are mostly employed in harvesting and in the grading sections. A full-time worker is paid a total package of 70,000 Uganda shillings ($35 US) per month while a casual worker earns 1,500 Uganda shillings per day (75 cents US). The trend towards casual and temporary labour is encouraged by, amongst other factors, unpredictable weather conditions, unstable market demand for produce, and labour laws which require that certain benefits, such as notice pay, leave allowances, and medical attention, be provided to seasonal and permanent employees."

Source: FAO et al (2007)

This situation has worsened even further in countries being hit hard by climate change, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines. In particular, the continuing onslaught of floods and heavy rains has led to massive internal displacement, as people are forced to seek alternative homes and livelihoods. This migration increases women's likelihood of experiencing hostility and sexual violence generally. Women seeking domestic employment in urban centres may also endure year round verbal and physical abuse, as well as sexual violence, in their bid to support their family at home, whose access to land and food may have been hit hard by climate change.

Women also experience differentiated impacts as a result of climate change even if they do not migrate. In Bangladesh, for example, in the Khulna-Satkhira region, it was found that following natural disasters such as Cyclone Sidr, people struggled to find food, clean water and housing, and their were consequent outbreaks of illnesses and diseases such as diarrhea, cholera and malaria. Since women are frequently responsible for the provision of food and water, they are the hardest hit. It was also found that many lost their shrimp-farming livelihoods because of flooding;[13] and that others find themselves in competition with migrant male shrimp-workers looking for work because their own lands are degraded.

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11 http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4575-land-grabbing-and-food-sovereignty-in-west-and-central-africa
http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/Global/usa/planet3/PDFs/Forests/PalmOilsNewFrontier.pdf

12 http://www.fao-ilo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fao_ilo/pdf/engl_agricultureC4163.pdf

13 http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/climate_change_drivers_insecurity_and_global_south

In Nepal, women are also finding themselves left to shoulder the burden created by climate change. 80% of the population are dependent upon farming, but an already existing trend of male migration to neighbouring India in search of work is being aggravated by drought and failing crops in Nepal's Western Hills. The women must remain at home and manage the farms as best they can, praying that the monsoon will bring plentiful rain.[14]

Industrialised agriculture has also had major environmental impacts which have, again, impacted women in particular. Women responsible for securing food and medicines from local sources under traditional systems, find that land and biodiversity is being lost to agriculture (in an industrialised process in which men are more likely to be employed). The intensive use of pesticides; the large-scale degradation of agricultural land; deforestation to clear land for crops; the production of monocultues of agrofuels crops including oil palm, sugar cane and jatropha; and use of genetically modified seeds, are all factors putting an immense and ever-increasing burden on ecological systems.

GM cotton provides a specific example of devastating potential hazards. In addition to questions surrounding the potential health impacts of GM products (which could impact on people using GM cotton products,[15] and on animals grazing on cotton[16] [17]), rural communities have been impacted directly by being encouraged to cultivate hugely expensive GM cotton varieties by Monsanto and Bayer CropScience. This has contributed to the tragic phenomenon of farmer suicides, with many farmers taking their own lives when the crops fail to deliver as promised,[18] because they have no prospect of repaying the debts they incurred to buy seeds and associated chemical inputs in the first place. The wives of these farmers and their children are left to fend for themselves.[19] [20] [21]

The cultivation of monoculture cash crops and tree plantations that are water intensive, like sugar cane, bananas and eucalyptus, is also highly problematic for women. With water an increasingly scarce resource, decreased water availability and increased pollution from agricultural run-off again increases the distances that women have to walk, often carrying heavy loads, to fetch water for household consumption and bathing,[22] and to wash clothes in rivers and streams.

There is also a concern that the current proliferation of bio-gas powered tube wells for the irrigation of industrial-scale agricultural production, which is being driven by the increasing cost of diesel and electricity, will make the animal dung currently used for free by rural women, for fuel and fertilizer, harder to come by and more costly. Again this commodification of a natural resource will impact rural communities negatively, especially women.

Another relatively new dynamic that is having an extremely severe impact on food prices, and thus on women's ability to feed their families, is increased volatility in food prices. The price of traded food becomes ever more important to women as they lose access to lands and territories previously used for gathering or cultivating food for free, or because they have

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[14] http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/06/nepals-female-farmers-fear-climate-change/
[15] http://www.greens.org/s-r/26/26-15.html
[16] http://indiagminfo.org/?page_id=238
[17] http://www.gmwatch.org/latest-listing/49-2010/11872-bt-cotton-and-livestock-health-impacts-dr-sagari-r-ramdas
[18] http://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/agriculture/article3248530.ece
[19] http://www.i-sis.org.uk/IndianCottonFarmersBetrayed.php
[20] http://www.i-sis.org.uk/farmersSuicidesBtCottonIndia.php
[21] http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/15/india-gm-cotton-bayer
[22] http://www.fao.org/sd/fsdirect/fbdirect/FSP003.htm

been forced to take up work, probably as agricultural labourers, to generate a financial income and have little or no time to farm.

These high and volatile food prices are a result of many factors, including the deregulation of agricultural markets; the dominant role of a few large traders on world markets; increasing demand for land and water for animal feed and agro-fuels; more frequent crop failures as a result of weather extremes triggered by climate change; and a stronger link between prices for agriculture and energy commodities through the increasing use of energy intensive inputs and the use of agro-energy as a substitute for fossil fuels.

Another key factor is the increasing involvement of speculators and other financial investors in the agriculture/food sectors. Investors and banks are increasingly turning to these markets as a means of generating profits, a shift which was facilitated by deregulation in the US in 1999 (which removed caps on how much investors could engage in the food commodities markets). In 2012, for example, it was found that Barclays Bank had made some £500 million in 2010/11 from betting on the price of basic foodstuffs such as wheat and soya.[23] These investors are betting on prices of food, by trading in derivatives called 'futures', and they stand to make a handsome profit during devastating food crises, when food prices peak.

There are also indications that these companies' activities are driving the price of those foodstuffs up. Although the world of financial speculation is extremely murky, and it is hard to tell precisely what *is* being privately traded, it seems that investors betting that food prices will increase encourages food traders to hold back supplies of storable commodities with a view to selling them later when the price is higher. This restricts supply and pushes food prices up.[24] It seems that this is what happened during the Mexican Tortilla Crisis in 2007, when corn prices were high. Agribusinesses such as Cargill are alleged to have hoarded corn in 2006 and early 2007, claiming stocks were limited; they then sold the stores later at vastly increased prices. As a result, the price of tortillas, a basic foodstuff in Mexico, increased by more than 40%.[25]

Recommendations

The only viable response to the economic and food crisis — which has been triggered by twenty years of neoliberalism — is the full implementation of the food sovereignty paradigm.

The concept of food sovereignty can be understood as being about local access and control of food sources and associated productive resources. The term food sovereignty was coined in 1996, initially as a position by the international peasant farmers' movement, La Via Campesina, in response to and as a form of resistance to trade liberalization in the agricultural sector, which was being pushed hard by industrialised countries in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Food sovereignty takes a rights based approach, encompassing the right of self-determination, and the right to food and decent work. It drives an anti-colonialist agenda in food production and consumption, upholding the right of small producers to have access and control over their productive resources including land, forests, water sources, and seeds. It emphatically

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[23] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/barclays-makes-500m-betting-on-food-crisis-8100011.html Find World Development Movement report and reference.
[24] New Internationalist report on speculation http://www.newint.org/features/2011/11/01/food-speculation-commodities-trading/ and wdm webpages
[25] http://www.bilaterals.org/spip.php?article15259

acknowledges the central role of women as producers across various sectors including agriculture and fisheries. These conditions are critical to ensuring access to affordable, safe and nutritious food for all, including urban marginalized communities.[26]

In particular, food sovereignty emphasises domestic production based on traditional agro-ecological methods of food production, ensuring household and community food security first, and *then* distribution to wider domestic markets. It also emphasizes cooperation — rather than competition — in food and agriculture trade, rejecting and resisting trade liberalization as a means of controlling the production and livelihoods of small farmers producing for local markets. It also advocates a spirit of cooperation with respect to food aid, especially in the face of natural and climate disasters, and rejects the use of food aid as a means of controlling food and agriculture commodities markets.

Women's rights, as set out in the legally-binding Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[27] and other intergovernmental human rights treaties, must be implemented.

Overall, governments need to:

Reject industrial-scale agricultural production as advocated by agro-chemical/biotechnology firms, including imports, exports and organic production, that conflict with the pursuit of food sovereignty.

Reverse the concentration and misappropriation of land, redistributing lands held by feudal landlords, transnational corporations and financial investors to small and landless farmers, with women as key beneficiaries.

Ensure that, as small producers, women have equal rights to access and control productive resources such as land, seed, water, and forests.

Ensure that women have access to locally-produced, nutritious food free from chemical hazards. This should include special food rights for pregnant and lactating mothers.

Facilitate food production by small farmers, including women, that is based on sustainable agriculture and agro-ecological production processes, with a view to ensuring nutritious food is available to communities.

Provide financial support, including subsidies and interest-free loans, to encourage local, sustainable, organic agriculture that promotes food sovereignty;

Recognize food and agricultural production as part of the formal sector, allowing workers in this sector to enjoy the rights recognized under formal International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions, and giving women full recognition as part of the food production work force in all sectors, including agriculture, fisheries, livestock production, forestry and dairy.

Ensure women's right to bargain collectively, which will enable them to secure policies relating to equal opportunities, equal pay for work of equal value, maternity leave and benefits, child care, and reproductive health services.

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[26] For a fuller definition of food sovereignty see: http://www.foodsovereignty.org/FOOTER/Highlights.aspx
[27] http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm

Reinvigorate and facilitate the continued maintenance of traditional seed banks by women, and support the reclamation of genetic resources from multilateral institutions.

Involve women in decision-making processes relating to food production, distribution and consumption, at the community, provincial and national level.

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