



## Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

# Food and Seed Sovereignty as conditions for degrowing our food system

by Lanka Horstink, Member of the Portuguese environmental NGO GAIA, Coordinator of the Seed Freedom Campaign in Portugal, PhD student in Sociology at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon

This proposal holds that the current global, highly concentrated, highly industrialised, highly polluting and undeniably unfair food system cannot be truly transformed without a shift in the power balance from transnational corporations and their protectors - governments of highly developed countries and supra-national institutions such as the World Bank -, to local, self-identified, groups of people. As long as food policies are decided in corporate boardrooms, at trade ministries and trade summits, out of reach of public scrutiny, and as long as common resources can be sold to the highest bidder, it is not possible to unleash the potential of agriculture to heal our wounded ecosystems and eliminate hunger and extreme poverty.

The stakes are extremely high: food is already a bigger market than energy, and it is part of a growing sector now called “the life industry”, including everything from seeds to the food on our plate, not forgetting chemicals, pharmaceuticals and bio-energy. These are extremely concentrated markets - oligopolies bordering on monopolies -, they are global and they have the support of powerful governments and their supra-national agencies. The transnational corporations that dominate these markets have protected themselves with strong international agreements and treaties that allow them to own the rights to land, water and seeds. Thanks to these treaties, the countries that currently dominate agricultural production, are those that dominate the trade in agricultural products, not those that are most endowed in natural resources.

Despite the high degree of industrialisation and globalisation in our food production system, three quarters of our food still comes from local farming. But these local food webs and the capacity of people to feed themselves are under great threat because of the continued erosion and privatisation of our common agricultural resources, such as land, water and seeds. Struggling countries in the Global South are selling off their land to wealthier governments and corporations, expelling small farmers from lands they do not officially own, but have worked on for centuries. Indigenous seeds and plants are being claimed as the property of a select club of giant agrochemical companies. Trade-oriented international treaties and agreements are forbidding farmers to collect seeds from their harvests, a thousand-year old practice, forcing them to buy industrial seeds and the chemicals that guarantee their productivity, year after year. These same treaties are

effectively commodifying nature's treasures, in a "green developmentalist" bid to convince the public that all that is sustainable must be trade-able. Countries in the Global South are near helpless to defend their local food production, since any aid from the supranational institutions includes the obligation to import products from the North and allow Northern corporations to operate freely in their countries.

It is not just people in the Global South that suffer the consequences of a global trade-oriented food production system. There are today as many obese people as there are people going hungry. Food related diseases are on the rise. There are regular scandals related to food production and distribution: mad cow disease, salmonella and E.coli outbreaks, the melamine debacle in China and suspicions of a link between H1N1 and intensive animal production systems. Agricultural production contributes to at least a third of greenhouse gases. The list is long. But agriculture is as much a solution for the ecological and social problems identified, as it is one of the main causes. Small-scale, agro-ecological agriculture can heal biotopes, feed local populations and pull rural people out of extreme poverty. It can even combat climate change.

But to develop a truly healthy and fair food production system we need a solution that is democratic in form and ecological in spirit: we need to elevate Food Sovereignty (and with it Seed Sovereignty) to a human right and give control over local, regional and even national food systems back to the people that live there. Food sovereignty holds that all peoples should have free access to common agricultural resources and the right to determine their own food policies. Besides a claim to a right, it is also a philosophy that advocates a deep respect for Nature's abundance, fragility and limits, and promotes solidarity between people. If embraced, Food Sovereignty would turn our food system upside down and give us a shot at a truly healthy and fair food system.

The concept of Food Sovereignty was born in the 1990's as a reaction to "green developmentalism", which advocates neo-liberal policies to achieve economic as well as social and ecological welfare objectives, but has systematically failed to halt rampant ecosystem degradation, hunger and rural poverty. Food sovereignty offers an alternative to mainstream environmental governance, based on four pillars: the right to food, the access to productive resources, the promotion of agro-ecological conversion of production and equitable trade with strong local markets. The idea of Seed Sovereignty is more recent and a result of the on-going privatisation of plants and seeds, protected by powerful treaties such as TRIPS and UPOV, slowly eroding farmers' rights. This privatisation has already come to Europe, where an upcoming Seed Law is expected to make any form of seed-saving and exchange outside of the official catalogues, illegal.

Food Sovereignty advocates believe that by empowering people to produce and decide their own food, by keeping the natural resources needed for food production free (i.e. freely accessible and non-patentable) and by uncoupling agriculture from trade, we can tackle some of the main challenges humanity is facing: hunger, poverty (rural poverty has the lion share of poverty), the degradation of our ecosystems and climate change.

The question is less whether Food Sovereignty or any other ecological-democratic concept is a solution to the gaping democratic and ecological gap in global environmental governance, or even whether organic or agro-ecological farming can indeed feed the world. There are enough broadly participated studies to suggest this is at least a very real possibility (Examples are the IAASTD and the UNCTAD reports). The real question is whether the changes can be brought about within the current political-economic system. The sad results of the latest Earth, Biodiversity and Climate Summits, suggest not. The

political will to make our food production healthy and fair is held hostage by the political need to maintain economic growth at (almost) any cost. Even less support can be expected to make our food production not only sustainable, but to make it/ keep it free. Autonomy of citizens is not on any global agenda anywhere, since it is a threat to the monopolies and oligopolies that are currently running our food system.

**Given how crucial agriculture is to human survival, given how instrumental it can be in healing our planet and given at the same time how crucial it is to the still so much desired economic growth of developed and fast-developing countries, it seems this is the battleground par excellence where democracy and ecology meet business-as-usual. Is there any way out of this conundrum? Will people ever be entirely free to choose what they eat and grow? Will we walk the path of “simple abundance” for all or continue the path of short-term excessive returns for some?**