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SEEDS OF SOVEREIGNTY

CONTESTING THE POLITICS OF FOOD

dossier 2024

Seeds of Sovereignty: Contesting the Politics of Food

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SEEDS OF SOVEREIGNTY: CONTESTING THE POLITICS OF FOOD

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TOWARDS A NEW INTERNATIONALIST STRATEGY FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

by Jan Urhahn and Benjamin Fogel

We all need to eat to live, but, curiously, the question about how to ensure that a steady supply of quality affordable food arrives at our tables is often removed from strategic debates. Food seems secondary to the major political questions of our time, or its discussion is confined to particular audiences. Today, ecological collapse, nuclear war, and world-economic disintegration appear as threats on the horizon, even as their concrete effects are being felt across the world. This dossier, the product of collaboration between the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and Alameda, makes the case that food production and distribution are indeed of strategic importance to addressing the polycrisis that shapes the world we live in.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, problems with global food and agricultural systems became increasingly evident, as global supply chains were disrupted and the impacts were felt on existing agricultural systems of production.

In 2022, the crisis was again accelerated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which disrupted food production and supply chains for agricultural inputs, such as chemical fertilisers. More recently, events in Gaza, Sudan, and elsewhere have further highlighted the connection between war and food crisis, as we see famine wielded as a weapon of war, unleashing untold horrors against entire populations.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, inflation and the cost of living have brought the question of food crisis back to the political agenda. Child malnutrition has risen, as millions more people, even in the richest countries, have had to choose between paying bills and buying food. But it is the earth’s poorest and most marginalised populations who have been worst affected. And it is them who overwhelmingly experience the most devastating effects of climate change.

To address this as a strategic problem, the dossier centres on interlinked questions of how to organise, how to support organising, and how to build alternatives that practically transform food systems. At the core of the dossier lays the argument that this can only be done by shifting our thinking about food crisis from the concept of food security, based on the question of availability of food, which in effect normalises crisis, to the concept of food sovereignty.

According to the international movement Via Campesina, food sovereignty can be defined "as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems."

"It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations". In essence, food sovereignty moves the debate on food from questions of access to questions of power and production that go beyond food per se.

This dossier brings together leading experts and thinkers on the food crisis such as Jennifer Clapp and Raj Patel, in dialogue with practitioners and activists like Million Belay of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), which is directly involved in the struggle to create just and sustainable systems of food production and distribution.

The dossier presents the food crisis as global in scope. As argued by Sabrina Fernandes, this requires a renewal of internationalism, connecting local efforts to organise for food sovereignty (by, for example, farm worker unions in South Africa) to questions of global strategy.

The contributions of Schluwa Sama and Ansar Jasim on the role of empire in Iraq and of Ranja Sengupta on international trade address the latter directly.

This dossier thus takes a broad approach that addresses the interconnectedness of current crises. We hope it can contribute to a sustained strategic dialogue around food that supports organising for alternate futures.

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THE GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS IN THE AGE OF CATASTROPHE

By Jennifer Clapp

We are now in the midst of a major worldwide food crisis characterised by rising hunger in a context of increasing ecological fragility. This crisis in food must be considered as one part of a wider polycrisis, in which the climate emergency interlaces with an economic and debt crisis, a health crisis, and a geopolitical crisis. That these different crises cannot be easily separated speaks to the interlinked and overlapping nature of contemporary economic, ecological, health and geopolitical systems.

The global interplay of these systems creates complex dynamics with sometimes unpredictable outcomes. This is not the first time we have witnessed a worldwide food crisis that has been entangled within a wider polycrisis; the repeated nature of the polycrisis points to deeper structural features of the global food system that make it especially vulnerable to disasters. In order to combat the food crisis, we must transform our food systems to make them more just and sustainable, and to do this we must understand the dynamics that cause hunger.

The Crisis within The Broader Polycrisis

By 2022, the number of people facing chronic hunger had increased by 122 million from 2019's figure, bringing the global total to nearly 800 million. That is 9% of the world's population. A series of events — the global pandemic, an acceleration of the climate emergency, geopolitical conflicts and economic uncertainty — have driven this food crisis since 2019. These overlapping jolts led to breakdowns in the global food system, undermining food security.

This current world food crisis, however, is not simply the result of multiple triggers acting on an isolated system. Instead, it is part of a constellation of crises that together constitute a global polycrisis. As historian Adam Tooze has written for the Financial Times, although the shocks that contribute to a polycrisis may be disparate, "(...) they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts."

These kinds of interactive effects took hold with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The spread of illness combined with the policy responses and slowed economic activity. These dynamics disrupted global food supply chains, resulting in the colossal wastage of food in some places and acute shortages in others. These uneven outcomes were exacerbated by the globalised nature of food supply chains, where approximately 20% of dietary energy supply worldwide comes from imported foods.

The pandemic, and the policies which different countries chose to implement in response to it, hastened the onset of an economic crisis that had dramatic effects on food systems from Ethiopia to Japan.

A worldwide recession took hold from the first half of 2020, with the unemployment rate rising, and the poorest and most vulnerable suddenly unable to buy and access sufficient food. Even as economic activity began to recover by late 2020 through early 2021, ongoing disruptions to global supply chains resulted in massive inflationary pressure that saw food prices rise sharply; in most countries at rates that were higher than the overall rate of inflation. By mid-2022, food price inflation spiked well above 20% in parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe, which contributed to a 'cost of living' crisis and other political aftershocks.

Compounding this pandemic exacerbated economic fragility is a growing global debt crisis that is hitting the Global South countries hard. Ongoing food inflation, coupled with rising interest rates, has forced many countries to choose between repaying debts and ensuring that people are fed. This is a stark example of the way in which unsustainable debt reinforces unsustainable food systems; characterised by dependency on imported food, volatile markets, and extractive financial flows.

Geopolitical crises have further threatened the food system in recent years, most notably the Russian invasion of Ukraine that has been ongoing since early 2022. Both Russia and Ukraine are major exporters of wheat, maize, and oilseeds, meaning that the onset of the war sparked a major panic in global food export markets, which pushed prices even higher than their already-record levels. Countries in Africa and in the Middle East, which are heavily reliant on grain from Russia and Ukraine, suddenly had to seek out other import sources.

To compound this, fears over localised grain shortages sparked speculative financial investment in the grain futures markets, with prices reaching heights that went far beyond what supply and demand conditions warranted. Although food prices started to fall as 2022 progressed, the Russian-Ukraine war contributed to ongoing volatility and elevated prices in global grain markets. In 2023, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimated that some 20 to 30 million additional people globally faced hunger as a consequence of the war in Ukraine.

Finally, there is perhaps the most existential threat to food production — the climate and biodiversity crisis. Already the effects of climate change are wreaking havoc on food production, in both direct and less obvious ways. Take India; in 2022 the country experienced an unprecedented heat wave that meant its wheat yields fell by up to 25%. These shortages prompted the government to place an export ban on wheat, which demonstrates the ripple effect that country-specific shortages can quickly have on the global system. A year later, after heavy monsoon rains ravaged its rice crop, India again banned exports, this time on non-basmati rice. India is just one example.

Extreme weather is affecting food production in grain producing regions including North America, Australia, and Southeast Asia. These climate-related ructions on global food markets are only likely to get worse too.

The acceleration of climate change makes it nearly inevitable that simultaneous production shocks will occur in multiple regions of the world, including those that produce globally traded staple crops.

Structural Vulnerabilities in the Global Industrial Food System

The current polycrisis echoes previous world food crises, in particular the mid-1970s and between 2008 and 2012. Like this current crisis, these previous crises were triggered by a number of factors that interlocked in complex ways, and the effects on the global system were similar. The 1970s food crisis, for example, was inseparable from simultaneous geopolitical, energy and economic crises, and occurred in a context of multiregional droughts. Similarly, the 2008 to 2012 food crisis was entangled with a major financial crisis and played out against a backdrop of accelerating climate stresses and the rise of China as a major global food importer. In both cases, the crises played out similarly to what we are witnessing today; from highly volatile staple grain markets to rampant financial speculation on commodity markets, to production shortfalls, and of course the inevitable result — rising hunger.

The fact that food crises have kept repeating over the past fifty years highlights the vulnerability of the global industrial food system, its susceptibility to breakdowns caused by disruptions in other systems. Three features of this systemic vulnerability stand out: industrial food production based on a narrow selection of staple crops; an imbalance between a small number of agro-exporting states and many import-dependent states; and highly financialised and concentrated global agrifood markets.

The origins of all of these features date back centuries to the rise of industrial capitalism, early agricultural production and accelerated technological change. The longstanding policies of the world's most powerful states have only encouraged these trends.

Industrial Food Production

Most food today is produced with industrial farming methods that rely on mechanisation, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and a limited variety of often genetically altered seeds. This system has encouraged producers to focus on a very narrow base of staple crops that are able to be cultivated in large-scale uniform fields. At a global scale, this kind of farming drives vulnerability in the food system in multifaceted ways.

The rise of industrial farming from the 19th century onwards, coupled with the urbanisation of Europe, encouraged the large-scale monocultural production of staple crops. This was for several reasons, including the need for reliable, cheap, and transportable sustenance for industrial workers. From the outset, this system relied on just a few staple crops that still today provide the bulk of the global cereal trade. Indeed, over time this focus has become so extreme that today just three cereal grains – wheat, maize, and rice – make up nearly half of human diets and account for 86% of all cereal exports. With the addition of soy, together these crops account for around two thirds of human caloric intake. The extreme dependency on this narrow base of crops means that if the production or trade of any of the four is diminished or disrupted for any reason – be it climate change or geopolitical tensions – global food security is threatened.

Concentrated industrial production systems also rely on petroleum products to fuel farm machinery and in production of synthetic nitrogen-based fertilisers and chemical pesticides. Fossil fuels are also used in the long-distance transport of grains produced for global markets.

The industrial farming system's heavy dependency on fossil fuels not only renders it sensitive to oil price changes, but also contributes to climate change. Activities within food systems, from land use changes to food production, to transportation, account for around a third of global greenhouse gas emissions.

The Imbalance between Exporters and Importers

A very small number of countries produce and export staple crops to a much larger number of countries, which are reliant on these imported crops. This produces an imbalance, in which the food security of much of the world depends on just a handful of countries. As such, disruptions that undermine production in just one exporting country can threaten food availability in many countries.

The highly imbalanced nature of the food system can be traced back to the rise of industrial crop production methods from the 19th century. The countries in the regions where these methods were first established – North America, Australia, South America, and parts of Europe – dominated export markets for staple crops. This is also partly to do with the landscape of a country – notably, monocultural export production was, and still is, only possible in countries with large tracts of arable land. In the 1990s, the liberalisation of agricultural trade cemented these patterns but also opened the door for some new entrants to join the agro-exporting powerhouse club, as we have seen with the rise of soy production in Brazil and Argentina in recent decades. Today, five countries account for at least 72% of the production of wheat, maize, rice, and soy crops.

Seven countries, plus the European Union (EU), account for around 90% of the world's wheat exports, while four countries account for over 80% of the world's maize exports. Grain exports are a key source of income for these countries, so they have a vested interest in maintaining this system. As such, export countries tend to influence and shape the global trade rules in ways that reinforce their export power.

The pattern of food import-dependence has intensified over the past half century. Although many countries do produce staple grains for their own consumption, the majority do not produce enough to meet domestic demand, and therefore rely on global markets to make up the shortfall. This insufficient supply is not through lack of trying on the part of these countries. One key reason that production has declined in these regions is their inability to compete with the highly industrialised farming methods of agro-exporting countries. These methods are also often subsidised in the exporter countries, which further undermine the livelihoods of small-scale food producing countries in the Global South.

At the same time, neoliberal programs of structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) in the 1980s and 1990s encouraged countries in the Global South to divest from food production and instead to focus on producing export crops such as coffee, tea and cocoa and purchasing staples on the global marketplace. Policies like these have meant that many sub-Saharan African countries, for example, developed food import dependencies they did not have 50 years ago.

Financialised and Concentrated Markets

A handful of powerful transnational firms currently dominate the highly financialised grain markets. The outsized role that a small number of powerful corporate and financial actors have in these markets means that disruptions can lead to enormous price swings. These dramatic swings have effects on both people's ability to access and buy food and producers' ability to access agricultural inputs such as seeds, pesticides, and fertilisers.

Financialised agrifood markets began to dominate the global agrifood system by the mid-1800s, in tandem with the rise of industrial production methods and increased global trade in staple crops. Today, financialised futures markets allow investors to reap huge profits on the trade in grain, but these markets are prone to extreme food price volatility. As there are relatively few large financial actors speculating on grain, these markets are prone to volatility, especially when those investors flood into commodity futures markets exactly at the point that the food system is most at risk. Recent decades have seen a weakening of rules with respect to financial investment in these markets. The result has been that a growing cast of investors, from asset management companies, to hedge funds, to pension funds, have rushed into agricultural commodity markets just as prices were rising, pushing grain prices up further.

Large transnational firms also rose to dominance in both the grain trade and agricultural inputs industries in the mid-to-late 1800s and these sectors of the food system have remained highly concentrated ever since.

The ABCD companies — Archer Daniels, Bunge, Cargills, and Louis Dreyfus — control anywhere from 50-70% of the global grain trade, plus considerable parts of the food processing chain. These firms have experienced record profits in recent years, as food prices have soared. This is just one demonstration of the way in which capital profits directly from the global food crisis.

False Solutions

The structural vulnerabilities of the global industrial food system serve specific interests: powerful states, private corporations, and financial investors, all of whom have benefited from it since the expansion of industrial capitalism in the 19th century. This system has endured, not because it is the best way to provide global food security, but because it serves the accumulation of wealth and power. It is increasingly evident that the more global agriculture is reconfigured to benefit this set of interests, the more exposed it becomes to crises and disruptions in other systems.

Because these features of the food system serve powerful interests, we should not be surprised that mainstream responses — especially those promoted by big business, agro-exporting governments, and certain global institutions — do not address the underlying structural problems. Instead, the ‘solutions’ that these actors put forward work to further entrench these features. This was evident in the roll out of the green revolution in the 1960s-70s, the gene revolution in the 1990s, and most recently, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in farming.

Each of these initiatives was packaged with the narrative that food production must increase within the current industrial framework if we wish to have a hope of addressing world hunger.

The 2021 UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) also exemplified this approach. Billed as a forum to catalyse ‘game changing solutions’ to end hunger, the summit was instead largely captured by powerful corporate interests. This influence was so extreme that it prompted a boycott by progressive civil society groups and social movements. An example of the way in which this corporate involvement skewed the UNFSS’s approach, was the very large emphasis that the summit placed on increasing food production via technological innovations, such as digital agriculture and genome editing. Although these technologies were presented as a new way to support sustainability, in reality they only further entrenched the dominant approach to agriculture.

As food prices spiked in the first quarter of 2022, powerful states, international institutions, and corporate actors rolled out a host of initiatives to address hunger and the food situation. For example, in May 2022 the G7 Development Ministers launched the Global Alliance for Food Security (GAFS) as a joint effort with the WB. In September of the same year, 100 governments adopted the Roadmap to Global Food Security — Call to Action, presented at a Leaders’ Summit on Global Food Security hosted by the UN. Both initiatives sought to coordinate financing for ‘crisis preparedness’ for developing countries and were firmly within the framework of industrial food production methods, open trade, and partnerships with industry. The Leader’s Summit declaration emphasised the need for, “science-based and climate resilient agricultural innovations.”

The International Finance Corporation of the WB, in parallel, established a Global Food Security Platform that is investing US$ 6 billion to improve access to fertilisers, while simultaneously supporting private firms to make longer-term investments.

For its part, the private sector launched the Global Business for Food Security coalition in mid-2022 with the support of France, the European Commission (EC), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP), the European Investment Bank, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This corporate coalition seeks to improve access to agricultural inputs and food commodities while supporting the development of "robust value chains in fragile countries, particularly in Africa." The coalition's members include some of the world's largest agrifood firms that dominate in concentrated markets for grains, including ADM, Cargill, Bunge, and Dreyfus, and inputs, including fertiliser giant Yara and seed firm Limagrain.

In calling for industrial inputs to be intensified – including "innovation" based transformation and increased chemical fertiliser access – these powerful interests only encourage the continuation of an agricultural system dependent on fossil fuels. More than this, they advocate an even deeper reliance on global supply chains.

This will only extend the power of the countries that already dominate the staples trade.

Enlisting other countries to supply specialty crops as a result further weakens the food security of said countries by keeping them dependent on food imports. Furthermore, the call by powerful states to collaborate with industry completely overlooks the problem of corporate concentration. Although these initiatives nodded towards the need to monitor financialised agrifood markets, these measures are not with a view to regulation, but rather to better share market information, which ultimately benefits the exporting states and corporate interests.

Alternative Food Systems

So long as powerful interests profit from the current global food system, they will have no incentive to enact meaningful transformations to it. This means that action must be taken by the people, for the people. At present, powerful players thrive on concentration and uniformity in food systems, both of which directly undermine resilience. Therefore, to enact radical change we need diversity in food production, distribution, and consumption.

In terms of production, it is vital to break from the industrial model of agriculture that has become so hegemonic over the past several centuries. Powerful states and large firms have promoted this system despite the fact that it has caused enormous damage to the very ecosystems and social systems necessary for food production to thrive. We urgently need to shift to ecologically sound and climate-resilient production systems that do not rely on energy intensive inputs like chemical fertilisers. Reducing reliance on these industrial inputs would help insulate farming systems from disruptions in global energy, fertiliser, and agrochemical markets.

Ecologically oriented production systems must also put people at the centre; providing livelihoods and nutritious food foremost. This must be combined with the democratisation of production systems, empowering people to determine how these systems are designed and function.

Agroecology is one such system. Centred on the principle of diversity, it involves methods such as the intercropping of diverse species, crop rotation, agroforestry, composting and crop-livestock integration, all of which enhance agrobiodiversity. Agroecological systems also promote diversity in a broader sense by embedding the political goals of equity and agency. This model is already gaining traction across a range of countries, and there is evidence of its potential to meet food needs less harmfully than industrial farming. Agroecological systems also encourage dietary diversity, promoting other crops including millet, sorghum, groundnuts or roots and tubers. This approach pushes back against the narrow base of staple crops that have come to dominate human diets.

When it comes to distribution, it is essential to enhance the capacity of individual countries to grow more of the food they consume. Reducing food import dependencies will help to ensure that when shocks happen, they do not generate a crisis. This does not mean complete autarky, but rather a much better balance of where food comes from, in terms of both local and global markets. If undertaken using sustainable and equitable farming methods, efforts towards greater self-reliance in staple crop production can also support local people better than multinational corporations and powerful states ever will.

One way of working towards the goal of a more people-centred food distribution is by supporting territorial markets. Such markets are typically more directly linked with local, national and/or regional food systems. What this tends to mean is that there are shorter supply chains, and that these supply chains are grounded in place. As such, territorial markets embody local conditions and knowledge and foster community and regional relationships. Territorial market arrangements also tend to be less hierarchical, with a high participation of small-scale food producers who are vital suppliers of food in developing countries, but whose livelihoods are under threat from the expansion of corporate-dominated global supply chains. These types of markets provide services that go well beyond food as just a market commodity. They embody principles of inclusivity and by their very nature, they promote diversity. The distribution of food within territories is also supportive of biodiversity and climate change goals for two reasons: It elevates locally specific crops, and it means less fossil fuel energy is needed for transport.

Finally, people-centred food systems must actively counter corporate and financialised agrifood markets. This is about more than creating alternative production and distribution spaces. It means also pursuing regulatory changes that prevent powerful actors from shaping markets to protect their own interests. Without this, any efforts to promote territorial markets could easily be swamped by corporate actors and financial investors, who of course hold enormous influence over agrifood governance and markets.

One cause for optimism is the growing movement that is pushing back against corporate power in the food system. However, more is needed. A huge step in the right direction would be much stricter conflict of interest rules for corporate actors, alongside stronger antitrust and competition policies to prevent corporate monopolies and oligopolies in food systems. Similarly, since the 2008 to 2012 food price crisis, there have been growing calls for tighter regulation on financial actors in the food system. Finally, stricter regulation of commodity futures markets would help reduce the speculative investments that drive food price volatility, and can lead to spikes in food prices. Taken together, each of these vital steps — more ecologically sound food production systems, reducing reliance on long-distance food trade, and curbing corporate power in the food system — will make food systems more resilient and less vulnerable to the broader polycrisis.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN THE 2020s

By Raj Patel

Let us begin by listing the crises. Today, there are currently 120 armed conflicts ongoing around the world. In many cases the devastation wrought by these conflicts is exacerbated by the increasingly existential threat of climate change. In Africa alone, at least 15,000 people died in 2023 as a direct result of extreme weather. Most individual states' capacity to manage both domestic and global crises has been hampered by several years of rising interest rates. Not only do states need to somehow find more money to service the debt they've already acquired, but the price of borrowing to pay to rebuild after man-made and natural destruction forces governments into an impossible choice: fund social programs today, or repay existing loans so that you can afford to invest tomorrow.

All of this reverberates through the global food system. Although lower than its peak, the Food and Agriculture Organization's Food Price Index, which tracks international price changes for a basket of different foods, was at 120 in autumn 2023. Before the current crisis in the food system, the real price of food had not been this high since the early 1970s. As a consequence of soaring food prices and stagnant income, 735 million people face hunger today, and over three billion are unable to afford a healthy diet.

This high rate of hunger seems set to continue across the decade. Food sovereignty – specifically securing the political right of peoples to determine their own food policy in order to end hunger – offers a way to respond to these catastrophes through egalitarian and democratic challenges to the existing order. The existing order is, however, fighting back. To understand how, it's worth identifying the underlying forces behind hunger in the 2020s, brought to you by the letter "C" – seven Cs to be precise: COVID-19, climate change, conflicts, colonialism, chemical agriculture, capitalism, and craven opportunism.

C1: COVID-19

Though the death rate from COVID-19 is declining, there were still 300,000 deaths in 2023, bringing the official virus' global death toll to around 6.9 million people. There is a direct relationship between COVID-19 and global rates of hunger. In 2019, before the outbreak of the pandemic, the percentage of the world's population experiencing hunger was 7.9. In 2022, the latest year for which data is available, that number had risen to 9.2%. Worse, the aftershocks of COVID-19 are still being felt, and longer-term consequences will spool out a generation from now. Take the impact of lost schooling for students during lockdown; globally, this may lead to a 25% reduction in future income. Add this lower income to rising healthcare costs, and more chronic hunger is a likely result.

C2: Climate Change

One recent major impact of climate change has been a series of droughts in grain belts across the United States and Latin America, which have sabotaged grain production. These current droughts are in line with predictions that suggest that 60% of the world's grain-producing areas will see severe water shortages by the end of this century. This is just one example of the way in which the climate crisis is making large stretches of the planet increasingly hostile to food production. This has the obvious outcome of harvest failure and therefore increased prices and hunger rates.

C3: Conflicts

Conflicts around the world lead to increased hunger both in the countries in which they play out, and in the wider global context. As is usually the case, the two most prominent conflicts at present — the Russia-Ukraine war and the Gaza war — are dominating the news cycle, while slower-burning civil wars, or clashes led by states against their own populations — like the "War on Drugs" — fade into the background. The full spectrum of conflict matters for hunger though. Direct combat inhibits food production first-hand, most immediately by its effect on the land. One of the arms industry's most obscene weapons, the anti-personnel landmine, has been strewn across the world's food fields, meaning that fields become unsafe to replant and tend. More broadly, every armed conflict disrupts food supply lines, hampering global food production and distribution. In terms of the hunger of populations during wartime, states at war tend to divert funds from social security to military security, meaning that social nets start to fray. Refugees will often be forced to find food far from home, and sometimes this can play out for decades. Hunger can also be used as a weapon of war, as seen in Syria and more recently in Palestine: According to Oxfam, Israeli forces have been implementing actions with the aim of starving the population in Gaza.

C4: Colonialism

Centuries of colonialism have shaped both the modern taste for crops such as wheat and maize, and the supply paths of all commodity crops. India and Argentina are the counter-seasonal fallbacks for wheat, which can be directly traced to British colonialism and the United States' Monroe Doctrine. Indeed, continent-spanning supply chains share the same origins as racial capitalism itself. As for the contemporary colonial project, land-grabbing and violence against indigenous peoples go hand-in-hand with the disappearance of native seeds and the loss of biodiversity.

C5: Chemical Agriculture

Chemical agriculture fortified this colonial supply of grain, and has become an integral part of the food system. Market consolidation in the fertiliser industry has led to few options for farmers, and fertiliser shortages can lead to the disruption of food production. In the United States, the potash fertiliser market is entirely controlled by Nutrien and the Mosaic Company; 75% of nitrogen fertiliser is controlled by CF Industries, Nutrien, Koch, and Yara-USA. As a consequence of sanctions against Russia, one of the world's largest fertiliser manufacturers, urea and potash prices are only just starting to return to normal, and phosphate prices are sky high.

C6: Capitalism

Capitalism continues to invent new modes of extraction through global markets, and to stymie possibilities of egalitarian transformations that might end hunger. On March 25, 2022, as Russian shells fell on the grain shipment facilities in Mariupol in Ukraine, the share prices of the food companies Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) and Bunge hit an all-time high. The way that capitalism plays out within the food industry is entwined with finance and national debt. Clearing debt often takes precedence over providing social programmes and services; before the pandemic, 34 African countries spent more on servicing debt than healthcare. Today, 18 countries in the Global South have defaulted on their debt, with 11 in debt distress and another 28 at high risk of it. As an example of how debt operates, in 2020 Zambia asked for debt relief, and in 2023 the country's debt was reduced by 18%. But with this immediate relief comes higher interest rates, which means Zambia is now repaying US$100 million more than before. Repaying these high interest rates diverts funds from social programs. On top of this, debt spurs countries to use agriculture as a tool for export (in order to earn US$ to repay loans) rather than to produce food for domestic consumption.

C7: Craven Opportunism

This leads us, finally, to craven opportunism. Disaster capitalism loves a war, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict provided an alibi for exploiters of land and labour to double down. Fertilisers have emerged as a major theme of this exploitation. For instance, the former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro authorised the mining of indigenous Amazonian lands for fertiliser in response to the international price rises. The United States Farm Service Agency considered loosening conservation restrictions on land, and the EU paused its call to reduce pesticide use by 50%, as the result of intense lobbying by the chemicals industry. Meanwhile, Agnes Kalibata suggested in TIME that one solution to African food shortages would be for farmers to use more fertiliser – the same fertiliser whose price hit record highs in 2022. Kalibata is president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), an organisation founded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and registered in the United States. AGRA was launched in 2006 with the aim of doubling the agricultural yields and incomes of 30 million small-scale food producer households by 2020, thus halving both hunger and poverty. By 2023, the number of hungry people in AGRA's focus countries, relative to population, had increased by almost 50%, according to the latest UN data.

What, then, might be done? There always have been, and remain, better options to confront hunger. For the sake of symmetry, I present the five Ds.

D1: Depots

Recently the head of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) made a startling request: that countries should "please" not hoard grain, with the rationale being that there is not enough to go around if grain producing countries prioritise their own citizens. Since the massive food price spike in 2008, even the World Bank's own consultants averred that perhaps governments in the Global South were reasonable in wanting to control access to their local grain reserves. Although those reserves might be inefficient, they represent an investment in domestic stability that has long been discounted by the bankers.

D2: Diversify

The homogenisation of crops is a consequence less of genetics than of finance. Commodity traders have shaped global markets to offer crops that are fungible, so that a tonne of wheat from Kazakhstan might substitute for a tonne from Kansas in the United States. Diversified crops will need their own circuits of risk and price management, but that assurance needn't be bought at the price exacted by the food industry's profiteers. Public insurance for diversified crops offers a way to de-risk the portfolio of new crops that we need in order to feed the world sustainably.

D3: Debt Reparation

Countries in the Global South rarely get to shape their economic policy because they are indebted to the Global North. This has only increased in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Occasionally bankers from rich countries perform a pantomime of debt forgiveness, or offer overseas development aid. In 2022 the figure for that aid was US$211 billion; for comparison, the debt held by the Global North over the Global South is US$8.966 trillion. With high interest rates, governments in the Global South indebted by development financiers could face an even more acute choice between paying the rich or feeding the poor. This can only be alleviated through a global debt reparation policy.

D4: Decouple

Fossil fuels play an outsize role in the modern food system – 15% of total fossil fuel usage happens in food production. This despite abundant evidence that the planet cannot sustain humans' persistent attempts to shove nitrogen into the soil by using the energy locked up in natural gas. A key driver of food price inflation is the oil industry. Living within the planetary boundary for nitrogen can, by contrast, offer a path to feeding 10 billion people by 2050. Doing that will require breaking the hold energy and food industries have on the economy.

D5: Decolonise

The croupiers of global hunger are heading for bumper bonuses because we live in a system of exploitation built by centuries of greed. It would be foolish to expect them simply to shrug and walk away; power concedes nothing without a demand. Decolonisation demands revolutionary economic transformations in the lives of the working classes around the world. This would take us away from the imperial corporate structures that run the global food system, towards systems of solidarity and exchange that push back against exploitative capitalist frontiers.

To build food sovereignty is to develop the politics to meet these challenges. Through proposing a democratic and egalitarian process to reshape the politics of food, food sovereignty demands that the working classes come together to end hunger. Although more and more countries have adopted the language of food sovereignty – Italy and France most recently – this is a movement that cannot be limited to a single national approach. This is largely because of the global way in which food is produced and distributed. In France, for instance, "sovereignty" means that the French state is seeking to monitor and control its import supply chains, without a thought to the economic and social conditions under which those imports are produced, or what the workers along the supply chain might want for themselves and their communities.

Without solidarity on the ground, food sovereignty becomes the most attenuated kind of sovereignty — a nationalist kind that starts and ends within a single country's borders.

There are better alternatives than the French national law. In Brazil, the MTST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto — Movement of Unhoused Workers) has benefited from recent legislation, passed by Guilherme Boulos, formerly the movement's coordinator and now a socialist Congressman, that would support Cozinhas Solidarias (solidarity kitchens). These community feeding spaces double up as zones of movement organising in urban areas. They source their food, with government support, through local farms that include those of the MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra — Landless Workers Movement).

These kinds of joined-up policies, in which solidarity builds in and through movement engagement, are an antidote to incipient global fascism. Better still, the schools for this transformation already exist from the shacks of South Africa to the streets of Detroit in the United States and the agroecological laboratories of the MST in Brazil. It is through these counter-hegemonic experiments that food sovereignty offers the possibility of new forms of social relations. This is why — despite many reasons for pessimism — food sovereignty seeds the ground for pragmatic optimism.

** Karel Swart is the National Organising Secretary and one of the founders of the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU), a South African trade union. He grew up on a farm and he had to leave school early to take care of his younger siblings. He has been active in the union movement in South Africa since the 1970s and he is proud that most of his knowledge derives from the "trade union school".*

“SOLIDARITY IS THE FOUNDATION OF ANY STRUGGLE ”

INTERVIEW WITH KAREL SWART FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN AGRICULTURAL TRADE UNION CSAAWU

by Jan Urhahn and Benjamin Fogel

Introduction

It is impossible to understand the agricultural sector in South Africa without taking into account the country’s long history of slavery, land-grabbing, and colonialism. Farmers in the Western Cape Province have exploited cheap Black and Coloured labour since the 17th century. Later, white farmers would represent an important voter base for the Apartheid regime that rose to power in 1948. As one of the main beneficiaries of Apartheid, white farmers profited not only from access to cheap labour, but from other forms of state support, including subsidies and strict regulation of the supply chain.

When Apartheid ended in 1994, the privileges that had been enjoyed by white farmers were not the only thing to be abolished. In terms of economic policy, the new African National Congress (ANC) government fell in line with a neoliberal agenda that had already been partially adopted by the Apartheid government in the 1980s.

The ending of the international boycott movement that had been a response to Apartheid, as well as new ANC policy, meant South Africa also opened itself up to the world. The agricultural industry was now pitted against international competition and the sector was deregulated. In spite of all this, one significant victory for the working class in South Africa in the 1990s was the introduction of new labour laws that explicitly included the agricultural sector.

Wine is one of the South African agricultural sector’s largest exports. There are currently almost 2,900 vineyards that make up the industry, the majority of which are in the Western Cape Province. The vineyards are often family businesses which have been owned by white families for generations; these families typically cultivate large tracts of land and have tended to rely heavily on cheap labour by black or coloured workers.

Today, the trade unions in the Western Cape's agricultural sector are fragmented, and the organisation of farm workers is not limited to trade unions. Farm workers engage in forms of self-organisation on individual farms which do not necessarily adhere to the structure of a registered trade union. There are no industry-wide collective bargaining processes or agreements in the South African agricultural sector, let alone workplace co-determination. Founded in 2006 as an agricultural workers' union, the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural, and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU), was officially recognised in 2012. Here we speak to Karel Swart, the National Organising Secretary of CSAAWU, about challenges and the necessity of organising the workers who grow and produce our food.

The following interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

To start, can you give us a brief overview of the agricultural industry in South Africa? Who are the farm owners and why are they so powerful?

It is now more than two decades since the post-Apartheid ANC government introduced legislation that recognised farm labourers as workers and granted them some forms of legal protection. This was unprecedented in South Africa's history, but despite these theoretical gains, the past 20 years have seen very little meaningful transformation of the inherited Apartheid social, economic, and spatial patterns in rural areas.

My father was a farm worker; he worked on a farm for almost 50 years, and he retired with nothing. My entire family is from the countryside too, and there is an emotional attachment that we have to this poor, rural history. We can never forget our history. My own background is in agriculture, I am not an academic. I came up through a union and the union was my education.

Power relations in the agricultural sector of South Africa are part of the history of Apartheid, the system of segregation which lasted from the late 1940s until the early 1990s. The agricultural system helped keep the National Party (the party of Apartheid) in power, and was a major factor in the impoverishment of populations who were not white. White Afrikaner farmers had a lot of support from the Apartheid government. Land was forcefully confiscated by the government, and people who were not white were denied the right to have land. That is the heart of the problem.

I will never make the mistake of underestimating the power of the agricultural bosses. They are very powerful, in part because they have extremely influential and well-organised lobby groups. They always manage to get access to the government, and they are very determined to protect their own interests.

It's also important to consider the weakness of the trade unions. During the last years of Apartheid, the unions were much better organised, representing around 40% of all South African workers. Today that percentage has fallen to around 20. This is a total disaster. If the trade union movement declines, the power of the worker, and by extension everyone in the country, is weakened and the government is freer to make laws that run over us.

CSAAWU is our trade union, and it is recognised as one of the most vibrant, caring unions in the agriculture sector. We have gained the respect of the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), our trade union federation, and we are expanding from the Western Cape Province to the Northern Cape Province and other provinces in South Africa. Our aim now is to build CSAAWU into a massive, national union.

CSAAWU works mainly in the wine industry in the Western Cape Province. What is the situation there?

The wine industry is an important income stream for the Western Cape Province. This is the area where the majority of South Africa's wine is produced, and the industry is responsible for around 167,000 jobs in the region. As well as wine, the Western Cape Province is one of the main exporters of deciduous fruit for international markets, meaning that it has a large farming workforce spread across different industries.

Commercial agriculture has benefited enormously from the demise of Apartheid, which had led countries to boycott and impose sanctions on South African exports. The end of the Apartheid regime meant that access to Europe, Asia and Africa increased, and therefore profits for the industry increased too. Paradoxically, this change, which was brought about through the struggles of the oppressed masses in South Africa, has not led to change in the material conditions for many of those working and living on the commercial farms. Instead, the neoliberal restructuring of agriculture has made commercial farm work more precarious, through initiatives like casual contracts, and seasonal hiring.

What are some of the challenges that farm workers face in South Africa?

Life for farm workers can be a nightmare! Many farm owners control the farm gates, meaning they can close the gates and trap workers on the farm whenever they wish. Sometimes people are not allowed to see their family whatsoever on the farm, say if the farm owners decide extended family members aren't allowed to come and visit. There is poverty and even hunger on the farms too, and while the government has introduced a national minimum wage, it is still very low. Many workers in full-time employment in South Africa still earn extremely low wages, and farm workers have remained amongst the poorest in the country. There are also consequences for trying to organise; more and more workers recently are being dismissed because they have joined our union. Many are now dependent on food kitchens that we as a union have organised – at present we have between 20 to 30 food kitchens. As a farm worker, if you have a relationship with a trade union, farmers will not give you any work, even seasonal work.

Changes in the large-scale commercial agricultural sector in the form of mechanisation and digitalisation are impacting farm workers too. These processes are already underway, and they have influenced employment patterns over the past five to 10 years. In the wine, apple and pear, and table grape subsectors, 80% of workers during the peak season are employed on seasonal contracts. In the off-peak season on at least half of the farms in the Western Cape Province more than 50% of the workforce are seasonal workers.

The only way that we can change things is by challenging the balance of power. Farm owners benefit from exploiting farm workers; they increase their profits through exploitation. It is in their interest to keep wages low and working conditions poor, and that is why farmers don't want a strong, vibrant socialist union.

Through unions we can bring some relief to farm workers, but the farm bosses will not change unless workers join trade unions in their hundreds of thousands. At that point the power will start to shift, and we will be in a position to negotiate with the big capitalists, but we are not there yet. Even today when I meet with CSAAWU comrades, we will still often discuss the 2013 strike. This was a strike over wages, and it changed the way the farm owners treat farm workers. Before the strike, farm workers earned very little money; ZAR 69 per day (which is equivalent to around EUR 3.37 in early 2024), and not more than ZAR 300 a week.

The workers' demand in the strike was that they be paid ZAR 150 per day. This was a rebellion against the conditions they live and work in, and it was the first time in the history of the South African agricultural sector that farm workers rose up. The workers managed to win a 52% wage increase, which was a massive success. Typically, when we as a trade union bargain on behalf of workers, we will usually only achieve maybe a five to seven percent increase.

But the farm workers also paid a high price. The government sent police to break the strike, and it was the highest number of police and private security sent in in South Africa's history. Three of our fellow farm workers were killed, and hundreds of people were jailed, some for up to two years.

How can you grow the power of the union?

We need to organise, this is key, especially as the level of organisation in the South African agricultural sector is still very low. It's also critical to think in terms of area; to be as effective as possible we need to organise the entire community and all the farms in one region.

Take De Doorns for example. This is a small farming town known for producing table grapes, which was one of the centres of the 2013 strike. In De Doorns, we used to organise in terms of maybe two or three farms but overall there are probably 250 farms with a workforce of roughly 30,000 workers. We realised that it didn't work to organise in the old way, and that instead we must target the entirety of De Doorns. By bringing the whole workforce of the table grape harvest into the union, we strengthen our position.

It also means we don't have to bargain on a loose basis with every single farmer separately. If we get the numbers right, we would then be entitled to a regional bargaining council with the table grapes association. So currently that is our mission, both in De Doorns and elsewhere.

How do you approach organising the workers?

We take the union into the communities actively. For instance, we distribute our pamphlets at the points where the farm owners pick up workers in the morning, so that we can give them out directly and have a chance to speak with the workers too.

We use the same approach for different kinds of workers, be they permanent workers, seasonal workers or contract workers, and then we hold meetings in the communities. Under Apartheid, union organising had to happen underground, and we still draw on this long history of stealth organising today. We are skilled at operating underground when the conditions don't allow us to work openly.

Creating solidarity across different groups is important. We want to build alliances between farm workers, small-scale food producers, rural women, and youth leaders, and empower them to participate in political discussions about the transformation of land distribution and agricultural production in South Africa. In this way, we will also work to prevent social conflict from arising and escalating, by ensuring that people are heard, and that their interests are not advanced at odds with each other.

What are the main challenges you face when organising farm workers?

Over the last few years, it has become increasingly clear that any intervention needs to organise workers along the entire supply chain to stand united against injustice. This means expanding the reach of the union to go beyond organising mainly among more permanent and seasonal farm workers at bottling plants and wine cellars. We also need to organise workers in other agricultural sectors, such as on citrus plantations and on grain farms, but also in other parts of South Africa too. It is important that we continue our journey to expand CSAAWU's presence.

The strategic decision to organise along the supply chain in the wine industry and expand into new regions and sectors has been made on the basis of going where the need is greatest. Expanding our activities will build the collective resilience of farm workers in South Africa to protect and secure their rights as workers and human beings.

How do the farm owners react to your efforts?

The bosses are fighting back, and they have ways of showing that workers will pay a high price for their struggle. As most farm workers must also live on the farms on which they work, farm owners have a lot of leverage in terms of the control they have over living conditions. They can increase prices for electricity, housing and water, remove transport provision, and stop workers receiving visitors on the farms. Farm owners have the power to make life extremely difficult for workers. That is why we must learn from our history how best to fight this enemy. We must be prepared, and we cannot think our opponents will allow the union to do as it pleases.

How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the farm workers?

While many people in South Africa were able to work from home during the worst peak of COVID-19, medical workers, farm workers and other workers along the food supply chain were classified as essential workers. This meant they had to continue to go to work and to produce and harvest the food that the world needed to survive. There were several factors which made this system particularly difficult for essential workers.

For those who were parents of school-age children, they had to navigate the fact that their children were now expected to stay at home and learn online with the support of parents or caregivers. Most farm and food supply chain workers have little formal education, and many have no access to computers, smartphones or indeed the internet. The impossibility of impoverished farm workers helping provide education for their children while also working is obvious. Today it is still unclear how these children will catch up on the nearly two lost years of education.

In the workplace itself, COVID-19 regulations and restrictions often bore little relation to farm workers' reality. Workers would report issues like: "How could we wash our hands regularly when there is no water in the vineyards?" These safety measures only applied for those with resources and easy access to services. How could farm workers practise social distancing if the only transport taking them to town and the shops on a Saturday was the farmers' truck, with everyone on board packed like sardines? Or when they live in small shacks and overcrowded farmhouses?

It was people-to-people solidarity that assisted farm workers the most during this time of need. As CSAAWU, together with our partners, we mobilised a community that helped us set up soup kitchens, distribute items like masks and food parcels, and check in on the sick and the far-flung farms. If ever CSAAWU acted on its resolution of social movement unionism, it was during the COVID-19 period.

We also developed strategies to assist us in crossing the digital divide, including teaching shop stewards how to use Zoom, WhatsApp groups and other ways to stay connected.

What are the main challenges that you face as a trade union?

In South Africa, the ANC-led government is very tight with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). This closeness between the government and the trade union federation is a big problem. From my perspective, the COSATU lost its credibility and respect long ago. Our unions are just stagnating and membership declines, which means unions do not grow. COSATU urgently needs to break this alliance with the government and become independent.

Organising and building a voice for farm workers has remained a challenge in South Africa. Presently, a large number of very small, localised unions exist in the agricultural sector. However, these remain concentrated in particular regions, for instance the Western Cape has the largest number of organised farm workers. Despite these area-specific initiatives, union density amongst farm workers in the country more broadly remains low. Another challenge is the high level of unemployment in our country, which of course means lower union participation.

Almost half of our population is unemployed. If this was the case in any European country they would declare a state of national disaster, but not in South Africa.

The government is not prepared to take any decisive actions to implement policies that deal with unemployment. It's a conservative government; they don't want to take any steps that might upset Europe or the United States or any other imperialist country.

Finally, a lot of our problems as a trade union arise out of weakness and a lack of ability to implement the law. Our country actually has a progressive constitution and also progressive laws, but they are not enforced. Outside of the government, it is also the responsibility of the union to enforce the law. Without strength and unity amongst the workers, employers will ignore the law if it benefits them. There are so many laws in this country that are just being ignored because the people are not mobilised.

How do you foster international solidarity?

Solidarity is the foundation of any struggle. If you don't agree with the concept of solidarity, you don't belong in trade unions. A lot of South African wines get exported overseas to the United States, Europe and elsewhere. This international supply chain makes international solidarity fundamental, and we want to strengthen our solidarity along the entire wine supply chain.

I want to mention one tool that we have developed together with the global grassroots network of workers called TIE (Transnationals Information Exchange) and the German trade union Ver.di, along with support from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. In collaboration we have set up an international committees, which holds virtual meetings at which shop stewards and trade unionists from South Africa and Germany can discuss practical issues and ways to improve working and living conditions. We also discuss these issues with the farm owners on several farms.

This international committee enables us to address workers' problems directly with bosses. In our case, the external pressure from comrades in Germany is important because it can break the perceived invincibility of the white farmers in South Africa.

In short, we use these committees to negotiate. In a little bit more than a year we have managed to achieve great things at a farm in the Western Cape. We have brought in crèches, created a fund to support workers, arranged transport to hospitals, and transport to town. Workers have also been able to protect their wages.

We need to replicate these committees on an even larger scale, with trade unions from Germany, Scandinavian countries, the United States – from all countries where South African wine is sold. If we are able to say, "all the trade unions along a certain supply chain are organised together", then we will have teeth. We need to do things practically.

What about South-South solidarity?

It is absolutely necessary that we build solidarity with comrades in other countries in the Global South. It is a must. We work together with around 45 rural labour unions in Brazil that are organised in the Orange Juice Network (Rede Suco de Laranja). We have learnt important tools from them, for example the implementation of so-called health mappings, in which the farm workers record which health problems they all share. This creates a shared awareness of the ways in which their labour has directly impacted their health. We are also working with our comrades in Brazil to further develop organising tools.

* Schluwa Sama is a researcher. She has recently written a study about the trade in pesticides in Iraq. Schluwa holds a PhD on the political economy of Iraq with a focus on the everyday lives of peasants at the University of Exeter.

* Ansar Jasim is program coordinator for Iraq for the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Beirut Office. She is interested in civil society solidarity from a theoretical and practical perspective, with a special focus on Syria and Iraq.

IMPERIALISM AND IRAQ'S AGRICULTURAL SYSTEM

by Schluwa Sama and Ansar Jasim

Historically and still today, imperialism has had, and continues to have, devastating effects on global agriculture. This is particularly evident in Iraq, which has suffered the consequences of a modern war as well as the long, slower burn, of imperial colonisation. Therefore, although the effects of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq have been catastrophic, the USA is not the only power to blame for Iraq's devastated agricultural system. Indeed, the failures of the country's agriculture industry can be traced back to the centralised and highly controlled system of the Ba`ath regime, and to the British colonial system.

It's April 2023 in the offices of the Department of Disease Prevention and Pest Management arm of Iraq's Agriculture Ministry, where we are conducting a series of interviews: "We are only making contracts with the big reliable companies like Syngenta and Bayer", explains one employee, as his laptop mouse glides over a Syngenta-branded mouse map. On the wall behind him, a Syngenta clock ticks steadily. Within the ministry, corporations like Syngenta and Bayer, which are well-established in a global agribusiness context, have come to symbolise the future for Iraqi agriculture. Entering into agreements with these multinational companies will help the country leave behind an outdated, failing agricultural system, the thinking goes. In reality, this is just one more part of the country's long history of imperial violence.

British Colonialism and Lasting Social Transformations

During the direct British rule of Iraq, which lasted from 1914 until 1932, the property rights of agricultural land were granted to traditional leaders and to their families, rather than to cultivators and producers. As with many similar instances of colonial divide and rule, these policies led to the creation of a new landlord class, and created a feudal system that resulted in the pauperisation of the peasantry. Simultaneously, the conceptualisation of land as property, the primary purpose of which is to increase agricultural profit, became widespread in Iraq. This continued after British direct rule came to an end and the Iraqi monarchy was installed.

This unfair system was partly suspended in central Iraq in the wake of the 14 July Revolution in 1958, which resulted in some land distribution to small-scale farmers. But in the parts of the country which were less accessible to the state, such as the mountainous regions of Kurdistan, the system tended to remain in place. This period also saw the integration of Iraq into the international economic system, through its emergence as an exporter of grain, and then of oil. This would then lead to the transformation of Iraq into an oil-dependent economy.

Rather than abandoning the forms of social and political organisation inherited from British colonialism, successive Iraqi regimes have elected to maintain them. In this way, colonialism continues to shape Iraq. This is also the case in terms of the descendants of the powerful feudal landlords of the early 20th century, who still today hold positions of power in political parties and militias.

The Creation of a Vulnerable Agricultural System

Before the 2003 US invasion, Iraq possessed a very centralised farming system. Characteristic of other countries in the region, including Syria, this meant a high degree of state control. It also meant the state functioned not only as the main supplier of agricultural inputs, but also price control, state distribution systems and more. Beginning in the 1970s, the Iraqi regime had implemented increasingly authoritarian agricultural policies, paired with population control. One of the most notable examples of these initiatives were its mujamm´at or collective towns, in which farmers, mainly in Kurdistan, were expelled from their original villages under the pretext of modernising farming techniques. As a result, Kurdish farmers were cut off from their original villages and traditional livelihoods, leaving them dependent on the state, and in effect granting the state almost total control over their lives.

The Gulf War of the early 1990s had far-reaching consequences for agriculture in the region. In the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the UN imposed massive sanctions and an embargo against Iraq, which lasted until the US invaded Iraq again in 2003. These were designed to strip Iraq of its import and export capabilities, and to help boost trade in other countries in the region, like Turkey, as well as globally, such as Australia. To try and restore stability, the Iraqi government focused on two means of gaining control of its population and food production.

The first of these was through implementing a food rationing system, bitaqa tamwiniya, which had the dual effect of increasing the Iraqi population's dependence on the regime, while furthering the regime's capacity to control and punish its citizens. For instance, families with any connection to the resistance movement to the governing Ba´ath regime, or whose members refused military conscription, were excluded from food distribution.

The second of these 1990s responses to boycotts was the government's increased investment in its centralised agriculture system. The aim of this centralisation was to attempt to prevent hunger crises, and thereby guarantee the regime's survival in response to sanctions. This played out initially with measures such as desalination campaigns, before the controversial UN-led oil-for-food program started in 1995. Desalination campaigns enabled farmers to use previously unfarmed land (for example in the area of Yousefia near Baghdad). Thereby, the agricultural harvest could be increased to feed the population in periods when food imports were prohibited. Once the UN-implemented oil-for-food system started, the focus on increasing Iraqi agricultural profit lessened. Iraq's oil was sold on the world market and from these gains, food was imported into the country from various exporters outside of Iraq.

However, the focus on the productivity of the soil had a clear counterpoint: the newly reclaimed land was provided with water through dams and canals, which were designed to sanction and deprive areas that had been rebellious against the central government of water. This led to the near-extinction of the water-based culture of the Ahwari people in the Southern Iraq's marshlands.

It is this context which laid the ground for imperial violence to be so effective in Iraq; it shapes agriculture through the dominance it gives to profit. Profit, rather than the provision of the population with local and healthy food, becomes the primary objective of food production. To achieve this, imperial powers (in the case of Iraq this means mainly the US, but also states like Iran or China) "create" the conditions that make local food production unprofitable through transforming markets, state structures, agricultural methods and even the food habits of people.

Corporate Power and the Dehumanisation of Farmers

One of the most visible forms of corporate power in Iraq today is the access and control of the Iraqi agricultural market by international agribusiness. This presence is felt tangibly at large fairs in Baghdad and Erbil, where global corporations like Bayer and BASF display and introduce their products to the Iraqi market. It also dominates the workshops and networking events that encourage the formation of local start-ups. In both cases the actual producers, that is farmers and agricultural workers, are sidelined.

These trade fairs and agribusiness start-up events began in the early post-2003 war phase, and were part of the USAID's Agriculture Reconstruction and Development Program (ARDI), which introduced new highly productive seed varieties to Iraqi farmers.

Under the influence of the US, Iraqi agriculture in this period tended to focus purely on technical-economic considerations. In 2004, sending a clear message to the working farmers of Iraq and Kurdistan, the US-trained interim Minister of Agriculture, Sawsan Ali Magid al-Sharifi, said: "We need Iraqi farmers to be competitive, so we decided to subsidise inputs like pesticides, fertilisers, improved seeds." This expectation, that farmers should be competitive, prioritises corporate values of economic profit over supporting self-determined farmers to make a living by producing healthy food for the country.

Dismantling and Privatising the State

Maktab, or local agricultural shops, can be found all over Iraq. These are the places that supply farmers with corporate inputs, and they are the sites of the closest daily connection between farmers and corporations. The dismantling of state structures during the US occupation of Iraq left the country with few functioning state services. This vacuum has been filled by militia and corporate control: since 2003, local agricultural retailers have taken over the agricultural extension services of the state. Before the 2003 invasion, local branches of the Ministry of Agriculture offered agricultural extension services and support to farmers. But today, farmers like Ahmed, who is based in the township of Yusufiyah, laugh when asked where the state is: "We have not seen anyone from the state for a very long time. I don't remember the agricultural office. I would have to ask my mother. We get all our seeds and pesticides from the shop."

Highly Toxic Pesticides in Iraq

A recent study by the Beirut office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the Iraqi food sovereignty network Gwez w Nakhl, found that 50 tons of Tebuconazole were distributed by the government to farmers in 2021. Tebuconazole has been classified as a Highly Hazardous Pesticide (HHP) by the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) for its acute toxicity – it is so severe to be classed as "fatal if inhaled" – as well as its long-term effects; it has been found to be both carcinogenic, and a threat to reproductive health.

This was the first study that documented the sale of ingredients that are classified as toxic to humans by the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as banned in the European Union (EU). It found that along with Bayer, who distributes Tebuconazole, Syngenta also sells its pesticides, containing Thiamethoxam, directly to the government that uses it for its aerial spraying program.

This pesticide distribution contributes to the poisoning of the people and the land. Economically, it also hurts farmers and benefits corporations as it is part of a strategy in which corporations first give their products to farmers for free, or at a substantial discount. Then, once farmers are dependent on the products, they raise their prices.

The Destruction of Iraq's Seed Diversity

In 2003, the Iraqi National Seed Bank, which was located in Abu Ghraib, was destroyed in a bombing raid by the US military. This act of destruction, and the looting which led to the loss of Iraq´s thousand-year-old seed varieties is often juxtaposed with an image of "flourishing agriculture" before the 2003 invasion. In the words of the US-based corporation-critical NGO, Corpwatch: "The Fertile Crescent [which spans Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria] had developed a system of farming that was the envy of the world. Now, under Occupation, centuries of progress have been destroyed, almost overnight."

The bombing of the seed bank is probably the most dramatic act in a string of attempts by the US-occupation to transform Iraq's economy, and food and agriculture system, into a model of neoliberalism. However, to lean too heavily on just this narrative of destruction risks obscuring the reasons that the pre-2003 system was so vulnerable to US intervention in the first place.

Prior to 2003, Iraq's seeds were provided by state-owned companies managed by the Ministry of Agriculture at controlled prices. The Iraqi seed bank, located in the rural countryside near Abu Ghraib, was a dense complex of diverse research and consultancy facilities, as well as a seed storage facility. It is hard to come by data that gives a full picture of the situation before 2003, mostly due to the looting of many of the Iraqi state institutions and their archives.

However, a 2002 report by the US State Department from the Middle East Working Group on Agriculture paints a picture of a seed multiplication system in crisis: "Planting low-quality seeds during the 1980s and 1990s led to problems of weed and pest infestation, low productivity and an inability to use seed-processing machinery efficiently. Lack of high-yielding seed has reduced farm efficiency and often forced poor farmers to abandon their lands."

The same report refers to a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) initiative implemented at the request of the Iraqi government to support its seed multiplication system during the 1990s. While such a source should be treated with caution, it does suggest a rather dysfunctional seed production system. Hence, despite these ambiguities, this laid the perfect justification for the necessity to re-engineer the agricultural system.

In terms of the bombing and its aftermath, the fate of the 1,400 crop varieties stored in Abu Ghraib remains unclear. Some sources describe a "black box" of 200 seed varieties that was sent to the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) in 1996, and therefore will have escaped destruction. There are other accounts of the heroic rescue efforts of Iraqi scientists who gathered up all the seeds that they could; many of which had to be scraped from the floor where they were spilled from pilfered glassware. When it comes to rebuilding the seed bank, farmers and food sovereignty activists in the country seeking to recollect Iraqi seeds do not even know where to start. Seeds are not just about the crops and plants that a country can produce, they form a part of the agriculture and historical archive of a country. The inability to recount this history is itself part of imperial violence.

The Post-2003 Patent Law on Seeds

The centralised nature of Iraq's agricultural production, and the history of violence enacted against the country's rural and farming communities, rendered the system very vulnerable. This is part of what made it easy for the US to re-engineer Iraq's agricultural system in 2003. In 2003 the Coalition Provisional Authority was installed as Iraq's transitional government during the US occupation. They began to implement "orders", one of which was the "Patent, Industrial Design, Undisclosed Information, Integrated Circuits and Plant Variety" order. It amended the Iraqi patent law of 1970, to allow international seed companies to patent seeds in Iraq, while also prohibiting farmers from saving and multiplying seeds.

In 2013 this order was cancelled and replaced by a law which prohibits the use of any unpatented seeds in farming. On the ground today, the authors found that farmers did not tend to discuss these regulations. Instead, farmers refer to the cycle of debt accumulation they find themselves in, having lost the tradition of producing seeds, biopesticides, and other inputs locally. Today, as already mentioned, farmers are forced to purchase all agriculture inputs from private companies at prices that rise substantially each year. In Kurdistan, in some of the villages that have not yet been emptied or destroyed either by the former regime of Saddam Hussein or regular bombardments by the Turkish army, people still engage in forms of traditional agriculture. That means that, alongside the purchase of seeds and pesticides, practices like seed swapping and seed production still exist.

However, military encroachments by Turkey on the one hand, and the increasing privatisation and support of agribusiness, puts small-scale food producers under increasing pressure. Overall, rather than developing a neatly neoliberal economy according to the US play book, the economic system in Iraq today is a highly privatised and corrupt system.

One way to remedy this would be to help Iraqi farmers access original Iraqi heirloom seeds. At present, the seeds stored at ICARDA are only available to institutional players, but not farmers themselves.

Enabling better, fairer access to seeds would mean supporting activists in building up grassroots seed libraries across the country, through accessing the Iraqi seeds that are preserved in seed banks all over the world.

This would involve strengthening the structures that activists and farmers have already created, especially as international development agencies are mainly focused on building up the capacities of Iraqi state agencies.

At present, ordinary Iraqis can only access state resources through political connections, and these are definitely not supporting Iraqi small-scale food producers striving to build independent food production. Therefore, the main way forward is to support the transition from conventional to agroecological agriculture through starting to build on local knowledge, and creating decentralised seed libraries among other things.

The Reappearance of Legacies of Resistance

Despite Iraq's long history of violent repression, resistance movements have proved impossible to stamp out. Notable chapters in this story of resistance, like that of Khaled Ahmad Zaki in 1963 against the Ba´th regime in the Ahwar region, were echoed during the 2019 Tishreen Movement. This was a one-year-long political movement which involved occupying squares all over central Iraq, with the central demand of cancelling the post-2003 implemented constitution. This represented an attempt from below to reverse the political, social and economic system that was forced upon the people of Iraq through the US-led invasion.

The protesters also raised the question of sovereign food production in Iraq, and developed an understanding of its necessity in achieving political change. Sovereign food production is especially necessary in a wider context in which Iraq´s neighbouring states, be it Iran or Turkey, are major food importers into the country. In its demand for a new constitution, this 2019 uprising can be regarded as a major anti-imperialist movement, or at least as a vision for one, in the sense that it wanted nothing less than the overthrow of the entire post-2003 system.

The Tishreen Movement paved the way for a new vision of food sovereignty and organising across Iraq. People of different backgrounds began to meet and discuss what food sovereignty would mean in the context of Iraq, and these meetings resulted in the formation of the Gwez w Nakhl (which means "walnut" in Kurdish and "palm tree" in Arabic) Network for Food Sovereignty in Iraq and Kurdistan. This group is an obstacle to imperialist expansion on several levels. Iraqi imperialism is based on a discourse of sectarianism, and a vision of modernism that divides between rural areas and cities. People coming together in Gwez w Nakhl Network counters this vision, particularly through the formation of an alliance between Kurdistan and Iraq, which takes a history of anti-authoritarian struggle from the countryside as a baseline.

Transnational Organising

Imperialism and corporate power in the food sector are organised globally, so networks of farmers, activists, and researchers who are striving to build alternatives to the current food system must organise internationally. There are already some examples of this transnational organising. For instance, the exchange of knowledge between the Buzuruna Juzuruna (our seeds are our roots) collective in Lebanon and the network of Gwez w Nakhl-Network for Food Sovereignty. Also, the creation of different gardens in the villages around the cities of Dohuk, Sulaymaniyah, and Baghdad, as well as Kurdistan more broadly.

In these gardens people are committed to shifting from conventional agriculture to agroecology, planting without pesticides, producing seeds and carving out a space of independence from corporations. With few original Iraqi heirloom seeds available to farmers to set up community seed banks, Buzuruna Juzuruna have provided seeds and knowledge to Gwez w Nakhl.

This South-South solidarity builds organisations and collectives that can support other farmers in times of crisis, and overall this could lead to socio-ecological transformation. South-North connections though are no less important, either, and it is necessary to practise an internationalism where the Global North is pressured by its own citizens.

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THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE FRAMEWORK AND RECURRING FOOD CRISES

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

By Ranja Sengupta

The early stretch of the 21st century has been partly defined by recurring food crises, food price volatility, and uncertainty over agricultural production and distribution. Much of the world over the past two decades has seen acute agricultural crises, both in terms of food security and the certainty of farmers' livelihoods. The age of hyper-globalisation was supposed to precisely address these issues.

This would apparently be achieved through helping the Global South develop their domestic agriculture and food systems, and then helping the same regions reach global markets. In doing this, the logic went, the Global South would reach development objectives such as providing stable livelihoods and incomes, as well as access to food security tools which would eradicate hunger. Today, as we face rising hunger and ongoing food crises, the role and success of international trade regimes, including trade institutions and agreements, comes more and more under question.

Food Crises and International Trade

The US and European Union (EU) have tried to promote global trade as the dominant model since the 1940s. These efforts birthed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in the late 1940s, followed by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995. By the early 2000s, the WTO was widely regarded as being stuck in an impasse, and so the process of trade liberalisation was supplemented by a host of bilateral and regional Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). The interests of the developed countries, who were the main promoters of a globalised trading system, had not been getting sufficient support in the WTO. FTAs provided a quicker and simpler way of expanding the markets for the goods and services that the developed world so badly needed. In the meantime, recurring food crises, the most recent being the 2022 crisis brought on by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have been felt much more acutely in developing countries, in particular Net Food Importing Developing Countries (NFIDCs) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Globally, in both developing and developed countries, those who fall below the poverty line, migrants, temporary workers, and other marginalised groups face an increasingly difficult set of barriers to access food.

The policies of trade liberalisation and harmonised rules were supposed to address the problems of supply imbalances, stabilise markets and provide a bulwark against crises. The system created by these policies would supposedly produce sufficient food for the world, which would reach those most in need efficiently. But how beneficial, equitable, stabilising and development-friendly has the process of trade liberalisation been in reality?

Decades of the liberalisation of food markets has resulted in a high concentration in global food markets both at country level and by agribusiness companies. In 2020, just five countries contributed 63.8% of global wheat exports, and four countries accounted for about 72% of global maize exports. Similarly, the top five countries account for 72.62% of global rice exports, and three countries provide up to 58% of global soya oil exports. While natural resource endowment and the structures of production are certainly partial causes for this, global trade rules have also played a role in exacerbating this concentration of market power.

Acute price volatility in global food markets has been another major problem since 2020. Prices of agricultural products, by their very nature, are volatile. But when agricultural products are treated as financial assets that can be traded on commodity markets, they become vulnerable to shocks in related markets (such as the energy and metal markets), and to speculation. This contributes further to price volatility.

The pressures exerted through the global trade system, and exacerbated by the actions of governments in both developed and developing countries, have forced farmers in developing countries to switch from food production to cash crops just to survive. That is, farmers are driven to produce the likes of coffee, tobacco and cocoa instead of basic food crops. This has not only threatened food security across the Global South but it has also endangered farmers' livelihoods, in that they are often forced to take on costly loans to meet the high cash needs of such crops. They take on this risk lured by the promise of eventual greater profit. Agribusiness' control of natural resources and technology through FTAs has further aggravated this situation.

All these trends have made developing countries and LDCs more vulnerable to recurring food crises, and compromised their food sovereignty and food security. It has become clear over the past several decades that no developing country or LDC can depend on the global markets. Without augmenting domestic production and productivity while supporting farmers' livelihoods, these countries will be unable to protect themselves against recurring food crises. This process is itself hampered by the trade rules. In order to challenge the current order, we first have to understand the power dynamics of the global trade system and the institutions that maintain it.

The World Trade Organisation, Then and Now

Under the WTO, the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) established rules related to agricultural trade. The first of these was to help promote markets and international trade through the reduction in border taxes such as import duties. The second was the removal of export and domestic subsidies that distort trade. It should be noted that a major interest for developing countries and LDCs who wished to join the WTO was the supposed gain in agriculture. In general, developing countries and LDCs tend to be very dependent on their agricultural sectors. Part of the draw of WTO membership was a promise that the massive export and domestic subsidies given by developed countries (which significantly benefited western agribusiness and adversely affected developing country farmers' access to global and even domestic markets) would be effectively reduced. The silent agenda of developed countries in encouraging mass-membership of the WTO was to break into the markets of developing countries.

While widening access to markets has not progressed much, the most contentious part of the AoA has been its rules on domestic subsidies. The AoA's professed aim is to limit subsidies that distort trade (termed "Amber Box" subsidies) by incentivising farmers to produce more food, which is then dumped in global markets. At the same time, it allows subsidies that do not distort trade (termed "Green Box" subsidies) such as funding for research, environmental measures, disaster relief and public food programmes.

In reality though, the AoA rules are highly unfair and inequitable and adversely impact the Global South. This is the product of a multi-pronged process:

> While the AoA theoretically allows a minimum level of Amber Box subsidies to all countries, countries including the US, the member states of the EU, Japan, Switzerland, and Canada have managed to extract additional trade-distorting subsidy allowances, referred to as extra AMS entitlements, for themselves. These same countries have also used Green Box subsidies to their advantage, for example by giving direct payments to their agribusinesses. As a result, they have continuously over-produced and dumped their subsidised agricultural exports on poor countries. This means they can maintain significant control over global agricultural markets, and can threaten agricultural livelihoods and food sovereignty in the Global South.

> The AoA has limited the subsidies for developing countries and LDCs that could support their farmers and farming, for example through price support for procurement for running public food programmes. This has limited their policy options to address domestic agricultural development and challenges.

> There have also been significant pressures on developing countries to limit and neutralise special and differential treatment (S&D). S&D is an underlying promise of the WTO to developing countries and LDCs that, in the field of agriculture, ensures certain policy flexibilities in order to support agriculture and farmers. These include, on paper, the ability to give higher subsidies under specific categories, and longer terms for implementation of AoA provisions on tariff and subsidy reductions. These are intended to shield developing countries and LDCs from the harsh competition unleashed by the AoA, and to help them catch up. However, developed countries have repeatedly blocked proposals that suggest better application and rational expansion of S&D provisions, not only in agriculture but across other WTO agreements.

Current Negotiations at the WTO

Since 1995, the divide between Global North and Global South on agriculture has only intensified at the WTO. Though agriculture was supposed to be an area in which Global South countries had more interest, countries in the Global North have vied for dominance of the sector. This is because certain developed countries – including the US, the EU and others – have entrenched commercial interests in agriculture. There is also a group of agricultural exporters that is dominated by developed countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Together, these countries have repeatedly advocated for their own interests, usually in direct opposition to developing countries' interests.

This conflict has been a particularly prominent feature of negotiations since 2017. At present in the WTO negotiations, there are several issues of interest to developing countries that remain unaddressed. These pertain to the abilities of these developing countries to meet their food security needs and fortify themselves against repeated food crises. The first of these unresolved issues is the demand to allow developing countries to subsidise farmers through administered price support, while purchasing food stocks for public stockholding programmes. In WTO parlance, this issue is referred to as Public Stockholding for food security purposes (PSH), on which a permanent decision has been outstanding since 2013. The second is a Special Safeguard Mechanism that would allow developing countries and LDCs to raise import duties in order to protect against a sudden increase in agricultural imports. Finally, proposed cuts to western domestic subsidies have also been either left unaddressed, or at best distorted to benefit developed countries.

Alongside these stalled negotiations, the pandemic and the 2022 food crisis have been used strategically by developed countries to launch a parallel set of negotiations. Started in the name of food security, in reality these hinge solely on trade liberalisation.

The keystone of this approach is a push to further open the markets of developing countries, and to prevent any restrictions on exports (even those that protect domestic food security). This approach also proposes that rather than first targeting the most unfair subsidies given by developed countries such as extra AMS entitlements, total domestic subsidies should be cut in a manner which places an equal, though obviously not equitable, responsibility on all countries. Analysis has shown that developing countries and LDCs will be forced to cut more subsidies than developed countries if such an approach is followed. This is because their minimum entitlements, including development-oriented subsidies (which were essential policy tools given to them as developing countries), will also have to be cut down.

In addition to the AoA rules, and the standards and technical barriers laid out through several WTO agreements, there are the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) provisions of the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) which promote the patenting of plant varieties. In addition, there are ongoing plurilateral initiatives on investment facilitation and on e-commerce. All these initiatives can constrain the access to technology, natural resources, markets and domestic policy space available to developing countries. In doing so, they hamper the abilities of these countries to augment their agricultural production and build up protections from crises.

Free Trade Agreements and Investment Treaties: The Global North Agenda

With the WTO in an ongoing impasse, bilateral FTAs began to proliferate. These trade agreements perpetuated an agenda that goes even beyond the WTO mandate. Currently, as registered by the WTO, there are 361 FTAs in force. Recently, there has been the emergence of ambitious mega FTAs, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Partnership for Prosperity. These FTAs attempt to both expand issues which are currently under discussion at the WTO, as well as bring in new issues. They have significant implications for agriculture and food security across the Global South.

Through FTAs, developed countries are asking developing countries to either reduce or entirely remove actual applied import duties. This is a more aggressive step than the WTO rules, which aim to reduce the maximum import duty rates that a country can impose.

Through FTAs developed countries are also trying to push for the removal of export taxes, which are often imposed by developing countries to prevent exports and outflow of critical raw material.

Unhindered exports of agricultural raw material then ensures value addition in agro-processing sectors in developed countries. Further IPR provisions demanded in a typical North-South FTA go far beyond the TRIPS Agreement and propose measures that would increase the cost of agrochemicals and seeds. These IPR chapters also make it binding for developing countries to join the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) 1991. This treaty was designed and promoted by seed companies and a few states in the Global North, and it enshrines the control of these companies over seeds, while at the same time limiting farmers' methods for saving, exchanging and replicating seeds. This has significant implications both for farmers' access to seeds, and more broadly for biodiversity. Interestingly, FTAs do not allow subsidies to be addressed, on the grounds that subsidies are a multilateral issue.

Developed countries are currently proposing rules within e-commerce trade agreements, which would result in all agricultural activities being termed as "services". This is in effect an attempt at the disguised liberalisation of agricultural production, marketing and other related activities. Companies, including the German multinational pharmaceutical and biotechnology company Bayer, are now calling themselves "digital companies", and controlling production processes through the marketing of both inputs and the crops produced. The US supermarket chain Walmart exerts power over even the dispersion of pesticides through its use of digitally controlled drone technology.

Digital technology's increasing inroads into agriculture are facilitated both within and outside the ambit of trade agreements, and the result is that farmers are losing control over agricultural production. In developing countries, where rules related to digital technology are not yet fully formed, such technologies can take a predatory shape with long-term implications for production structures, livelihoods and incomes in the food sector.

There are also international investment agreements that cover investment chapters under the FTAs as well as stand-alone investment treaties, commonly known as Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITS). These ensure the opening of markets for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the protection of foreign investors' rights. Currently, there are 2,221 BITS in force, alongside 368 FTAs and other treaties that include investment provisions. Under investor protection clauses contained in these agreements, the rights of multinational companies involved in such FDI cannot be constrained, as they have recourse to the infamous Investor-State Dispute Settlement Mechanism (ISDS).

The ISDS allows multinational companies to sue national governments under secret international arbitration cases for any expropriation of their investment rights. The ISDS mechanism reduces the scope for crafting national policies, and also reduces the sovereignty of Global South governments to regulate the predatory behaviour of multinational companies. The result of the protection that the ISDS framework grants to big business, is the ever-increasing loss of farming communities' access to natural resources necessary for agricultural production, including land, water, and forests.

Finally, "sustainability" has become a new tool for multinational companies, backed by their governments, to gain commercial advantages through trade. Trade and investment agreements have multiple chapters and provisions that can create adverse impacts on environmental conservation and the rights of local communities. For example, there have been at least 13 ISDS cases since 2012 that have obstructed climate policies. Sustainability issues are now being brought by rich countries into the trade arena in the name of seeking solutions, but in general these have not addressed any substantive issues. These efforts include unilateral measures such as the EU's Anti-Deforestation Law and the Carbon-Border Adjustment Mechanism, as well as FTA chapters under the guise of "sustainable food systems." These measures seek to punish developing countries, and implement "sustainability standards" in a way that increases developed countries' market control, creates barriers for exports from developing countries, and pushes out their farmers from production and trade pathways. Simultaneously, developed countries refuse to commit to finance and technology transfers (or even withdraw predatory technologies) that can support the efforts of developing countries to transition to sustainable practices, while ensuring there is space to bring in policies that benefit domestic agriculture.

Resistance from the Global South

The resistance from the Global South to the trade hegemony imposed by the North has gone through many phases. There had been substantial opposition across countries in the past, on the ground especially, and the WTO had seen massive protests by farmers groups, NGOs, academics, and students.

However, given the impasse at the WTO, and the massive proliferation of the more secretive FTAs and investment treaties, such mass opposition has proven weak, and been weakened further. The increasing complexity of trade negotiations has made it difficult for grassroots groups to engage with the machinations of the current trade agreements and draw links between trade policies and the impact these policies have on the ground.

At government level, there seems to be concern among many developing countries about both the content and the process of such negotiations, especially at the WTO. These include the impact the AoA rules have had on developing countries' ability to expand and diversify production in order to meet recurring crises, as well as the implications for policy space to develop agriculture and ensure livelihoods. Countries including South Africa, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and groupings such as the African Group, the African, Caribbean and the Pacific Group (ACP), and the G33 group of developing countries have considerably strengthened their opposition in negotiations, but a consolidated and consistent opposition is still needed.

There are several reasons for this. Firstly, there is the perceived desirability of the WTO as the multilateral institution that will deliver uniform trade rules and development. Secondly, there is great dependence on, and interest in, developed country markets. Thirdly, developing countries still have dependence on finance, technical assistance or expertise from neoliberal institutions and developed countries to shape trade positions.

Constructing alliances has proved a challenge for Global South governments both inside and outside the WTO. This is for manifold reasons, including a lack of common ground on critical issues, as well as political differences among developing countries who are often closely aligned with powerful developed countries. The politics of aid and developed country supportive programmes have also played their part in dictating decisions by economically vulnerable countries. For example, the US administration threatened not to renew the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), which provides duty-free access to US markets for Sub-Saharan African countries. This threat arose when African trade ministers were about to reject a proposed agreement in the WTO that was in the interest of and keenly pursued by developed countries. Soon the African countries were forced to support the agreement.

South-South cooperation and groupings such as MERCOSUR (the Southern Common Market) and BRICS (which comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates) offer strategic opportunities. It must be stressed, though, that there are different interest groups even within these groupings. For instance, MERCOSUR countries like Brazil and Argentina are major agricultural exporters.

As a result, they benefit from full trade liberalisation and are opposed to import duties and domestic subsidies for other countries. However, for many developing countries, in particular NFIDCs and LDCs, subsidies and import duties are key tools for supporting domestic production and livelihoods. Even in countries, which are agricultural exporters, such as South Africa, Pakistan, China, India and Indonesia, domestic food security concerns generally outweigh the export interests.

In spite of some conflicts, cooperation-based approaches among Southern governments that are tolerant of mutual needs and have a broader vision, especially of domestic food security concerns, can and must be a more strategic path. This is especially when compared to relying on developed countries for either fair trade rules or for supply of agricultural products.

An Alternative Model of South-South Cooperation

The lack of effective alternative models has been one of the key reasons why there is not a visible and substantial resistance in spite of repeated calls by various farmer's organisations to "leave agriculture out of the WTO", an alternative trade model has not been forthcoming. In particular, the specific principles that should underpin such an alternative framework is a key question and requires much deliberation.

The experience of the WTO and FTA negotiations makes clear that safeguarding policy space for individual nations to design and implement agricultural policies is crucial. This is one step towards augmenting and stabilising production and productivity in the Global South. The agency and tools to deal with recurring crises, diversify production bases, ensure livelihoods, protect raw materials, and other objectives must be prioritised across the Global South. The current WTO rules, and the ongoing negotiations, are hostile to such objectives. FTAs too, are increasingly constraining policy space by including new issues that get deep into regulatory areas, such as TRIPS plus IPR rules, e-commerce, liberalisation of government procurement, and limits on state owned enterprises.

Further, an agenda based on South-South cooperation must place small-scale food producers at its core. While the exact definition and scope of what a small-scale food producer is may vary from country to country, a framework such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) could form the basis for it. No trade rule must be allowed to supersede these rights which, for example, relate to incomes and livelihoods of small-scale food producers or agricultural workers. Similarly, such a framework could be based around the right to food, and would provide a set of clear, progressive guidelines that must not be allowed to be subverted by trade rules. Critical issues such as food standards and technical barriers, the operation of public food stocks and sustainability could be worked out on the basis of cooperation among Global South countries. Finally, the rules of any trade agreement, whether under the WTO or FTAs, must be equitable both between and within countries and must protect and expand special and differential treatment of developing countries.

Strategic Considerations for Resistance

Given the complexity of agricultural trade, there are important things that organisations and grassroots movements should keep in mind. First, even if organising groups have adopted anti-WTO, or no-FTA positions, it's still vital to engage with negotiations, at least to prevent damaging provisions from going through. Such engagement can be maintained even while fully opposing such agreements. This should include generating analyses of negotiations and impact studies, as well as engagement and advocacy with governments.

This process of engagement will be aided by an alliance of organisations and movements. As with many successful movements, this will rely on the shared knowledge of groups and movements coming together who work inside and outside the system, and who have diverse expertise and interests. Farmers' groups are naturally opposed to such trade agreements including the WTO and the FTAs. They are often outside the formal spaces, and tend to provide a strong voice of dissent. Such outside voices could be complemented by policy research and advocacy organisations that work within the official spaces and raise critical voices.

Even on the research front, the somewhat technical analyses of policy research NGOs must be supplemented by the vast experience of grassroots organisations and movements. For this insider-outsider alliance to succeed, a relationship of trust and understanding is necessary. At the same time, there must be constructive efforts to develop an alternative trade agenda on agriculture, to ensure more equitable trade rules and greater policy space for the Global South both within and outside such institutions and agreements.

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FOOD FOR INTERNATIONALIST THOUGHT

By Sabrina Fernandes

Food production and consumption are, by their very nature, internationalist concerns. Economic stability, political relations, the social reproduction of labour, and health care are not determined solely within a nation's borders. The interconnectedness of food requires a careful internationalist strategy for re-thinking and the coordination of access to, and distribution of food as well as what humanity should be eating (that is, food considered beyond mere units of energy for consumption or chosen based on what makes it to supermarket shelves). Fundamentally, overcoming the food crisis will require addressing the root causes around the ownership and control of land, the commodification of food crops and the environmental and health degradation associated with the dominant global system of food production. Opposition to this system at present comes from different sources, including rural and urban workers' organisations, impacted communities and indigenous peoples. Though these groups are disparate their shared struggle is for the creation of a common politics for food, land and nature.

A combination of recent crises – including flooding in Somalia, drought in Ethiopia and an earthquake in Afghanistan – have illustrated the increasing global dependency on food and humanitarian aid. During events like this, it becomes harder for countries to navigate external pressures, and their capacity to produce and distribute adequate food through regular economic channels is diminished. The global polycrisis impacts the ability to predict outcomes and risks, but unpredictability cannot become an excuse for normalising inadequate responses to hunger in the face of accelerating and increasingly complex crises.

Instead, unpredictability must be factored into strategic calculations. Ecological collapse will cause damage at a scale that no fundraising and transfer of grains can mitigate. Indeed, in a landscape of ecological collapse, it will become impossible to secure the basic nutrition of the more than eight billion people living on the planet.

Industrial agriculture and monocrop production become more vulnerable by the day, due to the impacts of climate change, war and dependence on the petrochemical industry. This vulnerability puts food supplies under constant threat.

From Food Security to Food Sovereignty

Inequality is not an accident, nor is it either an isolated feature or after-effect of the polycrisis. Rather, it is a defining characteristic of capitalism. Inequality prevents the majority of the world's population from accessing the adequate means to produce food, and from sustaining a livelihood that includes consuming a varied, healthy diet. The largest world governance institutions and state metrics still centre their approach on food security, while food sovereignty has emerged as the strategic orientation of social movements and rural worker organisations in the past thirty years. For these groups, food is more than just a matter of sustenance, but is a central means by which we can organise society justly and sustainably.

The World Food Summit of 1996 approached food security through the principles of ensuring there is enough safe and nutritious food that can be accessed daily to meet healthy dietary needs and food preferences. By definition, this is a desirable and worthy goal. However, in the years since, food security has developed into a paradigm which does not question the underlying power dynamics and the reproduction of material conditions that make food insecurity a permanent feature of the global order.

At its core, the food security paradigm deals only with access to food, without challenging the political and economic structures that determine and control access, as well as distribution.

By failing to address the root causes of hunger and famine, the food security paradigm makes it impossible to end hunger globally. Of course, many people worldwide possess food security, but this is restricted to increasingly limited geographic pockets. In terms of the people localised in one area, food vulnerability is influenced and determined by class, race, gender and, of course, citizenship status. Globally, "underdevelopment" and "de-development" lead to widespread food insecurity across areas. Another problem with the food security paradigm is that it is easily co-opted to generate partial answers that pose no threat to the corporate food system, or worse, that even open up new profit opportunities. Accelerated by other crises, the food security paradigm becomes ever more dependent on aid, be it through direct food delivery, cash transfers or small development projects that cannot compete with the food giants and their price-setting powers.

In practice, a "science of food security" emerges, one which takes as its focus calories and the output that is compatible with precision agriculture having the aim to increase crop yields and to assist management decisions using high technology sensor and analysis tools. This model tends to be reliant on Green Revolution technologies that rely on chemical fertilisers and pesticides and that are tied to colonial projects and corporations, in order to optimise resources in aid response and/or development projects.

In this rationale, food insecurity can be addressed by reaching optimum yields of certain crops that should meet the demand for fats, fibres and protein. All of this is carefully managed and data-driven. Precision farming is advocated by the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) with the objective of optimising, "agricultural value chains [...] critical in advancing food and nutrition sufficiency without increasing the size of land under cultivation." The framing of food that reduces it only to "optimal input" relegates vital elements of food production and the culture of eating, like territory ownership, taste, heritage, care, well-being and connection as secondary. This reductionist approach has, though, proved useful to corporate agriculture, since it reinforces the case for genetically modified crops (GMOs), more efficient fertilisers, and the standardisation of food production for market purposes. Advocates of plant breeding technologies (including GMOs and hybrid seeds) argue that government overregulation is an obstacle to achieving food security. Overregulation, as the argument goes, denies populations the opportunity to grow crops that have increased nutrient use efficiency and are more resilient to climate shocks.

The unpredictability of the climate crisis and the threat of an impending ecological collapse has been hijacked by new industries. These actors dominate the agricultural sector by offering tech-based solutions that increase "resilience" by helping to absorb shocks.

The rise of these industries is a prime example of what happens when resilience is taken out of a strategic horizon of radical change, and transformed instead into a market outcome. If critics of the polycrisis want to actually solve it, it is worth considering what "resilience" is being used to mean.

Is it a resilience that reinforces the profit orientation and metabolic fractures that lie at the basis of food insecurity? Or resilience as a means to help build the conditions that will tackle the cause beyond the symptoms of food insecurity.

The paradigm of food security is about optimising productivity. It's true that productivity matters – after all, feeding the world requires enormous quantities of food. But if productivity is approached solely as a technological problem, it reinforces the tendency to fragment the quantitative and qualitative aspects of food production and consumption. On the quantitative side, production for food security is viewed as a challenge of multiplication. Whereas division, that is, distribution of food, is left to logistical planning. This ignores what Raj Patel identified in his influential 2007 book Stuffed and Starved, as the bottleneck of power that concentrates international food distribution among a small set of corporations. This bottleneck excludes the poor and small-scale food producers from decision-making.

It also normalises worrying tendencies, such as an overreliance on industrial animal exploitation as a protein source, which has direct health implications, as well as longer term consequences like the proliferation of new viruses, greenhouse gas emissions and inefficient use of water and soil.

When the question of what food actually is arises, quality can get absorbed into categories like calories and a set group of nutrients. This framing, though, fails to properly widen the discussion around food to include variety, taste, customs and community life. Further, the global crisis of hunger can appear to be primarily one of not enough food. This fails to engage with the fact that, in the solutions presented to food insecurity, the perpetuation and repackaging of food as a commodity maintains colonial practices, sustains land inequality and contributes to environmental degradation.

The food crisis is not merely a crisis, but the result of a project that has empowered the world's elites, century after century.

The threat of hunger and starvation has proved potent enough to keep people in precarious working conditions in which they are subject to exploitation, as long as their most basic food needs are met.

The food security paradigm does not challenge capitalism, and therefore does not challenge the root causes of the food crisis. At most, the food security paradigm attempts to partially reform the food crisis through poverty alleviation schemes.

Food sovereignty, on the other hand, offers a vision for an alternate world. Food sovereignty is based on life creation and sustenance, and therefore it needs to incorporate democratic approaches to land, territory and decision-making. Together these approaches can produce the desirable outcomes of respecting food preferences and promoting an active life that are included in the definition of food security.

Food sovereignty questions the basis of the existing order, and seeks to build powerful alternatives. This even means rethinking today's culture of food, which promotes ultra-processed foods, the unsustainable and cruelty-based consumption of animal protein, and the year-round availability of out-of-season fruits and vegetables shipped from far away. The food sovereignty paradigm urges us to rethink the causes of famine and food insecurity. Also, it asks those who have the means to choose what they eat to use this agency.

Food sovereignty is necessarily concerned with questions of property ownership and the determination of the means of food production. This is why social movements fighting for agrarian reform and popular control over territory, including indigenous territorial claims, have pioneered debates on food sovereignty. La Via Campesina, the biggest international movement of peasants, small-scale food producers and agricultural workers, frames food sovereignty as a fight for the future. That means not only securing what is needed today, but changing conditions for long-term sustainable access to high quality food alongside transformed ways of living.

Diversity as Radical Resilience

The concept of food sovereignty is deeply concerned with restoring and expanding systems of care. The struggles of rural women, indigenous and black communities to access land, restore ecosystems and grow healthy food demonstrate how the task of ending hunger is intertwined with the emancipation of peoples everywhere. For example, it is not enough to include gender clauses and safeguards in trade and food aid agreements. This is because clauses like this fail to address the underlying structure that excludes women both from accessing land in the first place, and then from accessing the resources which are necessary to grow and distribute food without becoming more dependent on debt and state transfers. Food sovereignty stresses autonomy and self-determination, which means the relationships behind production must be transformed too, so that they become more horizontal, more decentralised and more diverse.

Food sovereignty defies monoculture in more than one way. In a letter to La Via Campesina Brazil, the late, great Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano wrote: "Monoculture is a prison, it always was, and now with GMOs, much more. Diversity, by contrast, liberates. Independence is reduced to a hymn and to a flag if it is not based on food sovereignty. Self-determination begins at the mouth. Only productive diversity can defend us from sudden collapses of prices, a phenomenon that is the norm, the deadly norm, of the world market."

By monoculture, Galeano means both the monocrop methods employed by corporate agriculture, and the way that the current hegemonic approach to food creates homogeneous food systems, which flatten cultural specificity. The lack of crop diversity in monocultures means there is less variety in nutritious food that is available locally. However, this is hidden from anyone who shops at major supermarket chain, where out-of-season fruits and grains imported from far away are readily available. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) believes that there is a decline in agrobiodiversity due to Green Revolution methods and globalisation, which changes perceptions of what can be grown and eaten: in the past humans relied on more than 7,000 plant species as food sources, now we depend mostly on a few crops, such as rice, wheat and maize.

Monocrop culture carries a disdain for traditional knowledge and agricultural practices, which contributes to a production system that reshapes rural life in multifaceted ways. Women are pushed out of food production, and young people are pushed out of rural areas altogether, and into the peripheries of mega-cities. Monocrop agriculture requires only the labour of a small portion of the workers who would be needed to work the land if it were owned and managed in alternative, collective ways. This process is referred to by the Brazilian movement Teia dos Povos (People's Web) as "deterritorialisation". Land concentration is the term used to describe the ownership of land in an area being concentrated in the hands of a small number of people or companies.

This phenomenon, and the violence around it, also leads to the expulsion of people from territories, with particular consequences for gender and racial inequality. Worldwide, landowners are usually men, and where corporate agriculture is dominant, the plantation system disadvantages women with more short-term, precarious and less protected jobs.

As a response to this, agricultural women workers have led agrarian reform movements around the world. Especially powerful in the Global South, these movements have helped to set the agenda against issues like the privatisation of seeds by companies and agrochemicals like chemical fertilisers and pesticides that destroy the soils and kill biodiversity. In a region as diverse as Latin America, this combination of battling to secure access to land, while at the same time ensuring that the role of women, Black and indigenous communities is valued, helps to move the struggle for food security to food sovereignty.

The Marcha das Margaridas (The March of the Daisies) is one example of this. A wide-scale mobilisation by rural women in Brazil, it combines grassroots and institutional politics to advance feminist agroecology, a vision of agricultural practices which centres care and democratic participation. Increasingly, the demand is not only for agrarian reform, but one that is also feminist, agroecological and that empowers local people. It is not enough to divide up the land and redistribute some of it. Public policy and investment are also needed to ensure that people can regenerate degraded soil, build adequate housing, provide schooling for their children, and find economic avenues for transporting and to get access to markets for their produce. All of this must happen with the prioritisation of local and domestic populations over commodity exports.

If these conditions are met, then small-scale food producers will not only benefit from a land title, but they will also earn the means to cultivate the land and to live well. Demands raised by the Marcha das Margaridas have recently resulted in new social programs launching in Brazil. The National Programme of Agrarian Reform was re-established, prioritising women, and a new programme, Productive Backyards, was set up to advance "nutritional and food security" and the autonomy of rural women. Here, diversity translates into a call that connects land ownership to the right to food to the social transformation required to translate these rights (as access and control) into sovereignty (as permanence and safety).

Globally, rural women are building collective practices that strengthen local economies and contest traditional patriarchal ways of organising around the land. Examples include the ecofeminist organisation Alianza de Mujeres en Agroecología (Alliance for Women in Agroecology) in Colombia, and the rise of "campesina feminism", which highlights the role of women in agroecology in Guatemala.

The principles of agroecology align with these strands of feminism in clear ways; for instance, rural women tend to use organic farming practices and farmers` seeds. Rural women are also a powerful driver for the local markets, through manufacturing and selling goods like artisanal soap and medicinal plants.

Inclusive Modes of Production

Fixing the global food crisis means promoting more inclusive modes of eating. This includes reimagining the distance between where food is produced and where it is consumed, how choice is created, the role of technology in production, and how to reduce global transportation. It also touches on our relationship to organic and inorganic residue creation, the problem of food waste, our relationship to other animal species and, finally, the ways in which food is about time and pace of life.

An inclusive mode of eating requires an ecoterritorial mode of food production. Agroecology plays an important role here. This is for various reasons, including its refusal to detach food production from the ecological conditions that enable a large number of crop varieties to be cultivated. Also, as a system, it is more resilient to climate shocks, without being propped up by the dual short-term "remedies" of resource extraction and chemical inputs, both of which create a vicious cycle of long-term problems. Agroecology is not restricted to rural areas, and it helps to reconcile socio-metabolic patterns of food production by also promoting urban agriculture.

This model of agriculture involves the regeneration of soil, the adaptation of cities for an era of climate crisis, and bringing together the priorities of urban and rural labour in ways that help to address the gaps created by forced migration to big cities.

Corporate monoculture promotes a one-size-fits-all approach to food production. An ecoterritorial mode of food production is a radical break from this, in that it fosters a system where food and labour are considered according to scale and context. In agrarian reform movements, large farms are converted from extensive pieces of land – which tends to have less-than-ideal productivity, violent labour practices (including slave labour), and environmental degradation – to land which is approached through cooperative systems, where the use of machinery is complementary to human labour and management.

When social movements began to incorporate more of an agroecological perspective, it made strategic sense. First, because agroecology is compatible with the values of traditional communities, who approach food and nature in radically different ways from capitalist agriculture. Second, because it fosters the tools and knowledge that make the movement's production less vulnerable to climate and market shocks and constraints. This latter reason is also why large agribusinesses have begun to appropriate agroecological techniques, in the hope of guaranteeing yields and profits and alleviating the risks brought about by climate change. But this is, again, resilience as a market band-aid solution, not as a means to build long-term strength and change the system in a fundamental way. Because agribusiness misrepresents agroecology, treating it as technology devoid of culture and livelihoods, appropriation of it will ultimately fail.

The agroecological paradigm enables regeneration against unfavourable conditions by creating the means to tackle emergent and escalating challenges. Together, agroecology and food sovereignty demand radical public policy and land redistribution. Current institutions limit any alternative systems, in favour of a corporate food system. Until this stops we will not be able to realise an inclusive mode of eating, in which access to and control over food is connected to sustainable land and community relations, without agrarian reform and policies that foster new commercial connections and logistical systems, it is almost impossible for small-scale food producers, united as they may be, to compete with agribusiness and large food traders who have the ability to set prices and accumulate land. As argued in the Declaration of Nyéléni – produced at the 2007 World Forum for Food Sovereignty, written in Mali and signed by representatives from popular organisations from more than 80 countries – there cannot be food sovereignty if access to food is granted at the expense of the rights and livelihoods of those who produce it.

Transparent trade and commerce are key pillars of food sovereignty and the fight against the commodification of food. Transparent trade means resisting international free trade agreements (FTAs), such as the one currently under negotiation between the European Union (EU) and Mercosur (the economic and political block comprised of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay). In a show of internationalist strength and cooperation, peasant and small-scale farmers organisations in Europe and South America began mobilising against this FTA. In one of their joint declarations, they argued that the agreement would worsen the lives of peasants and farm workers and stated that "instead of promoting the ecological reterritorialisation of our food systems, (the FTA) will increase the transcontinental exchange of agricultural products which can rather be sustainably and agroecologically produced in our territories. From a sustainable food system point of view, this is in total contradiction with all the commitments of our governments in the climate Paris Agreement and in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)."

Food Sovereignty is an Internationalist Project

These interconnected struggles make up a popular, emancipatory internationalism that centres around economic affirmation and self-determination within a state's borders. This is without chauvinistic nationalisms which negate integration, while at the same time reinforcing the exclusion of other vulnerable peoples in the name of a single nationalist project. In order to think of food sovereignty as a long-term project, that includes building an inclusive and sustainable future, we must consider the role of food sovereignty in creating adequate conditions for change. The climate crisis threatens internationalist sovereignty today, both in the sense that it impacts national security, and that it results in the loss of entire territories and necessitates the migration of people, in this context, food sovereignty shows how popular knowledge, caring economies and inclusive systems can create the kind of resilience that mitigates risks and helps to navigate the uncertainty imposed by the polycrisis.

In the internationalist approach to the polycrisis, resilience means more than just the capacity to weather the storm of unpredictability. Instead, resilience is about constructing favourable and sustainable conditions that lead to the kind of action that targets the root of the crises. A strategic internationalist conception of food sovereignty is part of this challenge, since it exposes the international political economy that generates hunger and famine in places that would otherwise be ripe for sustainable and healthy food systems. It exposes how economic deals imposed by governments onto agricultural workers and peasants do not fix vulnerabilities, but create more of them, all to benefit corporations who then keep their tradition of price speculation and food monopolies.

This is worsened by a global context of wars and occupations. There is of course the direct destruction that is the first-hand result of these ongoing conflicts, but also the way in which they generate a constant demand to rebuild and regrow, as well as the greenhouse gas emissions that are produced along the way. The uncertainty of war hurts sovereignty in obvious ways, but also prevents any path towards food sovereignty by displacing and starving populations, at the same time as it destroys the local conditions that could remedy displacement and starvation. This is the case in Gaza, which in early 2024 is still under a humanitarian aid blockade, and in Sudan, where close to 5 million people are under emergency levels of hunger. It is also the case in Ukraine, where the war created 11 million food insecure people and impacted food prices worldwide due to Ukraine’s role as one of the world’s breadbaskets — with food supplies that previously reached up to 400 million people every year.

Since the inadequacies of the global food system are not just flaws, but deep characteristics of the dominant capitalist mode of food production, the internationalist strategy means focusing on food sovereignty over food security. Achieving food sovereignty is about fighting climate change, ensuring land rights, valuing traditional knowledge, all under the leadership of diverse social movements with an anticapitalist orientation.

The weaving together of internationalist struggles in the food sovereignty paradigm can bring true resilience: growing food to feed the world, while also creating the conditions to weather systemic shocks, survive and grow stronger in the fight for systemic change.

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AFRICA’S AGRICULTURAL FUTURE LIES IN AGROECOLOGY

by Million Belay

A premise which has its roots in traditional knowledge and ecological principles, some people may find the term agroecology mysterious or esoteric. However, far from being an abstract concept, agroecology can be a lifeline for long-lasting food systems, providing a route that links the welfare of people with the health of the land. Agroecology is not just about farming and growing food; it means combining social justice, ecological science, and indigenous knowledge. Overall, it is a holistic system in which ecosystems and agriculture work in harmony to produce food that is both environmentally sustainable and safe for consumption. As an approach, agroecology prioritises not just yields of crops, but the health of ecosystems, the well-being of communities, and people`s sovereignty over their food systems.

For small-scale food producers, agroecology is a beacon of hope. It promises a way out of the vulnerability imposed by monocultures and the dependency on external inputs such as chemical fertilisers, hybrid seeds and pesticides. Agroecological systems are inherently diverse, which means they are more resilient to the pests and diseases which can decimate food systems at a local level. They are also resilient to the market shocks that can disrupt local economies and cause crises further up in the food system. They encourage farmers to cultivate a variety of crops, an approach which promotes nutritional diversity in diets, and a safety net in the face of adversity. Furthermore, these practices strengthen community bonds, as farmers often work together: sharing knowledge, seeds, and labour.

Food sovereignty is at the core of agroecology. This is because agroecology promotes the right to healthy and culturally appropriate food, which is produced through ecologically sound and sustainable systems.

Food sovereignty means communities having the power to shape the future of their own food systems, rather than being passive observers and recipients of global agricultural trends.

As examples of how agroecology can play out in practice, an agroecological farm in Kenya combines crop rotation, agroforestry, and natural pest control, relying on years of local expertise. In Uganda, community seed banks may help to preserve biodiversity by providing access to a variety of traditional crops that are robust to local climate problems. These viable examples can be found all over the African continent.

Technology and Agroecology

Technology can play a huge part in transforming Africa's agricultural systems into agroecological ones. When considering technology, we must interrogate what we mean by technology, as well as who owns the technology, and the power relationships that lie behind said technologies.

Technology could revolutionise Africa's agriculture if it is employed with the participation of farmers, and if it is used in a way that makes sense contextually.

It must be designed with small-scale food producers in mind, allowing for scalability and adaptability to local settings. Digital technologies, for example, can play a role in facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges via platforms and mediums like WhatsApp or Facebook. They can also be used in tracking or aggregating goods from multiple producers, or in connecting farmers with cost-effective logistics and transport options. In each of these applications though, it's vital that the digital technologies operate in a regulatory environment where the data taken from farmers is not used for profit, and which enables farmers to decide with whom it is shared.

There is a risk that digitisation paves the way for big food and big tech to use their existing technological advantage to extend their control over African markets. Therefore, the challenge for governments and their public policies is to create the regulatory environment for digital technologies without it becoming a breeding ground for monopolies that crowd out small-scale food producers.

Labour and Agroecology

The labour involved in agroecological farming practices often leads to misconceptions of agroecology as a backward step to the labour-intensive practices of the past. This is a myopic view. In reality agroecology involves labour of a different kind — a kind that is intellectually engaging and physically rewarding. By its nature, it is a system of agriculture which involves managing polycultures, enhancing soil health, and maintaining ecological balance; all of which require knowledge and skill.

This labour should be valued and supported through educational programs that teach ecological literacy and practical skills in agroecology. In an ideal agroecology system, this education would begin at primary school level by introducing agroecology and agroecological concepts into the curriculum. Furthermore, there should also be agroecology training for government and civil society extension agents as well as the provision of supportive publications.

Energy Efficiency and Agroecology

The extent to which agroecology is energy efficient is a testament to the ingenuity of working with nature, not against it.

Agroecological practices often use renewable energy and minimise reliance on external inputs, which are energy-intensive to produce. Moreover, they take advantage of biological processes — such as the process by which legumes convert nitrogen into ammonia or natural pest control through predator-prey relationships — which reduces the need for chemical fertilisers and pesticides. This not only cuts energy consumption, but also enhances the resilience of farming systems to shocks such as drought or market volatility. Agroecological farmers can cope with crises and global volatility as they mostly rely on their own inputs, produce their own food, and are relatively immune to the whims of fuel prices.

Agroecology and Productivity

Is agroecology productive enough to feed a rapidly growing African population? To answer this question we must first consider what productivity means in conventional agriculture, which is one-dimensional and fixated on yield per hectare. Agroecology challenges this narrative, proposing a multidimensional view of productivity that includes soil health, water quality, biodiversity, and social equity.

In agroecology, productivity is determined by the variety of crops that are planted and harvested rather than by counting the output of a single crop. This vision questions the wisdom of pursuing high yields at the cost of long-term ecological health and social well-being. Instead, it promotes a well-rounded strategy that maintains productivity over time, understanding that true abundance comes from ecosystems operating in balance.

Agroecology and Social Movements

As the drive for conventional agriculture is accelerating, political movements, like the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), are burgeoning across Africa. This reflects a collective awakening to the importance of healthy, sustainable, and equitable food systems. These movements are not merely about lobbying for policy changes, but also about grassroots empowerment, community engagement, and the democratisation of food systems. They call for a shift from top-down approaches to more participatory, inclusive governance structures that recognise the rights and knowledge of local communities.

The path to agroecology is not merely about changing farming techniques; it means overhauling worldviews. It requires a collective shift in how we value food, farmers, and the land itself.

According to the prevailing narrative, Africa cannot feed itself without the use of agrochemicals, high-breed seeds, and a shift in agriculture to market-led practices. To counter this, we must put forward a more robust vision which centres the realities of climate change, biodiversity loss, and escalating global conflicts. In this metric, it is impossible to focus only on one narrow definition of productivity. Instead, the need to produce more, healthy, culturally appropriate food, with the right to food at its core, becomes primary.

The international community has a role to play in all of this. Development assistance and agricultural investments must be aligned with agroecological principles. This means moving away from the promotion of high-input agricultural systems, and instead supporting the scaling-up of agroecological practices. It requires a change in funding priorities, from supporting large agribusiness to investing in small-scale food producers and local food systems.

In conclusion, agroecology is not a luxury but a necessity for the future of Africa, and indeed the world. It offers a sustainable pathway for the continent's agriculture, ensuring food security, preserving biodiversity, and empowering communities. As the world grapples with the challenges of climate change and sustainability, Africa has the opportunity to lead by example.

Through its implementation, we can demonstrate that agroecology is not just feasible, but can actually be the foundation for a prosperous and sustainable future. We face a choice between perpetuating a system that degrades both the land and its people, or nurturing one that restores ecosystems and revitalises communities. The time to make the right choice is now.

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