

## Short Communication

Special Issue - Food Justice and Food Sovereignty in the context of the Right to Food

### THE DOMINANT POLICY APPROACH TO THE RIGHT TO FOOD HAS BEEN IMPROPERLY UNDERPINNED BY A FOOD SECURITY PARADIGM

Schuftan C<sup>1\*</sup>

\*Corresponding author email: [schuftan@gmail.com](mailto:schuftan@gmail.com)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9858-9911>

<sup>1</sup>Claudio Schuftan, People's Health Movement and World Public Health Nutrition Association, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam



Focusing on food security is hiding the true challenge of reclaiming a truly democratic path to the right to food and adequate nutrition. Under the food security paradigm, the question of power in the food system never comes up. So, as long as access to food is guaranteed under some system or other, there is no problem. Therefore, the notion of ‘securing-the-needs-of-the-hungry’ is also meant to signal the presence of a ‘security’ discourse that identifies ‘hunger’ and the ‘hungry’ as a threat to the political economy. The dearth of active scholarship in this area may be due, in part, to the opposition that the Via Campesina’s food sovereignty narrative poses to the existing institutions handling food issues, particularly at their governance level. The increasing dependence on agriculture --not as a source of food for direct consumption, but as a source of inputs for the food processing industry-- means that the raw food commodities produced by agriculture will have a diminishing potential to directly impact human consumption and health since many are processed, reshaped and transformed into unhealthy ultra-processed formulations.

This is why food sovereignty recognizes the right of consumers and countries to refuse agricultural and post-harvest technologies deemed inappropriate; it calls for the right to decide what we all are to consume, and how and by whom food is produced. This means communities must be free to decide on food produced in their own environments and countries. The historical evolution of the food sovereignty and food justice movements has shaped the scale, depth and context of their message in today’s world. Food sovereignty, founded by peasant and subsistence farmers in the Global South, has grown to be an international rallying cry for equal, democratized food systems. In resisting food security --because it entails applying unnecessary technologies in agricultural and post-agricultural development-- food sovereignty attempts to reclaim democratic politics in the faulty food security discourse.

Food sovereignty activists argue that without a shared political outlook in the food system, both producers and consumers remain passive recipients of policy, of external funding and of subsidies not decided by them. These activists accept the state’s preeminent role as the guarantor of human rights, but demand that the control of these rights resides and remains in communities.

Therefore, in the face of ongoing and increasingly evident injustices in the food system, and of a growing double burden of malnutrition (triple if one considers undernutrition, overweight and micronutrient deficiencies), it is clear that the realization of the right to food and adequate nutrition will require a paradigm shift in the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food anchored-in and driven-by a broader economic, social and political transformation.

Furthermore, food security has not gone far enough to make linkages with farmers' rights. We must trace and assess the ways in which institutions of global governance produce and circulate particular assumptions and ideas about food and agricultural issues, especially about the causes of food insecurity and malnutrition. These assumptions are rooted in the necessity of capitalist markets, and in the roles of biotechnology and commercial agriculture. How the existing market relations came to be and are maintained --and affect the human right to feed oneself-- is seldom questioned.

The food security paradigm is deeply implicated in the perpetuation of, what are, relations of domination that allot power to the profitable agro-industrial food sector that rules entire economies for the benefit of just a privileged few. This understanding of food security has been rightly criticized as serving primarily states, institutions, classes, and individuals that stand to gain materially from capitalist agrarian systems. (This criticism is warranted given that under food security, the question of power in the food system never comes up). It is this hegemonic notion that links the realization of the right to food with the extension of capitalist markets the one that is increasingly being questioned and rejected by social justice movements. A food justice movement that takes seriously the problems of equity, equality, health, and sustainability will thus need to start asking these harder questions.

The food security narrative has been successful in offering a place to agricultural corporations to provide their 'solutions' to the problem of hunger. Governments have bought into the corporate food regime's myths, believing that without corporate agriculture, there would be inadequate food to meet the growing needs of the population. For the above reasons, the term 'food security' is becoming a concept of diminishing value for justice projects. This because, ultimately, the issue is one of justice --for people and for the environment. Food security, while only purportedly grounded in a human rights discourse, simultaneously tends to be understood as realizable almost exclusively through capitalist markets. This is considered highly regressive by the right to food movement.

### **Food Sovereignty Consistently Means a 'Right to Act'**

The concept of food sovereignty blends and integrates actions straight into the right to food and into our struggle for food for all according to need.

The food sovereignty narrative poses a rightful threat to existing market conditions and institutions; it importantly complements the longer-term socio-political restructuring processes that health equality calls for. Food sovereignty's planning begins with a wide spectrum of claim holders providing inputs on ways to transition to a better use of agricultural land to produce food that promotes a healthier nutrition.

## GOING BACK TO BASICS

- Food sovereignty is 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 those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and to change directions in the food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems so that these are controlled by local producers. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farming, artisanal fishing and pastoralists, in their food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just and fair income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those who produce the food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations, free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations. (Nyeleni Declaration, Mali, 2007).
- Right to Food or Right to Nutrition- Human Rights concepts applied to nutrition have evolved in the last 20 years. Early thinkers in this area began talking of an inalienable ‘right to food’ by all human beings. But after the worldwide adoption of the UNICEF-proposed conceptual framework of the causes of malnutrition in 1990, it became clear that food security was only one element of nutritional well-being. This led to the coining of the concept of the ‘right to nutrition’ (here emphasized as the right to adequate nutrition) that addresses all determinants of the said conceptual framework. As the late Urban Jonsson put it “fruits are food; apples are nutrition ...and we eat apples or other specific items, not foods generically”.
- Like many other rights, the right to nutrition is commonly treated as a vague aspiration. However, it can be taken more seriously by pursuing it incrementally, by focusing on parts of the problem and spelling out the obligations of different parties/duty bearers in detail. For example, a first focus can be on the concept that children should be regarded as having the right to freedom from stunting and wasting. Explicit contracts with duty bearers involved-in/responsible-for childcare could be used to clarify their obligations.
- There is a potential worry though: Some districts may lean toward keeping their rates of malnutrition high in order to ensure that government resources keep

coming in. The problem is that social welfare systems that provide more help to the poorest people or the poorest areas in effect reward poverty, which tends to lock them into that condition. Reducing levels of wasting and stunting is what should be rewarded as a means to climb out of poverty; that is a very different sort of incentive.

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