

## Who will feed us?

### How small-scale food providers help realise the Right to Adequate Food<sup>1</sup> for the world's peoples



**Patrick Mulvany** argues that to secure the right to food, we must challenge the industrial paradigm and put food sovereignty first.

Despite the tireless efforts of negotiators since World War 2 to change the food system and agree a legal code and requirement to fulfil people's Human Rights in relation to food, the Right to Food for many hundreds of millions of people has been and continues to be undermined. In the last half of the past century, governments increasingly forgot the primary purpose of agriculture, including livestock production and fisheries – to feed their peoples adequately. This purpose was suborned to satisfy the avarice of those controlling industrial agriculture and the transformation, trading and sale of its products, seeking increasingly concentrated profit. The result: a dysfunctional food system with nearly a billion hungry; almost two billion obese and a reckless erosion of the resources and ecosystems upon which food production depend. Food security – the mantra of those concerned with the food dimensions of national security – effectively became a slogan in support of agribusinesses delivering edible commodities.<sup>2</sup>

Belatedly, in the 21st century, many assessments, forums and initiatives now formally recognise the inadequacy of this approach in terms of the provision of nutritious food as well as its sustainability.<sup>3,4,5</sup> But the measures policy makers propose – to re-engineer industrial production in collaboration with agribusiness corporations<sup>6,7</sup> – will do little to improve the adequacy of food provision. This requires tackling the root causes of the unsustainable industrial system – the corporate power of agribusinesses. It is left to those who currently provide food for most people in the world – small-scale food providers – to provide the solution: food sovereignty.<sup>8</sup>

#### A food sovereignty framework

Food sovereignty provides a framework for policy, practice and the governance of food that is effective, efficient and equitable. It was conceived by La Via Campesina twenty years ago and launched at the World Food Summit in 1996. Food sovereignty puts food and small-scale food providers at the centre of policy and practice. It is based on their wisdom, experience and skills in providing nutritious food and sustaining the ecosystems that produce food sustainably. Its proponents have identified the main causes of food insecurity and the processes and technologies which undermine small-scale food producers.

Food sovereignty provides the basis for highly productive, smaller-scale food production – using methods that are ecological, biodiverse and resilient to shocks. In realising food sovereignty, the Right to Food can be fulfilled through the provision, as locally as possible, of adequate nutritious food.

#### What is food sovereignty<sup>9</sup>?

Food sovereignty is the right of people 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:

1. Focuses on food for people and the Right to Food, rather than export commodities
2. Values food providers and respects their Rights, rather than squeezing them off the land
3. Localises food systems, rather than promoting unfair global trade
4. Puts control locally, rather than having power vested in remote TransNational Corporations
5. Builds knowledge and skills, rather than depending on alien technologies such as GM and compliant agrochemicals
6. Works with nature, rather than using methods such as energy intensive monocultures and industrial livestock factories that harm beneficial ecosystem functions

#### Complex food webs

Food sovereignty supports small-scale food providers who produce the food eaten by most people in the world, largely using biodiverse and ecological methods. An estimated 70% of the global population (nearly 5 billion) are fed with food provided locally, mostly by small-scale farming, gardening, fishing or herding. It is estimated that there are around 2 - 3 billion people in rural, coastal and urban areas who are engaged in food provision to some degree. Predominantly, it is women who provide and process food from their gardens or smallholdings, looking after livestock and preparing fish.

A further 1.7 - 2.7 billion people are engaged in local food webs, including markets and trade. Small-scale food providers operate within complex food webs, where food is provided to households from many sources both locally and from other locations, including through formal and informal markets. It is estimated that of the 70% of the food provided through these food webs, some 35-50% comes from farms; 15-20% from urban agriculture and gardens; 10-15% from hunting and gathering; and 5-10% from fishing.<sup>10</sup>

The importance of small-scale food provision in securing the world's food is under-recognised by those whose interests lie in defending industrial food chains, except when so-called 'smallholders' can be captured into those chains as consumers of agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides) and providers of food grown with cheap labour. Yet it is increasingly acknowledged, most recently reiterated by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the UN Committee on World Food Security, that these 'smallholders' have an important role, in their own right, in the food system:

"Smallholder agriculture is the foundation of food security in many countries and an important part of the socio/economic/ecological landscape in all countries... Smallholders contribute to world food security and nutrition while performing other related roles in their territories. Historical evidence shows that smallholder agriculture, adequately supported by policy and public investments, has the capacity to contribute effectively to food security, food sovereignty, and substantially and significantly to economic growth, the generation of employment, poverty reduction, the emancipation of neglected and marginalized groups, and the reduction of spatial and socio-economic inequalities. Within an enabling political and institutional environment, it can contribute to sustainable management of biodiversity and other natural resources while preserving cultural heritage."<sup>11</sup>

### Building on the innovations of African Family Farmers<sup>13</sup>

- Genuinely participatory research programmes that value existing knowledge and skills, including participatory plant breeding, should be integrated into publicly funded national research strategies, so long as small-scale food producers have decisive control, in order to reframe overall research priorities.
- Researchers should be accountable to the organisations of small-scale food providers and not subject to corporations' control of research agendas.
- Farmer to farmer extension and knowledge sharing programmes and skill sharing.
- Processes between small-scale food providers should be strengthened and training provided for young farmers, fishers and pastoralists in developing resilient food production systems, that also include enterprise and technical skills.
- The innovations of family farmers and other small-scale food providers should be promoted through media and outreach programmes for training, education and information dissemination.

### Family farming – providing local food

In Africa, 'smallholders' prefer to be called 'family farmers'. A recent publication based on reports by the African farmers' regional networks from West, Central and Eastern Africa concluded that innovative family farming, backed by appropriate research, supportive investments and adequate protection, can out-perform industrial commodity production. It provides the basis for the food sovereignty of communities, countries and sub-regions of Africa.

To achieve this, a priority is the development of participatory research in support of, and determined by, family farmers and small-scale food producers. This is required to enhance the adaptive capacity and resilience of food provision. Cooperation with formal science can be helpful if this develops innovations that can be controlled and used by small-scale food providers. Push-pull technology for controlling pests and weeds in maize,



participatory plant breeding (PPB) and the system for rice intensification (SRI) are good examples of useful contributions to food provision developed through participatory methods.<sup>12</sup>

### Challenging the industrial paradigm

The international community recognises the challenges for improving productivity and realising the Right to Food. Yet, despite the accumulated evidence of the failures and unsustainability of the industrial system and the contrasting positive contributions of the innovations and practices of small-scale food providers, much effort is concentrated on supporting industrial commodity production, processing, trade and distribution. Institutions and governments continue to invest in and roll out industrialised approaches, promoting the proprietary technologies and research they depend on. The scientific challenge is therefore to move away from the reductionist approach of industrial production and towards resilient, biodiverse and ecological food provision. This requires a people-centred, ecosystem approach to producing food. This approach embraces complexity and diversity, sustainably using technologies, seeds, livestock breeds and resources that can be controlled by small-scale food providers.

The political challenge is for citizens to require governments to regulate and reduce the negative impacts of, and remove direct and indirect subsidies for, industrial production systems, and progressively dismantle them. In parallel it is essential to have in place measures that will prevent the commodification of, and corporate control over people's collective rights to the commons that are required to improve productivity using more resilient, biodiverse and ecological methods. To realise the Right to adequate Food requires defence, support and promotion of ecological food provision.<sup>14</sup> Small-scale food providers working in the framework of food sovereignty have the knowledge, skills and capacity to achieve this, if their food production systems are protected.

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