29. Food and agriculture sector

Judith Hitchman

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION: THE STATE OF PLAY IN FOOD AND AGRICULTURE TODAY

Traditional diets are part of our cultural heritage and therefore linked to food sovereignty (Nyéléni.org 2007). Yet over the last 50 years, food systems have become linked to the global governance of food and agriculture, with the commodification of seeds and inputs as well as commercialisation of processed foods. As a consequence, food systems have become increasingly far removed from food sovereignty. This process of removal is due to agriculture being regulated by the World Trade Organization (WTO), hence food is a commodity rather than a fundamental human right (Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights) (United Nations 1948). This has led to industrial agriculture producing cash crops often for export, dispossession of small-scale local producers (despite the fact that they account for 70 per cent of all farmers and are in fact the ones who feed local markets), land and water-grabbing, and seed patenting. This situation has become considerably aggravated by the signature of an agreement by the World Economic Forum with all United Nations (UN) agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The nomination of Qu Dongyu as Director-General in August 2019 also played a role, with the situation becoming exacerbated by the signing of a partnership agreement in 2020 with CropLife International, the global trade association representing the largest agrochemical, pesticide and seed companies (La Via Campesina 2020). Dongyu is pro-private sector and has followed José Graziano Da Silva of Brazil, who strongly supported the social movements, with prior achievements including the introduction of the Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) policy in Brazil under President Lula in 2003.

Global agriculture is worth up to $2.4 trillion, accounting for an important percentage of the global economy. Food systems far removed from food sovereignty have led to considerable distortion, with countries or regions in which much of the population suffer from hunger often exporting certain crops, while local people have little access to fresh nutritious food. Some key figures include the following (ETC Group 2019):

- Twenty global corporations control the food chain.
- The three biggest corporations control over 50 per cent of the seeds.
- Four corporations control over 99 per cent of the livestock breeding.
- Ten corporations control 55 per cent of fertilisers.
- Four traders control 75 per cent of the grain and soybean market.
- Eleven corporations control 30 per cent of the food processing industry.

The results of this are quite dramatic (Nyéléni.org 2007; FAO 2020):

- One in ten people in the world are malnourished; hunger is rising.
- Thirty per cent of the global population is overweight or obese.
• One in five people in the developed world today cannot afford to consume three meals a day or to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables.

• Approximately 15 per cent of the population in developed countries such as the United States and many European countries need food support through food stamps and food banks, with this figure rising.

29.1 WHAT IS THE RESPONSE OF THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY (SSE)?

In spite of the alarming figures shown above, 70 per cent of the world’s food is produced by small-scale family farmers, using less than 25 per cent of the world’s agricultural land. This food is essential to territorial and local markets all over the world, which are influenced by various forms of the SSE in significant ways. Currently, in most countries, there is an increasing awareness of the need to achieve greater food justice and improve citizens’ democratic control over their food systems. Sustainable local food systems lie at the heart of this approach, with the following subsystems and typologies:

• Local farmers’ markets.
• Allotments.
• Community gardens.
• Grow-it-yourself.
• Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)
• Local food coops.
• Local collective producers’ shops.
• Solidarity shops and systems.
• Farmgate sales.

At the heart of these phenomena lies the struggle for access to land, seeds and water, as well as the right to food, food justice and different ways of regaining control over food systems. Agroecology as a holistic, scientific approach to production and consumption includes, as a strong anchor, both traditional and indigenous environmentally friendly farming, and social movement-based links between production and consumption. Agroecology protects and promotes agrobiodiversity. Miguel Altieri, a Chilean-born agronomist and former lecturer at the University of California, is widely credited as the leading figure and author on this subject. Agroecology has been adopted by the broader food and agriculture social movements as a response to industrial agriculture. The ‘10 Elements of Agroecology’ were adopted by the FAO Council in December 2019 (FAO 2018). The work was based on the participatory contributions of the Civil Society and Indigenous People’s Mechanism Working Group on Agroecology. It is important to note that a circular and solidarity economy is included as one of the ten elements. This is the result of the two Forums on Agroecology held by the FAO in 2014 and 2018.

The social movements also held the Nyeleni Forum on Agroecology in Mali in March 2015. An extract from the final declaration reads (Nyeleni, 2007, 71):

IV. Build local economies
• Promote local markets for local products.
29.2 THE ORIGINS OF THE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENT

La Via Campesina was formally constituted in April 1993 (during a conference held in Mons, Belgium) only months before the finalisation of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which, for the first time, included agriculture and food in its negotiations. The 46 representatives (women and men) of organisations of peasants, small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples and farmworkers from the Americas, Asia, Europe and Africa who met at Mons clearly understood that the GATT Final Act, along with the creation of the WTO, represented a profound shift away from more controlled national economies to an almost exclusively market-driven global economy. They also clearly understood that the further entrenchment of neoliberalism would spur national governments to continue to dismantle the agrarian structures and programmes that peasants and farmers had won after years of struggle: these very structures and programmes that helped to ensure the viability of small-scale farming, promote production for domestic consumption and contribute to national food security. The leaders of the conference were quick to identify the threat which farming families in the North and South faced: ‘their livelihoods, their way of life and, indeed, their very mode of existence were all at stake’ (Aurélie Desmarais and Nicholson 2013, 3).

29.3 LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS

In response, several countries have included food sovereignty and the right to food in their constitution, as well as a legal framework for solidarity economy. These include Mali, Senegal, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nepal and Costa Rica. And these same countries, as well as many more, have legislative frameworks for SSE. It is clear that in order to overcome the damaging industrial food and agricultural system outlined above, food sovereignty and agroecology must include an economic paradigm change. The policy document on ‘Connecting Smallholders to Markets’ (Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) Working Group 2016) is one of the most important policy documents that supports local and territorial markets for smallholder producers and consumers.

29.4 THE ISSUE OF ACCESS TO LAND

A basic requirement for food production is access to land. Over the last 50 years, much of the traditional agricultural hinterland of cities which provided the city with food has become part of the urban sprawl. The New Urban Agenda clearly mentions the need to preserve agricultural land, and recommends the use of community land trusts as a means of preservation from...
speculation and maintaining traditional agricultural land. Community land trusts are important forms of the SSE and are widespread around the world. They have proven especially important in many ethnic minority communities inhabiting American cities. They enable them to grow culturally appropriate food in neighbourhoods that were previously highly disadvantaged. According to Terre de Liens, the French community land trust organisation:

They emerged in Europe in the 1970s and have rapidly developed in the past 10 years. Their focus is to facilitate and support access to land for agroecological farmers. They mobilise community support around maintaining local food production and commercialisation, ensuring environmental protection, and fostering the development of organic farming and agroecology. In some cases, they also seek to ensure that farmland is preserved in the face of urban and infrastructural sprawl. (Nyéléni Europe Food Sovereignty Movement 2020, 115)

Today in France, 100 farms are still lost every week due to land concentration and an ageing farming population. Nevertheless, there is an increasing population of young, often new farmers practising solidarity-based farming through collective farms and CSA. The most important overarching policy framework is the ‘Voluntary Guidelines’ for the governance of land tenure, negotiated by the Civil Society Mechanism and the UN Committee on Food Security and Nutrition in 2012, which was subsequently adopted by the FAO (FAO 2012). It clearly outlines the rights of people to land, and governance thereof, and is an instrument that can be used to protect and defend land rights around the world.

29.5 SEEDS: THE HEART OF LIFE ITSELF

Ecoagrobiodiversity has been greatly reduced by the control of large corporations. Nevertheless, the SSE and community seed-saving of traditional varieties has become an important way of preserving traditional open-pollinated varieties of plants. There is strong resistance by social movements to the Union for the Protection of New Plant Varieties (UPOV) and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Small-scale family farmers defend the right to freely save, exchange and replant their seeds. It should also be mentioned that this includes the struggle against genetically modified organisms and so-called ‘new genomic techniques’. It has been scientifically proven that traditional, open-pollinated seeds and participatory breeding techniques allow plants to adapt to and resist climate change, and that the nutritional value of fruit and vegetables produced using agroecological approaches is higher than that produced by industrial agriculture. Open-pollinated varieties are also more resilient to climate change. Community seed-saving is an essential aspect of the SSE and genuinely sustainable food systems.

29.6 WATER, CLIMATE CHANGE AND AGROECOLOGY

Water is an essential element in agriculture (see entry 27, ‘Energy, Water and Waste Management Sectors’), and the climate crisis is increasing the instances of both droughts and floods. Yet agroecology and agroforestry are powerful tools in preserving food production and overcoming many of the effects of a changing climate. Ensuring that forests and trees are part of the landscape in order to protect against soil erosion, as well as mulching to keep moisture in
the soil when growing crops, are both important practices within agroecology. Agroecological practises are more labour-intensive than industrial farming; however, they do ensure much greater protection against a changing climate. This is essential within an SSE-based approach to food production, as are the social aspects of agroecology.

29.7 NOT JUST AGRICULTURE, ALSO FISHERIES

Artisanal fisheries face the same issues and threats from industrial fisheries globally as those experienced by small-scale family farms. Ocean acidification caused by excessive use of chemical fertilisers, the use of high technology to identify shoals of fish that are then targeted by factory ships that process fish at sea, and many other issues are forcing artisanal fishers away from their traditional practices and fishing grounds (Josse and Brent 2021). Practises such as community supported fisheries are now quite widespread in North America and are an effective SSE means of supporting small-scale fishers (Local Catch Network 2022). Direct sales by small-scale fishers to local communities is also a widespread practice in many countries.

29.8 HOW IS FOOD DISTRIBUTED AND CONSUMED IN SSE-BASED AGROECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS?

Distribution and consumption cannot be disassociated from production in an agroecological and SSE perspective, but instead need to be considered in a local to the global framework (Hitchman 2017).

Land use and social inclusion are two aspects that are generally the object of legislation of devolution and are considered by the local government, irrespective of whether there is a national policy framework or not. Some important examples of SSE practice include the use of municipal land to grow food for public canteens (such as schools and hospitals), thus making land and food part of the commons (see entry 13, ‘The Commons’).

During the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a significant increase in SSE practice relating to food in many parts of the world. For instance, Brazil’s Movement of Small Farmers (MPA) has consistently delivered free food baskets of any surplus food to *favelas* to ensure that people have access to healthy fresh food in spite of the loss of salaries. This is clearly an example of community empowerment. Other examples include the way in which CSA farms in China and in the Basque country carried out weekly home deliveries of produce – to all their members in the case of China, and to the vulnerable in the Spanish Basque Country. URGENCI, the global CSA network, has written a report on the resilience of these practices during COVID-19 (URGENCI 2021).

CSA and local solidarity partnerships for agroecology have developed many different techniques of SSE to ensure social inclusion and fair income for farmers, as well as affordable food for all. These range from local government subsidies of some shares, to differentiated costs based on subscribers’ income (within a trust-based system), to farm-based work in order to offset some costs for a limited number of subscribers. Solidarity also exists between consumers and the producers in the event of a shortfall due to illness of farmers or climate events. This principle of shared risks and benefits originated in Japan in the 1970s as the *teiket* system,
the original version of CSA. CSA networks at the national level are federated by URGENCI. There are currently approximately 3 million families that are members of national and regional networks of URGENCI.

Producers’ local cooperatives, consumer cooperatives and their shops are also part of the SSE. They include small farmers’ cooperatives and processing and retail shops, which are now common across the world, particularly within Latin America. They are based on either agroecological practice or participatory guarantee system organic certification, another aspect of the SSE.

Additionally, it is important to be aware of the corporate capture of SSE initiatives by industrial agribusiness operators, including everything from food boxes to sales of local varieties of fruit and vegetables, and even of agroecology (without the social movement dimension).

CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In the field of food and agriculture, the role played by social movements, starting with La Via Campesina, whose membership is over 250 million, has been significant. Other key social movements cover all recognised UN constituencies and include key players within the SSE such as indigenous people, herders, pastoralists, fishers, women, youth, consumers and the urban poor. They work together at the global and regional levels to defend human rights and introduce and implement the policy that supports producers and consumers through the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) (IPC 2014). The IPC now includes a growing dimension of the SSE.

REFERENCES


