

Food Sovereignty and combating poverty and hunger in Ghana

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Abstract

This paper reviews the concept of food sovereignty as an alternative to failing conventional food policies. Using the Ghanaian economy as a case study, it investigates the implications of food sovereignty for attaining the ambitious Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of combating poverty and hunger in developing economies. The need for social shaping of (bio)technologies have been emphasized. It has also been recommended that policies on support for small holder farmers in developing countries will have to be defensive and responsive to price-distorting subsidies. Not only should government be committed to promoting, defending and protecting the rights of local farmers and agricultural employees. Such policies should also consider technology-programs from food sovereignty perspective.

Introduction

The food sovereignty approach, which started in 1996, was basically a reaction of NGOs/civil society to WTO agreements. To this social movement, hunger and poverty are not caused by food shortage, or scarcity but rather implementation of wrong policies. Hunger has to do with lack of access to food, inadequate income and lack of access to productive resources. Food Sovereignty has been defined in recent years as the right of people and communities to decide and implement their agricultural food policies and strategies for sustainable production and distribution of food (People's Food Sovereignty Network July 2004). From the protectionists, it became apparent that there was complete loss of confidence in conventional mainstream food policies and strategies to solve problems causing hunger, malnutrition and poverty that have characterized rural economies over the years. As pointed out by Windfuhr (2005), these conventional policies turn to benefit the wealthy more than the less well-off.

Over 700 representatives of civil society, including farmer, fisher folks,

pastoralist, indigenous and women organizations presented concerns over disconnection of local production and consumption patterns in Rome at the forum for Food Sovereignty in June 2002. They described conventional food policies as failed medicine' supporting globalization and liberalization policies that intensify the structural causes of hunger and malnutrition. These policies have forced markets open to dumping of agricultural produce in developing countries, privatized communal and public natural resources and concentrated resources in the hands of a few giant corporations. As a result the poor continues to be poor while the reverse is true for the minority rich. Global studies highlight that the distribution and incidence of poverty is predominantly a rural phenomenon (UN Millennium Task force on Hunger 2005, IFAD, 2001) and majority of the hungry and malnourished are smallholder farmers.

The masses are therefore demanding more efficient food policy framework-food sovereignty- that will address the needs of the poor. Arguing further, food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security and the right to food can be seen as a tool to achieve it. Food sovereignty has been described as a legal and political concept while food security is more technical (Rosset 2006) favoring global food production systems with high yielding technologies regardless of the negative effect on smallholder farmers and the environment. Food sovereignty also argues for new technologies that are not embedded in global chains which allow multinational companies to control global production from a distance. But rather (bio)technologies which promotes self-control/local control such as what Tailoring Food Sciences to Endogenous Patterns of Local Food Supply for Future Nutrition (TELFUN) research program seeks to achieve in developing countries like Ghana, Ecuador and India.

This paper reviews the on-going debate on food sovereignty and critically investigates key implications for achieving the millennium development goal of halving poverty and hunger in Ghana by 2015. Some recommendations are made for policy directions.

Discussion

Debate on food sovereignty started in 1996 by a civil society represented by Community Based Organizations (CBOs), Farmer Based Organizations (FBOs), Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs), fisherfolks and pastoralists who agitated that hunger and poverty are not caused by food shortage or scarcity but rather by the implementation of wrong policies. The bane of the

arguments has been that feeding a nation's people is an issue of national security and sovereignty. If the population of a country must depend for their next meal on the vagaries of the global economy, on the goodwill of a superpower not to use food as a weapon, on the unpredictability and high cost of long-distance shipping, then that country is not secured (Rosset, 2003). The debate on food sovereignty has been concentrated on four main arguments including right to safe food, access to productive resources, mainstream agroecological production and local markets development.

The Right to Safe Food by all people

The right to food is more of a constitutional human right, placing demands on state managers to make nutritious and culturally acceptable food available and accessible to all people. Right to food is based on existing international law which imposes obligations on states parties to respect, protect and fulfill individual's right to access adequate food (FAO, 2004). Unlike food security which does not give credence to where food is produced, food sovereignty concept emphasizes local productions using ecologically sustainable management systems.

Linked to the production of safe, nutritious and culturally accepted food is the issue of *tailoring food (bio)technologies to endogenous patterns of food supply*. In most developing countries, a social organization characterised by horizontally interconnected actors provide for the nutritional needs of significant proportion of the population that are usually located in the marginal (rural and urban poor) areas. In such situations, the right to produce and the right to consume food are mutually linked since majority of the hungry and malnourished are smallholder farmers. It is therefore logical that science and technological practices are tailored to meet the needs of the local people. Instead of developing science and technology for society, science and technology should be developed in the society (Ruivenkamp 2005).

Food products have been perceived as having social dynamic forces and therefore food (bio)technology has to be developed with intended users and thereby creating the environment needed for adoption; people wanting technology that are developed together with them (Ruivenkamp 2003; Feenberg 1999, 2002). Research agenda settings must involve full participation of farmers, processors and consumers in the local networks with the other institutions serving a facilitating role.

Access to productive resources

Also linked to the individual's right to food is the access to food producing resources, including land, water, and seed. The smallholder farmers have been marginalized in the distribution of natural resources (Rosset, 2006) by the expansion of agricultural production for export. This is usually controlled by wealthier producers who own the best lands and continually displace the poor to ever more marginal areas for farming. There is a growing concern about foreign dependency syndrome by developing economies. In the area of Agriculture (bio)technology products like seeds, enzymes and biocatalysts have become 'politizing products' transforming the global food system (Ruivenkamp, 2005). They are politizing products because - for example -they facilitate control from a distance. If a farmer uses a particular high yielding variety, the farmer is also forced to re-arrange production and buy pesticides and other inputs from that company, making reproduction dependent on this company supplies and credits to buy these inputs. The problem is that most farmers may not have access to these new products. Those who may have access and buy become more dependent on these multi-national companies. Therefore life science companies become the political actors regulating social organization of production from a distance through the supply of "informationalized" industrial/new seeds. The result has been separation of Agriculture from its ecological environment.

To avert the situation of lack of access to seeds, Visser (2002) suggested food sovereignty related seed policies to encompass measures safeguarding and promoting the maintenance and development of genetic diversity on-farm. These suggestions build on the notion that farmers' practices of free exchange of genetic resources are culturally based, and that these cultures do not regard genetic resources as sources of economic reward. From another authors' point of view (Salazar *et al* 2006), farmers often recognize the attractive features of modern varieties, including high yields and novel resistances, but also identify various characters that are not appreciated, especially regarding taste, processing qualities, and resilience under less optimal growing conditions. For food sovereignty, the solution is not so much to keep on conserving old varieties, but to develop new varieties which are in accordance with the desires of the farmers and consumers- and this calls for research and technology development in the society.

Mainstream Agroecological Production

In developing countries, peasant farmers have shown tremendous ability to prevent and even reverse land degradation, including soil erosion (Templeton and Scherr, 1999). They can and/or do provide important services to society at-large, including sustainable management of the basic crop and livestock genetic resources upon which the future food for humanity depends. Small farmers with secure tenure can also be much better stewards of natural resources, protecting the long term productivity of their soils and conserving functional biodiversity on and around their farms (Altieri, 1995). New technologies must be tailored and adapted in site-specific way to the highly variable and diverse farm conditions typical of smallholder farmers (Altieri, 2002).

Trade and local Markets development

Trade policies especially the trade rules agreed in the agricultural package (Agreement on Agriculture-AoA) are becoming binding and more stringent for many countries in terms of issues like tariffs, food safety and intellectual property protection. There is however imbalance in the level of liberalization obligations for different groups of countries. For instance while developing countries have opened up their markets through trade liberalization policies, their smallholder farmers still have to compete with subsidized exports from industrialized countries most of which are produced by agribusiness companies. This enables the developed countries to sell their produce at lower prices than the cost of production. World market prices are depressed for most staples forcing most smallholder farmers to be under unfavorable competitive situation. Currently WTO-AoA has been criticized against export subsidies but action on this has rather been very slow.

Farmers in developed countries certainly do not have natural comparative advantage to produce for the whole world but rather enjoy artificial privileges. Food sovereignty has not been perceived as an enemy to market based policies but rather places emphasis on fair and equitable trade. Food is first a source of nutrition and only secondarily an item of trade. Primarily agricultural policies must focus on production for domestic consumption and self-sufficiency. Just and equitable trade policies that eliminate negative effects of subsidized exports, food dumping and artificially low price. Give all farmers irrespective of their origin equal platform to compete.

Implications for the Ghanaian Economy

There is no doubt agricultural growth is critical to meet the ambitious Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of combating poverty and hunger in developing economies. (Millennium Development Goals are time-bound and measurable goals and targets set for combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women agreed by world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit held in September 2000). In Ghana over 60% of the population depend on Agriculture for their livelihood, and typically cultivate small acreages. With a population of close to 21million, more than 30% of Ghanaians live below the poverty line (UNDP, 2005) and per capita income is a little over \$600. However, Ghana is determined to halve the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day and most likely to suffer from hunger by 2015.

The Ghana growth and poverty reduction strategy (for 2006-2009) builds on creating favorable conditions for private-sector-led growth, improving the delivery of basic social services, and raising the efficiency of the public sector with special emphasis on improving the Agricultural sector. Ghana is determined to halve the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day and most likely to suffer from hunger by 2015. Nevertheless, the effort must be directed towards self discipline and commitment by all people. Ghanaians must be committed to transforming their own destinies, which have been linked either directly or indirectly to the agricultural sector.

One of the main problems highlighted by promoters of food sovereignty is the loss of Governments' authority to regulate important national policy areas such as trade, biodiversity and even land policy. The policy space for the nation's own decision is increasingly reduced, since international norms are prescribing what is possible at the national level not to mention World Bank /IMF conditionalities. It is for this reason that civil society mounts pressure on the state to review their policies to reflect food sovereignty issues. The idea of being committed to destiny transformation is entrenched in the Food Sovereignty concept and some implications for the Ghanaian economy are as follows;

Ghana can not depend on food imports

Food supply must be internally generated instead of imports.

Trade based food security policies based on the old economic recommendation to produce products in which countries have a comparative advantage

have forced developing countries to open up their agricultural markets to cheap imports. This has resulted in situation where smallholder farmers in developing countries have had to compete with subsidized exports from industrialized countries. A typical example is the effect of trade liberalization policies on the Ghanaian local rice industry. Local rice production accounts for over 40% of the 7 million Ghanaians who are into peasant agriculture (GAWU Report 2006). Consumption of milled rice went up from below 100,000mt to over 600,000Mt in 1985-2003 (an increase of over 500%).

It is also estimated that annual rice consumption growth rate is 3%; meaning that in the next decade and half more than 1 million metric tones of rice will be required to feed the nation. This also suggests that rice has increasingly become lunch and super of many Ghanaians. Unfortunately, the sharp rise in consumption has not impacted positively on the local rice production levels since significant proportion (about 75%) of rice consumed is imported. This has resulted into a situation where thousands of local rice farmers continue to struggle and become uncompetitive in their own local market. The major challenge faced by local farmers is high cost of production since most of the agricultural inputs are imported. The rice industry in Ghana today needs revival and more so if the Millennium Development Goal of reducing poverty is to be achieved. There is the need for change of perception among Ghanaians that foreign goods are better than local ones. Eating local rice goes beyond satisfying the stomach, it is an economic issue.

Farmers must be empowered to produce and consumers encouraged consuming locally grown food. Currently, a lot of consumers have been disconnected from locally produced healthy foods (Nicolosi, 2006). Developing taste for local foods put money in local economies. Food product regains its social significance, nutritive value and health if grown locally and first accepted locally.

Market must be internally generated

When markets are internally generated, jobs are created and local people (especially small-scale farmers and processors) regain their economic power

One way to promote local economic development is to create local circuits of production and consumption, where farmers can sell their produce and in turn buy other necessities from local artisans and merchants. This has been demonstrated in a recent landmark study in Brazil (Leite et al 2004). The authors described how local towns benefit from the commerce that is generat-

ed when estates belonging to absentee landlords are turned into productive family and cooperative farming enterprise through land reform driven from below.

Another typical example is the Ghana School Feeding Program (GSFP), which is strategically designed to fight hunger and reduce poverty using locally grown foodstuffs like maize, rice, soyabean, cowpea, millet and sorghum. GSFP has been designed to have wider implications for farmers. The aim of the program is to strengthen community food production and consumption systems through reduction in post harvest losses, provision of ready market for farm produce and incentives for increased production which will ultimately enhance food sovereignty. Some School feeding programs in the Ashanti region of Ghana are already using 'mamaba' high quality protein maize developed through local plant breeding research program.

Agriculture must be reconnected to the local Environment

Food (Bio)technologies must be location specific and agricultural products reconnected to local consumption patterns. Improved technologies must be developed and existing ones redesigned to suit local conditions. Over reliance on foreign technologies has resulted into disconnections in production-consumption systems. Examples of disconnections in conventional production-consumption systems have been cited as appropriation and substitution of farmers' activities through agro-industrial processes such as breeding of new cultivars and the maintenance and propagation of basic seeds that was originally done by farmers but now completely taken over by international organizations Ruivenkamp (2005). Other examples are the use of synthetic sweeteners, chemical fertilizers, enzymes, and microbiologically produced fatty- and amino-acids in preservation and processing methods.

Another example is a current research program 'Tailoring Food Sciences to Endogenous Patterns of Local Food Supply for Future Nutrition'(TELFUN) sponsored by the Interdisciplinary Research Education Fund (INREF) of the Wageningen University mentioned earlier. This program seeks to use the local cowpea network in Ghana to reconnect agriculture to the local environment emphasizing re-location of science and technology developments to local food networks, re-codification/ tailoring (bio)technologies to local environment and using food products as social dynamic forces (Ruivenkamp 2007). Using the bottom-up approach, TELFUN proposes an interactive research comprising plant breeders, food technologists, nutritionists and social scientists. The aim

is to develop (bio) technological practices within and for local food network to enhance food sovereignty.

Conclusions and Recommendations

On-going debate on food sovereignty has been reviewed. To meet the Millennium development goal of halving poverty and hunger in developing countries small holder farmers must have access to reproductive resources and consumers encouraged to patronize locally produced foods. Researchers should develop food (bio)technologies with full participation of local farmers, processors and consumers. State managers in developing countries must demand more policy space to push their food sovereignty agenda forward. Policies on support for small holder farmers in developing countries will therefore have to be defensive and responsive to price-distorting subsidies. Government should be committed to promoting, defending and protecting the rights of local farmers and agricultural employees. Food sovereignty does not urge to go beyond price policies and protectionism only, but also for new technology and research programs that are well accepted by society.

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