

Food sovereignty, political objective

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The access of small farmers to land, water and seeds... is not a guaranteed right nowadays. Agricultural and commercial liberalisation condemns to poverty a large part of the population that lives from agriculture and that should be in charge of providing food for the population locally and regionally. Neoliberal globalisation, on its way to privatise all aspects of life, has done the same with agriculture and natural resources. Today, claiming the right of the population to food sovereignty has turned into a prevailing need.

The concept of food sovereignty was proposed for the first time by the international movement Via Campesina in 1996 in Rome, on the occasion of the International Food Summit of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO. Food sovereignty is defined as the right of communities and people to decide on their own agricultural and food policies, to protect and to regulate the production and the internal agricultural trading with the aim of achieving a sustainable development and guaranteeing food security.

To reach this sovereignty requires a strategy that breaks with neoliberal agricultural policies imposed by the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and with the dominant capitalist economic system, which promotes a totally unsustainable model of agricultural and food production.

The globalised system of production, trade and distribution of food has proved to be a resounding failure in terms of ecologically guaranteeing a minimum food security. According to a study realised by the FAO, in the year 2000, it was considered that there were 826 million people in the world, mainly women and children, who suffered from hunger and other forms of malnutrition, when at world-wide level there is sufficient food production to feed all the population. So, where is the problem?

One of the main reasons for hunger and malnutrition has to do with the lack of access to natural resources (land, water, seeds...) of the small peasantry. Most of the cultivable land in the world is in the hands of the big transnational companies that impose the model of agricultural production for exportation, forgetting food necessity of the local population. A merchandised, intensive and genetically modified agriculture that puts the economic interests before the needs of the people.

In contrast, the concept of food sovereignty places agricultural producers at the centre of the political debate, supporting the right of the people to produce its own food independently of the conditions established by the market. A principle that breaks with the myth that only international markets will be able to solve the question of food insecurity. It is about prioritising local and national markets, reinforcing agriculture, fishing and family cattle ranches by promoting food production, distribution and consumption on the basis of social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Women, the most affected

The industrialised agricultural and food model and the transnational companies that apply it threaten the existence of farmers, traditional fishing, pasture economy as well as the food commerce on a small scale where the women have a central role. It should be taken into account that, in the southern countries, 80% of the food is produced by women, who are the main responsables of the maintenance of the biodiversity, of the seeds, and consequently are also those who suffer most from the neoliberal and sexist policies.

At the same time, women and children are the most affected by hunger at a world-wide level, even though, as we said previously, they are the main food producers. In addition, the massive use of chemical agents and genetically modified crops in intensive agriculture has harmful effects on the environment, human health and, in particular, on the reproductive health affecting mainly the women, who are the main work force in the field.

Another example of this inequality has to do with the access to the land: in many southern countries the law denies to women the right to own land, and in those where, legally, they have this right, traditions and practices prevent them to exert it. In Europe, many female farmers suffer a complete legal insecurity, since the majority of them works in family farms where the administrative rights are the exclusive property of the farm holder and the women, even though they are working in them, do not have a right to subsidy, to plantation, to milk quota, etc. Let alone the labour conditions of immigrant women in agriculture in the northern countries, where they work in totally unacceptable social and legal conditions, suffering a double discrimination: as women and as immigrants.

Steps forward

But the mobilization in favour of food sovereignty can presently count on new allies. Groups of women, fishermen, consumers, shepherds, indigenous people... join the farmer movement in the fight of the population for food sovereignty. This was the main result of the Forum for Food Sovereignty that took place on February 2007 in the rural village of Sélingué, in Mali.

An encounter that allowed progress in the defining of joint strategies between a wide range of social movements worldwide. The international encounter got together more than 500 delegates from 80 countries, with a balanced participation of people from all the continents, especially invited for the occasion. The objective was to carry out a strategic debate on what is understood from the different social movements by food sovereignty, what concrete proposals are presented and how to carry them out.

The encounter was promoted through an international call from movements as significant as Via Campesina, the World March of Women, Friends of Earth, the World Forum of Fishing Population, the Networks of Farmer and Agricultural Producer Organizations of West Africa (ROPPA). It was the culmination of a long preliminary process and, at the same time, a departure point for a new stage of mobilisation in favour of the food sovereignty. A step forward in this fight, literally vital for hundreds of millions of people.

P.S.

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