

Reclaiming the Right to live from the land Developing local food sovereignty alliances to normalise peasant agriculture in the 21st century

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Author's Background

Fergal Anderson is a small-scale vegetable grower and woodsman from the west of Ireland. He has worked extensively on the issue of Food Sovereignty in Ireland and Europe, helping to organize the first European Forum for Food Sovereignty in 2011 during his time working for La Via Campesina. Fergal is a member of the board of the Organic Growers of Ireland and coordinates the Irish Working Group for Food Sovereignty.

Summary

Throughout history, peasant farming has proved remarkably resilient to the forces of free-market capitalism both in Europe and Internationally. However, in many countries there are declining numbers of small scale famers, and an increase in larger conventional farms (due to international and national policies). There is an urgent need to renormalise and celebrate the resilience and adaptability of the peasant farming model, and look at how it can be adapted into our 21st century societies. Local alliances, developed through existing local political structures offer the best strategy for implementing effective policy to encourage new entrants into agriculture and develop the necessary infrastructure and logistics to put food sovereignty into practice at a local level.

Background

While there has been a growth and establishment of a market for local and organic foods in many countries, there remains a challenge in normalising engagement in local food systems by citizens, and in increasing the number of small scale farmers serving urban and peri-urban areas. This would require an increase in the flexibility and adaptability of food distribution systems, which peasant farming is ideally suited to providing.

Main chapter

There is an urgent need to build links between farmers and citizens in communities, as well as between organizations of existing farmers and citizen-farmer partnerships such as CSAs in order to challenge both conventional farming systems and provide healthy and affordable food for urban, peri-urban and rural communities. Existing food distribution systems (large retailers and their suppliers) are not suited to short-scale distribution, and cannot offer real solutions to the global challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Peasant farming using agroecological systems is ideally placed to meet these challenges. Multi-functional, high production and low-input peasant farms are easy to establish, bring multiple benefits in terms of community resilience, employment, biodiversity and can offer short-chain adaptability as well as high quality food.

Across Europe young people both individually and collectively are already applying agroecological methods of growing food and applying new modes of distribution based on the principles of Food Sovereignty.

As Food Sovereignty encompasses a broad range of issues, from working conditions, to the politics of seeds, it can act as a bridge between different stakeholders, and offer a framework for planning and organizing both locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

Existing peasant and small scale models of both production, processing and distribution have already proven themselves, and require only positive public policy support. Local and Regional "Food Sovereignty Plans" developed through grassroots consultation could provide a valuable framework for developing future food and agriculture policies in both rural and urban areas.

Often, local and national legislation does not offer specific incentives or logistical and infrastructure supports which encourage the development of local food systems. Farmers who are providing directly for local markets (as opposed to wholesale or export ones) find themselves in legal and administrative grey areas which discourage new entrants into the fields. This situation, allied with industrial phytosanitary standards offers a real practical barrier to the development of local food production and processing systems.

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Local and regional strategies could contribute positively to the further establishment of a new generation of peasant farmers in local territories. Through working together and sharing strategies, local and regional governments, existing peasant farming organisations and local short-chain citizen-producer groups can identify synergies and a working plan for the future.

Local strategies offer not just the potential for developing practical support infrastructure for small scale producers at a local level, but also a means of communicating the need for civil engagement with food producers to citizens. Normalising interaction between citizens to organize their food distribution and access producers is a first step in developing the more concrete initiatives which have succeeded well in countries such as France and Italy. Such interaction means breaking down many of the assumptions which have become engrained in consumer behaviour through the retail age and demanding more autonomy, responsibility and creativity from a new generation which wishes to make informed, educated and transparent decisions about not only the provenance of their food, but the organisational and economic structures in which that production is embedded.

Regional strategies for Food Sovereignty in this context allow space for the organisation of larger food volume production. Stocks and stores of staple foodstuffs which may not be produced in sufficient quantities on small scale farms can be managed and stored at a regional level. Production can be coordinated between regions to ensure a sufficient supply. Regional inter-coordination also allows for the organisation of trade between regions to make up for shortages. Regional organisation can also reinforce the process of normalisation of peasant scale food production, through the coordination of land trusts, land transfer organisation, installation aids and other incentives to aid the establishment of small scale producers.

Core messages and conclusions

Core Messages:

- Local Food Sovereignty Alliances can help to bring together different actors, using Food Sovereignty as a “bridge” between a broad range of stakeholders
- A new generation of peasants who make the best of new agroecological advances and traditional skills can be born through a synergy between existing organisational and individual knowledge and new and young entrants into farming
- A “normalisation” of peasant agriculture will require a broad endorsement from local government level, and can be led from the good examples set by Food Sovereignty Alliances
- Strategies must be developed at both local and regional levels to facilitate increased numbers of small-scale food producers

Conclusions:

- Peasant agriculture combined with innovative short-chain distribution schemes can offer solutions to hunger, climate change and biodiversity loss whilst revitalising local communities
- Young farmers moving in this direction need incentives in the form of an identifiable legal and administrative framework in order to provide a working model for adoption in the future
- Civil society organisations have a key role in promoting and developing this administrative framework
- Food Sovereignty offers a forum for discussing food and agriculture at a local level which involves local communities and builds bridges between different stakeholders