



People's Rights vs. Agribusiness: the Case of Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is the right of individuals, communities and countries to define their own food, agriculture, fishing, labor and land policies. These food and land policies are socially, ecologically, economically and culturally appropriate to the people who define them. Food sovereignty also guarantees people the right to produce their own food and to have access to necessary food-producing resources like seeds, land and water.

Food security is different than food sovereignty in that it is not culturally specific, and it does not guarantee people the right to produce their own food under ecologically, socially, culturally and economically appropriate circumstances.

Our Global Food System

Agriculture and food production have become more globalized than ever:

- ▶ Forty-six percent of total global land area is under agricultural management.¹
- ▶ A third to half of the planet's ecologically productive land is in crops or pastures.²
- ▶ Agriculture accounts for approximately two-thirds of global water use.³

To many of us who live in industrialized cities, farming seems like an anachronistic way of life. Food comes from supermarket shelves, not from seeds, soil and human labor. And yet, despite the global economic and political pressures on small- and medium-scale farmers, 70 percent of the world's population still earn a living by producing food.⁴

Agribusiness is a term used to describe a global industry that is involved in all aspects of food production, processing and distribution. Some agribusiness companies sell seeds, machinery, fertilizers and pesticides; others process and transport grains; some convert raw materials into processed foods; and several companies have a hand in every step. In recent decades, there has been a rapid consolidation of agribusiness companies that sell seeds and fertilizers and those that buy, sell and transport grain.

The increasing concentration and expansion of the global agribusiness industry poses a threat to food sovereignty. Biodiversity, sustainable food production, and the livelihoods of small family farmers are also threatened as agribusiness consolidates more power.

Agribusiness out-competes small-scale family farmers

As a result of government policies and international trade agreements, family farmers have been forced off their land and out of business at an increasingly fast pace. According

¹ Wood, Sebastian, and Scherr 2000

² Wackernagel and Rees 1995; Vitousek 1997

³ Gliessman, Stephen R. 1998. *Agroecology: Ecological Processes in Sustainable Agriculture*. Boca Raton. CRC Press.

⁴ Shiva, Vandana, "War Against Nature and the People of the South", in Anderson, Sarah, ed., *Views from the South-The Effects of Globalization and the WTO on Third World Countries*, Food First Books, 2000

⁴ Shiva, Vandana, Gitanjali Bedi, eds., *Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security-The Impact of Globalisation*, Sage Publications, 2002

to Farm Aid, 330 U.S. farmers leave their land every week. Between 2005 and 2006, the U.S. lost 8,900 farms (more than a farm per hour). There are approximately 5 million fewer farmers today than there were in the 1930's.

Some say the loss of family farms is a sign of progress and that bigger, industrial agricultural production is better. In reality, the consolidation of corporate agriculture and the erosion of independent family farmers have negatively impacted consumers, the environment and rural America. Consumers now have fewer choices in the supermarket; much of our land and many of our lakes and rivers have been contaminated by intensive use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides; and rural communities have been economically devastated because farmers are unable to compete against large agribusiness firms.

It is important to remember the many benefits associated with small, independent, family-farm agriculture:

- ▶ *Production of nutritious, fresh, high-quality food*
Small-scale family-farm agriculture provides consumers with high-quality fresh foods. It is family farmers who have been integral in supporting and maintaining farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and direct-marketing strategies of farmers to consumers. Family farmers in the U.S. and globally have led the opposition to genetically modified crops in order to keep our food safe and healthy.
- ▶ *Responsible stewardship of the land, including maintenance of high levels of biodiversity*
Industrial agriculture tends to operate on a model of intensive production—putting every acre of land into a single monoculture – rarely leaving a single bush or tree in its wake. By incorporating more diverse cropping systems, small farmers preserve open space and trees, thereby maintaining important ecosystems. In the U.S., small farmers devote 17 percent of their area to woodlands, compared to only five percent on large farms.⁵
- ▶ *Vested interest in local community—not absentee landlord*
In many places, small farms play a vital role in the local economy. In farming towns dominated by corporate agribusinesses, profits go to corporate headquarters rather than staying local. Towns strongly represented by family farms tend to have more local businesses, better local services, higher employment and more civic participation—in large part because farmers purchase goods and services within their own communities.⁶

Agribusiness threatens biodiversity and seed diversity

In the last 30 years, there has been a rapid decline in agricultural-seed genetic diversity, largely motivated by an increasing monopoly and privatization in the global seed market. The loss of genetic seed diversity and access to seeds has the most severe impact on the world's small farmers and Indigenous communities. The decline in agricultural genetic diversity and crop diversity has direct social, cultural and economic effects. In many areas where local varieties have been displaced by newly introduced crops, people have stopped consuming a healthy and diverse diet.⁷

⁵ Rosset, Peter. *The Multiple Functions and Benefits of Small Farm Agriculture. Food First. 1999*

⁶ Durrenberger, E. Paul, and Kendall M. Thu. *The Expansion of Large-Scale Hog Farming in Iowa: The Applicability of Goldschmidt's Findings Fifty Years Later. Human Organization 55(4): 409-415. 1996*

⁷ Thrupp, Lori Ann. *2000. Linking Agricultural Biodiversity and Food Security: The Valuable Role of Agrobiodiversity for Sustainable Agriculture. International Affairs 76(2): 265-281.*

Some food for thought

- ▶ The five largest agro-chemical companies control almost the entire global seed market.⁸
- ▶ Monsanto, a biotech company and producer of the herbicide “Roundup,” spent more than \$8 billion buying seed companies in the three-year period between 1995 and 1998.⁹ For \$1.8 billion, Monsanto purchased Delta and Pine Land, the largest producer of cottonseed, giving Monsanto an 85 percent share in the U.S. cottonseed market.¹⁰
- ▶ Seven thousand apple varieties were once grown in the U.S.—more than 6,000 are now extinct.¹¹
- ▶ Six varieties of corn account for more than 70 percent of the world’s corn crop.¹²
- ▶ Ten thousand wheat varieties used to be grown in China—a number that has dwindled to 1,000 since the 1970’s.¹³

Agrofuels—the newest agribusiness threat to food sovereignty

Agribusiness companies are now behind the great rush to promote crop-based fuels as a supposed “green energy” and a way out of our climate crisis. But don’t be biofooled! Agrofuels pose a huge threat to global food sovereignty, forcing fuel crops to compete with food crops. In the race to produce agrofuels, land that was once used to grow food is now being used to grow crops that will go into the gas tanks of the world’s privileged elite rather than the stomachs of the hungry. Small-scale, family farmers are being pushed off their land to make way for fuel crops. These farmers cannot compete against the likes of agribusiness giants ADM, Bunge or Cargill – companies that are investing millions of dollars in the expansion of soy, palm oil, sugar cane and corn for fuel.

The growing struggle for food sovereignty

Powerful movements around the world are fighting to make food sovereignty a basic human right. Via Campesina—the world’s largest peasant movement—has made food sovereignty one of its primary platforms (www.viacampesina.org). In February 2007, an historic World Forum for Food Sovereignty took place in Mali, bringing together civil society and social movements from around the globe to discuss strategies to achieve food sovereignty for all people.

Supporting food sovereignty means fighting against the erosion of biodiversity and seed genetic material, and defending cultural sovereignty, community livelihood, and the well-being of small farmers and our environment.

⁸ Palmedo, Mike, “Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean”, *Venezuelan Bank of External Commerce*, Feb. 05, 2004

⁹ Shiva, Vandana 2000. *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*. Cambridge: South End Press.

¹⁰ Shiva, Vandana. 2000. *Tomorrow’s Biodiversity*. Thames and Hudson

¹¹ 2000. *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*. Cambridge: South End Press.

Thrupp, Lori Ann. 2000. *Linking Agricultural Biodiversity and Food Security: The Valuable Role of Agrobiodiversity for Sustainable Agriculture*. *International Affairs* 76(2): 265-281.

¹² Gliessman, Stephen R. 1998. *Agroecology: Ecological Processes in Sustainable Agriculture*. Boca Raton. CRC Press.

¹³ Shiva, Vandana. 2000. *Tomorrow’s Biodiversity*. Thames and Hudson