

A GMO-free Europe: one step to achieve Food Sovereignty?

Workshop at the 5th European Conference on GMO-free Regions “Food and Democracy”, Lucerne, April 25th

Summary

In 5 ½ hours the 34 participants engaged in a lively debate around various pressing issues regarding the question of food sovereignty in Europe. After an introduction of the moderator (Tina Goethe, SWISSAID) and short statements of the four resource persons (Benny Haerlin, Save our Seeds and GMO-free Regions; Hans R. Herren, IAASTD and Millennium Institute; Guy Kastler, Confédération Paysanne and Via Campesina; Helen Holder, Friends of the Earth Europe) the debate focussed on the issues as summarised below.

Introduction and Objectives of the workshop:

The idea of the workshop was to bring together the experiences of the movement for food sovereignty with the ones from the movement for GMOfree food and agriculture. The movements and initiatives are already strongly linked in many different ways, but contacts should be strengthened as well as the possibilities of learning from each other. The GMOfree movement in Europe with its many and diverse networks on different levels and its important achievements for GMOfree regions etc. could be described as a success story. How could these movements be embedded in and/or extended to the wider context of food sovereignty, reflecting that the demand for democratic control over food production and consumption is the common ground of both movements?

With the International Assessment on Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology (IAASTD) we have a promising instrument that should be best used to inform the debates around the multiple crisis regarding the food system, the climate as well as the financial and economic crisis. In this context the demands for food sovereignty are higher than ever on the agenda. The challenge now is to defend the concept against nationalist interpretations and insist on its international focus.

Clarification of the concept of Food Sovereignty

“Food Sovereignty is defined as the right of peoples and sovereign states to democratically determine their own agricultural and food policies.” (IAASTD, Global Summary for Decision Makers 2008)

In more detailed definitions of Via Campesina and the IPC (see annex) the right to democratic determination refers also to individuals and communities. But although individuals are not explicitly mentioned in this short definition, they are included as citizens that vote in democratic states and consumers that choose. Still the question remains whether communities and regions should not be referred to in the definition of this concept. The concept includes the right to food as well as the right to produce food, the latter being an aspect that should be much more highlighted. The GMOfree movements focus on the right to produce and to consume what you want to.

The core demands of the GMOfree movement as well as of the food sovereignty concept are democratic control and self determination. GMOs are what we are fighting against, food

sovereignty is what we are fighting for. The GMO issue has brought food sovereignty into mainstream!

Relation between producers and consumers

The GMOfree movement started as an urban movement by concerned consumers. Labelling was a very early victory and laid the ground for the different mobilisation power the movement gained in Europe in contrast to the US. Supermarkets there played an important role. Only during the last years, as the issue of GM cultivation emerged also in Europe the movement enlarged to farmers and developed a broader approach (esp. regarding the GMOfree regions).

Food Sovereignty is a concept that was developed by the international farmers movement against the free trade agenda of the WTO and export oriented governments. Now food sovereignty should also be looked at from the consumers' side and the movement should make stronger efforts to include the urban sectors. The role of the supermarkets is crucial but very difficult to deal with, as they are on one side the prime target and means to transport consumer demands while at the same time drivers of industrialisation and important actors to push for low production prices and as much liberalisation as possible.

What could food sovereignty mean for consumers? One billion people suffer of obesity leading to severe health impacts. This could be interpreted as a lack of food sovereignty, as the needs, tastes and desires of the people are colonized by the different actors of the industrial food chain. Food is reduced to its nutritional information and the personal and/or traditional knowledge about food and food preparation gets more and more lost. So being food sovereign is not only a matter of economic strength. We have to identify the rules of the system and where sovereignty is reduced and threatened. In between the consumers and the producers the industrial actors – especially transnational corporations – dominate the trading, processing and retailing of food, reducing the space for our sovereignty (see graph from IAASTD in the annex). Their influence and domination encroaches more and more to the production and the consumption of food.

The fact that many urban citizens cultivate gardens (in Germany about 50 per cent of the population has access to a garden) could be one entry point to sensitize consumers how we relate to the land and the soil and how we depend on it: agriculture is a culinary act and eating is an act of agriculture.

The IAASTD noted and analysed among others a growing disconnect between consumers and producers as one important element of the malfunctioning food system. The participants of the workshop contributed several promising experiences and initiatives that aim at reducing this gap (local and regional experiences from Japan, Switzerland, France, Portugal were mentioned). The open question is whether these often small experiences could be up-scaled? On the one hand, up-scaling is needed, as we have to feed big and mega-cities that rely on huge grain reserves. On the other hand, experiences with up-scaling organic production or the production of bio-energy show the difficulties: if turned into mass production according to the needs of discounters, organic production tends to contradict its principles.

One important aspect of the relation between consumers and producers, respectively the disconnect between them, is the issue of certification. The bigger the gap and the smaller the trust between producers and consumers, the more important are labels, standards and

certifications. Standards organise the access to markets and often exclude smaller farmers. Consumers increasingly get lost with ever more and confusing labels. Certification has become a big business that in the end increases the price for organic or fair trade products and people (consumers and producers) who want to do it better, get punished. We actually should turn this system around and GM food and other not sustainably produced food products should have to be certified in order to get access to the market. Furthermore, these models of productions should actually be taxed to cover the huge externalities they carry. It is always a question of power and domination, who defines and controls standards. The current system is shifting the issue of regulation into the private sector making leading to a privatisation of food policies. Interesting initiatives in many countries exist to develop auto-certification systems based on trust and closer relationships between producers and consumers (e.g. “sellos de confianza” from MAELA in Latin America).

In order to enlarge existing networks and strengthen links between producers and other civil society organisations in Europe, Via Campesina Europe and different NGOs have initiated a process to build a “European Network for Food Sovereignty”. Main objective of the network, that is still in the initial process, is to influence the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EU. This reform is seen as a chance to bring in the concept of food sovereignty, not in order to protect the EU market but to achieve food sovereignty in all regions and countries. A big meeting is planned to be held beginning of 2010 in Hungary.

Seeds at the heart of food sovereignty

In Europe there are hardly any traditional seed saving and exchanging system left and the once rich variety of traditional seeds has been dramatically reduced, also due to the retraction of public institutions from the distribution and breeding of seed. Big seed companies, many of the now part of agro-chemical / biotech corporations, have taken over the seed market. European farmers now depend on industrially produced seeds, designed to grow only with chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides and developed for large scale monocrop production. Those seeds are either hybrid and therefore non reproducible or they are protected by intellectual property rights (plant variety protection and patents), that make the companies “owners” of the seeds and force farmers to buy new seeds for every year. This turns the farmers into debtors of the seed industry. But the seed companies are using the genetic variety of traditional seeds as a base for their breeding and have never compensated the farmers for their breeding efforts during hundreds and thousands of years.

Farmers have lost an important aspect of their sovereignty and increasingly they lose the choice, as the corporations decide which seeds they will bring to the market. The European seeds regulation is marginalising farmers bred and/or traditional seeds through standards, that favour industrially bred seeds. Local seeds may even become illegal through this regulation. Genetic markers that enable corporations to trace and claim “their seeds” present a new threat for farmer controlled seeds. Many public funds go into a biotechnology research that does not respond the needs of the farmers and consumers.

We need to take back the control over the seeds. All over the world – and in Europe – seed networks evolve, that facilitate the conservation, exchange and cultivation of local and traditional seeds. Regarding the research agenda, the selection of seeds has to be done on the fields of the farmers together with the farmers. This participative breeding is a very promising approach and the FAO has already supported and capitalised on various projects. Drought resistant plants, that will play a crucial role regarding the challenges posed by the climate

change, have been found and developed through participative breeding. There are also interesting projects to re-develop non hybrid seeds, like the open pollinated Bantam maize or the organic, non hybrid sweet corn from Sativa (see workshop on diversity of breeding and seeds C6 at www.foodanddemocracy.org).

The issue of farmers controlled seeds is basic and should not be confused with nice collections for museums. We have to defend it on the level of European policy and regulation as well as on international processes as the CBD (also see the workshop on patents C3 at www.foodanddemocracy.org).

The IAASTD report is asking for more public funds in agricultural research that respond to the needs of small farmers, is participatory and targets ecological agriculture. It is not only science that offers solution, but also the knowledge of the farmers and the women farmers worldwide. GMOs do not present a solution to the mayor problems the vast majority of farmers face. The Union of Concerned Scientists just published an evaluation of the performance of GM-crops, coming to the result that GM crops do not produce higher yields. (http://ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/science_and_impacts/science/failure-to-yield.html). In order to be able to counter the ever same arguments, that we need GM crops and more research into genetic engineering to be able to feed the world, we have to come up with sound science. The IAASTD report is an important tool and we have to lobby our governments to support the IAASTD process and assure the implementation of its findings and options for action. We need an Intergovernmental Panel on Food and Agriculture like we have for climate change (IPCC). The IAASTD is the IPCC for agriculture. In June the mandate for the IAASTD bureau comes to an end: it has to be renewed and the process needs to be continued.

Europe's dependence of protein import

European agriculture (meat and dairy products) depend almost completely on the import of protein. Historically this "labour division" goes back to deals between Europe and the US after World War II. In the 80ies Southern countries have been pushed to export production in order to meet their debt payments. The consequences for the rural population and the environment of those countries that are producing soy and corn in huge monocultures to be exported are severe: Soy plantations are extended at the cost of rain forest and other ecosystems, small farmers loose their land and are displaced.

Europe is not willing to produce protein according to its meat and milk production. This has to be changed, especially in the context of the upcoming CAP reform. Several shifts and strategies are possible:

- meat and milk production should has to be grass based (first initiatives in France are promising, see e.g. the presentation of J. Koester at www.foodanddemocracy.org)
- local protein plants, other than corn and soy, could be produced within Europe (like chickpea)
- some Eastern European countries could produce more protein (e.g. Rumania)
- Farms have to be re-regarded as close cycles (including CO2) which means that animals have to brought back to the farms. The separation of animal and grain production is part of the problems and contributes to the climate warming.

Another huge problem is the dependency of European agriculture from the import of fossil energy. We have replaced human labour through fossil energy. That is not only highly unsustainable and makes industrial agriculture a No1 CO2 producer. It also links the food

prices directly to the oil price, leading to a dangerous situation of highly volatile prices. Organic, small scale and biodiverse farming can contribute to the mitigation and adaption of climate change. This has to be brought into the debates and negotiations about climate change. The food, fuel and climate crisis are highly interlinked with each other.

ANNEX

“Food Sovereignty is the right of individuals, communities, peoples and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies, which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and cultural appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies.” (International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty 2004)

“Food sovereignty is the RIGHT of peoples, countries, and state unions to define their agricultural and food policy without the “dumping” of agricultural commodities into foreign countries. Food sovereignty organizes food production and consumption according to the needs of local communities, giving priority to production for local consumption. Food sovereignty includes the right to protect and regulate the national agricultural and livestock production and to shield the domestic market from the dumping of agricultural surpluses and low-price imports from other countries. Landless people, peasants, and small farmers must get access to land, water, and seed as well as productive resources and adequate public services. Food sovereignty and sustainability are a higher priority than trade policies.”
(www.viacampesina.org)

Tina Goethe, SWISSAID
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