Food sovereignty: Its politics and its representation

Introduction

La Via Campesina, the international network of movements of peasants, landless, rural workers, and small farmers, has called for an 'International Food Sovereignty Day to Cool Down the Earth' during the COP17 civil society mobilisations. Anticipating the event, a leading activist within the Rural Network, Reverend Mavuso, wrote an important piece titled: *Climate Change and global warming are perpetrated by the Capitalists to oppress the poor to make profit.* Mavuso correctly argues that "Any environmentalism that doesn't start and end with people will just become another excuse for the rich to oppress us". Indeed, any '...ism' that fails this test inevitably sustains oppression. Towards the close of his essay, he describes the political experience of the poor in spaces claiming to discuss our collective futures: "Here the poor are not allowed to represent themselves. They must be represented by civil society organisations" (Mavuso, 2011).

And that neatly points to the dilemmas and choices that CLP has faced as the circus that is COP17, along with its civil society shadow, came to our part of the world. Perhaps we need to make clear at the outset: we DO think climate change and its associated issues matter - matter very much in fact! But obviously the official 17th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (i.e., COP17 of the UNFCCC), currently underway in Durban down the road from our office, is of little interest. Dubbed the "Conference of Polluters", it brings together the perpetrators and agents of the global crisis in an almost meaningless charade whose fundamental purpose is the reform and consolidation of the structures of power and capital, of empire and accumulation that reproduce crisis in the first place. In CLP's thinking and approach, COP17 is quite straight-forwardly the terrain of the state writ large – it is an (anti)politics that is dead and morbid.

But do the "civil society" mobilisations alongside the official process genuinely enact an alternative? It's probably fair to say 'yes and no'. As an NGO, CLP is consistently assumed to be both part of and committed to "civil society". However, as is clear from our earlier writings (see e.g. editions of Padkos on "Finding Our Voice in the World" and the "Dark corners of the state-we're-in"), that's not an assumption we sit comfortably with – especially when civil society is understood as a 'domain of politics' rather than a list of organisational types (see Neocosmos in "Dark Corners..."). In our experience and our view, much of 'civil society' praxis is deeply embedded in the politics of the terrain of the state – it too, is dead and morbid. As ever, we're convinced that if there's life, if there are possibilities of genuinely emancipatory and new ways forward, then those will be in the spaces opened by the actual struggles of actual movements of actual poor and landless people. Accordingly, we have done what we can to support and learn from the movements that we work closely with as they deal with COP17. As a result of that work, we have had interaction with La Via Campesina (LVC), the formation that originally birthed 'food sovereignty' – a praxis and a concept that CLP has grappled with productively over the last few years.

In the lead up to COP17, LVC has articulated some key priorities and perspectives that connected struggles around food sovereignty with the bundle of issues associated with climate change. Thus, in their "Call to Durban"[1] LVC pointed out that:

1 [access the full document, from which the following excerpts are taken at: http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1109:la-via-campesina-call-to-

> “We are peasants, small holders and family farmers, who today produce the vast majority of food consumed on this planet. We, and the food we produce, are being placed in danger, as temperatures rise, planting dates become unpredictable and there are ever more severe droughts, hurricanes and monsoons. Yet we also offer the most important, clear and scientifically-proven solutions to climate change through localized agroecological production of food by small holder farmers under the Food Sovereignty paradigm.
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> “The global food system currently generates at least 44% of all greenhouse gas emissions, through long-distance transport of food that could easily have been grown locally, by excessive use of petroleum and petroleum-based agrochemical inputs, by monoculture, and by forest clearing for the industrial plantations we call “green deserts.”
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> “We can drastically reduce or even eliminate these emissions by transforming the food system based on food sovereignty … While we make many legitimate and urgent demands on our governments to seriously address climate change, we pledge to continue to build agroecology and Food Sovereignty from below” (LVC, 2011).

In a later[2] “Call to Mass Action and Mobilisation” for the International Food Sovereignty Day to Cool Down the Earth, LVC make plain that:

> “Humanity is confronted with a food, economic and ecological crisis that is rooted in the neoliberal capitalist system of production, distribution and consumption. ... Today transnational corporations and governments are presenting false solutions to climate change, hijacking the United Nations Conference of Parties (COP17) also referred to as the Conference of Polluters … The countries of the South and Africa in particular will be hard hit by climate change. ... This will hugely impact on agriculture, which is an important livelihood source across Africa. ...
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> “Industrial agriculture and production is responsible for global warming, hunger, land dispossession, massive displacements of farmers, rural workers and indigenous communities across the continent.
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> “In South Africa the host country after 17 years of democracy, millions of farm workers and dwellers have been evicted from commercial farms, only 5% of agricultural land has been transferred to black people, millions in rural and urban areas suffer from food and nutritional insecurity. Today this country is the most unequal society in the world. Particularly women in South Africa have felt the impact of these unequal relations and exclusion more severely.
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> “The solutions put forward by these corporations and governments are already leading towards a re-colonization of Africa and the countries of the global south with massive land grabs and the imposition of a new green revolution.
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> “Instead of finding real solutions to climate and ecological crisis faced by humanity, the Durban COP17 meeting is a platform for corporations through their governments to accelerate the complete commodification of nature. These criminal schemes presented as solutions include amongst other things the promotion of Genetically Modified Seeds, Agro-fuels, carbon trading, climate smart agriculture, Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD). …
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> “Food Sovereignty and agro-ecology are the real solutions of farmers and workers to climate change”.

durban&catid=54:cop17-durban-2011&Itemid=26]

2 Issued 3 November 2011 – see: http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1140:5-december-international-food-sovereignty-day-to-cool-down-the-earth&catid=48:-climate-change-and-agrofuels&Itemid=75

So what is food sovereignty?

> “Food sovereignty is about communities', states', and unions' rights to shape their own food and agricultural policy. Now that may sound like a whole lot of nothing, because you're actually not making a policy demand, you're just saying that people need to be able to make their own decisions. But, actually, that's a huge thing. Because in general, particularly for smaller farmers in developing countries, and particularly for women, decisions about food and agricultural policy have never been made by them. They've always been imposed. … [W]anting more control over your food system is exactly what food sovereignty is about” Patel 2010.

History and politics

What is nowadays named 'food sovereignty' emerged historically and politically. That history and politics is important to recall and understand for any future of food sovereignty as an historical and political project. It was the first conference (held in Mons, Belgium, in 1993) of the newly emerging network of peasant- and small-farmer-based organisations, La Via Campesina, that named and inaugurated an internationalised, struggle for something called 'food sovereignty'. The organisations and struggles that came together to form La Via Campesina emerged in response to the erosion of peasants' capacities for control over their land, seeds, and productive livelihoods under the weight of the aggressive global advance of a model of industrial agriculture. The form and content of the resistance against it, and its accompanying search “for an alternative approach among those most harmed by the epidemic of dislocation left in its wake” (Desmarais 2008), was also shaped by imposition of a new state-political orthodoxy. This was associated with the era of 'neo-liberalism' that leveraged the power of international finance capital, and its countryside corporate interests in agro-industry, to prescribe new roles for the state. Thus, as Martinez-Torres and Rosset (2010[3]) point out, in order to understand the rise of La Via Campesina itself, “we must first examine the transformation of the nation-state and its role in rural areas, particularly but not exclusively in the Third World, and as exemplified in Latin America. It is the changing nature of state intervention in recent decades that generated significant new challenges for rural peoples”.

From the period following the World Wars till the 1970s, the dominant development model obtaining in 'Third World' state was Import Substitution Industrialisation aimed at growing a national productive base for domestic consumption. This approach shaped the role of the 'developmentalist' state with regard to rural and agricultural sectors as well, with an emphasis on securing local/national food for urban workers – but at low prices. (Invariably this yielded policies and practices that, on the one hand secured a role for national food productions, but at the cost of of systematically extracting surplus value away from rural areas and rural workers and producers, and toward the urban and industrial sectors.) Rural poverty was thus entrenched even though the state “ state, to a greater or lesser extent in different countries, provided public services to rural areas that supported domestic food production and peasant agriculture” (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010).

3 In their excellent paper describing the evolution of La Via Campesina as a transnational movement to the present (2010), Martinez-Torres and Rosset “ identify five phases …: The first phase took place during the 1980s up to 1992. Here several national rural movements felt the impact of similar global policies on local and national conditions. The second phase (1992-1999) was marked by the consolidation of continental networks in Latin America and the birth and structuring of La Via Campesina as a global movement. The third phase (2000-2004) essentially consisted of becoming a key player on the international stage. The fourth phase (2004-2008) was marked by growth and internal strengthening, including setting up of regional secretariats, and the fifth, and current, phase (late 2008-present) responds to recent changes in the world and reflects a maturing political-economic analysis”. For the purposes of the current discussion, we focus primarily on the first 2 of these phases (and won't attempt a summary of the remaining phases) in order to properly characterise and describe the specific politics from which food sovereignty was originally articulated.

To sustain the required political architecture, the dominant urban-based political parties channelled resources to rural peasant organisations and bought their loyalty. As a result the

> non-revolutionary peasant organisations were often political machines to serve urban electoral interests... Leadership skills were based on the ability to carry out negotiations with cronies in political parties and government offices in exchange for maintaining social peace and delivering votes, rather than being based on having an ideologically clear analysis or on the ability to mobilise large masses of people in the streets. Their organisations subordinated the objective interests of their members in broad-based structural change that might favour rural and peasant interests to the urban interests of their political parties in maintaining the status quo (ibid).

However the capacity to channel state resources in this clientèlistic way came undone under the impact of 'structural adjustment' from the 1970s on[4].

> As states were radically downsized, their services (ranging from credit to extension and price supports) dried up, and political parties no longer had much of value to maintain corporatist and clientelistic peasant organisations. ... As political parties and their domesticated organisations became increasingly irrelevant for rural peoples, a new generation of peasant organisations came to the fore These new organisations, either born from the older ones or founded virtually from scratch ..., were typically founded on principles of autonomy from political parties, government offices, the church, and NGOs (ibid).

Together with the removal of protective trade regimes and the imposition of 'free trade' agreements, peasant producers and the rural poor faced a deepening crisis under these new conditions. The 'new generation of peasant organisations' described by Martinez-Torres and Rosset took up the challenges, and their politics were to be foundational in the subsequent expression of 'food sovereignty' through La Via Campesina. Although there were already deep similarities in the conditions faced by the peasantry and rural poor across Latin America, Asia and Africa, it was in Latin America where the characteristic forms of this new political resistance first and most coherently emerged (giving La Via Campesina a distinctly Latin American flavour in its formative years).

Perhaps due in part to the international reach of the neo-liberal onslaught, common objectives emerged among organisations of resistance and critique in both the global 'south' and 'north'. Dalla Costa comments too that the notion of 'food sovereignty', even though it required specific articulation with regard to specific locations, “responded not only to the fundamental demands of various rural contexts both in the global South and North, but also to urban issues that converged on the need to implement alternative models of agriculture that opposed the dominant model” (Dalla Cosata 2007).

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4 In an earlier Occasional Paper, we have discussed some of the origins and impacts of 'structural adjustment' . See: ***From hunger to justice: Food security and the churches in Southern Africa***, Occasional Paper No. 2, Church Land Programme, 2004: “For many southern countries, extensive national debt provide leverage for the international financial institutions (IFIs), pre-eminently the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to impose structural adjustments as a pre-condition for granting credit. The reforms – or structural adjustments – invariably include measures including the following: the elimination of protective tariffs; privatisation; deregulation; cuts in public sector employment; cost recovery policies for the provision of basic services (e.g., health, water, energy, etc.); and generally reduced social safety nets. … From the perspective of food security, a further general implication must be understood. Prioritising the repayment of debt means that debtor countries must orient economic activity to generate foreign exchange. For agricultural policy this means that export-oriented cash (often non-food) crops are more 'valuable' than food production for local consumption, and that more and more food is imported. The net effect of these processes is to heighten the vulnerabilities of farming communities and to worsen food security in a number of ways.”

These factors were key in enabling the particular reach and appeal of La Via Campesina which formed around “an explicit rejection of the neo-liberal model of rural development, an outright refusal to to be excluded from agricultural policy development and a fierce determination not to be 'disappeared' and a commitment to work together to empower a peasant voice” (Desmarais 2008). In so doing, it was able to build on not only the formations of resistance in Latin America then, but also peasant, landless, and family-farm, organisations, campaigns and networks in India, Europe, and North America[5]. “La Via Campesina was born as the wave of peasant dissatisfaction and movements 'crested' into the international sphere, and they hooked up with each other as a transnational social movement, or globalization from below” (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010).

Martinez-Torres and Rosset offer a selection of comments made by observers of La Via Campesina that are helpful in capturing the specificity of the movement's praxis and politics:

> La Via Campesina is at least partially responding to a politics of representation that all too often left peasant voices out. The privatisation trend of neoliberalism in the 1980s affected foreign assistance and funding policies of international donors, who increasingly cut aid to governments and passed it instead to NGOs (see Conroy et al.1996). Donors thus encouraged the growth of organizations that were able to make claims to represent a constituency in the Global South. The ability of these organizations to deliver 'the peasantry' in order to comply with the structures of 'accountability', 'transparency' and 'participation' that have emerged in response to the criticisms received by these international financial institutions, is the key to the survival of these NGOs. (Patel 2006, 78-9)
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> This tendency of NGOs to speak 'on behalf of peasants' led one Via Campesina leader to state in 1996 that, 'To date, in all global debates on agrarian policy, the peasant movement has been absent: we have not had a voice. The main reason for the very existence of the Via Campesina is to be that voice and to speak out for the creation of a more just society' (Paul Nicholson, cited in Desmarais 2002, 96).
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> It is for this reason that La Via Campesina from the very beginning clearly staked out its differences from NGOs and will not allow the membership of organisations that are not true, grassroots-based peasant organisations. It has also staked out its differences from foundations and aid agencies, refusing to accept resources that come with compromising conditions attached, nor permitting any kind of external interference in its internal decisions, thus guaranteeing the independence and autonomy which are so critical to maintain (Rosset and Martinez 2005).
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> The political style of La Via Campesina is that of a poor peoples' movement: people who have been pushed to the edge of extinction by dominant power in their countries and in the world, people who have usually not been taken into account, who have been 'fooled too many times' by smooth-talking politicians and NGOs, people who were never invited to sit at the table and had to 'elbow their way' into the seat they now occupy. Like most social movements, they have a deep distrust, based on bitter experience, of methods that channel and 'calm' dissent: that is, of 'conflict resolution', 'stakeholder dialog', World Bank 'consultations' and 'participation', etc. (Rosset and Martinez 2005).

5 this geographic expansion has continued throughout the life of La Via Campesina and now includes about 150 such organisations from fifty-six countries

> In this phase, peasants 'muscle' their way to the table through the vehicle of La Via Campesina wherever key debates or negotiations take place that affect the future of rural communities, whether at international summits, trade negotiations, civil society gatherings, etc. They take their seat at the table in their own name, pushing aside NGOs and others who had previously 'spoken on behalf' of rural peoples, with the clear message that, 'we are here and we can speak for ourselves'. In this period few alliances are made, as La Via Campesina is young and inexperienced, while NGOs are old and stronger in this arena, and the most critical step is to assert one's existence and most basic right to a voice of one's own. At their first Conference, La Via Campesina defines itself as a peasant movement and as a political space for peasant organisations, chooses its name, and makes the critical decision to be autonomous of the NGOs that in the past had so often 'managed' peasant organisations.
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> Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2010.

It is also characteristic of the politics at the heart of the emergence of the food sovereignty project that the demands it issued were declared not only in slogans and street protest but in the praxis of its constituent movements. As Dalla Costa (2007) notes, La Via Campesina's proposals for alternatives emerged pari passu with practical enactment of peasant-based agriculture and 'traditional' systems outside global markets in order to build “the greatest autonomy and self-sufficiency of populations ...[through] its **decision** to find emancipation once and for all from capitalistic food policies”.

Thus far, we have emphasised the multiple bases and locations of the struggles, North and South, that coalesced into La Via Campesina and the formulation of a demand for food sovereignty. Now we propose a brief consideration of one specific such base which, for its sheer scale and political clarity, is worthy of particular interest – the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra' (MST) – the Landless Rural Workers Movement of Brazil. In so doing we remain focused on the issue and politics of food sovereignty though – for, as João Pedro Stedile, arguably MST's best-known voice internationally, points out:

> we were working through Via Campesina, whose idea is to articulate the peasant movements from all over the world. Peasant movements have tended to be very local. But with the internationalization of capital, agro-industry has been concentrated in 8-9 companies that control the seeds, the inputs. They have forced campesinos to organize on an international basis as well. So Via Campesina coordinates mass actions against the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF, and tries to debate and create another model. We work by consensus and one of our consensus principles is that food is not a commodity that belongs in the market. Food sovereignty means every country has the right to produce its own food for its people, not to serve capital.
> Stedile 2003: 23.

Discussing “the world's most important social movement”, Patel (2007) highlights the context of massive inequality of landholdings in Brazil within which the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra' (MST) – the Landless Rural Workers Movement – emerged. “In 1970, over 90 percent of farms in Brazil were smaller than 100 hectares, while 0.7 per cent of holdings were greater than 1,000 covering just under 40 percent of the country's land” (ibid). Liberalisation through the 1980s and '90s consolidated the pattern and “in 2002, there were 5 million landless families in Brazil, with 150.000 camped by the roadside” (ibid: 205). In the movement's own words, the “Landless Worker's Movement was born from the concrete, isolated struggles for land that rural workers were developing in southern Brazil at the end of the 1970's” (http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=history accessed July 2010).

That period of towards the end of the 1970s was also a moment of (international) economic crisis which stalled Brazil's industrialisation cycle which had been drawing in young people from rural areas to find urban-based employment. Together with these 'objective" conditions were the beginnings of shifts in the political climate. First, whereas the Catholic Church had historically tended to support military dictatorships in Brazil, there emerged a group of progressive bishops associated with what became liberation theology and the work of the CPT (the Pastoral Commission on Land, of the Catholic Church in Brazil). As Stedile (2004) recalls it: “The friars played a good role in stirring up the farmers and getting them organised” (19). Second, opposition to the military dictatorship grew and the mood tended to infect almost all social conflicts with a political flavour of rebellion and struggle. In this context, organised local land occupations began to spread in Brazil, and they formed the basis for what was to become the MST.

Thus, in early 1984, an Encontro Nacional brought together militants of the wave of land occupations. Here MST was formally launched having decided “to organise ourselves as an autonomous movement, independent of the political parties ...[and] of the Catholic Church” (Stedile 2004: 21). Twenty years later[6], MST involves 1.5+ million people in 23 of Brazil's 27 states, and 350 000 families – more than a million people (Patel 2007: 205) - have settled land through their struggles. Through self-initiated land occupations, under the slogan “Occupy, Resist, Produce”, MST is a significant architect of agrarian reform at a scale and depth seldom affected by top-down reforms.

Box 1: MST's agrarian reform

Today, there are about 400 associations in the areas of production, commercialization and services, 49 Agricultural and Cattle-raising Cooperatives (CPA) with participating 2,299 families, 32 Service Cooperatives with 11,174 direct partners, two Regional Commercialization Cooperatives and 3 Credit Cooperatives with 6,521 members.
There are 96 small and medium-sized cooperatives that process fruit, vegetables, dairy products, grains, coffee, meat, and sweets. Such MST economic enterprises generate employment, income, and revenue that indirectly benefit about 700 small towns in Brazilís interior.

Connected to production is education: about 160,000 children study from 1st to 4th grade in the 1800 public schools on MST settlements. About 3900 educators paid by the town are developing a pedagogy specifically for the rural MST schools. In conjunction with UNESCO and more than 50 universities, the MST is developing a literacy program for approximately 19,000 teenagers and adults in the settlements.

There are currently Education and Teaching courses at seven universities ... to train new teachers. In addition, the JosuÈ de Castro School in VeranÛpolis, Rio Grande do Sul is collaborating by providing training to students in the management of settlements and cooperatives, in order to train them with skills for the work being developed in settlements. Also in 2001, a Nursing course was started, and in 2002, a Communications course for MST participants was added.

With the support of the Brazilian Minister of the Environment, the MST developed an Environmental Education program for leaders, teachers, and technical experts in the settlements. ... Lastly, in collaboration with the Cuban government, 48 MST members are currently studying medicine at the Latin American School of Medicine in Cuba.

MST families are conscious of the need to preserve the natural environment and human health. Accordingly, in September of 1999, landless families introduced Bionatur seeds, produced without any pesticides, herbicides, or other chemicals. Families have also worked to preserve forests, such as in Pontal do Paranapanema (Sao Paulo), and to produce herbal medicines.

http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=history

6 For our current purposes we do not propose to rehearse the important and compelling history of the MST. Our emphasis remains elucidating the specificity of the movement's praxis and politics.

All this practical agrarian transformation happens on the basis of organised, collective action by the landless themselves. Typically, each MST settlement begins in the formation of *encampamentos* (encampments) where supplies of water, food, shelter, health and education is limited and self-provided from within the resources of landless families undertaking the particular occupation. These are the nucleus of the land occupation process at the base of the entire MST project.

Patel (2007: 207-212) quotes (and comments on) the MST itself pointing up the political logic of the location of agency and control within the formations of the organised landless themselves:

> 'No one should represent anyone else, each man and each women represents him- or her-self. We want to overcome the problem of representativity, of delegation of powers. It is in participating that everyone represents themselves'. …
>
> The movement has built a space for its members to think for themselves, to discuss democratically and to own their own mistakes. Nothing could be more anathema to the expert-driven project of development, whose only slight concession to this is 'public participation' – a process in which 'the community' is called in to listen to, and thus validate, the plans that experts have made for them. ...
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> Today, the movement is funded largely by the donations of the settlements. … This way, the MST is able to pilot its own future, without needing or being able to point a finger at outside influence – at the Church, the government or international donors – because through their financial independence, the members of MST are beholden only to themselves.

Such features of the MST' praxis have prompted leading radical philosopher, Peter Hallward, to remark that:

> What the MST has understood with particular clarity is that legal recognition can only be won as the result of a subjective mobilisation which is itself indifferent to the logic of recognition and re-presentation as such. The remarkable gains of the MST have been won at what Badiou would call a 'political distance' from the state, and depend upon its own ability to maintain a successful organising structure, develop viable forms of non-exploitative economic cooperation, and resist violent intimidation from landowners and the state police" Hallward 2004.

Distilling the content of food sovereignty

A synthesis of the priority and consensual demands and perspectives on food and agrarian change that was articulated out of such struggles, and especially through La Via Campesina, coalesced around the notion of food sovereignty. The proposal of a genuine alternative approach to issues of food through food sovereignty was broadcast to the world at an alternative conference, called in parallel to the official UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) 1996 Rome summit. The articulation of this novel approach was intentionally at odds with the prevailing mainstream concern for food security.

Food sovereignty focused on the political right of people to control the systems and contents of food in their own places - whereas food security offered only the prospect of a

> mere right to access whatever food others decide to produce and distribute. To put it more clearly: the objective was the possibility of accessing land as well as the water than runs through its veins, of accessing the biodiversity of the vegetation and animal life that populates it, and to be able to manage these fundamental sources of reproduction of life on which the possibility of nutrition is founded, adopting fully sustainable methods that make these sources renewable. The framework for this new relationship with the land and food production and distribution hinges on a concept of food as common good rather than any other commodity, which gives substance to the fundamental right of everyone to food and thus life. The outlook is not that of competition on the global market, but of cooperation, solidarity and equality between peasants, geared to offer authentic and varied agricultural products to the local and national markets, and the excess to other markets; with a primary concern for the satisfaction of the food needs of the populations in the place one belongs to (Dalla Costa 2007: 7).

Box 2: La Via Campesina's own definition of food sovereignty reads:

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.

from La Via Campesina (http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=27&Itemid=44 as at September 2010.

As CLP noted in an earlier Occasional Paper (No. 2, CLP 2004), to overcome the inequities and environmental damages associated with the dominant model, proponents of food sovereignty argue for a very different model of food production and trade which stresses, *inter alia*,

- prioritisation of local food production for local markets and not the promotion of agroexports and the displacement of farmers from their own markets by agribusiness
- a thorough re-think of agricultural subsidies so that they do not damage other countries (by dumping) but instead support family farmers engaged in ecologically appropriate farming etc.
- genuine, redisitributive agrarian reform to achieve acces to land
- sustainable and appropriate farming methods and technologies specifically excluding genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) and in direct contrast to the dominant agribusiness model of industrial, chemical-intensive mono-cropping.

> Food sovereignty refers then to an alternative project of organisation of production and social relations, a different social project founded on peasant based agriculture, which as such can offer work opportunities to many people, as opposed to the industrial agricultural model and the monoculture that too often deprives people, not only of any income, but also of autonomy and identity, especially in the case of small producers turned into employees of multinational corporations. The issue of the possibility of a mode of agriculture that is sustainable in all respects: economically, socially and environmentally, and that re-establishes the traditional methods that are respectful of nature by allowing its regeneration and thus the yearly generation of reaps and fruits, is the core element of the path towards food sovereignty (Dalla Costa 2007: 8).

Rosset (first in 2003, and updated in 2010 with Martinez-Torres) has explored and tabulated some key dimensions of this alternative project and, in Table 1. below, points up the contrasts with the dominant system against which the struggle for food sovereignty is waged.

Table 1. Dominant model versus food sovereignty model[7]

Issue	**Dominant model**	**Food sovereignty**
Source: Rosset (2003).		
Trade	Free trade in everything	Food and agriculture exempt from trade agreements
Production priority	Agroexports	Food for local markets
Crop prices	'What the market dictates'(leave the mechanisms that create both low crop prices and speculative food price hikes intact)	Fair prices that cover costs of production and allow farmers and farm workers a life with dignity
Market access	Access to foreign markets	Access to local markets; an end to the displacement of farmers from their own markets by agribusiness
Subsidies	While prohibited in the Third World, many subsidies are allowed in the US and Europe, but are paid only to the largest farmers	Subsidies are ok that do not damage other countries via dumping (i.e. grant subsidies only to *family* farmers for direct marketing, price/income support, soil conservation, conversion to sustainable farming, research, etc.)
Food	Chiefly a commodity; in practice, this means processed, contaminated food that is full of fat, sugar, high fructose corn syrup and toxic residues	A human right: specifically, should be healthy, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and locally produced
Being able to produce	An option for the economically efficient	A right of rural peoples
Hunger	Due to low productivity	Problem of access and distribution due to poverty and inequality
Food security	Achieved by importing food	Greatest when food production is in the hands of the hungry, or when produced locally
Control over productive resources (land, water, forests)	Privatised	Local, community controlled
Access to land	Via the market	Via genuine agrarian reform
Seeds	Patentable commodity	Common heritage of humanity, held in trust by rural communities and cultures; 'no patents on life'

7 Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2010.

Issue	Dominant model	Food sovereignty
Rural credit and investment	From private banks and corporations	From the public sector, designed to support family agriculture
Dumping	Not an issue	Must be prohibited
Monopoly	Not an issue	The root of most problems
Overproduction	No such thing, by definition	Drives prices down and farmers into poverty; we need supply management policies in US and EU
Farming technology	Industrial, monoculture, Green Revolution, chemical-intensive; uses GMOs	Agroecology, sustainable farming methods, no GMOs
Farmers	Anachronism; the inefficient will disappear	Guardians of culture and crop germplasm; stewards of productive resources; repositories of knowledge; internal market and building block of broad-based, inclusive economic development
Urban consumers	Workers to be paid as little as possible	Need living wages
Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)	The wave of the future	Bad for health and the environment; an unnecessary technology
Another world (alternatives)	Not possible/not of interest	

Towards the close of his magnificent book on our global food system, ***Stuffed and Starved***, Patel (2007) attempts a broad outline of the changes, from the individual to global levels, necessary to move towards food sovereignty under the following sub-headings (see pp303-317):

1. *transform our tastes* -
2. *eat locally and seasonally* -
3. *eat agroecologically* -
4. *support locally owned business* -
5. *all workers have the right to dignity* -
6. *profound and comprehensive rural change* -
7. *living wages for all* -
8. *support for a sustainable architecture of food* -
9. *snapping the food system's bottleneck* -
10. *owning and providing restitution for the injustices of the past and present* -

While there is undoubted value in naming some specific content and implications of the food sovereignty approach, there is also danger. As the discussion of its origins above makes clear, at the heart of food sovereignty is a properly a *political* struggle. It cannot be reduced to a 'model' set of demands and practices to be implemented – not by the state, not by civil society, and not by university units & researchers . Patel is surely correct to emphasise that “Reclaiming control of the food system … requires tough, democratic deliberation. … It's a discussion that ought not be pre-empted by its definition so much as broadened by it” (Patel 2007: 303). Broadening food sovereignty can only proceed in and through a broadening of the emancipatory struggle/s for it – at a distance from the state, and in the collective minds and hands of the people.

In our South African context, given the historic and systematic destruction of the material base of peasant production, the relative thinness of autonomous rural grassroots organisation, and in the face of the persistent vanguardist and middle-class domination of civil society, it is important to acknowledge that we are a long way from enacting food sovereignty as a politically-powerful, national emancipatory project. Under persistent ideological and material pressure to orient towards “civil society”, there is an ever-present danger of instrumentalising 'the people' and conscripting a hollow shell to 'represent' real struggles - even within movements.

If food sovereignty is our necessary future – and it is – it will be led and thought by those who suffer most under current crisis and who think its resistance. Of course that doesn't exclude the roles of everyone else – as long as those roles are defined under the discipline of solidarity that is subject to the will of the people. Indeed, more and more people, and more and more social elements will need to be drawn in in this way to really move forward to food sovereignty. The struggle for popular sovereignty, as much over food as any other aspect of our collective life, will require ongoing rupture and rebellion from below – certainly against capital and the state at all levels. But that struggle is also against any of the ways in which the power of a few over the many denies human freedom, even when that's in the manipulative 'representation' of people by organs of civil society or against the domination of ordinary people by unaccountable and power-hungry practices and individuals who emerge from time-to-time within social movements.