



Human Rights Advocates

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Promoting Right to Food Through Food Sovereignty

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The concept of food sovereignty has been developing rapidly since it was first proposed a decade ago. It has become a reference point for discourse on food issues worldwide. Food sovereignty can be defined as “the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets...”¹

This statement will address the food insecurity aspect of food sovereignty. Global food insecurity persists because food production and its distribution do not meet the needs of the world’s population.² The right to food is an inclusive right. It is not a right to a minimum ration of calories, proteins and other nutrients. It is a right to all nutritional elements that a person needs to live a healthy life and a right to accessible food.³

The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food (SR), described food security as: “The right to have regular, permanent and free access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.”⁴

Food insecurity impacts, and is impacted by, a range of other factors such as health and employment.⁵ Three ways to address food insecurity are to increase: the area under food production; productivity per unit area; and the connectivity within food systems so that less food is wasted from the point of production to consumption. While genetically-modified (“GM”) crops may in some cases increase production, it is apparent that they are not the most efficient or proper method.

The root cause of hunger is not a lack of food, but a lack of access to food. In Mexican households food insecurity is a problem of availability, access and consumption of food.⁶ The poor lack money to buy food and lack land on which to grow it. It is essential to: follow sustainable traditional farming practices that keeps food production in the hands of small-scale farmers, thereby reducing corporate control. When food systems are under corporate control, genetically modified organisms (GMO’s) are often created by altering the DNA of an organism (in this case a food producing plant) to change the plant’s characteristics. Through this process of genetic engineering (GE) a plant can be made to produce a higher yield, be more resistant to pesticides, require less water, be fast growing, etc.⁷ However, there are a number of problems with this approach that will be discussed: unsustainable long-

¹Michael Windfuhr and Jennie Johnson, *Towards democracy in localized food systems*, Introduction (2005) citing People’s Food Sovereignty Network (2002), http://www.ukabc.org/foodsovereignty_itdg_fian_print.pdf

²*The Challenge of Food Security: International Policy and Regulatory Frameworks*, Ed. by Rosemary Rayfuse and Nicole Weisfely, p. 19 (Edward Elgar 2012)

³*The Right to Adequate Food*, Human Rights Fact Sheet no. 34 (2010) at 2. <http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/otherdocuments/factsheet34en1.pdf>

⁴*The Right to Adequate Food*, FAO Fact sheet no. 43, at 2, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet34en.pdf>

⁵*The Challenge of Food Security*, *supra* note 2 at 44.

⁶ *Food Security and Nutrition in Mexico*, at 3, USDA (July 2010), GAIN Report No.: MX0043, <http://gain.fas.usda.gov>

⁷Yvette Taylor, *Food security and the GMO Myth* (2011), available at http://www.earthorganization.org/articles/Library/Food_Security_and_GMO_Foods/default.aspx

term agriculture and negative health effects. The last section will address a better method for achieving sustainable agriculture.

I. GM Technology Fails to Address Food Security

Technological advancement in agriculture is not catering to the need of the food insecure. Rather, it supports corporate control and impedes common persons' access to adequate food. In one example confirming the poor yield performance of GM crops, a U.S. Dept. of Agriculture report noted, "GE crops available for commercial use do not increase the yield potential of a variety. In fact, yield may even decrease. Perhaps the biggest issue raised by these results is how to explain the rapid adoption of GE crops when farm financial impacts appear to be mixed or even negative."⁸

Many authoritative sources, reporting on the future of agriculture, have found that GM crops have little to offer global agriculture and the challenges of poverty, hunger and climate change, because better alternatives are available. These alternatives go by many names, including integrated pest management (IPM), organic, sustainable, low-input, non-chemical pest management (NPM) and agro ecological farming, but extend beyond the boundaries of any particular category.⁹

II. Negative Health Effects

Usually, analysis of GMO safety fails to consider important issues like:

- GMO plants, seeds and byproducts contain not only residues of commercial chemical pesticides, but also insecticidal proteins produced by the plant.
- Each commercial pesticide contains chemicals that undergo changes within pesticide containers, when mixed with other pesticides, and when released in the environment.¹⁰

The lack of scientific consensus on the safety of GM foods and crops is underlined by the recent research calls by the European Union and the French government to investigate the long-term health impacts of GM food consumption in light of uncertainties raised by animal-feeding studies.¹¹ Sovereignty concerning GMO's demands further studies and debates centered on GMO'S in agricultural production.¹²

Numerous studies indicate that GMOs have harmful health effects, including:

- Rats fed with GM tomatoes developed stomach lesions.¹³

⁸*GM Crops – Just the Science*, Non-GMO Project (2009), at 4 (citing USDA Report, May 2002, <http://www.nongmoproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/GM-Crops-just-the-science.pdf>)

⁹ *Id.* at 8.

¹⁰European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility (ENSSER), Press Release (Dec. 2013), <http://www.ensser.org/media/0713/>

¹¹*No Scientific Consensus on GMO Safety*, ENSSER (2013), <http://www.ensser.org/increasing-public-information/no-scientific-consensus-on-gmo-safety/>

¹²Mae Humiston, *Feeding the World, Ruling the World*, at 40-41 (Tufts University 2013).

¹³ Michael Antoniou, Claire Robinion and John Faga, *GMO'S Myths and Truths*, (2012), http://earthopensource.org/files/pdfs/GMO_Myths_and_Truths/GMO_Myths_and_Truths_1.3b.pdf.

- GM potatoes fed to rats caused excessive growth of the lining of the gut similar to a pre-cancerous condition.¹⁴
- Rats fed GMO maize over three generations suffered damage to liver and kidneys and other organs.¹⁵

III. Sustainable Agriculture as Improved Technique to Achieve Food Sovereignty

Sustainable agriculture can be defined as: “an integrated farming system ... which is based on locally adapted agro-diverse cropping patterns and use of local resources (natural resources and processes), based on local knowledge, skills and innovations.”¹⁶

Sustainable agriculture includes an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long term satisfy human food and fiber needs while protecting the natural resource upon which agriculture is based. Sustainable agriculture makes the most efficient use of non-renewable resources and on-farm resources and integrates, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls, while sustaining the economic viability of farm operations and enhancing the quality of life for farmers.

The SR has called for supporting local food production in developing countries.¹⁷ The main goals of developing countries should be to protect the pre-harvest losses including drought, flooding, weeds, pests, and rodents. However, the majority of food loss is due to lack of storage space, processing, and transportation; also 25% of food grain is lost to insects and mites.¹⁸ The agriculture system that is informed by thousands of years of traditional farmers’ wisdom blended with cutting-edge scientific knowledge is called “agroecology” and it is being practiced by grassroots communities worldwide.

The traditional knowledge of family-based farmers encompasses basic ecological principles for planning and managing sustainable agricultural systems. Agroecology links ecology, agronomy, culture, economics and society to create healthy environments, food production and communities supporting food sovereignty.¹⁹ The progress made towards the implementation of the right to food must therefore be sustained and further strengthened.

The role of national governments is to create the legislative framework that will ensure that progress is made towards the eradication of hunger and malnutrition, by setting clear targets, by monitoring progress, by ensuring effective coordination of efforts, by institutionalizing the dialogue between

¹⁴ *GM Foods are Not Safe*, Institute for Responsible Technology (citing Pusztai A. and Bardocz S. and Ewen S.W.), <http://responsibletechnology.org/docs/gmos-are-not-safe.pdf>.

¹⁵ Jeffrey M. Smith, *Most Off-spring Died When Mother Rats Ate GM Soy*, (2005) <http://www.rense.com/general68/rats.htm>.

¹⁶ *Sustaining Agriculture in the Era of Climate Change in India*, Food and Water Security Coalition of India (2008), http://www.fwsci.com/climate-change/Position_paper_-_CSA.doc

¹⁷ *WTO rules must address food security needs of developing countries*, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=46637&Cr=Food+Security&Cr1=#.Uv7rMs5njU0>.

¹⁸ *The Challenge of Food Security*, supra note 2, at 38-39.

¹⁹ *A Holistic Science*, International Development Exchange, <https://www.idex.org/solutions/agroecology>.

government and civil society to identify solutions, and by ensuring accountability in the implementation of laws, policies and programs.²⁰

IV. Human Rights Advocates urges:

1. The Human Rights Council to recognize the importance of food sovereignty for promoting the right to food.
2. States to create legislative framework that will ensure eradication of hunger and malnutrition that includes:
 - a. Special government supplies for small landholders and protection of their traditional agriculture knowledge;
 - b. Appropriate storage to prevent food waste;
 - c. Segregation of GM crops and seeds from conventional ones; and
 - d. Assurances of food that will not have negative health consequences.

²⁰ *A Rights Revolution, Implementing the Right to Food in Latin America and The Caribbean*, <http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/otherdocuments/note06-septembre2012-en-v2.pdf>