

Food Sovereignty as one answer to the Care Crisis
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What does food sovereignty has to do with care and the care economy? What does it has to do with feminist answers to the care crisis? In the next twenty minutes I will argue, that the concept of food sovereignty offers interesting approaches and important connections, which can help us elaborating strategies and demands from a feminist perspective in the context of the confronting the care crisis.

The activities related to the provision of food, starting with its production, going along the whole food chain up to the actual preparation of food: cooking and feeding represent an important part of the care economy. If we look at the time resources needed for these activities, we might say that the food related activities are actually the most important part of care work. I just learned, for example, that in Switzerland – according to a survey from 2004 – preparing meals represents the most time consuming activity of care. The time needed for washing the dishes was even counted extra. The division of labour within the food chain is highly gendered. As in the care sector in general, the responsibility for the provision of food – including food production – often lies with the women.

Switzerland is a highly industrialised country and only a small percentage – three percent – of its population is active in the direct food production. When it comes to the industrial processing, retailing and marketing of food – and not to forget the restaurant and hotel sector – it represents of course a much higher percentage of paid work within the food chain. As far as I understand, this kind of work is not considered to be part of the care economy. But let us look at the situation in developing countries, where food production, storing, trading, processing and marketing is still mainly done by small producers. 85% of all farms worldwide produce on less than one hectare. And it is these 525 Mio. small or family farms that produce most of the staple food and are thus the warrantors for local and national food security (IAASTD). A considerable part of this production is done on a subsistence level. And women play a major role in it.

Let's look at some figures highlighting the significance of women in food production:

- women are responsible for half of the world's food production worldwide
- women account for 60% of the labor force and produce 80% of the food in most African countries
- women do 90% of the work in the rice cultivation in South-Asian countries
- Women are majority of urban food producers in many cities around the world

As a result of migration from the rural area to the cities and of course as a result of the recent food crisis and the rising food prices, urban agriculture has gained importance and public attention (Mrs. Obama and picture from Colombia). But the so called kitchen gardens are not only a rising urban phenomenon, they are essential for the food security in local communities and on household level in poor rural areas. Unlike cash crops, that are still considered to be a male dominated sector, kitchen gardens are almost completely a female domain. With their kitchen gardens women are able to produce vegetables, fruit and medical herbs not only for their families but also for the local markets. But of course, women do not only produce food in kitchen gardens, they cultivate plots of land to produce staple food or work on the land of their husbands, father or other family members. And – especially young women – work as

agricultural laborers on plantations, where they produce flowers, fruits or high-priced vegetables for exportation to industrialized countries.

In this context, especially when looking at the production for subsistence, I would argue that food production is part of the daily care work of women, as it can't be strictly separated from the provision and preparation of food. A considerable part of the food produced is for self consumption.

Small scale agriculture – subsistence production as well as the production directed to local and national markets – is facing enormous difficulties and challenges. During the last three decades multilateral agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund pushed for privatization in the agricultural sector, drying out any support from the state directed to the small scale production and the production of staple food. In order to meet debt services, many developing countries were pushed or even forced to invest in and support export production and open up markets for agricultural goods from the world market. With the agreements of the World Trade Organization WTO the liberalization of agricultural trade has been continuously broadened and enforced. As a result of these policies, small scale farmers have been pushed out of business and the production for local and national markets has been dramatically neglected.

Today, 75 per Cent of the world hungry are small producers, farmers, livestock keepers, landless people and agricultural laborer. 70 per cent of them are women.

Today, the Philippines – a traditional rice producing country – depends on rice imports. The same with Mexico, the origin country of maize, today is a maize importing country. And African countries – once being net food export countries – today have to meet 25 per Cent of their food needs through importers. With the food crisis last year the whole world witnessed the complete failure of this food system.

But the food crisis has not only resulted in the extension of hunger and poverty in many countries of the world. It has also resulted in impressing profits for the agrobusiness. In its annual report 2008 for example, Syngenta dares to claim, that the year 2008 has been a record year for agriculture. Other agricultural corporations, like Monsanto or Cargill equally presented record profits after the first quarter 2008 – at the peak level of the food crisis. Why this?

Corporations along the food chain successfully used the decades of privatization and liberalization to massively expand their business. To get an idea of this massive growth look at the figures from 2002 compared to the ones from 2007 – in only five years. This growth is mainly a result of a concentration process and – in the case of the input sector – has happened at the expense of thousands of small and medium sized seed companies and breeders. Farmers are increasingly losing their independence, and – especially family farmers and women – get deprived of their control over the seeds.

Regarding the agricultural input sector:

The Top Ten of the multinational seed companies control 67% of the world's seed market (1.Monsanto, 2.DuPont, 3.Syngenta)

Looking at the agrochemicals market, the concentration is even higher: 89% (1.Bayer, 2.Syngenta, 3.BASF) – and, agrochemical corporation have systematically bought up seed companies.

Another sector in the food chain is the one of industrial processing. Something, that traditionally has been an important part of the traditional work done by women at the household level. We could say, that industry has taken over this work – on the one hand liberating women from this work burden, on the other hand taking the processing of food more and more out of our control. But we are going to discuss that later on, let's come back to the figures:

26% of the world market for processed food and beverage are controlled by only 10 corporations, Nestlé being by far the number one.

Food Retailer: Top 10 sell 40% of grocery sold by the Top 100 (1. Wal-Mart, 2. Carrefour, 3. Tesco)

I present these figures to show, that in many parts of the world we have given away not only an important economic sector, but also the democratic control over food production and consumption. And this is, where the concept of food sovereignty comes in:

Food sovereignty claims back this democratic control – which is meant by sovereignty – over the food production and consumption. Basically it is about the simple question, what is growing on our fields and what ends up on our plates. Who is given the power to decide over these questions and how are the benefits of the world's food system shared. As we have seen from the figures, the benefits could hardly be shared more unjust than they are shared today.

The concept was presented by the international farmers movement La Via Campesina at the World Food Summit 1996 in Rome. It was elaborated in opposition to the still unbroken dogma, that a highly liberalized market would server best to gain global food security and to meet the needs of all.

*“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.”*

Till then the concept has been widely spread and accepted, even by the latest global report on agriculture presented last year. I will come back to this report, the “International Assessment on Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology” (IAASTD in short) later on.

The right to food *and* the right to produce food

- priority of local production to feed people locally
=> local markets
- access of smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk and landless people to land, water, seeds and livestock breeds and credit => true land reforms
- the recognition of the rights of women farmers
- the right of consumers to decide what they consume => no GMOs
- the right of countries to protect themselves from under-priced food imports => no dumping
- the need for agricultural prices to be linked to production costs => fair prices
- agroecology as a way not only to produce food but also to achieve sustainable livelihoods, living landscapes and environmental integrity => organic and biodiverse production

The concept of food sovereignty is now increasingly discussed among concerned consumers. Looking again to the graphic about the concentration within the food chain: today it is mainly this bottleneck, dominated and controlled by a few corporations that take decisions with great impact not only to producers (which seeds are sold?) but also to consumers (at what price the food is sold, what kind of food is sold, how is it produced etc.). But although the gap between the producers and the consumers is big – not only geographically but also socially – the consumer choices have direct and indirect impacts on the forms of agricultural production.

Translating the concept of food sovereignty to the consumers would lead to the following claim: buy local, seasonal, fair and organic! This relatively simple message already includes the main demands of the concept of food sovereignty – and it works for Northern, industrialised countries as well as for the Global South.

But relating food sovereignty to consumers and more specifically to care, goes beyond these claims.

Personal and traditional knowledge about the processing and preparation of food is getting more and more lost. Liberalizing ourselves from being tied to the kitchen and fighting for equal career opportunities, women have tried to reduce the care work relating to the provision of food to its minimum. And men rejected to take over their share of it. This resulted in handing over this domain of our daily to the industry. Today, the care crisis in the industrialized countries is mainly due to the lack of time resources. Of course, this process cannot be described as a linear and deliberate one, and it is not always a free decision. In poor families, all time resources are needed to earn an income – taking time for the preparation of food is simply out of reach. Fast food, like hamburger or deep fried pizza or similar processed food have taken over the place of traditional dishes or other time consuming recipes. But the lack of time for cooking is not only a phenomenon of poor families. And the households, that have enough money to spend, it is not the cheap pizza, but quite expensive convenience food, that is consumed.

The lacking knowledge about food and its preparation combined with the dominating fast food model has lead to disastrous health implications. There is not only a billion people suffering from hunger, but another billion is suffering from obesity. This is not only a phenomenon in rich countries, but also a severe problem in urban slums in for example in Brazil. I would argue, that this is also a lack of food sovereignty – of the consumers.

This week I have read an alarming article about the health impact of the financial crisis in the US. Trying to cope with the consequences of the economic recession millions of Americans save money on their food spendings and – again – end up with cheap fast food like hamburger, fries and pizza. Experts in the US estimate that a 10 per cent rise in poverty will lead to a 6 per cent rise in obesity. One should think, that jobless people should have enough time to prepare healthier food at home. But – it seems – that the knowledge and capacity to do that, has been lost. Once again, it is the corporations that profit. At the New York Stock Exchange, there are only two corporations under 30 that have come up with a positive result: Mc Donald and Wal-Mart.

I am far from arguing that women should go back to the kitchen. But I am suggesting to re-discuss the issue of how to organise food related care activities. We have a lot to gain: not only more sovereignty, but well-being, health and cultural diversity.