

## BACKGROUND TO FOOD SOVEREIGNTY & ITS RELEVANCE TO AUSTRALIA

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### The Key Message:

There is a crucial distinction between *Food Security* and *Food Sovereignty*. Food Security is concerned with ensuring adequate access to food for all, but it does not specify where food comes from, the agricultural production values with which it is produced, or the social conditions of those producing it. In other words, Food Security is an end, but it says nothing about the means to achieve that end.

*Food Sovereignty* by contrast has a great deal to say about the means. Fundamentally it is about farmers, rural communities, individuals and, in the international system, smaller countries that over the years have experienced the devastating effects of the 'dumping' of agricultural surpluses via 'free trade' treaties, asserting democratic control over their food systems.

The Food Sovereignty critique, and the content of the human right to adequate food on which it is based, says that the current global food and agricultural system is actually *generating hunger* rather than alleviating it. The facts bear this out: last year for the first time in history more than 1 billion people were officially recognised as malnourished. The shockingly high death toll - thousands of children *every day* - is *not* due to a lack of food, as many Food Security proponents suggest. On the contrary, when we take into account:

- the grain diverted to biofuels like ethanol- as much as 33% of the US corn crop,
- the even greater volumes of grain used to fuel the appallingly cruel and highly polluting global factory farming system, which is a major reason why industrial agriculture is the single greatest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for as much as 30% of total emissions, and
- the enormous amount of food wasted each year - Australia alone wastes around \$5 bn per annum,

there is enough food now to feed 9 billion people. The reality is that there is *an overproduction* of food - mainly corn, soy, and meat - today. This overproduction has spawned a \$1.3 trillion per annum global processed food industry, and it is here that the roots of the global 'obesity epidemic' are to be found. Dietary-related ill-health is soon to be the biggest public health challenge facing Australia and many other countries.<sup>2</sup> Millions of our children's lives are being permanently blighted by the early onset of type-2 diabetes, and they will be the first generation of non-indigenous Australians to experience a reduced life expectancy.

The problem of hunger - like the problem of obesity - is therefore due not to a lack of food, but rather to the *anti-democratic* nature of the global food and agricultural system. This system can properly be termed an oligopoly, since its main beneficiaries are a handful of giant transnational corporations. 'Cheap' food aside<sup>3</sup>, this system is not in the greater interests of ordinary people, and it doesn't benefit farmers, who are in crisis worldwide: more than half of the malnourished are actually small farmers or rural workers. This rural crisis also exists in Australia; and again, it is the product of the concentration of market power in the hands of the supermarket duopoly *vis-a-vis* farmers. Farmgate prices for many staples have not risen for three decades, while input and credit costs have risen steadily. The result is that Australian farmers now must produce four times the volume to earn half what their ancestors did in 1950. Thus it is hardly surprising that

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<sup>2</sup> As documented in the Preventative Health TaskForce Technical Paper on Obesity (September 2009): <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/preventativehealth/publishing.nsf/Content/tech-obesity>.

<sup>3</sup> While in pure dollar terms food today is 'cheaper' than in most previous generations as a proportion of the average wage, when one factors in all the environmental and social costs that are currently 'externalised', food has never been more expensive - one estimate suggests for example that for beef sourced from cattle raised on clear-felled forests, a single \$1.99 Macdonald's Cheeseburger actually costs in the region of \$200: see Raj Patel, 2009, *The Value of Nothing* (Melbourne: Black Books).

five Australian farmers leave their farms *every day*, and that their rates of suicide and depression are more than double the national average.

### **What is the Food Sovereignty alternative?**

Asserting democratic control over food and agricultural systems means the progressive de-centralisation of the current global food and agricultural system, and enabling local and regional food systems to emerge and flourish. It means re-valuing food and agriculture as fundamental to individual, social and environmental health and well-being. It means farming being respected and valued as a dignified and vital part of our societal fabric, and farmers being seen as the indispensable environmental stewards who actually have within their hands the power to restore health to our soils and water tables, and in the process to sequester carbon from the atmosphere. It means connecting urban consumers with the sources of their food in every sense, so that they think of food as delicious, nourishing and contributing to both individual and social well-being, rather than simply thinking about it in terms of its price.

### **What is the relevance and applicability of Food Sovereignty to Australia?**

Food Sovereignty principles have been explicitly implemented in constitutional provisions, laws and public policies in numerous countries around the world. As governments recognise the vulnerabilities of a food and agricultural system dependent on hugely extended global supply chains and enormous inputs of fossil fuel energy, they are adopting as a policy priority the need to transition towards more resilient, locally-based and socially just food systems.

Research undertaken by the *Business Alliance for Local Living Economies* in the United States also demonstrates the strong 'multiplier effect' of local food enterprises, as money circulates many times within a local economy, creating further business and employment opportunities.<sup>4</sup> The economically-depressed state of Michigan, for example, has for some years been using its economic power as a supplier of state-run and state-funded institutions like prisons, hospitals and schools to insist on local food procurement provisions in service contracts.<sup>5</sup> Illinois recently took this a step further, legislating for minimum percentages of local food procurement.<sup>6</sup> This decision followed a two-year study undertaken by the Illinois Local and Organic Food and Farm Taskforce, the key finding of which was that:

“A set of straightforward measures to encourage Illinois farmers to grow food for local consumption, coupled with a system for processing and transporting the food to Illinois markets could bring an estimated \$30 billion to the state's economy each year.”<sup>7</sup>

There is no reason why similar government-supported initiatives could not be undertaken in Australia. Across the country, individuals, groups and communities are working towards creating and strengthening their own local and community food systems. The community gardening movement, which has grown many-fold over the past 15 years, is one example; the recent Permacult initiatives, which began in Melbourne in 2006 and have now spread around the country, are another. A third is the beginnings of a Community-Shared Agriculture Movement, begun by Robert Pekin and his colleagues at Food Connect in 2005.<sup>8</sup> Food Connect has recently replicated in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, and plans for replications are underway in Canberra and the Sunshine Coast, amongst other places.

The individuals who are part of these groups have also entered into the arena of food policy and planning. Recognising the fragmentation of food and agriculture in Australia across numerous government departments, networks like the Sydney Food Fairness Alliance, Food Fairness Illawarra, Friends of the Earth (Adelaide) and the Coffs Coast Local Food Alliance are calling for

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.livingeconomies.org/aboutus/research-and-studies>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mlui.org/growthmanagement/fullarticle.asp?fileid=17006>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.familyfarmed.org/governor-signs-legislation-putting-illinois-on-track-to-vastly-expanded-local-farm-economy/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> [www.foodconnect.com.au](http://www.foodconnect.com.au)

greater cohesion, transparency, participation and democracy in food policy formulation.<sup>9</sup> The Tasmanian government recently took a lead in this field, with the establishment of Australia's first-ever Food Security Council in December 2009.<sup>10</sup> Vic Health has been scoping the possibility of a Food Policy Coalition in Victoria.<sup>11</sup>

These state-based initiatives lead naturally towards the establishment of a nationally-coordinated food policy. In this respect it is encouraging to see that the current government has announced as a policy initiative the formation of a National Food Plan, if returned to office.<sup>12</sup> The few details that have emerged thus far are however suggestive of a focus on boosting production for export, with little if any attention paid to issues of equity, resilience, waste and genuine sustainability.<sup>13</sup> All the focus is on increasing production<sup>14</sup>; yet, as discussed earlier, the crises being generated by the global food and agricultural system, of which Australia forms a key part, are actually crises of *overproduction*, *not* lack of production.

### **Conclusion: From production-led Food Security to democracy-led Food Sovereignty**

As long as the focus is single-mindedly on increasing production, the dynamics which have led to the current social and environmental problems will continue to be reproduced. This shows why we need to shift the emphasis away from the language of *food security* - which inevitably results in a focus on production - and towards *food sovereignty*, which examines *how* food is currently produced and distributed, and who are the main beneficiaries in these processes. Significantly, the development of the proposed National Food Plan, as reported, only provides for consultation with the largest players in food and agriculture - the National Farmers' Federation, the Australian Food and Grocery Council, and Woolworths. All of the groups and individuals working towards the building of truly sustainable and resilient local food systems are thereby excluded. This serves to reinforce the anti-democratic nature of the production-and-profit oriented food and agricultural system as it currently stands.

Small and medium-sized farms, growing a diversity of crops, or mixed crops and livestock, for their local communities, were recognised by 400 of the world's leading agricultural scientists and development specialists as having a vital, if not central, part to play in addressing the multiple crises humanity currently confronts: poverty, hunger, inequality, climate change, non-renewable energy depletion, soil erosion, desertification, and fresh water depletion.<sup>15</sup> The current food and agricultural system unfortunately has little use for these farms and the people who work them, as seen in the decades-long global rural crisis. As Haesook Kim, a member of the first-ever delegation sent to Australia in June 2010 by the global small farmer and peasant movement Via Campesina, remarked, we ignore the plight of small farmers at our peril:

“Yesterday morning [when we were in Adelaide] we visited an organic farm. I saw a poster, and I want to share with you its message. It said, 'No farmers, no food, no future.' It's time for Food Sovereignty.”

<sup>9</sup> See the *Plains to Plate Convergence Declaration* – <http://futureoffoodsa.ning.com/page/declaration-1>, and the *Hungry for Change Declaration* – <http://sydneyfoodfairness.org.au/food-summit-declaration-2009/>.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/siu/committees/tasmania\\_food\\_security\\_council](http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/siu/committees/tasmania_food_security_council).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/en/Resource-Centre/Publications-and-Resources/Healthy-Eating/Reports-and-evaluations/Scoping-report-Food-Policy-Coalition.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ausfoodnews.com.au/2010/08/03/labor-proposes-national-food-plan.html>.

<sup>13</sup> In making the announcement, Federal Minister for Agriculture Tony Burke said that “[t]he Gillard Labor Government’s National Food Plan will look at the opportunities and risks to the long term sustainability of food production. This Plan will include a consultation process with key industry players such as the National Farmers Federation, the Australian Food and Grocery Council, CSIRO and Woolworths.” Reporter Nicole Eckersley commented that “[t]he plan would examine food security, affordability, sustainability, productivity and global competitiveness, as well as examining the possibility of streamlining business regulations, taxation, labour market and policy settings”: *ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> “The Food Plan expects to begin by bringing farmers, manufacturers and processors, distribution and logistics companies, retail and food service companies, and the expertise of our agricultural and food scientists together to develop a strategy to maximize food production opportunities”: *ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development: <http://www.agassessment.org/>.