

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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Discussion Notes

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**Facilitating learning and action for food
sovereignty on family and community
levels**

Organized by:

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Facilitating learning and action for food sovereignty on family and community levels

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Summary about the focus: Building local community strength in Rwenzori, Uganda

This paper focuses on strengthening local communities in West Uganda, where an approach focusing on building up social capital and sharing responsibilities for own development within and between families. We see it as an approach to reach food sovereignty because it takes its roots within the family itself, where the responsibility for both family food and cash crops exists and is not always shared equally. When families start working together and use the resources in a group of both men and women, elders and youth, a local community becomes stronger and can match the capacities within the group with the need for knowledge. New methods on e.g. agro-ecological practices are learned in a context-relevant way together, and together with old practices e.g. on seed saving.

The paper argues in particular for

- Collaboration within families is crucial, and the families are important institutions in reaching food sovereignty,
- Building social capital in local communities is a key to control over food,
- Context-specific learning and knowledge in combination with an organizational and institutional capacity in local CBOs or NGOs all are paramount for strengthening food sovereignty on a local level and addressing issues to the local and regional politicians, authorities and civil societies,
- Many strategies can strengthen the families' and community groups' control over their own food; two of them are 1) selling surplus of own production on local markets, and 2) forming cooperatives of the same product which are specifically sold as cash crop.

The history of the project

Inspired by experiences from Farmer Field Schools in Uganda and Denmark (called Stable Schools), a groups consisting of the Rwenzori-based umbrella organisation Sustainable Agricultural Trainers' Network (SATNET) together with National Organic Agriculture Movement of Uganda (NOGAMU) and Organic Denmark started identifying important issues in late 2008 for improving food security in the region. We educated the first external facilitators in June 2009. Within a year, it became very obvious how important it was to focus on social capital and community strength in the villages and local organisations. Since then we have gone through a long, but mainly constructive process with now 40 local NGOs and CBOs. In the process, we have seen how community groups produce increased amounts of more diversified and healthier food, exchange knowledge, build up new experience and knowledge e.g. about seed saving and herbal medicine, how they help each other on to reach common goals and to increased extent join forces in collective action initiatives (e.g. advocating for road building or take strong standpoints against pesticide donations from government members), as well as develop local markets. Two different strategies for income generation and entering markets have developed: Some of the groups sell surplus of their food crops on the local market, and others develop a common enterprise like cocoa or coffee to sell together.

What is a Farmer Family Learning Group?

An FFLG consists of 15-30 households in a village or particular community. These families work together on each other's farm as a group to solve their own problems, to learn from each other through experience exchange, and to attain one or more common goal. They meet at least once every week at a host farm, and they rotate between farms. They look at the farm, using some version of an 'Agro-ecological system analysis' framework (AESA; sometimes developed by themselves depending on the conditions in that local area), advice each other and discuss how to design and implement recommendations that will improve the farm. Sometimes the group takes up conflicts in the family or the group, address issues of common interest e.g. road quality or access to water. Often, the group has a common goal, e.g. 'in our group, we should all have a banana plantation of at least half an acre and all our children should go to school', or anything else. Often, the families work together when meeting, on the host farm, e.g. digging, weeding, or planting crops.

In this approach, the farm is considered as a system, and since whole communities are involved, the farm is not regarded as an independent entity from other farms within the locality. The farms are linked together, and can e.g. exchange seeds or compost manure. The families build social relations and trust through working together and starting saving and credit schemes. Social capital building include a combination of social trust, exchange of ideas and sharing of values and norms.

Each FFLG has a facilitator. In the first instance, it is what we call 'an external facilitator' or 'a community process facilitator', who is educated on a facilitator course (2 weeks) in the organisation. He or she has the task to make the group running, make sure that the modes of operation work smoothly and that conflicts are solved. This leader identifies – ideally together with the group in a democratic process – an internal facilitator, who eventually takes over the facilitation of the group. An internal facilitator is a group member and a community based farmer with practical skills and experience in sustainable agriculture. When the internal facilitator as well as the external facilitator and the group feel comfortable with continuing with the internal facilitator, the external facilitator leaves the group, and depending on whether he or she is employed or voluntarily working with the CSO or NGO from which (s)he took the education, (s)he will start working with another group.

At the moment, some hundreds FFLGs exist in the Rwenzori region and work according to these principles. The groups work in different ways, and one of the key principles is: 'FFLG is an approach which is owned by everybody who uses it, and which cannot be patented'.

Our learnings from the project

1. Collaboration within families is crucial, and the families are important institutions in reaching food sovereignty

In the initial phase of the project, when identifying issues to address, the project group was made aware from several community leaders, that it was important to address 'families' needs' more broadly, and not only e.g. woman empowerment. It is definitely relevant to focus on woman empowerment, but the point was that this was best done by involving whole families. We became increasingly aware of the importance of this concept during the project period. The families started making book keeping and records, so it became visible how money was spent, and so that investments could be discussed. The sharing of responsibility and the mutual understanding of each other and the roles of each other in the group, to contribute to the family, became visible.

Another aspect of involving whole families was the benefit of involving children and youngsters. Many young people became increasingly interested in farming, and became more skilled and more involved in the

activities and decisions on the farm. In many of the families, important decisions were taken jointly about dividing land for family food and for cash crops, which had great impact on the mutual respect within the family, and the common priorities. Record keeping was taken up in many homes

Food sovereignty is clearly a question which is crucial on family level, and this is the basis for being able to take control over food in a community: that the family shares views on what is fair and which strategies to choose, and to raise awareness of healthy and nutritious food among children.

2. Building social capital in local communities is a key to control over food

The importance of social capital in the community proved to be enormous, and many of the groups expressed that they had got something which their local community had lost half a generation ago, or maybe never had in their life time, due to many factors. Groups of people migrating into areas, disturbances and displacements during a conflict in the area in the near past time, and increased migration of men to towns as seasonal workers had disrupted many of the social structures. The social capital took many forms, e.g. from simply working together on equal basis, to start marketing products together, to divide tasks between them in the group (e.g. that one produced liquid manure for all, and a groups were knowledgeable about how to build improved stoves or latrines), and to share valuable knowledge, e.g. on seed saving and use of herbal remedies.

Edith's group was situated close to Kasese. The land per family was extremely small in this village, and much of the effort in this group has been to intensify the eco-systems of the gardens. One focus of this group was to build improved stoves, so that they could save fire wood and avoid smoke which burdened the eyes and lungs of women and children. One elderly woman showed her stove with great pride and said that it had been built on one afternoon by one of the other women in the group. It had improved her life very much, in addition to the vegetables she had started growing by herself, and the strength she felt she gained from more healthy food and for being involved in the work with the other women which made her use her body better again' (from 'The Rwenzori Experience'). In this way, the group members helped each other, and could take different tasks – some were stronger in certain things and others were strong in other tasks. In one other group, an elderly woman, a widow, could not dig very well, but the group weeded and mulched her banana plantation, and then she took care of the youngest children and made something for everybody to drink and sometimes to eat at the group meetings.

At one visit to a village, the group explained that the process which they had been through now meant that they stood together and rejected e.g. trucks which came with pesticides e.g. as gifts from campaigning parliament members before an election. First, they had learned about more sustainable farming methods, and next, they felt strong together.

3. Context-specific learning and knowledge in combination with an organizational and institutional capacity in local CBOs or NGOs all are paramount for strengthening food sovereignty on a local level and addressing issues to the local and regional politicians, authorities and civil societies

This does not need a long text: it is obvious that learning has to be developed in the place where it should be used, and by the persons who need it. Relevant, embedded knowledge developed commonly in a group is a driver for change and for development in an area. When people are farming using methods which are based on complex interactions between natural and agricultural systems, complex knowledge is needed, and this can be developed by getting together. Likewise, complex social situations like the ones mentioned above

(political and armed conflict in the Rwenzori region, migrations, alcoholism, gender issues etc.) require complex solutions and understanding, which can only be developed in the place where it is needed.

Two strategies as examples of strengthening local control over food: a) selling surplus of own production on local markets, and b) forming cooperatives of the same product which are specifically sold as cash crop.

Two widely different approaches were developed or strengthened in the FFLGs, as the families managed to produce more varied food and food in larger quantities. They were widely different and had different consequences for the family as well as different challenges. Selling surplus of own food production was the immediately most viable strategy, which could be easily adopted by any family and any group. There would most often be a market in the nearby area, where it was possible to sell e.g. onions, matooke, tomatoes, eggs or other food crops. Sometimes, the families or the groups took steps to market something together e.g. onions, or they took steps to add value to it, e.g. produce cassava flour or mill the maize. This strategy had some big advantages for the family: it contributed to their own family food, and only relied on the possible surplus. It often left the woman in control of the income, because it was ‘normal food grown on the farm’, which gave a good starting point for a shared vision in the family. The other strategy required land which could be particularly allocated to a cash crop, unless it easily was intercropped with existing crops, which in some cases was possible with vanilla and some herbs like rosemary. It also required a relatively advanced stage of cohesion in the family, because it would most often be the husband, who was in charge, and traditionally in control of the money which came from this crop.

Both strategies seen in connection with family home steads where the family food was produced, created a solid foundation for taking control over food and income, and in many cases contribute to the local consumption of homegrown healthy food, produced from healthy soil, and with no chemical inputs.

More info:

‘The Rwenzori Experience’ from Third World Network: <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/end/pdf/end15.pdf>

The FFLG facilitator manual: <http://orgprints.org/19341/>

FAO-book: ‘Mainstreaming organic agriculture into the African development agenda’: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3294e/i3294e.pdf> (page 162)

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE

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Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has – as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework – barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” was held at Yale University on September 14-15, 2013. The event brought together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting was to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

The Yale conference was a huge success. It was decided by the organizers, joined by the [Land Deal Politics Initiative \(LDPI\)](#), to hold a European version of the Yale conference on 24 January 2014 at the ISS in The Hague, The Netherlands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mette Vaarst is senior scientist at Aarhus University, Denmark, educated veterinarian and anthropologist, researching aspects of organic and agro-ecological farming since 1991, including social capital, industrialization of farming and interactions between agricultural and community actors. She lectures on agro-ecological farming and food systems. She is volunteer worker and activist in different NGOs and works with local community development in Uganda. One particular field of interest is context specific inter-learning between the Global South and North.



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