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Food Sovereignty as a Weapon of the Weak? Rethinking the Food Question in Uganda

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Abstract

The new paradigm of food sovereignty offers a series of alternatives to the neoliberal development mode. It also offers some answers to the emerging food question by proposing solutions to reduce dependency on purchased food or aid, focusing on territory, community, autonomy, sustainability, ecology and nutrition. The food crisis, which is widely connected to both the ecological and energy crises and exposes the contradictions of the corporate food regime, was manifested in both the deficiency of supply and exponential increase of prices of staple food. Global food crises bring to the fore a number of responses offering inter-linkages between questions of access to food, poverty and power, as well as issues of productivity and the contested debate around technological solutions. The food question in Uganda has been merely interpreted via the modernization paradigm in purely quantitative terms and codified through the notion of food security: the idea that the issue is just one of securing certain availability of food at national and international level through internal production or external aid. The aim of the paper is to debunk the debate from this productivist paradigm, which in Uganda agricultural policies coincides with an emphasis on increasing commercialization of peasant food production. The notion of food sovereignty however cannot be simply read in epiphenomenal terms or merely the lens of contemporary social movements. Indeed it has profound historical, ecological and political articulations with the long-term strategies of peasant households to maintain their relative autonomy, expand their resource base and ensure social reproduction. The paper explores these dynamics through the case of northern Ugandan peasants and their struggles to maintain access to land and food production as crucial instruments to their internal social organization, political authority and economic reproduction. These social struggles are also to maintain their relative autonomy *vis a vis* states (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial) and national and international markets. These dynamics acquire particular relevance in the light of the increasingly unjust, unequal and politically repressive character of the nation state. They are also important because of the overtly central political and economic role played by food in geo-political interstate relations and relations between classes (farmers, peasants and workers) evidenced by amongst other things the current wave of large-scale land acquisitions, which is altering the patterns of food production at global level.

Introduction

The notion of Food Sovereignty, elaborated by La Via Campesina in the mid 1990s, represented an epistemic, theoretical and practical response to the limitations and nefarious socio-ecological consequences of the structuring of the international corporate food regime in a period of neoliberal globalization (see Desmarais 2007; La Via Campesina 2007, 2011, 2013). The conundrums of the current international food regime have clearly manifested in 2009 with

the end of cheap food, rising agricultural prices and the emergence of globally-spread food riots (Bush, 2010).

This paper explores the fractures in the hegemonic narratives and policy practices of food security in Uganda. By deconstructing the shortcomings of the food security paradigm, the paper aims to discuss and pose a set of challenges, analytical and of practical implementation, to the concept of food sovereignty in Uganda. How can the notion of Food Sovereignty be operationalized in Africa, particularly in the context of the absence or weakness of transnational agrarian movements and the predominance of neoliberal ideology surrounding food security—an ideology which lies at the core of food and agricultural modernization policies?

One of the main concerns of this paper is that the food question cannot be analysed in isolation from its constituent parts. It proposes to look at the integration of food and land-based social relations in the context of localized and historical-geographical specificities of livelihood practices among Acholi peasants in Uganda as way to problematize the concept. The aim of the paper is to debunk the debate from the productivist paradigm in Uganda, which states that agricultural policies coincide with an emphasis on increasing commercialization of peasant food production. The notion of food sovereignty cannot be simply read in epiphenomenal terms or as merely the lens of contemporary social movements. Indeed it has profound historical, ecological and political articulations with the long-term strategies of peasant households to maintain their relative autonomy, expand their resource base and ensure social reproduction. The paper explores these dynamics through a case study of northern Ugandan peasants and their struggles to maintain access to land and food production. These struggles are crucial instruments of their internal social organization, political authority and social reproduction. These social struggles are also to maintain their relative autonomy *vis à vis* states (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial) and national and international markets.

The overall discourse of food security in Uganda is based on four pillars: land formalization and privatization; commercialization of smallholder agriculture; promotion of large scale plantations and agri-business; and support for genetically modified organisms in agriculture. They represent different, yet interconnected, components of the hegemonic discourse and practice of transnational agri-business which is itself translated into and manifested as a package of policy directions, prescriptions and actions. Unpacking the foundational lineages that compose the neoliberal-inspired global agricultural and food project might help to assess the current status of food and agricultural policies and discourses in Uganda—while at the same time paving the way for its critical rethinking.

Formalizing Land Ownership

The idea that land formalization and land titling are key mechanisms to increase the flow of capital investments in rural areas and are essential for the creation of vibrant land markets has been at the core of the agenda of International Finance Institutions (IFIs) in the last decade. Of paramount relevance to this argument is the work of the Peruvian development economist Hernando de Soto who, in the search for the “mystery of capital¹”, posited a direct, positive relationship between the system of representation and formalization of land ownership and its monetary value (2000). In his view, it was this prime function of representation of land ownership, epitomised in freehold property in the Western world, that stimulated the use of land as collateral for access to credit and therefore as a stimulus to rural development and the commercialization of agriculture. In other words, De Soto envisaged a massive creation of wealth (monetary and representational) by transforming what he defined as “dead capital” into “live capital” and by bringing life into a dead asset. This discourse has been profoundly influential, almost hegemonic, among development economists and policy makers at a global level and particularly in Africa. In Uganda, the 1998 Land Act recognized the simultaneous co-presence of different forms of land tenure – freehold, leasehold, *mailo* and customary². And yet while this legislative act, welcomed, among others, by activists and land NGOs, seemed to create a policy space for a coexistence of different and multiple land tenure regimes, it identified and postulated a convergence towards a homogenized, single land tenure system based on the notion of individualized, freehold, private property. The stated policy intent was to create a more harmonized and uniformed land tenure system (Batungi, 2008). Seen from a regional perspective, land law reforms in Eastern Africa and the ensuing changes in statutory land laws mark a significant continuity with colonial policies. As argued by Mclauslan (2013), it was colonial policies, which started to promote the creation of markets in land, individualization of land tenure and the demise of customary tenure, all of which characterize the post-1990 reforms. This argument is resonant with another work by Ambreena Maji (2006) who argues that in Africa the emphasis on neoliberal land reforms has switched the focus from land redistribution to tenure reforms, from politics to law, with the effect of de-politicising the debate and neutralizing alternative paths of reforms. Under the push of international organizations, foreign governments and mainstream NGOs, Uganda has embraced the pro-market willing-buyer willing-seller approach anchored in the pre-eminence of land markets and property rights. Similar to what South Africa experienced, where market-led land and agrarian reforms have first been promoted, this approach delivered only minimal transformation of land

¹ The overall intellectual work implemented by de Soto attempted to answer the question of why capitalism works in the West and (allegedly) fail everywhere else.

² As a consequence of both colonial and post-colonial land policies the land tenure system is very heterogeneous. *Mailo* land in particular is the outcome of the Buganda Agreement of 1906 between the British Crown and the Baganda Oligarchy. The act assigned exclusive control of 9000 square miles to Baganda traditional chiefs.

ownership, maintaining the status quo and preserving forms of inequality and exclusion in land based social relations (Lahiff, Borrás and Kay 2007; Lahiff, 2007). Borrás and Franco (2011:111) defined this model as one of non-(re)distribution. Premised on the assumption that the invisible hand of the market will naturally and redistribute land to the most efficient producers and therefore enhance agricultural production, this approach, seems therefore incapable of addressing the emerging unevenness in land ownership pattern in Uganda.

In the Southern part of the country, where significant inequalities in land access persist, tenant-peasants continue to till land they do not own and to be subordinated to the will of often-absent landowners who arbitrarily impose exorbitant monetary rents and other forms of surplus extraction (often labour) on them. We can trace the genealogy of the historical pattern of land/social relations to the early colonial times. One of the consequences of the 1900 Buganda Agreement signed between the Baganda and the British Crown, was to create a class of local notables among the Baganda oligarchy, chosen by and dependent from colonial masters (Mamdani, 1976:41) and create the preconditions for the sale or lease of land to incoming settler planters (Wrigley, 1959:23). By allocating 9,000 square miles to “tribal” chiefs, the act consolidated the power of chiefs by transforming them onto landlords while at the same time drastically impacted on the class structure of the colony.

In the light of small numbers of incoming settlers and the absence of a massive coercive apparatus, which was unable to assure a constant supply of labour power, the basis of economic exploitation of the colony was built around the aggregate output of a mass of rural smallholders. Beside indirect rule, it was also around a strategy of *divide et impera* that the entire colony was subordinated to the colonial rule. Baganda chiefs were in fact imposed in Ankole and Toro, while in the Northern provinces, especially among the Langi and Acholi, the absence of clearly constituted and centralized forms of power demanded the creation *ex novo* of a class of rulers (Branch, 2011).

Commodity production for export was to become the main sector around which the colonial economy was structured. In 1902, the ties with the international capitalist economy were strengthened Do you mean completed through the completion of the Ugandan Railway, which meant that commodities could now be exported at advantageous costs (in service of British metropolitan capital accumulation). Furthermore, a class of Asian traders, which consolidated its presence in the area through centuries of exchange between north-eastern India, the Arabian Peninsula and the East African coast, helped to expand the hold of the market through urban trading practices. Asian traders would come to constitute the class that controlled the terms of exchange, the Ugandan (Asian) urban bourgeoisie.

Cotton, which better suited the conditions of soil and climate in Uganda, and which peasants alongside British plantation production predominantly grew on small plots, was going to be the

principal crop in the export sector in the first three decades of the colony. In 1920-21 81,000 pounds of lint were produced in Uganda, of which 85% were grown in the Southern regions (Mamdani, 1976:47). Peasant households embraced cotton production mostly in order to respond to the coercive measures of the colonial government as well as to find means to pay increasing rents to landlords and taxes to the colonial states. The colonial technologies of power imposed on the chiefs of various rank the imperative to dedicate part of their land to cotton production (Wrightley, 1959:49). Chiefs-landlords responded by increasing the amount of forced labour people performed as a service to the chief. Simultaneously the colonial state started to demand that they provide forced labour for British planters. The process of bifurcation of the colonial state apparatus paved the way for the exercise of mechanisms of coercive governance known as “decentralized despotism” (Mamdani, 1996). The plethora of coercive mechanisms, however, did not secure a regular flow of cheap wage labour for large-scale planters because of ongoing peasant resistance (Mafeje, 1991; Mamdani, 1976). Moreover, the use of coercion was necessary to ensure the supply of cheap labour for the making of roads, the carriage of official stores and other public works. The chronic lack of labour was resolved by making first the northern districts then the adjacent Banyarwanda the source of cheap migrant labour, not only for planters and municipal works, but also for the repressive forces of the colonial state (Mamdani, 1987:71).

The cumulative effect of these multiple coercive measures and demands on peasants manifested into an agitation struggle known as the Bataka movement in 1922 (Wrightley, 1959: 52; Mamdani, 1976: 123-124). The movement, which represented the demands of tenants and won over strong political consensus from small holders and rural workers, gained an important political victory in 1928 with the Basulu and Envujjo Law. The law was passed in order to entrench tenants rights, especially the permanency of their tenancy rights, the reduction of demands on their labour-dues (busulu), fixed rents and taxes and finally tribute on cash crops was fixed to 4 shillings (Mafeje, 1991:138-139).

Indeed, peasant struggles were not limited to the South and to the sphere of negotiation of the terms of incorporation in colonial markets and structures of state governance. Peasant struggles took different forms. These included the maintenance of political sovereignty *vis a vis* colonial authority as well as the struggle for autonomy in preserving specific forms of governance, structures of authority (Adimola, 1952), management of land and labour and the terms of incorporation within capitalist markets in northern and eastern Uganda (Tosh, 1978; Vincent, 1981). Notorious in the Uganda’s peasant historiography are strategies of resistance which involved frying cotton seeds, sabotaging cotton plantations, breaking fences and escape from state attempts to control its socio-reproductive, settlement and mobility practices (Isaacman, 1980). The tension intrinsic in the processes of state construction and deconstruction crystallized in the struggles over enclosing territories, people and resources of its

ungoverned periphery (Scott, 2009). Forced enclosures that manifested in the early colonial times in the South were soon expanded to the entire country where landlordism was absent and customary tenure dominated. Idi Amin's 1975 Land Reform Decree erased the legal recognition of all the forms of customary tenure, turned the peasant into tenants of the state, and allowed Local District Committees to expropriate land from customary tenants in favour of those who had the capacity to "develop" agricultural production. (Mamdani 1975, 1986). By undermining the legal protection of usufruct rights of tenants the decree paved the way for the movement of state bureaucrats and state-connected capitalists into the countryside with the aim of demarcating and enclosing large pieces of land (Mamdani, 1986:46). According to Mamdani (2012), the 1998 Land Act, far from representing a measure aimed at preserving and protecting customary land tenure regimes, must be interpreted as the latest phase of the modern state endeavour to colonize and expand the effect and logic of the 1900 Buganda Agreement to the entire country. The co-operation of both "the dull compulsion of economic forces" and the coercive enclosures of state apparatus, profoundly affected the agrarian social structure. The overall effect of these conjunct pressures manifested into an expansion in the bureaucratic control of land and the commercialization of the countryside, while simultaneously reproducing a class-based, fragmented and highly differentiated agrarian social structure. Land based social relations and the associated set of struggles connected with issues of control, access and use of land have been a major locus of contestation. Land formalization has been, and is, a catalyst of these processes of rural social change so current debates over land policies matter a lot to our understanding of complex rural dynamics.

And yet IFIs, the World Bank *in primis*, continue to provide mono-dimensional analysis of complex land based social relations stressing the importance of formal tenure security, and the associated virtues of freehold property. The recently issued World Bank's "Doing Better Business" survey argues that clear and secure land tenure policies have the potential to provide potential benefits to improve the business environment (World Bank, 2013:19). Specifically, the World Bank exhorts the Ugandan government to increase the land currently formally registered in the national cadastral (18% at the moment), through to the establishment of a computerized land information system and the opening up of zonal offices to register land (Op. cit., 57). They argue that this is the first necessary step in order to institute credible systems to value land, enhance the credit flow in the rural areas, as well as improving the coverage of and level of compliance with property taxes. This is part of the larger goal of increasing the national tax base through the formalization of land, businesses, citizenship.

Notwithstanding policy efforts, it seems that policies of titling and the formalization of land rights have not been successful in the countryside, especially in the northern part of the country. There are two reasons for this: 1) the high cost of registering land that only well-off farmers can afford; and 2) the perceived uselessness of formalization to smallholders so far as

the traditional structures of authority and management of land in the countryside are effective in recognizing the rights of members of rural communities to the use of and residency in land. Indeed, evidence from fieldwork research in local contexts in the Northern as in the Southern districts suggests that processes of property titling and the use of property as collateral bring into being opportunities for speculation, accumulation of rents and concentration of wealth *via* forced transfer of wealth from the less affluent to the more secure peasants and urban classes (See Mitchell, 2006; Manji 2005).

Commercializing Smallholder Agriculture, Consolidating Agri-business

In a context like Uganda where almost 75% of the population's livelihood is based on agricultural production, pressures for small-scale producers to produce commercially intent have a long history. Colonial governments in Uganda, as is well known and documented, have attempted through a combination of taxation, forced labour extraction, and coercive measures implemented by traditional chief such as forced crops, forced sales, and rents, to push peasants towards cash crop production. The expansion (or lack of?) of export production has persistently been the subject of moral exhortation from state leaders, missionaries, and upper classes. During late colonialism and in the post-independence period, under the command of local state officials, " Grow More Cotton" and "Grow More Coffee" campaigns were implemented in order to expand the base of peasant production and orient it towards export. Albeit unevenly, the state provided peasants with subsidized seeds and fertilizers through cooperatives, and maintained the monopolistic control over harvested crops. Indeed it maintained, through a set of parastate institutions, not only the exclusive right to buy at prices below the average price on the global market, but also the privilege to market export crops through the Cotton, Tobacco and Coffee Marketing Boards. The foreign currency fund obtained from this exercise of surplus extraction from the peasantry was used to stimulate a series of import substitution industrialization policies mostly in textiles, food processing and canning, under the control of a single parastatal, the Uganda Development Corporation (Mamdani, 1986:45). Representing the *manus longa* of state control over economic activities within society, marketing boards and parastatals of various genres became the fulcrum of the growth of an African (largely Ganda), state-connected and dependent bourgeoisie after independence, which operated in partnership with the local Asian bourgeoisie and foreign capital. The expulsion of Asian middle men in 1969 affected the entire economic structure of the country. Peasants and even the bourgeoisie were drawn into the informal economy in the 70s as a result of decolonization and cutting ties with Asian and European capital networks (Hundle, 2013). This also explains the culture of informalization that peasants were part of and continue to be part of as they were dealing with rapidly shifting economic changes in post-independence years. It was a survival strategy when national leaders were experimenting with decolonization and restructuring their own economies.

Although to a certain extent colonial and post-independence policies succeeded in creating a class of tenants substantially incorporated within the circuits of market exchange, the low levels of integration of peasants within market circuits still represented a problem for the government. As a consequence of the processes of deregulation and liberalization of agriculture, the imposition of draconian austerity measures and the reduction of state expenditures in agriculture that characterized the 1980s under the pressures of structural adjustment plans, Uganda witnessed a substantial withdrawal of peasant production from the export market (Daviron and Gibbon, 2002). The reorientation of peasant production towards local markets can also be interpreted as a strategy to avoid the persistent squeezing of peasants agricultural surplus by the state in a context of rising internal demand for staple food (Martiniello, 2012).

Following this preliminary attempt to explore the genealogy of small-scale peasants in Uganda, it becomes clear that small-scale farming is extremely differentiated. In the South, the combination of large scale plantations with patterns of landlord-tenants relationships and a wider integration within commercial circuits, created the conditions for the “real subsumption” of peasant farming to what Marx would call the “dull compulsion of economic forces” and market imperatives. Instead, in the northern districts of the country, low degrees of commercialization, the absence of landlord-tenant relations, and relative availability of land through customary tenure regimes meant a larger degree of autonomy *vis a vis* the market and the state. The internal stratification of small-scale farming and its diversification across different geographies also coincided with different patterns of land access, control and use. In the South, the fact that land is mostly accessed through the market and the payment of monetary rents, plus the fact that some peasants worked as outgrowers for large scale, export-oriented tea, sugar, and coffee plantations translated into specific patterns of agricultural production: cash crops, monocropping, the use of chemical inputs and fertilizers, the use of hybrid seeds and so on. On the other hand, in the North, non-market access to land, labour, seeds and implements of labour shaped the orientation of agricultural production towards consumption and expansion of its resource base rather than with intent of sustained commercialization.

Despite the differences in attitudes, practices, orientations and world-views among small scale farmers *vis a vis* commercialization, as well as their varying historical contexts, the international community and the think tanks that express its voice unanimously agree that there is the need for intensification of agricultural production in several areas of Uganda where population growth has risen to levels that make it difficult for sufficient production to be generated from existing croplands using traditional methods. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute, the government of Uganda must enable smallholder farmers to profitably and appropriately make use of inorganic fertilizers, improved seeds and planting materials and other agricultural technologies for higher agricultural production (2013:4). Low levels of

productivity of small-scale farming are allegedly identified as the main cause for deteriorating agricultural production and reduced food security. Therefore the main objective is to ensure a higher rate of usage of appropriate fertilizers and seeds, control crop diseases, raise the levels of capitalization of small scale farmers, improve rural infrastructure to connect producers to markets (World Bank 2013:Xiii, Xvi). In line with Rostow's (1990) modernization theories of "take off" the agricultural economy needs to be transformed into a more efficient and productive one by strengthening links between research and advisory services and between advisory services and small famers, strengthening credit institutions, prioritizing road investments that are based on agricultural potential and supporting the private sector to deliver agricultural services (World Bank 2012). So while the diagnosis unequivocally blames small scale farming for its low levels of agricultural productivity and integration within markets and its consequences for food security – in 2006 the most commercialized quintile of households engaged in the agricultural sector sold no more than 50% of their output (World Bank 2013:31), the antidote is universally identified in the adoption of Green Revolution's improved technologies. These are associated with higher agricultural incomes, more efficient agricultural production, improved nutritional status, lower staple food prices and increased employment opportunities of the (Economic Policy Research Centre 2012:1).

In its campaign to foster agricultural commercialization, the government of Uganda and its international allies pinpoint those virtuous actors that have the capacity to lead structural agrarian transformation. In his speech on the "State of the Nation" in June 2012, President Yoweri Museveni magnified the virtues of large-scale, modern, and chemical-intensive commercial agricultural plantations by attributing to them the reasons for a recovery of the economy: "three players in agriculture have done well: the plantation owners (mostly in sugar, tea and coffee); the big scale farmers and the medium scale farmers," He further argued, "if the 40 million acres of land of Uganda that are suitable for arable farming are put to their full potential, there will be a revolution in this country. Everybody will be richer" (2012:3). The political establishment in Uganda sees the rise of agricultural prices not as a threat to the social order but as an opportunity to be seized by the expanding production of export crops that are increasingly being demanded on the regional and global market for which Uganda enjoys a comparative advantage. The development model promotes a larger and denser integration of small scale producers within the regional and global market, particularly through the formation of export oriented agro-industrial cluster zoning based on the activities of the agri-business sector which is the fastest growing business sector over the decade (World Bank 2013: 22,58).

Food Insecurity and Technological Fix

The hegemonic narrative argues that the goal of ending hunger and malnutrition in Uganda can be achieved by strengthening governance, increasing investments, and appropriately managing natural resources. As expressed among other places in the Uganda National Food and Nutrition Strategy, the overarching goal of the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries is a hunger-free country without malnutrition (Republic of Uganda 2005). The aim is therefore to transform Uganda into a properly nourished country within 10 years. The discourse of food security in Uganda, which stresses issues of access to food, therefore is strictly combined with another component: the nutritional component. A household is food secure if it can reliably gain access to food in sufficient quantity and quality for all its members to enjoy a healthy and active life (Republic of Uganda 2005:iv). So the discourse of food security is intermeshed with a series of concerns linked to the nutritional content of staple crops. The periodic outburst of food shortages are often reported especially in north-eastern part of the country of Karamoja where pastoralist communities live. Despite these claims, the World Food Programme argues that overall Uganda does not lack food. There is wider recognition in the country that the majority of food that circulates in the national market comes from small scale agriculture. So the claim of food insecurity needs to be further investigated. In fact in a context where almost 80% of the population is currently engaged in agriculture, the lack of access to food is experienced by particular social categories and at different spaces and times. Food insecurity crosses both urban and rural spaces. In the northern regions 20 years of protracted war and the forced reclusion of large numbers of Acholi peasants in Internally Displaced People camps has had serious implications on food production and distribution. Landless rural households and rural poor in the Southern part of the country that have insufficient access to rural assets and resources fail to produce their own subsistence requirements. Although farmers that are more integrated within commercial agriculture experience in certain periods of the year the lack of food, it is urban poor that mostly suffer uncertainty in their access to food. Indeed the series of food riots and popular protests that emerged in consequence of food inflation in the late 2010 and in 2011 occurred in urban contexts. The convergence of poverty, unemployment and skyrocketing oil and food prices, especially in basic food, exasperated an already precarious social order when riots began in Kampala in the hotspot of Kisekka Market, in Mbale, Gulu, and in other districts. The events were waived by the opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change, which used the burning social issue of food as an instrument to mobilize urban discontent versus the inefficiency and corruption of the National Resistance Movement's government. Tripling food prices in many districts severely affected the meagre finance of urban poor creating profound social tensions. In May 2011 food crops inflation rose to 39,3% from 29,1% in March: a bunch of *matooke*³ - costs 27-30.000 Uganda shillings up from 9.000 in September 2010. The overall food inflation in the financial year 2011/2012 reached the astonishing figure of 30.6% pushing the overall national inflation rate to 24,6% (World Bank,

³ the most common staple food made out of bananas

2013:66). The opposition's demands of reduced taxation on fuel and food or of subsidized access to food for urban poor were opposed by the government in the light of the assumption that higher food prices would have benefited commercial farmers. And yet those who mostly benefited from rising prices in cooking oil, bananas, maize, cassava, beans and so on were not small scale peasants but middlemen, big farmers and agri-business rather than the majority of rural producers. It is argued by the government *in primis* that food inflation is due to increased regional demand (which is considered as a great opportunity for "serious producers") and to the emergence of expanding middle classes in China, Brazil, India and to some extent in Africa (2012: 16). This statement is highly contentious as it ignores the rampant process of financialization of the food sector – the futures' market, itself a consequence of the global crisis, growing portions of land dedicated to produce bio-fuels rather than food (Bello, 2009) and the direct effect of oil inflation on food prices (Weis, 2007). According to recently issued statistics by the World Bank fuel inflation moved from 5.7% in February 2011 to 35% exactly one year after (2013:66).

Despite this, however, the claim that Uganda is a food insecure country remains highly problematic. There is no doubt that small-scale rural producers are suffering from the increasingly economic, political and ecological pressures they are facing - in terms of agricultural liberalization, absence of support, land alienation, climate change and unequal exchange. However I argue that the narrative of food insecurity is instrumentally and ideologically used with the purpose of promoting the capitalist-oriented, adverse incorporation of Ugandan agriculture within the international corporate food regime. The constant appearance of images of malnourished children from Karamoja on TV reproduces stereotyped imagery of backward, primitive pastoralist and peasant communities which serves the legitimization of the ongoing capitalist-oriented and modernization-led social transformation. More scrupulous analysis of increasing difficulties in practices of social reproduction among pastoralist communities reveals instead the gradual erosion of their usual pattern of mobility. The attempts by various governments in the region to sedentarize them and transform them into settled agriculturalists and/or cattle ranchers in very arid and hostile environments, in the name of agricultural modernization, and the ensuing abandonment of pastoralism as a mode of living produced harsh consequences in terms of food access. A series of modernization interventions have been undertaken in Karamoja in the last decade supporting the mechanization of agriculture, to enable more vulnerable households to open up more land for cultivation by providing tractors and start up tractors' hiring schemes, distributing ox-ploughs, subsidizing the provision of inputs especially improved and fast maturing, drought resistant and high-yielding seeds (Muhereza, 2012). Beside being very ecologically problematic and unable to reduce existing poverty levels and widening existing inequalities, these projects cut the nexus of reciprocity between crop cultivation and livestock which had positively adapted to the semi-arid conditions of Karamoja.

If coupled with rising enclosures, privatizations, pushes for the commoditisation of subsistence (Bernstein, 2010) and the commercialization of social reproduction, then the causes of diminished access to food should be more evident. Although policy documents on food security affirms the need to move beyond focusing on increased agricultural production by incorporating the challenges of how food is accessed, it over-emphasizes limitations of food supply and its relation with the market. In fact the National Food and Nutrition Strategy document stressed the need to stimulate more efficient mechanisms of food supply and accessibility, developing and expanding internal and external markets, assisting the private sector to improve food processing, preservation and storage, marketing and distribution, promote a well-coordinated system for collecting, collating and disseminating information on food marketing and distribution, securing food aid (2005:22). In obedience to principles of neo-classical economics the problem seems to lie in non-perfectly functioning markets because of exogenous distortions (state interventions) or ineffective information systems. Rather than analysing lack of food from a critical socio-political perspective the main focus of the national strategy on food remains that of raising agricultural productivity as a powerful force for reducing food insecurity.

Corporate-led technological innovations and never-ending faith in the virtues of the market represent, in this context, the antidote to solve the Malthusian postulate about the disequilibrium between growing population and (allegedly) decreasing food production. Indeed, in the moment of writing this paper, the Ugandan parliament is debating, without a serious civil society involvement, the Bio-Safety and Bio-Technology Bill. The action of policy makers has increasingly been driven by the preoccupation with an expanding population and the presumed low nutritional content of traditional crops. In contrast, the process of improving the adaptation and quality of seeds, plants and crops has been in the repertoire of activities that peasants have practiced since time immemorial. Conventional plant breeding done through the selection of phenotypic markers is however being replaced by the genetic manipulation of crop plants through molecular assisted selection. The application of genetic engineering to agricultural production, justified through the argument that some crops cannot be improved through conventional means, is shaping a particular corporate-driven pattern of plant breeding. The intent is to produce more crops that deliver higher yields, that are resistant to pests, that are nutritionally enhanced and have a higher content of oil and protein. In Uganda in particular under the aegis of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) of the Bill and Melissa Gates Foundation and through the support of a cartel of a few corporations, the process is in its inception. Under the leadership of the National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO), which coordinates agricultural research activities at a national level, a group of profit-minded agricultural scientists are implementing a set of in-lab experiments on bio-fortification of staple food such as bananas and cassava, the enhancement of provitamin A in finger millet and sorghum, and testing genetically modified varieties of water efficient maize and disease-

resistant soya beans. The Water Efficient Maize for Africa project (WEMA) led by the Kenyan-based African Agricultural Technology Foundation, and funded by the Bill and Melissa Gates Foundation, Howard G. Buffet Foundation and USAID, has been implemented since 2008 in South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, with the stated goal of increasing yield stability and reducing hunger, and improve the livelihoods of millions of Africans.⁴ Monsanto's⁵ contributions to the project include providing maize germplasm and donating its commercial drought-tolerance and insect protection traits royalty free. The emphasis on producing excess quantities of maize does not, ipso facto, translate into access.

Although it is important to recognize a certain diversity of views among agronomists on creating genetically modified crops and at the same time avoiding the contamination that could affect the environment, the scientific debate, albeit important, seems to represent only one side of the coin. Some scientists at Makerere University, in fact, argue that while GMOs can bring positive effects in beans, soybeans and bananas, the manipulation of genetic structures in sorghum, finger millet and maize would be impossible to be contained as there is no capacity to check the spreads of GMOs in non-GMOs crops - as the source used for plant breeding come from so called "wild" relatives. In other words there is a high probability that when introduced in the open environment the cross-pollination would be almost unavoidable with devastating impacts on the bio-diverse ecological patrimony. The effect would be of transforming all the different varieties of sorghum, maize and millet selected and grown for millennia by eastern African peasants in GMOs. This debate brings to the fore a set of paramount ecological and health questions. The missing point in the debate is however more politico-economic in character. These interventions in fact reveal that below the surface of events and narratives the overarching goal is to incorporate African food production and consumption systems into the global food chain through the expansion of research and marketing of seed technologies. The core, unmentioned, goal of AGRA is, in fact, to access African genetic wealth without sharing benefits nor recognizing the role of peasant communities who developed the cultivars for centuries (Thompson, 2012:345). This process generally referred to as bio-piracy is accompanied by a parallel process aimed at patenting the seeds that results from adding one or more genes to the crop varieties that had been developed for centuries by rural populations. In Uganda and in Africa more widely, for example, the process of modification of sorghum and millet does not recognize nor share benefits with peasants who have been developing and freely sharing those varieties for generations. The process of patenting seeds, whose global market is controlled by an oligopoly of a few Transnational Corporations as Monsanto, Du-Pont, Syngenta, Limagrain, attempts at transforming seeds into a commodity that as any other

⁴ See <http://www.monsanto.com/improvingagriculture/Pages/water-efficient-maize-for-africa.aspx>, Accessed 20 June 2013

⁵ Monsanto is the largest transnational corporation operating in the seed sector.

commodity can be bought and sold, commoditizing the source of African food systems and increasing foreign control on production and consumption of food. The purchase of hybrid seeds is in fact followed by an agreement signed between farmers and the detainer of the intellectual property rights of the seed not to diffuse, multiply or exchange seeds so that at every planting season the farmer has to get back to the market to buy the reproductive capacity of the seed. Furthermore, GMOs increase the overall costs of production as the forecasted higher yields are only produced when combined with a sustained application of fertilizers and herbicides that are often sold as one package product. In sum, through a set of complex rules articulated at the World Trade Organization and at the World Intellectual Property Organization, global institutions that serve the interests of agro-industrial cartels, peasants who have suffered from multiple acts of dispossession and bio-piracy are now asked to compensate the bio-pirate.

Food Security versus Food Sovereignty

The dominance of the paradigm of food security in Uganda, constructed through the combination of the optimization of productive efficiency and a legalistic approach to the “right to food”, manifests in policy documents, government’s members speeches, advisory committees, NGOs forums and among academics. Its primacy remains unchallenged and unquestioned across society particularly in the light of the incremental weakening of civil society structures and the monopolization of the political space by the state, which is itself the most active force in promoting agricultural modernization. Urban and rural elites in conjunction with an increasingly internationalized bourgeoisie appreciate in their everyday practice and discourses, the supremacy of the virtues of modernized agriculture and agri-business. Defined in the 1980s as an answer to the emerging challenges of food crises and famines in Africa, food security has, however been unable to understand the main causes behind the crises of agricultural production and the agrarian social reproduction. The main line of argument of the food security paradigm was that states had impeded the proper functioning of the market and inhibited the entrepreneurial potential of African agricultures, limiting the construction of functioning and efficient markets. The solution therefore lied in less state intervention, agricultural deregulation and liberalization, enhancement of land markets (an euphemism for dispossession), land privatization, and green revolution. The diagnosis, however, did not question the hierarchical nature of the post-World War II food regime that had adversely incorporated African agricultures into the global division of labour, assigning the state a drastically different role. Ugandan peasants and farmers had in fact had been substantially, although not entirely, integrated within the international food regime as providers of tropical products (coffee, tea, cotton, sugar) that did not serve the needs of African populations, but rather favoured the extraversion of African agriculture. The emphasis was placed on national supply, industrialization of agriculture and external food aid (Fairbairn 2010:23) that promoted

further integration within what McMichael defines as the globalization project (2012:22). More recent policy developments in Uganda emphasize the relationship between the necessity to raise food production via agricultural liberalization and to increase the individual purchasing power of rural households, part of the larger project of creating consumer citizens. Methodological individualism, which inspired neo-classical economics analysis, influenced a different framing of the food problematic. This time, it was centred on individual access and caloric in-take. As Fairbairn highlights food security is now framed as a problem of individual choices at a micro-economic level in the context of the free market rather than as an issue concerning governments' policy choices (2012:24). Furthermore, it is important to notice that the effects of the corporatization of the international food regime are manifested in the further transformation of patterns of agricultural production and land use. Beside the consolidated export of tropical commodities, Uganda is witnessing increased use of land for capitalist oriented cattle ranching, the production of oilseeds, and an expansion of so-called flexi-crops (sugar, maize, soya, sunflower). This seems to provide evidence for its insertion in what has been labelled the food-feed-fuel complex (Borras, McMichael, Scoones, 2010; Borras and Franco 2011).

The combined effects of unfavourable terms of incorporation within the vertically integrated circuits of agri-business and the marginalization of peasants, in the light of accelerating biophysical contradictions of capitalist industrial agriculture (see Weis 2010), required a call for a new approach. The notion of Food Sovereignty elaborated in the 1990s by the most politically influential transnational agrarian movement, La Via Campesina, in struggle against the effects of the corporate agriculture, provides an avenue that attempts to move beyond the market episteme. The term food sovereignty, coined with the aim to politicize the food and agricultural debates from below, refers to the "right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments" (Witman, Desmarais, Wiebe, 2010:2). By questioning the assumptions that are at the core of the development of industrial agriculture the concept of food sovereignty allows for a combined critique of the power, economic and ecological dynamics that characterize the international food regime. For McMichael its substantive meaning reflects the importance of small-scale holders intent on asserting the critical importance of bio-diverse and sustainable agriculture (McMichael, 2009a; 2009b). According to Desmarais the concept represents a radical contestation of the attempts to ensure the right to food within the WTO through reforming or fixing existing structures (2007). In her view by introducing food sovereignty, La Via Campesina was challenging all those views as technological fixes, liberalization, deregulation and privatization that represented the spine of policy measures about food and agriculture (2007:132). As a movement, food sovereignty, represents a political, ecological and cultural alternative to the capital intensive agro-industrialization. It in fact contributes to the re-framing of the agrarian question away from its "classical" imperatives by incorporating

questions of equity, social justice and ecological sustainability in the methods of production and circulation of food (McMichael, 2010:173).

By reframing the question of food away from the productivist and over-consumptionist trends and imperatives of modernized corporate agriculture and embedding it within agriculture and the environment, cultures and territories, it recuperates and valorises peasant knowledge. Walden Bello interprets it as a parcel of the process of de-globalization, built on a set of principles and practices: production for the domestic market rather than for export; production at the level of community to valorise the principle of subsidiarity; protecting local agriculture from destruction by corporate dumping of over-subsidized commodities; maximising equity and reducing environmental disequilibrium; emphasising quality of life and de-emphasizing growth; expanding the scope of democratic decision-making in the economy; transforming the property complex; encouraging the development and diffusion of environmentally congenial technologies (Bello, 2009: 145). It provides the intellectual and political space for a radical rethinking of food away from the capital-imposed logics of value creation, commoditization and endless accumulation. For Miguel Altieri, the concept of food sovereignty is indissolubly linked to agro-ecologically based production systems in which “ecological interactions and synergisms between biological components provide mechanisms for the system to sponsor soil fertility, productivity and crop protection” (2010:121). This approach in his view creates wider socio-cultural and ecological synergies by promoting principles of diversity, recycling, integration and re-embedding food within social processes and eco-systemic dynamics. The last section of this paper raises a set of preliminary critical reflections on both food sovereignty as an analytical apparatus and on the critical actions necessary for its on-the ground implementation in a socio-political milieu like Uganda.

Critical Reflections on Food Sovereignty

Drawing from Borras and Franco’s critical comments on the necessity to address the land dimension within the food sovereignty project (2010:107), this section explores the implications of land-based social relations on the instantiation of food sovereignty. This author, in fact, shares the same preoccupation about the importance to analyse the food and land questions simultaneously. This is because, obviously, there exists an organic link between the forms of land tenure, land access and land use and the ensuing possibilities to implement the project of food sovereignty on the ground. I interpret the accent posed by Borras and Franco on land based social relations (2010, 2012) as an invitation, on the one hand, to explore the possibilities and limitations that relations of property and production centred on land constitute in terms of food sovereignty, on the other, as a challenge to explore the changing class dynamics in specific social formations. In this sense this approach helps to provide providing a “disaggregated view of the competing social classes linked to each other by their relationship to land” (2010:108). In

Uganda, as I have showed in the previous sections, the absence of redistributive land reforms and the dominance of a willing-buyer willing seller approach provides the main obstacle to the actualization of food sovereignty, especially in the South. It is therefore of crucial importance to analyse the various and diverse character of land based social relations in different geographical locations in order to assess the potential for the practical implementation of the concept.

Food sovereignty places the role of small-scale producers at the core of this budding episteme. They are the real subjects that can challenge, in alliance with sympathetic NGOs, researchers, and progressive sections of both national governments and international organizations, the existing economic, political and ideological narratives and structures of globalized and corporatized capitalism. And yet there is a trend in the scholarship at homogenising this quite heterodox social group. As I showed in the previous sections small scale producers have been differentially integrated within capitalist markets across different geographic locations in Uganda. Where agri-business's presence is more pronounced and the commercialization of agriculture reached substantial levels of pervasiveness, they tend to be vertically integrated as out-growers and therefore subordinated to the operation and to the rhythms of production imposed by capitalist markets. In other cases they tend to produce under contractual agreements or sell their produce to wholesale retailers. Although small-scale producers at all the latitudes strive to maintain control of their food production by dedicating part of the land they access to food production, their forms of production, agricultural techniques, and patterns of land use seem to be subordinated to capitalist market imperatives (see Woods, 2009). In the northern parts of the country instead where agricultural commercialization has moved slowly and encountered both, objective and subjective, resistances, peasant producers have maintained a much stronger control of their means of production (land, seeds, labour), and therefore of the general pattern of production, exchange and consumption. Low levels of commercialization and organic composition of capital, the relative availability of land through customary land tenure systems, partial absence of landlordism, and the presence of vibrant local peasant markets, can impede the entrenchment and deepening of commodity relations especially if coupled with low levels of mobility of labour, land and credit and of rural households' competition. As Friedmann states:

If household reproduction rests on reciprocal ties, then reproduction resists commoditization. If access to land, labour and credit and product markets, is mediated through direct non monetary ties to other households or classes, if these ties are reproduced through stable institutional mechanisms, then commodity relations are limited in their ability to penetrate the cycle of reproduction. (Friedman, 1982: 163).

In the case of Northern Ugandan, especially between Lango and Acholi agriculturalist communities, where peasant household reproduction rests on a set of communal and class relations relations then there are objective limitations to the operation of the law of value limiting the penetration of commodity relations into the productive process. It is subsistence or social reproduction that in this case drive agricultural production not the “agricultural entrepreneurial calculus” (Friedman 1982). This does not mean that Acholi and Lango are egalitarian rural societies, rather, that although social stratification is slowly developing, the conditions for its consolidation are limited by surrounding social conditions. Class dynamics in northern Uganda needs to be accounted for if we aim to understand existing rural social dynamics and the challenge these present to the implementation of food sovereignty. cursory references in some of the programmes and visions of transnational agrarian movements are made about the role of medium scale farmers and the potential for alliances with this social group (see Borras, Edelman, Kay, 2009). Paul Nicholson, a Basque peasant and one of the most influential personalities in La Via Campesina, defines small farmers as people owning “forty hectares, thirty-hectare, twenty-hectare, ten-hectare” (Masioli & Nicholson 2010:34). In northern Uganda small scale producers have access on average to two hectare of land per rural household. Access to land varies according to the capacity to use land productively. Access to land within customary land tenure regimes is not determined by the market but by the capacity to put land under cultivation. In this sense the access to larger portions of land is limited to: a) the village bourgeoisie (Mamdani 1987) which can “customarily” claim access to land; b) to politically connected rural elites ; c) to urban salaried and professionals that invest monetary (urban) wages in land in rural areas. In all these cases middle scale farmers are those who most closely emulate patterns of land use and production and ethos that are proper to large-scale commercial farming. In this context they are the receptors and implementers of the precepts and impulses deployed by agri-business companies. They are the sole users of tractors, they are among the few to access irrigation systems, exclusively produce for the export market, plant hybrid seeds, make extensive use of fertilizers, over-exploit rural workers. In doing so they are the promoters of a view that increasingly sees land and agriculture as sources of profits. In the light of their favourable access to monetary sources and credit they also re-invest their profits in other remunerative activities in the countryside especially in merchant activities, transport services, and as rentiers. It is therefore fundamental to incorporate class dynamics within the food sovereignty paradigm in order not to misidentify those social classes that can be identified as parts of the problem rather than bearers of the solutions.

Intersecting with the issue of class, the gender question is another aspect that needs to be incorporated within the food sovereignty paradigm as the recent women manifesto of La Via Campesina in Jakarta recently stressed. In Uganda, women are very often the real

agriculturalists of the country. In many rural societies women are in charge of assuring the social reproduction of rural households. Among the Acholi in Northern Uganda women are customarily entitled to two plots of land they allocate to food production. Each wife or mature woman of the household, or *min ot*, in Acholi language maintains two fields of millet, one field of sesame, and a small plot of beans, pigeon peas, ground nuts and spinach (Girling: 1960:191). She had to make sure that the supply of food is yearly available for the reproduction of the households. After marriage women used to come with seeds brought from the father's households to begin cultivation. They also possess the right to termite's hills and mud holes for making pots, plants used for fibres and others for catching fish. In historical terms the rise of cash crops, generally, but not exclusively detained by men had marginalized their authority in household decision-making and left the control of agricultural produce in the hands of men. In today's Uganda, liberal feminist discourses focuses on the imbalances between men and women in access to land. One of the proposals made by NGOs is to assure women's land security through freehold property as a way to limit the operation of patriarchal relations that exclude women from ownership. This discourse, however, seems to ignore the centrality that women maintain in social reproduction. Furthermore, the massive involvement of women in struggles of resistance against large scale land acquisitions witness to the fact that although based in patriarchy and gerontocracy customary land tenure systems are perceived by women as the best way to negotiate access to land rather than through the market (Martiniello, 2012). According to Federici, the central role played by women in the struggles against land dispossession can be explained as land represents their system of social security (2005:49). Women's lack of access to land has therefore less to do with tradition than with the pressures resulting from land privatization, commercialization of agriculture and the consequent loss of communal land. Therefore, land policies, that aim at enhancing food sovereignty need to take into account the specific role played by women in guaranteeing the necessary food production for the household.

From the point of view of concretely implementing food sovereignty on the ground the role of transnational agrarian movements has been fundamental. In Africa, although growing, the movement has not developed vigorous actions and campaigns as in Latin America and East Asia. Although the actions and efforts in this continent have multiplied in the last decade there is still a lot of work to be done. African social movements have in fact gained momentum especially as a result of the African social forums in Nyeleni in 2007, in Maputo in 2008 and again in the anti-land grabbing conference in Nyeleni in 2011. However peasant organizations have remained extremely fragmented and disconnected from the wider political arena. As P. McMichael argues, although as a paradigm food sovereignty has identified the limitations and violence of the highly modernist approach of food security, its implementation has remained elusive (2010:169). A fracture has in fact manifested between the loci of transnational activism and the sequence of episodes of resistance of rural communities against land grabbing and

corporate-capitalist agriculture. One of the biggest limitations has, in fact, manifested in both the difficulty to intercept localized and everyday forms of rural struggles and providing concrete support to them so to enlarge their visibility and connect them to larger more comprehensive demands. One of the most appropriate critiques to rural social movements highlighted hegemonic trends and the creation of a hierarchy within Transnational Agrarian Movements which determined the appropriate theories and practices of struggle, steps and strategies to be followed (Belletti et al 2008). The relationship among global, regional, national and local organizations enormously impact upon the issue of framing and demand making. Transmission of knowledge and experiences by stronger peasant organizations might inhibits the endogenous process of analysis and evaluation in accordance with historical, geographical and sociological peculiarities and specificities. The unintended outcome of this process was to homogenise the multiple and dialectic insights coming from a variegated array of historical and geographical experiences and instances of resistance (Martiniello 2013:315). One of the best examples of this process comes from the interpretation of African social movements as a nightmare by Joao Pedro Stedile, one of the leaders of the Brazilian Movimiento Sem Terra (MST). Although not structured in the form of a large assemblage of politicised peasants organizations, landless and rural workers as it has been the case in Latin America, the multiple practices of community based, indigenous led social resistance has been diffused and such form of resistance has taken a central stage in the struggle against dispossession. Similarly the notion of food sovereignty rather than being “exported” to Africa with its array of strategies and practices, needs instead to be conceptualized starting from the daily practices of peasant communities that embody an incredibly valuable historically constructed and territorially grounded patrimony of experiences, narratives and worldviews. This might help also to move beyond the epiphenomenal character of its contemporary formulation and incorporate its historical and localized meaning.

Food Sovereignty as a Weapon of the Weak?

I argue that the notion of food sovereignty cannot simply be read in epiphenomenal terms or merely through the lens of contemporary rural social movements. Indeed, it has profound historical, ecological and political articulations within the long-term strategies of peasant households in Uganda to maintain their relative autonomy, expand their resource base and ensure social reproduction. Through the analysis of Ugandan peasants’ historical experiences, practices and livelihoods strategies and their struggles to maintain access to land and food production I maintain that food sovereignty represents a crucial praxis to consolidate and protect internal social organization, political authority and socio-economic reproduction. These social struggles are also to maintain their relative autonomy *vis a vis* states (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial) and national and international markets. These dynamics acquire particular relevance in the light of the increasingly unjust, unequal and politically repressive character of the nation state.

This section will attempt to ground food sovereignty in the social, political and economic practices of rural population in northern Uganda.

During fieldwork in northern Uganda in 2010 and 2011 one phrase recurred in my conversations with Acholi peasants: “our culture is based on food”. Historical studies based on linguistics, archaeology and paleoecology bring to light the existence of complex and extremely elaborated food-producing systems in the Great Lakes region (Shoenbrun 1993, 1998; Ehret 1974; Ehret 1998). At the intersection of different influences from Central and Eastern Sudanese, Southern Cushitic communities and Eastern Highlands Bantu speakers, a set of developed and diverse food systems preceded the Iron Age and developed in the region roughly for a thousands year after 500 B.C. Central Sudanic-speaking societies resided at the Western side of the great lake regions raised and milked cattle and grew sorghum and millet (Ehret, 1974). Eastern Sudanic speaking people also appeared to grow sorghum and beans and were also involved in raising and milking livestock (Shoenbrun, 1998:15). The Southern Cushitic people’s food system, which, similarly produced other varieties of sorghum, seemed instead to pay more attention to breeding, herding, milking and breeding of cattle (Op. cit 16-17). Food systems basically differentiated in terms of the ecological conditions and the patterns of settlement. After 500 B.C. the Great Lakes Bantu were able to achieve an agricultural synthesis by incorporating the food expertise developed in the region through the interaction, intermarriage and trade between the different populations. The cumulative agricultural expertise they inherited created the premises for what Shoenbrun defined the “roots of agricultural abundance” (1993:65).

The successful integration of cereal agriculture and stock raising, the planting of root-crops such as yams, oil palm, beans, gourds and cow peas, and leguminous plants, combined with the role played by fishing and hunting, established the premises for consolidated patterns of settlements and soil fertility maintenance (Shoenbrun 1998:20). The eclectic food systems produced were a consequence of the improvement of agricultural techniques of land clearance and field maintenance which allowed for more stable patterns of settlement into the drier zones of the region (Shoenbrun 1993, 1998).

Anthropological and linguistic studies support the idea that Acholi people are descendants of Nilotic speaking ancestors and that their presence in today’s Northern Uganda is the outcome of a gradual but constant infiltration from Sudan starting around 1700 (Girlings, 12-14). Explanations of the causes of what has been termed the “Shilluk migration” are not entirely elaborated. A possible and suggestive hypothesis links the outgoing flow of people to profound changes in the systems of land tenure and the growing appropriation of peasant surplus occurring in Northern Sudan which fell under the Turco-Egyptian rule in 1821. The state initiated the dispossession of and the control of large tracts of land peasants and take control of

large tracts of land, imposed forced agricultural labour and established a new land tax policy – collected mainly through military campaigns and the promotion private property in land (Zezeza, 1997:120). The expansion of agricultural production and the growth of labour intensive practices in agriculture, which engendered a sharp rise in slave trade and agricultural slavery, were met by desertions and migrations by peasants (Op. cit: 135). So peasants exerted their right to escape adverse political conditions, one of the most efficient tactics of evasion to the control and rule of the state.

The area inhabited today by Acholi people was at the crossroad of many distinguished political and economic influences. From North, the Arabic slave raiders and traders, which emanated from centralized state structures of the Sudanic states, from South, Swahili merchants that extended the trading networks from the Sultanate of Oman. In response to historical and ecological factors and to constant threats coming from outside, regular mobility in both settlement and production patterns was a necessary aspect of production (Mamdani 1976:20). Simple herding and shifting cultivation satisfied this requirement. Constant movement also led to the dispersal of families resulting in decentralized and segmental social units. Following Scott's suggestive hypothesis, let us to consider the localized, social, economic and cultural practices as a conscious and deliberate political choice aimed at evading state control (2009:51). Their location at a distance from the control of the powerful inter-lacustrine kingdoms of Southern Uganda, the living at the margins, the simplification of social structure and means of subsistence, shifting cultivation, mixed cropping, field rotation, continuous mobility far from being a sign of primitivism or backwardness have to be interpreted as adaptations to evade state capture (Op.cit.:30). War and defence were at the core of the social organization of the village unit. Age grades of Acholi males from 15 years upwards formed the fighting organization of the people and were organized on a territorial basis (Girlings 1960:75). Mukrejee termed them military democracies in the light of the segmented character of their political organization and the absence of paramount chiefs (Mukerjee 1956:77). The Arabs merchants traded with them in guns and ivory and encouraged them to make raids on neighbouring people to capture slaves for them. The Acholi regularly traded with merchants of Bunyoro-Kitara, with whom they traded a surplus of sesame, animal's skins and ivory in exchange for iron hoes and clothes. External condition influenced therefore the structures of authority and the forms of social organization. The *Rwot Kweri*, literally the chief of the hoe, was central as master of the war, rain-maker, and land manager and agricultural organizer. In a context of great availability of land, low population densities, low technological development, sparse settlements and distance from the main trading centres, the Acholi agro-pastoralist communities developed many forms of mutual help and collective labour that sharpened their political and socio-reproductive autonomy. Land for cultivation was allocated to a lineage by the *Rwot*, more recently however cultivation rights may be established in any area by clearing the bush, breaking the ground and planting crops (Girling 1960:184). Clan lands was therefore

at disposal of households use so long as they required or claimed it. Rights in cultivation descent from father to son and they are subordinated to the continued use of the soil and membership of the clan. The practice of shifting cultivation, still predominant today, demanded mobility and movements therefore any village had the liberty to occupy uncultivated land or land which had been cultivated but has since been abandoned. Security of tenure was therefore guaranteed by the permanent use of land. Such forms of occupation however did not imply permanent ownership but grants the usufruct for such period (Parsons 1956:13). Shifting cultivation moreover demanded the constant clearing of new strips of land for agricultural activities. In condition of harsh, rocky environment and forested savannas, where land is plentiful, population sparse and technologies rudimentary⁶, the necessity of common work was imperative.

Controlled burning performed the task of clearing the ground in preparation for cultivation by reducing the weeding. Hunting also represented a domain of particular interest. Communal hunts were also organized especially in the dry season from November to February. Traps, nets, grassland burning techniques and spears were all utilized and the hunt was collectively performed. Its booty was redistributed according to elaborate social norms that connected the individual household with the village. Fishing was also included in those multiple activities aimed at supplementing agricultural activities⁷. Planting in this specific succession millet, sesame, pigeon peas, sorghum, and cassava ensured autonomous food supply and the expansion of the resource basis. Meat was not rare as it was assured through hunting. Fish are caught in the rivers or swamps. Cattle was once abundant⁸ and central to the welfare of the household as value storing in a society with few monetary ties (Mamdani 1976: 22; Girlings 1960:14). Each activity was accompanied by rituals and ceremonies performed by headmen. Ceremonies were performed at the seedling and harvesting season, before hunting, for the soil fertility, rain making and so on. Rites also assured social cohesion through a network of practices of social obligation. Mutual help, obligation to the group, the centrality of the household and village were all emphasized. Material distinctions between people were of little importance. Relations of production were cooperative not antagonistic. Appropriation was of nature in the course of production without social appropriation (Mamdani, 1976:21). Use value on land and its importance were cemented in a common ethic and social responsibility in the use of land. Through customary land tenure regimes people also were guaranteed grazing rights, hunting rights, water rights, rights over ant-hills and shea butter-nut trees (Parson 1956:14). These complex and nested regimes of land rights combined and articulated both the individual and the collective rights in non-conflictual ways.

⁶ The hoe still represents today the main agricultural implement in the area.

⁷ Mostly performed in dry seasons where water is down and streams can be easily accessed.

⁸ As the result of cattle raiding from neighbouring groups and by Sudanese slave raiders in the late nineteenth century, and because of the recent war, cattle is almost not existing in the area.

Pluri-activity, diversification of livelihood strategies, mixed cropping and shifting cultivation represented the pillars of Acholi's food sovereignty - a process that was of course strengthened by their land and seed sovereignty. The preservation of these social features was therefore crucial for social reproduction and represented a challenge to the attempts of the early colonial state to impose its rule. The movement of resistance in fact emerged as an instance of the wider attempt of refutation of the imposition of the colonial authority and its demands in the forms of taxes, forced labour and land requisitions. It can be interpreted as a moment in the more complex and long-term confrontation with external political and economic forces, to maintain the political and economic sovereignty over a specific geographical territory and social group. In 1904 Acholiland was described as the most backward part of the protectorate owing to its remote situation and poverty (Girling 1960:174-175). In order to promote a more stable colonial order, the erstwhile District Commissioner Postletwhite (1947:66) initiated a policy of compulsory displacements, moving large numbers of the population of West Acholiland aimed at "forcibly changing the habits of indigenous people". In the face of people's reluctance to work for cash, colonial officials attempted to distort the pattern of communal cultivation and develop agricultural production on the basis of individual family units. Land availability and the absence of individualised land tenure gave comparative stability to the traditional socio-economic order (Girling 1960:183).

When cotton was introduced in the area in the late 1930s by colonial authorities it did not monopolize farming. It played an important part to the social reproduction of the household as it allowed paying colonial taxes and other monetary duties. Nonetheless it never supplanted food production; rather it was integrated within the usual cycle of production, which placed at the core in this sequence food staples as millet, pigeon peas, sesame, sorghum and cassava. Rather than a transition from subsistence to cash crops, the Acholi peasants opted for a combination of the two, although they gave large priority to food crops. The introduction of cotton enhanced the creation of a minority of "progressive" medium and large-scale farmers who used to plant it with commercial intents. A group of emergent progressive farmers took up farming for profit often after a period of salaried employment. As late as the end of the 1950s, colonial officials still perceived Acholiland to be an area in which the development of commercial enterprise has so far played only a negligible part (Branch 2011:50). In 1964, after independence, it was estimated that there were fewer than ten successful farmers of this kind in Acholi". (Leys 1966:50). Acholi peasants depended on family labour and had few incentives to produce cash crop surpluses.

In post-independence period, Acholi peasants were only partially integrated within the market economy. By replicating the effort of the colonial state, the central state attempted to extract surplus produce from peasants through the exaction of taxes and the establishment of Marketing Boards which had the monopoly of purchasing cash crops, and taxes to exports. And

yet although under a set of conjunct market and state pressures, Acholi peasant households could still manage to negotiate the terms of market integration.

These insights into the agricultural social reproduction strategies of Acholi peasants illuminate the dual character of contemporary social struggles, which embody and manifest both political and socio-economic strategies. In other words while social struggles can be expressed through protests and land occupations, these have to be seen as a process aimed at improving available resources through constant adaptations in a context of increased pressures. The recrudescence of land struggles brings to the fore the centrality of land and food questions in the strategies of social reproduction of rural households as well as a resurgence of rural mobilizations. These localized struggles do not detract from the significance of broad based transnational agrarian movements, rather they help to explore the different patterns of commoditization and praxis of resistance. Recent struggles in northern Uganda against large scale land acquisitions further mark the integration of land and food and their relevance for livelihoods strategies. I argue that more open manifestations of struggle, although stimulated by the threat of land dispossession, cannot be related mechanically to it. Instead I situate the current wave of local struggles against land grabbing as the culminating and cumulative moment of everyday peasant resistance. In Scott's formulation: "the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents and interest from them: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigner ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth" (1985:29). These forms of resistance, which are intended to mitigate or deny claims made by super-ordinate classes, have ordinarily to do with a material nexus of class struggle, the appropriation of land, labour, taxes, rents and so forth. (Scott 1985:32-33).

The recent and ongoing struggle around the attempt by the state to grab 40.000 ha of land in the Amuru district and allocate it to the Madhvani Group, a regional conglomerate with a long-term presence in the country, for large-scale sugar plantation, signals a great degree of awareness among rural population of the importance to maintain their food sovereignty. On Wednesday, 18th April 2102 to block their eviction from land they claim is rightfully theirs, between 60 and 80 women from Amuru District stripped naked before representatives of the Local District Board and surveyors of Madhvani Group, the firm seeking land in the area for sugar cane growing. Hundreds of locals composed of women and youth, who had gathered to await the arrival of the officials, charged towards the guests, asking them to forget about their land. By resisting dispossession and challenging state violence, small-scale poor peasants, men and women, reiterated their will and preference to be buried in their ancestral land rather than being displaced. The event widely reported in the national media illuminates crucial aspects of peasants' agency and resistance, brings to the fore the present dynamics of the global political economy and highlights the role of the state in current land acquisitions.

Refusing to become out-growers or rural workers and successfully resisting displacement, the rural populations in the Amuru district stressed again the fact that by losing touch with their land “they would have become slaves”.

A conversation between the President Museveni and a local peasant, held in one of the president’s visits to Amuru, epitomizes the priority that food plays in the life of Acholi peasants. In the attempt to convince people to vacate land, the president asked “don’t you take sugar in your tea? Why do you not want others to?”. The peasant replied: “I never liked sugar and those of us who do shall stop taking it, then! If we can do without it, so can others”. Food sovereignty in this light therefore represents a praxis, a discourse, a weapon of the weak, as it constitutes the material and cultural patrimony that can be mobilized to face and reject state’s and capitalists’ strategies to take control of their resources.

Struggles over access to land and food are foundational moments in the wider confrontation for relative autonomy in a context of increasing marginality, dependence and subordination. Reproductive autonomy “materializes as the creation and development of a self-controlled and self-managed resource base, which in turn allows for forms of co-production of man and living nature that feed back into and strengthen the resource base, improve the process of co-production, enlarge autonomy and thus reduce dependency” (Van der Ploeg 2008:23).

The diversity of agricultural techniques and livelihood strategies adopted respond to the changing local agro-ecological conditions and socio-economic circumstances of peasants. These are foundational components and moments to processes of social reproduction. According to Altieri in traditional agroecosystems, the prevalence of complex and diverse cropping systems are of key importance to the stability of farming systems allowing crops to reach acceptable levels of productivity in stressful environmental conditions (Altieri, 2010: 124). Fieldwork research in Northern Uganda reveals also that rural households were more able than commercial farmers to minimize the effects of climate change, through diversification, the increment in use of drought tolerant local varieties, mixed cropping and agro-forestry. According to Natarajan and Willey polycultures based on combination of sorghum, peanut and millet yielded consistently more than corresponding monocultures in conditions of stressful access to water (Quoted in Altieri, 2010:125). Central to the consolidation of food sovereignty at community level is the ability of rural populations to control seeds production and exchange. The realization of food sovereignty is therefore subordinated to the continued and secured access to seed production. Acholi peasants are at the forefront of the struggle for seed sovereignty. They have in fact been successful in protecting their capacity to production and reproduction of seeds in the face of both corporate appropriation of genetic resources and seeds patenting and NGOs attempts at promoting hybrid seeds varieties among farmers. Kloppenburg interprets the combined processes of development and deployment of transgenic

varieties and the imposition of intellectual property rights as manifestation of primitive accumulation in its simple form and as moments of accumulation by dispossession (2010:372). In Acholi peasant communities, seeds selection is reserved to women, who carefully select and store the seeds, and assess the part of the harvest to be destined to the household's food consumption and the part that needs to be preserved for future agricultural cycles.

This historical account of the struggles for food sovereignty in northern Uganda had dual aim: on the one hand it highlighted the interconnection between food sovereignty, land and seed sovereignty, on the other it grounded the concept in existing rural social relations and situated these processes in the ongoing peasant struggles. This exercise exhorts us to historicize theory in order to understand the historical salience of practices of food sovereignty as a weapon of the weak against capitalist enclosures and state rule.

Conclusions

The paper represented a preliminary attempt at deconstructing the food question in Uganda. By naming the assumptions and contradictions of the food security paradigm the paper explored the transformative potential of food sovereignty and the relative social, political economic and ideological struggles it entails. The main objective of the paper was to explore the challenges, potentials and limitations in the theoretical framework of food sovereignty and in its actualization. By arguing for the necessity to link food sovereignty to social struggles over land, seed and labour, the paper aimed to give life to the concept situating it at specific space-time coordinates and within existing rural social dynamics among Acholi peasants. Far from romanticising Acholi peasant communities the paper aimed at bringing class and power dynamics in the analysis of food sovereignty in order to illuminate the agrarian social structure and identifying the social subjects who can potentially implement, and give interpretation to, the notion of food sovereignty.

By focusing on historicity the paper aimed to put into dialogue the existing literature on food sovereignty and the leading social movements with the localized and fragmented, as persistent, character of struggles for land and food sovereignty. In this way the paper emphasized the wider socio-political terrain that surrounds and inform the struggles for food sovereignty in Uganda in the present and in the future.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

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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” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring 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 is 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.

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