



FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AS A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT: Evolution, Achievements, and Challenges of the Food Sovereignty Movement in Nepal

Part 1

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In 1996, peasant organizations and social movements like La Via Campesina introduced the concept of Food Sovereignty into the global policy circle. They argued that without ensuring producers' access to and control over productive resources, empowering small producers, and protecting them from market hegemony and corporate control, it would be impossible to end hunger and meet increasing production demands. Food Sovereignty, both as an idea and a principle, surpassed the concept of 'Food Security,' moving beyond mere food provision to question who produces food, where, how, how much, when, and for whom.



Advocates of Food Sovereignty pointed out that many of those suffering from hunger and poverty reside in developing countries, where rural producers and agricultural workers lack access to resources. They also criticized the impact of neoliberalism and the expansion of corporate control and free trade markets on rural food producers, wage workers, and the urban poor. Therefore, the call for Food Sovereignty challenged the dominant economic model, advocating instead for sustainable production and equitable resource distribution.

Within a few years, the movement gained significant global traction, with thousands of organizations advocating for alternative rural agrarian policies and peasants' rights. In Nepal, the movement entered through members of La Via Campesina (LVC), particularly the All Nepal Peasants Federation (ANPFa), and gradually gained support from other organizations and networks. Thus, the banner of food sovereignty became a prominent slogan during Nepal's historic changes in 2006. It was enshrined as a fundamental right in the interim constitution of 2007 and fully institutionalized as a legal right under the 2015 constitution, with the passage of the food sovereignty law in 2018 and subsequent regulations in 2024. There were many constraints in the process, but a vibrant peasants movement along with wider support from national and international networks created a conducive environment. While implementation remains a challenge, the popularization of the concept and the formulation of laws and regulations represent significant achievements.

Rising political relevance of food sovereignty

The concept of food sovereignty gained unprecedented political relevance over the last few years [1]. There may be a plethora of reasons why discussion around food sovereignty has become more and more relevant and lively today than many of the traditional intellectuals have thought a few years back.

I put forward three most prominent arguments contributing to the relevancy of Food Sovereignty today.

The first reason may be the growing inequality, hunger, and marginalization due to corporate agriculture as claimed by the food sovereignty movement long ago. According to the World Inequality Report [2], we live in the most unequal world where the wealth of the topmost 10 % is more than the wealth of 3/4 of the population, and the wealth of 50% of the poor population is just 2%. That is



why more than 828 million people go to bed hungry every night suffering from extreme poverty [3] and almost 2 billion people are suffering from malnutrition diseases [4].

Neoliberal approaches and programs, such as food security, have failed to solve the issues they aimed to address 25 years ago. This is where food sovereignty has emerged as an alternative principle to tackle the problems of hunger and poverty.

The second important phenomenon that helped to bring the concept of food sovereignty to the mainstream both at the national and global levels is the passing of United Nations Declarations on the rights of the peasants and other people working in rural areas [5]. The peasant's rights declaration as a historical document has escalated the discussion and debate around food sovereignty and its realization. Similarly, the United Nations Decade of Family Farming [6], where the La Via Campesina (LVC) holds vice-presidency of the global steering committee of UNDRF has been continuously raising the issue of food sovereignty and peasants' rights to safeguard family farming which is defined by LVC as peasants agriculture. If we see both UNDRF and UN Decade of Family Farming documents, it is clearly stated according to the spirit of food sovereignty that, to solve the issue of rural farmers, to address the impacts of chemicals and corporations in farming and orient towards sustainable farming practices, food sovereignty provides solutions.

The third reason for the mainstreaming of the food sovereignty debate is the growing call for climate justice, agroecology, and sustainability. Whether it is the UN Summit on Sustainable Agri-food System (2021) or the massive call for the generational renewal in agriculture by Food and Agriculture Organizations (FAO), even the climate justice call of the Conference of Parties (COP), LVC and its members are organizing parallel forums putting agroecology and food sovereignty as solutions. Thus, the food sovereignty movement is not limited to peasants' movement but to human rights organizations, environment justice movements, and women's rights movements, many organizations are talking about it such as Friends of the Earth, The World March of Women, International Peoples' Assembly (IPA), People's Forum USA, South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE), South Asian Peasants Coalition, etc.



The genesis of Food Sovereignty and its conceptualization

La Via Campesina (LVC) has discussed the alternative path of agrarian transformation and rural development which is just, eco-friendly, and peasant-led since its inception in 1993. During the second conference of LVC in Mexico, they were already defining such a path and developing the concept. It launched the concept of Food Sovereignty in 1996 at the Rome Civil Society Organization Forum which was organized as a parallel forum to the World Food Summit of the Food and Agricultural Organisation [7].

While the inter-governmental body discussed the concept of food security to address escalating global poverty and hunger, emphasizing food donations to poor countries, opening trade and investment, and inviting corporate investments in agriculture, mass-based organizations, and LVC members gathered in thousands outside the FAO building argued that these actions would exacerbate the marginalization of peasants and rural communities instead of alleviating poverty and hunger [1].

Farmers and other grassroots organizations opposed neoliberal policies, International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in agriculture. The central idea was to address the plight of peasants, who produced more than 80% of the world's food at that time, yet remained among the most vulnerable to hunger and poverty.

Access to productive resources as well as their autonomy in decision making was the central issue of farmers. Therefore, to eradicate hunger and poverty, it was important to follow peasant-led solutions instead of inviting corporations, opening markets, and dumping food, Nettie Wiebe from Canada and Pancha Rodriguez from Guatemala, the women leader of LVC who were among the few to finalize the concepts recalled [8].

The 1996 struggle with this thought put forward a model of sustainable agricultural development and a self-reliant economy to ascertain the farmers' access to means of food production and to secure the people's rights and privileges through the thought of a people-oriented alternative strategy; food sovereignty.

To put it differently, the definition by LVC in 1996 is that; food Sovereignty is the right of people to produce food locally and sustainably through agroecological methods that respect the climatic, cultural, and geographical



context of each region. It is built on the principles of solidarity, collectivity, and social justice. Food Sovereignty is an alternative to a destructive and harmful industrial food system. It prioritizes local trade and markets, which empower peasant agriculture, food production, distribution, and consumption based on environmental, social, and economic sustainability. It ensures the right to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock, and biodiversity by peasants. Most importantly, Food Sovereignty gives the power to preserve and grow food-producing knowledge and capacities worldwide [8].

The six fundamental principles of food sovereignty were highlighted by the Nyeleni Declaration.

1. Food sovereignty emphasizes food production for the people rather than food production for market and profit.
2. Food sovereignty emphasizes on dignified living of food-producing peasants. It emphasizes their self-respect and sovereignty.
3. Food sovereignty advocates the local food system. It opposes the foreign influence on the locals. It emphasizes biological or organic agriculture rather than chemical farming.
4. Food sovereignty emphasizes the local decision-making process. Its postulation is to protect the producer's access and control of the means of production. It opposes the privatization of the means of production. It emphasizes that the peasants should have sovereign rights in the policy-making and decision-making process and comprehensive agriculture reform and land reform should take place in the peasants' participation.
5. Food sovereignty emphasizes local knowledge, skill, and capability. It emphasizes local seed, farming practices, family farming, and sustainable production.
6. The other fundamental postulation of food sovereignty is sustainable agriculture done in harmonization with nature. It highlights the protection of biodiversity. It underlines undertaking rural development and agriculture systems in the balance of nature through means of ecological farming. [9]

Therefore, food sovereignty is ensured when peasants, agriculture workers, poor farmers, Indigenous people, Dalits, and local minority groups and communities have the right over productive resources, including land, water,



forest, seeds, credit, information, and technology. The food sovereignty policy framework has stated that agriculture is the tradition and a way of life of people.

Evolution of food sovereignty over time and space

The principle of food sovereignty which was conceptualized, developed, and brought into debate publicly worldwide by LVC during the World Food Summit in 1996 in Rome was endorsed by the many progressive peasants' movements around the world as their policy instrument and an alternative program for agricultural development in such a way that it became the banner of hundreds of organizations within few years [8].

Right after the World Food Summit of 1996, many civil society organizations working in diverse sectors around the world have taken the issue as part of their policy framework. Whether it was the protest against the newly established World Trade Organization (WTO) or the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and other Multinational Corporations, LVC members and other activists were loudly talking about food sovereignty.

The peasant's leaders like M.D. Nandundaswamy of Karnataka India was already known for organizing many events against the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), and G7 Countries Forum since 1988. Peasant leaders from Europe like Paul Nicholson (Basque) were also mobilizing the masses against neoliberal reforms backed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). These protests were rejuvenated after the introduction of food sovereignty and thousands and thousands of people were mobilized against the WTO ministerial conference in Seattle (1999), Hong Kong (2001), and Cancun (2003).

Numerous documents, including intellectuals like David Graeber, discussed counter-globalization and the anti-world trade regime movement led by LVC and other people's organizations. From Seattle to Cancun, protests were gaining momentum. In Cancun, Lee Kyung Hae from the Korean Peasant League, a member organization of LVC, sacrificed his life during a protest, declaring that the WTO was killing farmers. These examples underscore the intensity of the struggle for food sovereignty.



At the UN level, there was sustained pressure on IFAD and FAO, two Rome-based intergovernmental bodies. This pressure prompted IFAD to establish the Farmers Forum in 2005 to amplify farmers' voices. The Voluntary Guidelines of the Code of Conduct on the Human Right to Food (VGRF), adopted by FAO in November 2004, and the outcomes of the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) in 2006 were products of global peasant struggles under the banner of food sovereignty. LVC's engagement at IFAD and FAO significantly contributed to these achievements.

In 2007, grassroots groups affiliated with La Via Campesina and other networks convened in Mali for the Nyéléni International Forum on Food Sovereignty. The forum took its name from Nyeleni, a legendary peasant woman in Mali known for domesticating 'fonio,' an African heritage grain. Her name was chosen to honor her leadership in food sovereignty struggles within her village, predating the international recognition of these concepts in policy circles [10].

This historic forum in 2007 not only established but also elaborated upon the six principles of food sovereignty. It played a pivotal role in refining and solidifying these principles into a robust and comprehensive framework.

The progressive government welcomed this concept and started to put in their legislation. Venezuela was first among all. In 1999, the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela was approved by popular referendum, and Article 305, Article 306, and Article 307 addressed the portions of the food sovereignty framework.

Similarly, in the West African country Senegal, the National Assembly passed the farmers' law, LOASP, and food sovereignty principles were influenced by peasant organization. In 2006 another West African country Mali approved the Law on Agricultural Orientation (LAO) as a groundwork for a food sovereignty framework.

Similarly, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, and other countries like Canada and Australia also referred to Food Sovereignty during food policy formulation. That gave a lot of strength to the food sovereignty movement around the world.

In Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia, many national, regional, and continental platforms put food sovereignty as the major agenda of struggle



such as Food Sovereignty Network South Asia (FSNSA), South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE), Asian Peasants Coalition (APC), South Asian Peasants Coalition (SAPC), Pesticide Action Network Asia and Pacific (PAN AP), Focus on the Global South etc in Asia. Nyeleni Europe Forum (2011) organized the conference to follow the process of Food Sovereignty. There is a big list of major events on food sovereignty around the world.

Another such achievement was the formation of 'The International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty' (IPC). IPC was originated from the parallel forums organized against the IMF, WB and later during the 1996 food summit. Many of the organizations who were present in 1996 later organized to form IPC in 2002. It played a key role in the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, 2006 and Nyeleni Forum 2007. It was formalized when the Committee on Food Security (CFS) of the FAO was reformed in 2009. The IPC has evolved into a platform where diverse food producer groups—including fisherfolk, youth, small farmers, and indigenous peoples—come together to analyze common challenges and seek solutions. It has played a crucial role in enhancing civil society's engagement with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The establishment of the IPC on food sovereignty within the CSM has led to significant achievements. For instance, one outcome of this collaboration is the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGTs). Ratified in 2012, these guidelines support organizations worldwide in securing access to natural resources for food production. Moreover, the IPC has facilitated policy reforms in several countries, such as Argentina and Brazil.

Nepal closely observed global developments, with direct influences from events like the IFAD Farmers Forum, IPC meetings, and conferences organized by LVC. The widespread adoption and localization of the food sovereignty concept across various countries, along with debates on innovative applications, contributed to the maturation of the movement. Embracing diversity and various interpretations became central to the concept's evolution, recognizing the need for adaptation to diverse cultural and geographical contexts [11].



Continue to read part 2 of this article next week to know more about the incorporation of Food Sovereignty into Nepal's Constitution!

References

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