

Food Sovereignty: Debates and Directions

A little over a year ago, a heterogeneous group of farmers and peasant organizers, food advocates, feminists, civil society activists, independent researchers, and scholars gathered at the University of the Philippines (UP) Third World Studies Center (TWSC) to examine, discuss and debate food sovereignty perspectives in Southeast Asia. For two days (October 14-15, 2010), our collective energy was geared toward fostering a better grasp of what food sovereignty might entail in the context of Southeast Asia. Such gathering followed a similar endeavor that had taken place in Montreal the year before, where local, national, and international viewpoints had been discussed on how public policies might help foster food sovereignty not only within Quebec and Canada but also at the international level.¹

Food sovereignty was proposed as a lens to discuss food issues ranging from production, transformation, distribution and consumption because of its broad and inclusive character. Initially defined by Via Campesina in the early 1990, its definition was further defined during the *Nyéléni* Forum for Food Sovereignty in 2007. As stated in the Declaration of Nyéléni, "Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems."² More precisely, the workshop aimed to examine and debate food sovereignty from various perspectives through the experiences of social and farmer's movements on a range of themes. This includes, among others, agrarian reform policies, right to food, land grabbing, biofuels and land conversion, public-private partnership, genetically modified organisms and biotechnology, farmer's rights, seed savings and intellectual property rights, organic production and marketing, global food crisis and economic policies. To reflect these concerns, the workshop was organized around five themes, namely:

- 1) Situating Food Sovereignty within Social Justice Struggles and Movements
- 2) Global Challenges and Comparative Experiences in Southeast Asia
- 3) Grassroots Perspectives and Experiences
- 4) Government Responses and Initiatives for Food Sovereignty
- 5) Farmer's and Consumer's Alternative Practices for Food Sovereignty in the Philippines

The second main objective of the workshop was to document the exchange and push further the discussion by preparing a special thematic issue of *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, the TWSC's journal publication. Right from the beginning, the organizers (Réseau d'études des dynamiques transnationales et de l'action collective [REDTAC], Southeast Asia Regional Initiatives for Community Empowerment [SEARICE], and TWSC) established that contributions would range from full articles, research notes, and perspective pieces. Articles would be more detailed and would be peer-reviewed; research notes would be shorter and present ongoing projects and initial findings of research without being peer-reviewed; perspective pieces would present a particular stand on at least one of the presented issues. Moreover, we agreed that the issue could include articles and research notes from contributors that were not able to attend the workshop, but were looking at food sovereignty from an original perspective.

The end product is both challenging in terms of the diverse and multiple tracts it opens for further research—yet, there is a certain coherence that emerges. The first is that food and agricultural issues are at the center of key sets of activities and confluence. This is not too difficult to realize, considering the fact that we all need to eat to live. Issues of access and choice are paramount: as a direct reflection of power relations within and between societies, who has access to sufficient and appropriate diet? As a powerful indication of the political economy and social division within society, what is produced and how? Can one survive producing food and living off the land? Who controls the inputs needed for production? How are agricultural products purchased and distributed? Is Southeast Asia different from other parts of the world, in terms of export agriculture, land grabbing,

climate change, and rural development? Are women involved in decision making when it comes to agricultural production and control of assets? Lastly, are consumers and consumers' movements able to influence policies and practices towards fairer trade and more environmentally sound practices?

These and many more issues are explored in this rich collection of articles, research notes, and perspective pieces. To set the discussion, three short pieces have been translated from an earlier collection of articles that came out of the Montreal workshop and cycles of conference. The first piece helps to better understand food sovereignty as an emerging conceptual tool to engage in the exploration of food as a commodity—a social construct and a profoundly political and even ethical issue. The second piece locates the broader context of the 2008 food and financial crises, powerfully revealing the multiple connections and intersections of global economic capitalist forces with local, and sometimes subsistence-based agricultural practices. The third piece helps understand how food sovereignty today has become an important collective action frame that is allowing for various linkages crossing spaces and borders. Once the scene has been defined, it becomes easier to engage and dive into specific dimensions of food sovereignty in Southeast Asia, such as indigenous struggles in the face of the rapid expansion of palm oil plantations, economic reforms and food security policies in Vietnam, foreign aid and land policies in the Philippines and in a more theoretical frame, how discourse on human security may or may not open productive spaces for debating issues such as food security versus food sovereignty. The research notes section opens and presents a rich research agenda that reflect ongoing questioning across the region: subsistence agriculture versus plantation-based models; nation-building and feeding citizens; women's space and participation in agriculture; massive land conversion, biofuels, and land reform; indigenous knowledge, shifting and multiple livelihoods strategy; foreign assistance, land reform, and the role of the market; the centrality of rice in everyday diet and how its price can determine how much can one eat; and disasters, climate change and vulnerability. To arouse reflections and push the discussion even further, one contributor raised a series of questions and doubts on the normative and a priori assumptions often implied in debates and discussions on food sovereignty. These critical comments bridge well the article and research notes sections with the more engaged, normative, and militant perspectives that are then offered by members of grassroots organizations

and committed activist intellectuals whose researches, policy analyses, and actions are able to push the discourses and practices further and act in many ways as countermovement to prevailing processes dominated more and more by food consortiums and agri-business firms oftentimes controlled by powerful political elites, both private and public. As a final contribution, an extensive review of recent books helps in locating the niche and contribution of this special issue of *Kasarinlan*.

As any research and reflective endeavour, this issue is the result of unrelenting efforts of the *Kasarinlan* editorial team, in particular Joel Ariate Jr., Miguel Paolo Reyes, Elinor May Cruz, and Emerald Flaviano, and a whole team of young and emerging researchers at TWSC as well as Michelle Alviz and Agnes Lintao from SEARICE. It is also important to underline the wonderful organizing efforts of Lauren Sevilla Faustino who helped with the coordination of the food sovereignty workshop and even created its original logo. Maria Ela Atienza, Christine Gibb, Milagros Arguelles, and Jean Yasol did great work in facilitating the panels and keeping the discussions as focused as possible. For those who would rather watch and listen than read a long double issue of *Kasarinlan*, a short video has been produced by Arca Arguelles-Caouette that examines the issues raised in the workshop by looking at it from the ground and through the eyes of the participants.³

The workshop was made possible through the generous support of a number of institutions that understood and saw the pertinence of creating a space for thinking collectively but also analytically about food sovereignty in Southeast Asia. These include the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Centre d'études et recherches internationales (CÉRIUM), the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Canada Research Chair on Asian Studies, SEARICE, the TWSC and REDTAC. *Maraming salamat!* ❀

NOTES

1. See the CÉRIUM (Centre d'études et recherches internationales) website for the online magazine Possibles issue titled "Beyond the food crisis food sovereignty, rethinking agriculture" (<http://www.cerium.ca/Au-dela-de-la-crise-alimentaire-La>).
2. See the Declaration of Nyéléni in the Forum for Food Sovereignty held on 23 - 27 February 2007 at Sélingué, Mali (<http://www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>).
3. See the video titled "Choosing Food Sovereignty in the Philippines 2011" uploaded in YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mqMOEqZxAA>).



SOUTHEAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ON
Food Sovereignty

The workshop logo designed by Lauren Sevilla Faustino.

