

RSIS Non-Traditional Security (NTS)

Year In Review 2014



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The Rise of Food Sovereignty in Southeast Asia

Jonatan Anderias Lassa

Since the 1996 Food Summit, there has been an acceptance among policy makers and researchers globally that “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” However, this definition is deemed inadequate by some social movements. La Via Campesina, an international social movement, launched Food Sovereignty at the 1996 Food Summit as an alternative concept to the mainstream definition of food security which was officially adopted by the Food and Agriculture Organization. It was initially considered as an alternative framework to the market-driven nature of food security which did not give enough attention to the questions of where, how, by whom and for whom food was produced. Food Sovereignty has been gaining popularity as a number of governments have

officially adopted its framework and principles on a national level. In the Via Campesina’s Forum for Food Sovereignty in 2007, its principles were elaborated once again as following:

- Promotion of greater participation in decision-making and the rights of farmers to define their own food and agriculture systems;
- Marginal farmers should have access to land (including land reforms), water, seeds, livestock breeds and credit;
- Right of local people to have access to healthy and culturally appropriate food in which;
- Food should be produced in an ecologically sustainable manner;
- Decision-making on food production, distribution and consumption should be placed in the hands of local producers, distributors and consumers and not in the hands of markets and corporations;



- Prioritization of local and national economies and markets, and empowerment of peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production;
- Ensuring transparency in food trade that guarantees just income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition;
- Ensuring the rights of local producers to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity;
- Establishing new social relations free of oppression and inequality;
- Ensuring food systems safeguard inter-generational equity.

In the rice producing regions of Southeast Asia, the food sovereignty movement arose from organised action among rice farmers. In this case, it simply meant rice (rather than food) sovereignty. However, over time, food sovereignty expanded to include more diverse types of food commodities and food systems. It has finally emerged as a new framework where civil society and governments seek to democratize local food systems. It emerged from an alternative policy framework conceptualised and popularised by global civil society to be a progressive discourse to mainstream food security policy of governments in Southeast Asia.

In the context of Asia, food sovereignty is often promoted by:

- Asia Pacific Network on Food Sovereignty – headquartered in Quezon City NCR Philippines
- PCFS People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty, Quezon City established in 2001
- Food Sovereignty Network South Asia (FSNSA) headquartered in Kolkata, India
- The International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (Global)
- La Via Campesina, the International Peasant Movement



Landworkers Alliance (UK members of La Via Campesina) demanding that the UK government give them support rather than multinational agribusiness corporations. Part of a global action for food sovereignty.

World Development Movement / flickr.

Jokowi and Food Sovereignty Adoption



Yulian Hendiyana / flickr

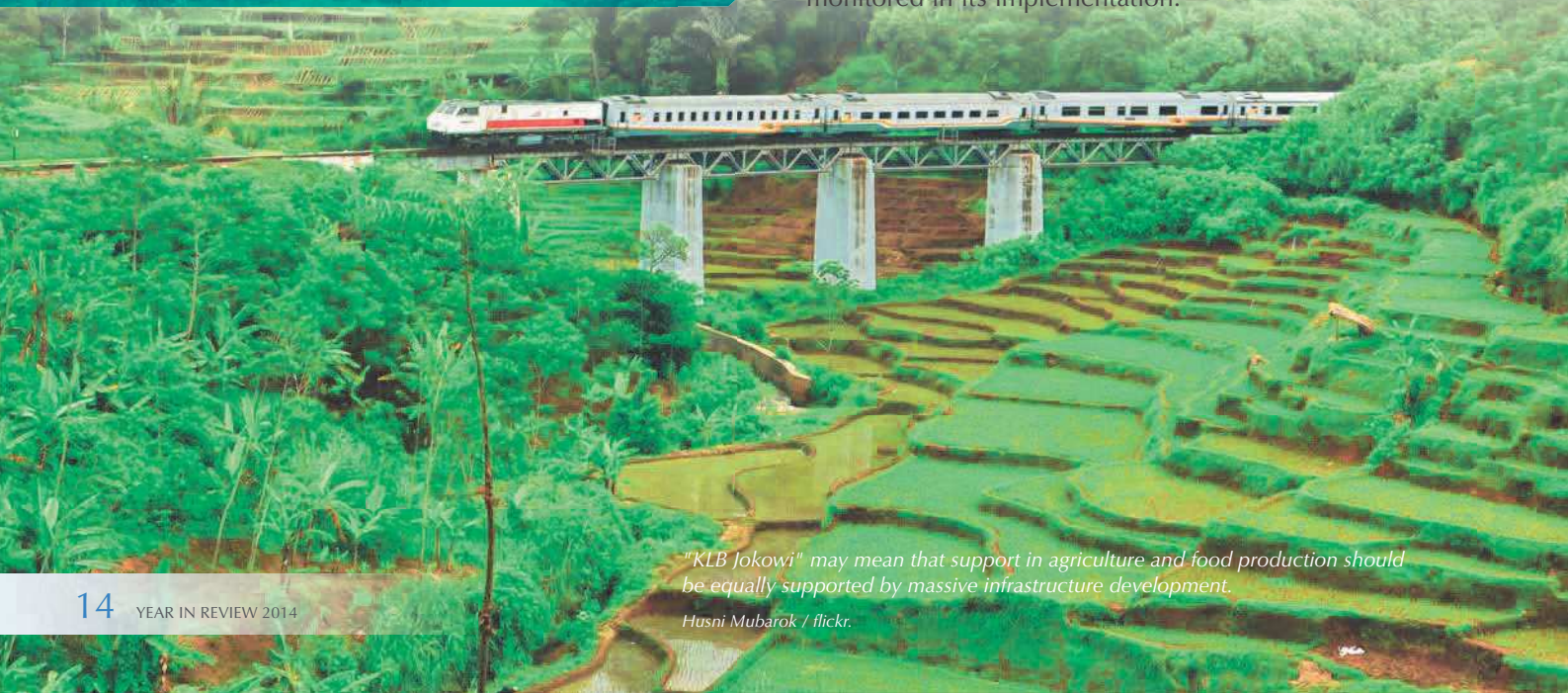
The newly elected president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, adopted Food Sovereignty as a concept in his political campaign in 2014. His approach proved to win hearts and minds of the voters.

A recent post on Jokowi's Facebook page, stated, "Food security is different from food sovereignty. Food security is simply the availability of foodstuffs (logistically) in warehouses and in the markets regardless of the origin whether from imports or locally produced. Food sovereignty means we produce and market our food ourselves, while the surplus of agricultural crops is exported. If we are sovereign in our food production, any disturbances abroad, will not have a significant impact on our food reserve and we can still have an adequate supply to feed our people. Our commitment towards food sovereignty is firm. Our food sovereignty vision at the highest level is for our food production to overflow the local and international markets or at the very least, we have to be the largest food producer in ASEAN."

Food Sovereignty, as opposed to food security, has recently been adopted as a formal policy framework by the newly elected Indonesian President, Joko Widodo (Jokowi). Jokowi's notion of food sovereignty has largely focused on the food production dimension of food security. Food sovereignty can be politically attractive to strong nationalistic regimes which can capitalise on the concept to win the hearts and the minds of voters particularly in the large agrarian economies of Southeast Asia. It was once a concept used by farmers' organisations, fishers, pastoralists and local/indigenous peoples' organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as interested politicians. It was flexibly designed, as Paul Nicholson (La Via Campesina) argued, so that "Food sovereignty is not a fixed principle, it's a process - it's happening, and it's been made to happen, through the struggles of peoples all over the world."

"Food sovereignty is not a fixed principle, it's a process"

Prior to Jokowi, the Indonesian government passed the Food Bill 8/2012 which defines food security as 'the rights of the state and the nation to determine food policy which ensures people's right to food and provides rights for the people to determine food systems that is appropriate with local resources'. Despite the fact that President Jokowi claims to adopt the notion of food sovereignty into Indonesian food policy, it is still little known how the key food sovereignty components are being formulated in policy planning and adequately monitored in its implementation.



"KLB Jokowi" may mean that support in agriculture and food production should be equally supported by massive infrastructure development.

Husni Mubarak / flickr

The Challenges

The operationalisation of food sovereignty is never without difficulties. One of the debates is where to locate sovereignty (at citizens or at state level). The concept, therefore, requires a clearer definition. Jokowi's definition of food sovereignty has been much clearer at the production level but less clear on how to sustain food access and nutrition, with food stability.

In today's neoliberal economic context, some scholars have credited food sovereignty to be used as a counter narrative to confront global land grabbing problems as well as unsustainable practices in local and international food systems. Indonesia and Malaysia are concerned with the promotion of local production to increase rice self-sufficiency, illustrating their policy orientation towards food sovereignty. The recent adoption of food sovereignty is likely to reinforce a food self-sufficiency policy in Indonesia, which many have argued is often short lived and inefficient.

The Philippines civil society has been pressuring the government to adopt the food sovereignty framework. However, the government's interest remains on market orientation. Indeed, economic success from the production of genetically modified (GM) maize has made little

room for the government to proceed to experiment with food sovereignty. It remains unclear how much traction food sovereignty gets in Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia's food policies. There is an increasing concern from Vietnam's agriculturalists over the impact of GM crops, especially maize. However, criticisms of GM foods are concerned with food safety and risks and whether necessary controls over inputs and seeds exist. Amid the continuous trends of reduced agricultural land, demographic shifts, climate change and the search for new technology to feed 9 billion people in 2050, recent and future bio-technology may offer greater possibilities for a second green revolution. The proponents of food

sovereignty may be resistant to science-based innovation especially when it comes to GM foods and related biotechnology. The food sovereignty policy narrative embeds risk averse behavior to markets and new biotechnological experiments which in turn may give little space for future innovation and is a challenge to future food security. It is indeed necessary to conduct

a more systematic study into the costs and benefits of food sovereignty to provide a scenario analysis of existing and alternative models for future food security and for more rational policy making.

Recent adoption of food sovereignty is likely to reinforce a food self-sufficiency policy in Indonesia, which many have argued is often short-lived and inefficient



Via Campesina argues for Food Sovereignty.

Jean-Marc Desfilhes / flickr.