

## BOOK REVIEW

# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND THE PARADOX OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

*Leslie Hossfeld, Brooke Kelly, Julia Waity. (2018).*

*Food and poverty: Food insecurity and food sovereignty among America's poor, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.*

Food sovereignty and food productivity programs are indeed able to increase the quantity and value of production, but in practical level it does not take place in term of production value. We can see that the increase in production is not directly proportional to the decrease in the rate of hunger and malnutrition. FAO stated that in 2016 at least 10.7% or around 815 million people in the world experienced malnutrition. Similarly, UNICEF, WHO, and the World Bank said that in 2017 there were around 150 million children under five in the world experiencing stunting. The majority of people who experience starvation and stunting were from developing countries and those from poor families in rural areas are in fact from the families of small farmers and farm workers.

These problems indicate that the concept of agricultural development, especially food agriculture still raises a paradox. Food agriculture development is merely oriented towards increasing yield productivity. Food production is increasing yet people are starving and malnutrition continues. Worse, those who experience food insecurity are farmers and farm laborers who are in a matter of fact food producers. The power of the farmer to the means of production is smaller and contradictory compared to companies and industries. The industry does

not only dominate agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, seeds, mechanical equipment, agricultural processing, but also controls the land being used as farmers' living space.

Seeing from government policy through the budget allocated for food sovereignty, it is already quite large. In the three-year period (2014-2017) the budget allocated by the government increased by 53.2%. In 2014 the food sovereignty budget amounted to 67.3 trillion, and in 2017 the budget reached 103.1 trillion rupiah. More than half of the budget is allocated to the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Public Works PERA, fertilizer subsidies and seed subsidies, also for the Upsus Pajale program (Special Rice, Corn and Soybean Efforts). However, unfortunately the policies and programs have not been able to realize the ideals of food sovereignty.

In food production, the problems and principles revolve around self-reliance (self-confidence) and self-sufficiency. To be able to realize self-sufficiency in food production, requires the existence of economic democracy, which means that the rights of the peasants to make decisions and make a living must be upheld, while the domination of the elite and the corporation must be eliminated.

Agricultural activities must also be based on biodiversity which guarantees social and ecological sustainability. Genetic and environmental conservation must be promoted in food production through ecological methods based on biodiversity while opposing patents on life and genetic changes in plants and livestock. Every country must have a food production program. The main program is to solve the problem of economic democracy and the sustainability of food production itself. These programs must be able to reduce oppression and exploitation and must encourage collectivism (cooperation).

Although national rice production claims increased by 81 million tons in 2017, the fact is that rice imports continue to occur. It was recorded in 2015 that rice imports were 861 thousand tons, in 2016 it increased to 1.3 tons, decreasing in 2017 by 256 thousand tons, and experiencing a dramatic increase in 2018, which amounted to 2 million tons. When the farmer's income deteriorates, both because of the high cost of production, on the one hand because of the abundance of imports also triggers the fall in prices of local products, and consumer prices actually move up. This picture shows the fact that the main force behind the rising prices of agricultural facilities, the decline in prices of agricultural commodities, and the high price of food is the monopoly control of trans-national companies.

The most basic thing in food sovereignty is definitely the problem of farmers. Food is not just a matter of increasing production. Food sovereignty programs and policies make farmers and farm workers only as objects that marginalize them nonetheless. In food production, it requires economic democracy, which means that the rights of the peasants to make decisions and make a living must be upheld, while elites and corporations still dominate the food market. The problem of farmers and food will never be over if the game of prices of agricultural food commodities made by corporations continues.

According to Hossfeld, food insecurity is often associated with living in a food desert, which is defined as an area in the U.S. with

limited access to affordable and nutritious food. Food deserts can lead to higher rates of obesity and other diet-related diseases. "Food deserts may not directly cause food insecurity, but they do provide good indicators of areas where food insecurity is more likely to occur," Hossfeld said. "These areas are primarily in lower-income communities, which are disproportionately, but not exclusively, populated by African-Americans, Hispanics and other marginalized racial and ethnic groups."

Hossfeld stated these households have higher health care costs; increased likelihood of heart disease, diabetes and higher blood pressure; and health problems associated with access to food. Health care costs have been almost 50 percent higher in food-insecure households when they are compared to households that are food secure. When we think about poverty and hunger in developing nations, we think immediately about children who are thin and underweight; we call this malnutrition," Hossfeld said. "Increasingly in the U.S., malnutrition has to do with food and the food environment in which people live."

Easy access to cheap food is a good thing, but problems begin to mount when that food has little to no nutritional value and is high in calories and fat. Malnutrition in the U.S. is not an issue of being underweight, but comes from a lack of healthy food of which leads to obesity. Accessing healthy, affordable food should not be a challenge, yet it is one of the greatest struggles Americans face. Hossfeld said place matters. Food insecurity is higher in rural areas and the inner cities of metropolitan areas and it is lower in suburbs. It is greatest in the southern region but growing in the West. It is as well important to know the difference between food access and food insecurity; this difference is clear when comparing food deserts to "food swamps." "Food swamps are areas in which the only food you can access is fast food or food from a convenience store," Hossfeld said. "You have access, but the food has very poor nutritional value."

The problem looming largest over all of these issues is the stark lack of orientation between agriculture, nutrition and health policy,

according to Hossfeld. She said farm policy and food policy do not equal health policy. The role agriculture plays in improving health and nutrition cannot be overstated. Agriculture farm and food policy that supports and builds local food system initiatives may provide the greatest opportunity as a potential solution to food access and increased health outcomes. “The clear disconnect between agriculture policy, nutrition, health policy, food access and food insecurity has led to conditions that are truly perilous in terms of intensifying health inequities and health disparities,” Hossfeld said.

The international response to the malnutrition epidemic has been through the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which has recently aligned its strategies to alleviate hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity by calling for sustainable food systems for healthy diets and improved nutrition. The FAO, the World Health Organization and the World Food Programme have declared a Decade of Action to eradicate hunger and prevent all forms of malnutrition, including obesity. These organizations’ research and programmatic agenda around sustainable food systems is essential for health and well-being. Hossfeld said thinking big and small is the only way to truly put a dent in food insecurity numbers in a timely fashion. Community-based sustainable food sovereignty programs may provide the greatest mechanism for and greatest likelihood toward food justice in the U.S. today,” Hossfeld said. “Aligning agriculture and health and nutrition policy to enhance the food environment is not only a local, regional, and national challenge, but a global mandate that all should follow.”

Today, global food and agriculture systems are under the monopoly and power of giant corporations that are behind “barbaric” efforts to impose neo-liberal economic policies and free trade. This definitely worsens the livelihood of millions of people in rural areas and exacerbates the face of poverty and hunger that continues to occur. Coupled with efforts to increase the export value of extensive plantations it is thought to be the best way to produce foreign payment instruments (foreign exchange) needed to import food.

On the other hand, Indonesia’s position with the WTO along with regional and bilateral agreements has allowed TNCs (trans-national agrochemical companies) to hold power over the agricultural and food markets. In fact, food sovereignty does not oppose the existence of global trade, but rather against giving priority to the market as a referee (regulator and determinant) of agricultural and food policies. This reality has shown that access to global markets is not a solution for the peasants. The problem lies precisely in the lack of access to their own local market as a result of cheaper external products flooding.

The third alternative way for related stakeholders (ministry of agriculture, trade ministry, etc.) is to open up local food markets which accommodate food crops produced by farmers. In this case the distribution market chain that makes the commodity price game needs to be regulated by a scheme that sits with farmers as food producers. Not only oriented towards increasing productivity, but also orientation of food programs based on the community supported by a national food distribution program that is pro-active and siding with food producers (farmers and laborers). The government, through its policies, must also be able to guarantee adequate food availability through efficient efforts to obtain food from within the country. Therefore, the food distribution program is able to reach the price of all types of staple food, as well as the need for effective control over prices.

In other aspects, the implementation of food sovereignty must be able to place the sovereignty of farmers as the main goal, and not make farmers only as production tools. In addition, there is a need for indicators or markers of food sovereignty that are the reference of all parties. This becomes important as the direction and policy of food sovereignty becomes systematic and measurable, and becomes a guide and a marker of how food sovereignty can be implemented.

When the farmer’s income deteriorates, both because of the high cost of production on the one hand and the abundance of imports which forces the fall in prices of local products,

consumer prices in fact move up. This picture shows the fact that the main force behind the rising prices of agricultural facilities and the decline in agricultural commodity prices which also caused high food prices was the monopoly control of trans-national companies such as Cargill, Monsanto, Nestle, and food and agriculture systems others.

Meanwhile, WTO regional and bilateral agreements have allowed TNCs to dominate and hold power over the agricultural and food markets. Food sovereignty is not against trade, but against giving priority to the market as a referee (regulator and determinant) of agricultural and food policies. As a result of the priority on exports, it has damaged food self-sufficiency at the local (domestic) level. The fact has proven that access to international markets is not a solution for the peasants. The problem lies in the lack of access to their own local market because it has been flooded with cheap products.

Food sovereignty always strives for both individual rights and collective rights, upholds and strives to realize human rights and supports people's freedom to carry out direct actions to fight for their rights. Therefore, policy advocacy within the framework of food sovereignty fully supports the rights of the peasant to produce food and rights as a document, namely the right to decide for themselves what they want to consume and the rights of nations to protect themselves from the invasion of imported agricultural and food goods.

FUAT EDI KURNIAWAN

*Research Center for Population,  
Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI),  
Jakarta, Indonesia,  
E-mail: edy.fuad@gmail.com  
/fuat.edi.kurniawan@lipi.go.id*