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Short Communication

Special Issue - Food Justice and Food Sovereignty in the context of the Right to Food

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY OR FOOD SECURITY? WHICH WAY FOR SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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A lot of debates originating from the Americas and the global north have been ongoing regarding the right to food. These debates are centred around the concept of food sovereignty, pitting it against the more established food security concept. The right to food was first established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and incorporated into the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

The right to food is enshrined in both food security and food sovereignty concepts, but the approaches are different. The food security concept states that, "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences in order to lead a healthy and active life" (FAO, 2006). This is further amplified in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2) which affirms that by the year 2030, there should be zero hunger globally. Achievement of SDG 2 has elicited a number of interventions and actions, which include strategies to increase food production, enhance nutrients in food and in the body and to prevent food losses. Emphasis on food access and availability, therefore, became the main focus of the food security concept. Needless to say, there are many techniques and approaches used today to enhance food security, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). These include large scale mechanized farming, production of genetically modified food and food fortification, to mention but a few. Despite all these efforts, food security is still an issue of concern in SSA, with the triple burden of malnutrition ravaging many countries. Further, a new challenge of food safety has compounded the problem.

The concept of food sovereignty originated with small-scale producers organized as the transnational social movement La Vía Campesina and was launched globally at the 1996 United Nations World Food Summit. Food sovereignty is a broad concept that focuses on the rights of people, rather than corporations and market institutions, to control how and what kind of food is produced. In contrast to food security, food sovereignty encompasses the importance of modes of food production and where foods come from. It highlights the relationship between the importation of cheap food and the weakening of local agricultural production and populations.

Whereas both concepts emphasize the need to increase food production and productivity to meet future demand, the issues of food safety in production and manufacturing as promoted by good agricultural practices (GAPs) and good manufacturing practices (GMPs) pioneered by FAO, are still persistent. Secondly, although both concepts take into consideration the necessary linkage of food and nutrition, the food security concept is not intentional on addressing how optimal nutrition will be achieved through large scale and mechanized production of food. For instance, production of genetically modified organisms (GMO) has been



associated with food allergies among many people; particularly young children. For many years, this has remained an issue of concern, yet the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have not addressed it decisively.

The concept of food sovereignty is clearly and primarily focused on non-industrial, small-scale agriculture and family farming preferably of an organic nature, and mainly relating to agro-ecology. A review of literature on traditional food production and consumption methods in SSA reveals that food sovereignty may not be a new concept as such. Households used to produce food that was acceptable to them, using traditional methods that would ensure food safety as well as conservation. It was until the emphasis on large scale food production was introduced that the methods of food production and consumption changed. Consequently, soils were depleted of their nutrients, forests were cleared for commercialization of food production and food safety issues began to arise. These challenges have been a threat to lives and livelihoods in SSA. Moreover, many traditional species of crops, animals, birds, insects, and other food biodiversity has been depleted. Suffice to say, even traditional cooking recipes have also vanished. Today, research on indigenous knowledge is trying to save what is remaining and to restore what was lost of traditional practices. Regrettably, SSA is no longer in a position where they can immediately do away with the current practices of food production. Time and advocacy are of essence.

In conclusion, food remains a basic necessity and this is a human right. Thus, obtaining food is a priority and also key to survival. Sub-Saharan Africa needs to interrogate both the concepts of food security and food sovereignty in the face of the current experiences and for future. Only after this can choices be made and advocacy done for the most relevant approaches.