



Right to food, food security and food sovereignty


**Fondazione
Barilla**
il tuo cibo, la tua terra

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**THE RIGHT TO
FOOD IS ONE OF
THE IMPORTANT
HUMAN RIGHTS**

**ACCORDING TO
INTERNATIONAL
LAW.**



1.

Introduction

Feeding its citizens is one of the important challenges every society has to face in one or another form. The food should also be healthy, nutritious and produced without affecting the environment. Ensuring this requirement is a huge task. Hunger, malnutrition and disease related to food are among the major challenges that countries in different parts of the world face.

National governments and international institutions have developed different legal frameworks and policies aimed at addressing those challenges. Among the important developments in this regard is **the recognition of the right to food as a human right in international law and national constitutions**. On the other hand, governments also have employed different policies to ensure food security to their citizens.

Despite the efforts made internationally and nationally, and the subsequent growth in global food production, hunger and malnutrition remain pervasive with more than 750 million people currently facing severe food insecurity in 2019. In the same year, an estimated 2 billion people in the world





did not have regular access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food (considering the total affected by moderate or severe food insecurity). Moreover, a preliminary FAO assessment suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic may add between 83 and 132 million people to the total number of undernourished in the world in 2020 based on different economic scenario (FAO, 2020).

On the other hand, food security approaches of the past had their own drawbacks in terms of sustainability and ecological impacts. In the following pages, we will explore the evolution of the concept of right to food, food security and food sovereignty as well as the different approaches employed by governments and international actors for ensuring food security.

In the first part of the document, we will discuss the concept of the right to food and its similarities and differences with food security. In the second part we will discuss international frameworks and national legal provisions that are targeted at realization of the right to food. We will take our discussion further by exploring different policy approaches employed by governments around the world.

In the fourth part of the text, the concept of food sovereignty will be explored. Here we will try to show the difference between the paradigm of food sovereignty and conventional food security approaches and will discuss why food sovereignty is the right approach for addressing hunger and malnutrition effectively. In the fifth and final part, we will continue our discussion about food sovereignty by introducing the concept of agroecology and the role it can play in achieving food sovereignty.



2.

What is the right to food?

The right to food is one of the important human rights according to international law. It is included in several international, regional and national legal instruments as one of the important duties of states. The right to food can be defined as:

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The right to food is the right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear” (Ziegler, Golay, Mahon & Way, 2011)

The right to food includes both solid food and liquid food. By liquid food we mean access to clean and safe drinking water.

According to article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Political Rights (ICESPR), governments have a duty to ensure that their citizens have adequate standard of living. Food is one of these included as the prerequisites of an adequate standard of living. The covenant makes it incumbent on governments to take steps either in groups through international cooperation or individually through national policies to achieve the fulfilment of their citizens right to food.

Among the steps states are required to take, according to the covenant, included improving the methods of food production through the use of available technology and science, adopting policies and programs and reforming agrarian systems to ensure efficient use of land and other resources for enhanced food production.



Other international legal frameworks also acknowledge the duty of states to ensure the right to food to their citizens. Article 25 of the Universal declaration of human rights¹ recognizes food as one of the important human rights. Article 55 and 56 of the United Nation Charter² also gives states a mandate to improve living standards of their people. Other legal instruments that recognize the right to food include: Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC)³, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women⁴ (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)⁵.

Hence, the right to food is a human right. It protects the right of all human beings to live in dignity, free from hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. The right to food is not about charity, but about ensuring that all people have the capacity to feed themselves in dignity. Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

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2.1

Food security and the right to food

In the Rome Declaration on World Food Security, food security is defined as:

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“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” (World Food Summit, 1996).

1 <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

2 <https://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/>

3 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

4 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>

5 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>



The following conditions have to be fulfilled in order there to be food security (FAO, 2006; HLPE, 2020).

FOOD AVAILABILITY: The availability of sufficient quantities of food of appropriate quality, supplied through domestic production or imports (including food aid).

FOOD ACCESS: Access by individuals to adequate resources (entitlements) for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Entitlements are defined as the set of all commodity bundles over which a person can establish command given the legal, political, economic and social arrangements of the community in which they live (including traditional rights such as access to common resources).

UTILIZATION: Utilization of food through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met. This brings out the importance of non-food inputs in food security.

STABILITY: To be food secure, a population, household or individual must have access to adequate food at all times. They should not risk losing access to food as a consequence of sudden shocks (e.g. an economic or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (e.g. seasonal food insecurity). The concept of stability can therefore refer to both the availability and access dimensions of food security.

In addition to the above four dimensions, agency and sustainability have come to be recognized as important dimensions of food security in recent years (HLPE, 2020). The HLPE⁶ defines the two concepts as follows:

AGENCY: Individuals or groups having the capacity to act independently to make choices about what they eat, the foods they produce, how that food is produced, processed, and distributed, and to engage in policy processes that shape food systems. The protection of agency requires socio-political systems that uphold governance structures that enable the achievement of Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) for all.

SUSTAINABILITY: Food system practices that contribute to long-term regeneration of natural, social and economic systems, ensuring the food needs of the present generations are met without compromising the food needs of future generations.

6 High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security.



While the right to food includes these six dimensions of food security, it is broader than food security due to the fact that it entails a responsibility of states to guarantee food security for their citizens. Therefore, the right to food gives governments a duty to work for the realization of food security of all individuals. Conversely, it gives individuals, the rights holders, a right to demand food security from their governments according to international law.

2.2

The right to food in practice

While international law stipulates clearly that food is a human right and that states have a responsibility to ensure this right, the practice is complex, and many states are unable guarantee food security for their citizens due to different reasons. While the challenge of food shortage and insecurity persists in many parts of the world governments, international organizations, civil societies and other actors have been making efforts to address it through different mechanisms.

2.2.1 The Rome Summit

Even if the right to food has been considered as a human right since 1948, when it was included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) it only started to get wider attention internationally after the 1996 World Food Forum in Rome. During the Rome summit, representatives of 180 countries pledged to eradicate hunger and reduce the number of undernourished people by half by the year 2015.

The world food summit adopted the Rome Declaration on World food security. In the declaration, participating governments made a commitment to take actions to ensure the rights of every person to have access to safe and nutritious food in line with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, in accordance with article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

Despite the commitments made in the first Rome summit, progress was very slow in terms of achieving the right to food. In 2002, A second summit was convened to check on the progress made based on the commitments made at the first summit.



The findings of the review were highly negative. The number of people who were food insecure did not show change in the five years since the first summit. While 815 million people were food insecure in 1996, this number has remained the same in 2002 despite the tremendous progress made in China at the same period. This meant the number of people who are food insecure has actually increased when the progress in China is excluded. Countries where the number of malnourished people increased included Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Iraq, Kenya, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda (Ziegler et al., 2011).



At the second Rome summit, a new declaration was adopted by the member governments in which they have agreed to develop set of voluntary guidelines on the right to food (World Food Summit - WFS: fyl, 2002). Based on this declaration, in November 2002, the FAO council established an intergovernmental working group to develop the Voluntary Guidelines on the Progressive Realization of the right to food. The guidelines were adopted by the FAO council approved by all member countries in November 2004.



The guidelines provided governments with practical guidance in their effort to ensure the right to food for their citizens. Progress has been made in different areas in the 15 years since the adoption of the guidelines. According to the (FAO, 2019) The guidelines influenced the development of other instruments targeted at ensuring the right to food. These instruments include the Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (GSF, 2009) of the Committee on World Food Security, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT, 2012), the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines, 2014), the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems (CFS-RAI, 2014), the Committee on world Food Security Framework for Action for Food Security and Nutrition in Protracted Crisis (CFS-FFA, 2015).

The guidelines also inspired actions by states towards the progressive achievement of the right food. **Several governments recognized the right to food in their constitutions and others developed national and sectoral laws that are targeted at achieving the right to food.** Some of the countries that recognized the right to food in their constitutions following their adoption of the voluntary guidelines include Brazil (2010), Egypt (2014) and Nepal (2015, FAO, 2019).

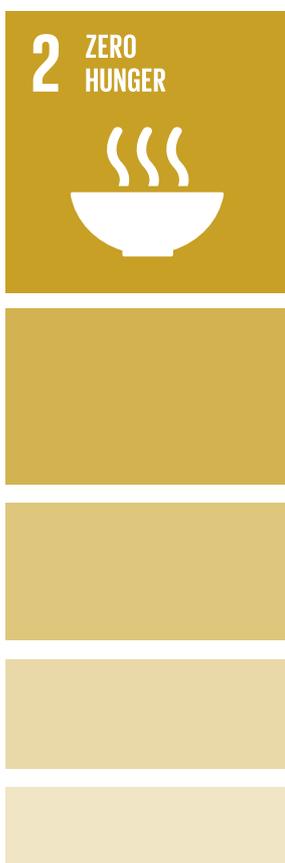
2.2.2 The Millennium Development Goals and the Right to food

Eradicating hunger was also an important component of the Millennium Development Goals⁷ (MDGs). In fact, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger was the first goal among the eight millennium development goals. One of the three targets of MDG 1 was to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger between the years 1990 and 2015.

7 The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were eight international development goals for the year 2015 that had been established following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, following the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) succeeded the MDGs in 2016.



According to the United Nations Development Program's 2015 report, significant progress has been achieved in regard to reducing extreme poverty and hunger between the adoption of the millennium development goals in the year 2000 and the final year of the implementation of the goals 2015. For instance, it has been reported that the proportion of undernourished people in the developing regions dropped by almost half since 1990. However, the number people who face chronic hunger remained extremely high despite the reported progress. Nearly 800 million people still suffered from chronic hunger at the end of the MDG period (FAO, 2020).



2.2.3 The sustainable development goals

When the Millennium Development Goals were succeeded by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, reducing hunger still remained an important challenge for which the global community couldn't quite find an effective solution. One of the seventeen SDGs is eradicating hunger by 2030.



The first target of SDG2 “Zero Hunger” reads as:



By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.

<p>TARGET 2-1</p>  <p>UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO SAFE AND NUTRITIOUS FOOD</p>	<p>2 ZERO HUNGER</p> 	<p>TARGET 2-2</p>  <p>END ALL FORMS OF MALNUTRITION</p>	<p>2 ZERO HUNGER</p> 
<p>TARGET 2-3</p>  <p>DOUBLE THE PRODUCTIVITY AND INCOMES OF SMALL-SCALE FOOD PRODUCERS</p>	<p>2 ZERO HUNGER</p> 	<p>TARGET 2-4</p>  <p>SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTION AND RESILIENT AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES</p>	<p>2 ZERO HUNGER</p> 
<p>TARGET 2-5</p>  <p>MAINTAIN THE GENETIC DIVERSITY IN FOOD PRODUCTION</p>	<p>2 ZERO HUNGER</p> 	<p>TARGET 2-A</p>  <p>INVEST IN RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE, AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH, TECHNOLOGY AND GENE BANKS</p>	<p>2 ZERO HUNGER</p> 
<p>TARGET 2-B</p>  <p>PREVENT AGRICULTURAL TRADE RESTRICTIONS, MARKET DISTORTIONS AND EXPORT SUBSIDIES</p>	<p>2 ZERO HUNGER</p> 	<p>TARGET 2-C</p>  <p>ENSURE STABLE FOOD COMMODITY MARKETS AND TIMELY ACCESS TO INFORMATION</p>	<p>2 ZERO HUNGER</p> 



This goal is clearly geared towards achieving the right to food as indicated in article 11 of The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). However, the SDGs have one important difference from previous international commitments due to the fact that **sustainability is at the center of all the goals**. For instance, target 4 of the SDG2 reads as:

By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality



But are we on track to fight global hunger? Latest data warns the world is not on track to achieve Zero Hunger by 2030. In fact, if recent trends continue, the number of people affected by hunger would surpass 840 million by 2030 and the COVID-19 pandemic may worsen that scenario, because it further deteriorated the nutritional status of the most vulnerable population groups (FAO, 2020).



2.3

National Legal protection of the right to food

In addition to the international efforts made to achieve the right to food, national governments also have been taking different steps to achieve food security for their citizens. **Integration of the right to food into local laws and policies** is one of the important measures states can take to hold themselves accountable for the realization of citizens' rights to food. Several countries have integrated the right to food into their constitutions in different forms.

2.3.1 Explicit and direct recognition of the right to food

According to the Constitutional and Legal Protection of the Right to Food, around the World (Knuth and Vidar, FAO 2011), 23 countries recognize the right to food explicitly and directly as a human right in their constitutions⁸. **Nine of these countries recognize the right to food as an independent right applicable to everyone.** For instance, the South African constitution gives all citizens the right to have access to sufficient food and water.

8 A total of 23 constitutions recognize the right to food explicitly as a human right. Of these, **nine** countries recognize the right as a separate and stand-alone right: Bolivia (art. 16), Brazil (art. 6), Ecuador (art. 13), Guyana (art. 40), Haiti (art. 22), Kenya (art. 43) and South Africa (art. 27.1). The Interim Constitution of Nepal recognizes an individual right to food sovereignty (art. 18.3) and Nicaragua (art. 63) provides for the right of every person to be free from hunger.

Ten constitutions recognize the right to food of a specific segment of the population: Brazil (art. 227), Colombia (art. 44), Cuba (art. 9), Guatemala (art. 51), Honduras (art. 123), Mexico (art. 4), Panama (art. 52), Paraguay (art. 54), and South Africa (art. 28.1.c) have provisions regarding the right to food of children; Costa Rica (art. 82) protects the right to food of indigenous children; while South Africa (art. 35.2.e) also specifies the right to food of prisoners and detainees.

An additional **five** countries recognize the right to food explicitly as part of a human right to an adequate standard of living, quality of life, or development: Belarus (art. 21.) and Ukraine (art. 48), the Congo (art. 34.1), Malawi (art. 30.2), Moldova (art. 47.1); while the right to food is explicitly recognized in Brazil (art. 7.4) and in Suriname (art. 24) as part of the right to work.

Important note: Each country in this category is counted only once here.



– Article 27 (1)

of the South African constitution states that Everyone has the right to have access to:

1. (a) health care services, including reproductive health care;
2. (b) sufficient food and water; and
3. (c) social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependants, appropriate social assistance.

In the cases like this every citizen is entitled to access to sufficient food and water regardless of age, sex, economic conditions or any other criteria.

Among the 23 countries that recognize the right to food as a human right, ten guarantee the right to specific categories of citizens. While all citizens are entitled to the right to food in the first case, only a certain category of citizens such as children or prisoners are given the right to food. For instance, the Colombian constitution gives children the right to food.

– Article 44

of the Colombian constitution reads as:

Children have fundamental rights to life, integrity, health and social security, and adequate food.

Five countries have constitutional provisions that stipulate the right to food explicitly as being part of another human right. This is usually phrased in a similar fashion as article 11 of ICESCR as part of a human right to adequate standard of living, to quality of life and development. An example of this type of recognition is the Belarussian constitution where the right to food is recognized as part of the right to a dignified way of living.

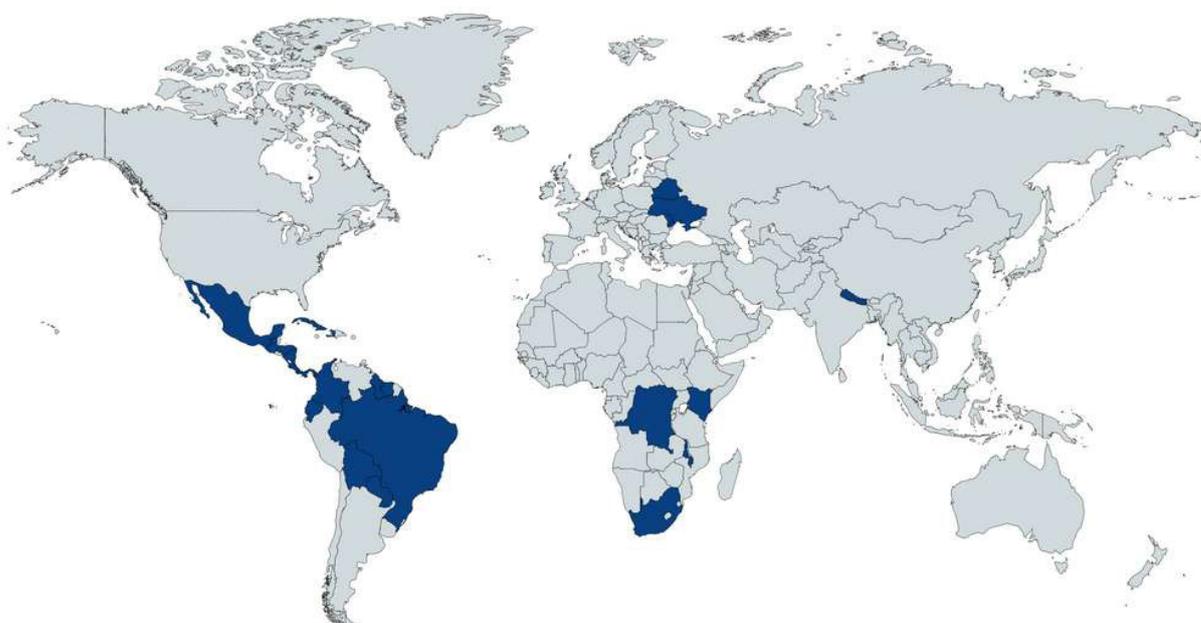
– Article 21(2)

Every individual shall exercise the right to a dignified standard of living, including appropriate food, clothing, housing and likewise a continuous improvement of necessary living conditions.



LIST OF COUNTRIES THAT DIRECTLY RECOGNIZE THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN THEIR CONSTITUTIONS

BELARUS, BOLIVIA, BRAZIL, COLOMBIA, COSTA RICA, CONGO, CUBA, ECUADOR, GUATEMALA, GUYANA, HAITI, HONDURAS, KENYA, MALAWI, MEXICO, MOLDOVA, NEPAL, NICARAGUA, PANAMA, PARAGUAY, SOUTH AFRICA, SURINAME, UKRAINE



2.3.2 Indirect recognition of the right to food

In addition to the 23 countries that have legal provisions that directly recognize the right to food, **several other countries have legal provisions that recognize the right implicitly as part of broader human right.**

Many constitutions do not explicitly mention food as a human right but have provisions for other human rights in which the right to food is implicit.



These rights include the right to an adequate or decent standard of living, to well-being, to a means necessary to live a dignified life, to development, and to a standard of living not below the subsistence level. For example, the Ethiopian constitution gives citizens the right to development:

– Article 43

The Right to Development

(1) The Peoples of Ethiopia as a whole, and each Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia in particular, have the right to improved standards of living and to sustainable development...

(4) The basic aim of development activities shall be to enhance citizens' capacity for development and to meet their basic needs.

In addition to those mentioned here, many countries protect the right to food in different forms. The right to minimum wage ensuring an existence compatible with human dignity, assistance for the destitute, special assistance and protection of (orphaned) children, support for working mothers before and after childbirth, support for the elderly and disabled, all implicitly recognize some aspects of the right to food (Knuth and Vidar, 2011). The Iranian constitution, for instance, provides welfare rights for different categories of citizens, including children, the elderly, people with disability etc...





– Article 29

Welfare Rights

(1) To benefit from social security with respect to retirement, unemployment, old age, disability, absence of a guardian, and benefits relating to being stranded, accidents, health services, and medical care and treatment provided through insurance or other means, is accepted as a universal right.

2.4

Government Policies targeted at the right to food

In addition to legally recognizing the right to food as a human right, governments around the world design and implement development policies targeted at fulfilling their duties towards realizing the right to food for their citizens. Many countries in the world, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America face food insecurity and malnutrition on a larger scale. Therefore, most of the countries in those regions have policies targeted at improving food security as part of their general development policies.

Governments usually follow **two approaches when formulating food security policies. Preparing a special Food Security Policy document or incorporating food security policy issues into other national development policies and strategies** (FAO, 2009). Despite the difference in approaches towards policy formulation, the following are a few of food security policies widely implemented by governments around the world.

2.4.1 Provision of agricultural inputs and rural infrastructure

Rural development policies have been and still are an important components of development policies of most developing country governments. As the rural poor make up the majority of the population in most developing countries, it is difficult to imagine development without pulling the rural poor out of poverty.



Moreover, large proportion of the rural population in poor countries depend on agriculture in one or other way. Thus, most countries have policies targeted at increasing agricultural production, food production in most cases.

Specific policies may vary from one country to another based on different factors that affect the choice of policies such as the level of development, size of the agricultural sector and type of main crops and the level of food insecurity and others. **While these policies may not explicitly target realizing the right to food, their actual targets are highly relevant to the right to food.**

In many countries, governments tried to increase food production through the provision of agricultural inputs to smallholder farmers (Pigali, 2012). Among the inputs usually provided are high yielding seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and farm equipment. An important example of this approach is the **green revolution**.





In the 1950s and 1960s several developing countries aggressively tried to increase agricultural production heavy use of technology and industrial agricultural inputs. High yield varieties, synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and farm machineries were used in an ever-increasing pace around the world which led to an increased food production around the world. For instance, countries such as India and Bangladesh have achieved dramatic increase in their production of cereals such as rice through the technologies adopted during this period (Pigali, 2012). In India, food self-sufficiency was achieved with public investment in agriculture and rural infrastructure and the introduction of Green Revolution technologies, quadrupling wheat and rice production from 50 million metric tonnes to well over 200 million tonnes in less than 50 years (Ziegler et al., 2011).

Governments also tried to increase food production through investing in rural infrastructure such as irrigation schemes and rural roads. Investment in irrigation schemes and other farm related infrastructure is targeted at the “availability” component of food security, while rural roads and communication infrastructure are aimed at increasing access by reducing cost of transportation.





2.4.2 Price control and subsidies

Many governments institute **price control and different market regulations** to improve food security, especially for poor households. The main aim of these policies is to improve access to food by keeping prices low and protect households from unexpected price shocks in the market by imposing price ceilings. Many developing countries historically used such policies to provide cheap food for urban households with the aim of encouraging industrialization through lower wages. However, many others used food price controls to support rural households as well (Abdulai & Kuhlitz, 2011).

Governments also use subsidies in addition to price control to keep lower food prices. Subsidies can take two forms. Universal food price subsidies that benefit all net food buyers and limited access subsidies, where rationed quantities are granted at concessional prices. In many cases, governments use subsidies to target the most vulnerable groups.

India is a notable example of government using food subsidies to enhance food security. The Indian government has managed to eradicate famine by increasing economic and physical access to food by distributing food through fair price shops under the Public Distribution Program since the 1940s.





It involves the Food Corporation of India buying food-grains in the surplus states (offering minimum support prices for rice and wheat), transporting it to 15,000 government godowns (storage facilities) in deficit states, and distributing the food-grains through over half a million 'fair-price shops', where families are entitled to buy a fixed amount of rice and wheat at subsidized prices (Ziegler et al., 2011).

Until 1997, the public distribution program (PDS) served all citizens without specific targeting criteria. Since 1997 the Indian government has taken different reform measures to better target the poorest households. People who live under that national poverty line and other vulnerable groups, such as landless labourers, rural artisans and households headed by widows and terminally ill persons, were prioritized for The National Food Security Act (NFSA, also called the right to food act), which was passed by the Indian parliament further reinforced the reforms. As of 2018, more than 810 Million Indians are legally eligible for subsidized food grains (Pillay and Kumar 2018).

Last but not least, governments also hold a stock of food for the purpose of maintaining stability of food supply. In Bangladesh, for instance, the government maintained large food storage as part of the Public Food Distribution System (PFDS). The PFDS and the government held food stocks have long played an important role in ensuring food security and crisis management in Bangladesh (Ziegler et al., 2011).





2.4.3 Other safety net programs

Governments also use many other social safety net programs to enhance food security. Among the commonly used methods are **cash transfers to families, food for work schemes and supplementary feeding programs**. In Brazil, the government implemented the “Bolsa Alimentação” (the food bonus) program to support poor households. Between the years 2001 and 2009 the government carried out cash transfers of R\$⁹ 15 per month to poor mothers with children (aged six months to seven years) who were considered to be at nutritional risk (Ziegler et al., 2011).

Food for work schemes are also widely used by governments in other developing countries. These programs usually have dual aims of building common assets such as roads and in the meantime enhancing food security. In Ethiopia the government has been implementing food for work programs in food insecure areas of the country since the late 1980’s. In addition to providing those communities food, the programs have been used to develop important rural infrastructures such as roads, dams for irrigation and digging wells and ponds (Humphrey, n.d.).

Supplementary feeding programs have been widely used in developing countries with significant focus on infants, children, and pregnant or lactating mothers as target groups. These programs are usually implemented in coordination with NGOs and other international actors (Abdulai & Kuhlitz, 2011).

2.4.4 Agricultural market liberalization

With the advent of liberal economic policies in the developing world since the 1980’s, countries were pushed to liberalize their agricultural markets. The rationale behind this approach is that, it enhances food security by promoting efficient agricultural production. A more open trade is believed to increase agricultural production and lower food prices. Therefore, this is expected to have a positive impact on food availability and access (Clapp, 2014; Mittal, 2009).

At the center of this approach is the notion of **comparative advantage**. It is expected that countries will focus on crops which they can produce more efficiently relative to other countries (i.e. countries with natural endowments that allow for growing certain crops with less resource

9 The Brazilian real is the official currency of Brazil (sign: R\$).



and ways that can make use of economies of scale). Therefore, many developing countries were encouraged to produce cash crops for exports with the hope that increased export earnings will allow for importing of food crops (Lines, 2012).

Governments were also encouraged to remove price controls and food subsidies with the hope that market-based prices will increase farmers' incomes and encourage them to produce more, thus increasing food availability and stable prices. Public marketing boards and food stockholding were also discouraged as inefficient and costly (Mittal, 2009).

However, many argue that market-based policies have not lived up to their expectations. The majority of Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) countries that liberalized their agricultural markets under Structural Adjustment Programs did not achieve meaningful improvements in terms of food security (Mittal, 2009). Moreover, integration into the international markets left many countries vulnerable to external shocks (Lines, 2012). This and other shortcomings of the current food system will be discussed with greater detail in the next parts.





3.

Food sovereignty

Since the second half of the 20th century, the dominant policy paradigms have been shaped by the notion of food security. Governments, international agencies, NGOs, businesses and academia and major philanthropies all concerned themselves with increasing the volume of food produced around the world. Specially, starting in the 1950s and 1960s, many developing countries adopted the green revolution with an aim of achieving food self-sufficiency. The green revolution which was characterized by an intensive use of agricultural inputs such as synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and high yield varieties has enabled some countries to achieve significant growth in food production but that came with major ecological and societal costs (Capra,2015).

The green revolution was followed by the agricultural market liberalization since the 1980s which came along with the Uruguay round of the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) negotiations and the advent of structural adjustment programs in Africa and Latin America. Despite the promise of its advocates, this policy has also failed to enhance food security in any meaningful way for the vast majority of people living in the countries that adopted the policies (Mittal, 2009).

The overarching goal of the food security narrative has been achieving food security through any means possible, regardless of the method of food production or the ecological and social costs associated with it. Thus, the rise of food sovereignty movements is mainly precipitated by the failure of mainstream food security paradigm to achieve food security and sustainable agricultural growth for the vast majority of the world's population. The movement gained momentum after the 1996 world food conference where La Via Campesina (LVC) introduced the term food sovereignty.



Chronology of major food sovereignty developments

1966 - UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “right to adequate food”

1974 - UN World Food Conference (Rome, Italy) 1970– Countries focus on food self-sufficiency

1993 - Formation of La Via Campesina (LVC)

1996 - World Food Summit: reaffirmation to right to food by participating governments, LVC coins the term “food sovereignty”

2000 - UN Millennium Summit: establishment of the Millennium Development Goals

2002 – Forum on Food Sovereignty held in Rome, in conjunction with the World Food Summit

2007 - Forum for Food Sovereignty, Declaration of Nyéléni (Sélingué, Mali)

2008 - Ecuador includes food sovereignty in its constitution (Article 281)

2009 – Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) born, bringing together a network of African networks working on a range of issues, from farming and agroecology to indigenous peoples’ rights and related advocacy

2010 – In Canada, The People’s Food Policy Process add a 7th Principle to Food Sovereignty: Seed is Sacred.

2011 - Meeting for the development of a European food sovereignty movement (Krems, Austria)

2013 UN - Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition identifies detrimental hunger-generating policies with the intention of eliminating them



3.1

What is food sovereignty

The concept of food sovereignty has evolved significantly from its early days with the changing trends in world food security and the emergence of new challenges. However, its core tenets which are, **self-sufficiency** and **local ownership** of food systems, remained intact. In their position statement in the 1996 world food conference, La Via Campesina defined food sovereignty as

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Food sovereignty is the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security.

In the 2007, the Nyéléni declaration further expanded the definition by including more detail and

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*“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**. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of **markets and corporations**. It defends the interests and **inclusion of the next generation**. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the **current corporate trade and food regime**, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal - fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.” (DECLARATION OF NYÉLÉNI, 2007)*



This definition makes it clear that the aim of food sovereignty is putting the control of food systems into the hands of its rightful owners, those who produce, distribute and consume food. Food sovereignty aims to transform the current system that highly relies on markets towards one that is based on self-sufficiency.

Food sovereignty is guided by the following six principles that are set by the Nyéléni food forum in 2007:

1. FOCUSES ON FOOD FOR PEOPLE: Food sovereignty stresses the right to sufficient, healthy and culturally appropriate food for all individuals, peoples and communities, including those who are hungry or living under occupation, in conflict zones and marginalized. Food sovereignty rejects the proposition that food is just another commodity for international agribusiness.

2. VALUES FOOD PROVIDERS: Food sovereignty values and supports the contributions, and respects the rights, of women and men, peasants and small scale family farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fishers, forest dwellers, indigenous peoples and agricultural and fisheries workers, including migrants, who cultivate, grow, harvest and process food; and rejects those policies, actions and programs that undervalue them, threaten their livelihoods and eliminate them.

3. LOCALIZES FOOD SYSTEMS: Food sovereignty brings food providers and consumers together in common cause; puts providers and consumers at the centre of decision- making on food issues; protects food providers from the dumping of food and food aid in local markets; protects consumers from poor quality and unhealthy food, inappropriate food aid and food tainted with genetically modified organisms; and resists governance structures, agreements and practices that depend on and promote unsustainable and inequitable international trade and give power to remote and unaccountable corporations.

4. MAKES DECISIONS LOCALLY: Food sovereignty seeks control over and access to territory, land, grazing, water, seeds, livestock and fish populations for local food providers. These resources ought to be used and shared in socially and environmentally sustainable ways which conserve diversity. Food sovereignty recognizes that local territories often cross geopolitical borders and advances the right of local communities to inhabit and use their territories; it promotes positive interaction between food providers in different regions and territories and from different sectors to resolve internal conflicts or conflicts with local and national authorities; and rejects the privatization of natural resources through laws, commercial contracts and intellectual property rights regimes.



5. BUILDS KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS: Food sovereignty builds on the skills and local knowledge of food providers and their local organizations that conserve, develop and manage localized food production and harvesting systems, developing appropriate research systems to support this and passing on this wisdom to future generations. Food sovereignty rejects technologies that undermine, threaten or contaminate these.

6. WORKS WITH NATURE: Food sovereignty uses the contributions of nature in diverse, low external input agroecological production and harvesting methods that maximize the contribution of ecosystems and improve resilience and adaptation, especially in the face of climate change. Food sovereignty seeks to heal the planet so that the planet may heal us; and, rejects methods that harm beneficial ecosystem functions, that depend on energy intensive monocultures and livestock factories, destructive fishing practices and other industrialized production methods, which damage the environment and contribute to global warming.

3.2

Food sovereignty and food security

Food security and sovereignty are highly interrelated concepts. In fact,

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both food security and food sovereignty emphasize the need to increase food production and productivity to meet future demand. Both concepts stress that the central problem today is access to food, and thus involves redistributive public policies in terms of income and employment. They also consider the necessary link between food and nutrition. (Gordilo, 2013).

Despite those similarities, the two concepts have important differences. **Food security aims to address the issue of hunger and food shortage through a top-down approach.** On the contrary, food sovereignty rejects the status quo and attempts to build alternatives **through a bottom up approach** (Eddis, 2014).



The prevailing approach towards food security has given rise to an unsustainable food practices and fragmented food systems. Furthermore, heavy reliance on markets has led to extreme market concentration and loss of decision-making power by small scale producers and consumers. Moreover, the food security paradigm led to food production system that is environmentally destructive and exploitative (Eddis, 2014). This is evidenced in the environmental and socioeconomic impact the green revolution had on many communities in the Global South¹⁰ (Pingali, 2012).



Food sovereignty, on the other hand puts sustainability and local communities at the center of its strategy for achieving genuine food security. It emphasizes ecologically appropriate production, distribution and consumption, social-economic justice and local food systems always to tackle hunger and poverty and guarantee sustainable food security for all peoples (Nyéléni, 2013). Therefore, questions such as: **“WHO PRODUCES FOOD? WHAT GOES INTO THE PRODUCTION OF FOOD? WHO BENEFITS FROM FOOD PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND CONSUMPTION? WHAT IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL COST OF PRODUCTION?”** are of a paramount importance for food sovereignty. Producing sufficient food is no more the end anymore.

10 According to a socioeconomic perspective, the term Global South refers to those countries, scattered around the globe, located in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, which have a low to medium income compared to the countries in the Global North. The Global North includes the United States, Canada, all the member states of the European Union, Russia, Israel, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, as well as Australia and New Zealand which, despite being geographically in the southern hemisphere, are very advanced, high-income economies.



3.3

Why is food sovereignty important?

The approach towards food security is facing many challenges that range from ecological impacts to increasing inequality. While there is a growing awareness of the gaps in the current approach, there has not been significant changes in direction so far. The following are some of the important reasons for a paradigm shift towards food sovereignty.

3.3.1 The current system is unreliable and made communities vulnerable

The overarching assumption behind agricultural and food trade policies of the past few decades was an increased agricultural production and liberalized markets will bring about an increased availability of food by driving down prices and efficient distribution. This approach has been successful in increasing food production globally and driving down prices (Benton and Bailey, 2019). Currently, the world produces more food than ever, and productivity has grown many folds in the preceding decades.

However, this growth is not without its own inconsistencies and paradoxes. Despite the world producing enough food to feed everyone, malnutrition and hunger are rampant in many parts of the world. 690 Million people, equivalent to 8.9% of the world population, suffered from hunger and an estimated 2 billion people did not have regular access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food in 2019 (FAO, 2020). On the other hand, obesity and diseases associated with consumption of energy-dense foods rather than nutrient rich foods has become a tremendous public health challenge in many countries.

Despite there being enough food produced majority of the world's poor cannot afford healthy diet due to high prices of food. According to the FAO (2020), *“healthy diets cost 60% more than diets that only meet the requirements for essential nutrients and almost 5 times as much as diets that meet only the dietary energy needs through a starchy staple”*. For instance, the price of fruits and vegetables in the US nearly increased 75% between 1989 and 2005 while the price of fatty foods went down 25% during the same period (Bryan, 2008).



Disparities in access to food between communities in the same countries also are getting more attention in recent years. Issues like *food deserts*¹¹ in countries like the US where poor households and minorities are deprived of access to healthy foods also shows the failure the prevailing food system to provide communities efficiently even when there is sufficient food.

Food waste and loss are also significant problem of our food system. Despite the existence of hunger and malnutrition in many parts of the world, a huge chunk of food produced globally goes to waste. According to FAO (2020), 14% of all food produced globally is lost even before reaching the retail level. A significant proportion of produce is also lost in the retail and consumption stages.



¹¹ Food desert: area characterized by a lack of supermarkets, shops or markets, which limits the possibility of buying fruit, vegetables and other fresh, good quality food at affordable prices.



The recent Covid19 crisis has also shown in many ways that global value chains can be disrupted and leave countries without critical supplies, such as medical equipment. Countries have placed bans on food exports in order to domestic supplies, which means countries that are net importers of food will find it difficult to satisfy their food demand (IFPRI, 2020). Food security was also affected in many ways due to the crisis.

Among the strange trends observed during the COVID19 crisis was the level of food waste by industrial producers due to low demand. Farms in the United States were seen dumping milk, vegetables and other products due to failure of value chains, while at the same time millions were spending hours in line to receive food aid (Yaffe-Bellany, 2020).

3.3.2 Ecological and human health costs of industrial agriculture

The globalized value chains that currently dominate the international agricultural market heavily rely on the intensive use of fossil fuels in all stages from input production to distribution.



They use fossil fuel for the production of fertilizers, pesticides, production, processing, transport, refrigeration and retailing and are a major contributor to climate change and pollution (Centre for Food Safety, 2014). **Food production accounts for a quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions** (Ritchie, 2019). Large portion of this comes from industrial agriculture (Capra, 2015).

On the other hand, the heavy use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and other industrial inputs is causing severe harm to the environment and human health (Capra, 2015). Excessive use of some fertilizers is associated with the contamination of ground and surface water as well as destruction of aquatic habitat (UNEP, 2016). For example, nitrate, that mainly comes from agricultural inputs, is one of the leading pollutants of ground water (WWAP, 2013). In the European Union 38% of water bodies are significantly affected by agricultural pollution (WWAP, 2015). In Argentina, excessive weed killer use is associated with severe health impact on communities living around soybean farms that excessively use weed killers (Gillam, 2019). Such environmental and human health impacts are documented in many parts of the world and are only going to get more widespread with the current trend of increasing adoption of agricultural techniques that rely on excessive use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and weed killers (Gillam, 2019).





Loss of genetic varieties is also a huge challenge that emerged from the green revolution and is being further exacerbated by the ever-increasing industrial farming in the poorest countries. For instance, before the Green revolution, India had more than one hundred thousand rice varieties with diverse taste, nutrition and pest-resistant traits. This number has fallen to only seven thousand varieties due to the quest for high yield varieties (Times of India, 2016). According to the FAO, (2019) 26% all local breeds of animals in the world are at risk of extinction.

In addition to food crops and animal species, many other species such as pollinators, soil organisms and the natural enemies of pests that are essential to the ecosystem are in decline because of the destruction of and degradation of habitats, overexploitation and pollution and other factors.

The loss of biodiversity has severe long-term consequences for food security and the ecosystem in general. Biodiversity supplies several indispensable ecosystem services such as pollinating plants, maintaining healthy soils, providing habitat for wildlife including fish and other species that are vital to food production and agricultural livelihoods. Genetic varieties of food crops are also important for resilience to environmental changes, including climate change (FAO, 2019). Hence, **the loss of biodiversity will make farming communities more vulnerable for climate change** and other environmental shocks as well as disrupt the ecosystem.

3.3.3 Protecting livelihoods

For hundreds of millions of people around the world, subsistence agriculture, artisanal-fishing and cattle herding are the only sources of livelihood. These livelihoods are currently under attack from the expansion of industrial farming and unfair competition from the international agricultural market.

In several countries' peasant farmers have been toppled from their lands to make way for big industrial farms (Oxfam, 2016), while others migrate to urban areas because subsistence farming ceased to be profitable due to cheap food imports (Lines, 2012). On the other hand, small-scale farmers, who adopted intensive agriculture, are being impoverished due to increasing input costs and falling food prices.

In addition to being destructive to the environment and human health, the agricultural input market is highly exploitative and monopolistic in its nature. Supported by intellectual



property rights laws of The World Trade Organization (WTO) and business friendly national laws biochemical producers exercise economic control over seeds, which used to be owned by peasants (Freese, 2008). While the use of commercial seeds has benefits, such as better quality and increased output, the increased monopolization of seeds and the subsequent destruction of alternatives has resulted in indebtedness and agrarian distress. For instance, some activists pointed out that indebtedness due to increasing cost of inputs, lack of institutional credit and declining price of agricultural output due to liberalization still cause agrarian distress, indebtedness and farmers suicide in India (Shiva, 2013).

Between the years 1995 and 2004, an estimated number of 1.5 million farmers have committed suicide (Posani, 2009). Among the reasons cited are indebtedness of farmers, especially in states where farmer credit is tight and falling prices of agricultural products (Shiva, 2013; Posani, 2009; Vasavi, 2009). In this sense, providing rural farmers with much better financial and social service resources is pivotal, along with a state-level safety net that can help those farmers victimized by climate change and adverse climate shocks.

The growth in agricultural productivity in past decades came at the expense of environmental sustainability and in many cases the loss of decision-making power by farmers, specially smallholder farmers. Therefore, reversing this trend is essential for the global effort towards poverty reduction and sustainable development. By maintaining the right of peasants over their land, seed and other resources food sovereignty can play an indispensable role in this regard.

DID YOU KNOW?

Nowadays, most of the farmers in the world, both conventional ones and those who farm organically, decide to buy seeds every year from producer companies. Why don't farmers keep their own seeds? Because certified seeds, which are the result of research and development, are free of viruses and have very high germination and quality, thus ensuring better harvests, while collecting your own seeds for the following year does not guarantee this process, risking a significant reduction in crop quality. Obviously there are exceptions, especially in specific and small-scale contexts affected by various socio-economic variables.



4.

Agroecology

Food sovereignty looks to the science of agroecology to develop more climate-friendly and sustainable food and farming systems. Contrary to conventional agricultural methods that follow limited sets of agricultural techniques and inputs, food sovereignty acknowledges local knowledge and promotes variety of farming techniques and locally available inputs for the achievement of sustainable food systems (Pimbert, 2019).

According to the (FAO, 2018),

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Agroecology is an integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of food and agricultural systems. It seeks to optimize the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while taking into consideration the social aspects (cultural values and food traditions) that need to be addressed for a sustainable and fair food system.

Agroecology is fundamentally different from other forms of agriculture in the fact that it is **based on a bottom-up approach with local knowledge systems at its center**. Peasant farmers, pastoralists and fishers and other local actors play a leading role in finding solutions for local problems. This involves innovations that are based on creation of knowledge combining science with traditional, practical and local knowledge of producers (FAO,2018).

Moreover, agroecological farming techniques mainly depend on inputs that are found in local environments, which makes it affordable for peasant farmers that usually can't afford expensive commercial inputs. On the other hand, its embrace of soil rehabilitation and conservation techniques makes it best suited for addressing severe soil depletion, salination and many other problems associated with intensive farming techniques.



Historically farmers used different agroecological techniques that are developed through knowledge accumulated for centuries (FAO, 2018). Many of these techniques are still used by farmers around the world. Agroecological methods that are commonly used on farms and the surrounding environment include for example, crop rotations, genetic mixtures, intercropping, polycultures, mulching, terracing, the management of diverse micro-environments for nutrient concentration and water harvesting, agro-pastoral systems, and agroforestry (Pimbert, 2019).

Yet agroecology has not received much attention from national governments, international organizations and financial institutions (FAO, 2018), although there are several examples of successful agroecological farming around the world (Oakland Institute, 2015). For instance, a 2008 UN report that covered 24 African countries has shown that agroecological methods achieved average yield increase of more than 100% with yield increases up to 128% in East Africa. In Brazil, 100 thousand households engaged agroecological farming have achieved 300% to 100% yield increase for crops such as black beans and maize. In addition to yield increase, resilience to changing weather patterns was also observed (McKay, 2012)





Cuba is a testament for the potential of agroecology to ensure food security, environmental protection as well as maintaining national sovereignty during crisis.

Starting in 1989, following the collapse of the socialist block, Cuba faced a sudden fall in both its imports and exports including agricultural inputs. The government and people of Cuba had to shift to agroecology in order to maintain agricultural production in the absence of imported inputs such as chemicals and machine parts. The country survived the peak of the crisis through the return of the people to the land, the use of animal traction, biological pest control methods, and input substitution, in which alternative inputs are substituted for farm chemicals.

Encouraged by this initial success, the Cuban National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) pushed for greater diversification and integration of ecological practices. This was facilitated by a robust social movement with a growing membership. Since 1997, more than 100,000 families – over a third of all Cuban farmers - have joined the agroecology movement and are transforming their production systems.

According to FAO data, combining traditional methods with agroecological techniques developed by Cuban researchers, Cuba achieved a tremendous growth in food production between the years 1994 and 2007. Moreover, **farms with a greater integration of agroecological methods have been found to be highly resilient to climate change and environmental disasters** such as hurricanes compared to those with conventional agricultural techniques.

(La Via Campesina, 2016)

In 2006, Cuba was named the only country with sustainable development in the World Wildlife Fund's Living Planet report (Hay, 2019). It was also rated as the most sustainably developed country in the newly developed sustainable development index based on a data covering the years between 1990 and 2015 (Hickel, 2020).



5.

Conclusion

Since its first recognition as a human right in the universal declaration of human rights, the right to food has gotten a growing acceptance in international legal instruments and national legal systems. The international community has undertaken different steps towards the realisation of the right to food. In this regard, the two Rome summits have played an important role in bringing the issue of the right to food to the fore front and setting long term goals for its achievement. The development of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Progressive Realization of the Right to food is another important development that came out of the consecutive Rome summits. Realizing the right to food (eradicating hunger) also has been an important component of Millennium Development goals and its successor Sustainable Development Goals.

At national level, states have also taken a number of measures towards the realization of the right to food. These measures include the inclusion of the right to food in their constitution and national law. Moreover, governments also employed policies targeted at achieving food security. Such policies include those focused on modernization of agriculture through the provision of agricultural inputs, such as high yield seeds and fertilizers as well as provision of rural infrastructure, price control and subsidies, agricultural market liberalization among others.

While there has been a significant improvement in food production around the world due to the technological improvements and state policies of the past decades hunger and malnutrition have persisted in many places. Moreover, the benefits of the policies were not evenly distributed between countries and within individual countries as well. The agricultural growth achieved also came with major ecological and societal costs.

Those challenges associated with the food security approach and other factors have given rise to a new paradigm, food sovereignty, which emphasizes food self-sufficiency and local ownership of food systems. Food sovereignty emphasizes the production of food through ecologically sound and sustainable methods while putting food producers and consumers at the center of decision making.



Food sovereignty promises to resolve the inconsistencies in the prevailing system by employing agroecological farming techniques that are harmonious with the ecosystem and are mainly based on the knowledge of farming communities and the use of locally available resources. Despite the lack of investment in agroecology nationally and internationally, experiences from different countries (some mentioned in this text) show that agroecology can boost food production while protecting and rehabilitating the ecosystem.



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Afterword

BARILLA CENTER FOR FOOD & NUTRITION FOUNDATION

The Barilla Center for Food & Nutrition Foundation (BCFN) is a think tank and research center which analyzes the complexity of current agri-food systems and, through a variety of initiatives, fosters change towards healthier and more sustainable lifestyles in order to achieve the Goals set by the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs). With its scientific research and public initiatives, the BCFN Foundation promotes an open dialogue between science and society both nationally and internationally. It addresses today's major food-related issues with a multidisciplinary approach and from the environmental, economic and social perspective, to secure the wellbeing and health of people and the planet.

Advisory Board

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SDSN MEDITERRANEAN

SDSN Mediterranean is the regional Sustainable Development Solutions Network of the United Nations which promotes the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) throughout the Mediterranean region through research, innovation and new teaching methods and is coordinated by the University of Siena.

The role of SDSN Mediterranean includes many activities, such as: mobilizing the relevant bodies, coordinating the activities of the network, disseminating the regional and global initiatives, also with policy makers, the private sector and NGOs, promoting initiatives that offer regional and global solutions, as well as forging close-knit communities of young academics with a strong awareness of the greatest challenges posed by sustainable development.





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