

Towards Democratic Food Systems In Asia: Forging A Collective Path

A high-angle photograph of a person wearing a red and white patterned long-sleeved shirt and a wide-brimmed straw hat with a blue band. They are standing in a wooden boat with blue-painted gunwales, preparing food. The person is using a long-handled metal spoon to scoop a mixture of rice, vegetables, and bean sprouts from a large red plastic colander into a white bowl. On the boat's floor, there are several large metal pots; one contains white rice dumplings, and another contains a yellowish soup. A pink plastic cooler sits nearby. The boat's hull has some text and numbers, including 'CAMBODIA', 'COMPOSITE', '088.859.2963', and '0513.064.787'. The background shows the calm surface of the water.

A report by
Focus on the Global South

October 2023



This report titled *"Towards Democratic Food Systems In Asia: Forging A Collective Path"* provides an overview of the vibrant discussions that took place during the Regional Meeting on Food Sovereignty that was held in Surin Province, Thailand, from March 24 to 30, 2023. The Meeting provided a pivotal convening space for representatives from diverse movements and organisations to explore, share knowledge and experiences, and delve into crucial conversations on the complex concept of food sovereignty.

Participants engaged in a range of topics, deliberating on sustainable agricultural practices, equitable access to resources, agrarian reform, human and collective rights, local food systems, and the empowerment of communities. The report encapsulates the valuable insights shared by the participants, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to achieving food sovereignty in the region.

Collaborating Organisations:

Focus on the Global South

Community of Agroecology Foundation (CAEF)

Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN)

Report compiled by Isaak Heller.

Photos by Phun Phearun and Ridan Sun.

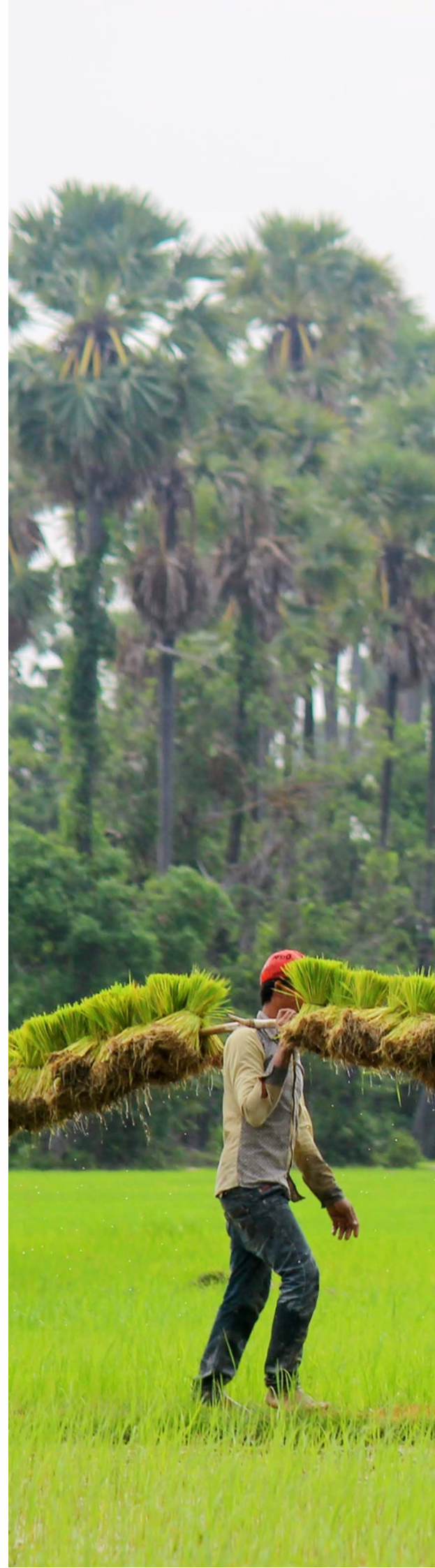


The Time for Food Sovereignty is NOW...

Amid the onslaught of multiple crises of public health, conflicts, and economic recessions, millions lost their jobs and livelihoods and were left by governments without sufficient aid. One of the things that bound people together in these trying times was food. Travel restrictions disrupted the fragile global food supply chain, severing access to food for millions who have been forced by the system to depend on international trade for food security and livelihoods.

In response, farmer communities from different provinces initiated or reinvigorated agroecological practices and seed banking and set up local markets to strengthen their collective resilience and food self-sufficiency. Some worked with civil society organizations to facilitate the delivery of their produce directly to low-income urban consumers. Across the region, grassroots-led community kitchens, pantries, and markets became the vanguard in the fight against hunger during the height of the pandemic.

These initiatives—juxtaposed with the dysfunctional food supply chains and the lack of timely support for those severely affected by lockdowns—have highlighted the importance of food sovereignty. Whether they are aware or not of what food sovereignty is, communities from different walks of life took it upon themselves to





address hunger and malnutrition even in the simplest expressions, such as backyard and rooftop gardening. In some cases, these expressions have intensified public pressure for governments to enact policies and programs that support local food production.

Years before the pandemic, food sovereignty and related campaigns have been pushed with varying intensity and within various political spaces across South and Southeast Asia. These struggles are forged against the backdrop of unfair trade, absence of support from governments that have left food provision to the whims of the market, deep agrarian conflict, increasing threats to human rights, and other systemic issues. As such, they are often geared towards radical change and systemic transformation. Movements for food sovereignty have gained traction or waned over time, largely depending on the strength of communities in resisting forces, policies, or entities that undermine them.

Key to building this strength is increasing community awareness on the bundle of rights called for under the food sovereignty framework, along with the need to effectively claim or defend them. For this purpose, agroecology, and seed saving play a crucial part in empowering communities to become more cohesive in responding to threats (i.e. cheap agriculture imports, land grabbing, displacement, indebtedness, and the climate crisis). These approaches also encourage solidarity and collective action within communities. By amplifying ecologically sustainable and culturally-appropriate methods in producing food, communities are able to reclaim their autonomy in defining food systems, re-embed food production in local and regional territories, and challenge profit-oriented

models of rural development. Food Sovereignty as a framework sees food as a human right, not a commodity; values the contributions and well-being of small-scale food producers; localizes food production and distribution systems; places control over territory, land, grazing, water, seeds, livestock and fish populations on local food providers; builds and preserves traditional food production knowledge and skills; and works with nature. A more in-depth articulation of the Food Sovereignty movement's principles, practices, and demands can be found in the *Nyéléni Synthesis Report* [here](#).

By their recognition of the injustice of the corporate-dominated food system and the need to transform it, food sovereignty and agroecology as paradigm and practice are thus inherently political.

While food sovereignty has long been practiced at the grassroots level, the concept has not won the popular support needed to significantly influence government policies and programs as a step towards more meaningful systemic change and transformation. One obvious reason is that capitalist interests and landed elites continue to have a large amount of influence over the legislative decisions of states. Stakeholders, on the other hand, face gaps in knowledge, resources, and movement building capacities as a result of socioeconomic realities. Social movements must combat this, while also fleshing out the policies and socioeconomic structures needed to mainstream food sovereignty.



Regional Meeting on Food Sovereignty in Asia, March 2023

The Regional Meeting on Food Sovereignty and Agroecology Exchange, held in March 2023, brought together food sovereignty activists and practitioners from Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka in order to identify and address gaps in food sovereignty as a paradigm, practice, and movement, and to build on the lessons from the 2019 Regional Food Sovereignty Conference in Chachoengsao (the event report of which can be found [here](#)).

Through the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and practices, the conference examined the evolving challenges confronting small-scale food providers and consumers, discussed grassroots and social movement based responses to these challenges (in part through the engagement of social movements, government institutions, and multilateral fora), and facilitated the exchange of knowledge and experiences on established and emerging community-driven alternative practices.





Global Challenges to Food Sovereignty

Our current global food system regularly creates extreme hardships for small-scale food producers who usually:

- (a) do not own land or capital, and are therefore vulnerable to displacement, exploitation, and debt cycles,
- (b) face crop failure and physical danger as a result of environmental degradation, pollutants, and climate change, and
- (c) have insufficient access to government support services.

Food prices are also unnecessarily high and unpredictable, causing widespread hunger. These lived realities are a result of a wide range of systemic issues.

Corporate and feudal interests monopolize control over key parts of the food supply chain that people are dependent on in order to live (including land, capital, farm input markets, and access to produce markets), and then only allow access to these “resources” at a steep cost.

Wealthy individuals and corporations are often able to forcefully acquire land through the use of violence, harassment, intimidation, patronage politics, corruption, and criminalisation with few repercussions from the government. At times, states and/or militaries forcibly take land/capital from local communities, often for the benefit of private interests. In countries that have legislation designed to redistribute land/capital, implementation is usually highly corrupted in favor of the powerful. This allows for land banking and the continuation of feudal tenancy relationships where landowners take most of the value generated by small-scale food producers.





Similarly, concentrated control of financial capital allows lenders to charge high interest rates (leading farmers into cycles of debt), and private control of the farm equipment and the facilities needed to process farm outputs allows for further profit extraction.

Dependence on corporations for farm inputs has been increased through initiatives such as the Green Revolution, where university trained agronomists, agriculture corporations, and governments convinced/ compelled peasants to give up healthier and more sustainable traditional agriculture practices (which have slowly been forgotten), in exchange for production techniques that require buying:

- (a) GMO seeds that are designed to not be able to reproduce (which makes it so that farmers must buy seeds from corporations every year),
- (b) dangerous pesticides, herbicides, and insecticides that can hurt consumers, farmers, and the environment, and
- (c) expensive machines and irrigation systems.

At the same time, continuing market concentration (eg. monopolies) in farm input markets has resulted in massive farmer debts and enormous corporate profits. Finally, most small food producers are unable to supply directly to consumers, and are instead forced to sell their produce to one of a few middlemen who serve the producer's geographic area. Even when small-scale food producers can supply directly to consumers, they often face local landlords, politicians, or mafias that charge high rental fees for stalls at markets and tolls for using key roads or rivers. In many cases, direct farmer-to-consumer initiatives are not institutionally supported by governments, thus leaving them to operate in silos.

In addition, trade liberalization has made it so that local producers must compete with cheap imported goods when selling their produce in local markets.

These imported goods are often cheaper because many foreign governments heavily subsidize production, and because many richer countries use more advanced technology during production processes. When combined with other policies/systems that largely favor big corporations, many local producers are forced to give up smallholder farming and artisanal fishing, making countries dependent on food imports for survival. When countries are dependent on imports for food, food prices depend on highly unstable global market prices. This means that when the price of food is high on the global market, countries face massive domestic food price inflation, resulting in widespread hunger. When liberalizing trade policies combine with monocropping (ie. when farmers produce a single crop for export, instead of multiple crops for their community to eat), farmer livelihoods depend on the unstable global market price of a single crop.



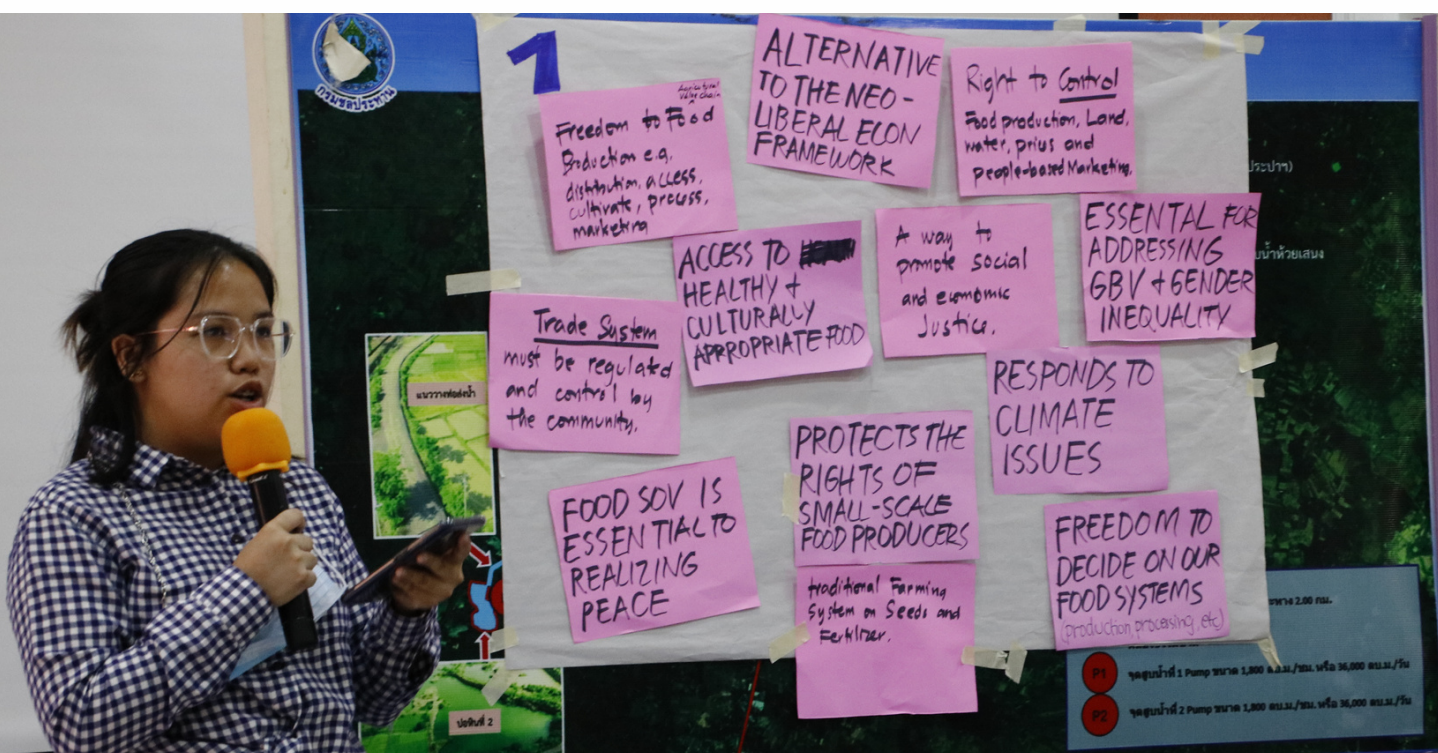
As a result of the decimation of local industries, agriculture, and jobs caused by neoliberal restructuring, many countries in the Global South are forced to take on massive loans from International Financial Institutions in order to survive crises.

During the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, lenders in the Global North made it easy for countries in the Global South to borrow because there were fewer investment opportunities in the Global North. As a result, many countries took on massive debts. With the coming of COVID 19 and the increase in global interest rates (as a result of monetary institutions in the Global North raising their interest rates), many countries are facing recessions, making it harder to raise the money necessary to service loans (which is generally raised from taxes). In total, in 2023, developing countries will be

expected to pay 380 billion US Dollars or more in debt service. This is likely to cause many defaults, and a third world debt crisis. Western creditors are blaming China for the predicted crisis, even though China has generally been more generous in forgiving debt. The Global North (but not China) also uses their control over loans to force countries in the Global South to implement neoliberal/neocolonial policies that allow for free trade, deregulate corporate activities, lower taxes for corporations, defund government social services, and deregulate foreign direct investment.

Corporate interests and countries from the Global North control international decision making bodies (including International Financial Institutions which play a role in negotiating trade agreements and loans, and the United Nations which negotiates international human rights frameworks and climate agreements) in order to push false solutions that benefit their profit margins.

Direct corporate control of these processes has also recently increased as a result of the shift from multilateralism to multi-stakeholderism, which displaces decision making from governments by putting governments, corporations, and civil society at one table to negotiate critical issues (such as food crises). This approach treats diverse stakeholders as equal parties at the negotiating table, and ignores existing inequalities and power dynamics across stakeholders. With the mainstreaming of the multistakeholder approach, countries are increasingly ignoring the agreements made by multilateral decision making bodies when it is convenient. As part of this, trade agreements have shifted from being multilateral (ie. they generally apply to all members of the WTO), to plurilateral (ie. they are negotiated between specific sets of countries). Additionally, while neoliberalism continues to be deeply embedded in the institutions of the Global South, International Financial Institutions and their neoliberal ideologies have lost some credibility, and the North is starting to shift to a post-neoliberal order.



In particular, one of the agendas being pushed in corporate-dominated multistakeholder spaces is the **digitalization of agriculture**, which has introduced other new problems. Multinational corporations that used to only specialize in food have started collecting large amounts of data from agricultural production processes. This data is used by seed companies, fertilizer companies, and corporations involved in finance, banking, and commodity trading for price control/prediction. The energy requirements (and therefore, carbon emissions) for housing this data are enormous.

The **financialization of capitalism** (where speculation has replaced production as the driving force of capitalism) has created a global banking system that is susceptible to financial crisis. This is a result of countries liberalizing finance and bailing out the reckless decision making of large banks. If a crisis in the global banking system interlocks with the likely third world debt crisis, it would have very severe results.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (a) the earth is warming around twice as fast as what we need to aim for, (b) if current global emissions continue, the damage done to certain ecosystems will be irreversible, and (c) humanity will start facing large food and water crises. **Climate change** is especially harmful for small-scale food producers because farming and fishing livelihoods depend on the weather. On the other hand, corporate led industrial agriculture is a key contributor to climate emissions, and the use of many of its most harmful activities (such as the use of synthetic fertilizers, the burning of crop residues, and meat production) continues to increase. Despite creating the bulk of greenhouse gas emissions, corporations continue to prioritize their own profits through the promotion of false market/tech-based solutions, and state funded corporate-led natural disaster recovery programs.



On top of the capitalist and climate crises, many small-scale food producers are also caught in the middle of wars driven by imperialist aggression, resource conflicts, racial and ethnic violence, and fundamentalism, among others. During *armed territorial conflicts*, small-scale food producers can face massive displacements, completely unregulated corporate extraction, and threats to their lives.

It is critical to move beyond general terms such as “peasant” or “consumer” because rights, privileges, discriminations, experiences of exploitation, and roles in production/reproduction processes are often based on gender, caste, ethnicity, indigeneity, citizenship, religion, and race.

Rural women are undercompensated and underrecognized in their role in food production, even though they often do the majority of food production work. Women are usually in charge of handling tasks such as food processing, cleaning, handicraft, and/or household finances in addition to handling the majority of reproductive work (such as taking care of children, the household, and the community). Rural women have lower land ownership rates, less access to education, fewer opportunities to improve their skills, and fewer opportunities to lead their own work. Domestic violence, high rates of early marriage, and lack of decision making power are other critical issues that many food producing women face. Caste, ethnicity, indigeneity, citizenship, religion, and race often dictate access to land ownership, experiences of displacement, experiences of discrimination, experiences of violence, levels of exploitation, and access to rights/government protections. Group based hierarchies allow for higher levels of economic exploitation because concessions can be granted to specific groups to divide resistance movements.

Authoritarianism is on the rise and democratic spaces have been shrinking, in large part because anti-democratic forms of governance are needed to maintain high levels of exploitation.



Money and economic power is used by corporations, elites, and the Global North to control the media, to fund right wing strategy development, to co-opt or put pressure on decision makers, to put in place government decision makers who will uphold crony capitalism, and to popularize social movements that are useful for maintaining the status quo. Personal connections to powerful groups/individuals is another form of non-democratic influence. Large militaries, private security companies, and prison systems are used to crush and contain resistance through violence, economic sabotage, and borders. Espionage and surveillance are used to undermine/predict social movement strategies, gather evidence that can be used to blackmail or criminalize resistance, and seed division/distrust. Governments and corporations attack key social movement actors (such as dissenting media outlets and movement leadership) through court systems, assassinations, and red tagging.

Corporations and governments are **co-opting progressive concepts** when naming neoliberal policies and practices (for example, carbon farming). Similarly, climate commitments have been used as cover for a new wave of land grabbing, and gender is often weaponized by Global North governments against countries from the Global South when they are advocating for their economic and geopolitical interests. Hateful **ideologies** and ideologies that frame certain social groups as inferior/non-deserving are used to justify exploitation while wars on drugs and terror are used to justify increased military/police activity. A **cultural climate** where individualism and upward mobility through capitalism is seen as the only option makes politicization, organizing, and collective action harder, while the culture of consuming corporate products makes foods that are grown/made by small-scale domestic producers seem inferior.

Food sovereignty movements face a number of other difficulties including:

- (a) the need to maintain morale,
- (b) surviving when using (under-subsidized) food production practices that promote long term community health over immediate gain, and
- (c) factions within movements.





Key Programs and Policies Needed to Support/Enable Food Sovereignty

In order to address the problems described above, a wide variety of alternative policies and programs are needed. While participants should see the [Surin Agenda](#) for a concrete set of agreements and next steps, some general movement demands include:

- Land, water, capital, tools, and processing facilities must be collectivized, redistributed, and/or subsidized for small-scale food producers.
- Non-corporate community/environment friendly small-scale food (and farm input) production practices must be spread through communities.
- Small-scale food producers must be able to feed their communities and supply consumers without powerful players first extracting value.
- Foreign competition with small-scale domestic producers over domestic consumption must be reduced through the implementation of import restrictions and barriers.
- We must democratize international decision making (including for economic matters).

- Domestic corporations and the landed elite must be held accountable when they violate the rights of small-scale food producers. Legally binding instruments must be created that hold transnational corporations accountable (through legal liability in the corporation's host state) for human rights violations committed through all parts of global supply chains (including parts of the supply process that are handled by contractors). This must also include the right to live-able wages.
- A massive debt release program is necessary to prevent another third world debt crisis.
- Access to loans must not depend on the acceptance of neoliberal conditionalities.
- International agreements must address the root causes of climate change and mandate that countries in the global north (who are the main beneficiaries of the processes that cause the climate crisis) pay for climate change related damages in the global south.
- Finance must be regulated to serve society and prevent market crashes.
- Rural women and women who are small-scale food producers need (a) recognition at the national policy level through paid maternity leave, (b) recognition and compensation for domestic work, (c) stronger public services (because many women involved in care work rely on these services for their livelihoods), (d) laws that encourage/enable land ownership by women, (e) reproductive health services and education, (f) measures against domestic violence, and (g) measures against harassment in public spaces.
- Structural (and interpersonal) discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, indigeneity, citizenship, religion, and race must end.
- Democratic spaces must be expanded through demilitarization, regulations to uphold digital privacy, the creation and enforcement of policies to keep money out of politics, and the creation and enforcement of laws that allow dissent.



Mechanisms, Pathways, and Entry Points For Securing Food Sovereignty

While a food sovereign society is possible, its realization goes against the interests of powerful actors including corporations, landed elites, and the global north. Because of this, food sovereignty movements must be united, strong, and strategic when building political power. Building political power among food producing communities can be deeply intertwined with spreading and **creating the knowledge and infrastructure** that small-scale food producers need in order to practice agroecology. Special attention was paid to regional alliances, mechanisms for bringing international pressure and resources to bear on country specific issues, and international policy making spaces that heavily impact national and local policy.

Understanding the formal structures and internal dynamics of international decision making, governments, corporations, funders, movement actors, and other decision makers is critical in order to be able to identify (a) the decision makers that decide outcomes relevant to a movement's demands, (b) the types of pressure that will be most effective in influencing these specific decision makers, and (c) how to get movement allies into positions of power.



Alliances and coalitions are more effective in generating political pressure than isolated groups because wider networks control more political resources (and as a result, are harder to suppress). This increased power to generate political pressure can be applied to decision making bodies that make large scale structural decisions, as well as to the campaigns of specific member organizations. Coalitions are also necessary for

- (a) spreading, deepening, and consolidating demands and analysis among member groups (especially structural demands that may not be obvious at local levels),
- (b) spreading effective strategies and coordinating coalition wide strategy, and
- (c) sharing content, intelligence, documentation, and campaign materials.

This sometimes becomes formalized through the creation of a shared political platform. Because of this, it is critical that individuals join organizations, that local level groups join larger federations, and that mass organizations, political parties, think tanks, and progressive NGOs form alliances (this can be within a sector, across sectors, within a country, or internationally).



A large and strong grassroots base is often what allows people's movements to win against corporations, large landowners, or the government. This is built through grassroots organizing. Our mass bases should have a real understanding of their rights, should be able to create effective and innovative initiatives, should be able to form alliances with other groups, and must be able to use public spaces (such as the media) to generate pressure on decision makers. The food sovereignty movement can benefit from building mass bases among many different constituencies including farmers, fisherfolk, rural communities, women, youth, urban consumers, factory workers, and indigenous peoples. Special attention must be placed on training the movement's next generation of leaders. These mass bases can influence decision making by:

- a) disrupting key economic activities (eg. strikes, blocking the delivery of goods/materials, land occupations, and boycotts),
- (b) influencing public opinion (for example through rallies, demonstrations, mass collective actions on social media, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience), and
- (c) generating electoral pressure.

Organizing efforts are most effective when they support communities in leading campaigns to address the community's urgent needs. While addressing a community's urgent needs usually requires changes from many different types of decision makers, individuals and communities often first become politically involved through individual/community level campaigns because the potential outcomes of these engagements are more tangible, and because communities have more influence over these decisions. This could result in the formation of:

- (a) organizations fighting for the local implementation of government programs (eg. agrarian reform or support services),
- (b) unions,
- (c) agroecology cooperatives (which help farmers survive hostile neoliberal environments),
- (d) seed saving initiatives,
- (e) support centers for women (on issues such as job training, reproductive health, and gender based violence), and
- (f) territorial markets that connect local producers directly to local consumers (this avoids exploitation by middlemen, allows producers and consumers to form relationships, results in a smaller ecological footprint, and increases communal agency and dignity).



Educational efforts should similarly:

- (a) target communal learning,
- (b) take place in local communities,
- (c) prioritize hands-on peer to peer knowledge exchange, and
- (d) be relevant to the needs of the community.

Community relevant topics could include how to create/lead effective campaigns, the effects of specific policies, knowledge of rights, job training (especially for women), reproductive health, and small-scale food production practices that prioritize sustainability and long term community health (generally through the use of regionally specific traditional knowledge/practices, at times combined with modern scientific advancements. These practices should avoid relying on corporations and pesticides, and employ intercropping instead of mono-cropping).



In addition to a mass base, it is critical to be able to **identify, mobilize, and create influential allies** that have legal authority, social stature, cultural influence, legal skills, and/or resources that can influence societal decision making. Engaging in the processes used to select public officials is one key way to mobilize resources. The ability to shape public perceptions and worldviews through the media, the arts, and the academe is also critical. This means that movements must be able to identify potential media outlets and know how to secure coverage. It can also involve networking, organizing, and cultivating relationships with journalists, musicians, artists, film makers, academics, TV show hosts, newspaper editors, and influential individuals on social media. Creating movement specific platforms such as listservs, webinars, or newsletters can also be helpful. These actors can at times affiliate with institutions that provide varying degrees of safety and legitimacy in the face of government repression. Legal aid is critical to many campaigns because:

- (a) the court system may decide certain movement outcomes,
- (b) movements often need to defend themselves against the use of criminalization and lawfare against activism,
- (c) movements need individuals who can understand existing/proposed policies and articulate formal policy demands, and
- (d) controlling money flow is also critical.

The United Nations' Special Rapporteur can be a powerful international ally when movements report allegations of violations of the United Nations' human rights frameworks to the rapporteur's office. If the office can verify a complaint's allegations, they write an official letter to the government, which creates a formal record, and is a useful way to get the attention of the press. **The United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Peasants (UNDROP)** outlines a progressive set of rights that are compatible with the demands of many food sovereignty movements. UNDROP recognizes rights as a collective matter that are dependent on social, cultural, and political contexts, takes a systemic/structural approach that touches on all aspects of the food system (including the necessity of equitable access to seeds, land, and water), and emphasizes the importance of working class struggle.

Finally, many different forms of **research and documentation** are critical both for movement strategy, and for conversing with legislators, the media, the general public, and the court system. It can be useful to document on the ground experiences (using videos, pictures, participatory research, and qualitative/quantitative surveys), unethical or illegal activities, money flows, and the impacts of policies that are designed to be dense or misleading. For **media, campaign materials, and campaign demands**, narrative framing, accessibility, and catchiness is critical. This necessitates identifying key target audiences, clearly linking campaign demands to the experiences of target audiences, and working with individuals who know how to effectively reach these target audiences (including relevant translation services). When framing demands, it is important that social movements start from the assumption that it is the government's job to ensure the wellbeing of its citizens.



Conclusions

The Regional Meeting on Food Sovereignty and Agroecology Exchange discussed key systems that prevent the realization of food sovereignty, the ways in which these systems are upheld by corporations, landed elites, and the global north, and the ways that food sovereignty movements can work for change. Overall, food sovereignty movements must shift from responding to threats to proactively moving our own agenda. This requires us to clarify our vision, sharpen our strategy, and build our strength and unity.



FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH

is an activist think tank based in Asia providing analysis and building alternatives for just social, economic, and political change.



www.focusweb.org



info@focusweb.org



[/focusontheglobalsouth](https://www.facebook.com/focusontheglobalsouth)



[/focussouth](https://www.instagram.com/focussouth)



[/focussouth](https://twitter.com/focussouth)

REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS

4th Floor Visid Prachuabmoh Building
Chulalongkorn University, Phayathai Road
Bangkok 10330
Thailand
+66 2 218 7363
+66 2 255 9976 (fax)