

Women and Food Sovereignty: A Response to a Failed Model of Agriculture

by Ilana Solomon, ActionAid USA

This is a preprint of an article which will be published in the Oxfam GB journal, Gender & Development 16.3 (November 2008). The journal is available at www.informaworld.com/gad.

ActionAid is an international anti-poverty agency working in over 40 countries, taking sides with poor people to end poverty and injustice together. ActionAid has been working at the intersection of women's rights and the right to food for decades and together with communities, we have implemented projects to support female smallholder farmers; to increase women's access to and control over land, seeds and biodiversity; to realise the right to food, and to influence national and international food policies such as those governing trade and agricultural support.

Food sovereignty has been a key approach to ActionAid's work on the right to food for many years. While we aim to promote food security from a rights perspective, the food sovereignty approach (described below) means that decisions about how to best achieve food security are made at the local and national level. A women's rights focused food sovereignty approach encompasses the most empowering and sustainable means to promote the right to food.

All over the world, the prices of nearly all major food and feed commodities have skyrocketed. The World Bank reports that global food prices rose 83 per cent over the last three years. The Food and Agriculture Organization cites a 45 per cent increase in their world food price index during just the past nine months. In response to the crisis, protests have erupted in over 30 countries. Poor people across the world are demanding an end to the spiralling prices that are threatening their food security.

Women shoulder the burden of the crisis. This is in part because rural women in developing countries are largely responsible for providing food for their families. As the prices of staple foods such as wheat, rice, and corn, continue to rise, poor women will struggle harder just to provide food for their family. Many women who already spend a high proportion of their income on food will be forced to buy less and go hungry.

Marie-Chantal Georges, a partner of ActionAid Haiti described her experience with the current food crisis. Marie-Chantal is HIV positive but cannot afford food to take with her medicine. 'It's been more than a month now since the President of Haiti promised to find a solution to the high cost of food. I haven't seen any changes – on the contrary all the prices are going up. This morning I had to take my medicine without eating, and Lord only knows if I am going to find something later', she said. Of the approximately 17.5 million women across the globe living with HIV/AIDS, having access to safe and nutritious food to keep themselves strong and, in some cases, to take with their medicine, is a matter of life and death.

Women are also unduly burdened by the crisis because of their traditional role as food producers. While the rise in food prices would logically lead women farmers to increase their production of food crops for their own consumption and for sale to domestic markets, decades of failed agricultural policies imposed on developing countries by international financial institutions and other donor agencies have undermined women's ability to produce and sell

food. Additionally, in the context of male subordination, poor women's lack of access to and control over land, technologies, and credit, make women particularly vulnerable to the food crisis.

Structural adjustment programmes, adopted by many developing countries as a precondition for receiving debt-relief, have been particularly devastating for women. Structural adjustment programmes have often included an overall reduction in government support to farmers by reducing investment in agricultural research and extension services, eliminating price controls, and reducing or removing subsidies for inputs such as fertilisers or seeds. In Malawi, for example, ActionAid partner Joyce Tembenu has been forced to stop planting her indigenous seeds because they no longer have time to mature in the wake of increasing droughts due to climate change. While hybrid crops take less time to mature, they require more inputs such as fertilisers. Unsubsidised fertilisers, however, are too expensive for Joyce to afford.

Structural adjustment policies, along with the lifting of trade protections that led to floods of cheap imports, have been devastating for women farmers. While some have been able to move into the production of cash crops for export, many women struggling to grow food for their families have been pushed off their farms and into unstable jobs with poor pay and labour conditions. This situation leaves women even more vulnerable to crises like the current food prices shock.

The glimmer of hope that arises from the food crisis is that it presents an opportunity to expose the failures of current agricultural policies and to reshape global agricultural policies by bringing food production, especially by women, to the fore.

Women across the world are calling for a different approach to food and agriculture -- one that protects the environment and human rights. The global farmers' movement, Via Campesina, has led the way in defining a new approach: food sovereignty. At a civil society event at the twelfth UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD XII), held in Ghana, in April 2008, women gathered together in a workshop entitled *Women and Food Sovereignty: Understanding the Issue and Moving to Action*. At this workshop, Beatrice Donkor, a member of the Food Span Network in Ghana, spoke about the importance of allowing poor women the space to make their own choices in agriculture.

'Food sovereignty', she stated, 'is the right of individuals, communities, people, and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food, and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies.'

Food sovereignty, from a women's rights perspective, involves the primacy of women's and communities' rights to quality food and food production over the rules of trade and structural adjustment. It entails the support and promotion of local traditions, markets and producers over production for export and reliance on food imports. Many see it as an alternative strategy for action on a local, national, and global scale.

Part of a women's rights approach to food sovereignty is to ensure that rural women are central in decision making around their food and agricultural production. As Beatrice states, in Ghana, women grow 70 per cent of food for family and local consumption. Women must be at the forefront of decision making about agricultural production and management.

Focusing on women and food sovereignty has already brought about success at the local level. For example, in northern Ghana, ActionAid Ghana has begun to support the establishment of women farmers' networks. The Chereponi and Nanumba districts, for example, now each have six farmers' networks that work to protect the rights of women farmers. One of the networks' focuses has been the adoption of new sustainable farming techniques, such as the use of organic fertilisers. Communities in these districts believe that organic fertilisers bring about higher yields, are healthier, and environmentally sound. Additionally, they are much less expensive than chemical fertilisers.

In another example, ActionAid has worked together with the Ministry of Agriculture and other partners to help increase food production through the training of women farmers in agro-ecological techniques. These techniques have been proven not only to increase food production, but are more ecologically and culturally acceptable in the communities of northern Ghana.

The formation of women farmers' networks and the use of training and capacity building has established women as leaders and decision makers on food production in their communities. This lesson must be repeated at the global level.

The current food crisis exposes a broken food system in which women's rights to livelihoods, food, and natural resources are not respected. The solution must involve a radical rethinking of agriculture, in which developing countries are not constrained by policies imposed from abroad, and that provides a substantial increase in investment in rural development and agriculture in developing countries. Extension, research, marketing, and processing must promote sustainable agriculture and women farmers. Finally, in a well functioning food system, women must be empowered to make decisions regarding their own development, food, and agricultural production.

ActionAid is advocating, at both the national and international levels, for a new approach to agriculture which fundamentally addresses women's rights and the right to food. In 2007 ActionAid launched a major global campaign, HungerFREE, calling on governments to deliver on their commitment to halve world hunger by 2015. At the international policy level, ActionAid is demanding that policy makers take a new approach to agriculture, one which puts women and smallholders at the heart of agricultural policy. Furthermore, ActionAid is advocating for climate justice; climate change is having a grave impact on food rights and women's rights. To learn more about our work, to join our campaigns and take action now, please visit www.actionaidusa.org and www.actionaid.org.

Ilana Solomon is a Policy Associate, working on food policy at ActionAidUSA, and is the author of ActionAid's report 'Cereal Offenders: How the G8 has Contributed to the Global Food Crisis and What They Can Do to Stop It' (July 2008).

For information on ActionAid's HungerFree campaign, visit www.actionaid.org/hungerfree. To learn more about ActionAid's work, to join its campaigns and take action now, please visit www.actionaidusa.org.