

Farming for Families and Food, Not Corporate Profits

By Corrina Steward | April 18, 2005

Two contradictory visions of globalization are sweeping around the world: one favors a top-down model of economic development via militaristic, corporate aggression. The other favors grassroots-led, democratic pluralism and seeks to produce diverse local development models suited to the needs of local communities.

Proof of these inconsistencies abounds. Paul Wolfowitz's election to the presidency of the World Bank signifies the advancement of a militaristic approach to controlling global resources; at the same time, thousands around the world continue to protest against the war in Iraq and other examples of U.S. imperialism. Schemes to privatize water, agricultural crops, and other life-giving resources continue to be pushed through proposed trade agreements and state-corporate relationships; yet, global social movements are calling for community sovereignty with unprecedented forcefulness and international solidarity.

One of the biggest ironies is that global agricultural production is regulated by international trade rules when nearly 90% of food is produced for local consumption and never traded on the global market. José Bové, a leader of the international farmers' movement Via Campesina, points out that, "No one would have believed [before the World Trade Organization came into existence] that we would get to the point where the biggest social movement in the world is a farmers' movement."¹

It is indeed surprising that agriculture—the most rudimentary form of industrial capitalism—is at the center of trade conflicts during this advanced stage of global industrialization. Yet, it also indicates a huge misunderstanding by free marketers of the local realities in the agricultural regions of the developing world, and even in U.S. and European farming communities.

Trade Rules for All, Benefit Few

The World Trade Organization's (WTO) Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) focuses on market access, export subsidies, and domestic support as a means for implementing a fair trading system. Reform in these areas focuses on export-oriented farming, which receives the majority of government support, and does not guarantee improved livelihoods for the farmers producing for non-export markets or on a small scale.

The WTO measures overlook several practices and trends, including the key issues of dumping of over-produced commodities and corporate control of the agricultural market.

A recent Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy report pointed out that dumping is a human rights issue: "Coupled with the lack of social safety nets, [dumping] has caused serious human rights concerns since the implementation of the AoA, particularly for small-scale farmers who lose their livelihoods due to competition from subsidized, dumped imports."² The human rights argument goes even further. Not only does dumping eliminate economic opportunities for rural communities, it denies local farmers the social and cultural values of their farming practices.

Corporate control of agricultural markets is intricately linked to government subsidies and also has human rights implications. In February, the Bush administration proposed reducing the annual ceiling on payments to U.S. farmers from \$360,000 to \$250,000. George Naylor, president of the National Family Farmer Coalition (NFFC), argues that this



would pit U.S. cotton and rice producers against other U.S. commodity producers because the caps would only affect the former.³

Rather than allow a rift between U.S. commodity producers, Naylor insists, “Farmers have got to get together to say ‘this is ridiculous.’ We’re destroying our communities, our resources, all for the benefit of a few corporations. This policy is not good for us, for the United States. It’s only good for those few corporations.”

Corporate agribusinesses are the main profiteers of subsidies as they provide the means for keeping production costs low. Subsidies perpetuate a vicious cycle of poverty and resource degradation by encouraging overproduction of crops, soil erosion, increased pesticide use, below-cost prices, and deflated farmer income. Agribusiness benefits from subsidies through the lowering of crop prices, which minimizes their costs and increases their profits.

“The same forces that are working against farmers in Africa and El Salvador are working against farmers in Iowa,” Naylor concludes. Due to the poverty and resource degradation cycle, producers are forced to take whatever price commodity buyers offer—limiting farmers’ capacity to define their livelihoods.

Democratizing Global Agriculture

As trade agreements seek to homogenize global agriculture policies and production, Via Campesina—a global network of farmers with as many as 200 million members—is calling for local policies and diversified production models. They are making farming communities’ needs central to agricultural policies and providing a much-needed reality check to U.S. and European Union trade negotiators.

Via Campesina has begun to carve out a new policy space in global agricultural politics for “food sovereignty.” The concept of food sovereignty is gaining political and social leverage as proposals like the Free

Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) continue to threaten the ability of family farmers in both the North and the South to determine how food will be produced and who will make food production decisions. Via Campesina’s members believe in “the peoples’, Countries’, or State Unions’ RIGHT (sic) to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries.”⁴

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Inserting food sovereignty into current agricultural trade and policy debates reframes them to approach national resources from a human rights approach rather than an economic one. The human right to essential resources is not a new concept. Several United Nations treaties already recognize the right to food, and traditional community rights over biodiversity are supported by the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

With food sovereignty, the rights-based approach to international dialogue has resulted in new alliances between the global North and South, such as the alliance between U.S. farmer groups like the NFFC and peasant farming organizations in Central and South America. The food sovereignty fight is a multi-national farmers’ struggle against corporate agribusiness and the national and international policies that support them.

Rather than focusing on limiting subsidies, NFFC explains that the poverty and resource degradation cycle could be controlled by:

- 1) Increasing global commodity prices through price supports;
- 2) Maintaining reserves of excess production to be used in times of need (e.g., drought) and as a means of maintaining steady commodity prices; and
- 3) Stopping production of a given commodity when there is an oversupply.

To implement these measures requires the right to prevent foreign imports from flooding national and local agricultural markets and reigning in corporate influence on the market. Cultivating local control begins with solidifying basic rights: rights to land and water and rights to political and social capital for marginalized communities.

Signs of Change

Despite the refusal of U.S. leadership to acknowledge that democratic, grassroots approaches to development are popularly supported world-wide, this model is gaining considerable ground. Every day, the Landless Peoples' Movement in Brazil gains access to land necessary for community self-sufficiency and demonstrates that local control of vital resources is more environmentally and economically sustainable. Other movements—from local food networks in the U.S., to cross-border agro-ecological collaborations in Central America—are formulating their own community-based development models.

Via Campesina is changing the language of agricultural trade from a language of corporatization to a language of farmers' rights and local sovereignty. This resistance to corporate agriculture is the basis of hope for rural communities around the world.

Corrina Steward is a resource rights specialist at Grassroots International in Boston, MA. She wrote this commentary for Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org). For more information on social movements working on food sovereignty and the Resource Rights for All initiative, go to: www.grassrootsonline.org.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bove's comments are taken from a talk on "Food Sovereignty and Resource Rights" at Grassroots International in Boston, MA on March 7, 2005.
- ² Smaller, C. 2005. *Planting the Rights Seed: A Human Rights Perspective on Agricultural Trade and the WTO. Backgrounder No. 1*, THREAD Series, IATP: Minneapolis, MN.
- ³ Naylor's comments are taken from a talk on "Food Sovereignty and Resource Rights" at Grassroots International in Boston, MA on March 7, 2005.
- ⁴ Via Campesina. 2003. What is Food Sovereignty? http://www.viacampesina.org/IMG/_article_PDF/article_216.pdf

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