Book Review

Food Sovereignty: Towards Democracy in Localized Food Systems, by Michael Windfuhr & Jennie Jonsén

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The food sovereignty policy framework seeks to eliminate hunger and malnutrition. Multiple definitions of food sovereignty exist; proponents have yet to agree on a single set of policy proposals.¹ With Food Sovereignty: Towards Democracy in Localized Food Systems, Michael Windfuhr and Jennie Jonsén find common ground among various interpretations of food sovereignty and offer a policy agenda. Windfuhr and Jonsén’s analysis of the sources of hunger and malnutrition is compelling, and the authors convincingly explain the shortcomings of traditional responses to these problems. They are not persuasive, however, when arguing that food sovereignty is currently the most effective framework for addressing hunger and malnutrition.

Windfuhr and Jonsén begin Food Sovereignty by describing the severity of global hunger and malnutrition. Although enough food is produced to feed the entire world population, 850 million people are hungry and malnourished.² Windfuhr and Jonsén focus on the suffering of smallholder farmers³ and the rural poor, who comprise nearly three-fourths of the world’s hungry.⁴ The authors predict that hunger and malnutrition will only increase as absolute global demand for food begins to surpass global supply.⁵

¹. MICHAEL WINDFUHR & JENNIE JONSÉN, FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: TOWARDS DEMOCRACY IN LOCALIZED FOOD SYSTEMS (2005).
². Id. at 3 (citing Food & Agric. Org. of the U.N. (FAO), THE STATE OF FOOD INSECURITY IN THE WORLD 2004, 6-10 (2004)).
³. Id. at 3.
⁴. Id. at 4.
⁵. Id. at 5.
Windfuhr and Jonsén argue that the source of hunger is the global system of food and agricultural trade. This system privileges multinational corporations, wealthy countries, and large landholders, but it marginalizes smallholder farmers and other rural people. Structural adjustment policies push poor countries to produce export crops only; subsidies in wealthy countries put smallholders elsewhere at a comparative disadvantage.\(^6\) Large transnational corporations dominate the ownership and production of agricultural inputs, from seeds to pesticides.\(^7\) Intellectual property rights systems protect this ownership and prevent “the spread of knowledge and technology among smallholder farmers . . . .”\(^8\) Concentrated control of inputs by transnational corporations disadvantages small, locally-based producers but keeps input prices low. The international food processing industry seeks cheap inputs and so encourages this concentration among large transnational corporations.\(^9\) Furthermore, global agriculture is largely industrial: intensive and input-heavy. Industrial agriculture tends to degrade land and “consolidate[] agricultural land and assets in the hands of big landowners, agribusinesses, and other large commercial entities.”\(^10\) International policy agreements, like the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Agriculture, have fixed this system in place.\(^11\)

The food sovereignty policy framework, Windfuhr and Jonsén explain, seeks to transform the world’s food and agriculture system. Non-governmental and civil society organizations have been developing this framework since the mid-1990s.\(^12\) Windfuhr and Jonsén glean from the various statements and proposals of nongovernmental and civil society organizations a list of shared commitments of the food sovereignty framework. As illustrations of shared commitments, Windfuhr and Jonsén cite the “priority of local agriculture,” “access of smallholder farmers . . . to land,” “the right to food,” “the right of smallholder farmers to produce food,” “the right of consumers to decide what they consume,” “the populations’ participation in agricultural policy decision-making,” and “the recognition of the rights of women farmers . . . .”\(^13\) Food sovereignty proponents also advocate ending subsidies and dumping,\(^14\) and they promote agroecology, which is “the holistic study of agroecosystems . . . .”\(^15\)

In order to achieve these commitments, supporters of the food sovereignty framework have pushed for political reform. Windfuhr and Jonsén identify “six concrete policy proposals” that Food Sovereignty advocates have advanced.\(^16\) The first is a Code of Conduct on the Human

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6. Id. at 6-7.
7. Id. at 8-9.
8. Id. at 8.
9. Id. at 8.
10. Id. at 8.
11. Id. at 6.
12. Id. at 11.
13. Id. at 13-14.
14. Id. at 13.
15. Id. at 14 (citing MIGUEL A. ALTIERI, AGROECOLOGY: THE SCIENCE OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE (1995)).
16. Id. at 15.
Right to Food. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization Council accepted such a Code of Conduct in 2004, but compliance is voluntary. The other policy proposals are:

An International Convention on Food Sovereignty that replaces the current Agreement on Agriculture[,] [a] World Commission on Sustainable Agriculture and Food Sovereignty established to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the impacts of trade liberalization on Food Sovereignty and security[,] [a] reformed and strengthened United Nations[,] [an] independent dispute settlement mechanism . . . to prevent dumping and . . . GMOs in food aid[,] [and] an] international, legally binding treaty that defines the rights of smallholder farmers to the assets, resources, and legal protections they need to be able to exercise their right to produce.18

These sweeping policy proposals aim to change completely the way we create, possess, and exchange food globally.

Windfuhr and Jonsén describe two other frameworks, aside from food sovereignty, that “have been used in the discourse on the issue of persistent hunger and malnutrition and in the design of strategies for its eradication”:19 the right to food framework and the food security framework. The authors identify strengths and weaknesses with both concepts. The right to food framework includes legally binding obligations for individual states “to respect, protect and fulfill” the right to food for individuals within those states. But the right to food framework lacks specific policy proposals, Windfuhr and Jonsén say, since it is “a human right rather than . . . a political concept.”20 Food security “exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”21 The framework does not impose binding obligations on states, however, and focuses too little on individual access to food and to productive resources.22 Windfuhr and Jonsén argue that both the right to food and food security frameworks “lack[] a particular set of policies” and instead “focus[] on the obligations of states and on allowing people who are negatively affected to use legal remedies to get their rights implemented.”23

Windfuhr and Jonsén’s criticisms of the right to food and food security frameworks are valid, but they do not successfully make the case that food sovereignty is a more effective framework for addressing hunger and

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17. Id. at 15.
18. Id. at 15-16.
19. Id. at 19.
20. Id. at 15.
22. Id. at 22.
23. Id. at 23.
malnutrition. First, food sovereignty reiterates many of the policies in the right to food framework. Windfuhr and Jonsén claim that “Food Sovereignty . . . is a more precise policy proposal” than those offered by the right to food or food security frameworks. It is difficult to see how this is the case. The authors acknowledge, for example, that the right to food is captured in a variety of international agreements. It is guaranteed in the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; United Nations agencies have held “expert consultations on the right to food”; NGOs and CSOs created a Code of Conduct on the right to food; the UN Commission on Human Rights appointed a UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food; and Food and Agricultural Organization members have adopted voluntary guidelines for achieving the right to food. Food sovereignty seeks to enshrine its values in similar international instruments and agreements. Windfuhr and Jonsén criticize the right to food framework for offering wronged individuals only “legal remedies to get their rights implemented,” but food sovereignty appears also to call almost exclusively for similar legal remedies.

Food sovereignty’s policy proposals are more sweeping, perhaps, than those associated with the right to food or food security. But Windfuhr and Jonsén does not explain how proponents of food sovereignty can implement such major change. They do not discuss how advocates can create “a reformed and strengthened United Nations,” for example. Neither do they explain how they can reform individual state governments. Windfuhr and Jonsén argue that governments must address rural marginalization, aid access to land and resources, fund rural areas, and employ rural people—but they do not describe how citizens can ensure that their governments fulfill these obligations.

Windfuhr and Jonsén rightfully criticize the food security framework for neglecting individuals. Food sovereignty, however, relies heavily on international instruments and agreements, which would seem to contradict the framework’s focus on “local autonomy.” Windfuhr and Jonsén acknowledge as much toward the end of their piece: “[A] potential conflict remains between the advantages of local control and sovereignty and the advantages of open-mindedness to new internationally controlled policies.” The authors seem confident that as food sovereignty develops, it can function on both a national and international level—but this tension suggests a real weakness in the concept.

Food sovereignty, Windfuhr and Jonsén say, sprang from non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations. “[F]armers’ organizations . . . fisherfolk, pastoralists, and indigenous peoples’ organizations” originated the idea before scholars and international bodies

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24. Id. at 23.
25. Id. at 19-20.
26. Id. at 23.
27. Id. at 16.
28. Id. at 25-27.
29. Id. at 27.
30. Id. at 33.
took hold of it. Food sovereignty would be enriched from a renewed focus on members of civil society. What is missing now in Windfuhr and Jonsén’s otherwise rich discussion of food sovereignty is how individuals—from activists in wealthy nations to smallholder farmers in poor ones—can bring food sovereignty policies into existence. How can food sovereignty, better than the right to food or food security, ensure that rural people have access to food, means of production, and choices about how and what they eat? To answer this question, food sovereignty advocates should consider how they can effect change in the food and agricultural system at lower levels, rather than focusing exclusively on changing international institutions at the top.

31. Id. at 1.