



The Radicalization of the Struggles of the Food Sovereignty Movement in Africa

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Neoliberal capitalism has entered a prolonged systemic crisis that is producing a new generation of social movements and struggles. As the African scholar and activist, Issa Shivji, writes: "humanity stands at the crossroads, where the choice is between rescuing the primitive system of capitalism... or dumping it into the dustbin of history and building an alternative humane world." (Shivji 2010:1). This is the choice that confronts a new generation of food sovereignty movements in Africa and in the world.

A "new scramble for Africa" is now in overdrive (Moyo et al 2012). This new scramble for land, water, minerals and bio-resources is accelerating the destruction of peoples' livelihoods, the dispossession of the peasantry and of whole communities. It is one more episode in a long historical process of capitalist "accumulation by dispossession" that dates back to the early phase of colonial expansion.

The continent of Africa has experienced the greatest degree of destruction and devastation as a result of neoliberal capitalism and its crisis. But Africa is not just a continent mired in poverty, hunger and underdevelopment; it is also a place of resistance, rebellions and uprisings in pursuit of real existing emancipation. New resurgent Food Sovereignty Movements, inspired by the transnational agrarian social movement La Via Campesina, today are resisting land grabbing and the remedies proposed by the Alliance for A Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). It is on these new movements that we have to focus our attention to understand the prospect for ending capitalism on the continent. However before we examine the question of the food sovereignty movement, it is important to outline the broad contours of food sovereignty and agrarian transformation today.

The Contours of Food Sovereignty and Agrarian Transformation Today

Food sovereignty is a radical framework for social struggles aimed at the dismantling of the world capitalist agricultural system. It emerged out of the neo liberal capitalist restructuring and the dominance of finance capital over the entire process of accumulation. This period has been characterized by the destruction of the everyday lives of people and the environment on an unprecedented scale (Amin 2011). The commodification of every aspect of food has been a central tenet of this period, further deepened by the finance capital-state nexus. Food became a commodity, losing its use value (a basic human right), where access is determined through the market with the single objective to maximize profits. Thus the concept food sovereignty was given prominence, out of the lived experience of those excluded, in the mid 1990's by the transnational agrarian social movement La Via Campesina.

Today the concept, in some instances stripped bare of its anti-capitalist content, is used by a host of social actors from governments, social movements, NGO's and the academic sector. The Nyeleni Declaration on Food Sovereignty held in Mali in 2007 defines "food sovereignty as the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems... food sovereignty is only possible if it takes place at the same time as political sovereignty of peoples" (Nyeleni, 2007). This approach embeds demands for food sovereignty in the resistance against the dominant neoliberal capitalist model of production, distribution and consumption.

Situating food sovereignty within the transition beyond capitalism is central in the process of radicalizing the food sovereignty movement and restoring its anti- capitalist content. In this regard Akram-Lodhi poses a pertinent question to this discussion, "whether rural social movements are developing an understanding of the ways by which they can seek to reconfigure the social conditions and relations of capitalism or are in fact forging ahead with the development of a post capitalist alternative" (Lodhi, 2013:152). The articulation of food sovereignty can easily digress into formulations that want to locate it within a context of "democratic" capitalism or what is known as "capitalism with a human face". The essence of food sovereignty requires a complete transformation in the domain of politics, economics, environment and social organization (Wittman et al, 2010). The transformation of the industrial model of agriculture cannot happen without ending capitalism and the broader transformation at a local, national, regional and world scale. "The food sovereignty movement, in politicizing the current food order draws attention to the severe shortcomings of commodifying food, and its ecological foundations, across the world, and in doing so offers a new ethic that would inform a decentered and democratic "food regime" (McMichael, 2009:163). The central tenets of food sovereignty could be summarized as genuine people centered agrarian reform, democratization of the food system, food as a human right, agro-ecological production, solidarity and cooperation in production, redistribution, consumption and struggle.

The resolution of the agrarian question today is central to achieving food sovereignty. The core elements of the agrarian question include politics, production, accumulation and ecology. Thus the agrarian question today is about four interrelated components “(1) the penetration of capitalist relations into agriculture; (2) the contribution of agriculture to capitalist development as a whole; (3) the ecological crisis generated by capitalist agriculture; and (4) the alliance between the workers and peasants in the struggle for democracy and socialism” (Moore, 2008:57). The politics of the agrarian question, particularly the transition beyond capitalism, is often ignored or given limited attention in discussions of food sovereignty. Linking the agrarian question to food sovereignty is of critical importance today for addressing the question of hunger, poverty, the ecological crisis and the global subsistence crisis in general. Linking food sovereignty and agro-ecology is equally critical because it gives priority to local production, distribution and consumption. This requires building an alternative system through radical agrarian reform with agro-ecology as the basis of production.

The most revolutionary aspect of the definition of food sovereignty articulated by La Via Campesina is that “food sovereignty means stopping violence against women”. This is an important aspect, which is often ignored, and that needs to be an integral part of the way movements understand food sovereignty. This fact has been aptly captured by the African revolutionary Thomas Sankara that “women’s emancipation is at the heart of the question of humanity itself. The revolution and women’s liberation go together. We do not talk of women’s emancipation as an act of charity or because of a surge of human compassion. It is a basic necessity for the triumph of the revolution”. Likewise, without the emancipation of women, food sovereignty is impossible or at best a meaningless concept.

The transformations necessary to achieve food sovereignty reach down to the household level where “patriarchal relations cement women’s role in insecure, subordinate, low and unpaid work” (Ghosh, 2012:14) and “makes women more vulnerable to violence and exploitation” (La Via Campesina, 2011). Patriarchy is a central edifice and permanent feature of capitalism, embedding women’s position in society in ways to maximize the extraction of profits. In this context, it is important to point out the central role that the externalization of the costs of reproduction has played in the capitalist accumulation process. “A large share of the costs of reproduction, past and present, have been shifted onto households and communities involved in non-waged activities (such as subsistence agriculture and unpaid household labor).” In large measure these costs are shifted onto women at the household and community level. Achieving food sovereignty requires a recognition of how the “externalization of the cost of production of labor and nature has become an entrenched characteristic of capitalism (Silver and Arrighi, 2011:67).

It is against this background that food sovereignty becomes a critical weapon in the hands of social movements demanding the redistribution of the “means of food

production” (Moyo, 2011). In the final analysis food sovereignty means the control of and access to land, water and bio resources by women workers and peasants in particular. The struggle in the context of Africa should not only be restricted to the local or national level but has to entail regional food sovereignty precisely because of the nature and character of capitalism today.

New Food Sovereignty Movements in Africa

Over the past two decades we have witnessed the resurgence of movements that have adopted food sovereignty as their guiding principles. In some instances there is an obvious disconnection between the theory these movements articulate and their practice. An example of this is where some social movements with a long history of embracing food sovereignty in Southern Africa are also part of institutions like the Southern African Confederation of African Unions (SACAU), which has recently adopted a GMO policy framework where “GM technology is one of the options that can increase production, improve productivity and income of farmers, and contribute to addressing food security challenges in the region” (SACAU, 2011). What is more interesting is that the apartheid beneficiary white commercial farmers union AgriSA (which is known for land grabbing in the region, the exploitation of farm workers and an active adherent of the capitalist food system) is an active member of SACAU. It is these contradictions between theory and practice that we should engage with, particularly its implications for the food sovereignty movement in Africa.

Despite this disconcerting reality, there is also a new generation of agrarian and food sovereignty movements that emerged out of the multiple crises that have been engendered by neoliberal capitalism. Zimbabwe’s land occupation movement and the Right to Agrarian Reform for Food Sovereignty Campaign, in short Food Sovereignty Campaign in South Africa, are two such movements that hold important lessons for the task of building vibrant and radical movements in Africa.

Zimbabwe arguably represents the only radical redistributive land reform from below since the end of the cold war (Moyo and Chambati, 2012:1). The racially skewed land ownership pattern was dismantled when approximately 170,000 farmers occupied 6000 large-scale white-owned farms and agribusiness land (Hanlon, 2013, Moyo and Chambati, 2012). Yet very few movements have seriously engaged with the land occupation movement in Zimbabwe to draw important lessons for their own struggles. In part this could be attributed to the negative media attention and misinformation distributed by western media outlets and intellectuals. This distorted the image that movements in Africa and elsewhere had of the Zimbabwean land reform process, and made them reluctant to support the land occupation movement or to carefully learn from it.

Over the past decade a number of studies have been published that dispel the myriad of myths about Zimbabwe (Moyo and Chambati, 2012, Scoones et al, 2010, Sadomba,

2011). The positive outcomes associated with the Zimbabwean land reform had been articulated by African scholars and movements (Moyo and Yeros, 2005) but were essentially ignored until western scholars began pointing out some of the successes of the radical land reform from below. Zimbabwe like most postcolonial settler countries in Southern Africa implemented the neoliberal structural adjustment prescriptions ordered by the World Bank and IMF in the 1990s. These policy prescriptions had a devastating impact, resulting in economic decline and massive unemployment (Hanlon, 2012). As Zimbabwean war veteran and scholar Wilbert Sadomba points out that “the Zimbabwean state, being essentially a bourgeoisie neocolonial establishment, promoted interests and values that were opposed to those of peasants, rural and urban workers, and marginalized war veterans who comprised the land movement” (Sadomba, 2012: 80). It is this reality that led to the land occupation movement and revolution of 1998 – 2002 led by the war veterans of Zimbabwe and a host of subsequent movements that have emerged out of this process.

Peasant land occupation in Zimbabwe precedes the 1998-2002 period, although the latter period has its own distinct character and dynamic. The land occupation movement had an organizational form that was horizontal and anti- bureaucratic. This included functioning in small autonomous units, with the objective of politicizing the masses and setting up strategic bases where directives could be given, with no central national command centre. This allowed peasants to shift from a sole focus on the local and to mobilize to challenge the state at the national level. An important feature of the movement was its ability to dismantle the rural- urban division. The urban landless were integral in the land occupation for urban housing and agriculture (Sadomba, 2012, Moyo and Yeros, 2012). The mass loss of jobs by urban workers in the 1990’s combined with the severe housing shortage provided the impetus for urban residents to join the movement.

Contrary to what many believe the Zimbabwean state responded with severe force to the 1998 land occupation. Robert Mugabe strategically decided to “hijack the land movement in a bid to use it as cultural capital against the MDC and particularly white commercial farmers” (Sadomba, 2012). However because of the horizontal form of organization of the land occupation movement, it made it difficult to coopt the land occupation completely and also explains how this movement spread nationwide in relation to land demands. This form of organization-- where you operate in “small units and isolated activities”-- was a lesson that war veterans imported from guerilla warfare, and became the main form used of the struggle and mass mobilization.

Trade unions, NGO’s, farmers unions, including the formally constituted Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA) “either lacked the interest or organic roots to organize a radical land movement”. A key weakness of this process is that farm workers benefited little from the radical land redistribution and were not centrally integrated into the land occupation movement. However production has

become more labour intensive and workers have access to plots of land for production. Moreover, despite the movement's achievements in Zimbabwe it did not break from a neoliberal capitalist framework and is still tied to the "dominance of monopoly finance capital that drives the supply of agricultural seeds, technology and credit". New movements like the Zimbabwe Small Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF) is forging ahead with agro-ecological farming that are beginning to challenge the industrial model of agriculture. It also has the task to build on the history of the land occupation movement to defend the land reform process and engage in new struggles to achieve food sovereignty in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's land occupation movement has left a radical imprint in the imagination of the landless movement in South Africa. In 2011 the Food Sovereignty Campaign officially adopted "land occupation as the new way of doing land reform", a practice that some of its members were already carrying out in urban and rural areas (Food Sovereignty Campaign, 2011). The Food Sovereignty Campaign was established in 2008, consisting of small-scale farmers, farm workers, rural dwellers, forestry communities and urban farmers. Early on it recognized the importance of breaking the artificial divisions between rural and urban, small-scale farmers and farm workers--divisions that some movements in Africa are unable to overcome. The recent militant strike wave by farm workers in South Africa highlights the point that farm workers should be a central part of the process of radical agrarian reform for food sovereignty. The Food Sovereignty Campaign was able, because of its organizational form and class composition, to organize similar actions with farm workers in its area of operation when the strike erupted. During this struggle 17 farm worker members of the campaign were arrested and are still embroiled in a case with the state.

Moreover for the Food Sovereignty Campaign, food sovereignty is not only a rural imperative but also an urban struggle. This is reflected in the fact that the Campaign was led by an urban worker-farmer, who was part of a militant urban land occupation for agricultural livelihood creation in the City of Cape Town. The building of activists through popular education, organizing and struggle is a key feature of the movement. It has adopted a horizontal form of organization where a convener is elected every six months to a year in order to build a collective leadership base.

Women leadership has been strongly embedded in the movement and provided the militancy of the movement. In a pamphlet issued by the Campaign it state "the purpose behind the structure of the Food Sovereignty Campaign is to recognize and encourage the need and capacity for sovereignty of every person". Each organization at a local level has its own autonomy and actions are determined by the struggles at a local level. The movement emphasizes the importance of direct action, including sit-ins, land occupations, marches, pickets and other forms of protest. The movement's strategy to date is based on a simple logic: that is, that local direct action and making connections among local struggles is the basis for building a movement to confront

capital and the neoliberal state. While this is still a relatively new movement its form of self-organization and method of struggle presents some key lessons in moving building.

In advancing the struggles of the food sovereignty movements in Africa, we have to recognize that there were liberation struggles preceding our own struggle not just in Africa, but also in other places like Latin America and the entire world. We have to learn from the errors of this period, but also from the number of advances that have been made. The Zimbabwean case demonstrates that our methods of struggle and organizational form also have to be rooted in the history of the emancipatory struggles, learning from both its failures and successes.

NGO'ism as both an organizational and (non) political form arguably presents a huge obstacle in the radicalization process of movements on the continent. "The sudden rise of NGOs and their apparently prominent role in Africa is part of the neoliberal organizational, and particularly ideological offensive" (Shivji, 2006:36). In many African countries NGO's outnumber social movements and have become the primary vehicle for peasants and workers to express their aspirations. At times this was necessary because it was in some instances the only form allowed to exist. Here the issue is not against NGO's per se but the fact that movements have taken on this organizational form as a means of political organization and structuring their movements. Of course all NGO's are not the same and some fulfill a vital role in society. However the problem arises when movements with a programme for radical social change adopt this form and structure their movements accordingly. In most cases it precludes self-organization and self-mobilization for emancipation. This in part could be explained by the fact this form is driven by the quest for financial resources often required from donors or movements emulating the NGO's that played a critical role in their formulation. In our quest to move forward in building militant and radical food sovereignty movements we have to overcome this constraint confronting many movements in Africa. The Zimbabwe land occupation movement and the recent farm worker strike wave in South Africa demonstrate that, while financial resources are often important, it is not the determining factor in the struggle for emancipation or a substitute for self-organization and self-mobilization.

There are numerous lessons that we can learn from the past emancipatory struggles, and the agrarian and food sovereignty movements in Africa. Firstly, movements need to radicalize their politics and struggles to take the food sovereignty movement forward. Radicalization in this context means the political consciousness that capitalism, as a system is incompatible with food sovereignty and the emancipation of humanity. Secondly, to advance food sovereignty we need to make the anti capitalist component of its agenda central if we are to make the transition to a society based on solidarity and cooperation. Thirdly, the transition beyond capitalism can only be achieved through a broad alliance between peasants, small-scale farmers and workers,

bridging the divide between urban and rural. Finally, the training of a critical mass of militants through theoretical study, struggle and action should be central. Actions based on a sound theoretical understanding by the food sovereignty movements should not be eschewed in favour of only action. Movements should be rooted in the history and tradition of emancipatory struggles of workers and peasants. While we cannot predict when revolutions or mass uprising will arise, we should make sure that when they do erupt that a collective leadership and theoretical understanding are available to guide the struggle towards a real alternative.

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