
Food sovereignty is not possible without biodiversity

Over the years, the establishment of large-scale monoculture plantations for food production has been accompanied by the so-called Green Revolution “technology package”, leading to the poisoning and impoverishment of biodiversity. This has had particularly serious impacts on women, because in many communities around the world, they are primarily responsible for providing their families with health care, water and food – activities that are closely linked to the conservation of biodiversity.

At the same time that a large part of this biodiversity has been lost, monoculture plantations of genetically modified soy, corn, eucalyptus trees, etc. have been introduced and expanded. Through the definitions they use, official organizations like FAO have supported and strengthened the monoculture plantation model, by qualifying genetically engineered eucalyptus plantations as “forests”, showing a total lack of consideration of the enormous biodiversity of a real forest.

The large-scale monoculture plantation model has been promoted on the basis of its alleged “productivity”, which has nonetheless not succeeded in preventing approximately one billion people from suffering from hunger in the world today. It should also be stressed that this “productivity” has been seriously called into question, even by the scientific community. The largest study on this issue carried out in the United States found that organic agriculture, without the use of chemical products, is far superior to the conventional model in terms of crop yields and viability (1). What's more, it is a fact that small-scale peasant farmers, despite all of the pressures they face, continue to produce most of the food consumed by the world's population.

And it was precisely those small-scale peasant farmers, gathered together in the international organization La Via Campesina, who developed the concept of food sovereignty in the early 1990s. Food sovereignty is an umbrella concept that encompasses approaches aimed at confronting and creating alternatives to the neoliberal policies that sustain the mainstream development paradigm, based on trade and industrial agriculture and food production. These policies, largely channelled through the international “framework” established by the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other international bodies responsible for global economic and financial policy-making, have been responsible for, among other things, the ongoing expulsion of small-scale farmers from the countryside and the growing control wielded by a few transnational corporations over the entire production chain, from the production of seeds to the sale of grains – factors that have severely undermined food sovereignty.

Under the same logic, a process has been underway for several decades that involves the appropriation and privatization of the world's seeds by a handful of transnational Western corporations, known as “patenting”. Today, many peasant farmers are forced to purchase seeds, paying royalties to the corporations that “own” them. This means the loss of their autonomy in the reproduction of life on the land, and bigger profits for the corporations. And for the corporations it is strategic to gain control over all of the seeds to continue guaranteeing their supply to farmers.

More recently we have seen the emergence of the concept of so-called “environmental services”,

which entails the commercialization of elements of biodiversity such as water, climate regulation and soil conservation, and even their incorporation into stock markets, opening the way to “speculation” with nature. The fact that the value of these services will necessarily depend on supply and demand leads to an especially perverse logic: the greater the destruction of the environment, the greater the demand for and profitability of an “environmental service”. And all of this is called the “green economy”.

What does this mean for local communities, and above all, for biodiversity and food sovereignty?

It means more pressure on the natural resources and biodiversity on which these communities depend, and in turn, the further expulsion of thousands more people. And even in cases when they are allowed to remain, these communities are cut off from access to these natural resources and biodiversity. It is a lack of respect for their culture and a threat to their food sovereignty when, for example, they are prohibited from planting subsistence crops – something that is already happening in various parts of the world. The result is the loss of control over their territory and the loss of their autonomy.

That is why today, it is extremely important for communities to fully understand the “green” proposals made to them, from the REDD+ forest carbon mechanism to the sale of environmental services. These initiatives are generally presented as something good, which will supposedly benefit the community and improve the environment. In reality, they are mechanisms which, through their very logic, tend to worsen the global environment, and which, because of the control they seek to exercise over the territories of indigenous, traditional and rural communities, profoundly impact on the food sovereignty of millions of people throughout the world who want to preserve their ways of life.

(1) See <http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/fst30years>