Mali: Forests within food sovereignty

Mali is host in February to over 500 women and men from some hundred countries from all over the world that are meeting at the “Nyeleni 2007: Forum for Food Sovereignty.” The objective of the meeting is to launch an “international movement to achieve true recognition of the right to food sovereignty,” to reaffirm this right and “set out its economic, social, environmental and political implications.”

What is understood by “food sovereignty”? The concept of food sovereignty arose in 1996, when Vía Campesina expressed it for the first time at the World Food Summit held in Rome. In 2002, the NGO/SCO Forum for Food Sovereignty defined food sovereignty as “the right of peoples, communities and countries to define their own agricultural, pastoral, labour, fishing, food and farming policies, which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances.”

Since then the concept has been strengthened during subsequent meetings to become an alternative to the productive models imposed by globalizing policies directed from entities of power (WB, IMF, WTO, etc.) that have consolidated the control of food by large transnational corporations, starting from seeds, sowing and inputs and going on to cover distribution, processing, sale and consumer habits all over the world.

Food sovereignty is centred on local autonomy, local markets and community action and incorporates aspects such as agrarian reform, territorial control, local markets, biodiversity, autonomy, cooperation, the debt, health and many other issues related with food production.

Thus, perhaps, the first point to be underscored is that food sovereignty is a process of grassroots resistance and its conceptualization not only is deeply rooted in the social movements fuelling these struggles but is also an opportunity to bind them together in a common agreement over objectives and actions.

So, starting from peasant movements, the concept is widened to include the landless, traditional fisherfolk, shepherds, indigenous peoples…and the defence of forests that is also a matter of food sovereignty.

Non-timber forest products have been and still are a basic input for many communities either living in the forest or close to the forest and resorting to it for their livelihood. They find honey, fruit, seeds, acorns, tubers, insects and wild animals in the forest; all important additional sources of food. Forests also supply resins, rattan, bamboo, tannins, dyes, leaves, straw, skins and leather, useful for either self consumption or to be sold, thus ensuring income to obtain other foodstuffs. The forest is also a supplier of plants for forage, particularly important for the production of cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys and camels.

Forests are also threatened and destroyed by those same processes threatening peasant farming: the advance of agro-business and large-scale monoculture plantations for export – ranging from

soybeans to eucalyptus trees –; the destruction of biodiversity with the imposition of transgenic crops; the oil matrix involving exploitation processes poisoning and destroying everything around them; the fencing in of sites showing high biodiversity to use them for the tourist business or for bioprospecting. In every case these are scenarios exploiting or displacing entire communities, stripping them of their way of life and their culture and leaving them to sink into poverty. The predominant model involves a circle of exploitation, extermination, exclusion. When the forest is destroyed, food sovereignty is destroyed.

However, this is not happening without a reaction. From their grassroots, peasants, traditional fisherfolk, shepherds and indigenous peoples who have developed and made possible production systems ensuring their own livelihood and that of other people not directly involved in production, are seeking to open a breach against these demolishing processes. From a local level, building autonomy, taking up again the principles of cooperation, integration and dialogue with nature that enabled them to build biodiverse agro-ecological systems and the dynamic conservation of ecosystems, grassroots movements are becoming the masters of their fate and teaching the world that “It is time for food sovereignty”!