

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Position paper

Developing countries have changed from net exporters to net importers of food in recent decades. They produce agricultural raw materials for export, so-called cash crops, and import more and more processed food. In the 1990s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank encouraged the governments of many developing countries to neglect their own agriculture - especially the production of staple foods - and to open the borders to imported products. In return, the cultivation of produce for export was stepped up, which promised high yields and the foreign currencies needed to service their debts.

So far, this development has had fatal consequences for rural farming in developing countries: there is hardly any state investment in agricultural advisory services, education and infrastructure. The agricultural budget, which is low as it is, is increasingly benefiting large producers who grow flowers, tropical fruits, coffee, soya or palm oil for export. **Conversely, low-priced finished products from the global food industry often find it easier to access markets in developing countries than products from their own regions.**¹ Olivier De Schutter, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, stresses that the idea of producing large quantities of food to feed the poor is a misguided one.² For example, EU subsidies generate surpluses that are exported at dumping prices and destroy local markets in developing countries.

Faced by this disastrous development for smallholder farming families, the farmers' organisation La Via Campesina developed the concept of "food sovereignty". It demands the right for communities and states to define their own agricultural and food policies.³ **Food sovereignty seeks to strengthen seasonal foods from sustainable farm production. The focus is on local markets, as well as fair producer prices.**

What SWISSAID is calling for

All over the world, the prices for the food produced are too low and the farming families are struggling to survive because the liberalised trade in food from industrial agriculture is driving local producers out of local markets. Therefore, SWISSAID is calling for the following:

- Switzerland must consistently **champion the cause of ecological family farming** at both national and international level, recognise the strategic importance of small farmers for global nutrition and take consistent measures in all areas of government activity to strengthen the legal and economic position of those farmers.
- Switzerland should implement the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) in line with its obligations. In addition, Switzerland approved the **UN Declaration on the Protection of Farmers' Rights** in 2018. It should now take to the national and international stage to champion the recognition and implementation of the declaration.
- Switzerland should make a commitment to **raise awareness among consumers**. Priority should be given to the principles of food sovereignty: local and seasonal produce that is organically grown and fairly traded, responsible meat consumption and the avoidance of food waste.
- Switzerland should gear its agricultural research towards the needs of rural agriculture. Significantly more must be invested in public **research for ecological farming** at both national and international level.
- Multinational corporations with their headquarters in Switzerland should adhere to clear and binding guidelines with **minimum ecological, social and ethical standards** when trading agricultural products on the international market. Voluntary commitments by companies do not go far enough. What's more, Swiss investors must not invest in projects and businesses that result in land grabbing.
- Switzerland must promote **fair trade relations** at both bilateral and multilateral level (for instance, World Trade Organisation, WTO). The focus is on local markets and, thus, on shielding farmers' produce from imports at dumping prices. Therefore, all countries, especially developing countries, should have the right to levy tariffs to protect themselves against imports at dumping prices.
- In the case of free trade agreements and international treaties, Switzerland should waive demands for **strict plant variety rights (such as UPOV 91)**.
- Switzerland grants preferential tariffs to developing countries (duty-free or reduced tariff). However, it is important that smallholder farmers in particular benefit from this trade regime, and that it is not manipulated by large corporations. In addition, preferential tariffs must be extended to processed produce in order to generate more value added. **Imports should meet sustainability criteria.**

The arguments

Food sovereignty combats hunger

Food sovereignty relies on local food production, regional markets and seasonal nutrition. Ecological farming is particularly important in view of climate change and the associated risks for food production, as it is more resilient and can adapt better to changing climatic conditions. This is why only food sovereignty is capable of feeding humanity in the long term, in contrast to industrial agriculture.⁴

Stop the global race to grab arable land

Farmers all over the world are fighting against the sale of their fertile fields. Countries, corporations and investors with lots of financial clout secure large swathes of fertile arable land in poorer countries by buying or leasing them in order to produce agricultural produce for their own markets.⁵ As a result, local farmers lose their land because they do not own any land rights. Access to land is, therefore, an important requirement in the concept of food sovereignty.

Strengthening the right to seeds

Three multinational corporations currently control two thirds of the international seed market, a dramatic concentration process has taken place in recent years. The strict application of intellectual property rights has contributed to this. For example, the Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV 91) prohibits farmers not just from selling protected varieties but also from exchanging them. In addition, reproduction by farmers on their own land is restricted to selected crops and is subject to reproduction fees in some cases.⁶ On the other hand, food sovereignty strengthens agricultural seed systems and guarantees farmers the right to seeds.

Food sovereignty protects the climate

Floods, droughts and extreme temperatures – agriculture is particularly hard hit by climate change. However, industrial farming is also partly responsible for climate change, for example through the production and use of synthetic chemical mineral fertilisers and the use of concentrated feed in animal farming. Agroecology, on the other hand, which is fostered through food sovereignty (see the SWISSAID position paper on agroecology), relies on closed food cycles and organic fertilisers. This enables soils to enrich humus and store carbon. Local food supply avoids transport and thus greenhouse gas emissions.

Promotion of local markets

Overproduction from misguided agricultural policies in the global north is driving smallholder farmers out of local markets in developing countries. One of the many examples of this is the fate of dairy farmers in Cameroon: With the abolition of the EU milk quota regulation in 2015, large milk surpluses arose, which were exported to Cameroon and other countries in the form of milk powder at dumping prices. The deregulation of the EU dairy market has resulted in dairy farmers in Cameroon being forced out of their own market.⁷ Food sovereignty, on the other hand, creates a basis for local food supply by granting each country the right to protect its own production from dumping prices with price stabilisation measures or tariff protection.

1 Global Agriculture: www.weltagrarbericht.de/themen-des-weltagrarberichts/weltmarkt-und-handel.html

2 Interview with Olivier de Schutter in 2018. www.woz.ch/-8f66

3 The concept centres around the right to democratic control of food production – i.e. the self-determination of producers and consumers – and not around the demand for maximising self-sufficiency. As such it differs from the concept of food security, which merely seeks to ensure sufficient nutrition for all people.

4 Global Agriculture: www.weltagrarbericht.de/fileadmin/files/weltagrarbericht/Neuaufgabe/WegeausderHungerkrise_klein.pdf

5 Global Agriculture: www.weltagrarbericht.de/themen-des-weltagrarberichts/landgrabbing.html

6 [Public Eye and ProSpecieRara, 2014: Saatgut – Bedrohte Vielfalt im Spannungsfeld der Interessen \(Seeds – Threatened diversity in the field of conflicting interests\)](#)

7 Reichert T., Leimbach J. Billiges Milchpulver für die Welt (Cheap milk powder for the world) www.germanwatch.org/sites/germanwatch.org/files/publication/13255.pdf