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Rights and Fights over Food

Friday, January 25, 2013
10:00 – 11:30 am

Session Organizers:

- Sarah Hobson, Executive Director, New Field Foundation
- Sara Mersha, Director of Grantmaking and Advocacy, Grassroots International
- Yeshica Weerasekera, Director, Program Partnerships, International Development Exchange (IDEX)

Panelists:

- Sarah Hobson, Executive Director, New Field Foundation
- Ricardo Jacobs, Agrarian Reform for Food Sovereignty
- Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

Facilitator:

- Yeshica Weerasekera, Director, Program Partnerships (IDEX)

Sponsors:

- New Field Foundation
 - Grassroots International
 - International Development Exchange (IDEX)
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Yeshica Weerasekera began by welcoming everyone and provided some introductory information on struggles about food and food production: With 1 billion individuals currently struggling for food around the world we need to increase our food production 70% by 2050. How can we transition to a model of agriculture that is low-carbon, resource-preserving and feeds people and builds livelihoods? Key to this discussion is agroecology, which is defined as, “the application of ecological science to the study, design and management of sustainable agro-ecosystems.”

Olivier de Schutter spoke about two major developments: increased pressure on natural resources, and land grabs that result from this pressure. Since 2005, more investors – both private and public – have been seeking to purchase land, and the water under the land, in order to avoid depending on markets for these resources in the future. According to the Land Metrics Project, since 2000 some 58 million hectares of land have been subject to these ‘deals’. 70% of land deals concern South Africa, Sudan, Mozambique, Zambia, DRC, and some Asian countries like Philippines, Indonesia, and Laos. In these countries, the government is relatively weak and the elites are not accountable to the population.

In many countries of South Saharan Africa small farmers are not protected. They don’t have titles over their land, and unfortunately the land in highest demand is the most fertile, closest to ports and

communications routes. Furthermore, there are very few safeguards being imposed in the agreements they are negotiating. Investors pay only minor fees (typically the cost amounts to \$1 for one hectare per year for cultivation), and there is no transparency on the way in which this money will be used by the government. These investments go to the production of cash crops for export, mostly (a third of them) for energy crops. Even food crops are for global markets. The very point is for these investors to secure stable access to the crops that they cultivate. This worsens the local food security, because as most food leaves the region, it becomes more expensive for the locals. In the case of indigenous peoples, they are weakly-represented in decision-making processes surrounding this. Despite this, they depend on the land for their livelihoods and they lose the most without being able to consent to the process.

During the mid-2000s, many countries developed schemes to codify land use in order to protect farmers from eviction. The problem is that these titling schemes have been captured by elites, or landowners. Very poor farmers and other vulnerable populations are not able to benefit from these processes due to corruption.

More recently, rather than replicating the more “Western” notion of property rights, there has been a focus on protecting land users from forced eviction. In 2012, the UN Committee for Food Security adopted a new set of guidelines stating that the priority for governments should be to secure tenure rights by continuing to promote customary forms of tenures, secure the tenure of those living on the land, promote the need for transparency and control by parliament, and limit concentration of the land appropriation.

Olivier concluded by stating that the way food systems have worked since the 1920s is no longer sustainable: they are heavily dependent on fossil energy, use large amounts of water and soil, and deplete soil nutrition due to the large use of monocultures. We need to use different elements of nature to make the best possible use of scarce resources.

Olivier was asked about political and social obstacles to implementing an agroecology model. Olivier responded that the ecology model of production requires a complex connection between the people and the land, and for this reason it is more easily applied to small scale farmers. But we don’t seem to trust small scale farmers enough – they are more productive in resource use, but less competitive market-wise. In developing countries agriculture policies are dominated by a concern to increase exports and support the most competitive producers who are able to sell in large global markets. Yet, this promotes a kind of farming that insists on uniformity and not on diversity, which is what agroecology is about.

In addition, to make Agroecology possible farmers must plant trees and rearrange soils to reduce erosion. Agricultural research has been focused on a narrow range of crops including cereal crops and biotechnologies, and not enough on good farming techniques that are sustainable. There is also a very strong cultural prejudice against small scale farmers. There is a commonly held view that modernization means industrialization; a belief that the Global South must follow the United States and Europe, so convincing cultures of the positive impact of these alternative techniques as part of development is important.

Ricardo Jacobs spoke about the case of South Africa where there is a legacy of land dispossession. This puts enormous limits on the development trajectory of the country. The impacts of industrial agriculture on South Africans are: a) the externalization of the cost of labor and nature, this cost is shifted towards communities and nature; b) South Africans have to be content with whatever employment they find;

low wages and precarious employment are common; and c) some effects of food insecurity and rising food prices are causing a lot of stress in local communities.

Movements are responding to this problem through:

- Livelihood survival strategies (i.e. urban and rural gardens)
- He explained how people are responding to the struggle of livelihoods. For example, those wines from South Africa rely on cheap labor; and there is not an adequate food basket.
- Direct action through civil disobedience, social movements protesting the system, etc. Land occupation is a new way to pursue land reform in South Africa.

Ricardo stated that Agroecology is resistance, both in terms of production and in a political sense. Even if people engage in Agroecology, the current system of food production is still undermining agroecological systems. If people engage in food saving and seed justice, multinational corporations have the resources to fight these approaches. We have to re-imagine the way in which we can support movements, because movements cannot operate within the framework we have conceptualized – rule of law, constitution, human rights, etc. 35% of land in South Africa is owned by European farmers/land owners. This system is not sustainable; we need a system based on solidarity and collaboration.

Sarah Hobson discussed the role of women in Africa in shifting the food system. Africa is one of the richest continents in terms of natural resources, and one of the largest locations of land grabs. At the national level, women farmers are not able to access opportunities, because they don't have the credibility and resources to be able to do so and are not seen as agents of change. They are boxed into small roles, given small amounts of microcredit, which does not necessarily empower them and often leads to debt. Although the African women's movement is becoming strong, dynamic, and is growing in strength it has been focused on national policy, political leadership, reproductive rights, inheritance law, etc. The feminist movement is only beginning to address women in agriculture. Yet, women in agriculture produce and process 70% of Africa's food and should be key players in any efforts to reform the current food system.

There are also new influences and changes impacting women in Africa. For example, the peasant farmer movement is growing rapidly in Africa and La Via Campesina is a growing force. Women farmers are finding increased opportunities for action and solidarity. But, as with men, they are facing displacement, loss of seeds, and pressure to engage in high-input farming. Sarah recommended supporting strong rural women's organizations and supporting their advocacy at all levels.

Sarah read a quote of Alimata Trore, President of COFERSA (a union of 16 rural women's cooperatives representing nearly 1000 women in Mali):

"With us, women in Mali have always been the guardians of natural resources. We preserve, and make rational use of agriculture and forest products. For example, we plant trees such as karite, baobab, and neri, but unfortunately the trees are cut each year by men in order to make new farming fields, to build houses, and to sell wood. What we are defending: Rural women play a fundamental role in the use of natural resources. They must be involved in their management. Their work must be recognized! Ecological peasant farming can feed communities on a large scale. It is essential to support it. It is food sovereignty that we are fighting for. It's not a question of producing organically for export, but providing a supply of food for our families and communities in a sane and sustainable way. Rural women who are well organized can grow, process and market their products locally, the same as others elsewhere. Their work must be organized. It is necessary to protect our local markets from poor

quality imported products that are bad for our health, the environment and the economy. Support rural women to have strong organization that represent them properly in the decision-making structures for natural resource management. Support rural women's initiatives at all levels to ensure the sustainability of natural resources, to ensure sufficient and healthy food, both for the present and for future generations."

To conclude, Sarah mentioned some collaborative funding mechanisms in which New Field Foundation is involved:

- 6 U.S.-based funders (Christensen Fund, Grassroots International, New Field Foundation, and others) have formed an initiative called, *We Are the Solution*, celebrating family farming in West Africa and protesting the green revolution in Africa.
- 12 rural women's associations in 5 countries in West Africa, influencing policy and practice in relation to food production. Building their capacity, documenting their knowledge, getting the message out.
- International Fund to Amplify Agroecology Solutions is a collaboration to support new initiatives to promote a sustainable future in the face of climate change.

The panelists were asked about the difference between Agroecology and food security. They responded that food security is about food distribution and access. It doesn't look at the entire model of production, the impact on the environment and populations. Agroecology has to do with all of this. It seeks the democratization of management of natural resources. We have to think of an entirely new system of production, exchange and consumption to have food sovereignty. A new scramble is how to call this period of change in Africa.

Participants broke up into small groups. Some key points raised in the report-back were as follows:

- How do we balance the needs of those still on the land, the producers who have the knowledge and linkage, while still appreciating the needs of those in urban areas to access healthy food? We need regional economies that bind these two together.
- The lack of democracy is critical, like in Haiti with the large agencies imposing the solutions. In urban and rural areas the issues don't look the same, and those working on water sheds in urban and rural areas for example don't share the same language.

Yeshica concluded the session with some key take-away points:

- The rural-urban divide is increasing. From our perspective the rural crisis only amplifies the urban crisis (through the creation of shantytowns, etc.).
- It is critical to support human rights defenders and the right to food. We have to understand what this social disobedience means. We also need to support spaces where people are practicing Agroecology. Have faith in those doing it, and amplify it.
- We need to move towards solidarity and collaboration.
- The Gates Foundation Trust has 23 million dollars invested in Monsanto. It is vital to know where your foundation money is being used and to ask those important questions.
- It can be extremely beneficial to have local advisers and consultants.