

WN Guest editorial

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Sustainable Development Goals **'The world we want'. Who is 'we'?**

'End poverty in all its forms everywhere'. This is how the UN [Sustainable Development Goals for 2016-2030](#), which follow the 2000-2015 *Millennium Development Goals*, begin. The second goal is equally aspirational. 'End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture'. There are 17 goals with 169 targets so far. Thus target 2.1 says 'By 2030 end hunger and ensure access by all people particularly the poor and people in vulnerable situations including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round'. Then target 8.1 says 'Sustain *per capita* economic growth in accordance with national circumstances, and in particular at least 7% per annum GDP growth in least developed countries'. All this comes under the general banner of [The world we want](#)'.

The SDGs are in an advanced state now. They will be finalised after more preliminary meetings, and released as the plan for world development at the UN General Assembly held between 15-28 September in New York. There are many questions and issues to be asked and raised. Here my question is, 'who is 'we'?' Those in charge apparently are the current leaders of the undefined 'international community', including some who have been masterminding top-down 'development' for many years. In which case, these are who 'we', and what will be done is not what everybody else needs, but what they want. A related issue is the absence from the *Sustainable Development Goals* of any explicit or even implicit reference to food sovereignty. They are drafted as if the vision, concept and practice of food sovereignty does not exist.

No sustainability without sovereignty

[Food sovereignty](#) is a precondition for food security. Genuinely sustainable agriculture can be achieved only when hands-on farmers themselves have the right and the means to decide and control what they will produce, when, how, and for whom. The family farmers and smallholders who produce more than half of the food in the world, most of whom are rendered vulnerable by unjust political and economic regimes, can be sure of sufficient and nutritious food all year round only when they have secure tenure of their land so that they can grow what feeds them, when they have reliable sources of supply and ready access to local markets, and when they are free from debt.

Food sovereignty rejects food systems in which decisions are made by corporate and other private entities, government officials, and others removed from the day-to-day realities of genuinely local food systems. Food sovereignty includes the right of people to produce, sell and acquire culturally appropriate healthy food suited to local climate and terrain, produced by socially just and ecologically sensitive methods. Food sovereignty also means the right of people – communities and citizens as well as farmers and growers – to participate in decision-making on what to grow and what to distribute and sell, and in general to define and sustain their own food, agriculture and fisheries systems.

What food sovereignty means

Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity, unfairly distributed between and among nations, are responsible for preventable disability, disease and death. A focus on food sovereignty entails fair distribution of existing resources, and fair shares of relevant responsibilities. It means that people, families and communities have control over their own lives, have a voice and influence in decisions that affect them and their homes and environments, and so act as real citizens in genuine democracies. This is all worth fighting for – and is being fought for, in city streets and countrysides in many countries the world over.

Food sovereignty is ultimately about ethical ways of life that rise from collective, participatory processes. To take food sovereignty seriously, and to work towards its achievement as an integral part of the need to create, develop and strengthen a genuinely sustainable human, living and physical world, is the great challenge now and for the future. It means facing up to the linked crises of weak governance, corporate greed, financial speculation, unfair trade, crippling foreign debt, and man-made climate disruption. More specifically, it means systematic support to rational, low-input and often traditional and long-established systems of farming. It means encouraging national, regional and local food systems that encourage and improve the capacity of all those who work on the land, rivers and seas.

Moving towards a world in which food producers and consumers get real control and have real choice over food supplies and dietary patterns that are good for them, future generations, and the planet, means confronting the current broken world political and economic system. I sense this is why there is no reference to food sovereignty in the current draft of the Sustainable Development Goals.

UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon states in his [Synthesis Report](#) on the SDGs issued in December: ‘We are at an historic crossroads, and the directions we take will determine whether we succeed or fail’. Indeed so. There is still time for transformative thought and action. Much depends on just how active we – all of us – are prepared to be.

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