

# Towards Food Sovereignty

In the context of the SSF Guidelines, the need now is to progressively work towards achieving food sovereignty for the small-scale fishing communities and fishworkers

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This piece is inspired by the discussions held during the ICSF-BOBLME East Coast Workshop to discuss the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on Securing Small-scale Fisheries in the context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) during 6–7 March 2015. The intent here is to raise several points for consideration during the process of consultations around the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. The premise of this article is: if the objectives of the SSF Guidelines are to be realized in their entirety “through the promotion of a human-rights-

times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food, to meet daily dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. It refers to availability, access and assimilation of food. Food security could, therefore, be achieved without any connections to local community-controlled systems of food production. Food could be made available through import of food, “made in India or make in India” agribusiness-based food production and distribution, or social welfare schemes (for example, the public distribution system (PDS) in India, cash transfers to purchase food, and so on) that source food from imports or industrial production, completely bypassing local community food-production systems. Therefore, measures to ensure food security do not necessarily sustain or promote sustainable, agroecologically or culturally appropriate local food systems. Food security met through industrial production systems destroys the livelihoods of food-producing communities. The modern industrial food system has been built through erosion of the diversity-rich, indigenous peasant food-web. This, in turn, has undermined the sovereignty with which communities built their food cultures, one element of which is the production of food. They also destroy soils, waters, air and diverse life forms which are the basis of our food system. It is only through food sovereignty that we can address food insecurity.

**Food security met through industrial production systems destroys the livelihoods of food-producing communities.**

based approach, by empowering small-scale fishing communities, including both men and women, ... for the benefit of vulnerable and marginalized groups”, there is a need to go beyond the “progressive realization of the right to adequate food”. The need is to progressively work towards achieving food sovereignty for the small-scale fishing communities and fishworkers. Only through food sovereignty as the long-term goal can fisheries contribute to an “economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for the planet and its people”.

In 1996, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) defined food security as the condition whereby “all people at all

## Food sovereignty

In 2007, the peasant movement, La Via Campesina, defined food sovereignty as a rights-based concept—

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the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume the food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. The definition articulates, powerfully, some of the guiding principles of food sovereignty as: ‘food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets, and empowers peasants and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, water, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food’. An important dimension of this definition is that food sovereignty is claimed as a collective right of communities and peoples rather than as an individual right.

Food sovereignty, in the context of fishers and fishworkers, has been articulated by the People’s Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS). In its statement at the 30th session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the FAO in July 2012, it emphasized that discussions on governance of rights, resources management and stewardship of small-scale fisherfolk need to go beyond the issue of ‘access’ to resources and should cover democratic ownership and control of these as well. This aspect of ‘access’ versus a collective right over resources and democratic ownership and control is at the heart of the difference between security and sovereignty. Fishers and fishworkers must be a part of the decision-making process on how their territories (oceans, lakes, rivers and so on) are used. They must have a right to engage in their customary practices influenced by seasonality and other natural cycles and patterns of fishing. They must have the right to practice their

livelihoods and maintain their food cultures and traditions—cultures that have been built through experience of being an intimate part of their respective ecosystems (riverine, coastal, marine). The crucial role and leadership of women in achieving food sovereignty is explicitly recognized by the food sovereignty movement.

The February 2015 workshop on the SSF Guidelines threw up several challenges faced by the fishing communities. Chief among them were resource pollution by industry, power plants (nuclear and thermal), urban centres, tourism, sand mining, and so on, violation of legislation by the State and industry (notably those related to pollution control and pollution prevention and Coastal Regulation Zone) and non-implementation of legislation that protects community rights of governance of their resources (for example, Forest Rights Act, customary rights of fishing communities, participation of *kulapanchayat* and *gram panchayat* in decision making). These challenges are exacerbated by the increasing corporate control of oceans and the fishing sector and the destruction of local, decentralized markets. All these challenges are a direct threat to the fishing communities in their pursuit of achieving food sovereignty.

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Small-scale fishing at Sundarbans, India. Industrial production systems often destroy the livelihoods of food-producing fishing communities

The Guiding Principles on which the SSF Guidelines are based, as well as the SSF Guidelines themselves, have set up a framework that will help rebuild food sovereignty. This is reflected clearly in the priority accorded to (i) governance of tenure and tenure rights, (ii) recognition of customary laws, (iii) protection of the quality and diversity of resources, (iv) gender equality with an emphasis on women's rights and safety, and their crucial role in post-harvest activities and the need to 'challenge practices that are discriminatory against women', and (v) the need for 'urgent and ambitious action' to combat climate change, including in the context of sustainable small-scale fisheries.

One point that stands out in the context of the SSF Guidelines is that they are 'voluntary'. If these Guidelines are to be implemented to rebuild lives and livelihoods of fishing communities through food sovereignty, there is an urgent need to implement them in their entirety. In a situation where even legislation and legal mandates are not being

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implemented or, in some cases, violated by the State, how can implementation of 'voluntary' guidelines, with a potential to rebuild food sovereignty, be ensured?

Given that these SSF Guidelines have been built through grassroots consultation with the fishing communities, it is the social movements of fishworkers who have to spearhead their implementation. In this situation, the response of the Food Sovereignty Alliance (FSA) is to move forward through solidarity and reciprocity between fishing communities and other communities (pastoralists, peasants, adivasis, dalits and others) of the Alliance. The challenges facing the fishing

communities and other marginalised communities are the same.

Food sovereignty is built on principles of reciprocity, equity, gender justice and solidarity. It also means not viewing various constituencies in silos—for example, fishers, farmers, pastoralists, adivasis—rather recognising that together they form communities. The State and corporations typically have fragmented views of how natural resources are used. The State, rather than the communities and people, is viewed as the 'owner' of these resources. To achieve food sovereignty the ideas of commons, custodianship and community are essential. This requires a transformation in the way nature and natural resources are perceived—not as a commodity but with the spirit of trusteeship/custodianship. It also means that the engagement between society and nature and between various constituencies in society must rest on democratic governance of resources, drawing upon customary approaches that nurture equity and justice, customary laws of engagement and accommodations, agroecological methods of production and decentralized systems of producing, sharing and distributing food, all of which have evolved experientially over centuries.

Small farmers, small-scale fishers, adivasis and others in a given region must find ways to share knowledge, exchange produce and support their nutritional web so that food sovereignty can be asserted by all. In the context of small-scale fishers' dependence on the market and a centralized, import-dependent PDS for grain, pulses and edible oil, access is provided only to poor-quality food, destroying health and eroding local food systems and cultures. Movements like the FSA, ICSF and other social movements working on the rights of small-scale fishers must help build connections across communities to achieve food sovereignty. The connections must aim at enabling grains, pulses, oilseeds, vegetables, greens, fish, meat, milk and eggs to be made

available through reciprocity and exchange in local markets. It also means that we need to build pressure on the State to operationalize the new Food Security Act, 2013, so that food distributed is locally procured from producers, in a way that sustains agroecological and culturally appropriate production by food producers—peasants, pastoralists, adivasis, dalits, fisherfolk. This way communities can work together to understand each other's resource dependencies so that ecosystems as a whole are protected. This, in turn, will allow for local food cultures to be sustained. Inland fishers, small farmers, pastoralists and adivasis need to collectively protect lakes, rivers, tanks and reservoirs so that communities can have access to good quality and quantity of water to grow food and raise fish.

Movements must also come together to oppose the undemocratic manner in which decisions are made in the name of development—decisions that erode governance rights of communities over their resources. This solidarity must oppose the justification provided for this kind of development which puts the farmer against the fisher—building large dams purportedly to address farmer's need for irrigation water which is in conflict with the ecological flow that needs to be maintained in the river for fish, and the right to life of adivasis whose homelands are threatened with submergence with the construction of these dams. Another point of convergence and joint effort between the FSA and the social movements of small-scale fishers is the clear recognition of the leadership of women and the need to place their rights at the centre of any effort to achieve food security and sovereignty.

The FSA recognizes one other significant constituency—the co-producers. This group has great relevance in the context of the fishers' movement as well. These are consumers who are deeply engaged with the producers in co-creating and co-producing food. Consumers have a strong influence on the



Fisherwomen waiting for the catch, Andhra Pradesh, India. The crucial role of women in achieving food sovereignty is explicitly recognized by the food sovereignty movement

production process and their needs are insidiously shaped by the industrial food system. Increasing supermarketisation, demand for cheap, convenient food and increased processing to increase shelf-life are all driving not only what is produced but also the nature of labour. This is one of the many reasons for increased feminisation of agriculture and fisheries which has led to more women becoming wage-labourers.

It is hoped that the various ideas articulated in this article will be the beginning of a dialogue of sharing and reciprocity that will strengthen our collective effort for a more just and equitable society. ♣

#### For more



[foodsovereigntyalliance.wordpress.com/](http://foodsovereigntyalliance.wordpress.com/)  
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[viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/food-sovereignty-and-trade-mainmenu-38/262-declaration-of-nyl](http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/food-sovereignty-and-trade-mainmenu-38/262-declaration-of-nyl)

**The Nyeleni Declaration.**  
**La ViaCampesina, 2007**