

**THE
SUITABILITY OF
FOOD
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FOR
DEVELOPMENT
IN UGANDA**

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The Suitability of Food Sovereignty for Development in Uganda

Uganda has been heralded as a future “breadbasket for Africa” (Martiniello, 2015, p.509). In 2011, the Ugandan agricultural sector employed 75% of the country’s population (Martiniello, 2015, p.509). Yet, almost half of the country’s population is considered food insecure, meaning unable or scarcely able to access an adequate intake of food and nutrition (Whitney et al., 2018, p.401). This apparent discrepancy is present in many developing countries and has contributed to the growing opposition to dominant development initiatives around the world. One of the proposed frameworks utilized by small-scale farmers, primarily in Latin America, has been that of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty, as discussed here, should be understood as a mode of production favouring the rights of farmers to their land, their resources, their labour, and the distribution of their produce. Here, the suitability of food sovereignty as a rural development model in Uganda will be examined.

In itself, food sovereignty developed along with the failures of the modern agricultural and rural development programs in the Global South. What we refer to here as a “dominant” framework or model refers to an economic and social model favoring the global integration of the agricultural sector, guided by a logic of surplus generation (Gathii, 2011, p.517). This dominant model largely ignores rural development, favoring the development of agriculture for the purposes of subsidizing urban industrialization (Pachón Ariza, 2013, p.363). This agricultural development is achieved by the use of engineered inputs until they are absorbed into the global economy, or they are unable to compete and migrate

into the urban industrial employment sector (Roudart, 2018, p.9). In Uganda, this has taken the shape of the African Green Revolution program, led by private-public partnerships. This program seeks to increase production, specifically of cash crops, to fund the nation's development plans (Martiniello, 2015, p.509; Shilomboleni, 2018, p.116). The African Green Revolution program is still in its infancy, but if the failures of past programs are any indication, an extensive alleviation of food insecurity seems unlikely.

According to James T. Gathii (2011), domestic policies have been the most significant internal threat to food security in developing countries (p.511). The Ugandan government's efforts to increase agricultural production, tax farmers, and increase exports to subsidize industrialization projects and food for the urban population expands upon earlier colonial policies (Gathii, 2011, pp.523-525). This strategy can be understood along the dominant theory, where policy decisions can come at the expense of rural farming communities that are bound to disappear with the expansion of industrial agriculture and global competitiveness. These national policies are firmly planted in the neoliberal industrial agricultural development model promoted internationally.

Since the 1980s, lower tariffs on food imports have been the policy tool of choice to allow developing countries to export their products at lower prices. However, these lower tariffs have made it easier than ever for developed countries to dump their products into lower-income countries at their artificially lower prices (Gathii, 2011, p.526; Pachón Ariza, 2013, pp.363-364). Exporters from developed nations have the advantage due to the costly production subsidies, at the expense of rural farmers in developing nations.

Lower tariffs also robbed lower-income countries of their main means of protecting their domestic economies, while subsidization, too costly for many governments, was permitted (Azoulay, 2012, p.71). An agricultural industrial revolution, such as the African Green Revolution program, is based on the experiences of developed countries who were able to protect their domestic agriculture. Sub-Saharan African countries, such as Uganda, have rarely been able to implement similar protective mechanisms effectively, rendering the model unsuitable.

The African Green Revolution's reliance on the use of artificial inputs provided by agribusiness partners, most of whom are from developed countries, may further contribute to imbalanced terms of trade in Uganda. The use of the artificial inputs can make local farmers dependent upon expensive technologies provided by these private firms (Shilomboleni, 2018, p.116). This only increases agribusinesses control over Uganda's food production, moving control over food resources further away from the local communities. For some, the program has even been considered an indoctrination into a capitalist system where local farmers will be exploited for cheap labour for the benefit of developed countries' consumption (Shilomboleni, 2018, p.123). These artificial inputs, along with the expansion of land-use for industrial agriculture, further decreases available land for smallholder farmers (Gathii, 2011, p.524). This has restricted their capacity to practice traditional land management, leading to low soil fertility and crop yields, disproportionately impacting those who cannot purchase chemical fertilizers (Shilomboleni, 2018, p.120). Over 46% of Uganda's soil is considered degraded, leading to losses of up to 12% of Gross National Product (Jumba et al., 2020, p.450). The wide-ranging

consequences of the loss of available land to these rural farmers is even more essential to consider given the current climate and biodiversity crises.

Proponents of food sovereignty as an alternative to this dominant framework suggest that food security can be achieved when farmers have more control over local available resources. Food sovereignty considers land a right of the people; increasing the access to these resources would allow farmers to use traditional practices that have served historically to ensure food security. Traditional agricultural practices are known for high ecological efficiencies and environmental conservation (Gathii, 2011, p.513). For example, these practices embody traditional knowledge that has allowed for selective breeding for nutritional value (Whitney et al., 2018, p.400). In the Ugandan context, traditional social structures based on reciprocity are highly efficient and ensure food security and economic stability for rural households. This is particularly evident in the northern regions of the country that were spared from most agricultural industrialization projects. For those regions, the lack of external aid reinforced the local economy, and they are considered some of the most productive farmlands in the country (Martiniello, 2015, p.519). These merits of localized production have only strengthened arguments for food sovereignty as the world supply chains were proven vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian conflict.

Still, the particular context of a country does matter in the application of food sovereignty principles. Food sovereignty as an international movement originated in Latin America, where it has since gained significant political support, and has even been enshrined in some states' constitutions (Pachón Ariza, 2013, p.363).

However, in Uganda, the government's programs do not display the same support for these principles. Therein lies one of the criticisms of the food sovereignty platform - as a one-size-fits-all model, it can fall into the same traps as the dominant model which it seeks to oppose (Martiniello, 2015, p.509, p.521). Transnational agrarian movements (TAMs) have had difficulty effectively advocating throughout the African continent, often being unable to build a cohesive list of demands that tie into the lived experiences of rural communities from diverse areas (Martiniello, 2015, p.509, p.521). The Ugandan government has even been accused of persecuting and censoring TAM organizations and individuals, further fragmenting and alienating their networks (Martiniello, 2015, p.517). Food sovereignty is based on local emancipation and control of resources, but the international movement itself can be limited in its applicability to various contexts as a model.

The food sovereignty framework as a sustainable development model rests on assumptions that do not hold up in the Ugandan context. For example, the model assumes that Ugandan farmers prefer subsistence crops to cash crops. This is not always the case. Many farmers prefer to depend on cash crops for faster, more reliable (regular) profits which suit certain financial needs (Isgren, 2016, p.435; Martiniello, 2015, p.509; Whitney et al., 2018, p.413). This is particularly relevant in the short-term for regular payments such as school fees, even if traditional methods are more beneficial for ensuring long-term productivity. It is also unlikely that food sovereignty can reduce high unemployment as many smallholder farmers associate the need for more labour with higher costs, which renders dominant frameworks more attractive as they are generally less labour-intensive practices (Isgren, 2016, p.442). The food sovereignty model again runs into the pitfalls of a one-size-fits-all model solution.

Rural communities in Uganda have not resigned themselves to the constraints of a government development model either. In the Amuru district, women led resistance movements against the sale of lands to the Madhvani Group for the establishment of a sugarcane plantation (Martiniello, 2015, p.520). Rural farmers have led the charge in local development by increasing their activities in local economies outside of agriculture in the hopes of maintaining, sharing, and upholding traditional knowledge in agriculture (Roudart, 2018, p.14). Rural farmers actively engage in food sovereignty as a way of ensuring food security when facing increased socio-economic or environmental constraints (Shilomboleni, 2018, p.130). Food sovereignty gives the opportunity to put words into action and aims to provide farmers with freedom of choice and the opportunity to further traditional knowledge. The pillars of food sovereignty as guiding principles of rural development may further the ability of farmers to appropriately adjust their own means of production to ensure their own food security. When these pillars are integrated into development models, rather than transformed into a model of their own, they have a further reach that can bolster the voices and considerations of rural agricultural communities in Uganda and beyond.

In conclusion, a food sovereignty “model” may not be a viable alternative agricultural and rural development model in Uganda. There is no doubt that a significant change in current development approaches must be undertaken in Uganda to uphold rural communities’ freedom to define their own development and ensure their food security. The dominant development model undermines this ability to choose and with it, the financial, environmental, and societal stability of rural communities.

Food sovereignty pillars such as the control of resources, when integrated into dominant discourses, could stand to significantly alleviate the pressures these communities face due to the dominant framework. It is likely that until a suitable, flexible, and sustainable model for rural development is found, furthering the objectives of food sovereignty within dominant frameworks may promote the voices of rural agricultural workers in Uganda and elsewhere.

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