

Understanding Food Autonomy and Self-Help

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ABSTRACT

Food autonomy involves the ability to make decisions, the ability to choose and the ability to use resources. It is related to a recognition of peasant participation in food production, their access to resources and the creation of relations with markets. Food autonomy requires consideration of the various connectivity and self-help actions organised by the peasants' communities. An initiative of SHG mung-bean food-based ME in Mangali village of Hisar is presented in this chapter to understand how the group functions. SHGs can become an agent of change as i) it consolidates local mung-bean food production, local resources and motivations of the peasants; ii) it develops another perspective of development based upon a more localized choice for processing, distributing, marketing and accessing local food; and iii) it empowers local people (especially peasants and the poor rural community) and strengthens the connectivity between local mung-bean production and consumption. The need remains for technological efforts to address the specific location of peasant resources while in the SHG there is a need to restore or redefine collective responsibility.

Keywords: self-help groups, food autonomy, peasants, mung-bean

I. INTRODUCTION

Across the world, peasants, indigenous peoples, ecologists, producers and consumers are seeking to realize autonomous food systems, based on equity, social justice and ecological sustainability (Desmarais 2002, Windfuhr 2005, Desmarais 2007, Pimbert 2006, Borras 2008, McAfee 2008, McMichael 2008, Roling 2008, Rosset, 2008, Borras & Franco 2009, Rosset 2011). There are many different local food systems throughout the world today, particularly in developing countries; and most of the world's food is grown, collected and harvested by the 2.5 billion-plus peasants, the world's small-scale farmers, pastoralists, forest-dwellers and artisan fisher-folk. These peasants organize themselves in local food networks through which they aim to reach autonomy in a range of areas, such as in production, processing and marketing (Scott 1985; Mitlin and Bebbington 2006; Gledhill 2007, Ploeg 2008).

Van der Ploeg referred to three main aspects of these peasants' struggles. First, peasants are struggling for autonomy in the context of dependency, exploitation and marginalization created by 'empires' (Hardt & Negri 2000). Second, the peasants play a critical role in the development and promotion of sustainable production and consumption, especially in the current agrarian crisis; they establish strong interrelations with the environment and through the care that they invest in their lands, seeds and food become an integral part of sustainable food networks. Third, the 'empires' tend to marginalize and destroy the peasantry, so there is a continuous coexistence of peasant and empire arrangements through which peasants struggle to establish those arrangements in food production, processing and marketing that create autonomy for them through local food networks. In this context, autonomy refers to a struggle in the following six domains.

II. DOMAINS OF AUTONOMY

A. Ability To Make Decisions

Autonomy entails an ability to make decisions about food production that are not only guided by the market but also related to the sense of well-being, dignity and identity of local people. These decisions to redirect food production to other objectives come from the initiatives of local people to reorganize food production, processing and consumption and thus territorialize food networks.

B. Ability To Choose

Autonomy involves the ability to make choices, here, about food production (Lang 1998). This requires local peoples' participation in decision-making processes through which preferences are made at the level of food production, processing and consumption that involve people being able to control the appropriateness of their food production (i.e. invoking a sense of social, economic and cultural suitability).

C. Ability To Use Resources

Autonomy entails the ability to use resources, especially land, water and seed, from a people's development perspective. Peasants working on the land must be able to practice sustainable management of natural resources and conserve biodiversity. This implies that peasants exercise autonomy when they rely on their judgement about how to act, motivated by authentic, self-determined goals. It also implies that peasants must have the ability to use local production for their own economic, nutritional and cultural needs.

D. Recognition

Autonomy is related to a recognition of peasant participation in agriculture and specifically food production. It requires an understanding of the ability of peasants to deliberate, decide and then act purposively in food production and other processes related to processing, storage and distribution and as custodians of seeds. It implies they must have control over the definition of their food production according to their own social, economic and cultural logic.

E. Access To Resources

Autonomy should not be confused with independence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Peasants striving for autonomy can still rely on others for guidance and support or access to resources. Autonomy is in no way coherent with a view of peasants as unattached and isolated. Autonomy does not imply that farmers are expected to work alone. They still can depend on others, but this is done by their choice. Indeed, they can be involved in groups; they may adopt values or behaviours that lend priority to that group and, in doing so, they can still be acting autonomously. Autonomy requires 'strategic actions' in conjunction with the internal sense of being autonomous and belonging.

F. Relations With Markets

Autonomy is also characterized by specific relations established with the markets. These relations are part of a wider set of relations that connect the peasantry with the surrounding world and that allow them a level of flexibility. They are established through the collective actions of peasants through which peasants in groups can enjoy stronger negotiating powers with traders. They can also link to other stakeholders in food networks, both backwards and forward, as well as to processors, scientists, research institutes, government institutes, banks and others. They can move from being passive recipients of information, services and regulations to a situation in which they can utilize public and/or private institutions as resource providers and thus take full responsibility for their development.

Autonomous relations with markets should be related to the development of territoriality created by multiple forms of peasants' initiatives connecting food production and consumption in local food networks. It should also relate to the development of organizational novelties, which may create new connections to natural and social (including network) resources. This implies that the struggle of peasants is the *fight for new connections and or reconnections* in local food networks, which may be termed 'frontier areas for the struggle of peasants'. This is not only a struggle to *resist the disconnections* in agriculture from local parameters and the specific patterns in market intermediates leading to a decrease of local control and reinforcement of the marginalization of peasants and their agendas; it also concerns a *struggle for new connections and reconnections* through, as Roep and Wiskerke (2004) emphasize, the construction of organizational novelties that develop novel links to natural and local resources.

Through the construction of *organizational novelties*, peasants can strive for freedom from harsh conditions and for freedom to act in such a way that food production is aligned with their specific interests. This implies that assets should not be perceived as just materials to be used for socio-economic reproduction but also as *catalysts* that may offer opportunities for autonomy. Rural communities that are well organized, such as many SHGs, employing collective action in pursuit of shared interests may have better opportunities to create these organizational novelties and *catalytic materials*. This requires, however, a recognition and understanding of Self-help.

Various authors (Altieri 1990, Ploeg 1992, Pretty 1995, Long 2001, Ploeg 2003, Ruivenkamp 2005, Kareiva et al. 2007, Long 2007, Altieri 2009, Wittman 2009) have emphasized the disruptive effects of the patterns of disconnections embedded in the industrialization of agriculture and food production. Wittman, for example, demonstrates the de-linking of agriculture (society) from nature as a result of agribusiness and corporate food production systems and the destructive effect of these on the socio-cultural and ecological values of peasant farming systems. However, with the re-emergence of peasant farming systems, she also refers to the potentiality of *reconnecting society and nature*.

Analysing biotechnological developments in global food chains, Ruivenkamp (1989, 2005) argues that current biotechnological developments are shaped by and in turn reinforce three historical processes of disconnection or separation of industrialized agriculture in global food chains: 1) the separation of agriculture from its ecological environment, 2) the separation of agriculture from food, and 3) the separation of agricultural products from their intrinsic nutritional quality. Also – and importantly in the context of this thesis – he refers to the possibilities of making choices and using strategic actions for a *re-coupling* of agriculture to its natural environment, restoring the relationship between food production and consumption by developing ‘*tailor-made biotechnologists* as catalysts for endogenous developments’ (Ruivenkamp, 2005).

Brunori, Galli and Rossi (2004) explore collective action at the local level through the example of wine routes in Tuscany. *Collective action* produces a local frame of a constructed environment, institutions and routines that give people access to resources that could not be accessed through acting individually. Two of the most relevant outcomes of collective action in this wine route were synergy and coherence. *Synergies* can be defined as linkages between two or more entities, whose joint efforts produce effects that are quantitatively and qualitatively greater than those produced by the efforts of the same entities acting individually. *Coherence* is a quality belonging to the elements that constitute the context of action.

Another concept important to understanding autonomous relations with markets was developed by Bakshi (1995), who developed a *three-tier SHG concept* to characterize the organizational structure of three strongly related units: the informal, *grassroots-level women’s groups* at Alappuzha (a small coastal town in the southern state of Kerala), the informal *neighbourhood groups* (NHGs) in the small hamlets (later federated into Area Development Societies [ADS]) at the ward level and the *Community Development Society* (CDS) at town level, all together working to empower the poor. The CDS focuses on a variety of health, education, housing, poverty and other issues as determined by a bottom-up, needs-based planning process based on the three-tier SHG system.

III. SELF-HELP

Central to the idea of self-help is the formation of groups, the concept of a ‘community’ and the development of egalitarian relationships promoting people’s well-being. Self-help groups (SHGs) are defined as *groups or associations of individuals with common needs who undertake a systematic activity, participating directly in decision-making and sharing benefits* (Narayanasamy et al. 2003). As voluntary structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of a specific purpose based on informal participation, SHGs are oriented towards mutual learning among members. The groups develop their own rules, regulations, meeting procedures and processes and it is expected that the leaders of these groups will function in a participatory and democratic manner. It is implicit in the idea of SHGs that people take action based on shared interests and interpretations of their social environment as the context within which they aim to realize goals. As a movement, self-help aims to practice alternative development strategies by mobilising people and giving themselves a voice to build up people’s organizations that will overcome barriers to participation and autonomy. Self-help is based on a humanist model of development – focused on men and women, and not just on the growth of materials (Friedmann 1992, Elders 2003). From this perspective, people are not perceived as passive receptacles of society’s directives but are active creators of social behaviour.

SHGs are based on bottom-up and participatory approaches grounded in the environments where people live, learn and work. SHGs represent participatory forms of social action aiming to realize autonomy through local people’s involvement in identifying and tackling issues that affect their members and communities. SHGs are thus the expressions of rural people’s needs and interests in their participation and empowerment; they emphasize that people are not objects of development, but on the contrary, are co-agents and subjects of development. This implies that people should have access to and control over resources.

SHGs provide an opportunity and a space to participate, a base for action and a point of connection and identification with others through which members may attain an enhanced sense of autonomy. They often provide decision-making opportunities, with negotiation, planning and management through which people define their

goals and act upon them. People are not unattached, isolated entities reliant on their inner capacities and self-conceptions alone; they also rely on others for guidance and support or access to resources. Groups fill people's needs to identify with others, participate in an action that provides priority to those others as a group, and, in so doing, experience relative freedom. As such, the self-help phenomenon can be an important means for autonomous development, offering an approach that puts people first based on collective action (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2004).

SHGs are also generally found to be very effective in organizing informal education and training (for example, entrepreneurial and technical training) programmes for the exchange and sharing of knowledge and skills of the rural folk, set up in collaboration with government programmes and micro-finance institutions; the SHG approach is characterized by the development of participatory organizations that contribute to the development of MEs, enhance their effectiveness in rural areas and foster autonomous development (Singh et al. 2011).

IV. AN INITIATIVE FOR STRENGTHENING THE FOOD NETWORK AND LOCAL AUTONOMY

The Mangali village, Hissar District Haryana SHG aims to give peasants room for manoeuvre to strengthen the mung bean food network in its local social cultural and ecological context (Singh, 2015). Generally, there are various ways of strengthening a food network, although the exact lines along which this can be done may vary significantly (de Bruin and van der Ploeg 1990). Realizing this potential in the present case necessarily involves strengthening the local mung-bean food production, processing and distribution. The SHG represents an attempt to achieve this by reinforcing the peasants' abilities and capacities to produce mung-bean foods that are processed and packaged to the particularities of local settings.

Unlike the private-capital approach of the agro-industrial market, which creates distance between producers and consumers and discourages food autonomy among peasants and rural communities, the community-based SHG approach enhances local participation in food production and management. This peasants' SHG does not demonstrate the central command regulations of agricultural production; rather, it envisages a strengthening of the local food network to connect local production to consumption.

The initiatives of the SHG for the development of the mung-bean food network are based on three main conditions: i) *peasants' motivation* for the development of the SHG ME to create capacity in mung-bean food processing at the community level and enhance participation in mung-bean food management and marketing for connecting producers to consumers; ii) *availability of resources*, including the local mung-bean food production, seeds, labour, food processing and packaging machines, community-based information network and the capacities (experiences and skills) of the community; and iii) its *activities*, particularly in respect of seed supply, mung-bean procurement, local mung-bean food processing, packaging and labelling, which are strategic, collective and innovative, as is necessary for this type of development.

This implies that the SHG integrates peasants' motivation, resources and action to create forms of relations inside and outside the community through which they become able to create recognition of their food production/efforts, enhance their capabilities in local food production and local processing, create resources, develop their skills and enhance participation in the market. Four main features of the SHG might be usefully summarized and emphasized here in describing how this self-help system of food-based ME has become an agent of change in connecting local food production and consumption.

Firstly, the peasants' group *initiated the ME and developed an identity*. In coming together and naming the group, peasants enhanced social-cultural locality-based connectivity and created their group identity inside the community. This expressed and effected a transformation of their role, from producer-consumers to producers-processors and/or consumers. The labelling of their mung bean food products with the SHG name then facilitated a wider recognition of the group initiative in local food production, local processing and distribution.

Secondly, the SHG has *enhanced and created resources and developed an information network*. The peasants connected to researchers, the research university and machine manufacturers, thereby developing a horizontally connected community-based information network and enhancing community resources (seeds, processing machines and packaging facilities). Both of these have strengthened the local mung-bean food network.

Thirdly, the SHG has enabled *peasant participation, resource sharing and skills development*. Seed supply activities were observed to engage peasants in the local seed production system for short-duration mung bean that strengthens the local cropping system. The procurement and later transport of seed was engaged cooperatively. Mung-bean food processing, meanwhile, was taken on by some of the members and packaging by others. In this way, the SHG created a space for members to share resources (labour, time, crops, seeds, etc.), skills and

information about mung bean food production for development trajectories at the community level in primary and secondary processing.

Fourthly, the SHG has *connected peasants to consumers*. By approaching the local community people (consumers) and social institutions (schools, *Aanganwadi* centres and village grocery shops) peasants created connections inside the community, While connecting with nearby village markets, including through small retailers and market stalls, they also created their relations outside the community. At the same time, they connected with the consumer mung-bean preferences (cleanliness, medium-size, easy-to-cook and storability) to integrate into their processing activities. The processing of locally grown mung bean, the introduction of oil for bean conditioning and the use of traditional recipes are some of their strategic actions that have developed local producer-consumer and market relations. This has contributed to the development of food autonomy through direct marketing as material and social elements fundamental to improving decision-making capacities for products, prices, place and promotion for the mung-bean network in particular and rural life in general.

Regarding the challenges faced, the sustainability of food-based SHG ME indicates the need for technological efforts to address the specific location of peasant resources. In this initiative, grain quantity (mung bean food production), as well as grain quality (size), have been successfully identified and addressed, whereas the availability (cost) of electricity was and has not. This suggests that it may be worthwhile to collectively involve actors in tailored technology development. Strong connections among these agents are also shown to be important.

For the future of the SHG in food autonomy, it seems equally important to restore or redefine collective responsibility. Stricter measures may help restore collective cohesion, for instance by only allowing peasants who actively invest labour, time and/or money in the SHG to participate. This implies that the SHG members might reject passive participants/peasants, who only participate for personal gain. Rotational leadership and group sensitization meetings may also help to revitalize collective responsibility. During the operational stage of the SHG, much of the collective effort has been dedicated to building and maintaining relationships (both within the community and in the outside world); a collective action, however, should also include a focus on the maintenance of internal relationships, among the group members. It is important to define clear goals, for example, and continually adjust and/or reaffirm them. This means that the group has to consider regularly what they want to perform, how, why and with whom.

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