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Can there be food sovereignty here?

Tania M. Li

Abstract

A central figure in the food sovereignty movement is the ‘middle peasant’, a cautious figure who balances food with cash-crop production, guided by a strong aversion to ecological and market risk. Drawing on long-term field research in highland Sulawesi, Indonesia, this article explains why farmers switched from food to mono-crop cacao production, and a stable middle peasantry did not emerge. It outlines their reasons for the switch, their struggles to make ends meet on small plots of poor-quality land, and the rapid polarization that soon arose. Ironically, their farm-dependence increased their vulnerability. Unlike farmers in many parts of the world who appear to be autonomous but are actually supported by state transfers, remittances or wage work, these farmers were on their own. Competitive capitalist relations quickly emerged and took on an especially virulent, almost textbook form. These relations were compulsory. Farmers with inadequate plots of land, and newly landless highlanders, could not opt out, challenging notions of food sovereignty framed in terms of liberal notions of choice. Even when small-scale farmers are untouched by land grabbing or corporate schemes, as in this case, expanding their capacity to exercise control over their food, their farms and their futures is still a huge challenge.

Keywords

middle peasants, capitalist relations, compulsion, polarization, Indonesia, cacao, social movement

In the definition provided by the organizers of the food sovereignty colloquium held at Yale in 2013, food sovereignty is ‘the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory’(<http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/foodsovereignty/index.html>). Other definitions have different emphases, but assert the same vision of sovereignty as the right of ‘peoples’ to define or control their food system. This is surely a right worth fighting for, even though the challenges of realizing it are immense.

One challenge to the notion of food sovereignty, highlighted by Bina Agarwal (2014), is that the elements assembled under the definition quoted above don't necessarily cohere: sustainability, proximity, sufficiency and democracy may pull in different directions. The disjuncture is partly a matter of scale. Much of the mobilization around food sovereignty is directed against the global corporate food regime, and presents a maximally-inclusive, hence generic, picture of the kind of non-global, non-corporate (i.e. national, local, small farm-based) food regime that needs to be defended. It also relies on exemplary sites of locally based, sustainable farm systems to inspire activists, and to confirm that there

are viable alternatives. Both these forms of argument (the generic and the exemplary) can open up a gap between the movement's platform and its potential constituents.

To the extent that food sovereignty aspires to be a mass-based popular movement that addresses farmer concerns, it has to articulate a vision with which farmers can identify. It also has to offer a pathway from the on-the-ground predicaments of particular groups of farmers towards the brighter future captured in the movement's promise. My contribution to the journal's critical dialogue on food sovereignty explores the challenges from the perspective of a particular site where the movement's core goal – democratic control over the food system – fails to resonate.

The site I will describe is the Lauje highlands of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, where for centuries indigenous highlanders grew most of their own food, managed their land under a collective tenure system and engaged in practices of reciprocal labor and food exchange (for a fuller exploration, see Li 2014). Beginning in 1990, highlanders abandoned food production and switched to producing mono-cropped cacao. They made the switch on their own initiative, without the impetus of land grabbing by state or corporate actors, or pressure from state development or agri-business schemes. The experience of these farmers challenges us to think deeply about what food sovereignty means in such a milieu, and what it offers as a way forward.

Challenges of food sovereignty before the switch

Before they switched to cacao, Lauje highlanders grew corn, rice and tubers under a forest-fallow system (also known as swidden or shifting cultivation). They produced for their own consumption, and sold and bartered for food with neighbors, with people in the next valley, and with people who hiked up from the coast. Yet their food production left them chronically insecure. Their crops were attacked by pests (monkeys, birds and wild pigs), and excessive wind or rain could ruin standing corn. They managed these risks as best they could, by planting multiple varieties in different garden plots on different slopes with different soil conditions and sun and wind exposure. But every 4–7 years, they were hit by catastrophic droughts linked to the El Niño weather cycle, which is especially severe in this region.

During droughts of extreme duration or temperature, all their food crops shriveled up and died, and they could not buy food or barter with other highlanders because everyone was in the same situation. These were terrifying times for them. Their access to food collapsed and it wasn't a one-off: people shared memories of different droughts, and how they had managed to survive them. They drew on traditional famine foods – wild root crops and sago – but these sources could run out. Epidemics followed due to polluted water and weakened resistance. Scores of people could die in a single hamlet in the space of a week. Colonial records show linked cycles of drought, famine, epidemics and warfare going back two centuries, so this was not a new problem.

Highlanders' experience of recurrent food shortages and periodic famine stimulated them to seek access to cash so they could buy food and meet other needs. They grew tobacco for export in the 1820s,

and later added shallots to their repertoire; they collected forest products for sale; and they occasionally did paid work for each other or for people on the coast. Minimally, they wanted money to buy clothing (a decent shirt and pair of shorts, a blouse and skirt or sarong so they could blend in on market days) as well as knife blades, salt, cooking pots and kerosene to light the tiny wick lamps they made from old tin cans. Increasingly, they wanted to send their children to school, so they would learn to speak Indonesian. They saw themselves as part of the broader society – a rather isolated and impoverished part. They were reminded of their poverty every time they went down the coast to trade, as they were ridiculed for their ragged clothing and their primitive, backward ways. Their desire to access trade goods emerged within this culturally meaningful, hierarchically ordered, social milieu.

Sadly but not exceptionally, highlanders' involvement in market relations did not enable them to escape their poverty, as they were routinely cheated by Lauje and other merchants based on the coast. Tobacco merchants extracted most of the surplus from highland producers who were trapped in relations of debt that persisted from one generation to the next. A good merchant would 'help' them in difficult times, when they needed funds for weddings, or to make up for failed food production. But the tobacco merchants did not provide highlanders with a 'subsistence guarantee' (see Scott 1976). Merchants dropped non-performing farmers, and failed to shelter them from the devastating effects of drought.

The situation of Lauje highlanders is far from unique. In other parts of the globe as well, indigenous people are subject to extractive relations. They don't live in isolation from economic and cultural flows, and they judge themselves, and are judged by others, in relational terms. For these highlanders, the desire to be less poor, live decently and send children to school was a powerful motivation for change. It led them to the decision to start planting cacao, following the example of tens of thousands of other small-scale farmers, migrant and indigenous alike, whose initiative made Sulawesi one of the top global producers of cacao in the 1990s.

After the switch: why didn't a stable 'middle' peasantry emerge?

Much thinking about food sovereignty and 'the peasant path' is centered on the 'middle peasant', a cautious figure who might well desire wealth, but is guided by a strong aversion to ecological and market risk (Netting 1993). Such a figure would never do what Lauje highlanders did: put most of their land under a single, perennial cash crop. I have already explained their initial motivation. Cacao promised to provide them with a steady source of cash, reducing their vulnerability to drought and offering the prospect of modest advance (a tin roof, a sturdier house, better clothing, education). Initially, they intended to sustain food production as well, but they soon ran out of land. The highland soil is too poor for intensive food production. As highlanders knew all too well, if they did not leave their fields to fallow and burn them periodically, they ended up with nothing but stubborn weeds.

Shortage of land made it difficult for highlanders to follow the pattern established by farmers in other parts of Indonesia, who could add perennial crops to their farming system without squeezing out food (cf. Dove 1993). Lauje highlanders couldn't do both. As land became scarce, they had to use it as productively as possible, which meant planting more of the higher-value crop. They were acutely aware that they had become vulnerable to fluctuations in market prices, more specifically to the relation between the price of cacao and the price of rice, which they now had to buy. But their old system also had faults: it had left them chronically impoverished, and insecure.

The highlanders' experience suggests that we cannot count on the 'middle peasant' condition (or the ecologically balanced, indigenous farmers' condition) to emerge naturally (Roseberry 1989). Rather, we need to ask under what conditions can a stable food and cash crop regime be put in place? The conditions are of course varied, and I have already mentioned two: the availability of land, and the ratio between the price of what can be sold and what must be bought. A few other conditions stand out:

1. The character of the crop. Cacao is farmer-friendly at first, as entry costs are low: it just takes some seedlings and a patch of ground. But it is disease prone and production goes down to zero by year seven if expensive chemicals are not applied. Inefficient farmers who didn't make enough money to invest ended up with heavy debts, and eventually lost their land.
2. Access to markets. Peri-urban farmers and farmers on good roads with access to an extended local market can sustain mixed farming systems more readily than farmers in remote areas. The local markets where Lauje highlanders could sell fruit and vegetables were quickly saturated, and the surplus would perish long before it reached the nearest town. To earn much-needed cash, their best prospect was to grow crops that could be stored and transported, preferably crops destined for national or global markets big enough to absorb their produce without crashing the price.
3. Availability of subsidies. Despite their image as self-sufficient, small-scale farmers in many parts of the world receive significant subsidies in the form of state transfers and remittances, and off-farm wages play a key role. They rely on these external sources to provide a protective cushion against adversities, to generate funds to invest in their farms and to keep marginally productive farms going so they can retain a foothold on the land (Bernstein 2010, 104–8). Transfers were not available to Lauje highlanders, and wage work in the regional economy was scarce and poorly paid. Hence, they were on their own, directly dependent on their farms for survival, and obliged to make the best use they could of their meager resources. Far from enhancing their control over their lives and farms, farm-dependence made them more vulnerable.
4. Social institutions. Many studies of 'middle peasants' and indigenous people emphasize the role of community solidarity, and a 'moral economy' of mutual care in protecting vulnerable households from adversities like illness or crop failure. Lauje highlanders did indeed have institutions of caring and sharing, but these were not sufficient to protect them from the famines of the past, nor did they prevent them from enclosing their common land. They all participated in dismantling their commons, as each of them claimed the land on which they planted cacao as their own individual property. They did not object to the emergence of an informal land market, nor to the prosperity of neighbors who worked hard to improve their situation. Their 'customary' institutions had no rules

against land concentration, because, thus far, land had been abundant. They didn't anticipate that some highlanders would eventually have no land to farm. They may yet devise protective social institutions and an explicit 'ethic of access' (Peluso 1996) suited to their new conditions, but such institutions cannot be assumed to exist naturally, in advance (Li 2010).

Capitalist relations and the erosion of choice

A prominent feature of the transformation that occurred in the Lauje highlands was the speed with which choice was eroded, as farmers were locked into new relations of production from which they could not withdraw. These relations were capitalist in form, as they were embedded in differential ownership of land and capital, which started to circulate 'freely' and accumulate in the hands of farmers who used them efficiently to earn profits and expand. Farmers who could not sustain both family and farm took on debt, and entered a downward spiral that resulted in the sale of their land to their more successful neighbors and kin. It was a process of accumulation and dispossession on an intimate scale that was often awkward and painful for the people involved. Nevertheless, it proceeded swiftly and relentlessly. Why was this so?

The emergence of capitalist relations poses the most significant challenge to notions of food sovereignty that emphasize farmer control, so it is important to unpack what makes capitalist relations so distinct, and so relentless. As I noted earlier, Lauje highlanders had more than a century of experience in producing for markets. The new element was the structure of their market engagement, which shifted from being a matter of choice to a matter of compulsion (Brenner 1985; Wood 2002). Lauje highlanders farming on their common land in decades past could take advantage of market opportunities when they seemed attractive, but they were not obliged to sell crops or labor if the conditions were not right. They could, for example, stop producing tobacco if they felt the extractions of the merchants made the returns too low, and retreat into food production.

After land became private property, landless highlanders did not have a choice: they were compelled to work for wages or starve. Land-short farmers who could not grow enough food to feed themselves were in almost the same position. Ironically, their best 'choice' – a deeply constrained one – was to plant more cacao, and hope that the revenue would be enough to buy food. Attempting to survive on food from their inadequate land was guaranteed to lead to debt and land loss. Only farmers with plenty of land could afford to sustain some food production, striking a balance that gave them some direct control over their food supply.

Polarization isn't inevitable. Farmers in many parts of the world own land as private individual property, but they hold onto it tightly, in the cautious, 'middle peasant' style. The rapid polarization that occurred in the Lauje highlands was the result of the difficulty highlanders experienced in establishing and defending a stable 'middle peasant' position. Once capitalist relations took hold, they really were compulsory. Highlanders who made 'wrong' choices (being too generous in helping their struggling kin, or using scarce land and capital 'inefficiently') ended up impoverished. Careful study of conjunctures when such polarization occurs, as well as conjunctures when it does not occur, throws the

challenge of achieving a stable and prosperous farm-based 'middle peasant' livelihood into sharp relief. It also highlights the limits of a concept of sovereignty understood in terms of liberal notions of choice. Choices are always constrained, and they are especially constrained for the poorest people, who have the least capacity to choose the food and farm regime they want.

Conclusion

The conjuncture I've described here is specific: it was formed by ecological, cultural, social, economic and political relations that were laid down historically, and made up the character of the people and the place. It is not my intention to generalize from it, but rather to use its specificity as a tool to highlight the challenges of achieving food sovereignty. If we return to the definition quoted above, food sovereignty is 'the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory'.

Before 1990, Lauje highlanders produced their own food, but they saw their situation as far from ideal. Their food crops often failed, and in severe droughts there was famine. Exploitation by local merchants made it impossible for them to protect themselves through savings or to improve their situation. Hence, they exercised their sovereignty to make a choice: they switched to cacao, a crop that was booming across Sulawesi at the time. As a result of the switch, some of them achieved their goals for better housing, clothing and education for their children. Others became deeply impoverished, and lost their land. Remarkably, even land-short highlanders expressed little nostalgia for the old days in which they grew their own food. They still described swidden production as backbreaking work, for uncertain returns. In their eyes, the culturally appropriate choice for rich and poor alike was not to stay as they were, but to strive to achieve more security and, if possible, some degree of material and social advance.

Planting cacao began as a choice, but soon became compulsory, as highlanders transformed their land into private property, and were obliged to produce efficiently simply to hold onto their land. Under the prevailing conditions (the shortage of land and its poor quality, the distance to markets, the character of cacao) it was very difficult for them to establish stable 'middle peasant' farms. A sharp and rapid polarization divided highlanders into haves and have-nots, two distinct classes set on quite different trajectories, even though they were still connected by kinship, and the richer ones helped their struggling neighbors on occasion.

For the food sovereignty movement to resonate in the highlands, it would need to address the constraints I have identified, and help alter them. Land-short highlanders desperately trying to hold onto their land and sustain their residual autonomy would be delighted if an extension agent offered them a food crop productive enough to feed their families from their tiny, steep, infertile, worked-out plots. They could also use a high-value, hardy, quick-yielding cash crop, sturdy and compact enough to be transported on shoulder poles or motorbikes. So far, the best candidate they have found is cacao, but it has drawbacks: it is prone to disease and heavily dependent on chemical inputs. For newly landless highlanders, new crops wouldn't help as they have no place to plant them, although crops that require

lots of labor and offer them more opportunities for waged work would be helpful. Even when small-scale farmers are untouched by land grabbing or corporate schemes, as in this case, expanding their capacity to exercise control over their food, their farms and their futures is still a huge challenge.

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