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Food Sovereignty Discourse in Southeast Asia: Helpful or Disruptive?

By Jonatan A. Lassa and Maxim Shrestha

Synopsis

The Indonesian government's recent endorsement of food sovereignty as its formal policy framework signals a turn in food policy discourse in Southeast Asia. Is this helpful or a disruptive development?

Commentary

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, as opposed to food security, has recently been adopted as a formal policy framework by the new Indonesian President, Joko Widodo (Jokowi). In his Facebook page, Jokowi recently posted: "Food security is different from food sovereignty. Food security is simply the availability of foodstuffs (logistically) in warehouses and in the markets regardless of the origin whether from import or from locally produced. Food sovereignty means we produce and market our foodstuffs ourselves, while the surplus of agricultural crops is exported."

Extrapolating on the external dimension, Jokowi said: "If we are sovereign in our food production, any disturbances abroad will not have a significant impact on our food reserve and we can still have adequate supply to feed our people." Stressing the government's firm commitment to food sovereignty, he added: "Our food sovereignty vision at the highest level is for our food production to overflow the local and international markets or at the very least, we have to be the largest food producer in ASEAN."

Food sovereignty ideas

The concept of food sovereignty was first introduced on the sideline of the 1996 Food Summit by an international farmers' movement, the La Via Campesina, as an alternative to the mainstream definition of food security which was officially adopted by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). In the last two decades, there has been a general acceptance among policymakers around the globe that "food security exists when all people, *at all times*, have *physical and economic access* to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life". However, this definition was not seen as adequate by some groups; it was seen as not giving enough attention to the questions of where, how, by and for whom food was produced.

The food sovereignty concept has been gaining popularity as a number of governments have officially adopted its framework and principles on a national level.

Via Campesina's Forum for Food Sovereignty held in 2007 defined the guiding principles as follows: Local people have rights to define their own food, agriculture systems and biodiversity. Farmers should have access to land, water, seeds and livestock breeds and credit with a focus on marginal farmers include land reforms. Decision-making on production, distribution and consumption should be placed in the hands of the locals and not in the hands of markets and corporations. Priority must be given to local and national economies and markets and should empower peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture and artisanal fishers. Transparency in food trade must be guaranteed such that there is just income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition are protected. It implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generation (inter-generational equity).

Food sovereignty and political attractiveness

The operationalisation of the food sovereignty concept, however, is not without difficulties. One of the debates is on where to locate the sovereignty (whether at citizens or states level), for which the concept requires a clearer definition. Indonesian Food Bill 8/2012 recognises the rights of the state and the nation to determine food policy which ensures people's right to food and provides rights for the people to determine food systems that is appropriate with local resources. President Jokowi's adoption of *food sovereignty* has been much clearer at the level of production and the governance of food sovereignty but is still less clear on how to sustain food access and nutrition security and food stability.

Food sovereignty can be politically attractive to strong nationalistic regimes (as seen e.g. in Bolivia and other countries) that can capitalise on the concept to win the hearts and the minds of the voters especially in the large agrarian economies. In the rice production regions of Southeast Asia, the movement arises from organised action among rice farmers where some simply meant rice sovereignty rather than food sovereignty. However, over time, there has been an expansion of the food sovereignty concept to include diverse types of food commodities and food systems.

In today's neoliberal economic context, some have argued that food sovereignty can be used as a counter narrative to confront global land grabbing problems as well as unsustainable practices in local and international food systems.

Can food sovereignty save the world?

The question is can food sovereignty save the world? Scientists have argued that amid the continuous trend of reduced agricultural land, population change, climate change and the search for new technology to feed nine billion people in 2050, recent and future bio-technology may offer greater possibility for having the second green revolution with a vision of ecological sustainability. Concern, however, remains that if the concept is endorsed without critical review, it may defect from the future of food security.

The proponents of food sovereignty may be resistant to science-based innovation especially when it comes to genetically modified foods and related food biotechnology. It can be a challenge to future security because food sovereignty policy narrative embeds risk-averse behaviour into market and new bio-technological experiments, which in turn may give little space for future innovation. However, food sovereignty critique of GM foods remains valid as it concerns not only with food safety and risk but also the control over inputs and seeds.

In addition, concerns remain whether the framework may reinforce more food trade protection and endorse inefficient food self-sufficiency policy. Whether or not food sovereignty can offer better outcome for Indonesia, a more systematic study is recommended concerning cost and benefit of existing and alternative food security framework and policy options for a more rational policy of food sovereignty and security.

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