

Book Review

Food Security Governance: Empowering Communities, Regulating Corporations
by Nora McKeon

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Who eats, who decides, who profits? These 21st-century challenges, brought into sharp focus by the food riots of 2008, form the backdrop to this insightful book. It offers a highly informed analysis of the challenges to and opportunities for governance towards a healthy, accessible, and equitable food regime.

The book provides an overview of the expansion of the industrial food system within the war-ravaged economies of the 1940s up to the neo-colonial occupation of foreign territories to feed distant consumers in the present century. It describes the range of systems and approaches to providing food – from corporate control to food sovereignty. And it gives an insider’s in-depth account and analysis of a novel and inclusive form of governance, unique in the United Nations, for setting global norms for food security and nutrition – the renewed Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Optimistic accounts on ways forward offer readers hopeful pointers on how rights-based food systems can build on the knowledge and skills of those who currently feed most people – family farmers, peasants, and other small-scale food providers – in order to secure future food supplies for all.

The author, Nora McKeon, is especially qualified to write this book, which builds on the analysis and scholarship presented in her earlier publications: *Global Governance for World Food Security* (2011), *The United Nations and Civil Society* (2009), and *Peasant Organizations* (2004). After studying history at Harvard and political science at the Sorbonne she joined the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, where she worked to open up the institution to the organizations of small-scale producers who are the front-line actors of food security yet marginalized in decision-making that affects them. Since then she has been engaged in teaching, writing, and advocacy on food issues, social movements, and global governance, and she was also a co-ordinator of the campaign of European non-governmental organizations and African peasant networks – *europAfrica: towards food sovereignty*.

In this book, she presents an accessible and plain language account of the attempted enclosure of the food system by proprietary interests, including those that would contaminate and thereby control world food supplies through GM foods and feed. In contrast, the resistance by small-scale food providers and social activists

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defending the collective food system of the majority that is resilient, healthy, biodiverse, and ecologically sustainable, is keenly articulated.

In the context of this clash of food regimes and competing narratives, she explains, as needed, the embedded jargon in food systems writings, including in the process of its title – governance. She promises that ‘... the exploration of food governance conducted in this book will be guided by three questions that have to do with power, who wields it, to what effect, to whose benefit.’ Unsurprisingly, she moves far beyond a reductionist view of governance as strengthening democracy and the rule of law. She is fully mindful of its wider and inclusive purposes as described, for example, in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, as: ‘the process of collective decision-making and policy implementation, used distinctly from government to reflect broader concern with norms and processes relating to the delivery of public goods.’ The latter point is an important theme of this book, echoing former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier De Schutter’s reflections on this role of the renewed CFS in defending food as a vital public good.

The food price crisis was a wake-up call for many governments, a reprise, to some extent, of the earlier oil-price-hike-induced food crisis of the 1970s. And the reaction of power holders has been similar. Taking advantage of the new crisis they again called for a shake-up in the global governance of food. In the 1970s they were able, as a result of the crisis, to reduce the influence of the ‘one country, one vote’ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Its activities were dispersed to more-compliant agencies: ‘Research’ to the World Bank and its Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR); ‘Investment’ to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), funded by the oil-rich but food insecure states; and ‘Food aid’ to the World Food Programme (WFP), customarily directed by the United States, initially as a dump for its surplus grain production. This time, similar forces have attempted to subvert the United Nations and create separate international ‘partnerships’ and ‘alliances’ of powerful corporations, philanthrocapitalist organizations, and client governments. These are designed to impose food security solutions on potentially insecure states. They also help to open new markets in ‘resource-rich’ and ‘under-exploited’ Africa, described as ‘the ‘last frontier’ in global food and agricultural markets’.

This insider’s account of those undemocratic efforts by the powerful and the collective resistance by social movements makes for compelling reading. The current renewal process in food security governance started at the 2009 ‘High-Level Meeting on Food Security for all’ (RANSA in its Spanish acronym), hosted by the Spanish government in Madrid. A pre-emptive statement, organized by the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), was presented by La Via Campesina, on behalf of social movements and public-interest NGOs, at the final plenary. The statement, calling for inclusive and democratic governance, reflected the mood of a wide range of French and Spanish-speaking states wary of further crises caused by overheated, powerful economies beyond their control. The acceptance of the statement by vigorous acclaim of most delegates, ushered in the renewal of the formerly moribund Committee on World Food Security (CFS), a relic of the intentionally ineffective ‘reforms’ after the previous food crisis in the 1970s.

The detailed description and analysis of the process of renewal of, and subsequent actions by, the CFS, with its autonomous and self-organized Civil Society Mechanism (CSM), is this book's special contribution to the history of food security governance. It is eminently readable and charts the whole process from its energetic and decisive beginnings in 2009 to the sober realization that repressive forces will continue to frustrate progress. These forces have included the use of diplomatic *démarches* by the USA to prevent mention of aspirations towards food sovereignty in the core decision of the renewed committee. This is the agreement on a 'Global Strategic Framework for Food Security' (GSF) designed to set the norm for all food-related actions by states and other actors. The *démarches* were effective in communicating the USA's position 'to a number of governments including those of African countries who were to be rewarded with US funding in the context of the G7/G8 New Alliance [for Food Security and Nutrition]'. The GSF was weakened. Now, recognizing the potential threat to their hegemony posed by the CFS, 'big food security actors who had snubbed the "old" CFS are back in force – agrifood corporations, the World Bank, powerful countries ...'.

Public-interest civil society organizations and social movements are reinvigorating their challenge to this power and, through their advocacy and actions, are showing how a food secure world can be achieved. Beyond pressing for (overdue) regulation of profit-focused agrifood corporations through United Nations institutions, such as the CFS, there are refreshing descriptions in this book of wider actions taken by civil society organizations (CSOs) including farmers' social movements towards a new food regime based on food sovereignty. For example, the activities of the African regional farmers' networks in the *europAfrica* campaign are cited in this book.

The author summarizes food sovereignty as:

a paradigm that substitutes for the free market-productivist modernization paquet in all its dimensions. It is rights-based, including the rights of Mother Earth. It is attentive to ecology, the environment, and biodiversity. It fights climate change and builds resilience. It is territorially rooted, bridges the distance between producer and consumer and furnishes healthy food for all. It binds agroecological modes of small-scale production with modes of processing and distribution that are appropriate to them and that create employment and stimulate local economies. It operates against inequalities.

The food sovereignty movement with its 'power of a process from below', as described in this book by Paul Nicholson of *La Via Campesina*, has the potential to transform the world's dysfunctional food system.

The book builds on this message of hope that the collective will of the majority can win through. It can constrain power, if transparent and democratic processes, such as those emerging through the CFS, can corral decision-making. As the inspirational former West African farmer leader, Ndiogou Fall, is quoted as saying: 'The levels of decision-making seem to be jumping around like frogs, from the national scene on up. The temptation of just huckling down to work in one's own field is strong. But it is no longer an option.' In this spirit, the social movements of small-scale food providers have rallied around CFS processes and, through the CSM 'from

above' and in their local actions 'from below', have effectively exerted collective pressures on decision-making. This should help to resolve the conundrum that opened this review – who eats, who decides, who profits? – in favour of real people's needs for healthy, diverse, and locally controlled food webs. This contrasts with the wishes of shadowy 'legal persons', i.e. corporations, which would capture and pervert the food chains of the global food system for their benefit.

Nora McKeon's book is a tour de force and a perceptive addition to readings on this subject. It will reinforce the commitment of those who are in solidarity with the world's food providers and it will inform newcomers. Simultaneously it is an eye-opener and guide for emerging students of food regimes and novice negotiators in what is described in an endorsement of the book as the 'Byzantine world of global food politics', and a vivid historical account of decades-long processes to realize the Right to Food for the majority that will be heartening to activists. This book will energize CSOs and social movements for the next, ever more challenging, phase in the struggle to transform food security governance towards food sovereignty.

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