

The Food Sovereignty Movement in Europe – At the Cusp of Establishing Alternative Parameters in Understanding Food Systems

Jason M. Leung

The food sovereignty movement in Europe can only be studied when contextualized within historical conditions that gave rise to the competing interests of corporate food systems, as well as other alternative food networks. This social phenomenon compelled various advocacy groups and communities to claim a political stand-point in the food debate, thereby producing a rich body of discursive knowledge on contentious issues pertaining to the right to food. This basic human right has been pursued at all costs, including practices that resulted in more harm than good.

It is the vigilance of civil society organizations and the advocacy of NGO's coalescing into a social movement which continues to expose the harm caused by exploitation of environmental resources and the complicity of neoliberal governments. The advocates of this social movement employ the tool of "communities of practice (Wenger, 1998)" to effectively address and expose the profit motive of agricultural industry as they insidiously promote capitalist corporate interest in the guise of "right to food". It is in this political and social context that a counter-movement on Food Sovereignty is planting nascent roots.

This study will attempt to historically contextualize the characteristics of the food sovereignty movement as spearheaded by the Nyeleni Food Sovereignty Movement in Europe. This is the broadest ever coalition of progressive NGOs, food networks, and people's organizations, all working as a counter-movement to the long established hegemonic food regimes described by Friedman and McMichael (1989). It is a case study of an embrasive coalition of progressive entities grounded on the position of advocating for people's right to food sovereignty while challenging corporate interest and modern day hegemonic state power in Europe.

The emergent definition of food sovereignty as the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, while safeguarding their right to define their own food and agricultural systems (Nyeleni Declaration 2007), is juxtaposed to how food regimes have historically embedded corporate dominance over food production and food consumption to ensure hegemonic control by economic superpowers. The impact of the first and second food regimes as identified by McMichael and Friedman (1989), propagated dominant economic forces that inextricably link the right to food to international hegemonic interest.

At the onset, this study will attempt to capture the characteristics of a social movement that strategically situates itself at the cusp of public discourse to challenge the contentious understanding of right to food juxtapositioned to international hegemonic interest. Such public discourse and advocacy has found a domain in the Nyeleni Food Sovereignty Movement in Europe as it operates as a community of practice.

As a community of practice, members explore how a common understanding of food sovereignty is debated and reconciled within the Nyeleni coalition which was established in 2007. This comes with an awareness that food sovereignty is an emergent concept in the whole body of food discourse. Among others, this study has the purpose of investigating how respected experts within the food sovereignty movement could attempt at arriving at a unified position and consensus in defining the characteristics of a movement that should pose serious challenges to the food regime in a European context. In its advocacy for food sovereignty in Europe, it continually evolves a body of knowledge and practice while addressing political and economic realities in Europe. Such active exchange of knowledge and practice has brought advocates of food sovereignty in the Nyeleni movement to operate as a community of practice because individuals and organizations share a concern and passion for something they do, and learn how to do it

better as they interact regularly in a physical or virtual domain (Wenger, 1998).

Given the above framework, this study will have an interconnected three-pronged methodology as an investigative case study.

First is to trace the history and identify the distinctive characteristics of a European food sovereignty movement by casting the Nyeleni coalition as a case in point.

Secondly, as Europe's broadest coalition of food sovereignty advocates, the Nyeleni movement can only operate structurally as a community of practice. It embodies those characteristics and principles of a movement that can only advance its agenda by innovating on established methods that engender strength in community building. This study will proceed with the contention that as a social movement, Nyeleni is an embodiment of a community of practice as it proceeds to provide its supporters with a sense of shared identity and unity of purpose.

As a social movement and a community of practice, Nyeleni is at the cusp of continually opening various fora to advance discursive dialogue around contentious issues related to food sovereignty.

As a third concern therefore, this study will attempt to characterize emerging patterns on how the food sovereignty movement situates itself at this cusp, defining and redefining the characteristics of food sovereignty as an advocacy movement that generates a body of progressive knowledge and practice in Europe today.

For this study, research tools such as expert interviews and focus group discussions among food sovereignty advocates under the Nyeleni coalition will be conducted. This researcher will further identify the characteristics of a food sovereignty movement operating as a community of practice, by serving as a participant-observer in the research process.

References:

Friedman, H., & McMichael, P. (1989). Agriculture and the State System: The Rise and Decline of National Agricultures, 1870 to Present. *Sociologia Ruralis*, XXIX-2, 93-117.

Nyeleni. (2007, February 27). Declaration of Nyeleni. Retrieved May 2, 2017, from Nyeleni 2007: Forum for Food Sovereignty: <https://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Study Program	M.Sc. EnviroFood
Duration	2017
Supervisor	Dr. Cinzia Piatti
First Examiner	Prof. Dr. Claudia Bieling
Second Examiner	