

The Role of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in contributing to Food Sovereignty in West Bank Palestine

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In the last decades, agri-food crises have happened quite frequently, arguably also as a consequence of globalizing forces and consequent globalization of the food system, not to mention unsatisfying agrarian politics. This is manifested in industrializing the food and agricultural sector. Part of this process has seen dumping of cheap products into the markets and free-trade mechanisms that weaken local food systems (Friedmann, 2005). Because of that, local small-scale farmers are experiencing hard times globally. Often they are detached from their land and traditions. Their food production heritage can be threatened and it is not sufficient any longer for their consumption (McMichael, 2015). This is true also for farmers and farming in West Bank Palestine (WB).

Agriculture is a fundamental element in the Palestinian economy and national heritage. Farming used to provide the community with food and jobs and it is a source of pride and self-sufficiency (ANERA). For decades, the situation of farmers and agricultural sector in WB has worsened, due to the political situation which harshly affected the agrarian one, adding to the aforementioned global issues that have consequences on Palestinian agriculture too. In fact, as a result of political uncertainties, continuous battling with neighbor states and absence of proper state regulation, Palestinian farmers go through hard conditions. For instance, the contribution of agriculture to employment fell to 8.4% in 2014 compared to 2013 11.4%, and to the GDP declined to 3.9% in 2014 from 4.9% in 2013 (PARC, 2014). Since there is a limited support from the Palestinian government to the agricultural sector, up to 1% of the budget of the Palestinian Authority is destined to agriculture. In addition, Israeli policies limit access to resources, such as water, and to the market through targeted politics and through strict control of imports and exports of agricultural products (PARC, 2014).

Despite (or also thanks to) this difficult situation, also in WB many alternative forms of agriculture have still managed to emerge. In line with the current literature, in WB too these food and agriculture networks vary in size, beliefs, goals and outcomes, but they are all characterized by a certain idea and degree of sustainability. Also called Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), in WB they seem to contribute to the increasingly felt need for Food Sovereignty (FSO). FSO, defined as “*the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems*” (viacampesina.org), was launched by La Via Campesina, an international movement of peasants, small-medium scale farmers, women farmers, landless and indigenous people. Such a concept opposes corporate-driven agriculture, which have arguably destroyed communities and ecosystems, and defend small scale sustainable agriculture, the latter believed to promote social justice and agriculture, and dignity (viacampesina.org). In a place such as WB, Food Sovereignty

assumes even more importance and can be a trigger for not only survival but to allow local populations to thrive.

This thesis investigates the local food system in WB and questions the role of AFNs for reaching Food Sovereignty.

- **Aims/Research questions**

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the role of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in leading to Food Sovereignty in West Bank Palestine.

The research questions of this thesis are the following:

- What are the main features of the existing food system in West Bank Palestine?
- Can sustainable agricultural practices contribute to Food Sovereignty?
- How can AFNs lead to independence and freedom among people?

- **Method**

This thesis employs a qualitative research design, with semi-structured interviews. The research area is the West Bank part of the Palestinian territories for which ten case-studies have been selected. Interviews have been conducted with farmers, activists, non-profit organizations and representatives of La Via Campesina.

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