

## Assessing USAID Through the Lens of Food Sovereignty

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### Abstract

Over the last three decades, the international food sovereignty movement has become an increasingly powerful force in the struggle to improve the lives of peasants and other rural workers. Led by organizations such as La Via Campesina and the World March of Women, food sovereignty presents an alternative to the dominant neoliberal strategy executed by institutions like the World Bank, WTO, and IMF. On December 17, 2018, the UN General Assembly officially adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), which was a big win for the food sovereignty movement. While there has been much written about the triumph of the declaration and the struggle to get it implemented, there is not much existing literature which assesses how well governing institutions have met the standards established in UNDROP. This study gives an assessment of the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) agricultural policy using UNDROP and the six major principles of food sovereignty as a standard. The findings suggest that, while USAID's stated goals on human rights and ecological sustainability are in line with food sovereignty, its attachment to neoliberal economic policy and green revolution technologies prevent it from truly implementing a strategy which meets food sovereignty's standards.

**Keywords:** Agroecology, Food Sovereignty, Green Revolution, Sustainability, UNDROP, USAID

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### **Introduction:**

The agricultural crises around the world are staggering. In terms of hunger and malnutrition, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports the worst numbers since 2005. Food systems were heavily impacted by COVID, and there were huge spikes in food insecurity during 2020, but the root causes of these crises are much older. Food insecurity and malnutrition in the world had been on a steady increase since 2014, the year the FAO set its goal to end hunger by 2030 (FAO, 2022). This trend remains true when breaking the world up into major regions as well. Asia and Latin America have both seen small increases while Africa has seen a significant increase. Peasants and other agricultural workers in the periphery, as well as in the core, often live in extreme poverty and face discrimination and poor working conditions, contributing to the alarming numbers on hunger. In addition, modern agricultural practices used throughout the world are unsustainable and contribute to climate change, while also compounding the previous two issues.

In response to ongoing agricultural crises including food insecurity, social injustice suffered by peasant farmers, and the climate crisis, there are a number of growing international social movements, including slow food, food justice, and food sovereignty, which seek to combat these issues. Food sovereignty, which this study focuses on, has made a significant impact in the UN in securing important rights for peasants and agricultural workers. On December 17, 2018, the UN General Assembly officially adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) which ensures the rights of peasants to social justice, labor rights, seeds, housing, education, and sustainable agricultural practices among many other crucial things. It was a landmark victory for the international food sovereignty movement, which had spent 17 years attempting to win the right for peasants to have a direct voice in the UN Human Rights Council after La Via Campesina (a leading organization in the food sovereignty

movement) “first called for peasants’ rights... in the UN Human Rights Commission” in 2001 (Claeys and Edelman, 1).

While there is plenty of literature on UNDROP, the effort to get it implemented, and its implications for the future, there is not much research addressing international policy implemented by the US (one of only eight countries to vote down UNDROP in the UN General Assembly) and assessing its application of the principles laid out by UNDROP and food sovereignty. Specifically, this study examines USAID and its agricultural agenda which includes the Feed the Future Initiative, the Global Food Security Act, (GFSA) and the US Government Global Nutrition Coordination Plan (GGNCP). In order to assess the USAID agenda, this study uses principles and criteria laid out by UNDROP and the international food sovereignty movement and then presents improvements and alternatives to the current strategy taken up by USAID.

### **Roadmap of this Study**

The first part of this article is a review of the literature on UNDROP which positions this study within its respective field of research. The second part is an in-depth examination of food sovereignty and the UNDROP declaration itself. The third part is an examination of the USAID agenda and an assessment of it using the principles laid out in UNDROP as well as the broader principles of food sovereignty. The findings of this study suggest that the broader principles of food sovereignty and those stated by USAID are in line with each other, but USAID’s material policies are not in line with food sovereignty. The study then concludes with some alternative policies which follow food sovereignty principles.

### **Review of the Literature on UNDROP and Food Sovereignty**

The previous literature on UNDROP focuses on two main components: the effort made by activists and international organizations to get it implemented, and the implications this declaration has for the future of peasants’ rights, food security, and

ecological sustainability. Claeys and Edelman argue that peasant activists from around the globe, both in the periphery and in the core, along with international peasant movements such as La Via Campesina (LVC), Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN), and the Europe-Third World Centre (CETIM) formed a grassroots coalition which was able to push this declaration through the UN General Assembly (Claeys and Edelman, 2019). As for the implications of the declaration, Claeys and Edelman, along with Friends of the Earth (FOEI), an “international grassroots environmental network,” (FOEI, 2020) position UNDROP as a fundamental tool for the furthering of the rights of peasants and rural workers via concrete legislation. Something consistent throughout the literature on UNDROP is that, while the declaration is certainly a great victory and the culmination of years of struggle, it is by no means the end goal of the food sovereignty movement. Instead, UNDROP is seen as a steppingstone that can lead to more ambitious goals in the future.

The other area of interest for this study is a broader critique of US food and agricultural policy from the perspective of food sovereignty. This includes a critique of food policy toward Native Americans (Eco Haw Consulting, 2015; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019) and Latin American immigrants (Holt- Giménez, 2017), as well as a critique of US involvement in the Green Revolution (Ajl, 2021; Holt-Giménez, 2017; Patel, 2008; Shiva, 2016).<sup>1</sup> While there are plenty of

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<sup>1</sup> The Green Revolution was a set of agricultural technological developments and transfer initiatives developed in the 50s and 60s. Many of the practices and technologies are still used today, and their results are controversial. The literature on food sovereignty is very critical of the green revolution and cites its negative impact, not only on sustainability, but on poverty and violence toward small scale farmers as well. This study uses Green Revolution technologies to refer to agricultural practices and technologies which originate from developments during the green revolution, are owned by agribusinesses, and privilege output and profit over sustainability and the livelihoods of farmers. The primary source on

critiques of the US in the broader food sovereignty literature, and some mentions of USAID in particular, there remains a need for an assessment of USAID's adherence to UNDROP through the lens of food sovereignty. This is essentially where this study can be placed in the broader literature.

### **Why is it important to take a food sovereignty perspective?**

Food sovereignty is both a social-political movement and a human rights principle which seeks to build on the notion of food security. In its capacity as a human rights principle, food sovereignty demonstrates that the most fundamental principle informing USAID agricultural policy (and the dominant hunger related human rights principle in the world) is food security. On its website, USAID states their definition of food security as "having, at all times, both physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet dietary needs for a productive and healthy life" (USAID Agriculture and Food Security, 2022).

Strategies adopted under the banner of food security include sustainable intensification, climate smart agriculture and seeds, biofortification, biofuels, and other technocratic fixes. These strategies are carried out by agribusiness monopolies (like Monsanto, Cargill, and Syngenta), philanthropy capitalist institutions (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Howard G. Buffett Foundation), international agricultural institutions (FAO, Feed the Future), and private-public partnerships between these groups (Ajl, 2021; Holt-Giménez, 2017). Their main purpose is to recognize some reality of exploitation of the earth and its people, insist that the main issue is lack of food production (even though the world produces enough food for more than ten billion people), to make promises that a miracle technological fix is right around the corner, and to never

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the Green Revolution used in this study is *The Violence of the Green Revolution* by Vandana Shiva.

challenge the root of these problems (Ajl, 2021; Holt- Giménez, 2017).

Food security does not challenge the economic and political power of agribusiness monopolies, and therefore cannot deliver on its goals to end hunger and exploitation of people and land. Because of this, the FAO has engaged in different measures to conceal the extent of the failure in the food security strategy. For example, the millennium declaration set goals which were supposed to be met by 2015; however, these goals focused on the years 1990-2015, despite being written in 2000. This allowed for the incredible reduction in hunger and extreme poverty in China during the 90's to be included in the results and mask some of the hunger and poverty elsewhere in the world despite China's exclusion from the millennium declaration (Holt- Giménez, 2017, 177-178).

The present situation regarding hunger, malnutrition, and sustainability is dire and can be attributed in large part to the failures of the food security strategy. Since 2016, when the Global Food Security Act was passed, hunger and malnutrition have been increasing. The FAO demonstrates that both moderate and severe food insecurity, as well as malnutrition were on the rise during the second half of the 2010s in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Each of these figures sharply increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, but even before then, between 2014 and 2019 they were already on the rise. Also, agriculture contributes significantly to climate change. The FAO estimates that roughly 20 percent of greenhouse gas emissions in the world come from agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and livestock (FAO, 2022).

Food sovereignty offers an expansion to food security by using six principles laid out at the 2007 Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty. They are as follows:

(1) Food sovereignty focuses on food for people, moving away from food's current identity as a commodity to enrich global agribusinesses and transforming it into something that sustains, and

is therefore a right to, all people. By this principle, food production must be sufficient, healthy, and culturally appropriate.

(2) Food sovereignty values food providers, which are considered to be “small scale family farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fisherfolk, forest dwellers, indigenous peoples and agricultural and fisheries workers, including migrants” (Nyéléni, 2007, 76). Food sovereignty rejects any policy which undervalues or threatens the wellbeing of these groups.

(3) Food sovereignty seeks to localize food systems, establishing community and solidarity between food producers and consumers by protecting local markets from food dumping and protecting consumers from unhealthy and inappropriate food. By this principle, food sovereignty also seeks to “put providers and consumers at the centre of decision-making on food issues,” (Nyéléni, 2007, 76) and rejects strategies which give control to giant, multinational agribusinesses.

(4) Food sovereignty puts control locally, giving control over the land, water, seeds, and other agricultural tools of nature to the food providers themselves so they can “share in them in socially and environmentally sustainable ways which conserve diversity” (Nyéléni, 2007, 76). By this principle, food sovereignty also recognizes the right of local communities to use their own territories, promotes cooperation across regions and sectors, and “rejects the privatisation of natural resources through laws, commercial contracts and intellectual property rights regimes” (Nyéléni, 2007, 76)

(5) Food sovereignty builds knowledge and skills by developing “appropriate research systems” (Nyéléni, 2007, 76) to expand on traditional knowledge held by local food providers which allow them to conduct sustainable, effective agricultural practices and pass on knowledge to future generation. This principle also rejects technologies which interfere with these practices such as green revolution technologies.

(6) Food sovereignty works with nature by using sustainable methods developed by local producers that foster biodiversity and

improve resilience, and it rejects methods which harm ecosystems and contribute to climate change such as monocrops and industrial farming techniques (Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty, 2007).

Food sovereignty is an indispensable tool in the fight against hunger, malnutrition, and climate change because it answers deeper questions which elude food security such as how, where, and by whom food is produced. On the individual level, it allows for further rights and protections for the most vulnerable people in the world by protecting their right to the self determination of their own food system. Hypothetically, a person could be food secure while incarcerated, but they would not have food sovereignty. On the societal level, it takes care to maintain tradition and culture, as well as the health of the land and planet. Food sovereignty provides a basis for the 2018 UNDROP, and a basis for this study's analysis of USAID's approach to agricultural policy.

### **What is UNDROP?**

As previously stated, the process of implementing UNDROP began in 2001 “when La Via Campesina (LVC) first called for peasants’ rights in debates on the ‘right to development’ in the UN Human Rights Commission” (Claeys and Edelman, 2019). The success in implementing the declaration is thanks to 17 years of struggle by a grass roots coalition comprised of peasant activists, international peasants’ movements such as La Via Campesina (LVC), and human rights organizations like Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN), and the Europe-Third World Centre (CETIM) (Claeys and Edelman, 2019). Its contents are a direct reflection of food sovereignty principles and serve as a concrete, legal basis for assessing USAID policy.

UNDROP defines a peasant as a small-scale agricultural worker who relies significantly on household and other non-monetized forms of labor and is dependent on the land. Other rural workers covered by the declaration include those engaged in small-scale agriculture, crop planting, livestock raising, pastoralism, fishing,



forestry, hunting or gathering, and handicrafts related to agriculture or a related occupation in a rural area and their dependents, as well as indigenous and nomadic people. On top of this, there are special protections for women and children including protections against discrimination and violence against women and rules which ensure their participation in all areas covered by the declaration. Children are protected against malnutrition and work which abuses them or interferes with their education and development. Those covered by the declaration are guaranteed full enjoyment of the same rights and freedoms laid out in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well. Each of the material rights in the declaration such as land, housing, and biodiversity include protections for traditional knowledge in these areas. The declaration is very clear that peasants have the right to their own culture and traditional knowledge without discrimination or interference, and that this right applies to every other right established in UNDROP.

One of the most important rights established in the declaration is the right to food sovereignty. It gives peasants the right to adequate, culturally appropriate, nutritious, sustainably produced food, physical and economic access to this food, and the right to determine their own food and agriculture system. In order to ensure these rights, peasants are also given the right to genetic agricultural resources such as seeds. This is extremely important as agribusiness monopolies currently hold patents on certain types of seeds which contributes greatly to poverty in rural areas, as well as unsustainable agricultural practices. For example, Monsanto currently holds patents on corn, soy, and canola seeds, among others. The problem with this is that small scale farmers will purchase these seeds from an agribusiness monopoly (typically their government will give them credit for doing so) either on the promise that they will increase crop yield, or because it has become a necessity to stay competitive in the market. This will cause the selling price of the crops to go down because so many people have started growing them, leading to poverty among the farmers. Additionally, many of these seeds come

as a part of a package along with fertilizers and pesticides which are unsustainable and destroy the biodiversity and fertility of the land (Shiva, 2016). It is this reality which makes the right to seeds so important. The right to seeds is a crucial mechanism in fighting rural poverty as well as establishing sustainable agricultural practices.

The ecological protections in UNDROP focus on nature, climate change, land, natural resources, water, and biodiversity. The declaration establishes the conservation and protection of peasant land, as well as its natural resources as a right enjoyed by peasants. This includes measures which allow peasants to write and contribute to the design and implementation of national and local climate change policies, protections against the exploitation of the environment, sustainable water systems for the purposes of fishing, farming, and drinking, and the obligation of states to promote agroecology.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the declaration includes rights to civil liberties and justice including freedom from arbitrary detainment and slavery, and the freedom to form civil societies and unions. Additionally, peasants have the right to voluntary labor which provides an adequate living free from exploitation and hazardous working conditions, adequate housing, and an appropriate education necessary to carry out productive and sustainable agricultural practices.

### **What is USAID's Agricultural policy?**

The most important documents relating to agricultural policy and the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas presented by USAID are the US Government Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS) for 2022-2026 and the US Government Global Nutrition Coordination Plan for 2021-2026 (GNCP). These documents heavily inform USAID's initiative to fight hunger and malnutrition, called the

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<sup>2</sup> Agroecology is essentially a science of sustainable agricultural practices which protect small scale food producers in accordance with food sovereignty. It is covered in depth in a later section in this study.

Feed the Future Initiative (FTF). The GFSS is listed on Feed the Future’s “Guidance and Tools for Feed the Future” page as the main document informing the program. The GNCP is listed on Feed the Future’s “Vision and Strategy” page. USIAD claims their strategy “aligns with and complements the U.S. Government Global Nutrition Coordination Plan” (usaid.gov). The rest of this section summarizes each document and then synthesizes the USAID approach to agricultural policy and the rights of peasants and other rural workers.

The food security strategy builds on the Global Food Security Act passed by US congress in 2016. Essentially, the act requires the president to put forth a comprehensive strategy for reducing world hunger and allows them to allocate funds via the Foreign Assistance act of 1961. In accordance with the food security act, the food security strategy establishes three main goals. The first is inclusive and sustainable agriculture-led economic growth, which seeks to equip micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME’s) with innovative practices and technologies, technical services, and business management skills. The intention here is that this will expand MSME’s access to markets and trade, creating growth in the agricultural sector which will spill into other sectors and lift the entire country’s economy. This goal also intends to focus on landless, extreme poor, women, youth, and marginalized or underrepresented groups.

The second goal is strengthened resilience among people and systems, which seeks to equip food producers with productive, natural, social, economic, and political assets including peacebuilding, diverse livelihood opportunities, and investment in research to continue developing tools for resilient agriculture. The intention here is that individuals and the systems they manage will be at reduced risk of shocks and stresses, and better equipped to overcome shocks and stresses in the event they happen. Of note is that one of the natural assets provided here is “access to seeds,” not “ownership or sovereignty over seeds.” The third goal is a well-nourished

population, especially among women and children. This goal seeks to invest in nutrition, food safety, and natural resource management, in order to improve the nutritional value of the diets of people living in developing countries. The idea is that, in order to access and use the assets, technologies, and services laid out in the first two goals, people need to be healthy and have nutritious diets.

There are six major areas of focus for the US Government Global Nutrition Coordination Plan. The first is women's nutrition during pregnancy and lactation. Women of reproductive age in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are at particular risk for undernourishment as a higher intake is needed during pregnancy. They are also at higher risk for anemia and nutrient deficiencies which can cause complications during pregnancy. For these reasons, the GNCP states that it is extremely important to intervene as early in girls' lives as possible and get them nutritious food to avoid these problems. The second area of focus is breastfeeding and complementary feeding. The GNCP seeks to improve nutrition in these areas by "supporting and promoting the adoption of optimal practices by mothers and other child caretakers requires social and behavior change interventions combined with multi-sectoral strategies that improve the availability, access, and affordability of healthy foods" (USAID, 2021, 22). The third area is prevention and management of wasting in children under 5 years old. This involves the US government, along with several other states and actors calling for the prioritization of prevention and treatment of wasting as an essential health service in the 2020 Global Action Plan on Child Wasting.

The fourth area is micronutrient sufficiency. The GNCP recognizes that non-diverse diets consisting only of staple crops lead to nutrient deficiency. The strategy for tackling this issue leans heavily on biofortification. The fifth area is issues of special emphasis. These issues include COVID-19 and obesity, which are combatted by the US according to the GNCP. The six and last area is nutrition-relevant policies and opportunities for high level

engagement. Here, the US sees COVID as an opportunity to expand its role in the global food system and “be a champion for bold, generous, and highly cost-effective action” (USAID, 2021,22).

USAID’s synthesized approach to agriculture and the rights of small-scale producers is to pursue a sustainable and resilient access to nutritious food with a focus on women and children. A central idea of USAID’s approach is that, when people have access to healthy diets, they can then develop the agricultural sector of a country. This development is also expected to spill into other sectors and develop the entire country. Of particular interest for this study is the fact that neither of the documents mention food sovereignty or the UNDROF. The strategy for providing sustainable and resilient access to nutritious food relies heavily on technological fixes such as biofortification and research into innovative farming techniques and cereals. There is not much in the way of challenging agribusiness monopolies and establishing self-determination of food systems. From here this study assesses USAID using the principles of food sovereignty and the rights established in UNDROF as a standard.

### **USAID’s Stated Goals are in Line with UNDROF and Food Sovereignty**

USAID’s main goals, as they are stated in the GFSS and the GNCP, are in line with the six pillars of food sovereignty as well as many of the objectives in UNDROF. For example, the strategy employed by USAID’s Feed the Future Initiative places special emphasis on small scale producers and the most vulnerable people working in rural areas in the periphery. The first three pillars of food sovereignty focus on this exact objective. Article 15 in UNDROF focuses on this as well and establishes that peasant farmers and other rural workers must have the right to appropriate, nutritious food as well as economic access to this food. Food sovereignty and the UNDROF also make important elaborations on this goal which are necessary if USAID wants eliminate hunger and malnutrition for the people it identifies. For example, the fourth pillar of food sovereignty demands

that small scale food providers *have control* over their land as well as the tools necessary for food production, on top of access to technology and research. Articles 19 and 26 of UNDROP also establish a right to traditional knowledge of agricultural processes, and that states are obligated to take measures to protect it.

USAID's strategy also acknowledges climate change and the urgent need to innovate food systems so that they can be sustainable. One of the major goals in the GFSS is to make sure that food systems are resilient to shocks and can reliably yield an adequate amount of food. While this objective is mostly centered around economic aspects, it also stands to reason that the ecosystems of the farms themselves will need to be sustained in a healthy way as to avoid dramatically poor harvests and unexpected food shortages. Later in the document, the GFSS also establishes climate change adaptation and natural resource management as a "cross cutting intermediate result" (GFSS, 50-56). It states that "projected impacts of climate change are an existential threat to food security... and disproportionately affect marginalized and disadvantaged members of society" (GFSS, 50). The document also acknowledges the importance of developing approaches that allow food systems to thrive under the emerging challenges of climate change.

This aspect of USAID's strategy is reflected in the fourth, fifth, and sixth pillars of food sovereignty. Articles 5, 18, and 20 in UNDROP also focus on the right to nature, sustainability, and biodiversity. Some important additions made by food sovereignty include the protection of traditional knowledge when developing sustainable agricultural practices. The articles mentioned in the UNDROP reinforce this principle and establish that states must work with small scale producers and incorporate traditional knowledge in their strategy. Biodiversity is also a key term used in both the GFSS and UNDROP. An objective stated in the GFSS is "returning fragile lands to carbon-rich forest, wetlands, and grasslands that harbor biodiversity" (GFSS, 51). Article 20 establishes that states must emphasize strategies which foster biodiversity in

agriculture systems. This language is incredibly important because the implementation of monocultures and single crop farms has historically had a negative impact on the sustainability of agricultural systems (Shiva, 2016).

### **USAID’s Material Policies are Not in Line with UNDROP and Food Sovereignty**

While many of the objectives outlined in the GFSS and GNCP are shared with food sovereignty and the UNDROP, many of the actual policies implemented by USAID fall short of these objectives. USAID’s first departure from food sovereignty is that giant agribusinesses monopolies, philanthropy capitalist institutions, and other large-scale operations can remain as the main producers of the world’s food. Despite their rhetoric on prioritizing small scale farmers, USAID has also been willing to advance the interests of multinational corporations by funding the development of their seeds.

For example, USAID has been working alongside the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), and Monsanto since 2008 on a project called the Water-Efficient Maize for Africa Project (WEMA) (Holt- Giménez, 2017, 186-187). Its purpose essentially, is to develop climate smart seeds such as drought resistant maize. AATF has made these seeds available in markets across Africa in Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. Monsanto continues to make profit because they own some of the genes infused in the seed as well as many of the options for fertilizer required to grow the crop (BIFAD, 2018; CIMMYT, 2020). The reality about many of these modified seeds is the same as the “miracle seeds” sold during the green revolution. The seeds have nothing miraculous in themselves. In reality, they are just highly responsive to special fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation practices, which are also patented, so they are all sold as part of a package. Additionally, these seeds, along with the fertilizers, pesticides, and

irrigation practices serve to harm the soil and ecosystems of the farmland, stripping the earth of its nutrients, fertility, and biodiversity (Shiva, 2016). USAID's privileging of agribusiness monopolies in the development of seeds goes against its stated commitment to biodiversity and environmental sustainability and is out of line with food sovereignty and UNDROP.

Agribusiness corporations can also indirectly benefit from research conducted by USAID and the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), which receives funding from USAID. "Drought tolerant maize varieties- Pioneer's Aquamax, Monsanto's Drought Gard, and Syngenta's Artesian... drew informally upon CIMMYT knowledge and germplasm" (BIFAD, 2018, 6). USAID's involvement in the development of seeds violates UNDROP's declaration on the rights of peasants to seeds. Often times peasant farmers have no choice but to purchase the seeds and fertilizers because it is the only way to stay competitive in the market. Sometimes they purchase them because they buy into the sales pitch which guarantees a drastic increase in crop output. Whatever the case, even if the farmers are willingly implementing the climate smart and miracle seeds, this strategy still violates article 19 of UNDROP which guarantees the right of peasants to seeds.

The right to seeds also establishes the right of peasants to have active participation in the research and development of crops and seeds. The WEMA project did not do this. It was a private-public partnership between several philanthropic institutions, USAID, and Monsanto. Also, article 19 establishes the rights of peasants to rely on their own seed or on other locally available seeds. While nothing about the WEMA project legally prevents people from buying other seeds, it is this situation exactly which the food sovereignty movement tries to eliminate. In order for USAID to be in line with food sovereignty, they need to adopt policies which actively privilege the development and ownership of seeds by the peasants farming them over the seeds produced by large agriculture interests. They must also move away from private-public partnerships



and privilege the wellbeing of people and the earth instead of the profits of corporations.

### **Alternatives in Line with UNDROP and Food Sovereignty**

In addition to the practices which USAID should stop doing, this section will lay out some positive proposals which could be taken up immediately. The first and most important proposal is agroecology. Currently, neither the GFSS nor the GNCP mention agroecology at all, but if USAID wants to meet its stated goals on sustainability, poverty, and nutrition, then it will have to include it in their agenda soon.

Agroecology is a science which attempts to develop sustainable agricultural practices by formalizing agricultural processes utilized in traditional farming systems. At its core, agroecology says control of the land should be given to the true experts, the people who farm it. The knowledge of sustainable practices which has proven itself over centuries should be harnessed and used now (Ajl, 2021; Altieri, 2002; Altieri, 2009; Altieri et al, 2017; Holt- Giménez, 2017; Mendez et al, 2017). Instead of mechanized work which produces the most amount of food for the least amount of labor cost while robbing the soil of its nutrients and fertility, agroecology demands sustainable, labor-intensive agriculture so that people are not displaced from the land and replaced by industrial farming.

This science of sustainable agriculture has taken root in several Latin American countries. In Brazil, Cuba, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Mexico, and all across Central America, huge advancements have been made in both the development and implementation of agroecology (Altieri and Toledo, 2011). In Brazil, many of the earliest farmers who began studying and practicing agroecology became professors and now teach it at universities. They work with family farms, giving them training, not only on farming practices, but in navigating agricultural markets. Farmers movements in Brazil such as the Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) have adopted agroecology in their strategy and created schools which now teach

the science (Altieri and Toledo, 2011,598-600). In Cuba, the crisis of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the trade embargo enforced by the US caused the country to become self-reliant agriculturally. In response, the Cuban National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP), comprised of thousands of family farms, has been implementing agroecological practices, and the country now relies heavily on small-scale farm operations. They have also implemented hundreds of thousands of urban farms which are able to supply almost half of Havana's fresh fruits and vegetables (Altieri and Toledo, 2011, 600-601). According to the World Food Programme, Cuba's agricultural programs have "primarily eradicated poverty and hunger" (World Food Programme Cuba Country Brief). Many of the family farms operating in Cuba have also worked with the Central American Campesino a Campesino (farmer to farmer) movement.

In the 1980s the Campesino a Campesino movement began as Guatemalan and Mexican farmers passed their agricultural innovations to each other via word of mouth. These practices eventually spread across Honduras and Nicaragua and are now taught at schools and universities (Altieri and Toledo, 2011; Holt- Giménez, 2006). In the Andean region, pre-Columbian techniques such as raised fields on the high plains in Peru have been formalized and taught by the Agroecología Universidad Cochamba in Bolivia and the Proyecto Andima de Tecnologías Campesinas in Peru (Altieri and Toledo, 2011, 603). In Mexico, NGO's such as Centro de Desarrollo Integral Campesino de la Mixteca have engaged in initiatives which create reforestation, foster biodiversity, and conserve the soil and water. In El Progreso, El Carmen, and Buenavista Tilantongo, farmers and community members have completed massive reforestation projects and brought life back to hundreds of hectares of land (Altieri and Toledo, 2011, 603).

Instead of harmful fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation practices, agroecology employs animal manures, cover crops, intercropping, companion planting, trap cropping, forest gardens and raised beds. Traditional methods used before the green revolution

can be reimplemented and formalized to replace harmful technologies. The world's soil can begin to come back to life and absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, helping in the fight against climate change. Agroforestry can also be used to incorporate perennials which can absorb mass amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> into agriculture systems (Ajl, 2021; Altieri, 2002; Altieri, 2009; Altieri et al, 2017; Holt- Giménez, 2017). This small scale, labor-intensive strategy upholds the principles of food sovereignty which focus on preserving nature, making food systems local, and protecting traditional knowledge. Agroecology itself is also a right given to peasants by UNDROP; it serves to reinforce several articles in the declaration including the right to nature, food sovereignty, seeds, biodiversity, and traditional culture and knowledge.

To help incorporate traditional knowledge systems into agricultural research, agroecology has recently started to use Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is essentially a research process by which members of the population affected by the research participate in it (Mendez et al, 2017). The idea is that the researcher would learn the unique agricultural knowledge from the farmer and incorporate it into research on sustainable practices. It includes a phase at the beginning of the process called the 'preflection stage' where the researcher and farmer plan out the research together, build trust, and refine research questions. After this, a sort of trial-and-error process is performed where the research is put into action with frequent reconvening for reflection and adjustment (Mendez et al, 2017).

PAR is still very much a work in progress. For example, conflict can arise between the researcher and the farmer. It is possible for them to struggle with communication, and the process of PAR can be long and frustrating, causing hiccups and stalls in the process. There are also power dynamics at play on the lines of race and class as the typical partnership in PAR is an academic from the core going to work with a peasant from the periphery. Despite these challenges however, PAR has been making advancements into agroecology and

stands to be a vital part of its development moving forward (Mendez et al, 2017). In order to meet its goals of eliminating hunger and creating sustainable systems indispensable in the fight against climate change, USAID must invest heavily in organizations like those mentioned in this section instead of partnering with large, multinational monopoly agribusinesses.

Regarding USAID's partnership with philanthropy capitalists and agribusiness corporations in the development of seeds, as previously stated, the UNDROP is clear that small scale producers must be able to use their own seeds. Article 19 of the UNDROP establishes that peasants must have the right to protect traditional knowledge of genetic agricultural resources, including seeds, and the right to share the benefits of those resources. They also have the right to develop and use their own seeds, and states must develop and enforce policy which protects these rights. While USAID's partnership with large scale producers does not explicitly forbid small scale farmers from developing and using their own seeds, it is imperative that states significantly limit the power and influence that large scale producers have over the market. In order to protect peasants' right to seeds, USAID must cease working with agribusiness monopolies, such as Monsanto, Cargill, and Syngenta, and begin committing money and resources to agroecological research and development of seeds and farming practices conducted by small scale farmers.

### **In Conclusion**

The international food sovereignty movement and the rights declared in UNDROP are indispensable in reversing the harm done to people and the planet by neocolonial food systems. They are indispensable in the project of establishing environmentally sustainable food systems which combat climate change and can eradicate hunger, malnutrition, poverty, and violence experienced by small scale agricultural workers. While some of the fundamental goals stated by USAID are in line with food sovereignty and UNDROP, the agency's

actions leave a lot of room for improvement. The biggest fundamental challenge that must be overcome is for the US and USAID to begin privileging the livelihoods of people rather than the profits of corporations. Only then can the US truly be engaged in agricultural policy which pursues a future in which all people are free from exploitation, hunger, and malnutrition, and in which our agricultural systems, as well as our planet, remain healthy, productive, and habitable.

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