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Giuliano Martiniello
Research Fellow
Makerere Institute of Social Research

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Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR)
Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda
www.misr.mak.ac.ug

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Introduction

The global food crisis, which manifested in increasingly volatile and skyrocketing food prices, generated a plethora of globally-spread food riots across the global South (see Bush 2010). Although the crisis differentially impacted on developing countries, it raised their food import bills by 37% in 2008 (United Nations 2009:7). These tumultuous developments had major implications: they added 75 million people to the ranks of the hungry and 125 million people into the category of extreme poverty (FAO 2008:ix).

Various explanations have been given for this price-volatility: the rise of middle classes' demands and changing diets in countries like Brazil, India, China, and its associated growing demand for animal feed, energy security and climate change. Though significant, these are only partial readings to which we should add speculation in commodity futures (financialization of the food sector),

conversion of farmland into urban estates and the conversion of corn and sugarcane from food production to agro-fuels. A major shortcoming with conventional explanations of the food crisis is that they are mostly based on supply-demand analysis: they are epiphenomenal in character. In this framework hunger and malnutrition become associated with a preoccupation on production and supply constraints not on uneven access to productive resources. In doing so they merely identify the symptoms rather than its underlying causes. In contrast the crisis was an intrinsic manifestation of short-term conjunctures and long-term dynamics, fractures and contradictions of the neoliberal corporate-based food regime (McMichael 2010, Bello 2009). Capitalist transformation of agriculture in fact involved expanding mechanization, chemicalization, concentration, dependence on hydrocarbon farm inputs, expanded use of bio-technologies, and commodification of seeds production. Tony Weis interprets these conjunct processes as simultaneously showing the accelerating biophysical contradictions of industrial agriculture (2010) and the limitations of the emerging "grain-oilseed-livestock complex" (2013). From a global perspective, Araghi argues that this development produced absolute depeasantization and displacement under postcolonial neoliberal globalism (2008:133).

Harriet Friedman (2005) draws a connection between the decline or the crisis of the food regime and the emergence of alternative ideas and concepts: "frames", coined by social

movements. This is done with the intent of highlighting the main lacunae of the regime, and suggesting other development trajectories and practices. In this sense social movements and civil society organizations actively shape and compete with other actors, including TNCs, states and international development and finance institutions, in the making and definition of interpretative frames. Each one competing with others on how food-related issues should be interpreted, approached, and actualized. The notion of food sovereignty gradually emerged from the collective elaboration and practices of transnational agrarian movements, as La Via Campesina. It represented an epistemic, theoretical and practical response to the limitations and nefarious consequences of the structuring of the corporate food regime in a period of neoliberal globalization (Desmarais 2007). Food sovereignty was coined with the aim to politicize the food and agricultural debates “from below”. It refers to the “right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments” (Witman, Desmarais, Wiebe 2010:2). By questioning the assumptions that are at the core of the development of industrial agriculture the concept of food sovereignty allows for a combined critique of the power, economic and ecological dynamics that characterize the international food regime. Food sovereignty contributes to open up the debate on small-scale farming and its associated agricultural practices and re-asserts the importance of bio-diverse and sustainable agriculture (McMichael 2009). Kloppenburg interprets the interlinked processes of development of transgenic varieties, bio-piracy and the imposition of intellectual property rights as moments of accumulation by dispossession (2010:372). In contrast, the long-term process of improving the adaptation and quality of seeds, plants and crops has always been in the peasant cultural repertoire of activities. For Miguel Altieri food sovereignty is indissolubly linked to agro-ecologically-based production systems in which “ecological interactions and synergisms between biological components provide mechanisms for the system to sponsor soil fertility, productivity and crop protection” (2010:121). In doing so food sovereignty has progressively been associated with a new set of ideas and practices related to territory, locality, alternative food networks, localization of economies, and agro-ecological practices. In this regard Van der Ploeg (2014:2) suggests that the power of food sovereignty as a concept lies in its promise to integrate a wide range of issues linking quality, quantity and availability of feed, identity of producers, style of farming, democracy, and sustainability. According to Agarwal (2014), the concept of food sovereignty shifted its emphasis from national self-sufficiency (against dependence from northern countries in accessing food) to local self-sufficiency and autonomy in decision-making. Although the author does not provide an explanation for this switch, one cause might be detected in the incorporation of many developing countries within the restrictive frame of international development institutions. The policies of the World Trade Organization for example, whose policies of liberalization of global trade in agricultural commodities since the Uruguay Round, played a crucial role in neoliberal re-structuring of agriculture and the ensuing reduction of the role of the state in agriculture.

A prominent critic of the food sovereignty “trope” suggests that food sovereignty does not capture the socially differentiated nature of rural communities. These may be along lines of class, gender, age and ethnicity (Bernstein 2014). Constructed in antithesis to capital, the notion of peasant community makes it difficult to grasp the existence and emergence of class distinctions and conflicts within rural communities. Other critics have raised the question of whether or not the notion of food sovereignty has any substantive meaning (Edelman 2014) and highlighted its semantic distance from rural people whose everyday existence is subordinated to a set of insecurities of land access, soil quality, water, and seeds (Boyer 2010:333). Subjected to the laws of restructuring of neoliberal capitalism, peasants, we are told, are “disappearing” (Bryceson et al 2000) or live under worsening conditions of “commoditization of subsistence” as petty-commodity producers (Bernstein 2010). Furthermore, by analyzing the mounting “feminization of agriculture”, Agarwal (2014:6) takes issue with another assumption of the food sovereignty discourse: the alleged preference of small-scale farmers for subsistence crops. Finally, as argued by an influent sympathizer, although as a paradigm food sovereignty has identified the limitations and violence of the highly modernist approach of food security, its implementation has remained elusive (McMichael 2010:169).

This brief review of the food crisis and sovereignty discourse has a particular echo in Uganda, a country often labeled as the potential bread basket of Africa. Seventy five per cent of Uganda’s population is engaged in agricultural-based livelihoods strategies and women produce approximately 80% of the food consumed nationally (Ratjen et al. 2008). Like other developing countries, Uganda is rich in natural resources and thanks to particularly favorable climatic conditions and hydric, a great variety of food crops can be grown. Although the contribution of agriculture to total GDP has been declining over the years, the sector has continued to dominate the Ugandan economy as it contributed approximately 22.9% of the GDP in 2011 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics 2012:41). Traditional agricultural exports (coffee, cotton, tea, tobacco) still represents 31.4% of total export value (Op. cit.:224) and the Ugandan agricultural economy is increasingly tied to value chains across the world. Its main trading partners are from East Asia, Eastern Africa and EU. Nearly 7.5 million Ugandans were considered poor in 2009/2010 (UBOS 2012:v).

In Uganda the neoliberal discourse of food security is based on the imperative of progressively increasing the quantities of produced food through large-scale plantation systems and agribusiness’ technologies. At the core of the discourse is the fictitious conceptualization and construction of food as a commodity that can be bought and sold and whose price and quantities will be established by the law of supply and demand. This approach shapes major policy directions aimed at land formalization and privatization, commercialization of smallholder agriculture, promotion of large-scale plantations and agri-business; and support for genetically modified organisms in agriculture. Notwithstanding its primacy, this approach has been questioned by civil society organizations that contest the monopolization of the political space by the state.

By exploring competing food-related discourses and practices, the paper critically reflects upon conceptual and analytical questions that affect the practical implementation of the concept of food sovereignty in Uganda. The paper raises the question of how the notion of food sovereignty can be operationalized in Africa, particularly in the context of relative weakness of transnational agrarian movements, the partial cooptation of civil society organizations into the legalistic framework of right to food, and the predominance of neoliberal ideology surrounding food security—an ideology which lies at the core of food and agricultural modernization policies in the country. A complex set of questions and concerns include the need not to analyze the food question in isolation from its constituent parts. It proposes to look at the integration of food and land-based social relations in the context of localized and historical-geographical specificities of livelihood practices among Acholi peasants in northern Uganda as a way to ground the concept. The paper aims to broaden the discussion about food sovereignty by looking at it through the lenses of territory, locality, praxis and peasantries while simultaneously providing an analysis of culture, structure and agency in the *longue durée*. Interpreting food sovereignty as praxis allows us, on the one hand, to historicize agricultural livelihoods strategies and situate them within wider forms and institutions of social, political and economic organization of rural households in the context of increased pressures coming from the state, market and ecology. On the other hand, it helps to open up the debates on agrarian conditions from the perspective of agrarian subjects.

As I show in the paper, the key element in forging socio-economic (and political?) autonomy, mutuality, cooperation and resilience is given by combined mechanisms of sovereign access to land, control on labour capacity mobilization and indigenous seeds selection and reproduction. I suggest that civil society organizations and peasant practices can play a significant role in affecting the direction of societal change though in a context of increasing marginalization, subordination and dependence.

Pillars of Food Security Policies in Uganda

Formalizing Land Ownership

The idea that land formalization and land titling are key mechanisms to increase the flow of capital investments in rural areas and are essential for the creation of vibrant land markets has been at the core of the agenda of International Finance Institutions (IFIs) in the last decade. Of paramount relevance to this argument is the work of the Peruvian development economist Hernando de Soto who, in the search for the “mystery of capital”, posited a direct, positive relationship between the system of representation and formalization of land ownership and its monetary value (2000). In his view, it was this prime function of representation of land ownership, epitomised in freehold property in the Western world, that stimulated the use of land as collateral for access to credit and therefore as a stimulus to rural development and the commercialization of agriculture. This discourse has been profoundly influential among

development economists and policy makers at global level and particularly in Africa. In Uganda, the 1998 Land Act recognized the simultaneous presence of different forms of land tenure – freehold, leasehold, *mailo*¹ and customary. This legislative act was welcomed by land activists and NGOs yet it postulated a convergence towards a homogenized, single land-tenure system based on the notion of individualized, freehold, private property. The stated policy intent was to create a more harmonized and uniformed land tenure system (Batungi 2008). According to Mamdani (2012), the 1998 Land Act, far from preserving and protecting customary land tenure regimes, must be interpreted as the latest phase of the modern state endeavour to colonize and expand the effect and logic of the 1900 Buganda Agreement to the entire country.

Seen from a regional perspective, land law reforms in Eastern Africa and the ensuing changes in statutory land laws characterized the post-1990 period. It marked a significant continuity with colonial policies that started to promote the creation of markets in land, individualization of land tenure and the demise of customary tenure (McAuslan 2013). This argument is resonant with another work by Ambreena Manji (2006) who maintains that in Africa the emphasis on neoliberal land (tenure) reforms switched the focus from land redistribution to tenure reforms, from politics to law, with the effect of de-politicising the debate and neutralizing alternative paths of reforms. Under the advice of international organizations, foreign governments and mainstream NGOs, Uganda embraced the pro-market willing-buyer willing-seller approach anchored in the pre-eminence of land markets and property rights. Similar to what South Africa experienced, where market-led land reforms have first been promoted, this approach delivered only minimal transformation of land ownership, maintaining the *status quo* and preserving forms of inequality and exclusion in land-based social relations (Lahiff, Borrás and Kay, 2007). Premised on the assumption that the invisible hand of the market will naturally redistribute land to the most efficient producers, and enhance agricultural production through economies of scale, this approach pushes to the background issues of unevenness in land ownership. International development agencies continue to provide mono-dimensional analysis of complex land-based social relations stressing the importance of formal tenure security, and the associated virtues of freehold property. In this regard the recently issued World Bank's survey "Doing Better Business" exhorts the Ugandan government to increase land formally registered in the national cadastral (only 18% at the moment), through to the establishment of computerized cadastral systems and digitalized zonal offices (2013:57). Clear and secure land tenure policies are seen as the first necessary step to institute credible systems to value land, enhance the credit flow in the rural areas, as well as improve the coverage of, and level of compliance with, property taxes. In this spirit, the World Bank launched the 1.000,000 land titles campaign. However titling and formalization of land rights have not been successful in the countryside, especially in the northern part of the country. There are two reasons for this: the high cost of registering land that only well-off farmers can afford; and the perceived uselessness of formalization to smallholders. These latter

¹ Mailo land is the outcome of the 1900 Buganda Agreement between the British Crown and the Baganda Oligarchy which assigned exclusive control of 9000 square miles to Baganda traditional chiefs.

contend that the traditional structures of authority and management of land in the countryside are effective in recognizing the rights of members of rural communities to the use of, and residency in, land. Evidence from experiences in other countries suggests that processes of property titling and the use of property as collateral promote speculation, accumulation of rents and concentration of wealth *via* forced transfers from the less affluent to the more secure rural and urban classes (see Mitchell, 2007).

Commercializing Smallholder Agriculture, Consolidating Agri-Business

In Uganda pressures on smallholder agriculture to produce cash crops have a long history. Colonial governments used traditional chiefs to impose forced crops and forced sales (Mamdani 1976, Tosh 1978). The expansion (or lack) of export production has persistently been the subject of moral exhortation from state leaders, missionaries, and upper classes. During late colonialism and in the post-independence period, under the command of local state officials, “Grow More Cotton” and “Grow More Coffee” campaigns were implemented in order to expand the base of peasant production and orient it towards export (Mamdani 1986).

In recent times, low levels of productivity of smallholder agriculture are unequivocally identified as the main cause for deteriorating agricultural production and reduced food security in the country. In the last couple of decades the Poverty Eradication Programs (1997/2009) and the Plan for Modernization of Agriculture (2001-09) targeted “model farmers” as core beneficiaries of agricultural extension services with the hope that these will act as a nucleus from which new methods of farming can percolate and diffuse to the other village farmers. Under the slogan of “securing food security through the market”, the plan aimed to increase commercialization of agriculture. That was to be through diversification and specialization, and support enterprise development and agricultural zoning by abolishing the traditional systems of agricultural extension services and marketing boards, which although focused on major export cash crops, had reduced price volatility and provided inputs and credits to farmers (Bategeka et al. 2013:2). The stated objective was to increase farmers income-price by reducing taxation and establish private marketing agencies. The result was the replacement of import-substitution strategies and the further orientation of agricultural production towards export. In the light of these agricultural reforms grounded in the market ideology, the government progressively reduced its public spending in agriculture from 10% in 1980 to 3.7% in 2008/2009 (Okello 2009:13). Only a tiny minority of politically well-connected individuals maintained the remaining fragments of state support in agriculture especially in the sector of coffee production and other cash crops for export. This is illustrated by the rapid expansion of traditional export crops like coffee cocoa, tea, sugar, cotton and palm oil. High-value horticultural commodities were promoted like fresh fruits, vegetables and cut flowers, expansion of large-scale production of soy, sugar and grains, some of it for biofuel and livestock feed. In 1985 food crops accounted for 72,4% of agricultural GDP. This percentage decreased to 65,3% in 2000 (FAO 2000).

International donors and think tanks therefore constantly exhort the government of Uganda to enable smallholder farmers to profitably and appropriately make use of inorganic fertilizers, improved seeds and planting materials and other agricultural technologies for higher agricultural production (IFPRI 2013:4). The main objective is to ensure a higher rate of usage of appropriate fertilizers and seeds, control crop diseases, raise the levels of capitalization of small-scale farmers, improve rural infrastructure and connect producers to markets (World Bank 2013:Xiii-Xvi). In line with government's "2040 vision" of transforming Uganda from a low-income, agricultural-based country, into a modern middle-income country driven by service and industry sectors, the agricultural economy needs to be transformed into a more efficient and productive sector by strengthening links between research and advisory services and between advisory services and small famers, strengthening credit institutions, prioritizing road investments and supporting the private sector to deliver agricultural services (World Bank 2012). In state and donors' discourses small-scale farming is always part of the problem, blamed for its low levels of agricultural productivity and integration within markets - in 2006 the most commercialized quintile of rural households engaged in the agricultural sector sold only about 50% of their output (World Bank 2013:31). The antidote is universally identified in the adoption of Green Revolution's improved technologies as prescribed by the agri-business model, which are associated with higher agricultural incomes, improved nutritional status, lower staple food prices and increased employment opportunities (EPRC 2012:1). In his campaign to foster agricultural commercialization, President Yoweri Museveni magnified the virtues of large-scale plantations by attributing to them the reasons for a recovery of the economy: "three players in agriculture have done well: the plantation owners (mostly in sugar, tea and coffee); the big scale farmers and the medium scale farmers" (2012:3). The political establishment in Uganda sees the rise of agricultural prices not as a threat to the social order but as an opportunity to be seized by the expanding production of export crops that are increasingly being demanded on the regional and global market for which Uganda enjoys a comparative advantage. The development model promotes a larger and denser integration of small-scale producers within the regional and global market, particularly through the formation of export-oriented agro-industrial cluster zoning based on the activities of the agri-business which is the fastest growing business sector over the decade (World Bank 2013: 22, 58).

Food Insecurity and Technological Fix

The hegemonic narrative argues that the goal of ending hunger and malnutrition in Uganda can be achieved by strengthening governance, increasing investments, and appropriately managing natural resources. A household is food secure if it can reliably gain access to food in sufficient quantity and quality for all its members to enjoy a healthy and active life (Republic of Uganda 2005:iv). The discourse of food security is intermeshed with a series of concerns linked to economies of scale, the nutritional content of staple crops, the purchasing

power of households and so on. In doing so food insecurity seems to be caused by lack of availability of food at household level rather than to uneven distribution and access to land shifting the traditional focus of food security from a question of political choice at national level to one of purchasing power at household level.

Despite the periodic outburst of food shortages across the country, the World Food Programme (WFP) argues that overall Uganda does not lack food (WFP 2011). There is in fact wider recognition in the country that the majority of food that circulates in the national market comes from small-scale agriculture. So the claim of food insecurity needs to be further investigated. Lack of access to food is experienced by particular social categories in different places at different times. Food insecurity crosses both urban and rural spaces. Landless rural households or impoverished tenants, especially in the southern part of the country that have insufficient access to rural assets and resources fail to produce their own subsistence requirements (Lwanga-Lunyiigo 2007). Also farmers that are more integrated within commercial agriculture experience periods of lack of food. In the northern, 20 years of protracted war and the forced reclusion of large numbers of Acholi peasants in Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps plus the influx of food aid mostly from US (Branch 2012) had serious implications on food production and distribution. Also urban poor suffer uncertainty in their access to food as showed by the burst of food riots and popular protests resulting from food inflation in 2011. Riots begun in Kampala in the hotspot of Kisekka Market, in Mbale and Gulu where the convergence of poverty, unemployment and skyrocketing oil and basic food prices exasperated an already precarious social order. In May 2011 food crops inflation rose to 39,3%: a bunch of *matooke*² 27-30.000 Uganda shillings up from 9.000 in September 2010. The overall food inflation in the financial year 2011/2012 reached the astonishing figure of 30.6% (World Bank 2013:66). There is little doubt that small-scale rural producers are suffering from increasing fiscal burdens and various forms of taxations as indicated in the recent 2014/2015 Budget: the absence of state support, land evictions due to “development” projects such as dams, special economic zones, large-scale plantations for cash crops and bio-fuels, climate change and unequal exchange. Yet the mainstream narrative of food (in) security misconstrues the causes of the food crisis, and portrays those economic and political actors that are part of the problem, as key to its resolution.

The latest versions of this argument stress the need to stimulate more efficient mechanisms of food accessibility, developing and expanding internal and external markets, assisting the private sector to improve food processing, preservation and storage, marketing and distribution, promoting a well-coordinated system for collecting, collating and disseminating information on food marketing and distribution, and securing food aid. However in this framework questions of access to food and other natural resources are de-historicised, devoid of their power content, and left to the performing mechanisms of flows of information. Neo-classical economic dogma asserts that the problem seems to lie in non-perfectly functioning markets because of exogenous distortions (state interventions) or ineffective information

2 the most common staple food made out of bananas

systems. In doing so the food question shifts its attention from the political nature of state political choices to the rational choices of utility-maximizer individuals.

Other preoccupations in the food debate include the pressing questions of expanding populations and the presumed low nutritional content of traditional crops (Government of Uganda 2005). Corporate-led technological innovations and the never-ending faith in the virtues of the market represent the solution to the Malthusian dilemma. In the summer of 2013, the Ugandan parliament debated, with serious civil society concern, the Bio-Safety and Bio-Technology Bill, which advocates the adoption of genetic manipulation of crop plants through molecular assisted selection in lieu of conventional plant breeding. The intent is to produce higher yields, pest-resistant and nutritionally-enhanced crops through the application of genetic engineering to agricultural production. Under the aegis of AGRA (Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa) and through the support of a cartel of TNCs, the process is in its inception. Under the leadership of the National Agricultural Research Organization, agricultural scientists are implementing laboratory experiments on bio-fortification of staple food such as bananas and cassava, the enhancement of provitamin A in finger millet and sorghum, and testing genetically modified varieties of water-efficient maize and disease-resistant soya beans. The Water Efficient Maize for Africa project led by the Kenyan-based African Agricultural Technology Foundation, and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and USAID, has been implemented since 2008 in South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, with the stated goal of increasing yield stability and reducing hunger, and improve the livelihoods of millions of Africans.

These events raised a series of ethical, cultural and ecological concerns. Agronomists at Makerere University, for example, argue that the introduction of genetically modified varieties of sorghum and finger millet in an open environment would most likely engender the pollination of all other indigenous varieties. The effect would be presumably a reduction in the bio-diverse patrimony and a standardization of different varieties of sorghum and millet selected and grown for millennia by eastern African peasants in GMOs. Below the surface of philanthropic interventions and policy narratives, the objective is to incorporate African food production and consumption systems into the global food chains by privatizing the main source of production and increasing its foreign control. The key goal of AGRA is, in fact, to access African genetic wealth without sharing benefits with, nor recognizing the role of, peasant communities who developed the cultivars for centuries (Thompson 2012:345). This process, generally referred to as bio-piracy or looting, is accompanied by a parallel process aimed at patenting seeds resulted from adding one or more genes to the crop varieties that had been developed for centuries by rural populations. Sterilizing and patenting seeds, whose global market is controlled by an oligopoly of a few TNCs, represents the further step in the integration of seeds into the global value chains. Purchase of hybrid seeds is in fact followed by an agreement signed between farmers and the detainer of the intellectual property rights of the seed or plant variety, not to diffuse, multiply or exchange seeds. These agreements

are aggressively promoted and monitored through a set of complex rules articulated by the World Trade Organization and the World Intellectual Property Organization. By such means, institutions of global governance are pushing peasants, who have suffered from multiple acts of dispossession and bio-piracy, to remunerate the bio-pirates.

Civil Society Discourses and Responses

Against this background, civil society organizations (churches, environmental organizations, local and foreign NGOs, CBOs) have articulated competing, and sometimes overlapping, discourses based on the right to food. By mobilizing themselves around issues such as human rights, food security, sustainability and community-based development, they have played a major role in the achievement of legislation and policies in favor of the right to adequate food (Ratjen et al. 2008:27). Codified in the United Nations Bill of Human Rights, the right to food is an individual and universal right that every human being hold. With the adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food, Uganda is pioneer in establishing a framework law on the right to food and is an example of civil society and the government increasingly working together with these guidelines. Based on these achievements in the national legal framework a network of NGOs and CSOs started to apply the guidelines to monitor the Ugandan government's activities in fighting hunger and malnutrition. They wanted to try and hold the state accountable for violations of the right to food.

In addition civil society organizations have been consistently mobilizing discourses and actions around a set of collateral issues such as large-scale land acquisitions, GMOs, terms of exchange of agricultural commodities, conservation and management of natural resources and intellectual property rights. With regard to land acquisitions for example, the Uganda Land Alliance, an umbrella organization grouping different social actors around issues of land rights, pressed the government to respect the United Nations Voluntary Guidelines, and highlighted its anti-legal practices.

Following the successful example of Kenya, where societal mobilization against the adoption of pro-GMOs legislation obtained the temporary interdiction, segments of civil society in Uganda sustained the creation of spaces of interlocution and debate to raise awareness among the population about the health, ecological and cultural implications of the adoption of GMOs, a subject left to the poorly participative and transparent mechanisms of conventional politics. In a similar vein, civil society organizations successfully opposed the adoption by the Ugandan government of the Convention of International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV). UPOV, an intergovernmental organization with headquarters in Geneva, was established in Paris in 1961 with the aim to codify intellectual property rights for plant breeders and encourage the development of new varieties of plants. UPOV grants the breeders not only the right to sell and produce propagating materials but also to additional rights to reproduction (multiplication), conditioning for purpose of propagation, offering for

sale, importing and stocking. By granting and protecting (new) plant variety rights (PVR), it imposes on farmers numerous conditions and limitations, and the payment of royalties to the industries and companies that detain the PVR.

The 1991 Rio Convention on Biodiversity introduced the principle of an equitable sharing of benefits between breeders and farmers. Because Uganda mostly depends on agriculture, civil society organizations argue that UPOV Convention is not the right instrument for the legal protection of farmers since it is not compatible with the ways and means of the majority of the population. They suggested instead that the protection of the rights of local communities is best achieved through the African Model Law (AML) which instead takes into account smallholders' interest by allowing them to continue their age-old right to exchange, use and sell seeds.

In the face of such challenges, the Ugandan state is deploying its arsenal of coercion and control by targeting progressive NGOs that advocated for land and food rights, spying and threatening engaged researchers, sympathetic lawyers and journalists. The result is an increasing fragmentation of civil society interventions, the partial co-optation into legalistic frameworks, subordination to state censorship for their very survival, and separation from those segments of society they claim to represent. Overall civil society organizations' capacity to put pressure on state institutions depends on their capacity to act in connection with popular constituencies as the successful case of Save Mabira Forest Campaign in 2007 showed (see Child 2009). Yet though the Mabira case has been widely referred to as an example of sustained protest by civil society groups and as a deterrent to undemocratic decision-making and profit-driven business initiatives around the commons, in depth analysis shed light on the existence of complex webs of power between state, the business community and civil society and the often ambiguous role played by non-governmental organizations (Honig 2014).

Food Sovereignty as Peasant Praxis?

Drawing from Borras and Franco's critical comments on the necessity to address the land dimension within the food sovereignty project (2010:107), this section explores the implications of land-based social relations on the instantiation of food sovereignty from the perspective of agrarian subjects in northern Uganda. Through the exploration of Acholi peasantries' historical and contemporary agricultural practices, livelihoods strategies and struggles to maintain access to land and food production, with a particular reference to the Amuru district, I suggest to read food sovereignty as a set of social, political and ecological practices aimed at ensuring local self-sufficiency and social reproduction. This section therefore historicises *praxis* to ground food sovereignty in the social, political and ecological practices of rural populations.

Historical studies based on linguistics, archaeology and paleoecology brought to light the existence of complex and elaborated food-producing systems in the Great Lakes region (Shoenbrun 1993, 1998). Situated at the crossroad of various population movements, intermarriages and exchanges, the region became the place of an agricultural synthesis after 500 B.C. The successful integration of cereal agriculture and stock raising, planting root-crops such as yams, oil palm, beans, gourds and cow peas, and leguminous plants, established the premises for consolidated patterns of settlements and soil fertility maintenance into the drier zones of the region (Shoenbrun 1998:20). The cumulative agricultural expertise inherited created the premises for what Shoenbrun defined the “roots of agricultural abundance” (1993:65).

Colonial enterprise aimed to push peasants to produce cotton in order to pay taxes and other kind of fees and be able to purchase the imported European consumer goods that penetrated the colonial economy. Yet Acholiland was marginal in many ways to the early British colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. As a dry, geographically remote and sparsely populated area located far to the north of the country it seemed of little interest to the commercial appetites of the colony.

A nation of agriculturalists and stock breeders, Acholi did not show propensity to cash-crops production nor to labour migration into southern region (Atkinson 2010:5). Land availability and the absence of individualised land tenure gave comparative stability to the “traditional” socio-economic order (Girling 1960:183). Rights in cultivation descended from father to son and they were subordinated to the continued use of the soil and membership of the clan. Consistently with what Mafeje (2003) argued, such forms of occupation did not imply permanent ownership but only granted usufruct-rights. Women accessed land through their husbands although they were in charge of those plots dedicated to food crops near the house. Each wife or mature woman of the household maintained two fields of millet, one field of sesame, a small plot each of beans, pigeon peas, ground nuts, spinach (Girling 1960:191). Seed production and selection was performed by women who after marriage used to come with seeds brought from the father’s household to begin cultivation. In a context of low population densities, low technological development, sparse settlements and distance from the main trading centres, the Acholi agro-pastoralist communities developed many forms of mutual help and collective labour that sharpened their political and socio-reproductive autonomy and connected households and the village. Mutual help, obligation to the group, the centrality of the household and village were all emphasized. Material distinctions between people were of little importance. Relations of production were cooperative not antagonistic. Appropriation was of nature in the course of production without social appropriation (Mamdani 1976:21). Use value of land and its importance were cemented in a common ethic and social responsibility in the use of land.

Acholi peasants depended on family labour and had little incentive to produce cash crop surpluses. Planting in this specific succession millet, sesame, pigeon peas, sorghum, and

cassava ensured autonomous food supply and the expansion of the resource basis. Seed production and selection was performed by women who after marriage used to come with seeds brought from the father's household to begin cultivation. Pluri-activity, mixed cropping and shifting cultivation, combined with the control over labour capacity and seed reproduction represented the pillars of Acholi's food self-sufficiency. As reported in the 1967 Agricultural Census sorghum and millet were regularly inter-cropped, and often mixed with groundnuts, field and pigeon peas, and sim sim (Uganda Government 1967). Polycultures based on combination of sorghum, peanut and millet yielded consistently more than corresponding monocultures in conditions of stressful access to water (Natarajan and Willey quoted in Altieri 2010:125).

These dynamics and forms of agency acquire further relevance in the contemporary context of mounting competition over land resources, neoliberal restructuring of agriculture, prolonged war, the ensuing coercive internment of 1.8 million people in "internally displaced" camps, massive cattle dispossession by Uganda army, military elites' land grabbing and flows of tons of US food aid. Yet in the face of continuous pressures of various kinds the northern regions are still by far the largest producers (in terms of hectares and production) of food crops (UBOS 2012:43). These include sorghum, field, cow and pigeon peas, groundnuts, sim sim and second largest producers for finger millet, beans and cassava. In particular Amuru district is the largest producer district in the northern region for beans - 74,671 tonnes - and groundnuts - 14,375 tonnes (Op. cit.:42). Obviously these statistics do not provide us with information about food crop production's (re)distribution among rural households, nor about the disposition of family labour product. With regard to the latter, it's critical to highlight that: only 19% of finger millet produced, is sold, while the majority of harvested product is consumed (37,7%), stored (33,5%) and used for other "ceremonial" or reciprocity purposes (9,8%); only 14,3% of sorghum produced is sold, while 46,9% is consumed, 30,1% is stored and 8,6% is used for redistributive socio-cultural activities (Op. cit.:44). Fieldwork in Amuru confirmed these data. There were minimal levels of commercialization of agricultural outputs although some variation between crops. The district has also been characterized by very low levels of access to formal credit (1,5%), to government agricultural modernization programs as NAADS (1,2%) (UBOS 2010a: 304, 310, 323). In the absence of support programs from above, peasants seem to rely on more horizontal networks (farmer-to-farmer) of knowledge transmission with regard to agricultural techniques, crops varieties, conservation practices, and climatic conditions. In terms of land access, northern Uganda still enjoys the highest size of average holding per capita - 1,6 ha - compared to the national average - 1,1 ha (UBOS 2010b:14). In Amuru 98,4% of people access land through customary land-tenure systems while freehold is registered on only 0,5% of parcels (Ravnborg et al 2013:17). Notwithstanding the absence of written documentation, registered in the 94% of the respondents, and against the paraded insecurity of customary land-tenure regimes, only 0,3 % of respondents in the area perceived this form of tenure as insecure (Op. cit.:22, 39). Low levels of commercialization and organic composition of capital, the relative availability of land through customary land

tenure systems, partial absence of landlordism, and the presence of vibrant local peasant markets, can impede the entrenchment and deepening of commodity relations especially if coupled with low levels of mobility of labour, land and credit and of rural households' competition. As Harriet Friedmann notes:

If household reproduction rests on reciprocal ties, then reproduction resists commoditization. If access to land, labour and credit and product markets, is mediated through direct non monetary ties to other households or classes, if these ties are reproduced through stable institutional mechanisms, then commodity relations are limited in their ability to penetrate the cycle of reproduction (1982: 163).

This is an incisive reminder that though capitalism is the dominant mode of production, where peasant households' reproduction rests on a set of communal and class relations there are objective limitation to the operation of the law of value. This does not mean that Acholi is an egalitarian society, nor that peasant households are insulated from broader market imperatives. Rather that though social stratification is rapidly advancing, and class formation is crystallizing in the form of tripartite division in peasant agriculture, entrepreneurial agriculture and agri-business (see Van der Ploeg 2008:1-6), peasants' forms of social organization actively shape the trajectories of agrarian change. Yet this social group face enormous challenges emanating from other social groups which represent the interests of traditional, turned-entrepreneurial, agrarian classes - the village bourgeoisie (see Mamdani 1976). These can "customarily" claim access to land, the politically-connected rural elites, and urban salaried and professionals with speculative intent. They are receptors and implementers of the precepts and impulses deployed by agri-business: mechanization, production for export market, chemicalization of agriculture, workers' over-exploitation. In doing so they are the promoters of a view that increasingly sees land and agriculture as sources of profits often re-invested in other remunerative activities in the countryside especially in merchant activities, transport services, and as rentiers.

In capitalist agriculture all resources are fictitiously constructed as commodity, including labour (Van der Ploeg 2014:6; Woods 2009). In Amuru, family, communal and other reciprocated forms of labour, and other resources' (especially seeds) exchanges between households, and low levels of out-migration, represent major obstacle to labour commoditization. It is therefore crucial to assume the existence of different degrees and forms of commoditization which radically alter the spectrum of possibilities and opportunities for rural households. Even when peasants respond to market opportunities they act differently from capitalist actors' market rationality driven by imperatives of profit maximization and endless accumulation. It is subsistence, survival or social reproduction that in this case drive agricultural production not the "agricultural entrepreneurial calculus" (Friedman 1982). By determining the crop varieties to plant, the seeds to use, the quantities to sell, consume and store, by constructing social relations that counter market consumption, households can play a significant role in shaping the impact of market within their local area (Bush 2007:194). Rural households

have been for example successful in protecting their capacity to re-produce seeds in the face of corporate appropriation of genetic resources and seeds patenting, and NGOs' attempts at promoting hybrid seeds varieties among farmers in the area. Seeds selection and reproduction is reserved to the meticulous' role of women who have produced a veritable set of local seed's banks. Seeds also represent an important means of social exchange. The very elaborated nature of local food systems and their embeddedness into socio-ecological norms and relations are of paramount significance here to explain the resilience of peasant farming in a context of mounting pressures for commoditization of social reproduction. These insights into the social reproduction strategies of Acholi peasants illuminate the character of social practices that underpin food sovereignty.

The recent and ongoing struggle around the attempt by the state to grab 40.000 ha of land in the Amuru district and allocate it to the Madhvani Group for large-scale sugar plantation, which signaled an impressive participation of women in physical and symbolic resistance against dispossession, shows a great degree of awareness among rural populations of the importance to maintain access to reproductive resources. In other cases, where dispossession occurred in the district to make space for conservation areas and game reserves, peasants resurrected to strategies of "illegal" or mobile farming at the margins of enclosed lands. The resurrection of hidden and manifest forms of contestation reinvigorate the significance of land and food questions, especially in a post-conflict context where precarious and insecure existences are the norm, and peasants deeply value their continued access to land and the commons as the main avenues to social reproduction.

Concluding Remarks and Future Research Trajectories

Paraphrasing the first lines of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, McMichael argued that "*peasants make their own history, but not always as they please*" (2008). This article has argued that many of the organizing principles at the core of food sovereignty paradigm are inscribed in the socio-cultural and ecological practices and norms of peasant populations in northern Uganda. Yet these practices are taking place in an increasingly adverse national and international environment, and under circumstances transmitted from the past, which enormously challenge their implementation and jeopardize the future of peasant agriculture and food security/sovereignty prospects. The paper explored this tension by suggesting the need to understand food sovereignty from the everyday peasant practices which embody an incredibly valuable, historically-constructed and territorially-grounded, expertise and knowledge. This might help to move the debate beyond the epiphenomenal character of its contemporary formulations and incorporate its historical and localized meaning. Such insights needs to be put into dialogue with global formulations elaborated by transnational agrarian movements (TAMs), which have been instrumental in conceiving and promoting the notion of food sovereignty (see Borras, Edelman and Kay 2008). TAMs have not occupied a central political stage in Africa as they have in Latin America and South-East

Asia. African social movements did gain momentum especially as a result of the African social forums in Nyeleni in 2007, in Maputo in 2008 and again in the anti-land grabbing conference in Nyeleni in 2011. However peasant organizations have remained extremely fragmented and disconnected from the wider political arena. Major limitations included the difficulty to intercept localized and everyday forms of rural struggles and connect them to larger more comprehensive demands.

Local instances, practices and struggles represent here the substratum upon which global interconnections are drawn. It is along the local-global axes that the dynamics of capital accumulation and resistance take place. It is along this axis that future research needs to concentrate. The nucleus of future research trajectory should include in-depth explorations of the changing class structures and agencies of the Ugandan countryside in order to grasp with the character of everyday politics. Particular emphasis should be given to the dynamics of production, consumption, distribution, and social reproduction at household level. In such a phase of schizophrenic acceleration of capitalist penetration and transformation, many aspects of the food sovereignty question remain unknown. It is essential to devote particular attention to changing dynamics of land use, seed production, consumption patterns, sexual division of labour, use of fertilizers and pesticides, and water access. This requires a close investigation of the singular conditions of constraint and opportunity that different categories of small-scale farmers confront in particular space-time settings.

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