Shifting the paradigm: moving towards food sovereignty, theoretical and practical reflections.

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1. Introduction

According to the global report on food crises almost 127 million people across 51 countries faced acute levels of food insecurity in 2017. Four countries situated in the Middle East have been affected by protracted conflict and have registered very high numbers of food-insecure people: Yemen 17 million, while Syria, Iraq and Palestine together accounted for over 10 million (FSIN 2018, P. 3-2). There is little doubt that war represents the main driver of food insecurity in major complex political emergencies. However, the conjunctural analysis discounts long-term dynamics that have generated and reproduced food insecurity in the Middle East. For example, skyrocketing global food prices in 2006-2007 and the ensuing emergence of food riots by poor urban masses (Bush and Martiniello 2017) eventually fueled Arab Spring movements in which one of the main popular demands was access to bread and justice.

Such an alarm bell has sounded with a particular vigor in countries of the Middle East and North Africa region which have in the last decades become increasingly dependent on international markets and food aid for the daily consumption of their growing urban populations, particularly for grains and other key agricultural commodities. Middle East governments import about a third of globally traded grain (Woerz 2014), and the region has become the most food-dependent region in the world (Harrigan 2012). These events have massively contributed to the re-emergence of debates over food questions and in particular the question of food dependency in a context of commercial concentration in the global food trade especially of global grain markets which are dominated by a small number of key exporting countries and corporate agro-industry: %70 of global grain trade and meat is carried out by huge transnational corporations, the big four: Archer Midlands, Bunge, Cargill and Dreyfus (Zurayk 2012).

Such conditions of food insecurity and dependency have been further exacerbated by persistent military and political conflicts in the region along with ecological devastation and climate change which contributed to worsen prospects of food security particularly for smallholders and the poor rural dwellers who have experienced increased hardship in reproducing their livelihoods (Bush 2016). Rahema (2008) also proposes that the region faces “radical Islamism” emergent in “several parts of Asia, often in the context of failed developmentalism and corrupt and authoritarian regimes” (quoted in Veltmeyer 2011, P.236).

Though with enormous differences in relation to land and water use and availability, and ecological systems, Arab countries have significantly responded though a variety of means to the threat of food insecurity. In the face of these daunting food security challenges, Arab governments have attempted a variety of responses to the tremendous oscillations of global food prices, ranging from food subsidies such as in Jordan and Lebanon, incentives to the dwellers like in Iran, increase of food storage, to more aggressive forms of large-scale land acquisitions abroad especially in Sub-Saharan Africa by countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Emirates (Harrigan 2014: ch.3). Other attempts to counter worsening prospects of food security include a plethora of technical fixes such as agricultural intensification, expanding irrigation, value chain development, and other sets of interventions that aim to further specialize the agricultural economies of many Arab countries into niche markets such as fruits and vegetables for which, we are told, they enjoy higher comparative and competitive advantages. They are therefore advised by international financial institutions to use the revenues generated from these activities to purchase grains on the international markets. In this context, food security is increasingly seen as something involving purely technical challenges: how to match new technologies with the best management practices, how to refine more sound value chains and interconnect different localities. This approach silences the question that food security is embedded in the region’s relations (see Sen 1981). A focus on technical fixes prevails among technocrats and international organizations and in discourses of companies of ulterior motives of sales maximization in seeds and pesticides.

And yet, attempted solutions to the food crisis via agricultural modernization strategies seem to reinforce a trade-based approach to food security and the preeminence of export-oriented, commercial, capitalist agriculture based upon the extensive use of chemicals, agro-toxics, hybrid seeds and severe water pumping with little or no attention to issues of improved land access for smallholders, land redistribution, environmentally sustainable and rain-fed agriculture. These short-termist attempts fail to tackle the questions at the heart of food crisis experienced by MENA countries.

Many accounts of the current food crises in the region elude questions of how and why the region once known as fertile crescent, and fairly recently as a self-sufficient region and food basket, has become so heavily dependent on long-distance food trade. This contrast with what is known from time immemorial about the region’s cereal production surplus simply attracted by the conquistador of North Africa (El-Ghonyee 1993, p. 452). It is important to notice in fact how the phenomenon of food insecurity is in fact relatively young and has been driven by the region’s incorporation in the world capitalist economy and the related processes of capitalist restructuring of land and agriculture (Issawi 1962, Owen 1981). The current status of severe food dependency resulted in fact from the structural and historical transformations in food, agricultural and land policies in the region which inhibited countries in the region to adjust domestic food production to growing internal consumptions needs (El-Ghonyee 1993).

Already in 1981 a report by the United Nations Commission for West Asia, The Food Security Issues in the Arab Near East, had emphasized the fact that the growth of food production in Western Asia did not match population growth (%3 per annum) and therefore largely fell short of domestic food demand which amounted to %4.5 per annum. It stressed that a relatively high dependence on imported food together with concentration of food imports in few foreign supply sources represent the basic threat to Arab food security (Sherbini 1981, p. 225).

This chapter explores the ways in which the national food security is embedded in the region’s relation to the imperatives of international markets as an antidote to the current lack of explanation of theBricks-and-mortar causes behind the current state of food dependency in the region. It does so analyzing the role of MENA region within changing international food regime and the implications for food security. It then provides a genealogy of the concept of food sovereignty analyzing the evolution of ideas around food starting from the post-war period and the challenge it represents for the current food regime. It also analyzes the obstacles and opportunities for a shift towards more socially and ecologically sustainable models of organization of production, circulation and consumption of food in the region. Final section of the chapter identifies the existing gap in the role of corporate-driven global agricultural value chains. In sum, three phases of integration of the

2. Food Sovereignty: Genealogy of the Concept

A useful way to approach the research question mentioned above is to propose an historically informed analysis of the changing international food regimes and the place of MENA region within it. The notion of food regime, elaborated by McMichael and Friedman (1989), refers to a mode of food production, circulation and consumption on a global scale pivoted around the interlinked roles of market and state in the context of general capitalist development. As shown by Riachi and Martiniello (this volume) the progressive integration of the region within the international food regime contributed to molding a specific division of agricultural labour across three different food regimes. Through the implementation of land and agricultural reforms that facilitated the emergence of private property rights and proportioned classes in the countryside and the simultaneous extra- version and channeling of agricultural produces towards international markets, countries in the MENA region have contributed to the expansion of agricultural exports and the growth of food production, circulation and consumption. The notion of food regime, elaborated by McMichael and Friedman (1989), within it. The notion of food regime, elaborated by McMichael and Friedman (1989), refers to a mode of food production, circulation and consumption on a global scale pivoted around the interlinked roles of market and state in the context of general capitalist development. As shown by Riachi and Martiniello (this volume) the progressive integration of the region within the international food regime contributed to molding a specific division of agricultural labour across three different food regimes. Through the implementation of land and agricultural reforms that facilitated the emergence of private property rights and proportioned classes in the countryside and the simultaneous extra- version and channeling of agricultural produces towards international markets, countries in the MENA region have contributed to the expansion of agricultural exports and the growth of food production, circulation and consumption.

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MENA region within the international food regime have progressively advanced the logics of capitalist profit to agriculture and intensified the degree of incorporation of the region’s land, water and agricultural resources. The capitalist food regime rapidly transformed the core ideas regulating the control, access and use of food. As Polanyi (1957) vividly pointed out, the transformation of agriculture transformed food into a fictitious commodity, one that could be bought and sold as any other commodity. These ideas have been consolidated by the neoliberal project, but they have not always been hegemonic. The following section will explore the evolution of core ideas around food after WWII and the continuity and discontinuity with the concept of food sovereignty.

The notion of food self-sufficiency emerged in the immediate aftermath of the decolonization process, when several African, Asian, and Latin American countries framed food self-sufficiency (and productivity) as the primary objective of development. The principle of food self-sufficiency identified by Mao Zedong as a central element in the transformation and renewing of Chinese society (Chun 2013), and emerged in Latin America in the context of radical redistributive land reforms of the 60-1950s (Boyer 2010), spread in Africa and the Middle East following the push of theories of dependence and uneven development (Amin 1976) which had caught the attention and imaginary of the populations and leaders of the decolonized world. Increasingly aware of the political use of food aid by the United States through the PL 480 (See McMichael 2006) and of the challenges that the agricultural input system posed to national food needs (Raikes 1988), African and Arab governments found themselves at a crossroads: accepting food policies increasingly regulated by the laws of supply and demand defined by the international markets; or defining policies oriented to the control of the national agro-food system in order to reduce the dependency from the international markets and ex-colonial powers. The notion of food self-sufficiency represented therefore the pillar of broader strategies of endogenous and auto-centered development opposed to extrametric models (Amin 1976; Bayart and Ellis 2000). In this sense the concept had a markedly political valence as it aimed to highlight the existence of power relations within the world capitalist economy and the international division of labour.

The political content of the food question was further emphasized by the powerful intervention of Amartya Sen (1981), which marks a turning point in the debate over poverty and hunger in the world. In his studies Sen emphasized the fact that capabilities arguing that the origins of famines in developing countries had little to do with questions of bad harvests but that had more to do with issues of social injustice and failing institutions. Both views agreed that the persistence of poverty and hunger people. The right to food began gaining visibility in international law with the work of the Committee on Economic Social Cultural Rights of the United Nations. In 2004, the committee worked produced the voluntary guidelines for action that government must take in order to implement the right to food. It produced three obligations for government to implement the right to food: respect the right to food; protect right to food (control private actors and TNCs or speculators), fulfill the right to food. The right to food is achieved through the fine-tuning of the latter, which are measured in terms of caloric intake, forms of labour, the use of pesticides or GMOs.

Both views agreed that the persistence of poverty and hunger was largely caused by issues of bad harvests but that had more to do with issues of social injustice and failing institutions. Both views agreed that the persistence of poverty and hunger is essentially economic rather than political question: a function of the maximization of production and optimization of the circulation of food at global level. Seen from this angle, the notion of food self-sufficiency empties itself of its more politically emancipatory attributes – the role of the state, the choices of agricultural and land policy, and the international hierarchy of power – and becomes declined in narrow terms. The right to food is a legal concept which obliges states to act in order to foster the right to food for poor and low income households through school meal programs, social programs to assist people and so on. These legal instruments have been useful in some occasions as examples in India and Brasil show in protecting peasants from dispossession and improving access to food. Governments, in the activities, in the attempt to keep them accountable. Movements for food democracy linked to the right to food emerged also in condemnation of the massive impact of the industrial food system on the ecosystem and on human and animal health. By showing the nefarious implications of the corporate industrial food system such as increased greenhouse gases, polluted water and eroded soil, reduced biodiversity, and deteriorating organic matter of the soil, it put in motion an embryonic
3. Food Sovereignty vs Food Security

In the face of the current political, economic and ecological challenges, critical scholars have started to look for a new developing paradigm for the MENA region. This section explores the ways in which the concepts and notions elaborated in the food sovereignty paradigm represent an alternative to the dominant corporate-based food paradigm. It analyses the ways in which food sovereignty distances itself from the current paradigm of trade-based food security. It asks, what are the challenges and opportunities of food sovereignty in the region and if it can enhance a shift in the ways in which food is produced, exchanged and consumed, and therefore analytically framed.

As we have seen, food security in the hands of the IFIs and other development agencies has concentrated on the ability of countries to purchase food on global markets; to liberalize domestic and international food markets and get local prices right (World Bank 2016, as quoted in Bush and Martiniello 2017). The emphasis of IFIs policy toward food insecure economies has been to promote the weary policy of comparative advantage: even poor countries should try and generate income that will enable food purchases on global markets rather than focus inward on generating greater autonomy and food sovereignty locally. Seen from this perspective, the notion of food security is merely interpreted through economistic lenses and it loses all its more politically eminent attributes, such as the role of the state, the choice of food and agricultural policies, and the international power relations in food systems.

The modern world food system has commoditized food to the extent that the hungry can only access sufficient nutrients for survival if they can purchase food. Food as a commodity has both an exchange and use value. Yet because it is a commodity that is both essential for life and stretches across many commodity chains, poor people are vulnerable to the uncertainties that surround access to it. These vulnerabilities are acute if the state under which they exist fails to ensure adequate local production or cannot purchase and then distribute food at prices that are affordable for the hungry (Bush and Martiniello 2016). If the country is poor and its territory ecologically marginal, there is likelihood of recurrent and persistent food crises and accompanying political opposition as occurring nowadays in the case of Yemen.

The strongest reaction to the hegemony of food security has emerged under the heading of food sovereignty. This term refers to the right of nations and people to control their food systems, their markets, modes of production, food habits and environment (Holt-Gimenez, 2011; Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010, p. 2). In 1996, La Via Campesina, the transnational umbrella gathering peasant organizations all across the world, defined food sovereignty as the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity (La Via Campesina 1996).

Food sovereignty has been characterized as an attempt to develop a strategy that will reconstruct economic and ecological diversity and supersede homogeneity of the exchange value regimes (McMichael, 2013). Food sovereignty sets itself apart from the idea and practices of food security that are rooted in notions of international trade, free markets and price equilibrium. Food sovereignty represents an epistemic fracture from previous intellectual traditions placing at its core the political character of the food question (McMichael, 2014). Political discontent has mounted with a modern food system that has been so dependent upon uniformity, capital intensity, GMOs and green revolution technology, and the food sovereignty paradigm provides opportunities to define alternative modes of thinking about food beside possibly helping to solve of its major challenges (Bush and Martiniello 2017).

The pivot of the food sovereignty narrative is the centrality it gives to the rural world and the role of smallholders knowledge and practices in it running against developmentalist narratives that posited the disappearance of the peasantry and the inevitability of urban futures. In doing so, it values food producers as the subjects of social and political change (see Zayek 2012). It remembers us that smallholder farmers globally produce more than 60% of food calories, yet they occupy only 30% of all agricultural land (Samberg et al 2016). This data is particularly significant in the light of the feminization of agriculture as although women produce most of the food in the global south, their role and knowledge are often ignored, and their rights to resources and as agricultural workers are violated. Food sovereignty asserts food providers right to live and work in dignity.

Moreover, according to the French National Centre for Scientific Research, the environmentally devastating agro-toxics used in the corporate-driven food production food generated 97.5% loss of plant genetic diversity on farms in the past 100 years. Connected to that is the right to food which is healthy, ecologically sustainable and of prudently appropriate, which is the basic legal demand underpinning food sovereignty. Guaranteeing it requires policies which support diversified food production in each region and country. In the food sovereignty framework, food cannot be treated simply as any another commodity to be traded or speculated on for profit. Food must be seen primarily as serving the sustenance of the community and only secondarily as something to be traded. Under food sovereignty, local and regional provisions take precedence over supplying distant markets, and export-oriented agriculture is rejected. The free trade policies which prevent developing countries from protecting their own agriculture, for example through subsidies, tariffs and public policies, are also inimical to food sovereignty. Food sovereignty emphasizes locality and the control over territory, land, grazing, water, seeds, livestock and fish populations on local food providers. Privatization of such resources, for example through intellectual property rights regimes or commercial contracts, is explicitly rejected. It therefore stresses the importance of anchoring control of food system within local communities and their ability to build upon existing indigenous and traditional knowledges and skills needed to develop localized food systems. It therefore contests corporate oriented research and the produced technologies such as genetic engineering.

La Via Campesina’s vision of food sovereignty emphasized ecology, entailing the sustainable care and use of natural resources especially land, water and seeds. In doing so it helped opening social enquiry to socio-ecological interactions and to the synergisms with biological components as a foundation for sustainable agro-ecological systems. The debate was advanced further with the popularization of the ideas of agro-ecology and ecological farming. In this regard, Vandana Shiva has argued that the paradigm of industrial agriculture has been rooted in war. The twin laws of exploitation and domination she argues ‘harm peoples health and the environment’ (Shiva 2016, p. 2). Her response has been to advance the importance of strategies that expand agro-ecology or relationships that link and embrace the
interactions between soils, seeds, the sun, water and farmers. Her analysis elaborated now for more than 30 years, is to remind policy makers that "Taking care of the Earth and feeding people go hand in hand" (Shiva, 2016, p. 12). Food sovereignty therefore requires shifts in the food production and distribution systems in order to protect natural resources, number of farmers, greenhouse gas emissions, avoiding energy-intensive industrial methods that damage the environment and the health of those that inhabit it.

Such call for agro-ecological practices has been made more urgent in the light of the catastrophic effects of climate change whose implications are massively felt by smallholder producers who depend on nature for their livelihoods. Even FAO, the organization that has promoted the green revolution paradigm for the past 50 years, started to cast doubt over the ecological viability of this model of production. José Graziano da Silva, FAO Director-General, argued at the 2018 second international symposium on agro-ecology in Rome: "the world keeps producing food according to Principles of Green Revolution of the 1960s and soils, forests, waters and air quality keep degrading. We need a transformative change".

In his view, a focus of increasing production at any cost has not been sufficient to eradicate hunger, despite we produce more food to feed the humanity. Agro-ecology embodies such necessary paradigm shift in the effort to promote a transformative change in the global food system while simultaneously preserving the environment as well as the resilience of farmers, boost local economies, safeguards natural resources and promotes adaptation and mitigation of climate change, and values local and indigenous knowledge. It is important to note that agro-ecology and food sovereignty are interlinked. There is no food sovereignty without agro-ecology and the latter is the agronomic technique of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is thus embodied in larger questions of both the rights of farmers and indigenous communities to control their own futures and make their own decisions emphasizing local control and autonomy. As Winfried and Jørgensen have argued "food security is more of a technical concept, the right to food a legal one. And food sovereignty is essentially a political concept" (Windfuhr & Jørgensen 2005).

The concept of food sovereignty in fact helps reframing and re-politicising the food question contributing to open up the democratic space for food producers in the global South in a context where the space for agriculture is crowded with philanthro-capitalist and aid agencies which by and large, are promoters of commercial and market led agriculture. That is, despite a significant number of farmers with genotypes, chemical and hybrid seeds, they are locked into the system because of the absence of alternative modes of production that support agro-ecological perspectives. This would help to create a resilient farmers economy where there is little or no support by donors who often value market led commercial agriculture over production of local food or food availability.

The 2007 Nyéhèni Declaration LVC’s official conference statement, detailed the negative nature of imported technics – their role in safeguarding the interests of others, particularly the interests of the monopolies, above those of the people. It criticized technologies and practices that damaged local capacities, including the environment and the soil within which metabolically sound agriculture can take root. Against this top-down agricultural revolution, LVC values, recognizes and respects diversity of traditional knowledge, food, language, and culture. It defines and advances a peasant path to modernity and development by stressing the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and water and asserts that everyone has the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies. Food sovereignty claims the primacy of peoples and communities’ rights to food and food production, over trade concerns.

A food sovereignty approach can be helpful toward defining and implementing agricultural interventions that support the active realization of the right to food and (associated rights) by placing those most impacted by hunger and food insecurity at the centre of decision making. Or, put differently, employing a food sovereignty framework can help to address how the right to food can be fulfilled in a given context and thus can serve as an important tool for envisioning—or re-envisioning—agricultural investment (Schivacci et al 2018, p.3).

4. A paradigm shift to tackle food security in the MENA region?

The notion of food sovereignty developed in Latin America under the impetus of rural social movements that, especially in cases such as Brazil, allied with progressive sections of the state. Food sovereignty has become the political manifesto that eventually helped to coalesce fragmented peasant organizations into transnational agrarian movement (see Borras and Edelman 2008). Food sovereignty has ever since moved to East Asia and to a certain extent in Africa, but its discourse did not take root in the Middle East. And yet, some critics of the current operation of the international food system have started to reflect upon the possible opportunities and challenges that the food sovereignty paradigm offers for the analysis of the food crisis and its possible solutions (Ají 2018) especially in region which still hosts 20 million smallholders (Bush 2016).

Despite the appeal that the concept has to highlight the salience of food questions in the MENA region, the implementation of a food sovereignty framework in the region is complicated by persistent war, military conflicts, ecological devastation, pauperization of water sources, climate change, and mass migrations. As Ají has noted, food sovereignty may be a brilliant idea to meet the interests of rural landless people in the Brazilian countryside and urban foodless people in the favelas but in MENA, anti-systemic struggle is often at the stage of securing sovereignty as in the case of Palestine for example, rather than inculbing it with social content and meaning (68:2018). In other words, given that the region is wrapped into multiple violent and political conflicts that have at their core questions of political sovereignty in different sites such as Syria, Yemen, Palestine and Iraq, how can food sovereignty supersede these barriers and become as useful vector of transformational politics?

Seen from the perspective of the nation-state, the food sovereignty framework which initially focused on the right of nations, provides a strategy to tackle food insecurity and dependency in a context of rampant food concentration and increasingly volatile prices. And yet though the absence of organized peasant movements (Palestine is the only exception) makes the grounding of a food sovereignty vision and praxis extremely complicated, as Ají (2018) brilliantly demonstrated, the food sovereignty concept has increasingly become an anchor of identity and resistance of the region. For example, in its call to detach from the operation of food empires, the concept re-engage the appeal to the notion of delinking elaborated by the Egyptian economist Samir Amin (1990) and its attempt to move away from food dependency from international food markets. Moreover, these antecedents of food sovereignty call for the significance of populist agronomy especially in Tunisia where the attention to the hydraulics problematic of the country pushed to think and develop ecologically sustainable water management technologies among others.

And yet, despite the MENA region faces huge problems of man-driven water scarcity and procreating food imports, high vulnerability to climate change and significant problems of transboundary pest diseases, agro-ecology can help tackling issues of management of freshwater ecosystems which are essential to human health, environmental sustainability and economic prosperity. This is furthermore important in a region where rain fed agriculture occupies 60% of farmland. That is, there is room to revitalize rain-fed agriculture via agro-ecology since it reduces the risk of uncertainties by making the system more resilient and smallholders less vulnerable through diverse and multiple cropping patterns, water conservation strategies and bio-diversity. This might help improve the deteriorating soil fertility in the region for example through supplementary food and farming systems that allow to do so, new synergisms and investments need to take place especially in facilitating farmers’ field schools to provide a space that allows smallholders experimentation in order to deal with existing and emerging problems.

That is, it should include multiple approaches such as includes activists participatory research, field research on farm and sharing of information of local people to share, enhance, and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act (“Chambers 1994, F. 963-935). Participation should be more inclusive and holistic to farmers perspective. And for participation to become more transformative, Giles Mohan (2007) argues that we need to see it as a form of citizenship in which political processes are institutionalized and people can hold others accountable” (p.799). This expresses the exercise of power both at the individual to the
collective which local farmers seem to lack. The projectization of agriculture often comes with the unorthodox language of empowerment (Rahman 2010) mainly practiced by development agencies as an alternative savior for development. There is a need to question whether empowerment is farmers driven and for what purpose.

To improve the scale up in the practices of agroecology, there needs to be a backing of policy makers with totally viable alternatives that should be smallholder friendly and environmentally considerate. Policies need to see agroecology as a holistic approach that can contribute to the betterment of health issues, among others. The above cannot be effective unless there is a democratic space that cater for the needs of the poor. And yet, agroecology is not just a series of technical prescriptions, it is rather an approach that values farmers political participation and social movements in decision making. The greatest obstacles scaling up in agroecology emanate from the power and influences of Transnational Corporations over public policies and research, especially the pesticides and seeds company. In this sense, agroecology poses a tremendous threat to corporate power over food and farming systems. It is thus through the legal, legislative and policy mechanisms that corporate agribusiness poses the biggest road blocks for agroecology neglecting issues of good health and the environment. Since agroecology pushes against the corporatization of food and farming systems, it explains why peasants and other smallholder farmers are facing huge repression from government and other transnational corporations repressive food chains. The third food revolution or supermarket revolution (Lang & Heasman 2004) indeed has a lot of exposure to food security and agroecological practices and struggles challenging the local right for food and land that emerged as responses from below to the challenges imposed by neoliberal agricultural restructuring. As shown in the documentary Palestinian Seed Queen by Mariam Shahin, Vivien Sansour, started initiatives of recuperation of heirloom seeds varieties that were disappearing in occupied West Bank. Israel's illegal occupation of the West Bank has dramatically damaged the Palestinian sector. Farmers have been deprived of access to land, water resources and markets. Dark wheat, called Abushamra in Arabic, was selected and promoted given that it grows with little cost. The increase in cases of cancer in the north pushed many people to try and go back to more traditional lifestyles. After harvest one third of the seeds is kept by one farmer while the remaining is divided among two other farmers, so the network expands. As a local farmer put it in a meeting with other participants pointing to the deterioration of nutritional content of industrial food: "Bread has become like eating spoons of sugar and does not taste like bread anymore. The idea is to revitalize rain fed agriculture and bring it back to its traditional way of food production. Since the food system is closely tied to the economy and table. Vivien's heirloom seed movement is challenging Israeli agribusiness monopolies in the Palestinian occupied territories. In a context in which everything traditional is labeled as primitive, the network emphasizes the role of peasants in seeds preservation and recuperation of terraced land. The journey of going back to eating healthy food starts with the preservation of heirloom varieties such as mulukhiya, foul (fava beans), and so on. Food is successfully cooked and then shared with people to taste. The network has in other words become a platform to share agro-ecological practices and learn from each other. The Palestinian local farmers groupings in the West Bank is one case example of this. Often in collaboration with civil society groupings (either informally or formally organized), NGOs and international organizations trying to enhance agro-ecological practices, Palestinian smallholder farmers are successfully trying to alleviate the problem of land degradation by using a mechanism of land reclamation to retain soil fertility and produce higher yields. In the Palestinian West Bank, local farmers are “bringing more land into cultivation by reclamation of mountainous areas” and thorough selection of plants fit for the topography of the land. In the "fruit trees, the dominant crop forming 69% of the cultivated land" of which “olive trees and stone fruits are most preferred to farmer” (ANERA 2013, p.3-2).

Other virtuous initiatives promoting food sovereignty and agro-ecologically sustainable environmental transformation include the food sovereignty days promoted by the Observatoire de la Souverainete Alimntariere e de L'Environnement (OSAE) based in Tunis. This innovative NGO brings together an array of activists, researchers and family farmers in the attempt to raise public awareness about issues such as agro-ecological practices, the preservation of heirloom seed varieties and the struggles farmers are raising against genetically modified seeds. Yet these initiatives also pointed to the enormous challenges family farmers are encountering in a context of subordinate and uneven incorporation into local markets and growing power of food empires and big pharma.

Similarly, in Egypt, there has been cases of deploying “agroecology as a weapon” and one that “can serve a solution. One farmer who “joined the small organization of farmers in his village to improve the quality of his produce” commented: “I buy supplies with colleagues to save money, and we sell together to reach the highest price. This makes us stronger together, to resist high prices and the weakening of the Egyptian pound” (ibid). Egypt however continues to face dwindling space for agriculture”. Oltre for urbanization purposes and many impoverished farmers have had to change practices and democratic struggles championing agrobiodiversity has been lost in Lebanon, and the apple varieties are limited to just three or four (ibid, p.7). These initiatives are also trying to raise awareness on the meaning of agro-ecology and what it entails in terms of agricultural practices in a context in which there is reduced access to healthy unpolluted commons and natural resources such as seeds, soils and water which are all scarce resource around the Mediterranean Basin, increasingly grabbed by corporate actors removing it from the hands of smallholders who are the most able to use them sustainably (ibid).

And yet, despite the challenges that the region presents from an ecological point of view, it is important to learn from a recent article in The Guardian, that “Syrian seeds could save US wheat from climate menace.” With the Syrian civil war, “Lebanon’s Beqaa region became the transitory station for a seedbank, one that is idealized that ‘could help feed the warming planet.’ From 1

5. Existing Agro-Ecological Practices and Struggles in the Region

Despite the current dominance of food empires, it’s worth noticing the existence in the MENA region of pockets of virtuous and sustainable agro-ecological practices and democratic struggles challenging the local right for food and land that emerged as responses from below to the challenges imposed by neoliberal agricultural restructuring. As shown in the documentary Palestinian Seed Queen by Mariam Shahin, Vivien Sansour, started initiatives of recuperation of heirloom seeds varieties that were disappearing in occupied West Bank. Israel’s illegal occupation of the West Bank has dramatically damaged the Palestinian sector. Farmers have been deprived of access to land, water resources and markets. Dark wheat, called Abushamra in Arabic, was selected and promoted given that it grows with little cost. The increase in cases of cancer in the north pushed many people to try and go back to more traditional lifestyles. After harvest one third of the seeds is kept by one farmer while the remaining is divided among two other farmers, so the network expands. As a local farmer put it in a meeting with other participants pointing to the deterioration of nutritional content of industrial food: “Bread has become like eating spoons of sugar and does not taste like bread anymore. The idea is to revitalize rain fed agriculture and bring it back to its traditional way of food production. Since the food system is closely tied to the economy and table. Vivien’s heirloom seed movement is challenging Israeli agribusiness monopolies in the Palestinian occupied territories. In a context in which everything traditional is labeled as primitive, the network emphasizes the role of peasants in seeds preservation and recuperation of terraced land. The journey of going back to eating healthy food starts with the preservation of heirloom varieties such as mulukhiya, foul (fava beans), and so on. Food is successfully cooked and then shared with people to taste. The network has in other words become a platform to share agro-ecological practices and learn from each other.

The Palestinian local farmers groupings in the West Bank is one case example of this. Often in collaboration with civil society groupings (either informally or formally organized), NGOs and international organizations trying to enhance agro-ecological practices, Palestinian smallholder farmers and sellers of processed food products is another agro-ecological successful story within the region. Other NGO’s like Arcenciel have provided trainings in conservation agriculture and better agroecological practices of conservation agriculture. Local Lebanese organizations such as Buzurna Juzurna are managed through farmers social networks and provide employment to local farmers such as hiring of Syrian refugees for gardening and selling their vegetables produce every week in Beirut at Haven for Artists in Mar Mikhael (ibid, p.5). Other agroecological trainings carried out also tend to focus on the “importance of preserving good open pollinated seeds”; “growing vegetables between the trees and orchards and planting aromatic culture at the edges of terraces” (ibid, p.6) despite that much of historical agrobiodiversity has been lost in Lebanon, and the apple varieties are limited to just three or four (ibid, p.7). These initiatives are also trying to raise awareness on the meaning of agro-ecology and what it entails in terms of agricultural practices in a context in which there is reduced access to healthy unpolluted commons and natural resources such as seeds, soils and water which are all scarce resource around the Mediterranean Basin, increasingly grabbed by corporate actors removing it from the hands of smallholders who are the most able to use them sustainably (ibid).

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Conclusions

This chapter explored the roots of contemporary food security challenges in the MENA region through an analytical analysis of the international food regimes and the ensuing transformation of land and agricultural policies. It then discussed the emergence of the food sovereignty paradigm and its critique of the current neoliberal corporate food regime from a theoretical point of view. It also discussed the challenges to the grounding of questions of food sovereignty and agro-ecology in the MENA region as possible solutions to mitigate pressures of climate change, soil deterioration, and water scarcity.

In MENA most food is imported to meet the market demand which has a negative impact on the nutritional component (preservatives may be added to increase the shelf life). Second, the smallholder farmers do not have enough support from the governments compared to middle- and large-scale farmers who practice large monocropping agriculture. Thus, the “economic narrative” of promoting economic growth (“Rivera-Ferre as quoted in Misra 2017, p.5) where “agriculture roles in transitory economy is to generate surplus food and an accelerated capitalist development through urbanization and industrialization” (ibid. p.5). Third, agriculture or food production in Most Arab countries is limited “by severe shortages of water and arable land, leaving the region dependent on food imports and vulnerable to weather and market fluctuations” (Khouri et al. 2011, p.2). And finally, the economization of agriculture to fit into industrialization and globalization model remakes it to “become technology and capital intensive [hence] generating an abiding anti-smaller bias; leads to a standardized monoculture; artificially depletes the rural economy; and, become detrimental to both population and planetary health” (Misra 2017, p.5).

Given MENA’s limited natural resources made particularly scarce through over-extraction of water, the region is presented with particular challenges when it comes to cultivatable land. Khouri et al. (2011, p.51) asserts that “the only option is to increase productivity” should not be limited to research and development but as well as targeting the focal areas that can aid in improving food security in the Arabic countries. And although the authors propose a lean work relationship between public-private partnerships, they acknowledge that the region must seek to enhance agricultural production in each country in ways that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable while “reducing exposure to market volatility by improving local, short-distance supply chains that enhance the horizontal networks of the chain and consolidate cooperative of small producers” (ibid, p.52).

As argued by FAO officials, development experts, and academics at the above-mentioned symposium on agro-ecology; the ecological limits of the Green revolution model have become now clear. And this is particularly evident from the Middle East perspective given the relative scarcity of resources. In Mr. Stéphane Le Foll, French Member of Parliament (TBC) argument:

“The model imposed around the world which uses a lot inputs, chemistry, machines at the heart of Green Revolution that FAO once supported, it came at the end of the cycle. Aimed at building on nature itself, we need a doubly green revolution; we need local knowledge, and a dialogue between indigenous and scientific knowledge as well. We also need to govern the process. Major international bodies are at the heart of the issues ensuring that these debates can take place. Yet it is important to set up major lines of public policies which are important to achieve other objectives.”

This talk raises contemporary issues facing the food sovereignty paradigm. It raises questions in today’s paradigm shift of food policy paradigms, the significance of local farmers and their organizations. It posits us to ponder how prominent governments handle the changes local farmers face, promoting instead a focus on local knowledge, social justice and social economy of the rural areas. This could be a way to counteract the level of inequalities of which the countryside both exposed to unequal power relations in terms of gender gap and wealth distribution itself. In the words of Shi Yan, there is need to recognize that agriculture is not an industry (agriculture without farmers) close to capital and development but as well as targeting the focal areas that can aid in improving food security in the Arabic countries. And although the authors propose a lean work relationship between public-private partnerships, they acknowledge that the region must seek to enhance agricultural production in each country in ways that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable while “reducing exposure to market volatility by improving local, short-distance supply chains that enhance the horizontal networks of the chain and consolidate cooperative of small producers” (ibid, p.52).