

## A Landmark Food Sovereignty Forum in Mali

Farmers from around the world rally under the banner of food sovereignty.

By [David Bollier](#)

Over the past days over 500 delegates from over 100 countries have been writing documents by flashlight, gathered together in Nyeleni Village in Selingue, Mali. Farmers, fishers and consumers from Norway to Nigeria are building an action plan for an equitable food system based on human rights protection and responsible stewardship of our commons. The discussion is guided by a bold vision of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is about farmers and fisherfolk pastoralists and indigenous peoples growing food for their local markets without being undermined by global trade rules. It is about producing food without degrading soil and water, and assuring that consumers have access to healthy locally grown food.

The groups that are gathering under the banner of food sovereignty are trying to help farmers to develop sustainable agriculture and fight genetically modified seeds. They want to help fisherfolk protect the oceans and fisheries; indigenous peoples promote people's control over land, water and seeds; and pastoralists defend their nomadic lifestyles and diverse local breeds of livestock. The general goal is to stop global agribusinesses from using their market power and trade rules to inflict harm on local economies, the environment and people, and instead to empower local and regional producers to raise and sell commons-friendly food.

Anna Lappe, author of *Grub: Ideas for an Urban Organic Kitchen*, has been reporting on the World Forum For Food Sovereignty, from Mali. [She has also been blogging](#) for the Grassroots International website. Lappe writes: "As I dust off my computer keyboard, or wipe the sand from my eyes, or sit on the ground with delegates while we eat our handmade lunches, I think about the \$400 million budget Kraft has to export and promote its vision of what food should look and taste like and where it should come from. I've never before felt the clear sense of the people power of grassroots movements around the world who are fighting for food sovereignty, in many cases fighting for their lives."

A discussion paper prepared for the Forum describes why a movement for food sovereignty is so necessary:

*The dominant development model is eroding the access and control of local communities to the resources on which they depend for survival and dismantling local systems of resource stewardship, governance and production. Land, forests, water, plants, animals and other genetic resources are increasingly becoming commercialized and privatised commodities. The state, private agribusiness, extractive industry, and large scale tourism and infrastructure projects are encroaching on communal and public lands, natural water bodies and indigenous peoples' territories. Seeds and livestock breeds are being patented by private agribusiness and biotechnology firms. Water – "crucial for sustaining life itself" – is deemed as an economic good and allocated to "high-value users" (i.e., those who can pay commercial prices). Communal fishing areas, forests, wetlands, pastures and woodlands are being*

*auctioned off to wealthy private entrepreneurs and companies for commercial aquaculture, industrial plantations, mining and logging concessions. The store of indigenous and local knowledge built over generations by communities is being pirated by pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies.*

Food sovereignty is an attempt to develop a coherent alternative to the pernicious system of food production that now prevails in many parts of the world. As the organizers of the Forum put it:

*Local autonomy, governance, organisation and the defense of the commons are at the heart of food sovereignty. They ensure the rights of communities to access and control of their land, territories, water and agricultural biodiversity, and help to resolve conflicts over the use of the same resources by different user communities. They do not deny markets, but rather seek to keep markets under community/societal control. The “local” is an economic as well as political space, which helps communities from all over the world and from different constituencies to identify with each others’ issues and struggles and forge common strategies. But as the commons become privatised and local spaces are occupied by market forces, the need for survival is pushing communities into conflict situations with each other.*

A banner hangs in the Global Forum for Food Sovereignty’s main hall sums up the vision nicely:

For an agriculture with peasants  
For fishing with fisherfolk  
For livestock with pastoralists  
For territories with indigenous people  
For wholesome food for all consumers  
For labor with workers’ rights  
For a future with youth in the countryside  
For food sovereignty with women  
For a healthy environment for all

The full text of the Forum discussion essay – along with other materials about the conference – can be found [here](#). Click [here](#) for Grassroots International’s blogging from the Mali conference.

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