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## **Globalization and the Rise of Corporate Agriculture: Implications for Farmers' Rights and Food Sovereignty**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Over the past four decades, globalization has brought about a major transformation in how food is produced, distributed and consumed across the world. One of the most significant outcomes of this process has been the rapid expansion of corporate agriculture, which has placed large agribusiness corporations at the center of global food systems. While this shift has contributed to increased agricultural productivity, technological advancement and the integration of international markets, it has simultaneously generated profound structural inequalities within the agricultural sector. In particular, the growing dominance of multinational corporations has raised serious concerns regarding the erosion of smallholder farmers' autonomy, the concentration of economic power and the marginalization of traditional agricultural practices. This paper critically examines how globalization has facilitated the rise of corporate agriculture and analyses its implications for farmers' rights and food sovereignty. The paper engages with the concept of food sovereignty as an alternative framework that challenges the corporate-led model of agriculture by emphasizing democratic control over food systems, ecological sustainability and the rights of local communities.

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## Introduction

Food is not merely a basic human necessity; it is also deeply embedded in cultural, economic and political contexts. The ways in which food is produced, distributed and consumed reveal much about the priorities and power structures within a society. For centuries, agriculture remained predominantly a local activity, shaped by the specific land, climate and cultural traditions of individual communities. However, since the late twentieth century, this pattern has undergone a profound transformation. Globalization, characterized by the increasing flow of goods, capital, technology and ideas across national borders, has reshaped agriculture from a localized practice into a globally integrated industry.

In this new global food system, large multinational corporations have come to dominate key areas of agriculture, including seed production, fertilizers, pesticides, food processing and retail distribution. Companies such as Bayer-Monsanto, Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, and Nestlé control significant portions of the global food supply chain (Howard, 2016). This process, often called the corporatization of agriculture, has brought both advantages and serious problems. On the one hand, corporate farming has contributed to higher food output and cheaper food prices in many markets. On the other hand, it has marginalized millions of smallholder farmers, reduced agricultural biodiversity and weakened communities' ability to make decisions about their own food.

The concept of food sovereignty, understood as the right of peoples, communities, and nations to define their own food and agriculture policies, has emerged as a significant response to the challenges posed by corporate agriculture. First articulated by the international peasant movement La Via Campesina in 1996, food sovereignty asserts that food is too vital to be left entirely to market forces. Alongside this, farmers' rights, including the rights to save seeds, access land, and receive fair prices, have become central to contemporary debates on the future of agriculture.

This paper explores how globalization has enabled the rise of corporate agriculture and what this means for farmers' rights and food sovereignty. The paper examines the relationship between globalization and agricultural transformation. Second, it discusses the key features of corporate agriculture and its growth. Third, it analyzes the implications for farmers' rights. Fourth, it explores the concept of food sovereignty and the challenges it faces.

## Globalization and the Transformation of Agriculture

Globalization is a complex and multidimensional process. In the context of agriculture, it refers to the increasing integration of national and local food systems into a global market. This integration has



been driven by several key factors, including trade liberalization policies promoted by international institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank; significant advances in transportation and communication technologies; and the gradual removal of trade barriers that once protected local farmers from international competition (Reardon & Barrett, 2000).

One of the most influential turning points in the globalization of agriculture was the adoption of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) during the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations in 1994. The AoA required member countries to reduce agricultural subsidies and open their markets to foreign competition. While this was intended to create a fairer global trading system, critics argue that it disproportionately benefited developed countries and large agribusiness corporations at the expense of farmers in developing nations (Patel, 2007). For example, highly subsidized agricultural products from the United States and Europe flooded markets in Africa and Latin America, pushing local farmers out of business because they could not compete on price.

The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s also played a significant role in transforming agriculture. By introducing high-yielding crop varieties, synthetic fertilizers and modern irrigation techniques, the Green Revolution dramatically increased food production in many parts of the developing world. However, it also shifted agriculture toward a more industrialized model that favored large-scale farming over small subsistence agriculture (Shiva, 1991). The adoption of modern seed varieties, which were often patented and sold by private companies, began to undermine the traditional practice of seed saving that had allowed farmers to maintain agricultural diversity for centuries.

Today, global agricultural trade is valued at trillions of dollars and food production is increasingly organized around the demands of global markets rather than the needs of local communities. The commodification of food, understood as the treatment of food as a product to be bought and sold for profit rather than as a basic human necessity, has become a defining feature of the globalized food system (McMichael, 2009). This transformation has created substantial economic opportunities for large corporations, while also producing significant inequalities and vulnerabilities for small farmers and food insecure populations.

### **The Rise of Corporate Agriculture**

Corporate agriculture, also known as agribusiness, refers to farming and food production that is organized and controlled by large private companies rather than by individual families or communities. This model is characterized by economies of scale, mechanization, vertical integration (controlling



multiple stages of the supply chain), and a focus on profit maximization. Corporate agriculture has grown significantly over the past few decades, fueled by globalization, advances in agricultural technology, and favorable government policies in many countries (Weis, 2007).

One of the most visible manifestations of corporate agriculture is the increasing concentration of power within the agrifood sector. A small number of corporations now control a disproportionate share of the global market for seeds, agrochemicals, and food processing. For example, following the merger of Bayer and Monsanto in 2018, just four major corporations, namely Bayer Monsanto, DowDuPont, ChemChina through its subsidiary Syngenta, and BASF, came to control more than sixty percent of the global seed market and a comparable share of the agrochemical market. This level of market concentration provides these corporations with substantial influence over agricultural practices, including what farmers grow, how production is carried out and the prices they ultimately receive.

The expansion of corporate agriculture has also been linked to the development and commercialization of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Corporations such as Monsanto developed patented GM seeds that were designed to be used with specific herbicides or pesticides, creating a situation in which farmers became dependent on purchasing both seeds and chemicals from the same company each year (Shiva, 2000). In countries like the United States, Argentina, and Brazil, GM crops have become dominant in key sectors such as soybeans, corn and cotton. While proponents argue that GM crops increase yields and reduce pesticide use, critics point out that they have also deepened farmer dependency on corporate inputs and contributed to the erosion of biodiversity.

Another important feature of corporate agriculture is the growing role of supermarkets and global retail chains in food distribution. In many countries, a handful of retail giants such as Walmart, Carrefour, and Tesco now control a large portion of food retail, setting the standards and prices that farmers must meet to access markets. This has had mixed effects for farmers: while access to large retail networks can provide market stability, the power imbalance between large buyers and small producers often results in farmers receiving very low prices for their products (Reardon & Timmer, 2005).

Contract farming is another mechanism through which corporations extend their influence over agricultural production. Under contract farming arrangements, companies provide farmers with seeds, inputs, and technical support in exchange for an agreement to sell their produce exclusively to the company at a predetermined price. While this can provide farmers with access to technology and guaranteed markets, it also transfers significant risk to farmers and reduces their autonomy over



production decisions (Little & Watts, 1994). In many cases, the contracts favor the company, leaving farmers with little recourse if prices or conditions change.

### **Implications for Farmers' Rights**

Farmers' rights constitute a comprehensive framework of entitlements related to the control, access, and use of agricultural resources. These rights include the ability to save, use, exchange, and sell seeds; access to land and other productive resources; the right to receive fair and remunerative prices for agricultural produce; and the right to participate in decision making processes that shape their livelihoods. The expansion of corporate agriculture has had significant adverse implications for each of these dimensions, often limiting farmers' autonomy and increasing their dependence on external inputs and market forces.

The issue of seed rights is perhaps the most contentious. For millennia, farmers have saved seeds from one harvest to plant in the next season. This practice, known as seed saving, has been essential not only for farmers' economic survival but also for maintaining agricultural biodiversity. However, the expansion of intellectual property rights (IPR) in agriculture, particularly through plant patents and plant breeders' rights, has increasingly restricted farmers' ability to save and exchange seeds. Under many national and international IPR frameworks, farmers who grow patented varieties are prohibited from saving seeds and are required to purchase new seeds each year from the company that holds the patent (Helfer, 2004).

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), adopted in 2001 under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), represents an important effort to protect farmers' rights in this area. The treaty formally recognizes farmers' rights and calls on governments to protect and promote these rights (FAO, 2001). However, implementation has been inconsistent, and the treaty exists in tension with the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement administered by the WTO, which requires member countries to provide patent protection for plant varieties (Dutfield, 2011).

Land rights are another major area of concern. The globalization of agriculture has been accompanied by a significant increase in large-scale land acquisitions, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Referred to as "land grabbing," this process involves the purchase or long-term lease of large areas of agricultural land by foreign governments, corporations, and investment funds. According to the Land Matrix Initiative (2023), over 70 million hectares of land have been the subject of large-scale



acquisition deals globally since 2000. These acquisitions often displace smallholder farmers and indigenous communities, who lose their livelihoods and access to resources without adequate compensation or legal recourse (Borras et al., 2011).

The economic vulnerability of smallholder farmers is also closely associated to the power dynamics of global food markets. When large corporations control the inputs (seeds, fertilizers, pesticides) that farmers need to grow crops and also control the markets where farmers sell their products, they can extract economic value at both ends of the supply chain, leaving farmers with very narrow profit margins. Studies have consistently shown that the share of consumer spending on food that goes to farmers has declined over time, alongside increasing corporate concentration in food systems (Murphy et al., 2012). This economic pressure pushes many small farmers into debt, often forcing them to sell their land and migrate to urban areas.

The mental health and social consequences of these economic pressures have also been severe. In countries such as India, a well-documented crisis of farmer suicides has been linked to debt burdens associated with purchasing corporate inputs, crop failures, and falling prices (Kennedy & King, 2014). While the relationship between corporate agriculture and farmer suicides is complex and contested, the crisis illustrates the human cost of agricultural systems that prioritize corporate profit over farmer welfare.

### **Food Sovereignty: Concept and Challenges**

Food sovereignty is a concept and a political movement that has emerged in direct response to the challenges posed by globalization and corporate agriculture. It was first formally articulated by La Via Campesina, an international coalition of peasant farmers, at the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996. La Via Campesina defined food sovereignty as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (La Via Campesina, 1996).

Food sovereignty goes beyond the concept of food security, which focuses primarily on ensuring that people have enough to eat, regardless of how that food is produced or distributed. Food sovereignty, by contrast, emphasizes the importance of who controls food systems and insists that communities and nations should have the power to make decisions about what food is grown, how it is grown and how it is distributed. This framing challenges the dominant view that global markets and corporate actors are the most efficient and desirable organizers of food production (Patel, 2009).



The food sovereignty framework rests on several key principles. These include prioritizing local food production for local consumption; ensuring access to land, water and seeds for small farmers; promoting agro-ecological farming methods that are environmentally sustainable; ensuring fair prices for farmers and affordable food for consumers; and giving communities the power to make decisions about their own food systems (Nyeleni Forum, 2007). These principles offer a clear alternative to the corporate-dominated food system that currently prevails in much of the world.

Despite its growing popularity among social movements, academics, and some policymakers, food sovereignty faces significant challenges. One of the main obstacles is the power of transnational corporations and their ability to shape trade agreements, national agricultural policies, and international regulatory frameworks in ways that favor their interests. The revolving door between the agrifood industry and government regulatory agencies in countries like the United States has been extensively documented and raises serious questions about the independence of food policy from corporate influence (Nestle, 2018).

Another challenge is the tension between food sovereignty and free trade. Many international trade agreements, including the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture and numerous bilateral trade deals, contain provisions that limit governments' ability to support local farmers, restrict food imports, or regulate the activities of foreign corporations. These provisions can effectively prevent governments from implementing food sovereignty policies, even if they have popular support (Clapp, 2012).

The relationship between food sovereignty and biodiversity is also important. Corporate agriculture tends to reduce agricultural biodiversity by promoting the use of a small number of high-yielding varieties, while food sovereignty advocates argue for the preservation of traditional varieties and farming knowledge. Research has shown that agricultural biodiversity is essential for long-term food security, as it provides the genetic resources needed to adapt crops to changing climates and new diseases (FAO, 2019). The loss of biodiversity associated with corporate agriculture therefore represents a long-term threat to food security, even if it contributes to short-term productivity gains.

India provides one of the most striking examples of the impact of corporate agriculture on small farmers. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Indian government approved the commercialization of Bt cotton, a genetically modified variety developed by Monsanto (in partnership with the Indian company Mahyco). Bt cotton was designed to be resistant to the bollworm pest and was rapidly adopted by millions of Indian cotton farmers, particularly in the states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Punjab (Gruere et al., 2008).



The results were mixed. While Bt cotton initially delivered yield improvements and reduced pesticide costs for some farmers, it also led to significant increases in seed prices, as Monsanto charged substantial royalties for its patented technology. When secondary pests (not controlled by Bt) became more prevalent and cotton prices fluctuated, many farmers found themselves in serious debt. The crisis contributed to a wave of farmer suicides in cotton-growing regions, leading to national and international debate about the role of corporate agriculture in farmer distress (Shiva & Jalees, 2006). The case of Bt cotton in India illustrates how the introduction of corporate technologies can have complex and sometimes harmful effects on small farmers, even when those technologies deliver some benefits.

## Conclusion

Globalization has fundamentally transformed agriculture over the past several decades, creating a global food system that is increasingly dominated by a small number of powerful corporations. While this transformation has brought some economic benefits, including higher food production and expanded market access, it has also had serious negative consequences for farmers' rights and food sovereignty. The concentration of corporate power in seed, agrochemical, and food retail markets has weakened the position of smallholder farmers. Trade liberalization has exposed local farmers to unfair competition from subsidized foreign products. The expansion of intellectual property rights has restricted farmers' traditional rights to save and exchange seeds. And large-scale land acquisitions have displaced communities and undermined local food systems in many parts of the developing world. The concept of food sovereignty provides a compelling alternative vision for food and agriculture policy, one that prioritizes the rights and needs of farmers and communities over the interests of corporations and global markets. While food sovereignty faces significant political and institutional obstacles, it has also gained growing support from social movements, academics, and policymakers around the world.

Addressing the challenges discussed in this paper will require systemic change at multiple levels: reforming international trade and intellectual property agreements; strengthening legal protections for land rights; increasing public investment in sustainable agriculture; and democratizing food policy-making processes. These changes will not be easy to achieve given the power of vested interests in the current food system. However, they are necessary if we are to build a food system that is just, sustainable and capable of feeding the world's growing population while respecting the rights and dignity of those who produce our food.



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