

## **What do you think of an ‘Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance’?**

I have just spent a day at a discussion about forming a food sovereignty Alliance in Australia. There were people representing a wide range of groups and interests from Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales. Some Farmers, plus representatives from Food Connect, Slow Food, Gene ethics, Chair of Social ecology, Community gardens of Australia Network, Food cooperatives plus others and myself the Rural Consultant from the UCA.

Food Sovereignty is a growing world wide movement. There have been International gatherings as people in each nation around the world are realizing that Transnational and Multinational corporations are gaining power and ascendancy over even nations. International trends of agribusiness farming is also disenfranchising smaller farmers and businesses and influencing the trade, distribution and production of food around the world.

Food Sovereignty groups have formed in the USA and Canada who are Australia’s equivalent partners in food trade. **In the USA WASHINGTON – on the eve of the final Department of Justice/USDA public workshop examining the effects of corporate concentration in food and agriculture, a coalition of farm and food activists submitted almost a quarter of a million (nearly 240,000) petitions calling on both the Justice Department and USDA to take swift action to curb the abusive market power that a handful of corporations exert over farmers and consumers.**

In Canada they have been conducting a National ‘Food for Thought’ tour to develop a Canadian National Food Policy. One of their policies said ‘I have had the opportunity to participate in forums in over 25 communities across Canada’. It has been truly worthwhile to listen and to learn about people's real concerns over food security and food sovereignty. I have seen first hand how many are promoting local food initiatives in their communities. They are not waiting for governments to act but have initiated various projects on their own. Many examples of this can be found here in the BC Southern Interior.

There are a few themes that seem to run constant right across the country:

- The need for senior levels of government to support local food initiatives: ie decentralization of food distributors and mandatory local procurement for state institutions to provide a stable and secure market for farmers
- The negative impact of trade agreements on our ability to control our food supply and our food sovereignty: ie NAFTA rules that allow our markets to be flooded with cheaper goods during harvest are forcing our farmers out of business
- The desire by many citizens to have access to good quality local produce and the positive effect this has on our collective health.

Other examples include the Campesino a Campesino Sustainable Marketing Project and the Farmer's Pollinator Project in Mexico and Central America. Farmers Forging Food Sovereignty focuses on farmer alternatives to corporate control over production and consumption. The strategy is to help farmer movements for food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture to document and share their alternatives among broad sectors of the rural and urban population in order to advance peasant-led food system alternatives.

### **What are these Food Alliance groups advocating for?**

It depends on each country but two things are common.

A return to protection of the national food production of nations, both against the dumping of artificially cheap food that undercuts local farmers, and against the artificially expensive food imports that we encounter today. It means rebuilding the national grain reserves and parastatal marketing boards, in new and improved versions that actively include farmer organizations as owners and administrators of public reserves. (Rosset, 2006).

A change away from dominant technological practices in farming, toward an agriculture based on agroecological principles, that is sustainable, and that is based on respect for and is in equilibrium with nature, local cultures and traditional farming knowledge (Altieri, 2008, <http://www.landaction.org/spip/spip.php?article315>, July 2008). It has been scientifically demonstrated that ecological farming systems can be more productive, can better resist drought and other manifestations of climate change, and are more economically sustainable because they use less fossil fuel. We can no longer afford the luxury of food whose price is linked to the price of petroleum (Schill, 2008).

### **Do we need an Alliance in Australia?**

Bob Katter has identified just one similar reason in his list of 20 demands made in 2010

- Amongst his list of 20 key demands, Bob Katter wants the next Australian government to reduce the market share of Coles and Woolworths down to 22.5%, i.e. a 75% reduction on their current share of around 80%. It's worth recalling that only 35 years ago the market share of the duopoly was around 40%, so their rise has indeed been meteoric. We only have to look at the issue of milk price at the moment. Who else in Australia is taking price cuts for their labour unit production?

It's also worth recalling that over this same 35-year period around 45,000 Australian farmers have left the land as a result of the 'cost-price' squeeze, and the power of the supermarkets to depress farm gate prices has played a major role in this exodus.

The Murray Darling Basin Guide has some analysis that indicates that approx 5% of farmers are leaving farming every year - more than that in some regions and industry sectors.

It is easy to identify that approx. 15% of growers in Australia are producing 80% of Australia's export produce. The socio-economic related affect is not understood but the related socio-economic input of the smaller farms and businesses who produce only 15% would have to be more significant than their productivity indicates. The representation and voice of this 85% of smaller farmers in Australia is very difficult to get heard in all agri-economic discussions. I know from my own experience! I have been on the Farmers Assoc councils and other agricultural groups as a smaller farmer and I can say that the bigger farmers definitely set the agenda.

It is commonly argued that 90% of farmers in Australia are still family farms. Defining family farm is becoming an issue because many family farms are really becoming corporate agribusinesses.

We have in Australia now Chinese, Arabians, Japanese, Brazilian, Phillipine (Ones that I know about) based corporate or family businesses buying farming land in Australia to help maintain food supply sovereignty for their own country.

### **Why should the church be involved?**

The draft mission statement of the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance is:

**“Our mission is to enable all Australians to participate in and control a vibrant food system that is diverse, equitable, and resilient, which supports our well-being; and is social, economically and ecologically durable/ sustainable”.**

Surely our church's mandate is stand up for justice, feed the hungry in our country and the rest of the world as well as care for the environment.