

**UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION  
ON THE RIGHTS OF PEASANTS  
AND OTHER PEOPLE WORKING IN RURAL AREAS**

**Right to food and  
to food sovereignty  
(art. 15)  
Training sheet No. 4**



*“There is not one developed world and one underdeveloped world  
just one maldeveloped world”*

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## THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND TO FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The right to food and food sovereignty are inseparable. **Food sovereignty** is a specific political concept, developed and promoted in 1995, first by La Vía Campesina (see Box) and then shared and taken up by other social movements.

Further refined over time, food sovereignty is now a key concept for peasants' organizations, one that encapsulates their political vision for the future of the world's peasants. In the end it was decided to link the concept with the right to food, for the sake of consensus in the negotiations on the final version of the Declaration of the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.

However, the right to food, food security and food quality will never be realized unless peasants and workers take control of agricultural and food systems.

### Food sovereignty: peasants' perspective[1]

*Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.*

*Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability.*

*Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations.*

<sup>1</sup> Based on the Nyéléni Declaration, adopted in 2007 by La Via Campesina, <https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf>



*Food sovereignty in practice is built around the following six pillars:*

- 1. Prioritization of food for people: the right to food for all must be at the heart of agricultural and food policies.*
- 2. Due recognition of food producers: the rights of peasants and other producers must be protected and their role in society acknowledged and valued.*
- 3. Creation of local production systems: peasants produce in the first instance for their communities, and international trade ceases to be the standard means of feeding people.*
- 4. Strengthening local control: the territories and resources food producers depend on are managed by them.*
- 5. Construction and preservation of knowledge and know-how: producers' knowledge is the key to sustainable production for future generations.*
- 6. Working with Nature: this means rejecting technologies that degrade Nature and adopting practices that respect and cooperate with it.*

### **An individual and a collective right**

Peasants' principal right is the right to decide what they eat and produce; how to produce it and how much to produce. At the same time, food sovereignty is in no way an individualistic right, whereby everyone can decide for themselves without worrying about anyone else. The right of peasants to define their food and agricultural systems is also the right not to adopt, by order or on incitement, practices or methods that diverge from peasants' *raison d'être*.

This means that it does not apply only to the individual, but is first and foremost a collective political right. Peasants have the right, collectively and in collaboration, to devise, organize and implement the food and agricultural systems of their choice.

Food sovereignty encompasses all levels of decision-making in respect of agriculture and food (agrarian reform, natural resource management, fair trade arrangements with no dumping in third countries, etc.), which means that these issues must once again become the focus of democratic debate, with peasants' views given special consideration.

The foundations of food sovereignty have been laid, then, and States must now respect that right, listening to peasants and consulting them on its implementation.



## FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: WHAT THE DECLARATION SAYS (ART. 15.4)

The definition of food sovereignty adopted by all these social movements (see above) is summarized in article 15, paragraph 4.

### Healthy, adequate and sustainable food

The goal of food sovereignty is to ensure adequate nutrition for all. To that end the involvement of peasants is a *sine qua non*. Food is explicitly required to be adequate and healthy, in accordance with the definition of the right to food, which requires nutrition that guarantees the possibility of enjoying the highest degree of personal development. Moreover, it must be “produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods that respect their cultures” (art. 15.4).



#### Art. 15.4

*“Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to determine their own food and agriculture systems, recognized by many States and regions as the right to food sovereignty. This includes the right to participate in decision-making processes on food and agriculture policy and the right to healthy and adequate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods that respect their cultures.”*

## RIGHT TO FOOD (ART. 15.1)

The main victims of hunger and malnutrition in the world are peasants and rural workers, yet it is they who produce our food. Little wonder that the right to food is of such enormous importance to peasants.

The right to food is already enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which has been ratified by the vast majority of States, article 11, on the right to an adequate standard of living. The right to an adequate standard of living includes the right to food and to freedom from hunger. The right to freedom from hunger is a right that cannot be taken away from any human being, for it corresponds to the right to life.

#### Art. 15.1

*“Peasants and other people working in rural areas have the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger. This includes the right to produce food and the right to adequate nutrition, which guarantee the possibility of enjoying the highest degree of physical, emotional and intellectual development.”*

Article 15, paragraph 1, of the Declaration states that the right to food is more than a right to survival (see box). In other words, everyone should be able to live without having to worry about going hungry or being malnourished.

The right to food is an individual and a collective human right, guaranteeing that every human being has the right to feed him or herself in dignity. It includes the right to produce their own food; that in turn encompasses the right to land, to seeds, to water, and to other natural resources.

Because not everyone has the means, the necessary skills, or the desire to produce their own food, they also have the right to obtain food by buying it. In that case, they must have sufficient financial means, and access to affordable products.

In other words, “*The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.*”<sup>[1]</sup>

## THE RIGHT TO PRODUCE FOOD (ART. 15.1)

As we have seen, article 15, paragraph 1, also establishes the right to produce food. This augments the right to food, preventing it from being diluted into mere financial assistance. The aim is not just to enable peasants to buy food or benefit from food aid, but to enable them above all to produce food to feed themselves and their communities.

The inclusion of the right to produce food as part of the right to food has long been defended by successive United Nations Special Rapporteurs on the right to food. The fact that it has now been enshrined in the Declaration is undeniably a great step forward in legal terms. It is further reinforced by the requirement in paragraph 2 for States to recognize the right of access to food, not only in economic terms, but also in physical terms (see Box, art. 15.2). The aim is not to make every farm self-sufficient, because that is not always possible, but to promote the production of food locally, in the community.



## STATES' OBLIGATIONS (ART. 15.2)

States' primary obligation with regard to the right to food is to provide access to food. Access must first and foremost protect against hunger, and then ensure the highest possible level of development for every person. To achieve this, food must be adequate, healthy and culturally appropriate.

Article 15, paragraph 2, states that access to food must be both physical and economic. States cannot simply hand food out; on the contrary, they must do all they can to ensure that peasants' conditions are such that food is within their reach, either physically or financially.



Lastly, access to food must be sustainable, not only for today's peasants, but also for future generations. This entails, among other things, protecting arable land, the environment and biodiversity.

### Art. 15.2

*“States shall ensure that peasants and other people working in rural areas enjoy physical and economic access at all times to sufficient and adequate food that is produced and consumed sustainably and equitably, respecting their cultures, preserving access to food for future generations, and that ensures a physically and mentally fulfilling and dignified life for them, individually and/or collectively, responding to their needs.”*

<sup>1</sup> See general comment 12, on the right to adequate food, of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, E/C.12/1999/5, 12 May 1999, para. 6.

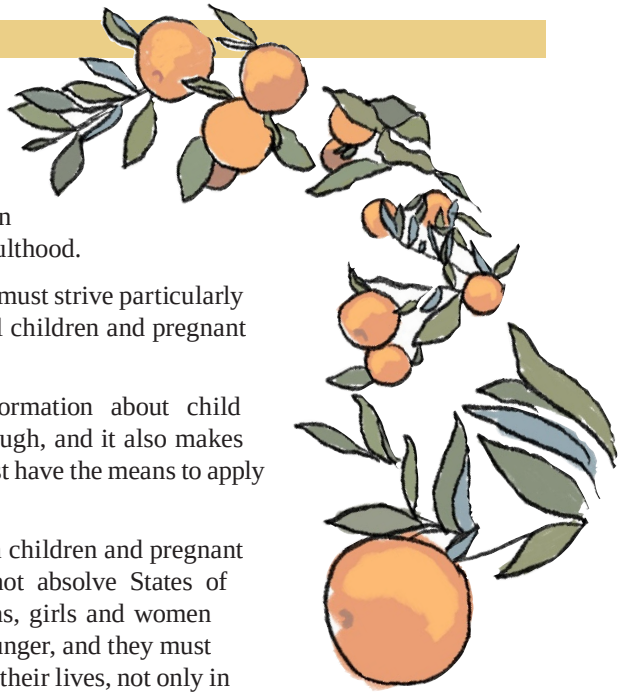
## FOCUS ON CHILDREN (ART. 15.3)

The right to food is particularly important for children. Leaving aside the moral imperative not to let a child go hungry, undernutrition or malnutrition during childhood can lead to serious health problems in adulthood.

Under article 15, paragraph 3, States must strive particularly to ensure adequate nutrition for rural children and pregnant and breastfeeding women.

It also stresses the need for information about child nutrition. But information is not enough, and it also makes clear that, once informed, people must have the means to apply their knowledge.

Note, however, that duly focusing on children and pregnant and breastfeeding women should not absolve States of their other obligations. As it happens, girls and women of all ages are the main victims of hunger, and they must therefore be protected at all stages in their lives, not only in the context of maternity.



## NEW POLICIES (ART. 15.5)



To safeguard the rights to food and to food sovereignty, States must adopt new public policies. These should be developed in partnership with peasants and other rural workers.

This partnership is the cornerstone of the right to food sovereignty, a concept that depends on precisely these actors contributing to the design of food and agricultural systems.

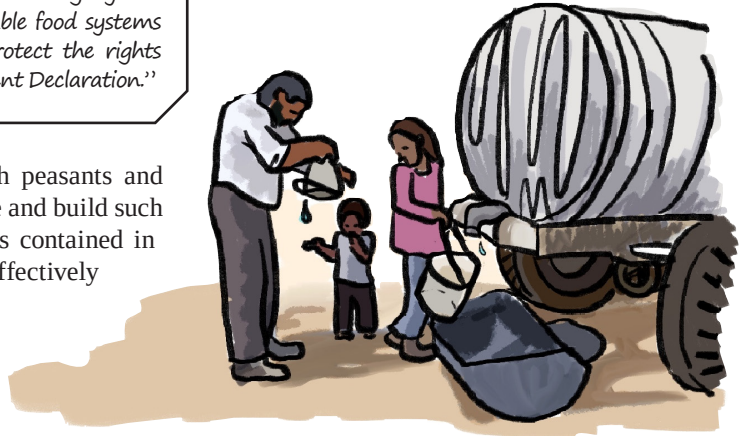
A partnership should not comprise mere consultation, whereby the opinions of those affected are simply noted, the more easily to be dismissed. On the contrary, the partners must have genuine power to put forward proposals and take decisions.

#### Art. 15.5

*“States shall formulate, in partnership with peasants and other people working in rural areas, public policies at the local, national, regional and international levels to advance and protect the right to adequate food, food security and food sovereignty and sustainable and equitable food systems that promote and protect the rights contained in the present Declaration.”*

Only by working with peasants and rural workers to devise and build such systems will the rights contained in the Declaration be effectively realized.

The obligations deriving from the right to food sovereignty are linked to the obligations under the right to participation, whereby peasants must be involved in the development of all public policies that impact their rights (Declaration, art. 10; see training sheet No. 7). With food sovereignty, then, the entire food and agricultural system must be rethought.



Paragraph 5 does not stop at establishing an obligation to act in partnership to realize the rights to food and food sovereignty, but goes on to require that the public policies thereby devised must have as their aim the creation of “sustainable and equitable food systems that promote and protect the rights contained in the present Declaration”.

#### Consistency

In many countries, implementation of the right to food and food sovereignty will require new policies and new laws.

To ensure that such an overhaul of the legislation actually takes place, paragraph 5 provides for the establishment of mechanisms to ensure consistency across all sectors concerned:

*“States shall establish mechanisms to ensure the coherence of their agricultural, economic, social, cultural and development policies with the realization of the rights contained in the present Declaration.”*

This means that arguments that are based on a country’s domestic law will not stand up, for it is always the rights contained in the Declaration that must prevail, unless the internal legislation goes further than those provisions.



## SUMMARY

### Key points on article 15

- Peasants and rural workers have the right to define their food and agricultural systems.
- They have the right to participate in decision-making processes in respect of food and agriculture policies.
- Peasants and rural workers have the right to food and to freedom from hunger.
- They have the right to produce food to feed themselves and their community with healthy food in sufficient quantity, produced by environmentally sustainable methods that respect their culture.
- In partnership with peasants and rural workers, States are to develop public policies (at local, national, regional and international levels) to promote the right to food, food security and food sovereignty.
- States shall guarantee the enjoyment of these rights for peasants and rural workers.



For more information, go to  
[www.cetim.ch/factsheets-on-peasants-rights](http://www.cetim.ch/factsheets-on-peasants-rights)

See also the text of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas on the UN website,  
<https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/73/165>



*United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas: 12 training sheets*

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