



Land and Trade
Briefing Paper:

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Land is central to life in the Pacific. It lies at the cultural, spiritual, and economic heart of Pacific lives, being described as “the web of life that holds together custom, culture, history and beliefs of each person in a community”(1). It is also a common adage that in the Pacific if you have land you'll never be hungry, however that remains true only whilst the ideas of corporate globalisation are not applied to land. The role of land as a custom provider and backbone of food sovereignty is the antithesis of the pressures that are being felt in the Pacific to open up and embrace free markets.

The differences between the concept of food sovereignty and the corporate food regime couldn't be more stark. Food sovereignty, a concept that was coined by La Via Campesina, a global peasant alliance, can be briefly described as: “the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security.” The corporate food regime however aims to implement a neoliberal approach to food, an approach that aims to remove any barriers to trade (domestic subsidies, tariffs etc) and see that only those most competitive should be able to supply food. This means that if in theory it was cheapest for a country to stop all food production and import 100% of its food needs, a country should do so regardless of the vulnerability they may face from changes in world food markets.

The modern corporate food regime has its genesis in the World Trade Organization with the multilateral body institutionalising the

control of food security away from the nation-state to the global market(2). Under the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture countries are required to relinquish their right to food self-sufficiency(3), this frames food security as being more about accessing global food markets than having the capacity to produce domestically – that is, a country is considered 'food secure' if it has free access to the global trade of food products. For the Pacific, food self-sufficiency is intertwined with land but under the ideology of free markets, customary control of land, and its ability to support domestic production and consumption, is also seen as a barrier to trade.

Control of and access to land has been a key political issue in the Pacific. The anti-colonial pushes for independence in the Pacific had issues of land and its control at their heart, fighting to ensure that customary control is still upheld. Political independence handed Pacific governments sovereignty back over their land, with many nations enshrining custom land ownership in their constitutions.

For the Pacific, food sovereignty is safeguarded through land ownership which includes access to water sources and to the shores and sea that surrounded their land. There is recognition of a very strong social contract in agriculture, and in caring for productive resources such as land and water. According to Claire Slatter(4), “customary ownership of land is the one thing that stands between people of the Pacific islands and hunger. Without land, people will be impoverished, totally dispossessed and will lose sovereignty over food. Yet, under the corporate food regime, customary ownership of land stands in the way of economic growth and development.”

The corporate food regime is focussed on the liberalisation of agricultural trade with an emphasis on food imports. The Pacific has a heavy reliance with imports as a percentage of food expenditure varying across the region, from 36 percent in Kiribati to 84 percent in Palau(5). This heavy reliance makes the Pacific vulnerable to volatile international food prices with that being experienced most acutely by the landless and poor.

Under the logic of the corporate food regime the removal of customary control over land will allow investment to enter the region, freeing up land, opening up employment and allowing food needs to be met through global food markets. The reality of course is not that simple. Foreign investment doesn't always benefit local populations, few high-skilled high-paid jobs are available, and lower tariffs on food imports doesn't always translate to cheaper food. When food crises hit, whilst the impacts are felt in the Pacific they are greatly insulated with many being able to rely on their customary land to meet their food needs.

The corporate food regime couldn't do a better job of feeding the Pacific than customary land, the latter allows those not engaged in the cash

economy to still be able to meet their nutritional needs as well as allow others to be able to exchange excess food under traditional economies or for cash through roadside stalls. With the corporate food regime comes the other pressures to open up Pacific economies, land is no longer seen as a central part of Pacific life but rather a barrier to trade and investment.

Abandoning the traditional systems that have fed the Pacific for generations and embracing the promises of the global food markets is a lose-lose for the Pacific – losing control over their land as well as losing their ability to have food sovereignty.

The push to embrace neoliberal approaches to food and economics sits at odds with the Pacific reality and history. Customary land and its essential role in all aspects of Pacific life cannot be reduced to just another component in free market production, reduced only to its monetary productivity. Trade agreements are looking to integrate the Pacific into the global economy on its terms, not the Pacific's. Part of this is challenging the long-held and proven practices of customary control of land and with it the benefits such land access brings to the Pacific in regards to food sovereignty.

**This brief was compiled by the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG).
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