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Enabling food sovereignty and a prosperous future for peasants by understanding the factors that marginalise peasants and lead to poverty and hunger

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Abstract Dominant development discourse and policy are based on crucial misconceptions about peasants and their livelihoods. Peasants are viewed as inherently poor and hungry and their farming systems are considered inefficient, of low productivity, and sometimes even environmentally degrading. Consequently, dominant development policies have tried to transform peasants into something else: industrialised commercial farmers, wage labourers, urban workers, etc. This article seeks to deconstruct three key misconceptions about peasants by explaining how and why marginalised peasants around the world face poverty and hunger. An explanation of the process of marginalisation of peasants through the influence of five "mediating factors" is put forward. It is contended that by addressing the mediating factors through policies devised with the active participation of peasants, the marginalisation of peasants would be reduced or eliminated. This would allow peasants to forge an adequate livelihood in rural areas based on their independent farming, and thereby contribute to the achievement of food sovereignty.

Keywords Food sovereignty · Rural poverty · Peasant · Brazil

Introduction

Throughout history and up to the present day, poverty and hunger have been prevalent in rural areas, particularly among the ranks of several types of small-scale, family-based producers collectively labelled as peasants. This trend has fuelled a misconception of what peasant livelihoods are and what they can deliver to society. The dominant view of peasants is that they are inherently poor and hungry and destined to continue as such due to their way of life. Dominant development policies including the industrialisation and modernisation of agriculture, urbanisation, export-led growth and globalisation, have tried to eliminate or transform peasants into something else, whether intending to benefit them or not. As a result, the dominant development paradigm has not only sidelined but actually denied a future to peasants. Rather than acquiescing to such a condemnation, peasants are mobilising through the international peasants' movement *La Vía Campesina* to promote a development model that allows them a future *as peasants*. This is a crucial stipulation embedded within the food sovereignty development paradigm: that peasants are the *sine qua non* of sustainable agri-food systems.

This article aims to contribute to the food sovereignty paradigm by deconstructing three key misconceptions about peasants which are prevalent in dominant development policies and discourses. These misconceptions are: (1) that peasant farming systems are of low productivity and therefore economically inefficient, (2) that peasants are unable to even feed themselves, and (3) that peasant farming invariably leads to environmental degradation. Millions of peasants around the world live under highly exploitative conditions which lead to their marginalisation, poverty and hunger. This situation is often also related to environmental degradation. Based on research carried out in the semi-arid North-East of Brazil, a region of unequal land access where sharecropping, contract farming and casual agricultural wage labour arrangements prevail, an explanation as to how peasants are marginalised through the influence of five "mediating factors" is put forward.

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The article argues that in order to reduce and eventually eliminate the poverty and hunger of marginalised peasants,[1] these mediating factors ought to be addressed via policies and initiatives that are debated and designed with the active participation of peasants, as stipulated by food sovereignty. Such policies would enable peasants to forge an adequate and more prosperous livelihood in rural areas as independent agricultural producers.

Defining peasants

To begin the discussion of peasants it is important to understand the demographics of smallholder farmers more generally. Half the world's population continues to live in rural areas and in coming years absolute numbers of rural people will increase[2] (IAASTD 2008b; ILO 2008). In rural areas worldwide, agriculture provides a livelihood to 86 percent of its people (ILO 2008), equivalent to 40 percent of the world's population (IAASTD 2008b). Furthermore, "smallholder farming… remains the most common form of organization in agriculture, even in industrial countries" (World Bank 2007: 89). Different size thresholds have been used to denote a "small family farm", ranging from 5 to 30 hectares in Europe (Lipton 2005), 10–50 hectares in Brazil (ILO 1996; Stedile 2002) and one to two hectares in Africa (ILO 2008). In the developing world there are an estimated 1.5 billion small-scale producers farming land smaller than two hectares (World Bank 2007). Around the world an estimated 446 million smallholders farm less than one hectare of land (ILO 2008) whilst 654 million rural poor live in marginal environments (IFAD 2001).

The term "peasant" has been used to refer to a wide range of agriculturalists who are generally small-scale, family-based and diversified. Other terms to refer to these types of producers range from "family farmers", "traditional farmers", "smallholders", "rain-fed farmers", "subsistence farmers", "petty producers", "simple commodity producers", "sharecroppers", "tenant farmers", "contract farmers" and more. Even though all can be considered "peasants", it is important to differentiate between those who are marginalised, such as sharecroppers and contract farmers who must rely heavily on wage labour, and those who are not, such as independent family farmers. The classic definition of peasants, proposed by Shanin in the mid 1970s, refers to four characteristics: (1) small-scale agricultural production (mostly for subsistence but also for commerce and payment of dues), (2) production based on family labour, (3) traditional behaviours and culture related to village or community life, and (4) their social domination and economic exploitation by dominant classes, the market and the state (Shanin 1988; Bryceson 2000; Edelman 2003).

Recently *La Vía Campesina* have re-defined the term "peasant". *La Vía Campesina*, whose name literally means 'the peasant way', adopted a "peasant identity" from the outset and distanced itself from large-scale commercial and corporate farmers (Desmarais 2002, 2007; Edelman 2003). They have "re-appropriate[d] the term "peasant" and infuse[d] it with new and positive content" (Edelman 2003: 187). Indeed they conflate the terms "family farmers" and "peasants" and sometimes use them interchangeably (Edelman 2003; Nicholson 2009). In 2009 *La Vía Campesina* published their "Declaration of Rights of Peasants-Women and Men" in which they stated "a peasant is a man or woman of the land, who has a direct and special relationship with the land and nature through the production of food and/or other agricultural products. Peasants work the land themselves, rely above all on family labour. …Peasants are traditionally embedded in their local communities and they take care of local landscapes and of agro-ecological systems. The term peasant can apply to any person engaged in agriculture, cattle-raising, pastoralism, handicrafts related to agriculture or a related occupation in a rural area. …The term peasant also applies to landless" (ICC 2009: 6, 7).

The peasant mode of farming

A key difference between peasants and other types of farmers is "the mode of construction" of agriculture (van der Ploeg 2008) and the value assigned to it. Whereas for industrialised, commercial or corporate farmers, agriculture is a business where the production of marketable commodities and profit maximisation are the main goals, for peasants agriculture is a way of life and the basis for their physical and cultural survival. Although peasants "are highly differentiated, …on the whole, they are consumer-producers for whom the separation of capital and labour, profit and wage, process of production and use of end-product, is meaningless" (Lipton 1977: 66). Indeed in peasant farming "the resources normally summarized as capital (land, animals, buildings, machines)… do not function as capital within the farm. They do not have to render levels of profit… other benefits matter… [they] enable farming to continue both in the short and long run" (van der Ploeg 2008: 51). For peasants, the use of their production is generally prioritised as follows: to feed their families (e.g. storing enough to last until the next harvest),

[1] This would contribute towards meeting the first of the Millennium Development Goals which aims to halve the proportion of people in absolute poverty and halve the proportion of people suffering hunger, both from 1990 and 2015.

[2] It is only the *proportion* of rural people within the global population which has decreased. The absolute number of people living in rural areas, currently 3.4 billion, has and will continue to increase (based on data from ILO 2008).

to use or store it for future agricultural production (e.g. saving a portion of the output as seed, feeding some crops to livestock), and finally to sell in order to gain a monetary income (Johnson 1971b; Johnson and Siegel 1969; Van Der Ploeg 2008).

Peasants are rarely exclusively farmers; instead they rely on diversification of productive or income[3] activities (van der Ploeg 2008). Peasants often combine any number of a range of on-farm and off-farm activities which include food and cash crop agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, forestry, hunting, fishing, agro-processing and crafts production (Lipton 1977; IFAD 2001; van der Ploeg 2008). "The rural sector… is not purely agricultural. …While the [rural] individuals… are mostly engaged in farming, many have secondary incomes from various rural crafts" (Lipton 1977: 60, 61). "Smallholder households in all regions often combine traditional or cash-crop cultivation with raising small livestock (p. 22)… [Even] poor households typically have diverse sources of livelihood" (IFAD 2001: 101).

Peasant farming is small-scale, diversified, managed in a labour-intensive rather than land- or capital-intensive way (Lipton 1977; IFAD 2001; ILO 2008; van der Ploeg 2008) and results in higher productivity per unit area than large-scale farms. In other words smaller farms are more land and environmental resource efficient than larger ones (Lipton 1977; ILO 1996; Ellis and Biggs 2001; McCullough et al. 2008). There has been strong evidence supporting this argument for decades:

> Research shows that small farms are much more productive than large farms if total output is considered rather than yield from a single crop… In polycultures developed by smallholders productivity in terms of harvestable products per unit area is higher than under sole cropping with the same level of management. Yield advantages can …from 20 to 60 percent… The inverse relationship between farm size and output can be attributed to the more efficient use of land, water, biodiversity and other agricultural resources by small farmers (Altieri and Nichols 2008: 474).

> Data show that small farms almost always produce far more agricultural output per unit area than larger farms, and do so more efficiently. This holds true whether we are talking about industrial countries or any country in the Third World. …A recent report examined the relationship between farm size and total output for fifteen countries in the Third World. In all cases, relatively smaller farm sizes were much more productive per unit area—two to ten times more productive— than larger ones (Rosset et al. 2006: 315).

Peasant farming generally follows several agroecological values and principles. Agroecology is the amalgamation of traditional farming systems practiced by resource-poor peasants, many of whom belong to indigenous communities, with modern knowledge on the functioning of agroecosystems, including all environmental and social aspects (Altieri and Nichols 2005; Gliessman 2007). The foundations of agroecology are a range of complex traditional farming systems throughout the world which are adapted to local, heterogeneous environments (many of them exhibiting harsh conditions). Traditional farming systems depend on high use of local natural and human resources (such as local crop and animal varieties) and low use of external resources (including industrial machinery, agrochemicals and capital), maintain biodiversity in time and space and generally sustain long-term productivity (Altieri and Nichols 2005; Gliessman 2007). Often, many traditional farming systems practiced by peasants involve the integration of trees, livestock and other animals (such as fish) into the system (Altieri and Nichols 2005; Gliessman 2007).

The dominant view of peasants and related misconceptions

Through history the dominant view of "peasants" has been very negative. Peasant farming has been labelled as being backward, archaic or stagnant, as peasants were thought to cling to "tradition" and refuse to change, experiment and adopt new technologies (Johnson 1971a, b; Bryceson 2000; Edelman 2003; Desmarais 2007; van der Ploeg 2008; Handy 2009). This, coupled with their alleged laziness and lack of motivation, as well as their poor resources, was said to explain their low productivity (Lipton 1977; Bryceson 2000) and recurring hunger (Johnson 1997; Handy 2009). Furthermore the growing poverty of peasants was thought to prompt them to overuse or misuse resources, and to employ unsustainable practices which caused environmental degradation (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005; Handy 2009).

The negative view of peasants is probably linked to the prevalence and persistence of poverty and hunger among several types of producers and labourers which at many

[3] This "income" should not be interpreted in a purely monetary sense. Very often the "income" of peasants is not monetary, such as when their production is self-consumed (McCullough et al. 2008; Lipton 1977; van der Ploeg 2008) re-cycled or used in the farming system, or exchanged for other resources and services without the use of money (van der Ploeg, 2008). "For many… [smallholder] households the most important source of "income" is household production that is consumed at home" (McCullough et al. 2008: 33).

points have been labelled peasants. Of the poorest 1.2 billion people in the world, 75 percent are "rural poor" which include smallholder and rain-fed farmers, wage labourers, landless people, pastoralists, indigenous groups and tribes, artisanal fishermen and others (IFAD 2001). Half the world's 852[4] million people suffering from chronic hunger are smallholders; 33 percent of them live in marginal areas and 17 percent in other areas[5] (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005). Furthermore, 22 percent of the hungry are landless families (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005) who likely survive as sharecroppers and/or wage labourers. These statistics have probably fuelled the misconception, or enabled the deception, that peasants are inherently poor and hungry and destined to continue as such due to their way of life. A basic premise of this article is that the vicious cycle of poverty, hunger and environmental degradation faced by millions of marginalised peasants around the world is due to the influence of mediating factors, and not to the fact that they are small-scale, family-based producers. The following section identifies and explains who are the marginalised peasants in order to later explain the process of marginalisation through the influence of the mediating factors.

Understanding who are marginalised peasants

From the literature it is clear that the poorest peasants, referred here as marginalised peasants, are those who are landless or near-landless (smallholders, particularly in marginal areas), most of whom enter into sharecropping or tenancy arrangements with landowners big and small, and usually also work as wage labourers, particularly in agriculture (Lipton 1977; ILO 1996, 2008; IFAD 2001). The terms "sharecropper" and "landless" are sometimes used interchangeably as sharecroppers do not own any land and must pay rent. "Landless labourers, or farmers with no more than an acre or two, who must supplement their income by wage labour… live overworked, underfed [and]…often… as their ancestors, surrender half their crops to the same families of landlords" (Lipton 1977: 15). Subsistence farmers, whether in marginal areas or not, and sharecroppers (or landless) engage in agricultural wage labour to varying degrees. Conversely, many agricultural wage labourers have a smallholding, often in a marginal area, to which they return seasonally or intermittently. "Subsistence farmers [are] mainly found in developing countries, often own [a] very small holding; …[and] may work as temporary wage workers" (ILO 2008: 17). "Wage labourers may be either fully landless or from smallholding peasant households working occasionally as wage workers to supplement insufficient own-farm derived income" (ILO 1996: 27). These two broad and linked categories of (landless) sharecroppers and agricultural wage labourers have through history been amongst the most marginalised and destitute people on the planet.

Landlessness, sharecropping and agricultural wage labour have often been linked in a process that involves indebtedness, dependency and exploitation. In Latin America, Africa and Asia there is a ""frozen history" …across many generations, of land enclosed by colonial or national elites. The disadvantaged groups, often ethnic minorities, become landless and are forced by coercion or hunger to work for the elites" (IFAD 2001: 75). Landless and marginal smallholders have at many times had to approach wealthier farmers or landlords for loans of cash or grain food, particularly during bad harvest years, or to access key resources (e.g. seeds, water resources, draught animals, etc.) (Johnson 1971b; Byres 1983; Cooper 1983). These debts usually had extortionate interest rates which led to default and meant peasants lost their land. Rent rates of sharecropping arrangements were also extortionate, often leaving peasants with a meagre output which led to further debt and destitution. "Sharecropping is as old as recorded history" (Byres 1983: 7) and although it was (or indeed is) considered to be "pre-capitalist", there are several records of its continuation in recent history (Byres 1983; Cooper 1983; ILO 2005). Nonetheless there are not many current studies of "sharecropping" as such, although the system continues around the world and is often referred to with different names such as "contract farming", "tenant farming" or "bonded labour".

Small-scale subsistence farmers in remote or marginal areas, sharecroppers, tenant or contract farmers and landless farmers all rely to a lesser or greater extent on agricultural wage labour. Although the distinct characteristics and functioning of sharecropping (or contract farming) and wage labour arrangements vary in time and place, they generally share commonalities which characterise them as institutionalised exploitation regimes. Common features of sharecropping or contract farming arrangements are aptly described by the International Labour Organization (ILO):

> Often employers own and control not only agricultural land, but also other assets needed by workers, such as housing, access to water, access to forest resources, animals, convenience stores, credit… Complex interlocking relationships that can involve wages, barter and other types of exchanges between

[4] The most recent estimate following the 2006–2008 global food price and economic crises said there are 1.02 billion hungry people in the world (FAO 2009).

[5] Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) rightly note that "socio-political and ecological or economic marginality are not necessarily correlated… "Marginalized" peasants can, and do, occupy smallholdings on highly fertile land" (p 21).

> employers and workers can reinforce workers' dependence. For instance, when workers can only obtain loans from their employer… Bonded or forced labour exchange often originates in the interlocking of the labour and credit markets whereby the labourer, who is in debt to the employer, has the obligation of working for the employer until the debt has been repaid (ILO 2008: 16).

Exact statistics on the extent of marginalised peasants are difficult to establish. In the mid-1990s agricultural wage labourers were calculated at 440 million however their numbers have continued to increase (ILO 1996: 93). "Wage labour, including the number of wage-dependent smallholders in agriculture, has been increasing for over a decade in all regions (p. 23)… There are more workers in wage employment in agriculture today than at any time" (ILO 1996: 93). A more recent estimate which combines smallholders and landless workers claims they number 1.3 billion (World Bank 2007). In several regions across the world there are substantial numbers of poor peasants working in agriculture and other rural industries as "bonded labourers", often in locations far from were they originate. In 2005, a large proportion of the estimated 8 million bonded labourers worldwide, and in some regions a majority, were working in agriculture (ILO 2005).

Methodology and research setting

This investigation aimed to assess the ways and extent to which a "local food commerce initiative" promoted food sovereignty by: (1) enabling peasants to derive an adequate livelihood as independent farmers in rural areas, (2) creating a local food commerce system and (3) promoting agroecology. Field research was undertaken in North-Eastern Brazil (municipality of Mirandiba in the state of Pernambuco) (refer to Box 1 for background information on the area) during 3 months in early 2008. Over 130 research exercises involving 13 participatory research tools (Chambers 1994a, b; Kumar 2002; Pretty 1995) were carried out to gain an understanding of the context. As part of the fieldwork the author lived in two peasant communities and carried out in-depth research of 14 peasant families using "trend analyses" (Kumar 2002) to understand and compare their livelihoods during three time periods. Following the fieldwork, the information gathered was transcribed, translated, organised and pieced together into case study reports. Field research was also complemented with information from a detailed anthropological study by Johnson (1971a, b) of sharecroppers in the neighbouring state of Ceará during the late 1960s.

The results cited in this paper refer to the 14 case study families' livelihood strategies in the period 1990–1996, when they lived as marginalised peasants and faced exploitation, poverty and food insecurity. Five families were sharecroppers in large *fazendas* and two were contract farmers in horticultural plantations whilst six were subsistence farmers who owned or had inherited a small plot of marginal land. All but one relied on sporadic agricultural wage labour in local *fazendas*, usually during winter, and a few also worked as wage labourers in masonry which was generally better-paid but was also infrequent. Several case study families had migrated to cities or faraway plantations in the past, but had returned when they were unable to escape poverty. The husbands of five of the seven families from one community migrated every year during the dry season to work as wage labourers in the irrigated *São Francisco* Valley. Three of them had migrated there with their wives or families to work as contract farmers for a few years. All of the families' income was very low during this period. Most wage labour was poorly paid and the families who sold beans and maize received low prices from intermediaries. Except for one elderly woman, nobody received any kind of government benefits. During the first period many families faced food insecurity. Their

Box 1 Land tenure, agricultural production and rural labour in North-Eastern Brazil

Rural areas of north-east Brazil were dominated by large landholdings (*fazendas*) owned by wealthy elites. Landowners used the *fazendas* primarily for the production of cattle and hired peasant families to live and work in their land under several forms of sharecropping arrangements, producing mainly cotton, maize and beans (Johnson 1971b).

Fazendas continue to exist and operate in similar ways, however, from the late 1970s two main developments have changed the land and labour dynamics: land occupations and agrarian reform led by the "Landless Workers Movement" (MST), and the development of irrigation and horticulture production on the *São Francisco* Valley (part of which lies in Pernambuco).

The MST organises landless sharecroppers to occupy idle land within *fazendas* and set up "settlements". The government agency in charge of agrarian reform, INCRA, inspects the land and can order an expropriation and grant the "settlers" legal titles. Throughout Brazil around 300,000-350,000 rural families have obtained land titles this way and an estimated 80,000 families are currently living in MST settlements waiting to receive them (Stedile 2002; Wolford 2003).

On the irrigated *São Francisco* Valley, large landowners as well as medium- and small-scale farmers under contract (the latter often as sharecroppers) produce fruits and vegetables for the Brazilian market and for export. Several thousand rural migrants from around the north-east work in tomato and sugar cane plantations as wage labourers, either earning a daily wage rate or earning based on the amounts they pick during harvest time (Collins 1993; Bloch 1996).

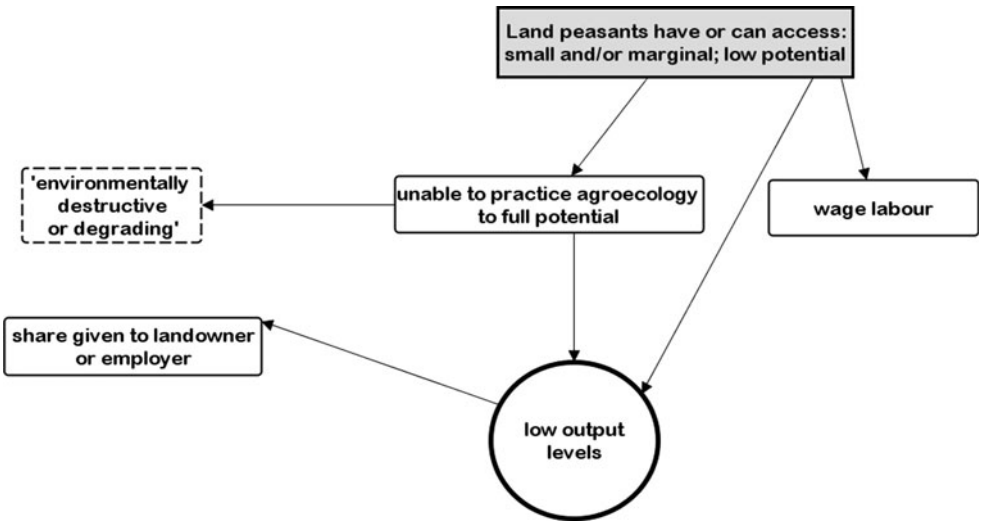

Fig. 1 Effects resulting from the type of land peasants have or are allowed access to

food production was low because they did not have much time to dedicate to their own field, and in addition sharecropping families had to pay varying shares of their food production (between 20 and 50 percent) as rent. Although most of the food (60–90 percent) the families ate was produced by themselves, they had to buy basic staples, and often had to buy beans towards the end of the year when prices were high. As their income was low however, they could not afford much food, especially beans, and sometimes ate maize meals only.

Discussion of the mediating factors which lead to the marginalisation of peasants

Based on these families' past livelihood strategies, five mediating factors were identified which affected their ability to forge an adequate livelihood, ultimately leading to their marginalisation and trapping them in a cycle of poverty and food insecurity. Although the context and conditions faced by these families are specific to the area and period in question, general insights can be drawn that are likely to be transferrable to other locations with similar conditions and systems of land concentration, contract farming/sharecropping and casual or seasonal agricultural wage labour. The mediating factors which lead to the marginalisation of peasants are:

1. The land peasants have or can access
2. The peasants' freedom to control land and related or generated resources
3. The peasants' possibilities for earning or accessing money
4. The peasants' freedom to allocate their own labour time to their own agriculture
5. The peasants' access to markets and traders (for food crops and for cash crops)

The effects and interrelationships between these mediating factors are discussed below to explain the process of marginalisation of peasants.

The land peasants have or can access

The first link in the process of marginalisation of peasants relates to the land they own or can acquire access to[6] (Fig. 1). Around the world, a number of smallholder peasants have tried to forge a living from subsistence plots they purchased, inherited or settled on, but due to the concentration of fertile land in few large landholdings, their plots tended to be small and/or located in remote, marginal, risky or ecologically vulnerable areas with scant access to essential resources and services (Johnson 1971b; IFAD 2001; Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005; Rosset et al. 2006). "If the poor own land, the farms are typically very small, dryland or in low-fertility regions….Land size is often too small to ensure the nutritional well-being of the household" (IFAD 2001: 23, 26). "In many countries smallholders are… excluded and forced onto unproductive land… Their land may be located in difficult environments for agriculture (arid, steep hills, etc.), often with poor soils and without access to irrigation" (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005: 25). Indeed it is not only land quality which matters, location is also important as it determines access to key resources such as water. In the study area it was found that proximity to a year-round water reservoir or river was imperative and it was the landowners who decided the

[6] This land does not solely refer to land owned by peasants with legal titles. It can be land they rent as sharecroppers or contract farmers, or otherwise occupy (illegally or without proper legal titles).

location of the sharecroppers' farms and consequently of their access to water (Johnson 1971b).

In remote areas peasants also lack access to work opportunities and to markets or buyers for their crops. This forces many of them to leave their plot in search of wage labour. "The dynamics of land concentration and marginalization… [have been] raising the number of smallholders seeking wage employment to supplement insufficient farm-derived income" (ILO 1996: 94). "Most of the rural poor still control some farmland; although the proportion mainly dependent on hired labour is rising" (IFAD 2001: 112). However, often wage labour is simply not available near the areas where marginal smallholders live, therefore many are forced to migrate and enter a sharecropping or contract farming arrangement in a large commercial farm or plantation.

Sharecropping and contract farming do not guarantee access to fertile land. Throughout history sharecroppers have generally only been allowed small plots, most of which were located in areas not coveted by landowners, such as hillsides and rocky terrains, because fertile areas were dedicated to commercial production for the landowner (Johnson 1971b; Byres 1983; Cooper 1983). Similarly, under contract farming it is the crops under contract that are grown in the more productive areas; contract farmers must grow their food on the marginal areas. An interviewed family that worked as contract farmers in the *São Francisco* Valley explained, *"We planted the tomatoes in the irrigated field and next to the tomatoes, in the ditch, we planted our crops: maize, beans, coriander, etc… but only a few lanes, just for eating ourselves"*.

In ecologically marginal lands peasants are unable to practice agroecology to its full potential and as a result their output levels are low. Some marginal lands require more time and effort to clear and prepare (for example rocky terrains), the soils tend to be nutrient poor and fertility levels might fall rapidly (for example on hillsides), and they are likely to depend solely on rainfall as access to more reliable water sources will probably be very limited. Even when sharecroppers are allowed access to more productive lands, however, they might be charged a higher rent, as an interviewee explained. "*When we worked a rocky field we would get two to three sacks*[7] *of beans. When we worked a field near the river it was a good field, but we worked it "by halves" … so if we harvested ten then five were his [the landowner's]*". Indeed throughout history land quality often determined the share of output demanded by the landlord as rent: shares for fertile lands were higher than shares for poorer lands (Byres 1983; Cooper 1983). Furthermore, landowners or employers sometimes forced peasants to overexploit an area or to farm land ill-suited for agriculture in order to avoid giving them access to more fertile areas (Johnson 1971b). Therefore much of the farming that takes place on ecologically marginal areas occurs because it is often the only land that sharecroppers or contract farmers are allowed access to. Marginalised peasants can often fall into a cycle of degradation and further marginalisation:

> Dominant classes may gain control and use more fertile land and force others to use more marginal land. The attempts of the latter to make a living with reduced resources have often led to land degradation… A vicious cycle of increasing impoverishment and further marginalization of land and land managers [i.e. farmers or peasants] can sometimes result. Hence land degradation is both a result of *and* a cause of social marginalization (emphasis in original) (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987: 23).

Although it is true that marginalised peasants' farming on ecologically vulnerable lands can result in land degradation, it is a misconception (shown in the dotted-line box) that peasant farming generally is environmentally degrading. Peasant farming following agroecological practices is a sustainable and efficient system for food production, land and ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation (Altieri and Nichols 2005; Gliessman 2007).

The peasants' freedom to control land and related or generated resources

In order to be able to practice agroecology to its full potential, it is crucial for peasants to have reliable, long-term control over the land they farm. This is a prerequisite that marginalised peasants cannot fulfil (Fig. 2). Landless workers, sharecroppers and some types of contracted farmers farm land they do not own. The literature shows that throughout history sharecropping "contracts" were usually verbal agreements, the terms of which could be changed at any point by the landlord and the duration of which was uncertain as sharecroppers could be evicted at any time if the boss or landowner so desired (Johnson 1971b; Byres 1983; Cooper 1983). "The basic material of their livelihood, then, is owned by others, generating an ever-present uncertainty whether land will be available in the coming year. …The basic insecurity of the land tenure… influences their behaviour" (Johnson 1971a: 145).

The integration of trees and/or livestock into the farming system are important agroecological principles which marginalised peasants are often unable to apply. Livestock, particularly large animals such as cows, their products (milk, meat, hides) and services (manure for fertilising, draught power), and high-value tree products such as fruits,

[7] "Sacks" are the common measure of beans and maize in the area; a sack weighs 60 kg.

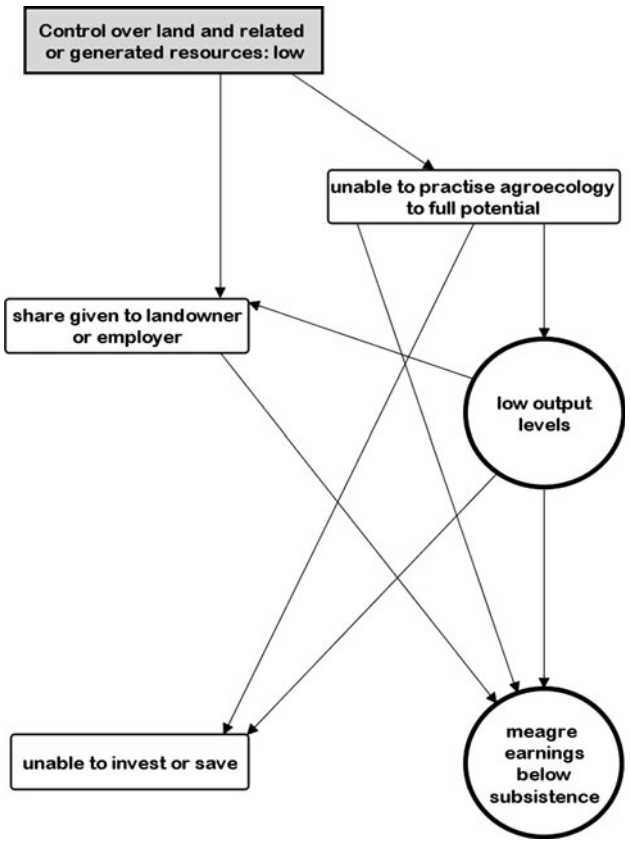

Fig. 2 Effects resulting from the peasants' low control of land and related or generated resources

can significantly enhance the diet, security (by acting as savings) and income of peasants. Trees and livestock also perform a range of key ecological services (Altieri and Nichols 2005; Gliessman 2007). Although smaller livestock species such as chickens and pigs are commonly kept even by poor peasants (Johnson 1971b; IFAD 2001), marginalised peasants are often prevented (due to the land and resources they can access) or banned by the landowner or employer from keeping large livestock or growing certain trees (Johnson 1971b). Trees take several months or years to produce but then generally do so for several years. If peasants cannot guarantee they will remain on the land to reap the benefits, they feel discouraged to make the significant investment needed to acquire and grow trees. As another interviewee explained, "We never planted fruit trees on the land of others, it's not worth it, you plant and after a while they [owners] take the land back, they say you cannot farm there anymore, then it's all left for them". As marginalised peasants cannot or do not invest in trees and large livestock, they miss out on opportunities to produce higher-value products (such as fruit and animal products) and to generate greater earnings.

Furthermore, sharecropping arrangements generally give access, but not total control, to the land and the resources the land generates. There might be restrictions on the peasants' use of valuable side products from the harvest such as stubble for feeding livestock,[8] as one of the interviewees recounted:

> I rent a land, it's more sandy, on the "baixo",[9] of better production, …easier to work. …I also work this rocky area because I don't own land on the baixo, so I have to work on the rocks. …But it's better to work on the rocky lands that belong to you than to work on the rented baixo of others. …I think it's better to work on my field and only harvest six [sacks of beans] because I am producing my beans and the pasture for my animals. On the lands of others I only keep the beans, the pasture I don't have a right to because it's rented.

Finally, marginal peasants might face a range of restrictions on how they can use or dispose of their harvest. In sharecropping arrangements, rent is often paid with a portion of the harvest of both food and cash crops, which can be substantial.[10] Furthermore, peasants might be required to sell the rest of the cash crop harvest to the same landowner at below-market prices (Johnson 1971b). New contract farming schemes replicate the same exploitative arrangements of sharecropping and require peasants to give a portion of their harvest to the contractors or landowner (Collins 1993) and to sell the rest to the same contractor or a specified buyer. One of the interviewees who grew vegetables under contract in the *São Francisco* Valley explained: "The sale was divided. The owner found a buyer, sold it and divided the payment with us. He deducted the expenses we had [incurred] and if there was [a positive] balance then we got paid, if there was no balance, then nothing, we ended up owing him. Then we would have to plant another field to see if we could cover what we owed.

[8] Johnson (1971b) explained that as most of the landlord's revenue from the *fazenda* was derived from cattle, he allowed practically no sharecroppers to own donkeys, horses or cows, as these competed with his own cattle for pasture. The few sharecroppers that owned large livestock had to keep them restrained and provide them with their own feed. Furthermore, even on land which was rented out to sharecroppers, after they had harvested their yearly crop, the landlord reserved the right to graze his cattle on the stubble that remained. These kinds of practices might be a significant reason why "cattle ownership is often heavily skewed against the poor" (IFAD 2001: 114).

[9] The *"baixo"* refers to moist, low-lying areas where standing water is available for most of the year (Johnson 1971b).

[10] In Johnson's study, sharecroppers paid a third of their food crop harvest to the landlord (Johnson 1971b), however around the world through history, it has not been uncommon for arrangements that required up to four-fifths or even five-sixths (Byres 1983). The interviewees stated they paid the landlord between 20 and 50 percent of their food harvest depending on the type of sharecropping arrangement.

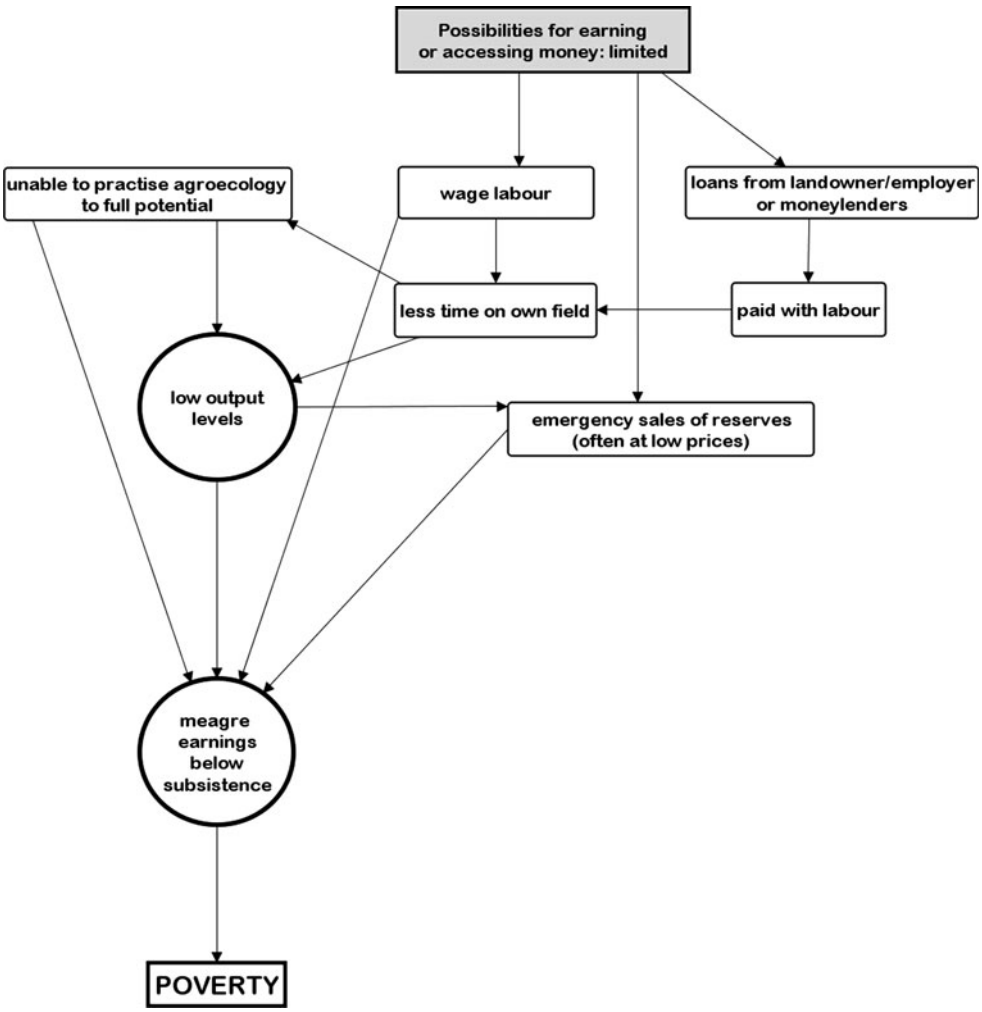

Fig. 3 Effects resulting from the peasants' limited possibilities for earning or accessing money

Myself, I never got a profit during that time I worked as a contract farmer".

The peasants' possibilities for earning or accessing money

The third mediating factor refers to the peasants' possibilities to earn or access money, particularly near their homes (Fig. 3). In general, peasants can achieve a high degree of self-sufficiency and disassociation from monetary markets (van der Ploeg 2008). Their farming systems can provide food, fuel, fibres, medicines and many of the families' needs, whilst reciprocity relations within peasant communities can mobilise and redistribute resources and labour through exchanges or loans without the need of money (Johnson 1971b; IFAD 2001; van der Ploeg 2008). However, money will inevitably become indispensable to access certain basic necessities and services, particularly if emergencies arise. Marginalised peasants have very limited possibilities for earning or accessing money. Their options are usually to obtain small loans from people in their community, larger loans from the landlord/employer or local moneylenders (who often charge very high interest rates), buy food and other necessities on credit from local shops or traders, sell some of their food reserves (often at very low prices), or sell their labour (Johnson 1971b).

Reliance on wage labour, and particularly agricultural wage labour, tends to be high for multiple reasons. In several developing regions "off-farm income is often the poor smallholder's main source of cash income" (IFAD 2001: 22) which usually involves wage work as "labour is often the only asset of the poor" (ILO 2008: 16). Although some marginalised peasants are able to work in a non-agricultural trade, it is often only a minority who have the skills, and even when they do, such jobs are not always available. An interviewee whose husband could practice masonry explains, "He works [as a mason] some days, when he is able to find a day of masonry …then he is able to find a little bit of money as a mason, something. …But if there is no work then he works in our field". Therefore "agriculture continues to provide the predominant source of employment in many [rural] regions" (ILO 1996: 46).

Estimates of the contribution of rural non-farm income to overall income levels in rural areas are varied; however, such estimates are usually not disaggregated for different groups. Indeed, "there is evidence to suggest that rural non-farm activities are more often undertaken by the better-off members of a rural community" (ILO 2008: 48). Furthermore, "diversification into non-farm activities is not an unequivocally positive phenomenon" (Hazell 2006: 27). "Wages in non-farm activities are generally, but by no means always, higher than in agriculture" (ILO 1996: 45). "Distress diversification" into traditional rural industries that rely on female labour for example, can yield lower wages than in agriculture (ILO 1996) and be highly exploitative. One of the interviewees recounted her experience working in "flour houses" where mandioca (a root crop) would be processed manually into flour. "I used to work every year in the flour houses… for about 2 months. …The owner of the houses would bring the mandioca, put it on the floor and we would sit there to scrape the mandioca with a knife. …I would start at five in the morning and stopped at midnight. …The work was very cheap, we worked but earned very little".

Consequently, for a vast number of marginalised peasants, agricultural wage labour is often the only option to gain monetary income. Agricultural wage labour tends to be very low paid (ILO 2008; Johnson 1971b; IFAD 2001), rates can vary significantly through the year making earnings volatile (Johnson 1971b; ILO 2008), generally there are seasons where there is simply no work available and there is widespread unemployment, and furthermore, payment mechanisms can be exploitative, for example through partial or full "payment in kind" instead of cash remuneration (ILO 2008). An interviewee described the dynamics of agricultural wage labour in the area:

> During winter [i.e. the rainy season] everyone works in their own fields and still takes a day or two to work in neighbouring fields to earn. …Sometimes I worked as an [agricultural] wage labourer to survive the hardest period. Someone would come and say "I want you to work for me, 12 reais" [Brazilian currency]. …Around here there are many people that have a lot of work [to be done] and few workers, so they hire workers for a day here, two, a week… for a short time. …It's few days [of work], and cheap… one day far from the other. Sometimes a month or two go by without finding a single day [of work]. …In our region we were all vagabond wage labourers and sometimes we didn't even get what we worked for. The owner wouldn't pay, or paid half and left it there.

Marginalised peasants taking loans from landowners or moneylenders must often pay back through their labour, as their ability to pay back in cash is limited. "Shopkeepers and small landlords make credit and loans available to workers. To pay off the debt, workers frequently agree to work a certain number of days at a wage below the existing wage levels" (Johnson and Siegel 1969: 8). Through history such arrangements have been the basis of bonded or forced labour. "Bonded or forced labour exchange often originates in the interlocking of the labour and credit markets whereby the labourer, who is in debt to the employer, has the obligation of working for the employer until the debt has been repaid. Such types of labour exchange constitute a denial of basic human rights" (ILO 2008: 16). Two of the interviewed peasants explained how these exchanges functioned:

> When the shop lets you buy on credit… to get a few things to eat… then you owe the shopkeeper, so we work for that person as a wage labourer to earn [and pay off the debt]. …But then by the end of the week you are owing more than what he said you would earn… When you finish working it's not enough to pay the increase [interest] (female interviewee). The owner [of the shop] would sell at a high price, so you had to work the whole week and then ended up owing another week… you just starved (male interviewee).

These conditions help explain why agricultural wage labour is generally a poverty trap. A study of agricultural wage labour in 45 developed and developing countries found that in 40 percent of cases the average wage was below subsistence levels; that is 1 h of work did not provide enough money to buy even one kilogramme of the cheapest staple (ILO 1996: 34, 94). For marginalised peasants resorting to wage labour is often seen as a "distinct hardship" (p. 83) because they know working on their own fields would usually yield far more in value[11] (Johnson 1971b). However their problem then becomes converting their farm output to hard money, as they are faced with countless impediments to sell their products, particularly for a fair price. It is often extreme need that forces marginalised peasants to sell their labour, in full knowledge that they are becoming locked in a cycle of poverty.

The peasants' freedom to allocate their own labour time to their own agriculture

The fourth mediating factor in the process of marginalisation refers to the amount of labour time peasants can dedicate to their own fields, as compared to the time they

[11] Johnson analysed the total value generated by a sharecropper working for a day on his own field and found it was four to five times higher than the average rate for a day of agricultural wage labour (Johnson 1971b; Johnson and Siegel 1969).

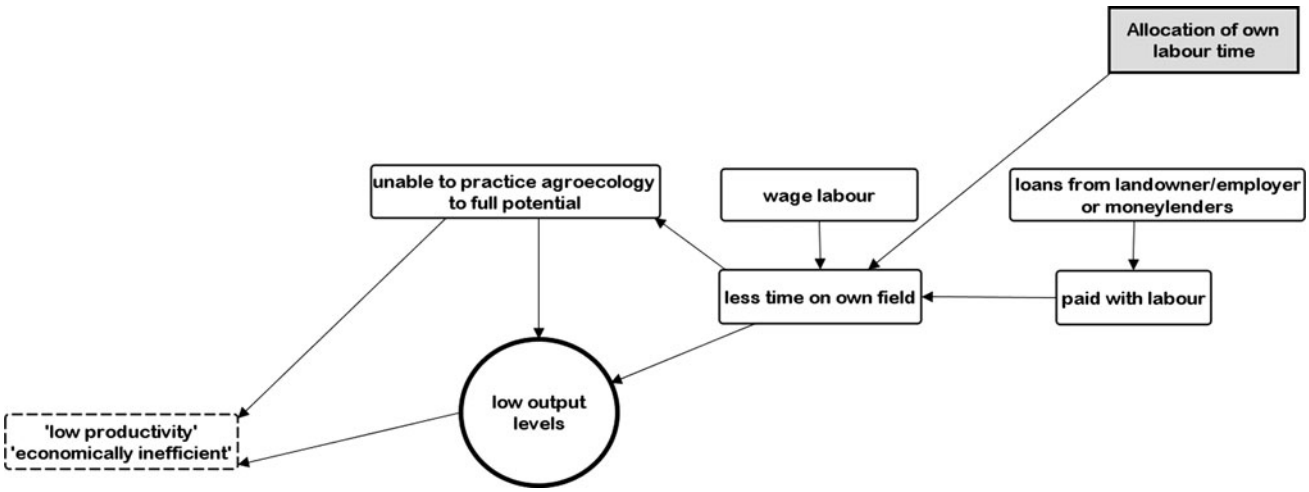

Fig. 4 Effects resulting from the peasants' freedom to allocate their own labour time to their own agriculture

need to dedicate to wage labour in order to gain cash, meet rent obligations, pay off debts, etc. (Fig. 4). The more time peasants need to work as wage labourers means the less time they have to tend their own fields.[12] As a result, the production level from their fields is lower. As previously mentioned, peasant farming is often labour intensive to reduce the need for external inputs which require capital (Lipton 1977; IFAD 2001; ILO 2008; van der Ploeg 2008). This means peasant farming requires more labour time. If peasants are unable to dedicate enough time to their fields, or to work in them during critical periods such as planting and harvesting seasons, their ability to practice agroecology will be hampered and will result in lower yields and possibly environmental degradation. Therefore, even though peasant farming based on agroecology is highly productive, marginalised peasants tend to have low output levels. This situation has fuelled the misconception (shown in the dotted-line box) that all peasant farming is of low-productivity and hence economically inefficient.

The peasants' access to markets and traders for food and cash crops

The final mediating factor is the peasants' access to two types of markets: the markets or traders they can buy from and sell their food crops to, and the markets or traders they can sell their cash crops to (Fig. 5). Marginalised peasants have limited access to both types. Generally they are only able to sell their food and cash crops to the landlord/employer or intermediaries who pay them low prices, as they are unable to access other markets or buyers.

In terms of food crops, a trend that is experienced in rural North-Eastern Brazil is the significant fluctuation of food crop prices within a year. This trend occurs across other rural regions of the developing world (Cooper 1983) due to a series of complex reasons which are beyond the scope of this paper. The usual effect of the trend however, is that when marginalised peasants are forced into "emergency sales" of their food reserves, prices are low; and when their food reserves start to dwindle and they are forced to buy, prices are high. Two interviewees explained this trend: "When we need to sell a sack of beans, to buy something, the price is low, we practically give it away for free… to the middle men. When small farmers have [a stock], it has no value, and when we don't have any, then it has value" (male interviewee). "Our production only serves for us to eat, but if it were for selling, the price is low. It only has a high price when we buy. …We end up regretting giving it away for one real and then having to buy for four" (female interviewee). This trend is a major reason why peasants try to avoid relying on the market for their food security and strive to be as food self-sufficient as possible.

Even when peasants have a surplus which they can comfortably sell, and even when they are able to find alternatives to the intermediaries by going to a local town or nearby city market to try to fetch a higher price, food crop prices are often low. There are multiple reasons for this. Firstly, the urban bias of development across the world has led governments to pursue a "cheap food policy" by which supports to agriculture are targeted to large scale farmers so they produce food on a massive scale and sell at cheap prices (Lipton 1977; Desmarais 2007).

[12] What is meant by "own field" is the land where peasants grow their families' food and cash crops. The discussion and diagram focus on the time dedicated to fields in order to keep the argument simple. However, as was previously mentioned, peasants engage in a range of agricultural activities. Therefore the actual factor is the amount of time peasants can dedicate to their own field and other related agricultural activities which are part of their agri-food strategy.

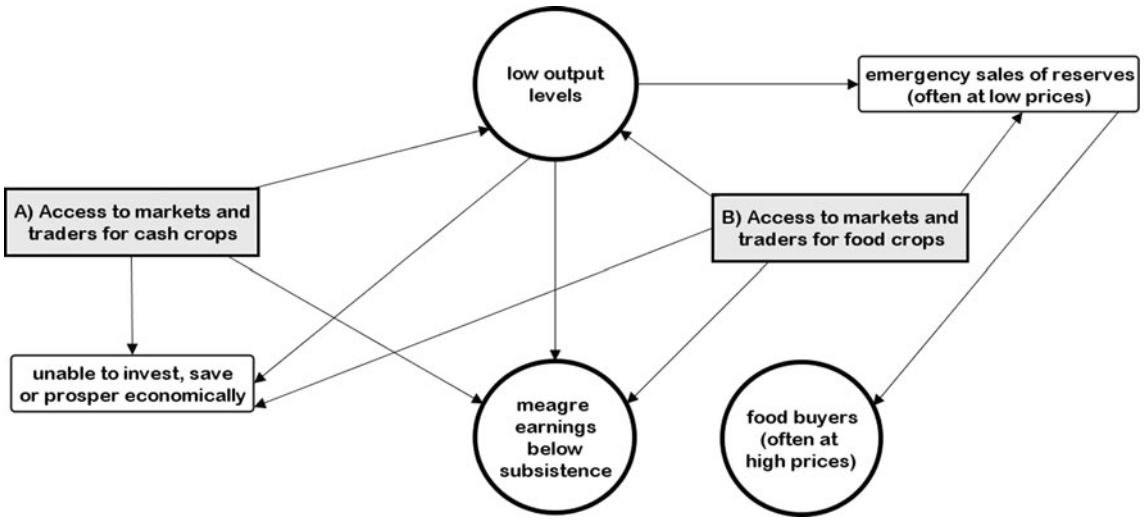

Fig. 5 Effects resulting from peasants' access to markets and traders for food and cash crops

Secondly, agricultural trade liberalisation policies have allowed cheap food to be imported ("dumped") into developing country markets, outcompeting locally-produced food, particularly food staples traditionally produced by peasants (Hellin and Higman 2003; McMichael 2004). Therefore, as marginalised peasants cannot access a market that will pay them a decent price for their food crops, it does not make sense for them to sell and consequently to increase their output. This is what forces marginalised peasants to remain or become "subsistence" farmers. An interviewee explained, "We never sold maize because it doesn't compensate, [the price] is even cheaper than beans. …We always plant less maize, enough for our use only, to eat and to give to our chickens, our goats". Under these conditions it is no surprise that marginalised peasants are unable to make a living from the commercialisation of their production.

The process by which the mediating factors lead to the marginalisation of peasants

A paramount effect of the process of marginalisation is that peasants become food buyers, which often leads to food insecurity and hunger (Fig. 6). When peasants are unable to dedicate enough time to their own fields, they end up producing less of their own food, and need to meet the shortfall through purchases. Even though a common security-oriented strategy of peasants is to try to save enough of their harvest to meet their families' food needs until the next harvest (Johnson 1971b), many are forced to sell part of their food reserves to get some money. These "emergency sales" deplete their food reserves and have to be replenished through purchases later. An interviewed family explained, "We would always set aside six sacks for us to eat, but sometimes we had to sell some. …When we ate our beans and it wasn't enough to make it to the next year then we had to buy some" (Husband) "but we only managed to buy small amounts, ten kilos more or less… nobody was able to buy much" (Wife). This aspect, in combination with many of the previously discussed factors, contributes to turning marginalised peasants into food buyers. It is estimated that agricultural wage labourers and other rural poor spend between 50 and 70 percent of their earnings in purchases of basic staple foods (ILO 1996; IFAD 2001). However as their earnings are meagre, they are unable to afford enough food. Consequently, the result is food insecurity and even hunger. The mainstream view that peasants "cannot even feed themselves" is a misconception (shown in the dotted-line box) because it is mainly the exploitative and marginalising conditions they are trapped in that prevent them from doing so.

Figure 7 combines the five mediating factors previously discussed (shown in shaded boxes) to explain the process by which they lead to the marginalisation of peasants. The process results in three main effects (shown in circles): (1) low agricultural output levels (which is not the same as low *productivity* of the farming system itself), (2) accumulation of meagre cash earnings which are below subsistence level and (3) turning peasants into food buyers. The ultimate effects of the process (shown in bold-line boxes) are extreme poverty, food insecurity and often hunger. The process of marginalisation has also fuelled the three main misconceptions about peasants (shown in dotted-line boxes): (1) that their farming systems are of low productivity and economically inefficient, (2) that they are unable to even feed themselves and (3) that their farming systems degrade the environment.

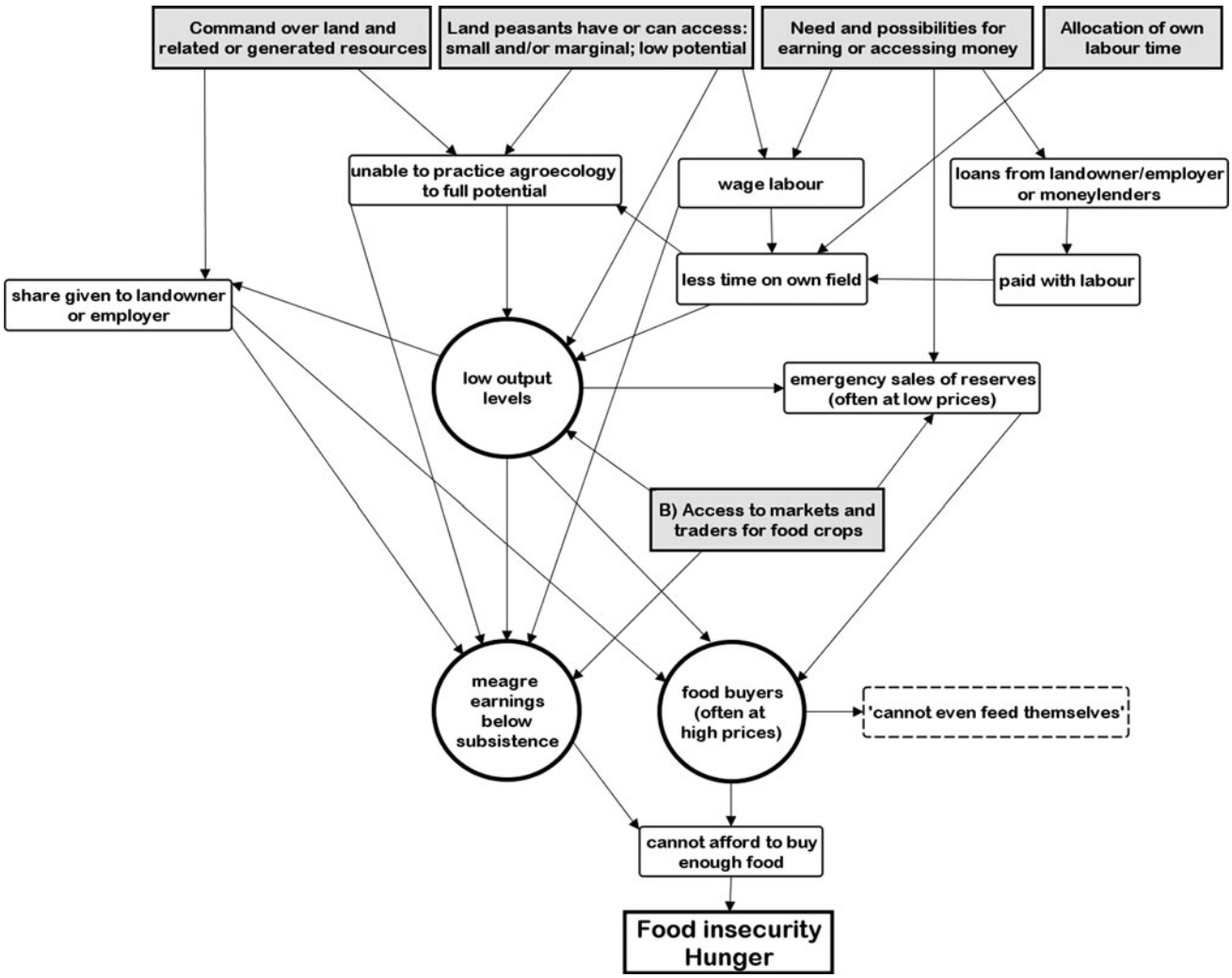

Fig. 6 How marginalised peasants become food buyers

Addressing the mediating factors through food sovereignty

Over more than a decade *La Vía Campesina* have led the discussion and definition of food sovereignty, an alternative agricultural and rural development paradigm, together with the support and participation of a growing number of organisations, social movements and stakeholders (Desmarais 2007; Nicholson 2009). In 2007 at the Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty the "collective understanding" of food sovereignty identified six main points: it focuses on food for people, values food providers, localises food systems, puts control locally, builds knowledge and skills, and works with nature (ISC 2007). Many of the food sovereignty principles and associated demands made by *La Vía Campesina* seek to address the mediating factors identified in this article. *La Vía Campesina* argues those who work the land should own it or at least have guaranteed usufruct rights (Desmarais 2002; Stedile 2002; Nicholson 2009). Equitable and comprehensive land reform that benefits peasants is imperative for food sovereignty (Desmarais 2002; Stedile 2002; ICC 2009; Nicholson 2009) and such reform would address the first and second mediating factors. Furthermore, *La Vía Campesina* argues strongly for policies and measures that specifically support peasants and small-scale family farmers and allow them to make an adequate livelihood in rural areas that involves farming. Food sovereignty states peasants and small-scale family farmers have the right to, and ought to obtain access to land, seeds, forests and water resources, as well as to key services such as credit, transportation, storage, market information, research, extension services, capacity building, etc. in order to practice and improve their agriculture (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005; ICC 2009). Such policies would address the third, fourth and fifth mediating factors. Finally "food sovereignty… rejects the proposition that food is just another commodity… [and] protects food providers from the dumping of food and food

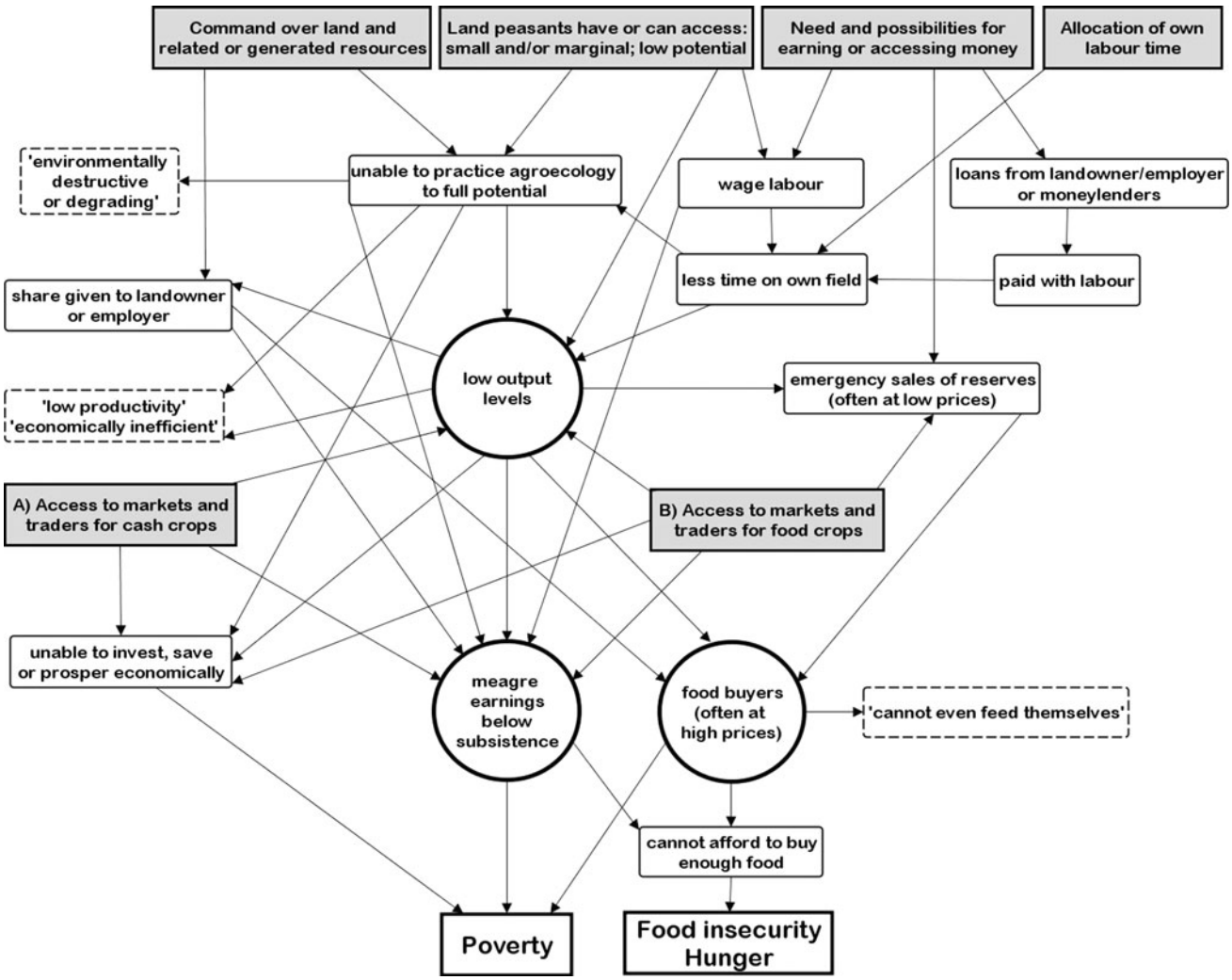

Fig. 7 The marginalisation of peasants through the influence of five mediating factors

aid in local markets" (ISC 2007). *La Vía Campesina* argues for fair agricultural trade and prices, particularly for peasants' products, which would further address the fifth mediating factor.

Ultimately *La Vía Campesina's* call for food sovereignty is a demand for rights: rights to food, resources and a range of social, economic and environmental rights as well as the right to full and active participation in policy making to materialise these rights. "If we talk about food sovereignty, we talk about rights, and if we do that, we must talk about ways to ensure that those rights are met, across a range of geographies, by everyone, in substantive and meaningful ways" (Patel 2009: 671). For food sovereignty to be achieved, a "concomitant system of duties and obligations" (Patel 2009: 668) must be established with the active participation of all citizens, producers and consumers, who ought to shape and determine agricultural and food policies appropriate for their local communities and countries (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005; ISC 2007). Indeed the landmark International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) report defined food sovereignty as "the right of peoples and sovereign states to democratically determine their own agricultural and food policies" (IAASTD 2008a: 8).

Conclusion

Dominant development policies have not addressed the conditions which make thousands of peasants around the world poor and hungry; indeed they have often created or worsened the mediating factors that lead to their marginalisation. This paper highlights it is imperative to take into account the exploitative sharecropping and wage labour practices that persist around the globe, and understand the influence of the five mediating factors in the process of marginalisation of peasants. Although local contexts and

conditions vary, it is likely that marginalised peasants are affected to greater or lesser extents by several, if not all, of the five mediating factors, which contribute to their poverty, food insecurity and hunger. The proposed explanation of the process of marginalisation of peasants could be used to research and analyse the livelihoods of peasants in other regions and contexts, as well as to assess the baseline situation of peasant communities prior to the formulation or implementation of development projects and initiatives. It is hoped that by taking the five mediating factors into due consideration, and by actively and substantively engaging peasants and their organisations in policy development, more effective poverty alleviation policies and programmes for peasants and the rural poor will be designed and implemented. This would allow peasants to forge an adequate livelihood based on their independent agricultural production, with linkages to local food systems and the local rural economy, thereby paving the way for the achievement of food sovereignty.

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