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The troubled path to food sovereignty in Nepal: ambiguities in agricultural policy reform

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Abstract
The food sovereignty movement arose as a challenge to neoliberal models of agriculture and food and the corporatization of agriculture, which is claimed to have undermined peasant agriculture and sustainability. However, food sovereignty is an ambiguous idea. Yet, a few countries are institutionalizing it. In this paper, we argue that food sovereignty possesses the attributes of a 'coalition magnet' and, thus, brings together policy actors that support agricultural reform, but have diverse and often opposing interests, in a loose coalition. This facilitates agenda setting, but there may be problems in policy formulation and implementation stages due to the ambiguous nature of the idea. Consequently, despite including food sovereignty in a country's constitution and/or legislation, policies and programs related to food and agriculture exhibit the status quo, which is not expected under an alternative food paradigm. We examine this argument in a case study of Nepal, where food sovereignty has been instituted as a fundamental right in the Constitution.

Keywords Food sovereignty · Coalition magnet · Ideas · Actors · Nepal

Abbreviations

ADS	Agriculture Development Strategy
ANPA	All Nepal Peasants' Association
ANPFa	All Nepal Peasants' Federation
ANPFa-R	All Nepal Peasants' Federation Revolutionary
CPN	Communist Party of Nepal
CPN (UML)	Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist and Leninist)
NPA	Nepal Peasants' Association
PMAMP	Prime Minister Agriculture Modernization Project
SAPC	South Asian Peasant Coalition
TRIPs	Agreement on Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
TYIP	Three Year Interim Plan
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Introduction

Food sovereignty is claimed to be an alternative to the expansion of capitalist agricultural production and the neoliberal globalization of agricultural markets (Burnett and Murphy 2014), which are supposed to have promoted chemical-intensive industrial agriculture, the rise of multinational seed corporations, and the displacement of farmers from their lands, among other things (Edelman et al. 2014). But the definition and redefinition of food sovereignty over the years appears to have given it different meanings (LVC 1996, 2002; The Nyéléni International Steering Committee 2007).

Amongst scholars, there is a debate about the merits of food sovereignty as an idea which can underpin agricultural reform. On the one hand, there are scholars who implicitly claim that the existing food paradigms (food security and the right to food) ignore local and democratic means of food production (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010). The paradigms of food security and the right to food are understood as being silent regarding small farmers' and peasants' contributions to agriculture and on issues of sustainability (McMichael 2006). It is argued

that food security and the right to food are concerned with the availability of food by any means, ignoring the means and sources of food production. Therefore, to emphasize local, agro-ecological food production and to assert the rights of small-scale food producers, the idea of food sovereignty is being promoted as a better pathway (Claeys 2013; McMichael 2014; Wittman 2011).

Other scholars argue there is lack of clarity and precision in the idea of food sovereignty (Bernstein 2014; Edelman et al. 2014; Grey and Patel 2015; Hospes 2014; Patel 2009; Tilzey 2018). There are questions in relation to who the sovereign is in food sovereignty (Grey and Patel 2015; Patel 2009). The social movement on food sovereignty claims that small-scale farmers and peasants can feed the world in a sustainable way, but there are questions regarding the definition of a peasant and skepticism that peasants alone are capable of feeding the world (Bernstein 2014). There are also questions about the food sovereignty movement's view on agricultural trade (Burnett and Murphy 2014), and doubts as to the claim that food sovereignty is about the democratization of food systems (Agarwal 2014).

In response to the claim that food sovereignty is an ambiguous idea, scholars have attempted to demystify it. For example, Schiavoni (2015) and Schiavoni (2017) have attempted to deconstruct the sovereignty in food sovereignty by arguing that there are multiple sovereignties in food sovereignty, which can be reconciled. Claeys (2015) suggests understanding the concept of food sovereignty from a broader human rights perspective. Despite such attempts, various aspects of food sovereignty still remain unclear, as we discuss later in the article. Nevertheless, the idea of food sovereignty has appealed to many social and political actors in some countries, mainly in Latin America, and to a lesser extent in Asia and Africa.

Of the limited number of countries that have institutionalized the idea of food sovereignty, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Egypt and Nepal have included it in their constitutions in various forms (Beuchelt and Virchow 2012; FAO 2017). Few studies have endeavored to explain why these countries have adopted the idea of food sovereignty despite its ambiguous nature. For instance, McKay et al. (2014) and Peña (2013) find that in some Latin American countries, food sovereignty has been a political project used by state actors in particular ways to "support their own strategies and goals". Food sovereignty was institutionalized due to strong social movements and the rise of leftist leaders in those countries, rather than emerging as a result of a common understanding and consensus on food sovereignty. However, such an explanation of the institutionalization of food sovereignty seems to be too simplistic. The studies also analyze the difficult path of implementing food sovereignty. This may be due to the multiple understandings of the concept, but the studies have not delved deeper into this.

The process of translating the ambiguous idea of food sovereignty into specific policies is a contested process, which needs more scholarly attention. Therefore, we use the policy debate on food sovereignty in Nepal as a case to explore this issue. We are particularly interested in how food sovereignty can be used as a lever to put agricultural reform onto the agenda without necessarily resulting in actual policy change.

We argue that with its ambiguous nature and broad appeal amongst various stakeholders, the idea of food sovereignty can be considered a 'coalition magnet'—a phrase coined by Béland and Cox (2016) that we explain later. A coalition magnet can successfully serve the purpose of facilitating the formation of a strong coalition, thereby enabling reform advocates to institutionalize food sovereignty as a policy principle. As a coalition magnet, the idea of food sovereignty has the potential to bring together actors who support agricultural reform, but who have a diversity of interests and interpretations of the idea. However, since food sovereignty is an ambiguous policy concept, the coalition may be much less viable as a power resource in the post-agenda setting phases. Hence, actual policy change may not be adopted or implemented. The concept of a coalition magnet can help shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of food sovereignty as a policy concept.

In the sections below, we first discuss the literature on food sovereignty. We engage with the debates surrounding the concept and how food sovereignty, which started as a social movement, became institutionalized in some countries. Then, identifying the idea of food sovereignty as a coalition magnet, we explain the potential of coalition magnets in agenda setting and discuss the difficulties of maintaining coalitions formed around a magnet in the policy formulation and implementation phases. We substantiate our argument through an analysis of the food sovereignty coalition in Nepal, and then explore the viability of the coalition in the policy implementation phase.

Contradictions and contestations in the idea of food sovereignty and its potential as a coalition magnet

According to Heller (2013), cited in Edelman (2014), the specifics of how and when the term "food sovereignty" originated are not clear. Edelman (2014) states that historical accounts indicate that the term may have originated in Latin America in the 1980s, although other terms with similar meanings to food sovereignty such as food autonomy and food self-sufficiency had been in use, albeit infrequently, since the 1960s. As a new idea, however, food sovereignty began to gain popularity after the World Food Summit of 1996, when La Vía Campesina introduced it to wider public

debate. Food sovereignty was defined as "the *right of each nation* to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity" (emphasis added, LVC 1996, n.p.). It stated that the right to exercise food sovereignty was a prerogative of the state. Nations were said to have achieved food sovereignty once they had achieved national food self-sufficiency, food autonomy, and domestic control over the entire value chain from production to consumption (Edelman 2014).

Promoting the idea of food sovereignty was a response to increasing food imports, dumping of food on domestic markets, heavy reliance on foreign capital, inputs and technology, and control of the food system (including exports) by the corporate sector and foreign companies that were promoting industrial agriculture. In other words, food sovereignty was a response to external aggression in the domestic food and agriculture sector. Peasants and rural people were calling on their national governments to fight against such aggression and to safeguard their livelihoods because the corporatization of agriculture was expanding rapidly and spreading into developing countries, creating problems such as land grabs, soil and environmental degradation, the displacement of people, and the gradual loss of traditional and indigenous agricultural methods, among other things (Tilzey 2018; Borras and Franco 2012; Sassen 2013). Essentially, food sovereignty calls for a return to local and agro-ecological agricultural systems, controlled by peasants, which are sustainable (Van der Ploeg 2014). It has been suggested that the idea of food sovereignty may be a reincarnation of agrarian populism, which calls for peasant essentialism or 'peasant-ness' (Brass 1997; Bernstein 2014). However, this is just one framing of the idea of food sovereignty. As we discuss later, food sovereignty has also been interpreted as the achievement of food self-sufficiency through large-scale industrial farming.

La Vía Campesina claims that developing countries' capacity to produce agricultural policy has been severely constrained by the existing global architecture of economic governance related to food and agriculture (Desmarais 2002; Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010). Therefore, its members argue that there is a need for countries and people to reclaim their right to shape their own food and agricultural policies, keeping food producers, especially peasants and indigenous peoples, at the center of such policy-making. Food sovereignty is considered the paradigm to achieve this objective.

As the food sovereignty campaign progressed after food sovereignty had been formally defined for the first time in 1996, there was agreement among non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations and social movements on the "overall framework of policies to achieve Food Sovereignty". However, different groups emphasized different issues within the framework (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005), which resulted in the definition of food sovereignty being reconsidered in 2002, 2004 and 2007.

The latest definition of food sovereignty, as spelled out in the Nyéléni Declaration of 2007, interprets it as "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" (emphasis added, The Nyéléni International Steering Committee 2007, n.p.). Defining food sovereignty initially as the right of nations to maintain and develop their own capacity to produce their own basic foods suggests that the idea of food sovereignty was born out of a sense of loss of national sovereignty. But later, defining food sovereignty as the right of peoples to define their own food and agricultural systems suggests there was not only a loss of national sovereignty, but also people's sovereignty was being compromised within nations, resulting in a need for people to claim back their sovereignty.

Within the idea of food sovereignty, there is lack of clarity regarding who the sovereign is. Whether food sovereignty is state-centric, people-centric or pluralistic remains unclear (Edelman 2014; Hospes 2014; Schiavoni 2015). Food sovereignty seems to be such an ambiguous concept that it encompasses almost everyone. For example, the concept promotes peasant-based, small-scale, agro-ecological agriculture, but the idea is also palatable to those who favor large-scale, commercial agriculture with a view to ensuring national level food self-sufficiency as seen in Bolivia (Cockburn 2014; Gysel 2016), Ecuador (Arce et al. 2015), Venezuela (Kappeler 2013), Mexico (Eakin et al. 2014) and Indonesia (McCarthy and Obidzinski 2017; Neilson and Wright 2017). Even if one accepts that food sovereignty is people-centric, the question of who the sovereign people are in food sovereignty remains unanswered because peoples are not a homogenous entity. Reconciling the interests of farmers and consumers, indigenous and non-indigenous people, etc., is not easy as there are deep tensions and contradictions (Agarwal 2014; Bernstein 2014; Edelman et al. 2014; Grey and Patel 2015). As Agarwal (2014) states, there are significant differences between the interests and needs of small farmers and well-off farmers.

Patel (2009) finds the idea of food sovereignty not being explicitly defined. He considers food sovereignty a 'big tent' that can encompass disparate groups all of whom find something in the idea with which they can identify. Therefore, food sovereignty remains an "ill-defined and inconsistent idea" (Daugbjerg et al. 2015), which lacks conceptual clarity and a common framework (Hospes 2014; Patel 2009). Scholars have attempted to identify the 'sovereign' in food sovereignty and clarify its focus and coverage (Claeys 2013; Schiavoni 2015, 2017; Wittman 2011). However, the concept still remains ambiguous (Tilzey 2018).

The idea that food sovereignty is a 'big tent' (Patel 2009) may have facilitated the formation of a large coalition in favor of food sovereignty, which helped put the concept on the policy agenda of some countries. However, because of the multiple interpretations of food sovereignty and, hence, different, even conflicting, policy prescriptions, operationalizing the concept into a coherent set of policy measures may be problematic. This suggests that food sovereignty may be a potential coalition magnet, which Béland and Cox (2016, p. 429) define as

> the capacity of an idea to appeal to a diversity of individuals and groups, and to be used strategically by policy entrepreneurs (i.e., individual or collective actors who promote certain policy solutions) to frame interests, mobilize supporters and build coalitions.

Coalition magnets can become political power resources as they affect the ability to shape outcomes and reach particular goals (Béland and Cox 2016). The coalitions that form around ideas may be tightly or loosely organized. Furthermore, they may be formal or informal, and national or transnational. The types of idea that Béland and Cox (2016) consider to be coalition magnets are often new cognitive constructions of a phenomenon of which political actors might not have previously been aware.

Somewhat counterintuitively, it is the ambiguity of the idea that attracts individuals and groups with divergent interests or preferences to build a coalition. This is because ambiguous ideas can be interpreted according to one's own understanding. Whether a coalition can be successfully built on the basis of an idea is partly determined by the intrinsic qualities of the idea, especially its valence and its potential for ambiguity or polysemy (Béland and Cox 2016) or multi-vocality (Parsons 2016).[1] Ideas that have positive valence, but diverse interpretations may be promoted in different forms based on an individual's interests or preferences and, therefore, such ideas have the potential to attract multiple actors. Hence, according to Parsons (2016), in order to understand the role of ideas as coalition magnets, it is important to track carefully the actor(s) and the issues they championed with respect to policies, how their agenda was related to perceived problems, and how both changed over time. Parsons's views are no different to those of Béland and Cox (2016), who argue that the direct role of the individual and collective actors who have to mobilize politically to impose particular ideas is essential in building coalitions.

While ideas that exhibit the characteristics of a coalition magnet may facilitate the formation of coalitions in agenda setting, such coalitions may prove fragile in the post-agenda setting stages of the policy process, i.e. policy formulation, decision making, implementation and evaluation (Howlett et al. 2009). This is because the ambiguous nature of the idea will probably direct policy in different, sometimes opposite, directions, each with its supporters. Therefore, combining the various policy options in a coherent policy package may be difficult, if not impossible. This resembles Laclau's 'empty signifier' (Laclau 1996), which is a symbol that can be used to unite disparate groups within a society. Whether this makes the idea of food sovereignty an expression of agrarian populism (see Bernstein 2014) is an open question which we do not address here.

Therefore, a coalition that forms around a magnet in the agenda setting stage may not necessarily be a viable policy coalition, and thus a power resource, as stakeholders engage in the difficult process of translating broad and diverse objectives into specific policy measures.

In the sections below, we analyze the case of the institutionalization and operationalization of food sovereignty in Nepal in order to examine our conjecture that the idea of food sovereignty may have been used by policy entrepreneurs as a coalition magnet to garner support for their agricultural reform program among individuals and organizations who did not necessarily share a common understanding about the idea and how to translate it into specific policy measures. These entrepreneurs may have effectively transferred the idea of food sovereignty from the transnational level to the national level, while interpreting the concept in many different ways. For an idea to become a coalition magnet, three things are essential: (1) effective manipulation of the idea by policy entrepreneurs, (2) embracing or promotion of the idea by key actors in the policy process, and (3) coming together of actors who were previously at odds with each other, or mobilizing actors who were not previously engaged with the particular issue.

Our analysis is based on interview data collected in Nepal, and review of key policy documents. Between July and September 2016, we conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews in Kathmandu with 30 stakeholders who are closely associated with the food sovereignty movement and debate in Nepal. The interviewees included leaders of farmer organizations (both affiliated and unaffiliated with political parties), politicians and their representatives, government officials, development thinkers and planners, civil society actors, policy analysts, activists, and legal experts.

Food sovereignty in Nepal

The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist) waged an armed struggle in Nepal in 1996. The group made a number of economic and socio-political demands. One of the major

[1] Multi-vocality refers to the capacity of an idea to be understood in multiple ways, combining shared and unshared interpretations (Parsons 2016).

objectives of the struggle was to abolish the monarchy. In 2005, King Gyanendra dismissed a democratically elected government and assumed direct control, which spurred the mainstream political parties to come together to oppose the King's move. This resulted in their signing a 12-point understanding with the CPN (Maoist) to garner its support for the abolition of the monarchy.

To ensure the success of the movement, the political parties asked all their affiliated organizations to form coalitions and mobilize their respective bases in the political struggle. Accordingly, political parties' sister organizations, including peasant organizations, came together. The three major peasant organizations in this endeavor were the All Nepal Peasants' Federation (ANPFa),[2] affiliated with the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist and Leninist), commonly known as CPN (UML); the Nepal Peasants' Association (NPA), affiliated with the Nepali Congress; and the All Nepal Peasants' Federation Revolutionary (ANPFa-R),[3] affiliated with the CPN (Maoist).[4] Together, these organizations formed a loose coalition, which was named the National Peasants' Coalition.

The political movement of 2005–2006 did not only successfully abolish the monarchy, but it also established a number of social, economic and political rights. The National Peasants' Coalition realized that having succeeded in jointly mobilizing the peasants for political regime change, it was imperative that they continue to work together to advocate agrarian reforms[5] and peasants' rights. In due course, about ten additional associations joined the Coalition.[6]

The success of the political movement resulted in the reinstatement of the parliament that had been dissolved by the King. An 'Interim constitution drafting committee' prepared the Interim Constitution, which was approved by the parliament unanimously.[7] In the Interim Constitution, food sovereignty was included as a fundamental right of every Nepali citizen.[8] Moreover, a state policy would be to make reservation on food sovereignty for a certain period of time to promote the interests of marginalized communities, peasants and laborers living below the poverty line (Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007).

Food sovereignty as such was not on the agenda of the political movement of the time, and it was never mentioned in the agreements between the political parties.[9] The Comprehensive Peace Agreement that was signed by the Government of Nepal and the CPN (Maoist) on 21 November 2006 stipulated the formulation of policies to implement a scientific land reform program by doing away with feudal land ownership practices, and establishing the rights of all citizens to *food security*. The Agreement stated that the political parties were committed to respecting and guaranteeing the right to food security for all the people, and ensuring that there shall be no interference in the use, transportation and distribution of food items, food products and food grains.[10]

The drafters of the Interim Constitution chose 'food sovereignty' over 'food security', but left the former undefined. They did not explain what the right to food sovereignty entailed, or what it meant to 'provide reservation on food sovereignty'. This illustrates the lack of clarity concerning the idea of food sovereignty among the drafters of the Interim Constitution. According to Adhikari (2014), although political actors included 'food sovereignty' in the Interim Constitution, they continued to focus on 'food security'. According to some civil society actors and agriculture experts, this was because the concept of food sovereignty had not been clearly defined or rigorously debated (see also Tilzey 2018). Its inclusion in the Interim Constitution was, first and foremost, a symbolic political act that did not reflect a specific policy agenda. As we argue below, it appealed broadly to various groups because of its polysemy or multivocality. Initially, a few policy entrepreneurs propagated the idea of food sovereignty, which was later accepted by a range of actors who had different interpretations of the concept. The policy entrepreneurs were also successful in selling the idea to major political and policy actors, which resulted in opposing forces coming together to accept and institutionalize food sovereignty.

[2] ANPFa is a member of La Vía Campesina.

[3] ANPFa-R only provided moral support in the beginning as it was an underground organization along with its parent party until the political movement concluded after which it joined the coalition.

[4] In May 2018, CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist) merged to form a single party, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN).

[5] Issues such as unequal access to land, a lack of access to agricultural credit, the unavailability of quality agricultural inputs on time have been long-standing issues in Nepal. .

[6] http://anpfa.org.np/index.php/about-anpfa/membership-and-networking, viewed on 5 November 2016.

[7] http://un.org.np/node/10500, viewed on 5 November 2016.

[8] A new Constitution was written by the Constituent Assembly and it replaced the Interim Constitution on 20 September 2015. The new Constitution is 186 pages long, and is divided into 35 parts, 308 articles and nine schedules. It has been criticised by some for its length and details. The new Constitution also stipulates food sovereignty as a fundamental right of every Nepali citizen.

[9] See, for example, "Twelve-point understanding reached between the seven political parties and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists)", http://www.peace.gov.np/uploads/files/1_GoV.pdf, viewed on 20 December 2016.

[10] "Comprehensive Peace Agreement concluded by the Government of Nepal and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists)", http://www.peace.gov.np/uploads/files/14_Gov.pdf, viewed on 20 December 2016.

Policy entrepreneurs and the manipulation of the idea of food sovereignty

The All Nepal Peasants' Association (ANPA), which later became the ANPFa, took the lead in calling for food sovereignty in Nepal.[11] Its leaders were the main policy entrepreneurs who propagated the idea of food sovereignty and convinced the others to accept and promote it.

The ANPA became affiliated with La Vía Campesina in 1994. However, as stated by its former General Secretary, it was not actively engaged in the global peasants' movement from the outset. After a few years' membership, the ANPA became an active member and has remained so to this day. The ANPFa is also an active member of the Asian Peasant Coalition, and co-ordinator of the South Asian Peasant Coalition (SAPC).[12] The active engagement of the ANPFa at the global and regional levels with organizations that advocate food sovereignty enabled the ANPFa to take the lead in the call for food sovereignty in Nepal. As the General Secretary of the ANPFa stated, the ANPFa is a member of the policy formulation team on food sovereignty at the international level. Therefore, it is very much aware of food sovereignty issues.[13] The entrepreneurship of the ANPFa in promoting food sovereignty in Nepal is also evident from the following statement made by the NPA Chairman:

> We were not really aware of food sovereignty. [The then General Secretary of the ANPFa] explained it to us. He was writing his PhD on the same subject, and so we learnt about food sovereignty from him.[14]

A vice-president of the CPN (UML), who was previously a Deputy Prime Minister of Nepal, is the president of the ANPFa. Similarly, one of the members of the ANPFa was appointed Minister of Agriculture, while a former General Secretary of the ANPFa was appointed as a member of Nepal's National Planning Commission. Because of its huge peasant base, the ANPFa enjoys strong support from its parent party, which is one of the most influential political parties in Nepal.

The idea of food sovereignty was also promoted by the ANPFa-R. A senior leader of the ANPFa-R, who became an advisor to the Minister of Agriculture, had also been affiliated with La Vía Campesina. He too had been vigorously pursuing the right to food sovereignty in Nepal. Thus, the actors who promoted food sovereignty in Nepal wielded considerable political clout and had influential roles in decision-making.

Therefore, mainly one peasant organization, the ANPFa, actively promoted the idea of food sovereignty in Nepal initially. Other peasant organizations adopted the idea at a later stage. Moreover, these peasant organizations are sister wings of the main political parties and are not led by real peasant leaders, but by politicians. We did not find any activities that were major driving forces in the promotion of food sovereignty in Nepal that were conducted by peasants.

The actors who promoted the idea of food sovereignty in Nepal did so by defining it in politically appealing, albeit ambiguous ways. Given that there is a strong anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) sentiment among some groups of people in many developing countries, including Nepal, the ANPA sought to frame the argument for food sovereignty in Nepal as a struggle against the WTO, mirroring the transnational food sovereignty movement.

In 2006, the ANPA published a booklet in Nepali containing information about food sovereignty. Titled *About People's Food Sovereignty*, its preface states that the aim of publishing the booklet is to inform the people about the WTO, the effect WTO policies have on agricultural countries such as Nepal, and what the state should do to counteract these effects (ANPA 2006). The entire preface of the booklet is in line with La Vía Campesina's call for food sovereignty as a fight against the WTO and neoliberal ideas in the food and agriculture sector, which are propagated by organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. However, the content of the booklet does not focus or elaborate on these issues. In the section on the WTO, it only briefly discusses the possible negative effects of the Agreement on Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) on agriculture. Moreover, the discussion is at a general level, and not specific to Nepal. There is no discussion as to how Nepal's WTO membership could be considered detrimental to the country's agricultural sector. This may be because Nepal's WTO membership has not had any major impact on its agriculture. In fact, Nepal's accession to the WTO has been lauded as a well-balanced outcome in terms of Nepal's commitments to economic reforms and the opening up of its economy to the outside world, and the preservation of policy space to meet its developmental objectives, including those relating to agriculture (Pandey et al. 2014; Rajkarnikar 2005).

Nevertheless, lead advocates of food sovereignty in Nepal oppose the WTO without any specific reason, especially in

[11] In the early 2000s, ANPA was restructured into ANPFa by bringing together 23 commodity-specific producer organizations under its umbrella. It claims to be an umbrella organization of entire Nepali peasants fighting against feudalism, imperialism and neo-liberalism since its inception six decades ago. It has also been active in mobilising the masses, especially peasants, in democratic movements time and again, http://anpfa.org.np/index.php/about-anpfa/who-we-are, viewed 12 January 2017.

[12] http://www.anpfa.org.np/index.php/about-anpfa/membership-and-networking, viewed 12 January 2017.

[13] Personal interview.

[14] Personal interview.

the context of its alleged adverse effects on Nepal's agriculture (see Dangal 2013). General claims made by farmer leaders from the major political parties that the WTO has given monopoly rights to multinational seed companies and that multinational companies prioritize food security, in practice defined as the availability of food (Fouilleux et al. 2017), illustrate why farmer leaders from the major political parties oppose multinational companies and the free market economy. However, they do not clearly explain their aversion to the free market economy and multinational companies in the context of Nepal. According to Adler et al. (2013), in general, issues such as unequal access to land, lack of adequate governmental support, and geophysical constraints on local food production in many hilly and remote parts of Nepal need more attention than the external factors such as Nepal's WTO membership. The following statement made by one of the farmer leaders illustrates this:

> Thirty-five to forty percent of our land in the hills is fallow. This is not because of the WTO, or because of the conditions of international financial institutions.[15]

Food sovereignty has been interpreted in multiple ways in Nepal and it, therefore, remains an ambiguous concept. First and foremost, such ambiguity is evident in the interpretation of food sovereignty as a broad framework versus a specific program. An advocate of food sovereignty who was an advisor to the Natural Resources Committee of the Parliament considers food sovereignty to be a framework. He argues that:

> Food sovereignty should not have been included as a fundamental right in the Constitution. It should have been kept in policy documents. Food sovereignty is a process to achieve the right to food.[16]

Civil society leaders who have long advocated food sovereignty also share a somewhat similar view as they state that food sovereignty provides an overarching framework, which will be operationalized by food security and the right to food.[17]

Similarly, the ANPFa-R holds the view that food sovereignty can encompass both food security and the right to food. The actors who interpret food sovereignty as a broad framework argue that it encompasses several elements such as land rights, indigenous production systems, the right to access resources, choice of inputs, governance, policy, etc. However, for the ANPFa, food sovereignty is an implementable program and can be considered a right. It is considered an alternative to food security because, in the words of the General Secretary of the ANPFa, "while food security is about giving fish to the hungry, food sovereignty is about teaching people how to fish".[18] He sees food sovereignty as being implementable because it is about providing farmers with land and access to resources as the country cannot be food-secure unless farmers have access to land and water.

Similarly, divergent views exist regarding the understanding of food sovereignty in relation to land reforms. Some farmer leaders and agriculture policy analysts and activists continue to support the agenda of land distribution to provide land ownership to the tillers.[19] This provision is also included in the new Constitution. Yet, according to a civil society activist who has been working on land rights issues for decades in Nepal, given the lack of enough agricultural land and its increasing fragmentation, it would be more beneficial to consolidate small pieces of land and give it to tillers on long-term leases of 30 to 50 years.[20] A more radical view, which is held by some strong food sovereignty advocates, is that the state should take back control of all private land and lease it to the tillers.[21]

Thus, a few policy entrepreneurs promoted the idea of food sovereignty in Nepal, and the concept was subsequently adopted by a range of actors. However, several understandings of what food sovereignty means and how it could be implemented exist. Food sovereignty as an idea is not opposed by many, but various actors have accepted it based on their own interpretations.

Embracing or promoting the idea by key actors

Food sovereignty brought together leaders of farmer organizations affiliated with various political parties, leaders of an independent farmer organization and civil society actors. However, the inclusion of food sovereignty in the Constitution may not have been possible had top political leaders not embraced the idea. As we discuss below, the most senior leaders of the major political parties, and the three key state institutions—the legislative, the executive and the judicial—have also embraced food sovereignty in Nepal.

Members of the National Peasants' Coalition, which is affiliated with the political parties, advocated food sovereignty and managed to persuade their leaders to accept the concept based on their respective understandings. One of the political parties did not oppose the idea of food sovereignty,

[15] Personal interview.

[16] Personal interview.

[17] Personal interviews with civil society leaders who have long advocated food sovereignty.

[18] Personal interview.

[19] Personal interviews with the Chairman of the NPA, a senior agricultural policy analyst, and an activist.

[20] Personal interview.

[21] Personal interviews with the Secretary of the ANPFa-R and the General Secretary of the ANPFa.

despite some "contrary views by certain leaders". The most senior leaders embraced the idea because it was understood as being akin to political sovereignty. Moreover, the president of the ANPFa, who is one of the most senior leaders of one of the largest political parties, played an influential role in the political movement of 2005–2006 and developments thereafter. According to ANPFa officials, during negotiations between senior leaders of the political parties about the country's social, economic and political course after the regime change, the president of the ANPFa constantly pushed for food sovereignty and was successful in persuading his seniors (the main negotiators) to agree on the Interim Constitution only if it contained a fundamental right to food sovereignty. The leaders of the peasant organizations were also successful in persuading Members of Parliament (MPs) from their respective parties to embrace the idea of food sovereignty. The fact that the President of the ANPFa was also in the coalition as well as being an influential MP helped to persuade other MPs.

Since the inclusion of the right to food sovereignty in the Interim Constitution, food sovereignty has appeared in almost every plan or policy document related to agriculture. For example, it was included in the *Three Year Interim Plan (2007/08–2009/10)* (TYIP), which was the first periodic plan[22] after the Interim Constitution. However, as we discuss later, the concept of food sovereignty is also vague in these plan documents. The planners accepted the idea of food sovereignty, albeit unwillingly.

Similarly, once the first draft of the Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS)[23] had been prepared, it was sent to the Agriculture and Water Resources Committee of the Parliament for feedback. The Committee embraced the idea of food sovereignty, as is evident from its suggestions to the draft ADS. In its analysis of the draft, it stated that agricultural development is not only the backbone of the country's development, but also the foundation of food sovereignty and the right to food (see MoAD 2015, Appendix 6).

Nepal's judiciary also embraced the idea of food sovereignty. In 2008, a public interest litigation was filed at Nepal's Supreme Court accusing the Government of Nepal of not fully honoring the fundamental rights of its citizens to live with dignity (due to the lack of adequate food), and their right to food sovereignty. The court ruled in favor of the petitioners and ordered the government to provide food by any means, including imports if necessary. It referred to Article 18(3) of the Interim Constitution on the fundamental right to food sovereignty, interpreting it in conjunction with the right to employment 18(1) and the right to social security 18(2).

Thus, despite its ambiguity, the idea of food sovereignty was not challenged by any major actor in Nepal. Rather, they embraced the idea, and some even promoted it, but in different ways, which reflected their various interpretations.

Coming together of actors who were previously at odds with each other

As demonstrated above, food sovereignty became an important magnet, which allowed the formation of a coalition of leading figures from the farmer associations and the political parties to pursue their (different) interests in agricultural reform, despite their previous long-standing differences on agricultural issues.

Obviously, given their ideological differences, the political parties were at odds with each other. Accordingly, their farmer organizations also had differences. The drive for political regime change initially united the political parties and their affiliated farmer organizations. The political parties' differences on agricultural issues is evident from the policies they had adopted in the past and the support they enjoyed from the different classes of people. As Hachhethu (2007) observes, the Nepali Congress Party adopted a policy of a mixed but open economy, and focused on overall economic growth with its agriculture policy also being growth-oriented. He states that after 1991, the Party abandoned its earlier goal of protecting the tillers. The Party was considered to have its electoral base in the urban middle and upper classes (Ishiyama and Batta 2011), and amongst well-off farmers. The Communist parties, on the other hand, represented the proletariat and the working class (Hachhethu 2007). After the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, the CPN (UML) emphasized land reforms, the aim of which was to end feudal and dual land ownerships, and ensure tillers' rights.

After the success of the political movement of 2005–2006, differences between the political parties and their associated farmer organizations resurfaced, which delayed the formation of the National Peasants' Coalition. As the Secretary of the ANPFa-R said:

> When we were at war, the Nepali Congress was in government for most of the time. So, for us, the Nepali Congress was the main opposition. Also, during the war, farmers seized land from elites, many of whom were close to the Nepali Congress. Land seizures did not take place at the behest of any political party. People were exploited by landowners and so they rebelled.

[22] Since the mid-1950 s, Nepal has been planning its development, producing periodic plans that cover a period of three or five years.

[23] The ADS is the main document to guide Nepal's agricultural development for a 20-year period from 2015 to 2035.

> Due to such events, the NPA were uncomfortable sitting together with us in the coalition.[24]

Despite this, they all accepted and promoted the idea of food sovereignty collectively. There was limited debate on the specific policies that they would seek to pursue under the food sovereignty agenda. However, according to a senior Agricultural Policy Analyst, in this new idea, the political parties found the means to continue with the politics of food and agriculture.[25] This is illustrated by the following statement made by the NPA Chairman:

> I am a democrat and I am always for all kinds of sovereignty. I am inspired by the understanding that we should be sovereign on food matters too.[26]

Implementing food sovereignty in Nepal

The appeal of the idea of food sovereignty, which has the attributes of a coalition magnet, enabled the convergence of actors who claim to have been struggling for agricultural reforms and farmers' rights for decades in Nepal. They were successful in establishing it as a fundamental constitutional right. However, since there is no common interpretation of food sovereignty, how will policies on food sovereignty be formulated and implemented?

Although the idea of food sovereignty has been interpreted and applied in a variety of ways by social movements around the world, it has some core features. These include granting the landless access to agricultural land, developing local, small-scale agriculture, supporting agro-ecology, and discarding genetically modified seeds, among others. In Nepal, despite the adoption of the idea of food sovereignty, these core features have not been seriously considered. Rather, as some early evidence indicates, there may be some cosmetic changes in food and agricultural policies that will be lauded as food sovereignty. The food and agriculture programs and policies that have been implemented since the Interim Constitution provide some evidence of this claim. In the following, we analyze the key plans, policies and programs undertaken in relation to food and agriculture since the Interim Constitution was introduced.

The TYIP referred to the right to food sovereignty as stipulated in the Interim Constitution. A stated objective of the TYIP was to *maintain food sovereignty by ensuring food security*, and to improve *national* food sovereignty by increasing *national* self-reliance on basic food products. The long-term vision of the TYIP regarding food security, on the other hand, was to ensure "food sovereignty rights of every *individual* by strengthening in a coordinated way all aspects of food and nutritional security" (NPC 2007, emphasis added). This illustrates Nepali planners' lack of clarity on the idea of food sovereignty, especially with regard to the relationship between food sovereignty and food security, and whether food sovereignty is about individuals' right or about ensuring national food self-reliance.

After the TYIP, the periodic plans adopted the idea of food sovereignty in a similarly vague manner. In the introduction to the section on food security, the Twelfth Plan states:

> In the context of Nepal's Interim Constitution (2007), having accepted food sovereignty as a fundamental human right, the focus of this Plan will be on ensuring food security for every citizen (NPC 2010).[27]

Such vague statements do not explain how the idea of food sovereignty will be translated into policies. The planners included food sovereignty in the periodic plans only because it was present in the Constitution, as confirmed by a former vice-chairperson of the National Planning Commission in the following:

> Food sovereignty is a political term. It is not an economic term. We would have only mentioned food security, but since they kept the term food sovereignty in the Constitution, we also had to keep it.[28]

Similar ambiguities are visible in the ADS. The vision of the ADS is "a self-reliant, sustainable, competitive, and inclusive agricultural sector that drives economic growth and contributes to improved livelihoods and food and nutrition security *leading to food sovereignty*" (MoAD 2015). Except 'food sovereignty', all the key elements of the vision are explained immediately after the vision statement in the document. Moreover, to allay the possible fear that the inclusion of 'self-reliance' and 'food sovereignty' in the vision statement could be interpreted as Nepal moving towards self-sufficiency, the ADS has categorically stated that the vision of achieving self-reliance on food should not preclude international trade in agricultural products.

The ADS interprets self-reliance as the ability to rely on one's own resources and being resilient to economic, social and environmental shocks and changes. This does not mean that self-reliance should be understood as self-sufficiency and yet the two terms are used interchangeably throughout the ADS (see MoAD 2015). According to a former member of the National Planning Commission, who contributed to

[24] Personal interview.

[25] Personal interview.

[26] Personal interview.

[27] Author's translation.

[28] Personal interview.

the ADS,[29] this is because those who participated in the preparation of the ADS disagreed on whether to envision a policy of food self-sufficiency or self-reliance.

The vision of the ADS is to be fulfilled through four strategic components, one of which is profitable commercialization (MoAD 2015). For some adherents of food sovereignty, achieving food sovereignty through commercialization is contradictory. The chairperson of the National Farmers Group Federation Nepal, which is the largest non-political farmer organization in the country, explicitly contests the idea of the commercialization of agriculture in Nepal. He argues that commercialization is not possible because the country has 150,000 pieces of fragmented land, the integration of which is not possible due to the country's topography. However, the Secretary of the ANPFa-R argues that commercialization in Nepal should not be understood in a general sense or synonymously with corporatization. Rather, it should be understood as advancing from a low-return agricultural system to a high-return agricultural system by adopting farming methods that increase productivity and production, and producing not only for self-consumption, but also to create surplus to sell on the market. He asserts that it is possible to commercialize agriculture by adopting traditional, local agricultural practices. This exemplifies the distinct preferences among food sovereignty proponents in Nepal, thereby hinting at the potential challenges to operationalizing the idea of food sovereignty.

The ADS was prepared by the Ministry of Agricultural Development in consultation with the National Peasants' Coalition (MoAD 2015). In the ADS preparation team, one member from each of the three farmer organizations affiliated with the major political parties represented the National Peasants' Coalition. Many proponents of food sovereignty who belong to non-political groups find many contradictions in the ADS in that it mentions food sovereignty, but at the same time adopts policies that reflect the status-quo. The members of the National Peasants' Coalition who were part of the ADS preparation team claim the success of including food sovereignty in the ADS, but defend themselves against the wrath of other food sovereignty proponents, stating that they participated in the preparation of the ADS at a very late stage.

The periodic plans, the ADS and other policies related to food and agriculture clearly demonstrate that the focus is on agricultural modernization and commercialization. The translation of these policy priorities into action is visible in the Prime Minister Agriculture Modernization Project (PMAMP), the aim of which is to implement the ADS (MoAD 2016). The goal of the project is to transform Nepal's subsistence agriculture into modern agriculture through agricultural commercialization. Some of the strategies of the project to achieve its goal include scientific land use, the adoption of modern agricultural technologies, the mechanization of agriculture, and infrastructure development for the processing and marketing of agriculture products.

Land fragmentation has always been considered a major barrier to undertaking agricultural commercialization and modernization in Nepal. Therefore, the aim of 'scientific land use' in the PMAMP is to consolidate land based on cooperative farming, contract farming and lease farming. To achieve this, some special agricultural areas are divided into four clusters with minimum sizes of 10 hectares, 100 hectares, 500 hectares and 1,000 hectares, respectively.

This strategy of land consolidation for agricultural modernization and commercialization only includes farmers who have land. However, what happens to the 65 percent of the rural population who are either landless or almost landless (owning less than 0.25 ha)? Moreover, how does this fit with the advancement of small-scale, local, agro-ecological agriculture as promoted by the social movement on food sovereignty, and by organizations that are affiliated with La Vía Campesina in Nepal (LVC 2006)? According to the ADS, the commercialization of agriculture will result in several employment opportunities in the farm and non-farm sectors. The landless and nearly landless would benefit from such enhanced rural activities and employment (MoAD 2015). However, this is almost a market-oriented approach, which appears to be against the ideal of food sovereignty. Moreover, strategies for agricultural development as stipulated in the ADS and agricultural programs promoted by the PMAMP suggest that in Nepal there is skepticism that a return to traditional agriculture along the lines of 'peasant essentialism' would contribute to the country's agricultural development.

Essentially, the social movement for food sovereignty argues for providing access to resources, mainly land. However, as previously discussed, in Nepal, proponents of food sovereignty have different views on how to secure such access. Some argue for land redistribution; some argue for consolidating land and leasing it to the tillers on a long-term basis; while others advocate a more radical approach, demanding that the state seize control of all land and lease it to the tillers.[30] This also illustrates the problem of formulating and implementing policy that aligns with the concept of food sovereignty in Nepal.

Thus, the different perceptions of food sovereignty proponents, and the adoption of food and agriculture-related policies in key policy documents and programs related to food and agriculture, illustrate that the idea of food sovereignty

[29] Personal interview.

[30] Based on discussions with several stakeholders during fieldwork.

resembles a coalition magnet. Its characteristics as a coalition magnet contributed to setting the agenda on food sovereignty in Nepal. However, in relation to translating the idea of food sovereignty into actual, consistent and, not least, uncontested policy, the ambiguity of the idea, which helped form the coalition in the first place, may result in fractures occurring in the coalition, unless some stakeholders accept that minor deviations from the status quo is the same as achieving food sovereignty.

Conclusion

As the case of Nepal illustrates, food sovereignty is a popular, appealing, yet ambiguous idea. This may facilitate the formation of a majority coalition around the idea of food sovereignty, which may enable reform advocates to put agricultural reform on the government agenda. This makes the idea of food sovereignty a coalition magnet. Interestingly, however, it is the very ambiguity of the idea that hampers the design of specific policy proposals. The political appeal of ideas such as food sovereignty acts like a magnet drawing together actors who have different, and sometimes even opposing, preferences. When it comes to translating the broad idea into specific policy measures, political and policy actors may start pulling it in different directions in line with their personal interpretations. Hence, implementing the idea effectively may become a major challenge and may result in very limited reform. Consequently, as the case of Nepal demonstrates, existing policies and programs will be adjusted at the margin and repackaged as 'food sovereignty'.

Applying the coalition magnet concept is a novel analytical approach to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of food sovereignty as a policy idea. Our study has highlighted how food sovereignty as a coalition magnet limits reform advocates' opportunities to translate the idea into actual policy reform. Our argument that food sovereignty can be considered a coalition magnet can inform thinking about how the idea of food sovereignty can be used more constructively to design policy that may result in actual change. The first-best approach is to reach a broader consensus on how the structure of the agricultural sector and the broader food system needs to be changed in order to achieve food sovereignty. Acknowledging that this may not be possible at the moment, the second-best approach would be to attempt to maintain the agenda-setting coalition throughout the post-agenda setting phases.

Although not applying the concept of coalition magnets, Skogstad's (2017) study of the European Union's biofuels policy can provide some insights into the viability of a coalition in policy formulation. Based on her findings, we suggest that the extent to which a coalition can be maintained in the policy formulation phase depends on the ability to design multi-dimensional policies. Such policy is shaped to address a number of aspects of a multi-dimensional policy challenge. As some actors will see that their concerns have been addressed, they may remain part of the coalition. However, the risk of multi-dimensional policies is that certain dimensions may not be effectively implemented. This may gradually become apparent to some coalition members, resulting in the re-politicization of the issue, and eventually splitting the coalition.

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