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EHNE-Bizkaia Agroecology training

Food Sovereignty in Practice in the Basque Country

By EHNE Bizkaia—The Basque Farmers Union*

“Food Sovereignty is a right and a utopia that helps us change society. It is the right of all peoples to decide on their means of production and what they eat. In order for this right to exist, we must change all the social and political structures we have today. It is a struggle against the system and a struggle for good livelihoods.”

—Estibaliz Redondo, EHNE-Bizkaia

It has now been twenty years since La Vía Campesina coined the term Food Sovereignty, defining it as the right of all peoples to decide on their food systems from production to consumption, based on agroecology and organized for the construction of local and national sovereignty. EHNE-Bizkaia—the Basque union of small farmers and ranchers—has been working to advance food sovereignty since Vía Campesina’s foundational congress in 1993. In *Euskal Herria* (the Basque Country) the struggle for food sovereignty is embedded in a broader struggle for political and cultural autonomy, drawing on a long history of Basque resistance against fascism and state-sponsored repression. A strong model of local cooperative food production thrives in the region, as part of a framework of community empowerment and solidarity economy.

When we talk about, define and explain food sovereignty, many people see it as a utopia because it clearly means we have to go beyond the existing laws of the global market and the agroindustrial model of production to construct a real alternative based on the clear political position that prioritizes people and the environment above the interests of multinational corporations. Years after defining the term, we now see clear examples

* Founded in 1977, EHNE Bizkaia is a founding member of La Vía Campesina and one of the 2013 Food Sovereignty Prize winners. EHNE’s mission is to advance agroecological production that ensures food safety, food quality, respect of the environment, as well as employment and a dynamic countryside in the Basque Country.



EHNE-Bizkaia member selling tomatoes at the farmers' market

that demonstrate that alternative market models based on collaboration, commitment and mutual aid between producers and consumers is possible. The organizations that work to build this alternative model are using different tools, affirming a model of change, and showing us that we can do things differently.

One example is the *Red Nekasarea*, a project of EHNE Bizkaia, started in 2007 to establish direct links between production and consumption. In less than 10 years, policies that favored big box stores and big infrastructure had covered 13 percent of the Basque Country under a layer of cement, leading to a dramatic loss of environment and livelihoods in the countryside. Something had to be done. In this context, we created a network of producers and consumers that were not only sellers and customers but mutual aid groups in which everyone was equally responsible for the food system.

The change of vision needed to form these groups required a lot of work—primarily education—with the producers in order to understand that they needed

to do things they hadn't done before like spending time communicating with their group or distributing planned, weekly food baskets (*cestas*). Those who receive the food are not just "customers," but people who are actively concerned with the day-to-day work of the farmer and who collaborate in production at different times throughout the year. Though this model seemed utopian in 2007, today it provides 800 families with food baskets produced by 80 farmers who plan production based on mutual agreements with consumers. Coordinator of Red Nekasarea Isa Alvarez recalls:

Two years ago the Red Nekasarea was based more on the urban sector supporting the rural sector—consumers helping producers—now with the economic crisis we need to make this support go in both directions because there are a lot of people in the city who have economic difficulties and can't access food, so now the consumer groups are working to solve these problems.

It's important to point out that this network is not just creating an alternative consumption model but really implies the creation of a whole new *economic* model. First, because the monthly quota people pay for their food baskets is not viewed as a payment for food but as support for a village form of production. In exchange, the farmer delivers baskets of their seasonal produce... they do not produce just on demand and Red Nekasareas's rules limit the size of participating farms. The idea is to create a network of collective groups that will multiply into many groups, not just consolidate into a few,

large groups. One of the objectives is to regenerate the social structure of the agrarian sector: over the last few years, 50 young people have been able to start farming. As farmer-member Unai Aranguren affirms,

Given the economic crisis, our plan to forge agroecology as a source of change, along with the political understanding of the local population and the creation of networks between producers and consumers is bringing more and more people back to the countryside.

One of the clear examples from this network is something that happened last year with one of EHNE's farmers. A winter storm blew down farmer Joseba Koskorrotza's greenhouse, destroying his crop, leaving him with nothing to distribute to his Nekasarea group and ruining his chances for the following year's spring planting. For him, this was an economic disaster, made worse by the fact that he was unable to keep his commitments to the consumers in his group. Any other farmer in this situation would be ruined or at the very least would have to take out loans to stay afloat. This case was very different.

The first thing that happened was that his food basket group came to his village on the weekends to help him rebuild his greenhouse so he could get back on his feet quickly. But even so, there was no produce to fill the food baskets. His fellow farmers in the Red Nekasarea network didn't hesitate. There were 28 produce farmers in Red Nekasarea and Joseba had 29 weekly food baskets to



To consume locally is our right

distribute, so each one of the producers donated a food basket each week to cover Josebas's group's needs while Joseba continued to charge for the cost of the produce. For the farmers, it was not a big deal to donate one basket but for the one on the receiving end, it made the difference between success or failure. Claims Joseba,

The spirit of solidarity that we thought was lost is there, but we have to put our fears and shame aside. That's when one realizes that if you get involved like this, in this network, it's not just to farm differently... it also means being part of a collective that is governed by other values—values that we thought were lost and that in difficult times make you see that you are not alone. It is when you understand that Food Sovereignty is more than just a new proposal for our relationship with the land... It's also a way of relating with our own community.

Examples like this may seem simple, but

they are possible thanks to the preparation of all those involved and to a lot of communication. This helps to weave relations of trust, which works better than any form of certification. All of this comes from knowing that the achievement of food sovereignty only comes through collective processes that are capable of rethinking the present system and building new forms, not just based on production but on relationships between people. This is the only way to attain the transformation proposed by food sovereignty. As farmer and EHNE member Valentín Jauregui notes,

In this globalized world in which we live, the problems of family farmers are the same in California, Euskal Herría, Mexico, Colombia, Africa... The big corporations have become



Ikurriña, the Basque flag

owners of the land. They don't love the land. Land for them is an object of production and they have forgotten that the land, truly, has another objective, which is to feed our communities.—the land is a living being. It is not merchandise, it is a fellow voyager. It is our sustenance, our reason for living, and the meaning of our lives.

EHNE-Bizkaia accepts the 2013 Food Sovereignty Prize Honorable Mention

“From a small peoples lost in the corners of old Europe called Euskal Herría, EHNE-Bizkaia sincerely thanks you for the recognition you have given us. This recognition strengthens our peasant hearts, motivating us even more—if that is possible—to fight for radical change in the food system.

Our struggle is a “creation struggle” in which we must confront the agro-industrial system and the big corporations through small-scale, diversified agroecology.

We must transform the food value chain through the creation of local direct markets, creating civic awareness for direct, local and seasonal commerce.

We must create a new kind of unionism that is inclusive, participatory and equitable, and values farmers' commitment to the land; a unionism that—apart from demanding a dignified livelihood—serves to collectivize the knowledge, sentiments and practices of community-based peasant farmers.

We must create social spaces that appeal to youth, turning them into agroecological militants—the new blood that reinvigorates Basque agriculture. We must cultivate young people who are committed to food sovereignty, whom we should train for the new technical and political challenges ahead.

This new unionism is led by women who are the leaders of social change—women who bring equality, horizontal politics, the transmission of rural culture and agrarian activism to the struggle.

We are peasant farmers who work proudly and joyfully to transform the food system by building global good will and solidarity and working with *Vía Campesina*.”

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