

## Sovereignties of Food: Political Struggle and Life-World Encounters in Southeast Asia

Christiane Voßemer, Judith Ehlert, Michelle Proyer, & Ralph Guth

► Voßemer, C., Ehlert, J., Proyer, M., & Guth, R. (2015). Editorial: Sovereignties of food: Political struggle and life-world encounters in Southeast Asia. *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 8(1), 1-6.

In Southeast Asian societies, food has always been at the center of diverse forms of contestation over access to land and other productive means, food self-sufficiency, and quality as well as food-based identities.

Political struggles and socio-economic differentiation in terms of food production, distribution, and consumption have dramatically intensified in the region. This has mainly been caused by enduring periods of agrarian reform, rapid global market integration, as well as processes of industrialization and urbanization in countries traditionally characterized as peasant societies.

Scott (1976) elaborates on the struggles and resistance of the peasantry in Southeast Asia in the context of emerging world capitalism and colonial hegemony – fighting against food shortages and the exploitation of their subsistence means. Following the region's independence from colonial exploitation, protests and other forms of contentious and 'everyday politics' of peasants and farmer organizations (Kerkvliet, 2009) have, of course, not withered but have redirected their claims against and adaptations to another 'food hegemon'. In this regard, Friedmann and McMichael (1989) critically analyze the establishment of state-led large-scale plantations for cash crop production in the Global South and the new socio-economic dependencies produced by the Green Revolution. Furthermore, the authors address the emergence of the current corporate food regime during the neoliberal phase of capitalism. In this regime, the hegemonic power emanates from transnational corporations and international finance institutions, controlling whole food commodity chains on a global scale and subordinating food and agriculture to the paradigm of profit-maximization.

The region's pathway of Green Revolution technology and concurrent regional and international trade liberalization have gradually and comprehensively led to growing social inequalities and agrarian differentiation. The interests and life-worlds of small-scale producers, landless people, fisher folk, and consumers seem to be threatened by the corporate food regime which favors large-scale and capital- and knowledge-intensive industrial food production (Manahan, 2011).

Critically addressing this structural violence emanating from the dominant food regime, a transnational social movement – *La Via Campesina* – emerged on the global stage in the 1990s. In sharp contrast to the food security discourse, originally promoted by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and related international aid agencies stressing the need of agricultural modernization to combat world hunger, the social movement calls for *food sovereignty*. Food sovereignty stands for the attempt to radically transform global

food-based inequalities by advocating an alternative path of small-scale agro-ecological and socially just modernity (McMichael, 2009). Aiming towards “the right of the 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” (Nyéléni, 2007), it goes beyond global policy agendas aiming to ‘feed the world’ through technocratic fixes that have shaped the promotion of the Green Revolution in Southeast Asia since the 1960s/1970s (Ehlert & Voßemer, in this issue).

The alternative agenda of food sovereignty, which continues to be critically addressed as romantic rural nostalgia (Collier, 2008), is making its way into national and international policy arenas, gaining recognition in view of old and new inequalities: The latest global food crisis and high prices of rice constituting Southeast Asia’s main staple food (Arandez-Tanchuling, 2011) continue to hit poor households in the region as competition over basic productive means like land, water, and seeds intensifies (LVC, 2008). Although strongly rooted in the Latin American context (Martinez-Torres & Rosset, 2010), the discourse of food sovereignty and its political struggle increasingly gains ground in Southeast Asia (Reyes, 2011). In Indonesia, transnational food activists ally with the Indonesian environmental and agrarian justice movement, campaigning against biofuels and palm oil monoculture in the context of both the decline in biodiversity and climate change (Pichler, 2014; Pye, 2010). At the same time, access to safe and healthy foods has become a matter of complex global food governance that is largely beyond the regulatory capacities of states and untransparent to people making daily food choices. Vietnam, which is usually hailed for its agricultural and economic success since market liberalization in the mid-1980s, has recently been facing a number of food scares in relation to the abuse of pesticides and unsafe chemicals, hormones, and drugs in livestock production and aquaculture (Thi Thu Trang Tran, 2013), worrying local consumers. This obviously raises complex questions about food and health and has led several states in the region to adopt a discourse of food sovereignty, re-evoking the need for a strong developmental state as a guardian over food safety and accessibility as argued by Lassa and Shrestha (2014) for Indonesia. Furthermore, ASEAN’s appropriation of the language of civil society and the discourse of food sovereignty is critically assessed as rhetoric cosmetics rather than stemming from a sincere commitment to fight hunger and social inequality in the region (Reyes, 2011, p. 224). Instead, in the aftermath of the food crisis governments would go back to normal by increasing productivity, Green Revolution mechanisms, and food aid (Manahan, 2011, p. 469).

The historical modes of peasants’ resistance against colonial powers addressed by Scott (1976) are modified by the food sovereignty movement which, as a political actor, puts the contemporary concerns of a transnational peasantry to the fore. Scott has been taken up by current scholars on the contentious politics of peasant and farmer organizations (McMichael, 2009; Patel, 2009) and continues to inform actual political contestations over food production, distribution, and consumption in Southeast Asia. However, these new political discourses as well as the agenda of the food sovereignty movement itself leave many aspects unaddressed. This special issue relates to the political dimension of the food movement, but complements this perspective by drawing attention to how sovereignty over food is actually practiced as a matter of everyday food choice and identity and contextualized in local agricul-

tural life-worlds. Under the heading of “Food Sovereignty”, this issue hosts studies on Southeast Asia that engage with questions of ‘sovereignty’ related to food as well as the nexus of food and health in a broad sense. The contributions enquire into very different struggles and sites of food sovereignty exploring the meanings of ‘the right to define own food and agricultural systems’, as well as the plural ‘sovereignties’ of food related to the multiple actors, topics, understandings and practices of food sovereignty

Three articles in this issue discuss different struggles for what we may broadly call food sovereignty based on empirical studies into settings as diverse as a remote peasant community in Indonesia, soup-pot restaurants in Phnom Penh, and a network of activists in the north of Thailand promoting alternative forms of agriculture. These empirical studies are framed by a methodological reflection on ‘actors’ in the discursive contexts of food security and food sovereignty, contributed by the guest editors of this issue.

In their article, Judith Ehlert and Christiane Voßemer apply the methodological approach of ‘actor-oriented’ development research by Norman Long to trace and criticize the limitations of the concepts of actors as passive aid-receivers in the food security regime, or as unified peasantry in the food sovereignty movement, and call for research to engage with the more complex *glocal* struggles for food sovereignty as rooted in the context of people’s life-worlds in Southeast Asia and beyond.

The second article and first empirical contribution to this issue by Sophia Maria Mable Cuevas, Juan Emmanuel Capiral Fernandez, and Imelda de Guzman Olvida delves into the role of swidden agriculture and its main produce – local rice varieties – for the food sovereignty of a community of peasants who identify as ethnic Tagbanua. As the ethnographic study reveals, local concepts of social identity, health, and deprivation are deeply intertwined with the year-round community practices of cultivating rice in the swidden. In the context of national policies that aim to extend the cultivation of rice as a commodity into this sphere of Tagbanua agriculture, the article offers an insightful and relevant contribution to understand peasants’ everyday struggle for food sovereignty in the Philippines.

The third article by Hart Nadav Feuer centers on Phnom Penh’s soup-pot restaurants as “urban brokers of rural cuisine” (Feuer 2015, p. 45), and as spaces where the travelling food concepts of customers and cooks are assembled into the idea and practice of a national cuisine. Analyzing the daily practices of choosing, cooking, eating, and discussing foods by restaurateurs and customers of soup-pot restaurants in Cambodia’s capital, Feuer brings in a rare and inspiring perspective on what he views as every-day democratic forms of exercising food sovereignty among food distributors and consumers.

The *Alternative Agricultural Network Isan* in Northern Thailand is a member organization of La Vía Campesina and is at the focus of Alexandra Heis’ article winding up this issue’s section on Current Research. The article employs a political-economic perspective to delineate the global corporate food regime and its manifestations in the Thai context. Against this background, Heis analyzes the network’s activities and discourses in the realms of organic farming, social relations of food production, and health as strategies of local resistance and empowerment. The article shows that these strategies of resistance are founded in vernacular concepts of identity and

build spaces where alternative meanings of and a more egalitarian access to good and healthy foods are enacted.

In our Research Workshop section, Amber Heckelman and Hannah Wittman present their ongoing work on agrarian responses of farmers in the Philippines to the challenges of climate change. This is part of a bigger and highly relevant project assessing “food sovereignty pathways in Ecuador, Brazil, Canada, and the Philippines” (Heckelman & Wittman, 2015, p. 87). The part discussed here draws attention to one of the countries which is already being hit hard by climate change and reports on how principles of food sovereignty are used to develop an assessment framework for climate resiliency and food security among smallholder farmers.

The Interview section comprises a conversation with Kin-Chi Lau from Lingnan University, Hong Kong. As a member of the Department of Cultural Studies, she initiated and currently coordinates an organic urban gardening project on campus. Among other interesting details on this, by now, well-established facility, she sheds light on the importance of local agricultural projects in the region. Rainer Einzenberger conducted this interview while Michaela Hochmuth edited the contribution.

Kilian Spandler offers insights into the 2nd Interregional EU-ASEAN Perspectives Dialogue (EUAP II) in our Network Southeast Asia section. Spandler highlights the importance of building interregional networks among young scholars and describes how such a process was facilitated by the EUAP II in different phases, including on-line communication to overcome financial barriers of travelling costs for young academics.

Two book reviews conclude this issue. A new publication by Melanie Pichler, *Umkämpfte Natur. Politische Ökologie der Palmöl- und Agrartreibstoffproduktion in Südostasien* (2014), was reviewed by Timo Duile. Stressing the importance of a critical-materialistic perspective in analyses of ecology and the state, Duile agrees with the author that such an approach is central in understanding why certain strategies of sustainability or transparency still fail in the contemporary political economy. The review is published in German.

Simon Benedikter and Ute Köster contribute a review of *Burma/Myanmar – Where Now?* (2014) edited by Mikael Gravers and Ytzen Flemming. The authors consider the extensive volume a solid source of information on Myanmar’s current state, specifically with regard to conflicts in the southeast and northeast of the country.



## REFERENCES

- Arandez-Tanchuling, H. (2011). Two years after the 2008 rice crisis. *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, 26(1), 295–311.
- Collier, P. (2008). The politics of hunger. How illusion and greed fan the food crises. *Foreign Affairs*, 87(6), 67–79.
- Feuer, H. (2015). Urban brokers of rural cuisine: Assembling national cuisine at Cambodian soup-pot restaurants. *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 8(1), 45–66.
- Friedmann, H., & McMichael, P. (1989). Agriculture and the state system: The rise and decline of national agricultures, 1870 to the present. *Sociologia ruralis*, 29(2), 93–117.

- Heckelman, A., & Wittman, H. (2015). Food Sovereignty: A Framework for Assessing Agrarian Responses to Climate Change in the Philippines. *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 8(1), 45–66.
- Kerkvliet, B. J. T. (2009). Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours). *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36(1), 227–243.
- Lassa, J. A., & Shrestha, M. (2014). *Food sovereignty discourse in Southeast Asia: Helpful or disruptive?* Working Paper No. 231, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang, Singapore.
- La Via Campesina. (2008). *Food crisis in South East Asia and East Asia*. Seoul, South Korea.
- Manahan, M. A. (2011). Is Asia for sale? Trends, issues, and strategies against land grabbing. *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, 26(1–2), 466–481.
- Martínez-Torres, M. E., & Rosset, P. M. (2010). La Via Campesina: The birth and evolution of a transnational social movement. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37(1), 149–175.
- McMichael, P. (2009). A food regime genealogy. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36(1), 139–169.
- Nyéléni. (2007). *Declaration of the forum for food sovereignty*. Selingué, Mali.
- Patel, R. (2009). Food sovereignty. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36(3), 663–706.
- Pichler, M. (2014). *Umkämpfte Natur. Politische Ökologie der Palmöl- und Agrartreibstoffproduktion in Südostasien*. Münster, Germany: Westfälisches Dampfboot.
- Pye, O. (2010). The biofuel connection – transnational activism and the palm oil boom. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 37(4), 851–874.
- Reyes, M. P. P. (2011). Southeast Asian perspectives on food sovereignty: Outcomes and observations. Workshop synthesis. *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, 26(1–2), 223–251.
- Scott, J. C. (1976). *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Thi Thu Trang Tran (2013). Food safety and the political economy of food governance: The case of shrimp farming in Nam Dinh Province, Vietnam. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 40(4), 703–719.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christiane Voßemer works as a university assistant and lecturer at the Department of Development Studies, University of Vienna. She is a graduate of Development Studies and currently working on her PhD thesis, applying an actor-oriented research approach to the transformation of health care in a Myanmar borderland.

► Contact: [christiane.vossemer@univie.ac.at](mailto:christiane.vossemer@univie.ac.at)

Judith Ehlert is a sociologist by training and holds a postdoctoral position at the Department of Development Studies, University of Vienna. In her PhD thesis, she worked on environmental knowledge and agrarian change in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Her current research project deals with the body politics of food and eating in Vietnam.

► Contact: [judith.ehlert@univie.ac.at](mailto:judith.ehlert@univie.ac.at)

Michelle Proyer received her PhD in education from the University of Vienna, Austria. Her main research interest covers transcultural comparative research at the intersection of inclusion and culture. She was involved in two international research projects in Thailand and Ethiopia. Currently, she works as a research associate at Kingston University London.

► Contact: [m.proyer@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:m.proyer@kingston.ac.uk)

Ralph Guth is currently working as a lecturer at the Department of Development Studies, University of Vienna, where he is also writing his PhD thesis. He is a political scientist mainly working on state theory, constitutionalism, and critical legal theory.

► Contact: [ralph.guth@univie.ac.at](mailto:ralph.guth@univie.ac.at)