

SZÖVET – an example of the food sovereignty initiative in Hungary

In the last few years, civil society organisations in Hungary have recognised the importance of recreating the connections between farmers and consumers. As a result of this process, food sovereignty – a crucial question of the world agriculture – has become an essential topic also for the Hungarian agriculture.

Since the Carpathian Basin has excellent environmental conditions for farming, the Hungarian agriculture has a long history of unique farming traditions. However, ‘de-peasantization’¹ during the communist regime in Hungary after World War II and globalisation with the appearance of multinational companies during the transition period in 1990s resulted in the prevalence of latifundia with the critical decrease in the number of small-scale farmers. The country’s EU accession in 2004, resulting in strong competition from other Member States, further increased the difficulties faced by small-scale family farmers.

In 2006 at the village of Nagykörű (North-East Hungary), a Hungarian organisation SZÖVET – Alliance for the Living Tisza (*Szövetség az Élő Tiszáért*) with representatives from all groups of society was formed with the aim to advocate the interests of local communities living along the river Tisza. Its main tasks include the creation and implementation of a comprehensive work programme to improve conditions of small-scale family farming with the respect for natural environment, and through this the improvement of the local population’s living conditions.

The aims and activities of SZÖVET can be linked to six principles of food sovereignty outlined in the Synthesis Report of the Nyéleáni Conference in 2007².

In accordance with the first principle of food sovereignty (“Focuses on Food for People”), which affirms the “right to sufficient, healthy and culturally appropriate food for all individuals, peoples and communities”³, SZÖVET supports fresh, chemical-free, low external input food production, and strives towards the sustainability of the cultural heritage. The task of agriculture is to **provide the local population with healthy, nutritious and culturally appropriate food**. SZÖVET “rejects the proposition that food is just another commodity or component for international agri-business”⁴.

According to its second principle (“Values Food Providers”), food sovereignty “values (...) and respects the rights of women and men, peasants and small scale family farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fisher-folk, forest dwellers, indigenous peoples and agricultural and fisheries workers, including migrants, who cultivate, grow, harvest and process food”⁵. In this spirit, **SZÖVET appreciates the activity of communities and farmers living along the River Tisza**. In its communication as well as at international and Hungarian conferences and fora SZÖVET emphasises value of the region.

Consistent with the third principle of food sovereignty (“Localises Food Systems”), SZÖVET **promotes the use of local and traditional plant varieties in Hungary**. A local example at Nagykörű is the *sour cherry* planted here in the second half of the 19th century by Baron György Petrovay. Petrovay had 65 varieties of sour cherry in his garden, of which the “Germersdorf Giant” proved to be the most appropriate for Nagykörű’s climate conditions.

SZÖVET’s main activity, **direct marketing**, is also based on the third pillar of food sovereignty. SZÖVET initiated regular direct marketing activities at farmers’ markets and tries

¹ Granberg, L., Kovách, I. and Tovey, H. (2001) *Europe's green ring*. Aldershot: Burlington

² Forum for Food Sovereignty (2007) *Synthesis Report*. <http://www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?article334>

³ Forum for Food Sovereignty, *op.cit.*

⁴ Forum for Food Sovereignty, *op.cit.*

⁵ Forum for Food Sovereignty, *op.cit.*

to bring “food providers and consumers closer together”⁶. Its long term objective is to secure continuous possibilities for the farmers within direct marketing locally and in the capital. In this way, SZÖVET can build contacts between consumers in Budapest and farmers in the countryside, thus offering healthy and culturally appropriate food for the population in the city.

Organising this kind of direct marketing action is of significant help for small-scale family farmers, who otherwise are not able to bring their own products to the markets in Budapest. In many cases the farmers do not own transportation vehicles or have no time to sell their products away from their land. Evidently, for direct food marketing to succeed **conscious consumers**, who make responsible consumption choices, are needed. These consumers “seek natural, organic and unmodified products that meet their essential health and nutrition needs. They avoid chemicals or pesticides that can harm their health or the planet. (...) Who made it? Where does it come from? (...) They want to know the source of the products they buy and desire more personal interactions when doing business.”⁷

SZÖVET’s **direct marketing activities** began in 2008 with the action called “Save sour cherry!” at the “Komjádi” market in Budapest. The main aim of the action was to call attention to unfair fruit prices at times of seasonal supply peaks. The unexpected success of the action (16 tons of sour cherry sold) proved that there was a large interest in local products. Today, SZÖVET operates on weekly basis at four farmers’ markets in Budapest⁸, regularly **buying fruits and vegetables from 10-15 farmers at the village and transporting the products to the markets in the capital**. It is a pre-eminent help for these farmers, because alone they would be unable to handle multinational companies. With its **exemplary activity SZÖVET refreshes old farming traditions in the whole region**.

For farmers it is important to have fair prices, above the production costs, for their products. SZÖVET’s activity is based on the principles of Fair Trade movement. The “fair trade price aims to ensure that producers can cover their average costs of sustainable production. It acts as a safety net for farmers at times when world markets fall below a sustainable level”.⁹

According to its fourth principle (“Puts Control Locally”), food sovereignty “places control over territory, land, grazing, water, seeds, livestock and fish populations on local food providers”¹⁰. One of the SZÖVET’s aims is to slow down farm-to-city migration. Its ambition is to protect small-scale family farmers from inequitable international trade and to put the providers and consumers at the centre of decision-making on food issues. Good example of SZÖVET’s activity in this regard is the issue of the so-called Smallholder Decree¹¹ of 2006. In SZÖVET’s opinion, the decree put obstacles impeding the development of direct marketing and contained unreasonable quantitative and hygienic restrictions on certain product categories such as processed vegetables or fruits, fresh meat as well as on the slaughter of pigs or sheep. It also banned the marketing of processed products of smallholders in local shops and restaurants. **In 2009, SZÖVET, together with 53 Hungarian civil society organisations, launched the advocacy campaign for the modification of the decree** by the Ministry “by taking full advantage of the continued use of traditional methods at any of the stages of production, processing or distribution of food specified by EC regulation on the hygiene of foodstuff”. As a

⁶ Forum for Food Sovereignty, *op.cit.*

⁷ Bemporad, R. and Baranowski, M. (2007) *Conscious Consumers Are Changing the Rule of Marketing. Are You Ready? Highlights from the BBMG Conscious Consumer Report*. p.2
http://www.fmi.org/docs/sustainability/BBMG_Conscious_Consumer_White_Paper.pdf

⁸ FAAN (2010) *Local Food Systems in Europe. Case studies from five countries and what they imply for policy and practice*. IFZ: Graz. <http://www.faanweb.eu/>

⁹ Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International, *What is Fair Trade?*
http://www.fairtrade.net/what_is_fairtrade.html

¹⁰ Forum for Food Sovereignty, *op.cit.*

¹¹ The Smallholder Decree 14/2006, II.16, regulates food production, processing and marketing by small-scale family farmers and was adopted by the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development jointly with the Ministries of Health and Social Affairs and Employment.

result of the campaign, on 15th May 2010 a new smallholder decree was enacted, which – though still including some impediments – is more favourable for small farmers.

In line with the fifth pillar of food sovereignty (“Builds Knowledge and Skills”), SZÖVET “builds on the skills and local knowledge of food providers (...) that conserve, develop and manage localised food production and harvesting systems, developing appropriate research systems to support this and **passing on this wisdom to future generations**”¹². To support this specialised knowledge **SZÖVET organises qualification programmes for adults** (for example: tractor-driver or farmer courses) **as well as local nature-excursions and school lessons for children to educate them in environmental consciousness.**

The sixth principle of food sovereignty (“Works with Nature”) focuses on the “contributions of nature in diverse, low external input agro-ecological production and harvesting methods that maximise the contribution of ecosystems”¹³. **The most important initiative of SZÖVET in this regard, the re-establishment of the traditional flood plain landscape management along the River Tisza, aims to preserve and promote the region’s ecological values, the diversity of local fruits and vegetables varieties in old orchards, forests and remnants of the floodplains.** “Landscape management differs from conventional forms of farming: it assures the subsistence of human livelihood on the land while it preserves the land and sustains its natural habitats. (...) Flood plain landscape management is based on the controlled emission and recedence of floods to and from the flood plain. (...) With this form of landscape management the water excess arriving with the flood is utilized and preserved for drier periods.”¹⁴

SZÖVET’s activities, such as restoring the co-operation between farmers and local communities through direct marketing or initiating the re-establishment of traditional local landscape management, are an important and exemplary contribution to the regeneration of sustainable local small-scale family farming traditions and thus to the accomplishment of food sovereignty in Hungary.

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¹² Forum for Food Sovereignty, *op.cit.*

¹³ Forum for Food Sovereignty, *op.cit.*

¹⁴ Alliance for the Living Tisza (2008) *A chance along the river Tisza. An initiative to bring harmony between nature and man, for a sustainable economy: Biodiversity Micro Grant Fund – Report and prospects.*
<http://www.elotiszaert.hu/>