

# Smallholder farming and food sovereignty in Uganda: An in-depth analysis of policy vis-a-vis farmers' realities

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## ABSTRACT

This article unpacks the reasons why smallholder farmers who grow food for a living are continuously but unsuccessfully struggling to feed their families. Drawing on qualitative research carried out from 2007 to 2008 with Ugandan smallholder farmers, the author demonstrates that while governments and similar institutions are concentrating on promoting modernisation of agriculture, smallholder farmers' efforts are concentrated on food sovereignty. This paper argues that there is a disjuncture between theory, policy and farmers' practices and experiences which have aggravated food insecurity of smallholder farmers. Based on the findings, this study concludes that for smallholder farmers to successfully provide food, theory and practice will have to draw their assumptions from smallholders especially regarding food sovereignty.

**Keywords:** Smallholder farming, food security, poverty, livelihoods, land tenure, food accessibility, food sovereignty.

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## INTRODUCTION

Uganda has always been presented as an excellent example of a highly dynamic and well-performing agricultural sector mainly due to its favourable agro-climatic conditions that allow farmers to enjoy two seasons of crop per year (Leliveld et al., 2013). Agriculture employs 65.6% of the labour force, contributed 21% to the Gross Domestic Product in 2009 and realised 47% of export earnings in 2011 (Government of Uganda, 2012). The Ugandan agricultural sector is characterised by smallholder farmers mainly relying on low-cost inputs and labour intensive farming. Uganda is considered a poor developing country with 1.6 million people considered to be chronically poor. One in every three children is stunted, 17% of the children are wasted and there is a moderately high prevalence of undernourishment (UNDP, 2014). The state of nourishment shows that while some people are considered food secure, the nature and variety of food they consume does not qualify them to be called so. In fact, according to the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) (2014), at its current progress and trend, Uganda will not be able to meet its MDG targets. Uganda had improved on its development indicators in 2007 to rise to the middle income countries category, but in 2011, it fell back to the low-income category, putting the country among the poorest countries in the world. With poverty and low incomes, hunger becomes inevitable, because poverty in its most profound dimension is manifested by having no food. Earlier on, Madeley (2002) observed that, aside from individuals who temporarily abstain from food for religious or health reasons, people go hungry because they are poor and cannot afford food to eat. When people are poor, they may not be able to grow enough food to live on; the inability to grow sufficient food to sustain themselves deepens and aggravates their poverty situation. FAO studies have estimated that hunger costs developing countries up to \$128 billion per year in productivity losses (FAO et al., 2014); this situation exacerbates the conditions of the already poor, making

it increasingly difficult for them to source for food. While in developing countries, governments often advocate for increased food production, increased output does not automatically translate to food security (Madeley, 2002).

The contribution of smallholder agriculture to food sustainable production, though usually not quantifiable, is indisputable especially in cases where smallholder farms characterise a majority in the agricultural sector like it is in Uganda (Leliveld et al., 2013). In a study of South African smallholder farmers, Baiphethi and Jacobs (2009) argued that peasant farmers have the ability to contribute to the reduction of hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa for both the rural and urban areas. Their study indicates that small holder farmers through their subsistence production can increase food supply and help cushion households from food price shocks, hence improving food security. In a recent document on the state of Global Food Insecurity released by FAO and others, it was observed that countries like Brazil, Bolivia, Indonesia and Malawi have improved their food security situation because they have harnessed the resources of smallholders to increase and secure food availability for their citizens (FAO et al., 2014). Chitonge (2014) in a study focusing on examples from South Africa, Malawi, Brazil and Zambia, concludes that smallholder farmers have the capacity to increase the production of staple foods in their home countries if afforded the right institutional support and commitment from their governments. As argued by some scholars, Uganda was insulated from commodity price shocks of 2008 because of its reliance on staples produced by smallholder farmers which are not tradable on the international market (Leliveld et al., 2013; Benson et al., 2012).

While the contribution of smallholder agriculture is acknowledged by scholars and practitioners alike, this has not translated into support for smallholder farmers in Uganda and elsewhere. Rather, the government advocates for the transformation of the agricultural sector from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture (Government of Uganda, 2013:45). Support from government therefore tends to focus on farmers who are ready to engage in commercial agriculture without any attention paid to their contexts or to provision of food to local communities. The market in this case is presented as the panacea for all food problems in the country.

This article interrogates this top-down assumption by describing and analysing the experiences of farmers who struggle with food insecurity in the wider context of existential vulnerability. It is argued that while recent efforts by governments and non-governmental organisations are focused on food production for the market, farming households are caught in a web of vulnerability that makes production and availability of food near impossible. The argument is that the strategies that are employed by smallholder farmers demonstrate the commitment of small holder farming not only to food production, but to food sovereignty.

## METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to explore how smallholder farmers avoid risk using knowledge to secure their livelihoods. The study engaged a population of thirty-six (36) smallholder farmers from Luwero District, Uganda, who are organised in groups. The groups of farmers are assisted by a non-governmental organisation, Voluntary Efforts for Development Concerns (VEDCO). The researcher worked with farmers for eight months, completing one Ugandan agricultural year, comprising two seasons of planting and harvesting.

A qualitative research design was employed to enable the researcher understand the farmers experiences and strategies from their own perspective (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). Within the qualitative design, an exploratory case study methodology (Bassegy, 1999) was used to deeply engage with farmers' everyday experiences, on farm and intra-household challenges and strategies.

Selection of study sites and farmers' groups was done purposively after a series of preliminary field visits, meetings with VEDCO staff, farmers' group members and farmers' group leaders. After this initial engagement, a systematic criterion was developed for selecting groups to work with taking into consideration aspects such as length of group existence, types of activities engaged in and how active group members were among other things. The criterion developed included some of the following characteristics:

- i. Groups whose activities were going to have available funding for their activities for at least eight months.
- ii. Groups which had been operational for the last two years and were at least active in the last year.
- iii. Groups which could be accessed by narrow paths on foot or motorbike at any time during the year.
- iv. Groups whose leaders (Rural Development Educationists-RDEs) had received training through VEDCO.

Based on the criteria developed, four groups were selected in two villages, in the North and South of the district to capture the variation in the activities that farmers from the two parts engaged in. In the four groups, the author was supposed to work with forty farmers, ten in each group, however because some group members were not active all the time, the author ended up working with thirty-six farmers until the end of the field work.

The author relied on participatory rural appraisal (Kumar, 2002) methods to collect data because of the nature of the findings. The author engaged farmers in the construction of time lines which captured significant events that had taken place in their community in their chronological order. Farmers constructed seasonality maps (Kumar, 2002), which were done for males separate from females, and traditional cash crops

separate from food crops. The construction of timelines and seasonality maps was usually followed by a lengthy and engaging discussion group session. Participant observation was another method used to effectively create rapport with farmers and engage with them to explain what and why they did what they did. While carrying out participant observation (Chilisa and Preece, 2005), informal conversations provided space for farmers to express their opinions and ideas. It is the triangulation of participant observation, focus group discussions, and construction of seasonality maps, among others, that allowed for an in-depth explanatory case of the farmers' lives, their challenges and strategies.

### **The policy context: The unchanging face of modernising agriculture in Uganda**

The government of Uganda over the years instituted reforms and programs to transform the agricultural sector, dating back to the colonial days in the early 1900s. Some of the reforms have been influenced by international commitments while others have been influenced by government's vision. What is evident in most reforms is the vision of a modernised and technology-driven agricultural sector. Currently, Ugandan government is implementing an agricultural policy based on the National Development Plan, in which agricultural modernisation features prominently. It must be noted though, that for all past governments which aimed at transforming the agricultural sector, in Uganda there has always existed a vibrant subsistence sector supporting livelihoods of many poor Ugandans. For instance, 85% of Ugandans depend on agriculture as their major means of livelihood and 62% of those are considered to be small holder farmers. Internationally Uganda embraces several commitments that mandate it to prioritise agriculture and food security. For instance, Uganda is signatory to the Rome declaration and plan for action on World food security. In the Rome declaration, states made a commitment to fight hunger by aiming at halving the number of hungry people in the world by 2015 (Madeley, 2002). In other words, food security would be realised when food is "available at all times, to which all persons have means of access, that is nutritionally adequate in terms of quantity, quality and variety and is acceptable within the given culture (Madeley, 2002:35). The commitment to fighting hunger by nation states is captured in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and continues to guide agricultural policy of states like Uganda.

### **Theoretical underpinning: Understanding of food security**

Food security has conceptually been linked to the dominant neo-liberal development discourse. Its origin is

placed in the international policy discourses of the 1970s, in particular the World Food Conference Report (1975) in which food security was conceptualised as "availability at all times of adequate world supplies of basic food stuffs....to sustain steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production prices" (Maxwell, 2001:4). Food security in this view was understood within the context of stabilisation of international prices (Jarosz, 2014). In 1974, informed by the Sahelian famines and the 1972 to 1974 food crises, Henry Kissinger re-conceptualised food security putting it in the hands of a few countries which would be able "through good fortune and technology", to produce surplus food so that they would sell to the less fortunate countries (Kissinger, 1974: 4-5). This put the responsibility of food security in technologically advanced countries, resonating with the modernisation discourses. In 1986, The World Bank, in a bid to position structural adjustment programmes as the answer to all poverty and development issues related to poverty, re-positioned food security to mean "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life at household level" (World Bank, 1986: 5). Food security would be achieved if all households had the incomes to buy food (Jarosz, 2014). Several scholars, such as Sen (1978), Chambers (1996) and Thompson et al. (2007) critiqued this view, especially the idea that as long as people had income they would buy food, hence the solution was increased incomes to increase food security.

Sen demonstrated that increasing supplies did not guarantee food availability if people did not have entitlement to that food (Sen, 1978). Shiva demonstrated that although food might be available to a community, it is not guaranteed that its members would have access to it or would be able to consume it. Shiva (2001) attributed this to culture as a factor that might determine what people ate or did not eat. Mukherjee (2007) added that food must be culturally acceptable in order for it to contribute to food security. In light of these arguments, the World Bank (2009) reformulated its conceptualisation of food security and set out three pillars on which food security is built. In the reformulation of the World Bank, when one of them is not satisfied, there is a likelihood of food insecurity. The first pillar is food availability, meaning a situation where people have or produce enough food for their particular social units at any one time. The second is physical access to food or the means to access it, in case it is to be bought. The last is food utilisation, which means making sure that the food eaten contains the right amount of nutrients to keep one healthy. Meeting all the three conditions guarantees food security (World Bank, 2009; Delgado, 2010).

### **Food security perspectives**

Globally, one billion people are chronically hungry due to extreme poverty; two billion people are food insecure,

925 million are undernourished and one in seven people do not know where their next meal is going to come from; yet 3.1 billion tonnes of food is wasted each year (Hyslop, 2013; Abdu-Raheem and Worth, 2013). To combat hunger, different perspectives on the causes of food insecurity and hunger have been fronted, each with its own unique strategies. For purposes of the present discussion, three of these perspectives will be discussed below:

### ***The Malthusian perspective***

Malthusian theorists argue that lack of food is caused by an increasing population against a fixed resource base. Malthusian theory is premised on the argument that there are too many mouths to feed vis-à-vis too little food (Sen, 1997). Proponents of this argument insist that population increases without corresponding increase in resources base causes hunger and starvation (Mwaka, 1991). They suggest that food production should be increased to meet the food requirements of an increasing population.

However, some scholars have argued against this perspective, stressing and demonstrating that increase in food availability does not necessarily give people, especially the poor, access to food (Sen, 1987, 1997; Chambers, 1983; Mafeje, 1973, 1978, 2003; Bush, 2007). While the Malthusists present a perspective that explains the cause of food insecurity, the practicalities of this theorisation are manifested in the propositions for ensuring food security. The strategy linked to increasing food output is modernisation of agriculture, which lays out how food production can be increased (Thompson et al., 2007), without paying attention to the people, the context and purpose of farming.

### ***The modernisation perspective***

Modernisation theorists assume that the world progresses in a linear format along a continuum which has traditional societies at one extreme end and modern societies at the other extreme (Mafeje, 1978). Traditional societies in this sense are characterised by lack of modern technology, low farm output, lack of exposure to modern knowledge, strong cultural values, among others (Galland and Lemel, 2008). On the other end of the continuum are modern societies which are characterised by technological advancement, individualism, liberal knowledge and culture among others. This allows modern societies to claim the ability to control all processes in the natural environment and social life, creating a fundamental distinction between the traditional and the modern (Roberts and Hite, 2000). Societies considered traditional therefore are supposed to continuously chase the ideals of modernity and abandon their unschooled practices, values and beliefs (Galland and Lemel, 2008).

In agriculture, modernisation schemes aim at introducing modern, high-yielding crop varieties to poor farmers, science and technology, market-oriented production (since there is increased output, there will be more to sell), hence objectivity and rationality constitute the basic tenets of modernity [AU1]. According to this perspective, small-scale farmers who are generally poor, are so because, they failed to embrace modern farming technologies and techniques. In modernisation, food production is supposed to be a source of food supply or a source of income stripping the process of any relationship to the people who produce the food (Sen, 1987). According to Shiva (1993) and Roberts (2008), this would negate food production as a source of livelihood, destroying relationships and local food varieties, thereby putting control over food production in the hands of the market. The arguments against modernisation perspective on agricultural production, therefore, have introduced another perspective on food security strategies, which is food sovereignty.

### **Food sovereignty perspective**

Food sovereignty has been referred to as “the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity” (Jarosz, 2014:173). Proponents of this theory argue that food sovereignty is a precondition and foundation for genuine food security. Scholars and practitioners advocating for food sovereignty argue that it is not enough to increase food output, rather the whole food system must be changed to ensure equitable access and control over land, water, seeds, fisheries and agricultural biodiversity (Roberts, 2008; Shiva, 1993). Food to eat seems to me too conventional and banal. This ensures that priority is put on self-sufficiency at the family level, the basic unit of society (Roberts, 2008).

The food sovereignty theorists argue that the reason that hunger still exist because governments have lacked the political will to fight it. Roberts (2008) emphasises that instead of putting emphasis on the market as the panacea to all food problems, governments and related institutions need to re-organise their strategies to benefit the poor and vulnerable groups of society. Shiva (1993) also underscores the point that food sovereignty is a process of giving control to poor people to produce their own food instead of committing huge chunks of land to mono-cropping, killing the varieties of foods that have saved the poorest people from hunger and price shocks. From farmers in Malawi to those in Cuba, supporters of food sovereignty argue that when governments prioritise producing food for self-sufficiency, the numbers of people who go hungry reduce significantly. It is further argued here that smallholder farmers, if given the right support, have the capacity to produce their own food and feed their families (Mafeje, 2003; Shiva, 1993; 2001; Roberts, 2008; Bush, 2007; Thompson et al., 2007).

## FINDINGS

Here, the paper will present and discuss the findings of this study. The section places local and small-scale farmers' perspectives within different theoretical framings and disciplinary orientations.

### Climate change and food insecurity

Ugandan farmers experience weather along a continuum of two extremes in which on one end of the continuum there is a wet season and on the other end a dry season. Along this continuum, there are periods of uncertainty, which prompt farmers to deploy a wide range of strategies in order to secure livelihoods. For many farmers, because of the weather criticalities and vagaries, farming represents a "gamble", an enterprise involving a great amount of risk with the hope of favourable outcomes. During a focused discussion involving 15 farmers, one voiced the view that aptly captures the essence of the angst, which farmers face:

These days, farming has become a complete gamble especially because of the weather. For me, I decide to plant anytime I see rain because I can never know what is going to come tomorrow or the day after that... (Extract of Group discussion, October 1, 2007).

Expanding on the 'gamble' mentioned above, another farmer explains:

When there is rain, somehow there are many crops, wild and others that are available for us to get and use as sauces. [...] but when the ground is dry, even getting green leaves is impossible (Extract from Informal Conversation, Namu, July 1, 2008).

Weather uncertainties are the general experience of all farmers within a specific region as they are often uniformly affected without exception. Insufficient rainfall is the harshest aspect of the weather in farmers' experience.

... Do you see the beans I planted the other day, expecting to harvest some food for my family to eat? The leaves are dry and have turned yellow due of lack of water. The rain got finished as soon as I had planted so the crops only managed to come out of the soil (from an Informal conversation, Peace, June 24, 2008).

The explanation given above paints a graphic picture of the consequences of changing weather patterns on food availability and variety of what could be consumed. Insufficient rainfall causes poor crop performance and

also seasonal shortages of food. Farmers' families bear much of the brunt of this outcome while the larger community or even urban centres are affected indirectly when there is no excess food to sell to city dwellers. Negative or unfavourable weather conditions impact on farmers' livelihood in a dramatic way.

Our worst nightmare is hailstones. There is no warning, there is no escape and every field, be it bananas, maize, or cassava, the young or old ones, are destroyed by hailstones [...] (Group discussion, March 15, 2008).

For farmers in this study, recent fluctuations in the amount of rainfall in Uganda compromise food security for farmers in both short and long term. Changes in weather present a level of uncertainty with respect to crop yield and available food supply to farmers and their families. If a field designated for the planting of beans dries up, planting other beans will have to wait for another rainy season and that means that a farmer will have to source for food for his family elsewhere. While insufficient rainfall dries up fertile field for cultivation, hailstones destroy entire cultivated fields of crops, making them impossible for consumption or for the market. Destruction of crops through the effect of either insufficient rainfall or hailstone threatens food security and restricts income. Weather conditions affect all crops, whether hybrid, high-yielding or local crops making them one of the major threats to food security. The experience of small scale Ugandan farmers confirms the argument of Chambers and Conway (1992) that weather is one of the major challenges faced season after season, which make smallholder agriculture a very risky venture. Babikwa (2004) also points out that weather changes affect farmers' crops in ways that might cripple the household livelihood security system for a very long time. In such a case the responses by governments and NGOs have to look beyond modernisation of agriculture to provide support for farmers in mitigating the effects of such shocks on livelihood systems.

### Food insecurity and land tenure problems

In many parts of Africa, land is the most important resources for families and communities. This is more so for local farmers. Land for smallholder farmers represents more than land for planting crops; it represents a home, an ancestral land for burials and other family ceremonies (Madeley, 2002). In this study, some farmers did not own land and women in particular were culturally not land owners, they only had access. The land rights farmers exercise is a critical factor informing the crops farmers grow. Vicky, a female farmer, articulates this point of view strongly when she says,

For me I have a plot of land, I am not a kibanja

owner so I have to make sure that all crops I have fit in the space I have got [...]. I made them all fit on a single plot of land because I needed both the sauce and the other food..... (Interview, Vicky, May 16, 2008).

The intercropping that Vicky carried out was not because she was not aware that she was putting many crops in one field but like she explained, she had to make sure that all her food requirements fit on the small piece of land she had at her disposal. For some farmers, such as Keziah whose view is expressed below, lack of land ownership causes farmers to migrate completely and relocate to other locations:

I have lived on my brother's land and have cultivated his land for a very long time. Now he has decided to sell to some buyer from town so I have to move and look for another place where I can stay..... I will keep coming back [it is 40km away] to plant my crops here because VEDCO does not reach where I am shifting to. (Interview, Keziah, June 10, 2008).

Not owning the plot of land, she farms and lives on, and not having the wherewithal to purchase it from her brother, is enough trouble for her to traverse long distances in order to maintain a farm. However, she has to keep travelling a very long distance by motorcycle to harvest her crops but also to keep her place in her group because the organisation was not working in the new area where she had moved to, hence she would miss the group network. Not owning land presents a formidable challenge to local farmers, which disrupt their farming routines as well as capacity to control future activities on a farmland.

Most of us here in this village are not bibanja (freehold titled land owners). We just own plots on which we have homes, and that is where we plant our crops... Sometimes we rent land and plant crops but it is hard to find land here that no one is using... (Group discussion, Kasala, February 22, 2008).

In the above extract, farmers in a general meeting for members in one village indicated that they did not directly own the land where they were staying. This meant that they could not plant crops such as cassava, bananas and sweet potatoes which are considered hunger foods because they could be pushed off the land anytime as it happened to some of the people in other villages.

In 1973, while writing about the agrarian revolution, Mafeje (1973) challenged the West and argued that even if it was proud of its ability to conquer the world through its control of other processes, people were still faced with the 'primitive' problem of making a living by depending on the soil. Almost every farmer everywhere makes living by

depending on the soil. The real issue is not depending on the soil, but not owning land or the uncertainty of not having a firm grip on the most important resource needed to ensure a stable farming project.

The foregoing discussions demonstrate that land ownership has an effect on food security in both the short term and the long term. Other scholars (Madeley, 2002; Moyo et al., 2009; Bahigwa et al., 2005; Umali-Deininger and Sur, 2007; Chitonge, 2014) have argued that access has an effect on food security. The present study reinforces this debate and shows concretely how land ownership and access rights compromise or promote food security for poor people. Although there are scholars (Rigg, 2006) who have argued that in some instances, where there is diversification of livelihood strategies, land ownership might not necessarily lead to improved food security, in small holder farming where the basic unit of production is land, land ownership affects food security in terms of what farmers can or cannot grow on land accessible to them.

### **Relationship between modernity and food insecurity**

In this study, farmers were being introduced to modern farming methods in which they grew crops such as cassava, bananas and sweet potatoes. These crops were given to farmers who owned more than five acres of land. Meeting this criterion allows farmers to get planting materials such as potato vines, cassava stems and banana seedlings to cultivate on individual farms. Cultivating a variety of crops has a multiplier effect. Farmers' utilisation of modern farming strategies as introduced by VEDCO did not have positive outcomes in many cases. Namu's experience is representative of many farmers whose expectation of modern farming methods failed them in a dramatic way:

The cassava varieties that VEDCO gave us yielded very well and we got excited the first time. However, when we uprooted the food, it was sour that even buyers could not accept it. It turned sour as soon as it matured so we found that we had no food to shield us from food scarcity... (Informal conversation, Namu, April 15, 2008).

In a bid to introduce farmers to the market without prioritising food provision, some farmers sold off all food produced by their families in order to raise money. Farming for the market has its blowbacks: it left nothing for the subsistence of some families. Kaala's experience is pertinent here:

When you come near my house, you see a lot of food around, but come back in a week's time and you will not find any of this food. My field and where I can get food, is only this one near the

house. Apart from that, that cassava field is my husband's and he cannot see anyone near it. When he has decided that this food is for money, you can forget eating any food from his field... (Informal interview, Kaala, January 24, 2008).

In some cases, as the farmer below explained the modern crops could not be kept in the field, unlike the local varieties of crops like bananas, cassava and sweet potatoes as expressed below:

The new varieties of crops [hybrids] need a lot of labour and yet they do not stay for long in the field, but we plant them because it is what the buyers want to take to the city.

In addition to the labour intensive character, new, hybrid crops are faced by crop diseases that their purveyors do not know how to manage. The nearest agents of modernity to the farmers are agricultural extension agents, who, in many cases as reported by the farmers, lack the expertise to deal with crop diseases. In a specific case, the extension worker did not know what disease it was and how it could be stopped. He promised that he would find out and decided to name it the "leaves disease", though farmers were calling it a type of wilt (Observation, April 18, 2008). The farmers in this case were pushed into food insecurity by the modern crops that were introduced to them as a means to get food secure. Some crops got spoilt that they could not be consumed, while others were not able to spend a long time in the field. The focus on the market as emphasised under modernisation compromised farmers' ability to feed their households. The emphasis on market, combined with limited knowledge of hybrid crop introduced by extension workers produced negative outcomes that threatened farmers' food security.

Beck (2000) argues that when the extension workers and other agents of modern technology reach that point where they develop what he refers to as the 'nobody knows mentality', then risk is inevitable and assumes a life of its own. At this point, society as a whole is permanently at risk. In small holder farming systems, Chambers (1983) argues that this translates into food insecurity. According to Shiva (1991) and Chambers (1983) such irresponsibility occurs because modern technology is not applied in real life environments to first see if or how it will work; hence the farmers are the guinea pigs on whom new technology is often tried out. Therefore, based on the experiences of local farmers as discussed above, one can argue that the failures of modernity predisposed farmers to food insecurity instead of leading them out it.

The reason the government is focusing all resources in agriculture on modernising poor backward farmers into modern farmers is because of the assumption that farmers lack knowledge about modernity especially about

nutrition. However, an understanding of farmers' own experiences is at variance with this bureaucratic assumption. Local farmers have knowledge, which government bureaucrats and policymakers lack. Farmers understand the nutritional value of the food they consume; however, they have a reason for sticking to it.

You cannot manage the food we are eating these days. We are eating this cassava I am going to cook and I will make dry tea (tea leaves and water) and that will be our dinner and lunch combined... (Informal conversation, Grace, January 28, 2008).

In the above conversation, the farmer indicated that she was aware that the food was not a good meal to give her family, but it is what she had available to cook. In the end even those who had got food to eat, they were just filling their stomachs to get satisfied. What is refuted here is that farmers did not have knowledge that they were consuming food that did not have enough nutrients for their families, especially their children. In this case, even if the farmer knew that the food was not nutritious enough for her family, she only worked with whatever resource was available to her. It was a case of entitlements (Sen, 1977) much more than it was a case of lack of knowledge.

## DISCUSSION

### **From food security to food sovereignty: Lessons from small holders**

The challenges faced by farmers in this case study demonstrate that the ability of smallholder farmers to produce food to feed their families and communities is mitigated by several factors. In order to enable this system, sustainable livelihoods emphasis cannot be placed on gender or knowledge or climate change, but on all of the aspects that affect farmers' ability to secure their livelihoods and function optimally. Conceptually, policy formulation will have to transcend the emphasis on food security to food sovereignty because food sovereignty is a prerequisite for food security (Jarosz, 2014). To understand food sovereignty and how it is the basis for smallholder farming, the ideas of Roberts (2008) are pertinent. Roberts argues that food sovereignty can be interrogated along four dimensions of why, where, what and how food is produced.

### **Why is food grown?**

Farmers in this case study, from their strategies and ways grow food to feed their families. The question here is not whether they manage to achieve this aim, but the

reason behind practicing farming is that it is for planting food to live on. Roberts (2008) agrees with the farmers arguing that farming activities also connect to a wider ecological system and the universe. Shiva (1991) also agrees that farms are supposed to produce food for people to eat as opposed to buying junk food from chain restaurants. Contrary to this primary purpose of farming, governments usually insist farming has the purpose of growing food for the market, so farmers have to sell to get income and buy food back into their homes, which is a circumlocution process. Shiva (1991) in fact wonders how people who grow their own food are considered poor and those who buy junk food from chain restaurants are considered rich. Food sovereignty, as demonstrated by farmers in this case study shows that the primary reason for growing food is so that farmers' families are food sufficient.

### **Where does food come from?**

The farmers in the study expected food to come from their fields and other bushes around them, the market was a last resort after their own farming systems had failed. Roberts (2008) points out that food emerges from our environment including fields, forests, insects, oceans and grasslands. When food comes from the surrounding environment, there is a deliberate attempt to protect and care for the environment around us. When the environment supports food production, the environment becomes a primary resources to be protected and cared for. This allows for the system to regenerate. In this respect, smallholder farming supports this system, hence food sovereignty.

### **What is food?**

Roberts argues that for people who depend on their lands and environment for survival, asking what food is, is similar to asking how they survive as a community. Farmers in this study demonstrated that food is about variety. In farmers' experiences we are able to understand that food is not just a utility that keep hunger away, it is shared with other people in the community, a view that is central to food sovereignty. Viewed from that perspective, Shiva (1991) and Roberts (2008) agree that for small holder farmers, weeds, roots and the bushes around homes form the variety of food that people depend on, as opposed to the mono-crop food types that are neatly arranged but devoid of variety.

### **How is food grown?**

Food in small holder farming is grown depending on crops grown. Crop yields then become food when cooked

or processed. The growing of food crops is dependent on culture and context and other variables, for instance, intercropping was dependent on the state of land ownership and maximising of the variety of crops that will eventually be harvested by the farmer. Roberts (2008) emphasises that farming cannot be done uniformly as if all land is flat and uniform. The mono-cropping culture promoted by the modernists like VEDCO and the Government of Uganda, approaches farming as an activity that can be done uniformly from one side of the country to the other. This is why sovereignty becomes a very useful practice to guide the understanding of food regimes because its emphasis goes beyond looking at food for its commodity value to its use value, as part of a particular culture and way of life. The different questions engaged with do not only bring the question of how people arrive at self-provision, it also engages with why they are not able to feed their families and what can be done differently for them to feed their families.

### **Conclusion: Ensuring food sovereignty based on smallholder farmer model**

This paper has engaged with food insecurity and its manifestations among small holder farmers in a modernising context. Although the findings of the case study might not be generalised, they provide an understanding of the different explanations that have been given to explain food insecurity in different contexts. Informed by the rich experiences of farmers, the study brings to the forefront what happens at the farm level, in the farmers' lives to influence their decisions regarding securing food. The approach that is developed is to take differing perspectives and nuance them together to arrive at the argument that farmers' lives are more concerned with food sovereignty, much more than availability of food. This argument is central to understanding how smallholder farmers have managed to feed the world to the proportions that they have and provide lessons for development practitioners to engage with the basics of farming in order to fight hunger on a global scale.

There are several studies that have shown that small holder farming has the capacity to feed the world's hungry. FAO et al. (2014) present that if women had the resources available to men, the world's hungry population would be reduced by more than 40%. Chitonge (2014) argued that smallholder farmers need the support of their governments in order for them to ensure that their families are fed. Examples from Malawi, Brazil, Bolivia, Haiti and Indonesia all demonstrate that if smallholder farmers are given support, they reduce the number of hungry people in their communities significantly (FAO et al., 2014). This case study does not only show why smallholder farmers struggle to feed their families, but it also shows the unique features that make smallholder farming inevitable in the run up to food sovereignty.

What the findings bring to the fore is that governments and similar institutions with an aim of fighting hunger and feeding the hungry in their countries are going to reenergise 'poor backward' farmers feed their own families instead of relegating that responsibility to the forces of the markets. The support that is required is not fragmented efforts by different institutions, but a nuanced approach that will involve understanding the farmers' farm realities and negotiating around those to enable them feed their families. As long as countries commit to this through informed policies, in ensuring food sovereignty, they will ensure that the poor will not be haunted by hunger and if it persists then governments will need to take responsibility and look at hunger as a failure of policy, rather than a failure of livelihoods or individual farmers.

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