

# Food, Agriculture, and Human Development

*U.S. Food and Agricultural Policy should reflect that the U.S. government, in collaboration with civil society, is creating public policies that encourage the development and welfare of all people, both domestically and internationally.*

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## Introduction

Government exists to serve the needs of society. It has an essential role in setting priorities and making decisions about trade and investment in order to advance the common good. Civil society, in its turn, has the right to freely express its views about society's needs, address them in public policy, and to otherwise participate in the decisions affecting social, economic, and environmental justice.

## Food Sovereignty

The current push from the World Trade Organization (WTO) and many international institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, is to increase the role of "free markets" and decrease the role of governments in promoting the welfare of people globally. **Food sovereignty**, however, sees the important role that governments should play in promoting people's welfare. The main premise of food sovereignty is that members of civil society and governments should have the "right to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries" ([www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org)). The pillars of food sovereignty include:

- The prioritization of local agricultural **production to feed people** over producing mainly for export
- The right of farmers and peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced
- Access of peasants and landless peoples to **land**

- The right of countries to protect themselves from below-cost agricultural and food imports
- Agricultural prices **linked to production costs**
- The **participation of civil society** in agricultural policy decisions
- The recognition of the **rights of women** farmers

Food sovereignty is one way that governments, in conjunction with civil society, can promote food security that in turn guarantees everyone the right to food.

## Government Procurement

In addition to promoting food sovereignty, governments also can be key promoters of racial and gender equity, public health, environmental justice, and community development. One way of promoting these societal goods is through the purchasing decisions that government's make, known as **government procurement**. What, how, and from whom a governmental body purchases its goods and services can have a significant impact on society. **Government buying typically represents ten to fifteen percent of a country's Gross Domestic Product** (GDP is a measure used by economists to talk about the size of an economy).

Intentional government procurement of agricultural goods and food can encourage sustainable agricultural practices, local agricultural development, and provide important financial support to family farmers. For example, the 2004 budget for the National School Lunch Program, one of many federal nutrition programs, was \$6.5 billion dollars

([www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org)). In the future, relationships between the National School Lunch Program and local farmers could be developed to support sustainable agricultural practices and guarantee nutritious food for students.

Under the regulations of some “free trade” agreements, however, government procurement would need to be as “non-discriminatory” as possible, meaning that decisions about purchasing would need to be based solely on the price and quality of a given product or service, not social or environmental concerns. The potential for trade agreements to limit the role governments can play in promoting sustainable agricultural development and community food security, both in the U.S. and abroad, raises important questions about the current model of “free trade.”

## Reflection Questions

1. What role do you think that a government should play in ensuring that people have enough food to eat?
2. How does food sovereignty differ from the “free market” model?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the “free market” model? The food sovereignty model?
4. What effects can trade agreements have on government procurement decisions?

### Sources:

- Via Campesina ([www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org)).
- National Family Farm Coalition ([www.nffc.org](http://www.nffc.org)).
- American Friends Service Committee ([www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org)).
- World Trade Organization ([www.wto.org](http://www.wto.org)).
- Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy ([www.iatp.org](http://www.iatp.org)).
- Citizens Trade Campaign ([www.citizenstrade.org](http://www.citizenstrade.org)).
- Center of Concern ([www.coc.org](http://www.coc.org)).
- Interfaith Working Group on Trade and Investment ([www.tradejusticeusa.org](http://www.tradejusticeusa.org)).

## Trade Agreements and Government Procurement

Trade agreements under the current “free trade” model limit the policy-making role of governments in promoting people’s welfare.

In order to create space for foreign competition, global trade agreements are being used to undermine the ability of governments at all levels to enforce vitally important procurement measures. Government procurement is the purchasing of goods by a governmental body or state-owned enterprise.

Many local governments have agreed to comply with the procurement provisions of these trade agreements, despite the fact that many of their commonly used policies could be challenged as “barriers to trade” by foreign contractors. “Barriers to trade” could include policies that offer preferences to businesses that:

- Are locally-based and enhance local development
- Offer a living wage
- Are pro-union or anti-sweatshop
- Offer workers health benefits
- Provide environmentally friendly products and services
- Are women- or minority- owned
- Do not do business in countries known for human rights abuses – such as policies used to help bring an end to apartheid in South Africa

The manner in which the current “free trade” model has the potential to impede on governmental attempts to protect people’s welfare should raise important questions for those concerned with political, economic, and social justice.

Source: Information is from the American Friends Service Committee’s ([www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org)) Trade Justice Campaign.