# 44 Food sovereignty or bust

## Transforming the agrifood system is a must

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The fight for food sovereignty is a response to the current corporate food regime, one predicated on industrial modes of production, corporate concentration in supply chains, the patenting of seeds and biotechnology, and neoliberal trade policies that displace agrifood systems in poor and developing countries (McMichael, 2009a). While peasants throughout the Global South fare poorly as their land and labor are integrated into the global agrifood system – often in the name of sustainable development – many are also at the forefront of new peasant-based agrarian movements (Borras *et al.*, 2008). Over the past few decades, the food sovereignty movement has fought to protect local food cultures, food economies, ecosystems, and political systems from neoliberal trade policies and capitalist modes of agricultural production. Therefore, after a brief review of the social and ecological relations perpetuated by the current global corporate food regime, I investigate this movement's potential to repair these effects, paying specific attention to the issue of anthropogenic greenhouse gases.

### Social and ecological consequences of the corporate food regime

An agrifood system can be thought of as "an interconnected web of activities, resources and people that extends across all domains involved in providing human nourishment and sustaining health, including production, processing, packaging, distribution, marketing, consumption and disposal of food … and can be identified at multiple scales" (Grubinger *et al.*, 2010, p. 2). The globally pervasive corporate agrifood system contributes to ecological degradation, food related human health problems, economic destitution, and cultural and political exploitation (Magdoff *et al.*, 2000; Shiva, 2008; Holt-Giménez, Patel, and Shattuck, 2009). It also contributes around 33 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions – 14 percent from industrialized agriculture and 19 percent from change in land use for agricultural production (De Schutter, 2010a). However, estimates vary depending on how much animal agriculture is attributed to GHG emissions, from 18 percent (Stehfest *et al.*, 2009) to as high as 51 percent (Goodland and Anhang, 2009) of global totals. The United Nations (UN) Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) has noted that globally, agriculture threatens biodiversity and ecosystem function more so than any single

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human activity. Simultaneously, the global agrifood system contributes to climatic changes that threaten its own survival, such as drought, heat waves, heavy rainfall, and flooding. For example, with an increasingly hotter and drier climate, large parts of Africa may face reduced crop yields of over 50 percent by the year 2020 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2007).

Additionally, this arrangement perpetuates hunger and malnutrition as the Global South simultaneously exports large portions of the world's proteins, vitamins, and minerals to the Global North (Roberts and Parks, 2009). North and South refer to the political and economic power differentials between 'core' and 'peripheral' nations (Wallerstein, 2004). With already high levels of food insecurity (Food and Agricultural Organization [FAO], 2010), global hunger is expected to grow by 10 percent to 20 percent by 2050 if conditions remain the same (World Food Program 2011). An ecological debt has emerged whereby lifestyles of rich countries necessitate high levels of consumption and GHG emissions that disproportionately contribute to global climate change (GCC), ozone depletion, and fishery impacts for people living in poor countries (Srinivasan *et al.*, 2007). In short, GCC exacerbates and is caused by problems associated with the current corporate food regime, leading to 'double exposure' for the world's peasants (O'Brien and Leichenko, 2000).

To mitigate these ecological and social impacts requires transforming the global agrifood system (De Schutter, 2010b). Instead, many professionals, activists, and scholars have sought to link the language of sustainability to the practice of development through 'sustainable development,' a now common solution advocated by many powerful countries and multi-lateral institutions. The notion of sustainability as development converges in the World Bank's framework of green neoliberalism: "[F]ew development practices, beliefs and truths can be expressed today outside the parameters of environmentally sustainable development, on the one hand, and neoliberalism, on the other" (Goldman, 2005, p. 7). The imperative of neoliberalism is economic growth through increased privatization of every public sector, supported by a belief in the individualization of social change through consumer choice. Neoliberalism, the supporting ideology and global policy regime of capitalism, is inherently unsustainable (Harvey, 2005; McMichael, 2008b). Moreover, the history of colonialism – largely responsible for the uneven development of capitalism – benefits the Global North, while undermining the ability of much of the Global South to direct, let alone resist, the development process. Hence, the corporate food regime supports eaters in the Global North, as agrarian peasants, many of whom labor in commodity export fields, struggle "for cultural survival through the food sovereignty movement" (McMichael, 2009a, p. 163).

## Food sovereignty: Principles and practice

In 1996 at the World Food Summit, La Vía Campesina, a transnational peasant-run organization working for agrarian reform, first coined the term 'food sovereignty.' They define this as

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> the right of peoples, countries, and state unions to define their agricultural and food policy without the 'dumping' of agricultural commodities into foreign countries. Food sovereignty organizes food production and consumption according to the needs of local communities, giving priority to production for local consumption. Food sovereignty includes the right to protect and regulate the national agricultural and livestock production and to shield the domestic market from the dumping of agricultural surpluses and low-price imports from other countries. Landless people, peasants, and small farmers must get access to land, water, and seed as well as productive resources and adequate public services. Food sovereignty and sustainability are a higher priority than trade policies.
>
> (La Vía Campesina, 2010, n.p.)

Although neoliberal policies and industrialized agriculture proliferate globally, their impact on agrarian communities in the North and South varies by region and time, so responses by the food sovereignty movement also differ.

The heterogeneity of the food sovereignty movement reveals the intersectional complexity of geography, race, ethnicity, class, and gender, and the value placed on developing strategies that offer widespread social and ecological benefits. In short, the food sovereignty movement is imperative to developing strategies that ameliorate the global agrifood system's contribution to GHGs because it focuses on more ecologically sustainable alternatives, and it works to create new social relations that respect, attempt to understand, and build alliances across race, ethnicity, class, and gender. I now turn to clarifying the movement's principles and practices in order to evaluate the possibilities for what Shiva (2005) refers to as 'earth democracy,' that is, a world of peace, justice, and environmental sustainability.

Human rights, self-determination, social equity, healthy agro-ecosystems, counter-hegemonic narratives, and new subjectivities underlie the movement's discourses and organizing tactics. Table 44.1 is meant to be read as a guide to clarify how critiques of the corporate food regime provide the context within which food sovereignty principles, with their constituent discourses and strategies, evolved. The table does not imply a linear process whereby problems associated with the corporate food regime are the drivers of the evolution of the food sovereignty movement. Instead, the critiques and the principles are mutually constitutive both within and between themselves. The far left column helps to clarify the context within which the movement has developed. This then backlights the main principles driving food sovereignty discourse and strategy. In short, this table is meant to capture commonly articulated food sovereignty principles. My discussion focuses on how these principles can help contribute to building solidarities across race, ethnicity, class, and gender while also addressing the role that food sovereignty strategies must play in mitigating the impacts of GCC.

*Table 44.1* Driving principles of the food sovereignty movement

| *Critique* → | *Principle* | *Discourse* | *Strategy* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Neoliberal policies open markets. Economic solution to political and social problems → | Human rights | Right to shape food policy, not a privilege. Need for flexibility at local level | Develop systems of duty and obligation: local actors create policies |
| Food commodity exports and the patenting of nature displace diverse → knowledge systems. Structural adjustment programs | Self-determination and/or self-governance | Sovereignty over local agrifood systems Biodiversity and cultural diversity. Delink from corporate industrialized agrifood system | Create local and regional agrifood systems. Establish locally controlled democratic governance arrangements. Ban biopiracy and dumping of transgenic food |
| Rugged individualism. → Private property | Social equity/ egalitarianism | Respect for collective and individual rights. Solidarity between all groups | Create spaces and mechanisms for involvement of all members of a community |
| Monocultures. High input agricultural models. → Biotechnological solutions (GMOs and pesticides) | Healthy agro-ecosystems | Proactive, responsible management of agro-ecosystems. Food production works within a functioning local ecosystem. Farming is culture | Agroecology: sees biodiversity and agriculture as intricately linked |
| Capitalist modernity views of peasants as disposable and → agriculture as a problem to solve. Logic of development logic | Counter-hegemonic narratives | Center agriculture as foundation for social and ecological reproduction | Print media, television, radio and the internet. Develop transnational and local networks and coalitions. Educate to empower |
| Denial of diverse identities and → culturally specific solutions in favor of market based and/or token political participation | New subjectivities | Respect non-capitalist and decolonial modes of thinking. Provide methods for the development of alternative modernity. 'Unity of diversity' | Work toward race, ethnic, gender, and class equality. Politics of consciousness-raising that represents multiple perspectives |

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### *Rights*

The core argument for food sovereignty is that people have the right to democratically determine their agrifood systems (Patel, 2009). This is important because the right to food can be co-opted. For instance, Germann (2009) argues that the Voluntary Guidelines issued by the FAO stripped the human right to food of its critical potential and instead reaffirmed the neoliberal project by "recast[ing] as a *policy goal*, instrumentalized in terms of a *policy approach* and proposed as *the economic freedom of the individual*" (p.138, emphasis in original). However, a food sovereignty analysis begins by attending to groups facing rural poverty and malnutrition, whose participation in the policy process is irreducible with neoliberal ideology (Windfuhr and Jonsén, 2005). Thus, having fair processes is a prerequisite for achieving fair outcomes.

Participation in the policy creation process, though, is necessary but insufficient. Marginalized agrarian communities maintain a right to demand what ought to be done, based on notions of sovereignty that transcend the nation state and access to mechanisms for involvement in the processes and politics responsible for securing rights. Moreover, food sovereignty requires the freedom to organize for collective action. This "[s]elf-determination needs to be reconceptualized with an eye toward specifying the hundreds and thousands of strategies that local communities use to assert control over the organization of economic activities and their inevitable (but not necessarily harmful) anthropogenic effects" (Peña, 2005, p. 145). Activists may also carve out space for alternative ways of knowing that reflect local knowledge and iterations of autonomy, while working to integrate collective concerns that challenge an individualistic understanding of rights (Peña, 2005).

### *Self-determination and self-governance*

Food sovereignty activists emphasize control of local, regional, and national agrifood systems as a distinct alternative to the infiltration of food aid and extraction of natural resources (Menezes, 2001). Many traditional knowledge systems – women's knowledge systems in particular – contain agricultural sustainability models that simultaneously maintain biodiversity and cultural diversity (Shiva, 2000). Delinking from the corporate food regime and industrialized modes of production often happens concurrently with relocalization efforts premised on community control. Moreover, the movement's polycentrism allows it to address and politicize both local and translocal agrarian issues in specific times and spaces (McMichael, 2008c).

While autonomy and self-determination are important, social equity must also be present (Menezes, 2001). One approach is to develop a shared class perspective across various scales among dispossessed peasants (Walker, 2008). While this provides a shared point of departure in much of the Global South, there is also differentiation tied to gender and nationality that must be recognized and respected. For example, in working out alliances between female activists from

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World March of Women (WMW) and La Vía Campesina in Mali in 2007, there was agreement that capitalism produces poverty and food insecurity, but disagreements over caregiving. Urban women from WMW prioritized sharing roles with men, while rural women in La Vía Campesina viewed working in the kitchen as a cultural expression and place where their knowledge can combat processed foods. Through such debate, WMW came to respect the needs of rural women for self-determination. They also helped them in campaigns to resist GMOs and privatization, while improving their economic power (Nobre, 2013), using events such as International Women's Day to link land rights in the Philippines, discrimination against women in Paraguay, and native seed recovery in Europe and Africa (La Vía Campesina, 2014).

### *Social equity and egalitarianism*

Paul Nicholson, one of the founding members of La Vía Campesina notes, "We have certainly defended the concept of 'patrimony of humanity' when it comes to seeds, water, and for land … We have a common good, and it must be protected and defended" (Wittman, 2009a, p. 679). In this sense, individual rights are embedded in collective rights. By striving for a 'radical egalitarianism,' food sovereignty seeks to alter power imbalances in the global agrifood system by dismantling oppression in all its forms, particularly in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and gender (Patel, 2009). Moreover, food sovereignty is premised on active solidarity to achieve a fundamental philosophical and cultural shift in our use of food, away from individual wealth accumulation and toward building equitable ties, including trade, between diverse groups of people (Jackson and Mitchell, 2009).

Decentralized, non-hierarchical forms of organization provide a foundation for developing such egalitarian rural livelihoods, particularly between men and women (Desmarais, 2007). For instance, women farmers experience disadvantages in terms of resource access as well as sexism in their daily lives. Therefore, women created the Women's Commission of La Vía Campesina, which furthered a feminist analysis that resists neoliberalism, and led to the spread of egalitarian practices both within this transnational organization and in the rural communities where these women reside. Strengthening community ties also helps to better resist the divide and conquer tactics of large corporations such as Monsanto.

### *Healthy agro-ecosystems*

Biodiversity and ecological health is vital to maintain in and around any local or regional agrifood system (Shiva, 2008). While there are varying alternative models of food production, biodynamic polycultures and permaculture farming (i.e. agroecological) practices are more widely practiced and promoted. These models protect ecosystem health with integrated practices that respect the soil, plants and animals, minimize external inputs, and where possible mimic natural

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processes. A commitment to systems like agroecology is important for bringing people together to engage in the organizing necessary to ensure food security (Altieri and Nicholls, 2008).

Such approaches are viewed as fundamental to achieving food sovereignty and slowing climate change (McMichael, 2008b). Small-scale sustainable farms emit between one-half and two-thirds less carbon dioxide for every acre of production (IPPC, 2007). These place-based experiences compel farmers to make context specific changes that include developing new social relations (Patel, 2009) alongside new biological methods of pest control (Altieri *et al.*, 1999), especially in the tropics where there is no seasonal cold.

### *Counter-hegemonic narratives*

The commodification of land and industrialization of agriculture uses food as a means to profit, which furthers the separation between humans and the ecosystems they occupy. Peasants, particularly women, are often viewed as disposable within the corporate food regime, whose labor is used as a 'natural resource' to be exploited by male capitalists in the Global North (Salleh, 2010). Or, for those experiencing hunger, this is a technological problem in need of patronizing scientific expertise. In both cases, many transnational development entities assume that poor countries need to adopt industrialized agriculture and neoliberal structural adjustments to avoid hunger and develop their economies to favor export based practices (Holt-Giménez *et al.*, 2009).

The food sovereignty movement works to overcome these social and ecological divides (Wittman, 2009b). Specifically, food sovereignty provides a set of narratives that push back against development models that drive a wedge between groups and instead emphasize the importance of empowering education that builds unity in the midst of diversity. Examples of this include La Vía Campesina Women's Commission that organizes regional, national, and international conferences to bring women together to increase their participation in global summits and meetings. The narrative of equity at the heart of food sovereignty helps retake the language of development from male dominated Northern governments and multilateral trade and development institutions without sacrificing democracy in the name of sustainability (Karriem, 2009). By centering agriculture as the foundation for social and ecological healing, the food sovereignty movement is poised to spread their message, and build strong social networks that take care of peasants and offer solutions to GCC (McMichael, 2008b).

### *New subjectivities*

Imposed trade regimes create severe ecological and social consequences for peasant populations, which currently frame how agrarian communities understand and respond to these conditions. Food sovereignty, though, offers unique cultural lenses to understand these relational complexities from the perspective of

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marginalized social groups. For example, the food sovereignty movement represents a shift away from social movements that seek concessions from the state or access to the market. Instead, it focuses on alternative political organization, diverse rationalities, and non-capitalist and decolonial forms of thought (Rojas, 2007). As discussed below, these subjectivities also provide a foundation for understanding how those most impacted develop culturally, economically, and ecologically relevant agrifood systems that simultaneously resist the corporate food regime (Salleh, 2010).

## For food sovereignty, let's begin to cool the planet

As should be clear by now, the institutions supporting such an ecologically and socially destructive global agrifood system make transformation difficult. Nonetheless, the movement has developed a comprehensive set of alternative strategies. Importantly, many food sovereignty activists are directly linking to the climate justice movement. At the annual UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Cancun in 2010, otherwise known as the Conference of the Parties (COP16), conflict between countries such as the United States and China and India led to non-binding resolutions to expand carbon trading markets, clean development projects, and the use of techno-fixes involving transnational firms, without clear carbon reduction targets deemed imperative by the IPCC. The same year, La Vía Campesina organized members from 29 states in Mexico, and 36 countries, to an international conference occurring simultaneously with COP16. This international food sovereignty alliance is pushing for more radical proposals given the Global South's disproportionate experience of the quadrupling of climate-related disasters between 1980 and 2006 (World Food Program, 2011, n.p.).

In order to begin cooling the planet, they demand the following:

> 1) Resume the principles of the Peoples' Accord in Cochabamba; 2) Establish a binding agreement to reduce by 50 percent greenhouse gas emissions in industrialized countries by 2017; 3) Allocate 6 percent of developed countries' GDP to finance actions against the Climate Crisis in countries of the global south; 4) Total respect for Human Rights, Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Rights of Climate Migrants; 5) The formation of an International Tribunal for Climate Justice; 6) State policies to promote and strengthen sustainable peasant agriculture and food sovereignty.

Subsequently, global days of action such as the 2011 International Food Sovereignty Day to Cool Down the Earth, were organized to coincide with COP17 in Durban, South Africa. During this day of action, activists strategized how to bring about agrarian reform for food sovereignty, develop seed sovereignty strategies and scale agroecological solutions to mitigate GCC, end corporate practices of biopiracy, and fully integrate equal participation for women.

Given that the corporate food regime produces different outcomes at different

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scales, the tactics and strategies activists adopt reflect local concerns and resist the integrative logic of an international trade regime that brings the labor and resources of these agrarian communities into export-dependent relationships with the North. Such resistance also responds to the expansion of export-only agricultural commodity markets for Northern consumption that increase GHGs. The mitigation of GHGs, then, includes local management strategies that reduce reliance on energy intensive systems that release high levels of carbon, nitrogen, and methane, and simultaneously increase carbon storage. By one estimate, if 10,000 medium sized farms in the US were to convert to organic production, they would store enough carbon in the soil to equivalently take almost 1.2 million cars off the road (Rodale Institute, 2003). Many farmers employ organic and agroecological methods in a flexible manner depending upon the climate within which farming takes place. This includes practices that better manage cropland, improve grazing/pasture land and the management of livestock, restore, retain, and increase organic soils and land, reuse manure as fertilizer, and create bioenergy from waste (Smith *et al.*, 2007).

The food sovereignty movement claims the right of peasants and small-scale and subsistence farmers in shaping food policy. Local or traditional knowledge often directly challenges the conventional wisdom of industrialized agriculture and biotechnology. For example, instead of applying artificial fertilizers to increase yields, many farmers will gather manure from livestock and blend this with household and field waste compost to create a sustainable natural fertilizer. Moreover, activists appeal explicitly for autonomy from globalized systems in order to allow for versatility in developing social and ecological alternatives that respect difference. Strategies to achieve self-determination, then, are different across scale.

Yet, the local expression likely varies based on specific social and ecological requirements. For example, women within the movement fought for female economic and political self-determination after being relegated to subordinate roles and positions in peasant and farm organizations for years (Desmarais, 2007). At the same time, neoliberal development models and patriarchal norms have prevented many peasant women from achieving the same yields as men because they have less access to land, water, seeds, training, and credit. Yet, women's agricultural knowledge is imperative to integrate into strategies that ameliorate the causes of climate change and hunger, particularly in places such as India where women also resist corporations like Monsanto and the GHG-producing biotechnology model they represent. After all, women grow most of the world's food, and in subsistence agricultural communities, oftentimes possess generations of passed knowledge of specific growing conditions (Shiva, 2008).

By contextualizing the problems faced by local communities the movement can flexibly adapt to challenge the homogenizing tendencies of the corporate food regime and come up with a variety of alternatives. However, solving problems at the scale of global capitalism becomes difficult when universalized claims to rights clash with the particularities of local struggles, preventing activists from building solidarity across difference (Harvey, 1996). Food sovereignty activists

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attempt to overcome these contradictions. As McMichael (2011) argues, to challenge neoliberalism on a global scale requires the practice of "multifunctionality", namely a "method of valuing and farming" premised on ecological, social, and democratic values (pp. 810–811). The movement embodies such an approach, which is needed to bridge difference within the movement, while providing a means to mitigate the causes of GCC.

Because agriculture takes place within particular local ecosystems, the movement preferences agroecology as it is more resilient to climate change, conserves soil, and enhances biodiversity (Altieri, 2009). Moreover, productivity on farms using agroecological farming rivals industrialized agricultural systems. One research project covered 286 sustainable farming projects in fifty-seven poor countries, covering 3 percent of cultivatable land in the Global South. Productivity increased on 12.6 million farms by an average of 79 percent (Pretty *et al.*, 2006). Equally important, agroecology reduces poverty by providing an agricultural practice that increases economic self-sufficiency (De Schutter, 2010b). This is especially urgent given predictions of climate change contributing to increases in food prices from between 50 percent and 90 percent by 2030 (Bailey, 2011).

Structural challenges that restrict the spread of agroecological farming practices remain. Consider land tenure: while experiments by governments in Cuba and Venezuela attempt to ameliorate poverty and the country's ecological footprint by redistributing land to peasants, and social movements such as the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement successfully occupy many large landed estates, this is by no means universal. Development agencies tend to favor policies that privatize agricultural production and increase land use for a few export commodity crops, thus exacerbating food insecurity and increasing levels of GHGs. The food sovereignty movement gives some clear indications as to how to proceed, but requires land to do so (Rosset, 2009). Thus, food sovereignty provides new discursive tools for those within the UN and FAO to push for redistributive land policies.

These counter-hegemonic narratives motivate the food sovereignty movement. Instead of social relations being determined by neoliberal ideology, and token forms of democracy, agriculture is viewed as a means to create more just and sustainable social relations. Media tools are used to organize agrarian communities around a global movement for food sovereignty. Communication technologies are now commonly used to organize food sovereignty activists around shared interests, evidenced by thousands of activists showing up at all the recent COP conferences to link food and climate issues. The impact in global policy circles is beginning to emerge. Take for instance the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food aligning his reports with much of the food sovereignty agenda, and spreading this through mainstream papers such as the Guardian (De Schutter, 2010a; De Schutter, 2010b).

The food sovereignty movement represents the most global and diverse challenge to the energy-intensive and GHG-emitting global agrifood system. As a critique, it exposes the exploitative tendencies of neoliberal policies, an overreliance on biotechnology such as GMOs, and the largely unquestioned

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commitment to industrialization. As an alternative, food sovereignty works to actualize new forms of human rights, self-determination, social equity, and healthy agro-ecosystems based on a set of counter-hegemonic narratives and new subjectivities. Our global inability to adequately mitigate the impacts of the corporate food regime on anthropogenic climate change is clear. Grassroots alternatives, though, that challenge and reorganize agrifood systems while also inviting society to celebrate and work across the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender are contained in the food sovereignty movement.

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