



TABLE Explainer



What is food sovereignty?

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TABLE Explainer series



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Why should you read this explainer?

Food sovereignty, "the right of 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," is often discussed as an alternative political framework and approach to food security (Declaration of Nyéléni, 2007). Food sovereignty has grown as a countermovement to the growing dominance of industrial agricultural practices, the increasing power of corporations in the global food system, and the convergence of diets towards more imported and processed foods. This explainer explores food sovereignty as a concept and movement, how it differs from the concept of food security, criticisms of the movement, and evolving definitions.

1. Introduction

The concept of **food sovereignty** was made popular in the 1990s by rural social movements, who promoted it as an alternative to the concept of **food security** in order to draw attention to the inequalities of the food system and the struggles of small-scale farmers. While definitions of food sovereignty are multiple and constantly changing,¹ the idea has been embraced by an array of actors as a banner for social justice and food system transformation. The concept has grown beyond its original base amongst peasants in the global South and small-scale family farmers in the global North to unite consumers, farm and food workers, academics and **food justice** advocates around the world.²

This coalition of different actors that have united around the concept of food sovereignty (referred to here as the food sovereignty movement [FSM]) has played a key role in criticising, amongst other things, the growing dominance of industrial agricultural practices, the increasing power of corporations in the global food system, and the convergence of diets towards more imported and processed foods. They have called for radical changes to **agri-food systems**, in favour of agroecological, localised and democratic methods of production and exchange.

The FSM, however, is highly diverse and heterogeneous, composed of multiple sub-groups, each representing a different set of interests and historical, cultural, and geographic contexts. In practice, the FSM therefore tends to avoid defining specific visions of food sovereignty too strictly, and instead encourages members to adopt context-specific solutions based on a set of shared principles.³ This approach, however, can raise questions about what food sovereignty actually means, what a food system based on its principles might look like, and what specific actions might help achieve it. This explainer will explore the historical context and evolving definitions of food sovereignty, before discussing some of these ambiguities.

2. What is food sovereignty?

The concept of food sovereignty has evolved and developed alongside the food sovereignty movement (FSM) itself, in response to the changing political, economic and ecological context of the 1990s and early 2000s. Here 'sovereignty' is used to draw attention to the distribution of authority and power in the food system.

2.1 Brief historical background

The end of World War II marked the reshaping of global political, economic and trade relations, and the development and widespread promotion of industrial agriculture. In response to an expanding population, a recovering global economy, and fear of socialist revolution in Mexico and Southeast Asia, the United States, with the support of other national governments, led what is known as the **Green Revolution**, aiming to increase global food production by increasingly mechanising agriculture and breeding higher-yielding varieties of maize, wheat and rice. The adoption of these technologies, seeds, fertilisers and pesticides was encouraged by policy makers, research institutes and emerging industries fabricating these products on a global scale from the mid-1960s, alongside the development and expansion of markets across the food supply chain from farm inputs to food products.

The FSM arose in opposition to the perceived negative social and ecological impacts of the Green Revolution and accompanying trade liberalization and structural adjustment policies (SAPs).⁴ Although the Green Revolution increased agricultural yields and improved total food supplies in some parts of Asia and Latin America, in many cases, it did not effectively tackle hunger and **malnutrition**, particularly amongst more marginalised portions of the world's population.^{5,6} Moreover, it was primarily larger farmers who were able to take advantage of new technologies and increase their productivity.^{5,7} As various countries, particularly in Latin America, Africa, and S and SE Asia, shifted support towards large scale export-oriented markets and removed access to subsidized credit and technical assistance, many smallholder farmers struggled to compete with large-scale capital-intensive agriculture in global markets flooded with subsidised products from industrialised countries.⁸

In the face of increasingly globalised trade and agriculture systems and diminishing state support, many peasant organisations looked for new ways of organising, turning to transnational cooperation with other rural social movements in order to increase their influence.⁴ In Latin America, India, Europe and North America, peasants and family farmers formed alliances and began to organise on a large scale throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s to defend their rights and protest against the changes to global agricultural trade being made during the **Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations**. In 1993, these various groups cemented their collective efforts, forming La Via Campesina (LVC), an international peasant organisation that has grown to encompass 200 million people across 81 nations in 2021. LVC has played a major role in defining and publicizing food sovereignty, using it as a framework that both unites and recognizes the diversity of rural, and more recently urban, people from varying social, economic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds.

2.2 The evolving definitions and membership of food sovereignty

While there is some debate among researchers about the exact origins of the concept of food sovereignty, it is generally accepted that it was popularised and promoted for the first time on the global stage by LVC at the **FAO-sponsored World Food Summit** in 1996. Food sovereignty was then defined as 'the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity'.⁹

This initial definition reflected the priorities of the rural social movements involved in its promotion at the time. These groups were primarily based in the global South and were focused on supporting smallholder farmers producing staple crops. By associating food sovereignty with the 'nation' they sought to restore power to the state and return to food and agricultural policies that supported peasant food production for domestic consumption and strengthened peasant livelihoods.¹⁰

The NGO (Non-Governmental Organisations)/CSO (Civil Society Organisations) Forums that ran parallel to the FAO World Food Summits of 1996 and 2002 served as important sites for the growth of the FSM. The committee planning these events recognised the need to engage with a more diverse array of constituencies, and therefore used quotas and funding to ensure the participation of social movements and groups from the global South.¹¹ These spaces allowed the idea of food sovereignty to travel beyond LVC and its initial base of peasant and family farmers: at these events it became a unifying concept for various CSOs and NGOs seeking to challenge the FAO's food security framework (as we discuss in more detail below), and was taken up by the multiple groups attending the 2002 Forum, including "fisherfolk, pastoralists, Indigenous Peoples, environmentalists, women's organizations, trade unions, and NGOs".¹² In the years following these forums, the FSM expanded further still, with LVC and the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) actively engaging worker, migrant, urban and consumer groups in their work.¹¹ The food sovereignty movement has thus gradually expanded beyond its initial agrarian base, to include not only a wider variety of food producers, but also groups promoting ethical consumption, fair trade, rural and urban development, and climate action.¹³

As the FSM has grown, definitions of food sovereignty have gradually become more comprehensive and inclusive. The definition of food sovereignty offered in 2007 following the Nyéléni Forum is the most extensive one offered yet, and defines food sovereignty as:

*"the right of 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. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations."*¹⁴ (see full definition in Table 1)

This definition acknowledges the diverse array of people involved in the FSM and offers food sovereignty not only as a theoretical concept but also as a strategy for change. It focuses on 'people' rather than 'nations'; highlights the importance of environmental issues; and rather than stipulating national production and self-sufficiency, focuses on

peoples' right to determine where and how their food is produced. At the same time, this definition expresses various contradictions ('the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food' arguably includes the heavily criticised actors in the '[corporate food regime](#)', for example) and its lack of specificity on various issues has been a source of critique both within and outside of the movement.¹

Although in practice the FSM often promotes a particular vision of sustainable and equitable food systems (namely peasants and family-farmers producing food appropriate for local consumption using [agroecological](#) methods [see our forthcoming explainer [What is agroecology?](#)]), the openness of food sovereignty definitions means that this remains an active subject of debate. It is therefore perhaps easier to determine what food sovereignty and the FSM stand *against*: the Green Revolution and dominance of industrial agricultural practices; neoliberal free trade policies (particularly the export [dumping](#) of agricultural surplus into foreign markets); and undemocratic governance of food and agricultural trade (particularly the organisational structure and rules of the WTO). The impact of the food sovereignty movement can be seen in the wider calls to ban, or phase out, the practice of export dumping, and to eliminate export subsidies.¹⁵

2.3 How does food sovereignty differ from food security?

Over time, the FSM has also influenced understandings of food security and the workings of the UN FAO. Food sovereignty is often understood in relation to the concept of food security, as the FSM emerged due to a shared feeling amongst the CSOs and NGOs attending the 1996 and 2002 FAO conferences that food security did not offer an adequate framework for understanding and addressing global hunger and malnutrition. The definition of food security used at the time of these conferences focused on availability of and access to food, and drew attention in particular to the quantity of food in circulation globally (see Table 1 below). Food sovereignty on the other hand highlighted the structural factors underlying global hunger and malnutrition, framing them as political, rather than, technical issues. The FSM drew attention to who was producing food, how and where it was being produced, and the power relations determining these decisions.¹⁶ It rejected understandings of food as a commodity and source of profit, and instead perceived food as, amongst other things, a human right and a source of nutrition and cultural value, inseparable from particular socio-ecological contexts.

Table 1. Evolving food sovereignty and food security definitions^{14,17,18,19,20,21,22}

	Food sovereignty	Food security
1970s		1974 World Food Summit¹⁹ The availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices.
1990s	1996 World Food Summit¹⁷ The right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity.	1996 World Food Summit²⁰ Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels [is achieved] when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.
2000s	2002 Peoples Food Sovereignty Network¹⁸ Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets; and to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production. 2007 Nyéléni Declaration¹⁴ Food sovereignty is the right of 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. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations.	2001 The State of Food Insecurity²¹ Food security [is] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. 2009 Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security²² The four accompanying 'pillars' of food security were defined as availability, access, utilization and stability.

Definitions of food security however have also evolved and changed substantially over time, partially as a result of the activism of the FSM, and the two concepts are now much more closely aligned.^{9,1} Most recent and widely used understandings of food security highlight the importance of ensuring that 'all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life'.²³ The discussion around food security has also become more democratic in recent years with the reconstitution in 2009 of the FAO's Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which gives representatives from civil society organisations an official platform to influence decision-making on issues related to food security, alongside nation-states, international financial institutions, private sector associations and philanthropic foundations.²⁴ For many proponents of food sovereignty, the two concepts are not entirely conflicting, and food sovereignty in fact represents part of a strategy to achieve food security.^{24,25,26} Indeed, the initial LVC definition of food sovereignty explicitly took this stance, stating that the 'right [to food] can only be realized in a system where food sovereignty is guaranteed... Food sovereignty is a pre-condition to genuine food security'.²⁷

Many members of the FSM however see food security and food sovereignty as two conflicting paradigms for understanding food systems. They perceive food security to be deeply embedded in and inseparable from the institutions and processes of the 'corporate food regime' and suggest that the concept of food security and its historical focus on production, availability, and efficiency has been responsible for growing corporate influence, environmentally damaging practices, and the marginalisation of smallholder farmers in the global economy.^{28,29} Many in the FSM are therefore keen to distinguish between the two concepts and defend the political agenda associated with the concept of food sovereignty.

The political strategy attached to food sovereignty is perhaps the main feature that distinguishes it from food security. Food security is primarily intended to be a descriptive, rather than normative, concept, and a tool for understanding the complexities of hunger and malnutrition.²⁵ Food sovereignty, on the other hand, signals allegiance to a particular way of generating change (i.e. movement-based rather than through dominant institutions; democratic and inclusive rather than 'top-down'; through grassroots political action rather than market mechanisms) and a particular vision of future food systems (i.e. agroecological; democratic; local).

2.4 How does food sovereignty relate to other movements and ideas?

Food sovereignty is closely linked to various other concepts and movements aimed at generating change within the food system, most notably the [right to food](#), the idea of food justice, and the principles and practices of agroecology.

Table 2. Food sovereignty relation to Agroecology, Right to food, and Food justice^{10,14,30,31,32,33}

	Food sovereignty	Agroecology	Right to food	Food justice
Widely used definitions	The right of 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. ¹⁴	The integrative study of the ecology of the entire food system ³⁰ ; A science, practice and movement ³¹ ; an approach to farming that maximizes ecological processes and does not degrade the natural resource base.	The right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.	The right of communities everywhere to produce, process, distribute, access, and eat good food regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, ability, religion, or community. ³²
Background and context	Originated amongst small-scale farmers, primarily in the global South, and draws on a history of peasant agrarian political action. First declared on the global stage at the 1996 World Food System summit.	Developed as a science primarily in the USA and Europe in the early 1900s, and as a movement and practice in the global South in the late 20th century. Particularly Latin America, building on existing practices of smallholder farmers.	Though it was recognised in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to adequate food, which aligns more with the FSM, surfaced with the position of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in 2002, which reports to the Human Rights Council and to the UN General Assembly.	Emerged in urban contexts, primarily in the USA, and builds on racial justice movements and urban community organising.
Approach	Aims to transform, rather than work within, political economic structures; Takes a flexible, rights-based approach, highlighting the rights of 'peoples, communities and nations', and particularly of 'rural peoples and producers', Prioritises 'bottom-up' and democratic ways of organising; Engages in political campaigns to influence global trade and agriculture policies; Speaks out against political, economic and social injustice; Promotes environmentally sustainable food production, primarily through use of agroecology.	Agricultural production practices to increase their control over their own production and livelihoods (e.g., cover crops, green manure, intercropping, agroforestry, biological control, resource and biodiversity conservation), by allowing them to reduce their dependence on global markets for the purchase of external inputs; Share knowledge through farmer-to-farmer teaching.	Primarily enforced and implemented in a 'top-down' manner by international actors and focuses specifically on individual rights; Has also gained traction amongst community food activists.	Examines the structural roots of economic and racial disparities that impact disparate health outcomes and access to resources including land and credit; Prioritises local level practice-oriented work to ensure better access to healthy food for minority urban communities.
Relation to 'food sovereignty'		Seen as a 'twin pillar' and the practical method for achieving food sovereignty at the scale of the farm ¹⁰ and the food system. ³³	Definitions are closely aligned; however FS proclaims rights of 'communities and nations', not only individuals, and points towards particular vision of food system by proclaiming right to 'safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production'.	Emerged in different context and prioritises local or regional, rather than global-scale work, but largely seeks to defend similar principles to FSM.
Membership	Peasants; family farmers; landless people; rural workers; migrants; youth; fisherfolk; pastoralists; Indigenous Peoples; environmentalists; women's organizations; trade unions; NGOs.	Farmers, farm labourers, activists.	All individuals (in theory).	Marginalised urban communities; Black and minority ethnic groups; Indigenous peoples; Food system labourers across the supply-chain.

Civil society organisations and social movements might sometimes opt to work under different banners, promoting either the 'right to food', 'food justice,' or agroecology. Depending on the context in which they are working, the principles that they seek to defend and the vision of food systems that they promote are often closely aligned. Food sovereignty is distinguished from some other forms of agri-food activism, (for example some forms of organic,

fair trade, or community-supported agriculture) in its explicit political focus (aiming to reform global and national governance structures) and its attention to social injustice (aiming to address power imbalances and inequalities both in the food system and in the activities of the FSM itself).¹³ Rather than accepting the 'politics of the possible',³⁴ and working within the political and economic structures of neoliberal capitalist societies, the FSM aims to mount a stronger challenge, imagining and enacting new systems of food provisioning and ways of organising society.^{13,35}

3. Key debates within food sovereignty

Although the FSM does not have a single vision of future food systems that they promote, they widely favour agroecological production and shorter, more local supply chains. This agenda for change, however, has been the source of much debate. Those who favour technological- and market-based approaches to food systems sustainability tend to contest the benefits of agroecology (see our forthcoming explainer *What is agroecology?*) and criticise the FSM's preference for domestic food production over global free trade. Moreover, both critics and allies of the FSM have suggested that various issues remain underdeveloped in the food sovereignty discourse. The FSM emphasises the rights of food producers; but they do not always acknowledge the diverse views and interests of the peoples that fall within this group, the ways in which the interests of producers might conflict with those of food consumers, or the fact that most producers also rely on purchased foods. It can therefore be unclear how a food system based on food sovereignty would meet the needs of these different people, or indeed, how food sovereignty might be achieved. What role would international trade play, and, likewise, the state? Who would govern a 'food sovereign' food system and how would more democratic governance be achieved? Whilst many of these ambiguities are an inevitable result of the inclusive, bottom-up approach adopted by the FSM, they also raise important questions for the future of a food sovereignty agenda, as we explore in the sections below.

3.1 What role would trade play?

Global trade has been the focus of much of the FSM's political work and the subject of many publications by affiliated academics. The FSM has criticised the prominence of export-oriented trade and the growing power of transnational corporations in the food system, highlighting the ways in which such trends can threaten the livelihoods of small-scale farmers, negatively influence the diets of consumers, and increase the greenhouse gas emissions associated with the food system. The movement has been particularly critical of global free trade agreements and the organisations that regulate them (in particular the WTO), for their lack of transparency or accountability, and for maintaining a trade system that, they argue, promotes the interests of wealthy, industrialised countries and privileges economies of scale over the rights of small-scale producers and sustainable food production.³⁶

These criticisms can give the impression that the FSM is anti-trade. While it undoubtedly prioritises local production over global trade and is highly critical of the rules and institutions that allow corporate dominance of global value chains, it is not anti-trade per se.³⁷ The FSM is however sometimes unclear on what kind of trade should be promoted, the circumstances in which global trade is acceptable, and how a trade system based on food sovereignty might be generated. Some suggest that global trade is acceptable when domestic production cannot meet a country's needs, and advocate for a more 'protectionist' type of trade that would support the interests of small-scale farmers through quotas and subsidies.³⁸ However, it is not obvious whether 'needs' are defined in terms of nutritional requirements only, or also encompass taste and pleasure. Would the trade of coffee and cocoa, for example, be acceptable within a food sovereignty framework?³⁹ Publications from the FSM also voice support for fair trade initiatives;⁴⁰ Disagreement also exists on how changes to trade might be generated and how to establish mutually beneficial relationships between rural and urban areas (see our forthcoming explainer *What is agroecology?*). While some members of the FSM focus on building autonomous local food systems, freed, where possible, from dependence on global trade, others focus their attention on changing state policy or global trade rules so that small-scale farmers can engage more fairly in national and global markets.¹⁰

3.2 How would food sovereignty meet the interests of everyone?

It has been suggested by some critics that the FSM's lack of clarity on trade reflects a failure to acknowledge the diverse interests of its members and the complexities of rural society more widely.⁴¹ Some proponents of food sovereignty, largely non-farmers in the global North, have been criticised for presenting a romanticised and simplified vision of rural life, portraying 'peasants' as a homogenous group and failing to recognise that 'food producers' include not only subsistence farmers or small-scale family farmers but also commercial farmers, farm labourers, food workers, and landless peasant.^{41,42} Proponents of food sovereignty prioritise inclusivity and democratic decision making through deliberative dialogue processes and convenings to reflect on the evolving needs of regional communities.¹⁶ True representation however is inevitably difficult to achieve in such a large, diverse movement, and some affiliated farmers have reported to researchers that LVC's actions in the international policy arena, for example, do not reflect farmers' needs on the ground.⁴³

This is perhaps unsurprising, given that different food producers often have very different needs and preferences depending on their economic status, as well as their intersecting racial, ethnic, and gender identities. For example, whilst a food sovereignty agenda might benefit small-scale farmers as a whole, it would not necessarily have positive impacts for women and girls, who are often particularly marginalised in family farming systems.^{1,44} Similarly, whilst some members might benefit from advocacy and actions that develop local markets, others might prefer to increase their presence in global export markets; some might prioritise land reform, whilst others might seek to expand their commercial farms. Moreover, many rural people indicate a desire to move away from agricultural livelihoods entirely and may favour education or training that facilitates employment in urban areas (that said, small-scale farming might become more attractive if its economic viability was ensured through a food sovereignty agenda).^{44,45} The FSM has undoubtedly become more inclusive over the years: it now explicitly recognises the specific needs of women, ethnic minorities and food system workers and many within the movement are actively attempting to bring together feminist and food sovereignty agendas through participatory quotas.^{46,47} Nonetheless, there can be a tendency amongst some advocates of food sovereignty to present a simplified understanding of rural societies in a way that precludes true representation and that ignores potential contradictions within the movement.¹⁰

Perhaps an even greater challenge is the goal of meeting the needs of both food producers and consumers. Although the FSM has traditionally focused primarily on the rights of producers, the concept of food sovereignty in fact encompasses all 'who produce, distribute and consume food'. As LVC themselves point out, '[F]ood sovereignty was not designed as a concept only for farmers, but for people...'⁴⁸ In economic terms however, the interests of these two constituencies often conflict, as higher incomes for farmers tend to result in higher prices for consumers (although this might be avoided if the profits across the supply-chain and among agro-industry were reduced).⁴¹ There is also a potential tension between the FSM's commitment to democratically governed food systems (which would allow consumers more control over what they eat and how it is produced) and the promotion of agroecological food production (which arguably demands the consumption of local, seasonal produce, and generally more plant-based diets in historically high consuming countries). Proponents of food sovereignty cite greater control over food production and access to fresh, nutritious food as features of food sovereignty that will benefit consumers. They argue that preference for processed, 'convenience' foods is not necessarily an expression of consumer choice, or sovereignty, but rather results from government policies, as well as marketing and lobbying from agro-industry. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that dietary changes might prove unpopular amongst consumers as things stand today, and that normative visions of future food systems might, in some cases, undermine the FSM's commitments to democratic decision making.

3.3 Who decides? And how?

Some definitions of food sovereignty highlight the importance of the 'nation' and domestic food politics, whereas others focus on 'people' and their right to shape their food systems.⁴⁹ Similarly, within the FSM, some actors prioritise

increasing the sovereignty of nation-states by transforming global trade rules and governance processes, and others prioritise increasing the sovereignty of individuals or communities, by generating local or bioregional food systems that provide producers and consumers with more influence and control. Uncertainty about whether sovereignty should reside with the nation-state or the 'people' is perhaps inherent to the very concept of sovereignty, and advocates suggest that the FSM asserts a 'new and modern definition of sovereignty' that moves between scales.^{50,51} This raises difficult practical questions however about the governance of food systems.¹⁰ Who should determine and govern a locality's, region's, or state's food system and set the goals for the production and distribution of food? And what processes and institutions will help achieve food sovereignty and ensure democratic legitimacy?

Whether the FSM prioritises the sovereignty of the nation or the sovereignty of the people, it seems likely that the state would need to play an important role in transforming the food system.^{10,41} National governments could help regulate national and global trade, protect and promote agroecological or small-scale farming, ensure that food produced for domestic consumption was distributed fairly on a national scale, and subsidise farmers' incomes and consumer food prices. As critics both within and outside the movement point out however, there has been little state support for food sovereignty thus far. This might either suggest that few national governments are inclined to challenge the dominant neoliberal political order and offer the necessary levels of state support, or that the food sovereignty discourse does not offer a useful practical framework for public authorities at the national and international level.^{28,49}

Even in cases where states have formally adopted food sovereignty (for example, Venezuela, Mali, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nepal, and Senegal), the results have been mixed, raising questions about the extent to which, even if inclined to do so, national governments are actually able to transform food systems. Formal recognition of food sovereignty undoubtedly provides social movements and civil society organisations with a new platform, transforming food sovereignty from a strategy of 'resistance' (against the state / WTO / dominant food system etc.) into a more positive agenda for change.⁵² However, there is less evidence that state support for food sovereignty has actually had significant tangible impacts. In Ecuador for example, the 2008 Constitution framed food sovereignty as an 'obligation from the State'; a year later however President Correa partially vetoed laws attempting to implement these constitutional changes, with many suggesting that his veto was heavily influenced by agribusiness.⁵³ This case highlights the difficulty of regaining (food) sovereignty in the context of global free trade agreements and complex corporate consolidation (see Table 3 below). As food sovereignty matures in theory and practice, the FSM faces questions about the scale at which it might best be able to enact change, and the role that the nation-state might be willing, or able, to play.¹⁰

Table 3. Examples of food sovereignty in policy and practice^{54,55,56,57,58,59}

State / Region/ Community	Generating food sovereignty in policy and practice	Challenges to generating food sovereignty
Ecuador, State support for food sovereignty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As stated in the 2008 Constitution: food sovereignty constitutes 'an objective and strategic obligation from the State'; state commits to supporting small and medium sized production, agro-biodiversity, and ecological and organic technologies by developing relevant fiscal policies, carrying out land reform, supporting appropriate research, regulating monopolization and biotechnology, strengthening producer organisations, and purchasing food from small producers. Laws on food sovereignty drafted through consultation with 15,000 individuals and 5,000 organisations and state institutions.⁵⁴ Support provided for domestic agriculture (e.g. price floors, national storage capacities, extension services, credit availability, monitoring of commodity chains). Modest land redistribution. Government programme established to promote public procurement from small-scale producers. Government department established to support development of solidarity economy Government developing schemes for agroecological certification. Various local governments support agroecological production through extension services, support for local markets, seed exchanges and certification schemes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> President quickly modified 2009 law: rejecting ban on biofuel production and GMOs, reducing commitment to income redistribution, delaying decisions on land reform, and including large producers in agricultural subsidies. Local governments and social movements remain heavily dependent on state policy for generating change.⁵⁵ FS has been reduced to pre-neoliberal redistribution policies at state level.^{55,56} The interests of agribusiness have not been challenged and monocrop and industrial agriculture still supported by government.⁵⁶
Toronto Food Policy Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitates discussion and dialogue between diverse array of actors within the food system Developed the Food Charter, in which Toronto City Council acknowledges all residents' right to nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food. Widened participation through creation of Toronto Youth Policy Council. Developed urban agriculture schemes. Developed projects linking local food producers to low-income citizens. Successfully campaigned for federal government to refuse to license Bovine Growth Hormone in Canadian dairy operations. Contributed to urban planning processes highlighting importance of local agricultural land Initiated programmes to encourage public procurement of local produce. Generated research to facilitate local production of culturally appropriate and diverse crops. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulties juggling conflicting priorities of hunger, social justice, and sustainability, and balancing broad focus with strategic planning.^{57,58} Small staff and budget, reliant on work of volunteers. No authority to pass or enforce laws, can only advise city council. Challenges linking urban and rural areas.⁵⁷ Difficulties convincing policy makers of need for holistic food system approach.⁵⁷
Parque de la papas (Potato Park), Cusco, Peru	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Area of 10,000 hectares established as an Agrobiodiversity Conservation Area by six Quechua communities, to celebrate and protect the agroecosystem and associated indigenous culture. Local management and control of territory and resources achieved through intercommunity agreement that strengthens indigenous customary norms and social relations. Diverse local economy supported by development of biocultural tourism, educational visits, handicrafts, sale of produce and a restaurant; six natural medicine pharmacies help address community health needs. Helped develop and promote idea of indigenous biocultural systems at national and global level to strengthen indigenous worldview and promote holistic land management practices Contributed to global negotiations on the Nagoya Protocol, which demands that countries. ensure equitable benefit-sharing of genetic resources with indigenous and local communities Worked with local government to successfully promote ban on transgenic crops and biopiracy. Persuaded International Centre for the Potato to repatriate hundreds of potato varieties to the area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International law on agro-biodiversity and genetic resources (e.g. The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture) not widely enforced and does not address land rights or policies supporting industrial agriculture. National legislation protecting traditional knowledge and indigenous rights conflicts with bilateral trade agreement with United States, which privileges intellectual property rights holders.⁵⁹ Peruvian state imposes only minor penalties for inequitable and illegal use of traditional knowledge and genetic resources.⁵⁹

4. Conclusion

Since it first emerged on the international stage in 1996, the food sovereignty movement has grown to include 200 million members from a diverse array of backgrounds and has helped to shift global conversations on food and agriculture towards greater emphasis on the importance of smallholder farming and on agroecological production, and centring experiences of the food insecure. The FSM has however been criticised for failing to offer a consistent vision of what it stands *for* or state how food sovereignty might be achieved. Given the bottom-up, inclusive, and democratic approach adopted by the FSM, it is unsurprising, and perhaps even beside the point, that it lacks a coherent vision. Rather than aiming to create a list of issues that it strictly supports or opposes, it prioritises the autonomy of its members, seeking to generate definitions of food sovereignty that reflect its broad base and collectively challenge deep inequalities of power.¹ In practice, the FSM is made up of multiple different constituencies and groups, all working to meet the specific needs of their members and respond to the challenges of their different contexts. It is therefore perhaps more useful to think of food sovereignty as a set of universal principles, namely 'dignity, individual and community sovereignty, and self-determination', that bring different actors together 'to incite context-specific transformation'.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, although food sovereignty has served as an important 'rallying cry' for a vast array of actors looking to express their discontent with and transform the dominant food system, both critics and friends of the movement recognise that attention to certain issues would further strengthen its claims.³⁹ How might food sovereignty help meet the diverse interests of all producers and consumers and bridge class, racial and gender divides? And what would food sovereignty mean for global trade, for governance and for agricultural practices? While there is broad agreement within the movement that 'business as usual' is not sustainable, visions for the future coexist and compete with a diverse array of agendas to change the way that we produce and distribute food.

Recommended resources

- Videos from the conference "Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue" was held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. <https://foodfirst.org/publication/food-sovereignty-a-critical-dialogue/>
- La Via Campesina official website: <https://viacampesina.org/en/>

For other explainers and more information about TABLE, visit <https://www.tabledebates.org>.

Glossary

Agri-food system

Agri-food system refers to the constellation of social, political, economic and environmental processes and actors involved in the production, distribution and consumption of food and related agricultural products. It encompasses all varieties of food production including aquaculture, forest-based production, livestock and crops, and focuses on both their biophysical and socio-economic characteristics.

Agroecology

Agroecology can be defined as a range of agricultural practices that are based on applying ecological concepts and principles to optimize interactions between plants, animals, humans, and the environment. Agroecology also places strong emphasis on the social and ethical aspects of food production. Its advocates tend to have a preference for organic practices (e.g. the avoidance of mineral fertilisers and chemical inputs, and instead prefer the use of biofertilisers, natural pesticides and crop rotation), it also emphasises the need for a 'multifunctional' farm system to produce both food and non-food outputs, and for smallholder and indigenous, as opposed to large scale farming. Agroecology has been interpreted in different ways: it also refers to a social movement and field of science.

Corporate food regime

The concept of the 'corporate food regime' was developed by political economist Phillip McMichael, in his work identifying different historical phases in the political economy of food and agriculture. He characterises the period from the late 1980s onwards as the 'corporate food regime' due to the increasingly prominent role played by large transnational corporations in all aspects of food provisioning, including through their influence on market prices and the establishment of new regulations and trade policies. The idea is widely used by academics, particularly proponents of food sovereignty, to critically refer to the various actors and processes that facilitate the dominance of an export-led global food system.

Dumping

Dumping refers to the practice of exporting products at a price lower than the normal price (e.g. the price in the domestic market of the exporter, or the price in the market of a third country), in order to increase market share and drive out competition. It is a highly controversial practice as it tends to support farmers in rich countries at the expense of producers and consumers in low-income countries. Although it is legal under World Trade Organisation rules, it has been heavily criticised, particularly by the food sovereignty movement, for undermining domestic production and food security in the global South, and marginalising smallholder farmers in the global economy.

FAO

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) is a specialised agency of the United Nations. It is dedicated to leading international efforts to defeat hunger worldwide.

Food justice

Food justice is defined as the right of communities everywhere to produce, process, distribute, access, and eat good food regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, ability, religion, or community. The food justice movement emerged in the 1990s in the US, primarily amongst Black and ethnic-minority urban communities, to highlight in

particular the racialised nature of inequalities within the food system.

Food security

Food security is an idealised state or goal where all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Food sovereignty

Food sovereignty is a political movement that emphasises the rights of food producers, distributors and consumers to have control over the food system, as opposed to corporations and market institutions. It has been defined as the right of 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.

Green revolution

The Green Revolution was an agricultural modernisation programme in the 1950s and 1960s that promoted the widespread adoption of fertilisers and pesticides, agricultural machinery and higher-yielding varieties of maize, wheat and rice around the world, particularly in Latin America and Southeast Asia. It was led by the US government along with the Rockefeller Foundation and the Mexican government, and was further promoted by development agencies, agronomists, and policy makers. Different reasons are attributed to its widespread promotion, including concerns about increasing food supplies to meet the demands of a growing global population, worries about rural unrest in the context of the Cold War, and a desire to expand farm input markets. The impacts of the Green Revolution are a topic of much debate. Proponents who seek a new 21st century Green Revolution highlight its role in increasing agricultural yields in Asia and Latin America; critics, on the other hand, emphasise that it did not effectively tackle hunger and malnutrition and that it resulted in environmental degradation, serious social inequalities and unhealthy dietary change.

La Via Campesina

La Via Campesina (LVC) is a transnational social movement, made up of 200 million people across 81 nations. It was formed in 1993 by peasants and smallholder farmers from around the world in response to the negative impacts of trade liberalisation and diminishing state support for small-scale agriculture. It has since grown to include landless people, rural women and youth, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers. LVC has played a key role in the food sovereignty movement, leading protests against global free trade agreements and promoting agroecology and smallholder farming. LVC has a decentralised structure, made up of multiple autonomous organisations, and prioritises inclusivity and democratic decision making.

Malnutrition

Malnutrition refers to deficiencies, excesses, or imbalances in the energy, macronutrients, or micronutrients that a person obtains. This is either because their diet is lacking or because their body is not able to fully absorb the nutrients from the foods eaten, e.g. due to illness. Malnutrition is an umbrella term that includes overnutrition (an excess of food energy), undernutrition (a lack of food energy and macronutrients such as protein), and micronutrient deficiencies (insufficient micronutrients such as iron, vitamin A or iodine).

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an ideology and a political and economic policy model that emphasises the importance of freedom from state intervention, the privatisation of public goods, and the primacy of economic growth and free market competition. Neoliberal policies were championed in the 1980s by US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher – these policies included cuts to state spending and efforts to promote economic growth by privatising public services and deregulating the corporate sector. Neoliberal thinking has since gained traction amongst many national and global policy makers, and in the 1980s and 1990s led by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to promote economic restructuring in countries around the world. More recently however, neoliberalism has received various levels of criticism. The 2008 financial crisis for example has prompted many economists and policymakers to call for greater government regulation of the financial and banking sectors.

Although neoliberalism is recognised for increasing the wealth of certain portions of the world's population, it has also been responsible for widening socio-economic inequalities and worsening climate and environmental crises. Debates about the value of economic growth and the ability of markets to efficiently and fairly allocate resources are therefore ongoing.

Right to Food

The right to food was initially recognised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It has since been developed by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, who now recognise the importance of the right to adequate food, defining this as 'regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear'.

Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)

Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) were introduced by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in the 1980s in response to a series of economic crises in the global South. During this era, these institutions made access to loans by poor countries conditional on a set of economic policies that aimed to reduce state spending and open up their economies to international trade. Proponents of SAPs claimed that they would encourage economic growth; however they have been heavily criticised for undermining national sovereignty, deepening social inequality and further marginalising many poorer countries in the global economy.

Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations

The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) is a legal agreement introduced in 1947 to encourage international trade. Prior to the Uruguay round of negotiations, which took place between 1986 and 1994, agricultural products had been effectively exempt from GATT rules. However, the Uruguay negotiations led to the Agreement on Agriculture, which opened up agricultural markets by reducing tariffs on agricultural goods and limiting government subsidies for agricultural exports and domestic production. This agreement has been widely criticised, particularly by the food sovereignty movement, for having negative impacts on smallholder farmers and poorer countries. Following the Uruguay round of negotiations, GATT was replaced by the World Trade Organisation.

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