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WHAT IS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY?



This piece is a summary of the TABLE Explainer [What is food sovereignty?](#) and aims to define the concept and illuminate key debates. Citations and references for the information discussed below can be found in the full explainer.

Brief history of food sovereignty

The food sovereignty movement (FSM) arose in opposition to changes in the food system that had resulted from the [Green Revolution](#) and accompanying trade liberalization and [structural adjustment policies \(SAPs\)](#). Peasants in the Global South, and small-scale family farmers in the Global North, perceived these changes to be associated with many negative social and ecological impacts. For example, whilst yields and total food supplies had increased, hunger and [malnutrition](#) had not been effectively tackled, particularly within marginalised communities. Moreover, smallholder farmers struggled to take advantage of new technologies and compete with large-scale capital-intensive agriculture in global markets flooded with subsidised products from industrialised countries. In 1993, this led to the formation of [La Vía Campesina \(LVC\)](#), an international peasant organisation that grew to encompass 200 million people across 81 nations in 2021. LVC has played a major role in promoting [food sovereignty](#) 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.

Current definitions and key principles of food sovereignty

Food sovereignty as a concept was popularised and promoted for the first time on the global stage by LVC at the [FAO](#)-sponsored World Food Summit in 1996, where it was defined as: "The right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity."

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The concept of food sovereignty has since been embraced by an array of actors and has developed into a food sovereignty movement (FSM). As the FSM has grown, definitions of food sovereignty have become more comprehensive and inclusive, with that offered in 2007 following the Nyéléni Forum being the most extensive one yet. This 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."

However, the FSM consists of many highly diverse and heterogeneous sub-groups, and so tends to avoid defining specific food sovereignty visions too strictly, instead encouraging context-specific solutions based on shared principles. Thus, it may be easier to discuss what food sovereignty and the FSM stand against: the dominance of [industrial agriculture](#); [neoliberal](#) free trade policies (particularly export [dumping](#) and export subsidies); and the undemocratic governance of food and agricultural trade (primarily via the [World Trade Organisation \(WTO\)](#)).

How does food sovereignty differ from food security?

In some regards, current definitions of [food security](#) and food sovereignty overlap. Food security focuses on 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." Thus, the two concepts do not conflict entirely, and food sovereignty can be seen as a method for achieving food security. This is reflected in the initial LVC definition of food sovereignty: 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."

However, many members of the FSM are keen to distinguish the two concepts and defend the more politically motivated strategies of food sovereignty. Food security is primarily a descriptive, rather than normative, concept used to understand the complexities of hunger and malnutrition. Meanwhile, food sovereignty signals allegiance to particular methods for generating

change (movement-based rather than through dominant institutions; democratic and inclusive rather than 'top-down'; grassroots politics rather than market mechanisms) and a particular vision for future food systems (agroecological; democratic; local). Here, food security is seen to maintain the status quo of the 'corporate food regime', whilst food sovereignty provides the political principles to overcome this.

Moreover, food sovereignty is often more closely linked to other movements aiming to change the food system, including the [right to food](#), [food justice](#), and [agroecology](#). Its link to agroecology is covered in more detail in our ['What is Agroecology?'](#) explainer.

The role of trade

The FSM has been critical of the power of transnational corporations and the prominence of export-oriented trade in the food system, arguing that these factors threaten smallholder livelihoods, negatively influence diets, and increase greenhouse gas emissions. The FSM also criticises global free-trade agreements and associated regulatory organisations (like the WTO), for lacking transparency or accountability and maintaining trade systems that, arguably, favour wealthy, industrialised countries over small-scale producers and sustainability.

Some criticise the FSM's preference for domestic food production (shorter, more local supply chains) over global free trade. In response certain members state that they are not anti-trade per se, and global trade is acceptable if domestic production cannot meet a country's needs. Here, they advocate for a more 'protectionist' trade system that supports the interests of small-scale farmers through quotas and subsidies. Thus, instead of focusing solely on building autonomous local food systems, they also look to change state policy and/or global trade rules to allow small-scale farmers to engage more fairly in national and global markets.

Meeting the interests of everyone

Some proponents of food sovereignty, largely non-farmers in the Global North, have been criticised for presenting a highly simplified vision of rural life, portraying 'peasants' as a homogenous group and failing to recognise the diverse range of 'food producers' (subsistence farmers, small-scale



family farmers, commercial farmers, farm labourers, food workers, and landless peasants). Thus, affiliated farmers sometimes report that LVC's actions around international policy do not actually reflect their needs. This links to larger issues ensuring that the FSM's large and diverse range of actors are fully represented.

Moreover, the needs and preferences of food producers vary massively depending on economic status, along with intersecting racial, ethnic, and gender identities. For example, some debate whether to develop local markets or increase their presence globally; and many, including women (who are particularly marginalised in small-scale farming), may want to move away from agricultural livelihoods entirely. Meanwhile, higher incomes for farmers and dietary changes often associated with food sovereignty (more plant-based and seasonal diets) may prove expensive for and unpopular with consumers wanting to control what they eat. Overall, a tendency towards oversimplifying rural societies and producer-consumer interactions must be avoided to achieve true representation and the FSM's commitments to democratic decision making.

Who decides and how?

Another uncertainty in the FSM is whether sovereignty should reside with the nation-state or the 'people' with some advocates suggesting the FSM must assert a 'new and modern definition of sovereignty' that moves between the different scales. However, this raises questions over who should determine and govern a locality's or state's food system and set goals for food production and distribution, and exactly how this should be achieved.

It is likely that the state would play an important role in transforming food systems, but very few states have openly supported food sovereignty thus far. This could either be because national governments are not inclined to challenge the food system status quo by transitioning away from it, or that food sovereignty lacks a useful or practical framework for authorities to act within. 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 how extensively, even if inclined to do so, national governments are able to transform food systems.

Conclusion

This summary has given a broad overview of the definition, history, and principles of food sovereignty, and how it differs from food security. Key debates associated with the FSM centre around its broad membership base and attempts to maximise inclusivity, which makes it hard to understand exactly what it stands for or how food sovereignty might be achieved. It is perhaps more useful then, to view food sovereignty as a set of universal principles ('dignity, individual and community sovereignty, and self-determination') which bring various actors together 'to incite context-specific transformation' in a move away from an unsustainable 'business as usual' food system.

The full report (with associated citations and references) is available at:

<https://www.doi.org/10.56661/f07b52cc>