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Food sovereignty

*Special Issue: Mapping the Global Food Landscape***The hefty challenges of food sovereignty's adulthood—
Synthesis paper**

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The three articles in this section reflect a broader shift that is taking place in the debate on food sovereignty. After almost two decades since its inception, the term—which is also a “counter-narrative”, a “mobilizing tactic”, and a “political agenda” (Desmarais, this issue)—has gained significant leverage as an alternative paradigm to industrial agriculture. A sign of the term’s maturity may be the growing consensus shared by critical food studies scholars and activists about its potential as an alternative paradigm. At the same time, food sovereignty’s adulthood is rife with complex challenges. At stake is no less than turning a dream born in the margins into a concrete, viable reality for the global agrifood system. This article focuses on three challenges faced by the food sovereignty movement today: (1) operating across multiple scales; (2) maintaining internal democratic practices as the movement continues to grow and become more complex; and (3) building cross-sectoral alliances to foster broader social change.

Operating across multiple scales

As Desmarais points out (this issue), one of the key features of the Global Food Sovereignty Movement is that it recognizes the particular histories and geographies of the struggles that are part of it while at the same time providing a common ground and shared vision. Such a vision—summed up by the three principles indicated by Wittman (this issue) of ecological sustainability, distributive justice and procedural justice—ultimately seeks to change the asymmetrical power

relations in the global agrifood system. However, the diversity of struggles, strategies, and tactics of the movement make it very challenging to develop a framework for action that enables coherently integrating actions taking place at various issues, levels and scales.

Through her analysis of the cases of Ecuador and Brazil, Wittman points to some of the underlying difficulties surrounding the implementation of food sovereignty. While she acknowledges that the norms and policies created in both countries to achieve the explicit goals of food sovereignty have indeed been important to advance the rights of small farmers, she concludes that several obstacles still need to be overcome before more significant changes will be seen on the ground. The complex challenges food sovereignty faces are evidenced even in contexts where it has gained significant traction, where national norms are often not met with local capacity: local problems, such as lack of basic infrastructure for storage or small-scale farmers' inability to meet food safety regulations, are compounded by regional and national problems, such as low demand for agroecological products, insufficient budget allocation, persisting patronage relations, and competing development strategies amongst government agencies.

Besides the problems involved with the domestic institutionalization of food sovereignty, a further issue the movement needs to tackle is the way in which national actions are related to global ones. One of the most pressing questions in this regard is how trade should be conceived from a food sovereignty perspective (see articles on trade, this issue). For La Vía Campesina, food sovereignty is a radical response to the inclusion of agriculture in neoliberal trade negotiations and the stark inequalities and power asymmetries that structure the global agricultural trade system. In opposition to this system, food sovereignty activists have promoted ecologically and socially sound localized agrifood systems organized by rural communities with the support of the state. Nevertheless, it is not sufficiently clear from this position whether this entails rejecting international trade altogether, or whether there is still room for trade under a different set of conditions.

This discussion on trade points to the broader concern of whether domestic gains achieved by food sovereignty activists—such as agricultural policies that are more responsive to the needs and interests of small-scale farmers—contribute to or contradict broader struggles of economic justice staged by the movement at the global level. Undoubtedly, domestic policy instruments continue to be relevant for protecting small farmers' income in the global North and the global South. However, these national policies can also undermine small farmers' livelihoods elsewhere.

In an effort to move beyond the localization/globalization binary (Clapp, 2014), the “multi-scalar” approach suggested by Wittman's article provides a starting point to think about transnational relations in the global agrifood system and to unpack what “sovereignty” means for food sovereignty activists (Edelman, 2014; Schiavoni, 2014). This approach—similar to concepts like “variable-scaled reflexive governance” (Marsden, 2013)—may allow seeing trade, and more generally national agricultural policies, not only as a zero-sum game between national producers but as the result of a complex interplay of a wide range of actors across local, regional,

national and global levels in which positive-sum outcomes are possible. Furthermore, this approach is well-equipped to analyze the diverse strategies used by the movement at a plurality of social and political scales in order to counter the dominant global capitalist agrifood system, which operates as well through multiple, overlapping scales and authorities (Ayres & Bosia, 2011).

Internal democracy in a global social movement

Along with the difficulties of operating across multiple scales, a second challenge of the global food sovereignty movement is to build a cohesive organizational structure that continues to grow in members and complexity without ceasing to uphold its internal democratic practices. The movement cannot be pinned down to a single social movement organization—such as La Vía Campesina—as food sovereignty has become the “rallying call” for diverse poor and marginalized actors across the global South and the global North (Anderson & Bellows, 2012; Sage, 2014). However, it is still relevant to explore the extent to which its claims for procedural justice and internal democracy continue to hold as it has evolved over time. Two ongoing tendencies indicate that the movement may be responding effectively to this challenge and moving in the right direction.

One is the process of training and capacity building of its base membership (Snipstal, this issue). The agroecological programs started by La Vía Campesina long ago have enabled building leadership from the bottom up, and fostering a political culture of critical thinking and active participation amongst its members. Agroecological schools, Snipstal argues, are not merely about learning a “more ecological model of food production”, but rather also about “build[ing] power, leadership and infrastructure at the base” (see also Gliessman, 2013). The philosophical principles and methodological tools that comprise these educational processes, such as “action-based”, “participatory”, and “contextualized” research, are in line with this idea.

While a systematic assessment of the scope and impact of this process of agroecological *formación* is required, it may be argued tentatively that such a process is an essential antidote against the movement turning into an ossified, patronage-driven bureaucratic structure. The fact that participants themselves have recently addressed previously overlooked issues—such as gender imbalances—in the movement (Desmarais, 2007; Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010), means that these pedagogical processes are serving, at least in part, to increase the members’ reflection on the movement they are part of. Creating the conditions of a stimulating democratic culture in any large movement requires both time and providing concrete spaces for deliberation and critical engagement, which are in turn key premises for political creativity and innovation (Heller, 2012). From Snipstal’s article it seems that the movement is doing precisely this.

A second tendency demonstrating procedural justice and positive direction in the movement is the ability to maintain a strong chain of accountability in its decision-making processes. This is particularly important as the movement gains political space within national

and international governance structures, wherein the risks of depoliticization and meaning cooptation are high (Desmarais, this issue). When, as a result of increasing success and influence, social movements experience rising expectations from members and the general public, a tension between inclusive engagement and organizational efficiency usually emerges (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015). From the positive experiences of the 2007 Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010; Schiavoni, 2009), and the more recent deliberations at the Committee on World Food Security (McKeon, this issue) and the Civil Society Mechanism (Rahmanian, this issue) it seems that the global food sovereignty movement has been able to strike an adequate balance. The decision-making mechanisms, notwithstanding all the contentious politics surrounding them, have continued to be responsive to the base while generating key political outcomes.

At the same time, due to the significant variation in the movement's participants across regions and contexts, tensions around issues of representation and internal differentiation persist (Boyer, 2010). To be sure, distinct class, ideological, organizational and cultural perspectives will continue to determine the power dynamics and politics within the movement itself (Baletti et al., 2008; Borras, 2010; Edelman, 2008).

Building broader alliances

A third challenge of the global food sovereignty movement is to effectively unite with other sectors of society so as to foster broader social change. Even though the movement emerged as a “transnational agrarian movement” (Borras, Edelman & Kay, 2008) with a specific peasant-oriented agenda, its radical approach to the current corporate food regime (Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011) conceived a food sovereignty project that is about “social change writ large” (Desmarais, this issue). In fact, after the 2007 Nyéléni Forum, in which over 500 grassroots leaders from nearly 100 countries participated (Schiavoni, 2009), the movement extended across the world (Sage, 2014). Although there is an ongoing discussion around the soundness of its conceptual foundations—criticized due to its lack of specificity (Bernstein, 2014; Edelman, 2014; Patel, 2009; cf. McMichael, 2014)—it has been recognized that the movement's strategic framing of the food sovereignty discourse has encouraged previously nonexistent linkages with other social movements that have similar radical goals (Shawki, 2012). A looser “transnational grassroots movement”—to use Batliwala's (2002) term—might be emerging out of these linkages, with new types of international solidarity networks and innovative forms of transnational partnerships.

What distinguishes transnational grassroots movements from other forms of transnational citizen networks is that their “locus of power and authority lies and is kept with the communities themselves rather than in intermediary actors” (Edwards quoted in Batliwala, 2002, p. 407). This strong connection to grassroots constituencies provides this kind of movement with a high degree of legitimacy and credibility that facilitates reaching out to other sectors of society.

However, bringing together particular struggles entails building effective “meso-mobilization” capacities (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992) by means of which joint understandings and “collective action frames” are developed (Benford & Snow, 2000).

For some observers, the discourse of food sovereignty has been instrumental in this regard, as it has elaborated a worldview “beyond capitalism” in which “autonomous food spaces” are plausible (Wilson, 2012). Conversely, others think that alternative common frames like “ecological public health” (Lang, 2010) might be more appropriate to attain a wider congruence of interests beyond a “producer-rights” agenda (Clapp, 2014). From this point of view, the language of food sovereignty might inadvertently distance people that may in fact share the vision of decommodifying and reterritorializing food systems. Whether the core framing concept is food sovereignty or not, what is crucial is that it allows formulating a structural analysis of the global agrifood system while at the same time providing a narrative that enhances social mobilization and broad political engagement (Sage, 2014).

Beyond the issue of appropriate collective framing, some analysts (Bernstein, 2014; Brass 2002) remain skeptical of the food sovereignty movement’s ability to develop a feasible program of social change. In this line of thought, ethnic, cultural, and especially class differences make it difficult for such a heterogeneous group—composed of actors as distinct as farmworkers, urban consumers and petty commodity producers from the global North and the global South—to coalesce around a single movement that seeks to transform the world food system. Against this kind of critique, the continuing strengthening of multi-sectorial and multi-class coalitions within the global food sovereignty movement signals that the construction of collective transnational political identities (keeping in mind the diversity) is indeed possible and is in fact enabling new forms of social resistance and transformation (Snipstal, this issue; see also Beverley, 2004; McMichael, 2014).

The character and shape of the new partnerships taking place within the food sovereignty movement amongst grassroots organizations and other actors—including NGOs, private and public institutions, scholars and researchers, and state and multilateral agencies—is also an essential aspect of the construction of alliances. Snipstal (this issue) points to the various areas in which fruitful collaborations are in fact being developed to enhance the movement’s educational and infrastructural capacities. Furthermore, Desmarais (this issue) also reflects on the importance of strong solidarity links, particularly in supporting groups that are developing their struggle in life-threatening contexts. She also argues that researchers and academics play an important role in the movement by engaging in critical research—although, as Edelman (2009) notes, this is a complex relationship that needs to be carefully defined so as to generate positive synergies.

Overall, the current multidimensional crisis (Fraser, 2014) offers a unique opportunity for the food sovereignty movement to make broader alliances with people that do not necessarily fit the profile of a militant activist (Shawki, 2012). Recent debates on broad issues like rising income inequality (Piketty, 2014), ecological sustainability (Weis, 2010), and nutrition (Scrinis, this issue), provide grounds to think that food sovereignty could potentially engage in a fruitful conversation with different sectors of society.

Conclusions

Food sovereignty is about building a different agrifood system. Currently, the global food sovereignty movement is growing: it consists of local, national, and regional expressions that have concrete effects in peoples' lives. In some countries, serious attempts to institutionalize food sovereignty into national policy are underway; at the global level, it is influencing a shift in the norms and terms of the debate. As it moves forward into adulthood, the present and future challenges of food sovereignty are immense. The first task is to fully understand the challenges at hand. While I have briefly discussed only three of these—operating at multiple scales, maintaining internal democracy, and building broader social alliances—many others remain unaddressed.

There is a need for extensive research—especially the kind that dares to ask difficult questions. For example, more research is needed on what food sovereignty “alternatives” look like on the ground, something which might entail—among other things—systematizing the highly diverse existing experiences in terms of actors, practices, processes and norms, and their material and ideological effects. Another area of research relates to the theoretical and empirical study of food sovereignty's approach to “markets”, understanding what this means for the broader hegemonic system. Finally, more research must study the complex and evolving relationship between social movements and state authorities in national contexts (like Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Mali, Senegal, Venezuela and Nepal) where food sovereignty is being translated into national policy (Beuchlet & Virchow, 2012; Schiavoni, 2014).

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