

Food democracy South and North: from food sovereignty to transition initiatives

[Olivier De Schutter](#) 17 March 2015

People seek to co-design food systems, to participate in shaping them, to recapture them. We were familiar with the slogan of workplace democracy; we must now open up our eyes to food democracy.

When the idea of food sovereignty emerged twenty years ago, from the [mobilisation of campesinos in Costa Rica](#) and from the protest marches of small farmers in the Indian state of Karnataka, it had one important lesson to teach us: policies in the areas of food and agriculture should not be taken hostage to the exigencies of international trade. This idea was central to the establishment in 1993 of the [Via Campesina](#), which was soon to grow into the largest transnational social movement in existence, now spanning [164 local and national organizations](#) in more than 70 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, and representing an estimated 200 million farmers.



As an antidote to the globalization of food markets, food sovereignty was very much a product of its times. The Uruguay round of trade negotiations launched in 1986 was nearing its conclusion, and at the request of major developing countries, agriculture had been placed at the centre of the table of the big bargain to be struck: food, it was becoming clear, was set to become the next frontier of the great mill of commodification, and farmers from the world over were asked to compete against one another — and let the least competitive disappear.

Food sovereignty was, first and foremost, a story of solidarity against adversity, of cooperation against competition. The trade negotiators wanted their farmers to compete: instead, rallying behind the new slogan, they decided to unite. A strange ballet of words occurred: those talking about trade « liberalization » were condemning farmers to new forms of pressure and coercion from the global marketplace and from the large agrifood companies that dominate it, while those speaking of food « sovereignty » meant in fact the opposite of food wars — they meant alliances across national borders.

With food sovereignty, a set of new displacements occurred: social movements replaced governments as the main source of legitimacy; the building of resilient communities through small-scale farming and the relocalization of agrifood systems was given priority over the search for efficiency gains and economies of scale; and (in the [words of Jan Douwe van der Ploeg](#)) the art of farming replaced the business of agriculture as the way to describe the future role of farmers.

Food sovereignty activists and their allies were attacked on a number of grounds. They were accused, first, of pitting the interests of food producers above those of consumers, especially

urban consumers, who were supposed to want abundant and cheap foods (and a variety of foods all year round), with the longest shelf-life possible.

We now understand much better the limits of such an approach. We have come to realize, over the past twenty years, the considerable damage inflicted upon us by the « low-cost » food economy that left it to the large agribusiness actors to take care of feeding us, through the supermarkets and long food chains. Ill-health from bad diets made up from industrially processed foods, low wages in the food sector (from the [tomato-pluckers in Florida](#) to the [fast food workers](#) in the McDonald outlets), and ecological damage on a large scale - all can be traced back to the [obsession with more production](#), bigger scale, and the lowering of prices at all costs. Low prices, we now insist, should not serve as a substitute for decent wages, and for social policies that should allow everyone, even the poor, to afford prices that are fair for all.

Food sovereignty activists were accused of denying the benefits of trade, and the efficiency gains that can result from each region specializing in what it is comparatively best at producing.

To this, their answer has been--our answer has been--that trade over long distances, controlled by the companies who own the logistics and control the networks, and the ability to source their bananas or their soybean from farmers located thousands of kilometers away, is not the only trade there is; that local and regional markets have been neglected and insufficiently supported; and that this neglect has not simply allowed the expansion of long-distance trade, but to a large extent also resulted from long-distance trade being given priority in public policies. Food sovereignty activists are now able to point, moreover, at the considerable risks that countries take when they depend on imports for their food, as global markets undergo regular shocks and prices regularly spike. Resilience requires diversity, including a diversity of markets; uniformity breeds the exact opposite.

These debates have dominated the past twenty years, and they are still very much alive. No clear winner has emerged yet. The battle for food sovereignty still must be fought, in the streets, in the fields, and in pages of *The Guardian* or of the *New York Times* — all spaces that must be occupied and recaptured.

But a generation has passed, and the problems facing the food systems have grown bigger. Food sovereignty today is much more than it was: it is invoked by food policy councils in North America, from [Toronto](#) to [Oakland](#); it is the rallying cry behind the growth of farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture; it is a slogan heard in food banks that seek to reconnect people to their local farmers and to the food systems they depend on more broadly, such as [The Stop](#) in Toronto; it is referred to by those who want to produce their own food, through vegetable gardens in their urban neighborhoods or in the schools to which they send their children.

Unambiguous food sovereignty

This represents a remarkably diverse set of initiatives, and it may be tempting to conclude that the key advantage of food sovereignty is in its ambiguity, allowing different experiments to unite behind it, and gradually contribute to filling out its meaning. Though there is much truth in this view, this should not blind us to the fact that there exists a deep underlying

convergence behind these various attempts to transform food sovereignty from slogan into action. Second-generation food sovereignty seems to present five key characteristics:

- *First, it seeks to build bridges between urban consumers and local farmers, by inventing different ways to rebuild local food systems.* This is in part a change in strategy: The frontline was the World Trade Organization ministerial summits in Seattle or Hong Kong, but it is now the local school board, the company's canteen, or the local farmers' market. Alliances are being built at local level between citizens, farmers, and municipalities. Food sovereignty was accused of placing the interests of farmers above those of urban consumers: by some magic, it is now the urban middle-class, often joining forces with low-income communities claiming more food justice, who are the most dynamic part of the movement.

- *Second, these various innovations that form food sovereignty today are democratizing:* People were passive consumers, responsible ones at best, they've now become active citizens, seeking to reclaim control over their food systems and to exercise their right to choose. It is not simply that the act of consuming has become political. It is more than that: people seek to co-design food systems, to participate in shaping them, to recapture them. We were familiar with the slogan of workplace democracy; we must now open up our eyes to food democracy.

- *Third, the social innovations that form the food sovereignty movement seek to strengthen social links.* As Polanyi has remarked in his "Notes of a Week's Study of the Early Writings of Karl Marx", the ascendancy of the market economy has had the effect of corroding human relations: just like useful goods have been objectified into commodities and human needs transformed into demand, «the personal relationship of individuals co-operating with one another» has been degraded into «the impersonal exchange-value of the goods produced by them». The penetration of market relationships in all spheres of life thus has impoverished human relations: people are individualized and less and less socialized, they are assigned roles as producers and as consumers, as buyers and as sellers, and they communicate through prices.

When people establish a food policy council, however, when they create a community garden, or when they join forces to convince the school board to buy local and organic, they move away from the roles preassigned to them by the division of labor within society: they redefine their social identities, acting as citizens to reshape their environment.

This not only allows them to escape the sense of disempowerment that we experience in our roles as voters and consumers, as we realize that casting a ballot or buying responsibly has hardly allowed us in the past to provoke society-wide transformations. It also brings about considerable benefits in terms of public health. Stronger community links, richer social relationships, [it has been shown](#), are the single most important predictor of increased life expectancy, more even than the avoidance of tobacco or of excessive alcohol consumption, or even of a lifestyle that is active rather than sedentary.

Fourth, food sovereignty initiatives favor resilience over efficiency. They are guided by the realization that we have entered an uncertain world — and that the pathway to recovery is largely uncharted. Peak oil, the imbalances in the cycle of nitrogen, genetic erosion as a result of the spread of monocropping schemes, soil degradation, the repeated shocks that result from climate changes, the logistical nightmares associated with the congestion of cities

— these [well-documented](#) threats will mean in the future more instability, more volatility, and the need to invent more solutions and to do so faster.

Just as resilience is at the heart of the movement that began in 2006 with the Transition Towns (now [Transition Movement](#)), it is a major concern now to many bottom-up, citizen-led initiatives that claim a right to food sovereignty. The keywords here are relocalization, diversity and (as an outcome of both) reduced dependency. The more that solutions can be designed locally, using local resources (*in addition to* outside resources rather than simply *instead of* them, for these outside resources may remain available as a back-up solution should local systems break down or prove insufficient), the less vulnerable any local system will be to outside shocks — such as a sudden increase in energy prices, a breakdown of supplies, or an economic crisis that placed basic items out of reach of the poorest.

And the more these solutions are diverse, the better the local system will be equipped to deal with contingencies, unpredictable by definition in the form that they will take, but that nevertheless we can predict with assurance *shall happen*.

- *Fifth, finally, the motivations and interests of food sovereignty are closely aligned with those of agroecology.* As a contribution to the science of agronomics, agroecology aims to reduce the use of external fossil-based inputs, to recycle waste, and to combine different elements of nature in the process of production in order to maximize synergies between them. But agroecology is more than a range of agronomic techniques that present some of these characteristics. It is both a certain way of thinking of our relationship to Nature, and it is growing as a social movement.

The truly green revolution

Agroecology is the truly green revolution we need for this century. It invites us to embrace the complexity of Nature: it sees such complexity not as a liability, but as an asset. The farmer, in this view, is a discoverer: he or she proceeds experimentally, by trial and error, observing what consequences follow from which combinations, and learning from what works best — even though the ultimate « scientific » explanation may remain elusive. This is empowering: the farmer is in the driver's seat, where she constructs the knowledge that works best in the local context in which she operates. In contrast, so-called « modern » agriculture, which is in fact twentieth-century agriculture, did the exact opposite: it sought to simplify Nature. What to do on the field was defined by whatever was prescribed by « science » developed in laboratories. The path from research to practice was unidirectional, and it was seen as unproblematic: since solutions were based on science, they were considered universally applicable. The experiential knowledge of the farmer was irrelevant at best; at worst, it was treated as « prejudice », and as an obstacle to the top-down implementation of sound scientific prescriptions from « experts ».

In this view from twentieth century science, the complexity of Nature is a problem: simplify it if you can, and never mind if this means robbing from the farmer her developing artistry, and transforming that art into the literacy of reading instructions for use on the spray bottles and on the seed bags.

As a social movement, agroecology encourages peer-to-peer exchanges of information between farmers. It prioritizes local solutions relying on local resources. And it transforms

the relationship between the farmer and the « expert » from the department of agriculture or from the international agency, not in order to reverse it and to replace one hierarchy with another, but in order to move towards the co-construction of knowledge, as most clearly illustrated by participatory plant breeding.

Making the links

The links between food sovereignty, transition initiatives and agroecology are not circumstantial, or a question of tactical alliances. They are based on a shared diagnosis and on a similar impatience with the system we inherit. The mainstream food system, they note, is corporate-led, energy-thirsty, and so obsessed with « low-cost » that it treats as externalities--as costs to be borne by the whole of society--the ill-health, rural depopulation and ecological damage it is associated with. The time for alternatives to develop has come. Alternative food systems should allow people to democratize, to relocalize, and to be guided in our search less by the imperative of efficiency demanded by the markets, and more by the quest for ownership that citizens demand.

There is considerable resistance to be expected. Vested interests, neo-Malthusian anxieties, sunk costs, growth-obsessed macroeconomics, a certain idea of « progress » or « modernization », shoppers' routines and gendered division of roles — these are all major obstacles to change.

But the conventional food system is not made of one piece only, and it can be transformed brick by brick. Alternatives can emerge bottom up, as social innovations conceived as experiments, increasing pressure for reform. That, ultimately--the broadening of political imagination--is what food democracy is about.