

# Introduction to symposium on food sovereignty: expanding the analysis and application

Molly D. Anderson · Anne C. Bellows

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## Introduction

Despite decades of international and national pledges and programs to dramatically reduce food insecurity and hunger, they remain urgent problems that affect people in almost every country of the world. Many public interest civil society organizations (CSOs), and even some countries, have adopted food sovereignty as a banner and coalescing framework for their efforts to achieve greater food security and justice for an expanding cohort of people who are engaged in food systems, yet disenfranchised from related policy making. Attention by academicians and public policy makers has followed in the wake of a dynamic and loosely organized international social movement supporting food sovereignty. We wanted to examine through this symposium how food sovereignty can and does contribute to increasing food security and how it compares in effectiveness with other approaches, particularly the right to adequate food.

Most of the papers in this symposium were originally presented in three sessions at the 2008 joint conference of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society and the American Society for Food Studies in State College, Pennsylvania. We organized these sessions because it seemed to us that insufficient scholarly attention had been

given to food sovereignty. We wanted to know what the concepts of food sovereignty and the right to adequate food could add to our collective understanding of food security and how it can be achieved, how their practice was contributing tangibly to solutions to hunger and food insecurity, and how scholars are addressing these questions.

We begin with definitions, as many of the following papers do. We encouraged authors to be consistent in their use of terms to avoid confusion, but some of the authors stress different aspects of definitions and common usage. We prefer the definition of food security used by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization:

Food security 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. (UN FAO 2001, p. 49)

The right to an adequate standard of living, including food, is grounded in Article 25 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and elaborated on and transformed into two short paragraphs (Article 11, the right to an adequate standard of living... including adequate food; and the right to be free from hunger) with binding legal duties and obligations in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Later United Nations (UN) documents further defined the right to adequate food (see especially UN Economic and Social Rights Council 1999) as a human right that nations must fulfill progressively and in concert with all other rights for all of their people. The legal right to *adequate* food guaranteed in the 1966 ICESCR is often abbreviated as simply the “right to food”, even in official parlance including the title of the related UN Special Rapporteur. We subscribe to the argument that this shortcut

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M. D. Anderson (✉)  
College of the Atlantic, 105 Eden St., Bar Harbor,  
ME 04609, USA  
e-mail: manderson@coa.edu

A. C. Bellows  
Department of Gender and Nutrition, Institute of Social Sciences  
in Agriculture, University of Hohenheim,  
70599 Stuttgart, Germany  
e-mail: anne.bellows@uni-hohenheim.de

has contributed to an interpretation of States' duties and obligations in progressively realizing the right to adequate food that overemphasizes food production and diminishes attention to food access, food culture, and public nutrition. To this end, we take guidance on the definition of the right to adequate food from the current UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter:

[T]he right to food is 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 (de Schutter 2012).

The 1992 World Trade Organization (WTO)'s decision to liberalize the trade of food in the context of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, Uruguay Round) instigated development of the principles and concept of food sovereignty. Made by non-elected officials, without any provision for public interest civil society participation, WTO decisions undemocratically shape the daily lives of everyone in every country. Members of civil society wanted to arrest what they perceived as a growing monopolistic power of the private sector in decisions about food security and trade, and to endow, in particular, the most disenfranchised with the capacity to participate in political decision making related to food, agriculture and nutrition. Food sovereignty was the vehicle and voice, first and foremost, of rural small-holder farmers and other food producers from the Global South and their response to a loss of local and national sovereignty. As Burmeister and Choi point out in their case study of South Korea in this Symposium, food sovereignty CSOs have aligned themselves politically with national governments to protest WTO decisions. La Via Campesina first brought the concept of food sovereignty to public light at the 1996 World Food Summit. It has been elaborated in several international conferences since then, but the original seven principles still guide its development. The first principle of food sovereignty is the human right to adequate food; thus, the two concepts are closely related.

We see both food sovereignty and the right to adequate food as parts of strategies to achieve food and nutrition security, although both have additional benefits to society that are crucial to changing the structural inequities leading to economic and political inequity, yet not part of most formal definitions of food security. These benefits include the right of marginalized persons to participate at the center of political decision making and to hold Nation States that have ratified the ICESCR accountable to their obligations

to realize progressively the right to adequate food. Actions based in food sovereignty and right to adequate food uphold democratic food policy making and identify necessary structural changes that are not typically identified with food security, e.g., land reform, agroecological approaches and the promotion of women's rights. Because of this tight interlinking of issues critical to achieving food and nutrition security, we propose that the different but overlapping realms of food sovereignty and the right to adequate food are essential to overcome the continuing barriers to universal food and nutrition security. The papers in this Symposium provide significant evidence of early attention to the application of food sovereignty and also its contrasts with the progressive realization of the right to adequate food. They demonstrate how food sovereignty emphasizes particular means of achieving food and nutrition security, as well as these outcomes *per se*. They also show how advocates and scholars are drawing attention to the multiple aspects of food sovereignty, as they strive for and analyze food and nutrition security.

### How the food security landscape is changing

With the rapid rise in prices of many agricultural commodities in 2008, food security suddenly became newsworthy, after years of neglect of agriculture in international development. Newspapers were full of stories about "riots" (protests) in cities where the price of bread, tortillas or rice had shot up past the means of poor people. The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO's) food price index shows that prices of staple foods jumped again in early 2011, after declines in 2009–2010. These "food crises" have complex causes whose relative contributions are still being debated. One point does not seem to be in dispute, however: rapid rises in food prices could easily happen again, because none of the proposed fundamental causes have been remedied. This means that effective and fail-safe ways to prevent hunger and food insecurity have not yet been achieved and the need to introduce new strategies is extremely urgent.

Among the more promising developments in food and nutrition security has been the reinvigoration and re-constitution of FAO's Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2009. Membership includes representation from Nation States, UN organizations, international financial institutions, private sector associations and philanthropic foundations, and for the first time, public interest civil society representatives as full members.<sup>1</sup> The civil society initiative has developed its own internal processes to assure that

<sup>1</sup> See FAO CFS (2008). This 2008 memorandum planned for the 2009 CFS reform changes.

the successive election of its own representatives remains transparent and as balanced as possible in terms of gender, world region, CSO focus, and so forth. The CFS has set up a High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition with a Steering Committee to provide advice. Exactly how much authority the CFS will have remains to be seen. At this writing, the CFS is preparing a Global Strategic Framework that is expected to be completed in the first half of 2012.

A number of parallel developments in support of food security followed the rapid food price rises in 2008. These include a number of loosely coordinated international and domestic initiatives, including the Comprehensive Framework for Action issued in July 2008 by a High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, and its updated form presented in the fall of 2010; the Feed the Future Initiative of the United States; and the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP), a Trust Fund hosted by the World Bank. The GAFSP is a multilateral financing mechanism set up with pledges made by G8 countries during the L'Aquila Summit in 2009. These developments are not coordinated with or through the CFS. They do not engage the breadth of representation that the CFS has now, most notably from public interest CSOs, leading to the criticism that policy making in these latter initiatives is "top down", i.e., the antithesis of a food sovereignty or right to adequate food approach.

Linked to the struggle to democratize policy making are questions about the role of profit in food systems, and how the private sector should interact with the public sector and civil society in addressing malnutrition and hunger. At the same time that record numbers of people were going hungry in 2008 due to rapid rises in commodity prices, speculation on commodity indices enriched financial investors (UNCTAD 2009) and food businesses posted record profits (Anderson 2010). Food sovereignty specifically rejects the commodification of food, which allows such speculation and profiteering. A nascent movement is arguing that Nation States have obligations and duties toward people outside their territories, i.e., extra-territorial obligations (ETOs). Further, policy related to international trade, transnational agro-food industries, and public and private sector engagement in multi-lateral engagements should adhere to, and regulate according to, those obligations and duties (see e.g., Kuennemann 2010).

As discussed by Naranjo in her Symposium contribution on peasants in northeastern Brazil, among the points of disagreement about how to achieve food security are whether the focus should be on smallholders raising food for subsistence or on relatively well-resourced farmers who are raising products for global markets, and whether technologies should emphasize high productivity and yields with external inputs of fertilizer, introduced seeds

and pesticides, or sustained yields obtained from agro-ecological practices that minimize external inputs and emphasize local resources and the integration of traditional and local knowledge. The factual basis of current and future needs are in dispute, such as the amount of food and land needed to provide for future populations, the impacts of climate change on agriculture in different regions and how to adapt, the amount of meat and animal products that will be required in the future, and whether current energy sources can continue to provide inputs used in current industrialized agriculture. On the other hand, there is almost universal agreement that attention must be directed toward women's marginalization in food and nutrition security and related policy. Yet little has changed and the political will to support the rhetoric of concern is not matched with resources necessary to create structural change (Bellows et al. 2011).

A different kind of challenge arises from the lack of agreed-upon benchmarks and monitoring systems for adequate food and nutrition. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which include halving hunger and poverty by 2015, have developed extensive indicators to track progress. Work on the objective of food and nutrition security is complicated by the way that the MDG separates food security from other intrinsically related goals, such as women's empowerment and childhood survival. The FAO (2005) publication, *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security*, provides recommendations for countries on how to establish benchmarks and indicators to measure progress toward or regression from right to adequate food goals. A critical purpose of the *Voluntary Guidelines* is to regularize Nation State reporting to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Civil society can issue parallel reports to the ESCR Committee that uphold, contest, or re-direct the analysis of progress on the realization of the right to adequate food (UN OHCHR 2008; Welthungerhilfe and FIAN 2007).

### **How understandings of food sovereignty and the right to adequate food are changing**

The right to adequate food and nutrition is a normative condition (*everyone should have adequate food and nutrition*) upheld by more than 60 years of an evolving international juridical framework. Food sovereignty has less than two decades of political analysis and strategy underpinning it. In that time period, however, it has been extremely important in mobilizing underrepresented and food-insecure populations toward greater capacity and engagement in controlling their lives and livelihoods.

Today, both concepts are in rapid development, partly through instigation by civil society as well as through support from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and his staff, FAO's Right to Food Unit and the appearance of scholarly articles that apply one or both concepts to specific populations and places. This Symposium is part of the latter category. Both concepts have been the focus of numerous conferences, such as the Right to Food Conference in Rome (October 1–3, 2008) and the Parallel Forum on People's Food Sovereignty held in Rome (November 13–17, 2009), in conjunction with the World Food Summit in Rome. Many organizations have developed resources to help educate the public about both concepts and how to use them.<sup>2</sup>

While food sovereignty was conceptualized by and on behalf of food producers in the Global South, it has captured the imagination of many other groups. Today, both public interest CSOs and scholars are attempting to apply food sovereignty in urban contexts and in the Global North, as well as continuing to address its relevance and meaning in the Global South among rural peasant-based societies. For example, a US Food Sovereignty Alliance has formed and the non-governmental organization (NGO) FoodSecure Canada has organized a People's Food Policy Project, based on the principles of food sovereignty. Questions have been raised, similar to those raised about domestic fair trade in the US, about whether applying food sovereignty in industrialized countries dilutes the original idea and impetus, and whether its use in the Global North and by urban populations requires a fundamental transformation in the concept or perhaps even conflicts with the realization of food sovereignty by developing countries and farmers living in them. The paper by Fairbairn in this Symposium is a contribution to this debate.

At the same time that *where* food sovereignty is appropriate is being tested, *who* is responsible for making it possible is also being scrutinized. Some governments have adopted food sovereignty in legislation, and this raises questions about how and whether non-civil society actors can or should be held accountable to food sovereignty's principles, especially when it might conflict with government policy on trade, land reform or social programs. While Nation States have clear obligations with regard to the legal obligations related to the right to

adequate food, the political objectives of food sovereignty can conflict with public sector positions. The role of the private sector and extraterritorial obligations have assumed more importance over the past few years (e.g., de Schutter 2010, numerous reports by FIAN International on ETOs).

A critical aspect of increasing civil society participation in policy development is engagement in monitoring and evaluation of government obligations with regard to the right to adequate food or the status of food security at the national level.<sup>3</sup> Historically, CSOs have published shadow reports parallel to national documents, designed to identify discrepancies in data or to report material not addressed in the official documents. Civil society groups also independently monitor situations they feel are ignored or under-reported. The NGO FIAN International publishes country reports on the status of the right to adequate food in various countries, as well as the annual Right to Food and Nutrition WATCH. Civil society reporting is especially significant when it expands the articulation of needs and demands to traditionally disenfranchised groups.

Monitoring and evaluation are important points of intersection for scholarship and activism in the fields of food sovereignty, the right to adequate food and food security. The academy has tremendous research capacity, regularly called upon by public and private sectors that can afford to pay for research. Partnerships with civil society are not less respectable, but they have been underwritten less often. As documented in the 2008 International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD),<sup>4</sup> existing investments in agricultural research co-exist not with improvements in social well-being and food security, but with greater numbers of persons living in hunger and economic instability. The IAASTD presents options moving forward that include the democratization of policy on food and agricultural research, i.e., which topics receive funding for study. This multistakeholder assessment is one of the best available examples of the evaluation of impacts on hunger and food insecurity of the comprehensive array of possible investments. Balanced representation in the IAASTD by the academy, private sector and different types of public service NGOs was crucial to the balance of options presented.

Supported further by the changing role of civil society mentioned above, the academy needs to think creatively

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the *Food for Thought and Action Food Sovereignty Curriculum* by Grassroots International and National Family Farm Coalition (Grassroots International and NFFC 2008); the *Right to Food Methodological Toolbox* from FAO's Right to Food Unit, available online at [http://www.fao.org/righttofood/publi\\_02\\_en.htm](http://www.fao.org/righttofood/publi_02_en.htm); and an online book with linked video and audio components, *Towards Food Sovereignty: Reclaiming Autonomous Food Systems* (Pimbert 2009), available progressively since 2009 on the website of the International Institute for Environment and Development.

<sup>3</sup> At this writing, 160 countries have ratified the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights that includes the human right to adequate food. The United States has signed, but never ratified, this international legal instrument, and has therefore no obligation to report on the status of the right to adequate food.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://agassessment.org/>. Accessed January 2012.

about new opportunities and priorities for scholarly engagement. As an example, a partnership between FAO and the International Project on the Right to Food in Development in Norway, with contributions from other CSOs, has developed academic and community-based indicators to track progress on the voluntary guidelines toward progressive implementation of the right to food (Immink et al. 2008). An interesting development in the process of monitoring and evaluation may be reflected in the participation of public interest civil society members not just as shadow reporters, but as seated members inside the CFS.

### Themes addressed in the symposium

This Symposium begins with two papers that apply concepts of food sovereignty in US cities: Santa Barbara, California, and Chicago, Illinois. Megan Carney examines three low-income Hispanic communities and finds an array of coping mechanisms in use to deal with the impacts of the economic recession. She also finds more severe impacts of the recession on women, and suggests that the “delinking” from the global-industrial food system that food sovereignty entails, in addition to participatory planning and decision making, might help residents to create healthier, food-secure communities. Co-authors Daniel Block, Noel Chávez, Erika Allen and Dinah Ramirez analyze the connections between the concepts of food sovereignty and overcoming the lack of access to healthy food in parts of Chicago. They focus on the roles of Growing Power, a community-based NGO, and the coalition Healthy South Chicago to show ways that urban residents have taken greater control of land within their neighborhoods, the potential for new jobs for community members, and bringing in new food venues.

Madeleine Fairbairn’s paper is a more abstract analysis of the potential of the concept of food sovereignty in the US context. She compares food sovereignty with other alternative framings of food system reform, such as community food security, and describes the tensions inherent in applying food sovereignty to consumers in addition to producers. She concludes that food sovereignty may help to complement and go beyond the concept of community food security and other calls for social justice that have already taken root in the US, if its advocates can successfully maintain the fundamental focus of food sovereignty on opposition to neoliberalism. Achieving food sovereignty requires a deeper political transformation of the corporate food regime than community food security advocates have supported to date, and US food sovereignty advocates have not yet matched the coherence of the anti-neoliberal agenda of advocates in the Global South.

The next two papers attempt to apply food sovereignty in South America and South Korea. Sofía Naranjo is concerned with the marginalization of peasants through dominant development policies, examined through case studies in northeastern Brazil. She discusses the process of marginalization, and argues that food sovereignty intervenes directly in this process to allow peasants to escape “poverty traps” and retain (or recover) their ability to gain decent livelihoods without degrading the land they are farming. Larry Burmeister and Yong-Ju Choi address national policies in South Korea. They examine the success with which La Via Campesina’s South Korean members, the Korean Peasant League and the Korean Women Peasants Organization, have gotten national (South Korean) policy attention to an important demand of food sovereignty: withdrawal of agriculture from World Trade Organization control. They trace the political strategies used by these organizations and ways that they have taken advantage opportunistically of trade disputes with the US to advance food sovereignty. Their paper makes the useful contribution to this Symposium of showing how food sovereignty can be furthered at the domestic policy level, and illustrates how producers and consumers can form alliances around food safety and quality.

In the final paper of this Symposium, Beuchelt and Virchow consider, from the perspective of national government policy, the relative merits of the right to food and food sovereignty to meet international development goals and strategies. They suggest that the right to food is more useful in policy aimed at reducing hunger because of its judiciousness, international support and wide ratification. Food sovereignty’s meaning is still in flux, as it is debated by growing numbers of people; this can reduce its power and lead to potential conflicts in national policy coherence, although many of the principles encompassed by food sovereignty are vital to fulfilling the right to adequate food.

### Missing pieces

This symposium is a small contribution toward introducing new analysis and application of food sovereignty, with the additional objective of clarifying the relationships between food security, food sovereignty and the right to adequate food. Some of the gaps in this symposium reflect gaps in the field, and some reflect the point in time at which most of these papers were first drafted (in 2008). First, the role of women as both primary providers of household food security (through producing foods that are consumed, purchasing food and preparing food) and as the most vulnerable to food insecurity (through poverty, lack of legal access to land, credit, and other production resources, political marginalization, etc.) needs considerably more

attention. Future work is needed on women's roles throughout the food system, not just in production and consumption, but also how they can overcome structural gender-based discrimination and gain greater power over their livelihoods.

Second, the place and rights of people who suffer hunger but are not food producers needs to be clarified further, as well as the responsibilities of consumers. Food sovereignty has focused on the rights of rural food producers, with relatively little contribution from nor expectations of urban consumers. Four of the papers in this symposium address the role of consumers in food sovereignty (Carney; Fairbairn; Block et al.; Burmeister and Choi), but many questions remain unanswered. Assumptions about urban consumption in both industrialized and poor countries drive many models about the amount of land and technologies that will be needed in the future, but what if urban agriculture is able to provide significant amounts of food globally (as it already does in some cities)? What if sharp increases in meat consumption do not materialize in developing countries, either because of recognition of the health impacts of overconsumption of meat products or because the price of meat and fish becomes prohibitive when environmental and social costs are internalized? How can food producers and consumers in the Global North form political alliances of sufficient strength with food producers and consumers in the Global South to change international food systems? Without such alliances, continued encroachment of biofuels and cash crops on land needed for growing food for subsistence and healthy local food economies seems likely—both in the Global South and North.

Third, policy related to the right to adequate food often focuses on the need to increase food production to meet rather general food needs; there is less of an emphasis on how to meet the nutrition needs of specific populations. Yet a great deal is known about human nutrient and micronutrient needs at different stages of life and in the reproductive cycle. Medicalized knowledge generally is not translated into accessible community-based nutrition education programs, nor into food and agricultural support programs and extension services to support local and national food systems that maximize access to highly nutritious diets. If an indicator of progressive realization of the right to adequate food were the local, regional, or national capacity to produce and harvest a complement of foods that together constituted a nutritious diet, then many regions or countries would fail. In the Global North, we expect nutrition to be balanced through non-food supplements; increasingly we export this technological solution to combat malnutrition in the global south. Food sovereignty stresses the importance of local food security through local production, and its pre-eminence over food production for

trade. In this way, food sovereignty has the potential for insights into how local, regional and national food systems—as well as local biodiversity—can and should be developed to meet complex local health and nutrition needs.

Fourth, the food sovereignty movement holds opportunity for academics to cooperate with civil society to monitor and evaluate the status of food security, and where applicable, the progressive realization (or not) of the right to adequate food. It is essential to consider whose knowledge gains visibility and who gets the credit, when academicians and civil society work together. If food sovereignty and the right to adequate food emphasize local provision through diverse crops and the use of agroecological practices, then the integration of traditional and formal scientific knowledge is important. Yet how will this be done? Will it preserve the rights of indigenous breeders and food producers, or lead to patents that make access to seeds more difficult? Selecting useful, accessible indicators for realization of the right to adequate food will require collaboration between academicians and civil society as well. How can monitoring networks that use consistent methods be set up, supported and maintained? And will reports about the status of food security link automatically to action plans based on the right to adequate food and principles of food sovereignty? This is not the case in the US, where annual reports of household food security are published with no linkages to accompanying workplans to address the alarming numbers of food-insecure households.

Fifth, the reform of the CFS and expanding processes for monitoring Nation State progress on the realization of the right to adequate food raises for us the role of civil society in domestic debates about food and nutrition security and food planning. Public policy can be enriched and strengthened by including ideas and support from civil society. In the US, there is the fundamental challenge that the 1966 ICESCR was never ratified, although the country engages energetically in international meetings on food and nutrition security. There are further no formal positions in the US for civil society representatives in food security policy making forums and agencies. Some bridges are being built between CSOs and offices within the Obama Administration (such as those with respect to organic farming and rural–urban linkages), and some collaborations between food businesses and civil society (such as through sustainable agriculture standards being developed in partnership between specific businesses or groups of businesses and NGOs). But the question remains, in the US as elsewhere, of how much the private sector can be democratized, and whether its impacts on the right to adequate food and food sovereignty need to be regulated. If so, what entity has the authority and power to enforce guidelines? And how will different perspectives on

acceptable risks and benefits be reconciled, between advocates of the right to adequate food and business interests?

While the challenges above still remain, we think that the papers included in this Symposium address many interesting questions about the relationships among food security, food sovereignty and the right to adequate food. In addition to explaining how food sovereignty and the right to adequate food can contribute to improved food security, one of these papers (Block et al.) demonstrates in its conception and implementation the kinds of civil society/academic collaboration for which we call above. Three of the papers (Carney; Fairbairn; Naranjo) are from doctoral students and show ways that new scholars are taking up new questions. We welcome this new attention to food sovereignty and the right to adequate food, and hope that this Symposium will generate constructive additional thinking.

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## Author Biographies

**Molly D. Anderson** PhD, holds the Partridge Chair in Food and Sustainable Agriculture Systems at College of the Atlantic. Her main interests are effective multistakeholder partnerships and metrics for sustainability, food system resilience, human rights in the food system and the transition to a post-petroleum food economy. At COA, her responsibilities include developing a program in Sustainable Food Systems; directing a partnership of College of the Atlantic, Elm Farm Organic Research Center in the UK and members of the Faculty of Organic Sciences at the University of Kassel in Witzenhausen, Germany; and coordinating a strategic plan for COA's farms. Before moving to Maine, Molly consulted for six years on science and policy for social justice, ecological integrity and democratic food systems. She held positions at Oxfam America and at Tufts University, where she taught, administered programs, built partnerships and conducted research. She co-founded the Agriculture, Food and Environment Graduate Degree Program in the School of Nutrition Science & Policy at Tufts and directed its first five years. She also directed Tufts Institute of the Environment.

**Anne C. Bellows** PhD, is University Professor, Chair, Department of Gender and Nutrition, Institute for Social Sciences in Agriculture, University of Hohenheim, Germany. She received her Ph.D. in geography from Rutgers in 1999 and trained as an urban and regional planner at the masters level. Recently, she has lead a research and engagement project entitled Gender, Nutrition, and the Right to Adequate Food. Her interests include: human rights-especially the right to adequate food and nutrition in terms ranging from a social organizing principle to an academic research method; food

sovereignty and food systems approaches as frames, for example for addressing food and nutrition security at different spatial scales; and food policy and public health strategies that cross the urban and rural “divide.” She has published in *Appetite*, *Right to Food and Nutrition*

*Watch*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Journal of Agriculture and Food Industrial Organization*, *Food and Foodways*, and *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, among others.