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## Food Sovereignty and Agribusiness

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### Synonyms

[Declaration of Nyéléni](#); [Family farmer-driven agriculture](#); [La Via Campesina](#); [Locavorism](#)

### Introduction

“Food sovereignty” refers to a set of interconnected efforts to protect peasant farmers from harms associated with agricultural trade liberalization. This entry discusses the development of the idea of food sovereignty and outlines some of food sovereignty’s component commitments. It also raises and responds to a set of critical questions about food sovereignty’s role in food justice discourse.

### Food Security Versus Food Sovereignty

There is an international consensus that everyone in the world has a human right to food. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 identifies a right to adequate food. The International Covenant on Economic,

Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) echoed this claim in 1976. The human right to food is a rallying point for international aid and development organizations that aim to guarantee “food security.” At the United Nations’ 1996 World Summit on Food, participants committed themselves to this ideal, which requires that food be available, that people have access to it, and that people be able to use available and accessible foods to meet their nutritional needs (World Health Organization 2016).

Since the late-twentieth century, international organizations have argued that increased agricultural trade will promote food security. By harnessing market efficiencies – and by making capital investments in agricultural technologies in the developing world – advocates of food security have hoped to guarantee everyone’s human right to food (Runge et al. 2003). However, since the early 1990s, representatives of the developing world have objected that food security discourse has been captured by efficiency-based arguments for disrupting traditional subsistence peasant farming. They object that agricultural trade liberalization harms peasant farmers.

Some of the critics of efforts to promote food security through trade liberalization have embraced a different ideal of food justice: food sovereignty (Schanbacher 2010). They demand “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. . . It puts the aspirations,

needs and livelihoods of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations” (La Vía Campesina 2011). In contrast with food security, which focuses on the availability and accessibility of food resources, food sovereignty places primary emphasis on the economic and political power of peasant farmers (Desmarais 2007; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Patel 2009).

### Interconnected Goals

Food sovereignty activists embrace a large set of interconnected goals. These diverse goals oppose different harms associated with agricultural globalization.

Food sovereignty resists the destructive disruptions caused by recent dramatic shifts in global trade patterns and massive increases in demand for agricultural commodities. Trade liberalization regimes of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries placed pressures on small farmers to abandon farming (because they could not compete with imports or with more efficient production methods) or to focus on producing commodity crops for exports (rather than food to feed their families and local communities). Food sovereignty aims to protect small-scale peasant farming from these disruptions and to put power in the hands of local communities to decide how (much) global capital and food imports will impact their lives (Wittman 2009).

On a related note, food sovereignty activists frequently object to the instability in food prices that trade liberalization and speculation has caused (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005). For example, food sovereignty advocates have called for peasant farmers to receive guaranteed prices for the food they produce. Furthermore, food sovereignty activists decry the detrimental impact of declining agricultural subsidies, e.g., as a requirement of WTO membership or IMF structural adjustment loans (La Vía Campesina 1996). And food sovereignty advocates often call for new state subsidies for peasant farmers, especially for

those who produce culturally appropriate foods for local consumption.

Food sovereignty advocates claim that trade liberalization has decreased the stability of the food system. On their view, the shift from subsistence farming to export-oriented agriculture makes the well-being of peasant farmers vulnerable to subtle shifts in the consumer choices or investment preferences of people in the wealthy world. Also, the shift away from peasant subsistence farming – and towards farming cash crops and increased reliance on agricultural wage labor – leaves the world’s poorest dependent on inexpensive imported foods. But these cheap food imports are sometimes nutritionally deficient, and their presence may be unreliable in economic crises.

Food sovereignty advocates also want peasant farmers to have discretion about the adoption of more efficient farming technologies, rather than have these technologies forced upon them by economic or legal necessity (Pimbert 2009). Food sovereignty also resists the ethos of agricultural efficiency because it is associated with environmental harms (e.g., pesticides, fossil fuel use) and because it relies on intellectual property regimes (e.g., seed patents) that further disempower traditional peasant farmers.

One of the boldest goals of food sovereignty movements is to promote gender justice. For example, La Vía Campesina says that “[f]ood sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women” (La Vía Campesina 2007). This goal may seem unrelated to core food sovereignty commitments. However, valuing and protecting women’s knowledge and power in traditional food economies, and helping women to flourish in the new post-subsistence-farming food economies that economic globalization has created, will require broad social and economic efforts to promote gender equality and to end the oppression of women (Navin 2015a).

## Questions About Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty has drawn many advocates and admirers. But it has also drawn critics. And even some admirers of food sovereignty acknowledge significant problems for the movement (Some of what follows in this section draws on Bernstein (2014)).

Food sovereignty is supposed to protect peasant agriculture from disruptions of global capitalism, but it may not be clear who is a peasant or what peasant agriculture is. This ambiguity matters. For example, if poor landless agricultural workers are peasants, then trade protectionism will not help *these* peasants, since they are paid for their labor, and since they have to purchase food with their wages, but food will be more expensive in the context of greater agricultural protectionism. However, if food sovereignty focuses instead only on the owners of small family plots who engage in subsistence farming, then it is not clear whether food sovereignty directly addresses the needs of the world's poorest people, since landowners tend not to be a community's worst off members. Furthermore, we should wonder whether food sovereignty speaks to the experiences of "peasants" in the developed world (Fairbairn 2012). For example, La Confédération Paysanne (LCP) represents the interests of farmers in French politics and pushes for greater subsidies for French farmers under French (and EU) agricultural policy. If these French farmers are peasants, then food sovereignty may pull in opposite directions: It would point towards agricultural subsidies for French farmers, but this would harm peasant landowning farmers in countries where cheap French imports undercut the market share of local products (Navin 2014).

Another worry about food sovereignty is whether the methods its advocates endorse will be sufficient to feed the world. Even if many people want to be subsistence peasant farmers, many more do not (or cannot). But they still need to eat. And it seems unlikely that the traditional methods that some food sovereignty activists celebrate will be able to produce enough surplus food to feed all of the people who do not engage in subsistence farming.

But even if the methods embraced by food sovereignty advocates could produce enough surplus to feed the world, it is unclear how food sovereignty advocates think surplus food ought to be distributed. Recall that a core commitment for many advocates of food sovereignty is that food should not be sold on open markets (like other commodities) but that the distribution of food (and its price) should be controlled by farmers and agricultural communities (Rosset 2006). But how is this supposed to work? A community can set its own prices, but whether its food surplus sells depends upon the prices demanded by other agricultural producers, i.e., in a competitive market. Also, agricultural communities are likely to get higher prices (and have less waste) if they develop larger and more efficient distribution networks. But this is just to say that many of the aspects of international agricultural trade that food sovereignty criticizes may be inescapable, if food sovereignty's peasant farming communities are going to feed the world (Navin 2015b).

Finally, we may wonder about the role of the state in food sovereignty. Some food sovereignty activists advocate anarchist autarkic agricultural communities. But many of the demands that get made under the banner of food sovereignty presuppose powerful state actors, e.g., to supply agricultural subsidies or prevent global capital flows. But why do food sovereignty activists think that states will take up these causes on behalf of peasant farmers? States have been pushing hard to open their borders to agricultural trade. And why *should* states support food sovereignty? The economic losers created by increased agricultural protectionism may include many more people (including many more *poor* people) than will be included in the groups of peasant farmers who will be aided by these food sovereignty efforts (McMichael 2010).

## Conclusion

Food sovereignty is a relatively new concept and it has attracted significant attention. People who are interested in ethical issues of contemporary food systems have good reason to follow the

development and deployment of this concept in food justice discourse and activism.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Alternative Food Networks](#)
- ▶ [Civic Agriculture](#)
- ▶ [Food and Agricultural Trade and National Sovereignty](#)
- ▶ [Food Sovereignty and the Global South](#)
- ▶ [Food Sovereignty](#)
- ▶ [Free Trade and Protectionism in Food and Agriculture](#)
- ▶ [Indigenous People and Food](#)
- ▶ [La Via Campesina](#)
- ▶ [Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Movement](#)

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