

Accelerating towards food sovereignty

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Rural social movements and urban food activists have sought to build food sovereignty because it has the potential to be the foundation of an alternative food system, transcending the deep-seated social, economic and ecological contradictions of the global food economy. However, continuing to build food sovereignty requires changes to global and local food systems that have to be undertaken in the messy reality of the present. This article therefore presents a series of wide-ranging, politically challenging but ultimately feasible interventions that are necessary but not sufficient conditions for its realisation.

Keywords: food sovereignty; food systems; global food economy; rural development; agrarian change; rural social movements; food movement

The rise of food sovereignty

Food sovereignty has come to occupy a central place in the discourse of food activists. For an idea that emerged from a series of discussions among farmers who were members of Via Campesina, the global peasant movement, food sovereignty has mushroomed. As of October 2014, googling the term generated over 809,000 hits, a search on Google Scholar generated over 11,100 hits, and multilateral rural development agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) employ the term in their discussions. Bolivia, Ecuador, Mali, Nepal, Senegal and Venezuela have embedded food sovereignty within their constitutions, and a diverse set of food-based civil society organisations have enshrined food sovereignty as a guiding principle. Food sovereignty has become part of the basic discourse of social justice advocates and organisations, including many that are not organised around food issues.

The rise of food sovereignty reflects a series of failures in the corporate food regime that has emerged over the past quarter century.¹ Dominated by global agro-food transnational corporations (TNCs), driven by financial market imperatives of short-run profitability, and characterised by the relentless food commodification processes that underpin ‘supermarketisation’, the corporate food regime

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forges global animal protein commodity chains while at the same time spreading transgenic organisms, which together broaden and deepen what Tony Weis calls the temperate 'industrial grain–oilseed–livestock' agro-food complex.² At the point of agricultural production the dominant producer model of the corporate food regime is the fossil-fuel-driven, large-scale, capital-intensive industrial agriculture mega-farm, which is in turn predicated upon deepening the simple reproduction squeeze facing petty commodity producers around the world.³ A core market for agro-food TNCs are relatively affluent global consumers in the North and South, whose food preferences have been shifted towards 'healthier', 'organic' and 'green' products with large profit margins. At the same time, however, for the global middle class the corporate food regime sustains the mass production of very durable, highly processed food manufactures that are heavily reliant on soya, sodium and high fructose corn syrup, and whose lower profit margins mean that significantly higher volumes of product must be shifted.⁴ Thus, the corporate food regime simultaneously fosters the ongoing diffusion of industrial agriculture – Fordist food such as McDonalds – as well as standardised differentiation – post-Fordist food such as sushi. The corporate food regime is sustained by capitalist states, the international financial and development organisations that govern the global economy, and big philanthropy. Missing from the profit-driven logic of the corporate food regime are those who lack the money needed to access commodified food and who are thus bypassed by the regime – a relative surplus population which is denied entitlement to food as a result of the normal and routine working of the global food system and who are thus subject to food-based social exclusion.⁵ At the same time the corporate food regime is predicated upon a model of production, distribution and consumption that significantly exacerbates climate change and degrades the ecological foundations of the production upon which it depends.⁶

Although it was first developed to challenge the neoliberal globalisation being promoted by the World Trade Organization (WTO), the influence of the concept of food sovereignty has grown because it offers a different way of thinking about how the world food system can be organised; it offers an alternative. As developed initially by Via Campesina and further elaborated at the 2007 Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty,⁷ food sovereignty is based on the right of peoples and countries to define their own agricultural and food policy and has five interlinked and inseparable components:⁸

- (1) A focus on food for people: food sovereignty puts the right to sufficient, healthy and culturally appropriate food for all individuals, peoples and communities at the centre of food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries policies, and rejects the proposition that food is just another commodity.
- (2) The valuing of food providers: food sovereignty values and supports the contributions, and respects the rights, of women and men who grow, harvest and process food and rejects those policies, actions and programmes that undervalue them and threaten their livelihoods.
- (3) Localisation of food systems: food sovereignty puts food providers and food consumers at the centre of decision making on food issues; protects providers from the dumping of food in local markets; protects consumers from poor quality and unhealthy food, including food tainted with

transgenic organisms; and rejects governance structures that depend on inequitable international trade and give power to corporations. It places control over territory, land, grazing, water, seeds, livestock and fish populations in the hands of local food providers and respects their rights to use and share them in socially and environmentally sustainable ways; it promotes positive interaction between food providers in different territories and from different sectors, which helps resolve conflicts; and rejects the privatisation of natural resources through laws, commercial contracts and intellectual property rights regimes.

- (4) The building of knowledge and skills: food sovereignty builds on the skills and local knowledge of food providers and their local organisations that conserve, develop and manage localised food production and harvesting systems, developing appropriate research systems to support this, and rejects technologies that undermine these.
- (5) Working with nature: food sovereignty uses the contributions of nature in diverse, low external-input agroecological production and harvesting methods that maximise the contribution of ecosystems and improve resilience. It rejects methods that harm ecosystem functions, and which depend on energy-intensive monocultures and livestock factories and other industrialised production methods.

Food sovereignty is thus an idea that is an alternative to 'food security', as this term has come to be used by multilateral development institutions to promote market-based and monetary solutions to a lack of access to food, and which says nothing about the inequitable structures and policies that have destroyed rural livelihoods and the environment and thus produced food insecurity. Food sovereignty instead offers a practice that is an alternative to the corporate food regime, with its proponents arguing that the food system needs to be predicated upon a decentralised agriculture, where production, processing, distribution and consumption are controlled by communities. So food sovereignty offers a vision of a real utopia rooted in the contemporary praxis of individuals and movements, and this vision has, in less than 20 years, become a critical component of global food movements.

Holt-Giménez and Shattuck have defined global food movements as the 'tens of thousands of local, national and international social movements concerned with food and agriculture', which 'have developed a wealth of political, technical, organizational and entrepreneurial skills, and advance(d) a wide range of demands',⁹ as a consequence of which global food movements currently takes on a variety of guises.¹⁰ Some are explicitly transformational, in the sense that they challenge the exploitative market structures of contemporary capitalism and the poverty produced by such structures. It is here that core support for the practice of food sovereignty can be found: Via Campesina, the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty, the Foodfirst International Action Network, and many food justice and food rights-based movements.¹¹ Some within global food movements are progressive, in the sense that they work within but are critical of the market structures of contemporary capitalism and the food-based inequalities that it creates: some fair trade chapters, some community food-security movement chapters, some community shared agriculture chapters, many slow food

chapters, and many food policy councils. Within this group, many purport to support food sovereignty, without subscribing to the structural ramifications and necessary political practice of food sovereignty; for these progressives, food sovereignty is a rhetorical device rather than a political programme. Finally, there are those in the global food movements who promote more reformist visions of food and 'development': individual staff at international development institutions like the World Bank, the FAO, the IFAD, the WFP, the United Nations Development Programme, UN Women and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development; some fair trade chapters; some slow food chapters; some food policy councils; and most food banks and food aid programmes. At times these people may use the phrase 'food sovereignty' but when they do they have little understanding of the politics and practice of food sovereignty. Thus, it is important to emphasise that global food movements must not be equated with transformational movements for food sovereignty. Indeed, as will be discussed below, one of the challenges facing proponents of food sovereignty is to locate the interstices within global food movements where the practice of food sovereignty could be more deeply insinuated.

What does food sovereignty entail?

Food sovereignty offers an appealing alternative, and this helps explain its resonance. However, accelerating the processes and practices needed to achieve food sovereignty requires real changes to global and local food systems that have to be undertaken in the chaotic reality of the present. In what follows therefore a series of politically challenging but ultimately feasible interventions that are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the realisation of food sovereignty are presented. This is done because, despite its depiction of a real utopia, food sovereignty is grounded in the messy compromises of the practical political praxis of the here and now, which is a question about where social power is located and how it can be transformed. Transformational food sovereignty movements answer this question by addressing the production and consumption relations found in contemporary agriculture, because at the core of food sovereignty are new forms of social power – political, productive and market – which are being constructed around the production and consumption of food.¹²

However, the question of social power must be placed in the context of our times. The prevailing set of social-property relations within which food providers and food consumers are embedded is capitalist – the means of production are under the control of a socially dominant class, labour is 'free' from significant shares of the means of production and free to sell its capacity to work, and the purpose of commodity production is the seeking of profit. The localised smallholder farming model that is central to food sovereignty's alternative food system, and which, by continuing to be widespread throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America, might be thought of as an 'incubator' of food sovereignty, cannot be abstracted from capitalist social relations, which are defined by relations of exploitation between capital and classes of labour.¹³ Smallholder farming is currently subordinated, through a range of mechanisms under the corporate food regime, to capitalist social property relations.¹⁴ Thus, and as its transformational proponents clearly recognise, food sovereignty is not about trying to reconfigure

the existing social conditions and relations of capitalism; it requires transcending the social conditions and relations of capitalism and developing a post-capitalist agrarian – and non-agrarian – alternative. Thus food sovereignty is about building power within the fissures of capitalist social-property relations, in order to transform food systems in favour of peasants, smallholders, fishers, food system workers and underserved communities. That this is the case is not recognised by progressive and reformist strands within global food movements, despite their use of the phrase ‘food sovereignty’.

Food sovereignty is thus an objective which must continue to be sought, by popular mobilisation and struggle, by practice and by dialogic popular learning.¹⁵ In this light it is worth asking: what is the path of change mapped out by transformational food sovereignty movements? Leaving to one side, for now, the role of praxis and teaching, there are two avenues deployed by transformational food sovereignty movements in their struggles:

- (1) Mobilising against the policies and institutions hostile to the interests of peasants, farmers and workers, in order to propel change. To this end transformational food sovereignty organisations wage ongoing campaigns against land grabbing, transgenic organisms, agrofuels, the violation of the human rights of peasants, international food trade and aid governance, and the poor living standards of rural workers, and in support of agrarian reform, gender justice, improved terms and conditions of rural employment, action to mitigate climate change, indigenous rights, indigenous knowledge, improved rural nutrition, seed sharing and conservation, fisherfolk rights, and the UN Human Rights Commission draft declaration on the human rights of peasants.
- (2) Negotiating with state institutions and international development organisations when it is believed that possible policy changes might be brought about through such collaboration. It was through this kind of process, for example, that food sovereignty was noted in the Final Declaration of the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 2006,¹⁶ following which the phrase started turning up in FAO documents. The clear overlap in the interests and objectives of transformational food sovereignty movements and the Office of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has also resulted in the phrase becoming more common in UN documents, particularly around indigenous rights.¹⁷ Finally, transformational food sovereignty movements have been strongly engaged with the heavily reformed Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which is a collaborative venture of the FAO, the IFAD, and the WFP but which has significant input from global civil society organisations, including transformational food sovereignty organisations.

However, I would argue that in these struggles and engagements there is only a partial elaboration of what kind of specific changes would bring about an acceleration of pathways toward food sovereignty. It might be argued that the inability to define a wider range of specific changes that they favour reduces the ability of transformational food sovereignty movements to reshape the perspective of the progressive and reformist strands of global food movements, because

it reflects an inability to identify the possible pathways by which societies can move into a more just future.

Pathways to food sovereignty

Another food system is possible. Indeed, given the role of the corporate food regime in accelerating climate change, the construction of an alternative food system is an urgent necessity.¹⁸ Moreover, given the changes that have been wrought by neoliberal globalisation in the past quarter century, significant changes to the food system can probably be built within a comparatively short period of time – say, a generation. The question, though, is *how* can movement towards food sovereignty be accelerated? In what follows, I elaborate eight pathways towards food sovereignty.

Agrarian reform

The starting point in constructing accelerated pathways to food sovereignty must be the explicit policy change that is espoused by transformational food sovereignty movements: pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform.¹⁹ A ‘stylised fact’ of development is that at a global level the distribution of land and other rural resources is either the result of the thievery that was imperialism or of the glaring inequalities produced by market imperatives as capitalism was introduced into the countryside of developing capitalist countries by imperialist powers.²⁰ Granted, this stylised fact does not hold in all places and all spaces; but as a general statement it holds true in 2015. Pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform is defined as a redistribution of land and other rural resources from the resource-rich to the resource-poor, such that the resource-poor are net beneficiaries of the reform and the resource-rich are net losers from the reform.²¹ Pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform may involve a plurality of social-property relations, including private and collective forms of property. Pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform directly addresses the historical injustices by which farmers have lost their access to land over the past 150 years,²² fundamentally tempers some of the glaring inequalities generated by market imperatives,²³ meets a basic precondition of how the rurally marginalised can begin to improve their livelihoods and thus address global poverty,²⁴ and creates the basis by which human rights can be realised and social and economic conditions transformed in a pro-poor direction.²⁵ Indeed, it is for these reasons that transformational food sovereignty movements consistently propose that pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform is an urgent necessity for petty commodity producers around the world.

Moreover, a glaring aspect of development is that the foundation of structural transformation in East Asia was pro-poor redistributive agrarian reform, which brought forth the incentives to maximise agricultural production among the very poorest strata of society, who did so in order to create the preconditions of a better life for their families.²⁶ Granted, pro-poor redistributive agrarian reform in East Asia did not create food sovereignty; nonetheless, it did construct the juridical mechanisms needed to maintain the smallholder farming that is

central to food sovereignty. At the same time it is important to emphasise that in East Asia pro-poor redistributive agrarian reform was about far more than land. Land reform, in the absence of a raft of additional measures that facilitate the capacity of petty commodity producers to increase their production, productivity and incomes, will not be beneficial to them, because they also need access to inputs at prices that they can afford, access to farm machinery, electricity and water at prices they can afford, credit at the right time and at the right price, and access to markets that pay prices that reflect their costs of production and not the prices that are set in global markets. Thus, pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform requires extra supportive measures needed for farmers to improve the well-being of their families.²⁷

Restricting land markets

While transformational food sovereignty movements are correct in advocating the need for pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform, a second necessary condition is required if pathways towards food sovereignty are to be accelerated. Pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive land and agrarian reform does not guarantee that the livelihoods of the rurally marginalised will improve. It does not do so because, following a reform, rural populations will continue to confront the reality of the market imperative, which requires that in the commodity economy of capitalism food providers must sell their products at competitive market prices if they are going to remain in business.²⁸ Market imperatives shape the operation of and the returns generated in local, regional, national and international markets. This in turn means that producers must continue to strive to be market-competitive, which requires continually striving to lower costs of production, which in turn requires that revenues from sales be directed towards investing in techniques and technologies that continually enhance market competitiveness. Not all producers will be able to meet the logic of the market imperative; indeed, this is a structural characteristic of capitalism. Those that are capable of meeting the market imperative will accumulate, while those that fail to meet the logic of the market imperative will turn to waged labour and to distress sales to meet short-term cash needs and then, later, to asset sales, including land. Eventually the market imperative differentiates producers into those who accumulate, innovate and expand and those who lose their assets and eventually have to rely upon selling their labour power for a wage in order to survive in the capitalist economy.

This has a critical implication for the outcome of pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive land and agrarian reform: such reform provides a foundation for those who successfully meet the market imperative to acquire more land and other rural resources by using their accumulated surpluses to buy up the land and other rural resources of their neighbours who are consistently in deficit.²⁹ In other words, pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive land and agrarian reform establishes the conditions by which land and other rural resources are later redistributed from the less successful to the more successful, and in so doing the pro-poor, and in all likelihood the gender-responsive, aspirations of the agrarian reform are negated. This means, in turn, that a successful pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform requires restricting the market imperative

– most importantly, restricting land markets. Most centrally this would involve putting enforced legal restrictions on land transfers to ensure that agricultural holdings remained within a specified size distribution. Such restrictions are a central explanation of the East Asian development experience.³⁰ It would also be necessary to place enforced legal restrictions on the enclosure of common lands, which many smallholders rely upon to construct a viable livelihood. Cumulatively, while these restrictions would not de-commodify land, they would have an effect on the prices and quantities prevailing in land markets, as well as stabilising access to common property resources. This is a necessary condition of a successful pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform, one which needs to be more forcefully articulated by practitioners of food sovereignty.

Three points need to be made about restricting land markets. The first is that the restriction of land markets is common in capitalist economies. Cadastral surveys define how land can and cannot be used, and there are limitations on the ease with which land defined for one purpose can be used for another. So, although restrictions on land markets may appear to be a radical departure from the tenets of neoliberal capitalism, such is not actually the case. The second point is that restrictions on land markets will require the intervention of a power capable of countervailing the strength of rural landed classes, and for better or worse that power must be the state – a point to which I will return later. Third, restrictions on land markets raise the question: what would be the incentive for those farmers who successfully meet the market imperative and are capable of sustained accumulation, innovation and expansion? Here, state fiscal incentives need to be created to push relatively more successful farmers into non-farm activities in order to continue to accumulate during the transition to a new food system. As was the case in parts of East Asia, when relatively more successful farmers are given economic incentives to diversify so as to sustain accumulation, diversification usually involves in the first instance the processing of agricultural output, which is more profitable than farming.³¹ As successful farmers diversify, their need over time for their land diminishes and, while many successful rural enterprises continue to hold onto land for reasons of social protection and social status, the amount of land they hold on to is reduced as they continue to accumulate. This creates additional land availability for those who are not so successful, so that they can more fully utilise their available labour and non-labour resources to increase production and productivity. In this way, restricting land markets while providing the supportive measures necessary for smallholder farming to succeed can result in the emergence of livelihood-enhancing farm and non-farm economies sitting side-by-side in the countryside, a more prosperous rural economy that facilitates a reduction in rural poverty. While not underestimating the challenges facing the development of this kind of policy framework, these are not insurmountable, as this process has been witnessed in some cases of successful late industrialisation in East Asia.³²

Agricultural surpluses

Restricting land markets can, in a sense, reduce the commodification of land and in so doing force more productive farmers into following other paths of

accumulation. However, the key objective of land market restrictions is to facilitate increased agricultural surpluses among the more marginalised in the countryside rather than the relatively more prosperous. As is well known, farming has the capacity to produce more than those working in farming need to live and keep working; such 'agricultural surpluses' are the foundation of improvements in well-being.³³ A key objective of transformational food sovereignty movements, then, is the creation of a rural development framework that facilitates sustained increases in agricultural surpluses and manages them not on the basis of market demand, subsidies and dumping but on the basis of need, through supply management. Historically, of course, during the latter half of the 20th century the development frameworks that sought to sustain increases in agricultural surpluses were the technological traps of the Green and gene revolutions.³⁴ These must be forsaken in the quest for sustained increases in agricultural surpluses, and in favour of sustainable pro-poor, gender-responsive biotechnological change.

Sustainable pro-poor, gender-responsive biotechnological change is predicated upon maintaining rural environmental and natural resources.³⁵ The sustenance of soil integrity, the use of appropriate quantities of water at the appropriate time, seed sovereignty, sustainable cropping choices and patterns, and local and appropriate fertiliser, pest management and farm equipment technologies – all are central to sustainable biotechnological change in order to boost production, productivity, agricultural surpluses and incomes.³⁶ Where resources are degraded, sustainable pro-poor, gender-responsive biotechnological change requires the restoration of those environmental and natural resources. In order to do this, indigenous knowledge needs to be shared, particularly through farmer-to-farmer networks, as has been done across Central America, East Africa and Brazil.³⁷ A necessary correlate of sustainable pro-poor, gender-responsive biotechnological change in agriculture is the reassertion of agricultural research and extension as a public, not private, good, an end to the privatisation of agricultural research and extension, and the re-establishment of publicly funded and disseminated agricultural research and extension not directed towards the rurally prosperous, as was the case in the past, but instead towards meeting the livelihood challenges of the rurally marginalised.³⁸

Agroecological farming

A critical part of meeting the livelihood challenges of the rurally marginalised is to facilitate the deepening and widening of agroecological farming practices, as is recognised by transformational food sovereignty movements.³⁹ This requires optimising the sustainable use of low-impact local resources and minimising the use of high-impact external farm technologies.⁴⁰ A correlate of such an agrarian strategy is that farm input and output choices, as well as local diets, need to be based, as they have been for all but the past century or so, far more on local ecologies, landscapes and ecosystems than on the needs of distant external markets.⁴¹

The benefits of an agroecological rural development strategy are several. First, agroecological practices are far more employment-intensive than industrial agricultural practices, and as such meet a key challenge of the twenty-first

century: creating jobs.⁴² These may not be the kinds of jobs that people would prefer to take, but for the underemployed relative surplus population such jobs are a vital part of the process by which their livelihoods are improved. As the East Asian case demonstrates, labour-intensive agriculture increases production and productivity as structural transformation occurs, and this would be an important part of an agrarian transition propelled by food sovereignty.⁴³ Moreover, even in the developed capitalist countries there are many who, if farming provided a living wage, would opt to attempt to farm out of choice. This is particularly so among younger people, seeking the autonomy of a sustainable lifestyle that farming has the potential to provide. Second, agroecological practices sustain soils and micronutrients and in so doing not only maintain the integrity of the soil but sustain and indeed improve its productive potential. This is of critical importance, because built into an agroecological rural development strategy must be the ongoing effort not only to sustain but in fact to increase crop yields by paying far closer attention to ecological requirements, input requirements, output choices and labour needs.⁴⁴ One of the foundational myths of the corporate food regime is that industrial agriculture is required to feed the ever-growing population of the world.⁴⁵ However, this is a myth. Granted, agroecological practices as they are currently constituted are not the dominant form of farm production around the world. However, copious scientific research worldwide indicates that agroecological production has the capacity to be as productive and profitable as industrial agriculture; indeed, once inter-temporal environmental impacts are included in the assessment of the costs and benefits of alternative farm production systems, agroecological production has the capacity to be more productive and profitable than industrial agriculture, while at the same time being more labour-intensive.⁴⁶ For example, it has recently been estimated that if world consumption of meat were halved the caloric 'savings' to food balance sheets would allow two billion people to be fed.⁴⁷ Agroecology, as a production system, is far more attuned to a nutrition-led farm production system than a market-led farm production system. As such it has the potential to supply the world, including those who are currently systemically food insecure, with a nutritious diet that not only generates jobs but also has far less impact on climate than the current industrial agriculture model. In other words, from the perspective of sustainable human well-being, labour-intensive, high-productivity agroecological production is a necessary component of twenty-first-century agriculture.

Local food systems

A shift to agroecological production systems brings with it an important correlate widely articulated by transformational food sovereignty movements: the need to build gender-responsive local food businesses, economies and systems.⁴⁸ For all but the past 150 years food systems have been local; while international trade in grain predates Roman times, the large-scale, long-distance movement of food has always constituted a small fraction of global production and as such control of trade was a foundation of empire.⁴⁹ The benefits of more localised food systems are several. For a start, historically, healthy local food systems are superior when it comes to distributing food to those most in need; localised

mechanisms of social reciprocity that are central to moral economies ensure that, barring the impact of nature, members of a community are in receipt of a minimum standard of living, including access to food.⁵⁰ In this way healthy local food systems are far better at ensuring the health of communities – even communities riven by socioeconomic and political inequalities.⁵¹ Healthy local food systems are also more resilient in the face of unforeseeable shocks, in that they are better at ensuring both that food is distributed to those in need of it and that production quickly returns to pre-shock levels.⁵² Finally, local food systems have far less impact on the climate and are thus far more sustainable than food systems that rely upon the large-scale, long-distance movement of food.⁵³

Having said this, the local should not be reified. Local food systems are sites of class, gender and racialised privilege, among others and, as a consequence, should not be viewed by definition as more equitable or more environmentally just. Rather, the issue is that local food systems that operate in conjunction with and reflect local landscapes,⁵⁴ because of both their relatively more manageable scale and the greater scope for localised action, are optimal sites upon which to accelerate progress toward a more just food sovereign system.

The state as a contested space

If the conditions necessary for constructing pathways that accelerate progress towards food sovereignty so far elaborated are relatively clear, they bring with them a condition that, in an era of neoliberal globalisation, may seem fanciful. Pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive agrarian reform, restrictions on land markets, the fostering of sustainable gender-responsive biotechnological change and agroecological farming practices, and the resurrection of gender-responsive local food systems all require the intervention of a power capable of challenging capital and capitalism. Those conditions necessary to build food sovereignty involve heavy doses of new forms of regulation, interventions in the operation of ‘free’ markets, and challenges to the prevailing capitalist order. The power to undertake this range of interventions remains, for better or worse, the state.⁵⁵ While changes in the food system may be initiated from within communities and social movements, as is currently the case, such changes cannot be generalised without the involvement of a state that responds to the assertion of popular economic sovereignty by managing markets to the extent needed to tame capitalist impulses.

While the need for pro-poor, gender-responsive state intervention to transform the food system might be clear, the possibility of such an occurrence may appear to be wishful thinking. However, despite the origins, evolution and stark realities of the modern capitalist state, the state need not be treated as the exclusive tool of capital. Around the world the state is a contested space with which advocates of the marginalised and the marginalised themselves engage in an effort to transform it.⁵⁶ Indeed, this is recognised by transformational food sovereignty movements on those occasions when they negotiate with states that purport to be advancing food sovereignty; they are not seeking to get the state ‘on side’, but rather to transform the state, recognising that such a change is a process. Transformational food sovereignty movements must continue to engage with the state, both from within, to make claims on the state and initiate social,

political and economic changes from within, as well as from without, to enforce claims that are made on the state and to ensure that there is no backtracking from any positive social, political and economic changes initiated.⁵⁷ One key avenue of engagement for transformational food sovereignty movements should be to campaign from within and without the state to improve the social wage, in terms of well-being, income, health, education and access to opportunities in the countryside, as part of a set of poverty-elimination policies. In poor urban areas the aim is to facilitate the capacity of consumers to pay more for their food.

Moreover, engaging with the state facilitates the capacity of food sovereignty activists to learn how to transform it. However ineffective it has been to date, the inclusion of food sovereignty in the constitutions of Ecuador, Bolivia, Mali and elsewhere is a response to intense engagement by transformational food sovereignty movements. In addition, the revival of the CFS is an outcome of engaging with states – the revival would not have taken place without the pressure of transformational food sovereignty movements working with sympathetic state representatives and sympathetic representatives within the UN system. Finally, while transformational food sovereignty movements are, in general, less adept at working with municipal and regional states, particularly in the North, they could significantly enhance their capacities by learning from elements within some of the progressive food movements that do work with municipal, regional and state-level governments to improve the operation of local markets, protect food system workers' rights, render affordable the terms and conditions by which land can be accessed, and commence the labelling of genetically modified organisms. In turn, these progressive food movements can learn from transformational food sovereignty movements about how effective organisation can improve the ability to express agency, as well as the structural features of the capitalist food system.⁵⁸ In this way, within the interstices of the progressive elements of global food movements the practice of food sovereignty could become more firmly embedded.

Of course, in dealing with the state there is an eminent need for caution. Yet the postwar social democratic state demonstrated the extent to which the state can be pressured into making redistributive historic compromises that significantly improve livelihood security.⁵⁹ In an era of neoliberal globalisation this lesson cannot be forgotten; a minimalist objective of transformational food sovereignty movements should be, first, the re-establishment of the public sphere as a step in the reconstruction of a redistributive state, in order to facilitate more fundamental transformations of state structures and power. This kind of 'radical pragmatism' will for many be a highly contentious assertion,⁶⁰ but in the messy reality of the present the construction of real utopias requires working within the interstices of the present in order to forge a future. Indeed, this is what many in global food movements currently do.

When engaging with and seeking to transform the state, transformational food sovereignty movements need to be acutely aware of the level at which they are engaging: in cases where the state is subject to periodic elections it is more likely that claims can be made and changes initiated at the local level than at the regional or national level, if for no other reason than the fact that, in most instances, for voters electoral politics are primarily local. Indeed, one important if imperfect outcome to emerge from engaging with the state for progressive

food movements – the establishment of food policy councils – has been a direct consequence of a focus on the local.⁶¹ Granted, local states are more subject to class capture.⁶² However, it is far more likely that a radical yet incremental act, such as the labelling of transgenic organisms, will be accomplished in a small US state or Chinese province, or indeed a mid-sized US or Chinese city, than in the country as a whole, as a first step. Yet that first step is of vital importance, both for its demonstration effects on neighbouring jurisdictions and for the effect that such a step would have on corporate behaviour, concerned as it is with maintaining access to markets.

Global trade

The requirement that transformational food sovereignty movements press for the reconstruction of a redistributive state is because for movement towards food sovereignty to be accelerated there is a need for a more interventionist state to initiate efforts to restructure global trade relations. It remains the case that the WTO, by regulating global agriculture, overseeing regional and bilateral free trade agreements, managing the trade-related investment measures that facilitate land grabbing, and in other areas, remains the most powerful global institution. In its activities, and as is rightly emphasised by food sovereigntists, the WTO is inherently neoliberal, promoting the ever-broadening and deepening of global capitalism through its principal agent, the TNC.⁶³ Therefore transformational food sovereignty movements have argued that agriculture should be removed from the purview of the WTO, in order to reduce the role of agro-food TNCs in the world food system. However, removing agriculture from the WTO does nothing to establish the kind of global trading arrangements that would facilitate acceleration towards food sovereignty. It would instead allow global markets to continue to operate in ways that benefit global TNCs.

A central demand of transformational food sovereignty movements must therefore go beyond limiting the role of TNCs by seeking to restrict the ‘freedom’ of global markets, so as to tame global market imperatives. This requires not so much the abolition of intervention in global markets as new forms of intervention that are more comprehensive – broader and deeper. The purpose of deeper intervention in global markets should be to reorient the purpose of trade away from the neoliberal objective of increased profitability and towards the more human-focused objective of improvements in well-being. In other words, the re-regulation of global markets should be done in order to transform food into what economists call a ‘public good’: something which is available to all and from which no one can be excluded.⁶⁴ Public goods are not immutable but are constructed through the struggles of citizens, including transformational food movements, which seek to disestablish the role of markets in social provisioning.⁶⁵ Thus, the transformation of food into a public good would go a significant way towards de-commodifying food and re-establishing the Polanyian idea that markets should be embedded in society rather than societies being embedded in markets.⁶⁶

In order to re-regulate global trade towards meeting public needs, a pro-poor, gender-responsive state must lead efforts to replace the WTO with an International Trade Organization (ITO), as originally envisaged by John May-

nard Keynes and Harry Dexter White. In the conception of Keynes and Dexter White, global trading arrangements following World War II were to be organised – and that is the word, organised – by the IMF, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Clearing Union and the ITO, under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. The ITO was to be an institution that would facilitate economic and social progress by managing international trade cooperation between countries. This was to be achieved by:

- governing markets and stabilising prices through tariffs, quotas, subsidies, the treatment of skills and technology as global public goods, the management of commodity trade, the management of foreign direct investment and the explicit prohibition of dumping;

in order to speed progress towards

- full employment rooted in socially-acceptable labour standards, enhanced value-added, improved wages and working conditions, and ensuring the viability of small-scale producers.⁶⁷

Thus, and in line with the demands of transformational food sovereignty movements, the ITO would have sought to protect small-scale producers by globally managing the supply of food and agricultural products and, in so doing, the incomes of small-scale producers.⁶⁸

The governing of global markets should be an explicit objective of transformational food sovereignty movements; indeed, I would argue that the construction of an ITO is a necessary condition of achieving food sovereignty. Yet transformational food sovereignty movements cannot construct an ITO; this can only be accomplished by a consortium of pro-poor, gender-responsive states committed to improvements in human security through employment generation, labour-intensive, high-productivity production, and access to public goods and social provisioning as a precondition of enhancing human well-being.

A new ‘common sense’

Clearly, none of the aforementioned measures will come about without pressure from global civil society on the state and on the international development and financial institutions. Thus, as in all politics, for global food sovereignty to reshape the food system depends on the current relation of forces between these elements and the dominant power of capital. Here the terrain is tipped against what are currently diverse and divergent movements of food providers and food consumers, and in favour of corporate interests and capital, with substantial support from the neoliberal capitalist state.

The strength of the forces of capital lay, in the domain of food, in the ability of capital’s ‘organic intellectuals’ to define ‘common sense’: ‘a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions’,⁶⁹ a set of attitudes, moral views and empirical beliefs reflecting an individual’s concrete experiences in society but lacking consistency or cohesion. Capital’s organic intellectuals – ‘the thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class...distinguished...by

their...function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong,⁷⁰ – negotiate individual subjectivity by welding together ‘dispersed wills’ into a shared awareness and meaning, from which emerges consent for class power because the ideologies which arise from the mediation of experience ‘have a validity that is “psychological”’.⁷¹ Thus sustained reiterations become accepted as truths: that the world cannot feed itself without industrial agriculture, that industrial agriculture requires transgenic organisms, that private property is sacrosanct, that localised food systems and petty commodity producers are relics of pre-modernity, and that the entry of capital into the food system has increased availability, ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’.

However, it is clear that, if attention is focused ‘violently’ on the ‘discipline of the conjuncture’, and thus focused on understanding what is specific and different about the present,⁷² neoliberal globalisation and the establishment of the corporate food regime has already produced something new: the call for food sovereignty and the forging of global movements for it. So transformational food sovereignty movements and their organic intellectuals need to do what they have already been doing for more than a decade: use praxis and learning to relentlessly contest contemporary ‘common sense’ across a range of arenas in social life in an effort to construct a new ‘common sense’ that configures different subjects, identities, projects and aspirations, building unity out of difference. Thus, as Eric Holt-Giménez notes,⁷³ transformational food sovereignty movements must reshape the ‘common sense’ of those other, progressive and reformist, elements of global food movements, with different and contrasting ideological perspectives on capitalist development and thus different agendas. Transformational food sovereignty movements must seek inclusively to find common ground with progressive and reformist food movements, ‘building the moral and intellectual hegemony necessary for...a broad social consensus’ that welds together dispersed wills into a new ‘hegemonic bloc’ around food.⁷⁴

One central aspect of food makes this project eminently feasible: the fact that food cuts across the narrowly defined and socially constructed identities that have undermined class-based politics in the past half-century. As everyone on the planet is a food consumer, food has the potential to facilitate the development of a new, globally recognised, inclusive universal subject if it is articulated in unique and specific ways.

The groundwork for the construction of a new, inclusive ‘common sense’ around food has already been established: transformational food sovereignty movements have been a leader in fostering concern, of admittedly differing degrees, among food consumers about the circumstances facing food providers, whether they be the ‘family farmers’ of Northern agrarian populism or the ‘peasants’ and ‘workers’ of places ‘out there’. At the same time food providers are often aware that food consumers are sympathetic to the straightened material circumstances they face. The issue, then, is to find more common ground between the food system’s producers and consumers and the global food movement’s producers and consumers.

Here, it would appear that transformational food sovereignty movements need to further elaborate two clear aspects of the corporate food regime that can be turned into sources of a stronger claim for change. The first is that the temperate industrial grain–oilseed–livestock agro-food complex of the corporate

food regime is centrally implicated in climate change and ecological degradation.⁷⁵ Food–climate and food–ecological degradation links need to be relentlessly emphasised by transformational food sovereignty movements when arguing that a new food system must be a source of climate restoration rather than climate degradation. Sharply intervening in the ongoing evaluations and deliberations of the extremely visible Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is but one example of a way of inserting food more prominently into efforts to achieve climate justice, bringing out the linkages needed to give wider traction to the idea and practice of food sovereignty than is currently the case.

Second, it needs to be emphasised that food not only transcends the narrowly defined, socially constructed identities of the corporate food regime but is centrally implicated in the glaring livelihood inequalities that define the current conjuncture. Thus there are food–class linkages. This may not appear obvious, especially to food consumers. While petty commodity producers continue to be widely found in developing capitalist countries, it is often argued that food and agriculture occupies a minor place in the employment pattern of the developed capitalist countries. However, consider this: while in 2006, of an employed labour force of almost 17 million in Canada, only 2.2% were directly working in agriculture, work in the corporate food regime is not in farming: it is primarily in service-sector jobs – restaurants, bars and caterers; corner stores and supermarkets; and wholesale food trade. This has interesting implications for those who are involved in transformational food sovereignty movements: the numbers of people who are employed in jobs related to the plethora of activities that are part and parcel of the corporate food regime are not directly known.

If the numbers of those employed within the food system were directly estimated, it would be established that there is in fact a shared interest between petty commodity producers in developing capitalist countries and workers in developed capitalist countries. Thus, aggregating industrial classifications that can be directly linked to the food system in the 2006 Canadian census demonstrates that 13.8% of all employed Canadians were employed in a food system-related activity in that year.⁷⁶ It needs to be said that this is a dramatic understatement of the actual number of those whose livelihoods depend upon the food system: it does not include educators, researchers, government civil servants, financiers, or logistics operators, among others, who might be employed in a food system-related activity. It is significant that many of those who can be counted under the current classifications as working within the food system are not unionised and work in lower-wage jobs, while many of those who cannot be counted under current classifications but are in fact working within the food system are unionised and are working in better-paid jobs. The implication is clear: under the corporate food regime food is a critical livelihood issue for far more people than food providers. So the character of the corporate food regime must become a central concern for classes of labour in both the South and the North; there is a shared livelihood issue rooted in the inequalities promulgated by the corporate food regime, and this needs to be a key dimension in trying to construct a new ‘common sense’ around food among a broad democratic alliance of citizens united for change. Sharply intervening in the ongoing activities of organised labour, from the perspective of establishing collective bargaining units within business sectors, and negotiating over both the terms and conditions

of employment and health and safety, is but one example of a way of inserting food more prominently into debates around economic justice. So too would be intellectual and organisational efforts to demonstrate that what are perceived to be the mutually incompatible demands of workers, farmers and consumers operating in different food system activities are in fact a set of shared interests. It is by bringing out the livelihood linkages between those who work in different parts of the food system within which they are enmeshed as consumers that wider traction for the idea and practice of food sovereignty than is currently the case can be constructed.

Towards food sovereignty

The objective of transformational global movements for food sovereignty is a livelihood-enhancing, climate-friendly food system that does not exclude anyone from food because it is available to all as a fundamental human right. This article has discussed a number of pathways that could accelerate movement towards food sovereignty. The foundation would be pro-poor, gender-responsive redistributive land reform, accompanied by extensive restrictions on land markets and the promotion of surplus-generating agroecological farming directed towards localised food systems. The reconstruction of a redistributive state is necessary to this, as a means of restricting local and global land, labour and product markets, as well as providing public goods and access to adequate forms of social provisioning. Cumulatively food sovereignty requires challenging the class power that is expressed in and through the corporate food regime by constructing a broad democratic alliance of peasants, smallholders, fishers, indigenous peoples, urban workers and underserved food communities prepared to confront the power of capital in the food system by fostering alternative modes of organising production and consumption in ways that contain elements of de-commodification and the re-regulation of markets on the basis of public need. The foundation of such a challenge must be the construction of a new common sense around food production and food consumption, which would elaborate shared identities and common interests, and thus allow agrarian and non-agrarian citizens to fully claim their individual and collective rights by establishing notions of democracy rooted in democratic economies, social and ecological justice, and the need for harmony between humans and nature.

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Notes

1. McMichael, *Food Regimes*.
2. Weis, *The Ecological Hoofprint*.
3. Akram-Lodhi and Kay, "Surveying the Agrarian Question."
4. Akram-Lodhi, "Contextualising Land Grabbing."
5. Akram-Lodhi, "Land, Markets and Neoliberal Enclosure."
6. Akram-Lodhi, *Hungry for Change*.
7. International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, "Définition de la souveraineté alimentaire."
8. These five principles have been paraphrased from the original six at the suggestion of a reviewer.
9. This paragraph is derived from Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, "Food Crises," 114.
10. Holt-Giménez, "Food Security?"
11. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, "Food Crises," 114.
12. This paragraph is a consequence of a comment from one of the reviewers.
13. Bernstein, *Class Dynamics*.
14. Akram-Lodhi and Kay, "Surveying the Agrarian Question."
15. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
16. Food and Agriculture Organisation, "Final Declaration."
17. de Schutter, "From Food Security to Food Sovereignty."
18. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group II, "Chapter 7."
19. The reference to pro-poor redistributive agrarian reform being gender-responsive is only implicit in the written statements of the transformational food sovereignty movement, but is explicit in its practice.
20. Akram-Lodhi et al., *Land, Labour and Livelihoods*.
21. Borras, "Redistributive Reform?"
22. Borras, "Questioning Market-led Agrarian Reform."
23. Wood, "Peasants."
24. World Bank, *World Development Report 2008*.
25. James, *Gaining Ground?*
26. Studwell, *How Asia Works*.
27. Borras, "Can Redistributive Reform be Achieved?"
28. Wood, "Peasants and the Market Imperative."
29. Akram-Lodhi, *Hungry for Change*.
30. Studwell, *How Asia Works*.
31. Ibid.
32. Kay, "Why East Asia overtook Latin America."
33. Ghatak and Ingersent, *Agriculture and Economic Development*.
34. Buckland, *Ploughing up the Farm*.
35. Carrillo, *Technology and the Environment*.
36. Pretty, *Agri-Culture*.
37. Holt-Giménez, *Campesino a Campesino*; Wilson, "Irrepressibly towards Food Sovereignty"; and Peterson et al., "Institutionalization of the Agroecological Approach."
38. Wolf and Zilberman, "Public Science."
39. Altieri, "Agroecology."
40. Altieri, *Agroecology*.
41. Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*.
42. McKay, *A Socially-inclusive Pathway to Food Security*.
43. Studwell, *How Asia Works*.
44. Altieri, *Agroecology*.
45. Conway, *One Billion Hungry*.
46. International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, *Agriculture at a Crossroads*.
47. Cassidy et al., "Redefining Agricultural Yields."
48. Patel, *Stuffed and Starved*.
49. Fraser and Rimas, *Empires of Food*.
50. Scott, *The Moral Economy*.
51. Ó Gráda, *Famine*; and Allen, "Realising Justice."
52. Fraser et al., "A Framework."
53. Erickson, "Conceptualising Food Systems."
54. Barber, *The Third Plate*.
55. Magdoff et al., *Hungry for Profit*.
56. Borras, "State-Society Relations."
57. IPPC Working Group II, "Chapter 7."
58. This paragraph has benefited from the comments of an anonymous reviewer.
59. Jessop, *State Power*.
60. Akram-Lodhi et al., *Globalization*.

61. Roberts, *The No-nonsense Guide*.
62. Mungiu-Pippidi, "Reinventing the Peasants."
63. Rosset, *Food is Different*.
64. Saul and Curtis, *The Stop*; and Akram-Lodhi, *Hungry for Change*.
65. Wuyts, "Deprivation and Public Need."
66. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*.
67. George, "Alternative Finances."
68. Shaw, *World Food Security*.
69. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 422.
70. Hoare, "Introduction," 3.
71. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 377.
72. Hall, "Gramsci and Us."
73. Holt-Giménez, *Food Movements Unite!*
74. Akram-Lodhi, "Peasants and Hegemony."
75. IPCC Working Group II, "Chapter 7."
76. Akram-Lodhi, "Who is Working?"

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