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**To cite this article:** Ben McKay, Ryan Nehring & Marygold Walsh-Dilley (2014) The 'state' of food sovereignty in Latin America: political projects and alternative pathways in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41:6, 1175-1200, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2014.964217](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.964217)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.964217>



Published online: 30 Sep 2014.



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## The ‘state’ of food sovereignty in Latin America: political projects and alternative pathways in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia

Ben McKay, Ryan Nehring and Marygold Walsh-Dilley

The concept of food sovereignty has been enshrined in the constitutions of a number of countries around the world without any clear consensus around what state-sponsored ‘food sovereignty’ might entail. At the forefront of this movement are the countries of the so-called ‘pink tide’ of Latin America – chiefly Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia. This paper examines how state commitments to food sovereignty have been put into practice in these three countries, asking if and how efforts by the state contribute to significant transformation or if they simply serve the political purposes of elites. Understanding the state as a complex arena of class struggle, we suggest that state efforts around food sovereignty open up new political spaces in an ongoing struggle around control over food systems at different scales. Embedded in food sovereignty is a contradictory notion of sovereignty, requiring simultaneously a strong developmentalist state and the redistribution of power to facilitate direct control over food systems in ways that may threaten the state. State-society relations, particularly across scales, are therefore a central problematic of food sovereignty projects.

**Keywords:** the state; food sovereignty; state-society relations; Venezuela; Ecuador; Bolivia

### Introduction

While its origins can be traced back to the early 1980s (Edelman 2014), the concept of food sovereignty most commonly deployed by social movements today emerged in a 1996 declaration presented by La Via Campesina at the World Food Summit of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome. In this document, food sovereignty is defined as ‘the right of each *nation* to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity’ (Via Campesina 1996, emphasis added). This notion echoes earlier conceptions of food sovereignty used in Mexico to imply ‘national control over diverse aspects of the food chain, thus reducing dependency on foreign capital and imports of basic foods, inputs, and technologies’ (Heath 1985, 115, quoted in Edelman 2014, 6). In good part, Via Campesina’s 1996 declaration was motivated by the failure of the World Trade Organization’s 1995 Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) to adequately address the issue of agricultural subsidies in the United States and Europe, and in

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An early version of this paper was presented at the Yale Conference on Food Sovereignty, and benefited from the comments received there. The authors would also like to acknowledge the editors of this special collection, chiefly Saturnino M. Borras Jr., and three anonymous reviewers as well as Sara Keene and Stalin Herrera, who provided helpful comments and constructive criticism. Authors are listed in alphabetical order.

particular the flooding of developing country markets with heavily subsidized agricultural goods. Rather than solve the subsidy issue, the AoA had the effect of institutionalizing the disparity between the two agricultural powerhouses (the United States and the European Union) and the rest of the world (Bello 2005, 38). This agreement marked a turning point in the assault on small-scale agriculture, particularly in the developing world, and Via Campesina's declaration was issued in response to this failure.

Just five years later, in a 2001 Declaration on Food Sovereignty, Via Campesina redefined the concept as

the right of *peoples* to define their own agriculture and food policies, to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives, to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant, and to restrict the dumping of products in their markets. (Via Campesina 2001, emphasis added)

A similar definition is found in the 2007 International Forum on Food Sovereignty, which defines food sovereignty as 'the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems' (Nyéléni 2007). These definitions emphasize direct, even 'local', control over food production and consumption. Here, food sovereignty is understood as a set of commitments leading to a food system that (1) provides sufficient, healthy, nutritious and culturally- and locally-appropriate food for all; (2) values and supports food providers, with a particular focus on small-scale family farmers, peasants etc.; (3) localizes the food system; (4) localizes control over and access to land resources; (5) values and contributes to local knowledge and skills; and (6) works with nature, with a focus on agroecological production (Nyéléni 2007).

This subtle change in the scale and location of sovereignty – from the national to the local and from the accrual of sovereignty in the hands of the nation-state to those of 'peoples' – marks an important definitional shift in mobilizing food sovereignty as a tool for political change. At the same time, food sovereignty has been taken up at the national level by a number of countries, which have written the concept into their constitutions as a guaranteed right. In Latin America, the constitutional inclusion of food sovereignty emerged in the context of a political shift to the left – the so-called 'pink tide' – that has united social movements protesting against the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s with progressive governments that are more responsive to public demands. That is, food sovereignty is being brought into the state precisely as many Latin American states become more explicitly linked to civil society groups and movements.

These overlapping shifts, both definitional and constitutional, raise important questions and tensions, not least about the role of the state in generating and supporting food sovereignty within its national borders. In what ways does food sovereignty as a concept and a practice call upon and mobilize – or reject – the state? And how do state-level interventions in the name of food sovereignty intersect with and/or contradict the goals of social movement proponents and the 'local peoples' that food sovereignty is ultimately intended to serve? These questions become particularly important in a context of 'distinct national, provincial, regional and cultural concerns in terms of community identity and subjectivity, and relationships to political and institutional authority', meaning that 'food sovereignty doesn't map tidily onto a national, or even provincial, scale' (Desmarais and Wittman 2014, 16). At the same time, however, visions of food sovereignty outlined in the Nyéléni Declaration and elsewhere require institutional, infrastructural and legal support and protections, which will rely at least to some degree on state involvement.

In this paper, we interrogate the ‘state’ of food sovereignty through a comparative analysis of the three countries in Latin America where food sovereignty has been enshrined as a constitutionally guaranteed right: Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia. We rely principally on secondary sources, archival documents such as newspapers and legal documents, and, to a smaller degree, on the experiences of the authors living, working and conducting qualitative fieldwork in each of the three countries. We outline the political processes through which constitutional, legal and policy measures were adopted, how food sovereignty was conceived in this process and to what degree food sovereignty objectives were achieved. We focus on state-society interactions, and ask how efforts by the state contribute to transformative aspirations or if they simply serve the political purposes of elites. The case studies presented here are necessarily (for space and comparative considerations) drawn in broad strokes, but nonetheless we find such a comparison helpful for addressing this question of how the state fits into food sovereignty aspirations.

Food sovereignty cannot be conceived of as a finite outcome; it is a political space and terrain of struggle around control over food systems. As such, state efforts around food sovereignty open up new political spaces in this ongoing contest. To unpack the transformative potential of such state-led food sovereignty efforts, we draw from Edelman’s (2014) work that asks ‘who is the sovereign in food sovereignty’, and add as well a question about against whom or what this sovereignty is exercised. We suggest that state engagement in food sovereignty projects – and how well they are able to achieve their own stated goals or contribute to transformative reform – depends in large part on how the state interprets these questions.

Struggles around *food* sovereignty are struggles over *sovereignty* (i.e. self-determination, see Clark 2013; Mesner 2013) at different scales. Sovereignty in this context simultaneously accrues to both state and communities (broadly defined). Clearly, food sovereignty at the regional or community level depends in large part on the sovereignty of the state. But the accrual of sovereignty at sub-national scales does not necessarily complement state sovereignty, and may be seen as a threat to it. Embedded in food sovereignty, then, is a contradictory notion of sovereignty – a contradiction that has the potential to create significant tensions as states pursue national food sovereignty frameworks and policies. State-society relations, particularly across scales, are therefore a central problematic of food sovereignty projects.

The state cannot ‘stand alone’ on food sovereignty, but neither can ‘local’ communities, groups or people. If food sovereignty is to be about the ability of ‘local’ peoples to have a say in defining, managing and controlling their own food and agricultural systems, then state efforts to support food sovereignty must involve some degree of structural reform to distribute power in ways that facilitate such local autonomy. State efforts around food sovereignty thus depend on the nature of state-society interaction and the ability of reformists to engage in symbiotic, mutually empowering relationships (see Fox 1993; Borras 2007). But this shifting distribution of power is necessarily shot through with conflicts and tensions, as actors across the state-society terrain interpret food sovereignty goals differently and place them against other priorities.

In Venezuela, the inclusion of food sovereignty in the national constitution has been accompanied by significant structural changes in governance systems, most notably with the decentralization of governance into community hands. This process has allowed greater local control over food and other systems, ultimately contributing to the sovereignty of *local* communities vis-à-vis the Venezuelan national state as well as foreign capital or political interests. In Bolivia, food sovereignty has been taken up by the state as part of a de-colonial project in ways that assert Bolivian state control over food systems vis-à-vis

foreign governments and international institutions. While a central element in this process is the rhetorical elevation of indigenous models of community, thus far there has been relatively little devolution of this control to the regional or community level. Indeed, the state in Bolivia is critiqued for failing to bring structural changes to the extractivist and dis-equalizing models that have guided rural development in the country thus far, relying instead on consolidating power and state-led redistribution of mineral wealth to historically excluded populations. Finally, in Ecuador, food sovereignty has been mobilized neither as part of a radical shift in governance that gives local spaces more power, nor as part of a sovereignty project vis-à-vis foreign powers, but rather as a state consolidation project to simplify, and ultimately adjudicate between, different visions of food sovereignty.

These cases demonstrate how the food sovereignty concept is used by state actors in particular ways to support their own strategies and goals. Not all of these strategies have the same potential for transformative change of the sort promoted by the rural and peasant movements that make up La Via Campesina. Indeed, the political project of the Bolivian state and the simplification strategies of the Correa administration in Ecuador have arguably done little to support such goals. Food sovereignty in these contexts has been used to galvanize consent and popular support, with state actors co-opting or consolidating food sovereignty as their own in ways that result in state-society power dynamics that significantly favour the former. In this context, food sovereignty becomes little more than a legitimating discourse (Kerssen 2013) and/or, as in Ecuador, is simplified and standardized (see Scott 1998) in ways that transform food sovereignty into ‘one-size-fits-all’, manageable projects.

Among the cases examined here – the three countries that have a constitutional guarantee of food sovereignty for their citizens – only in Venezuela are these nominal rights accompanied by partial structural changes that contribute to empowering people at the local level to have greater control over their own food production and consumption. This has been achieved through a radical re-envisioning of the locus of governance, creating and supporting community-level structures that put political power in the hands of the people in a new way.<sup>1</sup> This strategy is transforming relations around access to resources and decision-making control in favour of participatory institutions in communities, resulting in a symbiotic relationship between state and society that contributes to institutional reform and empowers local producers and consumers (see Fox 1993, 2005 for general background discussion).

### The ‘state’ of food sovereignty

Food sovereignty is, unlike other popular concepts aimed at enabling stable access to food, ‘essentially a political concept’ (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, 15), and the state is necessarily part of the food sovereignty process. Nonetheless, Bernstein (2014) calls the relationship between state and society ‘the elephant in the room of the programmatic aspirations of Food Sovereignty’ (24). There is no consensus about what effective state action would look like or what policies effectively support food sovereignty – though this question has certainly generated debate (Rosset 2003; Rosset 2008; McMichael 2008; Patel 2009; Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010). But as Schiavoni (2014a, 2) reminds us, ‘the state has often been a *facilitator* of many of the very policies and structures that the food

<sup>1</sup>This, however, is not a point of consensus among observers and researchers. See Kappeler (2013) for a very different take and argument on the Venezuelan case.

sovereignty movement seeks to dismantle, from land grabs to free trade agreements', complicating the question of what role the state might take in support of food sovereignty goals. Supportive state policies might include: protection against dumping, trade and speculation in agriculture; supply management; floor prices; marketing boards; agrarian reform; farmer-owned food inventories; hoarding controls; a moratorium on agrofuels; a shift to agroecology; and state-directed food provisioning (Rosset 2008; McMichael 2014). The food sovereignty goals of localizing and domesticating trade and maintaining limited farm sizes will similarly require strong regulatory controls (Edelman 2014, 17). While such policies might facilitate spaces for building food sovereignty, they require a radical political transformation (Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011) that is much easier said than done. Further, there is the distinct potential that such 'food sovereignty' policies actually strengthen the state vis-à-vis food sovereignty advocates or local communities (Edelman 2014).

This raises a central tension regarding the possibilities for state action in supporting food sovereignty: food sovereignty requires a simultaneous 'developmentalist' state and a redistribution of power to facilitate direct control over food systems in ways that may threaten the state. If food sovereignty necessarily involves the 'right to self-determination, for communities to redefine for themselves the substance of the food relations appropriate to their geographies' (Patel and McMichael 2004, 249), how might food sovereignty be defined, led, controlled, or implemented by the state? Indeed, this implies what Patel and McMichael (2004, 249) call a 'contradictory understanding of rights' with the state as guarantor but not author of food sovereignty rights.

The concept of food sovereignty entails a reformulation of the formal, Westphalian vision of the sovereignty of nation-states (McMichael 2009), while at the same time calling upon it. Indeed, it seems to rely upon 'multiple sovereignties' (McMichael 2009), which may in turn be harmonious or competing. How can you have a powerful notion of food sovereignty at the level of the nation state, particularly in the context of plurinationality like in Bolivia and Ecuador, when different groups (peoples, nations or communities) have divergent ideas about what food sovereignty means and looks like in practice? Food sovereignty involves, as McMichael writes in this collection (2014; see also McMichael 2012), a form of strategic essentialism that calls upon the idea of sovereignty to claim juridical ground in the short run, but, in forcing a rethinking of the locus of sovereignty, it also has the potential to reformulate the meaning of sovereignty itself in the long run. The actual forms and visions for food sovereignty are quite diverse and its meaning has an elasticity as it is taken up by groups (including states) beyond its roots in the countryside (McMichael 2014, see also Hospes 2014; Edelman 2014). These visions of what food sovereignty looks like are sometimes corresponding or approximate enough to be brought together, but are just as likely (as the Ecuador case discussed below demonstrates) to be too dissimilar. This multiplicity of forms indicates that a one-size-fits-all pathway to food sovereignty is impossible. Indeed, framing food sovereignty as an objective and achievable outcome unproductively reifies what is essentially a terrain of contestation, a political space and project – complicating our questions as to the role of the state in building and supporting food sovereignty.

The state is understood here an arena of complex, strategic relations between political and social spheres (Gramsci 1971; Poulantzas 1978; Jessop 2007). That is, we do not conceive of the state as a monolithic entity, but rather a contested system of social relations. The possibility of reform is influenced by the degree of autonomy and capacity of pro-reform state and societal actors and the nature of their interaction (see Fox 1993). That is, reformers must be both free to form and pursue goals independently (autonomously) as well as able to get people 'to do what they want them to' (Migdal 188, xi). Distinguishing between these



two dimensions of power is important because they are both necessary in order for reforms to be implemented. For example, state or societal actors may have the autonomy to pursue a food sovereignty agenda, but lack the capacity to implement such reforms, or vice-versa. In both instances, it is unlikely that a pro-poor reform will be carried out (Borras 2007, 70). However, these two relational dimensions of power – autonomy and capacity – are not pre-determined or unchanging; they are shaped and reshaped by actors in both the state and society. Strategic interaction between pro-reform state and societal actors can mutually reinforce reform agendas and alter degrees of autonomy and capacity.

Nominal rights to food sovereignty potentially open up spaces for the pursuit of a transformative agenda, but are not sufficient. A transformative agenda requires both the rights and the pro-empowerment institutional reforms that make these rights meaningful. Fox notes (2005, 7) that

Institutions may nominally recognize rights that actors, because of imbalances in power relations, are not able to exercise in practice. Conversely, actors may be empowered in the sense of having the experience and capacity to exercise rights, while lacking institutionally recognized opportunities to do so.

Our task is to examine the ways in which state frameworks for food sovereignty in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia are accompanied by institutional reforms which empower non-state actors to define the substance of their food-related institutions and capacities. Understanding that there are variations within pro-reform (interested in structural change in support of food sovereignty goals) and anti-reform (attempting to block such changes) groups within both state and society, the challenge is to create environments in which pro-reformists within the state and society can enact mutually reinforcing agendas (Fox 1993; Borras 2007). However, this is no easy task, as it requires a continuity of perceived shared interests from reformists both ‘above’ and ‘below’ (see Fox 2005). Indeed, this must be an ongoing project, as ‘anti-reform forces attempt to block the reform process through their own state-society alliances’ (Borras 2007, 279). The alignment of reformist goals and strategies across levels benefits from the inclusion of intended beneficiaries in the design, implementation and resource allocation for reform agendas (Fox and Gershman 2000; Fox 2005). Hence the importance of state-society interaction around food sovereignty or other empowerment reforms.

### **Food sovereignty in Latin America: three cases**

The election of leftist leaders in Latin America signified a new regional shift in anti-US imperialism and the reintroduction of the state into development planning and policy. Notably, the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998 defied the Monroe doctrine and historical precedent of maintaining US interests within Latin American capitals. After the turn of the last decade, the elections of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay and Luis Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva in Brazil (among others) represented a significant defiant bloc united around a reinvigorated civil society and anti-imperialist discourse (Cockcroft 2006). At the same time, increased transnational ties between rural social movements helped bring agrarian concerns to the national and international political stage (Borras et al. 2008).

In Venezuela (1999), Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009), new constitutions were adopted as part of this turn to the left, and a ‘new Andean Constitutionalism’ emerged (Schilling-Vacaflor 2011). While these governments nationalized key industries,

strengthening their control of the economy, they also increased social spending, created legislation aimed to increase participation and representation, and adopted measures to increase the fulfillment of human rights – including the right to food sovereignty. There is still doubt as to whether these measures signify an alternative to free market principles or a ‘bending and moulding’ of existing political and economic structures that is more ‘pro-regulation’ than ‘anti-capitalist’ (Arditi 2008; Panizza 2005). In the following section, we critically review each country’s insertion of food sovereignty into its constitution and their subsequent policies and programmes. We examine the tensions around the various forms of sovereignty, paying particular attention to how state-society interactions have developed around state-level food sovereignty efforts. Since the pursuit of food sovereignty ultimately requires changing the relations of access to and control over food and agricultural systems (from decision-making to productive resources), it is imperative that food sovereignty strategies are approached in a relational way – changing ‘social relations of production and reproduction, of property and power’ (Bernstein et al. 1992, 24).

## Venezuela

### Background

After a failed coup attempt in 1992, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chavez continued a movement ‘from below’ against years of social and economic exploitation by elite classes, before spending two years in prison. Declining socio-economic conditions amongst the middle and lower classes created a conducive environment for a dramatic transformative change. From 1979 to 1999, real per capita income declined by 27 percent – the worst in the region – while poverty increased from 17 percent in 1980 to 65 percent in 1996 (Wilpert 2007, 13). In 1998, Chavez was elected as President with 56 percent of the vote, marking the start of a political, social and economic transformation. Approving a new Constitution in 1999, President Hugo Chavez consolidated state power, while simultaneously opening up spaces to facilitate decentralized participatory democratic processes at the local level through social ‘*Misiones*’ and Communal Councils. While these reforms are intended to be redistributive and empower the marginalized, the highly contentious and conflicting ‘dual power’ that persists within and between state and societal forces has produced uneven, inconsistent and contested outcomes (Enriquez 2013, also see Kappeler 2013). This dual power is characterized by the co-existence of class powers which frequently exert conflicting influences over the state apparatus, presenting both opportunities and barriers to food sovereignty and other reformist agendas. When reformists within the state engage with like-minded societal actors in a mutually reinforcing way, pro-poor reformist agendas like food sovereignty can be realized (see Schiavoni 2014b).

Although Venezuela’s Organic Law of Agro-food Security and Sovereignty was only approved in 2008, elements of food sovereignty were enshrined in its 1999 Constitution, specifically in Articles 305, 306 and 307. The 1999 Constitution was written by a constitutional assembly comprising 24 members elected nationally, three indigenous representatives and 104 elected representatives from their respective states (Wilpert 2003). ‘Chavistas’ represented 95% of the total representatives, and within six months the new constitution was subjected to a national vote where 71.8 percent approved, with an abstention rate of 55.6 percent (Wilpert 2003). Venezuela’s 2008 Law, however, is a comprehensive 143-page document covering many key principles inherent in a food sovereignty concept (Gaceta Oficial 2008). Instead of outlining a few specific programmes, Venezuela has a variety of complementary initiatives that seek to build a pathway



towards food sovereignty. Despite being a major net importer of food based on a history of urban-biased industrialization policies and an extremely high rate of urbanization, Venezuela has demonstrated significant structural reforms that distribute power in ways that support self-determination of food systems.

One element of Venezuela's food sovereignty strategy has been its state-led redistributive agrarian reform programme (see McKay 2011; Enríquez 2013 for the details of this programme). This programme encompasses a multitude of complementary programmes and policies for credit (FONDAS,<sup>2</sup> INDER,<sup>3</sup> BAV<sup>4</sup>), technical assistance (INTI,<sup>5</sup> CIARA,<sup>6</sup> FONDAS, *Misión Ché Guevara*, Cuban-Venezuela Agreement for agro-technical expertise), agroecology (INIA,<sup>7</sup> INSAI,<sup>8</sup> Cuba-Venezuela Agreement), infrastructure development (INDER), marketing (CVAL,<sup>9</sup> MERCAL<sup>10</sup>), and even a government agency established to defend the rights of agrarian reform beneficiaries for legal disputes free of charge (Enríquez 2013). This programme is oriented towards improving access to land, food and markets.

*Access to land.* In 2001, *Misión Zamora* was established under the Land Law with the following key objectives: set limits on the size of landholdings; tax unused property as an incentive to spur agricultural growth; redistribute state-owned land to peasant families and cooperatives; and lastly, as of 2005, to expropriate/recover fallow/illegally-held land from the private sector for the purpose of redistribution (DeLong 2005). While in 2001 land subject to expropriation was defined as 'only high-quality idle agricultural land of over 100 hectares or lower quality idle agricultural land of over 5000 hectares (*latifundia*)' (Wilpert 2007, 111), as of 2010, *latifundia* is defined as being 'a piece of land that is larger than the average in its region or is not producing at 80 percent of its productive capacity' (Suggett 2010). This agrarian reform programme is designed to dismantle the *latifundia* and reinvigorate the countryside with more equitable resource distribution. From 2001 to 2010, over 5.5 million hectares of arable land has been 'recovered', benefitting over 1 million people (Wilpert 2011; Enríquez 2013, 622). While this radical reform programme has not gone uncontested by capitalist elites within and outside the state, the most recent modification integrates rural workers into implementing the reform themselves by giving ownership to those working (renting) land and thus incorporating a 'land to the tiller' element in the Land Law (Enríquez 2013, 631). This modification cedes a certain degree of responsibility and political power to rural workers to hold state and societal actors accountable to reformist measures, therefore interacting with efforts by pro-reform state actors in a mutually reinforcing way (see Fox 1993).

*Access to food and markets.* Under the Ministry of Food, *Misión Mercal* was established as a state-run food company, initially to combat the food shortages that plagued the country during the corporate lock-out in December 2002. *Misión Mercal* is a chain of

<sup>2</sup>Development Fund for Socialist Agriculture.

<sup>3</sup>Rural Development Institute.

<sup>4</sup>Agricultural Bank of Venezuela.

<sup>5</sup>National Land Institute.

<sup>6</sup>Foundation for Training and Innovation for Rural Development.

<sup>7</sup>National Institute of Agricultural Research.

<sup>8</sup>National Institute of Integral Agricultural Health.

<sup>9</sup>Venezuelan Food Corporation.

<sup>10</sup>Mercados de Alimentos.

government-subsidized grocery stores that sell food at prices ‘roughly 39 percent below traditional supermarkets’ (Isaacs et al. 2009). The Mercals, along with PDVAL,<sup>11</sup> are distribution links of the state-run intermediary chain which provide low-income Venezuelans with food staples at affordable rates. Large storage spaces, distribution centres and transportation networks have also been set up to combat food speculation, hoarding and sabotage (Isaacs et al. 2009). In 2010, there were 16,600 Mercals nationwide, employing roughly 85,000 workers (Smith 2010). In addition to Mercals, the Mission has set up 6075 *Casas de Alimentación*, or food banks, which provide free meals to roughly 900,000 people in need (Schiavoni and Camacaro 2009). Mercals account for roughly 20–30 percent of total food sales in Venezuela, with roughly two-thirds of the population visiting the stores regularly (Government of Canada 2011).

Despite these notable successes, including being recognized by the FAO as one of the 16 countries to reach the 1996 World Food Summit’s goal of halving the total number of their undernourished, processes of agrarian transformation in Venezuela are not without problems (FAO 2013). Kappeler, for example, highlights the struggles in incentivizing urbanites to move to the countryside and notes the many failures when urbanites with ‘little practical experience in the field of agriculture’ resettled to work on rural cooperatives (2013, 6). Kappeler also points to the contradictory processes that exist with Venezuela’s agro-industrial state enterprises and the food sovereignty agenda. Despite replacing the *latifundia* in many parts of the country, Kappeler argues that these state enterprises have ‘not reduced divisions of labor in the agriculture sector (as many supporters of food sovereignty suggest is required), but replaced one set of tensions with another’ (2013, 12). While one could argue that eliminating private capital’s control over a country’s food and agricultural systems could be a first step towards a food sovereignty process, Kappeler rightly points out the unevenness and inconsistencies related to Venezuela’s current food sovereignty agenda.

While these efforts towards improving access to land, food and markets are often held up as the principal state mechanisms supporting food sovereignty in Venezuela (e.g. Kappeler 2013), we suggest that a third arena, the Communal Councils, provides the most significant space for empowerment and social transformation around food systems (see also Marcano 2009; Schiavoni 2014b). Indeed, it is in the Communal Councils that we can see the most significant structural reforms, as well as the creation of spaces for sovereignty at smaller scales.

#### *Sovereignty of whom relative to what?*

One central element of Venezuela’s food sovereignty strategy is its Communal Councils, which are designed to foster a high degree of empowerment, participatory spaces and decentralized decision-making. Communal Councils began forming in 2005 and were officially recognized in 2006 with the Law of Communal Councils, which was reformed in 2009. Communal Councils are locally run organizations which enable people to exercise community governance and directly manage their own self-defined development needs over a self-defined geographic space.<sup>12</sup> The latest government figures indicate that there are 41,783 Communal Councils registered to date, each of which consists of between 150 and 400 families in urban areas, a minimum of 20 families in rural areas and at least 10 families in indigenous

<sup>11</sup>Productora y Distribuidora Venezolana de Alimentos.

<sup>12</sup>Communal Councils are not defined geographically by municipal boundaries.

zones (MPComunas 2014). Through a participatory decision-making process, all members of a community over the age of 15 can participate in the citizens' assembly, which is the council's principal decision-making body. Development plans and specific projects are put forward and voted on by the citizens' assembly who also elect representatives for two-year periods to work in a variety of committees which focus on issues such as health, education, natural resource management, finance, social control and monitoring, among others. Once approved by the assembly, financing from the government and state-funded foundations is transferred to the council's finance commission, bypassing any regional, provincial or municipal organs. Further, these councils are now combining in their respective geographic areas to create 'Socialist Communes'. As of the time of writing, 612 communes have been officially registered, which collectively integrate their local Communal Council initiatives to cover larger social and geographic scales over longer periods of time (MPComunas 2014). These systems of self-management are intended to empower the formerly excluded classes in political processes, enhancing local social capital and 'the capacity of the poor to network and organize collectively' (Petras and Veltmeyer 2006, 84).

According to Venezuelan school teacher and community organizer Jesus Rojas – who is also a member of the planning committee for his Communal Council in Rio Tocuyo, Lara, Venezuela – the 'formation of Communal Councils and Socialist Communes are constantly growing and are playing the most important role in local community empowerment and the revolutionary process' (interview, 10 August 2013). As a member of the planning committee, Rojas explained how the 14 Communal Councils in his region have officially registered as a Socialist Commune and are in the process of implementing larger-scale projects including expanding and improving infrastructure, electricity, water access and sewage systems, but also providing agricultural inputs and technical assistance for farmers, and expanding '*los centros acopios*' (collection centres) where farmers can sell their crops and receive a better price than the market alternative. This is one part of the state-owned Venezuelan Agricultural Corporation's initiative that procures crops from farmers and distributes them to several socialist food markets. Farmers are therefore more able to control their own production needs and directly take charge of their own situation in terms of inputs, production and access to markets. For small farmers, one of the most important components of this process is that 'they are free from the exploitative private intermediaries who used to reap all the profits and take advantage of both producers and consumer' (interview, Jesus Rojas, 10 August 2013).

While Communal Councils and Communes are dependent on financial resources from the state, they represent a new organ and space which work in parallel with traditional municipal and state-level government structures. This type of arrangement exemplifies the multiple dimensions of sovereignty across scales and the dynamic state-society relationship which uses 'state power at one level to sustain activities at another plane' (Iles and Montenegro 2013, 9). Communal Councils and their extended networks of Socialist Communes are therefore characteristic of a polycentric system wherein constituting elements act independently yet are capable of ordering relationships to each other (Ostrom 1972). As long as the state continues to guarantee the rights and autonomy of the Communal Councils and Socialist Communes to define, manage and control their own local and regional development needs, this kind of polycentric system may be a model for 'building new institutional conduits' for food sovereignty (Iles and Montenegro 2013, 9).

At the same time, decision-making within Communal Councils can be tense and contested, and struggles over diverging interests mean that councils are also an arena of debate and contestation. Forms of class struggle therefore play out during Communal Council and Socialist Commune assemblies as societal actors with diverse interests negotiate the community's development needs in a participatory way. While we cannot assume that food sovereignty is being

advanced in all of the Communal Councils, this type of participatory democratic decision-making and degree of local sovereignty over development processes by the community promote the types of political spaces that food sovereignty movements seek to engender.

### *Lessons from Venezuela*

The process of transformation in Venezuela is certainly not without its flaws as deeply entrenched class conflicts continue and a 'dual power' endures (Enriquez 2013). However, the continued expansion of Communal Councils, Socialist Communes and redistributive agrarian reform programme is shifting power and autonomy to organized communities and creating dynamic spaces for new forms of state-society collaboration. An important aspect of this process is that it is not just based on investment injection or socio-economic protection. Public spaces for political participation are being created through Communal Councils, which allow newly empowered pro-reformists within society to engage and make demands to the state. Further, the agrarian reform programme, though uneven and inconsistent in certain places, is reshaping rural power relations through direct resource-based transfers of wealth. These pro-poor initiatives are leading to empowering environments which enable people to not only fulfil their rights, but push for further reforms. The combination of reforms which have facilitated spaces of interaction between pro-reform state and societal actors and zero-sum resource-based transfers of wealth have led to forms of empowerment and, despite tensions and inconsistencies, are creating conditions for a transition to food sovereignty.<sup>13</sup>

### *Ecuador*

#### *Background*

The election of Rafael Correa in 2006 was built on his campaign of a Citizen's Revolution (*Revolución Cuidania*) that promised, among other things, a redrafting of the constitution in order to redefine national development objectives and citizenship rights. His populist rise followed decades of rural neglect and limited political participation of peasant and indigenous peoples. Following widespread privatization and economic liberalization in the mid-1990s, rural organizations launched massive protests that put them, and their demands, on the national political agenda. In his first year in office, Correa promised a constituent assembly to incorporate citizen participation in rewriting the constitution which was widely supported through a public referendum. The referendum was also a democratic means to elect the constituent assembly itself, of which 80 out of 130 members were from Correa's party (*Movimiento Alianza Pais*) (Conaghan 2008). As the constitution was rewritten through this assembly, one of the strongest demands from social movements and civil society was for the constitutional right to food sovereignty and agrarian reform (Fernández and Puente 2012).

The new constitution was ratified and signed into law on 28 September 2008. In it, food sovereignty and agrarian reform are principally addressed in Chapter IV, which defines food sovereignty as 'a strategic objective and an obligation of the *state* that persons, communities, peoples and nations achieve self-sufficiency with respect to healthy and culturally appropriate food on a permanent basis' (Asamblea Nacional 2008, emphasis added). The 14

<sup>13</sup>These new spaces developed during the Chávez era. How and the extent to which they continue to evolve in the post-Chávez period remains an open-ended question as a shift in the 'dual power' of the state and extreme class conflict in society could roll back these important spaces.

'responsibilities of the state' include the adoption of fiscal policies to prevent reliance on food imports; redistributive policies that permit peasants access to land, water and other productive resources; development of scientific research and technological innovation to guarantee food sovereignty; and the development and regulation of biotechnology, among others (see Asamblea Nacional 2008, 138–9).

The explicit responsibilities of the state listed in the constitution are articulated into policy initiatives through the National Plan of Good Living (*Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir*) (SEN-PLADES 2009) and the Food Sovereignty Law (LORSA). This national development plan establishes a more definitive 'call to action' by proposing a framework that outlines the government's objectives for ensuring all citizens a right to good living and their constitutional promises. The term Good Living (*Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay*) is intended to reflect an indigenous worldview of how to organize society around the community, environment and living within socially determined needs (see Gudynas 2011; Flor 2013). What is particularly interesting about the inclusion of the concept of Good Living in the constitution is that it has enabled a shared political discourse of resource nationalization to integrate the interests of indigenous social movements, peasant organizations and the Ecuadorian state. One of the ways this has been translated in state policies is through the LORSA, which intends to bridge the interests of civil society with the state in the implementation of the constitutional mandate for food sovereignty and Good Living development objectives.

*Land redistribution.* Issues of land use and distribution are central to the way the new constitution addresses food sovereignty. Immediately following the discussion of food sovereignty, the constitution states that 'the state will determine the use and access to land that should fulfill a social and environmental function' (Article 282, 138). However, despite the imperative for land redistribution in the new constitution and the continued calls for peasant-led agrarian reform, little progress on policies and programmes that significantly influence the distribution of land has been made (Giunta 2013).

The primary mechanism oriented towards land distribution is the National Land Fund, which is intended to 'regulate the equitable access of land for peasants' (Article 282, 138). However, while the newly drafted constitution identifies the state as the principal arbiter of the distribution of land, it does little to elaborate how agrarian reform can and should take place. In other words, there is no mention of what actors should be involved and what lands are to be (re)distributed. The same article also prohibits the existence of *latifundia* and the hoarding or privatization of water and its sources, but does not elaborate on how lands would be expropriated (Giunta 2013).

The country's post-2008 agrarian reform (Land Plan – *Plan Tierras*) was designed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Aquaculture and Fisheries (MAGAP) with several ambitious and misleading promises on expropriating *latifundia* and redistributing land (both state-owned and expropriations). Publically, MAGAP has said it plans to transfer 2.5 million hectares to landless peasants through offering state land and expropriating private and unused land. However, estimates of land in the hands of the state vary, both by top government officials, and data in the Land Plan itself, from 69,000 hectares to 200,000 hectares (Peralta 2011, 44). Around 1 million hectares were supposed to be purchased through the Land Fund; however, these promises have not been fulfilled (the Land Plan ended in 2013). The latest budget evaluation in 2010 showed that only USD 4 million went to land redistribution despite an original proposition of USD 10 million (Herrera et al. 2010). The plan also calls for a budget of USD 38 million over four years to carry out the reform. As of March 2013, out of the over 2 million hectares promised to peasants, the state has only distributed 25,000 hectares (MAGAP 2013).

Despite the lack of comprehensive agrarian reform, the government has implemented what it calls an ‘Agrarian Revolution’ that utilizes a territorial strategy of increasing federal resources for agrarian schools and incentivizing farmer organization. A number of programs and policies complement this strategy by seeking to expand market access by farmers and their organizations through expanded social spending. However, even these programs have been subject to scrutiny as federal funding levels have been grossly unequal between different regions. While overall spending in agriculture has almost doubled under Correa, his home province of Manabí received 71 percent of all agricultural funds from 2005 to 2009 (Herrera et al. 2010).

Historically, MAGAP has been a political arm of Ecuador’s *latifundia*, and large private interests continue to have a strong influence. These anti-reform actors have constrained the potential for any structural change through agrarian reform efforts despite public commitments of the president and his political allies. Indeed, MAGAP’s failure regarding agrarian reform comes after decades of unfulfilled promises to peasant and indigenous agriculturalists (Yashar 2005). Thus, even though agrarian reform and food sovereignty is presented as a goal of the state, there is little to show that MAGAP will substantially change in order to put these goals into practice (Clark 2013). Even the most recently appointed minister of MAGAP said, in May of 2011, that ‘peasants should have no illusions regarding the management [of MAGAP] and that a center-right institution is aiming to increase the productivity and competitiveness of Ecuadorian agriculture in the global market’ (Rosero et al. 2011). Overall, the Ecuadorian constitution fell short of translating the discursive power of food sovereignty as an ongoing and contested political arena into substantive political and economic change through agrarian reform.

### *Sovereignty of whom relative to what?*

One of the key tensions with regards to food sovereignty in national politics in Ecuador is that there are many civil society actors in Ecuador demanding food sovereignty and agrarian reform. These groups have divergent conceptions of sovereignty and appropriate land use, and vary in their approach to negotiate with state bureaucrats and bureaucracies (Yashar 2005, 72, 138–40). Indigenous groups have played an important role in particular, having gained significant political strength and contributed to Correa’s electoral success (Becker 2011a, 2011b). Some of the most prominent organizations that have contributed to communicating demands to the constituent assembly have been: CONAIE,<sup>14</sup> FENOCIN,<sup>15</sup> FEINE,<sup>16</sup> CONFEUNASSC-CNC<sup>17</sup> and Ecuarunari.<sup>18</sup> These movements presented their long list of demands to the assembly, which included explicit objectives

<sup>14</sup>National Indigenous Confederation of Ecuador (*Confederación Nacional de Indígenas del Ecuador* – CONAIE) is a confederation that includes some of the organizations also involved in the constituent assembly (i.e. Ecuariunari).

<sup>15</sup>National Federation of Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peasants of Ecuador (*Federación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas e Negras del Ecuador*).

<sup>16</sup>Ecuadorian Federation of Indigenous Evangelicals (*Federación Nacional de Indígenas Evangelicas*).

<sup>17</sup>National Affiliated Confederation of Peasant Social Security – National Peasant Coordination (*Confederación Nacional de Afiliados al Seguro Social Campesino – Coordinadora Nacional Campesina*).

<sup>18</sup>National Confederation of the Quichua Community (*Confederación de los Pueblos de Nacionalidad de Kichua del Ecuador*).



for food sovereignty (see CONAIE 2007 and FENOCIN, n.d.),<sup>19</sup> and called on the state to play a central role by nationalizing natural resources, supporting small-scale agriculture through policy initiatives, and redistributing land. The organization of the constituent assembly was divided into several groups with specific tasks to coordinate and integrate the various demands of civil society into the constitution. The sixth assembly took up food sovereignty and agrarian issues and was specifically tasked with listening to indigenous and peasant organizations. This assembly was where issues of sovereignty – both in terms of food sovereignty and the sovereignty of indigenous nations – were raised and contested. The various organizations included in this assembly used different strategies for including their members and representing their voices to the assembly. For example, while CONAIE sought to unify more generally around broad ‘themes’ of food sovereignty and insisted on weekly discussions with the assembly, FENOCIN was fixed on land reform and made demands in a more unidirectional manner (Rosero et al. 2011). Beyond these divergent strategies, the organizations also had different understandings of what ‘nation’ meant and how and to what degree ‘sovereignty’ was based on collective nation building independent of the state (in the context of plurinationality). These organizations differed racially, geographically, demographically, economically and culturally, but were ultimately required to negotiate and agree upon a coherent national conception of food sovereignty.

From November 2007 until January 2008, the sixth assembly established a ‘citizens’ forum’ throughout numerous towns and cities across Ecuador that resulted in around 250 proposals for food sovereignty and other agrarian issues. Two prominent academics from Correa’s party analysed the proposals and drafted a synthesized report that was presented to the assembly (Rosero 2008). After this report passed with a majority vote in the assembly, a meeting was held with leaders of peasant organizations and social movements to validate the results. During this meeting, there were significant disagreements over the understandings of what food sovereignty meant for each organization – what was described as ‘putting personal interests [of the organizations] over that of the collective good of the Ecuadorian people’ (Andrango 2008 cited in Rosero et al. 2011). When the organizations finally arrived at an agreement (what is called the ‘Consensus of Quito’), many concessions had been made in order to approve a final plan for the assembly. Conceptually, they all agreed that food sovereignty and its policies were the right of communities but should be executed through state policies. Agrarian reform, and the expropriation of ‘unproductive or unused lands’, was demanded but met with resistance within the assembly, which informed civil society leaders that such a reform would be dealt with through legal measures and carried out by MAGAP (Herrera et al. 2010; Rosero et al. 2011). Thus, while the Constituent Assembly opened up a novel space of democratic engagement around food sovereignty, the execution of the resulting vision was left in the hands of the same old structures and bureaucracy. As described above, the execution of the food sovereignty vision from the constitution was ultimately unsuccessful. The necessity to produce a single government document in a short amount of time was undoubtedly a problematic task for civil society. As a result of these conditions and concessions, a strong alliance did not form between these organizations and the pro-reform members of the constituent assembly.

<sup>19</sup>CONAIE’s proposal can be read here: <http://www.icee.org.ec/publicaciones/INDIGENA/ConaieAsamblea.pdf>;

FENOCIN’S proposal can be read here: <http://www.fenocin.org/>.

*Lessons from Ecuador*

While the constituent assembly opened the opportunity for both state and societal actors to participate in the rethinking of national development priorities, the structural transformations of society and the economy as envisioned in the constitution have yet to be realized. Many indigenous organizations and peasant movements have since withdrawn support from the Correa government, with CONAIE's president even calling his administration 'capitalist and neoliberal', as early as 2009 (El Universal 2009). While the constitution should be celebrated as a significant victory for citizens' rights to food sovereignty, the guarantor of those rights will need to revisit longstanding demands for structural change to fulfil its constitutional duties.

Rather than facilitating spaces for communities to construct and define their own food systems, constitutional food sovereignty in Ecuador relies almost exclusively on the state as sovereign rather than any kind of mutually empowering state-society synergy. In other words, '[t]he shift in state-society relations in Ecuador has largely strengthened the power of the state vis-à-vis civil society' (Clark 2013, 26). Though the food sovereignty concept provided a means through which social movements and peasant organizations could make demands for reform, state-level food sovereignty efforts failed to change existing relations of production and power (see Giunta 2013). In this context, food sovereignty was viewed as potential mechanism of agrarian reform, rather than as an end in itself. A critical obstacle was that redistributive agrarian reform did not materialize, in large part due to political contestations within the state apparatus (i.e. MAGAP). Nevertheless, the process of rewriting the constitution did open up what Deborah Yashar (2005, 29) calls 'political associational space', or the ability for organizations to dialogue and 'engage in sustained legal organizing'. Yet this political moment failed to produce a coherent and compelling enough vision to ensure the restructuring of political and economic resources in the country. The historical and ongoing constraints of government bureaucracies erected insurmountable structural barriers that prevented the radical redistribution of power and material resources. That is, in this case the state had the autonomy to establish constitutional goals around food sovereignty that were quite radical, but pro-reform state and societal actors lacked the capacity, or strong 'social networks', to take advantage of the political opportunity and transform these goals into the kind of change that significantly alter food systems in ways that support food sovereignty (see Yashar 2005, 79).

**Bolivia***Background*

Bolivia's military dictatorships in the 1970s and early 1980s, followed by the onset of neoliberal policies through the structural adjustment programme's 'New Economic Policy' (NEP) in 1985, dismantled public services and exposed vulnerable rural livelihoods to foreign competition and capital accumulation. This was compounded by what Kohl and Farthing call a 'perfect economic storm' consisting of:

the inability of two successive governments to generate jobs and significant economic growth; an aggressive coca eradication programme that destroyed the regional economy of Cochabamba; the collapse of the Argentine economy, eliminating Bolivia's largest labour market and, as important, terminating workers' remittances; and the decline in government revenue occasioned by privatization of the state oil company. (Kohl and Farthing 2006, 149)

The privatization of the state-owned water company SEMAPA (*Servicio Municipal de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado*) and the resulting ‘Cochabamba Water War’ (Olivera and Lewis 2004), combined with massive protests by Bolivia’s largest union of peasants, CSUTCB<sup>20</sup> and a general strike called by Bolivia’s Worker’s Confederation (COB), reflected the general discontent among the Bolivian middle and lower classes. This led to a tumultuous three years of clashes between protesters and the state, including violent military repressions of protests and the death of over 60 protesters, and ultimately, the overthrow of two Bolivian presidents. The 2005 election saw the clear victory of Evo Morales, leader of the coca growers’ union and a central figure in negotiating the transition of power from former President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada and his Vice-President turned President Carlos Mesa. This launched a new era in Bolivian politics, led by Morales’ party, the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), which was closely linked to the emergent indigenous, anti-colonial and populist social movements that had come together in opposition to the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s and beyond. This broad coalition of peasant, worker and indigenous organizations came to form the *Pacto de Unidad* (Unity Pact) which was essential in Morales’ rise to power and became integrated, to varying degrees, within the new regime.

One of Morales’ first priorities was to initiate a process through which a new constitution would be written. This followed up on the demands for a constituent assembly made by increasingly visible indigenous and peasant organizations beginning in the early 2000s, which sought to ensure the protection of indigenous territory in light of the new recognition of Bolivia as a multicultural and pluri-ethnic state (Assies 2006). A Constituent Assembly was convened in 2006, but the struggles of this assembly to write a constitution that captured the goals of its highly varied members – 255 elected constituents – reflect the deep divisions within the country and the difficulties of shifting towards inclusive and participatory democracy. When the constitution was written and finally approved in 2009, it included food sovereignty as a central element of several sections. It first refers to food sovereignty in the context of international relations and treaties, suggesting that they must function to meet the interests and sovereignty – including food sovereignty – of the people. Article 255 (Constitución Política del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2009) stipulates:

negotiation, signing, and ratification of international treaties shall be governed by the principles of ... food security and food sovereignty for all; prohibiting the import, production and marketing of GMOs [genetically modified organisms] and toxic elements that can harm human health and the environment.

Further, the chapter on ‘Sustainable Integrated Rural Development’ emphasizes food sovereignty as integral to rural development, laying out the objective to ‘ensure food security and sovereignty, prioritizing domestic production and consumption ... and establishing mechanisms to protect Bolivian agriculture’ (Constitución Política del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2009, art. 405, 406).

The constitutional presence of food sovereignty follows up on the inclusion of the concept in the other important policy documents of Morales’ administration. For instance, in the first National Development Plan elaborated under Morales in 2006, food sovereignty

<sup>20</sup>Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinas de Bolivia, or the Confederated Union of Rural Workers of Bolivia.

was laid out as a key element of a new vision of development. In 2008, this was elaborated into the Rural Development and Food Sovereignty and Security policy (PSSA), which was to be implemented through four main programs: (1) SEMBRAR,<sup>21</sup> which promotes private-public partnerships and is largely dependent on overseas development assistance for short-term investment projects designed to increase food production (MDRyT 2010, 63, Liendo 2011); (2) CRIAR,<sup>22</sup> which finances community-led initiatives to support small-scale agriculture (MDRyT 2010); (3) EMPODERAR,<sup>23</sup> which funds agro-entrepreneurial development projects (Liendo 2011, MDRyT 2010); and (4) Promotion of Agroecological Production (*Fomento a la Producción Ecológica/Orgánica*), which supports agroecological producers with production and marketing (MDRyT 2010, 66). These programs relied upon external financing and did not significantly restructure agriculture or governance, nor did they transform relations of production. Thus, the programs had limited impact on food sovereignty goals.

A more direct potential pathway to supporting food sovereignty was Bolivia's 'Agrarian Revolution' under the 2006 *Ley de Reconducción* no. 3545 (Extension Law), which redefines natural resources as state property, and puts more emphasis on state control and oversight over land consolidation and labour relations (Valdivia 2010, 74). The programme is characterized by four main policy aims: (1) distribution of state-owned land and redistribution by expropriation of land not serving a 'socio-economic function' (FES) to indigenous peoples and peasant communities; (2) mechanization of agriculture; (3) subsidized credits for small-scale producers; and (4) markets for the products of peasant origin (Urioste 2010). By 2010, the agrarian reform appeared to be relatively successful; more than 31 million hectares were titled and over 100,000 of these titles were distributed to 174,249 beneficiaries (INRA 2010; Redo et al. 2011). However, in the Department of Santa Cruz, where over two thirds of total cultivated land is located including 98 percent of large-scale soy plantations, a mere 12 percent of the territory has been regularized (Redo et al. 2011, 234). In addition, 91 percent of titled land has 'been endowed by the state and are composed entirely of forest reserves' (Redo et al. 2011, 237). Thus, while the Agrarian Revolution was intended to challenge the prevailing unequal agrarian structure, it has failed to do so, while also contributing to widespread deforestation as new frontiers expand into Bolivia's rich biodiverse areas of Amazonian, Andean and Chaco forests (Hecht 2005, 377).

This inability to dismantle unequal agrarian structures is related to a historical consolidation of elite power, particularly in the eastern lowlands region referred to as the '*Media Luna*' for its shape that looks like a half moon. Bolivia's eastern lowlands of Santa Cruz have been dominated by a capitalist class of agro-elites since the agrarian reform of 1953. This reform, devised by the US-designed Bohan Plan's 'march to the east', distributed large-scale landholdings between 500 and 50,000 hectares to well-connected capitalist elites (Valdivia 2010, 69). This was followed by fraudulent land and resource concentration by the dictatorships from 1971 to 1982 (Webber 2008; Urioste 2010), and the subsequent neoliberal-era reforms prior to the election of Evo Morales in 2006 (Kay and Urioste 2007). A high degree of territorial dominance and structural inequality in the lowlands has therefore been rooted in historical processes and institutionalized socially through decades of political and economic influences.

<sup>21</sup>Meaning 'to plant' or 'to sow'.

<sup>22</sup>Creación de Iniciativas Alimentarias Rurales.

<sup>23</sup>Emprendimientos Organizados para el Desarrollo Rural Autogestionario.

Though the historical class inequalities undoubtedly have created barriers for pro-reform social forces, the current ‘Agrarian Revolution’ has also failed to dismantle such structures. The land ceiling of 5000 ha, for example, is essentially rendered obsolete by Article 315 (II) which states that if a corporation has several ‘owners’ or ‘partners’ each can have up to a maximum of 5000 hectares, making land-size limits virtually non-existent. Furthermore, the land ceiling only applies to land acquired after 2009, adding to its ineffectiveness (Article 399). The ‘Agrarian Revolution’ also encourages and provides credit for farmers to mechanize their production methods, failing to foresee the increased dependence on petroleum-based inputs and debt creation this would entail for the majority of family farmers who control under 0.7 ha of land each<sup>24</sup> (Urioste 2010, 9; INE 2011; World Bank 2007). These shortcomings in transforming the unequal land-based social structure impede a pathway towards food sovereignty. This is compounded by the fact that the externally funded project-based PSSA programmes are established through temporary capital injection for relatively short-term project goals.

### *Sovereignty of whom relative to what?*

The Morales administration has mobilized food sovereignty as an element in a broader project of decolonization. In the newly rewritten constitution and recent framework laws, they draw upon indigenous and social movement ontologies – like *Sumaq Kawsay*<sup>25</sup> and food sovereignty – that contest Northern visions of development (Gudynas 2011). The uses of these concepts are both strategic and essentializing, but are an attempt to build an anti-colonial foundation while also seeking to address poverty, particularly in the rural sector, within that global structural environment. However, the Morales administration has been heavily critiqued for failing to follow through on its radical positions and promises, suggesting that this move is simply symbolic, at best, or a strategy to shore up supporters and expand power, at worst. For instance, Bolivian sociologist and social critic Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui argues that Morales’ claims of indigeneity and his calls for decolonization are purely rhetorical, and that the work of his administration has done little to disrupt the ‘hegemonic models that places [Bolivia] as the back yard of the large transnational companies’ (quoted in Erbol 2014).

Morales has used the threat of the conservative lowland politics as a way to keep social movements in line and remove their ability to exert pressure over the direction his administration takes – ultimately silencing the social movement threat while at the same time keeping up the appearance of widespread social movement support and involvement (Silva 2014). Despite this, however, social movement groups in Bolivia are increasingly stepping away from Morales and vocalizing a critique that his administration is failing to put into policy and practice any real structural change that reflects the indigenous ontologies Morales purports to support. For instance, these groups heavily criticize the continued resource extraction model of development (Weinberg 2010a, 2010b; Fabricant 2013), which Morales relies upon to generate the funds to support the expansion of social protections for the poor and rural sector (Postero 2010). This emerging schism was visible at the 2011 World People’s Conference on the Rights of Mother Earth, hosted by Morales in Cochabamba, Bolivia, which

<sup>24</sup>Authors’ calculation based on data from INE (2011) and World Bank (2007, 19) [(2,861,330 ha total arable land × 14%)/(660,000 total farm units × 87% smallholders) = 0.698 ha per unit].

<sup>25</sup>Closely related to the Good Living concept deployed in Ecuador, discussed above.

brought together government representatives and delegates from social movements around the world. A discussion on resource extraction within the Morales administration was pushed out of the official conference (see Albro 2013), with the official organizers of the conference seeking to silence these critiques of the Morales government.

Overall, as Morales' decolonization project unfolds, there is the explicit focus on building Bolivian sovereignty vis-à-vis international institutions and powers, particularly the United States. But there is also the threat to national sovereignty from the elites in the eastern lowlands. In this context, the state policies are guided by defending sovereignty at the national level such that a significant redistribution of power has not emerged. At the same time, while there is the appearance of productive state-society relations – particularly with social movements – in fact these relations have led to a high degree of co-optation by the state, resulting in a loss of autonomy amongst social movements and thus a lack of empowerment.

### *Lessons from Bolivia*

While in the constitution and elsewhere, such as the National Development Plans, the Law of Mother Earth and the Integral Development for Living Well, food sovereignty has been enshrined as a right of Bolivian peoples, the actual policies put into effect erode the possibilities to enact food sovereignty goals in practice. For example, in a follow-up to the Law of Mother Earth, Law 337 seeks to reduce deforestation and improve agricultural productivity in the Amazon region of the country. But this law was supported by the large agribusiness lobby as it actually has the effect of encouraging agribusiness expansion in the region because it creates the expectations of future pardon for illegal deforestation and sets very low fines for such transgressions (Mongabay 2013). Despite a general commitment to food sovereignty, there has been an inability to enact meaningful structural changes that might contribute to the achievement of food sovereignty on the ground.

Thus, in Bolivia, these commitments to support food sovereignty have largely failed to create spaces for participatory democratic decision-making and control over resources, or to give local peoples the opportunity to carry out a food sovereignty strategy as defined by them. Nonetheless, Morales has worked to throw off the mantle of control by global elites, consolidating state power over national resources and pushing back against control by external state and international institutions. However, the high degree of control over land and resources by agro-industrial elites in the 'Media Luna' has constrained the capacity of the state to put forth and carry out food sovereignty reforms. While the Morales administration is much more sympathetic than previous governments in Bolivia to the concerns, needs and ideas of rural and indigenous peoples and popular classes, the challenge of creating a space for alternative notions of development and exercising sovereignty in the face of global and national elites has constrained the state's capacity towards structural change. Furthermore, many of the key social movements have lost a certain degree of autonomy through their alliance and direct affiliation with the MAS. While recent developments have led to divisions within the *Pacto de Unidad*, perhaps the most important organization for food sovereignty, the CSUTCB, has maintained a strong alliance with the MAS and has arguably lost much of its autonomy to push the state for more reforms.

### **State pathways towards food sovereignty**

The rights to food sovereignty as expressed by La Via Campesina and federal governments in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador appear relatively similar in description. However, the



alignment of state and social forces and the character of state power (state autonomy and capacity) differ within each case, leading to different outcomes. In this paper, we argue that despite similar state-level rhetorical and constitutional uses of food sovereignty in these three countries, the concept has been carried out according to particular goals, strategies and processes with very different results.

The case studies examined here demonstrate that legal and constitutional frameworks alone fail to create conditions for food sovereignty. Laws and rights alone do not lead to social justice, which depends as well on a way to put these nominal protections into practice. As Patel (2009, 669) argues, ‘it is insufficient to consider only the structures that might guarantee the rights that constitute food sovereignty – it is also vital to consider the substantive policies, process, and politics that go to make up food sovereignty’. This is particularly true in relation to rural spaces and poor or marginalized peoples. These legal frames and protections are interpreted and implemented in a matter that reflects the prevailing social relations of power in the countryside and nation more broadly. Laws and policies are, as Borras and Franco (2010, 9; see also Franco 2008) point out,

not self-interpreting and not self-implementing. It is during the interaction between various, often conflicting, actors within the state and in society that land policies are actually interpreted, activated and implemented (or not) in a variety of ways from one place to another over time.

This is why it is helpful to think of food sovereignty efforts in terms of autonomy and capacity, to examine how the ability to undertake meaningful reforms is promoted or constrained along these two dimensions of power.

If state food sovereignty efforts are going to truly promote peoples’ ‘right to self-determination ... to redefine for themselves the substance of the food relations appropriate to their geographies’ (Patel and McMichael 2004, 249; see above), they must put into place radically new policies, processes and politics that facilitate these goals. This will necessarily entail rethinking the contemporary structures through which governance around food and agricultural systems takes place. Thus, food sovereignty is a space of political and social struggle to radically restructure relations of resource access and control. Creating such space depends upon a political restructuring that allows for the democratic conversation about food policy, rather than being the force that brings about such changes (Patel 2009, 679). Bolivian and Ecuadorian attempts to implement food sovereignty projects, such as Bolivia’s public-private partnerships for food production strategies (SEMBRAR) and their emphasis on agricultural modernization and mechanization, or Ecuador’s reliance on expanded agricultural credit as a central element of their agrarian reform, are more aptly described as temporary residual solutions than a significant restructuring of social relations. Indeed, while such initiatives may help to resolve immediate needs and bring greater public and political attention to the rural sector, they fail to directly contribute to the creation of participatory democratic decision-making or lead to the transfers of wealth and power that are much more likely to generate the restructuring of social relations necessary for food sovereignty. These efforts to create favourable market conditions, technological transfers and the injection of short-term investment represent residual approaches that repackage market-oriented strategies of food security as food sovereignty rather than facilitate structural change (see Bernstein et al. 1992). Without any transformative processes being pursued, food sovereignty as a discourse has been used to galvanize support across agrarian and indigenous populations. Food sovereignty strategies have therefore been ‘simplified’ as temporary projects and capital injections, which ultimately fail to address the

structural inequalities that govern capitalist food systems. While this may contribute to state sovereignty relative to both internal and external forces, it does not contribute to sovereignty at the community or local level.

Among the three cases examined here, the attempts by the Venezuelan state have come the closest to facilitating a structural shift that promotes local control over food and food systems. Venezuela's Communal Councils have been instrumental in empowering previously excluded local people through participatory democratic processes. Combined with a redistributive state-led agrarian reform programme that is working to dismantle an unequal agrarian structure, Venezuela is undergoing a process of structural transformation and creating spaces for people to define, determine, manage and implement their food and agricultural systems in a decentralized, participatory way. In other words, the state is establishing conditions with the onus on the people to define and create food sovereignty. Pro-reformist state actors are attempting to restructure the social relations of production through land-based transfers of power as well as political transfers of power through Communal Councils and Socialist Communes. Though these processes are not without tensions and are unravelling unevenly across geographic space and between government initiatives (see Kappeler 2013), they are facilitating local empowerment through participation and are conducive to establishing mutually reinforcing symbiotic state-society relations that can reshape existing power structures. Approaching problems of food systems and unequal agrarian structures in such a relational way has contributed to the ability of Venezuela to instigate the transformative change required to develop a viable pathway toward food sovereignty.

Contemporary corporate assault on land resources and labour in the context of multiple crises (food, climate, fuel, finance) and the related global land rush provide evidence that the state has an important role to play regarding access to and control over land and its productive resources (Borras et al. 2012; Wolford et al. 2013). While state action can promote, prevent, reverse and/or divert pro-poor reforms, societal actors can influence and shape such actions (see Barraclough 1999). Thus, where opportunities exist for the initiation of, or engagement in, spaces of participatory involvement, it is important that politically mobilized and organized societal actors engage in such processes and, where possible, interact with pro-reform state actors. Food sovereignty entails, thus, a dynamic state-society interaction – indeed, an interplay of sovereignty at different scales.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we examine the state-level actions in three Latin American countries that have instituted a constitutional right to food sovereignty. We acknowledge that the state is a necessary component of food sovereignty efforts, since it is only through state-level action that structural transformations necessary for food sovereignty can be pursued. But the state cannot stand alone on food sovereignty. After all, food sovereignty as a contested terrain entails multiple sovereignties – at the local/community level and the state level. Thus, the continuous symbiotic interaction between empowered pro-reform state and societal actors is a necessary prerequisite for food sovereignty.

Even with a shared leftist orientation and commitment in the three countries examined here, food sovereignty efforts took place within particular contexts, goals and strategies. In Bolivia, the concept of food sovereignty was integrated into a decolonizing project vis-à-vis the United States aimed at building up the sovereignty of the nation-state. But this sovereignty project ultimately did not involve a devolution of power internally, and, indeed,

Bolivia's food and agricultural policy has relied on and reproduced existing inequalities. In Ecuador, state-level attempts to be inclusive ended up placing state institutions in a position to adjudicate between differing visions of food sovereignty, ultimately reducing or 'simplifying' food sovereignty into pro-poor 'residual' projects rather than a broader transformative pathway with comprehensive agrarian reform. Additionally, political tensions within government institutions failed to effectively translate and carry out the redistributive demands of civil society. In Venezuela, however, pro-reform state actors are pursuing a strategy oriented at dismantling existing unequal agrarian structures and transforming relations of access and control, while simultaneously opening up space for participatory democratic decision-making at the local level. We suggest this presents the most promising trajectory for transformative change around food sovereignty. While such a structural transformation of society and the economy does not necessarily ensure that food sovereignty be realized (indeed, sovereignty is an ongoing political project), these changes 'sow the seeds' for *peoples* to cultivate food sovereignty in ways that enable communities to 'have the democratic conversation about food policy in the first place' (Patel 2009, 670).

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