

Food Sovereignty

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Citation: Pimbert, Michel Patrick and Claeys, Priscilla. "Food Sovereignty." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Ed. Mark Aldenderfer. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.013.297>
Published online: 22 May 2024

Summary

"Food sovereignty" is an alternative paradigm for food and agriculture that aims to guarantee and protect people's space, ability, and right to define their own models of production, distribution, and consumption. It is a response to the deep social, economic, and environmental crises generated by the dominant model of food and agriculture in capitalist, communist, and socialist states. Confronted with hunger, food insecurity, massive de-peasantization, and the commodification of food through the neoliberal transformation of food systems, the food sovereignty movement seeks to reverse inequitable and ecologically destructive industrial farming, fisheries, forestry, and livestock management and to rebuild the social, economic, cultural, political, and spiritual foundations of our agri-food systems. Deeply transformative in its vision and practice, the food sovereignty movement affirms that food is a basic human right—as opposed to a commodity—and should be regarded as an integral part of culture, heritage, and cosmivision. This implies that food providers and consumers should be directly and meaningfully involved in framing policies for food and agriculture.

The notion of food sovereignty is perhaps best understood as a transformative process that seeks to re-create the democratic realm and regenerate a diversity of relocalized and autonomous agri-food systems. Food system transformation is grounded in agroecological practices based on diversity, decentralization, democracy, and local adaptation within and between territories, with a view to build ecological sustainability and keep life within safe planetary limits. Food sovereignty cannot be achieved without gender and intersectional justice, equity, and economies of care, as it ultimately seeks to achieve peaceful coexistence among peoples and care for the earth.

The concept of food sovereignty has rapidly moved from the margins to more center stage in international discussions on food, environment, development, and well-being. Since it was first proposed by the transnational agrarian movement La Via Campesina in 1996, food sovereignty has become a policy framework adopted by some governments and international organizations. In response to advocacy campaigns by peasant organizations and social movements, the United Nations has recently adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), which recognizes new human rights to land, water, forests, seeds, and natural resources, and outlines states obligations with regard to human rights–based natural resources governance. The UNDROP itself recognizes food sovereignty as a collective right.

As the food sovereignty paradigm is gaining traction, the global food sovereignty movement, best described as a movement of movements, is diversifying. Peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, agricultural workers, nongovernmental organizations, and scholar-activists working on food sovereignty are engaging in dialogues with other social actors. The global food sovereignty movement is calling for the convergence of all anti-systemic and anti-capitalist movements, including climate and labor justice movements, feminist movements, black movements, degrowth economics, and antiwar movements. Food sovereignty as a concept, as a right, and as a paradigm for food systems transformation is a valuable starting point for the formulation of joint proposals and actions for systemic change in this emerging confluence of movements.

Food sovereignty is also an increasingly popular research topic for a wide range of academic disciplines, including anthropology, geography, history, law, philosophy, agronomy, and ecology, as well as transdisciplinary research on agri-food systems. Historical, decolonial, feminist, cross-cultural, transdisciplinary, and critical perspectives are all needed to further understand the origins, development, and politics of food sovereignty in different contexts. Place-based and nuanced explorations of the multilevel processes that enable and constrain systemic change for food sovereignty can help inform policy and practice in different settings. These are important future directions for research on food sovereignty.

Keywords: food sovereignty, right to food, agroecology, land, agrarian reform, commons, gender and intersectional justice, governance, peasants and indigenous peoples, La Via Campesina

Introduction

Food and agriculture are major drivers of anthropogenic change. In the midst of Earth's sixth mass extinction, biodiversity is diminishing steadily across agricultural landscapes (Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES] 2019). Food and agriculture alone are responsible for at least 38 percent of the world's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions driving the climate emergency (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] 2022). Industrial agri-food systems in particular are responsible for significant biodiversity loss (IPBES 2019), toxic pollution (Persson et al. 2022), and global climate change (IPCC 2022; Li et al. 2022). According to the latest report of the IPCC, unless global warming is dramatically slowed <<https://apple.news/AA-BrrnPsQfSVNx2MkuISag>>, billions of humans and other species will reach points where they can no longer adapt to new norms <https://apple.news/A0_0CmKYaTlak6OURsN-qoA> (IPCC 2022)¹. Meanwhile, hunger and under-nutrition affect a billion people worldwide, and globally over 30 percent of people are obese/overweight—a staggering 2.1 billion in all (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO] et al. 2021). Different crises increasingly compound each other: the gap between rich and poor is widening within and between countries (United Nations 2023) along with increased food poverty, forced displacement, and migration fueled by a range of causes including global climate change² and the replacement of farmers and farmworkers with automated equipment and digital technologies (Pimbert 2022b). As the International Assessment of Agricultural Science & Technology for Development (IAASTD) report noted, “business as

usual” is not an option (Herren, Haerlin, and IAASTD+ 10 Advisory Group 2021). Decisive actions for system-wide transformation are needed now—and no later than in the decade to 2032—to limit the worst negative impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, growing poverty, and other existential threats.

At its heart, food sovereignty is a people-led response to the existential threats and multiple crises facing food systems in the early 21st century. Led by peasant farmers and agricultural workers, indigenous peoples, pastoralists, and fishers, as well as citizens, scientists, women, and youth, these proliferating social movements and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are seeking to fundamentally transform agri-food systems in terms of conviviality, equity, ecological sustainability, resilience, and justice. The global food sovereignty movement emphasizes the need for system-wide transformation, rather than piecemeal reforms, to achieve the right to food, ecological sustainability, and global justice. It involves the creation of a new vision for, and fundamental reinvention of, whole systems. As we explore in this article, it focuses on interrelated and mutually reinforcing changes needed in many different domains of transformation. It demands seeing things differently from business-as-usual industrial food and farming and rethinking agri-food systems on a participative basis with inclusive deliberative processes (Pimbert 2008).

Food sovereignty has implications for systemic change beyond food and agriculture systems strictly speaking. First, it offers a paradigm grounded in human rights, agroecology, radical democracy, radical egalitarianism, and racial and gender justice, which is a powerful alternative to the industrial, capitalist, colonial/imperialist, and patriarchal model of agri-food systems that currently dominates and generates unprecedented social and environmental impacts. Second, it aims to counter the exclusion of marginalized constituencies from the spaces and processes where the future of our agri-food systems is being shaped. Food sovereignty seeks to guarantee and protect peoples’ right to define their own models of production, food distribution, and consumption. Third, as a response to the multiple crises and threats our food systems are facing, including the climate catastrophe, food sovereignty is paving the way for and providing alternative visions for food and agriculture systems, not only for peasant farmers and agricultural workers but also for society at large. It has far-reaching implications for food system transformation, many of which are in the process of being debated, experimented, developed, and replicated and that provide lessons for wider system transformation across the globe. As the global food sovereignty movement calls for the convergence of all anti-systemic and anti-capitalist movements, including climate and labor justice movements, feminist movements, indigenous peoples’ movements, black movements, and antiwar movements (Nyéléni 2022), food sovereignty as a concept, as a right, and as a paradigm for food systems transformation is a valuable starting point for the formulation of joint proposals and actions for systemic change.

This article first briefly describes the origins and history of food sovereignty, as well as its ideological and philosophical antecedents and genealogies, with an emphasis on key influences on its theory and practice. Next, it critically discusses major opportunities and associated challenges for food systems transformation, with a focus on eight different domains: reinventing modernity; enabling equitable access to and control over land, seeds, and other means of production; healing the metabolic rift (i.e., the delinking of agriculture and nature); decolonizing knowledge and research; supporting local organizations and networks; achieving gender and intersectional justice; rethinking economics; and democratizing governance. The objective here is not to assess the achievements and limitations of the global food sovereignty movement but rather to take seriously the movement’s invitation to imagine and explore the many ramifications of food sovereignty as an emancipatory ideal. In conclusion, this article points to future directions for food sovereignty research and practice.

A Brief History of Food Sovereignty

A Radical Response to Trade Liberalization and Structural Adjustment

The concept of food sovereignty was first put forward in an international context at the NGO Forum held concurrently with the World Food Summit in 1996 and convened by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (Desmarais 2007; Desmarais and Nicholson 2013). At the forum, La Via Campesina (LVC) presented food sovereignty as a radical alternative to the prevailing model of industrial food and agriculture, based on trade liberalization, neoliberal trade policies, and capitalist modes of production. LVC, now the world's largest transnational agrarian network of peasant farmers³ and farmworkers, was created in 1993 by peasant organizations from the Americas, Europe, and Asia⁴. The movement later expanded with the inclusion of organizations from other regions, including Africa. In 2021, it comprised 182 local and national organizations in 81 countries representing about 200 million small-scale food producers. Across different economic, social, and cultural contexts, peasants united in a global movement to denounce the negative impacts of trade liberalization, structural adjustment programs, and agricultural modernization, which were leading to massive de-peasantization (i.e., the transformation and gradual disappearance of the peasantry) in both the Global North and Global South.

LVC went on to present seven mutually supportive principles defining an alternative paradigm for food and agriculture (Box 1). Its statement, "Food Sovereignty: A Future without Hunger" (1996), declared, "Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security." It also affirmed "the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity" (La Via Campesina 1996), which became one of the early definitions of the right to food sovereignty. The concept of food sovereignty emerged as an alternative to both food security and the right to food (Claeys 2012). La Via Campesina and other agrarian movements were critical of definitions of food security associated with an export-oriented agenda of globalized food trade and with productivist solutions grounded in chemical inputs and hybrid seeds (Patel et al. 2007). They rejected the term for its association with trade liberalization, food imports, and a capitalist transformation of agriculture, while insisting that food sovereignty is not against trade. Food sovereignty should not be equated with food self-sufficiency, which is generally understood as a country eschewing all food trade and relying 100 percent on domestic food production to meet its food needs. In contrast, food sovereignty envisions the development of several localized or nested markets.

At the same time, LVC affirmed the importance of the right to food, while also arguing in favor of a more radical, multicultural, and less-statist conceptualization of human rights than that embedded in United Nations human rights instruments (Claeys 2012). LVC also demanded and defended new and collective human rights such as rights to land, seeds, water, and biodiversity, the right to produce food, and the right to food sovereignty, thus creating links with the human rights movement while expanding its boundaries (Claeys 2015).

Since that time, much has been written about how approaches focused on food security, food sovereignty, and the right to food emphasize different solutions and pathways for addressing world hunger and food insecurity. Initially, there were tensions among proponents of the three approaches. Among the questions that arose were whether food security can be achieved without food sovereignty, or whether food sovereignty automatically guarantees the right to food. The dominant view is that the concepts overlap and largely support each other (Clapp 2014). However, those adopting these approaches

may still have different and, at times, conflicting political stances (e.g., radical, progressive, anarchist, or reformist; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Roman-Alcalá 2021), including capitalist agendas.

LVC has produced numerous declarations and documents spelling out the key principles at the heart of food sovereignty (Box 1). These principles have been further articulated through their alliance building with other social movements. LVC was, for instance, one of the seven organizations⁵ that planned and facilitated the 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty in Nyéléni, Mali, where over six hundred participants from eighty countries further developed the political, economic, social, and ecological dimensions of this alternative policy framework. One of the key outcomes of the forum was the articulation of six pillars of food sovereignty (Box 1), as well as the definition of 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” (La Via Campesina 2007). These have served as a reference point for social movements, NGOs, and scholar-activists. While LVC has played a central role, the global food sovereignty movement is best described as a movement of movements that represents the global voice of peasants and others living off the land.

Box 1. Principles and Pillars of Food Sovereignty

Food Sovereignty: Seven Principles for a Future Without Hunger (1996)	Food Sovereignty: The Six Pillars of Nyéléni (2007)	Food Sovereignty: An Agenda for System Transformation (eight domains)
<p>1. Food—a basic human right</p> <p>Everyone must have access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity.</p> <p>2. Agrarian reform</p> <p>A genuine agrarian reform is necessary that gives landless and farming people—especially women—ownership and control of the land they work and returns territories to indigenous peoples. The right to land must be free of discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, race, social class, or ideology; the land belongs to those who work it.</p> <p>3. Protecting natural resources</p> <p>Food sovereignty entails the sustainable care and use of natural resources, especially</p>	<p>1. Focuses on food for people</p> <p>Puts people’s need for food at the center of policies—insists that food is more than just a commodity</p> <p>2. Values food providers</p> <p>Supports sustainable livelihoods— respects the work of all food providers</p> <p>3. Localizes food systems</p> <p>Reduces distance between food providers and consumers— rejects dumping and inappropriate food aid</p> <p>Resists dependency on remote and unaccountable corporations</p>	<p>1. Reinventing modernity</p> <p>Reject the idea of development as an ever-expanding process of commodification of nature and social relations.</p> <p>Adopt pluralistic definitions of “the good life” and modernity (e.g., Buen Vivir).</p> <p>2. Guaranteeing rights to lands, seeds, and natural resources and control over the means of production</p> <p>Promote and protect individual and collective rights to land, water, seeds, and natural resources.</p> <p>Democratize natural resources governance.</p> <p>Redistribute land through agrarian reforms and regulate land-based investment.</p> <p>3. Healing the metabolic rift (i.e., the delinking of agriculture and nature)</p> <p>Transform food systems through agroecology to regenerate biodiversity, soils, and water.</p> <p>Re-localize agri-food systems based on short food chains and circular models and move away from globalized, fossil-fuel intensive, linear supply chains.</p>

<p>land, water, seeds, and breeds. Long-term sustainability demands a shift away from dependence on chemical inputs and on cash-crop monocultures and intensive, industrialized production models. Balanced and diversified natural systems are required.</p> <p>4. Reorganizing food trade</p> <p>Food imports must not displace local production nor depress prices. This means that export dumping or subsidized exports must cease.</p> <p>5. Ending the globalization of hunger</p> <p>Food sovereignty is undermined by multilateral institutions and by speculative capital. Regulation and taxation of speculative capital and a strictly enforced code of conduct for transnational corporations is therefore needed.</p> <p>6. Social peace</p> <p>Everyone has the right to be free from violence. Food must not be used as a weapon. The ongoing displacement, forced urbanization, repression, and increasing incidence of racism of smallholder farmers cannot be tolerated.</p> <p>7. Democratic control</p> <p>Smallholder farmers must have direct input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels.</p> <p>Rural women, in particular, must be granted direct and active decision making on food and rural issues.</p> <p>Source: La Via Campesina, 1996. www.viacampesina.org</p>	<p>4. Puts control locally</p> <p>Places control in the hands of local food providers</p> <p>Recognizes the need to inhabit and to share territories</p> <p>Rejects the privatization of “natural resources”</p> <p>5. Builds knowledge and skills</p> <p>Builds on traditional knowledge</p> <p>Uses research to support and pass this knowledge to future generations</p> <p>Rejects technologies that undermine or contaminate local food systems.</p> <p>6. Works with Nature</p> <p>Maximizes the contributions of ecosystems</p> <p>Improves resilience</p> <p>Rejects energy-intensive, monocultural, industrialized, destructive methods</p> <p>Source: Nyéléni 2007 (full report, https://nyeleni.org/en/synthesis-report/ <https://nyeleni.org/en/synthesis-report/>)</p>	<p>4. Decolonizing knowledge and research</p> <p>Transform knowledge production through power-equalizing research based on cognitive and intersectional justice.</p> <p>Democratize, transform, and fund public research to serve the common good.</p> <p>5. Supporting local organizations and networks and the convergence of struggles</p> <p>Build networks of local organizations to strengthen the voice and agency of small- scale producers through the use of critical pedagogy and popular education methods.</p> <p>6. Achieving gender and intersectional justice</p> <p>Eliminate all forms of gender-based violence and construct new gender relations free of oppressions.</p> <p>Tackle the multiple, overlapping, and intertwined structures of oppression, using an intersectional lens.</p> <p>Ensure gender equitable participation in food governance.</p> <p>7. Rethinking economics</p> <p>Reimagine economics outside capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy.</p> <p>Holistically integrate productive labor with the reproductive labor of care of both women and of nature through an economics of care.</p> <p>8. Democratizing governance</p> <p>Enable peoples’ participation in the coproduction of knowledge and policies.</p> <p>Decentralize and redistribute power in polycentric and horizontal governance webs, both in and between territories.</p> <p>Address the corporate capture of agri-food system governance and the conflicts of interests inherent to multi-stakeholder governance.</p> <p>Source: Developed by Pimbert and Claeys, 2024.</p>
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The organizers of Nyéléni 2007 successfully expanded the food sovereignty debate beyond groups of peasant farmers to include indigenous peoples, fishers, pastoralists, consumer groups, urban poor, NGOs, and workers' trade unions, as well as youth and women. Dialogues between different constituencies have enriched the food sovereignty paradigm and generated more comprehensive statements over time (Claeys and Duncan 2019a). For example, indigenous peoples in North America have deepened the sacred and spiritual dimensions of food in the Nyéléni 2007 framework for food sovereignty (Miheshua and Hoover 2019).

Antecedents and Confluences

Given La Via Campesina's roots in Latin America, the food sovereignty movement has been greatly influenced by post-development thinking (Escobar 2004a, 2004b; Matthews 2018; Mignolo and Escobar 2013), liberation theology and popular education (Löwy 2009; McLaren and Jandrić 2018; Stenberg 2006), and the anti-systemic struggles of the left (Zibechi 2012). However, food sovereignty is not one school—it is a school of schools (Patel 2009). There are, for instance, older ideas and traditions rooted in different geographies that have resonance in early 21st century discourse on food sovereignty. Some of these antecedents have influenced the theory and practice of activists in this arena and continue to do so in a confluence of ideas and movements (Pimbert et al. 2021).

In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, agronomists and economists in North Africa and Southwest Asia articulated a vision broadly similar to the food sovereignty paradigm later developed by LVC. In Tunisia, the political economist Samir Amin advocated breaking away—or delinking—from the “maldevelopment” model imposed by world capitalism. Amin introduced the concept to define conflicts between prevailing conditions and peoples' needs, and to challenge the idea of “underdevelopment,” which denotes a lack. He argued that delinking was necessary for “auto-centric development” (Amin 1990), defined as “the abolition of the dominant forms of private ownership of land and factories, and taking agriculture as its base . . . not envisaging any forced appropriation from the peasants to ‘hasten industrialization’” (Amin 1990). In his later years, Amin strongly promoted his ideas of auto-centric development in his support for food sovereignty and peasant autonomy (Amin 2018, 2022).

In Egypt, the economist Fawzy Mansour also called for “a self-reliant strategy of development” (Mansour 1979). Most notably, he argued for a balanced rural-urban relationship to achieve food self-sufficiency (Mansour 1976). Anticipating the importance of agroecology in the food sovereignty movement of the early 21st century, Mansour recognized the sophistication of peasant knowledge and considered that pre-capitalist agriculture was sustainable and focused on feeding people rather than on making profits. He observed that the small-scale hydraulics and site-specific farming techniques developed by peasants “elicited from nature its self-generating powers rather than destroyed those powers” (Mansour 1980, 24). Ajl (2018) has further compared and contrasted the current food sovereignty paradigm with the auto-centered, self-reliant development proposals of Egyptian and Tunisian economists and agronomists, including Amin and Mansour. Similar research is needed to better understand the intellectual history of the peasant path toward food sovereignty in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific regions.

Nuanced historical and ethnographical research can help identify traditions of ideas that have had—and can still have—a major influence on the social construction of food sovereignty. These influences include:

- Agrarian collectivism, social anarchism, and libertarian socialist thought—all of which view peasants as progressive agents of change (Bakunin [1873] 1987; Herzen 1992; Kropotkin 1892, [1898] 1913; Palij 1976)
- Heterodox Marxism (Chayanov 1991; Levien, Watts, and Hairong 2018)
- Peasant studies (Hernández Xolocotzi 1985, 1987; Polanyi 1957; Scott 2009; Shanin 1987; van der Ploeg 2013; Wolf 1969)
- Center-periphery and dependency theory (Amin 1976; Gunder Franck 1978)
- Post-development theory (Escobar 1996; Esteva and Prakash 2014; Matthews 2018; Partant 1999, 2002)
- Agrarian social theory and social ecology (Bookchin 1990; Friedmann 2005 McMichael 2009; Gonzales de Molina et al. 2020; Martinez-Alier 2002; Sevilla Guzmán 2011)
- Feminism and ecofeminism (D'Eaubonne 1978; Mies 2014; Salleh 2017)

Some of these traditions have deeply influenced peasant struggles for self-determination and the right to food sovereignty. For example, Mikhail Bakunin's proposals on collectivist anarchism (Bakunin 1982) and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's 1863 text on the "principle of federation" (Proudhon 1863/1979) inspired the consciousness and agency of an impoverished peasantry in 19th-century Spain. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the peasants of Andalusia and Aragon established communal systems of land tenure, in some cases abolishing the use of money for internal transactions and setting up free systems of production and distribution. They created decision making procedures based on popular assemblies and direct, face-to-face democracy. In those parts of Spain not overrun by General Franco's troops, about three million men, women, and children were living in collectivized communes over large areas (Bookchin 1998; Evans 2020; Leval 1975).

Peter Kropotkin's anarchist ideas on agrarian and industrial mutualism (Kropotkin [1898] 1913) influenced Mahatma Gandhi's views on self-rule (Swaraj) and progress based on economic self-reliance (Sarvodaya) to end poverty through improved agriculture and small-scale cottage industries in every village in India (Bhatt 1982). And in the early 21st century, convergences between food sovereignty and the right to the city⁶ (Lefébvre 1968; Harvey 2012; Purcell 2013) emphasize new garden cities and agroecological urbanism (Bliss 2011; Ross and Cabannes 2014; Tornaghi 2016) as well as libertarian municipalism based on eco-technologies for community autonomy and post-scarcity (Bookchin 1990, 2022; Thompson 2021). In so doing they all build on, or echo, the vision of direct democracy and freedom that Kropotkin described over a century ago in *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (Kropotkin [1898] 1913).

Rising Influence of the Concept and Practice

In the first part of the 21st century, food sovereignty movements, proposals, and struggles have moved from the margins and gained more visibility (Desmarais and Nicholson 2013; McKeon 2015; Sampson et al. 2021). The struggle for food sovereignty has become truly globalized even if some regions remain less represented, due to language barriers, authoritarian regimes and criminalization, and the lack of human and financial capital necessary for social movement organizing. The progressive food sovereignty framework has been embraced by a growing range of actors, including indigenous peoples' networks and citizen groups, as well as NGOs and academics (Desmarais and Nicholson 2013; see also La Via Campesina <https://www.viacampesina.org>). Food sovereignty as a human right or as a policy objective is recognized by several organizations of the United Nations and some governments. This legal recognition has been widely celebrated but has also brought its own challenges. Food sovereignty has also been embraced by a growing number of academic research centers and universities.

Food Sovereignty and the United Nations. Several recent international reports on the state of global food and agriculture mention food sovereignty as a possible pathway to more sustainable agricultural development (such as International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development [IAASTD] 2009; High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition [HLPE] 2016, 2019). Article 15 of the 2018 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), achieved by La Via Campesina at the UN Human Rights Council, recognizes the right to food sovereignty as “the right to determine their own food and agriculture systems.” To a large extent, these references to food sovereignty in UN documents reflect the growing participation and influence of social movements and NGOs in global arenas for food security governance.

Food Sovereignty and the State. Along with developments in the international arena, states, regions, and municipalities have embraced the concept—and to a limited extent, the radical agenda—of food sovereignty. Constitutional recognition of the right to food sovereignty has been achieved in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nepal (Beuchelt and Virchow 2012; Tilzey 2019). Countries such as Mali, Senegal, Peru, Argentina, Guatemala, Brazil, El Salvador, and Indonesia have enacted legislation supportive of food sovereignty (Wittman 2015; Desmarais, Claeys, and Trauger 2017). Overall, these efforts have, at best, created opportunities for civil society participation and generated legal or policy change. But impacts on the ground have been limited, as extractivism, modernization, neoliberal policies—along with export-oriented agendas and processes of commodification and privatization of land, seeds, and water—continue to shape policies on food and agriculture.

Food Sovereignty and Academia. In the early 21st century, academic interest in food sovereignty has exploded. The critical analysis and study of food sovereignty have become legitimate areas of research and teaching (Agarwal 2014; Akram-Lodhi 2013; Andrée et al. 2014; Araghi 1995; Bernstein 2014; Binimelis et al. 2014; Blue Bird Jernigan et al. 2021; Brem-Wilson 2015; Borrás et al. 2015; Burnett and Murphy 2014; Claeys 2015; Desmarais and Wittman 2014; Duncan et al. 2019; Edelman 2014, 2016; Grey and Patel 2015; Henderson 2017; Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013; Kloppenburg 2014; Masson, Paulos, and Bastien 2017; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014; Meek and Tarlau 2016; McKeon 2015; McMichael 2014; Patel 2009, 2012; Pimbert 2008, 2018c; Ruiz-Almeida and Rivera-Ferre 2019; Schiavoni 2017; Tilzey 2017, 2019; Trauger 2015; Turner et al. 2020; van der Ploeg 2008, 2014; Wittman 2011; Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010; Wittman and Blesh 2017). The *Journal of Peasant Studies* has published a selection of academic papers presented at two well-attended international conferences on food sovereignty: at Yale University in 2013, and at the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague, the Netherlands, in 2014. Several academic journals regularly publish peer-reviewed articles on food sovereignty, among them *Globalizations*⁷, *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*⁸, *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*⁹, *Sustainability*¹⁰, and *Ephemera*¹¹.

Mirroring a wider phenomenon in academia, food sovereignty has not escaped controversy among scholars from different disciplines and often taking different positions on the subject. Criticisms have clustered around food sovereignty’s perceived “lack of specificity” (Edelman 2014; Patel 2009; Aerni 2011), vulnerability to corporate capture or containment (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015), and lack of a clear vision or concrete proposals around agricultural trade and investment policy reform (Burnett and Murphy 2014). Others have expressed fears regarding its overlap with “agrarian populism” and tendency to essentialize and homogenize the peasantry into a single category (Bernstein 2014; Roman-Alcalá 2021; Scoones et al. 2017), pointed to research gaps on the gender dimensions of food sovereignty (Masson, Paulos, and Bastien 2017), have questioned its sole reliance on constituencies as tools to negotiate difference in the global food sovereignty movement (Claeys and Duncan 2019a), and have debated its limited applicability and relevance outside rural spaces and the Global

South (Aerni 2011; Agarwal 2014). Notably, most scholars situate their critical discussions on food sovereignty within the broader context of agri-food system transformation.

While dialogue between agrarian activists and other actors have enriched the food sovereignty paradigm, the entrée of myriad groups into the food sovereignty arena has also generated questions on the roles of different constituencies in shaping it. Should peasant farmers have the final say in driving the food sovereignty agenda? On which terms should they engage with other actors in processes designed to shape the governance of food and agriculture (Claeys and Duncan 2019b)? In the meantime, the adoption of a food sovereignty framework by states or other actors pursuing the status quo has opened the door to the cooptation or deradicalization of the concept. As Demarais, Trauger, and Claeys put it: can food sovereignty be institutionalized without losing its emancipatory potential (Desmarais, Claeys, and Trauger 2017)?

Systemic Food Systems Transformation for Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty transformation envisions interrelated and mutually reinforcing changes in many different areas shaping our agri-food systems. Some of the major opportunities but also challenges and emerging critical issues for food sovereignty transformation are highlighted, with a focus on eight domains of transformation. They include reinventing discourses on modernity; ensuring equitable access to and control over land, seeds, and other means of production; healing the metabolic rift¹²; decolonizing knowledge and research; supporting local organizations and networks; achieving gender and intersectional justice; rethinking economics; and democratizing governance. Possible directions for future research are identified at the end of each of these eight sections.

Reinventing Discourses on Modernity

Discourse—the ways in which language is used to frame debates, policy, and action—is a critical domain in shaping transformations in food and agriculture.

In capitalist, communist, and socialist nation states, the dominant discourse on modernizing development envisions fewer people living off the land. It encourages an exodus of people from rural areas to work in industry and urban-based trade and services (Mendras 1984). With the enclosure of common land since the birth of rural capitalism in England in the sixteenth century—and even more so with industrial capitalism—small and family farmers have been labeled unproductive, economically unviable, lazy, and not worthy of support (Thompson 1966, 1971).

The historian Jim Handy has shown how conceptualizations of peasants as living in “almost idiotic wretchedness” was institutionalized in 18th-century Britain and in the Global South during colonialism as well as in “development” during the 20th century (Handy 2009). Apart from blaming peasant farmers for a perceived predilection to have numerous children, political and economic elites also dismissed peasants for not being sufficiently interested in consumption—and so supposedly “stifling” economic development because their needs are far too easily met.

Historically, these profoundly dehumanizing views of people living off the land have been reflected in modernizing discourses and development policies. Labor-saving agricultural technologies and enclosures of the commons have thus combined with agricultural and trade policies to exclude people from the land and agri-food systems (Araghi 2000;

Bryceson, Kay, and Mooij 2000). The dominant discourse on modernity and progress continues to create the conditions for systematic economic genocide of peasantry throughout the world (Amin 2018; Pérez-Vitoria 2005).

In France, for example, the latest census report of its Ministry of Agriculture shows that over one hundred thousand farms have halted any economic activity between 2010 and 2020 (AGRESTE 2021). As farmers and farms decline in number, land and capital are concentrated into larger and larger farm holdings.

Despite the dire human costs of this model of agricultural development, the solutions offered to address the crisis promote a digitally interconnected agriculture involving drones, intelligent robots, joysticks for remote control of devices, 5G technology, cultured and lab-grown meat, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in uniform landscapes. These radical agri-food system transformations in France prefigure similar developments in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and other parts of Europe (World Economic Forum [WEF] 2018; Smith 2019). The technologies of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) are set to massively replace human labor with the dead labor of machines. However, the idea that small-scale producers, pastoralists, and indigenous peoples as a group are bound to disappear reflects just one vision of the future: it is a political choice that relies on specific theories of change rejected by social movements working for food sovereignty.

Throughout the world, peoples—especially youth—are affirming other visions on how to live with, and care for, the land and their communities. Their pluralistic visions of modernity increasingly reject the commodification of nature and social relations (Rist 2013). Their alternative discourses focus on the creation and maintenance of “the good life”—concepts and practices such as *buen vivir* or *sumak kausai* in Latin America, ecological *Swaraj* in India (Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta 2014), de-growth in Europe (Latouche 2011), libertarian municipalism (Bookchin 2022), and feminist subsistence perspectives (Mies and Bennholdt Thomsen 1999).

In this reimagined pluriverse (Kothari et al. 2019), ideas, discourses, and practices reconnect individuals with nature and help rebuild diverse agri-food systems embedded in local ecologies and economies. All these discourses value and work with the productive and reproductive labor of people and nature (Salleh 2017). As such, these alternative life-centric discourses for food sovereignty transformation are incommensurable with the hegemonic view of industrial modernity.

Guaranteeing Rights to Lands, Seeds, and Natural Resources and Control over the Means of Production

In the early 21st century, 2.5 billion people from indigenous and other rural communities worldwide are estimated to depend on lands managed through customary, community-based tenure systems. These lands account for over 50 percent of the world’s total land area. Yet these communities have formally recognized rights over only one-fifth of them (Rights and Resources Initiative 2015, 2016). This lack of recognition of customary rights and persisting marginalization of local communities have in many cases made these resources vulnerable to appropriation by the state and private actors in the face of mounting pressures from development projects, foreign investments, and certain conservation initiatives (so-called green grabbing; Errico and Claeys 2020; Ghimire and Pimbert 1997). Responses to climate change are exacerbating pressures on land, for example, in the form of renewable energy or carbon-credit projects. Many transnational corporations have made net-zero emissions pledges but remain embedded in the fossil fuel economy. To reach their zero targets, these companies are adopting so-called nature-based solutions—ranging from

planting trees to increasing carbon storage in agricultural soils and closing off forests (Wynberg et al. 2023). These solutions ultimately seek to integrate the carbon-storage capacity of nature into corporate profit chains and turn nature and carbon into financial assets (Friends of the Earth International 2022). There is growing evidence that many land-based mitigation responses, such as afforestation or reforestation or carbon-offsetting projects, generate competition for land and lead to land conversion and displacements of other land uses, threatening the human rights of those living on and off the land (Claeys et al. 2023). In response to these enclosures, food sovereignty activists have defined, demanded, and defended access to and control over land, seeds, biodiversity, water, and other means of production as a human right with both individual and collective dimensions (Claeys 2015; La Via Campesina 2009). They have achieved the recognition of these new rights in the UNDROP. This declaration spells out the individual and collective rights of peasants, indigenous peoples, pastoralists, and fishers over land, seeds, water, forests, rangelands, and other resources, as well as the obligations of states to implement these rights through measures such as agrarian reform, the promotion of agroecology, local markets, local seeds, participatory decision making, and the transition to resilient and sustainable food systems.

The right to land is an important legal innovation that lies at the heart of food sovereignty and is the outcome of the involvement of food sovereignty actors in shaping human rights from below (Claeys 2015). A human rights–based approach to land insists on its social function rather than viewing it as a commodity or exclusively commercial good. It affirms that land represents not only a very valuable economic asset but also a source of identity and culture. It promotes and protects the right of local people to use, own, and, most importantly, control the developments undertaken on their own lands (Gilbert 2013). It provides a useful mobilizing frame for local, national, and transnational movements engaged in struggles to defend and control lands and territories, and is a tool to reestablish a political limitation on “absolute private property” (Vergara-Camus 2012). The right to land comprises the rights to access, use, manage, and control land and natural resources. It emphasizes the agency of indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs), such as peasants, pastoralists, and other small-scale food producers. It is closely linked to cultural rights, cultural heritage, and spiritual practices. Some of the implications of the right to land, as recognized in the UNDROP, include: the obligation of states to respect, protect, and promote the right to land by avoiding forced evictions and displacements; the obligation of states to redistribute land through agrarian reforms, to regulate land-based investments, and to safeguard lands against environmental damage; the obligation of states to ensure land policy supports poverty eradication and food security while guaranteeing a sustainable use; and the obligation of states to give priority allocation of public lands to landless peasants and other marginalized groups, such as women (Claeys et al. 2022) while protecting and respecting natural commons.

The right to seeds, also enshrined in UNDROP, has received considerable attention. Agrarian activists, NGOs, and scholars from around the world have increasingly used human rights and legal reform to induce changes in the legal and policy frameworks that regulate seeds, with a view to protecting farmers’ and peasants’ rights to use, plant, exchange and sell their seeds. They are advancing “seed commons” and “seed sovereignty” (Peschard and Randeria 2020; Pimbert 2022a) with a view to counter the appropriation and privatization of seeds and the modernization of peasant seed systems. Seed activism has taken a variety of forms reflecting the diversity of farmers’ seed networks (Coomes et al. 2015), modes of enclosures, and legal frameworks governing seeds. Seed activists have engaged in judicial actions, peoples’ tribunals, and civil disobedience (Doherty and Hayes 2014), and have tried to establish open-source seed systems or seed commons (Kloppenburger 2014; Montenegro de Wit 2019) or to promote collective rights to seeds (Coulibaly et al. 2020) In parallel to these efforts in the legal realm, seed activists have established seed banks (Garzón and

Gutierrez Escobar 2019) and peasant seed networks (Demeulenaere 2014) to resist seed enclosures by corporations (Howard 2020).

Indigenous peoples' sovereignty over the means of life (land, water, forests, seeds . . .) further extends the focus of rights per se by emphasizing a community's right and relational responsibilities to care for their food systems on the basis of their traditional practices and indigenous beliefs (Morrison 2011; Coté 2016). More generally, indigenous food sovereignty foregrounds ideas of self-determination, territorial control, indigenous knowledge, kin-centric ecology, and cultural affirmation. Many of the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2007) thus converge or overlap with the aims of food sovereignty and UNDROP¹³. Indeed, several indigenous peoples' movements, such as the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, have embraced food sovereignty as an integral part of their struggles for territorial control, decolonization, self-determination, autonomy, gender equity, and cultural affirmation (Gahman 2016; Collier and Quaratiello 2004; Hernández et al. 2022).

Healing the Metabolic Rift

Food sovereignty activists strive to reverse the fundamental contradiction between capitalism's drive for a controllable uniformity and nature's thrust for ever more diversity. Rooted in both indigenous knowledge and the science of ecology (Altieri 1995; Gliessman 2015; Pimbert et al. 2021), agroecological practices conserve soil and water (High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition [HLPE] 2015, 2019) and enhance biodiversity by deploying methods such as multi-species polycultures, intercropping, agroforestry, genetic mixtures, mixed farming, and agro-sylvo-pastoral systems. Agroecology also works to diversify the ecosystems and wider landscapes in which farming systems are embedded. Such indigenous and peasant land-use practices have created mosaics of agricultural areas and patches of wild biodiversity at multiple scales (Perfecto and Vandermeer 2017) in parts of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe (Armstrong et al. 2017; Balée 2006; Balée and Erickson 2006; Posey 1999).

However, several indigenous communities striving for food sovereignty do not use the term "agroecology,"—especially those more dependent on hunting and gathering than on agriculture. Their land stewardship and food provisioning practices are usually based on a kin-centric ecology in which indigenous people view both themselves and nature as part of an extended ecological family that shares ancestry and origins (Martinez et al. 2023; Salmon 2000). Indigenous communities sustain and secure their foods through culturally specific interactions with their kin—or relatives that include plants, animals, water, and all the natural elements of an ecosystem (Martinez et al. 2023). Echoing the agroecological practices of many peasants and pastoralists, it is these indigenous interactions—the cultural practices of living with a place—that enable sustainable land use, regeneration, self-determination, and food sovereignty (Johnston 2022).

Agroecological practices can reverse the uniformity of industrial monocultures in a number of ways, not just through boosting biodiversity but also by encouraging micro-geographical differentiation, dynamic local adaptation, and self-organizing ecological complexity. The shift from industrial uniformity to living diversity is further enabled by a transformative agroecology that restructures and reterritorializes food and fiber production, distribution, markets, consumption, and waste treatment and recycling within decentralized circular systems at scales from individual farm plots to entire cities. Such localized systems, mimicking life cycles in nature, encourage sustainable use of soils, water, and biodiversity over time and space. Based on a logic of degrowth¹⁴, they help reduce greenhouse gas

emissions and the consumption of water and materials as well as create jobs and income (Jones et al. 2012; Johnson and Webster 2021).

The reterritorializing of agri-food systems, including of livestock production, partly depends on the safeguarding and creation of energy-efficient local mills, micro-dairies, small abattoirs, workshops for mechanics and carpenters, fab labs¹⁵, community-based and artisanal food processing units, micro-breweries, local restaurants, community kitchens and canteens, and waste-recycling facilities (Pimbert 2012). Healing the metabolic rift between people and nature (Foster and Clark 2020) thus becomes possible as agri-food systems and supply chains are designed in the image of nature's metabolism to reduce the consumption of energy and materials within and between territories. Public investment in circular systems that link food and energy production with water and waste management within a specific territory can create sustainable livelihoods that reduce outward migration to cities as well as help to regenerate local economies and ecologies. Moreover, these internally diverse systems are usually more resilient to shocks and stresses, from climate change to market volatility¹⁶.

Food sovereignty advocates see agroecology¹⁷ as vital for the regeneration of local ecologies and economies (Pimbert et al. 2021). Agroecology as an integral part of food sovereignty is based on principles of diversity, decentralization, distributed power, dynamic adaptation, and democracy. Speaking at the 2015 International Forum on Agroecology <<http://www.agroecologynow.com/video/ag/>> in Nyéléni (Mali) (Nyéléni 2015), the West African peasant leader Ibrahima Coulibaly stated: "There is no food sovereignty without agroecology. And certainly, agroecology will not last without a food sovereignty policy that backs it up"¹⁸.

Food sovereignty movements such as La Via Campesina are claiming agroecology as a bottom-up construction of knowledge that needs to be supported—rather than led—by science and policy (Méndez et al. 2016; Nyéléni 2015; Pimbert 2018c). They favor a transformative agroecology based on the redesign and functional diversification of agroecosystems, as well as their integration with re-territorialized local and regional markets (Civil Society Mechanism [CSM] 2016). Re-embedding autonomous food systems within specific territories is viewed as essential for healing the metabolic rift.

This transformative vision of agroecology sharply contrasts with that of mainstream organizations that seek to co-opt agroecology and ensure its compatibility with the prevailing agri-food regime by promoting "input substitution" approaches that maintain dependency on corporate suppliers of external inputs and on global commodity markets. As such, this vision of agroecology grounded in food sovereignty is fundamentally distinct from the selective incorporation of a few agroecological practices within productivist models of agriculture that conform with the dominant agri-food regime (Levidow et al. 2014; Rosset and Altieri 2017), such as "climate-smart" agriculture (Pimbert 2015), "sustainable intensification" (Royal Society 2009), and agro-ecotech that combines organic farming with 4IR digital agriculture (Soil Association 2021). These forms of "junk agroecology" (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2020) start from a premise that productivity per unit of land needs to increase in a sustainable manner and changes must fit in the dominant agri-food regime. Coopted versions of agroecology usually reflect and reinforce an entrenched structure of gender inequality, exploitation, and dispossession—as documented in a study of government-led agroecological programs in South India (Ramdas and Pimbert 2024; Ramdas 2021, 2022). Powerful promoters of business as usual seek to "lock in" agroecology into transition pathways and forms of greenwashing that are designed to sustain capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Pimbert 2022b).

Decolonizing Knowledge and Transforming Research

The choice of research priorities—by and for whom, why, and for what purpose—is key for reinventing agri-food systems, which are now confronted with unprecedented social and environmental crisis. This transformation domain is highly contested because radically different knowledge(s) and ways of knowing are needed for food sovereignty. Constructing knowledge(s) for food sovereignty entails avoiding and reversing top-down research and the hegemony of scientism, as well as the commodification of knowledge and inventing radically different knowledge(s) and ways of knowing. It also means reversing the current democratic deficit in the governance of research while embracing cognitive, gender, and intersectional justice to decolonize knowledge(s). Changing the dominant research paradigm requires strengthening the voice, agency, and rights of peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, and citizen-consumers in the production of environmental, economic, social, and technical knowledge (Pimbert 2018a). Scholar activists who work with movements for agrarian change can play an important role in this regard. These academics try to address problems such as epistemic justice and power imbalances in research, the messy politics of land struggles, and possible pathways for a more cohesive and stronger researcher engagement in the movement (Borras and Franco 2023; Duncan et al. 2019; Wiebe 2023). When they adopt an explicit social change agenda in their research, scholar activists can effectively engage in transformations for food sovereignty.

In practice, there are two complementary approaches to construct knowledge(s) for food sovereignty transformations: democratizing public research and supporting grassroots research and innovation. First, public research must be democratized and transformed to serve the common good rather than narrow economic interests. This means reversing processes through which universities and research institutes embrace, in the words of historian Henry Heller, “what we might call a cognitive capitalism, which pursues new forms of knowledge that can be more or less immediately commodified as intellectual property: patents, inventions, copyrights and even trademarks” (Heller 2016).

Particular attention is given here to institutional, pedagogical, and methodological innovations that can enable people’s participation and agency throughout the entire research cycle—from deciding upstream strategic research and funding priorities to the coproduction of knowledge and risk assessments. As detailed elsewhere (Pimbert 2018b), this calls for deep, fundamental changes in research institutions, including putting citizens at the heart of decision making in research and the allocation of funds¹⁹, embracing cognitive justice and decolonizing knowledge(s) (Santos 2014; Visvanathan 2005), changing organizational cultures and operational procedures (Bainbridge et al. 2000), effecting reversals in professional practice (Chambers 1993, 2008), focusing on decolonizing and transdisciplinary research methodologies (Chilisa 2012; Smith 2012), protecting public research from commodification and privatization, and shielding research from corporate abuse and capture (Union of Concerned Scientists 2012).

Second, decentralized, self-organized research and grassroots innovation must be fostered. These include education for critical consciousness and place-based learning, peer-to-peer learning for the production of collective knowledge, the establishment of extended peer communities to validate and protect such collective knowledge, and the strengthening of local organizations to extend grassroots research and innovation to more people and places (Pimbert 2018c).

Self-organized research and grassroots innovation networks are rooted in specific places and usually span local to very large geographical areas. For example, the grassroots movement *Campesino a Campesino* or Farmer to Farmer (CAC), which originated in the early 1970s in Guatemala, has spread through Mexico, Nicaragua, and Cuba (Holt-Giménez

2006; Machín Sosa et al. 2013). By building local capacity, autonomy, and empowerment, the CAC process has generated effective site-specific agroecological solutions as well as nonhierarchical communication for social change throughout Central America and the Caribbean. Other examples include the Farmer-Scientist Partnership for Development (MASIPAG) in the Philippines (Bachmann et al. 2009), and L'Atelier Paysan (Goulet et al. 2022) and Réseau Semences Paysannes²⁰ in France. While they can experience conflicts and tensions, these decentralized and distributed forms of knowledge co-creation work from the bottom up and tend to be organized on the basis of a more egalitarian logic to address locally defined priorities and needs of a diversity of groups (Pimbert 2007).

Some horizontal networks for autonomous knowledge creation and peer-to-peer learning distance themselves from the state and rely on self-mobilization and self-financing. But most peoples' networks that promote the democratization of food and agricultural research consciously adopt a “dual power” approach to transform existing knowledge, policies, and practices. This might involve farmers and indigenous peoples engaging with scientists to decolonize participatory research on the basis of clearly negotiated roles, rights, and responsibilities, while also maintaining a decentralized network of safe spaces for more autonomous and diverse ways of knowing (experiential, local, tacit, feminine, phenomenological . . .).

Overall, however, research on the social, economic, technical, environmental, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of food sovereignty remains largely unfunded. For example, agroecological research currently receives a minuscule percentage of the total public funding for agricultural research and development; the lion's share goes to supporting industrial agriculture²¹. For agroecological change in food sovereignty to gain traction, public funds need to be redirected toward encouraging the decentralized co-creation of knowledge by food providers and citizen-consumers (Anderson et al. 2021; Pimbert et al. 2021).

However, funding decisions are only one element of the wider institutionalized bias favoring scientific and technological research that “locks out” agroecological innovations. Vanloqueren and Baret (2009) showed how funding priorities, public-private sector partnerships, the assumptions and cognitive routines of scientists, and other key determinants of innovation can synergize and lead to the creation of a socio-technological regime that favors genetic engineering and hinders the development of more holistic agroecological approaches to farming and land use. In turn, this systemic bias in research acts in combination with wider political structures and agricultural markets to lock out agroecological approaches from society and keep industrial agriculture in place (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems [IPES-Food] 2016).

Strengthening Local Organizations and Networks

Local organizations²² of indigenous communities, peasants, pastoralists, fishers, and food processors and distributors have always been important in facilitating collective action and coordinated management of agri-food systems in different contexts. Over time, people form local groups to work together on resource management, labor sharing, marketing, and other activities that, done alone, would be too costly or otherwise unfeasible. Local organizations can exist across a range of scales—from local to national networks, to international federations and confederations. One reason for linking up local organizations in this way is to increase their effectiveness in managing agri-food systems and to strengthen their agency and position in policy debates on farming, the environment, and access to food.

Several organizations with different functions, powers, and responsibilities are usually needed to coordinate different activities within agri-food systems. Such “nested

organizations” operate at different scales and function in complementary ways (Ostrom 1990, 2010; Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2007). Acting in complementary ways and at different scales, local organizations and their networks can manage the dynamic complexity of agri-food systems, integrating their ecological, economic, spiritual, and cultural aspects. This web of organizations thus provides the basis for decentralized governance and autonomous systems (Pimbert 2008).

Social movements and networks of local organizations also play an important role in strengthening the voice, agency, and coordinated activities of small-scale producers and other citizens in a variety of spheres. Many aiming to influence policy making and practice are not entirely focused on agriculture—they often have broader goals of social transformation. In struggles for food sovereignty, local organizations and their federations seek to have a greater say in the governance of agri-food systems. Far from seeing citizenship as a set of rights and responsibilities granted by the state, they envision these as gained through the agency and actions of people themselves. Local organizations and federations are thus increasingly seen as fostering a new expression of citizenship in the governance of agri-food systems.

However, strengthening local organizations within the context of food sovereignty depends on overcoming two major constraints. First, outward migration and depopulation of the countryside have significantly weakened local organizations, as fewer people are available to participate in the activities of local groups and institutions. Reversing this trend depends on introducing policies and practices that encourage people to live and work in rural areas again. However, they should be based on detailed knowledge of the complex local dynamics at play rather than on reductive explanations that focus on a single cause of migration. For example, while climate change is undoubtedly increasing migration worldwide (Kaczan and Orgill-Meyer 2020; Rigaud et al. 2018), it does not act independently of other factors, such as existing histories of displacement, long-term degradation of smallholders’ livelihoods, water scarcity, or impacts of export-oriented commodity production (Garcia and Spitz 2013; Kelley et al. 2022). Second, many rural communities are no longer in charge of managing their local agri-food systems. In his seminal study, Scott (1998) has shown how they are often not “trusted” by state bureaucracies to be able to do so. This disempowering pressure, which in some places has persisted for a long time, can leave indigenous and peasant communities—and their local organizations—incapable of managing their food provisioning environments or sharing management rights and responsibilities with others.

Evidence indicates that popular education for social transformation is important in rebuilding local organizations. Critical pedagogy helps farmers and other citizens learn “to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire 1972). Echoing a long tradition of popular education in Europe (Pelloutier 1901; Gramsci 1978; Ferrer 1996), Scandinavia (Broadbridge et al. 2011) and the Americas (Dewey 1916; Freire 1972; McCune and Sánchez 2019), grassroots networks use education as a tool to explore how an individual’s personal experiences and learning are linked to larger societal problems.

Pedagogical spaces for the recovery of autonomy and the strengthening of local organizations include La Via Campesina’s transformative agroecology trainings in Latin America, Asia, and Africa (La Via Campesina 2013; Rosset et al. 2011), Farmer Field Schools in Indonesia (Fakih et al. 2003), the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement critical pedagogy rooted in territory (Meek 2015; Meek and Tarlau 2016), and the popular education methods of L’Atelier Paysan in France (L’Atelier Paysan 2016), as well as examples of learning to build consciousness, skills, and collective capacity for food sovereignty in Europe (Anderson et al. 2019) and in Latin America (Meek et al. 2019). By emphasizing a politics of possibilities, these pedagogies of hope (Amsler 2015; hooks 2003) can help to rebuild and strengthen local organizations for food sovereignty.

Achieving Gender and Intersectional Justice

Gender justice and feminism(s) must be at the heart of food sovereignty if it is to abolish capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial relationships with food and the earth (Portman 2018). While a commitment to gender equality and women's rights has been present in the food sovereignty movement since its inception, the work of embedding feminism and intersectionality in food sovereignty has been incremental (Calvário and Desmarais 2023) leading to LVC's recent conceptualization of "popular peasant feminism." In recent years, the feminist dimensions of food sovereignty and agroecology have received growing attention, building on the lived experiences, activism, and commitment of peasant and rural women from different regions.

Some of the feminist dimensions of food sovereignty include:

- Ensuring gender equitable participation and representation of women within the governance structures of peasant organizations and political processes broadly speaking: the use of gender-parity quotas can be effective in ensuring more horizontal power relations; however, addressing the impacts of gender-based violence on women's participation is also key.
- Eliminating all forms of gender-based violence, as highlighted since 2008 by LVC's Global Campaign to End Violence against Women. Capitalism relies on women's exploitation in order to operate: capitalism and patriarchy are mutually reinforcing causes of violence against women, and food sovereignty must free women from both (Bourke Martignoni and Claeys 2022). Food sovereignty is about tackling the multiple, overlapping, and intertwined structures of oppression, using an intersectional lens, but it is also fundamentally about constructing new gender relations, free of oppressions, from the household to the global food system (Calvário and Desmarais 2023; La Via Campesina 2004).
- Protecting women's bodily autonomy and their sexual and reproductive health and rights: food sovereignty encompasses "personal" sovereignty and autonomy, including bodily and sexual autonomy, and freedom from violence (La Via Campesina 2017).
- Guaranteeing women's equal rights to land and resources, with comprehensive, participatory agrarian reform an essential step to ensuring that rural women can live a "dignified and fair life": defending an ecofeminist ontology of land, where land "is more than a means of production" and is "a space of life, culture, identity, an emotional and spiritual environment" (La Via Campesina 2014).
- Constructing new gender relations by recognizing women's role as both producers and reproducers while challenging gendered divisions of labor: advancing proposals, demands, and concrete measures to tackle structural factors as well as sexism within the movement, rural organizations, and society at large, thus embodying a perspective of power as relational. Radically politicizing the domestic sphere and rural societies in ways that challenge the views, practices, mechanisms, and ideologies that naturalize women's role as carers (Calvário and Desmarais 2023) while altering the traditional family structure to strip it from patriarchy and sexism and combatting intra-household inequalities (Park et al. 2015).
- Fostering a diverse, nonviolent, and inclusive countryside, and protecting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer persons in rural areas with a view to

ensuring a more inclusive, nonbinary approach to sex- and gender-based discrimination (La Via Campesina 2016).

- Placing the interconnectedness of people and nature at the center of economic and political systems: caring for the soils, for water, for the life cycles of microorganisms, insects, and other animals of the agroecosystem, for seed and plant as well as animal breed biodiversity, and for the people who work the land, as well as those who process, transport, and eat the food; placing life, and the reproduction of life, at the heart of our concerns; nurturing the interdependencies and relationships that generate social resilience. This approach stands in striking contrast with food as a commodity guided by linear thinking, actions, decisions, and relationships based on domination, profit, or individual short-term gain (Milgroom et al. 2021).

Many indigenous worldviews emphasize the importance of intergenerational relationships and responsibilities; in Western philosophy, intergenerational justice is meanwhile still an emerging field (Watene 2022). As a Maori scholar, Krushil Watene (2022) emphasizes that for indigenous peoples, “relatives” include all humans, animals, plants, land, and water, extending backward and forward in time. Nourishing and regenerating these relationships is central to the well-being of indigenous peoples and enables an intersectional approach to intergenerational justice.

In many indigenous cultures, rituals express peoples’ identities through their relation to stars, rivers, plants, mountains, ancestral lands, and generations of people. These indigenous intersectional relations are protected and restored through restrictions on resource use and recognition of the rights of Mother Earth/Nature, such as the goddess Pachamama revered by indigenous peoples of the Andes. Christine Winter (2021) explored the philosophies of indigenous peoples of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States and found that the intergenerational justice theory of white settlers does not fully reflect indigenous obligations to past and future generations. She highlights fundamental differences in understandings between indigenous and settler communities and argues that societies established through colonialization can benefit from embracing aspects of indigenous perspectives on intergenerational and intersectional justice.

Toward Economies of Care, Solidarity, and Degrowth

The dominant model of economic development works well for industrial food and farming. Free trade and other economic innovations favored by transnational corporations and financial investors continue to fuel the early 21st century’s historically unprecedented concentration of wealth and power by a tiny minority of hyper-rich individuals (Chomsky 2017). At the time of writing, the hyper-rich comprise fewer than one hundred people who own and control more wealth than 50 percent of the world’s population (Beaverstock and Hay 2016). Collectively, their strategic priority is to ensure that economic rules do not constrain their activity in any way, and allow instead for continued private accumulation as well as the externalization of social and environmental costs.

A fundamentally different economics is needed for widespread transitions to food sovereignty. Self-determining and self-managing communities of producers and citizen-consumers need their own distinct forms of economic exchange that minimize the need to participate in global commodity markets. Degrowth in overproduction and excess consumption as well as re-localized economies (Latouche 2011; D’Alisa et al. 2014; Hickel and Kallis 2020; Kallis 2018; Roman-Alcalá 2017) are essential for food sovereignty. This is largely because a violent tendency for “accumulation through dispossession” (Harvey 2004) is built into the very fabric of industrial agri-food systems and the world economy (Hickel et

al. 2022). For example, evidence from all continents shows that as commodity frontiers for the extraction of oil, metals, and other materials expand to new sites, local communities are displaced and impoverished. Rates of environmental destruction also increase (Martinez-Alier 2021; Temper et al. 2015; Global Atlas of Environmental Justice²³; Dunlap and Jakobsen 2020).

Diverse communities thus require alternative forms of economic organization that provide degrowth opportunities and local autonomous spaces for the generation of convivial use values rather than exchange values alone (Illich 1973). Last but not least, a transformed economics for food sovereignty would aim to holistically integrate productive labor with the reproductive labor of care of both women and of nature (Mies and Bennholdt Thomsen 1999; Salleh 2017). The challenge is to reimagine economics outside the realms of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

Fortunately, “more-than-capitalist economies” (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020) persist across the world. In fact, much of the world’s economy is informal, cooperative, hidden, community-based, and unwaged (Rist 2011, 2018; White and Williams 2014). Empirical examples from anthropology and economic geography show how diverse economies can also include more than human labor and human and nonhuman interdependence (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020). Although they are ignored, devalued, and undermined by mainstream economic theory, these forms of economic organization offer relevant models for food sovereignty. The following are key in enabling a progressive shift to an economics of care, degrowth, social inclusion, solidarity, and freedom (Pimbert 2018a):

- Strengthening diverse forms of economic exchange that combine market activities with nonmonetary forms of exchange based on barter, reciprocity, gift relations, care, and solidarity—complementary forms of local economic exchange that offer alternatives to markets predicated solely on money
- A guaranteed and unconditional minimum income for all men and women that reflects a clear commitment to gender and intersectional justice
- A significant drop in time spent in wage-work and a fairer sharing of jobs and free time between genders
- Wealth redistribution measures—taxing the hyper-rich and corporations as well as financial speculations to free up resources for poorer social groups and regions and to also regenerate local ecologies and economies
- The use of alternative local currencies to retain wealth in reterritorialized economies
- Supporting economic exchanges based on the principle of “from each according to his/her means, to each according to his/her needs”
- Economic indicators that reflect and reinforce new definitions of well-being such as conviviality, mutual care, and frugal abundance

It is noteworthy that these proposals for economic democracy do not exclude trade and exchanges between different parts of the world. For instance, practical plans to harness trade for food sovereignty include managing supply to ensure that public support does not lead to overproduction and dumping, which can lower prices below the cost of production and harm farmers in the Global North and Global South; creating regional common agricultural markets that include countries with similar levels of agricultural productivity—for example, North Africa and the Middle East, West Africa, Central Africa, South Asia, and

Eastern Europe; and protecting these regional common agricultural markets using quotas and tariffs to guarantee fair and stable prices to marginalized small-scale producers, food processors, and small food enterprises. More generally, the emphasis is on reorienting the end goals of trade rules so that they contribute to the building of local economies and local control instead of fostering international competitiveness and unequal exchange.

Economies of care and solidarity seek to combine these processes in mutually reinforcing ways for post-capitalist, postcolonial, and post-patriarchal economics.

Transforming Governance

Decisions on how, why, where, and for whom agri-food systems are designed and managed are critical for the future well-being of people and planet. As such, control over governance—the set of political, social, and economic rules, processes, and systems that determine the way decisions are taken and implemented for the design and management of agri-food systems—is a key battleground for the transformation of food and agriculture, be it at the global, regional, national, or local level.

Actors promoting industrial food and agriculture have had an explicit agenda to “reset” global governance in the tradition of “stakeholder capitalism,” which deepens the concentration of agro-industrial power and sidelines multilateral structures of accountability (Montenegro de Wit et al. 2021; Canfield, Anderson, and McMichael 2021). A recent example is the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, which adopted a model of multi-stakeholder governance backed by powerful corporate actors, bypassing the multilateral spaces where states already come together to make decisions (Canfield, Duncan, and Claeys 2021). The development of unaccountable multi-stakeholder platforms in food systems is further pushed by some of the biggest champions of 4IR agriculture—the WEF, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the global nonprofit EAT, market-friendly NGOs like the World Wide Fund for Nature, and corporations including Unilever, Nestlé, Tyson, and Bayer (Chandrasekaran et al. 2021).

In contrast, actors in the global food sovereignty movement have defended a human rights–based and inclusive vision of governance grounded in multilateralism. In this vision, decision making rests with states who are in turn accountable to their citizens, while food governance must be democratized and give priority voice to those most affected by hunger and food insecurity. Power asymmetries and conflicts of interests must be avoided, and the corporate capture of food governance must be resisted. At the heart of this approach is the right to food, which can serve as a guiding tool for food governance by helping identify the structural causes and main drivers of the systemic crises that people and the planet face. The emphasis on inclusiveness in governance structures is based on the recognition of the fact that marginalized groups and constituencies have been systematically excluded from decision making in the food arena, especially the peasants, pastoralists, fisherfolks, landless, workers, women, youth, and indigenous peoples.

In the early part of the 21st century, food sovereignty actors have been successful in creating spaces for the participation of those most affected in a number of UN arenas, including the FAO of the UN, the reformed Committee on World Food Security (CFS; McKeon 2015), and the UN Human Rights Council (McKeon and Kalafatic 2009). The reform of the CFS in 2009 and the creation of the CSM (now renamed the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism) have enabled various constituencies of small-scale food producers (peasants, indigenous peoples, agricultural workers, fishers, and pastoralists), urban poor, women, youth, and NGOs to develop a shared political agenda and speak with one voice (Brem-Wilson 2015; McKeon 2015; Claeys and Duncan 2019a). In all these spaces, food

sovereignty actors have denounced corporate-friendly visions of food systems reforms and demanded regulation of corporate expansion and concentration. They have fought for the human rights of small-scale farmers and denounced the commodification, privatization, and corporate capture of natural resources and food systems. In a context marked by the multiplication of multi-stakeholder arenas, attacks on human rights, and the rise of authoritarian and fascist governments, it is becoming increasingly difficult for food sovereignty actors to influence global food governance (Duncan and Claeys 2018). This points to the need for the movement to reflect collectively on where to engage at the global level and to what end (Food First Information and Action Network [FIAN] 2023). Adding to these challenges is the rise of climate policies and climate finance, which are impacting and reshaping food and agriculture systems in yet unanticipated ways.

In parallel, there is an urgent need to rebuild food governance for radical democracy from the bottom up—local to global. Transformations for food sovereignty require deeply democratic and inclusive forms of governance, building existing governance models and more radical experiments in direct democracy. Citizens and social movements committed to food sovereignty generally seek to reverse the democratic deficit by promoting an expansion of “direct” democracy in decision making in order to complement, or replace, models of representative democracy in policy making and governance. This view is consistent with the principle that people—rather than governments of nation states—have the fundamental right to decide their own food and agricultural policies (Nyéléni 2007). Ideas of decentralized, democratic, and distributed governance also echo peasant farmers’ and indigenous peoples’ views that food systems are (or should be) regenerative, redistributive, nonhierarchical, and governed on the basis of reciprocal rights and relations (Marya and Patel 2021; Wittman 2009). This deeply radical approach to politics seeks to remake society (Bookchin 1990). Strengthening citizen-controlled agri-food systems and autonomy calls for forms of political and social organization that can institutionalize interdependence without resorting to the global market or the central state.

However, a transition to large-scale direct democracy poses major challenges for social movements (Pimbert 2008). First, deepening democracy assumes that every person is competent to participate in democratic politics and demands a shift in mindset and behavior from that of passive taxpayers and voters. Second, active citizenship and participation in decision making are rights that have to be claimed mainly through the agency and actions of people themselves; they are seldom granted by the state or the market. Despite its aims to radically alter existing power relations, the food sovereignty movement has a contradictory relationship with the state. On the one hand, the movement is very critical of the negative impacts of state policy (e.g., repression, eviction, liberalization) and, on the other hand, its theories and proposals for change often rely on state interventions and support (e.g., demand for credit, extension services). This contradiction is not fully resolved as different approaches to claiming rights to decision making partially reflect distinct ideologies in the food sovereignty movement (anarchism, state focused-reformism . . .).

Third, empowering indigenous peoples, peasant farmers, and other citizens in the governance of agri-food systems, along with the stewardship of the ecosystems they are embedded in (such as grasslands, forests, and wetlands), demands a number of measures. These include social innovations that create inclusive and safe spaces for peoples’ deliberation and action, such as mini-publics²⁴; the establishment of local organizations, horizontal networks, and federations to enhance peoples’ capacity for voice and agency; moves to strengthen civil society; the promotion of gender and intersectional equity; and the expansion of information democracy and citizen-controlled media (such as community radio and video filmmaking). Other needed innovations promote self-management structures at the workplace and democracy in households, encourage learning from the history of direct democracy, and nurture active citizenship through popular education.

And fourth, people need material security and free time to be “empowered” to think about the policies and institutions they want and how they can develop them. Free time is needed for people to fully engage in, and regularly practice, the art of participatory direct democracy. That demands radical reforms in economic arrangements like those listed in the “Towards Economies of Care, Solidarity, and Degrowth” section of this article.

At larger spatial scales, collective action is needed to coordinate local adaptive management and governance across a wide range of agri-food systems and associated landscapes (farmlands, forests, grasslands, peri-urban landscapes, and beyond). So to put people at the center of agri-food systems and to foster autonomy, it is key to decentralize and redistribute power in polycentric and horizontal webs, both in and between territories (Pimbert and Borrini-Feyerabend 2019). In this regard, valuable insights can be gained from the Zapatista’s federation of autonomous municipalities in Mexico (Esteva 2005; Ramirez 2008; Zapatista Enlaces Civiles 2022) and the democratic confederalism that enables ecological regeneration, women’s liberation, and democracy in Kurdish Rojava (Dirik 2022; Hunt 2021; Öcalan 2011; Pimbert 2021).

Conclusion: Future Directions for Research

There are a number of gaps in knowledge that follow from our analysis of systemic transformations for food sovereignty. Theory and practice would benefit from further critical research in the following areas in particular:

1. *Healing the metabolic rift and inventing a new modernity.* Recent research has characterized key domains for agroecological transformation (Anderson et al. 2021). However, more research is needed to identify policies, practices, and structural changes that can enable a shift to agroecology-based food sovereignty, in particular in light of debates around the protein transition and the need to address the negative impacts of industrial livestock production. For example, new knowledge is needed on how processes of degrowth and delinking from global commodity markets can substantially reduce the consumption of fossil fuels and materials in agri-food systems that re-localize food production, processing, and distribution in specific territories. Under what conditions can the dead labor of industrial machines be replaced by the living productive and reproductive labor of people, animals, and nature in agroecological pathways to food sovereignty and conviviality? In cases where these agroecological pathways are more reliant on using human labor (including migrant labor), how can practices be explicitly based on a gender and intersectional justice approach? Learning to heal the metabolic rift would also benefit from nuanced research that makes more visible the relationship between women’s knowledge, domestic work, and care with socio-environmental sustainability at different scales (Larrauri De Marco, Pérez Neira, and Soler Montiel 2016).

New discourses on modernity, progress, and well-being are needed to enable people to live within safe planetary boundaries and avoid further transgressing the Earth’s critical bio-physical limits (Richardson et al. 2023). Although methodologically challenging, more in-depth research is needed to better understand how—and under what conditions—life-centric discourses can be translated into everyday practices of sustainable living in different contexts.

2. *Rights to land, seeds, water, soil, forests, and other natural resources.* International human rights law has recently evolved to fully recognize the human rights to land, seeds, water, and natural resources, as individual and collective rights. More work is needed to robustly analyze the implementation of these rights and how they are understood,

translated, and recognized in different contexts as well as how rights-based approaches to the governance of land, seeds, and forests complement and interact with approaches based on the commons. Research is also needed to identify the best approaches to protecting and legally recognizing the customary tenure rights of IPLCs in the face of continuous land grabbing. While the roles of IPLCs as custodians of global biodiversity is increasingly recognized, new pressures on their communal lands arise from the multiplication of conservation and climate projects in their territories. These projects are often grounded in capitalistic and market-based approaches that fail to put IPLCs at the heart of project design, implementation, and governance and tend to overlook the existence of multiple and dynamic land uses. Indigenous approaches to conservation and territorial development will need to be documented and supported from the ground up. Research should also continue to document the differentiated impacts of the privatization and commodification of communal lands on women, youth, and marginalized groups (Lemke and Claeys 2020) and efforts to democratize land and natural resources governance, and make it more inclusive.

3. *Decolonize knowledge and the role of scholars.* The analysis of “lock-in” and institutionalized bias in research is highly relevant for scholars, “organic intellectuals” emerging from different classes (Gramsci 1978), and social movements that seek to contest, construct, and transform different areas of knowledge for food sovereignty. It constitutes a key frontier for further inquiry by critical anthropologists and scholars in other fields. More generally, research is needed on how to develop knowledge and ways of knowing that can replace destructive epistemologies and ontologies rooted in colonialism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation.

More methodological work is also needed on how to robustly demonstrate the quality, validity, and outcomes of scholar activism in research. This could include further critical exploration of impact when knowledge is co-created by academics and non-academics (e.g., farmers, indigenous peoples). How might collective leadership support effective scholar activism for food sovereignty?

4. *Local organizations and food sovereignty.* Nuanced research is needed to understand the “processes of cumulative socio-natural displacement” (Kelley et al. 2022) that undermine local organizations and their institutions. In turn, this knowledge can help in identifying policies and actions designed to repopulate the countryside and rebuild vibrant local organizations of food producers, such as land reforms, redirecting subsidies from large-scale industrial agriculture to support diverse agroecological farming, and stronger controls on agribusiness investment.

More critical inquiry is needed on how to strengthen local organizations and their networks. For example, research could develop approaches to better understand how—and under what conditions—an “education for radical democracy” (Amsler 2015) and empowerment from below can be extended to more people and places. A transdisciplinary global anthropology of learning (Maguire 2017) may help researchers address this societal challenge.

Detailed inquiry is also needed on how local spaces and organizations can be transformed to enable greater gender and intersectional justice—and thus ensure that they do not reproduce glaring or subtle forms of exclusion. Finally, there is a need for more work on how such gender transformative methodologies can help translate on-the-ground commitment to a politics of freedom, equity, decolonization, and gender inclusion.

5. *Gender and intersectional justice.* More nuanced qualitative research is needed to explore, implement, and understand the feminist and intersectional dimensions of food

sovereignty, including ways to address and overcome patriarchy as a form of oppression that intersects with race, social class, and sexual orientation. Research and action are also needed to address the continuum of violence from intimate to corporate/economic, protect and realize women's rights to sexual and reproductive autonomy, and (re-)value relations of care for humans and nature. This will demand stronger connections between gender justice, radical food politics, and agroecology as alternatives to patriarchal and extractivist forms of capitalism. In parallel, more dialogue would be beneficial between food sovereignty and indigenous ways of knowing, notably around intergenerational justice.

Last, how can emerging concepts of “intersectional justice” avoid reproducing forms of colonialism that perpetuate the marginalization of indigenous people's agency, epistemologies, and ontologies?

6. *Rethinking economics.* Food sovereignty focuses on economic democracy, reinventing markets, building the commons, and commoning as well as supporting anti-capitalistic relations. However, there are many gaps in knowledge as convergences between degrowth, feminist economics of care, and food sovereignty have received little attention. Enabling a cross-fertilization of ideas, knowledge co-creation, and convergences between these three themes is a major challenge for the Nyéléni Global Forum in India in 2025 (Nyéléni 2023).

For example, new studies are urgently needed to explore, implement, and understand processes of economic transformation for food sovereignty based on economies of care and degrowth in consumption of energy and materials. Similarly, further research is needed on how the paradigms of commons, commoning (Dardot and Laval 2015; Vivero-Pol et al. 2019), and commons-based food systems can help challenge the existing profit-maximizing, individualistic, and exploitative model of food production, consumption, and post-consumption represented by the industrial food system. How can commoning pave the way for decolonizing and de-commodifying food systems (Ferrando et al. 2021), and how can rights-based and commons approaches work in tandem to advance social change?

7. *Democratizing governance.* Reversing the current democratic deficit in the governance of agri-food systems has become particularly urgent with the rise of authoritarian regimes and criminalization, the shrinking of civic space, and top-down technocratic responses to the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and the transgression of other vitally important planetary boundaries (Richardson et al. 2023). For example, proposals by banks and the private sector to mobilize new finance for climate change aim to fundamentally reshape global food security governance, reinforcing existing trends of multi-stakeholderism and corporate capture of decision making (Carney 2021; The World Bank 2023).

Actions to limit the power of corporate-led multi-stakeholderism in agri-food governance would benefit from a better understanding of how—and under what conditions—the coordinated efforts of food sovereignty activists and movements can strengthen a more-inclusive multilateral governance model, at different levels and in different arenas. Research will need to pay particular attention here to the meaning and conceptualization of food sovereignty in different contexts, to how the concept evolves as it is codified in different institutional settings, to how well it is translated in various policy and legal frameworks, and to how peasant and other social movements respond to the cooptation of food sovereignty.

More generally, deepening democracy depends on identifying more appropriate governance architectures for food sovereignty. Most notably, federating and building alliances between spaces of self-governance and bottom-up decision making could help

reinvent and deepen democratic governance of agri-food systems everywhere—from local to global levels. Achieving widespread food sovereignty may ultimately depend on the bottom-up development of self-empowered confederations for inclusive democracy. Although methodologically challenging, this is an important area of investigation for future research on transformative practice and democratic governance.

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Notes

¹ The IPCC report found that the impacts from human-caused climate change are more significant than previously thought. They are happening much faster and are more disruptive and widespread than scientists expected in 2015. Climate change is hitting the planet faster, and the latest IPCC climate report warns that rising greenhouse gas emissions could soon outstrip the ability of many communities to adapt.

² The number of refugees worldwide is growing. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR <<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html>>), 82.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced at the end of 2020. Over 24 percent of the world's population live in slums (2018 figures) according to the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) (Statista - Share of urban population living in slums in 2020, by region <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/684694/percentage-of-world-urban-population-in-slums-by-region/>>). These vulnerable populations do not have access to safe, reliable sources of drinking water and often have little or no access to sanitation.

³ The terms "farmer," "campesino," and "peasant" are used interchangeably here. Small-scale food producers—peasant farmers, artisanal fisherfolks, pastoralists, forest dwellers, land workers, indigenous peoples, and hunters and gatherers—provide food to the majority of the world population (ETC 2022). They also constitute the largest group of "economically active people."

⁴ La Via Campesina (LVC) is an international movement that brings together peasant organizations of small and medium-sized producers, agricultural workers, landless people, women farmers, migrants,

and indigenous communities from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe. It is an autonomous, pluralistic movement, independent of all political, economic, or other denominations. LVC comprises some 182 local and national organizations in eighty-one countries and represents approximately two hundred million farmers. For more details, see La Via Campesina. International Peasants' Movement <<https://viacampesina.org/en>>.

⁵ The organizers of the Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty were: La Via Campesina (LVC <<http://viacampesina.org>>); Le Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (ROPPA <<https://www.roppa.info>> and National Coordination of Farmer Organisations – Mali CNOP <<http://www.cnopmali.org>>); The World March of Women <<http://www.worldmarchofwomen.org>>; Friends of the Earth International <<http://www.foe.co.uk>>; World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers <<http://worldfisherforum.org>>; NGO members of the Food Sovereignty Network <<http://www.peoplesfoodsovereignty.org/>>; and the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty <<http://www.foodsovereignty.org>> (IPC).

⁶ The “right to the city” can be understood as the collective right to democratically control the production and use of urban space and urban processes.

“To claim the right to the city . . . is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization. Over the ways in which our cities are made and remade, and to do so in a fundamental and radical way” (Harvey 2012)

⁷ See Globalizations <<https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rglo20>>.

⁸ See Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems <<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sustainable-food-systems>>.

⁹ See Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems <<https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/wjsa21>>.

¹⁰ See Sustainability <<https://www.mdpi.com/journal/sustainability>>.

¹¹ See ephemera <<http://www.ephemerajournal.org>>.

¹² Metabolic rift is Karl Marx <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx>'s notion of the irreparable rift in the interdependent process of metabolic interaction between humanity and the rest of nature. This rupture between society and nature emanates from capitalist agricultural production and the growing division between town and country (Foster and Clark 2020).

¹³ UNDROP <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1650694?ln=en>> was approved by the UN General Assembly in December 2018

¹⁴ While aiming to maintain a good quality of life, controlled processes of degrowth in consumption of energy and materials usually rely on the eight “Rs”: reevaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalize, reduce, reuse, and recycle (Latouche 2011).

¹⁵ A fab lab (digital fabrication laboratory) is a small-scale workshop <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Workshop>> where people can create, play, learn, and invent. Fab labs provide access to the environment, the skills, the materials and the advanced technology to allow anyone anywhere to make (almost) anything. Fab labs now form a network of open, creative community of fabricators, artists, scientists, engineers, educators, students, amateurs, and professionals located in more than one hundred countries and 1,750 fab labs <<https://www.fablabs.io/>> across the globe.

¹⁶ The resilience of agri-food systems emerges from internal processes of functional diversity and redundancy, self-regulation, connectivity, response diversity, space and time heterogeneity, the building of natural assets such as soil fertility, social self-organization, reflective learning, autonomy, and local interdependency (Tiftonell 2020).

¹⁷ Agroecology is an alternative paradigm for food and agriculture that is simultaneously: (a) the application of ecological principles to food and farming systems that emerge from specific socioecological and cultural contexts in place-based territories; and (b) a socio-political process that centers the knowledge and agency of Indigenous peoples and peasants in determining agri-food system policy and practice (Anderson et al. 2021; Pimbert et al. 2021).

¹⁸ A similar opinion was strongly expressed by a South Korean delegate from La Via Campesina: “Agroecology without food sovereignty is a mere technicism. And food sovereignty without agroecology is hollow discourse” (cited by Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2014).

¹⁹ See *Democratising Agricultural Research: Making Excluded Voices Count in Agricultural Policy Making* <<http://www.excludedvoices.org>>.

²⁰ Réseau Semences Paysannes <<http://www.semencespaysannes.org>>.

²¹ In the United States, a recent analysis of funding by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) showed that projects with an emphasis on agroecology represented only 0.6–1.5 percent of the entire 2014 USDA Research, Extension, and Economics budget (Delonge et al. 2016). Britain’s development aid barely supports agroecology: overseas aid for agroecological projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America is less than 5 percent of agricultural aid and less than 0.5 percent of the total UK aid budget since 2010 (Pimbert and Moeller 2018). A similar picture holds true for East African countries, where the lion’s share of research and development funding by the Swiss government and the US-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supports farming based on the Green Revolution model and the development of global value chains (Biovision and IPES-Food 2020). Strikingly too, European Union funding to the FAO and other Rome-Food Sovereignty based UN agencies, and the Green Climate Fund, disregards agroecological research and development (Moeller 2020); most funding goes to industrial agriculture, which is responsible for the largest share of GHG emissions from food and agriculture.

²² Organizations are not the same as institutions. As defined by Douglass North, institutions are “the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction . . . [and that] structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social or economic . . . Institutions reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday life” (North 1990). Land tenure rules, and other rules regulating access, use, and control over natural resources, are examples of institutions. They are best understood as a set of informal and formal rules that are administered by organizations—which are essentially “groups of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives” (North 1990). Organizations operate within the framework—the rules and constraints—set by institutions. Examples include government departments or local beekeeper associations, both of which administer sets of formal and informal “rules of the game.”

²³ Global Atlas of Environmental Justice <<http://ejatlas.org>>.

²⁴ Mini-publics are made up of small numbers of citizens, who may be self-selected or randomly selected from a larger population (Fung 2003). They include citizens’ juries, fora for deliberative polls, consensus conferences, and citizen assemblies. Participatory policy processes, institutional choices, risk assessments, and bottom-up decision making can be based on mini-publics and methods for deliberative and inclusive processes (Böker 2017; Dryzek 2010; Pimbert 2022c; Smith and Setälä 2018; Wakeford et al. 2008). Food governance issues have been deliberated in this way by small and family farmers in citizens juries and scenario workshops on food futures in Andhra Pradesh (Pimbert and Wakeford 2003; Wakeford and Pimbert 2004), and by citizens’ assemblies on GMOs and agriculture in Mali (Pimbert and Barry 2021), and on the governance and priorities of agricultural research in West Africa (Pimbert et al. 2010).