



Critical Review

Local food sovereignty for global food security? Highlighting interplay challenges

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ABSTRACT

The food sovereignty movement proposes a localist approach to meeting food security while delivering broader social, economic and environmental benefits. The movement is spawning multiple local projects of food sovereignty, whereby people are empowered to define their own culturally and environmentally appropriate food systems. As the number of enacted examples increases, the movement is also affecting change at national (and international) levels, with a number of countries creating national strategies or legislation for food sovereignty. We reflect on the challenges created by such scaling up within the existing food system. We propose a focus on issues of institutional interplay in order to identify and critique challenges. We highlight three interplay situations between multiple, diverse enactments of food sovereignty at multiple levels, and between food sovereignty and the broader institutional contexts within which they are embedded.

1. Food sovereignty as a strategy for food security

Food security is usually understood as a status “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (World Food Summit, 1996). The number of chronically food insecure people remains high at 795 million worldwide (FAO, 2015), and this number is higher when micronutrient deficiency is also considered. Responses to food insecurity tend to focus on increasing food production (Chappell and LaValle, 2011; Glamann et al., 2015). However, 40% of Earth’s terrestrial surface is already being used for agriculture (Foley et al., 2005), and under productionist paradigms for delivering food security, arable land cover will increase. Many cultivated areas are high-input, intensified landscapes to which pesticides, fertilizers and irrigation are being applied with a severe impact on biodiversity and other aspects of the natural environment.

Food sovereignty has emerged as an alternative approach for achieving food security at the local level while also protecting biodiversity and the environment, and deliver broader social values, via non-industrial farming methods. The most common sovereignty definition, according to Beuchelt and Virchow (2012), was established in 2007 in Nyéléni, Mali, at the Forum for Food Sovereignty by La Vía Campesina: “Food sovereignty is 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 Vía Campesina, 2007). Food sovereignty can be framed as a form of localism, whereby sovereignty is regained over the economy (Hess, 2008).

This local movement is currently scaling up from a series of locally-embedded projects supported by a broader movement, into a national and international strategy for sustainable food security. For example, the MASIPAG network in the Philippines is replicating projects (see e.g. Heckelman and Wittman, 2015; Suh, 2015), and several governments are amplifying the scale of projects by integrating food sovereignty into their legislation of food security strategies. Examples include Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Senegal, Mali (Godek, 2015), and the Dominican Republic (Alonso-Fradejas et al., 2015); similar proposals are being discussed in Peru and El Salvador (Godek, 2015).

However, if food sovereignty is to deliver on its promises of food security alongside wider values, it must address issues of how it can exist within, and change, the existing food system. Wills (2015) argues that there are pertinent questions about the political geographies of such localist movements, such as whether power is really devolved, and whether actors engage and make the necessary changes to culture and relationships. Such changes are not straight-forward. For example, Morgan and Murdoch (2000) argue that similar fundamental shifts in food systems (in their case to organic agriculture in the UK) are shaped by the way in which the existing system constrains the generation and dissemination of knowledge required. It is therefore important to critically examine the way in which food sovereignty interacts with, and

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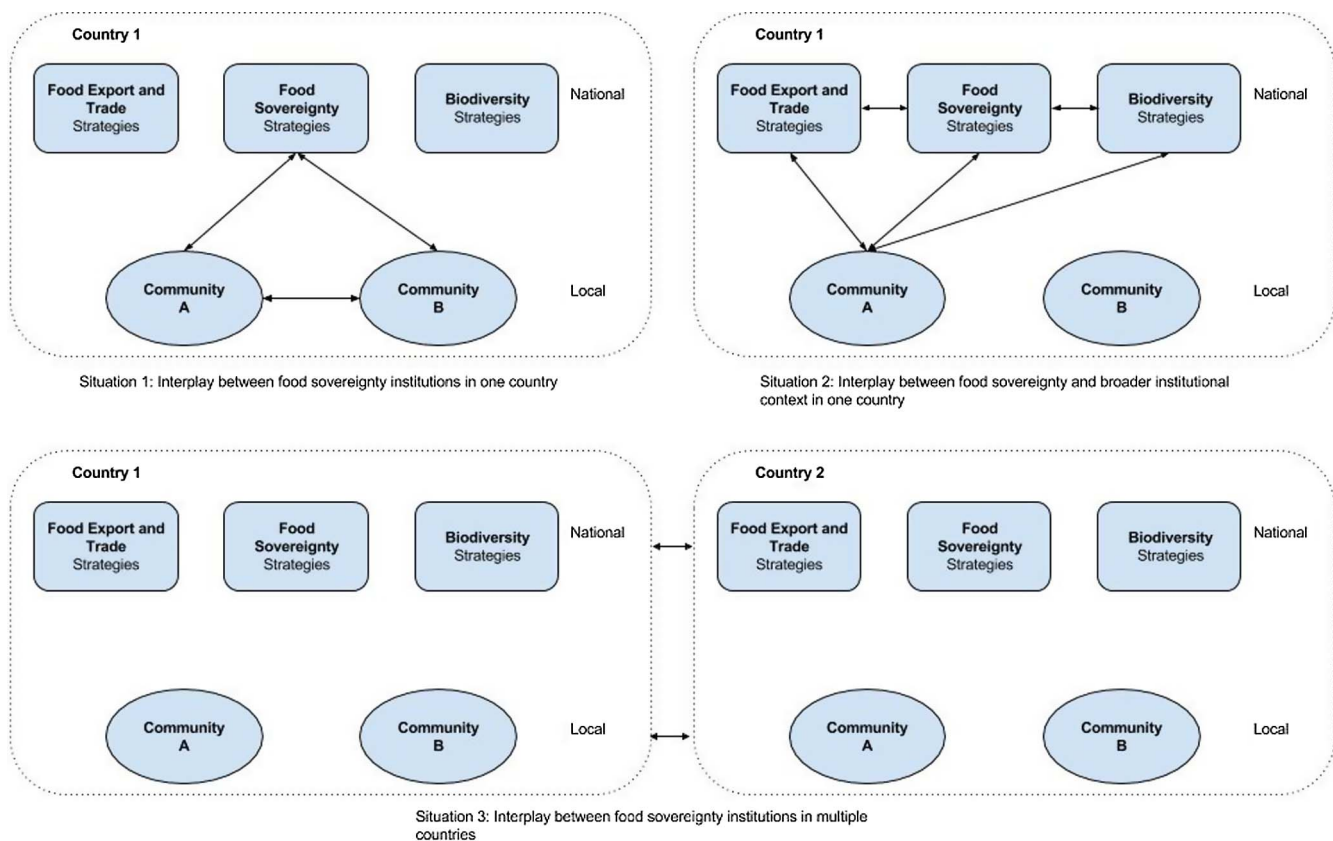


Fig. 1. Situations of institutional interplay in food sovereignty. Circles represent local level institutions, and squares represent national level institutions. Arrows represent issues of interplay between connected food sovereignty institutions in each interplay situation.

challenges, the existing food system.

2. Food sovereignty as a series of institutions

We argue that a framework of institutional interplay provides us with a framework for examining such issues of system change. An institution is defined by March and Olsen (2006, p. 3) as “a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources”. Institutions can be formal or informal and thus include policies and laws as well as norms and customs. Collectively, institutions guide human action; they can be broad institutions, shaping and reinforcing paradigms, or they can be more narrow, providing rules for shaping choices and actions within such paradigms (Kiser and Ostrom, 1982). How institutions interact is defined as interplay (Young, 2002); which can be positive, where institutions reinforce each other, or negative, where the goals or outcomes of one institution undermine those of another (see e.g. Paavola et al., 2009). Such interplay can be understood in terms of vertical interplay, between institutions at multiple levels (e.g. local to global), and as horizontal interplay, between institutions on the same level (e.g. between sectors or locations) (Young, 2002).

The overall food sovereignty movement, often represented by La Vía Campesina, is an institution that provides the broad paradigm and conditions of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty emphasises the positive synergies between agriculture, social justice, dignity and the conservation of nature (La Vía Campesina, 2011). La Vía Campesina is a worldwide movement for food sovereignty, defending small-scale sustainable agriculture while opposing corporate-driven agriculture. Smallholders count as the ‘backbone’ of global food security, arguably hosting the potential to feed the world in a socially and environmentally sustainable way (e.g. Altieri, 2009; Chappell and LaValle, 2011; Tschamtker et al., 2012). Thus, empowering smallholders

by granting them more social and political influence (Desmarais, 2008), as well as better access to and control over land is central to food sovereignty (Edelman, 2014).

Each local level example (enactment) of food sovereignty, or national strategy for food sovereignty, can be seen as an institution within the broader movement, with rules and procedures governing how sovereignty is achieved in practice. Some of these rules and procedures are common throughout food sovereignty enactments. For example, food sovereignty signifies local and environmentally friendly agriculture (Beuchelt and Virchow, 2012). The multidisciplinary science of agroecology therefore has largely co-evolved and often goes hand in hand with food sovereignty (Alonso-Fradejas et al., 2015), or can at least be seen as one interpretation of food sovereignty (Edelman, 2014).

However, despite common frameworks and principles, many rules and procedures vary because food sovereignty has many interpretations and operational definitions interacting with different operational contexts (see e.g. Wittman et al., 2010; Yale University Conference, 2013). This diversity is traceable to its historical origin: Food sovereignty emerged from *diálogo de saberes*, a collective construction of nascent meaning, based on reflective dialog between people with different experiences, visions and ways of knowing – a dialogue between academy and communities, theory and praxis, scientific and indigenous knowledge (Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2014). It is because of the process of *diálogo de saberes* that La Vía Campesina was never fragmented but instead created mobilising frames, such as food sovereignty or its own vision of agroecology (Desmarais, 2007). Thus, food sovereignty movements oppose unifying, technical, juridical and economic scientific Western knowledge, e.g. the concept of ‘climate-smart’ agriculture, which does not recognize or validate alternative forms of knowledge and might not be able to solve ‘real world’ problems of ‘real’ people (Guiso, 2000; Iles and Montenegro de Wit, 2015; Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2014). Food sovereignty’s potentially divergent, culturally and

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