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## What Place for International Trade in Food Sovereignty?

Kim Burnett and Sophia Murphy

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## Abstract

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International agricultural commodity trade is central to the livelihoods of millions of farmers across the globe, and to most countries' food security strategies. Yet global trade policies are contributing to food insecurity and are undermining livelihoods. Food Sovereignty emerged in part as a mobilization in resistance to the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture and its imposition of multilateral disciplines on domestic agriculture policy. While not explicitly rejecting trade, there is a strong, albeit understated, resistance to international commodity trade that risks marginalizing broader trade concerns in the visioning of what food sovereignty comprises. Our paper argues that trade is important to the realization of food security and to the livelihoods of small-scale producers, including peasants active in the Food Sovereignty movement, yet it remains under-explored in food sovereignty discourse and that further developing of its position on trade is strategically important.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This article is a discussion of food sovereignty and international trade and why those who share a vision of food sovereignty might want to re-examine the role of multilateral trade rules. Food sovereignty is coming up on a 20-year anniversary, if we count its origins in the first meeting of what became La Via Campesina (LVC), in Belgium in 1993. Born in resistance to the model of globalization that the World Trade Organization (WTO) has come to symbolize perhaps more than any other single institution, food sovereignty is commonly assumed to be hostile to international trade. This is not in fact accurate. Many of the farmers' organizations associated with the food sovereignty movement have members whose crops are sold in international markets and whose livelihoods depend on those sales. Nonetheless, there is real confusion about what kind of trade would be "alright" in a food sovereignty model, and considerable uncertainty on how to disaggregate international trade so as to understand the different balances of political and economic power that international markets in their diversity exemplify.

Trade has evolved significantly since the coming into force of the Uruguay Round Agreements and the founding of the WTO in 1995. Trade is less and less about an exchange of goods between two clearly identified countries, managed by firms from the respective countries. Increasingly, trade is about so-called global value chains,<sup>2</sup> in which one or more firms organize

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<sup>1</sup> A draft of this article is under review at the *Journal of Peasant Studies*

<sup>2</sup> The term valuechain was first coined by Porter, 1985.

the production of a good – say chocolate – by engaging directly with the producers (or their cooperatives or local buyers) of the primary commodity (in this case, cacao) and overseeing all stages of production through to the candy bar in its shiny wrapper. Quite possibly, three or more countries will be involved along the way.

The emergence of vertically integrated value chains in international trade, including agricultural commodity trade, was not so much the result of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) as other agreements, concluded at the same time, in Marrakech in 1994. These agreements include the General Agreement on Services (GATS) and the Agreement on Trade Related Investment Measures (TRIMs). Beyond the WTO trade agreements, and their counterparts at the bilateral and regional level, several other policy decisions created the conditions for global value chains to thrive: the deregulation of financial services and commodity futures markets; the end of government interventions in agricultural markets geared at either price or supply control; and the proliferation of both stand-alone investment agreements and hybrid trade and investment agreements (the North American Free Trade Agreement can be considered the prototype).

During the emergence of this latest form of globalized trade, international agricultural commodity markets have suffered a series of serious price shocks, the first in 2007. As a result, the world is feeling much more uncertain about its food supply today than it did in 1995. The civil and political protests that the food sovereignty movement embodied when its adherents confronted international trade negotiation meetings has become a more widespread malaise: all is not right with food systems whether in rich or poorer countries. The planet's resources appear stretched to breaking point (and in some cases beyond) by a production system that seems to be running out of control (generating an estimated 1.3 tonnes of waste a year (FAO, 2011)), while almost one billion people suffer chronic, life-stunting malnutrition because they cannot access even enough food for what FAO terms "a sedentary lifestyle" (SOFI 2012). Food sovereignty's appeal is growing, surely in part because it responds to this malaise and articulates an alternative. It is not – and never has been – about North-South politics, but about redressing political and economic power within food systems wherever they are.

What role is there for trade in what food sovereignty is defining? We start to explore this question in the article that follows. We do not have clear answers, but want to raise some issues and questions that in our view have not yet been sufficiently discussed by the food sovereignty movement. By outlining the evolution in both food sovereignty and trade, we hope to show some possible avenues for exploration that could move past more simplistic rejections of all trade as inevitably rich country – or rich company – dominated and towards something

that would better respond to the practical realities of the millions of small-scale producers (not to mention farm workers) whose livelihoods depend on international trade.

### Food Sovereignty: A Movement and a Concept

Food sovereignty as a movement is a relatively new transnational social movement and advocacy network of peasants, farmers, fisher folk, and other peoples dependent on agricultural production for their livelihoods. The movement originated in the Americas and Europe and expanded quickly to Asia, and later to Africa and other parts of the world (Holt-Giménez 2010, p.204). Food sovereignty emerged as a political movement when La Via Campesina used the term to assert itself as an international voice for peasant organizations at the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996. In just fifteen years, the movement has become a leading transnational agrarian movement (TAM) of peasant<sup>3</sup> organizations, lead in large part by LVC. As of 2010, food sovereignty represented primarily marginalized rural people from over 150 social movements and 79 countries, including 12 African countries and several countries in South and East Asia (Holt-Giménez 2010). The movement has become a pivotal force in working to safeguard the rights, dignity and livelihoods of millions of the most vulnerable persons and communities across the world.

LVC introduced the concept of food sovereignty in 1996 as an alternative to the expansion of capitalist agricultural production and neoliberal globalization of agricultural markets. The emergence of LVC coincided with the birth of the WTO and the coming into force of the Uruguay Round AoA. Under the banner of food sovereignty, LVC members articulated their rejection of the WTO and all it stood for. “WTO out of agriculture” was their slogan. They did not choose the perhaps more obvious slogan: “agriculture out of the WTO”. The slogan was an assertion that agriculture was their space, as producers, and they would dictate how the space should be managed. LVC was not just articulating a critique of the AoA’s rules and asserting that globalization should not dictate domestic agricultural policies. The organization’s wider point was to assert the primacy of agriculture and the damage that the logic of the WTO agreements would cause to the sector. LVC found itself in solidarity with the wider organization of social movements in the “alter-globalization” movement. From early on, LVC refused to give the WTO priority, choosing instead to devote its scarce policy resources for multilateral work to the UN system.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Via Campesina in fact defines themselves as an international movement of “peasants, small- and medium-sized producers, landless, rural women, indigenous people, rural youth and agricultural workers” (Via Campesina 2007). Peasants is used in this paper to embody all of these, for simplicity.

4 This assertion is based on Sophia Murphy’s experience working on trade and agriculture policies and meeting with LVC representatives over the years since 1998.

The conceptual definition of food sovereignty has evolved over the years. Via Campesina defined food sovereignty at its inception as “the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, respecting cultural and productive diversity” and “the right to produce our own food in our own territory” (in Desmarais 2007, 34). The organization later added “the right of people to define their agricultural and food policy” to the definition (in Desmarais 2007, 34). The movement and the concept became more formalized at the 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty (Nyéléni) in Mali, with the final declaration containing what is the most commonly recognized definition of food sovereignty today:

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 (Nyéléni 2007).

The forum also established the movement’s central focal areas, including land and agrarian reform, market protections for peasants (i.e. tariffs on imports and farm subsidies), sustainable and agro-ecological agricultural production, greater control for peasants over seeds and resources, and the rights and protection of women (Nyéléni 2007; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011).

### Trade and Food Sovereignty

From the inception of the food sovereignty movement through Néléni to today, trade has been a central focus of the political work, although primarily as a defensive agenda that rejected trade, particularly as embodied in international trade agreements. As the food sovereignty movement evolved, so did the role accorded to trade. It is possible to see a gradual acceptance of trade under certain circumstances in the statements made by adherents of the movement, with the shift away from focusing primarily on local markets to integrating consideration for fairer trade (below). Yet nowhere are the circumstances under which trade is acceptable within food sovereignty clearly laid out, and it is possible to identify both ambiguity and contradictions in what is said under a food sovereignty banner. It is unclear what place trade holds exactly, and related to that, what place there is within the food sovereignty movement for smallholder farmers whose production is exported, though clearly such farmers form part of LVC. It is probably fair to say the movement does not have a position on trade itself. In this paper, we explore how trade has changed over the past decade and then suggest some considerations for food sovereignty advocates to consider in their deliberations on how to think through trade policy recommendations.

### Promotion of local markets over trade

The food sovereignty movement is clear in its prioritization of local market exchange over global trade, in part as a direct response to neoliberal globalization and the tenets of agricultural liberalization that have accompanied it (Wittman et al. 2010, Rosset 2006, Nyéléni 2007). The original definition of food sovereignty put out by Via Campesina in 1996 focused on the rights of nations to develop the capacities to produce their own food. This right has been consistent through to Nyéléni, where the forum established “localizes food systems” as the third of six pillars of food sovereignty. The pillar promotes a bridging of the distance between producers and consumers and re-localises decision-making (IPC 2009). Elsewhere at Nyéléni, it was established that policies are to prioritize production for local consumption, and imports are not to displace this (Nyéléni 2007).

The movement’s prioritization of local markets, promotion of greater self-sufficiency and condemnation of the WTO could lead to the perception that the movement is against trade *per se*. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that the movement’s concern is with the current structures of agricultural production and trade. These structures are governed by policies that promote liberalization and privatization, which they see as harmful to hundreds of millions of small-scale producers, and which motivates them to push for greater autonomy in domestic policy. Agricultural trade liberalization can be understood to be part of a continuum that began with structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s and continued through the WTO and the many regional and bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) (Clapp 2012). These agreements systematically changed how and constrained to what extent governments could invest in their agricultural sectors and support their producers and traders. As a result, developing country producers, especially small-scale producers, faced competition in their local and regional markets from highly subsidized production grown in the United States and European Union (EU) as well as from unsubsidized but still cheaper production from other countries (FAO 2003; Kwa 2008; Bello 2008; IEG 2007: xxiv, 10). For farmers in industrialized economies, the AoA changed the programs governments could use to support agriculture and increased producers’ exposure to imports. This was true particularly in the EU, where markets were historically protected by high tariff barriers.

As many countries have shifted from being net exporters to being net importers of food, it has increased the exposure of the general population to international markets. In turn, these markets have been increasingly volatile since 2007, with three sharp price spikes amidst higher levels of volatility (Clapp 2009; HLPE 2011; Wise and Murphy 2012, 2013).

The perception of the movement as against trade is exacerbated by more critical perceptions of trade expressed by proponents of food sovereignty. In the Oakland Institute’s promotion of

Food Sovereignty, it links production of coffee, cocoa, and other ‘colonial legacy’ products to hunger and poverty (Oakland Institute, ND). Peter Rosset links export-oriented trade with the interests of large, wealthy and expanding farms, while small farmers and peasants are displaced onto marginal lands with poor soil quality and difficult growing conditions (Rosset 2006, 5). Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) meanwhile, consider fair trade to be part of the corporate food regime, classifying it as bolstering the neoliberal structures that the food sovereignty movement sees as the root cause of poverty, hunger and landlessness. While these perspectives hold some truth, their totalizing nature tends to lend to dismissal of exchange without nuance.

### Trade under certain circumstances

In fact, the food sovereignty movement allows for trade qualified by particular circumstances, albeit equivocally, as evidenced by the positions promoting room for trade, taken up by observers and some in the movement. Broadly, the movement allows for trade where domestic production cannot meet needs, and where agriculture promotes feeding populations first and not for prioritization of trade (Via Campesina 2010). Windfurh and Jonsén (2005, 32) observe that the “food sovereignty framework is a counter proposal to the neo-liberal macroeconomic policy framework. It is not directed against trade *per se*, but is based on the reality that current international trade practices and trade rules are not working in favour of smallholder farmers...”. Similarly, the third pillar from the Nyéléni conference goes on to reject trade and its institutions when qualified as harmful; that is “governance structures, agreements and practices that depend on and promote unsustainable and inequitable international trade and give power to remote and unaccountable corporations” (IPC 2009). The movement calls for allowances for protections and supports that protect small holders, as well as mechanisms such as supply management, commodity agreements, quotas, etc. in support of food security and sustainable livelihoods (Pimbert 2009). These requests mirror the agricultural policies adopted historically by most developed countries today (Chang 2005, Stiglitz 2007).

That agriculture is for feeding people before trade raises questions around where export commodities fit, particularly commodities that are not staple foods such as cocoa and coffee. Views that export-oriented trade is about large farmers or that ‘colonial legacy’ commodities are part of a neoliberal economic system and thus anathema to food sovereignty speaks to one of the broader challenges with the food sovereignty movement’s ambiguous position on trade: what of small-scale producers who produce for such markets and wish to continue to do so? Roughly 30 million smallholders grow most of the world’s coffee and cocoa, with 5 million small farmers growing near 90% of the world’s cocoa, and 25 million producing 80% of the world’s coffee (Fairtrade Foundation 2013). While primarily grown through plantations using labourers,



commodities such as tea, sugar and bananas are also grown by millions of small-scale farmers in some countries (*ibid*). Moreover, plantations employ millions of workers, many of them small-scale landholders, and others landless. These livelihoods leave much to be desired, but are too important to people's survival to dismiss or ignore.

Others in the movement promote fairer trade. At the 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty in Nyéléni, participants stated in the declaration "Fair trade initiatives and other arrangements should be supported" (Nyéléni 2007). At the same conference, transparent trade was promoted, where trade "guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition". What this "fairer" trade should look like, though, remains undefined. More recently, the Nyéléni newsletter maintained a promotion (albeit vague) for socially just trade:

Food sovereignty emphasizes ecologically appropriate production, distribution and consumption, social-economic justice and local food systems as ways to tackle hunger and poverty and guarantee sustainable food security for all peoples. It advocates trade and investment that serve the collective aspirations of society (Nyéléni 2013).

Perhaps the clearest position on trade in traditional commodities and food sovereignty is found in a report associated with ROPPA, an association of West African peasant associations that is a member of LVC and active in the food sovereignty movement (Koning and Jongeneel 2006). The report considers how cotton and cocoa production can be integrated into food sovereignty principles through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in particular to increase farm-gate prices of these commodities. Responding to the way export crops are often produced in harmful conditions that exploit workers and displace producers from the land, the ROPPA report calls for land reform and labour regulation (Koning and Jongeneel 2006). The report throws down a challenge to the certified "Fair Trade" and organic markets for being too limited in scope and failing to affect average prices for the sector at large. The report also calls for the creation of a countervailing power to the transnational corporations that dominate international markets.

The ROPPA report proposes three fundamental pillars for autonomy and empowerment in export markets: a) end dependence on importing markets; b) involve farmer organizations; and c) include production controls. Because the United States dominates a large portion of the cotton market (roughly 20 percent) the report argues that international supply management will be impossible to coordinate, and thus proposes that ECOWAS shift towards processing and selling cotton for its own domestic market (*ibid*). Note the authors do not say in the report whether there is sufficient demand in domestic markets for this approach to be feasible.

The case for cocoa is more comprehensive. The report recommendations call for an international supply control arrangement, which they argue would be possible because developed countries do not produce cocoa, and there are no close substitutes, giving producers more market power. While not dismissing challenges (for example, free riders), the paper's authors argue these can be overcome with the right incentives. They argue further that such an arrangement would be allowed under the rules of the WTO. While such a report does not demonstrate a commitment across countries and is largely conceptual, it does think through how export commodity production can be compatible with the principles of food sovereignty (*ibid*).

To date, few food sovereignty projects seem to work with small farmers whose production is exported, no clear agenda is present for them, and evidence of any work together with fair trade organizations is missing. In practice, the movement prioritizes production for local consumption and is (understandably) focused on how imports can displace this (Nyéléni 2007). But this leaves the conditions where trade is integral to food security unaccounted for.

### Opposition to the WTO

If the food sovereignty movement has been ambivalent about trade in general, the movement's rejection of the WTO as a legitimate institution for governing agricultural trade is crystal clear (Via Campesina 2013; Rosset 2006; Holt-Giménez 2010; Wittman et al. 2010). Forged in part in reaction to the WTO and the Uruguay Round Agreements, food sovereignty sees the WTO as an illegitimate, undemocratic institution embedding the neoliberal governance of agricultural production and trade, at the expense of peasant and small-scale producers. Deep resistance to the WTO is accounted for by the analysis such as this from Peter Rosset:

The WTO and other trade liberalization agreements are by nature designed from the ground up to favor the removal of barriers to trade, rather than its regulation in the public interest, and the non-transparent, anti-democratic, superpower-dominated mechanisms they use are unlikely to make anything else possible (Rosset 2006, 77).

LVC was also articulate on the failings of the negotiating process – that the WTO represented a power grab by multinational firms. Trade talks were deeply undemocratic and marginalized developing countries and, within countries, the voices of social movements, especially farmers and peasants. This critique targeted the WTO agreements most immediately, but also the precedents of structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the IMF, which embodied the same logic as informed the Uruguay Round Agreements and the establishment of the WTO.

Overall, the existing and expanding structures of global agricultural production and trade were decried as economically, culturally, socially and politically harmful to peasants, small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples and other food producers and to be root causes of poverty, hunger and landlessness around the world (Wittman et al. 2010, Rosset 2009, Desmarais 2007). In this analysis, international trade is an instrument of oppression, part of a larger economic structure that disadvantages the South against the North, the peasant against the transnational grain trader, and local cultural preferences against global consumer culture, embodied by McDonald's and supermarkets such as Walmart and Carrefour.

Accepting the need for multilateral discussion, if not necessarily trade agreements, the movement prioritizes the UN, especially the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as the appropriate forum in which governments should determine the rules by which to govern global food and agriculture. The United Nations is judged to be a more democratic institution that is more accessible to civil society and thus more likely to represent the interests of stakeholders. LVC in particular has invested significant time and political energy, with considerable success, into ensuring they have a voice at both FAO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), two of the three Rome-based food agencies.<sup>5</sup>

### Why Trade?

The political and economic power asymmetries, as well as the ecological costs, that characterize agricultural trade today leaves many questioning its usefulness. Our position is that trade does matter, not least for smallholders and farm workers. This is not an apology for the neoclassical concept of trade liberalization that is predominant today, which is based on the ideas of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. That theory argues that division of labour and specialization will encourage systems of production and exchange based on comparative advantage. The removal of government interventions such as tariffs, subsidies and market protections (which allows markets to follow the "invisible hand," guided by the economically rational self-interested behaviour of consumers and producers) will create a 'first best' single market in which welfare is maximized. While important, this theory of trade is ultimately unpersuasive on a number of counts, from the empirically measurable irrationality of many market actors when assessed against economists' expectations (Thaler and Sunstein 2009) to the challenges of unequal distribution that mar so many "free" markets (Stiglitz 2007). Rather, we support those who argue that trade is important in agriculture, but with some important qualifications on under what circumstances and with a focus on food security and sustainable livelihoods for the most poor. We think trade can, and should, ally with food sovereignty's broad principles.

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<sup>5</sup> The third being the World Food Programme.

Trade is an important safety net, guarding against local crop failures. If one region does not get the harvest it needs, then another can provide some of its surplus. Trade is also a source of food that allows human settlements to exist in places where the food available locally would not be sufficient for a large population. Trade creates choice, allowing people to enjoy different foods and different tastes, enriching our diets. Trade allows ecological efficiencies, allowing a more intelligent distribution of stresses on natural resources such as land and water than do the political boundaries of nation states. Why not allow the sun to do what otherwise a heated greenhouse might have to provide?

Perhaps the most important reason for trade from a food sovereignty perspective is that tens of millions of small-scale producers earn their living from crops raised for export. It is sometimes, though too seldom, a good livelihood. It could be a much better one. But it is unclear how producers can transition to a new livelihood, and whether that is a transition that the producers involved want. Rather, producers seem to express interest in improving conditions, and especially their economic bargaining power, in the markets they already know (Wolford 2010; Vorley et al. 2012). A recent IIED/Hivos study of smallholder agency in globalized markets makes the point that both farmers' organizations and, especially, NGOs, sometimes pursue an ideological agenda that neglects the stated economic preferences of the smallholders concerned (Vorley et al. 2012).

Indeed, many studies, rooted in critical analysis, demonstrate that the interests of small-scale farmers vary (Murphy 2010, Borras 2008, Wolford 2010, Masakure and Henson 2005). Many small farmers may prefer producing within the existing global structures, even seeing production for exports as prestigious (Singh 2002). Concern for the nature of markets today does not necessarily translate into a desire to confront the global system, but instead leads to demands for space to equitably integrate into the global system:

“Many small-scale farmers themselves are less preoccupied with critiques of global power and more interested in their rights as economic actors. That is, they want to improve their bargaining position in the markets they buy from and sell to, they want laws that accommodate their needs (e.g. contract laws in which the state protects them from abuse; labour laws that guarantee minimum wages and decent working conditions; and title to their land); they want programmes and support structures to help them better meet the demands of the most promising markets (improving quality control, attaining and retaining certification for lucrative markets, support to establish marketing co-operatives or other ways to consolidate their position). They also want some protection from loan sharks, from unscrupulous middlemen, from dumped

agricultural imports, and from landowners who flout the law, or bend it to suit their interests.” (Murphy 2010, 27)

Masakure and Henson (2005) find that small-scale farmers are motivated to engage in contract farming, which they perceive to be in their interests for a host of reasons, including providing guaranteed markets and income, alleviating market uncertainty, as well as providing knowledge transfer, additional income and other latent benefits.

Wolford’s examination of MST membership in North and South Brazil found that sugarcane producers in the North, who joined the movement in the late 1990s (rather later than small-scale producers from the South), preferred to return to sugarcane production over switching to agricultural self-sufficiency. In the end, she ties this primarily to ‘common sense’; the MST wanted to move farmers out of sugarcane production, on the grounds it is an ‘exploitative crop’, but settlers in the North knew the crop, how to grow it, and how to access its markets. They were more comfortable with the risks in the sugarcane sector than with those of home gardens. Knowing too the associated risks and power relations in sugarcane, when prices were right, growing sugarcane and acquiring reliable wages was their preference, over domestic production oriented towards greater self-sufficiency (i.e. home gardens) (Wolford 2010).<sup>6</sup> Such common sense surely pervades commodity smallholders and those producing for export markets.

In West Africa, one case demonstrates that farmers are looking for agency within the existing global structures, but don’t necessarily have a sole agenda to completely dismantle it. Kuapa Kokoo, a Ghanaian cocoa cooperative that produces 10% of Ghana’s cocoa supply, representing more than 40,000 farmers across 1300 Ghanaian villages (Kuapa Kokoo N.D.). It is the only farmer organization licensed to export cocoa in Ghana. Kuapa Kokoo is a particularly interesting case because it is quite involved in various ways around critical issues related to global structures of agricultural production and trade. The cooperative became fairtrade certified through Fairtrade International (FLO) two years after its creation. Shortly after, it became a majority shareholder of what is today Divine Chocolate, a 100% certified fairtrade chocolate company. The chocolate is produced in Germany, operations take place in London, but the profits return to the cooperative in Ghana.

Divine Chocolate has publically celebrated the fairtrade certification of major transnational companies including Nestlé and Cadbury, despite the companies’ limited commitment to fair

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<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps not necessarily for ‘export’ market, but reflects the same principles resisted by the food sovereignty movement, and the MST a close parallel to these principles.

trade and the fact that the companies are competitors in the same market (Divine Chocolate 2011). Ninety-eight percent of the cooperative's production is for conventional markets. Its priorities, by this account, are to improve the market conditions under which it operates. Producers in the South demonstrate a range of motivations for producing for fairtrade markets, some social and community driven, but others market and economic as well, including higher prices, greater financial access, and a more reliable market (Raynolds et al. 2007).

Clearly there are structural constraints to the success of Kuapa Kokoo and of Fairtrade certified markets generally. These products represent a niche market and their potential to be scaled-up and replicated are limited. But fair trade products and the efforts of the market can be considered an important part of the process of change, even part of a broader fair trade movement (Raynolds et al. 2007). In many ways the market mechanism creates new normative and discursive framings that challenge claims of the benefits of free trade and current commodity chain relations. As Bacon points out, while imperfect, fair trade does embody elements of a Polanyian Double Movement (Bacon 2010). Fairtrade markets also provide important opportunities for farmers who have too few alternatives. But they also evidence that small producers are not all interested in the same governance mechanisms.

To what extent should food sovereignty adherents support improvements in these markets as opposed to encouraging producers to grow other crops for local markets? The question is not just an economic one. Unequal political power is intimately linked to unequal economic results. Given unequal power, where should the energy for political change be directed? Food sovereignty activists have tended to insist on national policy spaces and national decision-making, an idea reinforced by the word 'sovereignty', which is strongly associated with self-governing spaces. How then should these self-governing spaces relate to one another? We explore these questions next.

### Representation and Smallholder Exporters

Food sovereignty is partially about the right of people to define their policies in a democratic system, the specifics of which should be determined by context. Diverse outcomes are expected and welcomed (Patel 2009, 663; Nyéléni 2013). The model clearly includes space to produce for export (and import) markets. But at the same time, food sovereignty is committed to a number of core tenets, which include prioritization of production for domestic food consumption and a strict resistance to transnational corporations. The requirement to respect these principles presumably constrains the choices people have in shaping their policies and food production and consumption choices. So there is clearly some tension, perhaps creative tension, around the boundaries food sovereignty sets on "allowed" choices. The boundaries are

not firm on many issues, but on trade there are some clear parameters, linked, as we saw above, to the unambiguous rejection of the WTO and the Uruguay Round Agreements.

Indeed, the principles of representation are complex. The food sovereignty movement did emerge to challenge existing representation of peasants. Food sovereignty under Via Campesina creates an intentional alternative peasant voice to those international actors claiming to represent the voices of peasants. At the time LVC was founded those voices were IFAP (the International Federation of Agricultural Producers) and NGOs, who often spoke in the name of the small-holder producers they worked with in the global South. Both IFAP and many NGOs were seen by food sovereignty adherents to represent, or at least reinforce, the principles of neoliberalism. The food sovereignty movement saw IFAP as representing those farmers who benefit from the neoliberal, capitalist structures of agricultural production and trade, particularly on large farms (Borras 2008, Pimbert 2010, Holt-Giménez 2010, Desmarais 2007).<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, though NGOs are recognized to have been important when peasant organizations were unable to participate in governance forums, there were tensions around what role NGOs should play when peasant voices came forward. “Many NGOs”, argues Desmarais, “have not been comfortable with what the ‘formerly voiceless’ have to say” now that they have gained voice, citing for example tensions in 1996 at the NGO Forum on Food Security (Desmarais 2007, 23). The movement works selectively today with particular NGOs, such as Foodfirst Information and Action Network (FIAN), the Land Research Action Network (LRAN), Oxfam-Novib and ICCO (Borras et al. 2008).

To claim representation, however, is, by the account of many, including supporters, to engage in the exclusionary (Borras 2008, Wolford 2011, Boyer 2010). Borras (2008), who has written extensively on the movement, and in broad support, makes the critique that the movement is relatively absent in national and local settings, and that, despite its intentions to the contrary, it fails to represent peasants across class, political and ideological divides, as well as in many geographical areas (p.268). Others have generally found a disconnect between the intentions at the international level and the needs at the ground level within the movement (Boyer 2010, Windfurh and Jonsén 2005). Boyer’s study in Honduras specifically found a disconnect between the needs at the local level and the movement’s objectives in international spaces (Boyer 2010). In her case study on engagement with MST in Brazil, Wolford’s (2010) main finding is that this appearance of representation necessitates contradictions and exclusion of interests within a movement, let alone outside a movement. She does not see this as necessary problematic; but more a natural tendency for tension, and a disjuncture between a public façade and actual engagement, that is part of activism. However, she also recognizes that an oversimplified

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<sup>7</sup> IFAP has since been replaced by the World Farmers Organization.

vision/representation is not without consequence. In the case of the Brazilian MST trying to integrate sugar cane producers in the North, the challenge proved to be an assumption that once joining the movement those they sought to represent would come to share their ideals. This proved not to be the case and the sugarcane farmers eventually withdrew from the movement.

The questions this leads us to, discussed in the next section, is how can we think of an international trade system that does not rest on narrow ideas of representation, but serves to represent the broader interests of smallholders, adhering to the principle of an equitable system that empowers smallholders as economic actors in markets, while allowing for diverse ways of engaging in agricultural production. This not only considers how we can imagine such a trade system, but also how such a trade system might emerge from current structures of international trade, which have undergone immense changes since LVC emerged in 2013. Farmers need many markets; the global trade rules dictate a single market. Can this change?

### **The rules of trade from which Food Sovereignty emerged**

The rules that today govern international trade were negotiated over the last 50 years to the exclusion of small-scale producer representation. A few countries did raise issues linked to food security, tied more to their consumer concerns than to worries about their producers. Agriculture was not seen as a useful engine for economic growth at the time (see World Bank 2007 for an overview history of the neglect of agriculture in 1980s-90s). One such country was Jamaica, whose ambassador, Anthony Hill, raised questions about the food security implications of including agriculture among the trade agreements. Jamaica was among a group of countries that was heavily reliant on international markets for its food supply, and that also enjoyed preferential terms for its exports through the trade and development agreements created by the EU for its former colonies (known as the Lomé agreements at the time). Jamaica had scant foreign exchange, and was nervous about the predictions made by the World Bank, the OECD and others about the expected rise in agricultural commodity prices as various forms of domestic and export support were eliminated in the major producers of commodities for export (in particular, the programmes of the EU and US). At the same time, the URA challenged the Lomé agreements and their creation of special rules for groups of countries. The GATT and the WTO are both premised on the principle non-discrimination. The preferential agreements that had been a feature of the post-war trading system had to be amended or revoked under the terms of the URA. Small exporters such as Jamaica saw little prospect of competing successfully in a market that included much larger and better-capitalized producers of the same export crops. The threat to producers' livelihoods was both an economic and a food security concern.



At the Marrakech Trade Ministerial Conference, at which the URA were signed, governments included the “Marrakech Ministerial Decision on measures concerning the possible negative effects of the reform programme on least developed and net food-importing developing countries” (usually referred to as the Marrakech Ministerial Decision). Vague and in practice of no practical use, the decision provided formal recognition that the concerns Jamaica had raised were valid. The AoA rules reflected the dominant negotiators’ assumptions that agricultural supplies were plentiful, that prices ought to rise, and that poor countries should be importing food, and focusing their productive resources on other activities.

Ostensibly, the GATT rules had applied to agriculture as a good like any other, but in practice the United States and then the European Community (now the European Union, or EU) had requested and received a waiver that effectively excluded their agricultural policies from the disciplines of GATT rules almost from the beginning, in 1947 (Wilkinson 2006). The Uruguay Round changed that with a dedicated AoA.

Most development NGOs had been working on structural adjustment and on debt, not trade,<sup>8</sup> focused initially on making sense of the AoA and on the implications for least developed countries and other net food importers. They challenged the numbers coming from the World Bank and OECD, which promised huge welfare gains for all. NGO analysts pointed out that the global South comprises more than 150 countries, among whom maybe a half-dozen or so were poised to increase their market share should developed countries in fact stop subsidizing their agri-businesses and their agricultural exports.<sup>9</sup>

NGOs made the point that trade was not about countries and not really about farmers. It was agribusinesses (most of them multinational) that traded; not national governments. Indeed, it was those businesses who had most actively sought an agreement for agriculture, and who most actively shaped the final outcome of the negotiations.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike development NGOs, farmers had paid attention to the URA negotiations, at least in North America and Europe, where the changes were expected to have a big effect on how domestic agriculture and food imports were managed. The principal umbrella organization of farmer organizations at the time, the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) had chosen, after much internal debate, to support the AoA. But there were many dissenters,

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<sup>8</sup> The Third World Network is a notable exception.

<sup>9</sup> Papers by the CIIR, CAFOD, CIDSE, Oxfam and others pointed to the problems ahead. Authors to cite.

<sup>10</sup> IATP, CFGB. Authors to cite.

and many farm organizations that were not IFAP members that disagreed that the AoA rules were appropriate.

For farmers in the Global South, a huge concern was the sale of imported goods in their local markets at less than cost of production prices (a practice known as dumping and well documented (FAO 2006, 2008)). For example, chicken legs that were rejected by North American consumers looking for “white meat” flooded West African markets. IATP documented systematic dumping of five crops grown in the U.S. and sold in international markets: rice, wheat, soy, maize and cotton over a number of years through the mid-1990s into the 2000s. All five commodities were exports crops or competed with other growers, sometimes in some of the world’s poorest countries. All five were handled by one of the ABCD - Archer Daniel Midland, Bunge, Cargill and Louis Dreyfus - the four firms whose dominance of agricultural commodity markets was growing in response to the policy changes made law by the WTO rules.<sup>11</sup> The AoA failed to curb the power of global trading firms, and while support to agriculture in the U.S. and E.U. changed, to the detriment of farmers’ economic interests, production incentives remained very large.

There were also farmers in traditional agricultural exporting countries, such as Brazil and Argentina, who were furious the AoA did not do enough to discipline rich country farm programmes (for example, the EU and the US retained the right to subsidize their exports) and that continued to lobby their government for further disciplines in the multilateral rules, hoping to increase their share of the global market as a result.

It was this context in which the food sovereignty movement began – a world in which international markets for temperate crops were still dominated by production from the United States and to some extent the European Union, both of whose governments sought to protect and expand their markets. Those two powers alone held most of the negotiating cards at the trade diplomacy table, and the resulting international trade rules reflected their disproportionate power. While the economic and political power asymmetries persist in this regard, trade has continued to evolve since the Food sovereignty movement emerged. We contend that the movement should consider looking at what has changed in its work to build more just food systems.

### Changing Trade Dynamics

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<sup>11</sup> Authors to cite background for the seminar at the WTO symposium in 2004 (Oxfam, Action Aid, ACFOA, etc.)

In 1995, LVC's rejection of the WTO was a rejection of international trade. The WTO *was* (to a very large extent) the discussion on trade. There were regional agreements, of course, but after NAFTA, it was the WTO that had created the template for how trade rules would regulate agriculture. In 2013, the debate around trade is much less sharply defined. The WTO Agreement on Agriculture is still law. But its provisions were written to be updated, and the failure of the negotiations on the Doha Agenda, meant to provide a successor to the Uruguay Round agreements, has left the process started in 1995 in suspension.

But the world did not stop; nor yet did trade. Among the big changes in trade since 1997 are: the end of the dominance of the U.S. and E.U. in international markets (Bureau & Jean 2013); the consolidation of global TNCs as the dominant grain traders (4 companies trade an estimated 75-90 percent of all cereals in international markets, see Murphy et al. 2012); the emergence of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China – but also Argentina, Thailand, South Africa and others) as major producers, processors and consumers; the steady growth in population and, more especially, in dietary preferences, creating demand for more meat and therefore feed. Perhaps most importantly for the assumptions that underlie agricultural economics, is the advent of biofuels, seemingly springing like Athena, fully formed at birth and transforming commodity markets in just a few years, powered by strong mandates and significant subsidies in the U.S. and EU. Suddenly there is a market for commodities that has a very different elasticity than food – with mandates, even the economic boundaries of high demand creating high prices and so cutting off demand are significantly attenuated.

These new trading conditions are shaping what is grown, what is traded, to who and at what price. But the very nature of how trade works has also changed in important ways. Increasingly, the story of trade is a story about investment. Companies move themselves and their know-how to where the markets are – they buy and process and distribute goods all around the world, replicating models that draw on a hinterland to serve a metropolitan centre, where ever that is. Farmers in Laos are contracted to grow chickens that Thai 7/11s turn into cooked birds to sell to consumers. The metropolitan centres are not just the EU and the United States anymore, although those economic powerhouses still matter, of course, and their food imports continue to grow (US food imports are more or less equivalent to their exports in dollar terms). A handful of countries in Asia have emerged -- above all China, whose growing presence as a producer, consumer and – newly but importantly – importer of foodstuffs. Brazil is poised to overtake the U.S. as the largest source of both soy beans and maize in international markets. Trade used to be about making the most of a country's fixed assets. But what is a fixed asset when land and water are commodities for sale to the highest bidder? There are no fixed assets – the capital is free to go where investors want it to go, and they are free to buy even that most immoveable of assets: land.

This changing realities of trade is also entangled in the post food-crisis world – a world in which assumptions of plenty and persistent declining prices for commodities has been replaced by concerns about scarcity and – belatedly – some dawning awareness of the finite nature of our planet. Buyers and sellers that assume scarcity do not behave the same way as they do when they assume limitless potential supply. People seek to minimize their risks, hedging bets rather than embarking on new ventures. For countries that relied on international markets for their food security, the shift was towards growing more food domestically and – where means allowed – even investing in land leases or purchases abroad, to grow food for export to the investor country (Murphy 2013).

The situation is not static. People with purchasing power are demanding different things from the food systems. They are spending more money on better quality food, produced by people they know or can meet. They are worried about their children’s nutrition and about where the freshwater is going to come from in 20 years’ time. There is a much better understanding of the planet’s boundaries and a continuing fight with short-term profit to start valuing resources adequately. Climate change is changing risk assessment.

Food sovereignty has evolved and taken root, too. A number of governments are using the language, and many other movements have chosen food sovereignty as a way to express their dissatisfaction with the food systems we have. National food sovereignty movements have emerged, given context and complexity to a project that began in international exchange among peasant organizations.

The WTO trade talks have meanwhile ground to a halt. There are many reasons for this—food security among them. The formal negotiations continue to revolve around the agenda set in Doha in 2001, an agenda that developing country governments in particular – for reasons of political expediency rather than deeply felt principle – are loathe to abandon. Yet it is clear to all involved that the agenda no longer offers countries the basis they need for effective trade rules that would support food security, let alone food sovereignty.

The impetus in trade talks lies instead in plurilateral agreements, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and in bilateral and multilateral trade agreements across the globe.

### Next Steps

To negotiate across borders in a democratic way requires international institutions. The food sovereignty movement would like to see this take place within the United Nations system. But

it is not clear the UN system has the legitimacy or capacity to take on that role in the near future. Meanwhile, we query whether the WTO might offer something useful in the more immediate struggle to make trade rules fairer.

Ironically, one place where we see the mobilization of less powerful states against more powerful states successfully taking place is in the WTO. This mobilization centers on some of the very principles of food sovereignty, no less. WTO trade negotiations crumbled in 2008 largely on account of agriculture, when a number of developing and least developing (LDC) countries, allied as the G33, fought to integrate allowances for special products and special and differential treatment to protect domestic agricultural sectors against import surges and to reduce dependence on global markets for food (Khor 2008).

It is not a coincidence that the collapse of negotiations after the food price crisis of 2007-2008. The crisis showed how vulnerable were poor countries that depended on international markets for food security. Developing countries are fighting to reclaim the national policy space they lost through SAPs and the AoA. With this in mind, we argue that consideration should be given to the WTO as a political platform in which useful action is possible and even desirable. We argue that there are some specific advantages to the multilateral trade system, despite significant challenges.

### What of the UN?

The food sovereignty movement has pushed to have the UN govern trade. This would be the best outcome from the perspective of integrating trade into other areas of political, economic and cultural life and from the perspective of engaging civil society. Yet no UN agency has a mandate to govern agricultural trade. The FAO has evolved in the years since LVC started building their multilateral presence, taking up an important and increasingly legitimate space in the governance of food and agriculture. Food security has moved to the top of the global policy agenda, and definitions of food security have also evolved importantly in the years since the 1996 World Food Summit. Not least, the right to food has now a prominent place in the international debate. The reformed Committee on World Food Security, too, with annual meetings is tackling many of the biggest challenges to global food security, and engaging in greater stakeholder participation, putting states, civil society and the private sector at the negotiating table in the process.

Nonetheless, there is something unconvincing about FAO playing a role in trade negotiations. Many would agree that isolating trade from the rest of the UN system, as governments chose to do with the WTO, has been a mistake. The political backlash from the implementation of the

Uruguay Round, not least in agriculture, is an important reason for the system's current state of paralysis. Nonetheless, it is difficult to argue that agricultural trade rules can somehow be isolated from other trade discussions, especially now that trade encompasses so many aspects of the economy, from the rules that govern the movement of labour, to intellectual property rights, financial services, and agro-processing industries. Somehow the trade rules for agriculture, while having to respect agriculture and its specificities, are going to have to come to terms with other sectors and economic priorities. FAO is simply not equipped to allow an integrated discussion of this kind, looking to sectors beyond agriculture. While trade should not be isolated from other essential policy areas, including food security policy and planning, nor should agriculture be isolated from the wider economy.

Nor the UN seen as a legitimate forum from which to govern trade. The WTO does have this legitimacy, and not just in the eyes of the dominant economic powers. Countries actively seek to participate in the forum. While continuing the important—even essential—struggle to renew and re-empower the UN, we argue that a shorter-term objective could also be to support the countries that want to change the WTO from within. The risk of not engaging is to lose an opportunity to strengthen small-scale producer voices in negotiations that shape the rules that are determinant on producers' livelihoods. The governments that are dominant in WTO negotiations, and the non-governmental constituencies that seek to influence outcomes, were historically an exclusive and narrowly constituted group. Countries that were largely excluded during the Uruguay Round are more present and empowered today, with negotiating groups that more closely reflect their interests. There is a long way to go, but there are tools with which to build.

We know unequal power is at the heart of bad rules. But this should not stop our efforts to push for reform, encouraged by the significant changes in the balance of power over the last decade. As a consensus-based organization, with ever closer to universal membership (though it is important to remember membership is *not* universal), the WTO's authority is not trivial. The organization is less led by the secretariat than most UN agencies and in that sense more accountable to the members, who are ultimately the spokespeople of elected governments. While continuing to advocate for changes at the UN that would curb and direct trade policy (for example by clarifying and implementing food security policies), why not simultaneously push for change that could lead to new multilateral trade rules at the WTO?

The dissolution of the WTO could create a void in international trade governance that would strengthen plurilateral agreements among the richest economies. In many ways, this is already happening, with agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Arguably, the same is true of investment – with no multilateral forum to discuss the issue, hundreds of bilateral

agreements have been signed and countries have no multilateral framework around which to organize their resistance. The trend towards more fragmentation in international systems is highly detrimental to the realization of food security. In this context, weaker states lack the space in which to cooperate and build alliances with one another, leaving them more vulnerable to the whims of the more powerful countries. The outcomes of too many bilateral and regional free trade agreements attest to this (for example, the Colombia Free Trade Agreement or CAFTA.).

Many will question the extent to which the WTO can be made more democratic. Our experience over the past fifteen years gives grounds for hope. Not just because developing countries have emerged as stronger negotiators, but also because the channels for non-governmental actors have evolved and improved, from a wholly closed forum to something more responsive, if still guarded.

The WTO could formalize multilateral trade rules that encourage and support a plurality of markets and that empowers governments to negotiate policy spaces for these markets in the interests of their citizens, in the interests of food security and sustainable poverty reduction (as the G33 has attempted to some extent in the wake of the food crisis). We think it is possible to imagine the WTO as a place that counterbalances the power of those countries (and companies) that have set the rules to their benefits and to the detriment of small-scale producers and farm workers. Such a WTO would move away from a mandate of increased liberalization to increased consideration of the needs of specific markets and support special and differential treatment, special products, commodity agreements, and other measures as seems useful to protect the public interest.

The emergence of global value chains and the new importance of investment make finance a critically important question for food sovereignty movements. This is not only a discussion that needs to happen in a trade context, clearly, and the work on land investments and on commodity market reform are – rightly – happening in other arenas. Nonetheless, trade is a part of this new economic reality and engagement in trade talks would be an important avenue to start to have an influence on outcomes. Intellectual property rights, the conditions placed on both foreign and domestic service providers (including especially banks), and the protection of public procurement as an instrument of support for small-scale producers (as well as for low-income consumers) are all vitally important.

## Conclusion

This paper begins a process of considering new ways in which trade could be integrated into a vision for food sovereignty. Food analyst and commentator Raj Patel says food sovereignty is over-defined, with so many ideas of what the concept means it is difficult to know which is true (Patel 2009). In much the same vein, the movement's position on trade is not yet clearly laid out. In fact, the movement's position on trade is ambiguous to a point of generating some contradictions.

The lack of a clear position on trade lends to misunderstandings about the movement's vision for change, which may close political doors and result in fractures within the movement. We thus argue that as the movement evolves and takes on an increasingly important (and more broadly based) political role, rethinking where and with whom to engage also takes on some urgency. We propose that engagement with trade offers not just new ways to realize food sovereignty as it has been defined, but also ways to round out and further develop the concept of food sovereignty itself. Dialogue with small-scale producers whose crops are sold in export markets will be an important part of this, to understand their interests and their motivations, and to use this understanding to broaden the scope of food sovereignty. Whether producing for Fairtrade markets, traditional, or non-traditional agricultural commodity chains, evidence suggests that these producers are motivated to continue their engagement in export markets. While it is true the rules governing international trade today were negotiated without small-scale producers being represented, we propose that this exclusion is not necessarily a given. As a result, we suggest that the movement might reconsider its dismissal of the WTO. The literature on social movements and political change argues that contentious issues require contentious politics, which are essential for opening doors where opportunities for engagement are absent. Yet the literature simultaneously argues that movements should be open to opportunities for structural changes when they are presented (Gaventa and McGee, 2010; Tarrow, 2011). Our argument is that there appear to be cracks in the door in the WTO today, as different from the context 20 years ago, and that this could present important opportunities to transform not only the rules of trade themselves, but how they are democratically shaped, with some potential for the principles of food sovereignty to be integrated. We further argue that the nature of globalization, with investment as an ever-more powerful determining force, and its effects on food systems around the world make some kind of engagement with the rules that shape globalization necessary, not optional.

We remain cautious in making these arguments. We do not intend to 'advise' the movement. Rather, our hope is to contribute perspective, grounded in theory and analysis, that may be of use to the movement as it continues to act against the dominant structures of agricultural production and trade that have been harmful to small scale producers around the world, and as it continues to forge its strategy to this end.



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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
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SEPTEMBER 14-15, 2013



PROGRAM IN  
**Agrarian Studies**  
YALE UNIVERSITY

<http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/foodsovereignty/index.html>

A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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