**Food Sovereignty: A Strategy for Social Inclusion**

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**ABSTRACT**:

Dominant approaches to rural development have proven unable to confront the structural challenges posed by a system where progress itself generates hunger and increasing environmental damage. This paper places its accent on the direct action of communities to organize themselves to satisfy their food and other basic needs and those of their regions with self-help strategies to be applied in both rural and urban areas. While generally applicable, this focus draws its inspiration from the experience of La Vía Campesina, the largest social organization in the world, with chapters in more than 80 countries and 200 million members.

The food sovereignty approach offers a forward-looking strategy to social mobilization and inclusion, confronting the scourge of rural disintegration while also addressing the pressing issue of environmental balance. There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that global food programs often have the unintended effect of undermining local production systems, institutions, and markets. Offering an alternative to assistance programs, the food sovereignty approach emphasizes collective action, organizing individual producers to plan deliberately productive strategies to attend their basic nutritional needs in an ecologically and culturally sensitive manner.

It directs political and social actions to the collective organization of communities to promote local mobilization and cooperation within and among communities, on a local and regional basis and sometimes on a much broader geographic scale. It functions by integrating expert knowledge, much of it from the producers themselves, as part of a well-proven farmer-to-farmer approach for the exchange of information and materials conducive to improving productivity and promoting diversity in accordance with local customs. Communities involved in producing for themselves and their partners generally also focus on improving the quality of food and their nutritional impact in ways consistent with protecting and rehabilitating ecosystems. Most organizations promoting food sovereignty consider agroecology to be the most effective approach to organizing production, emphasizing the use of locally available inputs and technologies as well as a diversity of cropping system adapted to local conditions.

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In spite of well-intentioned international commitments, the possibility of overcoming poverty remains a seemingly unreachable objective in today’s societies. The high-level conferences that codified the millennium and sustainable development goals established a social dynamic that continues to assume that delivery of services by the state to the underclasses would be able to attend to their needs. The definitions of poverty in these formulations are conditioned by the political contexts in which they originate. In this short essay, we focus on approaches that can guide us in moving forward to overcome the growing socio-political, economic, and environmental obstacles preventing us from eradicating poverty, promoting strategies that free people, as members of communities, to forge their own solutions to the challenge. Rather than examining the structural roots of our present problems, ecological unsustainability, personal inequality and social injustice, we propose to move forward to examine the basis for forging a strategy of social inclusion.

Our point of departure is the obvious and well-documented fact that a large majority of the world’s poor live in rural areas (Olinto et al., 2013). For society as a whole, poverty is presently defined in terms of access to basic human needs, in turn directly related to individuals’ inability to raise their productivity or obtain employment. This inability, in turn, is related to individuals’ capabilities, in a society dependent on private accumulation to create these opportunities – both in the labor force and in the realm of human development. Many do not have access to the land (or have lost it in recent times) or the means to produce their basic needs; even those with resources are limited by their low levels of productivity.

The spreading dissatisfaction with the standard measures of poverty is leading many scholars to redefine the determinants of a “good” quality of life. There is a growing realization that current definitions dominant in the social sciences, generally grounded in theories of income determination, do not lead to an appropriate understanding of the theme.[[3]](#footnote-3) Others consider social and institutional mechanisms that generate “poverty traps;” the “stubborn persistence of poverty” has spawned an abundant literature presenting alternative explanations for the dynamics that continue to defy easy political solutions (e.g., Bowles et al., 2016). It is probably fair to say that the summary offered by these authors characterizes current thinking on the matter:

[There are a] plethora of mechanisms … identified as potentially creating poverty traps. […] [W]hat this new literature does is to delineate a set of mechanisms that provide coherent microeconomic explanations as to why poverty traps could emerge—traps that could be rectified *only* by policy interventions. However, one should not underestimate the difficulties in designing efficacious policies and, in fact, the new literature on poverty traps has yet to explicitly focus on issues of policy design. […] So while this volume makes clear that the Horatio Alger view that poverty can always be escaped through hard work and determination really is fiction in many contexts, we have far to go in terms of understanding what is to be done (Bowles et al., 2016:11).

The approach in this paper adopts a different point of departure. Rather than grounding the analysis in the individualistic methodology of mainstream economics, we focus on the social institutions and ecosystems that shape people’s lives. We draw upon the experience of organizations that explicitly commit themselves to attend to the basic needs of their members and to assure the conservation of their ecosystems. The guiding principle for this presentation is the idea that social inclusion can best be achieved by shaping institutions that contribute to strengthening environmental justice.[[4]](#footnote-4)

While the discussion focuses on agricultural production, it is crucial to emphasize that most of the people living in rural communities are not just engaged in farming. Rural life involves a complex social and productive organization to ensure the reproduction of society in all its dimensions: including non-farming production, political leadership (governance) cultural activities, health, education, and myriad other facets of community interaction. In this conception of collective life, ecosystem maintenance and enrichment is generally not possible without complex “negotiations” with other communities in a particular bioregion (e.g., a watershed) to assure that the multiple and complementary activities required in the different parts of the region are undertaken without sacrificing the welfare of people living in other areas.

Another facet of this approach to community organization involves arrangements for the exchange among peoples in different communities and regions. It is unlikely and even undesirable, that communities organize themselves to subsist solely on the basis of their own production and resources. A significant feature of rural communities from time immemorial has been their continually expanding engagement in trade with others in their regions and increasingly distant areas.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, in developing an explanation of an alternative approach to social inclusion, we place our emphasis on the communitarian organization of social forces and the commitment to promoting a different model of interaction.

In the following sections, we focus on agricultural production as the basis for our assertion that food provision is a fundamental pillar for society to guarantee its members the ability to avoid poverty. The organization of the argument begins with a preliminary presentation of the epistemological foundations for this presentation followed by a discussion of the problem of environmental justice before delving into the intricacies of food sovereignty.

1. **An Epistemological Beginning**

Our starting point involves a questioning of the dominant ontology that asserts the need for large-scale industrialized agriculture and international trade to feed the world’s burgeoning population. Advocates lending support to small-scale organized peasant agriculture point out that this “obiter dictum” in fact ignores the fact that 70 percent of humanity’s food needs are presently met by these local and regional producers (Pollan, 2013).

This wide-spread fallacy is grounded in a series of assumptions common in orthodox economic thinking that take as their point of departure the methodological individualism so engrained in economic (and social) analysis since the XIX century. In this view, individual producers, whether they are large commercial enterprises or yeoman farmers, all make autonomous individual decisions based on their evaluation of market forces and the availability of resources. The profit-maximizing entrepreneur of this approach would separate the producers from their input supplies and from the consumers. Technologies would be ‘freely’ available and selected on the basis of the isolated decisions of well-informed participants in the market place.

This well-ordered market economy in which atomistic players interact in a harmonious way is not supposed to present any problems for each of the participants. The epistemological model presupposes that each of the participants has access to the necessary resources to implement their production in an efficient way, implicitly accepting the notion that they will also take into account and respect the needs of the ecosystems on which their production depends. Furthermore, the model also suggests that preexisting or developing inequalities among people are not somehow the product of their own collective heritage, but rather a product of their individual accomplishments; there is no place for structural limitations based on gender, ethnicity or other socio-cultural characteristics (such as class) that might influence the possibilities for each participant’s advancement.

This inherited system of analysis also presupposes the ability of the marketplace, that wonderful ahistorical institution that is so needed by all societies, to accurately determine the appropriate prices for all the elements required in the production process as well as for all the resulting products. This has become particularly important in recent times because of our “new-found” recognition of the significance of planetary (natural) resources in production, their finite availability, and the extraordinary efforts that are (would be) required to assure the correct disposal of the detritus left over from the production processes. Recently, it has become clearer than ever that this is an extraordinary supposition, on which rests the whole structure of the claims of efficiency and equilibrium.

A final supposition is related to the question of time. Much economic analysis supposes that the processes it analyzes occur instantaneously. Further, this characteristic also involves the facile dismissal of accumulated knowledge and technological developments of past epochs, since new inventions are presumed to be more appropriate for confronting the challenges of present day systems. This facet of economic analysis also deliberately and systematically dismisses the possible consideration of benefits for future generations and the implications of using or misusing resources and ecosystems that might be essential for the continuation of life as we know it today.

The implications of this epistemology for the food system are quite far-reaching. On the one hand, they contributed to the development of a whole package of industrialized paradigms applied to different agricultural production and environmental systems, most notably the implementation of various green-revolution technologies to seed development. On the other hand, they led to the supposition that any exploitative techniques that might lead to the impoverishment of the natural systems could be compensated by the application of newly formulated inputs to replace nutrients or eliminate biological threats that might generate limits for increasing productivity. Even more daring, they made the assumption that “man-made” forms of inputs might substitute for their natural forerunners as gene manipulation technologies have facilitated the production of “transgenic” products in both agricultural and livestock systems. In contrast, recent research is demonstrating that alternative production forms, such as organic farming and agroecology can do the job better (Reganold and Wachter, 2016; Altieri and Toledo, 2011).

1. **The Foundations of a System of Justice**

The basic tenets for a system of environmental justice can be readily identified. At a minimum, these require assuring all members of the society the satisfaction of their (socially defined) basic needs; in today’s world, this requires providing not only for the basic sustenance of the society, but also attending to the institutional requirements that guarantee the ability of all people to participate in the community’s governance, in the conservation and transmission of its culture, and to attend to the requirements to assure their health and other dimensions of their well-being. Of course, in an operative social system, these elements must be accompanied by a commitment to conserve the ecosystems on which they depend, and, if necessary, the rehabilitation of those that have deteriorated or been damaged by previous generations.

The translation of these seemingly simple conditions into a set of operative mechanisms for social organization has proved elusive in many contemporary nation-states. The progressive advances of inequality in most societies along with the advancing deterioration of the environment have tragically affected the poorer strata of society. These negative impacts are exacerbated by other social phenomena that divide modern societies by ethnic, class and racial characteristics, creating profound social differences that sometimes lead to violent conflict and almost always contribute to a collective abuse of the environment.

These institutional features of modern societies are having important effects on the ability of most countries around the world to assure the basic nutritional needs of their populations. In today’s world, there is no question that there is enough food available globally to feed the population, and yet a considerable proportion is hungry and an even larger segment is poorly nourished. Social Justice, then, is directly related to the institutional nexus in which it is embedded.

The international community has taken particular note of the impacts of these developments on the rights and livelihood of indigenous peoples. The international agreements that emerged over the past quarter century are stark recognition of the profound problems that rural communities in general, and indigenous communities in particular are experiencing in defending their heritage and historical claims to their territories and their culture. Although this is not the place to go deeper into the matter, suffice it to mention the relevant agreements that reflect an agreement on the need to strengthen these demands: 1) Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (1989) on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples accords free and informed prior consent for any public policy decisions that affect their territory or integrity as a social group;[[6]](#footnote-6) 2) the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)[[7]](#footnote-7) raises the legitimacy of their claims to an even higher level in international jurisprudence; and 3) the American Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2016), adopted by the Organization of American States,[[8]](#footnote-8) extends these rights to include intellectual rights for elements in their culture, in their territories and in their productive systems.

The struggle for environmental justice is the order of the day across the globe. Myriad communities find themselves resisting efforts by the national states of which they are a part or financial interests attempting to control resources and territories that they considered part of their heritage. This process has intensified in recent years with the expansion of search for raw materials and land for agricultural and livestock production. The process has become so extensive that even as conservative a journal as *The Economist* has dedicated considerable space to analyzing the phenomenon (2011).

The proliferation of local organizations prosecuting demands for environmental justice has also spawned a systematic effort to study and support them. One of the most extensive of the groups engaged in this process has constructed an academic research project, “Environmental Justice Organizations, Liabilities and Trade”, based at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. It developed an effective tool for incorporating the various communities engaged in struggles around environmental justice, creating an on-line database. The information for each place-based activity is integrated into a global atlas that permits the participants to visualize their relationship to others involved in similar struggles. It describes itself in the following manner:

**“The project supports the work of Environmental Justice Organisations,** uniting scientists, activist organisations, think-tanks, policy-makers from the fields of environmental law, environmental health, political ecology, ecological economics, to talk about issues related to **Ecological Distribution**. Central concepts are Ecological Debts (or Environmental Liabilities) and Ecologically Unequal Exchange. We focus on the use of these concepts in science and in environmental activism and policy-making” (Ejolt, 2017).

1. **Food Sovereignty: An Alternative to Food Security**

The proposal for a Food Sovereignty (FS) program involves an important shift from the prevailing public policy approach that is oriented towards food security. Although there is a large literature attempting to define the terms with many people strongly invested in their differences, for the present essay, suffice it to characterize the two and then explore the implications of the second concept for social policy and political development.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The FAO provides this “useful workable definition:”

*Food security* exists 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. Household food security is the application of this concept to the family level, with individuals within households as the focus of concern (FAO 2001, Ch. 2, p. 1).

This definition is useful in that it emphasizes an important characteristic: the availability of food to satisfy human needs, regardless of how it is procured. This is important because the issue is directly related to the question of the liberalization of world trade and international capital markets as well as the powerful influence of the principal corporate interests involved in global trade in grains (Morgan 1979).

Food Sovereignty, on the other hand, not only focuses its concerns on the availability of food, in the sense, described above, but also encompasses a number of other crucial matters that are directly related to the way food is produced, and who and where it is produced. Although the expression has a long history in public policy, for our purposes we will focus on its development as a political goal and organizing program by La Vía Campesina since the mid-1990s:

***Food sovereignty is different from food security in both approach and politics*.** Food security does not distinguish where food comes from, or the conditions under which it is produced and distributed. National food security targets are often met by sourcing food produced under environmentally destructive and exploitative conditions, and supported by subsidies and policies *that destroy local food producers but benefit agribusiness corporations. 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. It promotes community control of productive resources; agrarian reform and tenure security for small-scale producers; agro-ecology; biodiversity; local knowledge; the rights of peasants, women, indigenous peoples and workers; social protection and climate justice (*Nyéléni Newsletter*, 2013).

For purposes of the present article, the key to understanding the importance of delineating the differences is their differing impacts on *justice*. The operative difference between the two is the emphasis on the conditions of production, the processes, and the impacts that this production has on the environment and on the people involved. By emphasizing process and impacts, the FS approach places its emphasis on the ways in which food systems promote a dynamic integration of communities with an all-inclusive concern for the relationship between producers, production, and the ecosystems within which they function.

1. **Food Sovereignty: Promoting social inclusion and environmental protection.**

Although the academic discussions of FS have pointed to numerous limitations of the way in which the concept is currently used, in this paper we wish to stress its importance in any program for social inclusiveness. There is now ample experience with grassroots efforts to promote FS to demonstrate that it offers a meaningful alternative to the inability of the international community to meet its quite laudable declarations to eliminate hunger on a global scale (Millennium –2000-2015– and Sustainable –2015-2030 – Development Goals).[[10]](#footnote-10)

The basic argument of those supporting FS is that it offers an effective alternative to the official approach to rural development to assure environmental justice. Since its formal creation in 1996, La Vía Campesina is systematically advancing a definition of FS that clearly established an agenda for its practical work and political advocacy in regional and international fora. At an international meeting in Nyéléni, Mali, in 2007, it defined six pillars of food sovereignty:

1. Focuses on food for the people by: a) placing people’s need for food at the centre of policies; and b) insisting that food is more than just a commodity.

2. Values food providers by: a) supporting sustainable livelihoods; and b) respecting the work of all food providers.

3. Localizes food systems by: a) reducing the distance between suppliers and consumers; b) rejecting dumping and inappropriate food aid; and c) resisting dependence on remote and unaccountable corporations.

4. Places control at a local level by: a) placing control in the hands of local food suppliers; b) recognizing the need to inhabit and share territories; and c) rejecting the privatization of natural resources.

5. Promotes knowledge and skills by: a) building on traditional knowledge; b) using research to support and pass on this knowledge to future generations; and c) rejecting technologies that undermine local food systems.

6. Works with nature by: a) maximizing the contributions of ecosystems; b) improving resilience; and c) rejecting energy intensive, monocultural, industrialized and destructive production methods (in <<http://www.nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/31Mar2007NyeleniSynthesisReport-en.pdf>> accessed 30 May 2017).

These pillars continue to define the objectives and work program of the Vía Campesina. What is particularly notable about its activity over the past 20 years is its continuing ability to develop techniques and institutions that contribute to this program by deepening and expanding its scope of action. Perhaps one of the most important areas of activity has been its continuing exploration of the possibilities of *agroecology* to contribute to their output objectives by expanding the gamut of products to which this paradigm is being applied while also exploring its potential in an ever-widening circle of agroecological settings. A second tool that has played an ever increasing role in the consolidation of the organization’s ability to incorporate more members and improve the viability of each of its constituent groups is the *peasant-to-peasant school* program; this “institution” serves as a means of transmitting knowledge and improving skills while building solidarity within individual organizations across regions and the globe.

The proposal discussed in the present contribution assumes that to overcome the problem of provisioning of food, there must be a significantly reduced emphasis on “capitalist” markets (be they local, regional, national or international) as institutions for allocating resources and providing signals for production. In their place, emphasis is focused on self-provisioning and exchanges within regional settings for overcoming the barriers to assuring the adequate dietary needs, especially of the most food “insecure” segments of the population.

An important facet of this alternative focus is the empowering of farming communities to take a major role in ordering food provisioning. This involves concern for production and distribution as well as accepting responsibility for ecosystem health. Thus, there is an explicit devolution of powers to institutions that can coordinate production and distribution – including assuring adequate supplies for all social groups within their area of influence.

The concept of FS being discussed does not consider as central the matter of foods above the basic nutritional standards. It is addressing the needs of the considerable proportion of the world’s population that presently does not have access to an adequate diet. In doing so, however, it would seem that a considerable amount of attention and planning must be devoted to supplying the food needs of considerable segments of the population who are not and frequently cannot become agricultural producers themselves.

1. **Food Sovereignty: An alternative to industrial agriculture**

By placing “Justice” at the center of the discussion, an analysis of the food system bares the extraordinary contradictions that make it virtually impossible to attend the pressing needs of significant sectors of the population, in almost all parts of the world, even in some of the wealthiest countries. The inequalities inherent in the capitalist market are at the heart of the inability of the present system to assure a production model and distribution mechanisms that take into account the vast majority’s needs. These inequalities are accompanied by technological developments that are incompatible with environmental balance and universal provisioning. The prevailing model contributes to aggravating impoverishment by channeling resources from local groups to control by powerful interests, further accelerating the process of the global concentration of wealth. This transfer is occurring on a global scale, documented and criticized by numerous scholars who also lament the intensifying violence accompanying the process (Borras et al., 2012).

There are a few outstanding examples of governmental programs that are successfully attending the challenges of assuring minimum diets for ‘disadvantaged’ social sectors.[[11]](#footnote-11) These successes are generally attributed to an explicit commitment to an inclusive model of social development and the deliberate participation of the ‘target’ populations in the design and implementation of these programs, assuring the basic nutritional needs of those systematically left behind or excluded by the market. To the well-known achievements of public sector programs in northern European countries can be added the less well understood achievements of the Cuban revolution (Alteri and Funes, 2012; Wilson, 2013), and the “Zero Hunger” Program of the Workers’ Party in Brazil, initiated during the presidency of Luis Ignacio da Silva and continued during the following regime of Dilma Rousseff (Ansell, 2016; Morton, 2015). In China there are also important movements stimulating food sovereignty activities initiated by peasant organizations often collaborating with local governments in response to unfavorable economic developments and a grassroots realization of their importance for creating new possibilities for autonomous strategies to improve local well-being (van der Ploeg and Ye, 2016; Wen et al., 2012).

Social groups and political organizations are also involved in a variety of approaches to promote FS. This is exemplified by the on-going efforts of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance to identify groups around the world engaged in activities to promote production consistent with the goals of the Nyéléni Declaration, discussed above. For nine years, it has recognized significant successes in this area; in 2016, one of the recipients of its awards was the Farmworkers Association of Florida, which has worked for more than 30 years

“to build power among farmworker and rural low-income communities to gain control over the social, political, workplace, economic, health and environmental justice issues affecting their lives. Their guiding vision is a social environment in which farmworkers are treated as equals, not exploited and deprived based on race, ethnicity, immigrant status, or socioeconomic status. As members of the world’s largest social movement, La Vía Campesina, FWAF is building collective power and a unified force for providing better living and working conditions, as well as equity and justice for farmworker families and communities. This includes building leadership and activist skills among communities of color who are disproportionately affected by pesticide exposure/health problems, environmental contamination, racism, exploitation and political under-representation while lifting up women’s wisdom and leadership.” (in <<http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/announcing-2016-food-sovereignty-prize-honorees/>> accessed 30 May 2017).

The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network is another example of a grassroots organization that has been working to transform urban blight into a community based food system (White, 2011a). As one assiduous analyst of the experience described it:

“These [women] activists create the farm as a community safe space, which operates as a creative, public, outdoor classroom where they nurture activism and challenge the racial and class-based barriers to accessing healthy food. In addition to improving access to healthy food by re-purposing vacant land, they are transforming their communities into safe and green spaces” (White, 2011).

In her analysis of black farmers in the United States, Monica White also refers to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives that is pursuing a program to stimulate self-supporting communities with programs that increase income and enhance other opportunities. By promoting land retention and development, the Federation stimulates the development of self-supporting communities with programs that increase income and enhance other opportunities, especially for African Americans, but essentially for all family farmers. “We do this with an active and democratic involvement in poor areas across the South, through education and outreach strategies which support low-income people in molding their communities to become more humane and livable” (in <<http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/files/home/page/fschistory/mission.htm>> accessed 30 May 2017).

Elsewhere around the globe, local communities are joining into larger organizations and confederations to pursue their goals of greater local autonomy in managing resources and assuring social well-being. In 2016, the US Food Sovereignty Alliance (mentioned above) also recognized the important achievements of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) in its award ceremony. The Food Sovereignty Prize champions real solutions to hunger and is recognized by social movements, activists and community-based organizations around the world, and is considered to be a civil society alternative to the World Food Prize, proffered by “official” international organizations supporting the food security approach to hunger. In making the award, the Food Sovereignty Alliance highlighted that “hunger is not a technical problem, it’s a political problem […] small farmers have had the solution to hunger for millennia in agroecology and food sovereignty” (op. cit.). They pointed out that the AFSA:

“brings together organizations representing smallholder farmers, pastoralists and hunter/gatherers; indigenous peoples, youth, women and consumer networks; people of faith; and environmentalists from across Africa. Together they advocate for community rights and family farming, promote traditional knowledge systems, and protect natural resources. In the face of increased corporate agribusiness interests threatening their food systems, including massive land and water grabs, the criminalization of seed-saving practices, and false solutions to climate-change such as the so-called ‘Climate-Smart Agriculture’, AFSA unites the people most impacted by these injustices to advance food sovereignty through agroecological practices, policy work, and movement-building efforts” (op.cit.)

Ben Guri, AFSA’s chairperson accepted the prize pointing out that:

“the way forward will allow food producers, supported by consumers, to take control of production systems and markets to provide healthy and nutritious food. […] it can be done though collective, inclusive and democratic co-generation of the knowledge held by farmers, consumers, researchers and Africa governments, who are meant to serve the interests of their (farming) populations” (op.cit.).

These principles and approaches are also at the heart of a burgeoning network in India. An articulate spokesperson for the “Vikalp Sangam” (Alternative Confluences), Ashish Kothari explains that this is a platform for networking of groups and individuals working on alternatives to the currently dominant model of development and governance, in various spheres of life. “The Sangams are a space for people to exchange experiences and ideas emerging from practice and thinking in a whole range of endeavour: sustainable agriculture and pastoralism, renewable energy, decentralised governance, community health, craft and art revival, multiple sexualities, inclusion of the differently abled, alternative learning and education, community-based conservation, decentralised water management, urban sustainability, gender and caste equality, and more” (Kothari, 2016: 2) People practicing and conceiving the initiatives have been able to get together and share. Among the approaches are a food sovereignty alliance, urban initiatives for self-provisioning, community conservation areas, preventative healthcare education and facilities. As in many other parts of the world, the activities also include “resistance, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation” with policies and institutions that threaten to undermine the efforts to strengthen community.

An international grouping of communities committed to the principles of self-governance and food sovereignty is the Consortium of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Conservation Areas and Territories (known as ICCA). Together, these communities exist in about 18 countries and own or administer hundreds of millions of hectares. Their defining characteristics include: a **community closely connected to a well-defined ecosystem; c**ommunity **management decisions and efforts lead to**the**conservation** of the ecosystem's habitats, species, ecological services and associated cultural values; and the community is the **major player in decision-making (governance) and implementation regarding the management of the site.**These communities are evolving to assure the consolidation of their abilities to assure not only the ecological integrity of their regions, but also their material well-being through self-strengthening processes. Their unique cultural heritages and the constant interaction that the consortium provides is promoting mechanisms for consolidating their abilities to defend themselves in the face of adverse international pressures (Borrini-Feyerabend and Campese, 2017; Apgar et al., 2016).

As suggested above, however, La Vía Campesina (LVC) best encompasses the principles of FS enumerated above. It is a transnational social movement that clearly articulates the significance of food sovereignty for community and regional well-being (Edelman and Borras, 2016). Composed of national, regional, and continental movements and organizations of peasant and family farmers, indigenous people, landless peasants, farm workers, rural women, and rural youth, representing some 200 million families worldwide (Desmarais, 2007; Martinez-Torres & Rosset, 2008, 2010), this remarkable grouping comprises many rural movements and organizations. As “a global space of convergence and encounter among different rural and peasant cultures, different epistemologies and hermeneutics… [it has evolved over 20 years through] a process called Diálogo de Saberes (in Spanish (Leff, 2004), which roughly translates to ‘dialog among different knowledges and ways of knowing,’ [that] is key to the convergence and persistence [of significant diversity]. It is a process where different visions and cosmologies are shared on a horizontal, equal footing basis. Part of it can be thought of a peasant/indigenous way of solving or avoiding conflicts, because there isn’t one knowledge to be imposed on others” (Rosset and Martinez-Torres, 2014: 138-139).

FS evolved as a uniting force for bringing this broad coalition together. It offers a common framework that allows for diversity in formulating productive strategies. Their ongoing process of information exchange and peasant-based technical assistance programs are designed to take into account the specificities of each locale while creating a broad framework within which common problems can be addressed. They are explicitly organized to mount a united effort of self-defense (against neoliberal policies promoting intensive mono-cropping and industrial agricultural technologies) and innovation to explore a variety of approaches to satisfy local and regional needs with environmentally sustainable techniques.

As LVC developed its practices to promote FS, its members discovered that food production offered an insufficient platform for organizing and strengthening its local structures: they quickly discovered that some internal problems of inequality and oppression within their communities were creating obstacles for their advance. It became necessary to confront directly these inherited patterns of discrimination and individual protagonisms in order to fully mobilize the productive potential within their communities and regions. The discussions in regional and international fora rapidly moved beyond the subject of food production and producers to democratize the food system, emphasizing the centrality of food in local cultures and the significance of local knowledge of foods and their preparation in integrating the relationship between production and consumption. In this context, a renewed emphasis was placed on agroecology as an epistemological cornerstone of productive strategies that highlighted the intimate relationship between social production of food and the care of the ecosystems on which it depends.

One of the largest member organizations of LVC is the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil. It has been an active promoter of LVC activities and has often spearheaded innovative approaches to strengthening its own organization and attracting new members. One of the most significant of these activities is the educational program that it manages jointly with several agrarian universities in Brazil as well as in its own peasant-to-peasant training programs (Hammond, 2014). The Movement enjoyed relative support from the Workers’ Party governments and was able to occupy numerous idle ranches and develop urban settlements in many parts of the country that contributed significantly to improving the well-being of hundreds of thousands of some of the poorest people in the country (Massicotte, 2014).

The Zapatista movement in southern Mexico is another important social movement that continues to offer dramatic lessons on how to build community, developing the full panoply of institutions required for self-governance while also promoting substantial improvements in material well-being and assuring environmental conservation. This group emerged as a rebel force about 25 years ago, demanding local self-governance and full citizen rights during a difficult period in Mexican history. Without going into more detail, suffice it to say that this experience offers a stellar example of the possibilities of achieving many of the goals of progress through a concerted program of grassroots democracy and social inclusion (Baronnet et al., 2011; Mora, 2015).

In this section we have presented a wide range of approaches in process to promote social inclusion, improve material well-being, and assure environmental conservation. It is clear that there are concerted efforts on all continents to develop alternatives to the model of food security based on market forces. It is clear that community driven initiatives can offer valuable examples that merit evaluation by the international community.

1. **Food Sovereignty: A strategy for social inclusion**

FS offers a different point of departure for discussing the relationship between food and justice. By proposing the direct participation of producers in the design of the productive system, in the availability and diversity of foodstuff, and the care of their ecosystems, it transforms the character of this basic element in human existence. Although it does not necessarily remove all food from the marketplace, it proposes to alter the ways in which it is produced and the social relations between farmers and society (consumers).

Since the producers themselves manage the production system, it is necessarily defined by their territorial limits. Firmly anchored in their communities, its dynamics are defined by the collective actions of these producers. It is conceptually a productive model grounded in processes of collective decision-making and collective processes of learning and transmission of knowledge about the production process. The conceptual production model, agroecology, is continually being modified to adapt to changing conditions and new information about production and ecology, is part of this inherently collective process. To reinforce and extend the dynamics of knowledge production, the widespread implementation of *peasant-to-peasant schools* (McCune et al., 2014), involving exchange of information about techniques, technology, inputs, markets and consumption further deepens the collective social relations that are a fundamental feature of the FS model.

This collaborative model of training, production, and environmental management is also an important contributing feature explaining why it is also an epistemology that systematically promotes environmental justice. With broad collective participation and direct connections with the consumers, there is a constant feedback process that contributes to social interactions that promote collaboration and equality. The collective processes of implementing the FS strategy inherently limit the ability for individuals to resort to exploitative processes to extract “rents” from community efforts.

This short presentation cannot do “justice” to the complex and diverse social, cultural, political, and geographic elements that are currently at play in extending this strategy across the globe. Rather it is intended to open the discussion of the need to look beyond the State and the market to identify social institutions and processes being managed by local communities that are providing structures of cooperation to improve well-being and environmental conservation.

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3. In fact, the concern for the divergence between well-being and standard measures of progress is such that in the UK a Royal Commission was charged with providing guidance for public policy to reduce the gap (Scott, 2012). There is also a burgeoning field of the “economics of happiness” that is responding to this concern, albeit principally within the confines of orthodox economics (cf. Figart and Marangos, 2011; Carabelli and Cedrni, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Environmental justice” refers to the joint satisfaction of basic needs for an entire population (community, region, nation) along with respect for conserving and rehabilitating (if necessary) the ecosystems within which this population lives (ecosystem balance). The concept is discussed at length in Barkin and Lemus (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is abundant evidence of trade among distant communities in the Americas during the centuries before the conquest by the European powers (Mann, 2006). There is also evidence of intercontinental trade and cultural exchanges across both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (Hayes, 2008; Storey et al., 2007; Sorenson and Johannessen, 2004). An interesting feature of many of these exchanges between these different cultures is that there is little evidence of armed encounters. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. in <<http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312314>> accessed 30 Mayo 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. in <<http://undesadspd.org/indigenouspeoples/declarationontherightsofindigenouspeoples.aspx> > accessed 30 Mayo 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. in <<http://indianlaw.org/sites/default/files/ADRIP%201-17-17.pdf>> accessed 30 Mayo 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A comprehensive review of the evolution of the use of these concepts in the academic literature and in some facets of practice is available in Edelman (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. UNDP: “The SDGs aim to end all forms of hunger and malnutrition by 2030, making sure all people – especially children – have access to sufficient and nutritious food all year round. This involves promoting sustainable agricultural practices: supporting small-scale farmers and allowing equal access to land, technology and markets. It also requires international cooperation to ensure investment in infrastructure and technology to improve agricultural productivity. Together with the other goals set out here, we can end hunger by 2030” in <<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-2-zero-hunger.html>> accessed 30 May 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In this section, we are not considering the many creative and often successful programs currently in operation in many European countries (and perhaps elsewhere). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)