

11 Food Sovereignty



Neither Growing nor Yielding, but Fighting for Good Food for All!

About the authors and their positions

We see ourselves as part of the movement for food sovereignty and are writing from the perspective of the Österreichische Berg- und Kleinbäuer_innenvereinigung ÖBV – Via Campesina Austria¹ (Irmi Salzer) and the agropolitical group Agrar Attac (Julianna Fehlinger). We are mainly active in Austrian networks and participate in the Nyéléni movement for food sovereignty. We are also involved in the European Nyéléni process and are thus connected to partners throughout Europe. Irmi Salzer is an organic farmer in Burgenland and Julianna Fehlinger is sometimes a community farmer and sometimes an alpine farmer.

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<https://www.degrowth.de/en/dim/>

1. What is the key idea of food sovereignty?

Food sovereignty: The right of all people to democratically decide how food is produced, distributed and consumed

Food sovereignty as a concept was first presented in 1996 at the World Food Summit of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) by La Via Campesina², a global organisation of small farmers, rural workers, fishing communities, and landless and indigenous peoples. Since then, food sovereignty has evolved into the political leitmotif of a growing number of social actors from the widest possible range of societal groups fighting for the transformation of a global food and agricultural system dominated by industrial interests and focused solely on profit.

At the beginning of the 1990s, small farmers' movements (at first mainly in Latin America and Europe, then in the rest of the world) realised that, in light of the globalisation of agricultural markets and the increasing political power of institutions such as the WTO in the agriculture sector, it was necessary to form a globally active alliance of farmers. By founding La Via Campesina they sought to oppose through a strong transnational movement the neoliberal tendencies that were restricting the lives and survival chances of millions of small farmers and worsening the situation of hungry people all over the globe. As an answer to the technical term 'food security' that was coined by the FAO and that fails to address a number of questions, the young movement developed the concept of 'food sovereignty'. Food sovereignty addresses the power structures in which our food system is embedded; it addresses the conditions of food production and distribution; it asks about the consequences of our production methods for future generations; and it places the people who produce and consume food products at centre stage.

¹Austrian Association of Mountain Farmers – Via Campesina

²Literally 'the peasants' way'

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The principles of food sovereignty

Food sovereignty can be understood as a framework that must continuously be 'filled up' through concrete, local measures. Food sovereignty cannot be defined from the top down and for all time, but can only be shaped through a collective process of dialogue. Throughout the Nyéléni process (Nyéléni is the name used by the global food sovereignty movement to refer to itself; see below), the attempt has been made to define the main principles of food sovereignty based on the wide range of realities of both the farmers and the 'eaters'. Such principles include valuing food producers, the primary importance of feeding the population (instead of producing for export), the establishment of local production systems and the strengthening of local control over food, the development of knowledge and skills, and, last but not least, working with nature instead of against it.

Food sovereignty encompasses the rights of individuals, communities and institutions (including states), as well as a responsible relationship with nature, animals and other human beings. In the prevailing agricultural and food system, a majority of producers are denied their right to democratically participate in all political areas contingent to the production, processing and distribution of food products. International trade agreements, agricultural subsidies, GMO legislation, hygiene regulations, directives regarding access to markets, production regulations, etc. are on the whole adopted without the people directly affected having any right to participate in the process. The right to democratically choose and monitor agricultural, food, fishing, social, trade or energy policies is a necessary first step in order to enforce other rights such as the right to food, education and access to resources.

Only when these rights are enforced is it possible for producers to fulfil their responsibility regarding natural resources such as the soil, and biodiversity and the climate, so that future generations are also able to produce high-quality foods.

Food sovereignty means we must act in solidarity. Transnational solidarity, networking and mutual support are necessary to fight against exploitation and domination mechanisms. Local resistance and local alternatives must be completed through a global perspective.

2. Who is part of food sovereignty, what do they do?

From the peasants to the eaters– defining food sovereignty together and uniting social and ecological struggles in the South and North

Food sovereignty has been developed since the 1990s as an alternative for the Global North *and* South. At the beginning, the debate around food sovereignty was mainly led by *La Via Campesina*. However, *La Via Campesina* reco-

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gnised early on that a profound change and democratisation of agriculture and food systems can only be achieved if the movement sought to form alliances beyond those with producers, and to forge ties with other movements. Thus, the first International Forum for Food Sovereignty, the *Nyéleni* Forum, took place in Mali in 2007. Together with initiatives and organisations connected with environmental, human rights, consumer protection, women's, and also urban movements, the principles of food sovereignty were developed, and common goals, opponents and demands were identified. Since then, both regional forums (for example the Europe Forum for Food Sovereignty in Krems, Austria in 2011) and national forums have been held. Based on the common principles of democratisation, solidarity, local control, and greater care for the environment, movements for food sovereignty are continuously seeking to both create and advance alternative practices.

With regard to production models, adaptable (resilient) agro-ecological production methods are tested that, for example, use open-pollinated, non-GMO seeds, reduce agricultural dependence on oil and are based on natural cycles.

In the area of food supply, producer-consumer networks are constructed, e.g. by replacing traditional markets with relationships based on solidarity (Community Supported Agriculture - [CSA](#)), or by ensuring that producers earn a living wage through collective buying. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are trust-based certification systems that replace state control and supervision, and alternative education networks enable knowledge sharing on an equal footing, creating a collective space for all those involved in the agricultural and food system.

In order to stop the competition for land and soil and allow access to land for everybody who wants to farm it, models are being developed that remove land from the capitalist cycle of exploitation and promote the use of land as a commons.

The food sovereignty movement demands global social rights and dignified work conditions for all people—irrespective of their social origins or gender—throughout the agriculture and food system.

Through emancipatory processes, citizens should be empowered to participate actively and equally in shaping the political framework of the agriculture and food system. In this respect, the actors in the Global South and North face both similar and dissimilar political and social problems. The diversity of the groups coming together under the 'big tent' (Patel 2009) of food sovereignty is a strength, but also a challenge for the global food sovereignty movement.

Democratisation and the right to have rights

In order to enforce the right to democratic participation in the agriculture

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and food system, it is necessary to create conditions that do not arise of their own accord in our societies marked by exclusion and domination. Low-income people, migrants and women are often particularly shut out from participation. The food sovereignty movement is therefore fighting for conditions that enable all people to demand and enforce their social, economic and cultural rights and their right to participate in decision-making processes.

3. How do you see the relationship between food sovereignty and Degrowth?

Working together against false alternatives and for social-ecological transformation

In the German-speaking world, degrowth and food sovereignty are closely related, being often supported by the same activists and similar initiatives (such as Community Supported Agriculture, urban gardening, ecological agriculture, food co-ops, the occupation of fields) or are based on the same approaches for alternative paths (e.g. subsistence, unconditional basic income, commons, environmental and climate justice). All these approaches and initiatives are areas of experimentation for both food sovereignty and degrowth. In both movements, the combination –mainly non-institutional– of science, social movements and practical (collective) experience plays an important role.

Both food sovereignty and degrowth envision a new type of prosperity and well-being, one that includes social-ecological forms of production on the one hand, and a comprehensive democratisation of society (and the economy) on the other. In both cases the aim is to create new values that enable a good life for all based on solidarity and ecological living. Both movements should only be thought of in global terms and not just from a national perspective. One recent example of a coming together of both perspectives and movements is the 2016 campaign started by Attac Germany and Aktion Agrar with the title *Kühe und Bauern nicht verpulvern!* (roughly ‘Don’t throw farmers and cows down the drain!’), in which discourses about post-growth are combined with those surrounding food sovereignty.

The concept of food sovereignty has a history of more than 20 years and is constantly being reformulated through concrete struggles in both the Global South and the Global North. The degrowth discourse (as a widely debated concept) is younger and more clearly shaped by academic currents from the Global North. It has been taken up by many activist groups and grassroots initiatives and has developed a huge mobilisation potential in recent times.

In the following section we would like to establish certain criteria for analy-

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sing the possibility of bringing together degrowth and food sovereignty³.

Analysing power and domination structures

We consider that the fruitful currents of the degrowth movement are those that clearly label the profiteers of the capitalist model of accumulation and study the growth imperative of capitalist market economics. The concept of food sovereignty only has a limited capacity to expose the forces behind this growth imperative and to understand the social consequences that would result from overcoming it. Food sovereignty's main focus of fundamental criticism is the profit mentality that fails to take human needs into account or that creates needs in order to increase demand and consumption. The market is thus revealed as being a poor mechanism of allocation and distribution (the most current example being the crisis in the milk market). In order to advance the food sovereignty movement, the degrowth debate should be capable of showing why the economy has to grow under capitalism, which type of growth must be reduced and which domination structures are directly embedded in the growth imperative. It is therefore important to understand power not only in terms of possession but also as a social force, as a relationship of power.

A joint study of social and ecological crises

In the degrowth movement there is both a social and an ecological current of growth criticism. Only when it is possible to bring together the questions and points of criticism of both currents and to translate these into common perspectives and demands, i.e. when degrowth seeks to achieve a social and ecological –a social-ecological– transformation, will degrowth be able to enrich the food sovereignty movement. The food sovereignty movement itself is constantly seeking to maintain a balance between these two points.

The world is not a commodity – positioning ourselves against capitalist enclosure

Current capitalist dynamics seek to turn increasing areas of society into marketable commodities. In addition to labour, which became a commodity at the beginning of capitalism, and certain aspects of processed nature (such as food products), other aspects of nature (such as greenhouse gases) and of society (especially care work) are increasingly being turned into commodities. Positioning ourselves clearly against these processes and seeking to achieve the organisation of such areas as commons is an important step for a joint path of degrowth and food sovereignty.

Together against false alternatives

The main arguments of both degrowth and food sovereignty are already firmly anchored in the general world views of many critical citizens –and

³ Categories based on: Brand 2015.

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both movements can take advantage of this situation. Most of these individuals would agree with both the sentence: ‘We live on a finite planet on which there cannot be infinite growth’ and with criticism of industrial agriculture and factory farming systems. The essence of both degrowth and food sovereignty, however, is that they seek to politicise people and to show clearly that supermarkets selling organic products contribute as little to saving the world as so-called ‘green growth’. To this purpose, it is necessary to escalate the economic and sociopolitical perspectives of progressive sectors of society towards questions of wealth distribution and not let them stagnate in moralising anti-consumerism. This is the only way to leave behind false alternatives (such as the ‘green economy’, critical consumption and organic certifications) and approaches too deeply rooted in pragmatic politics, and to work on utopias, such as degrowth and food sovereignty.

4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

Focusing the criticism of growth on production and addressing dominance relations in the use of resources

Weder Wachsen noch Weichen! (roughly ‘We won’t grow and won’t yield either!’) is one of the main slogans of the European farmers’ movement. It is a criticism of the change in agricultural structures that exerts massive pressure on small farms and has been causing farm abandonment for decades. This structural change is intrinsically tied up with the liberalisation of agricultural markets and the industrialisation of agriculture. The slogan refers to the farms themselves, which –in order to continue enabling a farm-based agricultural system– should neither grow (in terms of area farmed) nor cease to exist. In this sense, growth does not refer directly to the concept of gross domestic product (GDP) growth, criticised by the degrowth movement when placed at the heart of economics and politics. However, both types of growth are closely related. For its part, the type of growth alluded to in the slogan, opposed by the farmers’ movement, refers to increasing efficiency per man hour –not per surface area– on the farms. According to the agro-industry, the whole of agricultural production must and will grow and become more efficient thanks to the structural change in the agricultural industry, supposedly in order to ‘feed the world’s hungry’. However, the World Agriculture Report has clearly shown that in terms of surface area and units of energy invested, smaller, agro-ecological farming systems are much more efficient than industrial-economic agriculture based on monocultures and factory farming. In addition, small farms are more capable of adapting to the needs of people and thus ensuring a sufficient food supply for all.

Currently, due to the elimination of the milk quota in April 2015 and the crisis in prices for agricultural products (especially milk, but also pork), the

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above-mentioned slogan is once again being increasingly heard. We see this as an opportunity to carry out a debate that is critical of growth and that addresses the production side of the problem and not, as is usually the case, only consumption. Food sovereignty has a wealth of experience in the area of direct involvement with agricultural and food politics, and this can be of value for the degrowth movement.

Within the food sovereignty movement, there is often insufficient systematic thought given to the concept of growth. The movement mainly addresses the negative consequences of these policies for agriculture and food in general, but questions such as why economic growth is absolutely necessary in capitalism and its importance as a tool for keeping society content (a growing pie makes it easier to solve problems of distribution...) are barely touched upon. Yet such a debate would significantly increase the movement's capacity for action.

Subsistence, social romanticism and resource quotas

Subsistence or self-sufficiency is recognised by segments of the food sovereignty movement as a positive concept when it refers to the regionalisation of food production. However, it is not seen as an end in itself. Especially in the Global South, subsistence and semi-subsistence agriculture are often insufficient to provide food producers with a good life. Thus, the main focus of the movement for food sovereignty is on the creation and strengthening of local and regional production and distribution systems and on recuperating community control over such systems –and individualistically abandoning society is seen as a form of depoliticisation. The movement is based on collective action and solidarity, and no demands are made for (individual) self-restraint and frugality. In addition, the movement does not content itself with the creation of anti-civilisational parallel societies-slash-alternative projects. At the Europe Forum in Krems in 2011, the Nyéléni movement set forth the following strategy of action: Resist – Transform – Build alternatives. Significantly, these three strategies are applied simultaneously and with the same degree of priority. In our opinion, degrowth's sufficiency-oriented current and focus (at least in certain segments) on individual changes in behaviour could especially benefit from such a politicisation.

A return to former ways of living, often preached about in moralistic undertones by segments of the degrowth movement, is not a vision shared by the movement for food sovereignty. Ambitions of this nature filter out historical dominance relations and reduce the question of ecologically and socially just economics to measurable indicators (such as the ecological footprint) or otherwise tend to be unrealistically romantic. Although the small-farm agriculture of the past centuries in most of Europe generally followed the principles of a circular economy, it was also highly hierarchical and patriarchal in its organisation. In addition, advances in communications technolo-

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gy have opened up historical opportunities for transnational solidarity movements. A fruitful connection between the innovations of modernity, on the one hand, and traditional cultural technologies as well as social forms of organisation (e.g. commons), on the other, must be the goal of any emancipatory movement.

The demand for a system of quotas for resource use, often heard in the context of post-growth movements, is considered especially problematic in the food sovereignty movement. Anybody studying the finite nature and protection of resources such as water and land must always take into account the associated power relations, mechanisms of exclusion, and questions of distribution. For example, what does the obligation to reduce CO₂ emissions mean for the one billion people on this planet who don't have access to electricity? Individual –and in the worst case marketable– resource quotas are authoritarian and technocratic pseudo-solutions that fail to address relations of power and do not help us achieve a social-ecological transformation. They are based on a monetary view of nature and life, and only further their commodification.

5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes

'A good life for all!' –through solidarity and mutual learning among social and ecological movements

The starting point for common emancipatory movements must be solidarity between the individual struggles involved and the realisation that future successes will be founded on a complementary relationship between the movements. We must therefore be open to learning from each other and sharing experiences. In addition, this requires a continuing debate on the dominant nature of capitalist growth (Brand 2015). Production and consumption must be analysed in regard to their 'nature as capitalist, patriarchal, racialised or post-colonial social relations' (Brand 2015: 34) in order to create the foundations for a social-ecological transformation based on solidarity.

The goal of fighting for a good life for all seems to us to be the most important common message of the emancipatory movements. The definition of a good life is developed on a daily basis in the complementary social movements and their struggles.

Once again, the so-called 'liberation from excess' cannot be the goal of emancipatory movements. To date, this has only been possible through the postcolonial exploitation of the countries in the Global South and especially of the lower social classes of the Global North and South. The most important social struggle in our capitalist society is the one between poor and rich; and the homogenising question of how all our societies can free themselves

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from excess is in our eyes a cynical one. Now that so many people are waiting at the gates of Europe to participate in some of the excess, it is made especially and brutally clear that hardly anybody in Europe is prepared to give anything up, or is able to do so: On the one hand, most people are benefiting less and less from excess due to the reductions in real wages; on the other hand we see a clear case of grandfather policies. So as not to admit this openly, those fleeing from other countries are simply treated as criminals. The fact that this strategy is even possible is in our opinion due to the enormous social inequality advanced by global neoliberal politics. For their part, those who we believe should really be collectively liberating themselves from their excess simply fade into the background.

In addition to a relationship based on solidarity between different social and ecological movements, we would also like to speak out in favour of the simultaneous application of diverse political strategies. As mentioned above, the movement for food sovereignty seeks to enable a transformation through three different but complementary and reciprocal strategies: Resist – Transform – Build alternatives.

Although, in light of neoliberal-capitalist land grabbing, the destruction of the foundations of life, and the violent exclusion of more and more people, it is urgently necessary to develop common strategies and build up common alternatives, it is probably unrealistic and from our point of view not even desirable to join energies into a single, unified movement. Social movements need to take each other into account and complement each other in a context of solidarity. But each movement must fight its own battles.

Literature

Links

Österreichisches Forum für Ernährungssouveränität:

<http://www.ernaehrungssouveraenitaet.at/>

Meine Landwirtschaft – Kampagnenseite: <http://meine-landwirtschaft.de/>

Solidarische Landwirtschaft: <http://www.solidarische-landwirtschaft.org>

Uniterre – Schweizer Bauerngewerkschaft: <http://www.uniterre.ch>

Nyéleni Europe – Bewegung für Ernährungssouveränität:

<http://nyelenieurope.net>

FIAN International – Menschenrechtsorganisation mit dem Fokus Recht auf Nahrung: <http://www.fian.org>

La Via Campesina International: <http://www.viacampesina.org>

afrique-europe-interact – transnationale Initiative zu Migration, Flucht und Landwirtschaft: <http://afrique-europe-interact.net>

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Hands on the Land for Food Sovereignty – Kampagne gegen Landgrabbing:
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