

Koen Dekeyser^{ac}, Lise Korsten^{bc} & Lorenzo Fioramonti^{ac}

Food sovereignty: shifting debates on democratic food governance

^a Centre for the Study of Governance Innovation and Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

^b Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

^c Department of Science and Technology and National Research Foundation Centre of Excellence in Food Security

Corresponding author:

Prof. Dr Lise Korsten

Department of Plant and Soil Sciences

Room 2-17, Agricultural Building

University of Pretoria

Tel: +27 12 420 3295

lise.korsten@up.ac.za

Koen Dekeyser orcid.org/0000-0002-8726-2200

Lise Korsten orcid.org/0000-0003-0232-7659

Lorenzo Fioramonti orcid.org/0000-0002-9727-4643

Abstract

This article develops the concept of food sovereignty while it critically reflects on its present status and future trajectories. The concept of food sovereignty provides an alternative framework for solutions to the human and ecological consequences of industrial food systems. While the concept of food sovereignty gains traction at international levels, including at the United Nations, its lack of conceptual clarity contributes to a variety of often diverging interpretations. This frequently constrains practical implementation and weakens its potential as an alternative paradigm to food governance. At the same time, food sovereignty thought is shifting beyond its initial agrarian focus to embrace whole food systems, which includes the role of consumers and urban areas.

Keywords food sovereignty; food governance; social movements; food systems; food security

1. Introduction

The concept of food sovereignty (FS) emerges as part of the critical debate around food governance and food security at local and international levels. Current industrial food systems are often criticised for their negative impact on society and the environment, including human health, biodiversity loss, climate change, and limited food accessibility for the poorest segment of the population (Chappell et al. 2013; FAO 2015; Pelletier et al. 2011). Against this backdrop, FS is presented as an alternative model based on the democratisation of food systems and the inclusion of small-scale farmers and sustainable production.

Initially developed by farmers and civil society, the concept became increasingly popular among governments, academia, and international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Legislation that embraces FS principles has been adopted in 15 countries and incorporated into the constitutions of countries such as Bolivia, Venezuela, Mali, Senegal and Nepal (Godek 2015; Schiavoni 2017). It became the key slogan for one of the most important transnational social movements in the world, La Vía Campesina (LVC), which first introduced the FS concept in 1996 (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). In this article we unpack FS to present its current status followed by an historical overview that portrays its evolution. Second, we critically engage with the most important current debates and discuss the latest developments in the evolution of FS. At the end, we discuss the development and future trajectories on FS.

2. Unpacking food sovereignty

The concept of FS is associated with the right to food (RtF) and food justice (Rosset 2003). Each concept has a specific perspective on how to achieve food security, yet they all share a call for reconnecting local and global food security, social justice, and citizens' participation in food governance. Within this debate, a number of social movements have taken leading role. La Via Campesina (LVC), which is regarded as one of the largest and most influential farmers' movements in the world and claims to represent between 200 and 500 million members through its 164 participating organisations, is the driving force behind the FS movement (LVC 2017; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010, 2014).

To date, FS is '*at once a slogan, a paradigm, a mix of practical policies, a movement and a utopian aspiration*' (Edelman 2014, p. 960). A diverse group uses FS for different roles, which leads to various interpretations that at times complement or contradict each other. Environmental groups embrace the idea of FS for its sustainable production methods through agroecology, while farmer unions support the focus on farmers' rights. Development organisations and North-South solidarity groups use FS thought for solutions to food insecurity and the protection of livelihoods, and policymakers take inspiration for a greater intervening role for agricultural policies. These different interpretations can conflict with each other and it is not yet clear how FS as a concept can balance these multiple expectations.

In this section we present and unpack the FS definition and pillars from the Nyéléni Declaration of 2007. The Nyéléni Declaration was the outcome of a large summit of the FS movement in Mali that laid the

foundations for the FS program and is still the most used definition of FS to date. We unpack the Nyéléni definition along its four main components, which include the importance of rights, the issue of how power is exercised, the importance of spatial dimensions (especially the localisation of production) and the distribution of resources. We critically engage with the Nyéléni definition and program in later sections.

- **Right** *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.*
- **Power** *It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations and proposes directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers*
- **Space** *Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability.*
- **Distribution** *Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations’ (Nyéléni 2007, p. 9).*

This Nyéléni definition was translated into six pillars that represent the common framework and the collective vision of the movement (Schiavoni 2015). These pillars are (1) Food for people, (2) Values food providers, (3) Localised food, (4) Local food control, (5) Building knowledge and skills and (6) Agroecology (Nyéléni 2007). Table 1 presents the Nyéléni pillars.

Table 1 Pillars of food sovereignty

Pillars	Description
Food for people	People have the right to healthy and culturally appropriate food.
Values food providers	The aspirations, needs and livelihoods of those who produce, distribute, and consume food are placed at the heart of food systems and policies.
Localised food	Local food production and consumption are prioritised in localised food systems.
Local food control	Food producers have a level of control over the resources needed to produce, while localised food systems are governed by communities and peoples.
Building knowledge and skills	Knowledge is spread through farmer knowledge networks on a peer-to-peer basis.
Agroecology	Agroecology is endorsed for its sustainable methods in producing food and its benefits to communities and the environment.

(Source: adapted from Nyéléni, 2007).

The first pillar states the right to sufficient, healthy, and culturally appropriate food for all individuals and communities, and rejection of the concept of food as a mere commodity. The RtF is a law-based request for states and communities to ‘respect, protect, and fulfil [an individual’s] needs for appropriate access to sufficient food of an acceptable quality’ (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, p. 19). This right to food was adopted by UN agencies dating back to 1999 (UNHR 2010). For the FS movement, this includes a rejection of the liberalisation agreements of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which shrinks the ability of states to develop their own agricultural policies, and to support their producers (Weis 2007). This limitation of state power by the WTO hinders solutions to food insecurity. Widespread food insecurity in a world capable of producing food for a population double its size (UNDP 2008), is ‘a violation of human rights’ (Ziegler 2008, p. 5).

The second pillar respects and supports the rights and roles of small-scale farmers who cultivate, grow, harvest, and process food. It defends the agrarian rights of small-scale farmers, which include access to water, land, and markets. This pillar resists the unequal power of small-scale farmers versus transnational food corporations or ‘food giants’ in local and global markets. A topic of resistance is the food import dependency in

developing countries that follows the dumping of food sponsored by the Common Agricultural Policy or the United States of America (USA) agricultural subsidies (Obenchain and Arlene 2015; Patel 2008).

Third, food producers and consumers are brought together in localised food systems as FS prioritises local markets over global ones, without the rejection of international trade itself (Burnett and Murphy 2014). Although the majority of food¹ is produced and consumed locally, food trade rules are designed to enhance and protect international trade (Mckee 2014; Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005), creating ‘poverty traps’ (Chappell et al. 2013). According to FS and the recent ‘locavores’ movement, a localised food system leads to higher quality, more sustainable, and fairer food systems (Cleveland et al. 2014). These ‘re-embedded’ spaces (Kneafsey 2010) can also offer opportunities for greater citizens participation (Sage 2014).

Fourth, the local community is the main level of decision-making and places the control and access to the means of production in the hands of local producers (Beauregard 2009; Edelman 2014). Control and access to the means of production are both an outcome and an instrument for implementing the FS program. Access to land is fundamental to FS (McMichael 2015) and is increasingly under pressure. This comes from urbanisation and other economic sectors, which compete for similar resources, such as export crops that replace food crops or the privatisation of resources in the ‘land grab’ (Deininger 2011; Deininger and Xia 2016; Hall et al. 2015). The political institutions required for this control are still debated, although polycentric approaches such as open source licences for seed development are proposed (Kloppenburg 2014).

Fifth, knowledge and skills are constructed, distributed, and received by farmer networks. Within these networks, farmers who design solutions to common problems promote them to their peers. This social construction and distribution protect the knowledge from privatisation and intellectual property rights. The knowledge is shared and belongs to everyone rather than specifically to any farmer (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014).

Sixth, agroecology studies the ecology of food systems (Francis et al. 2003), and forwards a production method that mimics natural ecosystems in farming. Its core principles include diversification, recycling and optimising interactions in the farming system (Altieri and Toledo 2011) and increases biodiversity, which is considered crucial for the future of agriculture (Chappell et al. 2013). The agroecological movement aims to shift the industrial production model towards small-scale production, dependent on low external energy (Chaifetz and Jagger 2014), as this contributes to social benefits such as broader economic development (De Schutter 2010). More than a sustainable production method, agroecology is a social process as it is farmers that drive the creation of knowledge, distribution and reception while they gain greater control and access to inputs and production methods.

These six pillars form the founding principles of the FS program. The next section briefly presents the history of FS and LVC, the most prominent organisations that introduced and developed FS.

2.1 The roots of food sovereignty

The earliest roots of FS date back to the mid-20th century. After the post-WWII food policy of the ‘right to food’ and the Cold War’s ‘right to freedom from hunger’ (Chaifetz and Jagger 2014; Patel 2013), a 1983 Mexican government program² used ‘soberanía alimentaria’ to reduce dependencies as it aimed to improve self-sufficiency and national control over the food chain. This ‘pre-FS’ peaked in 1987, with ‘autonomía alimentaria’ used later by Costa Rican activists to promote sovereignty in exports (Edelman 2014). In the 1980s, Latin America adopted neoliberal policies that eroded the state’s power to intervene in its agricultural sector. The globally fragmented small-scale farmer organisations reacted to this diminished role of their states by taking their struggles to the international level (Desmarais 2007; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). Small-scale farmers’ organisations developed international connections as they adopted a frame of common struggle, and a 1992 meeting in Nicaragua saw organisations from Central America, Europe, Canada, and the USA debate the need for transnational small-scale farmers solidarity (Desmarais 2007). In 1993, these debates resulted in the creation of the ‘movement of organisations’, LVC, translated as ‘The Peasant Way’ (Holt-Giménez 2009).

¹ ‘Most food in the world is grown, collected and harvested by more than a billion small-scale farmers, pastoralists and artisanal fisherfolk. This food is mainly sold, processed, resold and consumed locally, thereby providing the foundation of people’s nutrition, incomes and economies across the world’ (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, p. v).

² Programa Nacional de Alimentación (Edelman 2014).

Particularly, the 1994 Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade strengthened the bonds between northern and southern farmers against neoliberalism. In those early years, LVC started to represent small-scale farmers far and wide as it progressively gained access to global agrarian policy forums, while it continued to distance itself from non-political NGO's and international organisations that did not share its radical ideas (Desmarais 2007).

In 1996, LVC developed the first interpretation of FS as '*the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic food, respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security*' (LVC 1996, p. 1). At that point, LVC protested not only an increased liberalisation of their respective countries agricultural sector but presented an alternative direction in food governance. The newly formed LVC brought, through FS, the century-old question of the position of small-scale farmer back to the forefront: are small-scale farmers bound to disappear in the historical march to industrialisation (Bernstein 2004) or will they be allowed to adapt and carry on feeding the world?³ LVC chooses the latter (Agarwal 2014).

From 2000 onward, LVC formed relationships and alliances with other groups and organisations such as the World Social Forum and the FAO, but it refuses to engage with the WTO and the World Bank. Hence, LVC became a key international player and rallies diverse groups and organisations under the banner of FS (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010). As its international profile grew, LVC deepened its internal organisational structure to absorb its many new members while changing and enriching the FS definition and program at the 2007 Nyéléni meeting (see Table 1). The changes in FS thought from 1996 to 2007 included a shift of the sovereign position from the national level to the peoples or communities, a condemnation of large food corporations and a call to end all gender violence (Nyéléni 2007). Today, academics and policymakers take part in the process of forming FS.⁴ This influences debate on the flexibility and contradictions of FS, as well as the development of the 'next generation of FS'.

3. Current debates in food sovereignty

Farmers' organisations, policymakers, international institutions, academics, environmental and development organisations inserted FS into the debates on food security and food systems. All these stakeholders can recognise their needs and values in the 'big tent' concept of FS, but their different interpretations may have inconsistencies with each other (Patel 2009). In this section, we review the most recent and important debates. The FS movement criticises industrial food governance and proposes a radical alternative, but the fast changes in agriculture and the heterogeneity of the actors involved with food systems contribute to more complex agricultural landscapes. It is not clear how FS can be a guiding paradigm for all in this complexity. We group these debates into two main categories. The first deals with the organisation of FS, such as rule enforcement. Second, we contribute to the debate on the values of FS, such as pluralism within FS. We conclude with a reflection on the need for precision versus flexibility within FS.

3.1 Organising food sovereignty

3.1.1 Identity of sovereign

Who is to be sovereign in FS? The definition of sovereign shifted from the original focus on the nation towards peoples or communities. In 1996, LVC's definition identified the nation as the level on which to organise FS, which was a reaction to diminished national agricultural sovereignty after the 1994 WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) (Agarwal 2014; Desmarais 2007). Recognising that the state was regularly

³ Small-scale farmers deliver as high as 90 percent of all food production in African countries (Holt-Giménez 2009). Globally, family farmers produce 80 percent of world's food, constitute 98 percent of all farms, and work on 53 percent of all agricultural land. About 84 percent of those farms are smaller than two hectares (FAO 2015; Graeb et al. 2016).

⁴ One of the drivers of these debates is a series of conferences organised at Yale University (2013) and the International Institute of Social Studies (2014) which captured academics and activists' concerns with food sovereignty, resulting in special issues of the Journal of Peasant Studies (2014), Globalizations (2015), and Third World Quarterly (2015).

infringing peasant's rights, the 2007 Nyéléni Declaration identified the 'peoples' and 'communities' as sovereign as FS became '*The rights of peoples... to define their food and agricultural systems. This put the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems*' (Nyéléni 2007, p. 9). Such a broad interpretation places everyone at the heart of food systems, as everyone, in one way or another, at least consumes food. But more problematic is that it includes everyone without a specific distinction of scale, thus bringing the large-scale landowners and distributors, whom FS rails against, to the decision-making table (Patel 2009).

3.1.2. Governing and rule enforcement

The idea of FS protests against the concentration of power in large, vertically integrated corporations, and proposes '*a narrative about returning decision-making control to producers and consumers in the food system in order to mitigate the negative externalities of capital and state control of food, including hunger and food insecurity*' (Trauger 2014, p. 1147). This self-governance of communities, tribes, and groups over their food systems ensures that power over food is controlled by those most involved and affected by its production, distribution, and consumption. The proposed decision-making structures are organised around local, self-organising bodies such as communities, groups, or individuals with their relevant organisation forms such as food councils and traditional leadership, which can form part of networks with multiple and overlapping sovereignties (Trauger 2014). These networks might form a (con-) federation that would deal with the workings and conflicts of one sovereign group or level with another. However, the FS program includes strong views on farm sizes, property relations, production methods, and market relations, to name a few. Opposition to these views is expected when evidence suggests, for example, class differentiation within small-scale or family-based communities in commodity relations (Jansen 2014; Park et al. 2015). Strong regulatory mechanisms are required, and it is questionable that voluntary associations will have the power to enforce them outside of the state.

3.1.3. The state in food sovereignty

We approach the role of the state here in two ways: first, what role could the state play in a FS society, and second, what are the current outcomes when the state engages in the FS process through legislation? First, the role of the state remains uncertain and is noted as the 'elephant in the room' (Bernstein 2014), seen as an obstacle to FS (Clark 2016) or, until recently, has just not received much attention (Schiavoni 2017). This is in contradiction to the rather large role that the state should take in a FS society. The program of FS requires an active and strong state for its extensive agrarian reform, but its proposed devolution of powers to peoples and communities can paradoxically weaken the central state (Trauger 2014). The reliance on the state as the ultimate enforcer of rules might lead to an uneasy relationship, as it should support FS groups that can contradict its interests (McMichael 2015). Ideally, the interactions between the state and civil society should create a 'state-society' synergy that is mutually reinforcing and would enable systemic change or reform (Schiavoni 2017). As the FS movement regards food as embedded in complex and adaptive systems that operate at different scales, the state should recognise the 'multiple sovereignties' that FS groups hold in these overlapping scales, which could cross local, national, or international levels (Iles and Montenegro de Wit 2015; Schiavoni 2015). Ultimately, a 'partner state' (Clark 2016) should distribute power to communities and create the conditions necessary for the FS communities to function.

Second, FS legislation has been adopted by 15 countries within Latin America, which have taken a pioneering role (Godek 2015; Schiavoni 2017). Bolivia and Venezuela wrote FS principles into their constitutions of 2009 and 1999, respectively, but the actions these states took depended on their divergent interpretations of FS. The Bolivian FS program builds on the national state as it incorporates FS into the larger strategy of Bolivia's decolonisation, with land redistribution and support for small-scale farmers and their markets. In Venezuela, the objective of the state is to decrease its very high food import dependency and rebuild its national agricultural system (Kappeler 2013). Venezuela decentralised powers to the community level in order to create a sovereign space for local communities and included an agrarian policy that limits the size of landholdings, taxes unused property, redistributes fallow land to small-scale farmers and subsidises food. The Venezuelan FS program enables local *comunas* councils to govern their food systems, thus structurally transforming power relations through institutional changes. Bolivia, on the other hand, bypassed meaningful

land reform as it distributed forest reserves to small-scale farmers rather than addressing its large farm holdings (McKay et al. 2014). This is not to say that Venezuela's FS program is not without many shortcomings. For example, the state reduced undernourishment by relying on food imports rather than increases in (small-scale) production and reinforced state farms instead of small-scale farmers (Kappeler 2013). This signals a priority for food security through imports instead of FS (Schiavoni 2015).

In the countries where the state takes part in a FS process, civil society has sought partnerships with progressive elements of the state. While the '*state cannot stand alone on FS, and neither can local communities, groups, or peoples*' (McKay et al. 2014, p. 1195), the role of the state in FS itself is still under discussion.

3.1.4. Property relations in food sovereignty

For the FS project, access to land is fundamental as both a space to implement parts of its program and as a mobilising force for land activists (McMichael 2015). The FS literature prioritises 'access', 'sharing' and 'rights to use' (Trauger 2014), thus preferring a collective rather than individual ownership. The potential benefits of collective ownership are labour specialisation or pooling of access to inputs and markets (Agarwal 2014). However, the rights of individuals versus the collective and the form of ownership structures are left for the peoples and community to decide. The proposed ownership structures include cooperatives, collectives, customary law, individual ownership, or any combinations of these. But the collective rights can create tensions such as between farmers that already have access to land and those that have not. Even the FS movement itself has both wealthy farmers that are not supportive of redistributive land reform and landless groups that demand it. Furthermore, it is not clear if farm workers are considered 'landless' and in need of access to land (Patel 2009).

3.1.5. Food security and food sovereignty

Food security and the RtF are distinguished from FS as '*while food security is more of a technical concept, and the RtF a legal one, FS is essentially a political concept*' (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, p. 15). At its launch, the proponents of FS opposed food security as it was perceived to have a more technical than political approach and in favour of international trade (Hopma and Woods 2014; Lee 2013). Crucially, the FS movement finds that food security lacks an answer to *how* it is achieved. Later on, the FS movement recaptured the concept of food security as it proclaimed FS necessary to achieve 'true and sustainable' food security (Patel 2009). Perhaps it was easier to recapture the master frame of food security than to ignore or oppose it (Clapp 2014a; Duncan 2015). Currently, the FS movement uses food security as an objective but distances itself from approaches that do not place small-scale farmers centrally. While the idea of FS criticises the individual focus of food security, it has paid more attention to the food security of producers and less so towards those (poor) households that depend on the market for their food, or the impacts of gender, age, and class on food access (Clapp 2014a).

3.2. Values

3.2.1 Autonomy

Autonomy is approached as the outcome of FS and an instrument to implement the FS program. First of all, the idea of FS enshrines the autonomy of peoples and communities to define their food and agricultural systems, which can be interactively shaped with the state or other societal actors such as educational programs (Meek et al. 2017; Schiavoni 2017). However, FS also includes strong calls for gender egalitarianism, agroecology and prioritising local food and consumption. The assumption that peoples or communities are interested in all of the fundamentals of the FS program is criticised by Bernstein (2014) as 'agrarian populism' for idealising small-scale farmer communities as sustainable or just. While agroecology is a cornerstone of the FS program, it is questionable that small-scale farmers will logically choose agroecological production methods over industrial ones. The assumption of the FS movement for agroecology disregards the limited choices that force peripheral producers into labour-intensive agriculture and ignores the capacity, or willingness, of conscious farmers to choose other production methods. A sovereign community might choose to adopt genetically modified organisms or abandon farming altogether for another activity on the land. Even some LVC members have an explicit industrial agenda (Jansen 2014). Farmers may or may not (autonomously) prioritise long-distance trade if this is to their benefit, or if this enhances their food security and dietary needs with products outside their local

food systems or season. Fundamentally, it is not specified if only a selection of the FS program can be adopted rather than the whole concept, and how a conflict between different elements of the program will be handled. It is rarely questioned if there is a contradiction between the solidarity vision of FS and an individual farmer's right (Iles and Montenegro de Wit 2015).

3.3.2. Pluralism

Proponents of FS advance the democratic control of localised food systems to achieve food security with sustainable production. Currently, most agrarian systems already have a combination of local control, localisation, food security, sustainability, or industrialisation. As the FS narrative of a 'global food system in crisis' might not be manifested everywhere, many small-scale farmers engage in industrial agriculture and find opportunities in the global food system (Edelman et al. 2014; Jansen 2014). Park et al. (2015, p. 596) add that *'to assume that all rural women would choose (small-scale/family) farming as opposed to engagement with corporate agriculture is quite a leap of faith.'* While there is continuous debate within FS through the diálogo de saberes or 'dialogue among different knowledges and ways of knowing' (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014), the diverse farmers' interests can lead to different needs and wants. These diverse interests might lead to different decisions on food system governed through FS, just as not all democratic societies are the same. It is not clear how much of this pluralism is accepted within FS, or which elements have more priority than another. For Hospes (2014), a strive to end 'food violence' might be a better common framework in a plural society than FS.

Modern society is far more than food production and consumption and has more social struggles outside those that focus on food alone. While FS has links with the wider social 'transition' movement (Sage 2014) and other movements that have similar goals (García Trujillo 2015), it is unclear how FS relates to struggles beyond food or other rights frameworks. Although FS builds solidarity around food, this focus can obstruct other struggles or rights in a plural society. For example, Bolivia adopted FS in its constitution but its agrarian expansion drives a massive Amazon deforestation (Tabuchi et al. 2017). Generally, the degree of tolerance for pluralism outside and within FS is *'one of the biggest and most challenging questions'* (Edelman et al. 2014, p. 922).

3.3.3. Gender

Although it is questioned if women provide most of the agricultural labour (Palacios-Lopez et al. 2017), the 'feminisation of agriculture' increases as off-farm employment is disproportionately taken by men (De Schutter 2013a). In spite of this, women in agriculture face gendered obstacles to equal power, owning less than 20% of landholdings in developing countries which results in a higher level of food insecurity than men (FAO 2011; Patel 2012). Gender disparities impact access to land, capital, participation in agrarian transitions and political voice through paternalism and gender roles (Ngcoya and Kumarakulasingam 2016). The FS movement reacts to this by promoting radical gender egalitarianism (Patel 2009), and women's rights are considered to be of *'paramount importance for the realization of FS'* (Park et al. 2015, p. 585) and 'non-negotiable' (Patel 2012). LVC as an organisation has an egalitarian approach to gender representation. But, as the FS movement strives for greater decision-making power for the community, group, and family unit, it needs to address the inequalities that persist in these units, rather than to hide different agrarian classes in the notion of a homogeneous community (Jansen 2014). Park et al. (2015) criticise the FS movement for its 'we are all the same' rhetoric that can downplay class and other divisions and does not systematically address gender. The FS movement advances gender equity while it simultaneously advocates for small-scale farmers, one of the fiercest bastions of paternalism. The need to address the conservatism of small-scale farmers is apparent as, for example, rural women are still more likely to be dispossessed by male relatives than by a state or corporations (Agarwal 2014). Greater gender equality might be obstructed by patriarchy in autonomous FS groups that do not adopt the whole FS program.

3.3.4. Localisation

The FS movement seeks to embed food in localised food systems as it rejects neoliberal trade agreements that approach food as a mere commodity, such as the AoA. This does not imply that FS precludes long-distance trade, but rather that emphasises local food systems and short-distance trade. This localisation goes beyond a

reduction of geographical distance as it aims for local food systems to have higher quality, more sustainable, and fairer food. However, whether local food can deliver these results is contested (Cleveland et al. 2014; Coley et al. 2009; Peters et al. 2009). Although local can be an alternative space of political engagements (Ayres and Bosia 2011; Dekeyser and Korsten 2015), spatial proximity does not necessarily mean political accessibility. Localisation does not equal FS, even if large-scale agriculture is generally more connected to larger distribution networks and distant markets (Robbins 2015). Localisation could impact the food and nutritional security of many households that depend on food that is spatially ever more distant (Clapp 2014b, 2015). Millions of livelihoods depend on the trade of products over long distances and engaged farmers do not necessarily want to change to the local market (Park et al. 2015; Soper 2016). These farmers could benefit more from an improved power position in the international market rather than focusing on their local markets (Burnett and Murphy 2014). Furthermore, the popularity of a food system reform that limits people's access to favoured non-necessities such as tea, coffee, and off-season products, is doubtful. To build a local food system is not enough to overcome tensions such as an urban-rural divide or class differences within a community. Localising food is only one piece of the larger project of food system reform and is not enough in itself (Robbins 2015).

3.3.5. Complexity

The rural and solidarity focus of FS might conflict with the needs of non-farmers, for example around the price of food. About 54.5% of people live in cities and this figure will increase (UN 2016; WHO 2016). The urban poor change their diet and are increasingly obese (Foo and Teng 2017; Ng et al. 2014) while they remain vulnerable to high food prices (Zezza and Tasciotti 2010). That most rural citizens are net buyers of food further complicates the rural-urban divide (Edelman et al. 2014). Therefore, urban agriculture plays a role in the food security strategy of many poor urban households (Zezza and Tasciotti 2010), which includes FS positive initiatives such as box schemes, farmers markets, and community gardens. Ideally, a FS city produces most of the food it can while it purchases the rest through a local network from its surrounding producers with limited intermediaries, thus ensuring that the surrounding producers are included in the urban food matrix.

Currently, these surrounding producers are likely to be engaged in more rural migration, off-farm employment, and large-scale up-and downstream value chains (Park et al. 2015). Many rural young farmers seek to diversify with off-farm employment or do not want to farm at all (Agarwal 2014). The percentage of the population engaged in agriculture is still a powerful marker of poverty, and the possibility of a return to small-scale farmer dominated landscapes, with high labour input, is doubtful in these complex and more diverse rural economies (Jansen 2014). In these complex societies, the concept of FS should be flexible enough to deliver social justice and food security in each locality, but should also be precise enough to allow it to be implemented in different settings.

3.3.6. Adaptability

The current debates on FS include tensions between precise and flexible interpretations. To Edelman et al (2014), FS is regarded as a dynamic process rather than a set of fixed principles. To view FS as a process, rather than an outcome, is key in understanding the enthusiasm of its different actors as its flexibility allows wide-ranging interpretations. To not prevent other interpretations is even the first rule of FS (Patel 2009). This flexible approach has to insert FS into the food debates and has sustained the broad FS movement. Flexibility is useful when engaging with today's complex agricultural landscapes and in adapting to local people's needs. That local FS leads to different outcomes in a plural society is as much inevitable as it is welcome.

On the other hand, these flexible and sometimes contradictory interpretations of FS can hinder its implementation (Godek 2015). Many of the issues raised need to be addressed for FS to transition from a slogan and framework towards policy, specifically concerning consumers, pluralism, and other rights frameworks. Since its start in 1996, the development of FS has advanced through discussion and reflection, and the current debate may provide a new dynamic to this. Controversially, if the FS movement is clearer on what is prioritised and how this is implemented, it might lose some of its supporters. Currently, the concept of FS is developing beyond its traditional small-scale producers and is inclining towards the inclusion of whole food systems, a process which De Schutter (2013b) defines as 'the second generation of FS'.

4. Future trajectories

The current debates highlight the challenges and inconsistencies of the present conceptualisation of FS. When it comes to future trajectories, we can identify two main emerging dynamics. First of all, a potential ‘second generation’ of action in the field takes a broader food systems approach as it incorporates cities and consumers into the concept.. In particular, it appears as if a ‘*new era of research in FS*’ (Alonso-Fradejas et al. 2015, p. 434) strives for ‘*greater specificity and a refusal to seek refuge in vague and comforting platitudes*’ (Edelman et al. 2014, p. 927). Second, the interaction between FS and other social movements is increasing. Particularly the second generation themes of democracy, social linkages and resilience are similar to the broader ‘transition’ movements that propose locally rooted alternatives to the social and ecological problems created by industrialisation. In table 2 we unpack these emerging trajectories.

Table 2 Pillars of food sovereignty’s second generation

Pillars	Description
Urban-rural linkage	Local food systems create local alliances and overcome the urban-rural divide.
Democratising innovations	Consumers are active citizens that co-design the food system through food democracy.
Strengthen social links	Interactions through food create connections within the community and increase social health.
Resilience over efficiency	Increased diversity and reduced dependency create a more resilient food system.
Agroecology	Farmers transform from receivers to co-creators of knowledge.

(Source: adapted from De Schutter 2013b).

First, local food systems link cities with their surroundings, thus reducing food miles and increasing interdependence and community relationships. The distancing in industrial food systems, such as through financialization (Clapp 2014b), is replaced by a priority on local food, which is expected to increase solidarity between urban consumers and rural producers. The city becomes a prominent element of FS, whose focus was initially on rural areas and their food production (McMichael 2014). Second, the food system is governed by active citizens that are included in a democratic decision-making process. Food has the capacity to trigger social mobilisation and civic engagement if certain conditions are present (Sage 2014). For example, cities around the world experiment with ‘food democracy’ through emerging urban food policies and food councils, such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (Carlson and Chappell 2015; Scherb et al. 2012). Third, the interactions through food strengthen social links and well-being in communities. Food is a powerful driver of community interaction, for example when community gardens link people regardless of class, gender, or ethnicity (Saldivar-tanaka and Krasny 2004). FS becomes then ‘*as much a practice of creating connectivity as of creating autonomy*’ (Iles and Montenegro de Wit 2015, p. 494). Fourth, the food system should create broader value, including social and ecological value, and be built on resilience rather than the pursuit of private profit and continually increasing yields. The FS movement proposes food systems that have a diversity of techniques and crops with a minimum concentration of input suppliers to safeguard its resilience, while local food systems protect against international volatility (Chaifetz and Jagger 2014). Lastly, agroecology remains central to FS and this is summed up as ‘*Agroecology without food sovereignty is a mere technicism. And food sovereignty without agroecology is hollow discourse*’ (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2014, p. 986). Agroecology itself is increasingly accepted by farmers’ unions and civil society groups and is a strong reason why environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth are part of the FS movement.

These themes of democracy, social linkages and resilience are also prevalent in the ‘transition’ movements. These movements seek to bring changes to the current economic system and promote locally embedded alternatives to distancing and unsustainable production and consumption. The FS movement has linkages with these movements and the World Social Forum (Patel 2009). Crucially, as FS is ‘*not about sovereignty of food. It is about sovereignty of people and values assigned to food*’ (Hospes 2014, p. 121), the lessons learned from FS can inspire and spill-over to other domains such as energy, finance, water, knowledge, or health. Aspirations of various social movements to make local communities sovereign over their energy or finance has roots in a rich

leftist tradition and the FS movement could pay more attention to these traditions (Edelman 2014). However, the lessons learned from FS and its debates can provide a strong contribution to these traditions and other social movements, specifically the transition movement (Sage 2014).

5. Conclusion

This article discusses the concept and practice of FS while critically reflecting on its present state and future trajectories. FS is being used by practitioners as a catchphrase, by policymakers as a set of guidelines, and by social movements as a mobilising ideology. Its various interpretations explain its relative success at permeating policy debates in a number of societies and in different political contexts. While the six founding principles of FS portray a focus on agrarian rights and food production, its lack of clarity and contradictions, specifically in terms of its organisational structure and its values, has led to critiques and debates. These debates are likely to shape the future trajectories of FS. In particular, it seems that the second generation of thinking and action is broadening the original focus on ‘agrarian sovereignty’ to incorporate consumers, cities, and urban food security through a broader food systems approach. As the critique of conventional market-based approaches to development becomes more mainstream due to the convergence of economic, social and environmental crises, it is likely that FS will emerge as a ‘connecting concept’, capable of uniting various streams of theory and practice, from systems thinking to post-growth economics and social innovation.

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