

# CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: FOOD LINES, FAULT LINES AND SEEDS OF TRANSFORMATION IN VENEZUELA

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## ABSTRACT

An alternative proposal for social and ecological transformation in the face of a converging set of global crises, food sovereignty serves as a galvanizing concept for a growing number of movements across the globe. As scholars grapple with the concept, however, certain issues, such as questions of the role of the state in food sovereignty construction, have surfaced as recurring sticking points, or areas of seeming irreconcilable tension. It is argued here that key to theorizing about food sovereignty is drawing lessons from its attempted construction on the ground, as movements and other actors are forced to confront its contradictions, inconsistencies and many gray areas head-on. Toward such ends, this study advances a *historical, relational and interactive* (HRI) framework that approaches food sovereignty construction as a historically embedded, continually evolving set of processes that are interactively shaped by state and societal forces, reflecting competing paradigms and approaches.

The HRI framework is applied to the case of Venezuela, home to one of the longest-running national-level experiments in food sovereignty construction since the start of its political process known as the Bolivarian Revolution in 1999. While this experiment has seen some important gains over the years, including in the areas of agrarian reform, nutrition and agroecology, today, ongoing shortages of key food items expose cracks in Venezuela's food system and highlight both the enormity and urgency of the task of food sovereignty construction, as well as the limitations of efforts to date. Examination of the challenges at present gives rise to the question of whether a push for alternatives in efforts to construct food sovereignty may have taken precedence over attempts at dismantling or otherwise transforming Venezuela's dominant agrifood system. This underscores that part of what gives food sovereignty its transformative potential is its dual focus on dismantling the structures fostering injustice in the food system while at the same time striving to build viable alternatives. Arguably one cannot come before the other, or without the other, as the persistence of dominant structures will serve as an impediment to the full operationalization and scaling of alternatives, at the same time that if these structures are to be dismantled, something must be there to replace them. These dual processes are inherently relational, each shaping and shaped by the other in attempts to construct food sovereignty. From this standpoint, an additional framework of *the dialectics of building and dismantling* in food sovereignty construction is put forward as a springboard into further inquiry. Additionally, this study has sought to advance forms of co-generation of transformational knowledge bridging the traditional divide of scholarship and activism, while pointing to the need for further and deeper work in this area.