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**The 'State' of Food Sovereignty in
Latin America: Political Projects and
Alternative Pathways in Venezuela,
Ecuador, and Bolivia**

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Abstract

The concept of food sovereignty has been enshrined in a number of countries' Constitutions around the world without any clear consensus around what state-sponsored 'food sovereignty' initiatives might entail given the complexity and interconnectedness of the global food system. In the vanguard of this movement at the national level has been the so-called 'pink tide' of Latin America – namely Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. As a constitutional right, food sovereignty presents a significant opening to promote a citizen's revolution of the food system, but is such a proposal possible or desirable as a top-down initiative? The concept itself is inherently people-led as it implies constructing (or deconstructing) a food system that is defined, led, controlled, and accessed in a culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable way by local people in a given territory. At the same time, state intervention is a necessary function to confront the global food system, dismantle unequal agrarian structures, and recognize the autonomy of people and communities in defining and controlling their food and agricultural systems. In different geographies and societies of food sovereignty, it is necessary to evaluate how state and social actors interact in the pursuit of a national food sovereignty strategy, with particular attention to the relations of control and access to decision-making and physical resources.

To date, pushes for food sovereignty have been led and carried out at the local and transnational levels by social movements – largely circumventing the involvement of state actors. So how does food sovereignty manifest itself through a state-led process constitutionally in the national economy? Is it likely that even the most progressive regimes today will consist of pro-reform state actors with the autonomy and capacity to transform agrarian structures and cede political and economic power to communities on the basis of self-determination? Food sovereignty ultimately requires a structural transformation of the economy and society as a whole. It requires a synergetic relationship between state and societal actors able to dismantle power structures through transforming the relations of access and control over resources and decision-making processes. This paper critically analyzes the role of the state in constructing and pursuing a pathway towards food sovereignty using three country case studies. We argue that the most favourable conditions for pursuing a food sovereignty strategy exist when pro-reformist state and societal actors interact in a mutually reinforcing way to restructure relations of control and access over resources and political spaces.

Introduction

The concept of food sovereignty has been enshrined in a number of countries' constitutions around the world without any clear consensus around what state-sponsored 'food sovereignty' initiatives might entail given the complexity and interconnectedness of the global food system. In the vanguard of this movement at the national level has been the so-called 'pink tide' of Latin America – namely Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. On the one hand, Ecuador and Bolivia have put forth similar proposals for restructuring their food system (and the national economy more generally) around indigenous principles of “good living” (*Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay*). On the other hand, Venezuela has galvanized political support through massive social spending, a radical redistributive agrarian reform process, and the creation of decentralized participatory 'Communal Councils'. These three countries provide insightful case studies on how pathways towards food sovereignty are constructed and pursued at the national level by state actors. The question of food sovereignty in Latin America is an insightful lens into broader political contradictions how proposals of transformative change are constructed and exploited. New leftist governments based on widespread democratic support and revolutionary discourses of anti-neoliberal globalization offer a fresh new alternative to Western development approaches. However, a reluctance to carry-out structural change will inevitably result in a failure to fulfill such promises.

As a politically loaded concept, food sovereignty can easily be manipulated, co-opted, and/or misinterpreted. When used by political elites, food sovereignty can be used to construct a political project and gain consent, while continuing 'business-as-usual' with residual approaches based on corporate-infused food security measures. It can be 'simplified' and standardized, negating the complexity and primacy of traditional methods it entails, perhaps due to misinterpretation and/or manipulation (Scott, 1998). Alternatively, it can lead to a genuine structural transformation and democratization of food systems.

Food sovereignty as a constitutional right presents a significant opening to promote a citizen's revolution of the food system, but is such a proposal possible or desirable as a top-down initiative? The concept itself is inherently people-led as it implies constructing (or deconstructing) a food system that is defined, led, controlled, and accessed in a culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable way by local people in a given territory. At the same time, state intervention is a necessary function to confront the global food system, dismantle unequal agrarian structures, and recognize the autonomy of people and communities in defining and controlling their food and agricultural systems. In different geographies and societies of food sovereignty, it is necessary to evaluate how state and social actors interact in the pursuit of a national food sovereignty strategy, with particular attention to the relations of control and access to decision-making and physical resources.

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Conceptualizing Food Sovereignty

The concept of food sovereignty was first introduced by La Via Campesina in their 1996 Declaration on food sovereignty during the FAO World Food Summit in Rome. Its initial articulation was the following: “Food sovereignty is the right of each *nation* to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity” (Via Campesina, 1996, emphasis added). This concept was largely developed in response to the inclusion of agriculture in the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) which has facilitated the flooding of developing countries’ markets by highly subsidized crops primarily from the US and EU through loopholes such as the ‘Green Box’ ‘non-trade distorting subsidies’ outlined in Annex 2 of the AoA (Melendez-Ortiz, Bellmann et al. 2009). Undoubtedly, it is the small-scale and resource-poor producers which are most affected, competing with US and EU agro-industry that receive subsidies to the point where they are “exporting corn at prices 20 per cent below production cost, and wheat at 46 per cent below cost” (Jawara, Kwa 2004:27). This agreement effectively “institutionalized the monopolistic competition between the EU and the United States for third-country agricultural markets – that is, effective competition for global markets was limited to rich and powerful agricultural interests in the two economic blocs” (Bello 2005:138). This agreement marked a turning point on the assault on small-scale agriculture and, with the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) agreement establishing property rights for seeds, genes, pharmaceuticals, etc., corporate agro-industry solidified their control and ownership over practically every link in the supply chain – from seed development to supermarket shelves.

Five years later, La Via Campesina released their 2001 Declaration on food sovereignty redefining the concept as “the right of *peoples* to define their own agriculture and food policies, to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives, to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant, and to restrict the dumping of products in their markets” (Via Campesina, 2001, emphasis added). Here, the concept has changed from ‘the right of each *nation*’ to ‘the right of *peoples*’, giving it a much more populist orientation and making the distinction that it cannot be determined by political elites within the state apparatus but must revolve around the people constituting civil society.

Perhaps the most cited and widely recognized definition of food sovereignty is that which was developed at the 2007 International Forum on food sovereignty in Mali where over 500 people from 80 countries advanced the following definition in the Declaration of Nyéléni: “*Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems*” (Nyéléni, 2007a). The definition continues on with general, inclusive objectives based on the following six key components: (i) sufficient, healthy, nutritious and culturally/locally appropriate food for all; (ii) values and supports food providers, particular focus on small-scale family farmers, peasants etc.; (iii) localizes the food system; (iv) localizes control/access of land resources; (v) build local knowledge and skills; (vi) works with nature, with a focus on agroecological production (Nyéléni, 2007b).

While the definition has evolved throughout the years, underlying principles based on self-determination, cultural appropriateness, ecological harmony and democratic localized food systems remain key conceptual components within the broader framing of food security and the right to food – both of which exclude the socio-political and environmental aspects. As Windfuhr and Jonsén (2005) note, “while food security is more of a technical concept, and the right to food a legal one, food sovereignty is essentially a political concept” (15). As a political concept based on principles of localization, participation, and democratic processes determined by *the people for the people*, food sovereignty entails a shift from the global to the local; the corporation to the community; and from capital to labour. The definition has evolved throughout the years due to its political significance and the ability to create an over-arching framework under which all farmers resisting corporate control can mobilize and support. In the political arena, strategy matters – in campaigning, forming alliances, framing demands, and transforming those demands into a practical policy design for implementation. In this regard, the role of the state in these processes and the relations between and within the political and civil society are important strategic spaces where the ideals of a pathway towards food sovereignty must be considered in order to pursue such a transformative strategy.

Much of the literature on food sovereignty to date has revolved around conceptualizing and deconstructing what food sovereignty means and what it might look like if transformed into policy (Martinez-Torres, Rosset 2010, McMichael 2008, Patel 2009, Rosset 2003, Rosset 2008). Rosset (2003) provides a clear elaboration of a food sovereignty model and how it compares to the dominant model on twenty-one key issues from seed to sale. Moreover, Rosset (2008) puts forward seven ‘food sovereignty policies to address the global food price crisis’ which are relatively macro in perspective and require the political arm of the state to design, coordinate, and implement: Policies against dumping, trade and speculation in agriculture, supply management, floor prices, marketing boards, agrarian reform, farmer-owned food inventories, hoarding controls, moratorium on agrofuels, and a shift to agroecology (462). All of these would, unquestionably, facilitate the underlying conditions for a transition towards food sovereignty but they require a ‘radical political’ transformation (Holt Giménez, Shattuck 2011). Further, a pre-requisite for food sovereignty is the ability of local people to have control over and access to land and its productive resources. Therefore, agrarian reform is inherent in any pathway towards food sovereignty. However, just as food sovereignty goes beyond food security and the right to food; it is necessary to go beyond land and agrarian reform to what Borras and Franco call ‘land sovereignty’, defined as “the right of working peoples to have effective access to, use of, and control over land and the benefits of its use and occupation, where land is understood as resource, territory, and landscape” (Borras, Franco 2012:6).

Such a transformation is needed to dismantle existing power structures and confront perhaps not only a dominant, landed class of capitalist elites but also a discourse that has been constructed by the economically influential with mantras of modernization, ‘feeding the world’, efficiency gains, high productivity, and providing pathways out of poverty by exiting ‘traditional methods’ (World Bank 2007). Thus, it is necessary to discuss the role of the state in these processes – not only due to the food sovereignty project requiring, ultimately, a paradigm shift, but also due to the very principles of localization, participation, democratization, and self-determination of ‘the people’.

The ‘State’ of Food Sovereignty

The state apparatus is an arena of strategic, but complex, relations between and within the intrinsically connected political and economic (civil society) spheres (Gramsci 1971, Poulantzas 1978, Jessop 2007). Its relative autonomy and integral character reflect its internal contradictions constituted by class struggle. The state thus is a “strategic field and process of intersecting power networks, which both articulate and exhibit mutual contradictions and displacements” (Poulantzas 1978:136). For analytical purposes, we can conceptually separate the state apparatus into political and civil society, following Gramsci’s notion of the ‘integral state’. While political society, consisting of the military, police, legal system, political

institutions, etc., constitutes the realm of force or coercion; civil society, consisting of competing social classes struggling for mobility in relation to the means of production, constitutes the realm of consent. In other words, Gramsci refers to the state as “hegemony (civil society) protected by the armour of coercion (political society)” (Gramsci 1971:263). By no means are these two realms mutually exclusive, rather they interact in a dialectical relation which constitutes the state apparatus.

Theorizing on the role of the state is necessary (and often lacking) in the context of food sovereignty so as to provide a better understanding of the power relations influencing decision-making and implementation processes at the scale of the nation-state. While structuralists build off the notion that the state is “a human community that (successfully) claims *the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory” (Weber 1965); instrumentalists conceive it as “the instrument of the ruling class” (Marx 1913). With the former, the notion that the state is a fully autonomous entity requiring ‘political will’ to carry out reforms – such as those needed for food sovereignty – does not give due diligence to the power relations and class struggle within and between the political and societal realms. Conversely, the latter position considers the state as functioning purely in the interests of capitalist class fractions, serving their needs without any autonomy of its own. Obviously, there are many variants between these two extremes (Grindle 1986, Mitchell 1991, Evans 1995) of which a thorough analysis goes well beyond the scope of this paper. However, the point here is to problematize the role of the state in carrying out structural transformations which promote a pathway or establishes the conditions for food sovereignty as opposed to a residual shift in state priorities embedded within the discourse of a national food sovereignty *project*.

As an ‘integral state’, we give primacy to the notion of the state as a contested system of social relations. The degree of autonomy and capacity of state actors is therefore dependent on the nature and character of class struggle. For Poulantzas, the state is defined as “the *specific material condensation* of a relationship of forces among classes and class fractions” (Poulantzas 1978:129). In the context of food sovereignty and the policy proposals advanced by Rosset (2003; 2008) for example, it is important to understand the ‘relationship of forces (state and societal) among the powerful classes and class fractions’ interacting in a given space. Progressive ‘leftist’ parties in government such as those in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, may have a higher relative degree of autonomy to pursue transformative change, but may be lacking in their degree of capacity to carry out such change, or vice versa. This is due to the fact that they may have to confront an extremely influential and economically powerful capitalist class who control the means of production – both domestically and abroad. Political elites may use their coercive elements to forcefully expropriate this access and control from the capitalist class, however they risk losing relative power in a “war of position” if such actions do not have consent from the vast majority of the people. Thus, the discourse constructed around the

actions of certain actors becomes central to their ability to successfully carry out those actions with popular support. The transformative actions required to dismantle existing power structures inherent in any food sovereignty pathway must therefore consider the barriers and constraints to effectively and immediately carry out swift action for change. Proposals put forward for food sovereignty should, indeed, map out the ideal macro-socio-economic policies required to transform existing food systems; but it is also important to consider viable short-term proposals and actions that can underpin such broad, sweeping, and long-term goals. This, we argue, requires understanding the relational nature of the state apparatus and its degrees of relative autonomy and capacity in its historically situated context.

However, even when taking into account the relational forces constituting the state apparatus, we cannot assume that the policies and programmes to support a pathway towards food sovereignty will lead to *genuine* food sovereignty – that is, defined and carried out by the local people in a participatory, democratic, culturally and locally sensitive, sustainable way. In this regard, how can policy elites themselves design and implement a food sovereignty strategy if it is to be ‘defined by the *people*’? What does food sovereignty mean as a constitutional right if it is defined, led, controlled, and implemented through top-down initiatives? According to Patel (2009: 668), “for rights to mean anything at all, they need a guarantor responsible for implementing a concomitant system of duties and obligations”. If the state is the grantor of a right to food sovereignty then how, and under what conditions, is such a right fulfilled? The danger of a constitutional food sovereignty ‘project’ is that it becomes standardized, uniform and ‘state-led’ without ceding power to societal actors. A top-down food sovereignty project risks becoming co-opted by political elites to serve their own political projects while in substance only leading to ‘residual’ approaches based on market-led solutions integrated within the corporate-controlled global food system which continue to create dependencies. We cannot conceive of food sovereignty as a process *solely* based on state support mechanisms, nor can it be *solely* a top-down initiative. Certainly, the state can act as a *facilitator*, but it must *facilitate* the conditions for a transformative system able to restructure the unequal social relations of control and access. Without the transition to a people-led system, a food sovereignty ‘project’ could result in another ‘well-intended scheme designed to improve the human condition which goes tragically awry’ (Scott 1998:4).

In ‘Seeing Like a State’, James Scott (1998) argues that States use legibility, simplification, and standardization mechanisms in an attempt to ‘manage’ social and natural environments. Fueled by a discourse based on a ‘high modernist ideology’, schemes to simplify complex environments often erode the ‘natural order of things’ and reject the local, tacit-knowledge – or *Mētis* – which “represents a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to constantly changing natural and human environment”, (Scott 1998:313). Food sovereignty encompasses the notion of *Mētis* and prioritizes it as a defining feature of the food sovereignty

process. Therefore, implementing ‘food sovereignty projects’ which do not restructure relations of access and control over resources and decision-making processes attempt to design a more ‘manageable’, legible, and simplified project that standardizes the complexities of local sovereignty and therefore risk co-opting a politically-loaded concept into the workings of the state-building.

In the following section, we will present three case studies of Latin American countries that have written the concept of food sovereignty in their constitutions and developed food sovereignty strategies (policies and programmes). The point is to critically analyze the strategies being pursued and the relationship between state and societal actors in carrying out such processes. In the context of articulating a national strategy towards food sovereignty, we try to critically examine the extent to which such strategies embody Scott’s notion of ‘Seeing like a State’; repackage food security approaches under a food sovereignty label in order to construct a political project; or genuinely restructure agrarian relations and democratize food systems.

Food Sovereignty in Latin America: Three Cases

The election of leftist leaders in Latin America signified a new regional shift in anti-U.S. imperialism and the reintroduction of the state into development planning and policy. Notably, Hugo Chavez, elected in 1998 defied the Monroe doctrine and historical presence of maintaining U.S. interests within Latin American capitols. After the turn of the last decade, the elections of Rafeal Correa in Ecuador, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay and Inacio “Lula” da Silva in Brazil (among others) represented a significant defiant bloc united around a reinvigorated civil society and anti-imperialist discourse (Cockcroft 2006; Lomnitz 2006) At the same time, increased transnational ties between agrarian movements helped illuminate longstanding rural-urban and divides, as well as historical inequities in land control and ownership (Borras, Edelman et al. 2008). This was perhaps most visible during the widespread protests against the Free Trade of the Americas (FTA) throughout the region, but particularly strong in countries with a “leftist coalition” (Shefner and Fernández-Kelly 2011) Not only did this provide the opportunity to raise awareness for North-South disparities and diverging interests but also the importance of the state in playing a key role to articulate and guarantee national development.

In Venezuela (1999), Ecuador (2008), and Bolivia (2009) new constitutions were adopted as a ‘Turn to the Left’ emerged and a “new Andean Constitutionalism” was born (Schilling-Vacaflor 2011). While these governments nationalized key industries strengthening their control of the economy, they also increased social spending, created legislation aimed to increase participation and representation, and adopted measures to increase human rights – including the right to food sovereignty. There is still doubt whether or not these measures signify an

alternative to free market principles or a ‘bending and moulding’ of existing political and economic structures that is more “pro-regulation” than “anti-capitalist” (Arditi, 2008; Panizza 2005; Lomnitz, 2006). In the following section, we critically review each country’s insertion of food sovereignty into their constitutions and the subsequent policies and programmes working towards a food sovereignty pathway. Since the pursuit of food sovereignty ultimately requires changing the relations of access and control over food and agricultural systems (from decision-making to physical resources), it is imperative that food sovereignty strategies are approached in a relational way – changing “social relations of production and reproduction, of property and power” (Bernstein, Crow 1992:24).

*Venezuela*¹

After a failed coup attempt in 1992, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chavez sparked a movement ‘from below’ against years of social and economic exploitation by elite classes, before spending two years in prison. Declining socio-economic conditions amongst the middle and lower classes created a conducive environment for a dramatic transformative change. From 1979 to 1999, real per capita income declined by 27% -- the worst in the region – while poverty increased from 17% in 1980 to 65% in 1996 (Wilpert 2007:13). In 1998, Chavez was elected as President with 56% of the vote, marking the start of a political, social, and economic transformation. Approving a new Constitution in 1999, President Hugo Chavez consolidated state power, while simultaneously opening up spaces to facilitate decentralized participatory democratic processes at the local level through social ‘Misiones’ and Communal Councils. These initiatives require the direct participation of local people in the functioning, defining, managing, and implementing of such processes. Moreover, it cedes political and decision-making power to communities in a model based on self-determination. These processes bridged the gap between political and civil society, with the former including the latter in political processes while enabling the societal actors the ability to define their development needs in an autonomous way.

Although Venezuela’s Organic Law of Agro-food Security and Sovereignty was only approved in 2008, elements of food sovereignty were enshrined in its 1999 Bolivarian Constitution, specifically in Articles 305, 306, and 307. Venezuela’s 2008 Law, however, is a comprehensive 143-page document covering many key principles of inherent in a food sovereignty concept (Gaceta Oficial, 2008). Instead of outlining a few specific programmes, Venezuela has a variety of complementary initiatives that continue to build a pathway towards food sovereignty. Despite being a major net-importer of food based on a history of urban-biased industrialization policies and an extremely high rate of urbanization, Venezuela has demonstrated some significant progress in leading the process towards food sovereignty.

¹ Parts of this section were adapted from McKay, 2011

One of the key elements of food sovereignty is the *sovereignty* of local people to define and manage their own food and agricultural systems. This requires a high degree of empowerment, participatory spaces, and decentralized decision-making. Venezuela's Communal Councils are doing exactly this. Communal Councils began forming in 2005, only to be officially recognized in 2006 with the Law of Communal Councils which was again reformed in 2009 (Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2006; 2009). Communal Councils are locally-run organizations which enable people to exercise community governance and directly manage their own self-defined development needs. There are approximately 44,000 Communal Councils to date, each of which consist of between 150-400 families in urban areas; a minimum of 20 families in rural areas; and at least 10 families in indigenous zones (Azzellini 2013:26-7). Once the councils decide on certain development projects, resources are channeled directly to the council from national state institutions, bypassing any regional, provincial, or municipal organs. Further, these councils are now combining in their respective geographic areas to create 'socialist communes'. As of 2013, over 200 communes are in the works, which collectively integrate their local initiatives to cover larger social and geographic scales over longer periods of time. These systems of self-management empower the formerly excluded classes in political processes, enhancing local social capital and "the capacity of the poor to network and organize collectively" (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2006:84).

According to Venezuelan school teacher and community organizer Jesus Rojas – who is also a member of the planning committee for his Communal Council in Rio Tocuyo, Lara, Venezuela – the "formation of Communal Councils and Socialist Communes are constantly growing and are playing the most important role in local community empowerment and the revolutionary process" (J. Rojas, personal communication, August 2013). As a member of the planning committee, Rojas explained how the 14 Communal Councils in his region have officially registered as a Socialist Commune and are in the process of implementing larger scale projects including expanding and improving infrastructure, electricity, water access, and sewage systems; but also providing agricultural inputs, technical assistance for farmers, and expanding '*los centros acopios*' (collection centres) where farmers can sell their crops and receive a 'just' price. This is part of the Venezuelan Agricultural Corporation's initiatives which procures crops from farmers and distributes them to several socialist food markets (*Casas de Alimentación, Mercados de Alimentos, bodegas socialistas*). Farmers are therefore able to define their own production needs and directly take charge of their own situation, in terms of inputs, production, and access to markets. For small farmers, one of the most important components of this process is that "they are free from the exploitative private intermediaries who used to reap all the profits and take advantage of both producers and consumer" (Rojas, August, 2013). This process is transforming the social, political, and economic structure of these spaces, altering relations of access, control, and power in society.

Another important initiative ‘sowing the seeds’ for food sovereignty is Venezuela’s state-led redistributive agrarian reform programme. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage critically with the details of Venezuela’s agrarian reform programme (see McKay 2011), it is necessary to discuss some of the key elements which contribute to a food sovereignty process.

In 2001, *Misión Zamora* was established under the Land Law with the following key objectives: set limits on the size of landholdings; tax unused property as an incentive to spur agricultural growth; redistribute unused, primarily government-owned land to peasant families and cooperatives; and lastly, as of 2005, to expropriate uncultivated and fallow land from large, *latifundistas* for the purpose of redistribution (DeLong, 2005). While in 2001 land subject to expropriation was defined as “only high-quality idle agricultural land of over 100 hectares or lower quality idle agricultural land of over 5000 hectares (*latifundios*) can be expropriated” (Wilpert, 2007:111); as of 2010 *latifundios* are defined as being “a piece of land that is larger than the average in its region or is not producing at 80% of its productive capacity” (Suggett, 2010).

Ministry of Agriculture and Land	
Institution	Function
<i>National Land Institute (INTI)</i>	Land tenancy and redistribution
<i>National Rural Development Institute</i>	Technical assistance and infrastructure, including construction projects like irrigation, drainage, bridges, and roads
<i>Venezuelan Agricultural Corporation (CVA)</i>	Procures crops from small farms and cooperatives; assists with distribution to socialist markets (<i>Casas de Alimentación, Mercados de Alimentos</i>). Also involved in agricultural production, processing, and marketing
<i>Socialist Agrarian Fund (FONDAS)</i>	Assists farmers through micro-lending at little to no interest

(Suggett, 2010a; Ramachandran, 2006)

The Venezuelan Agricultural Corporation (CVA) is of particular importance due to its task of ensuring newly established farmers have a guaranteed buyer at a guaranteed, fair price. The CVA is a government processing, distribution, and marketing board for agricultural products that offers producers a floor price for their products. The goal of the program is to eliminate intermediaries which manipulate prices between producers and consumers. An ongoing problem in rural Venezuela is corporate intermediaries that tend to pay producers unfair (low) prices and sell to consumers at unfair (high) prices. The CVA has been established to eliminate this process by providing producers with price stability and simultaneously make the final price for consumers much more affordable. It has also acquired several agro-enterprises so as to prevent food hoarding and pricing sabotage which has affected Venezuela's food supply in recent years (Suggett, 2010b; Nunez, 2010; Gonzalez, 2012).

In January 2008, the Venezuelan Food Products and Distribution (PDVAL) was set up to work as a state-run food distributor to strengthen distribution networks (Suggett, 2008). A government report from 2008 shows that through these institutions the government has purchased 659,419 tons of foodstuff of which 237,085 tons are from domestic producers and 422,334 from international producers. These are distributed to Mercal's across the country to be sold at subsidized rates (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2011). While Mercal and PDVAL continue to expand, they serve over 30% of the Venezuelan population – over 10 million people (Wagner, 2005; Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2011h).

Misión Mercal

Under the Ministry of Food, Mission Mercal (*Mercados de Alimentos*) was established as a state-run food company, initially to combat the food shortages that plagued the country during the corporate lock-out in December 2002. Mission Mercal is a chain of government-subsidized grocery stores that sell “meats, fish, eggs, milk, cheese, bread, cereal, pasta, rice, flours, tomato sauce, fruit, coffee, margarine, oil, sugar, and salt, all priced roughly 39% below traditional supermarkets” (Isaacs et al., 2009). The Mercal's, along with PDVAL, are distribution links of the state-run intermediary chain which provide low-income Venezuelan's with food staples at affordable rates. Large storage spaces, distribution centres, and transportation networks have also been set-up to combat food speculation, hoarding, and sabotage (Isaacs et. al., 2009). In 2010, there were 16,600 Mercals nationwide, employing roughly 85,000 workers (Smith, 2010). In addition to Mercals, the Mision has set up 6,075 *Casas de Alimentación* (CASA), or food banks, which currently provide free meals to roughly 900,000 people in need (Schiavoni and Camacaro, 2009). Since its inception in 2003, Chavez announced that Mision Mercal has seen its sales increase from 45 000 tons of food products to 9.4 million tons in 2010 (Ellis, 2010). These impressive figures have ensured all Venezuelan's that their country is becoming much more food secure with an increasing amount of affordable food distribution networks. In total,

Mercal's account for roughly 20-30% of food sales in Venezuela with roughly two-thirds of the population visiting the stores regularly (Government of Canada, 2011).

Misión Ché Guevara

'*Misión Ché Guevara*' is a mandatory cooperative training programme for all agrarian reform beneficiaries who wish to receive government benefits associated with the reform process. The programme was established as a labour market program designed to pursue "the ideological and comprehensive training in productive skills, to promote the transformation of the capitalist economic model towards the socialist model and ensure social welfare and job placement in projects under the '*Plan de Desarrollo Económico y Social de la Nación*'" (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2011f). The programme is designed to support the formation of worker-led cooperatives which rely on an egalitarian worker-management framework by offering training, education, and support services (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2011f). The project proposal must work to benefit the community and contribute to development and employment – in the context of the pursuit of a social economy and a model of social production. The programme is available to all Venezuelan citizens, over the age of fifteen, who wish to start or join a "socio-productive project" to "transform the capitalist economic model" (of worker exploitation) into a model of "socialist production" (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2011f).

The Communal Councils, socialist communes, and the agrarian reform with its complementary programmes are the main drivers working towards a food sovereignty pathway in Venezuela. An important aspect of this 'strategy' is that it is not just based on investment injection or socio-economic protection. It is based on public space creation, autonomy and sovereignty at local levels, participation, and capacity building. These are important aspects to consider in the pursuit of a food sovereignty strategy which will be discussed further in the final section.

Ecuador

The election of Rafeal Correa in 2005 was built on his campaign of a Citizen's Revolution (*Revolución Cuidania*) that promised, among other things, a constitutional assembly to draft a new Constitution; one that would include a whole host of new citizens' rights and redefine development objectives for the country. After Correa's first year in office, a constitutional assembly² had been selected to incorporate citizen participation in rewriting the Constitution. The idea was to construct a large complex in the town of Montecristi in the coastal province of Manabí. Montecristi is a symbolic location as it is the birthplace of Ecuador's liberal

² A referendum was held to establish the Constituent Assembly and passed with over 80% of the votes. President Correa's party (*Movimiento Alianza Pais*) constituted 80 of the 130 seats (Conaghan 2008).

revolutionary Eloy Alfaro, and the site of significant pre-Columbian archaeological ruins from the Manteña culture. The result of this project was Alfaro City (*Ciudad Alfaro*), an elaborate complex built on a mountain overlooking Montecristi near the Pacific Ocean. Over the course of two years, Alfaro city was the destination of citizens and movements marching to make their demands to the constitutional assembly. One of the strongest demands was for the constitutional right to food sovereignty and agrarian reform (Fernández and Puente 2012).

After six months of listening to demands and deliberating the constitutional assembly finished drafting a new Constitution. The demands for food sovereignty and agrarian reform were primarily articulated in chapter three that provided the following definition: “food sovereignty is a strategic objective and an obligation of the state that persons, communities, peoples and nations achieve self-sufficiency with respect to healthy and culturally appropriate food on a permanent basis” (Asamblea Nacional, 2008). According to that definition, the Constitution outlined fourteen “responsibilities of the state”³ in order to realize national food sovereignty, some of the more transformative and challenging objectives are:

1. To adopt fiscal policies such as tax and tariffs to protect the national agriculture and fishing sectors and to prevent a reliance on food imports;
2. To promote redistribution policies that permit peasants the access to land, water and other productive resources;
3. To assure the development of scientific research and the innovation of appropriate technology to guarantee food sovereignty;
4. To regulate the use and development of biotechnology, such as its experimentation, use and commercialization

(Asemblea Constituyente 2008: 138-139, translated by Author).

An elaboration on the specific case of land is provided in the article (Art. 282) immediately following food sovereignty that states: “the state will determine the use and access to land that should fulfill a social and environmental function” (ibid: 138). The primary mechanism to ensure this responsibility is the National Land Fund that, according to the Constitution, will “regulate the equitable access of land for peasants” (ibid: 138). In this sense, the Constitution enables the state as the sole determiner of land availability, access and control. It does little to elaborate on how the process of agrarian reform can and should take place, who will be the actors involved (or not) and what lands are to be (re)distributed. The same article also prohibits the existence of *latifundia* and the hoarding or privatization of water and its sources, but does not elaborate on how lands would be expropriated rather; it is focused on penalizing landowners through

³ A full list is provided in the appendix.

taxation.⁴ Such a state-based declaration of agrarian reform does outline a significant commitment of the state, but fails to explicitly include the rights and agency of civil society in defining and controlling the process. This has been a clear tension since the Cuban Declaration on food sovereignty that outlined agrarian reform as: “above all, [it] should be recognized as an obligation of national governments... within the framework of human rights and as an efficient public policy to combat poverty. These agrarian reform processes must be controlled by peasant organizations...” (Via Campesina 2001).

Another guarantee of the Constitution that relates to food sovereignty is provided in article no. 401 of chapter two that declares Ecuador free of genetically modified seeds except for the case of “national interest that is determined by the President and agreed upon by the constitutional assembly” (ibid: 179). This ban on GMOs is now under threat when in September 2012 Correa said he made a mistake to include that provision in the Constitution and “genetically modified seeds have the potential to quadruple production and alleviate hunger and poverty” (Teran 2013).

The explicit responsibilities of the state listed in the Constitution are articulated into policy initiatives through the National Plan of Good Living (*Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir*) (SENPLANES 2009). This national development plan establishes a more definitive “call to action” by proposing a framework that outlines the government’s objectives for ensuring all citizens a right to good living and their constitutional promises. Good Living (*Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay*) is based on indigenous principles of organizing society around the community, ecology and living within socially determined needs. These principles have been longstanding contradictions to the exploitation of indigenous peoples and their land from colonialism to neoliberal globalization (Flor 2013). Good Living represents a potential alternative to embed the market and production into social relations that have a historical and cultural identity in Ecuador (Radcliffe 2012). But, in order to do so resources need to be redistributed and the unequal historical relations of production need to be reimagined with community, ecology and even citizenship at the forefront. One such tension is the issue of land ownership and control, which is not unlike many other Latin American countries.

Agrarian reform in Ecuador has been a slow and largely unfulfilled promise to date. In Ecuador 64 per cent of all farms occupy less than five hectares but constitute only 6 percent of all arable land (AGROecuador, 2000). The country’s Land Plan (*Plan Tierras*) was designed with several ambitious and misleading promises on expropriating *lantifundia* and redistributing land (both state-owned and expropriations). Publically, the Ministry of Agriculture (MAGAP) has said it

⁴ See the 2012 Land Law (Ley de Tierras) for a definition and consequences of owning a large estate: [http://documentacion.asambleanacional.gob.ec/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/90b9ea30-0a8c-42fc-ae22-94593fa86ce8/Ley%20Org%C3%A1nica%20de%20Tierras%20y%20Territorios%20\(Tr%C3%A1mite%20No.%209795](http://documentacion.asambleanacional.gob.ec/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/90b9ea30-0a8c-42fc-ae22-94593fa86ce8/Ley%20Org%C3%A1nica%20de%20Tierras%20y%20Territorios%20(Tr%C3%A1mite%20No.%209795)

plans to transfer 2.5 million hectares to landless peasants through offering state land and expropriating private and unused land. However, estimates of publically-owned land vary, both by officials like the president, and in the Land Plan itself from 69,000 ha to 200,000 ha (Peralta 2013: 44). The plan also calls for a budget of US\$ 38 million over four years to be executed through various functions. According to a prominent political and indigenous leader, out of the over two million ha promised to peasants, the state has only distributed 8000 ha (Churuchumbi, personal communication, January, 2012).

Around one million hectares are to be purchased through the Land Fund (*Fondo de Tierras*), an institution guaranteed through article no. 282 of the Constitution (ibid: 44). These promises have not been made to date (the Land Plan ends in 2013) and the latest budget evaluation in 2010 showed that only US\$4 million went to land redistribution despite an original proposition of US\$10 million (Carrión et al, 2010). Further, the reliance on publically-owned lands and reluctance to redistribute private land runs the risk of eroding existing social fabrics on the land or disturbing ecological systems (Borras and Franco 2012). In lieu of comprehensive agrarian reform, the government has implemented what is called an “Agrarian Revolution” (*Revolución Agrária*) that utilizes a territorial strategy of increasing federal resources for agrarian schools and incentivizing farmer organization. Numerous programs and policies complement this residual strategy of expanding market access to farmers and their organizations through expanded social spending. However, even these programs have been subject to scrutiny as federal funds have been grossly unequal between different regions. While overall spending in agriculture has almost doubled under Correa, his home province of Manabí received 71 percent of all agricultural funds from 2005-2009 (Herrera et al. 2010).

Some positive movements are that Ecuador’s trade policies in agriculture have favoured domestic production with tariff rates in the agricultural sector rising from 16.7 percent in 2005 to 19.6 percent in 2011 (WTO 2011). Further, the government has developed and expanded numerous policy interventions such as their Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme, the Human Development Grant (*Bono de Desarrollo Humano*) and supporting local farmers’ markets (Nehring 2013). However, one of the most visible food sovereignty interventions in the country is outside of state control and would like to remain so. The Community Food Basket (*Canasta Comunitaria*) is a local food network founded over twenty-five years ago in the Andean city of Riobamba (Gortaire 2006). Consumers in the area began to notice the rapid influx of imported and processed foods while local varieties began to diminish or disappear altogether. They formed a consumerist bloc and contacted local peasants from the area to organize a system of exchange that would guarantee a market and ensure the survival of local foods and varieties. After the 2008 food crisis, the Community Food Basket gained national notoriety for maintaining local and cheap foods built around local economies. It has since expanded to five major cities in Ecuador and incorporates around 1,400 families as of 2012

(Gortaire, personal communication 2012). One of the most important lessons of the Community Food Basket is the capacity of communities to embed the market within their social relations outside of the state, despite the state showing interest. The initiative continues to grow as a model throughout the country but has intentionally remained outside of the grips of the state so that each community, household or peasant can adapt and organize their own relations around the production, distribution and consumption of food (Gortaire, January 2012).

During a time when alternative approaches to development are badly needed from states, the Ecuadorian constitution and National Plan of Good Living were welcoming proposals. However, despite promises for the substantial redistribution of productive resources and a radical shift in the agrarian structure in Ecuador, the government has done little to establish a pathway to food sovereignty. Instead, the government has actively expanded the coverage and budget of social protection policies and credit schemes for small to medium producers and their organizations (Nehring 2013). Extractive activities continue to be the primary source of revenue and just this month the Correa administration announced a plan to drill for oil in the Yasuní Amazonian reserve. This area had specifically been set aside for ecological and cultural protection for the indigenous population residing in its 10,000 km² of tropical forests. Increased spending for territorial development programs should help to reinvigorate local capacity for expanding revenues and infrastructure but does not include reforms in land access, availability and control. Widespread protests and a loss of support from indigenous leaders and confederations have signified continual setbacks in the Correa administrations plans for political progress. While the constitution should be celebrated a significant victory for citizen rights to food sovereignty, the guarantor of those rights will need to revisit longstanding demands for structural change to fulfill its constitutional duties.

Bolivia

Bolivia's military dictatorships in the 1970s and early 1980s followed by the onset of neoliberal policies through the structural adjustment programme's 'New Economic Policy' (NEP) in 1985 dismantled public services and exposed vulnerable rural livelihoods to foreign competition and capital. This was compounded by what Kohl and Farthing call a 'perfect economic storm' consisting of the following:

“[T]he inability of two successive governments to generate jobs and significant economic growth; an aggressive coca eradication programme that destroyed the regional economy of Cochabamba; the collapse of the Argentine economy, eliminating Bolivia's largest labour market and, as important, terminating workers' remittances; and

the decline in government revenue occasioned by privatization of the state oil company” (Kohl, Farthing 2006:149).

The privatization of the state-owned water company SEMAPA and the resulting ‘Cochabamba Water War’ (Olivera, Lewis 2004), combined with massive protests by Bolivia’s largest union of peasants, CSUTCB⁵ and a general strike called by Bolivia’s Worker’s Confederation (COB) reflected the general discontent among the Bolivian middle and lower classes. By 2005, Coca growers’ leader Evo Morales was elected president, launching a new era in Bolivian politics with his Movement Towards Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*) with new concepts of *Buen Vivir* (Good Living), the Rights to Mother Nature, and food sovereignty integrated within the Constitution.

Bolivia’s 2009 Constitution first refers to food sovereignty in the context of international relations and treaties which must function to meet the interests and sovereignty of the people (art. 255). In this regard, the “negotiation, signing, and ratification of international treaties shall be governed by the principles of...food security and food sovereignty for all; prohibiting the import, production and marketing of GMOs and toxic elements that can harm human health and the environment” (Art. 255, II, 8). Further, Chapter III titled “Sustainable Integrated Rural Development” emphasizes food sovereignty as integrated in the rural development strategy, while creating the objective to “ensure food security and sovereignty, prioritizing domestic production and consumption...and establishing mechanisms to protect Bolivian agriculture” (Art. 405, 406). Moreover, the Article 16.1-2 states that, “Every person has the right to water and food” and that “the state has the obligation to guarantee food security with healthy food that is adequate and sufficient for the entire population”. Indeed these are important constitutional rights and objectives in the pursuit of realizing food sovereignty. However, we are interested here in how the state ‘sees’ food sovereignty in practice and how people are integrated in this vision.

Bolivia’s first National Development Plan of 2006 under President Evo Morales and the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) included the concept of food sovereignty as a key objective for the new vision of development. In 2008, this was elaborated in the Rural Development and Food Sovereignty and Security policy (PSSA) which is to be implemented through the Food Security Support Programme (PASA). These objectives were synthesized in 2010 in the Agricultural Sector Development Plan’s ‘Rural and Agrarian Revolution 2010-2020’. This document outlines seven National Sector Policies, each of which contain a Strategic Sector Axis constituted by programmes of implementation. The following table outlines Bolivia’s National

⁵ The Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia (Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia, CSUTCB)

Sector Policy 2: Transformation of Production Patterns and Food and the implementation programmes of the National Strategy to ‘Construct Food Security and Food Sovereignty’.

National Sector Policy 2	Transformation of Production Patterns and Food	
National Strategies 1 and 2	Construct Food Security and Food Sovereignty	Integrally Develop Agricultural Production and Productive Rural Development
Strategic Sector Axis	Agricultural Production for Food Security and Sovereignty	
Implementation Programmes	Description	
SEMBRAR (Right to Food)	Promotes partnerships between public and private sectors at regional and local levels to define food production strategies in order to guarantee the human right to adequate food (MDRyT, 2010:63). While Bolivia’s Zero Malnutrition is also encompassed within SEMBRAR, these initiatives largely depend on overseas development assistance and often comprise of multi-year investment projects (see CTB Bolivia, nd; FAO, 2012; Liendo, 2011).	
CRIAR (Creacion de Iniciativas Alimentarias Rurales)	Implements projects aiming to support peasant, family, and indigenous based farming. Projects attempt to integrate local producers with local markets by directly transferring financial resources to social organizations which implement the projects themselves. CRIAR is based on a community-driven approach and work to empower local people in the organizing, managing, and decision-making processes (MDRyT, 2010:64).	
EMPODERAR (Emprendimientos Organizados para el Desarrollo Rural Autogestionario)	Provides financial and technical support for a variety of agricultural development projects including timber, agro-forestry, and resources to introduce new technological processes (Liendo, 2011; MDRyT, 2010).	
Promotion of Agroecological	Promotes and strengthens ecological/organic production,	

Production (Fomento a la Produccion Ecologica/Organica)	transformation, industrialization and commercialization. Also works to connect agroecological producers with markets and 'encourages' fair prices (MDRyT:2010:66).
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These four programmes are the main mechanisms through which Bolivia's Food Security and Sovereignty Plan (PSSA) is to be realized. This underlying objectives of the PSSA are based on the following principles:

- I. Strengthening family, peasant, and indigenous farming
- II. Equitable access to natural resources for rural families in sufficient quantity and quality for food production
- III. Promote agro-ecological production based on an integral vision of sustainability and nature-friendly practices
- IV. Joint public-private participation in carrying out food security and sovereignty projects
- V. Comprehensive and multi-sectoral technical and financial strategy to construct food security and sovereignty

(Liendo 2011:12)

Bolivia's 2006 'Agrarian Revolution' under the *Ley de Reconduccion* no. 3545 (Extension Law) redefines natural resources as state property, and puts more emphasis on state control and oversight over land consolidation and labour relations (Valdivia, 2010: 74). The programme is characterized by four main policy aims (1) distribution of state-owned land and redistribution by expropriation of land not in compliance with FES to indigenous peoples and peasant communities; (2) mechanization of agriculture; (3) subsidized credits for small-scale producers; (4) markets for the products of peasant origin (Urioste, 2010).

Within the first pillar, two specific components of the FES have led to unintended consequences which, to a certain extent, undermine the agrarian reform. First the land ceiling of 5,000 hectares is per *individual owner*. Article 398 states that "In no case may the maximum surface exceed five thousand hectares", while Article 315 (II) states that if a corporation has several 'owners' or 'partners' each can have up to a maximum of 5,000 hectares, making land-size limits virtually non-existent (Constitution, 2009). Moreover, "the new limits of zoned agrarian property will be applied to pieces of land that have been acquired after this Constitution enters into force" (Article 399), meaning that all *latifundistas* over 5,000 hectares prior to 2009 are unaffected. This will essentially leave the landholding structure unchanged as large-scale landowners who acquired land prior to 2009 are able to legitimately maintain control over their territory. Thus, two shortcomings – that of landholding 'partners' and the pre-2009

‘grandfather’ clause – fail to challenge the unequal basis of the agrarian structure and the inherent power relations producing inequalities and exploitation.

The second pillar of the agrarian reform programme is the mechanization of small-medium scale agriculture. The Credit for Agricultural Mechanization Programme (*Programa Crediticio para la Mecanización del Agro* – PCMA) was established to promote the ‘modernization’ of small-scale agriculture by offering collective use of tractors and other equipment to municipal governments and peasant unions payable over five to ten year periods with no interest. With a US\$35 million credit from the Brazilian government in 2007, the PCMA serves to foster growth-mechanized agriculture which could have disastrous results for small farmers (Supreme Decree 29350). First, one must question the interests of the Brazilian government given that Brazilian soy producers control approximately 40.3% (~ 500,000 hectares) of Brazil’s most fertile land (Urioste, 2012:447). Second, promoting mechanized agriculture requires an increased dependence on external inputs (chemical, oil-based), and puts pressure on farmers to become indebted. Third, over half a million family farmers occupy, on average, just 0.7 hectares of land each and produce using labour-intensive techniques ⁶ (Urioste, 2010:9; INE, 2011; World Bank 2007). The ‘mechanization’ of agriculture is not appropriate for the majority of farmers in Bolivia’s agrarian society. Promoting such a production system could therefore lead to a ‘squeeze of the middle peasantry’, inadvertently forcing farmers to become agricultural entrepreneurs, join the rural wage-labour force, or migrate elsewhere (Lenin, 2004; World Bank, 2007). Finally, the expansion of mechanized agriculture has been the main cause of deforestation and soil erosion in Bolivia (Barber et al., 1996; Muller et al., 2013).

The final pillar to be discussed here is the creation of markets for products of peasant origin. In 2007, the state-run company to support food production EMAPA (Empresa de Apoyo a la Producción de Alimentos) was established with the following aims: to develop domestic food production, support small farm agriculture with input-supply and procurement, and supply markets. In design, EMAPA is similar to Brazil’s Food Acquisition Programme (*Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos* - PAA) which has been quite successful in strengthening local food systems but still needs to be scaled-up and expanded (see Nehring and McKay, 2013). However, instead of functioning as an effective public food procurement agency which connects small farmers with local markets, replacing private intermediaries and simultaneously strengthening small farmers’ productive capacity while ensuring food security, EMAPA has been plagued with management flaws and a lack of capacity. In an attempt to ensure food security, export restrictions were placed on staple crops until domestic supply was satisfied. However, food shortages in 2010 resulted in uncontrollable inflation and EMAPA was forced to increase its

⁶ Author’s calculation based on data from INE, 2011 and World Bank, 2007: 19. $(2,861,330 \text{ ha total arable land} \times 14\%) / (660,000 \text{ total farm units} \times 87\% \text{ smallholders}) = 0.698 \text{ ha per unit}$

prices, causing widespread protests (BBC News, 2011). Moreover, it is estimated that only 2% of targeted small farmers in Bolivia receive support from EMAPA (Wanderlay, 2011: 18). Despite these shortcomings, EMAPA does procure wheat, maize, rice, and soy from roughly 13,000 family farmers for strategic reserve stocks and/or local markets (EMAPA, 2013).

As of 2010, the agrarian reform appeared to be one of the most successful in Latin America – titling more than 31 million hectares and distributing over 100,000 titles to 174,249 beneficiaries since 2006 (INRA, 2010; Redo et al., 2011). However, in the Department of Santa Cruz – where over two-thirds of total cultivated land is located including 98% of large-scale soy plantations – a mere 12% of the territory has been regularized (Redo et al., 2011: 234). In addition, 91% of titled land “have been endowed by the state and are composed entirely of forest reserves” (Redo et al., 2011:237). Thus, the seemingly impressive “*saneamiento*” fails to not only challenge the prevailing unequal agrarian structure, but has also led to widespread deforestation as new frontiers expand into Bolivia’s rich biodiverse areas of Amazonian, Andean, and Chaco forests (Hecht, 2005:377).

These shortcomings in transforming the unequal land-based social structure impede a pathway towards food sovereignty. Furthermore, the externally-funded project-based PSSA programmes are established through temporary capital injection for relatively short-term project goals. Though perhaps well-intentioned, these initiatives largely fail in creating space for participatory democratic decision-making and control over resources to enable local peoples the opportunity to carry out a food sovereignty strategy as defined by them. In the next (and final) section, we will provide a synthesis of the three case studies and their approaches to food sovereignty while critically analyzing the role of the state in these processes.

These three case studies exemplify the diversity of policies and programmes used to pursue a food sovereignty strategy. Though there appear to be commonalities between all three, a crucial and distinct difference separates one country’s approach from the others. Venezuela’s approach to food sovereignty, specifically regarding its agrarian reform programme and Communal Councils/Socialist Communes, is the only one that is working towards transforming the agrarian structure and thus the “social relations of production and reproduction, of property and power” – approaching the problems in a relational way (Bernstein, Crow 1992:24). We elaborate further on this in the next section.

Projects versus Pathways: Residual and Relational Approaches to Food Sovereignty

The rights to food sovereignty as expressed by La Via Campesina and federal governments in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador appear to be relatively similar in description. However, the contested social forces that constitute state power, autonomy, and capacity differ within each case and have different outcomes. Food sovereignty ultimately requires a radical restructuring

of such forces that can first reorder resource access and control in a more egalitarian way to enable societal actors the ability to define and organize productive activities, inputs, distribution, and respond to the needs and demands of consumption. As Patel (2009) notes, egalitarian restructuring “is not something that happens as a consequence of the politics of food sovereignty. It is a prerequisite to have the democratic conversation about food policy in the first place” (2009: 670). Such ‘prerequisites’ are important to consider in the pursuit of a food sovereignty pathways. Instead of attempting to implement food sovereignty ‘projects’ such as Bolivia’s public-private partnerships for food production strategies (SEMBRAR) or the introduction of ‘modern’ techniques and the mechanization of agriculture (EMPODERAR and PCMA), certain ‘prerequisites’ are necessary. First, it is important that a food sovereignty strategy necessarily entails peoples’ *“right to define their own food and agriculture systems”* (Nyéléni, 2007a). This requires creating spaces which facilitate self-determination, cultural appropriateness, and the democratization and localization food systems. Therefore, recognizing new spaces of inclusive participatory processes empower the formerly excluded in decision-making and implementation procedures. Instead of ‘constructing’ a food sovereignty project such as Ecuador’s territorial development, resources should be allocated towards creating enabling environments for increased participation, transforming the relations of access and control over ideas and physical resources, and the sovereignty of local people to transform their own food systems. This is exactly what is being done in Venezuela; whereas the other two cases are characterized by ‘simplification’ and/or repackaging food security as sovereignty.

Venezuela’s Communal Councils have been instrumental in empowering previously excluded local people through participatory democratic processes. Combined with a radical redistributive state-led agrarian reform programme that is working to dismantle an unequal agrarian structure, Venezuela is undergoing a process of structural transformation and creating spaces for people to define, determine, manage, and implement their food and agricultural systems in a decentralized, participatory way. Venezuela’s approach to pursuing a food sovereignty strategy addresses the key problems plaguing their food system and agrarian society in a much different way than the other featured case studies. Pro-reformist state actors are attempting to restructure the social relations of production through land-based transfers of power as well as political transfers of power through communal councils and socialist communes. These actions facilitate local empowerment through participation and are conducive to establishing mutually reinforcing symbiotic state-society relations which can dismantle existing power structures. It is only by approaching the problems of food systems and unequal agrarian structures in such a relational way, that the transformative change inherent in a food sovereignty strategy will truly be effective. Approaching such problems in a residual way by creating favourable market conditions, technological transfers, and/or short-term investment injection projects will not lead to food sovereignty as they do not entail any structural change (Bernstein, Crow 1992). In

this way, we argue that Venezuela can be considered as the furthest from *reaching a state* of food sovereignty, but the closest in pursuit of a *pathway towards* food sovereignty.

The overarching trend in building a food sovereignty project is akin to the building of a political project in the context of modern day state formation. Without any transformative processes being pursued, the concept of food sovereignty appears to have been adopted by certain state actors to galvanize support amongst agrarian social movements. Food sovereignty strategies have been ‘simplified’ as temporary projects and capital injections which fail to address the structural inequalities governing food systems. Further, dominant discourses of ‘high-modernist ideologies’ continue to prevail as GMO seeds continue to be used in parallel with the pursuit of food sovereignty (Scott, 1998). These contradictions create dependencies on external inputs and foreign corporations as “the ownership of global seed supply has become increasingly concentrated such that the top four companies control more than half the global proprietary seed supply” (Patel 2013:30 and see, Kloppenburg 2004, Kloppenburg 2010). The result is the erosion of sovereignty on multiple levels. Moreover, adopting green revolution technologies neglects the value of traditional knowledges and expertise by those with generations of experience in their respective agro-ecological systems and communities (see Altieri, Toledo 2011). Referring back to Scott’s (1998) notion of *Mētis*, it is important to consider that “[a]ll farming takes place in a unique space (fields, soil, crops) and at a unique time (weather pattern, season, cycle in pest populations) and for unique ends (this family with its needs and tastes). A mechanical application of generic rules that ignores these particularities is an invitation to practical failure, social disillusionment, or most likely both” (Scott 1998:318).

Moreover, simply creating generic ‘laws’ and ‘rights’ does not necessarily lead to social justice or result in intended outcomes. As Franco (2008) explains there are “serious constraints *within state law* to rural poor access to justice” as “‘the rule of law’ in the countryside remains decidedly variegated and fragmented across numerous geopolitical territories and (quasi-)judicial bodies” (2008:1870, italics in original). Therefore, it should be understood that laws and policies will often be interpreted and implemented in a manner that reflects the prevailing social relations of power in the countryside (and beyond). As Borras and Franco point out “land laws and land policies are not self-interpreting and not self-implementing. It is during the interaction between various, often conflicting, actors within the state and in society that land policies are actually interpreted, activated and implemented (or not) in a variety of ways from one place to another over time” (2010:9). Thus, empowering target populations through their inclusion in defining, managing, and implementing reform processes can strengthen the state-society interaction in a synergetic way (Borras 2004). A food sovereignty strategy is ultimately about sovereignty of the peoples -- that is, the autonomy and capacity of local people to not just define their food and agricultural systems, but also have access and control over spaces, land, and resources. As Patel (2009) argues, “it is insufficient to consider only the structures

that might guarantee the rights that constitute food sovereignty – it is also vital to consider the substantive policies, process, and politics that go to make up food sovereignty” (2009:669). It is such processes and politics that are arguably the most important in pursuing a food sovereignty strategy.

Due to the heightened corporate assault on land resources and labour in the context of the multiple crises (food, climate, fuel, finance) and the subsequent global land rush (Borras, Franco et al. 2012), the role of the state is increasingly important in protecting the sovereignty of its peoples and territory from capital’s infinite drive for accumulation. Much like Barraclough’s (1999) assessment of land reform in Latin America, the state plays a “decisive” and “crucial” role in the pursuit of a food sovereignty strategy (Barraclough 1999:33,35). However, similar to Barraclough’s assessment, the state can promote, prevent, reverse, and or divert a pathway towards food sovereignty (1999:35). Thus, it is important to understand that the pursuit of food sovereignty requires restructuring unequal land-based social relations of access and control, as well as the democratization of decision-making and implementation processes at the local level. This cannot be realized, however, without the active participation of civil society. As Barraclough noted concerning land reform, “[I]n every case where significant land reforms occurred, protests and demands by organized peasant producers and rural workers made crucial contributions to bringing them about” (Barraclough 1999:36). The role of societal actors in pursuit of a food sovereignty strategy is even more important as it is they who should define, manage, and carry out the terms of their food and agricultural systems. But without ‘pro-reformist’ state actors initiating spaces for local participatory involvement and empowerment, food sovereignty will not be realized. Thus, a dynamic state-society relationship is an important component for carrying out a national food sovereignty strategy. While Barraclough concluded that the “main actors in bringing about and consolidating genuine land reform must always include the landless and near landless, together with their political allies and the state” (Barraclough 1999:48); Fox’s (1993) analysis of the Mexican Food System as well as Borras’ (2004, 2007) analysis of the Philippines’ ‘Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program’ (CARP) drew similar conclusions. Their studies suggest that the most promising conditions for structural reforms exist when pro-reformist state-actors ‘from above’ and autonomous societal actors ‘from below’ interact in a mutually reinforcing way which confronts (and dismantles) existing power structures. Due to the need to dismantle and transform unequal agrarian structures in pursuing a food sovereignty strategy, it is argued here that an interactive and symbiotic state-society relationship will result in the most desirable outcomes.

While an overly ‘state-centric’ approach involving state actors defining and carrying out ‘food sovereignty’ projects undermines the entire basis of the concept; relying solely on rural social movements and community-led initiatives to dismantle agrarian land-based social relations and confront the economically powerful corporate entities increasingly pursuing the control over

land, resources, and other agricultural inputs is extremely difficult without any form of political power. Therefore, within the ‘integral’ state apparatus both political society and civil society must play key roles in implementing a food sovereignty strategy.

Conclusion

Considering the role of the state is essential in theorizing and conceptualizing a food sovereignty strategy. Understanding the ‘state’ as an integral entity consisting of the relations within and between political and civil society provides a better understanding state processes in the pursuit of food sovereignty. As Poulantzas notes, however, “even when a Left government really controls state branches and apparatuses, it does not necessarily control the one or ones which play the dominant role in the state and which therefore constitute the central pivot of real power” (Poulantzas 1978:138). Adding to this, even when state actors ‘constitute the central pivot if real power’ implementing a ‘food sovereignty’ strategy may serve a political strategy to increase degrees of consent and gain popular support, while in reality ‘food sovereignty’ ‘projects’ are implemented using a residual approach and more akin to reinforcing dependence on the corporate agro-food system. Further, state actors may implement a food sovereignty strategy in a simplified, manageable way, negating the complexity of the process and eroding ‘Mētis’ with techniques based on a ‘high modernist ideology’ (Scott, 1998). Alternatively, a food sovereignty approach which dismantles the existing unequal agrarian structures and transforms relations of access and control, while simultaneously opening up space for participatory democratic decision making at the local level presents the most favourable conditions for food sovereignty to be realized. This requires a mutually reinforcing and symbiotic relationship between pro-reform state and societal actors, creating an interactive approach to a pathway towards food sovereignty.⁷

This paper has attempted to highlight the importance of the role of the state – in theory and in practice – when analyzing and/or theorizing about food sovereignty processes. We analyzed the pursuit of food sovereignty in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia based on policy design and outcomes and assessed these pathways based on their apparent residual and relational approaches to the problems and the extent to which they opened up and recognized spaces for local participatory decision making based on self-determination. While our analysis reveals that Venezuela is the only case approaching food sovereignty in a relational way, it still has a long way to go in pursuit of food sovereignty. However, the generation of empowerment through participation and transformation of the social relations of production and property are important processes challenging the workings of the corporate food system.

⁷ For more on state-society interaction see Fox, 1993 and Borras, 2004.

Deconstructing the role of the state and understanding the importance of state-society relations reveals how a nationally articulated food sovereignty strategy might be realized. This requires much more empirically-based research regarding power relations within and between state and societal actors in the context of a food sovereignty strategy. We hope this preliminary analysis provokes more discussion on the role of the state and leads to more research on the state-societal relations of food sovereignty.

Appendix: Full list of state responsibilities as elaborated in the Ecuadorian Constitution:

1. To expand the production, processing capabilities and fisheries of small and medium-sized producers, to respect collective production and the social and solidarity economy;
2. To adopt fiscal policies such as tax and tariffs to protect the national agriculture and fishing sectors and to prevent a reliance on food imports;
3. To strengthen the diversification and introduction of ecological and organic technologies into agricultural production;
4. To promote redistribution policies that permit peasants the access to land, water and other productive resources;
5. To establish preferential mechanisms of credit for small and medium producers, facilitating the acquisition of the means of production;
6. To promote the preservation and recovery of agricultural biodiversity, the use of related ancestral knowledge, as well as the conservation and free exchange of seeds;
7. To ensure that animals destined for human consumption are healthy and raised in a healthy environment;
8. To assure the development of scientific research and the innovation of appropriate technology to guarantee food sovereignty;
9. To regulate the use and development of biotechnology, such as its experimentation, use and commercialization;
10. To strengthen the development of organizations and producer-consumer networks, such as the commercialization and distribution of food to that promotes equity between rural and urban spaces;
11. To generate fair systems of food distribution and commercialization based on principles of solidarity; to prevent monopolistic practices and any type of speculation on food products;
12. To donate food to victims of manmade or natural disasters that are at a risk of food insecurity. Any food received from international aid must not affect the health or future of the production of locally produced food;
13. To prevent and protect the population against the consumption of contaminated foods or that might endanger their health or foods that have uncertain science about their effects on humans;
14. To prioritize small farmer associations and networks when acquiring food and raw materials for social programs (Asemblea Constituyente 2008: 138-139, translated by Author).

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

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

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

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