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Bolivia's Food Sovereignty & Agrobiodiversity: Undermining the Local to Strengthen the State?

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Abstract

In Bolivia the notion of Food Sovereignty has been incorporated into the new Constitution. However, one complication relates to how food sovereignty is conceptualized -- and for what end -- by State and NGO actors in agricultural development. Bolivia is home to substantial biodiversity. Like elsewhere, modern agricultural practices, and the prioritizing of a limited variety of 'cash' crops over others to meet market demands, have had a deleterious effect. The arrival of the 'Green Revolution' to Bolivia, which transformed farming systems to necessitate the use of agro-chemicals and monocropping practices, resulted in the loss of agrobiodiversity. Local NGOs and the current government have been concerned with ameliorating agrobiodiversity. This orientation includes two anticipated ends: adaptation to climate changes and food sovereignty. The logic underpinning food sovereignty involves the right to produce, distribute and consume nutritious, culturally appropriate food in a way that is ecologically sustainable. Agrobiodiversity conservation is recognized as an important way to achieve this right. Both the NGO and the state have focused attention on organic agriculture and strengthening Bolivia's internal markets as key to food sovereignty. However they differ in focus. The State's need to maintain the stability and profitability of the current agribusiness for exportation leads to emphasizing independence and *ownership*, an emphasis that, at times, takes precedence over sustainability in food sovereignty. What the State wants, from the perspective of the agronomists in the governmental organizations in this study, is to strengthen *sovereignty*. A key role of these organizations is to realize greater Bolivian autonomy through ecological agriculture and food sovereignty. However, to the extent that this is tied to a backlash against neoliberalism, it is constrained by neoliberal policy reforms, so that indigenous rights and environmental protection are undermined by immediate political and economic gains (Haargard and Andersson 2009; Kennemore and Weeks 2011). That food sovereignty from the government's perspective is also possible through conventional agricultural schemes is one of many examples that illustrate the double narratives and policies of Morales' administration. The broadened definition applied by the State raises questions over whether food sovereignty will function more as a buzzword than as something that can truly protect agrobiodiversity. This paper is based on findings from my ethnographic research with Quechua farmers in two communities in the Bolivian Andes. In both communities, farm households have been participating in ecological agriculture practices with a local NGO and have more recently joined a State research pilot project into organic agriculture with a national certification scheme. Despite the shared concerns for increasing agrobiodiversity, food sovereignty and organic farming, between the farmers, the NGO and the State, tensions are evident in the power imbalances embedded in these relationships.

Introduction

In Bolivia, farmers, NGOs and State actors¹ share common concerns for ameliorating the country's remarkable biodiversity. Critical discourse and efforts contend with damage done by modern agriculture practices and the 'Green Revolution,' which transformed farming systems to necessitate the use of agro-chemicals and mono-cropping practices, and prioritized a limited variety of 'cash' crops over others to meet market demands. The resulting loss of agrobiodiversity is an ongoing concern and efforts to reverse these trends draw connections with the importance of agrobiodiversity conservation as a way to contend with climate change and as way to fortify the right to Food Sovereignty, the underpinning logic of which involves the right to produce, distribute and consume nutritious, culturally appropriate food in a way that is ecologically sustainable.

Evo Morales, heading the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party, came to power on an anti-neoliberal and anti-colonial platform that vowed to make several changes that would reduce dependence on foreign interests and benefit (indigenous) Bolivians. Among the plans were the well-known renationalizing of the gas and oil industries, as well as land reforms and increased attention to equal rights for indigenous populations, and along gender lines, with an emphasis on Andean cultural concepts. In 2009 Bolivia adopted a new constitution, emphasizing and clarifying the rights of indigenous peoples, based in the liberal tradition of human rights and aspects of what is sometimes referred to as the Andean cosmovision, such as the relationship and roles between humans and the earth. Following Venezuela and Ecuador's lead, Bolivia adopted the notion of Food Sovereignty into the new constitution.

The data for this paper arise from interviews with agricultural development workers during my ethnographic research in two Quechua farming communities in the Bolivian Andes in 2010 and a return visit in early 2011. In both communities farm households have been participating in ecological agriculture practices with a local NGO and have more recently joined a State research pilot project into organic agriculture with a national organic certification scheme. Despite the shared concerns for increasing agrobiodiversity, food sovereignty and organic farming, between the farmers, the NGO and the State, tensions were evident in the power imbalances embedded in these relationships.

The non-governmental organization, which I have called ODEP (which in English stands for, "Ecological Development Organization of Potosí") has more than a decade of experience

¹ Organizations and people's names have been changed to protect anonymity and facilitate the discussion of broad tensions and power dynamics which transcend the specific organizations and individuals involved in this case study.

working with farming communities and associations in several districts in Norte de Potosí. Among its major funding partnerships is a Canadian NGO concerned with food and livelihood security in marginal farming communities in several countries of the global South. Together, they worked on themes of organic production and adaptation to climate change, composting, agrobiodiversity and soil conservation, and micro-irrigation, among others. ODEP's work is practical, generally working in the fields or hands-on with projects, while also having theoretical components in monthly workshops, with demonstrations and planning sessions for future work or events such as ODEP's agrobiodiversity fairs.

This paper highlights two State organizations working on ecological agriculture projects; one working directly with the farmers in the study where the data was collected and the other working more broadly across Bolivia. Though the regions in which these governmental organizations work vary, both do similar work to ODEP, providing training in ecological agriculture practices as well as carrying out research in both ecological and conventional agriculture.

What emerged in the interviews with government-employed agronomists is that the State's need to maintain the stability and profitability of the current agribusiness for exportation leads to emphasizing independence and *ownership* over sustainability. This raises questions regarding the ability to balance potentially conflicting goals and the sincerity of state efforts to employ food sovereignty as a meaningful model. The data presented here encourages discussion over state-supported food sovereignty in Bolivia and its potential, and raises issues for future research. This paper does not intend to disregard or diminish the important measures that have been taken by various farmers and institutional actors in Bolivia. Yet efforts toward food sovereignty that are at the institutional level – whether State or NGO – must be examined critically. Given the MAS administration's record of inconsistencies between discourse and practice in environmental and indigenous rights issues in Bolivia (e.g. see Postero 2013), the use of the term by the state threatens to water-down the meaning of food sovereignty, while using the term to suggest that it is strengthening its environmental resolve.

Background: Food Rights in a Post-Neoliberal Era

While a shift in perspective is occurring with the increasing international promotion of sustainable agriculture through organic production, and even food sovereignty,² mainstream

² For example, the FAO recently agreed to begin discussing food 'sovereignty' rather than (the currently dominant term) 'security' after several social movements presented a consensus declaration, developed during the Third Special Conference for Food Sovereignty, claiming food sovereignty to be a real solutions to food, climate and fundamental human rights crises. (<http://lapress.org/articles.asp?art=6630> accessed January 23, 2012).

development rhetoric has long claimed that large industrial farms are more efficient. Resulting strategies, implemented to tackle problems of hunger and food supply, have flooded the market with cheap produce that undercuts local farmers (Edelman 1999; Escobar 1995; Long 2008; McAfee 2006; McMichael 2006). Bolivia was no exception, with neoliberal reforms engaging the country with the global economy in ways that undermined local and national markets. Healy (2001:52) argues that decades of discriminatory agricultural policies positioned Bolivia's small farmers to be "ill prepared to compete with the flood of foreign, often subsidized agricultural produce into local and regional market places." Furthermore, agrobiodiversity has often been jeopardized with the pressure for farmers to produce cash crops in this context. Though the degree to which neoliberalism threatens biodiversity is debated in the literature, food sovereignty has been proposed as a way to protect agrobiodiversity (Isakson 2009; Wittman 2009). The complication, as this paper demonstrates, relates to how food sovereignty is conceptualized and for what end, in practice, by State and NGO actors in agricultural development.

The new Bolivian constitution in 2009 addressed the right to food and the State's obligation to guarantee food security, through a healthy, and sufficient diet for the entire population (Article 16).³ Food *sovereignty* is addressed further in the constitution in article 309, requiring state companies and state owned enterprises to provide Bolivians with rights to natural resources and strategic control of production. Additionally, article 407 outlines necessary steps toward integrating sustainable rural development. The MAS government passed a seven-part law regarding the 'Regulation and Promotion of Ecological Agricultural and Non-timber Forest Production,' known as 'Law 3525,' which is designed to regulate, promote and strengthen ecological production, fight hunger and ensure that healthy food is accessible to all Bolivians. It states the right to food sovereignty and outlines a certification system that would include fully organic farmers as well as farmers making the transition to organic production, and establishes two types of certification: one that meets international standards and one that meets standards established within Bolivia. The law established a national council of organic production, CNAPE⁴, to oversee this branch of the economy. It also outlined some of the roles of public and private entities under the Council, such as that "municipal governments prioritize the support and co-financing for implementation and development of ecological projects supported and funded by NGOs, foundations and/or international cooperation" (Article 25:II).

It is worthwhile to note that while the organizations addressed here work on 'sustainable agriculture', it is important to recognize that while sustainable agriculture and organic

³ The text of the Bolivian Constitution ("Nueva Constitución Política del Estado") retrieved July 3, 2013, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/.../Bolivia/constitucion2009.pdf>

⁴ *El Consejo Nacional de Producción Ecológica*

agriculture are terms that are sometimes used interchangeably, the latter is not actually always sustainable. Nor do organic farming practices necessarily challenge established global power relations (Altieri and Toledo 2011). While certification of organic producers holds promise for marginalized farmers, it brings with it complications. The literature has shown that despite high hopes, certification has not necessarily provided farmers with a market advantage (Higgins, Dibden and Cocklin 2008). Altieri and Toledo (2011:588) convincingly shed light on this with their argument that:

Organic farming systems that do not challenge the monoculture nature of plantations and rely on external inputs as well as on foreign and expensive certification seals, or fair trade systems destined only for agro-export, offer little to small farmers who in turn become dependent on external inputs and foreign and volatile markets. Keeping farmers dependent on an input substitution approach, organic agriculture's fine-tuning of input use does little to move farmers toward the productive redesign of agricultural ecosystems that would move them away from dependence on external inputs. Niche (organic and/or fair trade) markets for the rich in the North exhibit the same problems of any agro-export scheme that does not prioritize food sovereignty [...] often perpetuating dependence and at times hunger (Altieri 2009).

While it was not necessarily obvious what the government was doing to implement this plan in the province of Chayanta in Norte de Potosí in early 2010, by September of that year a pilot project was being developed in three municipalities in Bolivia through one of the governmental institutions, in this paper referred to as the Bolivian Program for Agricultural Research (PIAB). Two employees of the Bolivian regional NGO with which I had been conducting research, quit to work for PIAB. Workshops were held in the municipal capital and farmers from all around were invited to learn about the importance of organic farming and the broader implications of Law 3525, with an end goal of certifying organic farmers. A tense relationship of unofficial collaboration between the State and the NGO under official barriers unveiled larger issues of power dynamics in international development and neoliberal expectations.

Specific to the Bolivian context, but with implication at a global level, are tensions that arise between local NGOs working in agro-ecological development and the government initiating agro-ecological research. In contrast to the types of collaborations that appear to be on the rise between Bolivian *non*-governmental organizations and between these organizations and various international actors, the *government* at the time of this research was wary of entering into such relationships. Evo Morales' government reflects a shift occurring in various countries of the global South that have gained power in reaction to previous administrations enamored

by neoliberalism. Though it is increasingly evident that anti-neoliberal *discourse* does not always equal anti-neoliberal *practice* in Bolivia (Haargard and Andersson 2009; Kennemore and Weeks 2011; Webber 2008), the government is cautious in entering into relationships with organizations that might be under the influence of global neoliberalism. Nonetheless it does, and thus experiences pressure from certain key international funding agencies *and* from various key Bolivian institutions to collaborate with these same NGOs (or to play a hierarchical role in which it audits the work of the latter).

Evo Morales and the MAS government have expressed disdain for certain aspects of the NGO phenomenon in Bolivia, seeing them as representative of, and (re)enforcing neoliberal values. However, there are many visible examples of collaborations and active relationships across these lines. In Norte de Potosí, for example, local and international NGOs meet regularly with municipal government officials. Posters advertising fairs, activities, projects, etc. involve alliances to varying degrees among (federal) government, local NGOs and various international donors. Despite quotidian development planning and special events involving collaborative work across government–NGO lines, in 2010 Morales reinforced his guarded stance toward NGOs, arguing that only unions can speak for civil society. NGOs and foundations, he argued, are a weaker (European) model than unions. He also reiterated his 2009 statement that some NGOs serve as instruments of capitalism and imperialism.⁵

Institutionalizing Food Sovereignty

The NGO talked about Food Sovereignty with an emphasis on sustainability and nutrition, highlighting the notion of organic production as including both of these attributes. In ODEP's workshops, food sovereignty was often referred to within the context of "food security *with* food sovereignty." This combination was explained to me as a simple way for the farmers to understand the idea, since food security was a more familiar term; 'sovereignty' would be more memorable in conjunction with the idea of food security. At the time of my interviews, farmers responded uneasily about the meaning of these terms, as they did with terms like 'agrobiodiversity.' It was very rare for a farmer to feel confident explaining these terms to me (though they recognized them as commonly used by ODEP in the workshops). Occasionally someone confidently, but erroneously, said that it had to do with using chemical inputs when farming. This did not mean that the ideas behind the terms were not meaningful to the farmers. When I asked if growing different varieties of the same crop was important, the answers were almost unanimously affirmative. One woman made the connection between my two questions aloud; "yes of course different varieties are important! Is *that* biodiversity?"

⁵ http://www.lostiempos.com/diario/actualidad/nacional/20100128/morales-dice-que-algunas-ong-son-quinta-rueda-de-espionaje-del_55548_98938.html accessed Nov. 20, 2012.

In the case of food sovereignty, most of the women I interviewed seemed to have given it little thought. They took pride in their locally grown foods, but enjoyed access to outside items. Men and women alike described life in the country as constant work, but at least one could always expect to *eat*, which was different than the city, where one did not have to work as hard, but also could not live without money. “Here, in the countryside we just *live*,” Edelmira pointed out to me in contrast to city living. For ODEP ‘food sovereignty’ became a technical term that tied agrobiodiversity to food security and contributed to a larger social process to ameliorate the social value of *local* foods.

By contrast, the MAS government, concerned with re-nationalizing privatized industries and restricting foreign control over resources (especially from the United States), not surprising framed the solutions to problems of hunger, malnutrition and loss of biodiversity in terms of national security – or *sovereignty* (Rosset 2006). Since the notion of food security falls short of defining what foods are appropriate and where they should be produced, it makes room for arguments such as for importing cheap food rather than supporting local production. At the same time, it supports the position that a country in which food security is dependent on the vagaries of the global economy is not secure, neither in terms of food or national security (Rosset 2006:305). Coupled with a powerful discursive link between anti-neoliberalism and decolonization, Postero (2013:9) points out that the MAS government legitimates “its agenda to its indigenous constituents despite ongoing resource extraction on indigenous lands and neoliberal engagement with the global market.”

An agronomist I interviewed from the government’s food security program supported by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization described the importance of food sovereignty for Bolivia, though the FAO had not yet officially recognized the need to shift discourse away from food security toward sovereignty:

[MARIO]: We need to look at the difference between food security and food sovereignty. The first one has to do with the issue of survival. Whereas food sovereignty has to do with how *we can decide* what we are able and unable to eat!

For example quinoa is a part of our food sovereignty. It’s a part of our culture, our heritage. But nowadays the owners of the quinoa are not us; they are the United States! They are the ones who have patented many varieties of quinoa; they are the owners of the germplasm. The United States has done a lot of research in quinoa and they appropriated the quinoa. But it’s even worse than that [...] What the United States has done is monopolize the product and on top

of that made money, instead of the Andean philosophy of *humanity* which believes in possessing it and *sharing* it. We are producing a lot of organic [quinoa], which we sell to Europe and it is a high quality product, that contains a lot of minerals, because they don't have food with a lot of minerals over there, but *we are not* consuming that production in Bolivia!

The agronomist continued by explaining the differences in protein and vitamins between eating a hamburger from a large global food supplier, for instance, which he equated with lacking nutrition, and eating quinoa, with all its known health benefits:

That is part of food sovereignty! Don't eat food that has been subsidized by the United States – for example, flour. Or not eating food that they dump for free – this is food sovereignty!

With Evo Morales things have changed a lot – we weren't a country before. Now we are a country. We were slaves to the United States because of the credits of the World Bank and the IMF. They loaned us money, but we had conditions to do what they wanted. For example if they wanted to raise the taxes, or implement new policies that they wanted – we weren't independent. With Evo we have become independent of this charity from the United States. Now we eat what we grow and we are no longer dependent on the United States. The U.S. influences the whole world! But we have cut the umbilical cord and created our own life. Now we depend on *friends*, on *partners*.

The farmers in this study varied in their support and enthusiasm for Morales and the MAS. Some were quite critical, others simply cautious. Evita, a farmer and country school primary teacher, articulated the support MAS enjoyed when I asked what if anything had changed in her community since MAS had come to power:

[T]here are changes – a lot of changes, because Bolivia is recognized as a poor country and always dependent on other countries. [...] We were depending all the time on other countries and doing what they said. But now we have improved since the new government! We have a pension for seniors, for children and hospitals [...]

[JENNY]: Do the people in the countryside here like MAS?

[EVITA]: OH! Yes the people like them! Evo represents our nation. [Other powerful nations] still want to come because in Bolivia we have resources. They want to take our resources and take it and leave us poor. He said we are going to expel them! He wants good things for Bolivia, he has finished his term and we have voted again for him. Everyone is happy with the president and they don't want foreigners in the country. They are going to steal – steal!

At this point Evita's father, a farmer in his sixties, listening quietly to our conversation interjected, "Yes the United States!"

[EVITA]: Yes! We were slaves – slaves to other countries! Now [...] we've said don't interfere with us! We were depending on the United States but now we are a socialist country! [...] The people have lost confidence because they have been deceived. They [the U.S.] come and they ask, but we are not naïve anymore.

Mario described the main obstacles for small farmers, as he saw it, in a way that reflected other government employed researchers and project facilitators' comments:

First of all the lack of training, the lack of knowledge and I wouldn't say the lack of culture because they have more culture than us, but they need knowledge. The problem is that they get knowledge from the media, which is also a way to be *misinformed*. Because those who control the media [...] provide information that is convenient for them. For example, they simply talk about transgenic seeds because they own the companies that sell these products. They are not going say this is bad; they just keep quiet. They have created dependency. That's what has happened in Chile, Paraguay and Argentina, and this has happened in other parts of the world [...] They have created a dependence. They have displaced many people, they have created disaster. It's a suicidal method. At the beginning it is very profitable, there are high yields, but then the income slows down and they become indebted to the banks and the big companies. As you know, this is what conventional agriculture does. We know this, but the farmer doesn't know this, so we are here to show them what others have experienced in order to learn from those mistakes.

Mario sees his role as presenting a crucial counter discourse and practice to the dominance of the global agro-industry, yet his assessment of the farmers' ignorance of this stands in contrast to his assessment that the FAO has changed its approach because Bolivians themselves have

pushed for these changes. Implicit in this idea is that it is not the farmers but other (more educated, professional) Bolivians who are calling for food sovereignty and organic production. Agronomists in ODEP also describe their work as part of a larger effort to resist powerful companies like Monsanto, but ODEP's approach has been to legitimize its role as representing farmers, highlighting concerns about climate change, loss of biodiversity, a desire for leadership, etc. ODEP argues that the farmers, themselves, express these concerns.

The Potential for Gendering Food Sovereignty Discourse in Bolivia

In keeping with Evo Morales' 'decolonization' process, the government has strived to implement the Andean tradition of gender complementarity. At the same time that gender complementarity is understood to be an ancient Andean tradition that is still practiced today, it is widely acknowledged that a bias towards males and *machismo* exists (addressed in my interviews with a range of 'professionals', Burman 2011; Roberts and Kulkarni 2011). At the state level, efforts to correct this bias often blame colonialism for introducing and encouraging gender inequality (Burman 2011).

Western liberal ideals of gender equity were incorporated into the design of the government's ecological research project in Norte de Potosí. Its funding from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) required at least 50 percent of the participants to be women. The early stages of this agro-ecological research did not ask men and women to shift any gendered practices of work. It did not even require that women should speak in their workshops. Thus, increasing the number of women present at the workshop could be done without building up tension; it could be simply represented as the criteria of an external institution, required to bring *funding* and the perceived improvements to the municipality. Yet, considering participation only in terms of percentages of men and women in development projects stifles questions such as *how* men and women participate, whose voices are heard, and what types of knowledge and experience are valued. Simply ensuring that there are equal numbers of women to men in attendance at a meeting does not ensure that women will be given a voice, or have decision-making power (Cornwall 2004). Moreover, their (silent) presence on a decision-making committee can have the effect of validating men's decisions that are not necessarily beneficial to women (Barrig 2006; Kothari 2005).

Mario, also working for a FAO-funded governmental program, shed light on the interest in improving the participation of women in organic farming projects. He described what the program has been doing and where it needs to go from here:

We want to focus on gender. In our nation there is a lot of *machismo* but now among people [Bolivians] we have 50 percent women participating in the *sindicatos*. In government women's cooperation is very strong; now there are ministers and legislators. That's what we want for women in organic agriculture; *that* level of participation from women!

His view of the role of women in organic agriculture did not stop there however. It extended into the realm of work that might be perceived as "men's work" within the complementary gendered division of farming labour. At the same time, his vision of the role of women maintained narrowly defined characteristics of femininity. Twice in the interview he emphasized the role of women in organic agriculture, as he saw it, as grounded in an ideal of women's innate nurturing:

This type of agriculture is really *for* women because it is more delicate work. [...] Women could be the best organic farmers!

Bringing the feminization of organic agriculture into the picture with PIAB's aims for gender equity, it remains to be seen if the research initiative will develop broader participatory methods and an understanding of gender equality as with time. For the early stages of the initiative, at least, simply adding women to the project met the parameters of the gender equity requirements of the FAO at that time.

Shared Concerns and Barriers to Collaborations

Raul (one of the two agronomists who had left ODEP to work at PIAB), like other professionals in development NGOs, reported that prior to the MAS government the few existing conservation laws had rarely been applied in practice (at least in Norte de Potosí). Raul recalled discourses on issues of food sovereignty, climate change and biodiversity conservation in the past, but it was only very recently that the government had addressed the role it would take in implementing such ideas. Juan Luis, the director of ODEP, expressed concern that these ideas had been examined, debated and put in writing at the federal level – namely through "Law 3525" – but that no one from the government had spoken to ODEP, or other NGOs, to his knowledge, to ask how the government could facilitate the efforts that were *already in place* toward these goals. According to him, the government was paying lip service to a concept, taking little if any action to implement it. This suggested that when and if the State did take action, it might do so without communicating with these same, already active, NGOs.

Angel, heading the ecological research wing of his department, painted a highly idealistic picture of trust and mutual respect that could seemingly develop automatically through collaboration between small-scale farmers and State agronomists. Moreover, it would have the effect of repairing past tensions:

When you decide to work with participatory research you are covering the failures that other institutions have made in social areas. [...] When you go into a community as a researcher with participatory methods, you create a bond of friendship with the community and the farmer is going develop confidence in you. [...] PIAB technicians can talk with authority: what [community members] want, what they don't want.

The explanation above sheds light on the rationale underpinning the government's approach to organic production, not consulting with Bolivian organizations, such as ODEP, when developing its plans. Angel is clear in his conviction that the governmental organization can speak with (more) authority because of their attention to rapport and downward accountability. Nonetheless, PIAB *was* entering communities where Bolivian and international NGOs were already established – not just where projects had 'failed' - with several working on similar issues. The agronomist heading the ecological agricultural research from the government recognized recent increases in collaborations across organizations, but he was wary of collaborations with the same 'professionals' he had described above, that could result in building alliances with the NGOs already working in the three municipalities in PIAB's project. The damaged relations between professionals and farmers that he anticipated his project could repair, was not only about fixing the problems of 'the past', but importantly about changing the relations, and shifting power and resources away from the internationally funded private sector NGOs, toward the government.

The tensions that arise in governmental-non-governmental relations are further complicated by the degree to which neoliberalism has penetrated rural communities (e.g., two decades of chipping away at collectivism in favour of individualism). While these processes are not uniform, it means that the government has to contend with neoliberal approaches from more directions than just the right-wing elite, or international funding agencies.

[ANGEL]: Last year CENAPE strongly encouraged us to collaborate with other organizations, and this year they pushed for us to join with ODEP. I said to them I don't need to work with an NGO yet! What we need to do first is fortify PIAB, then, maybe we can work with ODEP.

I had a very heated conversation with ODEP, and I said to them that I know that the president [Morales] doesn't see NGOs in a good light. I gave them the example of USAID: the president kicked them out!⁶ So the primary mandate is not to get very involved with NGOs. I told them that we are not going to work with them yet, probably later. They said ODEP has a lot of experience, but I said 'that may be true, but we also have a lot of experience!' I am the general consultant in ecological production and I have been in touch with organizations from Europe, the United States, and I know every 'corner' of Bolivia.

The concern for collaboration extends beyond a desire to pool resources or for more efficiency; various pragmatic aspects of ODEP's work cannot be easily realized without collaboration with the state. César, ODEP's program coordinator, was clearest about ODEP's desire to collaborate with PIAB:

[JENNY:] Do you think in the future ODEP will work with PIAB?

[CÉSAR:] Yes, definitely, because it's a state institution and they are the ones in charge of certification. So we have to.

Like Mario, Angel stressed the importance of agrobiodiversity conservation for Bolivia as a whole and in resistance to foreign interests. He explained the institutionalization of food sovereignty as the umbrella, under which all other concerns for food production and security sat:

Food sovereignty is like the biggest umbrella for [the government] - to have food on our tables, to nourish us, and then to protect biodiversity and keep our native species. We want to value and rescue them *and* do what we find suitable for us! We don't want to be managed by international institutions! We want to define how we want to take care of and conserve our genetic and natural resources!

At the same time, he explained the importance of this notion to all branches of the government's research program – even those areas that worked with conventional farming research involving agro-chemical pesticide use and scientific farming methods including monocropping. The vision for food sovereignty, Angel insisted, was an issue of *national security* not simply something for the (still marginal) organic agriculture production

⁶ At the time of the interview, the American organization had not been expelled yet, but was significantly restricted and was threatened with expulsion, particularly by the departmental government of Beni.

We have strong conventional agriculture potentials – for example in Santa Cruz, which exports a large amount of soy. They also produce a large amount of corn in a conventional way, so we have to reinforce these methods.

When I returned to this region in March of 2011, the government project had come to a halt during a period of “inactivity,” or “transition” depending on whom one asked). A new director in charge of the project and a shift in primary funding from the FAO to the World Bank was providing less security for the future of the organic farming/sustainable agriculture project and raised questions of job security for many of the agronomists at PIAB.

[ANGEL]: In June we are going to work with the World Bank and they are going to give us a big financial injection. [...] But the World Bank funding comes with restrictions and conditions. [...] I have been attending some of the meetings with the Bank, but what they said is that this funding is not to hire people. We are to spend the money on vehicles and gas, and to work with organizations that are already established with a specific objective [...]. This is the difficulty because we *have to have technicians* – we can't work without people! So we are supposed to work with already established organizations by overseeing projects and supervising them.

Given the tensions between the government and NGOs generally, this type of directive from an international funding institution is perhaps a naïve attempt at efficiency. It may also be understood as encouraging alliances between a somewhat uncooperative government and more accommodating/technical NGOs, in this sense aiming to shift power (back) to the private sector. It is arguably easier to maintain the neoliberal framing of food security issues as solvable by market forces through the support of technical NGOs than through the government.

Angel's account of the role of the World Bank in funding PIAB's organic agricultural research raises questions around whether the Bolivian government and the Bank can reconcile divergent goals. To the extent that the government is looking for market solutions to questions of food security, its framework and markers for success may align with ODEP and other NGOs, which describe their goals to empowering farmers through increased participation in (regional) markets, ownership and responsibility over resources and enhanced individual skills such as leadership. However, the determination of the government to implicate itself more fully in agricultural research and development in marginalized locations in Bolivia underscores tensions between governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and in particular, the efforts of the MAS to exert more control over processes previously dominated by international neoliberal approaches to development. This creates a conflict of interest for the government, even as

collaboration may be more efficient. As Angel points out, the first concern is to strengthen the State in this area before collaboration can be effective. The issue is not simply a pooling of resources and division of tasks among organizations; it is also a matter of sharing power (Bebbington and Farrington 1993).

Discussion: Ongoing threats to Agrobiodiversity and Small Farmers

The tensions in North-South development relationships and efforts to promote ecological agriculture are illuminated in the context of a State such as Bolivia, working to establish a post-neoliberal framework. The Bolivian State espouses an anti-neoliberal discourse vis-à-vis the United States' foreign policy and 'aid,' while maintaining a neoliberal framework in much of its development work and citizen-shaping (e.g. in its approach to participation and to training farmers to be more economically productive individuals). What the State wants, from the perspective of the agronomists in the governmental organizations addressed here, is to strengthen *sovereignty*. A key role of these organizations, then, is to realize greater Bolivian autonomy through ecological agriculture and food sovereignty.

The MAS government threatens to make its food sovereignty efforts little more than increased state control of large-scale agriculture, prioritizing exports, such as soy and corn. As Postero (2013) highlights, the departments and indigenous autonomies have the right to self-govern and to make decisions about their development, yet in practice this freedom is quite limited by the funding structure. Here tensions arise in international-national, national-local, and governmental-non-governmental relations. Although aspects of these tensions relate to a particular colonial Bolivian history, the outcome of this examination has broader application. Lines are blurred between State, for-profit, and non-profit actors as States increasingly enter into "arrangements for joint governance of issues and places" with other organizations, particularly NGOs, at an increasingly global level (Holmes 2011:4).

While the ideal of food sovereignty resists corporate control of agriculture, the MAS government is concerned with maintaining the degree of economic security enjoyed by the genetically modified soy agribusiness, for example. At the same time, government professionals make strong statements against foreign control of Bolivian foods. Thus the way the term is understood by the state maintains politicized aspects of its roots in La Via Campesina's original definition in the presentation of an alternative to hegemonic neoliberal international agri-business systems and notions of food security. Yet, by positioning food sovereignty as an umbrella for all agricultural development in Bolivia (including conventional agriculture and genetically modified crop production), the term is modified to support all production at the national level. Conceptualized this way, it risks undermining actual local

production of small farmers through a lack of recognition of farmers' knowledge(s) and about power withheld from NGOs.

In contrast, the concept of food sovereignty as employed by ODEP facilitates the NGO's more technical work; it is not unpacked, not gendered, and not linked to its international peasant organization roots. Rather it is often addressed as a mechanism toward food security – an aspect of ecological agriculture. Importantly however, it maintains its original meaning of food produced through sustainable, ecological methods. Neoliberal assumptions are contested in relation to food security versus food sovereignty, and related issues of supporting regional and national markets over free-market export approaches. Yet other neoliberal assumptions about rational (indigenous) producers being trained to be responsible citizens remain intact as rights-based discourse overrides discourses of social change within the national context.

At a larger scale, ODEP's work with farmers involves working against the dominance of agribusiness giants and unjust global market relations. It involves both technical and political approaches to increasing food security and draws on both traditional Andean farming knowledge and scientific knowledge to do this. Sheppard (2005:36) argues that NGOs "cannot succeed in utilizing local knowledge without challenging some of the fundamental tenets of development, not only in terms of development's reliance on external or foreign technologies but also in terms of the kinds of narratives that are invoked to define the problematic of the local environment." ODEP's promotion of organic agriculture, agrobiodiversity and food sovereignty challenges the reliance on external/foreign technologies. It challenges the narratives invoked to define the problematic of the local environment – that is, in terms of drawing upon, as well as translating, aspects of the Andean cosmovision and notions of complementarity to its international funders.

This paper raises issues that call for more research. Much remains to be seen, and different political actors and bodies could take the understanding of food sovereignty in different directions. One such direction would be to incorporate gender more explicitly into the concept, given that the State has focused more attention on gender and fortifying Andean notions of gender complementarity. Gendered discourse of food sovereignty was absent within both ODEP and PIAB (and seemingly PASA-FAO) at the time of my case study. Whereas ODEP's Canadian partner NGO, while not explicitly gendering food sovereignty, uses the term in various contexts and stresses the importance of women's farming knowledge and techniques in selecting and saving seeds. Increasingly the concept of food sovereignty is critically incorporating gender in both academic and activist work (e.g. Vivas 2012; Wittman, Desmarais and Weibe [eds.] 2010). La Via Campesina for example has taken a feminist stance and identifies patriarchal values and *machismo* as barriers to food sovereignty (Masioli and

Nicholson 2010). Given Bolivia's current rights-based discourse explicitly tied to Andean notions of complementarity (in relationships between living things and the Earth itself, and in terms of gender complementarity), there is some potential for 'gendering' food sovereignty to a greater degree. Yet the contradictory discourses that emerge in this paper also serve as a reminder that the direction the government (or any organization) might take in further gendering the notion of food sovereignty is not guaranteed to take a particular form. The notion that women's innate delicacy could make them the best organic farmers (explained by someone enthusiastic to see equal rights for women) is apt here.

The backlash against neoliberalism is constrained by neoliberal policy reforms, so that indigenous rights and environmental protection are undermined by immediate political and economic gains (Haargard and Andersson 2009; Kennemore and Weeks 2011). The fact that food sovereignty from the government's perspective is also possible through conventional agricultural schemes, is just one of many examples that illustrate the double narratives and policies of the MAS administration. The risk in broadening the concept of food sovereignty to incorporate *State-controlled* genetically modified, mono-cropping and use of agri-chemicals is that it diminishes it to the status of a 'buzzword' that will do little to protect and foster agrobiodiversity or the food security of small farmers. The heated on-going struggle for land reform in Bolivia can be framed in a similar way to the re-nationalization of the oil and gas industries. From the perspective of the State, greater control of resources benefits all Bolivians. Yet loss of biodiversity, smaller plots of farmable land and adaptation of climate change for small farmers – especially in highland areas like Norte de Potosí – will continue to be concern. Just as the MAS government gives resource extraction greater legitimacy by redistributing some of the surplus to the population (Postero 2013), a similar process may be occurring by using food sovereignty as an umbrella for agricultural production. Emphasis on the importance of agrobiodiversity and organic production as something farmers *must be trained by professionals* to value, raises concerns for how farmer-centered this approach to Food sovereignty can be. The ongoing harm to humans and their environments within the global agri-business system, as we know it, demands ongoing research that supports alternatives to conventional agricultural practices and food sovereignty. At the same time, research must continue to address ways to overcome barriers to collaborations between various actors (farmers, NGOs, states, activists, social scientists, etc.), and problematize partner relationships. Challenging status quo power dynamics in these relationships is an ongoing concern if there is to be meaningful social justice changes for small-scale farm families of the global South.

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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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Jenny Cockburn](#) received her PhD in Sociology with a specialization in Social Justice from the University of Windsor in June 2013. Her dissertation, based on ethnographic research in farming communities and an NGO in the Bolivian Andes, focused on challenges to agricultural knowledge exchange and collaboration. She is currently working on publications with the intention to conduct post-doctoral research on incorporating a gendered framework into Food Sovereignty in Bolivia.