

# Food sovereignty: the debate, the deadlock, and a suggested detour

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Accepted: 4 March 2013 / Published online: 24 May 2013  
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**Abstract** Whereas hundreds of social movements and NGOs all over the world have embraced the concept of food sovereignty, not many public authorities at the national and international level have adopted the food sovereignty paradigm as a normative basis for alternative agriculture and food policy. A common explanation of the limited role of food sovereignty in food and agriculture policy is that existing power structures are biased towards maintaining the corporatist food regime and neo-liberal thinking about food security. This article sets out to provide an alternative explanation for this limited role by critically reflecting on the debate about food sovereignty itself. The main argument is that this debate is characterized by deadlock. Two mechanisms underlying the deadlock are analyzed: confusion about the concept of sovereignty and the failure of the epistemic community to debate how to reconcile conflicting values, discourses, and institutions regarding food. To overcome this deadlock and organize meaningful debate with public authorities, it is proposed that the food sovereignty movement uses insights from legal pluralism and debates on governance and adopts the ending of “food violence” as a new objective and common frame.

**Keywords** Food sovereignty · Sovereignty · Food values · Food violence · Food governance · Reconciling conflicting values on food

## Introduction

At the World Food Summit in 1996 the concept of food sovereignty was launched by the international movement La Via Campesina as the “right of each nation to maintain and develop their own capacity to produce foods that are crucial to national and community food security, respecting cultural diversity and diversity of production methods” (Campesina 1996). Since then, numerous local, national and international social movements and NGOs have embraced the concept of food sovereignty in efforts to fundamentally change agriculture and food policy (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005; Wittman et al. 2010). The concept has also attracted the attention of academics and expert professionals, who have formed an epistemic community to define and defend food sovereignty as a new rights doctrine and an alternative paradigm to neo-liberal thinking on food security (Altieri and Nicholls 2008; Anderson and Bellows 2012; Beuchelt and Virchow 2012; Boyer 2010; Charlier and Warnotte 2007; Menezes 2001; Mowbray 2007; Patel 2010; Pimbert 2008; Rosset 2008, 2011; Schanbacher 2010; Wittman et al. 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Social movements and NGOs have elaborated the concept of food sovereignty as a right into different, varyingly

<sup>1</sup> Epistemic communities consist of academics and professionals with shared beliefs on cause-and-effect relationships of normative problems and a shared set of normative and principled beliefs (Haas 1992). On the basis of these shared beliefs, they “frame collective debates, propose specific policies, or identify salient points for negotiation for politicians” (Dobusch and Quack 2008, p. 8). Haas (1992, p. 20) explains that, “The solidarity between the members of an epistemic community derives not only from their shared interests, which are based on cosmopolitan beliefs of promoting collective betterment, but also from their shared aversions, which are based on their reluctance to deal with policy agendas outside their common policy enterprise or to invoke policies based on explanations that they do not accept.”

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concrete, policy proposals. These include: the promotion of local production of food for local consumption; the development of small-scale, family and peasant farming; protection of access to land or property rights of small farmers, pastoralists, and indigenous people; the promotion of women's rights; agrarian and land tenure reform; the use of local, traditional knowledge in food production; protection of small farmers from patents on seeds, livestock breeds, and genes; non-GMO food; and equitable trade policies and anti-food dumping measures (Anderson and Bellows 2012; Pimbert 2008; Schanbacher 2010; Campesina 2009; Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005). These proposals have been presented individually or as elements of a broader policy framework by social movements and NGOs to public authorities at national and international level (Wittman et al. 2010; Beauregard 2009).

Governments are supposed to adopt policy proposals based on food sovereignty: "We call on all those responsible in governments to step out of the 'neoliberal model' and have the courage to seek an alternative path of cooperation with social justice and mutual assistance," stated La Via Campesina in 2003 (Rosset 2006, p. 102). On the occasion of the 37th session of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2011, La Via Campesina reiterating its demands for solutions based on the principles of food sovereignty, stated that, "We need the various governments to adopt effective and strong measures to prohibit these [land-grabbing] practices and to adopt policies that support sustainable farmers" (Campesina 2011, my added text). Five years previously, the International NGO/CSO Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), an international network which today comprises over 45 people's movements and NGOs (including Via Campesina), had urged that, "Governments must uphold the rights of all peoples to food sovereignty and security, and adopt and implement policies that promote sustainable, family-based production rather than industry-led, high input, and export oriented production" (IPC 2006, p. 6). The IPC wishes to support or challenge the ability of national governments to protect the interests of small food producers and consumers by playing an active role in the debate on global governance and accountability and effectiveness of the international institutional architecture (IPC 2009a). The network particularly seeks to broaden opportunities for political negotiation for people's organizations and movements within the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Whereas hundreds of social movements and NGOs all over the world have embraced the concept of food sovereignty, not many public authorities at the national and international level have adopted the food sovereignty paradigm as a normative basis for alternative agriculture and food policies. Wittman et al. (2010) note that six countries

in the world integrated food sovereignty into their national constitutions or legislation between 1999 and 2009: three in Latin America, two in West Africa, and one in Asia. But they also report that in some of these countries legal reform has been watered down or cancelled. They therefore question whether the six countries "will succeed in creating the necessary structures and mechanisms to implement the kind of genuine food sovereignty that will transform existing agriculture and food systems" (Wittman et al. 2010, p. 8). On many occasions, social movements and NGOs have bemoaned and criticized the failure of national governments to adopt policy proposals that are based on the concept of food sovereignty (see, for instance, IPC 2006; Wittman et al. 2010, pp. 8–9)

The track record at intergovernmental level is not impressive either. In spite of its working relationship with the IPC, the FAO has not developed guidelines on the adoption or implementation of food sovereignty for its member states. The IPC was involved in the FAO conference on agrarian reform and rural development in 2006, the implementation of the international treaty on plant genetic resources and the development of specific instruments to defend the specific interests of small-scale artisanal fisheries in the context of FAO code of conduct on responsible fisheries (IPC 2009a). However, none of these FAO meetings and initiatives resulted in food sovereignty being adopted as the key principle of agrarian reform or resource management. Beuchelt and Virchow (2012, p. 262) report that, "no official FAO document contains the concept." Another example is the debate in 2010 on the impact of trade liberalization on hunger between the Director-General of the WTO and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. They disagreed on many issues but not on the issue of food sovereignty: "The two speakers agreed that neither of them were advocating self-sufficiency, or 'food sovereignty,' a term that some activists use" (WTO 2012). Haugen (2009) notes that, "The concept [of food sovereignty] is, however, not yet endorsed or agreed upon in any inter-governmental forum" (p. 264, my added text).

A common and persuasive explanation of the limited role of food sovereignty in food and agriculture policy is that existing power structures are biased towards maintaining the corporatist food regime and neo-liberal thinking about food security (see, for instance, Charlier and Warnotte 2007; Pimbert 2008; Schanbacher 2010). This article sets out to provide an alternative explanation for this limited role by critically reflecting on the debate about food sovereignty itself. The main argument is that this debate is characterized by deadlock: standstill and non-progressive discussion with public authorities at national and international level, sustained by lack of conceptual clarity and lack of a common framework for debate with public authorities. This deadlock not only provides an alternative

powerful explanation for why food sovereignty plays a limited role in food and agriculture policy but could also challenge the food sovereignty movement to develop a new agenda and discourse, with a view to fundamentally changing food and agriculture policy. The article analyzes two mechanisms underlying this deadlock: confusion about the concept of sovereignty and the lack of attention given by the rather closed epistemic community to how to reconcile the conflicting values, discourses and institutions on food. On the basis of this analysis the article proposes the adoption of a pluralistic perspective on sovereignty and a new discourse for the food sovereignty movement that can help break the deadlock.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, I distinguish drivers and dimensions of the debate on food sovereignty on the basis of literature review. Second, I explore which ideas on sovereignty and on values on food have been used and developed by social movements, NGOs and scholars promoting food sovereignty. For this purpose, I distinguish two social science approaches to sovereignty and then try to assess to what extent definitions and reviews of food sovereignty (as presented at international conferences, websites, book chapters, and articles) match with one of them. I also review ideas of the epistemic community on how to cope with different or even conflicting values on food. These explorations are intended to explain the deadlock in the debate on food sovereignty. Third, I propose an alternative perspective and discursive detour that can help overcome the deadlock and enable advocates of food sovereignty to contribute to changing food and agriculture policy. To give an example of strategic implications from this detour, I present a three-fold proposal on how the food sovereignty movement can redirect and revitalize the FAO Committee on World Food Security.

### **Drivers and dimensions of the debate on food sovereignty**

With the launch of the concept of food sovereignty, La Via Campesina wished to make a political statement that it is a very diverse ensemble of small-scale food producers from all over the world who wish to decide for themselves what to produce, how to produce, and for whom to produce. Having witnessed widespread displacement of families from their land by the large-scale agricultural production and projects of foreign investors, these producers had lost faith in the ability of magic words like “modernization,” “development,” and “liberalization” to bring prosperity to all. Having seen how the expansion of large-scale agricultural production has harmed ecosystems, they proposed agro-ecology as a new and sustainable way of producing food. Faced with the top-down imposition of international

trade agreements under the aegis of GATT/WTO, they declared food sovereignty to be a new bottom-up right (Charlier and Warnotte 2007; Rosset 2003; Schanbacher 2010; Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005; Wittman et al. 2010). According to Anderson and Bellows (2012, p. 178), “The 1992 World Trade Organisation (WTO)’s decision to liberalize the trade of food in the context of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, Uruguay Round) instigated development of the principles and concept of food sovereignty.”

During the 2000s, an increasing number of non-governmental bodies and international policy research institutes, as well as scholars in social, ethical, and agronomic sciences, embraced the concept of food sovereignty. They used this concept for two purposes: to challenge existing political order and decision-making on food and agriculture and to challenge the value of food as a mere commodity. Put differently: food sovereignty is not about sovereignty of food. It is about sovereignty of people and values assigned to food. I consider both issues as two critical dimensions or axes of the debate on food sovereignty.

The Food Information and Action Network (FIAN) presented food sovereignty as “democracy in localized food systems” (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005). The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) emphasized that moving towards food sovereignty is “reclaiming autonomous food systems” (Pimbert 2008). The concept of food sovereignty was used to express concerns about the lack of “voice of farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, food workers, and indigenous people” (Pimbert 2008, p. 39) in national and international policy debates on the future of food, farming, and development. In this connection Fairbairn (2010, p. 27) qualified food sovereignty as a “counter-frame” to emphasize that, “Food security, like the right to food and freedom from hunger, was framed by the political elite [...] In stark contrast, food sovereignty was developed by La Via Campesina.” This reasoning also explains why Schanbacher (2010) qualified the politics of food as the “global conflict between food security and food sovereignty.”

The more substantive reason to resist top-down decision-making on food and agriculture was disagreement with the key values underlying the dominant neo-liberal discourse in international trade policy on food and agriculture. The growing epistemic community of farmer movements, NGOs, and scholars presented food sovereignty as an “alternative paradigm” to market-based and agro-industrial thinking on food and food production (Charlier and Warnotte 2007; Pimbert 2008; Schanbacher 2010; Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005). This alternative paradigm consists of an alternative set of social and environmental values, such as: “food as a human right,” “food as a source of nutrition” rather than a commodity, and

“sustainable use of natural resources.” Based on these values and echoing the key slogan of the World Social Forum (the annual meeting of civil society organizations from all over the world) that “Another world is possible,” advocates of food sovereignty claimed that, “Another world is possible for food and agriculture” (Pimbert 2008).

### Unclear ideas

It is not surprising that those who challenge the existing political order and dominant discourse on food and agriculture are confronted with disparagement and resistance to food sovereignty as a counter-frame. However, it is too easy to explain the limited role of food sovereignty in food and agricultural policy only in terms of the reluctance of national governments and intergovernmental agencies to accept a new paradigm and discourse. To understand the limited role of food sovereignty, we should dig a little deeper into the world of ideas of the food sovereignty movement itself. This world of ideas is deadlocked because of unclear ideas on sovereignty and lack of deliberation on how to combine different values on food. In the next two sub-sections I will explain this by analyzing different explicit and implicit views on sovereignty and on values on food and how they constrain the potential and prospects for the food sovereignty movement to contribute to changing food and agriculture policy.

#### Confusion on the concept of sovereignty

Though the concept of food sovereignty can be understood as an alternative paradigm or counter-frame for food and agricultural policy, these qualifications inadequately address the question of whether food sovereignty likewise implies *alternative* sovereignty or counter-sovereignty. For instance, is food sovereignty seen as an alternative to state sovereignty or not? A related issue is whether the notion of sovereignty being promoted by advocates of food sovereignty is territory-based or not.

To ascertain what views or notions on sovereignty characterize the debate on food sovereignty between social movements, NGOs, and scholars, I will first distinguish two social science approaches to sovereignty. I will use these to highlight the confusion on the concept of food sovereignty and to show that thinking on sovereignty has ground to a halt.

The first approach to sovereignty is dominant among legal and international relations scholars in their accounts of law, public power, and international order (Fowler and Bunck 1995; Jackson 1999). This approach is state-centric and links authority to territory. It assumes that there is only one sovereign and source of law within a territory: the state. A central idea is that international order is based on

state sovereignty: there is no higher authority than the nation-state (Jackson 2003). The sovereign is supreme, with scholars debating whether sovereignty can be absolute or non-absolute. James (1999) argues that sovereignty can only be either present or absent and has no intermediate form. Others hold that absoluteness does not refer to the extent or character of sovereignty, which must always be supreme, but rather to the scope of matters over which a holder of authority is sovereign. A widely shared definition of sovereignty is “supreme authority within a territory” (Stanford Encyclopedia 2010).

The second approach to sovereignty is pluralistic. It has been nurtured by legal anthropologists and is increasingly being followed by political scientists. It assumes that both state and non-state actors can claim some kind of sovereignty. Sovereignty can be linked to territory but also relate to “transactional spheres, networks of relations, regimes of property” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, p. 39). As a result, a multitude of sovereigns and sources of law can be distinguished, together forming a plural legal order. These sovereigns and laws may happily co-exist but also constantly challenge each other. The sovereignty of the state is not considered as “the supreme authority with a territory” but rather as “scattered” (Randeria 2003) or “floating” (Kostakopoulou 2002) over different political spaces within, crossing and beyond the state’s territory.

A key question is whether the concept of food sovereignty can be understood as an example of a state-centric or a pluralistic approach of sovereignty. The generic questions on different dimensions of sovereignty are: Who is considered the holder of food sovereignty? To what extent is food sovereignty territory-based? And, is food sovereignty absolute or not? Scrutinizing the different definitions of food sovereignty that have been coined since 1996, it is not easy to answer these questions. On the one hand, Via Campesina’s call for heads of states at the FAO conference in 1996 to endorse food sovereignty as a right of each “nation” suggests that Via Campesina’s original approach was state-centric. But on the other hand, the use of the term “nation” in the 1996 definition may also suggest a pluralistic approach to sovereignty: “nation” can refer to the state as a political entity but also to a cultural or ethnic community that may cover part of the territory of a state or cross its boundaries. In 2002 the International NGO/CSO Planning Committee (IPC) replaced “nation” with “peoples, communities, and countries” in its definition of food sovereignty. This again suggests a pluralistic approach to the question of who is the sovereign. As a geographical term, “country” can refer to the territory of a state, a political division, or a region associated with a certain people or certain characteristics.

However, later definitions suggest that neither a state-centric nor a pluralist approach to sovereignty has been

used to define food sovereignty. In 2004 the Asian civil society organizations published a draft of the “Peoples” Convention on Food Sovereignty, stating that, “By this convention, Food Sovereignty becomes the right of people and communities to decide and implement their agricultural and food policies and strategies for sustainable production and distribution of food” (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, p. 12). A key difference with the IPC definition of 2002 is that there is no mention of “countries”: that is, there is no more or less implicit reference to state sovereignty. As people and communities are mentioned as two distinct categories of actor, one could also speak of a “less pluralist approach” to sovereignty. Three years later at the gathering of the movement in Nyéléni in 2007, La Via Campesina declared food sovereignty to be “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” (Campesina 2007). On the one hand this suggests that food sovereignty is about peoples’ sovereignty relating to food and agriculture, challenging the state as the sole sovereign in this domain. On the other hand, to qualify food sovereignty as a right is not incompatible with the idea that the state as supreme authority is ultimately responsible for guaranteeing such a right within its territory.

Following the example of Via Campesina, many other non-governmental networks and organizations have started to promote food sovereignty, though they are struggling with the notion of sovereignty. Working for the Food Information and Action Network (FIAN), Windfuhr and Jonsén (2005, p. 32) start by saying that, “The particular strength of the Food Sovereignty framework is that the problem of decreasing state regulatory power is addressed. Part of the essence of the Food Sovereignty framework, is to regain policy space for national policymaking.” They explain that, “The main focus is to widen policy spaces for the nation-state in international regimes such as trade regimes.” At the same time, they question “whether the state can regain that power in times of globalization” (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, p. 29) and is “already becoming too weak” to play a role as an agent for policy development (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, p. 32). For that reason, Windfuhr and Jonsén propose a new, less state-centric conceptualization of food sovereignty: “food sovereignty does not primarily refer to nation-state sovereignty” but to “the right of those affected by national and international policies to control their policies and distribution of resources.” They conclude that food sovereignty is about “local democracy, participatory development, and subsidiarity” (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, p. 33). With this new emphasis, they do not reject nation-state sovereignty but wish to use the term food sovereignty to emphasize the

need for better representation and participation of different food producers (smallholder farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists) in existing local and national political systems. Using the principle of subsidiarity, they suggest establishing closer links between the scale of food production and the scale of food governance.

In his review of “What does food sovereignty look like,” Patel (2010, p. 191) concludes that “one of the most radical moments in the definition of food sovereignty is the layering of different jurisdictions over which rights can be exercised. When the call is for, variously, nations, peoples, regions, and states to craft their own agrarian policy, there is a concomitant call for spaces of sovereignty.” Subsequently, Patel identifies a standstill in the world of ideas on food sovereignty: “In blowing apart the notion that the state has a paramount authority, by pointing to the multi-valent hierarchies of power that exist within the world food system, food sovereignty paradoxically displaces one sovereign but remains silent about the others” (Patel 2010, p. 192). In my view the lack of reflection on different spaces of sovereignty also explains biases in using food sovereignty in reference to either international issues or local control. Fairbairn (2012), for instance, observes that there is a tendency to reduce the meaning of food sovereignty to local control when applied to the US context. Burmeister and Choi (2012) argue that there is a tendency of the transnational food sovereignty movement to ignore the role and importance of member affiliates at country level to align politically with national governments to protest WTO decisions.

To organize the “call for spaces of sovereignty,” Patel (2010) proposes “a Kantian politics of cosmopolitan federalism and moral universalism,” in which different sovereignties and political jurisdictions layer atop one another, guided by fundamentally shared principles of rights. For the first element of cosmopolitan federalism, he refers to the European Union as an example of multiple and overlapping juridical sovereignties at municipal, regional, national, and Europe-wide levels, “with each successive level trumping the ones below it” (Patel 2010, p. 192). Acknowledging that in the eyes of members of La Via Campesina the EU does not really have food sovereignty, Patel adds that, “It is also vital to consider the substantive policies, and politics, that go to make up food sovereignty” (Patel 2010, p. 192). He proposes that the food sovereignty movement should challenge “deep inequalities of power” through activities that instantiate a “kind of radical moral universalism”: to make the right to shape food policy meaningful for everyone, “equality-distorting effects of sexism, patriarchy, racism, and class power” have to be eradicated. By so doing, Patel departs from a pluralistic notion of sovereignty and proposes a revolutionary, if not absolute and utopian, way of coping with the existence of multiple and competing sovereignties.

My conclusion is that a state-centric approach to sovereignty has been both upheld and rejected in definitions and debates of social movements, NGOs, and scholars on food sovereignty. Some advocates of food sovereignty suggest that state sovereignty is compatible with food sovereignty, whereas others propose a kind of revolutionary approach that rejects the state as supreme authority within a territory. The implicit, mixed and unclear use of different approaches to sovereignty reflects more than a problem of definition in debates on food sovereignty. Social movements, NGOs, and scholars have not organized an open and systematic debate on the promotion of food sovereignty as a call for different collective actors to craft their own agrarian policy in differently scaled jurisdictions. As a result, the debate on food sovereignty has run into a deadlock that is characterized by conceptual confusion and stagnation in the development of ideas on sovereignty. The upshot is that the concept of food sovereignty has very little to offer in discussion on reform of agriculture and food policies with public authorities at national and international level.

Lack of deliberation on how to combine different values on food

Farmers' movements and NGOs advocating food sovereignty have called on representatives of states at both national and international level to review their food and agriculture policy and to base their policies on alternative values on food. Basically, they want existing political structures to remain but the political culture to change. According to Pimbert (2008, p. 53), some radical parts of the food sovereignty movement wish to fundamentally change political structures: these parts "are not working for 'inclusion' in existing political structures and the dominant culture. Instead, these advocates of food sovereignty strive to transform the political order in which they operate." Fairbairn (2010, p. 27) explains that this view is not limited to some parts of the movement but is an intrinsic feature of the concept: "Food sovereignty seeks not to just to tweak the existing system but to overhaul it entirely." Patel's call (2010) for a politics of moral universalism to challenge "deep inequalities of power" also illustrates that the epistemic community believes that food sovereignty is meant to contribute to the radical transformation of society. However, it is not very clear whether the scale of the political order that needs to be transformed is local, national, global or all three. It is also difficult to imagine how communities or states can contribute to radical transformation of a political order in which they operate. If the declaration of food sovereignty is seen as a way for a state or intergovernmental organization to be declared politically offside, how should this be discussed and

organized with such a state or intergovernmental organization?

Advocates of food sovereignty do not want the right of each nation or community to develop their own food and agriculture systems to be watered down by neo-liberal thinking and trade liberalization as orchestrated by the WTO. Neither do they expect this to happen: "Because it represents a genuine alternative to (rather than just a variant of) the existing *neo-liberal* model, food sovereignty may be able to withstand the risk of co-optation or dilution" (Fairbairn 2010, p. 30, italics added). "Food sovereignty specifically rejects the commodification of food" (Anderson and Bellows 2012, p. 179). The basic idea is to replace one value on food ("food as a commodity") with another (like "food as a human right" or "sustainable use of natural resources") as the normative basis of new policies and institutions to do with food and agriculture. This means that what is seen as the problem is not the conflict or tension between these different values on food, but rather the value of "food as a commodity" as such. Providing an overview of gaps in a symposium on food sovereignty held in 2008, Anderson and Bellows (2012, pp. 182–183) conclude that the following question was not addressed: "how will different perspectives on acceptable risks and benefits be reconciled, between advocates of the right to food and business interests?" So far, the epistemic community on food sovereignty has come up with few ideas on how to address neo-liberal doctrine and discourse, other than to disparage them and call for them to be replaced.

At first sight, the discourse and values of food sovereignty seem quite compatible with human rights doctrine and the right to food in particular: food sovereignty is described as a right and can be seen as an example of a rights-based discourse; the human right to food is considered as one of the core principles or pillars of food sovereignty (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005). However, if one takes a closer look at the concept of food sovereignty, one can see that it is not that logically related to the human rights doctrine and may even pose a fundamental challenge to it. First, to maintain that food sovereignty is a right of each nation or community suggests that these entities or collective actors can be right-holders. This is at odds with human rights doctrine, which traditionally sees the individual as the right-holder.<sup>2</sup> Second, in essence, international human rights law comprises agreements between sovereign states to

<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, human rights doctrine also includes the contentious concept of collective or group rights, such as the rights of indigenous people or ethnic minorities. Collective rights and food sovereignty are both rights of each community or nation, but indigenous or minority rights are specific to a particular group. Another difference is that rights of indigenous people or ethnic minorities comprise single rights to something, for instance to be educated, or to have access to healthcare, whereas food sovereignty is about the right of a community or nation to develop its own food and agriculture policies.

respect the human rights of individuals within their territory. If food sovereignty is to challenge state sovereignty, it will also challenge human rights doctrine and institutions. Thirdly, the bottom-up declaration of food sovereignty by a movement contrasts with the top-down declaration of human rights by heads of state.

Legal scholars and economists see a clear difference between the concepts of food sovereignty and the right to food. Haugen (2009) believes that the added value of food sovereignty is the mobilizing potential that this concept has among civil society actors. Similarly, Beuchelt and Virchow (2012, p. 271) appreciate that, “the concept of food sovereignty can empower marginalized groups to stand up and force the public and politicians to incorporate their plight into the political agenda and to take action to redress it.” In terms of law, Haugen (2009) concludes that the human right to food is more precise, has stronger support among states and is closer to legally binding obligations than the food sovereignty concept. Likewise, Beuchelt and Virchow (2012, p. 270) state that, “The legal approach to adequate food appears to be the more promising way to reduce global hunger as it applies to all human beings, including small food producers.” Therefore, they recommend “the continued reliance on the right to adequate food rather than introducing the concept of food sovereignty in national and international policy making” (Beuchelt and Virchow 2012, p. 270). Though Haugen (2009, p. 292) would agree with this, he underlines the importance of paying more attention to the relationship between the two concepts, and “the need for a closer association between the actors” from the spheres of civil society and the state.

From this I conclude that the promotion of food sovereignty by social movements and NGOs as an alternative paradigm to neo-liberal thinking and a new right of nations and communities has not triggered ideas on how to combine or reconcile different values on food. As a result, the discussion on food sovereignty has run into a deadlock, not offering many ideas and ways on how to use and combine different values to reform food and agricultural policy. The outright rejection of the value of “food as a commodity” and the ambition to overhaul “the existing system” clearly illustrate this. Likewise, civil society and state actors have failed to use the bottom-up declaration of food sovereignty and top-down declaration of human rights as an opportunity to jointly discuss and define the relationship between food sovereignty and the right to food without considering one concept superior to the other.

### **A conceptual and discursive detour to establish a new food governance system**

In this section I will propose a conceptual and discursive detour to bypass the deadlock in the debate on food

sovereignty and thereby to increase the prospects and potential of the food sovereignty movement to change national and international food and agriculture policy. To give an example of what this detour could imply for organizing changes of global governance of food and agriculture, a three-fold proposal will be presented on how the food sovereignty movement can redirect and revitalize the FAO Committee on World Food Security.

To start with, much of the deadlock in the debate on food sovereignty and its limited role in discussion on food and agriculture policy could be addressed by learning from debates on legal pluralism and governance. The lessons learned could have great practical implications for the food sovereignty movement. Scholars who study legal pluralism (von Benda-Beckman 2002; Berman 2009; Souza-Santos 1987) assume that, “We live in a world of multiple, overlapping normative communities” (Berman 2009, p. 226), including formal legal entities, like federal, state, and municipal governments as well as non-state communities. Of course, this explains many legal and normative conflicts. However, instead of trying to evade or stifle such conflicts, state and non-state actors might seek “a wide variety of procedural mechanisms and institutions for managing, without eliminating, pluralism” (Berman 2009, p. 238). Legal pluralism not only refers to conflict but also provides state and non-state actors with opportunities to develop new institutions.

Similar approaches emphasizing the plurality of norms and institutions and the need to develop new forms of collaboration and decision-making involving state and non-state actors have been developed in debates on governance. All the many definitions of the concept of governance emphasize that governments are not the only actors with the obligation to address major societal issues (Kersbergen and Waarden 2004; Kooiman 2003; Nuijten 2004; Rhodes 1996; Stoker 1998). The central message of Kooiman (2003) is that societal issues require interactive governance, that is, the development of new modes of governance on the basis of interactions between state and non-state actors.

The analysis of Eakin et al. (2010) of structural and institutional drivers of food violence provides a good example of a legal pluralistic and governance approach to food and food sovereignty. They argue that counteracting discourses in food system governance form the structural or institutional drivers of “food violence”: if these discourses are not discussed and reconciled “conflict and violence associated directly or indirectly with food security” will remain (Eakin et al. 2010, p. 247).<sup>3</sup> Their particular

<sup>3</sup> Violence includes both direct (physical) forms but also “structural violence” (Galtung 1969): “chronic economic marginalization, social exclusion, disempowerment, and other forms of indirect violence to which vulnerable people are exposed” (Eakin et al. 2010, p. 246).

concern is about “the inadequacy of institutions characterizing ‘food as commodity’ for addressing the diverse issues that have emerged around the concept of ‘food as right’” (Eakin et al. 2010, p. 267). To reconcile counteracting discourses and to redress this inadequacy, Eakin and colleagues call for a new structure for food system governance to be developed. To this end, they emphasize the need to develop inclusive political spaces and to adopt a pluralistic notion of sovereignty and a rights-based approach.

Acknowledging that the diverse values and meanings of food will persist, they call for a “democratic forum in which alternative perspectives on food and its value to society have equal footing, and rules and norms are established to compensate for the differential power and political interests associated with different perspectives on food values” (Eakin et al. 2010, p. 263). They are unsure whether this means that an entirely new food governance system is required or whether existing governance systems, such as the WTO, can be modified for this purpose. In any case, more “inclusive space” is needed for countries, regions, and local governance to discuss global food security policy and processes and transactions at supranational level. One of their priority concerns is to design food governance systems that “respect conceptualizations of national sovereignty and the diversity of viewpoints on food and its meaning among nations and districts and communities within nations” (Eakin et al. 2010, p. 267). They define food security as “the freedom to make food choices and to actively pursue individual and communal food sovereignty” (Eakin et al. 2010, p. 267). Another priority is to adopt a rights-based approach to food governance, meaning that the new structure for food system governance will be the outcome of debate on what rights (to food, to profits, to environmental resources) and whose rights matter most under what conditions.

The analysis of Eakin et al. (2010) could provide a new agenda, discourse, and direction to the food sovereignty movement: ending food violence and promoting the establishment of a new food governance system through the organization of deliberative practices and new institutions. This is not to deny food sovereignty as a right of nations or communities to develop food and agricultural policy but instead to seek and create political spaces for discussing how to reconcile the values of “food as a human right” and “food as part of an ecosystem” with the value of “food as commodity.” The search for new political spaces is not meant to de-radicalize the food sovereignty movement to become a technical facilitator of multi-stakeholder consultation. It is rather meant to reanimate the role of the food sovereignty movement in two ways: to address structural and institutional drivers of food violence, together with representatives from the WTO, human rights

bodies, and (member) governments, and to develop new governance modalities within and outside existing governance systems that can help to end food violence.

A key issue on the new agenda could be the development of food and agriculture policies based on a pluralistic notion of sovereignty. This could, for instance, trigger discussion on greater autonomy for local government to regulate local production for local consumption, which is different from the caricature of food sovereignty (as sketched by some top UN officials) of food self-sufficiency of a nation or state or organizing *all* production and governance of food at local level. Going beyond the notion of sovereignty as linked to territory, social movements and NGOs could also join in and broaden the discussion with agribusiness on how to reconcile social, environmental, and economic values in the governance of local, national, and global value chains (Bolwig et al. 2008; Hospes and Clancy 2011). In this connection, debates on sustainable food production and agriculture at the national and global level could be grasped as opportunities for the food sovereignty movement to highlight conflicting values on food and agriculture and to discuss how to reconcile these with corporate actors and public authorities at different levels or parts of commodity chains. Adopting a non-territory based notion of sovereignty and a new focus on value chains could also prompt the food sovereignty movement to start reflections with the fair trade movement and to mutually influence each other. This seems only a matter of accepting the invitation: quoting Robinson (2008), Fairbairn (2012, p. 228) signals that some of the fair trade movement are “thirsting for a deeper level of conversation” with the food sovereignty movement.

The establishment of a new food governance system also leads us to discuss and propose changes of global governance of food and agriculture. The “global agenda” could include a review of the reform of the FAO Committee on World Food Security (CFS) as a case or point of departure for such discussion. This reform was triggered by the global food price crisis of 2007–2008, when the number of hungry people had risen to over one billion (Duncan and Barling 2012; ICPS 2010). Up until then, the CFS had been perceived as “underperforming” and “irrelevant for the global food security agenda,” leading “some commentators and member states to consider that it be disbanded, wound down, or its frequency of its meetings reduced” (ICPS 2010, p. 3), as for instance, expressed in the External Evaluation of the FAO (FAO 2007, p. 178). However, when faced with rising hunger, member nations agreed in 2008 to embark on a reform of the weak performing CFS (FAO 2008). This resulted in a new and broader composition of the CFS. Whereas membership and final decision-making power remains limited to states, the CFS is now officially open to “participants” from a wide range of



institutions and organizations, including UN agencies with a specific mandate relating to food and agriculture, civil society organizations, international agricultural research institutes, the World Bank, and WTO. Participants have the right to intervene in discussions and to prepare documents and agendas (FAO 2009).

The IPC has facilitated a briefing paper for civil society in which the potential role of the reformed CFS as a dynamic, inclusive, and action-oriented authoritative body to end global food and agricultural institutional fragmentation, is highlighted (ICPS 2010). The CFS is presented as a multi-level and multi-actor body receiving inputs and producing outputs across all different levels. States are still seen as the central actors and elements of this CFS, yet they are not to work on food security alone, but instead are to collaborate with civil society organizations in different fields and at different levels. In theory, the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) of the CFS offers a new avenue for food-focused civil society organizations to enter into global governance of food and agriculture and to jointly influence the drafting of the Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (Duncan and Barling 2012; FAO 2009).

However, the new and broader composition of the CFS offers no guarantee of ending institutional fragmentation. In a dark hypothetical scenario of the future development of the CFS, the International Centre for Participation Studies predicts that the CFS will turn into a confused and irrelevant body: “Overwhelmed by the sheer range of inputs it receives without having a clear idea of how to process them, CFS plenaries soon become associated with strong feelings of dissatisfaction and irrelevance among all the major stakeholders” (ICPS 2010, p. 29). Duncan and Barling (2012) distinguish eight “internal challenges” the CSM faces when establishing rules for decision-making, given the different agendas, constituencies, and strategies of civil society organizations.

A traditional strategy the IPC could use to prevent the CFS from becoming a confused and irrelevant body would be to seek to overcome internal divides between civil society organizations and to rally different food movements around the flag of food sovereignty. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) consider strategic alliances between progressive and radical trends of food movements hard to realize, yet critical for effectively changing the current corporatist food regime.<sup>4</sup> They expect that when pivotal

groups within the progressive trend adopt food sovereignty as their banner and “tilt towards radical agendas” (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011, p. 136), the food movement’s capacity to effectively change the corporatist food regime will probably be strengthened. However, my expectation is that the use of the concept of food sovereignty and the adoption of a radical agenda by the IPC will confuse and polarize discussion in the CFS advisory group of participants and CFS plenaries. It is also not unlikely that the contributions of the IPC in its capacity of participant will simply be ignored by IPC member states that have the power to make decisions. The fact that virtually all the IPC’s comments on the draft proposal for CFS reform were not incorporated into the final version does not bode well (FAO 2009; IPC 2009b).

In my view, the IPC can prevent the CFS from turning into a confused and irrelevant body by adopting a three-fold strategy. The first strategy is to develop a new collective action frame as a basis for policy deliberation with other participants of the CFS advisory group and with member states at CFS plenaries. This can be done by tabling the question of how to reconcile conflicting values on food and to present this question as a problem all CFS’s members and participants face.

The second strategy is to seek and gradually build alliances with other participants in the CFS and with representatives of member states. A focus on overcoming internal divides of civil society could leave too little time for work on content and organizing discussion with other participants, notably the UN Special Rapporteur on Food and the WTO, on how to reconcile conflicting values on food. For the advisory group of participants to deliver substantive work and advice to the bureau of the CFS, I believe that it is crucial to organize a series of informal high-level meetings between the IPC, WTO, and UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food to discuss how to reconcile conflicting values on food. These meetings could provide a basis for institutionalizing inter-organizational deliberation and reflection on the architecture of global governance of food and agriculture. The reform of the CFS should not end discussion on structural and institutional drivers of food violence, it should fuel it.

The third strategy is to find or create a momentum in which a further evolution of the governance structure of the CFS is considered, giving non-state actors the status of members. Of course, this is not easy and unproblematic. The FAO document on the reformed CFS twice mentions that the CFS is and remains an intergovernmental body, as if to allay possible fears of states and UN agencies on sharing decision-power with non-state actors (FAO 2009). Considering that some (radical) parts of the food sovereignty movement want “to overhaul existing political structures entirely” (Fairbairn 2010, p. 27), it is also not

<sup>4</sup> According to Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011), the progressive trend of the food movement is primarily composed of the middle and working classes of the global North. It employs a food justice discourse and focuses on local “foodsheds,” family farming, and good, clean, and fair food. The radical trend is primarily framed by the concept of food sovereignty, and seeks to bring about deep, structural changes to food and agriculture that may adversely affect the middle and working classes of the global North.

very likely that this movement will unanimously favor membership of the CFS. In fact, such membership may deepen the rifts within the food sovereignty movement. Last but not least, there will be issues of representation, decision-making procedures, and legitimacy. However, it is very unlikely that the reformed CFS can become relevant for the global food security agenda and address the fundamental issue of food violence, if state actors do not share decision-making power with non-state actors. Do we need another global food price crisis before member states of the CFS agree on a radical reform by sharing power with non-state actors and calling for a new global structure for food system governance?

## Conclusions

The concept of food sovereignty has not been widely adopted by public authorities at the national and international level as a normative basis for alternative agriculture and food policies and thus food sovereignty plays a limited role in food and agriculture policy. The concept has not yet been endorsed or agreed upon in any intergovernmental forum. As an alternative paradigm and counter-frame to neo-liberal thinking on food security—one that seeks to overhaul existing political order—the concept of food sovereignty is a threat rather than a starting point for discussion with public authorities on how to fundamentally change food and agriculture policies. The result is a deadlocked debate characterized by standstill, polarization or non-progressive discussion between advocates of food sovereignty and public authorities at national and international level. The epistemic community of academics and professionals promoting food sovereignty may decide to continue working along radical lines, but in my view it is unlikely that this will lead to meaningful debate and fundamental change of food and agriculture policy.

To be able to contribute to such change and to prepare for meaningful debate with policymakers, the epistemic community should not de-radicalize its approach but seek to establish a new political order in another way. The first thing to do would be to discuss the unclear use of the concept of sovereignty. Is food sovereignty based on a state-centric approach or pluralistic approach to sovereignty? As long as the use of the concept of sovereignty is unclear or only serves to displace one sovereign for another, the debate with public authorities will remain deadlocked. To overcome this deadlock, I propose that advocates of food sovereignty put the notions of “spaces of sovereignty” and “sovereignty as a geography of jurisdictions” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, p. 39) on its agenda for academic research as well as on its agenda for policy debate with public authorities. This could trigger discussion on the scope of matters, territory or

transactional spheres over which a holder of authority is sovereign. A specific issue could be the definition of food sovereignty in relation to flows of goods (for instance, as part of global value chains).

The second thing to do would be to adopt a new problem statement and to develop a common frame for policy deliberation with public authorities without watering down the values that food sovereignty advocates assign to food. The key question here is whether the structural drivers of food crises and insecurity in the world are neo-liberal thinking on food security or, instead, counteracting discourses and conflicting values in food system governance. As long as the epistemic community on food sovereignty uses the first problem statement rather than the second one, debate with public authorities will remain deadlocked. The policy and academic question on how to reconcile conflicting values on food could help to break the deadlock. The notion of food violence, which basically explains food insecurity in terms of counteracting discourses and conflicting values on food, could serve as a common frame for policy deliberation with public authorities at national and international level. The IPC could prevent the reformed CFS from turning into a confused and irrelevant body by putting the question of how to reconcile conflicting values on food on the agenda and proposing the ending of food violence as a new discourse and direction of the international community.

In my view this all means that the epistemic community on food sovereignty is standing at a crossroads. One way is to continue presenting food sovereignty as an alternative paradigm to neo-liberal thinking on food and agriculture and to take for granted conceptual confusion and non-progressive discussion with public authorities. Another way is to address this confusion and to organize meaningful debate with public authorities by discussing relationships between sovereignty, territory, and flows, and presenting the ending of food violence as a common frame for policy debate.

**Acknowledgments** The author is grateful for the inspiring debates on food law, food values and food sovereignty with Professor Francois Collart Dutilleul, head of the LASCAUX programme at Nantes University. The author also wishes to thank the LASCAUX programme and Nantes University for funding and facilitating his stay as a visiting professor at Nantes University in March and June 2011. The author is also grateful for advice of Joy Burrough on the English.

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