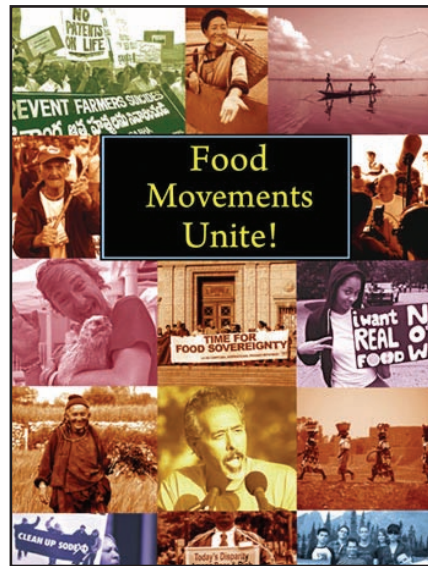


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OCCUPY THE FOOD SYSTEM! *Building a vision of transformation*

By Eric Holt-Giménez and Annie Shattuck

A dynamic global food movement is rising up around the world. Food justice activists are taking back their food systems through urban gardening, organic farming, community-supported agriculture, farmers' markets, and locally-owned processing and retail operations. Food sovereignty advocates organize for land reform, the end of destructive global-trade agreements and support for family farmers, women, and peasants. Protests against—and viable alternatives to—the expansion of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), agrofuels, land grabs, and the oligopolistic control of our food are growing everywhere every day, denouncing and replacing the dysfunctional corporate food regime with visions of hope, equity, and sustainability.

The social and political convergence of the “practitioners” and “advocates” in these food movements is well underway, as evidenced by the growing trend in food policy councils; the coalitions for food sovereignty spreading across the US, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe; and the practical and political solutions to the food crisis that appear increasingly in academic literature and the popular media.

The global food movement springs from strong commitments to food justice, food democracy, and food sovereignty on the part of thousands of farmers' unions, consumer groups, nonprofits, and faith-based and community organizations across the urban-rural and North-South divides of our planet. This remarkable “movement of movements” is widespread, highly diverse, refreshingly creative and—much like the “Occupy Wall Street” protests—busy forging a broad-based vision for transformation.

Many publications point to the hopeful initiatives in growing, processing, distributing, and consuming. And many analyses are now identifying the structural barriers to a fair and sustainable

food system. However, there has been little strategic reflection on just how to get from where we are—a broad but politically fragmented collection of hopeful alternatives—to where we need and want to be: *the new norm*.

The food movement faces the perennial political question: What is to be done?

Farmers, Sustainability and Food Sovereignty

Family and peasant farmers—who produce over half of the world’s food—have embraced food sovereignty as a political platform to roll back the corporate assault of our food and farming systems. Leaders like Paul Nicholson and João Pedro Stédile of Via Campesina call for *alliances of transformative action* and *new structural policies* for our food systems. George Naylor of the National Family Farm Coalition links today’s calls for food sovereignty to the historic U.S. farm struggles asserting that, “Without clarity on parity, all you get is charity.”

In Africa, where 70% of the production and processing of food is done by women, Tabara Ndiaye and Mariamé Ouattara of the West African “We are the Solution” campaign insist that women’s leadership is essential to “true food autonomy.” They call for rolling back the corporate-driven “Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa” and improving the status of women.

The spread of sustainable farming practices among nonprofits and peasant farmer groups in East Africa has led to the realization that farmer-led organizations need to play a leading role in transforming peasant food production. The East and South African Farmers Federation (ESAFF) challenges nonprofits working in sustainable agricultural development to change their roles from technical assistance to supporting farmers’

political processes. Supporting farmers’ political leadership is echoed by Groundswell, a new rural-development collective working in Haiti, Ecuador, Burkina Faso, and Ghana. Groundswell calls for a shift from project and donor-driven strategies to farmer and movement-driven approaches.

Consumers, Labor, and Food Justice

In the Global North, food justice, dismantling racism in the food system and healthy, local, and fair food strategies are powerful progressive forces. The roots of the food justice movement—roots that look very much like food sovereignty—can be found in radical experiences including the Black Panther’s free school breakfast programs. This program fed over 250,000 children around the country without one penny of government or foundation money. The Panther Party’s strategy of “survival pending transformation” was a practical and political approach to neighborhood food security in which food was one plank in a much wider platform for liberation that included land, education and health. Today’s “food deserts” are a reflection of the economic and political destruction historically visited on low-income communities of color. According to Brahm Ahmadi of People’s Community Market, the divides *within* the food movement of race and class can be overcome by supporting the leadership of the underserved communities most affected by the injustices in the food system.

The vision of movement building as a strategy for transforming the food system is reflected in Slow Food USA’s calls to go from simply “voting with our fork” to building a movement. We need to be pro-active citizens in order to create a food system that is “good, clean, and fair” for everyone—not just those who can afford it. The extensive

exploitation of immigrant and low-wage workers who produce, process and serve our food forces “good food” activists to understand labor’s role in the growing food movement. Food workers need food justice. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Restaurant Opportunities Center are building alliances with churches, universities, and other movements to address labor rights and workers’ food security from farm to table.

Local food systems can and are playing a role in economic recovery in the US when consumers find ways to reinvest their food dollars locally. Local food businesses are building rural–urban links, and citizens are introducing local policy recommendations to strengthen local food economies, keeping the power of the food dollar local—for both producers and consumers—through radical systems of locally-managed fair trade. Unlike corporate-driven certification schemes that attempt to mainstream fair trade into the very corporate retail chains sucking food dollars out of communities, this fair trade is a local-international strategy to keep food dollars in communities by linking consumer sovereignty with producer sovereignty.

Development, Climate, and Rights

Allies working within international development organizations are beginning to consider food sovereignty. Olivier De Schutter from the office of the Right to Food at the United Nations writes that the transformation of our food systems depends upon the spread of agroecology and the strength of social movements. The path-breaking—but corporately maligned—International Assessment of Agricultural for Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) affirms that to feed the world, “business as usual” (e.g., GMOs and corporate consolidation) is not an option. The

agenda-setting power of the UN FAO through the newly reconfigured Committee on Food Security provides an avenue for influence by civil society organizations.

Small farmers can cool the planet. Linking climate justice to food sovereignty brings two powerful, genuinely grassroots, international movements together for even greater North-South solidarity and alliance-building.

The World March of Women's journey to food sovereignty is shaping both the women's movement and the food movement by putting women's leadership and an end to violence against women at the center of the food sovereignty agenda. Rosalinda Guillén, a feminist farmworker-activist challenges food activists to transform themselves and their own movements in order to transform the food system.

Crisis and Transformation

A crisis happens when the old refuses to die and the new cannot be born. The corporate food regime may not be dying, but it is cracking, as new food systems struggle to be born.

The food riots of 2008 that swept through the Global South returned with runaway food price inflation in 2010–2011, this time sparking full-scale rebellions in Tunisia, Yemen, and Egypt. Unable to control price inflation or contain rebellion, the oligopolies of the corporate food regime are trapped. Monsanto—voted company of the year by *Forbes Magazine* in 2008—has saturated its Northern markets. Its new genetically modified seeds are performing poorly and the expiration of its patent on Roundup has opened the door to Chinese competition. In the face of falling stock values, the seed giant—along with 16 other monopolies—is trying to use the food crisis as a lever to break open markets of the Global

South. Their efforts include public-private partnerships of government aid campaigns like the USAID's "Feed the Future" initiative, and projects to prepare food-deficit countries for the spread of GMOs, including the Bill and Melinda Gates and Rockefeller Foundation's Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa.

The global recession is expanding the desperate conditions of the so-named "Bottom of the Pyramid" (BOP)—the world's poor living on less than US \$2/day—70% of whom are peasant farmers. With the food crisis as their rationale, the world's agrifood monopolies are jockeying to capture this low-income market. Even though the poor do not spend much individually, they number over 2.5 billion and as a market sector are growing at the rate of 8% a year. In the Global North, retail giants like Kroger, Walmart, and Tesco are scrambling over each other to acquire cheap urban land in US inner cities. Having saturated the rural and suburban markets, these corporations are expanding their operations through tax breaks and government stimulus monies to "eradicate food deserts." Are they serving the poor, or simply following their more affluent suburban consumers into the gentrifying inner cities?

At the same time there is a growing realization that low-income residents spend millions of dollars a year on food—dollars, that if recycled through locally-owned retail, could contribute significantly to community economic development. The term *food desert*, like the term *unused land* in the Global South, is being used to justify corporate expansion into low-income communities where people make their livelihoods.

But the global food crisis is more than the tragic increase in the number of hungry people and the pandemic of diet-related diseases. It is more than

the violence of land and resource grabs, the loss of rural livelihoods, and the abuse of food workers. It is more than the cyclical crises of capitalism now being experienced by the world's agrifood monopolies. The food crisis is a *political* crisis.

For this reason, ending the crisis requires much more than simply producing more food or making healthier choices. Ending the food crisis is a political problem that requires social, economic, and political organization for transformative change.

How can we turn the food movement into this political force for transformative change—not just a passing fad of a few weak reforms and some isolated food and agriculture projects?

We find ourselves at a time when farm, food, and labor activists are all calling for political convergence.

In doing so, they remind us that it is not enough to have good ideas, good practices, or even good analyses. Forging healthy, equitable food systems requires more than adding to the growing mix of innovative agroecological practices, localizing food, or creating good food policies. Food sovereignty, food justice, and the right to food ultimately all depend on building a unified food movement diverse enough to address all aspects of the food system, and powerful enough to challenge the main obstacle to food security—the corporate food regime.

A united food movement can forge alternatives while pressuring legislators and moving our food systems toward true transformation. Another food system *is* possible, but it will take the political convergence of the world's food movements to bring it to life.

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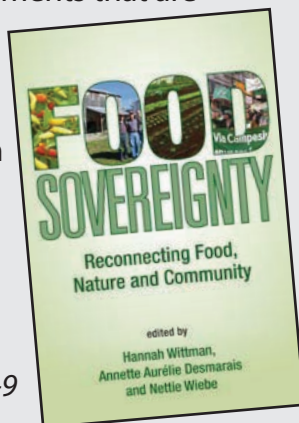
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