

# TROPICAL RESOURCES

The Bulletin of the Yale Tropical Resources Institute

Volumes 32-33, 2013-2014

Beasley, Erin. Non-profit Perspectives on “Food Security with Sovereignty”  
in Cochabamba, Bolivia.



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# Non-profit Perspectives on “Food Security with Sovereignty” in Cochabamba, Bolivia

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## Abstract

International narratives commonly position food sovereignty as an alternative framework to food security in the context of agricultural development. This paper examines the ways that non-profit organizations (NPOs) in Cochabamba, Bolivia, perceive their projects in terms of international narratives around food security and food sovereignty. While food security is often simplified to mean “the ability to eat,” food sovereignty in Bolivia has taken on a common meaning of “national food independence.” While neither of these simplifications fully represents the distributional concerns of either framework, NPOs continue to work to increase food access and access to information and political and financial resources to address local obstacles to farming. My analysis of institutional publications and key-informant interviews indicates that agricultural NPOs in Cochabamba identify differing values of these two frameworks for their projects, but most often discuss “food sovereignty” and “food security” as complementary and related terms.

## Positioning Food Sovereignty as an Alternative Framework

Literature on food sovereignty describes the term as a political response to the inadequacy of food security policies to ensure equity, control, and self-determination within rural food systems around the world (Schanbacher 2010, Boyer 2010, Patel 2009, Chappelle et al. 2013, Rosset 2003, Wittman 2010). Food security was originally presented by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1975 as “the availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to

sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices” (FAO 2002). Continued global issues of undernourishment, distributional inequity of production, and exploitation of labor and natural systems for agricultural production caused farmers, activists, and academics to question the effectiveness of the food security approach. Using these shortcomings as the starting point for discussion, food sovereignty is frequently raised as an alternative framework to food security (Patel 2012, Perfecto et al. 2009:207, Altieri 2009).

The development of food sovereignty as an “alternative” was raised by La Via Campesina’s international alliance of peasant farmers, the Movimento Sem Terra (MST) landless farmer movement in Brazil (Navarro 2002, Altieri 2009), as well as other international activists and scholars. Food sovereignty advocates emphasize improved control of resources by local residents through demo-

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cratic participation, especially by farmers' groups. The collectivist discourse developed by La Via Campesina is what Rosset and Torres (2013:6) describe as a "*diálogo de saberes*," an "emergent" response to the inadequacy of the food security approach. It is an acknowledgement of shared obstacles faced by marginalized groups across international borders. From that mobilizing political process, a more extensive definition took form at the 2007 International Forum for Food Sovereignty, where food sovereignty was defined collectively in the Nyéléni Declaration as

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. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.... Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture. (Via Campesina 2007)

This marked a shift from earlier definitions of food sovereignty that drew on entitlements and responsibilities of the state (Via Campesina 1996 in Menezes 2001:30) to a focus on food producers and consumers. Patel (2009) critiques the statement for including everyone, but in some sense, its inclusivity supports a call for civic engagement against consolidation of power in food systems. The Nyéléni Declaration emphasizes local self-determination and avoids placing the state as ultimate arbiter.

As food sovereignty discourse gained political traction in Latin America, countries in-

cluding Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia reasserted the state's role as the central institution responsible for ensuring food sovereignty (Dávalos-Saravia 2013:7, OAS 2012). An uncertainty remains, however, as to whether food sovereignty will focus on sub-national determination of local food production or national-level independence. These two trajectories will not only affect producers, but also the social space in which NPOs can support small farmers.

### **Policies of "Food Security with Sovereignty" in the Plurinational State of Bolivia**

In the midst of a polarizing global debate between food security and sovereignty, the Plurinational State of Bolivia specifically incorporated both tenets in the country's national policies. In 2006, "food sovereignty and security" was included in the country's National Development Plan, and expanded further in 2008 with the approval of the Food Sovereignty and Security Plan (Dávalos-Saravia 2013). Legislative recognition of "food security with sovereignty" came in 2012 with the passage of Law No. 144: Agricultural and Community Revolution<sup>1</sup> (Ley 144 de la revolución productiva y comunitaria) and Law of Mother Earth<sup>2</sup> (Ley de la madre tierra). Approval of these laws made Bolivia one of the first countries to recognize food sovereignty in national policy.

The political context of Bolivia is helpful in understanding why the state would embrace two seemingly opposed terms as part of national policy. First, the food security framework continues to have policy relevance: Bolivia is consistently considered the most food insecure country in South America; 27% of children under five are undernourished (Coa and Ochoa 2009:213). Even with the emergence of food sovereignty

as a policy alternative, it does not specifically establish a right to food (Schmidhuber and Tubiello 2007:19703), an issue which is of interest not only to Bolivians, but also central to the mission of the dozens of international aid organizations operating in the country to ensure food access. This simplified representation of food security as “access to food” keeps the term relevant to Bolivian policy.

The addition of food sovereignty principles into national policy occurred through participation of civil society and non-profit organizations, particularly after the 2006 election of the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) political party (Dávalos-Saravia 2013:3). From that process, several priorities for agriculture were included in the country’s Development Plan: “Improve land tenure and access; Change land use patterns to create more rural equity, decrease poverty, and conserve natural renewable resources; Expand irrigation as the primary “input” for agriculture” (ibid.: 9) These priorities address control of land and production processes through democratic means—basic principles of La Via Campesina’s food sovereignty discourse. Such policy narratives aligned with the political platform of the MAS party, and also with academics, practitioners, and civil society advocates who promoted development alternatives through agroecology,<sup>3</sup> decentralization,<sup>4</sup> and revaluation of indigeneity and indigenous ways of knowing.<sup>5</sup> Such narratives for alternative agricultural policies often evolve from an articulation with farmers, researchers, and activists (Bebbington 2004, Zimmerer 1993, Gudeman and Rivera 1990).

National politics around state sovereignty influenced the country’s notions of food sovereignty, in addition to civil society participation. After President Evo Morales’ election in 2005, the national government built its political platform around state sovereign-

ty, specifically from foreign extraction and finance. Morales nationalized private oil and gas companies operating in the country in a move to establish state control over natural resource wealth and to use revenues to fund social programs (Rochlin 2007:1330). Such sovereignty narratives minimized extranational claims to resources and reinforced the state’s authority to retain control over the rule-setting process. The governmental connection between national independence and food sovereignty is reflected in an explanation by Cochabamba’s legislative assembly: “Within the agricultural economic policy that [Bolivia] is advancing, one of the principal goals is to achieve food independence, in other words, all of the food eaten by Bolivians should be produced in the country as a way of not depending on other nations” (Brigada de Asambleístas de Cochabamba 2013). This simplified governmental perspective represents a different definition than both international and local farmers groups, but it parallels national narratives of self-determination. The government narrative around food sovereignty places the locus of control with the national government, prioritizing national consumption needs over localized trade advantages that might take food to higher-paying international buyers.

### **Food Security and Sovereignty Narratives Within the Non-profit Sector**

In 2013, I held key-informant interviews with directors and administrators of thirteen non-profit organizations in Cochabamba, Bolivia, working to support small-holder farmers. I also collected information from visits to project sites, published materials, and public events. The organizations included foundations, non-governmental organizations, research institutes, and one civil society group. All had their primary office in

Cochabamba. Some of the organizations had been operating for decades, while other groups were just starting to do projects and workshops. While respondents reflected on multiple themes across the NPO sector, the remainder of the article will focus on stated perceptions of “food sovereignty” and “food security” in the context of their organizations.

Similar to the national policy, which was informed by civil society groups and non-profits, most institutional respondents discussed sovereignty as an *addition* to food security in terms of their programmatic goals. None of the respondents focused solely on food security, but the simplification of food security as “food access” was ubiquitous. A common response indicated general acceptance of both ideas:

To me, they’re two terms with a lot of propaganda. Sovereignty means that everything that a person eats comes from their country. For food security, it doesn’t matter where it comes from, but I have to eat something. You could say that in our projects, we’re aiming for both of these things at the same time—sovereignty in the sense that you decide your diet, that what you eat is clean, and security in the sense that you eat.

A smaller group of respondents recognized both concepts, with a preference towards sovereignty, as reflected in the response below from another non-profit director. Here the director uses the combined term “sovereignty with security” in reference to revaluing local cultivation practices. However, he goes on to mention additional projects only related to food sovereignty.

Right now, we’re focusing more on

the theme of sovereignty, sovereignty with food security, and mostly on the topic of vegetables...[we want to help] to revalue methods, and forms of production at the community or individual level... we developed informational workshops to see what the negative effects of monocultures were, in terms of deterioration of the soil and people’s diets. That is, sovereignty more than food security.

Here, sovereignty refers not only to diet, but the conditions of the soil and cultivation that influence dietary outcomes. This comment references meanings of food sovereignty beyond the simplification of “food independence” found in the public sector. For other organizations, comments on food sovereignty are used to invoke distributional aspects of the food system such as the agrarian reforms and political gains of the landless farmers’ movement (MST) in Brazil. Another NPO director saw food sovereignty as a way to justify national laws that place controls on corporate-owned agriculture and genetically modified crops. Others used the term to encourage increased adoption of modern farming technologies for domestic food production (rather than export markets).

The director of an organization with a long history of developing projects with communities describes the collaboration with 18 other organizations to develop projects around food sovereignty:

There are four project areas, all under the theme of food sovereignty. The solution [of the project] was to increase their [agricultural] production—improve and increase production of potato and wheat, which are currently the two highest-value

crops in that region, and to increase the production and conservation of quinoa and amaranth in the region. Those aren't their main crops, but they already grow them there. At the same time, there are family gardens under the theme of food security and sovereignty. Within the family gardens, in the project plans they also established school gardens in two of the three communities.

In this case, the projects around food sovereignty include improved and increased production of wheat, potato, amaranth, and quinoa. In the context of this conversation, I understood the increased production to be for in-country consumption. Initiatives around home and school gardens were characterized under the combined term of “food sovereignty and security,” indicating that these projects provided food and increased control over local nutrition.

## **Conclusions**

Far from oppositional, national policy and local implementation of food sovereignty and food security take on complementary forms among NPO practitioners in Cochabamba, Bolivia. At the national level, neither food security nor food sovereignty are endogenous policies: they are both actively debated concepts, implemented in a hybridized, dynamic political context. The interaction of international food policy frameworks within national politics resulted in the simplification of two policy ideas (food sovereignty and security) that originally manifested concerns for equity, but the NPO sector ultimately expressed more nuanced equity issues under the theme of “food sovereignty,” while their perception of food security remained focused on “having food to eat.”

While there is not a significant peasant movement rallying around food sovereignty in Cochabamba today, it would be incorrect to assume that the issue is being ignored. In some sense, many of the mobilizing ideas of food sovereignty in this region have already been fought and institutionalized, both in the recent past and during longer-term historical struggles for agrarian land reform and political representation of rural and indigenous groups. The ideas are also institutionalized through the work of NPOs, who contract their services to local communities, creating an evolving demand for projects based on national politics, international discourse, and local realities. NPOs both influence and respond to those demands with diverse technical services, advocacy, and articulation with international discourse around food policy. In that sense, sovereignty issues are woven into the very fabric of Bolivian culture and politics. As long as the space for democratic participation remains open, NPOs and communities will continue to negotiate and reinterpret the practical meanings of food sovereignty and food security in this region to include values-based concerns of food production.

## **Endnotes**

1. Plurinational State of Bolivia. 15 October 2012. Law No. 300 "Ley marco de la madre tierra y desarrollo integral para vivir bien" Chapter 4, Article 13. Accessible from <http://www.gacetaoficialdebolivia.gob.bo/ediciones/view/431NEC>
2. Plurinational State of Bolivia. 26 June 2011. Law No. 144 "Ley de la revolucion productiva comunitaria agropecuaria." Accessible from <http://www.gacetaoficialdebolivia.gob.bo/normas/buscar/144>
3. AGRUCO (the Agroecology University of Cochabamba) was formally established in 1985, indicating the institutionalization of

agroecology and promoting research using an agroecological framework. Today, AGRUCO is an active research institute within the local public university, Universidad Mayor de San Simon.

4. The Ley de Participación, was passed in 1992, creating a process of citizen planning that required funding for development projects to be approved through municipal processes. One of the goals of decentralization was to give communities more self-determination over local development.
5. For further readings on the politics of indigeneity in Bolivia, see Ticona (2010) and Postero (2013).

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Tropical Resource Institute and the Yale Program on Agrarian Studies that funded my research, as well as to my colleagues in Cochabamba who took the time to share their thoughts on their work. I am particularly thankful for the advice and reflections offered by Dana Graef and Alder Keleman as I formed my research and developed this analysis.

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