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# Exploring the ‘localisation’ dimension of food sovereignty

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The ‘localisation’ narrative is at the heart of food sovereignty in theory and practice, in reaction to the ‘distance’ dimension in the dominant industrial food system. But while it is a central element in food sovereignty, it is under-theorised and largely unproblematised. Using the theoretical concepts of food regime analysis, uneven geographical development and metabolic rift, the author presents an exploratory discussion on the localisation dimension of food sovereignty, arguing that not all local food systems are a manifestation of food sovereignty nor do they all help build the alternative model that food sovereignty proposes. The paper differentiates local food systems by examining character, method and scale and illustrates how local food systems rarely meet the ideal type of either food sovereignty or the capitalist industrial model. In order to address five forms of distance inherent in the global industrial food system, localisation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for food sovereignty. A more comprehensive food sovereignty needs to be constructed and may still be constrained by the context of capitalism and mediated by the social movements whence it comes.

**Keywords:** food sovereignty; localisation; La Via Campesina; metabolic rift; uneven geographical development; food regime

## The global industrial food system and its critics

Processes of capitalist development and its logic of profit making have shaped agriculture over time and have had a major influence on the structure and dynamics of the dominant global food system, most recently through increased trade liberalisation, corporate concentration and new technologies such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs).<sup>1</sup> This way of organising the food system has many long-term social implications, such as displacement and dispossession, dietary changes and a widening gap between producers and consumers; and a large impact on the environment in terms of biodiversity loss, soil depletion, deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions. An emphasis on (re)localising food

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production and consumption is a key component of resistance to the current industrialised and globalised structures of the food system that are at the root of these trends.

Localisation can be viewed as a direct counter to specific forms of distance in the food system. As an integral part of an alternative food system, localisation can also be viewed in opposition to the wider industrial agriculture model. Yet it is unclear if it can necessarily be equated with a democratised food system or whether all attempts at localisation can be viewed as direct critiques of the industrial model. While localisation efforts may be able to address the most accessible conception of distancing,<sup>2</sup> that is, physical distance between place of production and place of consumption, can they also adequately address more complex notions of distancing? Clapp uses the concept to explore both physical and abstract spaces exacerbated by the financialisation of the global food system, and it is these abstract notions of distancing that may present more difficulty for localisation efforts.<sup>3</sup> The ambiguous nature of defining 'local' and 'local food systems' makes this task more challenging, as these are not only defined in geographic terms but also by 'social and supply chain characteristics' or, as Feagan states, by their aspiration for '*respatializing and reconfiguring agricultural systems*'.<sup>4</sup>

Peasants, social movements and civil society organisations are also putting forward alternatives such as food sovereignty, which was first presented on the world stage at the World Food Summit in 1996 by the international peasant and small-scale farmers' movement, La Via Campesina (LVC). Food sovereignty is an articulation of a radical reimagining of the food system and, as it evolves, its definition has also evolved.<sup>5</sup> Broadly it is the 'right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems'.<sup>6</sup> Food sovereignty incorporates the notion of localisation as an essential part of building alternative food systems. The declaration from the Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty says that 'Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, pastoralist-led grazing'.<sup>7</sup> Local markets, local economies and local production are all key aspects of a food sovereignty approach.

While academic exploration of food sovereignty has surged recently, the emphasis on localisation within food sovereignty discourse has not been unpacked in a systematic way and there are many tensions, contradictions and gaps that require consideration. First, is localisation actually (and necessarily) a challenge to the globalised, industrialised food system? Or is it merely a niche within the existing regime that allows affluent consumers more choice in their consumption habits? How does a localised food system deal with a reliance on export-oriented agriculture as the basis of an economy? Does localisation mean creating a parallel food system without altering the dominant one?

Second, while local food systems can demonstrably connect consumers more directly to producers, questions remain about who those consumers are and how far localisation efforts can reach. Can local food systems adequately feed those living in poverty and low-income situations, those who cannot afford to pay premium prices for local, ecologically produced food products? Can and will the working classes in both rural and urban settings participate in local food systems while the industrial food system continues to provide cheap food? If local

production privileges fair prices for producers, can it at the same time provide affordable food for all consumers? Or is local food a contradiction of the goal of food for all?

Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck suggest that 'The challenge for food movements is to address the immediate problems of hunger, malnutrition, food insecurity and environmental degradation, while working steadily towards the structural changes needed for sustainable, equitable and democratic food systems'.<sup>8</sup> Can food sovereignty discourse, rooted largely in rural movements, integrate the urban food movements that often deal with practical issues of access to food and may not seek major food system transformation? Do localisation efforts have the ability to address both the practical, immediate issues in the industrial food system while simultaneously posing a substantial challenge and presenting a viable alternative to the dominant model? How central are local food systems to the realisation of transformative food sovereignty?

In this paper I will concentrate on the question: how does the food sovereignty framework, and in particular, its call for local food systems, address geographical and sectoral distancing in the current global industrial food system? I will begin by outlining the analytical tools used to inform the discussion. By situating local food initiatives within the wider food sovereignty framework, in the context of the transnational agrarian movements that developed and espouse it, I will then argue that not all local food systems are a manifestation of food sovereignty nor do they all help build the alternative model that food sovereignty proposes. By examining scale, method and character I will begin to differentiate local food systems and illustrate how they rarely meet the ideal type of either a food sovereignty model or a capitalist industrial model, and instead fall somewhere in between. Finally, I will present an investigation of five forms of distance that are inherent in the global industrial food system and examine how effective localisation efforts are in addressing these. I will argue that localisation alone is not enough and a more comprehensive understanding of food sovereignty needs to be present, although it may still be constrained by the context of capitalism and mediated by the movements from which it comes.

### Conceptual exploration

Three main theoretical formulations are employed to inform the analysis that follows. Briefly 'food regime' analysis, originally formulated by Friedmann and McMichael,<sup>9</sup> provides a tool to analyse localisation and food sovereignty within a particular historical and political setting. Food regimes are defined as 'stable periodic arrangements in the production and circulation of food on a world scale, associated with various forms of hegemony in the world economy'.<sup>10</sup> McMichael argues that a corporate food regime exists as a third food regime following, first, a regime to fuel European industrialisation in the late 1800s and, second, one based on export of surpluses from the USA in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Each food regime is accompanied by a period of transition and struggle as the last regime falters and a new regime is consolidated. These periods of transition are spaces where the contestation between development models, modes of accumulation, types of agricultural systems and different food system actors can be observed; however, McMichael also recognises that food

regimes themselves encompass tensions and contradictions at a particular historical moment.<sup>12</sup> Food sovereignty and the social movements that advance it can therefore be positioned as part of the contested transition to a third, corporate food regime, or as a pivotal dynamic within an existing corporate food regime. In either formulation food sovereignty is situated as a challenge or ‘counter-mobilisation’ to the current global industrial food system.<sup>13</sup>

David Harvey’s theory of uneven geographical development is a second useful theoretical construct.<sup>14</sup> A key idea for framing the present analysis is Harvey’s understanding of theory as a dialectical process that ‘is perpetually negotiating the relation between the particular and the universal, between the abstract and the concrete’, which is a valuable way to consider food sovereignty.<sup>15</sup> Food sovereignty is a political discourse, a proposition and, in some ways, an abstract description of a desired system of agricultural production, distribution, consumption and social relations. In another sense food sovereignty is a grounded practice of concrete political, economic and social steps towards a specific vision for the food system and the actors involved in it. Harvey’s assertion that ‘Capitalist activity is always grounded somewhere’,<sup>16</sup> that social processes are materially embedded, offers a way to think about where the industrial food system is actually located, as well as to describe the distances within it. Clear linkages can be made between Harvey’s ‘accumulation by dispossession’ and, for example, geographical distancing understood as displacement of peasants from their land. But it is also possible to make the link between accumulation by dispossession and some forms of localisation, for example where food trends and labels such as ‘local’ or ‘organic’ are adopted by large corporations, paralleling Harvey’s argument of appropriation of creativity.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the metabolic rift, referring to Marx’s idea of the separation between humans and nature characterised by the rupture of the natural nutrient cycle, is a mechanism for exploring distance in the current food system and the different ecological repercussions of various models of agriculture. Foster explains that this idea of ruptured metabolism was used by Marx ‘to capture the material estrangement of human beings in capitalist society from the natural conditions of their existence’.<sup>18</sup> This concept has been used to illustrate division between urban and rural, producers and consumers, agricultural production and natural processes, as well as to argue that large-scale industrial agriculture and the development of distant markets have aggravated this rift.<sup>19</sup> Moore, however, challenges the use of metabolic rift as a simple binary that views capitalist development as the cause of environmental degradation and argues instead that capitalism and nature act upon each other,<sup>20</sup> and furthermore that capitalism develops ‘through nature–society relations’.<sup>21</sup> Ecological damage is not a side-effect of capitalist accumulation; rather it is an intrinsic part of it. As part of a complex argument, Moore makes the point that there is a commodification tipping point where capitalist transformation has taken place and after which, ‘neither governing structures nor production systems nor the (newly transformed) forests, fields, households, and other ecologies can reproduce themselves *except through deepening participation in the circuits of capital on a world-scale*’.<sup>22</sup> This idea that capitalism recreates itself through its internal, yet contradictory, logics of accumulation and capitalisation poses a significant challenge to the realisation of alternative food systems.

These three distinct but interrelated clusters of theoretical lenses, namely, food regimes, uneven geographical development and metabolic rift, will inform the analysis of the specific food sovereignty problematique that I am going to tackle in this paper.

### **Situating food sovereignty and local food systems**

Within the early framing of food sovereignty local food systems are not explicitly discussed, although the core notions of defining food and agriculture policy at a national or local level, asserting the right of peasants to exist and produce food, rejecting the industrialisation of agriculture and prioritising domestic markets suggest a strategy of localising food systems. By 2007 both the definition of food sovereignty in the Nyéléni final declaration and the six key pillars of food sovereignty outlined in the synthesis report refer to food systems shaped by local producers, the need to focus on local markets and the development of local food strategies as crucial pieces of realising food sovereignty.<sup>23</sup> Building and sustaining local food systems is a significant component in the food sovereignty approach yet, in their formal documents and positions, the movements for food sovereignty have not specified their vision of local food systems beyond general statements and, as Patel suggests, the definitions of food sovereignty itself are diverse, contradictory and in motion.<sup>24</sup>

The food sovereignty vision of local food systems remains relatively unarticulated partly because of the way in which transnational agrarian movements (TAMs) like LVC are formed and operate. Borras et al attribute the generalising tendency of TAMs to the complexity of representation. They argue that movement leaders inevitably simplify issues and stances 'to make complex realities legible [...] and manageable'.<sup>25</sup> Claims of representation are necessary for movements to have weight behind their proposals and demands but these claims are far from straightforward. Most TAMs are built on partial rather than full representation of a specific constituency and the degree of actual representation corresponds to the credibility and strength of the organisation or movement. In addition, representation is continuously shifting and movements go through cycles where they are more or less equipped to represent their constituencies. Finally, by claiming to represent a particular group, all those who do not identify with the group are left out and the movement does not articulate their claims.<sup>26</sup> Borras contends that LVC is both an actor on the international stage (and national and subnational stages via its member organisations) and at the same time an 'arena of action', a contested, dynamic internal space where positions and actions are debated, tested and negotiated, which has implications for how issues are framed and demands are made.<sup>27</sup>

Although the articulation of food sovereignty and local food systems by LVC and others necessarily overlooks many intricate details and leaves vital questions unresolved, broadly their expression of the food sovereignty framework views local food systems as ideally embedded in small-scale, peasant production using agroecological methods.<sup>28</sup> Food sovereignty seeks to move control over food systems to the local level and by its very nature, then, each local food system will demonstrate different characteristics and privilege some dimensions over others, resulting in a diversity of local food systems.<sup>29</sup>

Local food systems are dynamic and evolve as they develop and in this way may demonstrate changing characteristics over time, reflecting Harvey's portrayal of dialectics as constant movement between the universal and the particular, the theory and the practice.<sup>30</sup>

However, it is also important to note that isolating the local food system aspect of food sovereignty from its whole weakens the challenge to the corporate food regime that food sovereignty represents. Wittman et al contend that food sovereignty goes well beyond rearranging global food relations, although that is at its core, to provide an alternative model of rural development.<sup>31</sup> Giving credence to the possibility that food sovereignty exposes 'different concepts of modernity', Patel argues that, fundamentally, food sovereignty attempts to address deep-seated, long-standing power inequalities to achieve a 'radical egalitarianism'.<sup>32</sup> Patel's theorising of food sovereignty demonstrates the breadth of what is required to achieve it – including the transformation of power structures and social relations towards the elimination of 'sexism, patriarchy, racism, and class power'.<sup>33</sup> Reducing food sovereignty to local food systems mirrors the reductionist tendencies of the global industrial food system and therefore recreates the principles it seeks to resist. If the elements of food sovereignty are compartmentalised and dealt with separately, the transformative potential of the framework is compromised and there is a risk that the theoretical breadth of food sovereignty is lost in the concrete practice of one element. Local food systems are not sufficient on their own to challenge the global industrial food system, and a local food system – even one meeting the ideal food sovereignty type – does not constitute food sovereignty in and of itself.

Yet transformation of social relations, the food system and rural development trajectories are not possible without being grounded in the practice of food sovereignty. Is any work that is moving food system dynamics toward local or alternative models usefully contributing to food sovereignty's vision of challenging and changing the capitalist industrial model, even if only to prepare the ground? Can local food initiatives that are not controlled by farmers, that use genetically modified seeds or chemical inputs or are based on large monocultures, or that cater only to high-end consumers still be considered food sovereignty? In an attempt to tease out what constitutes local food systems based in food sovereignty and to explore the nuances, tensions and paradoxes that have yet to be solved in the articulation of food sovereignty, local food systems need to be differentiated.

### **Local, differentiated**

The strength of local food systems is that they are based in the particular and that they can be defined in a variety of ways that appropriately suit each context. Not all forms of local are synonymous and the ambiguity of definition means that, to determine the extent to which local food systems are capable of countering distance, it is necessary to analyse their characteristics and broadly classify them along a range where local food systems within the food sovereignty framework occupy one end and local food systems within the industrial capitalist framework the other. It is important to note that the individual treatment of character, method and scale in the sections to follow is an artificial one for analytical purposes. In practice, each of these elements overlaps.

### *Character*

Capitalism's defining features of commodity production – goods and services produced 'for market exchange in order to make a profit'<sup>34</sup> – and endless accumulation have left a definitive mark on agricultural production worldwide. Whether or not peasant agriculture can or does operate completely outside this logic is an unresolved debate.<sup>35</sup> For the purposes of classifying local food systems along a spectrum between industrial agriculture and food sovereignty, I argue that peasant character is substantively different from capitalist character. The tension between agrarianism and industrialism may be at the heart of the character differentiation between these two veins. 'The fundamental difference between industrialism and agrarianism is this: whereas industrialism is a way of thought based on monetary capital and technology, agrarianism is a way of thought based on land', writes Berry.<sup>36</sup> Bernstein, while arguing against this delineation, outlines the character of peasant production as described by the food sovereignty frame as 'a radically different episteme to that centred in market relations and dynamics [...] based in an ecologically wise and socially just rationality'.<sup>37</sup> The idea that peasants can and do operate outside the capitalist logic of accumulation yet still engage in markets and the production of a marketable surplus beyond basic subsistence production allows for an exploration of whether and how far contemporary local food system strategies act as an antithesis to agriculture organised via capitalist relations.

Accumulation by appropriation also confirms that the character of local food production and distribution is an important element of differentiation, since labels alone do not distinguish real alternatives from niches subsumed in the corporate food regime. Harvey argues that, through the process of commodification, the drive to accumulate surpluses results in appropriation of material objects and abstract ideas ('creativity' for instance) that are not generated by capital. He writes that accumulation logic 'creates a premium on the commodification of phenomena that are in other respects unique, authentic and therefore non-replicable'.<sup>38</sup> In many ways this explanation provides insights into the multiple manifestations of local food systems which, because of their locality, are at first glance 'unique and non-replicable'. Dominant players in the industrial food system capture alternative food system concepts quickly, however, eg Walmart offering organic foods, and turn them into marketable labels.<sup>39</sup> Campbell cautions that these initiatives, despite being connected to the corporate food regime, should not be entirely dismissed, as they represent 'a small but important set of counter-logics'.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, this creates obscurity in situating local food initiatives, as large corporate players appropriate labels created by alternative food movements to distinguish themselves from the mainstream food system, and therefore elevates the importance of character.

### *Method*

The bluntest differentiation of production methods is between conventional production, which uses chemicals and synthetic fertilisers and is therefore directly connected to the corporate food regime and industrial agriculture through inputs and technology, and what can be termed 'traditional production', which includes methods from organic to agroecological production. Conventional production



methods use a range of technical and synthetic interventions to increase productivity and control weeds and pests and, though widely adopted on large-scale farms in the global North, they are not confined there. Many small-scale peasant farms in the global South also use conventional methods following the introduction of Green Revolution technologies. Organisations like Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), for instance, sponsor programmes to distribute hybrid seeds to small-scale farmers. Conventional methods rely on the practice of mono-cropping to ensure uniformity and durability and to exploit mechanisation.<sup>41</sup>

As organic food becomes more desirable, particularly for upper class consumers in the global North, parts of the organic sector, initially based on the idea of small-scale, locally based, ecologically friendly agriculture, now resemble the conventional commercial sector, including consolidated distribution networks, large-scale mono-crop production, standardisation and a heavy reliance on fossil fuels.<sup>42</sup> Altieri and Nicholls note that organic certification that does not address size, or what they term ‘social standards’, has resulted in similar arrangements and working conditions on organic farms as on conventional farms, blurring the lines between industrial and peasant agricultural systems in this respect.<sup>43</sup> Local food initiatives established with agroecological production methods fall more fully within the food sovereignty framework. Agroecology is based on enhancing small-scale farm productivity while conserving ecological resources through engagement in deeply rooted traditional practices and scientific knowledge of ecological processes.<sup>44</sup> Rosset et al summarise agroecology as a set of principles that include soil conservation and soil building, recycling of nutrients, poly-cropping and biodiversity preservation, and the use of biological mechanisms for pest control.<sup>45</sup> While agroecology practice is spreading through food sovereignty networks, questions remain about whether enough food can be produced, at affordable prices, to feed everyone.<sup>46</sup>

### **Scale**

While it is often assumed that food system localisation implies small-scale agriculture, differentiating between different scales of production and distribution assists in distinguishing broad types of local food initiatives. Neumann observes that often the conceptualisation of scale is itself ambiguous, alternating between referring to size, level, network or site. He advocates choosing one consistent meaning of scale, but both scale as size and scale as level are useful here.<sup>47</sup> Iles and Montenegro’s recent work adds another dimension of scale – ‘relational scale’, defined as ‘networks of elements and processes in a complex adaptive system’.<sup>48</sup>

Scale as size is often invoked in relation to food production. Neumann uses the example of large-scale as interchangeably meaning ‘capital intensive, spatially extensive, or national’.<sup>49</sup> For example, small-scale agriculture is frequently defined in opposition to large-scale agriculture based on the amount of land cultivated, yet Bernstein contends that capital intensiveness is a more useful descriptor, since farm area does not indicate the number of farm labourers needed or the capital required to start and maintain the operation.<sup>50</sup> While acknowledging the imprecision of the classification, industrial agriculture

features increasing farm size related to mechanisation and the use of inputs, as well as increasing capitalisation, particularly in the current corporate food regime where corporate investment into the production side of the food system is becoming more commonplace.<sup>51</sup> Large-scale, meaning capital-intensive agricultural operations with large land area or a high number of animals, can be (and often is) used as a synonym for industrial agriculture. In fact, van der Ploeg calls increasing scale an 'indispensable ingredient of industrialization'.<sup>52</sup> Linking large-scale to industrial agriculture does not preclude the sale of industrial production within a local food system, although large-scale production typified by industrial methods is likely to be connected into larger distribution networks and more distant markets, as is illustrated through the three food regimes and their respective global commodity flows.

Scale as level is also a useful conceptualisation. The lower down the scale or closer to the household level a food system is, the more local it is. In this version of scale, small-scale means producing for a household or a market within the community while large-scale means producing for levels further up the scalar chain, such as international markets. The further down the local scale a food system is, the shorter the supply chain.<sup>53</sup> Using this framing, a farmers market where farmers are directly selling to customers is more local than a large grocery chain offering regional produce. The lower down the scale local food systems are, the more able they should be to bridge the metabolic rift, both literally and metaphorically. This is not always straightforward in practice, however, particularly as efforts to build local food systems grapple with questions of how to scale up these initiatives to include more consumers and larger geographical areas without losing focus on maintaining the embeddedness of these food systems. Friedmann relates the case of public procurement of local food in Toronto as a mechanism for shortening supply chains by utilising a third party certifying body as the link between private caterers at a university and local farmers. She contends that this is a successful case of increasing the scale of local food systems. Yet, in the process of scaling up, the direct linkage between producer and consumer is unavoidably a few steps removed.<sup>54</sup> While scaling up localisation presents difficulties for maintaining its benefits, local food systems need to reach a large number of consumers in order to challenge the industrial food system.

In both these cases it is possible to generalise that large-scale more readily corresponds to an industrial, capitalist framework and small-scale to a food sovereignty framework. However, as Iles and Montenegro argue, 'One cannot adopt a fixed, small-scale approach to confront such a flexible, 'many-headed beast' as capitalist agriculture',<sup>55</sup> which is demonstrated by the complexity of attempting to achieve global, system-wide change through small-scale agriculture.

Figure 1 presents a three-dimensional way to visualise the complexity of differentiating local food systems.<sup>56</sup> The food sovereignty framework ideal type is small-scale, agroecological, peasant production. However, most local food system initiatives have characteristics that are situated somewhere along the three axes of scale, character and method. Farmers markets may rely on relatively small-scale peasant production from farms using nitrogen fertilisers or other inputs, thereby fitting somewhere in the 'small-scale, peasant, conventional' box on the diagram. Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives may use agroecological methods on small-scale farms but hire wage labourers in the busy

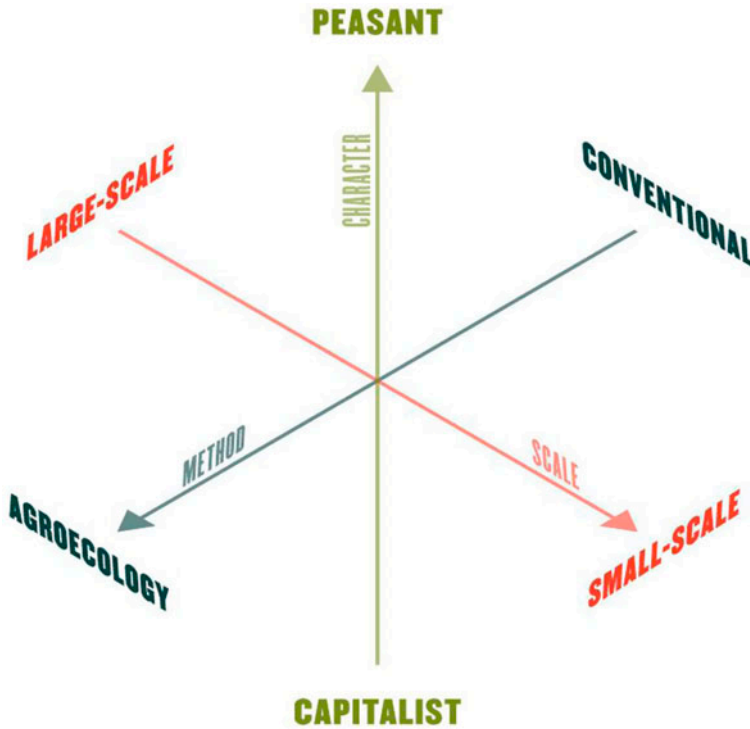


Figure 1. Differentiating local food systems.  
 Source: Author's own diagram; graphic design: Aylwin Lo.

season, and therefore could be placed in the 'small-scale, agroecological, capitalist' box. Public procurement initiatives may require certified organic food but not specify the scale of production, etcetera. Attempts to differentiate various forms of local can benefit from these explorations of scale, method and character, although they do not lead to a convenient and simple binary between the two models. Rather, what emerges is a gradient where, in practice, local food initiatives may fall closer to one model than the other, may demonstrate seemingly contradictory characteristics, or may move between the categories over time. In this way, localisation is not automatically synonymous with food sovereignty.

### **Food sovereignty deals with distance through localisation**

How does food sovereignty, and in particular its focus on local food systems, address the geographical and sectoral distances in the global industrial food system? In the context of a corporate food regime arranged around market principles arbitrated by international institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO), and favouring industrial agriculture and corporate supply chains, food sovereignty appears as both a contradiction and a proposal for reorienting food and agriculture. The location of food sovereignty as a counter-movement to the corporate food regime and its particular logic of capital accumulation is

mediated by the nature of TAMs, as illustrated above. Therefore, it is worthwhile analysing the techniques and effectiveness of food sovereignty movements and actors and their attendant local food system strategies to counteract the distinct forms of distance outlined below, as the ability of food sovereignty initiatives to respond to the global industrial food system in a concrete, systematic way is uncertain. Moore's claim of a commodification tipping point beyond which production systems can only reproduce themselves by becoming further entrenched in capitalist processes looms large.<sup>57</sup>

### *Production and consumption*

Perhaps the most obvious form of distance in the global industrial food system is the geographic or physical distance between where food is produced and where it is consumed. By looking at how food regimes have reshaped the relations between commodities, production methods and wider processes of capitalist development, it becomes clear that the industrial food system perpetuates distance between production and consumption and between producers and consumers. Distance between producers and consumers is created when consumers are detached from those who produce their food and from the processes involved in production and processing, as the metabolic rift suggests. This divide is produced, in part, by the commodification of food, which 'creates an abstract and disembodied notion of food' through standardisation, processing and global distribution.<sup>58</sup> Transforming food into a commodity is necessary for the functioning of the industrial food system, as disembedding food from its social, cultural, geographic and ecological aspects allows food to be vastly exchangeable and severely altered from its original state.<sup>59</sup> Commodification of food and the processes that have enabled it conceal the producers (and the production processes, maintains Campbell)<sup>60</sup> from consumers. Friedmann argues that 'the dominant tendency is towards distance and durability, the suppression of particularities of time and place in both agriculture and diets. More rapidly and deeply than before, transnational agrifood capitals disconnect production from consumption and relink them through buying and selling'.<sup>61</sup>

Locality and seasonality are cited as responses to features of geographical distancing in the industrial food system and, in this way, localisation is proposed as an oppositional force to distance and durability.<sup>62</sup> Local food movements tackle the distance between producers and consumers through direct marketing and the social re-embedding of food systems. Hinrichs asks difficult questions about who benefits in these local food transactions, however, and warns that social embeddedness is often taken for granted and generalised, when it should be assessed more vigorously.<sup>63</sup> Local food movements may heighten distancing through their 'missionary impulses', according to Guthman's scathing critique of local food system practices in the USA as racially marginalising and exclusionary.<sup>64</sup> Allen and Wilson suggest that many local food initiatives may reinforce existing inequalities of race and class rather than challenging them, because of the focus on consumer choice that ignores historically constructed inequalities. They posit that food sovereignty and other initiatives centred in the global South are more attuned to the importance of dealing with inequality.<sup>65</sup> In contrast, Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck characterise the food justice movements as

more concerned with marginalised people and their access to food and question the notion that they are predominantly made up of elites. They portray the food sovereignty movement as more concerned with structural transformation and redistribution of productive resources, often with a class lens, although this is not always clear.<sup>66</sup> Local food systems based in food sovereignty reduce the distance between production and consumption but this holds true for virtually any type of local food system. The question that remains is how much consumption, of what kinds of food, and by whom can be captured by local food systems? In many ways food sovereignty is more narrowly focused on the outcomes for producers than consumers, although the framework actively promotes the right to food (connected to its de-commodification) and advocates space for marginalised communities to reclaim their own food systems.

### *Distant markets*

By distancing production from consumption it is inevitable that agricultural products will often be sold in a place far away from where they were grown, necessitating a chain of intermediaries and market relations with ‘innumerable points for the extraction of value and surplus value’.<sup>67</sup> The globalisation of markets also translates into an abstraction whereby the market becomes an entity in itself rather than a space of transaction governed by the buyer and the seller. ‘Financialization promotes a new kind of distancing by encouraging a greater abstraction of agricultural commodities from their physical form’, states Clapp.<sup>68</sup> Edelman contends that the move from market, understood as a specific place, to market, understood as a metaphor or abstract space, required distancing the economy from society and hiding the actors and institutions that shape economic transactions.<sup>69</sup> Following Harvey’s conception of the material embeddedness of social processes, the intangible global agricultural commodities market, though complex, is still dealing in material products that have been grown in a particular place and will be consumed in a particular place.<sup>70</sup> The consequences of this abstract market are also embedded in the material world; however, increasing financialisation of agriculture has rendered cause and effect more opaque and therefore more challenging to resist.<sup>71</sup>

The food sovereignty framework does not preclude trade, although it promotes the removal of corporate control, free trade agreements and the flooding of domestic markets with below-cost of production food from global circuits of trade, and calls for agriculture to be taken out of the purview of the WTO.<sup>72</sup> The challenge for its proponents is that this dominant global paradigm still exists and implementation of food sovereignty occurs within the current global context even as it seeks to change it. Food sovereignty counters the abstraction of markets by pursuing primarily domestic and local markets and by seeking to ground market relations, put food producers at the centre and nutritional needs ahead of the market.<sup>73</sup> Local, direct marketing strategies do not automatically encompass these values, however. For example, farmers’ markets have been critiqued by Hinrichs as recreating commodity relations, despite higher levels of social embeddedness than with conventional markets. Food box programmes and CSAs (where customers buy in to the risks of the farm at the beginning of the growing season and in return receive fresh produce throughout the harvest)<sup>74</sup>

are more likely to break down the commodity relations of conventional markets and create ‘an alternative to the market’<sup>75</sup>, but this largely Northern model reaches very few consumers. Burnett and Murphy argue that the food sovereignty position on trade is too vague, given that it is still vital for peasant livelihoods and urban food security and that it could be shaped by food sovereignty discourse.<sup>76</sup> This raises the question: to what extent can local, direct marketing strategies eschew the imperatives of capitalist market relations and create an alternative set of concrete market relationships articulating food sovereignty?

### *Peasants from their land*

The dispossession of peasants from their land and the migration and displacement that results constitutes a third way of viewing geographical distance. Araghi argues that enclosure, privatisation and dispossession are defining features of capitalism, not only in its infancy but also as a continuous operational logic.<sup>77</sup> While it is important to note that it does not occur at every site of accumulation, Harvey states that dispossession is ‘a necessary condition for capitalism’s survival’.<sup>78</sup> Dispossession not only occurs to those caught struggling against the imposition of cheap imports flooding their national and local markets, it also happens to those who engage and participate in the same industrial food system that is eventually responsible for their dispossession. The dispossessed may be ‘adversely incorporated’ into the global food system, where they are marginalised and exploited,<sup>79</sup> for example as migrant labourers on highly industrialised, single commodity-driven farms or as contract farmers integrated into corporate production systems. Participation is often forced by the search for higher yields to offset low prices or the consolidation of processors who prefer to contract production on their terms or by the difficulty of unhooking from the industrial system once you are connected to it through inputs and other means. In Canada farm debt increased two and a half times between 1988 and 2007 and more than 10% of farms disappeared between 2006 and 2011, despite Canadian farmers engaging wholeheartedly in the industrial food system – Canadian agri-food exports tripled between 1988, when Canada signed the first free trade agreement with the USA, and 2007.<sup>80</sup>

To increase resilience against processes of dispossession, food sovereignty claims local control over food systems. The process of localising food systems has a more tenuous connection to peasants who are already dispossessed, however. Dispossession and the resulting displacement or adverse incorporation weakens peasant organisations, reducing their representative authority and their ability to control local food systems provisioning nearby urban centres. This is illustrated by Edelman’s analysis of the rise and fall of Central America’s transnational peasant alliance, which struggled to maintain its unity and strength in a context of deteriorating opportunities for small-scale peasants, increasing out-migration and other significant changes in the countryside. ‘Migration frequently undermines the capacity for political action’, he contends.<sup>81</sup> Borras et al reference a ‘persistent and troubling divide’ between escalating migration and the lack of representation and focus on migrant labourers by LVC and other TAMs.<sup>82</sup> While LVC does claim migration and rural workers as one of its core issue clusters, some of the difficulty may be attributed to the different class positions of small-scale farmers and farmworkers, as Bernstein asserts.<sup>83</sup>

***Rural and urban***

Definitions of rural and urban may be fluid, as rural people migrate to cities to find work and urban people move into rural areas in search of affordable housing or different lifestyles. Rigid definitions also negate the peri-urban and small town spaces between farm and metropolis and the flows of goods, services and people that exist between them.<sup>84</sup> Yet rural communities dependent on agriculture face unique challenges stemming from economic uncertainty, out-migration, urbanisation and the loss or underdevelopment of vital services. Rural and urban distancing is linked to historical and contemporary arguments about prioritising industry (primarily urban) over agriculture (rural), or vice versa, as a development strategy. Kay suggests that, to bridge the rural–urban divide, development strategies need to focus on synergies and interactions between the two sectors rather than extracting surplus from one to fuel the other.<sup>85</sup>

Bernstein asks perhaps the most critical question of food sovereignty and local food systems related to shrinking the distance between rural and urban: ‘how plausible are the claims of agrarian “counter-movements” and their champions that a return to “low-input” small-scale family farming [...] can feed a world population so many times larger, and so much more urban, than the time when “peasants” were the principal producers of the world’s food?’<sup>86</sup> According to the United Nations, the majority of the world’s population now lives in urban areas and the number is expected to climb 2.6 billion people by 2050, which represents the entire increase in world population until then plus the migration of 0.3 billion rural inhabitants to urban areas.<sup>87</sup> In this context the question of how local food systems will feed cities becomes especially relevant. Food sovereignty proponents argue that peasant agricultural systems still produce the majority of the world’s food (although this is contested) and that agroecological peasant production is more productive and more capable of adapting to and mitigating climate change than the industrial model. Therefore, food systems built around food sovereignty are more capable of dealing with both hunger and urbanisation.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the question of feeding large urban centres has not been dealt with systemically. Rosset et al’s Cuban case study illustrates that scaling up the farmer-to-farmer agroecology methodology still poses significant challenges, particularly in the face of structural barriers.<sup>89</sup> Urban agriculture, a facet of local food systems that has been largely unexplored by the food sovereignty movement, has recently gained attention as part of the answer to bridging this gap. The September 2012 Nyéléni Newsletter stated that food sovereignty had an urban dimension and listed urban and peri-urban agriculture as a food sovereignty strategy.<sup>90</sup>

***Agriculture and nature***

The separation of agriculture from natural processes is the basis of the metabolic rift, described above.<sup>91</sup> In the first food regime agricultural industrialisation was characterised by commercial commodity production, increased mechanisation, privatisation of land and the expansion of ‘ecological exploitation’ outside Europe.<sup>92</sup> During the second food regime synthetic chemicals and fertilisers were incorporated to increase production and to counter the effects of nutrient-deficient soils. The current food regime follows the same logic of expansion,

industrialisation and separation of food systems from their ecological base. Green Revolution technologies are intensely promoted in agricultural systems in the global South. The use of fossil fuels, new technologies such as genetically modified seeds, and the intensification of livestock production – linked to what Weis terms ‘an expanding ecological hoofprint’,<sup>93</sup> constitute a spiral that reinforces itself, requiring more and more investment in industrial methods to maintain production increases and perpetual accumulation. According to van der Ploeg, ‘instead of being built on ecological capital, farming has become dependent upon industrial and financial capital’.<sup>94</sup> Agriculture has come loose from its ecological foundations in a process of constant and chronic distancing.

Harvey’s explanation of how capital accumulation innately seeks to speed up production, distribution and consumption to reduce the costs associated with distance is relevant to Moore’s position that capitalism develops through the relations between nature and society.<sup>95</sup> Moore provides a list of examples, such as accelerating the time it takes to grow chickens and speeding up milk production in cows through the use of hormones.<sup>96</sup> This endeavour to overcome space and time is reliant on the type of capital that itself is delinked from materiality. While the limitations of distance are tackled in this logic, in another sense the distance between agriculture and natural systems is aggravated. By accepting Moore’s framing of nature–society relations and the premise that nature is also acting on capitalism, it is still possible to assert that the logic of capital accumulation within this relationship has fundamentally altered the link between agriculture and nature.

While local food systems based in food sovereignty are not the only local food efforts that take ecological questions into consideration, food sovereignty proposes a major shift in nature–society relations and a step toward mitigating the metabolic rift. McMichael maintains that food sovereignty challenges the ecological and social impacts of the industrial model and ‘engages modern science and technology’ in new ways.<sup>97</sup> According to Schneider and McMichael, metabolic rift theorising often excludes taking into account the knowledges of local places and agricultural methods that were and are lost as the rift widens.<sup>98</sup> In contrast, Altieri and Nicholls offer a number of examples of contemporary agroecology in Latin America integrating ancient techniques, demonstrating that agroecological methods are intrinsically localised to each specific region and natural environment; they seek to bridge the metabolic rift understood as a break with ecosystems and with the reproduction of knowledges.<sup>99</sup> The food sovereignty model based on agroecological production methods has a different relationship to nature than does its industrial counterpart promoting biodiversity and seed-saving, low emission agriculture and shortened supply chains. LVC’s most active, grounded local food system work is through agroecology training.

## Conclusion

This paper represents a preliminary attempt to dissect the role of local food systems within the food sovereignty framework and analyse how far they go in challenging the current model of industrial agriculture. Although the initial findings illustrate that not all local food systems are manifestations of food sovereignty or even operate as alternatives to the corporate food regime, neither can



they be unequivocally categorised as part of the capitalist industrial model. In practice most local food initiatives fall somewhere in between the two archetypes. Food sovereignty provides an alternative, both politically and practically, but its demands are mediated both through the nature of the capitalist system and corporate food regime in which it exists and by the dynamics intrinsic to transnational agrarian movements that have to reconcile diverse positions and the voices of many actors. These factors mean that, while food sovereignty moves towards addressing the five identified forms of distancing that characterise the global industrial food system, some questions remain unresolved by the current theory and practice of food sovereignty.

While much of the local food system research for this paper was focused on the global North, particularly North America, more research on local food systems in the global South, including specific case studies as well as larger system analyses, is needed. Other dimensions of distance (including complex issues of scale), the role of the state and other institutions as well as work that considers these questions more explicitly within current development discourses are all avenues of future research.

Although local food initiatives do not fully address the distances elaborated above, the discourse and localising practises of food sovereignty constitute a major contribution to uncovering and challenging the complex nexus of issues inherent in the current food regime. Food sovereignty represents a paradigm shift in rural development thinking and, through the TAMs that advocate it, has rightly claimed a space on the international stage and become an important part of the discourse on restructuring the food system.

### Notes on contributor

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### Notes

1. Bernstein, *Class Dynamics*, 79, 82–83; Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, “Food Crisis,” 111; and Borras, “Agrarian Change,” 6–9.
2. The concept of distancing has roots in Kneen, *From Land to Mouth*, 27, who defines it as a separation between human nutrition and food production via industrial processes. Princen, “Distancing,” 116, somewhat similarly defines it as ‘the separation between primary resource extraction decisions and ultimate consumption decisions’.
3. Clapp, “Financialization,” 798.
4. Martinez et al., *Local Food Systems*, 3; and Feagan, “The Place of Food,” 24 (emphasis in the original).
5. Desmarais, *La Via Campesina*, 34.
6. Wittman et al., “The Origins and Potential,” 2.
7. “Declaration of Nyéléni.”
8. Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, “Food Crisis,” 132.
9. Friedmann and McMichael “Agriculture and the State System,” 93–117.
10. McMichael, “A Food Regime Analysis,” 281.
11. McMichael, “A Food Regime Genealogy,” 141–148.
12. *Ibid.*, 146–147.
13. *Ibid.*, 148; and Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, “Food Crisis,” 109–144.
14. The concept of uneven development was first posited by Neil Smith, *Uneven Development*, in 1984.
15. Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 76.

16. Ibid, 78.
17. Ibid, 92.
18. Foster, "Marx's Theory," 383.
19. Ibid; Clark and Foster, "The Dialectic," 127; and Wittman, "Reworking the Metabolic Rift," 808.
20. This position is not new. It appears in Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, and earlier in Smith, *Uneven Development*.
21. Moore, "Transcending the Metabolic Rift," 2.
22. Ibid., 32 (emphasis in the original).
23. "Declaration of Nyéléni"; and *Nyéleni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty Synthesis Report*.
24. Patel, "Grassroots Voices."
25. Borras et al., "Transnational Agrarian Movements," 186.
26. Ibid., 182–186.
27. Borras, "The Politics of Agrarian Movements," 779, 783.
28. In the past decade LVC has been placing more emphasis on a wider variety of food producers, such as fisherfolk and pastoralists, in addition to peasants. *Nyéleni 2007 Food Forum for Food Sovereignty Synthesis Report*.
29. Ibid., 1.
30. Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 76.
31. Wittman et al., "The Origins," 4–5.
32. Desmarais, *La Via Campesina*, 39; and Patel, "Grassroots Voices," 670–671.
33. Patel, "Grassroots Voices," 670–671.
34. Bernstein, *Class Dynamics*, 25.
35. See Bernstein, "Food Sovereignty," for a contemporary version of this debate.
36. Berry, "The Whole Horse," 42.
37. Bernstein, "Food Sovereignty," 1041.
38. Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 92.
39. Campbell, "Breaking New Ground," 316.
40. Ibid., 318.
41. Friedmann, "Distance and Durability."
42. Guthman, "Raising Organic."
43. Altieri and Nicholls, "Agroecology," 34–36.
44. Altieri and Nicholls, "Scaling up Agroecological Approaches," 476.
45. Rosset et al., "The Campesino-to-Campesino Agroecology Movement," 163.
46. Bernstein, "Food Sovereignty," 1051–1053. Jansen, "The Debate on Food Sovereignty," provides a useful discussion on the productivity debate, particularly the claim that agro-ecology can be productive enough to feed the world.
47. Neumann, "Political Ecology," 405–406.
48. Iles and Montenegro, "Sovereignty at what Scale?," 2.
49. Neumann, "Political Ecology," 404.
50. Bernstein, *Class Dynamics*, 93.
51. Van der Ploeg, "The Food Crisis," 100.
52. Ibid.
53. Scaling up or insertion into chains can also be used to mean more integration of peasants into global markets and input and technology circuits, as is evidenced by the World Bank, *World Development Report 2008*.
54. Friedmann, "Scaling Up," 389.
55. Iles and Montenegro, "Sovereignty at what Scale?," 7.
56. Imagine the diagram as a set of boxes.
57. Moore, "Transcending the Metabolic Rift," 32.
58. Jacobsen, "The Rhetoric of Food," 67.
59. Ibid; and Campbell, "Breaking New Ground," 310.
60. Campbell, "Breaking New Ground," 311.
61. Friedmann, "Distance and Durability," 379.
62. Ibid., 380.
63. Hinrichs, "Embeddedness," 297; and Hinrichs, "The Practice," 36.
64. Guthman, "If They only Knew," 395.
65. Allen and Wilson, "Agrifood Inequalities," 537.
66. Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, "Food Crisis," 115, 131–132.
67. Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 97.
68. Clapp, "Financialisation," 800.
69. Edelman, "Bringing the Moral Economy Back In," 332.
70. Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 78; and Iles and Montenegro, "Sovereignty at what Scale?," 7.
71. Clapp, "Financialization," 801.
72. "Declaration of Nyéléni."
73. Allen and Wilson, "Agrifood Inequalities," 537.

74. Feagan, "Direct Marketing," 161–162.
75. Hinrichs, "Embeddedness," 295 (emphasis in the original).
76. Burnett and Murphy, "What Place for International Trade?"
77. Araghi, "The Invisible Hand," 120.
78. Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 91.
79. Du Toit, "'Social Exclusion'," 1002–1004.
80. Statistics Canada, *2011 Farm*; and NFU, "'Free Trade.'"
81. Edelman, "Transnational Organizing," 249.
82. Borras et al., "Transnational Agrarian Movements," 185.
83. LVC website, accessed May 31, 2014. <http://viacampesina.org/en/>; and Bernstein, *Class Dynamics*.
84. Von Braun, "Rural–Urban Linkages," 1–3; and Kay, "Development Strategies," 122.
85. Kay, "Development Strategies," 115.
86. Bernstein, *Class Dynamics*, 122–123.
87. DESA, *World Urbanization Prospects*, 1.
88. LVC, *Sustainable Peasant and Family Farm Agriculture*; ETC Group, "'Who Will Feed Us?'" ; and LVC, *Small Scale Sustainable Farmers*.
89. Rosset et al., "The Campesino-to-Campesino Agroecology Movement," 185.
90. "Food and Cities."
91. Foster, "Marx's Theory"; Moore, "Transcending the Metabolic Rift"; Clark and Foster, "Ecological Imperialism"; and Wittman, "Reworking the Metabolic Rift."
92. Clark and Foster, "Ecological Imperialism," 312; and Friedmann and McMichael, "Agriculture and the State System," 101.
93. Weis, "The Accelerating Biophysical Contradictions," 317.
94. Van der Ploeg, "The Food Crisis," 100.
95. Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, 100; and Moore, "Transcending the Metabolic Rift."
96. Moore, "Transcending the Metabolic Rift," 14.
97. McMichael, "Peasants make their own History," 505.
98. Schneider and McMichael, "Deepening," 477.
99. Altieri and Nicholls, "Scaling up Agroecological Approaches," 476.

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