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# The Food and Agriculture Sector and the Social and Solidarity Economy

*Judith Hitchman*

*RIPES Intercontinental and Urgenci International Community Supported Agriculture Network*

Bibliographic information

**Judith Hitchman. Forthcoming 2023. The Food and Agriculture Sector and the Social and Solidarity Economy. Edited by Ilcheong Yi, Peter Utting, Jean-Louis Laville, Barbara Sak, Caroline Hossein, Sifa Chiyoge, Cecilia Navarra, Denison Jayasooria, Fernanda Wanderley, Jacques Defourny, and Rocio Nogales-Muriel. *Encyclopedia of the Social and Solidarity Economy*. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited in partnership with United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE).**

Or

**Judith Hitchman. Forthcoming 2023. The Food and Agriculture Sector and the Social and Solidarity Economy. Edited by Ilcheong Yi et al. *Encyclopedia of the Social and Solidarity Economy*. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited in partnership with United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE).**

June 2022

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## Abstract

Industrial agriculture controls the food system with food itself being commodified, making it difficult to implement the human right to food and health. Various aspects of access to land, seeds and water are involved. SSE provides tools such as Community Land Trusts, community seed banks and the fundamental approach of agroecology. Alternative frameworks to the industrial paradigm for production and consumption exist, as do public policies that are generally most easily implemented by local government. Food sovereignty and social movements are the frameworks of counter-power that are pursued by SSE.

## Keywords

industrial agriculture; agroecology; food sovereignty; Community Supported Agriculture; social movements; food sovereignty

## **Introduction and background information: the state of play in food and agriculture today.**

Traditional diets are part of our cultural heritage and therefore linked to food sovereignty (Nyéléni.org 2007). Yet over the last 50 years, food systems have become linked to the global governance of food and agriculture with the commodification of seeds and inputs as well as commercialisation of processed foods. As a consequence, food systems have become increasingly far removed from food sovereignty. This process of removal is due to agriculture being regulated by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), hence food is a commodity rather than a fundamental human right (Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights)(United Nations 1948). This has led to industrial agriculture producing cash crops often for export, dispossession of small-scale local producers (despite the fact that they account for 70% of all farmers and are in fact the ones who feed local markets), land and water-grabbing, and seed patenting. This situation has become considerably aggravated by the signature of an agreement by the World Economic Forum with all UN Agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The nomination of t Qu Dongyu as Director-General in August 2019 also played a role, with the situation becoming exacerbated by the signing of a partnership agreement with CropLife International, the global trade association representing the largest agrochemical, pesticide and seed companies in 2020 (La Via Campesina 2020). Dongyu is pro-private sector and has followed José Graziano Da Silva of Brazil, who strongly supported the social movements, with prior achievements including the introduction of the Zero Fome policy in Brazil under President Lula in 2003.

Global agriculture is worth up to \$2.4 trillion dollars, accounting for an important percentage of the global economy. Food systems far removed from food sovereignty have led to considerable distortion, with countries or regions in which much of the population suffer from hunger often exporting certain crops, while local people have little access to fresh nutritious food. Some key figures include the following (ETC Group 2019):

- a) 20 global corporations control the food chain
- b) The 3 biggest corporations control over 50% of the seeds
- c) 4 corporations control over 99% of the livestock breeding
- d) 10 corporations control 55% of fertilisers
- e) 4 traders control 75% of the grain and soybean market
- f) 11 corporations control 30% of the food processing industry

The results of this are quite dramatic (Nyéléni.org 2007, FAO 2020):

- a) One in ten people in the world is malnourished - hunger is rising
- b) 30% of the global population is overweight or obese
- c) One in five people in the developed world today cannot afford to consume 3 meals a day or to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables
- d) Approximately 15% of the population in developed countries such as the US and many European countries need food support through food stamps and food banks, with this figure rising.

## **1. What is the response of the social and solidarity economy (SSE)?**

In spite of the alarming figures shown above, 70% of the world's food is produced by small-scale family farmers, using less than 25% of the world's agricultural land. This food is essential to territorial and local markets all over the world, which are influenced by various forms of SSE in significant ways. Currently, in most countries, there is an increasing awareness of the need to achieve greater food justice and improve citizens' democratic control over their food systems. Sustainable local food systems lie at the heart of this approach with the following subsystems and typologies:

- a) Local farmers' markets
- b) Allotments
- c) Community gardens
- d) Grow-it-Yourself
- e) Community Supported Agriculture
- f) Local food coops
- g) Local collective producers' shops
- h) Solidarity shops and systems
- i) Farmgate sales

At the heart of these phenomena lies the struggle for access to land, seeds and water as well as the right to food, food justice, and different ways of regaining control over food systems. Agroecology as a holistic, scientific approach to production and consumption, includes, as a strong anchor, both traditional and indigenous environmentally friendly farming and social movement-based links between production and consumption. Agroecology protects and promotes agrobiodiversity. Miguel Altieri, a Chilean born agronomist and former lecturer at the University of California is widely accredited as the leading figure and author on this subject. Agroecology has been adopted by the broader food and agriculture social movements as a response to industrial agriculture. The '10 Elements of Agroecology' was adopted by the FAO Council in December 2019 (FAO 2018). The work was based on the participatory contributions of the Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism Working Group on Agroecology. It is important to note that a circular and solidarity economy is included as one of the 10 elements. This is the result of the two Forums on Agroecology held by the FAO in 2014 and 2018.

The social movements also held the Nyeleni Forum on Agroecology in Mali in March 2015. An extract from the final declaration reads:

- "IV. Build local economies
- Promote local markets for local products.
- Support the development of alternative financial infrastructure, institutions and mechanisms to support both producers and consumers.
- Reshape food markets through new relationships of solidarity between producers and consumers.
- Develop links with the experience of solidarity economy and participatory guarantee systems, when appropriate."

This clearly shows the importance of SSE-based approaches to agroecology.

## **2. The origins of the food sovereignty movement**

La Via Campesina was formally constituted in April 1993 (during a conference held

in Mons, Belgium) only months before the finalisation of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which, for the first time, included agriculture and food in its negotiations. The 46 representatives (women and men) of organisations of peasants, small-scale farmers, Indigenous Peoples and farmworkers from the Americas, Asia, Europe and Africa who met at Mons clearly understood that the GATT Final Act, along with the creation of the WTO, represented a profound shift away from more controlled national economies to an almost exclusively market-driven global economy. They also clearly understood that the further entrenchment of neoliberalism would spur national governments to continue to dismantle the agrarian structures and programs that peasants and farmers had won after years of struggle – these very structures and programs that helped ensure the viability of small-scale farming, promote the production for domestic consumption and contribute to national food security. The leaders of the conference were quick to identify the threat which farming families in the North and South faced: their livelihoods, their way of life, and indeed, their very mode of existence were all at stake”(Aurélie Desmarais and Nicholson 2013).

### **3. Legislative frameworks**

In response, several countries have included food sovereignty and the right to food in their constitution, as well as a legal framework for solidarity economy. These include Mali, Senegal, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nepal and Costa Rica. And these same countries, as well as many more have legislative frameworks for SSE. It is clear that in order to overcome the damaging industrial food and agricultural system outlined above, food sovereignty and agroecology must include an economic paradigm change. The policy document on ‘Connecting Smallholders to Markets’ (the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) Working Group 2016) is one of the most important policy documents that supports local and territorial markets for small-holder producers and consumers.

### **4. The issue of access to land**

A basic requirement for food production is access to land. Over the last 50 years, much of the traditional agricultural hinterland of cities which provided the city with food has become part of the urban sprawl. The New Urban Agenda clearly mentions the need to preserve agricultural land and recommends the use of Community Land Trusts as a means of preservation from speculation and maintaining traditional agricultural land. Community Land Trusts are important forms of SSE and are widespread around the world. They have proven especially important in many ethnic minority communities inhabiting American cities. They enable them to grow culturally appropriate food in neighbourhoods that were previously highly disadvantaged. According to Terre de Liens, the French Community Land Trust organisation, “They emerged in Europe in the 1970s and have rapidly developed in the past 10 years. Their focus is to facilitate and support access to land for agroecological farmers. They mobilise community support around maintaining local food production and commercialisation, ensuring environmental protection, and fostering the development of organic farming and agroecology. In some cases, they also seek to ensure that farmland is preserved in the face of urban and infrastructural sprawl.”(Nyéléni Europe Food Sovereignty Movement 2020, 115). Today in France, 100 farms are still lost every week due to land concentration and an ageing farming population. Nevertheless, there is an increasing population of young, often new farmers practising solidarity-based farming through collective farms and Community

Supported Agriculture. The most important overarching policy framework is the ‘Voluntary Guidelines for the Governance of Land Tenure’, negotiated by the Civil Society Mechanism and the UN Committee on Food Security and Nutrition in 2012, which was subsequently adopted by the FAO (FAO 2012). It clearly outlines the rights of people to land and governance thereof and is an instrument that can be used to protect and defend land rights around the world.

## **5. Seeds: the heart of life itself**

Ecoagrobiodiversity has been greatly reduced by the control of large corporations. Nevertheless, SSE and community seed-saving of traditional varieties has become an important way of preserving traditional open-pollinated varieties of plants. There is strong resistance by social movements to UPOV (Union for the Protection of New Plant Varieties) and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Small-scale family farmers defend the right to freely save, exchange and replant their seeds. It should also be mentioned that this includes the struggle against Genetically Modified Organisms and so-called “New Genomic techniques”. It has been scientifically proven that traditional, open-pollinated seeds and participatory breeding techniques allow plants to adapt to and resist climate change, with the nutritional value of fruit and vegetables produced using agroecological approaches higher than that produced by industrial agriculture. Open-pollinated varieties are also more resilient to climate change. Community seed-saving is an essential aspect of SSE and genuinely sustainable food systems.

## **6. Water, climate change and agroecology**

Water is an essential element in agriculture (see the entry “Energy, water and waste management sectors and SSE”), and the climate crisis is increasing both droughts and floods. Yet agroecology and agroforestry are powerful tools in preserving food production and overcoming many of the effects of a changing climate. Ensuring that forests and trees are part of the landscape in order to protect against soil erosion, as well as mulching to keep moisture in the soil when growing crops are both important practices within agroecology. Agroecological practises are more labour intensive than industrial farming, however, they do ensure much greater protection against a changing climate. This is essential within an SSE-based approach to food production, as are the social aspects of agroecology.

## **7. Not just agriculture, also fisheries**

Artisanal fisheries face the same issues and threats from industrial fisheries globally as those experienced by small-scale family farms. Ocean acidification, caused by excessive use of chemical fertilisers, the use of high technology to identify shoals of fish that are then targeted by factory ships that process fish at sea, and many other issues are forcing artisanal fishers away from their traditional practices and fishing grounds (Transnational Institute 2022). Practises such as Community Supported Fisheries are now quite widespread in North America and are an effective SSE means of supporting small-scale fishers (Local Catch Network 2022). Direct sales by small scale fishers to local communities is also a widespread practice in many countries.

## **8. How is food distributed and consumed in SSE-based agroecological systems?**

Distribution and consumption cannot be disassociated from production in an agroecological and SSE perspective, but instead, need to be considered in a local to the global framework (Hitchman 2017).

Land use and social inclusion are two aspects that are generally the object of legislation of devolution and are considered by the local government, irrespective of whether there is a national policy framework or not. Some important examples of SSE practice include the use of municipal land to grow food for public canteens (such as schools and hospitals), thus making land and food part of the Commons (see the entry “the Commons and SSE”)

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in SSE practice relating to food in many parts of the world. For instance, the small producers’ movement in Brazil (MPA) has consistently delivered free food baskets of any surplus food to favelas to ensure people have access to healthy fresh food in spite of the loss of salaries. This is clearly an example of community empowerment. Other examples include the way in which Community Supported Agriculture farms in China and in the Basque country carried out weekly home deliveries of produce to all their members in the case of China, and to the vulnerable in the Spanish Basque Country. URGENCI, the Global Community Supported Agriculture Network has written a report on the resilience of these practices during Covid-19 (URGENCI 2021).

Community Supported Agriculture and Local Solidarity Partnerships for Agroecology have developed many different techniques of SSE to ensure social inclusion and fair income for farmers, as well as affordable food for all. These range from local government subsidies of some shares to differentiated costs based on subscribers’ income (within a trust-based system) to farm-based work in order to offset some costs for a limited number of subscribers. Solidarity also exists between consumers and the producers in the event of a shortfall due to illness of farmers or climate events. This principle of shared risks and benefits originated in Japan in the 1970s as the Teikei system, the original version of Community Supported Agriculture.. Community Supported Agriculture networks at the national level are federated by URGENCI. There are currently approximately 3 million families that are members of national and regional networks of URGENCI.

Producers’ local cooperatives, consumer cooperatives and their shops are also part of SSE. They include small farmer’s cooperatives and processing and retail shops, which are now common across the world, particularly within Latin America. They are based on either agroecological practice or Participatory Guarantee System organic certification, another aspect of SSE.

Additionally, it is important to be aware of the corporate capture of SSE initiatives by industrial agribusiness operators, including everything from food boxes to sales of local varieties of fruit and vegetables, and even of agroecology (without the social movement dimension).

### **Conclusion: The importance of social movements**

In the field of food and agriculture, the role played by social movements, starting with La Via Campesina, whose membership is over 250 million, has been significant. Other key social movements cover all recognised UN constituencies and include key players within SSE such as: Indigenous People, herders and pastoralists; fishers; women; youth;

consumers; and the urban poor.. They work together at the global and regional levels to defend human rights and introduce and implement the policy that supports producers and consumers through the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty (IPC) (IPC 2014). The IPC now includes a growing dimension of SSE.

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