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## 13. Sustainability and sustainable communities<sup>1</sup>

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Hundreds of millions of people live in societies that are participating in a growing movement to take control of their environments, creating “Territories of Life” and regions to produce food and strengthen their societies by applying local knowledge systems to implement traditional productive techniques enhanced by agroecology. Indigenous and peasant communities are self-consciously restructuring their organizations and governance structures, taking control of territories they claimed for generations (Barkin and Sánchez, 2020). The Indigenous peoples live in the most biodiverse regions, occupying more than one-quarter of the world’s land area, while small-scale farmers produce about 70% of the food consumed by people around the world (Grain, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

This chapter proposes the need for understanding the significance of these movements and their potential to influence other communities by means of an intensification of local and regional network markets that are also proliferating around the world. The growth of local peri-urban economies and community-supported agricultural systems are important bulwarks for the revolutionary communitarian subjects that are demonstrating the possibility of “life after capitalism”.

### INTRODUCTION

Food sovereignty (FS) is proving to be an effective strategy to promote community solidarity and environmental justice<sup>3</sup> by empowering producers to resist rural development policies proffered by international development organizations and, until recently, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). As presently practised and encouraged around the world, FS is a strategy grounded in the collective actions of producers who organize to promote their own welfare and apply appropriate techniques for cultivating the land and organizing local, regional, and national markets to facilitate the exchanges among the communities. In this chapter, we propose that the organizations presently advocating the implementation of an FS as part of a programme for building sustainable communities are contributing many conceptual and practical lessons that advance our understanding of the significance of social justice for ensuring environmental balance (e.g., Agyeman et al., 2016).

People involved in building new societies are seeking to overcome environmental degradation and the social and economic injustices inherited from their varied oppressive histories. Throughout the world, peoples have been divided against themselves, organized and reorganized to better serve the needs of ruling classes, be they political, economic, or social in their origins. In the most recent period, these divisions are becoming firmly rooted in the capitalist organization of society and the economy, transformed into a global structure that seemingly allows no alternatives, save for small groups of dissidents who can try functioning on the fringes of the planetary system.

This is especially true for peoples in “marginalized groups”, identified by their racial characteristics, ethnic origins, class position, gender, age, or even their geographic location, who are systematically discriminated against, or openly mistreated. “The powers that be” continue to impose structures and ideologies claiming that “there is no alternative”, to quote the well-worn phrase of Margaret Thatcher, as Prime Minister of the UK (Belinski, 2011). Despite this overarching system, communities around the world are no longer satisfied with the minor adjustments that they are allowed to implement in order to develop their own spaces in self-organized production, consumption, and lifestyles for systems of environmental justice.<sup>4</sup>

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF A SYSTEM OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The essentials of a system of environmental justice can be readily identified. At a minimum, they require assuring all members of the society the satisfaction of their (socially defined) basic needs; in today’s world, this requires providing not only for the basic sustenance of the society, but also attending to the institutional requirements that guarantee the ability of all people to participate in the community’s governance, in the conservation and transmission of its culture, and to attend to the requirements to assure their health and other dimensions of their well-being. Of course, in a responsible social system, these elements must be accompanied by a commitment to conserve the ecosystems on which they depend, and, if necessary, the rehabilitation of those that have deteriorated or been damaged by previous generations.

While leaders in most contemporary nation-states would agree on the importance of these prerequisites, their translation into a set of operative mechanisms for social organization continues to be virtually impossible in contemporary society. The progressive advances of inequality worldwide along with the advancing deterioration of the environment accompanied by a heightening climate crisis have tragically and disproportionately affected marginalized groups and the poorer strata of society. These negative impacts are exacerbated by other social phenomena that divide modern societies by ethnic, class, and racial characteristics, creating profound social differences that sometimes lead to violent conflict and almost always contribute to a collective abuse of the environment. As a result, many countries around the world are unable to assure even the basic nutritional needs of their populations.<sup>5</sup> In today’s world, there is no question that there is enough food available globally to feed the population, and yet a considerable proportion is hungry, and an even larger segment is poorly nourished.<sup>6</sup> Social justice, then, is directly related to the institutional nexus in which it is embedded.

In response, many Indigenous and peasant communities around the world are declaring themselves “anti-systemic”, designing social and political processes to challenge the logic of capitalism (Barkin and Sánchez, 2020). Some of these communities are active in international movements confronting today’s social, economic, and environmental crises; their defining characteristic is their relationship to the land. The historical emphasis on the class nature of their struggle (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001) and the political identity of their mobilizations (Alvarez et al., 1998; Esteva, 1999) are inseparable (Bartra and Otero, 2008). Their potential significance may be best illustrated by the fact that they occupy a very significant part of the planet; considering only that part of this population, organized in communities, recent geo-spatial research shows that “indigenous peoples manage or have tenure rights to more than one-quarter of the world’s land surface, and intersects about 40% of all terrestrial protected areas and ecologically intact landscapes” (Garnett et al., 2018; Fa et al., 2020). By embracing

innovative approaches to social (re)organization, production, and environmental management, they offer practical solutions that other social groups in both urban and rural areas can learn from (Fernández-Llamazares et al., 2021).

While forging their own paths towards social progress, they are formulating strategies to improve their lifestyles, control their productive systems, defend their legitimate claims to significant territories, and conserve their natural endowments. These approaches are permitting them to generate surpluses and distribute them for individual and collective benefit, creating a new “social capacity” that is transforming them into “communitarian revolutionary subjects”.

## FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR TRANSFORMING SOCIETY

In the context of our concern for building sustainable societies, FS is a significant social policy concept. It involves assuring not simply the availability of sufficient supplies of nutritious foods but also, and *just as important*, the way in which societies organize themselves to produce their needs or engage in trade with other nearby communities to obtain them. FS, then, encompasses issues related to the way in which food is produced, who produces it, and where it is produced. In the present world, FS is therefore not simply a matter of producing commodities, but it also incorporates an important political goal and a process of social organization to ensure social justice. One of the most articulate expressions of its significance was defined by *La Vía Campesina* in the mid-1990s:

*Food sovereignty* emphasizes ecologically appropriate production, distribution and consumption, social-economic justice and local food systems as ways to tackle hunger and poverty and guarantee sustainable food security for all peoples. It advocates trade and investment that serve the collective aspirations of society. It promotes community control of productive resources, agrarian reform and tenure security for small-scale producers, agroecology, biodiversity, local knowledge, the rights of peasants, women, indigenous peoples and workers, social protection and climate justice.

(Nyéléni, 2013)

FS is a strategy that is central to the possibility of an economic, political, social, and ecological transformation. It is at the heart of the history of many Indigenous and peasant societies of Latin America, peoples whose worldviews (cosmovisions) consist of complex systems of beliefs, values, and traditions firmly rooted in their millenarian traditions. Although not exhaustive, we might include the following characteristics of these beliefs: 1) their vision of a balance in relations between society and nature, where the bond with the natural environment entails responsibility; 2) a communitarian view of property, where the care and use of their ecosystem is determined collectively and usufruct rights do not imply the possibility of private property or sale; 3) community work requires the redefinition of labour, based on non-capitalist values; and, 4) participatory democracy, involving unique structures of governance, responsible involvement, and collective commitment (Huanacuni, 2010).

Although informed by their rich traditions, the communities are not mired in their past. They are engaged in a continuing redefinition of their identities and a renewed understanding of the significance of their cultural heritage under current conditions (Barkin and Lemus, 2016). That is, they are peoples who are transcending their historical heritage to redefine their collective identity, with a pluricultural character, that the community is profoundly aware of, preserving some characteristics that are functional while discarding those that are not of

importance; specifically, the communities decide to enrich their knowledge of the society-nature relationship (Wolf, 1982). The systematization of this knowledge allows them *to transform themselves as a community* (i.e., asserting their collective consciousness), generating models of sustainability and social justice on the margins of the global capitalist system. They are cognizant of the rapid changes brought about by environmental changes and are actively engaged in a search for improvements in their productive systems and experimenting with innovative strategies to attend to the future needs of society; it is remarkable to participate in the collaborative efforts they are engaged in with institutions and experts at the forefront of “sustainability science”.

Guiding this process of moving towards a more resilient society are five principles that we distilled from our collaboration with these communities: 1) autonomy to govern themselves and manage their institutions and territory; 2) solidarity and reciprocity within the community and with other communities involved in similar processes; 3) self-sufficiency, to the degree that it is possible, considering available resources and the ecosystem; 4) productive diversification to provide goods for exchange with other communities to obtain products that cannot be produced locally; and 5) sustainable management of regional resources, which requires collaboration with other communities in the ecosystem (Barkin, 2000).

Complementing these principles for shaping community are six pillars of a strategy for food sovereignty:

1. Focuses on food for the people by: a) placing people’s need for food at the centre of policies; and b) insisting that food is more than just a commodity.
2. Values food providers by: a) supporting sustainable livelihoods; and b) respecting the work of all food providers.
3. Localizes food systems by: a) reducing the distance between suppliers and consumers; b) rejecting dumping and inappropriate food aid; and c) resisting dependence on remote and unaccountable corporations.
4. Places control at a local level by: a) placing control in the hands of local food suppliers; b) recognizing the need to inhabit and share territories; and c) rejecting the privatization of natural resources.
5. Promotes knowledge and skills by: a) building on traditional knowledge; b) using research to support and pass on this knowledge to future generations; and c) rejecting technologies that undermine local food systems.
6. Works with nature by: a) maximizing the contributions of ecosystems; b) improving resilience; and c) rejecting energy-intensive, monocultural, industrialized, and destructive production methods (Nyéléni, 2007).

Taken together, these two operative and ethical frameworks make it clear that the communitarian revolutionary subject is not simply a slogan to describe a utopia to be built in the distant future. Even today, millions of people are actively involved in determining how to shape their societies along these lines. An important recent development is reinforcing their ability to move ahead. On the international scene, a new recognition emerged of the special contributions these peoples can make on the basis of their unique heritages and the obligation that governments have to assure their “prior informed consent” for policies and actions that might affect their institutions or their territories. In 1989, the International Labour Organization codified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (169) which specifies:

Indigenous and tribal peoples shall enjoy the full measure of human rights and fundamental freedoms without hindrance or discrimination. The provisions of the Convention shall be applied without discrimination to male and female members of these peoples.

(Article 3-1)

The peoples concerned shall have the right to decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions and spiritual well-being and the lands they occupy or otherwise use, and to exercise control, to the extent possible, over their own economic, social and cultural development. In addition, they shall participate in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of plans and programmes for national and regional development which may affect them directly.

(Article 7.1)

This was reinforced in the General Assembly of the United Nations with the adoption in 2007 of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that

establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world and it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of indigenous peoples.

These considerations were further extended with the adoption of the 2018 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, eliminating any ambiguity that might arise for peoples whose claim to indigeneity might be in question.

As will be evident in the next section in which we describe some of their activities, the revolutionary subjects are capable of changing their situation and transcending capitalist relations; they are born and reproduced in the community. "The community is an ethical project that has been proposed for a long time and acts as a guide for social transformations" (Villoro, 2003:41–42). The community has fundamental characteristics that give meaning to its construction as collective revolutionary subjects. These include the following: 1) the community formed by individuals who are part of a totality; 2) the community is based on service to advance the common good, a result of the sum of individual contributions in which reciprocity is inherent; 3) the community does not renounce individuality (personal identity) since people find their fulfilment when contributing to the collective (by their own free decision); 4) in the process, it deepens common values respecting plurality and individual values; and 5) the community promotes the growth of social virtues such as solidarity and fraternity, in which a consensual process prevails (Villoro, 2003).

## THE COMMUNITARIAN REVOLUTIONARY SUBJECT: A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR TO FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Throughout the world, many communities are actively engaged in searching for ways to unleash themselves from the binding ties of the global marketplace with its system of discrimination, limited opportunities, and wanton environmental destruction. Most rely on their strong institutions and cohesiveness to define strategies and seek alliances that allow them to move forward with innovative strategies to assure their material well-being, attend to their basic social needs for educating themselves and providing healthcare for the young and the elderly, and conserve their natural heritage and rehabilitate those parts that have been degraded in the past.

In many cases, the implementation of strategies to advance towards FS is among the first priorities. FS clearly prioritizes environmental justice. With the producers directly involved in design and management, they must grapple with the diversity and availability of foodstuffs and the care of their ecosystems. Firmly anchored in the community, it makes the defence of its territorial limits paramount and requires the collective action of the producers. To ensure adequate supplies, FS stimulates innovation, a collective process of learning and decision-making and intergenerational transmission of knowledge; because of an expanding international interest and community network, the exchange of knowledge about techniques, inputs, and products has contributed to scaling up this dynamic. Agroecology is becoming a significant framework for experimentation and mutual assistance, encouraging the proliferation of peasant-to-peasant schools and social events to promote the exchange of seeds and knowledge of new techniques, inputs, markets, and even consumption and food preparation (Anderson et al., 2020; Val et al., 2019; Rosset et al., 2019).

Perhaps the most significant indicator of the prevalence of FS as an ongoing commitment of peoples around the world to strengthen their communities and improve their productive capabilities is that small-scale farmers, peasants, and Indigenous peoples continue to be the principal purveyors of food to the world's population (Grain, 2014). A major investigation of the global food system reveals the extraordinary and perhaps surprising role that these "little" producers play in spite of discriminatory systems created by national and international forces trying to undermine their contributions; the report offers insights about their commitment to food production and the pressures they presently face.

The study documents the extraordinary perseverance of small-scale producers. Using official statistics from countries around the world and the database of the FAO, it quotes the conclusion of the Special United Nations Rapporteur on the Right to Food that "small farmers produce up to 80% of the food in the non-industrialized countries" and then goes on to observe:

global food production could be doubled within a decade if the right policies towards small farmers and traditional farming were implemented. Reviewing the currently available scientific research, he shows that agroecological initiatives by small farmers themselves have already produced an average crop yield increase of 80% in 57 developing countries, with an average increase of 116% among all African initiatives assessed.

(de Schutter, 2011a, b)

An analysis of the prevailing state of global food production clearly reveals that more than 70% of food for human consumption is produced by small-scale producers for their own use or for trading in local and regional markets (Grain, 2014). The data reveal that, unfortunately, because of large-scale international investments and speculation in land in the Global South, there is growing pressure for land to be sold or expropriated by governments in areas where traditional farming communities are prevalent; as a result of this process and of population growth, there is a tendency for small farms to be getting even smaller. At present, these units occupy less than one-quarter of the world's farmland while big farms are getting even bigger.

In spite of these dynamics, available information clearly shows that small farms are more productive than larger units. Much of the case study material that is now proliferating in the academic literature and the specialized press is documenting the "surprising" result that innovative experiments and systematic exchange of information among farming communities have flourished in recent years as a result of the consolidation of formal and informal community

networks.<sup>7</sup> These developments offer palpable evidence of the significance of the collective approaches in confronting social challenges and the importance of international networks like La Vía Campesina, the Indigenous Community and Conservation Consortium, and Urgenci: The Community Supported Agriculture Network in providing political and organizational support for local initiatives around the world.

Another important finding of the study is the significant role of women in food production in small-scale farming throughout the world (Grain, 2014). This is particularly relevant for our analysis because it highlights the centrality of community structures in the organization of production. Women play an important role in cementing the institutional foundations for small-scale farming; unfortunately, their role is often not appreciated or even denigrated because their contributions are not “monetized”. Detailed local studies of food systems reveal that between 60 and 80% of food in non-industrialized countries is produced by women. As the analysts pointed out: “There is very little data on the evolution of the contribution of women to agriculture, but their share would likely be growing, since migration is resulting in mostly women and girls picking up the workload of those who leave” (Grain, 2014:14–15).

These findings about the contributions of community organizations to food sovereignty can be complemented by a number of outstanding examples of national policy initiatives that are contributing to joining efforts to stimulate food production with programmes to alleviate hunger. In the Global South, perhaps the most well-known is the “Zero Hunger” programme of the Workers’ Party, implemented in Brazil during the presidency of Luis Ignacio da Silva and continued throughout the following regime, only to be abandoned with the election of Jair Bolsonaro (Ansell, 2015; Morton, 2015). The programme was especially notable as it targeted local community groups who were empowered to supply the federal anti-poverty programme as well as providing the ingredients for the local school breakfast and lunch programmes, breaking the traditional ties between the international industrialized food corporations and the national social welfare agenda. A more ambitious initiative has been implemented in Cuba for many years, in spite of the stringent austerity measures imposed by the US economic blockade, stimulating local food production and assuring supplies for social programmes (Altieri and Funes, 2012; Wilson, 2013). In China, there are also important movements stimulating food sovereignty activities initiated by peasant organizations often collaborating with local governments in response to unfavourable economic developments and a grassroots realization of their importance for creating new possibilities for autonomous strategies to improve local well-being (van der Ploeg and Ye, 2018; Si and Scott, 2016; Wen et al., 2012).

## THE COMMUNITARIAN REVOLUTIONARY SUBJECT: BUILDING POST-CAPITALIST SOCIETIES

Historically, many analysts characterized Latin American Indigenous movements during the 500 years from colonization to the establishment of the neoliberal system as “resistance”. The perseverance of hundreds of cultures, along with their languages and cosmovisions (belief systems) is transcending this *culture of resistance*. Today, communities throughout the region are proposing their own forms of organization, societies that are governing themselves and organizing on the margins of the national institutions that have mistreated them for so long. Their proposals involve a new perspective of emancipation and new productive structures to attend to their own social, material, and cultural needs. Their struggles are legitimating the

rights of peoples to their ancestral territories, in the face of policies to appropriate and transform nature to accelerate the expansion of the global economy, the accumulation of capital, and global inequality. The distribution of the benefits of the re-appropriation of nature and technology is not the issue; rather the “r-existence” of these traditional populations aims to consolidate renewed social formations, new ways to organize societies, and respect for nature (Porto and Leff, 2015). No longer content to denounce their mistreatment, they are seeking to improve their quality of life, grounded in their cultural identities, recuperating their languages and ancestral knowledge, while not renouncing the right to incorporate the latest advances in science, technology, and culture, to the extent that they consider them to enrich their heritage. This “r-existence” involves recuperating ancestral knowledge and/or reinventing it while integrating scientific knowledge and new ways of solving problems, in order to remain in their territories and assure social and ecological balance (Ejercito Zapatista, 2015; Beaucage, 2012; Rodríguez-Wallenius, 2010). As we shall see, their efforts are not only essential for their own survival but also essential for the well-being of humanity and the planet.

The deliberate struggle to transcend the obstacles of the global economy is not a new phenomenon of the 21st century. In early books on peasant efforts to move beyond these limits, Scott (1985, 1992) analysed the revolutionary potential of “everyday struggles” and hidden transcripts, while others have insisted on the potential of political negotiation and reconciliation in opening spaces for their alternative social projects (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2007). What we are observing today are actions involving important social transformations in defined contexts, including fundamental changes in the dynamics of social and productive structures, political life, and ecological conservation; these often involve repudiating the efforts of private capital and the state to limit their autonomy or ability to manage their territories.

In today’s Latin America, there is a great deal of energy dedicated to building new societies. In contrast to past epochs, communities throughout the region are no longer satisfied with trying to accommodate their demands to the institutional limits established by the nation-states within which they live. They no longer consider themselves to be isolated social groups struggling against corporate or state-sponsored initiatives to reorganize their territories or deny them rights to govern themselves according to their renewed understandings of their cultural heritages. Today, they enjoy the satisfaction that there is considerable institutional support from the wider societies to implement their demands for autonomy and manage their territories to repair the metabolic rifts they inherited (Wittman, 2009; Foster et al., 2010) and shape new social metabolisms consistent with the possibilities of their environment. A review of these initiatives to shape new societies reveals a wide variety of approaches to communal organization and collective production, from ambitious proposals to unite hundreds of thousands of people in a large territory to modest proposals to strengthen community organization among a relatively small but tightly knit group of people.

One of the oldest of these experiences dates back to 1977 in Mexico when a group of Indigenous peoples in the mountainous region south of the capital city began a collective organization to collaborate in a wide variety of agricultural activities. The “Tosepan Titataniske” ([www.tosepan.com](http://www.tosepan.com)), as they call themselves, evolved into a complex organization of nine cooperatives and a social dynamic that allowed them to negotiate with local and state governments, developing a sophisticated programme to protect their territory while stimulating gainful activities that created attractive opportunities for its members; a notable advance during this period was their ability to overcome historical problems of discrimination against women who were empowered by their own creative initiatives. Today, the collective brings

together more than 38,000 families who are successfully managing a wide variety of agricultural, industrial, and service cooperatives (including an important financial arm, healthcare, and housing) that allows them to negotiate effectively with outsiders interested in trying to control their resources (Rojas Herrera and Méndez Rojas, 2020). Recently, they undertook an ambitious reflection of their past history with a view to systematizing a 40-year plan for their future (Boege and Fernández, 2017).

The best-known of the groups in Mexico deliberately engaged in forging a new society is the Zapatista community in Chiapas. Its roots date back to the clandestine organization in the mountainous regions, prior to its spectacular “eruption” in eight urban areas on 1 January 1994, the day the new North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect. Shouting “BASTA” (Enough!) from the ramparts of the institutional structures of local and federal governments, the Indigenous peoples of Mayan descent incited a profound discussion of the possibilities for modern nation-states to responsibly attend to their specific cultural, material, social, and environmental demands.

More than a quarter-century later, perhaps as many as 500,000 people are organized in hundreds of communities over a vast territory, administered by democratically elected leaders in 16 self-governing local “caracoles” as well as 27 autonomous “counties”. They are demonstrating their “staying power”, providing for their own needs and constructing a social organization that is demonstrating its ability to care for the people and the environment while also confronting the ongoing “low-intensity” attacks that many communities are facing from para-military groups with the tacit acquiescence of local and national authorities, including the military (Delgado Wise and Martínez Olivares, 2017; Esteva, 2021).

The Zapatistas continue to spark enthusiasm and support in many parts of Mexico and globally. Their rigorous insistence on building community from the grassroots and unwavering adherence to strengthening the autonomous structures have proven effective in resisting the ongoing attempts to co-opt the movement by politicians trying to tread a more cautious path. Their decision to send a delegation to Europe in mid-2021 to solidify relations with sympathetic groups engaged in their own processes of social (re)construction and bring back experiences is another indication of the maturity and political acumen the group has displayed from its very beginning (Ross, 2019; Esteva, 2021; Barbosa, 2021).

The recent histories of the collective revolutionary subjects clearly demonstrate their capacity to effect social change and challenge the power structures of the societies within which these peoples are immersed. But they are not limited to these societies; the new ways of thinking about (re)building society are firmly rooted in the millenarian traditions of peoples everywhere. The revolutionary thought of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, enshrined in his writings on “*swaraj*”, emphasized the importance of self-government with the idea of assuring the collective well-being of all members of the community. Similarly, the African concept of “*ubuntu*” traces its origins to traditional concepts of collective responsibility to assure the cohesiveness of society and care for all of its members: “humanity comes from being a member of a tribe” (Gade, 2012). Although controversial within the region, the Andean concept of “*Sumak Kawsay*”, which roughly translates as “living well” or “*buen vivir*” in Spanish, also conveys the idea of a collective commitment to organizing society and relations among members to promote harmony and live within the physical limits of the region in which the community is located (Huanacuni, 2010). In Mexico, the concept of “*comunalidad*”, firmly rooted in the heritage of Indigenous peoples in the state of Oaxaca, expresses a worldview that incorporates principles of reciprocity, mutual aid, and support networks to strengthen social

cohesion and community benefit (Martínez Luna, 2010; Morosin, 2020). In this context, we can speak of “collective attitudes” as: “Dispositions common to the members of a group, (...), are expressed in beliefs about society according to preferences, promoting consistent behaviours that... involve adherence to certain values and rejection of some situations” (Villoro, 2003:278, our translation).

These philosophical formulations reflect the social capacity of the groups to continually strengthen and deepen their organizations. This social capacity is forged from the intangible resources that communities possess and use for consensual actions to establish strategies to consolidate their well-being (Barkin et al., 2011). This social capacity allows the community to mobilize its resources to achieve collectively established goals rather than those defined by the market. As it creates new activities for its collective benefit, the group discovers that it can generate an “economic surplus”, material and social resources, including intangibles such as knowledge, skills, voluntary labour, and shared tools, that it can use to improve its quality of life. This, in turn, further enriches the community’s social capacity, deepening the collective commitment to deepen collaboration.

Two of the most notable activities that illustrate this process among Indigenous communities in Mexico are related to forest and water resources. After a prolonged struggle to wrest control of the exploitation of woodlands from private companies that had seized control following the Mexican Revolution, Indigenous communities in many parts of the country undertook a process of developing their own management schemes, beginning with outside assistance while also immediately sending some of their younger members for training at the nation’s technical institutes. The result was that within a short time frame, a dramatic increase in biodiversity of the forest areas was evident and some of the communities were able to finance their own installations for processing the timber and making wood products; a sceptical international community revised its own evaluations of the possibilities of local forest curation, applying the Mexican experience to its own recipes for collaborative local forest development in many other countries (Barkin and Fuente, 2013; Stevens et al., 2014; Bray, 2020).

Water management is a more intractable problem. Although “ownership” of water resources in Mexico is vested in the nation, from the earliest days following the end of the revolutionary struggle, disputes over control of these resources generally were resolved to the advantage of the privileged groups (Barkin, 1976). Changes in this process have come slowly, but there are a number of exciting examples of local groups organizing to inform themselves and implement innovative and ambitious projects to recuperate valuable water sources that were causing environmental damage by improving the landscape to reduce erosion, capture runoff, and generate new cultivable areas. The “Water Forever” project is an outstanding example of how a coordinated multidimensional resource management programme can stimulate community cohesiveness and well-being. Other examples of water groups taking direct action to assure the best use of water, develop systems for recycling, and consolidate community solidarity are proving quite viable (Barkin, 2001). But perhaps the most significant development in our experience is the realization that the communities can improve the way in which nature itself manages water, improving landscape conditions in areas where nature stores water and assuring the health of the ecosystems throughout the watershed; our collaboration with communities involves their direct action to improve the system while also evaluating the ways in which the community uses its available water, promoting community solidarity (Fuente et al., 2019).

## FOOD SECURITY: AN ALTERNATIVE TO FOOD SOVEREIGNTY?

Important participants in the international discussion of food policy have argued that food sovereignty is not a realistic approach to attend to the needs of a growing population, projected to reach as much as 10 billion by the mid-21st century. Their position is based on the presumption that small-scale farmers, organized in peasant and Indigenous communities or in family units, are not capable of raising their productivity to meet the burgeoning global needs. Instead, they have advocated for a policy of food security; for a considerable period, this position dominated discussions in the annual meetings of the FAO. In the process, the FAO offered a “useful working definition”:

*Food security* exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Household food security is the application of this concept to the family level, with individuals within households as the focus of concern.

(FAO et al., 2001, Ch. 2, p. 1)


This definition is useful in that it emphasizes a central concern: the availability of food to satisfy human needs, regardless of how it is procured. This is important because the issue is directly related to the question of the liberalization of world trade and international capital markets as well as the powerful influence of the principal corporate interests involved in global trade in grains (Morgan, 1979).

The principal advocates of food security are agroindustrial and practitioners in the scientific community involved in advancing further developments of the green revolution and later approaches to increasing food production by developing new technologies for increasing productivity. Their concerns, as advanced in the international debates in which they are often obliged to participate, is that to attend to the world’s food requirements, the only possibility is the implementation of specialized large-scale monocropping systems that use the most advanced products of biotechnology, combined with the agrochemicals developed to protect the crops against plagues and provide the required nutrients. La Via Campesina characterized the differences between this position and their support of FS:

Food sovereignty is different from food security in both approach and politics. Food security does not distinguish where food comes from, or the conditions under which it is produced and distributed. National food security targets are often met by sourcing food produced under environmentally destructive and exploitative conditions, and supported by subsidies and policies that destroy local food producers but benefit agribusiness corporations. Food sovereignty emphasizes ecologically appropriate production, distribution and consumption, social-economic justice and local food systems as ways to tackle hunger and poverty and guarantee sustainable food security for all peoples. It advocates trade and investment that serve the collective aspirations of society. It promotes community control of productive resources, agrarian reform and tenure security for small-scale producers, agro-ecology, biodiversity, local knowledge, the rights of peasants, women, indigenous peoples and workers, social protection and climate justice.

(Nyéléni, 2013)

The concept of food security dates back to the post-World War 1 period, “linked to the concept of national security and to the capacity of each country to produce its own food so that it would not be vulnerable to possible politically- or militarily-related sieges, embargos or boycotts”

 References  
 FAO et al. 2001;  
 FAO et al., 2020'  
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 reference citations.

(Valente, 2002).<sup>8</sup> More recently, however, the debate between the two concepts can be best understood as a “global conflict”, characterized by “fundamental antagonisms” (Schanbacher, 2010:ix), a “conflict between models” of social organization, production, and relationship to the land (Martínez Torres and Rosset, 2010:169–170). Today’s concerns with household and individual welfare have changed the focus from geopolitical matters central to earlier issues of national security to entitlements (Sen, 1981) and well-being (Omawale, 1984).

These conflicts reflect the social and political chasm pervading policy discussions and discussion of how to attend to the pressing problems of human welfare and environmental balance today. On the one hand, there is a powerful group of corporate producers and their allies within the international financial and development organizations that insist on the priority of assuring production; they argue that the problem of delivering the products to target populations is a political issue that must be resolved in other venues. This position contends that production targets can only be achieved by applying the most advanced technologies – biological, chemical, and commercial – to supply people with homogenous merchandise that can be supplied to vastly different cultural and economic groups, stored for long periods of time, and readily transported.

In contrast, as pointed out in this chapter, the advocates of food sovereignty point out that a considerable proportion of the world’s population does not or cannot participate in the globalized markets that depend on complex supply chains. Their arguments are based on a complex analysis of the many dimensions of the role of food in human society and welfare. Perhaps the most significant issues are related to nutrition and environmental health. They contend that a diversity of locally produced foodstuffs is more conducive to the balanced diets that people need than the homogenous diets being proffered by the global food chains. They also argue that the industrial farming technologies employed by suppliers of the inputs for the global food system are disturbing the delicate planetary balance that is the proximate cause of climate change and the appearance of new viruses and other threats to human health.

The confrontation between these two models for the global food system is at the heart of the difficulty that many communities around the world are facing in their attempts to forge their own models of convivial living (Illich, 1973; Barkin, 2019). It is also a reflection of the importance of the material in this *Handbook of Alternatives to Global Development*. The discussion of the institutional nexus presented in the 12 chapters of the first section reflects many of the problems that advocates of FS are facing to promote their approaches in national and international policy fora. The last half of this book offers a window into the “many other possible worlds” that are already under construction, primarily in the Global South, as briefly explored in the last section of this chapter.

## FORGING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

One way to address the “poverty of development theory” (Chapter 12) is to make sustainability and sustainable communities central to development and underdevelopment to forge alternative worlds.

Today’s communitarian revolutionary subjects are actively engaged in a collective worldwide effort to not only show that “Many Other Worlds Are Possible” but that they are already under construction! We started this chapter by observing, following Agyeman, that sustainability is not simply an environmental matter, but that it must be constructed on the foundations

of social justice. However, given the barriers created by global capitalist accumulation, and the legacy of centuries of colonial domination, peoples in the Global South are taking the initiative to hoe many paths towards “Just Sustainabilities” by creating myriad post-capitalist societies.

Food sovereignty is an important building block in this process. Its significance is reflected in the explosive growth of La Via Campesina, the world’s largest social organization. From its foundation in 1993, it has expanded into 83 countries with more than 200 million participants in hundreds of local peasant and Indigenous member groups. It has transformed itself from an upstart organization whose members were struggling to resist the local incursions of industrial agriculture to a powerful voice defending their demands to continue their traditional systems for producing most of the food that humanity consumes. As with all other social endeavours, however, they realized that innovation has always been a significant element in strengthening and preserving tradition. Thus, FS involves an active programme for sharing knowledge about ecological and environmental matters as well as promoting a critical peasant-based model of agroecology in their campaigns to encourage and deepen FS (Rosset et al., 2020).

However, people do not live by bread alone! The other worlds that are under construction require a full panoply of “goods and services” that the communities must organize themselves to provide. In this chapter, we have shown that many organizations are being successful in moving beyond the confines of the institutions of their nation-states to provide for their needs and ensure the appropriate care of their natural surroundings. This requires the careful organization of political and social institutions to confront the challenges posed by groups who covet their resources and would destroy their territories and threaten their very existence in the process.

These peoples have survived all forms of adversity and today are demanding to be recognized and accorded their rights as citizens, as “peoples” who can offer important contributions to the rest of humankind. History has not been generous to them, but even today they occupy more than one-quarter of the land surface of the planet; it is not mere chance that this part of the globe is also the most biodiverse: it reflects the ways in which their cultures, their cosmovisions, have guided them in caring for and protecting this natural heritage. Most recently, a distinguished group of scientists and authorities from some of these societies examined this heritage, concluding with a warning that if this knowledge were to vanish, the very integrity of humanity would be threatened (Fernández-Llamazares et al., 2021).

This chapter portrays a vision of the ability of an important, but denigrated, part of world society to construct alternative forms of organization and production that facilitate their ability to organize themselves successfully. Not only are they providing for their own needs and caring for their territories, but they are also creating alliances with other like-minded groups and making significant contributions that might help resolve some of the most pressing problems of the rest of humanity. One crucial step in this journey should be self-reliance, as discussed in Chapter 14.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Heba Helmy for a careful reading of the manuscript and her especially constructive suggestions for making it stronger. Franklin Obeng Odoom’s careful mentoring of this chapter reflects his generous and professional commitment to participating in the construction of the better worlds we are hoping to bequeath to future generations.

2. The FAO continually emphasizes the importance of smallholder production in assuring nutritious foods for local communities throughout the world; they particularly document the significance of local procurement (home-grown school feeding initiatives) for school food programmes as a way of bolstering community agriculture and contributing to student health (FAO et al., 2020: ch. 4; Hunter et al., 2020).
3. In this chapter, we use the expression “environmental justice” to refer to the satisfaction of basic needs for an entire population (community, region, nation) (social justice) along with respect for conserving and rehabilitating (if necessary) the ecosystems within which this population lives (ecosystem balance). The concept is discussed at length in Barkin and Lemus (2016).
4. There are numerous organizations providing support for the myriad communities involved in the process of asserting their autonomy and building alliances within their own countries as well as internationally. From the vantage point of this writer in Mexico in mid-2021, one of the most audacious initiatives in this direction is the Zapatista journey to strengthen ties with grassroots organizations in Europe (Esteva, 2021). Fortunately, there are numerous other effective organizations bringing together communities forging alternative models of self-government, production, and care for the environment; among those with which this writer has direct contact are: La Via Campesina ([www.laviacampesina.org](http://www.laviacampesina.org)) with affiliates in 81 countries having a membership of more than 200 million and the Indigenous Community and Conservation Areas Consortium (also known as Territories of Life) with members in 83 countries ([www.iccaconsortium.org](http://www.iccaconsortium.org)). The Focus on the Global South (<https://focusweb.org/>) has provided support for these initiatives in Asia from its base in Thailand. A more recent network is the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (<https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org>), which is creating solidarity networks and strategic alliances among alternatives on local, regional, and global levels, creating spaces of collaboration and exchange. The Global University for Sustainability (<https://our-global-u.org/oguorg/>) is an ambitious project to bring together scholars collaborating with the communities involved in creating these alternatives.
5. “In 2014, ... the number of people experiencing undernourishment began to slowly increase until, in 2020, the world witnessed an unprecedented setback in its hunger eradication efforts” (FAO et al, 2021: 1). This report documents the breadth of the problem in great detail with quantitative estimates of its importance.
6. The FAO estimates that 30% of the world’s population faced “severe or moderate food insecurity” in 2020. Regionally, this was distributed as follows: Africa, 60%; Asia, 26%; Latin American and the Caribbean, 41%; even in affluent Europe and North America, it reached 9% (2021: table 3). Globally, this translates into more than 2,300 million people experiencing this problem (table 4).
7. Some of this literature is published in English in the journals *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, and the *Journal of Agrarian Change*. Spanish language publications emphasize the specificity of Latin American adaptations of agroecology, informed by the ample experience of peasant and Indigenous communities and the particularly innovative approaches in urban agriculture implemented in Cuba.
8. For a discussion of this history and the substantive debates about the differences between food security and sovereignty, consult Edelman (2014).

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