

Food Sovereignty and Urban Agriculture: Understanding Interlinkages and Exploring Implications in the South African Context

Abstract

In the global interplay of recurring food, climate, energy, environmental and financial crises, the issue of food scarcity is regaining traction in broader struggles over resource access and control. These developments are occurring in the context of the globalised agri-food system, which is characterised by increasing industrialisation of the agrarian sector, commercialisation of food production, distribution and consumption including trade liberalisation in food. Against this background, marginalised population groups face harsh conditions, from soaring food prices to land dispossessions. In this context of global capitalism, food plays a central role in both the disintegration as well as the formation of neglected groups. Hence, using food as an analytical lens helps us to observe dynamics of power relations, injustices, lived experiences and popular resistance in diverse places and across different scales. In fact, challenges to the commercialised agri-food system have gained momentum around the world: striking examples include the ever-expanding food sovereignty discourse and food sovereignty movements. The global spread of the food sovereignty discourse can be observed in widening transnational agrarian movements, nascent incorporation into national and international politics, and increasing support by scholar-activists. To date, the construction of food sovereignty discourses has been largely rural and peasant-based; at the same time, urban settings reveal a plethora of concrete food sovereignty actions. With more than 50% of the world population living in cities, urban agriculture has become critically important in local food and income provision. Activists and scholars therefore call for the domain of food sovereignty to be expanded to include urban food production and people. There is a growing awareness of the proliferation of (un)organised urban agriculture initiatives, yet many of these initiatives are not linked to food sovereignty movements and discourses.

Against this background, this study sets out to investigate urban food producers' lived realities and efforts toward food sovereignty in marginalised urban settings. It asks the central questions of *why and how urban agriculture initiatives emerge, and whether or not they engage with food sovereignty in the contemporary context of highly exclusionary dynamics in cities and the agri-food system*. The study focuses on South Africa, where about 65% of the population were living in cities, and more than 27% were unemployed, in 2018. It is estimated that about one fourth of urban households were at risk of hunger in that year. In response, food production in cities has become both a vital self-help strategy and a governmental intervention to address far-reaching neoliberal ills. Many marginalised dwellers rely in part on self-provision for social reproduction. Driven by these exclusionary dynamics, urban food initiatives represent a breeding ground for efforts to achieve food sovereignty, including demands for affordable nutritious food and access to land.

The aim of this study is to explore how urban food producers become active in exposing and fighting inequality. Understanding the mobilisation and politicisation of urban agriculture initiatives helps to shed light on the multi-dimensional impacts of the commercialised agri-food system on

the ground. The study zooms in on the case of an urban agriculture initiative involving diverse urban food producers including backyard gardeners and smallholders rooted in the deprived working class in George, Western Cape, South Africa. In 2012, the group was formed in a broad attempt to make healthy nutrition more widely available. The work of this local group is contrasted with the nascent food sovereignty mobilisation and debate at the national level.

The theoretical foundation of the study is based in 'critical urban theory' and 'critical agrarian studies'. Lefebvre's notion of the 'right to the city', in particular, is used to explore the lived realities of urban food producers and the initiative's interventions in relation to food sovereignty. Grounded in everyday life, the 'right to the city' focuses on processes in which citizens seek greater sovereignty, create space according to their needs, and introduce alternative visions to the logic of capitalism. The analysis is further enriched by Scott's work on everyday forms of peasant resistance and O'Brien's concept of rightful resistance. In line with the explorative nature of the study, qualitative research methods were used to investigate the interventions of urban food producers and the food sovereignty discourse in the country.

The study ultimately argues that urban agriculture initiatives have the potential to expose inequalities and propose alternatives, both of which are related to food sovereignty. In the case-study initiative, many members straddle land- and labour-based livelihoods and have ruptured roots in the countryside. Building from these conditions, the initiative has been able to create alternatives within the prevailing agri-food system. Its broader motivation for self-sufficiency is partly materialised through land occupations and community solidarity, as well as through knowledge, food and seed sharing. Thus, transformative efforts toward food sovereignty can be found in practice. However, such localised initiatives operate in niches and linkages with organised food sovereignty sympathisers have not yet been forged. While non-governmental organisations drive broader food sovereignty attempts at the national level, these have not yet been connected with the diverse food and agrarian struggles on the ground. These developments can be traced back to the country's history of oppression and segregation as well as intertwined dynamics of de-agrarianisation and jobless growth, to name just a few aspects.

Beyond the boundaries of South African, the findings of this study help to shed light on the close connection between rural and urban settings in an agri-food system driven by corporate power and the underdevelopment of the countryside. Hence, civil society-led work on food sovereignty urgently needs to include those groups not yet embraced by the food sovereignty discourse, for instance urban food producers, consumers, informal traders or farm workers, which have constantly been at risk of co-option by the state or the corporate sector. This dissertation provides analytical and empirical guideposts for research on efforts toward food sovereignty in cities.

The study's analysis of food sovereignty comprises four parts. First, using the specific case of an urban agriculture initiative in George, members' lived realities and initial mobilisation are illuminated. Second, urban food producers' engagement with food sovereignty is explored. Third, beyond these urban efforts, the incipient food sovereignty discourse at the national level and difficulties in connecting with localised struggles are sketched out. Fourth, broader implications for food sovereignty and its urban dimension are framed.