Indigenous Perspectives on Food Sovereignty

excerpted by Jack Kittredge from research by Jane Mt. Pleasant on Native American agriculture, Enacting Food Sovereignty in Aotearoa New Zealand and Peru by Mariaelena Huambachano, The Real Seed Producers, Food Sovereignty: Turning the Global Food System Upside Down by Grain, and Transformative Agroecology Learning in Europe by Colin R. Anderson, Chris Maughan & Michel P. Pimbert

The concept of Food Sovereignty was first launched by the international peasant organization Via Campesina at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome. Since then it has been discussed and developed further at many subsequent gatherings. In 2001 the ‘World Forum on Food Sovereignty’ was held in Cuba and a year later, at the NGO/CSO Forum on Food Sovereignty held alongside the second World Food Summit in Rome, the concept was further discussed and elaborated.

Food Sovereignty, according to the definition adopted at that 2002 Rome Forum
“is the right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, pastoral, labor, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies.”

That is quite a mouthful. The reader who has not been paying attention to this growing movement might be surprised at the breadth of rights it asserts.

It helps to understand that the concept was developed as a reaction to the increasing (mis)use of the term ‘food security’. The mainstream definition of food security, endorsed at Food Summits and other high level conferences, is a global policy objective that has evolved and diversified over time. Its primary goal, however, is to provide sufficient food of a suitable kind at the right time and place to feed the world population. As the UN World Food Programme (2007) put it, “Food security implies that food is available, accessible and affordable; thereby food security exists when adequate food is available to all people on a regular basis.”

So food security talks about everybody having enough good food to eat each day. But it doesn’t talk about where the food comes from, who produces it, how and under what conditions it has been grown. This allows food exporters, from both the global North and South, to argue that the best way for poor countries to achieve food security is to import cheap food from them, rather then trying to produce it themselves. This, as has become painfully evident, makes those countries more dependent on the international market, forces peasant farmers who can’t compete with subsidized imports off their lands, and leaves them looking to the cities for jobs that don’t exist. Food security, understood this way, just contributes to more poverty, marginalization and hunger.

This is the very vision of agriculture – one in which the billions of today’s peasant farmers have no place, and in which the global corporations control the food chain all the way from agricultural inputs and the growing of the crops, to the distribution, processing and selling of food across the world -- that the concept of food sovereignty challenges.

Although this approach has succeeded in producing large volumes of food, problems of hunger, degradation of land, unhealthy ecosystems, and lack of accessibility to food persist. The
Why Food Sovereignty?
by Jack Kittredge

Some readers of The Natural Farmer may wonder why we are devoting an issue to a subject like Food Sovereignty. Traditionally, we have devoted our pages largely to topics of immediate and practical interest to growers: how-to articles on crops, equipment, markets, inputs. If we focused on more political topics it was those vital to organic farmers and consumers of organic food: the National Organic Program, genetically engineered food, food safety regulations, the farm bill, organic certification.

So, why Food Sovereignty? Not a lot of people are pushing for it, its goals seem to require overturning many well established institutions, it is hard to see an immediate benefit to organic proponents, and it is very controversial. Wouldn’t we be better off leaving it alone and focusing on something else?

Perhaps, but current events have moved us to address this topic.

The organic movement is increasingly being split on the basis of scale. As organic food becomes more mainstream, the conventional food industry is controlling more and more of it. They are buying up the organic companies, to which the larger farms sell their products, putting out their own brands, and using political clout to evade or water down production standards.

Big Food is doing what it has always done to grow the larger food system — focus on tangible consumer concerns such as convenience, consistency and price. The harder-to-ascertain questions of food quality or how it is produced are obscured by slick promotional campaigns. Smaller farms can’t even compete in this marketplace and generally sell at farm stands, farmers markets, or through CSAs. This process is very similar, on a local level, to what small farmers are encountering on a global one – corporate control of large scale agriculture, pressure to produce for export and luxury markets, and encouragement of high tech methods such as GMOs.

In addition, US organic farmers are now experiencing what has been common around the world for peasant growers – falling prices and increasing competition. The presence of organic CAFOs, acceptance of soilless production, and failure to require humane animal treatment all point to the growing power of corporate interests in the National Organic Program.

Proponents of Food Sovereignty support small farms, biological diversity, agroecological methods, and local markets. They oppose agricultural biotechnology, corporate control of marketing, and subsidies supporting international trade. Not all these ideas are popular. Many people feel population growth and world hunger require vast increases in agricultural productivity that can only be supplied by experts. Others feel capitalism, corporations, and the market economy are necessary to provide the investment and the discipline needed to feed the world.

Whatever you think, we hope you will read these articles thoughtfully. It seems to us that this topic will only become a more important discussion into the future and supporters of organic farming need to be well informed to take part.

One farmer stated “Allin Kawasay is an ancestral principle and this principle has been practiced since many centuries ago. It is an ideology of sustainable living because if it were not for Allin Kawasay then there would have been no systems of governance and law in our community. We all share the same interests and objectives linked through shared norms and principles with respect to humans, animals, spirits, mountains, lakes, rivers, pastures, food crops, and wild life – we are all

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interconnected. We live in our ayllus, and so we have full governance and control of our land, and this is how it has been done for centuries. We are the guardians of our land, and we never starved, and we are happy people.”

The failure of a harvest for Quechua farmers is more than an economic loss. It can be a source of personal distress and concern:

“How we work and nurture our land influences greatly on our food, and food security. I love my seeds and I cry when my potatoes do not grow and I know it is because my mother, Pachamama, is unwell.”

Māori people and Mauri Ora

In contrast to the Allin Kawsay philosophy in Peru, there is no consensus in New Zealand’s Māori culture about an established good living philosophy. However, when Māori participants were asked about a concept symbolizing a good life approach, they all referred to Mauri Ora:

“If you ask me for a Māori word that embodies well-being and health of our people then the closest to it would be mauri ora (life force). I am not sure if all we Māori would interpret it as a good life approach though. But for me personally mauri ora is about your well-being.”

“Ora” means energy in Māori and in complementation with Mauri (the “binding force between the physical and spiritual”) forms the Māori philosophical system of Mauri Ora.

Mauri connects life with life and is found in land, forests, waters, and the life they sustain, and complements human thoughts, intentions, and language. In regard to the concept of Mauri in the realm of ecosystems, traditionally Māori realized that shifts in Mauri of any part of the environment, for example through use, would cause changes in the Mauri of immediately related components. As a result, the whole system is eventually affected. The process used by Māori to guide resource use reflects this belief in the interrelationship of all parts of the environment.

The Māori principle of kaikaititanga (guardianship) enacts an ancestral environmental policy for the preservation of food resources specifically, the ethical principle of rahui (restriction).

“Rahui is a restriction imposed on Māori land to prevent you from exhausting the food in that particular area. This is a principle I learnt when growing up with my grandparents. For example, pigeons were a common edible commodity back in those days. So if they wanted to look after that population of pigeons, for example, they could put a rahui in particular areas.” So you weren’t allowed to harvest any pigeons from that area, it was done with that purpose, rahui had that purpose.”

“Koha (reciprocity) is more than giving a gift, it encapsulates respect and respect regulates how we treat Papatūānuku (the land) sisters, brothers and all that comes from the land. I will give you an example, when mount Tarawera erupted, the people in Hauraki, Te Aroha, gifted some land for our ancestors to resettle on after the mountain erupted. A whole eight acres of it, down in Te Aroha, they just gifted that land to resettle the people who were affected by the eruption. But no one ever took it up. But the offer remained there, and I think it was only, I think our families from Te Arawa only gave it back, I think, sometime in the 1990s, late 1990s, when that land was handed back to the original owners who gifted it.

“See that’s where our understanding of reciprocity is about. See in this example they gave it out of the goodness of their heart. To help out people, so now that you don’t need it, you don’t keep it and do other things with it, you give it back. You give it back to the original owners.”

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Red skin, red flesh

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In Māori views, life is kept in balance by the principle of *kohia* because from a Māori standpoint, reciprocal relationships and responsibilities between humans and ecosystems are imperative for the harmonious relationship between human beings and resource management ecosystems inherited and handed down through generations.

“When I go to harvest things, I talk to the plants before I cut them and I announce to them that I am going to sacrifice them. So even if people are growing food to sell, there still needs to be a process of respect in place. And you only take enough for you, and leave the rest -- you are not greedy, and this is what I grew up with -- hard tikanga (ethic principles) rules.”

The phrase ‘food is sacred’ for Indigenous peoples underscores the profound and respectful culture, land and resource relationships they have. For example, in the case of Māori people, the value of food is entrenched in traditional, healthy, and nutritious Māori *kai* (food) that symbolizes their history, culture, community, and knowledge base. Similarly, the value of food for Quechua people has an intangible value, because the notion of food holds cultural meaning -- because the notion of food holds cultural meaning -- because the notion of food holds cultural meaning. The phrase ‘food is sacred’ for Indigenous peoples underscores the profound and respectful culture, land and resource relationships they have. For example, in the case of Māori people, the value of food is entrenched in traditional, healthy, and nutritious Māori *kai* (food) that symbolizes their history, culture, community, and knowledge base. Similarly, the value of food for Quechua people has an intangible value, because the notion of food holds cultural meaning -- because the notion of food holds cultural meaning.

Agroecology and Indigenous farming principles

Agroecology is the study of agricultural systems from the point of view of ecological processes. It is very largely beholden to Indigenous peoples as those are the farmers who for millennia have sustained the health and vitality of their communities on the same land without exhaustion. That cannot be done without paying close attention to ecological processes. But those insights need to be passed along to others, and successful practices need to become respected as traditions. In Indigenous societies many ways of “horizontal learning” and “diálogo de sabers” or wisdom dialogues have evolved in which participants jointly produce collective knowledge. Proponents of Food Sovereignty distinguish this approach to knowledge from that promoted in centers of industrial agriculture with their formal hierarchical learning institutions and systems of elite knowledge dispersal.

“... Our learning processes are horizontal and peer-to-peer, based on popular education. They take place in our own training centers and territories (farmers teach farmers, fishers teach fishers, etc.), and are also intergenerational, with exchange of knowledge between youth and elders. Agroecology is developed through our own innovation, research, and crop and livestock selection and breeding.”

International Forum on Agroecology (Nyéléni 2015)

Seed: the basis of Food Sovereignty

Farming started when local communities started collecting, planting and selecting seeds -- modifying them to meet their needs in the process. Today’s seed also embodies centuries of knowledge about how to conserve, change, plant and guide it to fruitful expression. Seed is about culture, tradition, spirituality, cooperation and diversity. And finally, seed is about survival, about getting diverse and healthy food to eat every day.

But seed is also about control. Seeds have been turned into a global commodity in the service of industrial farming with little concern for local adaptation to the specific methods, ecosystems, and needs of family farms. We often hear that we need corporate seeds to feed the world: they are alleged to be more efficient, productive and predictable. Locally developed farmer varieties are painted as backwards, less productive and disease-ridden. But in vast areas such as Africa as much as 80% of the food produced comes from homegrown farmers’ seeds.
The reports confirmed that farmers still produce and save most of the seeds and other planting materials they need and that a wide variety of them. In some countries, crops such as maize, sorghum, rice, millet, and teff; roots and tubers such as cassava and sweet potato; legumes such as beans, cowpeas, and groundnuts; and vegetables such as onions, tomatoes, okra, and lettuce are also used. In some countries, diverse populations of root crops, plants, bananas, and enset (Ensete ventricosum) are also maintained.

**Saving and sharing seeds in Senegal**

The exchange of local seeds is very prevalent here and accounts for 83% of the all the ways farmers obtain new seeds. But the family’s own local seeds still provide 80% of staple rice producers and 40% of rice producers. The seeds are exchanged with the farmers’ own seeds for planting. A farmer farmer from Senegal speaks of their pride in local seeds and the history of these seeds within the country’s agricultural systems: “Some farmers still keep local seeds that have been renewed for over 100 years! These farmers inherited the seeds from their grandfathers. The seeds are produced in harmony with nature and they withstand the test of time.”

Good, tasty, healthy food

Indigenous and local seeds, managed by farmers, are preferred because they have high nutritional value compared to hybrid and other industrial seeds. Respondents from Senegal stated that the local seeds obtain the “best yields to meet family consumption needs.” In Zambia, farmers often plant hybrid seed for sale and plant indigenous seeds for household consumption. A Zimbabwean farmer says: “African traditional seeds are nutritious and good for our bodies; they improve our health.” Respondents also argued that their own varieties taste better and store longer.

Communities in Tigray, Amhara and Oromia, Tebi regions in Ethiopia stated that they prefer local seeds because of their taste and how they cook. They observed that although so-called “improved” teff seed looks good, injera (fermented bread) made from this turns black after baking and is hard to digest. In contrast, the Bene local white teff is soft and the injera remains soft even after baking. All respondents concurred that the seeds are produced from local seeds like Aba are (white sorghum) is sweet and soft compared to injera made from improved seeds. Local varieties such as Gedalit and Jamyo also yield good animal feed as compared with Kodem (the ‘improved’ sorghum variety).

Nutrition and taste tie in closely with the health of communities in all countries. According to the respondents, farmers are becoming increasingly aware of how their health directly correlates with the foods they eat. They stated that different communities highlighted the importance of their locally managed seeds in addressing various health challenges. For example, locally grown seeds in Uganda and Mali yield food that can also be used for medicinal purposes. Communities in the Amuria and Hoima districts of Uganda say that millet and sesame play a critical role in replenishing the health and strength of new and lactating mothers.

Food is culture, and it is within the context of their cultural traditions that communities recognize and define what food is to them. In some communities, local seeds are a motivator for sustaining social gatherings as well as social, cultural and community ceremonies and practices. In Ethiopia, farmers stated that certain practices within farmer-managed systems help farmers to maintain their production according to traditional principles, which entail their social, cultural, spiritual/religious and economic life ways for many centuries. For smallholder farmers, seeds are shared elements. They have personality. Farmers respect them as sacred gifts from nature, so that their seeds cannot be held in custody/privatised or patented by individuals; rather, seeds belong to the entire community.”

Senegalese sowing rites

Farmers describe local seed in terms that show how it serves as a mobilizing force for all age and gender categories in the community. It is through the propitiatory rites that the social group expresses its communion for the advent of a favorable rainy season. An octogenarian in the village of Bounkiking explained how agricultural traditions are followed after the clearing of the fields: “There is, in the compound, a specific place reserved for women to pound the millet seeds for sowing. A girl carries the calabash containing the crushed seeds out to the field, remaining silent all the way. The head of the household deposits the calabash on the ground, and he alone is entitled to throw the first seed.”

It should be noted that the seeds are spiritually charged with incantations, holy water and plant powder that bring forth a lot of fruit. The first seed in the field is preferably sown at night: “Nocturnal sowing helps to realize the agricultural predictions,” says a farmer at Nguye Nguye.

In the Hal Pulaar ethnic group, the sowing of millet is undertaken on Saturdays, when the water level drops, linked to the nineteenth and twentieth days of the lunar cycle. The seeds are given to the wife, who per- fects them with bovine urine before spreading them on a white loincloth. Pumpkin seeds are wrapped in cow dung before being sun-dried for sowing in water during a flood. They will germinate when the level of water drops.

**Selection in Zimbabwe**

“Seed diversity and its preservation lies largely in the hands of women. From seed selection, to stor- age, to deciding which varieties to plant and how much, depending on the different weather forecasts. As women, we have expertly selected crops with a wide range of characteristics to meet various needs, from yield to disease resistance, from taste to post- harvest use, from ease of cooking to storage.” Ms. E. Kaunda, Shashe, Zimbabwe

Seed selection can take place at different times and places, for example in the fields at harvest time, after the harvest before storage, and/or at sowing time. A large majority of respondents — in Zimbabwe, 95% — agreed that the best time to select basic grain crop seeds is during the harvest, when it is easy to spot the best plants from which to derive quality seed.

Seed selection skills are typically passed down from generation to generation, often from women seed sav- ers to their daughters and granddaughters. A typical example is rapoko (finger millet) varieties that have been selected and reused for centuries in Zimbabwe. Seeds of some crops will keep for years if carefully conserved in household stores or community seed banks. Other seeds are only kept until the next planting season. Seed storage and location is determined by the type of crop and the space available in the farmer’s home. Seeds can be stored in the kitchen or on the roof, while some farmers use their living rooms as the main storage space. Seeds collected for the benefit of the farmers’ group may be stored in a community facility.

Preserving seeds after harvest is a challenge for all farmers. Saved seeds are no exception and require special attention.

The respondents confirmed that they store their seeds more securely than other grains, protecting them against moisture, pests (insects and rodents) and dis- eases, so that they will germinate well and grow into healthy crops.

The Malian respondents listed several traditional local preservation methods centering around the use of local plant-based materials, including tomichina, wangaraboubel (Cassia nigricans), powder made from the leaves of Boscia senegalensis, ash or sand, leaves of kania, denhagnouma (a peanut variety), wouloundoikou, niokorodiala Amer, pepper, neem leaves, ajandjaruwa, grape oil, prune tree ash, wild grape, and Balanites spp.

Farmers in Zimbabwe explained that they know which crop varieties and plants are not attacked by pests, and use those plants as additives to stored seeds that are susceptible to pest attack. Such “preservatives” include finger millet residues, eucalyptus leaves, mint leaves, and ash, especially from burnt maize cobs, “because the ash from the maize cob is bitter.”

Crops harvested in shells, such as ground nuts, nuts and cowpeas, are often stored in the shell for better protection. “We just leave the Bambari nut unhulled to prevent pest attack, and shell when it’s time to plant.” In Uganda’s Amuria district, the dried bean pods are beaten in the bag containing them, then stored together with the husks.

Storage problems are also a contributory factor to the decision on whether to save or buy seeds. In Uganda, some farmers are now purchasing seeds from the mar- ket because they are unable to prevent pest and dis- ease infestation until planting time. Farmers in Gulu district, for example, find that their beans and maize are easily ruined by weevils, while their groundnuts and sorghum have to be carefully protected against rats. Farmers may fear that their saved seeds will be destroyed before they can be planted, and ultimately decide to eat them instead. As well, when seeds are kept in the house, smallholders may be more tempted to eat them as food during times of scarcity.

**Sharing Seed**

“Traditional and farmer-saved seeds are not bought but exchanged among the farmers and thus are important in building stronger food sovereignty.”

Research in six African countries looks at farmer perceptions and responses to modern “improved” varieties available from industrial corporations. Farmers across the six countries listed the many crops they produce and demonstrated their depth of knowledge of each: how seeds should be selected, saved and preserved, when they should be planted, and which varieties are best suited to different environmental conditions.

**A traditional granary for seed storage and food.**
Farmers without money can have seeds to grow and feed their families.” Zimbabwean farmer

Some Ugandan smallholders said that they borrow seeds from their neighbors or get free seeds from friends and relatives, and then those seeds are exchanged freely within the local community, but they may also be exchanged with farmers from other districts, increasing the number of local varieties available. Some seeds are maintained by elderly people who specialize in growing a particular variety, but in such cases quantities are small and they may not be able to supply the whole village. The Uganda report also indicated that farmers feel very free to access seeds in their communities, with no laws hindering them from doing so.

Before the widespread introduction of hybrid seeds, it was always the practice that farmers exchanged seeds. This was more particularly the role of the women, who passed on the knowledge to their daughters or the young girls within their community. Women selected seeds based on desired traits such as drought resistance, ease of preparation, nutritional value, and pest and disease resistance. Some seeds are specifically saved by men, for example, in the cultural rituals performed by men. One role specifically played by the children is to help with seed preparation; for example, the peeling of the way of the shell. Another role of women in seed saving is to keep the seeds of groundnuts for keeping or planting; another is dropping the seeds of groundnuts, beans, maize, cassava, and other crops into the holes at planting time. They also help their parents with garden preparation, obtaining seed from relatives and neighbors, weeding the garden, carrying seeds, drying and packing seeds, and chasing away birds while the plants are still in the garden and once they have been laid out to dry.

Laws and regulations that undermine farmers’ seed systems

At the international level, the World Trade Organization’s Trade-Related Agreement on Intellectual Property Rights (WTO/TRIPS), which most African countries are parties to, states that members must implement some kind of intellectual property protection on plant varieties. This has been interpreted by industry as the requirement of states to join the Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV), which protects the rights of industrial plant breeders and restricts farmers’ rights to freely use and exchange seeds. The USA and Europe have insisted on adherence to UPOV provisions in their bilateral trade agreements, including free trade agreements (FTAs/EPAs) with African states. Some FTAs even require industrial patenting of seeds. These tools help to gain market advantages for the donor states’ transnational corporations, ensuring they get a good return on their investment by obliging farmers to pay for seeds—including some farm-saved seeds.

A governance conflict: plant breeders’ or farmers’ rights?

All the governments of the countries included in this study are signing up to restrictive intellectual property rights and trade agreements which promote industrial seeds and commodities. Yet at the same time, they are allowing to national agreements designed to promote agricultural biodiversity and sustain the diversity of farmers’ seeds. Such agreements include the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which also recognizes Indigenous peoples’ and local communities’ rights to resources and knowledge and has a target of zero losses of biodiversity by 2020, and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), which covers all agricultural plants and recognizes farmers’ rights to their seeds and associated knowledge and to their right to participate in policy and decision making. The latter measures are overwhelmingly supported by African governments at treaty meetings, and the signatory governments are obligated to incorporate these agreements and any subsequent decisions of their governing bodies into domestic law. Many do so, but implementation does not necessarily follow, because resources and power are invested in other

Fighting loss of land in Argentina

MOCASE stands for ‘Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero’ and is a farmers movement from the province of Santiago del Estero in Argentina. It was formed in 1990 to defend local farmers against the increasing aggression from large soybean farmers destroying their livelihoods. Asked about food sovereignty, they say:

“For MOCASE, food sovereignty is the right to produce and eat what we want. Our strategy is to strengthen our own production and consumption models based on self-sufficiency, production of our own food that we produce in our gardens, and the cultivation of cotton and maize. We protect our own culture passed on from our ancestors, the animals, the chickens, the different types of goats, and the geese. Santiago del Estero is a region with low requirements, and the mountains are our only source for food.”

When farmers of MOCASE themselves in between the big agribusinesses and their fields to stop large landowners from taking their land in order to plant soybean monocultures, they know that they are not only defending their livelihoods, but also that they are resisting a development model in which peasants have no place whatsoever.

Fighting food imports and an industrial food system

In the words of Jose Bove, a peasant farmer leader from France:

“For the people in the South, food sovereignty means the right to protect themselves against imports. For us, it means fighting against export aid and against intensive farming. There is no contradiction there at all.”

Food sovereignty allows different movements that traditionally have been played out against each other to come together in their struggles. The peasants, the landless, the fisherfolk, the pastoralist, indigenous peoples…. are increasingly coming together and are developing a common understanding of common aims and actions. Food sovereignty has also come to mean a lot more; it involves a right to food and many more things than that; it is a right to food sovereignty, and it is a right to the right to own the seeds, the land, and the environment, not just the right to eat.

A simple food security approach does not support the kind of self-sufficiency that is needed. Food sovereignty is more than having enough food, it also means the right to control our food systems, the right to access and use the seeds that we want, the right to have a healthy environment, the right to have a healthy and varied diet, the right to have a good standard of living, the right to have a good quality of life, the right to have a dignified life. Food sovereignty is therefore not only a level of nutrition, but also a level of dignity, cooperation and independence.

Food yields and nutrient analyses of the Three Sisters: a Haudenosaunee cropping system

Scholars have studied the Three Sisters, a traditional cropping system of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), from multiple perspectives. There has been no research examining food yields, however, defined as the quantities of energy and protein produced per unit land area, from the cropping system within Iroquois. Now we report estimated food yields and other nutrient contributions from the Three Sisters, comprised of interplanted maize, bean and pumpkin. Results from field experiments in New York establish that the Three Sisters yield more energy (12.25 x 106 kcal/ha) and more protein (349 kg/ha) than any crop monoculture or mixture of monocultures that were planted to the same area. The Three Sisters supply 13.42 people/ha/yr. with energy and 15.86 people/ha/yr. with protein. Nutrient contents of the crops are further enhanced by nixtamalization, an Indigenous processing technique where maize is cooked in a high alkaline solution. This process increases calcium, protein quality, and niacin in maize.

A traditional open-pollinated white flour corn yielded from 22 to 76 bu/acre (1155 to 4127 kg/ha); the higher yields obtained in New York’s Lake Plain region with its fertile soils and long growing season. These yield estimates are further supported by eye-witness accounts that describe a highly productive agriculture practiced by Iroquoian farmers in the 16th through 18th centuries.
In February 2007, Nyéléni 2007: A Forum on Food Sovereignty took place in the countryside of Mali outside a small village called Selengue. The actual conference village of Nyéléni was built brick by brick, hand by hand by local builders, using local materials. The food was harvested, caught, killed and prepared by a group of women from Selengue. For the first time, Nyéléni 2007 brought together farmers, fishermen, environmentalists, consumers, farm workers, indigenous peoples, youth, women, farmers, fisherfolk, environmentalists and non-governmental organizations. Half of the region had two coordinators. They or and the ISC made a deliberate decision to hold this meeting in Africa, where agriculture plays a central role, and where numerous rural and urban families suffer from hunger, despite the abundance of natural resources. At that time, Mali was the perfect choice – there was an active La Via Campesina member group, the government endorsed the principles of food sovereignty as a policy priority and there were democratic contributions to political formations.

The Forum was by invitation only, as a very careful quota system was designed to ensure balanced representation from all regions and all sectors. Each region of the world had two coordinators. They organized a specific number of delegates that included farmers, farmworkers, fisherfolk, environmentalists and non-governmental organizations. Half of the delegation were women. In total, 600 delegates from the five continents, convened in Mali in February 2007 for one purpose: strengthen and deepen the concept of food sovereignty.

Money was raised to cover all aspects of the Forum – travel for all delegates, building Nyéléni, technical support and education. The funds were raised from private foundations, individual donations and governments.

The opening plenary was led by an Iranian woman and an American woman, symbolizing the importance of women in the food system and reflecting the presence of women in the program and at the plenary sessions. Every evening the Women’s Caucus, Youth Caucus and Environment Caucus would meet to discuss the issues raised in the thematic workshops and to ensure their perspectives were heard. The Youth Caucus, for example, included representatives of farmers, farmworkers, fisherfolk, environmentalists and non-governmental organizations. Half of the delegation were women. In total, 600 delegates from the five continents, convened in Mali in February 2007 for one purpose: strengthen and deepen the concept of food sovereignty.

Money was raised to cover all aspects of the Forum – travel for all delegates, building Nyéléni, technical support and education. The funds were raised from private foundations, individual donations and governments. Everything was measured and coordinated – the number of huts built, the amount of food needed, the lines of bathrooms erected. There was also a contingent of medics from Doctors of the World, technical support group, cooks, and builders. There was a team of translators, so that the entire Forum had simultaneous translations into English, French, Spanish and Bambara. In total, there were close to 900 people who made Nyéléni happen.

Nyéléni was named for a woman well known in Malian rural communities. She is the symbol of food sovereignty for thousands of farmers and she represents the dedication required to actualize its principles. Ousmane Outtara oversaw the Nyéléni village in Selengue and describes her:

Nyéléni was an only child, which in Africa was considered a curse. Nyéléni, as a girl and only child of her parents, suffered in her youth from all the mocking her parents were subjected to. She secretly resolved to remove this slur that men had cast on her by defeating them on their own ground, that is to say agriculture and working of the land.

Nyéléni’s reputation grew beyond the limits of her region. She became a living legend. This is the time when her renown was established and she earned respect. And so the legend says that it was at the beginning of winter, which is the rainy season, and she domesticated fonio/angry rice. It’s also thanks to Nyéléni that we have a variety of millet called samio. Nyéléni’s father was called Nianna, her mother was called Saurua, she came from Siracoro. Unfortunately, history does not tell us whether one of her suitors ever married her, and therefore whether she ever had children. This is the story of Nyéléni.

What was the genesis of Nyéléni 2007?

In 1994, The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization established a Special Programme for Food Security to help governments implement national food security policies intended to ease hunger and increase access to food. The Programme coordinated the World Food Summit in November of 1996 to prioritize food security, as declared in the Rome Declaration on World Food Security where the heads of states, “reaffirm the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.” They also pledged, “to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015.” In response to the World Food Summit, La Via Campesina – an international movement of peasants, small- and medium-sized producers, landless, rural women, indigenous people, rural youth and agricultural workers – coined the term food sovereignty. In brief, food sovereignty is a food justice system that is sustainable in nature and has a governance and distribution system that is imbedded in the community and ensures the needs of the community are securely met.

In 2005, nearly ten years after the World food Summit, leaders of La Via Campesina began discussing the need to re-affirm the principles of food sovereignty and broaden the table. They envisioned a global gathering to clarify the economic, social, ecological and political implications with greater input across the continents and sectors, with intentional input from women and the youth. The intent was also to create a process to achieve recognition of the right to food sovereignty and broaden the table.

An International Steering Committee (ISC) was created comprised of members of the Food Sovereignty Network, Friends of the Earth International, International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, World March of Women, World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers, World Forum of Fisher People, Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l’Afrique de l’Ouest (ROPPA) and Coordination Nationale des Organisations Paysannes (CNOP).

The ISC made a deliberate decision to hold this meeting in Africa, where agriculture plays a central role, and where numerous rural and urban families suffer from hunger, despite the abundance of natural resources. At that time, Mali was the perfect choice – there was an active La Via Campesina member group, the government endorsed the principles of food sovereignty as a policy priority and there were democratic contributions to political formations. The Forum was by invitation only, as a very careful quota system was designed to ensure balanced representation from all regions and all sectors. Each region of the world had two coordinators. They or

The perspectives and needs of the youth, women and the environment were fully integrated throughout the workshops through the creation of 3 caucuses, with representatives in each thematic workshop. Every evening the Women’s Caucus, Youth Caucus and Environment Caucus would meet to discuss the workshop and to ensure their perspectives were woven into the discussions. If there was a concern, they would bring their concern to the ISC, which met twice daily. Every morning, the regions would meet to discuss how the issues raised in the thematic workshops could be actualized in the regions.

Andrianna (3rd from left) with Shamali, Amalie and Veronica

Andrianna (3rd from left) with Shamali, Amalie and Veronica
Of course, building a village and uniting so many people, created challenges. The builders went on strike for more money, which delayed the completion of the village. The electric lines were cut several times and had to be repaired. When the delegations began arriving it was night and the huts were not completely prepared. The organizers quickly put people in groups of three, provided potable water, flashlights, and mattresses to take to their hut. Some delegations had traveled for two days, so stress was high. A few delegations were frustrated with the tight methodology and did not want to participate.

Many of the Malians who provided logistical support had never left their village of Selengue. They did not receive any cultural trainings, so religious differences were hard to understand. For example, the Hindu delegation did not eat for the first couple of days as the vegetarian and meat food were not kept in separate places with separate serving utensils. A fence was erected around the village of Nyéléni, which brought up issues of inequity and privilege. A famous Malian singer came to perform for the Forum, and his first performance was outside the fence, for the villagers. Conversations around issues of inclusiveness and transparency went beyond the physical barrier.

There were many positive, long-lasting outcomes of Nyéléni 2007. A Declaration was endorsed that includes the six pillars of food sovereignty. The regions committed to the creation of regional Food Sovereignty Alliances. NOFA is a member of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance and the Northeast Regional Assembly has convened their annual meetings in conjunction with the NOFA Summer Conference two years in a row. The USFSA has organized a training retreat for organizations working on food sovereignty, especially those based in Africa. The Nyéléni Newsletter is produced on a regular basis, covers a range of issues related to Food Sovereignty, and is distributed in three languages across the world. Nyéléni is still recognized as a milestone and is distributed in three languages across the world. Nyéléni, the legend, statue
Jose Bové and Food Sovereignty
An Interview

Elizabeth Henderson and Andrianna Natsoulas posed the questions and Henderson translated the answers into English.

1. In the US, we heard a lot about you when you dismantled a McDonald's that was under construction, but we have not heard much since then. Please bring us up to date on your story.

Bové: Since 1999, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge. Until 2003, I was spokesperson for the Peasant Confederation (Confederation Paysanne, which represents 20 percent of the farmers in France), and until 2005 for Via Campesina on food sovereignty. We launched a movement against GMOs in France which prevailed since there are no GMOs grown in France or in all of Europe, except for Spain. Starting in 2007, I believe that we should bring our ideas to the field of politics. That year I was a candidate for President of the Republic. In 2009, I participated along with Daniel Cohn-Bendit in the founding of Europe Ecologie, a new political party, and I was elected as a Member of the European Union and reelected in 2014. I almost forgot, my non-violent actions dismantling a McDonald's and tearing up GMO plantings earned me two summers in a row in prison. Then I was forbidden to visit the USA when I tried to travel there in 2007 since I had fought against Monsanto, an American company, and tarnished its reputation. It's hard to sum up twenty years of my life in a few lines.

2. What are the historical roots of the term food sovereignty? Is there a connection with the Confederation Paysanne and the Confederation's definition of Peasant Agriculture? What is the relationship between the Confederation and La Via Campesina?

Bové: The idea of food sovereignty was born in 1996 during the meetings organized by Via Campesina and other organizations for the defense of the environment, the rights of women and of indigenous peoples. The World Trade Organization was established in 1994. The international agreements turned agriculture and food into commodities like all others. Everything became subject to free trade. It quickly became clear to us that this would turn into a social, environmental and economic catastrophe in the countries of the North as much as in the countries of the South. Twenty-five years later, I have to say that we were right. Liberalization has fattened the big enterprises like Monsanto, Nestlé, AGM, Cargill, while at the same time ruining millions of small-scale family farmers. Many of them had no other recourse than to join the exodus from the countryside to find a better future in the cities or in the North. The men and women who left their countries in Central America last year don't want to go to the USA to live on welfare. They took to the roads because they can no longer live at home. In acting this way, they force us to act. We have two options: build a wall to keep them from crossing the border, or change the rules of international trade. It goes without saying, I am for the second option.

3. Is Food Sovereignty linked to particular farming practices? Agroecology? Organic? Other?

Bové: The basis of food sovereignty is the right of a country or a group of countries to define the agricultural policies that seem best adapted to that country, its citizens and its environment. Food Sovereignty is first of all the capacity to produce the amount of food the population needs and which is adapted to local tastes, to local cuisine, and to the environment. Except for fast food, people in Paris, Seoul, La Paz or Yaoundé do not eat the same things. To be logical, it is obvious that the autonomy of farms must be developed and the way to do that is through organic agriculture. At the same time, it is not possible to continue specialized production of crops in some regions with animal breeding in others. Those activities should be linked. No manure, no food.

4. What is the relationship between Food Sovereignty and the concept of terroir?

Bové: Food Sovereignty creates a strong connection between local farm production and local food consumption. In France or in Italy, for example, we have hundreds of regional products that are only produced in well-defined geographical areas. In my home region, we produce Roquefort sheep milk cheese. During my visits to Bolivia, I have eaten quinoa, but I don’t eat it when I am in Europe. In Mali, I have tasted fonio, a delicious grain perfectly adapted to the sub-Saharan climate. In 1999, before I went to Seattle, an American family invited me to share their Thanksgiving turkey. Each country has its own customs, traditions and culinary treasures. They are linked to their traditions or their land. We should preserve these specificities. The Italian organization Slow Food has done exemplary work on this for twenty years giving value to this diversity that we should preserve.

5. What does Food Sovereignty mean to you and what role has it played in your work as an activist?

Bové: We should reverse the phrase “think global and act local” and transform it into “Think local and act global.” Food sovereignty leads us in this direction. To reconsider our agricultural model at the level of our region, of our city is not at all easy. You have to think the changes through and do it collectively. At the global or international level, we have to act and demonstrate in order to be heard by the political decision-makers.

6. How do you actualize food sovereignty as a peasant?

Bové: When I farmed, I raised sheep, producing milk that we made into yogurt and cheese at our farm and sold at the markets close to our farm. For me, producing locally for the people around me was obvious. It would have been hard to defend this idea on the international level if I had not put it into
practice concretely on my farm. I think we cannot be content with talk and concepts. Consistency be-
tween what you say and what you do is mandatory. Food Sovereignty pushes us to work on two levels at
once, the local and the global. That demands a certain suppleness. We cannot be happy just work-
ning at home without caring about what happens elsewhere and closing our eyes to the questions
which cannot be resolved except at the national or international level in order to take control over the
multinationals, to fight against land grabbing, to put everything on the line to reduce the impact of hu-
man activity on climate.

7. Have you been involved with the movement for
Associations pour le maintien d’une agriculture paysanne (Associations for the Maintenance of
Peasant Agriculture – AMAP, CSA in English)?

Bové: Since the mid-1970’s, in the region where I raised sheep, we were already doing cheese pro-
duction and direct sales. Ties connected existed between peasants and their customers. I have met
the peasants who started AMAP in France, I have visited quite a few networks of this kind and the
Peasant Confederation was instrumental in anchor-
ing this type of direct relations, contracts between peasants and their customers. In France, the move-
ment started in the south-east where peasants hoped to connect with the people who live in low-income
sections of the big cities like Marseille. Studies have shown that it is less expensive to buy vegetables
year round from a peasant through an AMAP than
to buy from the big supermarkets. Studies have shown that it is less expensive to buy vegetables
across the earth in the years since the phrase
was coined? If so, how?

8. Do you feel that Food Sovereignty has spread
across the earth in the years since the phrase
was coined? If so, how?

Bové: At the European Parliament I would say that
food sovereignty is better understood these days
by progressive delegates. At the UN for those who
food sovereignty is better understood these days
by progressive delegates. At the UN for those who
food sovereignty is better understood these days
by progressive delegates. At the UN for those who

9. How have you advanced the concept of Food
Sovereignty at the European Parliament?

Bové: That is long-term work, pedagogical work. I
have to explain to colleagues who are not familiar with agricultural issues that food sovereignty has
nothing to do with sovereignty, a term which in
French is tainted with nationalism and isolationism. Food sovereignty does not mean creating autar-
cunchic countries. It does not ban trade in agricultural products between countries. It does mean organizing
them so that economic, social and environmental
rights take priority over the multinational global
corporations. Some ministers speak of food sover-
eignty. The French President Emmanuel Macron has
referred to it. So we can say that we have succeeded
in breaking through. What remains is to push those
with the power to make decisions to act and for their
actions to conform with their words. This will not
be easy. In the face of global warming in order to
reduce our greenhouse gas emissions we must move
forward towards food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty brings a new dimension in the
context of the international uncertainty that we
experience today. Socrates said 2300 years ago that
every politician had to be a fine connoisseur of agri-
cultural markets. Remember, at that time Athens im-
ported more than 30 percent of its food and exported

10. What message do you have for the family-scale
organic farmers, homesteaders and gardeners of
the Northeast Organic Farming Associations in
the United States?

Bové: I had the pleasure of meeting some organic
farmers in March 2005, the last time I was in the US
to give a lecture at Yale. I was agreeably surprised
by their dynamism and modernism. As in Western
Europe, organic agriculture has the wind in its sail
in some parts of the USA. It’s a strong current and
we have to congratulate ourselves for having been
among its predecessors. The big food agribusinesses
have realized that organic farming is profitable and
are trying to get into this expanding market. The
purchase of White Wave Food by Danone is an
example of what is happening in this sector.

Organic farmers should be vigilant, not let them-
selves rest on their laurels. They should regroup,
mobilize to negotiate prices that cover their costs of
production and make it possible for farmers to earn
a proper living from their work. Without making
sure that prices are fair, organic agriculture runs the
risk of being cheated.

We are at a crucial juncture between two types of
organic agriculture. One that allows family scale
farmers to keep control of what they produce; and
the other where they become mere suppliers of ma-
terials for an organic food industry. In France, some
new cooperatives have appeared. They make long-
term contracts with the peasants to guarantee stable
prices that allow them to invest for the long term.
It’s a kind of trade – Domestic Fair Trade. Consum-
ers understand and often are ready to pay a bit more.
Major concerns about the direction of “organic” must be on the minds of organic farmers day by day. Success as an organic farmer is not guaranteed in the best of times, but what kind of decisions by USDA and the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) will make success more or less likely? Recent decisions regarding hydroponic production and livestock welfare standards clearly threaten the chances for family farmers to pursue one of the few remaining opportunities for success as family farmers. Without rules preventing fake organic or vertical integration—or whatever destructive market forces result from “free markets”—the vision and fulfillment of that vision are at risk. How can we create a movement to motivate our society and government to respect farmers, not only for producing healthy food, but also caring for the land and caring for the consumer?

Let me say right off the bat, we need a historical and philosophical background offered by Wendell Berry’s foundational book, The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture. I’m no historian or philosopher and thus very limited in historic detail of relevance. Nevertheless, I believe Berry’s deep analysis is accessible, though also very sobering. I believe his message is that, no matter how powerful, corporations, while often twist our political and economic leaders while often twisting the truth, and we have no choice but to be grounded in reality, in the truth, and we have no choice but to make every effort possible to establish new rules and values for an international caring society.

Fortunately, we are not alone in this quest. The movement’s themes are Food Sovereignty and Agroecology. These may seem unfamiliar terms, but I believe they relate to almost every farm struggle from time immemorial. Agroecology is simply the principle of farming with nature that we know is the foundation of the modern commercial notion of “organic.” But La Via Campesina also states unequivocally that “peasant’s agroecology” is something special: it is “political; it requires us to challenge and transform structures of power in society.” It stresses that ancestral knowledge is to be valued, too. Food Sovereignty encompasses new rules, laws, and culture that can save us from the valueless forces of Adam Smith’s invisible hand of the all-powerful free market—supply and demand—which is now cast as the global norm of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is also referred to as the “Washington Consensus,” a corporate capitalism on steroids where national and regional governments must submit to unregulated trade regardless of the damage to their domestic agricultural system and heritage or the protection of the environment.

To care for the land and be a first class citizen—or to even have land at all—has always been a struggle. Wendell Berry refers to the ancient Greek stories of the Iliad and the Odyssey and the biblical Book of Isaiah to contrast the different values inherent in societies that value war and material wealth versus those of caring peasants and families that know that good work is necessary and fulfilling, a sacred responsibility of human beings.

Many of the peasant members of La Via Campesina are from indigenous cultures that do, in fact, make these values and the land sacred. Is it wise for our modern society to forever forget that, from the beginning, our country was founded on making war on American Indians to steal their land to produce commodities for new industries and lucrative export? Isn’t the evidence of our dominant industrialized agriculture and even foreign policy enough to realize that the same mindset—the same world view—rules our political and economic leaders while often twisting our personal values for short sighted gain?

But in the years beyond the valiant efforts of American Indians to save their way of life so connected to nurturing the land, the new American society and government showed little mercy for the plight of family farmers except by conquering more Indian territory with encouragement to MOVE WEST! This was despite Thomas Jefferson’s belief that, “. . . it is not too soon to provide by every means possible that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small landholders are the most precious part of the state . . .” (Thomas Jefferson letter to Reverend James Madison, October 28, 1785).

I once visited with a member of a Nebraska Indian tribe over 20 years ago about the woes of family farmers in the 1980’s farm crisis. He simply said, “Well, you’re next.” I didn’t really understand what he meant at the time. I was still too white, so to speak. He meant that white family farmers would succumb to the same violent extraction economy that his people had—the internalizing of wealth to the greedy few (like today’s giant multinational corporations), while externalizing the costs to farm communities and the environment. I hate to admit that it has really taken these many years to totally understand what he meant and the implications.

Just before the Civil War, organized farmers, free labor, and small business owners became important members of the political coalition that became President Lincoln’s Republican Party. Family farmers believed they were a free society’s answer to the plantation system of exploiting slave labor. The family farmers all knew they were truly fighting for their future.

Nevertheless, the political tradition of minimal government in economic affairs and the concerted effort to destroy the reforms of Reconstruction prevented addressing the injustices experienced by family farmers, black or white. “Move west, young man, move west,” ran its course. After the Civil War,
growth of the industrial trusts and the long reach of their speculative and political tentacles along with serious “panics” and depressions gave rise to many organized grassroots farm movements that grew like prairie fires. The railroad, petroleum, and milling and packing trusts were all targets of these movements. The farm movements joined in coalitions with labor, former slaves, and even temperance groups to re-establish a society based on what was seen as the original promise that “All men are created equal” along with “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and void of farm foreclosures and unemployment.

The rich history of rural grassroots movements like the Grange, the Farmers’ Alliance, the Colored Farmers’ National Alliance and Cooperative Union, the Nonpartisan League, the Socialist Party, The Farmers’ Holiday movement, and many more illustrate that farmers can coalesce to change the course of history. Their many contributions would take a book for each movement, but much of what they worked for culminated in the Parity legislation of the New Deal. The principles of the Parity program were intended to assure farmers fair prices adjusted for inflation with supply management to avoid wasteful overproduction. It tended to keep livestock production associated with the land that produced the feed and allowed extended crop rotations and recycling of nutrients. The New Deal Resettlement Administration aimed to fulfill Jefferson’s vision of many small landhold- ers. Finally, society benefited not only from the conservation of the land and dispersed economic opportunity, also from the assurance of supplies of food from a national food reserve.

The rich history of these movements could possibly open our modern minds and hearts for organizing a victorious movement today for all farms being family-scale organic farms providing all our citizens with healthful organic food. This kind of farming system would also combat climate change rather than fueling and accelerating this dreadful phenomenon. For this to happen we need to popularize the democratic and regenerative principles of Food Sovereignty and Agroecology. We need to recognize that “we’re all in this together” locally, nationally, and internationally. We need to ask ourselves what will it really take to get from here to the promised land? I believe it will take precise thinking to avoid being led to nowhere by political slogans or other dead end roads that speak to the symptoms of our problems and not the root causes. With today’s many injustices and our ineffective corporate-bound government and media, the public experiences what I’ve seen called “generalized discontent.” Our movement needs to illuminate the path to a clearly democratic, participative, and caring society, or this “generalized discontent” can create the threat of racist and xenophobic politics that doesn’t address the many injustices associated with the unlimited power of multinational corporations. Understanding the mistakes of previous farm movements can help us avoid repeating them. It’s pretty clear that we can’t afford to fail this time.

Professor James Youngdale, in his book Populism: A Psychohistorical Perspective, analyzes the thinking, the motivations, and the paradigms of populist movements in our history like the farmer protest movements mentioned above. He explores various themes that can lead us astray. First of all, Youngdale would not agree with some recent media characterizations that movements based on racism and xenophobia should be called populist. Secondly, it is a mistake to view our problems as being rooted in unfair treatment of our nation in the international economy. For instance, contrary to President Trump’s view that the United States got the short end of the stick in trade agreement negotiations, the truth is that United States multinational corporations were dictating the terms of free trade agreements to all the other countries of the world. Another pitfall is to blame “monopolies.” These monopolies are all too apparent and too powerful, but this begs the question as to whether breaking them up would really change anything. How much would they need to break up, and isn’t it true that many of our problems existed when such big monopolies didn’t exist? Such proposed analyses fail to strike at the heart of why we don’t have a truly democratic and caring society and the government to go with it. Might not our efforts require changing the “world view” of our fellow citizens, what might be termed a spiritual revolution?

Twenty-first century problems require twenty-first century visions and movements. We don’t have to run around the country on horseback or bouncing on dirt roads in Model T’s or talking on party telephone lines to educate and focus our efforts. Hopefully we have so many more educated scientists and professors to help us work out the details, without them coopting our terms. The failings of industrial agriculture, our food system, and the economy on all accounts cannot be ignored. Most alarming, scientists warn of a possible precipitous collapse of OUR world’s ecosystem itself. Shouldn’t the insights of organic family farmers and the wisdom of peasants around the world lead to caring and hopeful change? I think they can.
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Celebrating Our Ancestral Roots: Abenaki Agriculture Alive and Well in the Northeast

by Maria Buteux Reade

"Kwon do day, kwon do day, kwon do day..."

On November 13, 2018, a group of people gathered in Montpelier’s Vermont Historical Society chanting these words, accompanied by the rhythmic beat of hide-covered drum. "Congratulations - you just saved our culture," Abenaki tune, a welcome song that we use to greet guests when they arrive," said Chief Don Stevens. Stevens presides over the Nulhegan Abenaki, one of the four native tribes that received official recognition from the state of Vermont in 2011 and 2012.

Chief Stevens, Dr. Fred Wiseman, Chief Roger Longtoe Sheehan and Melody Walker Brook were invited to share song and stories of their Abenaki history as part of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont’s eighth annual Agricultural Literacy Week. Jointly sponsored by NOFA-VT, the Vermont Department of Libraries, and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets, this annual week-long celebration enlightens people about the economic and cultural importance of agriculture in Vermont communities.

2018’s Agricultural Literacy Week, entitled “Celebrating Our Ancestral Roots,” focused on native agriculture in Vermont. Events at libraries around the state featured renowned Abenaki story tellers sharing aspects of their ancestral agricultural heritage and current practices.

By day, the guest speakers are professors, historians, technology experts, and artisans. Yet they are also revered tribal chiefs and respected leaders among the Abenaki community, dedicated to keeping a rich cultural heritage alive.

Chief Don Stevens of the Nulhegan Abenaki manages information technology and logistics for companies and institutions. An engaging spokesperson, Stevens helped lead the fight for state recognition for the Abenaki people of Vermont. Chief Roger Longtoe Sheehan of the Elnu Abenaki is a native artist, musician, and educator. In his southern Vermont home, Sheehan creates museum-quality 17th and 18th century furniture using the Abenaki techniques (including soapstone and wood pipes, stone tools and knives) representing the Eastern Woodland tribes. Melody Walker Brook is an Elnu Abenaki historian, professor, activist, and artisan who also specializes in beadwork, traditional finger weaving, ribbon work, and interpretation of wampum belts.

Dr. Fred Wiseman, aMississquoi Abenaki, is an ethnobotanist, retired professor and former department chair of Humanities at Johnson State College. Wiseman has lived in Swanton, a town in northern Vermont, since 1987 and led the fight for recognition from 1993 until it was achieved in 2011. Wiseman is a recognized expert in traditional arts, ceremonial oratory, historical native song and dance adapted for modern venues and audiences. Wiseman serves as director of the Seeds of Renewal project.

Corn Mother and Three Sisters

These four leaders shared various songs and stories specifically related to Abenaki agricultural tradi-
tions and techniques. Each person shared two stories central to their heritage: Corn Mother and the Three Sisters. All acknowledged there are slight differences among the versions but the essence remains the same. Here is how Chief Roger Longtoe related the story of Corn Mother, when he spoke at the Brattleboro Library.

"It is said that the Abenaki descended from the ash tree. Tabulmuk (the Creator) carved the First Man and First Woman from two fine ash trees and blew the breath of life into them. He loved how they spoke and sang.

After Tabulmuk created the First Man and First Woman, he made six more women and six more men. The First Woman, known as Corn Mother, was different from the rest; she had white-blond hair whereas the others had dark. After she and First Man had children, they made a home on a hillside above the Connecticut River and covered it with wildflowers. Life was good until the weather and environment changed. It became harder to find game and food, especially in winter. Their children and relatives began to go hungry. Corn Mother would burn tobacco and pray to the Creator for help.

The Creator came to Corn Mother in a dream and said he would help the people but it would require a sacrifice. (Roger paused to explain that in Abenaki culture, you have to give to receive.) She then spoke to her husband and explained that to feed their family and not starve in the winter, the Creator had asked them to make a sacrifice. In order to save the people, the First Man would have to kill his wife and sacrifice her body and blood to grow the food that would save their people. He was not happy about the proposal but she kept working on it throughout the winter. As spring came, Corn Mother convinced First Man.

The sacrifice involved several stages. First they would have to burn the beautiful wildflower meadow. The resulting charcoal would provide nutrients to feed the soil. Next First Man would fashion a blade from flint to kill Corn Mother. Finally, he would have to cut her throat and let the blood flow freely while he dragged her body by the feet up and around the field to spread her blood.

When the day finally came, Corn Mother leaned into the stone blade and her husband finished the sacrifice. He then built a mound in the center of the field where he buried his wife. As he wept, she coached him. 'Don't worry, I will be back and will speak to you. The grass will grow as tall as a woman and that will be me. This will be the grass that will feed your people. And you will see my hair and know it is me.'

In the mound where he buried his wife, the tallest and most beautiful corn grew, thus fulfilling her prophecy that their children never go hungry. And that is why we still plant our corn in a mound, in respect to Corn Mother."

Meanwhile back in Montpelier, Chief Stevens had shared the Three Sisters story, a corollary to Corn Mother. “After she died, Corn Mother’s sisters went up each year and tended their sister. When one of them died, she was buried alongside her sister. As she grew, she huggd and climbed up corn sister and became bears. The third sister died and was buried alongside her two other sisters. She was always scrappy and protective of her sisters. She came back as squash and spread around her sisters as a defense barrier. And that’s the origin of why we still plant the Three Sisters –corn, beans, and squash to together. Each provides support and balance for the others.”

“Abenaki people are probably the least recognized, least understood, and have the least amount of advocacy among any of the protected classes of peoples in the state of Vermont,” Wiseman emphasized. “Having state recognition is a good start. But we have a long way to go.”

One of the most effective ways to teach the persistence of the Abenaki is through agriculture. Wiseman and his fellow tribal leaders strove to revive traditional songs, rituals, and dances associated with the seasonal indigenous agricultural ceremonies, such as the Green Corn ceremony and a variety of planting rituals and harvest festivals. They also study and reintroduce Abenaki growing practices such as companion planting and mound systems.

Wiseman began working with Vermont’s Native American communities in 1993 to record their cultural, geographic, and historical information. As an ethnobotanist, he discovered ancient agricultural engineering and horticultural techniques still being practiced by Abenaki farmers in northern Vermont and the Connecticut River Valley. Visits with farmers revealed rare and supposedly ‘lost’ indigenous crops still growing on hill farms or spreading wild along valley river banks. Wiseman began to collect these rare seeds and deposit them safely in one place.

Saving Seed, Preserving Heritage

That effort evolved into the Seeds of Renewal project in 2012. The goal is to share knowledge of native seeds, cultivation techniques, and ritual ceremonies related to agriculture. Seeds of Renewal is a grassroots coalition of partners throughout Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, New Brunswick, Quebec and Nova Scotia. Its mission is to assist and encourage the Abenaki tradition of seed saving and indigenous gardening by helping to track down rare or long-lost seeds native to northern New England. According to Wiseman, “Seeds of Renewal is a technique, a technology, and a consortium, a way of understanding indigenous agriculture. Our partners all over the Northeast grow and save seeds to preserve these heritage crops.”
By 2013, Wiseman had gathered 14 crop varieties with possible ancient native origins in northern New England and adjacent Canada. He has amassed more than 55 cultivars by 2019. An experienced gardener himself, he knew the seeds had to be planted or properly conserved, or else their genetic lineage would be lost forever. That necessitated finding partners with sufficient land, agricultural knowledge, and commitment to care for the precious seeds.

Wiseman recalls, “One Koas farmer, Peggy Ful- lerton of Pierrmont, New Hampshire, planted the crops in gardens heavily fertilized with manure from her hogs and is extremely well fed in the New Hampshire summer sun, producing huge sunflowers, squash, and pumpkins – an exciting sight to behold! A community harvest supper organized for the first time in 2013 as the first fruits of the Seeds of Renewal project prepared as three sisters soup, Koasek corn-on-the-cob, squash muffins, and a host of other special heirloom recipes were prepared using these ancient crops.”

Fifty-five to sixty crops are now on the Seeds of Renewal Preservation Priorities list. “We try to get critically endangered crops safely planted, such as the Morrisville sunflower and Koas corn,” Wiseman explained. “All of these Seeds of Renewal crops can be propagated bare root and cold and are able to grow from Georgia to Labrador, which is crucial as the climate changes.”

Seeds of Renewal has expanded its range of supporting partners in 2019. According to Wiseman, “The New Indigenous Heritage Center located on the Eastern Promenade Interval Center, our longest term partner, is helping us grow large quantities of Seeds of Renewal produce for ceremonies. Peggy Fuller ton and Sagakwa Farm, in Pierrmont, New Hamp- shire, are preparing for the fourth annual crop share. Sterling College, located in Craftsbury, Vermont, focuses on growing out seeds without cross-pollination to preserve their integrity. Burlington’s ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center sponsors Harvest celebrations and other conferences. Anlabuwi, an intertribal Abenaki organization, partners with Seeds to do agricultural ceremony. The Indian Island Penobscots, the Indian Township and Sipayik Pass samoaquodries are growing Seeds of Renewal crops. Earth Haven Learning Centre (Ontario) publishes the Seven Sisters book.”

Seven Sisters – The Original Companion Plants

“People have been growing corn in the Connecticut Valley and northwestern Vermont for more than 1,000 years,” Chief Roger Longtoe reminded the group in Brattleboro. “Remnants of squash, beans and tobacco have been found. Jerusalem artichokes, ground cherries, sunflowers are evidence of a large settlement. That’s a clear sign that the Abenaki were growing the Seven Sisters at that time and probably earlier.”

A passage from Wiseman’s excellent book Seven Sisters: Ancient Seeds and Food Systems of the Wabanaki People and the Chesapeake Bay Region (Earth Haven Learning Centre, 2018) captures the essence of this project, “As with any family, each member helps the others in times of need. For example, while the Gaspe and Koas corn are too short and weak to support strong beans, the sunflower offers its sturdy stalk and leaves to the bean tendrils. Ground cherries have been observed in New Hampshire to have the amazing ability to flower and set fruit when planted beside the very susceptible Norridgewock bean variety. Also, as in any family, there are greedy or pushy siblings. The sunchoke quickly tries to dominate a planting, and she needs to be planted in very specific places so as not to crowd out her other siblings. It is up to the farmer or gardener to understand how these interdependent and loving siblings can live and work together in order to produce an effective harvest.”

Corn is the most versatile plant in the world. By some estimates, corn provided up to two-thirds of an ancient village’s nutrition. Wiseman has tracked down five varieties of maize, or Indian corn: Roy’s Calais Flint, Abenaki Rose, Koas, Gaspe, and Tom Thumb popcorn. These are not the summer sweet corn most people consume. Most Abenaki varieties are Flint corn which means they are best suited to grading for cornmeal. Plants can be a diminutive two feet up to six or seven feet tall; ears range from two to ten inches depending on variety.

There exist five types of native pole beans (True Cranberry, Norridgewock, Dolloff, Skunk, Heritage Dore) and fifteen varieties of bush beans, each with its own fascinating history. Beans grow exponential- ly: three seeds grow to 20 grow to 250 to a roomful while offering amazing potential in terms of climatic resiliency.

Squash was considered the feisty sister for her tendency to spread and take over. There’s only one native summer squash, known as white scallop, a patty pan variety. White scallop is actually the oldest known squash dating back to 1594. All the rest are winter squash, belonging to a genus of their own – such as Algonquin, East Montpelier Turban, Canada Crookneck, Worcester Pumpkin, Wesley Sugar Pumpkin, and Curtiss or Obscure Pumpkin. “East Montpelier Squash has a glorious history,” Wiseman notes. “This cultivar was said to be big enough to feed a whole village because the vines were so long, so prolific, and the squash so large.”

Wiseman draws a grainy white and black photograph from the 1890s of a Koas woman, Aunt Sarah, standing next to enormous sunflowers with huge leaves. He traveled all over Vermont measuring sun- flower leaves in pursuit of the sunflowers he’d seen in the ancient sites and legends. In pursuit he crested the Morrisville sunflower, the most famous – and critically endangered – sunflower which stands nine to twelve feet tall.

Jerusalem artichokes, now known as sunchokes, have been around for centuries. These underground tubers still grow wild along one-quarter of all the riparian rivers in Vermont. Full of starch, these are prepared and eaten like a potato. Abenaki would plant them where they camped for the summer, which explains their prevalence along so many riverbanks.

Ground cherries, also known as husk tomatoes, are the sweet tasting relatives of the Morrocan pumpkin. “East varieties exist, Hardwick and Johnson. Tobacco is considered a “brother” and must be planted by men and away from the sisters. The sticky tobacco residue keeps most pests away. Full of starch, it turns helps to protect the sisters. “We’re trying to reintroduce this crop so our ceremonial tobacco is truly Abenaki,” says Wiseman. “Seven Sisters” of the Seven Sisters include Eastern wild rice, green nuts, and wild leeks, or ramps.

Chief Longtoe made the connection of crops to the cultivation methods.

“To get officially recognized, we had to compile a history and document our Abenaki traditions as proof of our culture. We needed our people to write down anything they remembered or were taught as kids. Each tribe has its own stories and traditions, everyone remembers planting in mounds and using fish. One of the many traditional prac- tices we did and still do, and with good reason. We used a large mound of fish which we would not eat, white sucker fish in particular. Fred Wiseman learned that sucker fish in Abenaki means garden fish! We put the fish in the mound two weeks before we planted the corn seeds.”

Chief Stevens offered further insight. “As our ances- tors knew, when they planted their fields at the turn of the season, in the winter we canoped in the pines which is why we’re known as ‘People of the Pines.’ After the rivers flooded in the spring and left fertile soils on the banks, we would build wipmias that would last three or four months on the banks, use the fish to fertilize, plant seeds and grow our crops, harvest and plant them back to the Sisters for the winter. Every family would have a section along a major river and that would be their section. Fred’s family had a two and a half mile section along the right-hand side of the Mississinewa River just above where 89 crosses in Swanton.”

Still Applicable Centuries Later

Seed saving. Companion planting. Platform mounds systems. Are these ancient Abenaki agricultural practices of corn hills and mound systems appli- cable on a larger scale in Vermont? Wiseman says that’s an interesting puzzle. “Some of these seeds have endured for centuries and are present in 100-200 mounds of 5 to 65 acres each. Prehistoric terrace systems have been discovered in Northeast. These agricultural systems probably supported tens if not hundreds of thousands of people. The mound systems could potentially produce 600 pounds of squash per every three mounds with fish fertilizer. I think there’s a lot of unexplored potential for these systems. But Don and I and our colleagues are doing what we can and we welcome assistance. Unfortu- nately, we’re not able to access the grants that serve other ethnic groups. We’re hoping to put a small crack in the obdian ceiling as our Abenaki culture gains more recognition.”

Wiseman feels it is important to share these stories as a heritage of the greater New England local food communi- ty, which may not be aware of all that is taking place within Abenaki agriculture. As Chief Stevens says with justifiable pride, “We have a rich and thriving culture and want to share it with others.”

For further exploration:

VISIT: The “Seeds of Renewal” exhibit, curated by Dr. Fred Wiseman, will be on display through early May 2019 at the Vermont Historical Society in Montpelier. The exhibit explores Wabanaki agricul- tural history, cuisine, and ceremony.

READ: Seven Sisters: Ancient Seeds and Food Sys- tems of the Wabanaki People and the Chesapeake Bay Region. Dr. Frederick M. Wiseman, published by Earth Haven Learning Centre, Ontario, 2018

Wiseman’s immediate goal is to get the agricultural ceremonies up and running again on a calendar cycle basis, not as a performance basis. “We plan to apply all the research into ceremony to revive a vig- orous ceremonial calendar. We already completed the Biligosik Alamoskosowagogan ceremony kicking off the agricultural year on January 6, the first new moon after the winter solstice. On the horizon is an Abenaki cookbook. We are discussing partnering with Shelburne Farms to have them test the recipes for proper cooking times, ingredients, and taste and then photograph the plated product.”
Immediately west of Williamstown, the Massachusetts town in the northeastern corner of the Bay State, is a north-south spur of the Taconic range in New York. Heading west out of Massachusetts on Route 2 one climbs via switchbacks to Petersburgh Pass, then descends to Grafton, NY, site of Soul Fire Farm. The farm itself is 72 acres located largely on a long south-sloping hillside from which years of bad farming practices had allowed the soil to erode. In 2006, Jonah Vitale Wolff and Leah Penniman, then living in the South End of Albany, bought this land in a quest to grow healthy food for their family and community. It took them five more years to save enough to build a livable farmhouse and move onto the land.

From crops grown there the couple built their CSA, serving families in Albany’s South End, and in 2010 decided to expand their work to include trying to uproot racism in the food system. Since then they have brought thousands of mostly young people to their on-farm educational programs such as the Black Latinx Farmers Immersion, a weeklong program “designed as a rigorous introduction to small-scale sustainable farming that balances the nerdy exposition of concepts like ‘soil cation exchange capacity’ with the cultural and historical teachings necessary for our people to heal our relationships to land.”

It is hard to summarize all the work Soul Fire Farm is doing, still growing for the Albany CSA (including many Afro-indigenous vegetables and herbs), raising reparations money to settle individuals on farms, speaking at dozens of events around the country and, most recently, publishing through Chelsea Green the book “Farming While Black.” Anyone wanting to know more about these people and their work can check them out at www.SoulFireFarm.org.

This interview is mostly with Leah Penniman. Her “identity” is certainly complex as a mixed race woman – with an Afro-American mother and a white father – who has converted to Judaism to be with her other-- who has converted to Judaism to be with her partner Jonah. In it we try to find out a little about the couple’s history and the successes, failures, and difficulties of the work they have undertaken.

Leah and Jonah met at Clark University, where they graduated in 2002. While a student Leah came to nearby Many Hands Organic Farm in Barre, MA, to work, beginning in 1999. Through her we met and hired Jonah, David and Naima. Leah got her masters degree at Clark in 2003, the year Naima was born to the couple. Two years later, in 2005, Emet was born and they moved to Albany where Penniman was offered a teaching job.

As Leah explains this period, “Jonah and I started out thinking we would just farm. Not that there is anything wrong with that. We were catalyzed a lot by living in the South End of Albany and running into a lot of roadblocks just trying to get good food. I grew up experiencing hunger, but I thought I was past it. But then I saw other folks who don’t have grocery stores, no farmers markets, no food delivery into the neighborhood, no community garden plots, we didn’t have a car at the time. Finally we joined Denison CSA with an Albany drop off two miles away, I had Neshima in a stroller and Emet on my back. I’d pile the groceries in on top of Neshima and walk home that way. I had conversations with my neighbors about what it was like to live in a place with no food. That’s what motivated us to theme the farm we wanted to start on food access.”

Once they had purchased the farm (it wasn’t great land, they realized, but it was what they could afford) Jonah, who was a contractor, would do a job for someone else, get the money and use it on the farm. He also came out there on weekends to live and work – they had a tiny little camper in which he could live.

They moved onto the farm in December of 2010, during a massive snowstorm, Penniman recalls.

“At the time,” she says, “both of us were working full time other jobs. The farm was on the side and we hoped to be able to keep that going, which we were lucky enough to be able to do. We looked at all sorts of marketing methods, but our community was so clearly in need of food that it became our only market. We had twenty shares that first year, then doubled that and kept growing. We spend a lot of time in the winter at community events talking about the CSA, providing nutrition education, whatever people wanted us to do. That has been the primary feeder for the CSA. We know everybody who joins. They don’t come off a poster.”

“The farm sells shares on a sliding scale,” she continues, “and there are enough people who are willing to pay more to enable those who can’t afford shares too. But we got to a point in 2015 where the farm was growing and we couldn’t both be working full time off-farm. But the farm needed to make more money. To have that work we could either market to upscale restaurants by growing high end greens, or look at the value we had proven we could add through education and have a way to support ourselves doing that. We decided on the latter. We said ‘Let’s form a non-profit. Then we will have another revenue stream. We can build out the education part and that will make it possible for us to work here more and continue the CSA in the South End.’

“We had been relying a lot on volunteer labor,” she concludes, “but given the history of black labor on farms we felt uncomfortable not paying people well, so we had to raise money for that. Plus everyone was living in our house and we needed to have a place for people to sleep. We spent a Sabbatical year in Mexico and that was when we figured out how non-profits work – forming a board, fundraising, etc.”

So they created the nonprofit in 2016. It owns the farm business, but not the property. The income stream supporting the enterprise has been fairly balanced at $1/3, 1/3, and 1/3. Leah and Jonah try to keep the farm paying for it’s costs, which are about a third of the total, with 90% coming from the vegetables and 10% from the chickens. Another third or so comes from program and speaker fees, and the last third comes from grants.

Leah says that now perhaps that balance is closer to 1/4, 1/4, and 1/4.

“We accepted a pretty large grant,” she explains, “to be able to pay a living wage to our staff and be able to offer benefits. Before that we were at the bottom of the tier, paying $10 to $12 an hour. Now we pay $15 to $20. We only accepted the grant because it is for three years and the donor agreed to renew it if we don’t do anything illegal! We talked it all over with the staff. We would be stepping outside of the marketplace experienced by a commercial farm and entering the marketplace of non-profits. But that is what people wanted to do.”

Besides the farm, one of the most consuming of Soul Fire’s programs is the Black Latinx Farmers Immersion training. Trainees come for a week, arriving on a Sunday and leaving on a Friday. The program runs from 7:30 in the morning to 9:30 at night. The fee ranges from $0 to $1000, with most people paying about $200.

Using money from a partner organization that supports their work, Soul Fire actually pays Spanish-speaking farm workers to come -- wage laborers with an H-2A program or something similar. They pay no fee and Soul Fire makes up the wage that the worker is missing by attending.

“It is really stretch work,” sighs Penniman, “let me tell you. My Spanish is only manageable, and the sustainable farming movement and the farm workers groups have been totally separated. They shouldn’t be, of course. We have gotten really good at helping hipsters in Brooklyn with roof-top gardens, but haven’t done much with people who grew up on a milpa in Oaxaca and are now picking strawberries.
in the US. They all want to run their own businesses, and we want to help them. But it is a stretch for us.”

We asked Leah if any other groups are doing similar work in the US, and she mentioned the Cornell Small Farm Program. They also have a new program for farm workers who want to become managers. It takes place over a series of weekends and Cornell is collaborating with Farm School NYC on it.

Soul Fire has had to develop innovative ways to connect with candidates for these trainings.

“We don’t have to market ourselves for most of the programs we have offered,” Leah explains. “We have a waiting list that we have to cul through. The stretch programs, however – like reaching out to farmworkers – involve people who aren’t necessarily reachable via social media and that takes more getting to know folks. Our first cohort was fifteen Mexican-born farm workers at the Hudson Valley Farm Hub who were working on farm for wages. Now we have hired some of them to help us with outreach.

We also have reunions,” she continues. “Every winter we do alumni calls. We have a volunteer in each cohort of 20 or so people who were here. The volunteer will call the other folks in the cohort and see how they are doing. That helps us know what our impact was, and to keep the relationships going.

We have action programs at the end of every session here to see what people want to do with the experience. So when the volunteer calls they ask: ‘How is that food coop you were going to start doing?’

The public speaking part of the Soul Fire work is rewarding, Leah says. At first she used to think of it not as ‘the work’ but just talking about ‘the work’. But a couple things have shifted about that. A lot of people who end up at Soul Fire events started out hearing a radio interview or being at a talk. The value of story-telling is more apparent now as the feedback loop has closed. A lot of Leah’s ancestors, she realizes, were lay ministers or preachers, and she has been thinking about the oratory tradition in the church. It is a legitimate way to catalyze action in communities. Some people who have heard Leah speak even end up donating land to the farm’s reparations program.

Speaking has also become an important source of income for the work. Of the quarter that comes from speaking and program fees, most actually comes from speaking. She talks to libraries and community groups, and that sort of the bigger universities will pay a significant amount for a speaker. So the fees keep Soul Fire from depending too much on grants and donations. They also have an honors programs. They all want to run their own businesses, even though there is pressure to do so from funders and the community. We want a kitchen table sized organization where we have authentic relationships. The land is sort of a model. You have each tree dumping its sugars into a mycelial network that supports the others. You don’t have one 400 foot tall tree, but a lot of strong ones the same size. The people who we have trained and supported are our success stories. Some people who have come here as trainers are now setting up similar programs themselves. That is exciting. And some farmers are now on land that has been donated through our reparations program.

“One day last summer,” Penniman relates, “I was walking with Emet and he said: ‘Mommy, can we just go back to having our farm?’ (she laughs) Our team is now nine people – that is a lot more than two. I’ve read that for every person you add to your team you need to budget 20% of your time to support that person. I was still assuming I would do 100% percent of the things I was doing before we all had these people. But it doesn’t work that way. The training, the supervision, the support, the relationships building, birthdays… There is a lot of stuff like that which needs to be done.”

Leah has been doing all the fundraising, public speaking, and media work for Soul Fire, though they are now getting people to manage that. But she feels proud of the pace at which the couple has built the farm, despite the work.

“We did this with our own resources,” she stresses. “That is how it should be done. We saved money, we borrowed money, we built things with our own hands. We had an opportunity to build the institution at a natural pace. If someone just drops a property on people who barely know each other and says ‘create an institution’, there are going to be challenges if people haven’t built trust, haven’t established any norms, haven’t worked out their goals and values.”

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Penniman has been surprised that some of the work she does has not been as challenging as she expected.

“She cites. ‘I thought that would be hard. But we have figured out how to get good at it. Or like farming this crappy soil. That is a challenge but we have managed well enough.’

The problem has been the internal stuff,” she continues. “How do we figure out how to all get along with each other, working and being in such close proximity? Someone is living here from March through November, in the guest room. We also have an apartment and a yurt that people stay in. During the programs our hired facilitators have tents on platforms they stay on. Right now we are constructing a bathroom so people will have showers and toilets away from the house. That will be a total game changer, without people needing to go upstairs in our house!

“The opposite,” she concludes, “would be worse, of course – if no one ever came here or visited or cared what we were doing. There are a lot of farmers in our community who struggle with that – what is the meaning of life, what am I here? But as the non-profit has grown I personally feel that it is more and more of a struggle to find the time to do those things that got me started in the first place. I have barely preserved any food this year, I’m hardly farming at all – just teaching a farming class.”

One of the many sprints Soul Fire is tending is a land trust called the Northeast Farmers of Color Community Land Trust. It includes Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Asian farmers all across the Northeast. Soul Fire is the fiscal sponsor of the fledgling organization, and is helping it figure out issues like incorporation and governance.

Representative of the sincerity with which the couple is acting, they are working with the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican community, who were originally in the Taconic region but were kicked off to Wisconsin. Leah and Jonah are offering that community a “cultural respect easement” on their land – a new tool only legally recognized right now in California and Maine. It works like a conservation restriction but allows to a native community certain rights in perpetuity – hunting, fishing, burial, things like that, not agriculture. The land trust Soul Fire serves will hold legal title to the easement for the community.

It has not always been easy, however, to work with these communities. Leah feels this is the organizing that most tests her.

Soul Fire Farm: 2018 at a glance

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7,679 people engaged through Soul Farming and Food Justice events.
“The land trust is really exciting,” she says, “but it is some of the most challenging organizing I ever did. I went into it really naively, you know: ‘All these people who don’t have land will be natural allies’. But I have learned a lot of what happened in history to the folks in the Northeast. It makes sense now in retrospect. I read An Indigenous People’s History of the United States by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. It helped me understand how colonizers used the divide and conquer strategy to cement their power. They pitted indigenous groups against each other. The seeds of mistrust, once sown, only get deeper. And so if I hang out with the chief of one tribe then the chief of another tribe will not be my friend – will just answer my calls. In the past groups have been divided against each other. The colonizers did this between Black and Native folks, too. The Cherokees were encouraged to own slaves before Emancipation. Blacks could join the Buffalo Soldiers, special branches of the US Army, and go kill ‘Indians’ out west and get land. What does all that do to relationships between communities?”

“So,” she continues, “that explains a little about when I say: ‘Hey, kumbaya! We’re going to have a meeting and form a land trust,’ I get a lot of: ‘Well, I don’t talk to that person or that other person.’ The work of the last year has stopped being about legal documents and we have listening sessions. We try to understand native communities and other communities and what is going on for them. It is not going to be over easily. There were centuries during which the divisions were fostered, so it is going to take more than a couple of months to heal them!”

At Clark Leah majored in science, so she’s not well versed in management skills. But she has been reading and studying that stuff.

“The way humans work,” she relates, “and the psychology of groups and organizations – people have done a lot of thinking about it. People work remotely, for instance. But there is interesting science that people work of the last year has stopped being about legal documents and we have listening sessions. We try to understand native communities and other communities and what is going on for them. It is not going to be over easily. There were centuries during which the divisions were fostered, so it is going to take more than a couple of months to heal them!”

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The Battle for Venezuela’s Seed Law

by Jack Kittredge
excerpted from an article in The Journal of Peasant Studies

“In late December 2015, amidst plummeting oil prices, highly politicized food shortages, and an all-around tense political climate in Venezuela, an unexpected event took place in the country’s National Assembly just days before a major shift in its political leadership. A new seed law was passed, with provisions including bans on genetically modified (GM) seeds and the patenting of life forms, recognition of both formal and informal seed systems, and protections for the seeds of the country’s peasant, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant communities.”

Thus begins an article in The Journal of Peasant Studies describing in great detail the social and political forces behind a striking new legal framework for agriculture in Venezuela. I will excerpt below parts of this article that might help US farmer-readers understand how this happened. It is a unique example of passing food sovereignty into law.

Agrarian and environmental movements from many countries have embraced this law as representing a radical break from prevailing global trends in seed legislation and governance and an unexpected win in an otherwise bleak political landscape. Such a landscape is characterized by ever-deepening corporate capture of the world’s genetic resources, facilitated by a global architecture of legislation treating seeds as private property as opposed to a commons tated by a global architecture of legislation treating seeds as private property as opposed to a commons.

The passage of the Seed Law was among the final acts of the Bolivarian-majority National Assembly in Venezuela before stepping down. The Law would not have been passed – and it very nearly wasn’t – had it not been for a groundswell of mobilization from below, together with critical openings within the state. This process known as the Bolivarian Revolution. Such conditions, in fact, had contributed to a major shift in Venezuela’s National Assembly during elections earlier in December 2015, from a majority aligned with the Bolivarian Revolution (chavista) to an opposition majority, for the first time since 1999.

Before 1999, when over half of the population was living in poverty and facing a lack of decent work and basic services into the late 1990s, the general sentiment among the poor working-class majority was that the government was not there to serve their interests. The rise of the Bolivarian Revolution in 1999 reflected an achievement on the part of the disenfranchised majority to shift the power balance and claim the political space they had long been denied. The assumption of the presidency by Hugo Chávez Frias, on a platform of social justice, redistribution of wealth, and sovereignty, was considered by many a major manifestation of popular power.

For the Bolivarian Revolution, a first point of order, in addition to addressing the immediate material saving and exchange long fundamental to human survival.

No less extraordinary are the domestic conditions in which the Law was passed, marked by economic crisis and deepening political polarization, calling into question the future of the country’s political process known as the Bolivarian Revolution. Such conditions, in fact, had contributed to a major shift in Venezuela’s National Assembly during elections earlier in December 2015, from a majority aligned with the Bolivarian Revolution (chavista) to an opposition majority, for the first time since 1999.

The passage of the Seed Law was among the final acts of the Bolivarian-majority National Assembly before stepping down. The Law would not have been passed – and it very nearly wasn’t – had it not been for a groundswell of mobilization from below, together with critical openings within the state. This article takes a closer look at this process, addressing the common question upon the Law’s passage of how did it happen?

Before 1999, when over half of the population was living in poverty and facing a lack of decent work and basic services into the late 1990s, the general sentiment among the poor working-class majority was that the government was not there to serve their interests. The rise of the Bolivarian Revolution in 1999 reflected an achievement on the part of the disenfranchised majority to shift the power balance and claim the political space they had long been denied. The assumption of the presidency by Hugo Chávez Frias, on a platform of social justice, redistribution of wealth, and sovereignty, was considered by many a major manifestation of popular power.

For the Bolivarian Revolution, a first point of order, in addition to addressing the immediate material
needs facing the population, was to build the legal architecture necessary for broad-based popular participation in governance, toward a vision of ‘protagonistic and participatory democracy’. In July 1999, a constituent assembly was elected to lead the process of redrafting the constitution through a participatory national effort, with an emphasis on inclusion of historically excluded groups. The result by December 1999 was a radically different constitution, passed by popular referendum, that guaranteed a host of new rights to the population and laid the legal framework for direct citizen participation in governance.

In the years following 1999, a challenge facing the Bolivarian Revolution has been the tensions between the unharnessed popular power, or constituent power, that had brought the revolution about, and the constituted power of the state. The Bolivarian Revolution has opened up important spaces for the construction of popular power, in tandem with a new institutional architecture, while also raising inevitable tensions between competing forms of power.

These tensions are within the highly heterogeneous mix of groups and individuals, across state and society, identified with the Bolivarian Revolution. There is no singular unified Bolivarian agenda for food sovereignty, with perspectives running the gamut from radical takes aligned with those of La Via Campesina to more mainstream paradigms involving large-scale, capital-intensive forms of production and distribution. A key factor influencing the latter is the enduring legacy of the Green Revolution and related processes of agricultural modernization in Venezuela since the 1930s. Out of the 76 crops grown commercially in Venezuela, nationally produced certified seeds were available for only 8 of these at the time of the last agricultural census (rice, corn, potato, soya, sesame, cotton, black beans, and pinto beans), and in limited amounts. The vast majority of commercial seeds are imported. An extreme example is in vegetable production, where, although production levels meet an estimated 80% of national demand, nearly 100% of the seeds are imported.

The 'starting point' for the current process as such could be considered 2012, with a confluence of events. The first of these was the Third Venezuelan Congress of Biodiversity. This event was significant both for its theme, ‘Land and Territory’, including a focus on the rescue of traditional seed varieties, and for the participation of a wide variety of social movements, including both peasant movements and urban groups.

A second key event was the seventh annual National Gathering on Peasant Seeds held in the community of Monte Carmelo in the state of Lara, organized by local communities and supported by INIA. This three-day activity culminated in the National Day of Peasant Seeds on October 29. Just earlier the same month, the National Assembly had announced that it would be taking up the drafting of a new seed law, breathing a sense of urgency into these activities.

Among the outcomes of these events was the formation of a National Network of Seed Guardians, facilitating citizen participation in the drafting of the new law and ensuring that it would be anti-GMO. Also the national campaign Venezuela Libre de Transgénicos (GMO-Free Venezuela, also referred to as the Campaign) was launched.

A backdrop to the events of 2012 was the intensifying illness of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez Frías, looked upon by many social movements as a key ally and point of political reference. Leaders of national peasant movements as well as international delegates of La Via Campesina had been highly influential to Chávez’s take on food sovereignty matters, including his assuming an openly anti-GMO stance. In 2004, Chávez called for a ‘Venezuela free from Transgenics’. When Chávez died in March of 2013, his staunchly anti-GMO stance was not yet reflected in the law, leaving movements without a legal framework to protect a position they had long taken for granted. Furthermore, the government he left behind contained a mix of agrarian tendencies, including those...
more aligned with industrial agriculture, reflected in a number of initiatives. Indeed, even the common perception among social movements was that many government officials believed that peasant-based agriculture was politically correct but not technically correct, and therefore along with the policies supportive of peasants for reasons of political legitimacy. But there was always the risk of going in the other direction, and indeed this would become a key point of tension. Faced with such realities, the loss of Chávez was a wake-up call for social movements. It was also a moment of reaffirmation of the popular power that Chávez had represented to them.

Though members of the Campaign had ostensibly been part of the drafting committee for the new Seed Law, they had been left out and had not been privy to the initial draft, which included safeguards for patenting of lifeforms and loopholes for the legislative fora to engage in contentious mechanisms for popular participation. When they saw the draft, leaked to them by an ally within, they mobilized. This included the release of statements, more significant media interventions, street protests and the building of new alliances, including with chavista political parties. These efforts succeeded in opening up a space of negotiation with the National Assembly.

Coming out of the meeting in the National Assembly was lots of motion on the ground, and growing tension among various alternative approaches to the drafting of the Law. The popular constituent debate process took on a life of its own. The movement was in a position to identify and analyze key elements of the Law, toward the goal of catalyzing popular organization for local seed production, and to move beyond the capacity limitations for seed production in different localities. A major focus of these activities has been the development of the People’s Seed Plan. A main goal is to build up local and regional networks of seed supplies rapidly as possible, and to build links between local and national grassroots efforts around seeds. While this has been a difficult and extremely low-budget effort, some support has come from the new Ministry of Urban Agriculture, which was formed right around the same time as the passage of the Law, and has been an important ally since. With a recent change of leadership of this ministry, however, from someone who had come directly from the grassroots to a long-time government functionary, the relationship between movements and the ministry is uncertain at the time of writing.

Indeed, the agrarian agenda against the Law intensified during this process. These sectors have been able to take advantage of new spaces of power opened up by the change of political orientation of the National Assembly. The Commission on Science and Technology has initiated a process of discussion in the Law in alliance with the private sector. In these discussions, the shortages currently facing the country are often used as a pretext for revising the Law to harmonize it with global mainstream seed laws and treaties.

The main arguments against the Law, revealing contentious ‘politics of knowledge’ at play, are that it is anti-biotechnology (narrowly defined in these discussions as genetic engineering, whereas the Law uses the definition of biotechnology contained in the Cartagena Protocol); biased toward local seed systems (despite the Law’s inclusion of differentiated systems for commercial and locally-controlled seeds); limits the technology to the point that it is anti-science. Recognizing the point that some members from the scientific community and civil society groups from 28 countries signed onto a letter in support of the Law and affirming its scientific integrity in May of 2016.

While the Campaign has been defending the Law against attacks, it has focused the majority of its attention on actually implementing it, convinced that this is the most effective way to give the Law both legitimacy and staying power. Concrete outcomes thus far include increased production and distribution of native potato varieties in the Andean region; partnerships between local and multicultural cooperatives resulting from agrarian reform processes and newly-formed Food Supply and Production Committees for the production and distribution of vegetable seeds in the Andean region; and largest market exchanges among urban and peri-urban farmers in Caracas.

Seed Law activists point out that such efforts would have been illegal or not in violation of various rules and standards prior to the Law, and are now flourishing thanks to it.

There are ample learnings of broader relevance to be gleaned from the Seed Law battle, several of which we will highlight here.

• First, participatory democracy cannot be legislated into existence; it must be constructed through ongoing practice, out of struggle.

• Second, the manner in which the activists worked inside, outside, through and between formal structures of the state, simultaneously making strategic use of different types of spaces and creating new ones as needed, proved essential.

• Third, the activists did not wait for political opportunities to arise, but instead worked to create their own spaces through coordination, often with the absence of them. Furthermore, action was often times spurred not only by perceived opportunity but by the need to be seen as proactive, to avoid the costs that a social group will incur from protest but also ‘the costs it expects to suffer if it does not take action’. This point is essential to our understanding of how the Seed Law battle unfolded as it did, because beyond the opening of political opportunities, what prompted the most intense, coordinated and rapid actions was in fact threats – the threat of a new Seed Law would not provoke a way for legalization of GMOs; the loss of Chávez as the ultimate ‘influential ally’ within the state; and the shift of the National Assembly towards a more anti-agrarian opposition-majority. This helps to explain why the Law was finally passed when it was at the end of 2015 – not because it was a particularly favorable political moment, but because the previous years were potentially about to be lost, and the costs of not taking action were perceived as being high. Thus, even while the chavista Assembly members had their differences with the activists, when it came down to either losing the Law or pushing its passage forward, they chose the latter.

While the Law’s passage represents a major win in the Seed Law battle, the battle is far from over, as implementation is attempted amidst fierce political opposition and massive economic challenges. But in the midst of this, the activists involved have not lost sight of what has been achieved and draw instruction from the experience thus far. One thing they have learned is to expect the unexpected in contentious political processes involving dynamic state-society interactions. What began as an effort on the part of state actors to legalize GMOs ended with a law categorically banning them.

A point emphasized in this study is that the grassroots efforts that spun out of the Seed Law process, including the Seeds of the People initiative and the People’s Seed Plan, are no less important than the Law itself, and can be understood as grassroots manifestations of it. This connects to another point emphasized by many involved in the Seed Law battle – that just as important as the content of the Law is the process through which it came to be, including the intense deliberation and envisioning that took place in social movement spaces, and the points ofarticulation, as contentions as they were, between these processes and those of the state.

The Green New Deal: Fulcrum for the farm & food justice movement?

by Eric Holt-Giménez, Food First.org

Over eight decades ago, the Dust Bowl devastated over 100,000,000 acres of agricultural land and the Great Depression threw 15 million Americans out of work. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt instituted The New Deal with sweeping national programs for work, agriculture, food, and land conservation.

Today, the plan for a Green New Deal recently announced by congressional representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders is facing down even greater crises.

Forty years of bipartisan consensus on neoliberal economic policies has produced unsustainable levels of global warming. It has also polluted our water, destroyed our soils, contaminated our air, and poisoned our bodies. This destruction has gone hand in hand with the rise of unprecedented economic inequality.

It is time to demand real—Rooseveltiann—leadership from our elected officials on climate and equity issues. But policy gridlock runs deep. As the Sunrise Movement points out, either politicians advance policies without mobilizing their base for support, or social movements mobilize without elected officials to farm demands into policy.

To create a policy sea-change, we’ll need both strong, broad-based movements and responsive, elected leadership.

This is why the Green New Deal is so exciting. It’s a plan to bring together progressive politicians and social movements. The Deal proposes turning our country into an energy-efficient, carbon-capturing, full-employment, living-wage nation by 2028. This will require a major government effort with massive social investment and bold economic policies to correct inequities.

Could the Green New Deal turn the climate Titanic around before all the icebergs melt? That depends on whether or not the lower decks take control of the helm.

The Green New Deal will need copious amounts of political will, and there are only two ways to create that: big money or the power of social movements. Compliant politicians and the unbridled accumulation of wealth got us into this mess. It’s up to social movements to get us out.

Which social movements in the US have enough skin in the game to tilt the country’s political will on equity and climate? The growing climate justice, indigenous peoples, and economic equity movements have been instrumental in addressing these issues in decisive and creative ways. But we need more. It’s time for the US’s farm and food justice movement to step up.

Why food and farming? First, because the industrial food system emits most of the planet’s greenhouse gasses, and farming is reeling under the impacts of climate change. Second, because food and farming are the nation’s biggest, low-wage employers. Complaint politicians and the unbridled accumulation of wealth got us into this mess. It’s up to social movements to get us out.

The farm justice movement is the agrarian wing of the food movement. It promotes regenerative and agroecological farming practices like crop rotations that use perennials to stop erosion, improve water quality and ensure soil health, and diversified farming systems with grains, tree crops and livestock.

These practices have been spreading throughout rural, urban and peri-urban areas, where permanent and organic farming thrive. For these practices to provide viable livelihoods, we also need deep structural reforms, hard investments, and economic incentives. The public banks mentioned in the Green New Deal could play a key role.

To stop the industrial overproduction of food—the root cause of food waste and agricultural emissions—we need strong supply management programs, equitable land access, conservation programs, diversification of farm income, antitrust enforcement, and market reforms. If farmers are also provided with a guaranteed farm parity price for their product, they can conserve land instead of overproducing.

Prominent social justice organizations like the Climate Justice Alliance and the United Farm Workers support the Green New Deal, conditioned on a participatory “just transition.” That is, “[Programs] centering on reparations, decolonization and building a democratic economy through the advancement of the social and solidarity economy.” In other words, no regressive climate policies (like France’s explosive carbon tax) that cool the climate on the backs of low-income and middle class people.

Social movements have an opportunity to join together as never before—not just to get behind the Green New Deal—but to form a broad-based, multi-racial, working class movement to build political power. Visionary leaders from these movements are already knitting together strategies for solidarity, education and action.

This is essential because without strong grassroots involvement, a Green New Deal could be co-opted by industry to greenwash their operations and avoid a just transition. For example, government grants and tax breaks could go to giant CAFOs to build methane digesters for the livestock industry’s vast manure ponds. We need to prevent disaster capitalism—profiteering on working people’s climate misery—in which every crisis is an opportunity for amassing more corporate wealth.

If farm and food justice demands are articulated in the Green New Deal, it could help us transform our food system. This would have a major impact on our economy, our health and our environment.

For example, if the Green New Deal proposes “[U]pgrading every residential and industrial building for state-of-the-art energy efficiency, comfort and safety,” then farmhouses, small towns, barrios and inner-city farm sites stand to benefit. If we attain “100% of national power generation from renewable sources” combined with a “national, energy-efficient, ‘smart’ grid,” it should allow towns and neighborhoods to produce power in ways that plow economic resources back into the community. Of course, any renewable energy production on agricultural landscapes must avoid making these areas uninhabitable sacrifice zones. For this, the Green New Deal must ensure community-based, democratic management.

If we are to “[Decarbonize, repair and improve] transportation and other infrastructure” in the food system, we need to keep as much of the food dollar as possible in local communities by growing and consuming our food in close proximity. The photosynthesizing power of green plants and the carbon-storing capabilities of soil humus could be vastly increased through the Green New Deal’s “Funding of massive investment in the drawdown and capture of greenhouse gases,” allowing for the reforestation of riparian areas, woodlots, and agroforestry plots, and even small-scale kelp farming.

The Plan for a Green New Deal opens the door to address longstanding justice issues by “[Taking into account and [being] responsive to the historical and present-day experiences of low-income communities, communities of color, indigenous communities, rural and urban communities and the front-line communities most affected by climate change, pollution and other environmental harm; and [mitigating] deeply entrenched racial, regional and gender-based inequalities in income and wealth (including, without limitation, ensuring that federal and other investment will be equitably distributed to historically impoverished, low income, deindustrialized or other marginalized communities).”

These measures need to be part of our social justice platforms to address the inequitable levels of climate and environmental vulnerability. We need jobs with living wages to build family and community wealth. Food-producing communities need to be desirable places to live where the health, education and welfare of everyone is guaranteed. This will encourage young people to build on family and social networks and become active political and economic citizens who can determine their own destiny.

A Green New Deal could also help bring the food movement out of its political silo.

Many food activists seem to operate under the assumption that we can somehow change the food system in isolation from the larger political-economic system in which it is embedded. Changing everything in order to change our food system seems like an impossibly big task. But the food system can also be a lever for whole systems change.

The Green New Deal just might be the fulcrum upon which the farm, food and climate movements can pivot our society towards the just transition we all urgently need and desire.
Agroecology: Science, Farming System, or Social Movement?

Excerpted from a longer essay by John Ikerd

I didn’t become fully aware of the importance of agroecology as a social movement until 2017. That year I was commissioned by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to write the regional report on Family Farms of North America in recognition of the International Year of Family Farming. At the international conference in Rome, where I presented my report, advocates of the global food sovereignty movement were well represented. They were clearly committed to promoting farming systems rooted in the science of agroecology as a sustainable alternative to industrial agriculture. At a recent conference in California, a U.S. representative of the FAO told a group that the U.S. has been one of very few dissenting voices at recent FAO-sponsored international conferences exploring the potentials of agroecology.

Perhaps the U.S. government, or agri-corporate lobbyists, see agroecology as a threat to their continued industrialization of global agriculture. Regardless, I believe U.S. farmers need to become more familiar with the concepts and principles of agroecology. Agroecology is not only a means of protecting or restoring food sovereignty to rural communities but also a means of protecting the individual sovereignty of independent farmers. The agricultural economy of the U.S. is increasingly dominated and controlled by large multinational agribusiness corporations that have no compelling interest other than maximizing profits and economic growth.

First, agroecology applies the science of ecology to agriculture. Ecology is a study of the relationships of living organisms, including humans, with the other elements of their natural and social environment. There is a common phrase in ecology that relates directly to agroecology: “You can’t do just one thing.” The relationships in agroecosystems, such as those in the soil and among plants and animals, are incredibly complex. Everything is related, somehow and in some way, to everything else. You must understand how a biological system works for one farmer on one farm may or may not work for another farmer or another farm—even though nature functions by the same principles on every farm. Agroecology respects the “natural ecology of place.” Agroecological farming systems are defined by principles rather than specific farming methods or practices. Methods and practices must respect the uniqueness of place.

Agroecology also respects “the social ecology of place.” Agroecology views humans as members of the earth’s integrally connected ecosystem. The farmer is treated as a member of a farm’s agroecosystem and the relationship between a specific farm and specific farmer is critical to the farm’s success or failure. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to do traditional agricultural research relevant to agroecological farming systems, because what works for one farmer might not work for another, even on the same farm. Authentic organic farming also is rooted in the belief that a farm is an organism of which the farmer is an organ or integral part. This casts serious doubts on the ability to standardize authentic organic farming. Farming systems other than organic that treat farmers as members and caretakers of the earth’s integral community also may be consistent with agroecology.

Equally important, agroecology recognizes that farms are inherently interconnected with the specific communities and societies within which they function. The economic sustainability of a farm obviously is interdependent with the willingness and ability of people in its local community, or the larger society, to buy its agricultural products. Less appreciated, the quality of life of farmers and farm families are critically affected by their personal relationships with others in their communities—their customers, their neighbors, and people they meet in town through churches, schools, or participation in public service. These relationships may critically affect the farmer’s sense of acceptance, belonging, and self-esteem. The quality of personal relationships affect the quality of farm life and also may affect the economic success or failure of the farm.

Third, as a social movement, agroecology was a natural choice for the U.S. government as a way to address concerns expressed through the food movement of specific communities and societies within which they function. The economic sustainability of a farm is closely related to the willingness and ability of people in its local community, or the larger society, to buy its agricultural products. Less appreciated, the quality of life of farmers and farm families are critically affected by their personal relationships with others in their communities—their customers, their neighbors, and people they meet in town through churches, schools, or participation in public service. These relationships may critically affect the farmer’s sense of acceptance, belonging, and self-esteem. The quality of personal relationships affect the quality of farm life and also may affect the economic success or failure of the farm.

The FAO of the UN, in its statement of support for agroecology, made the following points:

• The global food system is at a crossroads. The industrialization of agriculture has created a situation where we are faced with a growing global population, persistent hunger and increasing malnutrition, soil degradation, water pollution and depletion, and loss of biodiversity during a time of climate uncertainty. In other words, the current industrial system of agricultural production is simply not sustainable.

• The challenge is to transition to an agricultural system that is capable of meeting the food needs of future society, not only by increasing productivity but also by distributing food more equitably—while not only protecting the natural environment, but also renewing and regenerating the resources essential for agricultural productivity, and increasing agricultural employment opportunities. The social and economic impacts of agroecosystems are inseparable from the ecological impacts.

• Agroecology focuses on optimizing the inter-relationships among microorganisms in the soil, plants, animals, people, society and the geophysical elements of the earth. Agroecological farming systems are capable of increasing food production and nutrition, alleviating hunger through more equitable food distribution, increasing biodiversity, restoring soil health, replenishing available water, and increasing agricultural employment and livelihoods, while sequestering soil carbon and mitigating the ef-
Agroecology is adaptable to the ecological, social, economic, and cultural diversity of the many different places on earth where agriculture is carried out to meet the nutritional needs of people. Agroecology works toward farming solutions that conserve and protect ecological integrity, above and below ground biodiversity, and respects diverse cultures, aptitudes, and knowledge bases by honoring the contributions of women and youth to family farming, rural communities, and agricultural productivity.

Fundamentally different public policies, priorities for public investments, and research and educational agendas for public institutions are needed to meet the agri-food challenges of the future. Agroecology is the logical basis for evolving food systems because it is equally strong in environmental, economic, social and agronomic dimensions. Agroecology is capable of evolving as new challenges emerge and its multiple ecological, social, and economic benefits evolve.

The FAO’s position is supported by decades of agroecological research, particularly in the so-called developing nations of the world that are in greatest need of food security. A 2016 independent study by an International Panel of Experts in Sustainability (IPES) cited more than 350 scientific sources and described the evidence supporting the indictment of industrial agriculture as “overwhelming.” The IPES members are from highly respected academic institutions and international organizations around the world. They concluded: “Today’s food and farming systems have failed. Agroecology is the logical basis for evolving food systems because it is equally strong in environmental, economic, social and agronomic dimensions. Agroecology requires ways of thinking that are fundamentally different from the specialization, standardization/mechanization, and consolidation mindset of industrial agriculture.

Agroecology is a response to the need to abandon the “market fundamentalism” that supports and overwhelms the industrial food system. The “market fundamentalism” that supports and overwhelms the industrial food system was a noble experiment and one environmental and the other social, but rather fundamentally different model of agriculture based on multifunctional, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods for farmers around the world.”

Diversified agroecological systems can also pave the way for more sustainable diets and improved health. Olivier De Schutter, leader of the independent panel observed, “It is not a lack of evidence holding back the agroecological alternative. The way food systems are currently organized and valued is too complex and too large to a limited number of actors, reinforcing their economic and political power, and thus their ability to influence the governance of food systems. We must change the way we look at agriculture. If we are to reshape the future of food and food production, in the U.S. as well as the rest of the world, we must reset the political priorities and fundamentally reform farm policy. Agroecology is a logical alternative to industrial agriculture.

Agroecology requires ways of thinking that are fundamentally different from the specialization, standardization/mechanization, and consolidation mindset of industrial agriculture. The “market fundamentalism” that supports and overwhelms the industrial food system was a noble experiment and one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”

Agroecology is a response to the need to abandon the “market fundamentalism” that supports and drives industrial agriculture. The economic industrialization of agriculture has been a success experiment and well-intended, but it failed. In addition to the host of ecological and economic problems it has created, it has also failed to fulfill its agricultural purpose, it failed to provide food security. Even in the U.S., we have more people classified as “food insecure” or hungry than we had back in the 1960s. One-in-eight Americans are classified as living in poverty and more than one-sixth of American children live in food-insecure homes—meaning a home where they can’t depend on getting enough food to support healthy, active lives.

In addition the U.S. is plagued with an epidemic of diet-related illnesses, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and a variety of cancer. The industrial food system has failed to reduce the harmful or nutrient deficiencies alongside the rapid rise of obesity and diet-related diseases; and livelihood stresses for farmers around the world.”

The report concludes: “What is required is a fundamentally different model of agriculture based on diversifying farms and farming landscapes, replacing chemical inputs, optimizing biodiversity and stimulating interactions between different species; as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods. Data show that these systems can compete with industrial agriculture in terms of total outputs, producing particularly strongly under environmental stress, and delivering production increases in the places where agricultural food is desperately needed. Diversified agroecological systems can also pave the way for divers diets and improved health. Indeed, they can contribute to the resilience of local food systems, and to help build stronger local economies and communities. People have learned that shopped-in foods generally are not as fresh and flavorful, and are probably not as nutritious, as fresh, locally produced foods are. In the case of dairy products, eggs, hormones or antibiotics are more common concerns. Many farmers who sell locally understand the concerns of people who buy local foods and attempt to address these concerns. But it is not being addressed by the industrial food system.

In return, people who buy local foods often mention their desire to support local farmers economically and to help build stronger local economies and communities. Estimates based on comparison of local and industrial food production in general indicate that foods grown for local markets contribute about four times as many dollars to local economies as commodities grown for industrial food production. That is, buying local foods also helps to address concerns that are not being addressed by the industrial food system. Some experts may question the importance of buying local foods and the incentives to produce local foods cannot be reduced to economic motives. “Several studies have found that the social desirability of buying local foods plays a central role in influencing consumers to participate in the local food economy.” Many local food advocates care about community.

People tend to trust “their local farmers” to not only produce “good food” but also to be good neighbors, good community members, and good stewards of the land. In other words, the local food movement in driven by the desire of a growing number of people to restore ecological, social, and economic integrity to their food system. Local farming is not just for farmers. Some experts may question the importance of social, ecological, and unsellable economic motives for buying local. However, the fact that local foods are also cheaper than non-local foods is an incentive for people who buy local foods. The populatization of organic, conventional, or “certified organic”—may or may not be agro-ecologically sound for any particular farmer.

Integral ecology views the farm as a living organism. As suggested previously, it is consistent with the philosophy of organic farming, but the holism or integrity of organic farming, precision farming, or “certified organic” may or may not be agro-ecologically sound for any particular farmer.

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Farmers' markets are everywhere, selling diverse toward organic and sustainable growing practices. and regional food systems expanding with an eye ways the terms “success” and “achievement” de consumer. situation that continues to create confusion with the ment in 2018, we are left with a divided regulatory hydroponic and aquaponic through public state not certify hydroponic or CAFO operations based standards are dismayed at how this could have While many of the original architects of the organic sector has grown to meet demand, so certifiers are left to work together as a community in hopes of finding commonality. When we ask the NOP about certain scenarios and production sys system that took too long to come up. Snail’s pace compared to industry. The authors and rule makers understood that continuous regulations. Some think that the rule may not be from the original intent of the organic livestock Practices (OLPP) final rule, adopted in the final days – a newly appointed Deputy Administrator, Jenny Tucker, is in place with an eye toward consistency and fairness LLC (MCS) is a USDA National Organic Program accredited certifier, wholly owned by the Maine Organic Farmers and Fertilizers are everywhere, selling diverse and regional food systems expanding with an eye toward organic and sustainable growing practices. Farmers’ markets are everywhere, selling diverse items. In order to address the over-supply of organic products, farmers and consumers are facing challenges. The NOP has taken major steps to address these issues, specifically on imports. As the investigations moved forward, many were surprised to find that the NOP, through the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (OFPA) legislation, was not given the authority to examine imports at the border or ports coming into the country with certi. MOFGA’s Certification Services (MCS) is a USDA National Organic Program’s (NOP) certifier training, held in San Antonio in February 2018, the NOP had already received over one thousand vegetable shipments as conditions of entry). The MOUs were finalized in August 2017, and as of the train. Many hopes are in play as the NOP moves forward – a newly appointed Deputy Administrator, Jenny Tucker, is in place with an eye toward consistency and enforcement. While progress has been made, there is a lot left to do. It is our hope that the NOP will continue to make strides to ensure organic integrity of all USDA certified organic products, both domest. A prime example of where the NOP regulations, or consistent enforcement, have challenged the concept and future generations of eaters are counting on us! by Chris Grigsby, Director, MOFGA Certification Services (MCS) (note: this article was written for the Winter 2018. 19 issue, Alternative Certification Programs. It did not make it in to that issue and I wanted to be sure readers saw it. – editor) Established in 2002, MOFGA Certification Services LLC (MCS) is a USDA National Organic Program accredited certifier, wholly owned by the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), whose mission is to continue MOFGA’s program of independent verification of organic food production. Our program encourages promotion and verification of organic standards, and farm sustainability in accordance with the National Organic Program (NOP) standards. Prior to the inception of the NOP, MOFGA was one of several certifiers across the country who certi. One would assume that this national accreditation means that all USDA accredited certifiers make determination and verification decisions in the same way; but the rules are not clear that in some areas and were made to be flexible as the landscape shifts. When the first rule changes took effect and the organic standards system is eroding. While many continue to foster the ideals borne of MOFGA’s beginnings, new systems, technology and “maxi ing shareholder profits” elicit increased attention and pushback from others. At the annual Accredited Certifiers Association and USDA National Organic Program’s (NOP) certifier training, held in San Antonio in February 2018, the focus was on many of the mechanisms that have been broken down in the integrity of product certified as organic and steps taken to mitigate these risks moving forward. In addition, many cases have been discussed and presented to align certifiers around best practices for dealing with integrity issues in the supply chain. With journalism stories in 2016 and 2017 uncovering compliance and fraud issues both at the national and international level, the NOP has taken major steps to address these issues, specifically on imports. 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Fair from Farm to Retail

by Louis Battalen

The Agricultural Justice Project (AJP) and NOFA—two of AJP’s four founding members—have launched a two-year ‘Fair From Farm to Retail’ Project to support the organic farming community here in the Northeast in addressing our shared social justice values while striving for dignified careers for farmers, our families, and workers on our farms.

We are following up on the NOFA Domestic Fair Trade Committee’s 2013 survey of 280 farmers in which organic farmers identified several social justice values as important aspects to their operations and expressed a desire to create a just, equitable working environment. The survey also identified some of the challenges and pressures—wages, benefits, fair practices, a steady market—keeping these values from being achieved.

To help farmers retain that focus, and to assist them in addressing and implementing social justice practices, NOFA & AJP will provide—at no charge—assistance by providing free technical assistance and resources to farmers to help put into practice some of the hopeful values that have but may fear are too expensive to achieve.

Both organizations are driven by similar visions & principles and commitment to the organic farming community. We seek to combine the particular strengths of NOFA’s long-standing and ongoing relationship with and support of organic farmers with AJP’s social justice resources and standards, as exemplified by its Food Justice Certification Program, intended to connect farmers & workers—who, when they are small scale producers are themselves workers—with a common ground of recognition and support where fair pricing, long-term relationships, and equitable labor practices are assured.

AJP is a collaborative, non-profit initiative working to transform the existing agricultural system using a broad spectrum of ecological, financial, and social justice tools—including extensive toolkits and templates, and one-on-one technical assistance—to assist farmers in evaluating how well the extent of their commitment to social justice values is supported in practice.

Any business in the food system (farms, processors, restaurants, food co-ops and others) can become certified if it meets the standards for employment practices and trade practices with buyers and/or suppliers. Here in the Northeast, GreenStar Food Co-op in Ithaca, NY and Soul Fire Farm in Petersburg, NY are among the increasing number becoming certified. Two excellent detailed stories about AJP’s certification program, and FJC entities can be found in the Summer 2018 and Winter 2018-19 issues of the Natural Farmer.

As such, the ‘Fair from Farm to Retail’ Project now underway in all seven NOFA chapter states will concentrate on farmers’ relations with employees (including safety, conflict resolution, and efforts to achieve a living wage) and buyers (fair pricing; developing long term relations, achieving a premium in the marketplace).

In the project’s first stage we are looking for 50 farms to complete a confidential Farmer Benchmark Checklist, an edited version of the AJP Self Assessment Checklist. The survey is a confidential tool— which should only take ten minutes; can be completed on line; and does not send the farmer out into one’s fields —will help farmers to recognize many of the key criteria that constitute a ‘social justice’ farm & how well one is already enacting some of these elements. AJP will provide a summary review of helpful observations and suggestions for potential next steps in absorbing social justice policies and practices for each farm, including a list of resources and sample templates if requested. Full details of the Project and the Farmer Benchmark Checklist can be found at the AJP website www.agriculturaljusticeproject.org.

These are hard times for family-scale farmers. We all know this. But there are seasoned farmers with well established social justice values willing to impart their experience and wisdom and there are beginning farmers entering the organic community with a selection of employees, hearts, not yet in their practices. We seek the participation of both as we head in the direction of a healthier farming system.

What is critical here is that regardless of further participation by the farm or whether farms choose to seek AJP’s Food Justice Certification—farms participating in this Project are under no obligation to do so—both AJP & NOFA want to encourage farmers to begin to clarify and developing such practices, and are willing to support such efforts at whatever level of engagement, through tool-kit resources; workshops and presentations on specific issues; or certification.

As of this writing we are halfway to our goal. For the Project’s success we seek farmers representing a broad spectrum—urban and rural; diverse communities (vegetable, field crops, dairy, fruit, and mixed livestock and poultry) and types of operations (certified organic, certified naturally grown, biodynamic, ecological practices). We seek farmers with apprentices, interns, seasonal, temporary, migrants, and H2A; selling to retail, through CSA’s, at farmers markets; non-profit and not for profit.

From this first group of 50 farmers, we will identify 20 to complete the AJP self-assessment form, with AJP trainers providing any necessary assistance gratis, providing recommendations and resources for improving working conditions, policies, and practices on the farm, simultaneously demonstrating the processes used in an AJP certification audit, and illustrating how they compare with the FJC Standards.

In the second season, the AJP team will conduct, also free of charge, on-site demonstration mock audits to our Food Justice Standards at several farms spread across the region, at which any of the participating farmers will be welcome. Included in these audits will be interviews with managers and a selection of employees, for our program is unique in that the certification process involves both an AJP trained organic certifier and a worker organization representative. The certifier conducts interviews and reviews business practices and policies, while the worker organization representative confidentially interviews staff, employees and managers to get a sense of the workers’ experiences. This tandem inspection process helps to create a voice for workers while also ensuring policies and procedures are in place. These inspections may also be combined with organic inspections to reduce expenses.

As a second component of the project, we will encourage farms representing a broad spectrum—urban and rural; diverse communities (vegetable, field crops, dairy, fruit, and mixed livestock and poultry) and types of operations (certified organic, certified naturally grown, biodynamic, ecological practices). We seek farmers with apprentices, interns, seasonal, temporary, migrants, and H2A; selling to retail, through CSA’s, at farmers markets; non-profit and not for profit.

This second group of 50 farmers will participate in a series of workshops and trainings,运气, providing technical assistance, to farmers participating in the Project in the second season. The workshops will cover a broad range of topics, including social justice and human rights principles and practices, and will be held at the beginning of the season, and will be repeated several times throughout the year.

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Retailers are a significant stakeholder in forging an alliance toward creating equity and fairness in the food system. AJP believes food cooperatives, in particular, can be key allies in adopting this certification as a best practice especially as consumer demand for socially and environmentally traded products continues to grow. It considers how products are sourced and grown, both in terms of the environment and in the working conditions of the labor force. Consumers are also willing to pay a premium for these goods.

Consumers are seeking a reliable way to evaluate the fairness of the food they purchase. By bringing together and prioritizing respectful relationships among different stakeholder groups in the food chain, AJP is increasing this awareness. Brandon Kane, General Manager of GreenStar Co-op, a 1,500 member food co-op in Ithaca, New York, sees adopting the standards as a path toward the “creation of a sustainable community, with stable jobs and greater economic viability for farms, buyers, and retailers. Fairness and equity in the food system is obviously a top priority for our co-op members,” he says, “and thus should be emphasized in messaging to our membership and customers…providing co-ops with a host of metrics that demonstrate that we are truly walking our talk.”

Many people who buy from local family-scale organic farms and businesses assume that these farms and businesses are thriving financially and providing dignified working conditions to their employees. Unfortunately, this faith is undermined by the realities of the cheap food system which has prevented the development of a sustainable business model that allows farmers and their employees to achieve an adequate standard of living. Prices paid to family-scale organic and sustainable farmers have not been high enough to enable them to pay themselves living wages while also covering the costs of management, equipment, and other expenses. AJP—including NOFA and CATA—the Farm Worker Support Committee, based in southern New Jersey—and AJP itself are also founding members of the Domestic Fair Trade Association...
The 4th National Assembly of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance, October 12 – 15, 2018

by Elizabeth Henderson

The 4th National Assembly of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA) took place against a backdrop of intense labor struggle as Community 2 Community, the hosts for the gathering, supported a strike by berry farm workers led by the independent union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia. Attendees also took part in the 88th week of the “Dignity Vigils” that C2C conducts outside the Bellingham Washington City Council meeting. Led by C2C director Rosalinda Guillen, the vigils demand that the councilors make Bellingham a sanctuary city to protect undocumented local residents from deportation. I attended the Assembly as a representative of NOFA, which joined the US Food Sovereignty Alliance in 2017 as part of a deliberate effort to broaden our connections to efforts involving people from diverse sectors of the food system. The declaration from the Assembly lists the range of participants – farmworkers, food chain workers, fishers, family farmers, urban agriculturalists, food providers, and social justice advocates.

Jamie Pottier of Agrarian Trust, has a concise description of the USFSA: “the US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA), is a ‘US-based alliance of food justice, anti-hunger, labor, environmental, faith-based, and food producer groups’ that ‘works to end poverty, rebuild local food economies, and assert democratic control over the food system.’ With roots in the global small farmers and farm workers movement, La Via Campesina and the International Planning Committee of Food Sovereignty (IPC), USFSA is a network of organizations and individuals in the U.S. working to build solidarity, strengthen the political power of farmers and food organizations, and connect ‘local and national struggles to the international movement for food sovereignty.’ As described by the event’s organizers, it is “a global process inside of the United States.”

The USFSA has a very lean structure. There is no paid staff. This year, USFSA implemented a regional structure, “paving a way forward in practicing frontline leadership with resource support from grassroots support organizations.” (From USFSA “Our History”) There are two coordinators per region and a national leadership council made up of these 8 people. The NE coordinators are Kathia Ramirez of the Farmworker Support Committee (CATA) and Julianna Fischer of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA). Several not-for-profits provide fiscal sponsorship (Why Hunger) and administrative support (Grassroots International, Presbyterian Hunger Program, Pesticide Action Network and Friends of the Earth). Work is done by collectives of volunteers from member organizations: Political Education, Agroecology: Land and Water, Narrative Strategy, International Relationships, and Youth. Most of Saturday morning was devoted to planning for these collectives that have since been meeting by conference call.

Food sovereignty, a term coined by La Via Campesina in 1996 and elaborated in the Declaration of Nyéléni in Mali in 2007, is defined as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems.” Dorry Niaz, the new director of the National Family Farm Coalition, elaborates: “[Food sovereignty] for us is about being able to feed ourselves as communities of farmers, fisherman and fishworkers and feed ourselves culturally appropriate food,” adding that for producing communities, this right also implies having access to enabling resources. “For farmers that means, seed, land, water; for fisherman it means working waterfronts, access to fishing rights, and clean water.” For long term NOFA members, organic farmers, gardeners and homesteaders in the NE states, the term is fairly new, though the basic concept is totally familiar – what we have referred to as local self-reliance and community interdependence. What is different is the much more upfront anti-corporate and anti-capitalist political analysis and the greater emphasis on international connections. NOFA folks have been very focused on our very local work on our farms and gardens, learning how to do organic production and sharing that know-how with one another. We have not spent much time on ideological or theoretical discussions.

As a farmer, I was concerned that the food activists at this Assembly might be too theoretical and unaware of the practical struggles that farmers face since, like it or not, we have to be economically viable to survive in the context of the capitalist food system. So I was glad when there was a plenary session where a representative from the Canadian National Farmers Union told how her family lost their larger scale hog operation and have only been able to continue farming on a very small scale with off-farm jobs like 85% of the farmers in Canada (the US too). Darnella Burkett, an African-American farmer from Mississippi and daughter of Ben Burnett, talked about the Federation of Southern Coops’ strategy for outsmarting the racists who dominate food markets in the south by seeking fair prices for member farms by selling to supportive northerners in cities like Chicago and through Red Tomato, a not-for-profit distributor based in MA.

I also participated in a discussion group on “Land and Farm Justice Movement,” where Patti Naylor, a farmer from Iowa and a member of the National Family Farm Coalition, explained how the combination of parity pricing and supply management would ensure farm income and reduce the pressure to overproduce. Rosalinda Guillen told how four farm workers members of Familias Unidas por la Justicia have created a farming coop, Tierra y Libertad, where they are growing blueberries and raspberries that they sell to the Bellingham Food Coop. Their long range plan is to grow food for farmworker families as a top priority and then sell the excess.

For the 88th week in a row, Rosalinda Guillen, of Community 2 Community Development, calls upon the Bellingham, WA City Council to take measures to protect local undocumented people from arrest and deportation by ICE.

Opening Mistica, October 13: The Food Workers succeed in smashing the WALL (MURO) constructed by Monsanto, Walmart, ConAgra and the other representatives of the corporate food system.
They have leased 65 acres and hope to raise the $3 million needed to purchase it. Guillen proposed the formation of a national land trust or national federation of regional land trusts to hold land as a commons and oversee fair distribution to farmers of color. The Land and Water collective formed at the Assembly has a committee that is following up on Rosalinda’s suggestion.

The Assembly opened each day with a “mistica.” That name suggests a religious rite: the first mistica I witnessed was reminiscent of Native American rituals; a second one was more like do-it-yourself street theater. The third took the form of a series of memorial tributes to food sovereignty activists who had died since the last Assembly, Kathy Ozer, Jon Kinsman, Brother Dave Andrews and Charity Hicks. I appreciated the way the agenda integrated artistic interludes with workshops and presentations, and also the acknowledgement that we were on Lummi and Nooksack land in Coast Salish Territory. I think it is important to remember the history of where we are and to pay attention to the unresolved injustices as well as the human achievements that have brought us to the present moment.

Awarding the Food Sovereignty Prizes was the concluding event of the Assembly. Initiated by USFSA as an alternative to the World Food Prize (which goes with a hefty monetary award to industrial ag scientists like Norm Borlaug, credited with initiating the “Green Revolution”), the annual Food Sovereignty Prizes honor social movements and community organizations in the US and abroad. This year the domestic prize went to Black Mesa Water Coalition, a Navajo group that is providing alternatives to the coal mines where many of their people currently work. Robert Nutlouis gave an impressive talk about their work training youth in indigenous ways, growing gardens and teaching about food as medicine. The international prize went to Organización Boricuá de Agricultura Ecológica de Puerto Rico, recognizing this very grassroots group of farmers for the brigades they mobilized to help one another dig out and rebuild after Hurricane Maria.

In the spirit of La Via Campesina, the organizers of 4th Assembly issued a concluding declaration: “With our collective strength, we shout ‘No!’ to injustices in the food system everywhere and ‘Yes!’ to the people rising up to radically transform unjust systems and practices, for the betterment and survival of humanity and defense of Mother Earth. And to the inspiring sister movements across the planet working for food sovereignty, we sing out a resounding ¡VIVA! WE STAND WITH YOU! WE ARE PART OF YOU!”

To read the full Declaration – http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/usfsa-iv-national-assembly/
WHAT’S ON YOUR FIELDS?

IT’S TIME TO #PLAYFREE

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JOIN STONYFIELD AS WE STRIVE TO MAKE ALL PLAYING FIELDS ACROSS AMERICA ORGANIC AND FREE FROM THE USE OF HARMFUL PESTICIDES.

TOGETHER WE CAN ALL #PLAYFREE

STONYFIELD.COM/PLAYFREE
by Betsy Garrold, Food for Maine’s Future and Local Food RULES

In 2009 the inspector from the Maine Department of Agriculture, which had suddenly and internally changed their definition of milk distributors, walked down the wrong driveway. They did not actually say it was milk distributors but it was saying it was milk distributors and they had to prove that. They had to prove that the goat’s milk was not food and therefore not covered by the Ordinance. The inspector was charged with Nestle to protect their ground water. The inspector was a part-time lobbyist, and from local co-operatives in western Maine. But the inspector was not entirely discouraged.

The other “wrong driveway” was that of Craig Hickman, farmer, legislator, all around great guy. Craig and his husband Jop run a small farm and B&B in Winthrop and when the state inspectors told them he had to stop using his extra goat’s milk to make yogurt to sell in his farm stand his response was to run for the legislature. He became chair of the Agriculture committee and is one of the leading farmers and farmers. He managed to pass the ordinance founding on the Maine constitution’s Home Rule provision and on the work done by the farmers. We went back, this time with water allies. And this time we had a powerful ally whom we had convinced to mess with the home-rule constitutional issue. Senator Troy Jackson was back in the legislature although no longer on the agriculture committee. Troy Jackson, Michelle Dunphy, and a handful of Republican legislators. We did not win this fight but it was only through the political manipulations of one of our chief foes in the state senate. In the house, however, we passed the amendment on a recorded vote with the 2/3 majority we would have needed to get this on the ballot for the people of the state of Maine to decide. So we were not entirely discouraged.

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The Saga of Food Sovereignty in Maine

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Hannaford warehouse in South Portland. For weeks the produce aisles of the stores around the state were empty. No one knows if this had a big impact on our final outcome but the fact that a fire at a warehouse in southern Maine could lead to most of our major grocery stores in the state looking kind of post apocalyptic was a wake up call for those who are paying attention. The fact is that the food supply chain is fragile. And people need to be able to feed themselves.

We got the bill passed, unanimously in both houses. A bill that said essentially: if a town passes an ordinance to have control of their own food system the state will not interfere. We were gearing up for a fight to override the expected veto from the governor when, outside of all expectations, he signed it. Victories are possible. It just takes persistence and being ready to defend the gains we make.

But as a friend of ours likes to say: “You get to the top of the mountain and you think you’ve made it and then the clouds part and there is the next higher peak you need to climb.”

We knew this was not going to be the end. We did not rest on our laurels. We kept busy organizing the 28 towns that have come to us almost immediately after the passage of the law to get their own ordinance in place. Auburn became the first city to pass the ordinance with no assistance from us at all. It is part of the zeitgeist now. The ground swell is happening.

Remember the national attention I told you about. This time it was the USDA. They are threatening to pull our state’s “permission” to state inspect meat and poultry processors and force them to have USDA inspectors unless the legislature amended the law to exempt meat and poultry from local control. The USDA position was based on the 1967 Whole Food Meat Act (from which Maine has an exemption) that puts production of all red meat and poultry in the hands of the USDA at the behest of Big Ag. Maine runs its own meat and poultry processing program under a cooperative agreement with the feds. They were threatening to make us a “designated” state along with 48 other states.

The governor called the legislature back into special session to deal with this. At the same time they dealt with Ranked Choice Voting and the marijuana legalization regulations. It was some interesting sausage making in that special session.

And as Heather says “when a bully wants your milk money and threatens you, what do you do? You stand up and fight back. But what do you do when he wants your milk money and threatens your friends?” As usual this is a divide and conquer mentality that works well for the oligarchs often. We strategized and conferred with our legislative allies and planned our next moves.

We went back to the legislature, took our muddy boots back into the halls of power, and with the help of our friends in the legislature we amended the law to suit the USDA and not totally gut the ordinance’s power. It was a good day. Made partially possible by the fact that we were really small potatoes in the special session. They used the USDA “emergency” as an excuse to call the special session on order to gut Ranked Choice Voting and the marijuana referendum just passed by the people of Maine. The legislators were anxious to get us out of the way and start carving up the two things they really wanted to mess with, RCV and marijuana. The sausage got made and the beat goes on.

Since that time various versions of the Local Food and Community Self Governance Ordinance have passed in many more towns. We are up to 40 plus towns and cities as of this writing and with town meeting season just beginning to rev up we expect to add to the count this spring. Here is a link for more information: https://localfoodrules.org.

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Demonstrators tell the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that the way to feed the planet is the way it has always been fed: Small Farmers practicing Food Sovereignty.

This newspaper contains news and features about organic food and farming in the Northeastern US, as well as a Special Supplement on Food Sovereignty.