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Competing sovereignties, contested processes
The politics of food sovereignty construction

*Christina McGee Schiavoni**

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Abstract

This study provides a preliminary theoretical and empirical exploration into how 'competing sovereignties' are shaping the political construction of food sovereignty—broadly 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 agriculture systems.' This study was motivated by a lack of clarity on the 'sovereignty' of food sovereignty that had been noted by numerous scholars. Earlier on, questions focused on who was the sovereign of food sovereignty—was it the state? Was it communities? More recently, as there is a growing consensus that there are in fact 'multiple sovereignties' of food sovereignty that cut across jurisdictions and scales, the question has become how these 'multiple sovereignties' are competing with each other in the attempted construction of food sovereignty. This question is becoming all the more relevant as food sovereignty is increasingly getting adopted into state policy at various levels, calling for state and societal actors to redefine their terms of engagement. This study has attempted to explore questions of competing sovereignties, first by developing an analytical framework using the lenses of scale, geography, and institutions, then by applying that framework to Venezuela, where for the past fifteen years a food sovereignty experiment has been underway in the context of a dynamic, complex, and contested shift in state-society relations.

Keywords

Food sovereignty, competing sovereignties, Venezuela.

Acronyms

ALBA   Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América
(Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America)

CFS   United Nations Committee on World Food Security

CVAL   Corporación Venezolana de Alimentos
(Venezuelan Food Corporation)

EPS   Empresa de Producción Social
(Social Production Enterprise)

FAO   Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FONDAS   Fondo para el Desarrollo Agrario Socialista
(Socialist Agrarian Development Fund)

GMO   Genetically Modified Organism

IMF   International Monetary Fund

UN   United Nations

WTO   World Trade Organization

Competing sovereignties, contested processes[1]
The politics of food sovereignty construction

1   Introduction

1.1   Food sovereignty at a crossroads

> Food sovereignty is not a fixed principle, it's a process - it's happening, and it's been made to happen, through the struggles of peoples all over the world.
> — Paul Nicholson, La Via Campesina[2]

A source of inspiration, perplexity, fascination, and frustration, few would assert that anything has shaken agrarian studies and related fields in recent decades more than the concept of food sovereignty. Amid debates for more than a century on the persistence of the peasantry, self-described peasant organizations from 70 countries of both the South and North joined together in 1993 to 'globalize (their) struggle' in the face of an onslaught of neoliberal policies, founding the transnational movement La Via Campesina (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010: 149-157). Not only did this new movement burst forth on the international scene with a visible presence, but within three years, it brought into public light the galvanizing concept of food sovereignty—broadly 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 agriculture systems' (Nyéléni 2007a). Food sovereignty has since served both as an alternative paradigm to the current global food order and as the basis for a new social movement that now spans well beyond La Via Campesina itself, including diverse movements of fisherfolk, Indigenous peoples, workers, consumers, urban activists, environmentalists and others among its ranks.

Now with nearly two decades since its emergence, food sovereignty is at a significant crossroads in its evolution. Amidst a deepening of global crises that are exacerbating hunger and many of the other issues that food sovereignty seeks to address, some hard-fought gains have been won. Some of the very same social movement leaders who fought for years in the streets outside of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) calling for food sovereignty now find themselves on the inside through the recent reform of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) (where, as one Indigenous leader put it, the battle continues, but on different fronts (Schiavoni 2011)). At the national level, food sovereignty is part of the constitution and/or national legislation of at least seven countries, and up for consideration in a number of others (Beauregard 2009: 27; Godek 2013)[3]. At the local level, food sovereignty-inspired initiatives are increasingly making their way into local policy; the town of Sedgwick, Maine, is a key example, as the first municipality in the United States to adopt a 'local food sovereignty ordinance,' followed soon after by more than half a dozen nearby towns. Just as food sovereignty is gradually moving beyond the fringes into policy-making spaces, it is increasingly drawing interest in academia, breathing fresh life into long-standing debates, while generating new areas of debate and inquiry. This paper seeks to contribute to these debates by offering a preliminary exploration into the question of 'competing sovereignties' in the political construction of food sovereignty, looking in particular at the dimensions of scale, geography, and institutions.

From social movement vision to national policy framework—and back?

The gradual warming of state actors to food sovereignty as a policy framework can be seen as both an advance and a challenge for the food sovereignty movement, raising questions that are at once political, philosophical, and practical. Most fundamentally, what is the food sovereignty movement's relationship to the state? On the one hand, food sovereignty was born out of a perceived weakening of state control over domestic food systems and a need to 'reclaim lost juridical ground (including land)' in the face of neoliberal policies (McMichael 2013: 6). On the other hand, inspired and informed by radical agrarian populism, food sovereignty from the outset has also been associated with community control and a certain degree of autonomy from the state (Borras 2010). A second source of tension is that the constituencies that make up the base of the food sovereignty movement have long been on the receiving end of state-sanctioned policies that have undermined their very existence, from free trade agreements to land grabs. The fact is that the state

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[3] The seven countries that have adopted food sovereignty, according to Beauregard (2009: 6), are Venezuela, Mali, Senegal, Nepal, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. Godek (2013:1) adds that there are currently proposals for the legal adoption of food sovereignty in at least three additional countries: the Dominican Republic, Peru, and El Salvador.

has often been a *facilitator* of many of the very policies and structures that the food sovereignty movement seeks to dismantle (Edelman 2013).

A third issue is that part of what makes food sovereignty so powerful and appealing to many is that the concept as it is known today[4] was conceived of, not in the halls of power, but out of struggle and resistance. To borrow a question raised by Bryan (2012: 222) over the increasing recognition of collective rights to territory in Latin America, could elevating the principles of food sovereignty to the level of state law 'risk marginalizing the very practices that give them meaning?' Indeed, the adoption of food sovereignty by a state would seem to open up an immediate new arena of struggle—that is, to defend the very integrity and original essence of food sovereignty against possible cooptation, distortion, and weakening; to ensure that the marginalized are in fact in the driver's seat; and to ensure that food sovereignty remains a living, breathing process and not a reified set of norms. The adoption of food sovereignty into state policy, then, calls for a redefining of the terms of engagement between state and society.

What, then, might this engagement look like? While definitions and frameworks abound, the question remains as to what food sovereignty actually looks like in practice (Patel 2009: 663). One point emphasized by social movements is that, 'while it is critical to have a common framework, there is no single path or prescription for achieving food sovereignty. It is the task of individual regions, nations, and communities to determine what food sovereignty means to them based on their own unique set of circumstances' (Schiavoni 2009: 685). The call for food sovereignty, then, is not a call for a specific arrangement of the food system, nor is it a call for a set of policies to be implemented (though that might be one element). It is a call for a *process* by which a new ordering of the food system is constructed. Who, then, are the protagonists of this process? Food sovereignty discourse points to a prioritization of those who have been most marginalized and oppressed within the current food system—i.e., the food providers who make up the majority of the world's hungry and the growing ranks of the urban poor—as the main protagonists of food sovereignty. But in the face of the structural violence driving both hunger and exploitation throughout the food system (De Schutter and Cordes 2011), an enabling environment would need to be fostered for such a wholesale transformation to occur. This is where the adoption of food sovereignty by states and the processes that ensue span well beyond food and

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[4] Marc Edelman (2013) makes the important clarification to the 'origin story' of food sovereignty that the term was not in fact first coined by La Via Campesina in 1996, as many accounts go. He demonstrates that the Spanish version of the term, *soberanía alimentaria*, can actually be traced back to the National Food Program (PRONAL) of the Mexican government from the 1980s. From there, it was appropriated and reconceived by farmers' movements in Central America, some of whom were later involved in the founding of La Via Campesina. That said, few would disagree that La Via Campesina can be credited with putting a fresh version of 'food sovereignty' on the world map in 1996 outside of the World Food Summit (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010, Patel 2009).

agriculture, getting to the very heart of questions of state-society interaction. This is a point that will be revisited over the course of the paper.

Multiple and competing sovereignties

Adding to the complexity of state-society interaction in the construction of food sovereignty is the complexity inherent in the concept of food sovereignty itself. *Sovereignty for and by whom? And what sovereignty?* Attempts to unravel these questions are not facilitated by the fact that food sovereignty is built upon a concept deemed 'a perennial source of theoretical confusion' (Bartelson 1995: 12), as the concept of sovereignty has been contested and evolving essentially since its rise in the 16th century (Bartelson 1995, Hinsley 1986, Lupel 2009). One of the reasons behind this confusion, according to Bartelson (ibid: 18), is that sovereignty is associated with both internal and external dimensions. Externally, sovereignty can be seen as 'a reciprocal agreement among national governments giving independent states the right to pursue policy within their own territory free from external interference' (Lupel 2009: 3). Conversely, 'in the context of the internal structure of a political society, the concept of sovereignty has involved the belief that there is final and absolute authority in the political community' (Hinsley 1986: 158). According to Bartelson (1995: 16-17), this duality of sovereignty, in which 'the concept seems to connote two contradictory ideas simultaneously,' has gone largely overlooked and helps to explain why sovereignty has been so difficult to grasp analytically.

Could the dual nature of sovereignty help to explain some of the confusion around food sovereignty, particularly the oft-cited lack of clarity around food sovereignty vis-à-vis the state (e.g., Edelman 2013, Hospes 2013, Bernstein 2013)? It would seem that the external dimensions of sovereignty are far easier to grapple with conceptually than the internal dimensions when applied to food sovereignty. For instance, the idea of external sovereignty readily translates over to food sovereignty in the assertion that a country's domestic food production and distribution capacities should not be undermined by policies and practices imposed by the WTO, World Bank, multinational corporations, or other bodies. The internal dimension of sovereignty, on the other hand, is much murkier when applied to food sovereignty, at least following the traditional definition of Hinsley above. By its very definition, food sovereignty runs contrary to the idea of there being any singular, absolute authority when it comes to control over the food system. Food sovereignty, then, entails a redefining of internal sovereignty as it has been traditionally understood, along with a broader reconceptualization of sovereignty.

Some helpful thinking on this matter has been done by Raj Patel (2009: 668):

> ... one of the most radical moments in the definition of food sovereignty is the layering of different jurisdictions over which rights can be exercised. When the call is for, variously, nations, peoples, regions, and states to craft their own agrarian policy, there is a concomitant call for spaces of sovereignty. Food sovereignty has its own geographies, one determined by specific histories and

contours of resistance. To demand a space of food sovereignty is to demand specific arrangements to govern territory and space. At the end of the day, the power of rights-talk is that rights imply a particular burden on a specified entity – the state. In blowing apart the notion that the state has a paramount authority, by pointing to the multivalent hierarchies of power and control that exist within the world food system, food sovereignty paradoxically displaces one sovereign, but remains silent about the others…

In Patel's articulation, the state still figures into food sovereignty, but in a departure from traditional notions of sovereignty, the state is 'de-centered' (to borrow a term from Litfin 1998), making way for other actors across a variety of scales and jurisdictions. McMichael (2005: 591) notes a similar phenomenon across many of the movements that have arisen in response to globalization, including the food sovereignty movement: 'Corporate globalization generates the circumstances in which the modern form of sovereignty, while still relevant to counter-movement politics, is challenged by alternative forms of sovereignty.' He elaborates elsewhere that, 'Instead of the single-point perspective associated with the modern state, these movements practice a multi-perspectival politics asserting the right to alternative forms of democratic organization and the securing of material well-being through *multiple sovereignties* based in cultural, environmental, and economic sustainability (McMichael 2009: 39, emphasis added).

Taking as a starting point the idea that there are 'multiple sovereignties' implicit in the concept of food sovereignty (McMichael 2009; Clark 2013), this paper seeks to explore the tensions that arise as these sovereignties compete with one another in the attempted construction of food sovereignty. For instance, how is the desire for states to assert their sovereignty over domestic food systems in the face of neoliberal policies to be reconciled with the desire for communities to assert their own sovereignty over local food systems? Can both the state and units that lie within the state be sovereign with respect to food at the same time? And are all communities to be equally sovereign with respect to food, rural and urban alike? What does this mean when some communities have greater food production capacities than others? These questions speak to a complex array of 'competing sovereignties' at play in the construction of food sovereignty, particularly when food sovereignty is adopted into state policy.

1.2   Research question

This paper will explore the question: How are 'competing sovereignties' shaping the political construction of food sovereignty? This question will be explored through the three interconnected analytical lenses of scale, geography, and institutions:

- **Scale** can be understood as the 'spatial, temporal, quantitative, or analytical dimensions used to measure and study any phenomenon' (Cash et al. 2006). 'Competing sovereignties' around scale can be seen, for instance, in debates over models of production (e.g., 'large-scale' vs. 'small-scale' agriculture) and in questions over the level(s) upon which

food sovereignty is to be exercised, particularly when these levels may intersect and overlap (Patel 2009). For instance, is the construction food sovereignty an inherently local project, a national one, and/or an international one? If it is intended to be each of these at once, are conflicts bound to arise? These are among the 'competing sovereignties' that will be explored in Chapter 2.

- **Geography** has many meanings associated with it, essentially dealing with questions of spatiality and 'social relations stretched out' (Massey 2004), and is concerned with the processes and relationships by which places and spaces come into being. For the purposes of this paper it is used to look at the spatial divisions constituting 'urban' and 'rural' and the associated social, economic, political, and cultural divisions that have been constructed around this dichotomy. Food sovereignty is often presented as being inextricably linked to control over territory and questions of land, but what does this mean for the more than 50% of the world's population that lives in cities? Do they have any claim to the arable land and to the food produced beyond city boundaries? And conversely, does the need to feed growing cities impinge upon the food sovereignty of rural populations? These are among the 'competing sovereignties' that will be explored around geography in Chapter 3.

- **Institutions** can be understood as 'both formal organizations and informal rules and procedures that structure conduct' (Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 2), with some specifically emphasizing the interplay between formal and informal power at play in institutions (Fox 2007: 221). 'Competing sovereignties' can be seen both in interactions among different actors within institutions (Fox 1993, Fox 2007), as well in tensions between the different types of institutions competing for power in food sovereignty processes, particularly in clashes between community-based social institutions and institutions of the state. Another area of debate is the extent to which food sovereignty can/should be institutionalized, particularly in relationship to the state. These are among the issues that will be explored in Chapter 4.

Underlying each of these areas of tension are questions around the role of the state, the role of society, and the interactions between the two. When employed together, these three analytical lenses can be helpful in uncovering the 'competing sovereignties' at play in the construction of food sovereignty in a given context. To explore this issue in a way that connects theory to practice, lessons will be drawn from the case of Venezuela, where for the past fifteen years a multifaceted food sovereignty experiment has been underway in the context of a complex and dynamic shift in state-society relations in the country and surrounding region.

1.3 Country case study: competing sovereignties in the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment

In considering questions of competing sovereignties and state-society interaction in the political construction of food sovereignty, it is instructive to

look at Latin America, where the adoption of food sovereignty into state policy is among the trends associated with the region's 'Left Turn' that has brought a new wave of progressive governments into power, in response to widespread poverty and social and economic inequalities (Araujo 2010, Araujo and Godek forthcoming, Menser forthcoming, McKay and Nehring 2013, Clark 2013, Godek 2013, Schiavoni and Camacaro 2010). The adoption of food sovereignty into state policy is part of a broader effort in which 'the recovery of the state has been considered a necessity for strengthening national sovereignty, for recovering the public good, and for the very possibility of any significant societal change' (Lander 2013: 87). As might be expected, however, these processes can be rife with contradictions, particularly when 'five centuries of colonialism and three decades of neoliberalism have left deep footprints' (ibid: 99). Thus not only are clashes among classes and between 'left' and 'right' at play, but there also exist internal tensions within and between the progressive movements and the new governments they helped bring into power, as alternative proposals clash head-on with deeply entrenched approaches to 'development' (Lang 2013, Lander 2013, Brand 2013, Clark 2013). The case study element of this research thus follows in a tradition of engaged scholars interested in the openings afforded by the processes of change underway in Latin America while aware of their limitations and contradictions and seeks to enrich the body of critical research in this area.

Rumblings of change

Perhaps among the most unlikely of the countries to have adopted food sovereignty in Latin America is Venezuela, which is better known today for its role as one of the world's most important petro-economies and for its fiery, often controversial, politics than for its involvement in food and agriculture. However, it is a little-known fact that issues directly connected to food sovereignty were among the sparks that ignited the process of social transformation known as the Bolivarian Revolution currently underway in Venezuela. On February 27, 1989, hundreds of thousands of people poured down into the capital from the impoverished hillside communities on the periphery of Caracas, protesting in the streets as they looted shops first for food, then for other basic goods, then for basically anything in sight (Hardy 2007: 25-30). The protest was precipitated by President Carlos Andrés Pérez signing a deal with the IMF to enter Venezuela into a structural adjustment program, causing an abrupt surge in food and fuel prices in which the cost of bread rose by over 600% (ibid). The President's response to the massive mobilization of this day, which has come to be known as the Caracazo, was to order the military to open fire. The official death toll was 276 civilians, with actual deaths estimated to be in the thousands. Similar events transpired in cities across Venezuela on the same day. The Caracazo, which fits many characteristics of recent 'food rebellions' (Holt-Giménez et al. 2009)[5], is credited not only with being one of the earliest public manifestations against

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[5] This point was made by William Camacaro at the New York City launch of *Food Rebellions: Crisis and the Hunger for Justice* on 5 March, 2010, New York, NY.

neoliberalism, but with being a defining moment of popular power that ushered in a politically heated decade and paved the way for the rise of the Bolivarian Revolution, following the election of Hugo Chávez Frías in 1998 (Ciccariello-Maher 2013).

For insights into why an oil-rich country such as Venezuela would embark upon an ambitious food sovereignty experiment, it is important to understand the basic context that gave rise to the Caracazo. The shantytowns covering the hills of Caracas can be seen as a visual representation of Venezuela's withdrawal from agriculture as the country developed its petroleum industry beginning in the early 1900s (Wilpert 2006: 250-252:). As attention was turned to oil, both the land-owning upper classes and the government lost interest in agriculture and stopped investing in land. The flight of capital from the countryside was accompanied by a mass exodus of *campesinos* (peasants and rural workers) into the cities, especially into Caracas. With little work to be found, many ended up on the edge of existence, living in extreme poverty and arguably fitting the characteristics of 'surplus populations,' as described by Li (2009). For those remaining in the countryside—just over 10% of the population by 1999 (World Bank)—the situation was equally tenuous. 75% of the land was concentrated among 5% of the largest land owners while 75% of the smallest land owners shared only 6% of the land (Wilpert 2006: 251-252), and also faced a lack of basic services and support. The abandonment of its agriculture sector led Venezuela to become among the most urbanized countries in Latin America and the first country in the region to be a net importer of food (ibid: 250-251). At the beginning of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution in 1999, the country was importing an estimated 70-80% of its food supply—much of which was out of reach by the poor—and the Caracazo was still fresh in the public consciousness. It was against this backdrop that renewed attention to food and agriculture became a strategic priority of the Bolivarian Revolution.

What is the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment?

This paper frames the efforts toward food sovereignty underway in Venezuela as the 'Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment' for several reasons. First is the largely unprecedented and truly experimental nature of what is transpiring. While social movements in many corners of the world are calling for food sovereignty, only a handful of countries have thus far adopted it into state policy, and among the first to do so—by some accounts *the* first to do so (Beauregard 2009:27)—was Venezuela. In 1999, its newly reformed constitution guaranteed its citizens the right to food through 'a secure national food supply based on sustainable agriculture as a strategic framework for rural development' (Ministerio de Comunicación e Educación 1999: 108-109), to be carried out through a series of laws, institutions, and programs under the banner of *soberanía alimentaria*, or food sovereignty. This was only three years after La Via Campesina had launched the concept of food sovereignty into public light outside of the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome in response to the failed food and agriculture policies of the prior two decades (Patel 2009: 665). To adopt a new concept developed by peasants as a key national policy

framework could be seen as a leap of faith, especially for a country that had largely abandoned its agricultural sector. Indeed, successfully implementing such a policy framework would essentially entail a 180° turn for Venezuela's food system. Adding to these challenges was the fact that the concept of food sovereignty itself was in its earliest stages of articulation and development in 1999. There was certainly no precedent to follow, or even much by way of existing models to draw from, in terms of how to approach the construction of food sovereignty as a national project. Efforts toward food sovereignty in Venezuela have therefore evolved alongside the global movement that originally inspired them.

The 'Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment' is also a helpful way to frame the food sovereignty efforts underway in Venezuela because it allows for an examination of a diverse set of actors and dynamics. This is important because while food sovereignty is part of the language of the Bolivarian Revolution, is enshrined in a variety of national laws, is promoted by a variety of government programs, and is on the agenda of numerous social movements and grassroots initiatives, there is no one single plan or agenda shared by these many actors. What exists is a patchwork of different, and at times divergent, efforts happening at various levels and scales, some led primarily by the government, some primarily by civil society, and most by some combination of the two. This paper refers to this whole complex package when it refers to the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment.

With this in mind, it is important to consider two main dynamics that come together to characterize food sovereignty efforts in Venezuela. First is a national effort, guided by the constitution and a subsequent series of laws, to shift Venezuela from a situation of food *dependency* to one of food *sovereignty*. As described above, this involves moving away from a domestic food system characterized by historically high levels of imports and significant disparities in food access over the past century to one in which all citizens are guaranteed the right to food through a secure national food supply based on sustainable domestic production. The other dynamic, which has received less attention, is an attempted transformation of state-society relations, involving a shift from *representative* to *participatory democracy*, in which ordinary citizens take on a more active role in politics and governance. One of the main vehicles for this has been communal councils: local, self-organized governing bodies through which communities determine their own priorities, manage their own budgets, and interface with the government. Supported by the Communal Council Law of 2006, there are upwards of 43,000 communal councils in Venezuela today.[6] Most recently, coming from both above and below is a major push toward the construction of *comunas*, or communes, through the joining of multiple communal councils across a shared territory. The stated goal is for power to gradually be transferred from the state to the *comunas* as they become increasingly organized, with an ultimate goal of a transition from state power to popular power. As of October 2013, there were 220 *comunas* officially registered with the government and, according to a recent national census, over 1000

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[6] Daal, interview 5 August 2013.

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more under construction throughout the country (González 2013, Rojas 2013). The construction of the *comunas* is seen as the cornerstone of the latest stage of the Bolivarian Revolution.

As one might imagine, there are many complex dynamics at play in these ambitious visions, which translate into what are often messy and tension-filled processes when attempted on the ground. Perhaps it is this complexity that has led some scholars to bypass these dynamics in their analysis of food sovereignty efforts in Venezuela, focusing instead on state-led initiatives. This, however, is only one dimension of a multifaceted process characterized by efforts both from 'above' and 'below' and the dynamic interaction between the two. To focus on one component over another would be to miss the larger picture of what is taking place in Venezuela, as well as to miss out on some of the most interesting insights to be gleaned from the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment. Here it is helpful to draw from the influential study of Jonathan Fox (1993) on food politics in Mexico in the 1980s. In attempting to assess the factors contributing to the unexpected relatively successful outcomes of a state-supported food program, he found that both state-centered and society-centered approaches failed to explain the dynamics at play. Instead, the outcomes could only be explained through an *interactive approach* that focused on the 'interaction between state and society, the institutions that mediate such interaction, and the factors that account for how those institutions are in turn transformed' (ibid: 39). Employing such an approach, Fox was able to uncover how certain openings from above facilitated by reformist actors within the state were met with mobilization by societal actors from below that 'shifted the boundaries of what was politically possible' (ibid), yielding unexpected outcomes that empowered rural communities. Similar to Fox's findings in Mexico, although based upon a different historical moment and political context, this paper asserts that the most interesting developments related to food sovereignty in Venezuela—and those most relevant to the question of competing sovereignties—are to be found at the intersection of state and society.

1.4   Methodology & methods

This study explores the question of 'competing sovereignties' of food sovereignty through the lens of state society interaction, drawing upon the interactive approach developed by Fox (1993) to draw lessons from the case of Venezuela. Analysis is divided into the three broad categories of scale, geography, and institutions, as described above. The research methodology of this study was qualitative in nature, with a combination of methods including critical analysis of existing literature and field research to gather primary data. The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase, begun in the spring of 2013, consisted of critical analysis of literature on food sovereignty and on state-society interaction, with a particular focus on the concept of sovereignty, including its origins and historical context, state-centered and people-centered interpretations, and the current crossroads scholars are at in their evolving understandings of the concept. The second phase, carried out in the summer of 2013, consisted of field research in Venezuela, using a

combined approach of individual and collective semi-structured interviews complemented by participant observation.

The general aim of the field research in Venezuela was to gain insights into how those who are actually working towards food sovereignty are both perceiving and navigating the 'competing sovereignties' that emerge. In particular, this research sought to uncover tensions existing between state and societal actors and how those tensions were being addressed. The research thus entailed looking beyond efforts explicitly focused on food and agriculture to broader processes of citizen participation and state-society interaction in Venezuela, looking especially at the juncture of the two. An area of focus was thus the process of the construction of *comunas*, as dynamic spaces of citizen organization and main vehicles for state-society interaction in Venezuela today, as described above. The research was carried out as an exploratory case study, as it was focused on an emerging topic for which little prior empirical data existed (as had been noted by several recent studies, e.g., McKay and Nehring 2013 and Kappeler 2013) and the goal was thus to help build more of a foundation for future research (Yin 2009, Streb 2010). The main unit of analysis was the politics of state-society interactions in the political construction of food sovereignty in the context of competing sovereignties as these get played out in the *comunas*.

Field research was carried out over the course of five weeks, from July 20 through August 25, 2013. During this period, twenty formal interviews with key informants were conducted in four different states, in addition to many more informal interviews and exchanges conducted through participant observation. The primary sites of study were four *comunas*, two urban and two rural, in two different states, which are listed in Appendix B. A balance of urban and rural perspectives was sought in order to explore questions of competing sovereignties related to geographical differences. In addition to these four *comunas*, other sites visited included farmer and fisherman-run cooperatives, government-run 'Social Production Units,' urban farms, public and private food distribution outlets, and government offices.

The twenty key informants were selected for their involvement in food sovereignty efforts. The majority of them were grassroots actors involved in the construction of *comunas*, and five held government positions. One of the government representatives was not directly working on food sovereignty but had been involved in the legislation supporting the formation of communal councils and *comunas* and had recently written a book on the topic (Daal 2013). Approximately half of the key informants were identified prior to the field research through existing contacts for their leadership in movements known to be active in food sovereignty efforts in Venezuela, such as the Jirajara Peasant Movement and GMO-Free Venezuela. The rest were identified over the course of the field research via referral from the initial key informants, in a process of snowball sampling (O'Leary 2010). The names and affiliations of the key informants are listed in Appendix A. The use of key informants is an example of purposive sampling, in that they were selected for their particular knowledge and experience, not because they were representative of the wider population (ibid). This study was thus not designed in such a way as to be generalizable. A

lack of generalizability need not take away from the intrinsic value of a study in qualitative research, however, particularly in uncovering new information in under-researched areas (Siggelkow 2007).

The interviews, while open-ended and flexible in order to allow for unanticipated courses of discussion, were centered on the following questions:

- How do interpretations of food sovereignty compare and contrast between state and non-state actors, at the local and at the national levels?

- What are the dynamics between food sovereignty efforts supported by state institutions and efforts coming from below? Where do they intersect, complement, and contradict each other?

- To what extent are forms of citizen organization such as communal councils and *comunas* in Venezuela facilitating citizen engagement in and increasing popular control over the food system? What is their relationship with the national government when it comes to issues of food sovereignty? What areas of tension are there?

- What are popular perceptions about the role of the state and the role of communities regarding food sovereignty in Venezuela? How are these being navigated by different actors?

- What are the differences in how food sovereignty is understood and approached by urban and rural populations? What are the challenges to constructing food sovereignty in a country as urbanized as Venezuela, and how are these being addressed?

The interviews were conducted in Spanish by the researcher and were recorded via audio recorder. They were later transcribed by a third party.

The participant observation component involved living with host families in two of the four *comunas* visited, one urban and one rural. This facilitated a more in-depth glimpse into how the *comunas* function as vehicles for citizen organization. This included the opportunity, for instance, to witness a communal parliament meeting attended by representatives of each of the communal councils comprising the *comuna* as well as the general public. Another component of the participant observation was participation in three social movement gatherings in three different states, one that was state-wide in scope, one at the national level, and one that included international participants. The participant observation assisted the researcher in making connections which helped to build trust and facilitate the interview process; put the interviews into context; and gain important insights which informed the investigation. Information gleaned from the interviews and participant observation was complemented and cross-checked via the use secondary sources, such as academic articles, government websites, NGO reports, and World Bank statistics. Finally, it should be noted that this research builds upon prior investigations of food and agricultural issues in Venezuela beginning in 2006 (see, for instance, Schiavoni and Camacaro 2010), which have also helped to inform this most recent study.

1.5   Scope and limitations

As mentioned above, this study offers a *preliminary* exploration into the question of 'competing sovereignties' of food sovereignty. Among the many possible dimensions to explore, this paper focuses the three areas of scale, geography, and institutions as a starting point. This is an effort to contribute to an as-of-yet underexplored area at a moment in which the boundaries of knowledge on food sovereignty are rapidly moving, as evidenced by a recent conference generating over 80 new papers on food sovereignty in September of 2013.[7] While lessons are drawn from the case of Venezuela, the field work was also quite preliminary and limited in scope. In no way do the findings paint a comprehensive picture of what is happening in Venezuela with regard to food sovereignty, nor do the key informants represent the full range of actors involved. The aim was to focus in on the particular elements considered to be of greatest relevance to the broader questions at hand in this study. Furthermore, the political processes underway in Venezuela are highly complex and subject to extensive debate. This paper has sought to strike a balance in which adequate context on Venezuela's political process is provided as needed without allowing the paper to become dominated by this, which could detract from its broader relevance.

Another element for disclosure is that the researcher is coming to this topic as an 'insider' to the food sovereignty movement, having worked for over a decade with movements based in the US, Venezuela, and other countries. As laid out by Edelman (2009), this position as an 'engaged' scholar in relationship to the movements being studied, while presenting certain challenges, also allows for certain synergies that can increase the richness and relevance of the research. In the field research in Venezuela, pre-existing relationships facilitated access to people and spaces that may not otherwise have been accessed, and allowed key informants to speak with a heightened degree of candor and thoughtful self-critique, as will be evident in the sections that follow. The researcher's prior experience as a practitioner also gave her an eye to what information was likely to be of relevance to those actually working to construct food sovereignty on the ground; thus it is hoped that this paper could be a contribution in that sense as well. Finally, all of the translations from Spanish into English in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are the researcher's own, as are any errors or shortcomings associated with them.

1.6   Overview of chapters

The next three chapters will bring readers through an exploration of 'competing sovereignties' of food sovereignty through the lenses of scale, geography, and institutions, respectively, with dynamics of state-society interaction underlying each. Each chapter seeks to integrate theoretical discussions with relevant literature and empirical evidence from the field. Chapter 5 will provide a conclusion and suggest directions for further research.

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[7] See http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/foodsovereignty/papers.html.

2 Beyond boundaries: competing sovereignties across scale

When social movement leaders from across the globe came together in Sélingué, Mali for the Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty to articulate a common framework and collective vision for the growing global food sovereignty movement, among the outputs were the following six pillars of food sovereignty (Nyéléni 2007b):

I	Focuses on Food for People
II	Values Food Providers
III	Localises Food Systems
IV	Puts Food Locally
V	Builds Knowledge and Skills
VI	Works with Nature[8]

Given the explicitly local emphasis of two out of the six pillars of this globally recognized framework, what are the implications for the construction of food sovereignty when adopted into state policy? It should be mentioned that elsewhere in the Nyéléni output documents (Nyéléni 2007a) is reference to both the state ('food sovereignty is considered a basic human right, recognised and implemented by communities, peoples, states and international bodies') and to the national level ('Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets'). However, in grouping the state together with units both within and outside of state borders and in pairing national-level efforts with local-level efforts, these references arguably add more complexity than clarity. The task of reconciling the 'competing sovereignties' implicit in this framework is left to the actors involved in constructing food sovereignty in a given context.

In exploration of 'competing sovereignties' in the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment, among the most contentious issues to surface were those related to scale. For many social movement actors, particularly in rural areas, the construction of food sovereignty is something that must start locally and build outward. Many of the state-sponsored programs, on the other hand, seem to approach food sovereignty primarily as a national-level project, with a focus on increasing the net national food supply, strengthening national distribution channels, and favoring the type of production that most readily lends itself to this vision. As the construction of *comunas* appears to be tilting the balance in favor of more decentralized models, one question is whether and how state institutions are able to respond to this push from below. There is also the question of whether emerging articulations of food sovereignty associated with the construction of the *comunas* can meet the food needs of Venezuela's predominantly urban population. These questions will be

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[8] For elaboration of the 6 pillars of food sovereignty, see Appendix C.

addressed in the next two chapters, but first, this chapter will provide a further exploration of competing sovereignties around multiple dimensions of scale in the construction of food sovereignty.

In Building *Relational Food Sovereignty Across Scales: An Example from the Peruvian Andes*, Iles and Montenegro (2013: 7) note a tendency for there to be multiple meanings attached to scale in reference to food sovereignty, as a result of which 'the promotion of particular scales has become an undifferentiated mix of size, levels of decision-making and organizing, and the relational processes at their intersection.' Building upon the work of Sayre (2005, 2009), they suggest looking at the three following dimensions of scale as related to food sovereignty: *scale as size*, *scale as level*, and *scale as relation*, with an emphasis on the last. This framework will be employed here in an examination of tensions around scale in the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment.

Scale as size

Iles and Montenegro (2013: 14) argue that 'the tendency in food sovereignty discourse has been to align scale with size (or a proxy such as capital-intensity). Yet size is only one dimension of scale, and arguably the least interesting from the standpoint of food sovereignty.' Robbins (2013: 31-35), on the other hand, makes the case that the size dimension of scale, when associated with capital-intensity, is one of several defining features in determining the extent to which a food system is oriented toward food sovereignty. That is, on one end of the spectrum, oriented away from food sovereignty, is larger-scale, capital-intensive, industrial production, while on the other end, oriented toward food sovereignty, is smaller-scale, less capital-intensive production. This is quite relevant to the case of Venezuela, where these two competing ends of the spectrum are a source great tension, both among and between state and non-state actors. Indeed, as a process of agrarian reform is making it possible to re-envision and reshape what agriculture looks like for the country (Wilpert 2006, McKay 2011, Enriquez 2013), there is an internal battle taking place over the model and scale of agriculture upon which Venezuela's food sovereignty should depend. For some, there is no question that the *conuco*, a traditional form of small-scale agriculture with indigenous origins, should serve as the foundation for food sovereignty, and *'Viva el conuco!'* has become a rallying cry among the agroecology and anti-GMO movements. For others, given the radical shift that Venezuela is attempting to make from heavy dependence upon imported foods to self-sufficiency through domestic production, the only path to reach this goal in the foreseeable future is via large-scale industrial agriculture. In what some see as a contradiction, both of these competing visions are currently being supported by different state policies and programs, from credits for agroecology projects and support for biological control laboratories to the provision of large-scale agricultural machinery and chemical inputs.

It should be mentioned that the current debate in Venezuela over what model of agriculture should serve as the basis for the country's agrarian transformation, as part of a broader process of social transformation, is neither

unique to Venezuela nor to this particular historical juncture. In the opening of *Peasants and the Art of Farming: A Chayanovian Manifesto*, Ploeg (2013: 2) reflects on debates around agriculture in Russia the aftermath of the 1917 revolution and more broadly:

> …should those engaged in the transition toward socialism regard peasant agriculture as something to be continued or transformed? Are peasant models of production a promising way to produce food and make significant and substantial contributions to the development of society as a whole? Or are other forms of production, such as large, state-controlled cooperatives (be it kolkhozes, people's communes, or whatever) far superior? …Wherever power was seized or major regime shifts occurred, the question was asked whether socialism (or more generally, a better society) could be constructed by giving peasants a prominent role in the overall process of rural development.

These questions of course are tied not only to scale, but also to the role of peasants as actors. While the latter is less of a question in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution, where peasants are generally seen as a small but important base (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 200-217), the question of whether agriculture should be oriented more toward peasant-based models and scales of production or toward industrial agriculture is a matter of central concern to the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment. Going back to 1917, a vocal advocate of peasant-based agricultural systems from that time, whose work remains of critical relevance to this day, is Alexander Chayanov. Based on extensive study of peasant agriculture in Russia, Chayanov argued that peasant-based agriculture was not only superior to capital-intensive agriculture in terms of production, but that peasant-based agriculture, while conditioned by capitalism, functioned with a logic outside of capitalism, and thus held the seeds of broader social transformation (Ploeg 2013: 5-6). These same arguments can be seen today in Venezuela. According to Gabriel Pool, who is a member of the Jirajara Peasants Movement and works for the state-run 'Legumes of ALBA' Mixed Socialist Enterprise (interview 6 August 2013), there is already ample evidence from Venezuela, as well as from neighboring countries such as Brazil, that smaller-scale, peasant-based, agroecological systems such as the *conuco* are not surpassed in their productivity by more capital-intensive forms of production, including those based on biotechnology. Pool is clear, however, that 'this is not simply about an increase in production,' but about reclaiming Venezuela's agrarian heritage, dating back to pre-colonial times, and renewing aspects of it that point toward a more just and sustainable future.

Pool is also among the vocal critics of state support for industrial agriculture, which he sees as being contrary to the interests of food sovereignty, a theme identified by a number of the key informants as an area of concern. As an example, he points to the recent nationalization of the country's largest agricultural input chain, AgroIsleña, which the state continues to run under the name AgroPatria 'but is no more than a chavista AgroIslena.' Practices such as this, according to Pool, undermine some of the more innovative efforts being supported by the state, such as financing for farmer-led research projects that build upon locally-held knowledge. Relatedly,

underway at the moment in Venezuela is a heated battle over whether or not a revised national Seed Law should include a ban on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) (see Mills and Camacaro 2013). Over the course of debates on the law, internal divisions have surfaced as some National Assembly members backed by social movements have failed to speak out against GMOs. In fact, a version of the law that would have paved the way for legal introduction of GMOs into Venezuela was nearly approved by the National Assembly in October 2013 before social movements forced the process to a halt, catalyzing a national consultation process over the law. According to Ana Felicien of GMO-Free Venezuela (Venezuela Libre de Transgénicos) (interview 6 August 2013), the controversy over the Seed Law in Venezuela points to the continued entrenchment of Green Revolution ideology as well as to competing interests within the government, both of which are cause for constant vigilance by social movements. Critical to achieving food sovereignty in Venezuela, according to Felicien, is a process of 'technological decolonization.'

Scale as level

The scale of agricultural production has important implications for how the broader food system is organized, which brings us to *scale as level*. In Chayanov's vision, key components of the organization of the food system, as summarized by Bernstein (2009: 63), were 'peasants/small farmers + cooperatives + a supportive state.' Cooperatives were the central component of Chayanov's Theory of Vertical Cooperation, which addressed how peasant-based agriculture, if organized via cooperatives, could fit to a variety of organizational scales (Shanin 2009: 88). While Chayanov is often mischaracterized as a 'small is beautiful' proponent (ibid: 94), in fact he envisioned 'a flexible combination of large and small units, defined by the different optimal sizes within different branches of agricultural production, i.e. the adjustment of units to sizes best suited to production…' (ibid: 89). Furthermore, he envisioned 'a multi-level cooperative movement, a cooperative of cooperatives, organised "from below" and facilitated but not managed by the government' (ibid).

There are some striking parallels between this vision of Chayanov articulated nearly a century ago and the vision being articulated by members of the *comunas* in Venezuela today. Before exploring these parallels further, however, it is important to note that earlier on in the Bolivarian Revolution, there had been a push for the formation of cooperatives, which was met with only limited success. This emphasis on cooperatives had been tied to the earlier stages of the agrarian reform process, in which priority was given to the granting of collective titles to newly recovered land holdings, coupled with government support for the formation of cooperatives. According to Clark (2010: 148), such promotion of cooperative development resulted in an unprecedented blossoming of agricultural and other types of cooperatives, such that from 1998 to 2006, the number of cooperatives in Venezuela registered with the government rose dramatically from 877 to 69,231. But while some of these cooperatives succeeded and flourished, many of them

failed. One reason is that some failed to become economically viable, but another, perhaps more fundamental, issue also pointed out by both Clark (ibid) and Page (2010) was a lack of alignment between the goals and values connected to cooperative promotion program and those of the participants. According to Clark (2009: 148), some who enrolled in the cooperative formation programs did so primarily to receive the associated government benefits and treated them as small businesses as opposed to cooperatives. Page (2010: 263) paints a rather more complex scenario in which prospective farmers may have entered cooperative formation programs with the best of intentions, but then struggled to adjust their prior conceptions of 'work' and to shift their thinking from the individual to the collective, while also struggling with a lack of agricultural knowledge that was not adequately compensated for by the technical support available.

In response to some of these challenges, the Venezuelan government has more recently shifted its approach to promoting Social Production Enterprises or Empresas de Producción Social (EPSs), which, as described by Clark (2010: 148-150), generally 'entail more state oversight and regulation than cooperatives, though they are worker/community-controlled at the local level.' These new enterprises, in addition to entailing a shift in social relations of production (in which those working the land seem to be viewed less as *campesinos* and more as workers who collectively control the means of production) also entail a shift in terms of scale in that they tend to be larger and more industrial in nature than many of the cooperatives that existed before them, and those that continue to exist. Furthermore, the EPSs are for the most part geared to feed into national supply channels via the state-run Venezuelan Food Corporation (CVAL) and distributed through state-run distribution channels such as the Mercal network of subsidized supermarkets.

As *comunas* are increasingly taking up the issue of food sovereignty, some of them are encountering tensions with these more centralized mechanisms of the state. This can be seen in an experience described by Angel Prado of the rural *comuna* El Maizal in the state of Lara (interview 23 August 2013). As a condition for receiving credit for corn production from a particular state financing agency, FONDAS, all the corn produced in El Maizal must be sold to CVAL, through which it is processed into cornmeal (the main ingredient of *arepas*, a major Venezuelan staple) and distributed via state-run food distribution networks. While this system is preferable over selling corn to private intermediaries because producers are guaranteed a fair price by the state, as El Maizal works to strengthen its food sovereignty locally, it is encountering barriers under the current system. For instance, some communities within El Maizal have continued the traditional practice of making *arepas* using fresh corn cooked over a fire, which they consider superior both in taste and nutrition. Yet the current agreement with the state does not have the flexibility to allow for a portion of the corn to go straight to the communities. There is also the irony of there sometimes being shortages of cornmeal in El Maizal due to ongoing issues with food distribution channels, a major challenge currently being confronted by the state, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Prado is quick to emphasize that he is not against the state and that El Maizal sees it as its commitment to contribute to national food sovereignty: 'We want to help Venezuela to stop being a food importer and we believe that we have a great potential here in our countryside (to do so).' Prado simply feels that national-level, state-run efforts toward food sovereignty should support and not hinder grassroots efforts at the local level. This will involve a shift in thinking and practice on the part of state actors: 'I think that the functionaries, more than anything, want to show numbers—numbers and results from their work. But they do not have it clear that we are headed toward a communal state with a very clear orientation in which the people organize themselves…' The very point of the construction of *comunas*, Prado asserts, is to enable the people to take the lead, and this needs to be the case with regard to food. The vision of food sovereignty of El Maizal, according to Prado, is to shift from supplying raw goods to the national food corporation by developing the internal capacity of the *comuna* to process and distribute its own locally produced food, first, among the 7,000 inhabitants of the *comuna*, and then, to help supply food to other *comunas*, 'especially to urban *comunas* that do not have the same food producing capacities.' Prado adds that he does not envision the dissolution of state-run distribution networks, instead envisioning a scenario in which state-run and community-run networks complement one another.

Scale as relation

The vision of El Maizal described by Prado, in which food sovereignty efforts start locally and build outward, was a common theme over the course of the field research in Venezuela and gets to the third dimension of scale that will be discussed here, *scale as relation*. According to Iles and Montenegro (2013: 14), this dimension of scale 'is much more difficult to grasp, as it requires a sharp break from conceiving organizational tiers consisting of bounded, static units. Relational scale is defined as the spatial and temporal relations among processes at different levels, as well as the processes connecting elements within levels.'

This shift from conceiving of scale vis-à-vis food sovereignty in terms of boundaries (e.g., distinguishing efforts that are 'local' in scale from those that are 'national,' 'international,' etc.) to conceiving of it in terms of relationships seems to describe a shift which is already underway in Venezuela, particularly in the construction of the *comunas*. For instance, none of the respondents expressed autonomous local food systems as the end goal. A recurring theme in the interviews was that the local is seen as a starting point in the construction of food sovereignty, which must then extend to the regional and national scales. Among those doing locally grounded work, there was a strong sense of being connected to a broader national effort. In this vision, working to construct food sovereignty necessarily entailed a concern over the food needs of those beyond one's community. According to Laura Lorenzo of the Jirajara Peasant Movement and the Pedro Camejo Socialist Enterprise (interview 1 August 2013), 'We're working to guarantee, first, the food needs of our community, then, of the communities surrounding us, and then, depending on production levels, there's the need to prioritize the food needs

of those in the big cities, because if not, imagine what would become of this revolution.' Similarly, Ángela Palmenarez of the Tres Raíces Cooperative (interview 1 August 2013) expressed that being part of the construction of a *comuna* automatically implies a commitment to work across scales. This means tending to the needs of one's community but also looking beyond one's immediate community to the other communities that form part of the *comuna* and to the needs of the population as a whole.

For some, such as Lorenzo, the idea of looking beyond one's community in the construction of food sovereignty extends past state borders, as part of a vision of regional integration and solidarity among people:

> Are we going to be happy if we secure our food supply in this country while other countries in the word, including our neighbors, with whom we share political and ideological ties, and ties of unity of peoples, go without? …The concept of sovereignty goes beyond Venezuelan borders. Take the example of Haiti, a country so close to us that was among the first in the region to lead the struggle for independence, which is now practically in ruins. Why shouldn't Venezuela help Haiti to be sovereign in its food needs if we are able to? ...Sovereignty as we see it is connected to this concept of unity of the peoples.

Felicien adds another perspective on constructing food sovereignty across scales, explaining that it is not simply about building food sovereignty outward from the local scale, but the fact that other scales impact what is possible locally: 'One thing that's clear is that there are different scales involved – some dominate more than others – the local is central, but the national and international scales condition the extent of food sovereignty.' This perspective of Felicien connects to a point made by Iles and Montenegro (2013: 8) that 'food sovereignty apprehended as solely small/local/autonomous quickly becomes hamstrung from acting upon the very processes that restrain or empower people's ability to make decisions about their preferred food systems.' The point is that even a seemingly local activity is in fact connected to, and conditioned by, practices and policies on a range of scales. Thus, '[u]nderstood in terms of relational scale, food sovereignty becomes as much a practice of creating connectivity as of creating autonomy' (ibid: 27).

This chapter has explored how 'competing sovereignties' are playing out across scale and some of the ways in which this is being addressed by various actors involved in the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment. It has reinforced the point that a variety of different dimensions must be considered when looking at matters of scale vis-à-vis food sovereignty and has demonstrated some of the ways in which these dimensions are interconnected. For instance, the scale of agricultural production, one of the areas of greatest contention in the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment, has implications for how the broader food system is organized and also for the types of relationships that are built around food. A finding of particular interest that emerged from the field research is that identification as part of a national effort toward food sovereignty can be helpful in bridging food sovereignty efforts at the local and national scales. This supports the arguments for a more relational approach to food sovereignty made by Iles and Montenegro (2013). Furthermore, identification as part of a national effort toward food sovereignty

has led several rural food producers who were interviewed to consider the challenge of feeding Venezuela's urban population their own challenge as well. Achieving autonomy over one's local food system was not an end goal expressed by any of those interviewed. For some, that was a starting point, but aspirations of food sovereignty extended to the national population as a whole (in some cases, extending internationally). These findings have bearing on the next chapter, which will explore 'competing sovereignties' across urban-rural divides.

3   The geography of competing sovereignties: addressing the 'urban-rural divide'

A common concern among both critics and potential allies of the food sovereignty movement that has yet to be sufficiently addressed is how food sovereignty translates over to non-agrarian contexts. Put differently, how relevant is food sovereignty to the broader non-farming population, particularly the more than 50% of the global population (and growing) that now lives in cities? As framed by Bernstein (2013: 23) in a provocative critique of food sovereignty from a Marxist agrarian political economy perspective:

> There remain two further critical questions….The first, already touched on, is whether a surplus to their own food needs, and how much of a surplus, low- (external) input, labour intensive producers, geared to 'self-provisioning' (and autonomy), can provide to those who are not food growers, the majority of the world's population today, to satisfy their food security. Even supposing that an adequate surplus was possible, the second question that follows is the downstream one: how will that surplus reach non-farmers and on what terms?

While some have pointed to an 'urban bias' in development policies as a barrier to overcoming rural poverty and the other challenges facing rural populations (Lipton 1977), could food sovereignty represent the opposite extreme? Most advocates of food sovereignty would answer with a resounding *no*. Both 'urban populations' and 'consumers' are increasingly included in food sovereignty discourse, particularly since the Nyéléni Forum, where they were represented as an official sector, and their presence within the movement continues to grow. Still, most would agree that much work remains to be done in bridging the needs of urban and rural populations in efforts toward food sovereignty, and this is an area increasingly being taken up by scholars and practitioners alike (Clendenning and Dressler 2013, Dickinson 2013, Robbins 2013, Schiavoni 2009). This chapter will explore these 'competing sovereignties' across urban and rural divides and look at how they are playing out and being addressed in Venezuela.

Feeding the city

With over 90% of its population living in urban areas (World Bank), concerns over food sovereignty are arguably no more of a rural question than an urban one in Venezuela. As seen from the Caracazo mentioned earlier, one of the

immediate challenges at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution was to ensure the food needs of the country's predominantly urban population. Initially, this was largely carried out through a series of government 'missions' created to bypass bureaucratic infrastructure by connecting directly with communities. Among the results of these early efforts are 6000 *casas de alimentación* or 'feeding houses' reaching vulnerable populations such as the elderly and disabled. Run through a partnership in which community members open up their homes and provide people power while the government provides food and equipment, feeding houses reach 900,000 of the most vulnerable Venezuelans (Mastronardi 2013). Another result of the missions was the creation of the Mercal network of subsidized supermarkets to make affordable food more universally accessible. Mercal markets currently number 17,000 (Press TV 2012) and have distributed 12 million tons of food over the past decade since their inception (SiBCI 2013). Complemented by other government-run food retail outlets and initiatives such as a national school meals program, these programs have dramatically reduced hunger and food insecurity in Venezuela, surpassing the first Millennium Development Goal of halving hunger in advance of 2015, which was recognized by the FAO earlier this year (FAO 2013). According to a national census, 96.2% Venezuelans now eat 3-4 meals per day, and the government has pledged to reach the remaining 3.8% who do not, with the goal of achieving 'Zero Hunger' for Venezuela by 2019 (AVN 2013).

It should be mentioned that recognition by the FAO came at the same time that international media outlets were abuzz over reported food shortages in Venezuela, presenting quite a different scenario from that recognized by the FAO. The fact is that shortages of particular food (and non-food) items are still a regular occurrence in retail outlets in Venezuela, particularly at politically heightened moments (Mallett-Outtrim 2013a). While some attribute this to government-set price regulations creating disincentives for companies to sell food products in the country, others point to politically-motivated hoarding and withholding of products intended to destabilize the government. They see it as no coincidence that two main items most frequently missing from supermarket shelves in 2013 have been corn flour and toilet paper, two items most Venezuelans would agree to be indispensable, and see this as part of an 'economic war' by the members of the political opposition who own the country's largest private food companies (Robertson 2013). The government has taken a series of measures to combat these shortages, including dialogue with the private sector, cracking down on illegal practices, hosting large farmers markets, and increasing importations of certain goods from Brazil and other neighboring countries.

According to many of those interviewed, the government's ability to ensure that the population's nutritional needs are not impacted by the periodic shortages points to the fact that Venezuela has reached food *security*, but is still far from food *sovereignty*. Gabriel Pool (interview 6 August 2013) explains that at the moment, levels of food imports in the country in no way correspond to levels of production and that continued importation—which has decreased since the 90s but still remains high at 50% (Mallett-Outtrim 2013b)—is more

than anything a matter of economic interest, including by some within the government. According to Pool, 'Now that a lot of food is being produced in the countryside, we're trying to structure a proposed alliance between popular movements in the city and in the countryside, in order to cut the "destructive distance" that lies between us.' Laura Lorenzo (interview 1 August 2013) shares similar sentiments: 'We know that food security is achieved through resources, but food sovereignty has to be a process coming from the bottom up—from the peasant, from the communities.'

Rethinking territory

The sentiments shared by Lorenzo and Pool point to a new way forward—not only moving beyond a 'logic of importation' (Pool), but also beyond the idea of a one-way flow of goods from the countryside to the city. This new vision speaks to the critical need for close partnership and coordination between urban and rural populations, with the *comunas* as an important vehicle for doing so. This will involve a process of breaking down barriers and artificial divides that have traditionally stood between urban and rural populations. Ana Felicien (interview 6 August 2013) elaborates:

> …In the moment in which all of the *comunas* take up the task of producing food and contribute to closing the circuits of production, distribution, and consumption of food, as a necessity and fundamental right of the entire population, we will be advancing toward food sovereignty. I think the coming phase is for all of the *comunas*, in the countryside and in the cities…to break this territorial division of labor in which there are 'agricultural *comunas*' and 'urban *comunas*' – that's an absurdity…

Felicien's insight about the need to break the 'territorial division of labor' gets to a key challenge confronting the food sovereignty movement as a whole, not only in Venezuela. That is, just as sovereignty has traditionally been understood as authority over a given territory (dell'Agnese 2013: 115, Litfin 1998: 6), food sovereignty is often associated with collective control over the land, water, and other food producing resources within a territory (e.g., 'We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory' (Via Campesina 1996)). While this idea might seem straightforward enough to envision, if challenging to implement, within a rural context, what does the association of food sovereignty with territorial control mean for urban populations? This question connects to related discussions underway around shifting notions of sovereignty and territory in the face of global environmental issues. In *The Greening of Sovereignty in World Politics*, Litfin (1998: 12) argues that global environmental issues, which transcend geopolitical boundaries, call for a new conception of territory: 'The meaning of territory, along with its place in the set of practices associated with sovereignty, is being modified by environmental responses. If territory provides the container for state sovereignty, then transnational environmental problems and efforts to address them seem to be reshaping that container.' This reshaping of the 'container' of territory would seem to bear relevance in the face of the global food system, through which much of the population is distanced both from the process of

food production and from those who produce it (Robbins 2013) and reduced to consumers of 'food from nowhere' (McMichael 2009b: 147). One of the goals of the food sovereignty movement is to lessen this distancing, but given a context such as Venezuela, in which the vast majority of the population is physically separated from the territory where most food production takes place, how is this to be done?

To explore this question, building upon Litfin's point, it is helpful to look at the ways in which understandings of territory are currently evolving. In *Rethinking Territory: Social Justice and Neoliberalism in Latin America's Territorial Turn*, Bryan (2012) explores how the trend by states to recognize territorial rights as a vehicle for pursuit of neoliberal agendas is leading social movements to rethink how they relate to territory. One way in which they are doing so is by moving away from notions of territory as 'cartographic space' to more culturally-based understandings of space and territory that take on a more relational approach (ibid: 219). These shifting understandings of territory are leading to new perspectives on sovereignty that move away from traditional exclusionary approaches in which sovereignty for one group can mean displacement of another. The focus then becomes 'less about the defense of place as a physical location per se than about maintaining a set of relationships. Under those conditions rights scarcely reference a universal order. Instead they are contingent upon those relationships, enjoyed and exercised in concert with others' (ibid: 222). Bryan's point about notions of territory becoming less about boundaries and more about relationships is strikingly similar to the points made by those of Iles and Montenegro (2013) in their call for a relational approach to food sovereignty, as described in the previous chapter. Particularly relevant here is their assertion that there are instances in which sovereignty 'needs to extend beyond spatial and temporal frame[s]' (ibid: 16), which would seem to be the case regarding the food sovereignty of urban populations. Relatedly, Bryan points to urban-based movements of Indigenous people in Bolivia 'shifting attention from control over land and resources to questions of collective well-being in order to survive territorial displacement' (Mamani Ramirez 2011, cited in Bryon 2012: 223). This example arguably has a strong resonance with the Venezuelan context, in which the majority of the urban poor are those who were displaced from the countryside, or their children.

Transforming relationships and identities

The fact that most of the urban communities in Venezuela are no more than a generation or two removed from their rural counterparts points to what are often artificial or arbitrary binaries erected between 'urban' and 'rural' and 'producers' and 'consumers,' as pointed out by numerous scholars (Kay 2009, de Haan and Zoomers 2003, Robbins 2013, Ruiz and Delgado 2008). Among the most problematic of these is arguably the label of 'consumer,' as, according to Robbins (2013: 24), 'The construction of *consumer* as a role within society places limits on the agency of citizens who purchase rather than grow their food. It turns citizens into merely shoppers rather than political, active agents in the food system.' One of the ways that this is beginning to be addressed in

Venezuela is through building and strengthening relationships across traditional urban and rural divides. This is happening not only through the creation of direct marketing channels (although that is one element), but through the co-construction of food sovereignty as a common political project shared by all Venezuelans. That is, people are increasingly seeing themselves as connected via the *process* of constructing food sovereignty. In this process, people are not only changing their relationships to one another, but also their *relationship to food* and to the processes of food production, distribution, and consumption. Connected to these processes of transformation, a term gaining in popularity among rural and urban movements alike is *prosumidor(a)*, a combination of the words for producer (*productor(a)*) and consumer (*consumidor(a)*), in an attempt to blur the lines, and therefore the distinctions, between the two.

Like Lorenzo, Pool, and Felicien, Virgilio Duran of the urban *comuna* Ataroa in the city of Barquisimeto in the state of Lara (interview 30 July 2013) seems to agree that food production and distribution are tasks that must be taken up by rural and urban populations alike, based on their capacities: 'Imagine if each one of us produced what we could in whatever little space we have. It would be a totally different situation, wouldn't it? Because it would break the dependency on those who have been monopolizing food production.' As a way forward, Duran spoke of encouraging urban people to grow food on rooftops, in patios, and in community gardens (practices for which communities can receive free technical assistance and supplies via state-supported programs[9]) in an effort to create 'productive corridors' of *conuco*-style agriculture that extend from the cities to the countryside. In the case of Ataroa, the *comuna* was able to acquire land on the outskirts of the city that is designated for agricultural production and has been partnering with rural producers on a large weekly farmers market, to complement distribution of staple goods coming from the state.

Numerous examples of urban-rural partnerships could be seen over the course of the field work. A particularly interesting one was between an urban *comuna*, El Panal 2021 of Caracas, and a rural social movement, the Jirajara Peasant Movement already mentioned above, that are actively working together on multiple fronts. One example is that El Panal already has an established sugar packing plant as a local enterprise, and the Jirajara movement will soon begin supplying the sugar for this plant. This is an articulation of a point that came up in a number of interviews—the fact that in cities such as Caracas there are both the people power and the infrastructure for food processing enterprises, and ample possibility for partnership with rural producers in this area. Laura Lorenzo of the Jirajara movement sees this project as just the beginning, and if successful, would like to work with El Panal and other *comunas* on similar projects featuring other crops. Along similar lines, as every *comuna*, urban and rural, is intended to have a 'socio-

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[9] Urban agriculture has been growing in Venezuela in recent years, with the government recently pledging to more than double the number of urban agriculture sites in the country to 80,000 by 2014 (Mallett-Outtrim 2013a).

productive' component (Mills 2013), a number of people mentioned potential for direct exchange of goods, through which rural comunas could supply agricultural products while urban comunas could provide other goods, such as school uniforms and school supplies for the children of rural *comunas* (Prado interview 23 August 2013). This idea, which is being worked toward among the *comunas* and social movements, connects to Kay's (2009) observation of the most effective development strategies being those that focus on urban-rural synergies.

Beyond the sugar project, El Panal and the Jirajara movement are also working on joint farmers markets and other distribution projects, but perhaps most interestingly, the Jirajara movement has helped El Panal to acquire land in the countryside, which they will be working together in partnership. Lorenzo explains that to understand this relationship one must look outside of the logic of capitalism and see it as part of the broader process of social transformation underway in the country: 'Food cannot be a commodity. It is a necessity. And as a necessity, we have to produce according to that function.' Robert Lanza of El Panal 2021 (interview 25 August 2013), at another moment, nearly echoed these same sentiments: 'We're building national points of connection between the urban and the rural that allow us to break capitalist chains of distribution and production.' Lanza explains that the *comuna* has several other projects underway in the countryside, which include training and educational components that enable *comuna* members to connect (or in some cases, reconnect) to processes of production. These efforts are complemented by a fairly extensive urban agriculture effort within El Panal that includes raised garden beds, a nursery, and worm composting, among other components. Lanza explains that it is a process of ongoing learning that combines life in the city with life in the countryside.

It is interesting to note that these efforts described by Lorenzo and Lanza differ significantly from earlier efforts in Venezuela, such as the 'Return to the Countryside' program, to encourage people to move out of the city and into the countryside (see Page 2010). The focus is not on people moving out of the city (at least not in the short term), but about city people developing a new relationships to the countryside, and rural people developing new relationships to the city. On the question of whether it is actually feasible for Venezuela to feed itself given the current ratio of urban to rural inhabitant, Gabriel Pool asserts that it is quite possible, even without any changes to the geographical distribution of the population, for Venezuela to be able to feed itself. Above all, it is a matter of political will (as not everyone in the government is on the same page in terms of being committed to food sovereignty), along with good planning and coordination.

Pool's point brings back in the role of the state, which was interestingly missing from much of the discussions on the bridging of 'competing sovereignties' across urban-rural divides. It is important to recall, as mentioned at the start of this chapter, that Venezuela's hunger rates were drastically reduced through a major effort on the part of the state, in partnership with communities, and through an approach that most of those interviewed characterized as falling more within the paradigm of food security than food

sovereignty. At the same time, some of the most cutting-edge efforts to bridge urban-rural divides at this moment are squarely within the paradigm of food sovereignty. These include joint food production and processing initiatives, land sharing and learning partnerships, and forging common identities such as *prosumidores(as)*, as described above. A question moving forward, going back to the vision of the *comuna* El Maizal mentioned in the previous chapter, is the extent to which these two paradigms are able to come together. A key factor of relevance here is the role of institutions, which will be addressed in the next chapter.

4　New institutional frameworks for navigating competing sovereignties

> For the extreme anarchist, every institution always represents repression, oppression, and injustice. For the conservative, all institutions are everlasting and untouchable. For a critical and realistic politics, institutions are necessary despite their imperfection; they are entropic and as such there always arises a moment in which they need to be transformed, changed, or destroyed.
>
> -Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*

The question of institutions may sit rather uncomfortably among advocates of food sovereignty. In addition to the issues raised in the introduction regarding tensions between the food sovereignty movement and the state, there are the widely held associations of institutions as being static, bureaucratic, and intended to maintain the status quo, which would seem to go against the very essence of food sovereignty. Yet as food sovereignty is increasingly adopted into policy, the question of what type of institutional framework might best support it becomes increasingly important (Godek 2013). This is also an important question in terms of navigating the 'competing sovereignties' of state and non-state actors in the construction of food sovereignty.

One way of approaching this question is to look at new ways of thinking around the purpose and functioning of institutions vis-à-vis processes of change. For instance, in his *Twenty Theses on Politics*, Latin American writer and philosopher Enrique Dussel (2008) brings a fresh perspective to state-society relations and the role of institutions, inspired by recent political transformations taking place across much of Latin America. As Dussel sees it, far too often power is given a negative association, whereas his point of departure is a positive understanding of power, stemming from the will-to-live of the broader political community, of 'the people.' Dussel refers to this power of the people in its unharnessed form, which he sees as the ultimate foundation of all power, as *potentia*. Potentia on its own, however, 'lacks real, objective, empirical existence. The merely feasible consensual will of the community remains initially indeterminate and in-itself, that is, it lacks roots, a main stem, branches, and fruit.' For potentia to be actualized, then, it must be converted into institutionalized power, or *potestas*, i.e., 'the heterogeneous differentiation of functions through institutions that allow power to become real, empirical, and feasible.' Political leaders in positions of power that has

been delegated by the political community in the form of *potestas* and are called to lead based upon 'obediential' notions power, as seen in the tenet of the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico that 'those who command must command by obeying.' It is when this delegated power, *potestas*, is separated from its source, *potentia,* that power becomes fetishized and ceases to obey the will of the people, instead becoming an instrument of oppression, as can be seen throughout history and at the present. The task then, for those working toward societal transformation, is to reclaim and reassert *potentia* and *potestas*.

Building off of Dussel's proposition, how can the *potentia* of the food sovereignty movement be actualized into *potestas*, and what kinds of institutional arrangements would best support this? This chapter will explore the role of institutions vis-à-vis the 'competing sovereignties' of food sovereignty.

In an overview of institutionalism in comparative politics, Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 16-17) describe four different types of institutional dynamism. First is when new socioeconomic or political circumstances give a new sense of relevance to an existing institution. Second is when existing institutions are put to the service of different ends, as 'new actors come into play who pursue their (new) goals through existing institutions.' Third is when external changes lead to new goals being pursued by old actors within existing institutions. Fourth, in 'moments of dramatic change,' is when circumstances give rise to entirely new institutions. It appears that a combination of each of these forms of institutional change is currently underway in Venezuela. The construction of *comunas* is giving rise to a new form of social institution, while existing state institutions are being mandated both to facilitate the construction of *comunas* and to work in partnership with them once they exist, which for many, entails a radically different way of functioning. Added to these dynamics is a gradual blurring of the lines between state and societal actors, as societal actors are engaging in governance not only through the *comunas,* but increasingly through existing state institutions as well—although this process is not without its tensions.

To begin an exploration of what can be learned from this process of institutional change in Venezuela as related to 'competing sovereignties' of food sovereignty, it is helpful to go back to the study of Fox (1993) on the politics of food in Mexico in the 80s, in which he found that among the keys to the relatively successful implementation of a state-sponsored food program was the creation of 'community food councils.' According to Fox (ibid: 217):

> The Community Food Councils became a new, two-way institutional access route that connected state and societal actors. From above, state reformists structured new patterns of representation within rural society. From below, these new opportunities for participation became autonomous channels for interest articulation that in turn left their imprint on the state…..

There are some important parallels between the councils described by Fox and the *comunas* of Venezuela in that both serve as mechanisms for dynamic interactions between state and society. One of the aspects emphasized by many of the grassroots actors interviewed in Venezuela when asked about the

role of the state versus the role of society in constructing food sovereignty is that rather than having clearly delineated roles and responsibilities between the state and society, what felt most important was to have ongoing, open dialogue with the state—and many looked toward the *comunas* as spaces to facilitate such dialogue and interaction. Furthermore, because they viewed food sovereignty as an evolving process, they recognized that what was true one week/month/year may very well not be the case the next, and therefore it was important for institutional relationships to have certain degrees of flexibility and dynamism to them. This connects to a point raised by Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 6) that, 'More important than the formal characteristics of either state or societal institutions per se is how a given institutional configuration shapes political interactions.' It also connects to Iles and Montenegro's (2013: 17) point about sovereignty being a relational concept: 'sovereign units are always defined in relation to something else and are always a process rather than 'a state.' Sovereignty is not fixed in nature and does not have an endpoint…'

In fact, in many ways, the construction of *comunas* seems to fit the call for 'multi-scalar social institutions' necessary to facilitate relational food sovereignty, as described by to Iles and Montenegro (ibid: 19). First, connecting back to Bartelson's (1995) point raised in the introduction about sovereignty having both internal and external dimensions, it is important that those working toward food sovereignty have both internal and external recognition of their sovereignty. That is, 'sovereignty must be legitimized both by and within the communities seeking sovereignty and by external institutions and publics at other scales' (Iles and Montenegro 2013: 21). The very formation of a *comuna* is a demonstration of internal sovereignty in that, through joining together and organizing themselves into a *comuna*, the communal councils and communities that run them are demonstrating their desire to function as a sovereign unit. In doing so, they also lay the groundwork for external recognition of their sovereignty because *comunas* are recognized by law, and as mentioned above, most state institutions have been mandated to work with and support them. A third key factor in addition to creating a base of sovereignty and building recognition of sovereignty is the creation of 'multiple, interdependent bases of sovereignty' (ibid: 27). The *comunas* also fit this description in that they are forming the basis for a national network of semi-autonomous communal bodies that interface not only with the state, but with one another, as described in some of the examples mentioned in previous chapters. Gabriel Pool (interview 6 August 2013) speaks to the role of comunas as vehicles for both food sovereignty and political sovereignty, which he sees as interconnected:

> So for me food sovereignty means political sovereignty. Yes, I think that structurally it's that—achieving food sovereignty as a fundamental basis for political sovereignty as well. This has to do with sovereignty in the territories, with seed sovereignty, and with sovereignty in knowledge and technologies. And the *comuna* is the fundamental space within the Venezuelan process to achieve this, as a cell that can generate politics that transcend scales, the different scales that have to do with food sovereignty.

A fourth, and crucial, point made by Iles and Montenegro (ibid: 19) is that sovereignty need not imply complete autonomy: 'Power sharing is implicit in this concept of relational sovereignty…We want to emphasize how some forms of sovereignty grow out of sharing, not pure self-reliance alone.' This is highly relevant to the *comunas*, not only for the relationships that they are building with one another, but also for their relationship to the state, which is framed in terms of *corresponsabilidad*, or 'coresponsability.' It is interesting to note that this is the same term used by the Mexican government to describe its relationship to the communities it partnered with in the running of food stores via the community food councils in Fox's study (Fox 1993: 116, 166, 201). The vision of *corresponsabilidad* described by those interviewed in Venezuela, however, extended beyond matters of logistical partnership to the idea of a shared political vision and commitment. First, *corresponsabilidad* is seen as necessary in the construction of the comunas through a massive push both from above and below. Second, once a comuna exists, *corresponsabilidad* describes the process through which institutions of the state must actively work to transfer power over to the *comuna* while members of the *comuna* organize themselves to be able to assume certain responsibilities previously associated with the state. In this sense, *corresponsabilidad* is seen as a means of bridging the formation of popular power and the existence (and gradual redistribution of) established state power. Of course, such processes will not be without tensions. According to Ana Felicien, although certain transformations have been made, the underlying structure of the state remains bourgeois in character, and as long as that remains the case, 'We have to be clear that constituted power (of the state) and constituent power (of the people) are going to be in permanent conflict with one another.' This comment by Felicien connects to what scholar and author George Ciccariello-Maher (2013) has described as a situation of 'dual power' characterizing the Venezuelan process, in which constituent and constituted power interact in a 'complex dialectic.'

Still to be addressed here are the other types of institutional dynamism mentioned by Thelen and Steinmo (1992: 16-17), involving changes to already existing institutions. As mentioned above, parallel to the construction of the *comunas* is a reform of state institutions, which are being mandated to work directly in partnership with *comunas*. On the one hand, this is an example of old actors taking on new roles, as described by Thelen and Steinmo (ibid). At the same time, this institutional reform is also characterized by new actors coming into existing institutions. One example of many is Laura Lorenzo of the Jirajara Peasant Movement, who also holds a position within the Pedro Camejo Socialist Enterprise, which lends machinery to farmers. Speaking of her experience, Lorenzo shares that:

> A lot of us who have come from organized popular movements have had the opportunity to be in spaces of government. We see the institutions as Chavez did – as a tool for organization. And so now that we are occupying government spaces our duty is to make all of the processes easier for communities—because we come from these processes and we know how difficult it is…our duty is to serve communities who have organized themselves, be they *comunas* or farmers councils – we need to make it easier for them…

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Dussel (2008) cautions, however, that: 'The excluded should not be merely included in the old system-as this would be to introduce the Other into the Same-but rather ought to participate as equals in a new institutional moment (the new political order). This is a struggle not for inclusion but for transformation…' In the Venezuelan context, this means the transformation of institutions through the incorporation of new actors as mentioned above must not simply a matter of 'grassroots engagement' or 'bringing everyone to the table,' but instead about a fundamental transformation of the institutions from within. According to Ulises Daal, former National Assembly member and current advisor to the National Assembly (interview 5 August 2013), this is beginning to happen today in Venezuela as part a new institutional framework referred to as *nueva institucionalidad*. Daal emphasizes, however, that that as long as the Bolivarian Revolution continues, there will be a permanent confrontation between traditional power structures and new emerging structures, and this confrontation will produce both contradictions and polarization. This connects back to the point of Felicien mentioned above, as well as to a similar point about state institutions made by Fray Silvera of the Tres Rs Cooperative (interview 16 August 2013), in an apparent paraphrasing of Gramsci (1971: 276), that 'the old has not yet finished dying and the new has not yet finished being born.' To conclude, the issues raised in the first three chapters speak to the need for new institutional frameworks to address the 'competing sovereignties' of food sovereignty. In Venezuela, interrelated processes of institutional change that are happening from both above and below hold promise in terms of advancing food sovereignty while at the same time confronting deeply entrenched power structures that have yet to be overcome.

5   Conclusion: 'competing sovereignties' and beyond

This study has attempted to provide a preliminary theoretical and empirical exploration of how 'competing sovereignties' are shaping the political construction of food sovereignty. The motivation for this study was a lack of clarity on the 'sovereignty' of food sovereignty that had been noted by numerous scholars. Earlier on, questions focused on *who* was the sovereign of food sovereignty—was it the state? Was it communities? Now, there is a growing consensus that there are in fact 'multiple sovereignties' of food sovereignty that cut across jurisdictions and scales, and the question has become how these 'multiple sovereignties' are competing with each other in the construction of food sovereignty. This question is becoming particularly relevant as food sovereignty is increasingly being adopted into state policy at various levels. For one thing, certain ambiguities around food sovereignty that could be overlooked when it mainly served as a political statement and a rallying cry suddenly matter a lot more when the implementation of food sovereignty is actually being attempted. Additionally, once food sovereignty is adopted by the state, a new phase of struggle for societal actors begins. On the one hand, many would agree that food sovereignty efforts cannot be led by the state, as to do so would go against the very idea of food sovereignty. On the

other hand, many would also agree that efforts toward food sovereignty cannot get very far *without* the state either, which is why advocates have pushed for the adoption of food sovereignty into state policy. Thus the call for food sovereignty is also a call for state and societal actors to redefine their terms of engagement. In doing so, questions of multiple and competing sovereignties also reemerge around the roles and interests of state and non-state actors.

This study has attempted to delve into these questions, first by developing an analytical framework through which to explore 'competing sovereignties,' and then by applying that framework to Venezuela, one of the first countries in the world to adopt food sovereignty at the state level and therefore a rich source of empirical material after fifteen years of attempted efforts toward food sovereignty. The findings and conclusions of this preliminary study of how 'competing sovereignties' are shaping the political construction of food sovereignty' are summarized below.

Scale

Several different dimensions of scale are important to consider as related to food sovereignty, with examples of 'competing sovereignties' found in each. While Iles and Montenegro (2013) have argued that *scale as size* is the 'least interesting,' dimension, this paper argues that this is in fact the most fundamental, conditioning the other dimensions of scale. For instance, the scale of agricultural production impacts how the food system is organized (*scale as organization*), and arguably how relations are built around food as well (*scale as relation*). The type of agriculture and food systems that social movements and *comunas* are calling for likely have a lot more to offer in terms of potential for building relational food sovereignty than do systems based on large-scale industrial agriculture. At the same time, interconnected, decentralized, community-based food systems are likely to be considered a lot more of a gamble for a government that has committed to eradicate hunger by 2019. Here, however, it is helpful to go back to Fox's study of Mexico (1993: 217), in which he found that it was only by ceding a certain amount of control over to autonomous, representative social organizations that the food program of the Mexican government was able to accomplish its goals. If the Venezuelan state is indeed committed to the political experiment of the construction of *comunas*, as it claims to be, then it must be prepared to support the *comunas* in guiding forward food sovereignty efforts. These efforts will likely look quite different from how they currently look today, including in matters of scale. Another point to emphasize related to 'competing sovereignties' vis-à-vis scale is that identification as part of a national effort toward food sovereignty can be helpful in bridging food sovereignty efforts at the local and national scales, as demonstrated by several of the *comunas* studied. When approached in this manner, national-level and local-level food sovereignty efforts need not be considered in competition with one another, but rather complementary and mutually reinforcing (albeit not without tensions).

Geography

While there is no easy answer to 'competing sovereignties' across the urban-rural divide, the types of relationships being forged between urban and rural *comunas* and social movements in Venezuela point to at least one important way forward. As described in Chapter 3, a reconceptualization of 'territory' could help to facilitate such relationship-building, and in an instance of synchronicity, creative thinking about relational approaches to territory (e.g., Bryan 2012, dell-Angese 2013) is happening right as La Via Campesina and other social movements involved in food sovereignty are in the midst of their own processes of 'rethinking territory' (Rosset 2013). It is thus important that these processes inform one another. Among the many lessons to be gleaned from how popular movements in Venezuela are addressing urban-rural divides is the emphasis on building relationships that extend beyond markets, focusing instead on shared identities and shared struggles. Similar efforts are taking place in other parts of the world, such as the Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners Conference in the U.S. and the solidarity economy movement that is gaining ground in various countries. It should be mentioned up front that this relational approach to bridging the urban-rural divide does not come close to adequately addressing the concerns of Bernstein quoted at the start of Chapter 3, although it is argued here that it should be seen as *part* of the way forward. It will be interesting to see, if the construction of *comunas* continues to advance, the extent to which comunas could be a vehicle for 'scaling up' such efforts. There is also the question of how these efforts are to be combined (if at all) with existing efforts that are more food-security focused. To address immediate food needs while also working toward long-term food sovereignty, there probably needs to be some sort of 'both/and' approach. A question is whether institutional frameworks can be developed that support such negotiation and coordination, which brings us back to the topic of institutions.

Institutions

As food sovereignty is above all a *process*, and not simply a series of laws to be enforced or measures to be implemented, it requires institutional arrangements that are flexible and dynamic and that create spaces for interaction. As mentioned above, one of the most critical factors that grassroots actors identified as being necessary for food sovereignty was ongoing dialogue and collaboration with the government, described as *corresponsabilidad*. Among the vehicles for such interaction are the *comunas*, which fit many of the characteristics of 'multi-scalar social institutions,' as described by Iles and Montenegro (2013). While existing state institutions have been mandated to work in support of and partnership with the *comunas*, this cannot effectively happen without a significant amount of institutional change, which can happen in a variety of ways, as described by Thelen and Steinmo (1992). While some significant transformation is taking place in this regard in Venezuela, many barriers remain. One thing that appears to be clear is that state and non-state actors both recognize that the other has an important role to play in food sovereignty efforts. It is a matter of negotiating the terms of engagement, as

well as reconciling competing paradigms. Here, perhaps it could be instructive to learn from the experience of movements in Cochabamba, Bolivia, as described by Menser (2009). After successfully fighting against water privatization in 2000, movements refused to put the water company back into the hands of the state and resume 'business as usual,' which could risk a repeat of what had happened. Instead, they built a new relationship with the state over management of water in which social movements were helping to define the terms. Part of the process involved building a new institutional framework that allowed for spaces of debate and interaction and forged closer links between state actors and citizens. This example seems to be instructive in terms of possible ways forward for state-society interaction vis-à-vis food sovereignty in Venezuela and elsewhere.

Future research

As mentioned earlier, this has been a preliminary study, leaving extensive room for future research. The framework used here to examine 'competing sovereignties' could benefit from being further elaborated upon and refined, including bringing in new dimensions in addition to the three that have been employed thus far. It would be interesting to apply a similar framework in different contexts, both in other states that have adopted food sovereignty and those that have not. There is also substantial room for further research on food sovereignty using Venezuela as a case study, as this paper has only skimmed the surface of the breadth and complexity of the Venezuelan Food Sovereignty Experiment. Finally, a burning question that remains, looking at the case of Venezuela, is what possibilities there are for newly emerging food sovereignty efforts to connect with already existing food security efforts. At the moment, there seem to be different efforts happening on different tracks in Venezuela, some currently even undermining others, and if they were able to be brought together in a synergistic way, the potential impact could be quite significant in terms of fighting hunger while also supporting a path toward food sovereignty.

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Appendices

Appendix A   Key informants

Name	Organization/Institution	Date
Alex Villa	Bolivar and Zamora Revolutionary Current	27/7/13
Gabriel Pool	Jirajara Peasant Movement and 'Legumes of ALBA' Mixed Socialist Enterprise	6/8/13
Ulises Daal	Venezuelan National Assembly (former member and current advisor)	5/8/13
Virgilio Duran	Comuna Ataroa and Pedro Camejo Socialist Enterprise, Lara	30/7/13
Ana Felicien	GMO-Free Venezuela	6/8/13
Robert Longa	El Panal 2021 Comuna, Caracas	25/8/13
Laura Lorenzo	Jirajara Peasant Movement and Pedro Camejo Socialist Enterprise, Lara	1/8/13
Angel Prado	El Maisal Comuna, Lara	23/8/13
Ángela Palmenarez	Tres Raices Cooperative, Yaracuy	1/8/13
Fray Silvera	Tres Rs Cooperative, Yaracuy	16/8/13
Luis Arriechi	Jirajara Peasant Movement and Pedro Camejo Socialist Enterprise, Lara	1/8/13
Nazaria Piñal	Jirajara Peasant Movement, Yaracuy	31/7/13
Ana Martinez	Comuna Ataroa, Lara	30/7/13
Fry Hernandez	Jirajara Peasant Movement, Yaracuy	31/7/13
Pedro Jimenez	Comuna Iracara, Falcon	27/7/13
Niurka Navas	Comuna Socialista León Ferrer, Falcon	27/7/13
Fani Pinto	Comuna Ataroa, Lara	30/7/13
Omar Garcia	Comuna Maria Teresa Angulo, Sanare, Lara	2/8/13
Neli Motilla	Jirajara Peasant Movement and Ministry of Agriculture	1/8/13
Carlos Terán	El Maizal Comuna, Lara	23/8/13

Appendix B   Participant research sites

Site/Venue	Dates
The Encounter of Social Movements for a Latin America and Caribbean Free from Hunger and Poverty, Caracas (This event ran parallel to an official meeting of CELAC, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States	23/7/13
The Encounter of Communal Men and Women for the Strengthening of Communal Governments in the State of Falcon, 27-28 of July, 2013, in El Pueblo Nuevo de la Sierra, Falcon State	27/7/13 - 28/7/13
Comuna Ataroa, Lara State	29/7/13 - 30/7/13
The National Meeting of Bartering Systems Sanare, Lara State	2/8/13
Comuna El Maizal, Lara State	23/8/13 - 24/8/13

Appendix C   6 Pillars of food sovereignty

1. Focuses on Food for People

Food sovereignty puts the right to sufficient, healthy and culturally appropriate food for all individuals, peoples and communities, including those who are hungry, under occupation, in conflict zones and marginalised, at the centre of food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries policies; and rejects the proposition that food is just another commodity or component for international agri-business.

2. Values Food Providers

Food sovereignty values and supports the contributions, and respects the rights, of women and men, peasants and small scale family farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fisherfolk, forest dwellers, indigenous peoples and agricultural and fisheries workers, including migrants, who cultivate, grow, harvest and process food; and rejects those policies, actions and programmes that undervalue them, threaten their livelihoods and eliminate them.

3. Localises Food Systems

Food sovereignty brings food providers and consumers closer together; puts providers and consumers at the centre of decision-making on food issues; protects food providers from the dumping of food and food aid in local markets; protects consumers from poor quality and unhealthy food, inappropriate food aid and food tainted with genetically modified organisms; and resists governance structures, agreements and practices that depend on and promote unsustainable and inequitable international trade and give power to remote and unaccountable corporations.

4. Puts Control Locally

Food sovereignty places control over territory, land, grazing, water, seeds, livestock and fish populations on local food providers and respects their rights. They can use and share them in socially and environmentally sustainable ways which conserve diversity; it recognizes that local territories often cross geopolitical borders and ensures the right of local communities to inhabit and use their territories; it promotes positive interaction between food providers in different regions and territories and from different sectors that helps resolve internal conflicts or conflicts with local and national authorities; and rejects the privatisation of natural resources through laws, commercial contracts and intellectual property rights regimes.

5. Builds Knowledge and Skills

Food sovereignty builds on the skills and local knowledge of food providers and their local organisations that conserve, develop and manage localised food production and harvesting systems, developing appropriate research systems to support this and passing on this wisdom to future generations; and rejects technologies that undermine, threaten or contaminate these, e.g. genetic engineering.

6. Works with Nature

Food sovereignty uses the contributions of nature in diverse, low external input agroecological production and harvesting methods that maximise the contribution of ecosystems and improve resilience and adaptation, especially in the face of climate change; it seeks to heal the planet so that the planet may heal us; and, rejects methods that harm beneficial ecosystem functions, that depend on energy intensive monocultures and livestock factories, destructive fishing practices and other industrialised production methods, which damage the environment and contribute to global warming.

Source: Nyéléni 2007b