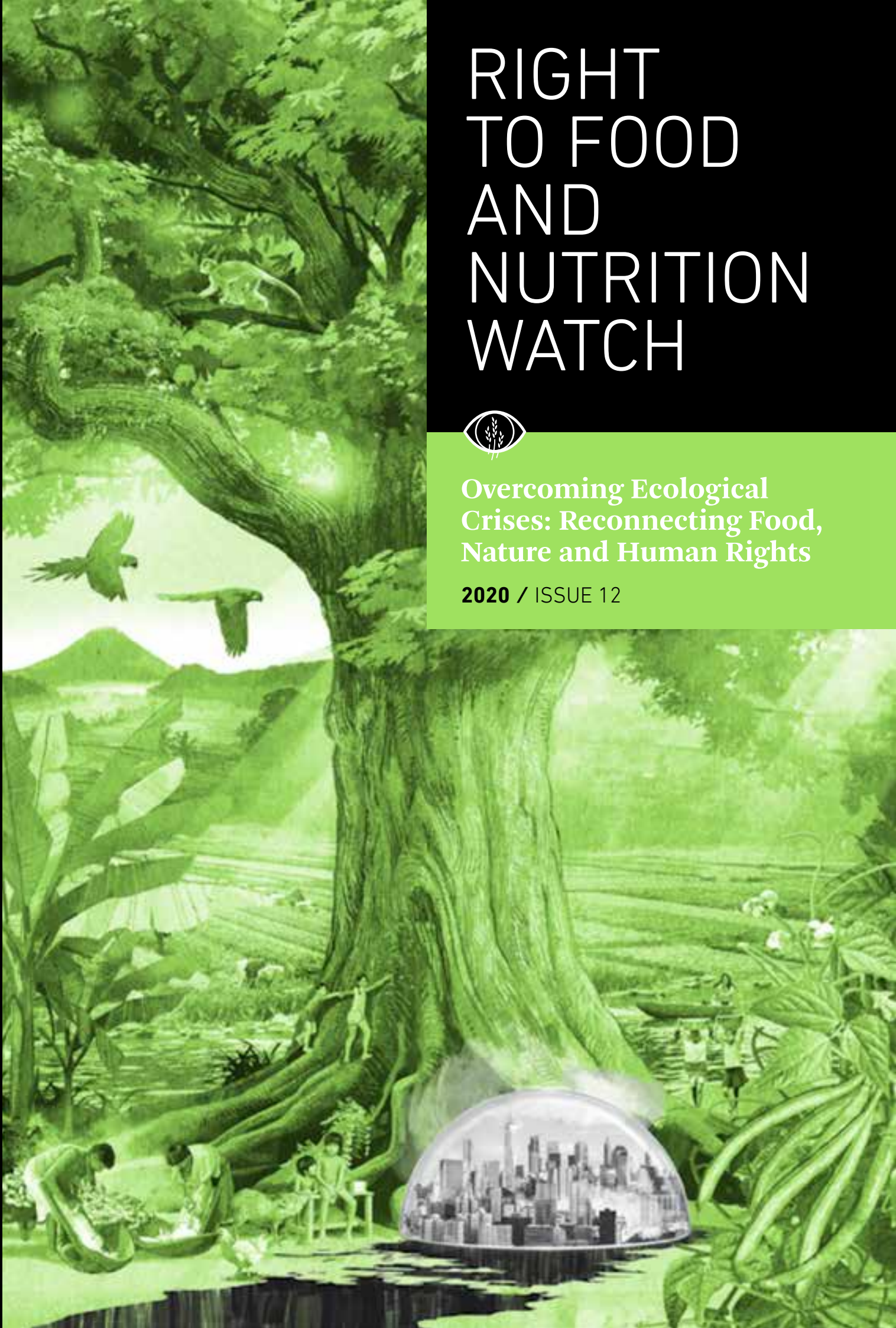


RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION WATCH



Overcoming Ecological
Crises: Reconnecting Food,
Nature and Human Rights

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GLOBAL NETWORK FOR THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION



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CONTENTS

01	We are Nature! Human Rights, Environmental Law, and the Illusion of Separation <i>Philip Seufert</i>	06
02	The Coronavirus Pandemic: A Critical Reflection on Corporate Food Patterns <i>Hernando Salcedo Fidalgo</i>	16
03	Converging to Overcome Crisis and Change the System <i>A Conversation among Food and Climate Movements and Activists by Salena Fay Tramel</i>	24
04	Land, Climate, and the Construction of Scientific Knowledge: An Insider's View of the IPCC Report on Climate Change and Land <i>An Interview with Marta Guadalupe Rivera Ferre by Katie Sandwell</i>	38
05	Is Veganism the Solution to Climate Change? <i>A Dialogue among Food Activists by M. Alejandra Morena</i>	46

ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy (of the European Union)	ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity	IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
CEDAW	UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women	ITPGRFA	International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture
CFS	UN Committee on World Food Security	REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
CNCD	chronic non-communicable diseases	UDHR	Universal Declaration on Human Rights
COP	Conference of the Parties	UK	United Kingdom
CSM	Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism for relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security	UN	United Nations
DBM	double burden of malnutrition	UNCCD	UN Convention to Combat Desertification
GHG	greenhouse gas	UNDRIP	UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
HLPE	High Level Panel of Experts of the UN Committee on World Food Security	UNDROP	UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas
IAASTD	International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science and Technology for Development	UNFCCC	UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	USA	United States of America
		WHO	World Health Organization

01

WE ARE NATURE! HUMAN RIGHTS, ENVIRONMENTAL LAW, AND THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATION

Philip Seufert



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FIAN International is an international organization that has been advocating for the human right to food and nutrition for over 30 years. It supports grassroots communities and movements in their struggles against right to food violations.

“Th[e] separation of [humans from the rest of nature] is central to the deep ecological crises that the world is facing [...]. Addressing these existential crises will require us to [...] reorganize our societal relationship to nature”.

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PHOTO | Junior Aklei Chaky

¹ Valente, Flavio. “Towards the Full Realization of the Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition”. *Development* 57(2), (2014): 155–170. Available at: [/link.springer.com/article/10.1057/dev.2014.75](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/dev.2014.75).

² Abbott, Alison. “Scientists bust myth that our bodies have more bacteria than human cells”. *Nature*, January 8, 2016. Available at: www.nature.com/news/scientists-bust-myth-that-our-bodies-have-more-bacteria-than-human-cells-1.19136.

³ Selosse, Marc-André. *Jamais seul. Ces microbes qui construisent les plantes, les animaux et les civilisations*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2017.

Humans are part of nature. There is probably no place where our intimate connection with the rest of the living world is as clear as with food. Through eating and digestion, nature is transformed into people.¹ This process takes place thanks to millions of microorganisms that live in our intestines and enable the human body to absorb the nutrients contained in the food we eat. This symbiosis of our bodies with the microorganisms that constitute our intestinal flora has developed over thousands of years, as a result of humans’ co-evolution with our surrounding environment. In fact, the human body contains more microorganisms than human cells.² Moreover, food production and the availability of nutritious, healthy and culturally adequate food fundamentally depend on functioning, biodiverse ecosystems as well as humans’ ability to cooperate with living beings – plants, animals, insects, and microorganisms.³ Food and its social and spiritual values are equally crucial for the fabric of our communities, and thus central to our human nature as social beings. More importantly, nutritious food keeps us healthy and enables us to respond to threats, such as pathogens and illness. All of this points to the intrinsic value of nature for the well-being of human beings and societies.

Despite our deep connection with the rest of nature, modern (Western) thinking and actions, including policy-making, treat humans and the rest of nature as two separate, distinct and independent spheres. This article argues that this separation is central to the deep ecological crises that the world is facing, and which manifest most strongly in human-made global warming as well as in the dramatic loss of biological diversity. Both climate change and the current mass extinction will deeply affect human societies because we cannot escape from these massive disturbances.

The emergence of the novel corona virus SARS-CoV-2 and the profound crisis it has caused is yet another development that forces us to reassess our relationship with the rest of nature.⁴ Addressing these existential crises will require us to overcome this separation and to reorganize our societal relationship to nature. This article lays out steps that may lead us in that direction, focusing on how human rights and other instruments can help clarify the human-nature relationship.

THE ROOTS OF THE SEPARATION OF HUMANS FROM THE REST OF NATURE

In order to contribute to discussions about the way forward, it is useful to better understand where the separation between modern human societies and nature comes from. Biologically, humans are animals and without a doubt part of nature. All living beings interact with their natural environment and many species alter it to some extent. It is one of the characteristics of us humans, however, that we have taken the manipulation of the natural world to another level, and it is clear that at some point in history we passed a tipping point at which the relationship between human societies – at least a part of them, in particular modern Western societies – and the rest of nature came out of balance.

An important turning point in this development was the beginning of modernity. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a scientific ‘revolution’ took place in Europe, which fundamentally changed the way in which societies viewed the world around them.⁵ This has had far-reaching implications for the way in which societies organize, and how they treat nature. New scientific methods of measuring, surveying, classifying, and valuing were applied to the natural world, in an attempt to dominate it. This implied that human societies and the rest of nature were increasingly seen as two distinct and independent spheres. Europe’s scientific ‘revolution’ coincided with the early days of European colonialism and the dawning age of empire. The new methods were quickly brought to the ‘new worlds’ and played an important part in their subjugation and exploitation.

Importantly, both the scientific ‘revolution’ and the beginning of European imperialism are closely linked to the rise of (early) capitalism. The new scientific methods enabled the systematic and violent extraction of wealth from the colonies, as well as the enclosure of the commons in Europe.⁶ Capitalism is fundamentally premised on the separation of humanity and nature. It is based on the transformation of natural goods into tradeable commodities, and the monetization of natural use values⁷ – in addition to the exploitation of human labor. This entails the domination of our natural environment. Consequently, capitalism not only uses the natural world to extract and accumulate wealth, but also creates a specific narrative of what ‘nature’ is.

Capitalism’s governing conception is that it may do with the natural world as it pleases, that nature is something external, which can be fragmented, and rationalized to serve economic exploitation.⁸ Nature is therefore partitioned into units, which are then put under property rights. As a consequence, capitalism has radically altered nature and landscapes, creating entirely new ecosystems, such as the monoculture plantations of industrial agriculture.⁹ This way of radically altering, exploiting and destroying the natural world continues until today, and we are now seeing new frontiers of the exploitation of nature. In the context of the so-called ‘green’ and ‘blue’ economies, nature has been redefined as a set of ecosystem services to which monetary value is attributed and which consequently can be traded in order to generate profits. The division of the living world into units that can be

4 For more information on COVID-19, please see article “The Coronavirus Pandemic: A Critical Reflection on Corporate Food Patterns” in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*. See also: Rob Wallace, Alex Liebman, Luis Fernando Chaves and Rodrick Wallace. “COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital”. *Monthly Review*. April 1, 2020. Available at: <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/04/01/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital>.

5 Koyré, Alexandre. *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press. 1957.

6 The enclosure of the commons refers to the process of transfer of lands that had been part of the commons to private ownership. It started in the late middle ages and intensified in the 18th century.

7 Please see: Harvey, David. *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. New York: Oxfam University Press, 2014.

8 Moore, Jason W. “The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis”. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44:3, (2017): 594-630. Available at: [/doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036).

9 Harvey. *Supra* note 7.

quantified and valued financially has led to the creation of new markets, such as carbon markets and emerging biodiversity markets. The creation of specific financial instruments, such as derivatives and carbon credits, marks a new dimension of how the natural world has been transformed into a source of wealth extraction for big business and global finance.¹⁰

¹⁰ International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, Land, Forests, Water and Territory Working Group. “Rogue capitalism and the Financialization of Territories”, IPC, Forthcoming.

A DISCONNECT BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

The separation of human societies from the rest of nature in modern Western societies is reflected, among other aspects, in a largely disconnected development between international human rights law on the one hand and environmental law on the other.

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) as well as the two core human rights treaties – the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR, 1966) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR, 1966) – are largely silent on nature, except for article 1.2 of both the ICCPR and the ICESCR, which establishes the principle that peoples have sovereignty over their natural resources. They do not, however, explicitly address the relationship between nature and human dignity, as core objective of human rights. In the further development of the international human rights framework, nature – mainly referred to as ‘the environment’¹¹ – has been largely treated, if at all, as something that is functional for human economic development, thus (implicitly) accepting the separation of two distinct spheres. In recent years and to a large part thanks to pressure by civil society organizations, there have been developments that could be an opening to a more integrated approach to the inter-relationship between humanity and nature. One step has been the creation, by the UN Human Rights Council, of a dedicated mandate on human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. The work of the two special rapporteurs with this mandate has contributed to understanding that protection of the natural environment is indispensable for the effective enjoyment of human rights.¹²

¹¹ While the term ‘nature’ encompasses the multi-functionality of nature as being inherently/intrinsically valuable in its own right, as well as its functions as being integral to or useful for the reproduction of human society, ‘the environment’ is a construct that alienates nature from humans.

¹² For more information, please see: www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Environment/SREnvironment/Pages/SREnvironmentIndex.aspx.

It is also important to note that over the years, the work of the human rights treaty bodies and institutions has increasingly recognized the special relationship that specific groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, peasants, small-scale fishers, pastoralists, etc. have with their natural environment. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) as well as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP, 2018), adopted in December 2018 as results of mobilizations of Indigenous Peoples, peasant movements and other rural people’s organizations, are important milestones in this regard. Both documents recognize the crucial contributions of nature-dependent groups to maintain healthy ecosystems, and clarify their specific rights as well as states’ obligations in this regard. Another important instrument of international law is the *Escazú Agreement* (2018) by the Latin American and Caribbean region, which explicitly recognizes, among others, human rights defenders in environmental matters.¹³

¹³ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). *Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean*. 2018. Available at: repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/43583/1/S1800428_en.pdf.

In parallel, since the 1970s, discussions in the context of the development of international environmental law have intensified in a context of increasing concern about rapid environmental degradation caused by human activity. In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment adopted the Stockholm Declaration, which is the first document in international law to link human rights and environmental protection. However, the framing of this declaration remains human-centered, and focused on states’ sovereignty over their national territories.

The report *Our Common Future* by the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as Brundtland Commission) of 1987 goes further inasmuch as it is sensitive to the connections between environmental protection, development, and efforts to reduce poverty, within the integrative concept of sustainable development. However, it remains rooted in the premise that the natural environment is a resource that humans are entitled to use for their benefit. In that framing, any human can claim, as a right of entitlement, the availability of a certain level of quality of that resource.¹⁴ This is opposed to claims by Indigenous Peoples for a right to healthy ecosystems, as these cannot be fragmented and attributed to different interest groups.

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (also known as Rio Summit) was a crucial stepping stone in the development of international environmental law. In the context of the summit, important international conventions were negotiated and adopted, which have shaped the way in which states and the UN multilateral system address global environmental problems ever since, namely the UN *Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC, 1992), the UN *Convention to Combat Desertification* (UNCCD, 1992), and the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD, 1992). It is worth stressing that environmental and climate agreements do not refer to any environmental or climate rights of people or communities. In addition, they do not establish strong accountability mechanisms to protect people and communities vis-à-vis state actions or omissions in the context of environmental protection or climate change mitigation. As a consequence, conservationist approaches that are based on the assumption that nature can only be protected if humans are excluded, have led to the expulsion of rural communities and Indigenous Peoples from their lands and territories in many parts of the world. Similarly, measures to address climate change under the UNFCCC, such as REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) have resulted in violation of several human rights of individuals and communities who depend on such ecosystems and make sustainable use of them.¹⁵ Overall, provisions in environmental and climate instruments focus on procedural aspects, such as mandatory environmental assessments and exchange of information, and less on substantive obligations of states to secure a certain environmental quality. In practice, this usually means that economic interests prevail over both preservation objectives and human rights protection. It is worth noting, however, that food is addressed as an integral element of the UNFCCC's objective.¹⁶

Recent advances in the development of international human rights law indicate increased awareness and concern about the complex relationships between human societies and their natural environment. Similarly, environmental and climate law are more sensitive to the need for today's measures to respect human rights. The CBD recognizes certain rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including their traditional knowledge, innovations and practices,¹⁷ as well as the inextricable link between biological and cultural diversity. This has been the basis for explicitly recognizing their rights to seeds in the *International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture* (ITPGRFA, 2004). However, only recently and very slowly, states have started to recognize that small-scale food producers and their agroecological management practices are key contributions to ensuring healthy and functioning ecosystems; and that this, in turn, requires the protection of their human rights in order to preserve biodiversity. Another example is the recent recognition by the UNCCD that effective measures to achieve its objectives require the respect and protection of local people's and communities' tenure rights.¹⁸

¹⁴ Please see: Aiken, William. "Human Rights in an Ecological Era". *Environmental Values* 1, no. 3, (1992): 191-203. Available at: www.environmentandsociety.org/mml/human-rights-ecological-era.

¹⁵ Please see: Friends of the Earth International. REDD+: *The carbon market and the California-Acre-Chiapas cooperation*. 2017. Available at: www.foei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/REDD-The-carbon-market-and-the-California-Acre-Chiapas-cooperation.pdf.

¹⁶ UNFCCC, article 2.

¹⁷ CBD, article 8j.

¹⁸ In 2019, the UNCCD Conference of the Parties (COP) adopted a decision in which member states commit to review development policies, including land use policies and agricultural practices to promote ecological regeneration on a large scale using the Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (2012) as a key reference. For more information, please see: www.unccd.int/news-events/new-delhi-declaration-investing-land-and-unlocking-opportunities.

RECONFIGURING HUMAN SOCIETIES' RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REST OF NATURE: ELEMENTS FOR A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

When thinking about the way forward, it is important to situate the current environmental crises within the context of the broader, multiple crises that we are witnessing. The looming collapse of the earth system as well as the rapid degradation of local ecosystems is closely linked to the sharp increase of inequalities and the concentration of resources in the hands of a few powerful actors, the destruction of the social fabric from community to national level and resulting migration, as well as wars and famine. The consequence is increasing violence against communities and people, which is further exacerbated by the rise of authoritarianism in all parts of the world. Non-white-male people and in particular women are particularly affected by such violence.¹⁹ There is indeed a close link between the way societies (mis)treat and exploit humans on the one hand and nature on the other.²⁰

¹⁹ For an analysis of the close linkages between the domination of nature and domination of women, please see: Andrews, Donna, Smith, Kiah, and M Alejandra Morena. "Enraged: Women and Nature". *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2019): 6. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/enraged-women-and-nature.

²⁰ Bookchin, Murray. *The Ecology of Freedom. The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Oakland: AK Press, 2005. For Bookchin, "the very notion of the domination of nature by man [sic] stems from the very real domination of human by human" (p. 65); Andrews et al. *Supra* note 19.

Another aspect to take into account is the increasing weakness and dysfunctionality of governance spaces, in particular public, democratic institutions. Some expressions of this are institutional fragmentation, competing law regimes, and lack of policy coherence. To a great extent, the weakness of democratic governance is the result of deliberate attacks from global business and finance on the one hand, which have succeeded in putting forward 'multi-stakeholderism' as a way of being part of decision-making at all levels, and chauvinistic nationalism on the other. Strategies aiming at overcoming the divide thus need to be comprehensive and address human rights, environmental justice, social justice, gender justice and democratic governance that is based on people's sovereignty as interconnected elements of radical transformation.

As mentioned above, we argue that overcoming the separation of humans from the rest of nature will be critical if we are to overcome the current crises. This will require recognizing non-Western cultures and worldviews, as well as deconstructing and decolonizing our minds and actions. A first crucial step is to ensure the full respect and protection of the rights and ways of living of Indigenous Peoples' as well as other groups that are deeply connected to the living environment, in particular small-scale food producers such as peasants, small-scale fishers, pastoralists and forest dwellers. Particular attention needs to be given to women in communities who often have a special connection to seeds, forests, and wild plants, and who are subject to structural discrimination and exclusion. This requires defending, reclaiming and strengthening public governance spaces and institutions with adequate participation mechanisms as well as working towards accountability strategies that combine human rights as well as environmental and climate law instruments in a mutually strengthening manner.

RE-INTERPRETING AND FURTHER DEVELOPING INTERNATIONAL LAW

The recent adoption of UNDROP provides an opportunity to re-interpret key instruments of environmental and climate law from a human rights perspective, taking into account UNDRIP as well as other relevant human rights standards. This is critical to clarify the relationship between the rights of peoples, groups and communities that directly depend on functioning ecosystems and the protection of such systems. The CBD, for instance, is built upon the premise that states have sovereignty over the genetic resources in their jurisdiction. The question that arises from the recognition of specific rights of Indigenous Peoples and other rural people related to such resources by UNDRIP and UNDROP (as well as other human rights

instruments) then is: what do states' sovereign responsibilities entail in terms of obligations to protect and guarantee communities' and people's rights? Answering this question could help policy-makers and other actors understand that key to addressing the rapid decline of biodiversity and climate change is the effective protection of Indigenous Peoples' and other rural peoples' management and production systems, including their tenure rights and systems, among other measures. This, as well as a better linkage between human rights spaces with those dealing with environmental, biodiversity and climate issues is crucial in order to establish multifunctional and inter-sectorial policies and institutions, which are able to address the contemporary world's multifaceted challenges.

In addition to the above, the international policy framework needs further developing in a way that brings the two spheres of international law – on human rights and on the environment – together, both conceptually and practically. Proposals to fully recognize a human right to a healthy environment could be a promising entry point and an opportunity to move beyond approaches that see nature or the 'environment' merely as functional to human survival. This could be an important contribution to ensure human dignity as well as social and environmental justice within a healthy earth and healthy ecosystems.²¹ The global dialogue towards the explicit recognition of this critical right could benefit from existing experiences that recognize rights of nature in legal frameworks.²² Human rights as well as ecological and climate concerns need to be brought together, in order to clearly formulate states' obligations to ensure healthy ecosystems, locally and globally. Once again, existing entry points, such as the rights to biodiversity and the rights to land and natural resources, as well as their sustainable use, as recognized by UNDROP, provide important building blocks. Indigenous Peoples and communities, in particular those of small-scale food producers, are those who take care of most ecosystems; protecting and strengthening their rights is therefore a key obligation of states. However, the process of reconciling legal frameworks would also have to address challenges such as establishing limits to the human use of natural resources and the question of how to deal with situations of conflicts between human needs and ecological protection. It also requires to clarify states' obligations under human rights law to take all necessary measures "to the maximum of its available resources"²³ in the face of the current ecological crises.

AGROECOLOGY: RADICALLY TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS AND SOCIETIES

As explained above, the capitalistic organization of societies is at the root of the current crises. Since the beginning of modernity, Western societies have been functioning upon the conviction that humans were not only distinct from the rest of nature, but independent from it. This conception has been imposed on the rest of the world through imperialism and, more recently, globalization.²⁴ Today, global warming, mass extinction and the emergence and rapid spread of new pathogens like SARS-CoV-2 clearly challenge this conception. As capitalism is built on the premise that it may do with nature as it pleases, it now confronts a reality that it cannot – at least not without provoking profound crises that threaten human survival.

Given the dire state of the planet, we need nothing less than a radical transformation of capitalistic societies. As such, the current crises may offer an important opportunity, and food is an excellent starting point, because of its key importance for human survival, and because it demonstrates our close links with nature.

²¹ There are also proposals for a third international human rights covenant on the rights of human beings to the environment. For more information, please visit: cidce.org/en/droits-de-lhomme-a-lenvironnement-human-right-to-the-environment/.

²² Examples include Ecuador's Constitution, Bolivia's legislation on Mother Earth as well as Aotearoa/New Zealand's agreement between the State and the Maori people.

²³ ICESCR, article 2.1.

²⁴ Moore. *Supra* note 8.

Based on the decades-long struggles of small-scale food producers' organizations and Indigenous Peoples, the food sovereignty movement has developed a clear vision and proposals for fundamentally reshaping food systems and power relations. These should constitute the basis for a profound transformation of our societies, in particular towards localized, circular economies. In the context of the ecological crises, agroecology has become a critical proposal for transformation. Agroecology refers to a way of food production and management that builds on and stimulates natural processes in order to boost resilience and productivity. Co-evolution of human communities with their natural environment is opposed to the domination, exploitation and destruction of nature in the currently dominant industrial food system. One illustration of this is the diversity of peasant production, based on the constant adaptation of seeds to local conditions. Another key aspect is the enhancement of soil fertility by creating living soils, instead of conceiving them as a mere substrate to which a given set of nutrients need to be added so that it can be absorbed by plants. Agroecological practices enhance organic processes, thus increasing resilience to climate change and other factors. Living soils store carbon and the contribution of production systems to counter global warming increases where crops are combined with trees and animals.

In addition to its crucial contribution to counter global warming and the rapid loss of biodiversity, agroecology fundamentally challenges power structures. As said before, the capitalistic domination of nature goes hand in hand with the exclusion and exploitation of certain groups of society, in particular women,²⁵ Indigenous Peoples, people of color, as well as peasants, pastoralists, small-scale fishers and other rural people. Developing and implementing policies for a transition to agroecology therefore also presents an opportunity to respect, protect and fulfill human rights of marginalized groups.

In order to tap the full potential of agroecology as a way of re-situating humans within the natural world, and to overcome structural discrimination, it is crucial to conceive it as a central part of states' human rights and environmental and climate law obligations.²⁶ The realization of the rights of peasants, Indigenous Peoples and other rural people to seeds and biodiversity is an essential part of this. Another key element is to ensure the control over land and other natural resources by people and communities, by means of an effective protection of their tenure and management systems, in particular those based on collective rights. Only with secure tenure rights will communities be able to play their role as custodians/stewards of ecosystems and living nature. What is more, we need an agroecological agrarian reform that ensures equitable and just distribution of land and related natural resources. All in all, agroecology is a key strategy to reshape the relationship of human societies with the rest of nature, and a pathway to an economic and societal model that remunerates people and nature, instead of dominant actors, in particular business and global finance.

²⁵ As stated by Andrews et al., *Supra* note 19: "Indeed, a long history of feminist analysis has drawn attention to the ways that women, nature and the 'other' are viewed as subordinate to the dominant 'norm' of white, male capitalism". For an analysis of how exclusion of and violence against women has been a central part in the development of early capitalism, please see: Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004.

²⁶ FIAN International. *Agroecology and the Human Right to Food and Nutrition. Analytical Briefing Paper*. Forthcoming.



IN BRIEF

Humans are part of nature. Food is the most manifest expression of our intimate connection with the rest of the living world. However, modern Western thinking and actions treat humans and the rest of nature as two separate spheres. Capitalism in particular is built on the premise that it can dominate and exploit the natural world in order to generate profits. This article argues that this separation is central to the deep ecological crises that the world is facing and which manifest most strongly in human-made global warming as well as the dramatic loss of biological diversity. The COVID-19 pandemic also forces us to reassess our relationship with the rest of nature. Addressing the existential crises that humanity is facing will require to overcome this separation. This article intends to lay out some steps that could lead us in that direction, focusing on how human rights and other instruments could better clarify the human-nature relationship.

The approval of human rights instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas provide an opportunity to re-interpret key instruments of environmental and climate law and to advance the protection of local communities as custodians of ecosystems. Effective implementation and bridging of existing human rights as well as environmental and climate law instruments will have to be complemented by developing further the international policy framework in a way that brings those two spheres of international law together, both conceptually and practically. Furthermore, we need nothing less than a radical transformation of capitalistic societies, building on the long struggles of small-scale food producers' organizations and Indigenous Peoples for food sovereignty and agroecology.



KEY CONCEPTS

- The human-nature separation is central to the deep ecological crises that the world is facing, in particular global warming and mass extinction.
- The human-nature separation and domination are central to capitalism, which is based on the transformation of natural goods into tradeable commodities, and the monetization of natural use values – in addition to the exploitation of human labor.
- The separation of human societies from the rest of nature is reflected in a largely disconnected development between international human rights law on the one hand, and environmental law on the other.

- The current environmental crises need to be understood within the context of the broader, multiple crises that we are witnessing.
- Overcoming the separation of humans from the rest of nature requires ensuring the full respect and protection of the rights and ways of living of small-scale food producers who are deeply connected to the living environment; further developing the international policy framework in a way that brings human rights and environmental law together; and a radical transformation of capitalistic societies, based on food sovereignty and agroecology.



KEY WORDS

- Climate change
- Biodiversity
- Ecosystems
- Human rights
- Environmental and climate law
- Indigenous Peoples
- Peasants
- Capitalism
- Food sovereignty
- Agroecology



02

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON CORPORATE FOOD PATTERNS

Hernando Salcedo Fidalgo

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[FIAN Colombia](#) is a section of FIAN International, founded in 2013. One of their main activities is training communities whose human right to adequate food and nutrition has been violated. To this end, they coordinate empowerment processes as well as meetings, exchange programs, and other events that enable communities to share their experiences. FIAN Colombia is a leader in advocacy in various international human rights bodies, and supports processes related to food policies and governance of natural resources across Colombia.

“It is evident that today’s societies, and their current food practices, have contributed – through so-called ‘modern food systems’ – to the biodiversity crisis and to the increased risk of existing and new zoonotic diseases, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.”

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¹ We prefer to refer to ‘food processes’, when understood comprehensively, and to ‘food systems’ when referring to industrial food chains. The notion of food systems has been built around the idea that food is a phenomenon which must take multiple variables into consideration. These are understood through general systems theory, to achieve interventions that modify the obstacles to their functioning. This

This year so far, and undoubtedly in times to come, an overwhelming amount of literature is being published about SARS-CoV-2, the virus behind the current pandemic. The food debate is also making the headlines, but more so as a problem of conventional food security, in terms of food supply during lockdown measures, than as the object of a structural analysis. In this article we wish to share a different perspective on the link between the health crisis and food.

CORONAVIRUS AND ‘FOOD PROCESSES’¹: LESSONS LEARNED

An article published in March in renowned medical magazine *The Lancet*² makes two statements that provide insights into the current health emergency. Firstly, the authors establish a link between “food systems of animal origin” and the pandemic. Secondly, they affirm that the corona virus in question (SARS Cov-2) – the infectious agent behind this pandemic – is transmitted from animals to humans through a zoonotic process.³ These statements challenge conspiracy theories on the origins of the virus, such as its creation in a laboratory, and underscore the importance of structural factors linked to the right to adequate food and nutrition.

The article interrogates the mainstream factors that have so far been argued as the cause of the pandemic, since it puts discussions on industrial food systems at the heart of the debate. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the article views the problem through the mainstream lens of hygiene. Its departure point therefore, is that the current situation is the result of contagion by an external microbial agent, which infects its carriers within a circuit of adverse proximity relations between wild animals and human beings.

The prestigious research team affirms – based on the proven mode of transmission by zoonosis detected over the last two decades – that the chain of contagion can be avoided if effective measures are put in place, such as regulating practices around food of animal origin in wet markets (such as the Wuhan market, where the pandemic supposedly started). These markets are informal open spaces, typical of cultures whose food patterns are strongly rooted in tradition, and where water is used to keep clean the produce on sale, whilst sometimes being used to sustain living species.

The article resorts to the microbial theory of disease discovered in the 19th Century, and as such, it is true to the linear and causal models of positivist science: It seeks to find the cause of spread of the disease in the close mingling of species, originating in the interactions occurring in these markets. In the following section, we demonstrate that existing food systems have been generating disease and dysfunction since the rise of the industrial era, and are deeply linked to the current pandemic. We therefore propose a non-positivist assessment of this moment in history, shifting instead toward an analytical and holistic approach to ‘food processes’.

THE TRANSMISSION OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES BETWEEN SPECIES: INSIGHTS FROM BIODIVERSITY⁴

It is vital to understand that the relationship between carriers in the transmission of infectious diseases is usually limited to one specific species. In other words, cross-species transmission is unusual and occurs only under certain conditions, to which we wish to draw attention. The main question is: in what type of situation does a virus jump from one species to another?

From a scientific perspective, the unusual proximity between species in wet markets is considered a risk factor. These types of assertions, backed by official science, legitimize the stigma attached to – as well as the discriminatory, racist and prejudiced view of – traditional practices in open markets. It is usually traditional food producers that sell their produce there. For them, the market not only is a clean space, but the fact that they can sell whole animals, both living and dead, is of added value, because it is a ‘natural’, unprocessed source of food. From this point of view, the problem is far from being an issue of standard hygiene.

Cross-species transmission of infectious diseases is linked to evolutionary changes resulting from the growing fragility of ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity. The risk of infectious diseases is an indicator of declining biodiversity,⁵ given that the higher the biodiversity, the lower the transmission rate of zoonotic infections.⁶ This is known as the ‘dilution effect’; an “ecosystem service that regulates diseases”.⁷ Climate collapse is a major contributor to the massive loss of biodiversity, just as the destruction of ecosystems is a key factor of global warming.

Notwithstanding the above, it is worth noting that right now biodiversity is most impacted by agribusiness practices, the use of pesticides, the proliferation of extensive monocultures (which is concomitant to the aforementioned activities), and the expansion and intensification of industrial livestock farming.⁸ In the case of industrial farming, animals of one single species live in close proximity, as they are concentrated in overcrowded conditions. This practice leads to an imbalance in the relationship with the environment and with wild species. In other words, agribusiness barns and coops are just as prone to infection as wet markets.

vision can be criticized from a complexity perspective, whereby these variables should not be simply taken as parts of an ensemble affected by those who ‘enter’ or ‘leave’ it, but must be seen as an integral and complex process.

- 2 Kock, Richard A. *et al.* “2019-nCoV in context: lessons learned?” 4 (2020). Available at: [www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30035-8/fulltext#%20](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30035-8/fulltext#%20).
- 3 Zoonosis is the transmission of diseases, usually infectious, from an animal species to the human species. Some have also spoken of reverse zoonosis, when transmission occurs from humans to animals. We shall come back to the ‘inversion’ terminology later.
- 4 Shuo, Su *et al.* “Epidemiology, Genetic Recombination, and Pathogenesis of Coronaviruses”. *Trends in Microbiology*, 24, 6 (2016).

5 Morand, Serge. «Biodiversité, élevage et maladies infectieuses». *Biodiv 2050*, 19 (2019).

6 Morand. *Supra* Note 5.

7 Morand. *Supra* Note 5.

8 For more information, please see: Wallace, Rob. *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Infectious Disease, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science*. NYU Press, 2016. Available at: monthlyreview.org/2020/04/01/covid-19-and-circuits-of-capital; and the a relevant interview with the author. Available at: monthlyreview.org/press/who-should-we-blame-for-coronavirus-rob-wallace-has-some-answers.

It is evident that today's societies, and their current food practices, have contributed – through so-called 'modern food systems' ⁹ – to the biodiversity crisis and to the increased risk of existing and new zoonotic diseases, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Ecosystem fragility has facilitated the transmission of infections across animal species, as well as of zoonoses from animal species to human beings and vice-versa. Below we share an example of evolutionary adaptation, throwing light on a model devised by FIAN Colombia that seeks to explain how current disease types are linked to and determined by corporate-led food patterns.¹⁰

FROM CHRONIC NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES TO ZOOSES AND INFECTIOUS EPIDEMICS: HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

For more than two years, FIAN Colombia has been developing a model that aims to build a generative relationship between dysfunctional ecosystems impacted by current food systems, and disease profiles and ways of dying of large sections of populations in countries across the world. According to this model, chronic non-communicable diseases (CNCD) are the most likely cause of morbidity and mortality, not only in industrial countries, but also in the Global South, where traditional eating habits are increasingly replaced by industrial foods, and women are the most impacted.

In February 2019, The Lancet Commission¹¹ published an article that suggested a linkage between chronic diseases, deteriorated ecosystems, and industrial food consumption. Obesity, one of several forms of malnutrition that is particularly prevalent amongst children and adolescents, is a clear indicator of the double burden of malnutrition (DBM). The latter combines a lack of intake of some nutrients (undernutrition) with excess in others (overnutrition), due to the high consumption of ultra-processed foods,¹² commonly known as junk food. Obesity is the main risk factor for developing CNCDs, as reported by the World Health Organization (WHO) in recent years.¹³ Women are amongst the most affected by both obesity and the double burden of malnutrition, as well as by the gendered division of labor, as they live for longer in worse health conditions linked to food.¹⁴

Industrial food production is responsible both for the disease patterns common to most contemporary societies (i.e. CNCDs), as well as for the increasing fragility of ecosystems resulting from its harm inflicted on the planet. It has therefore created a favorable environment for the current pandemic to emerge. In the face of uncertainty, the scientific and political community has returned to the old rationale of self-isolation. Infectious diseases – which were thought to have been overcome – now take the lead amongst the present mix of CNCDs and communicable diseases.

In an article published last year in the *Biodiv 50* journal,¹⁵ we proposed a holistic analysis of the 'food process', whereby ecosystemic and nutritional impacts on the prevalence of CNCDs were defined in terms of 'negative' or 'inverse' resilience, i.e. an adaptation process that tends to favor disease and death over the preservation of health and life. We are trapped in a double burden of disease, and as by-gone patterns re-emerge, we find ourselves facing confinement as the only option.

9 In its 2017 (No.12) report, the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) established a conceptual model of food systems. It distinguished the so-called 'modern food system', and found it to be closely related to agribusiness and the food industry. Available at: www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/hlpe/hlpe_documents/HLPE_Reports/HLPE-Report-12_ES.pdf.

10 We prefer to use this category proposed by FIAN Colombia instead of 'modern food system', as we are specifically referring to the dominant pattern determined by the 'edible foods' industry.

11 The Lancet Commissions. "Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems". *The Lancet* 393 (2019). This publication contains the result of a multidisciplinary and international analysis, carried out by a group of experts convened by medical journal *The Lancet*.

12 At FIAN Colombia we have been working on a definition that differentiates 'real food' from 'edible products'. 'Edible products' are industrially manufactured and have a high content of crucial nutrients such as sugar, salt, fat and additives. 'Real food' has not or barely been processed, and preserve their natural dietary matrix. We view this food as being beyond the concept of 'diet' (a medicalized and prescriptive term), linked to the regeneration of ecosystems, and within local, family, seasonal production perspectives, such as agroecology.

13 WHO. *Report of the Commission on Ending Child Obesity*. Geneva: WHO, 2016. Available at: www.who.int/end-childhood-obesity/final-report/en/.

14 WHO. *Supra Note 13*.

15 Salcedo Fidalgo, Hernando. «Comment sortir du système agro-industriel? Un enjeu de santé publique face à la protection de la biodiversité», *Biodiv 50*, No. 19, December 2019.

TOWARDS A HOLISTIC PROPOSAL FOR FOOD AGENCY¹⁶

We concur with feminist theorists and philosophers Judith Butler, Donna Haraway¹⁷ and Karen Barad¹⁸ that we are at a turning point. In a relatively short period of time (in planetary history terms) the planet's reserves have been ravaged. For a few to accumulate capital, poverty and exclusion have been exacerbated by exploitation and consumption of carbon-burning energy, feeding an economic system premised on unlimited growth. The current era – characterized by the predatory influence of both human beings and capital – has been defined respectively as the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, alluding to geological eras (through the '-cene' suffix) to denounce a phenomenon, that would either have taken thousands of years or followed a natural disaster to occur, were it not for human intervention.¹⁹

Corporate food models are in the eye of the storm, as they are both the cause and the result of the dysfunctionality of living systems and collective disease of the human species. Women are the main victims of this patriarchal process, but, as the “progenitors of our food chains”,²⁰ women are also a source of resistance and regeneration. For all the above reasons, in order to deepen our understanding of ‘positive’ resilience – which is a proposal for the defense of life that includes all life forms, known as biota – we need to widen our scope of vision beyond the exclusively human dimension. In this regard, scales are tilted toward a diverse biosis,²¹ through human and non-human agency. The recurrence of zoonoses is alarming because it shows that we are on the brink of an irreversible trend toward ‘negative resilience’ and abiosis.²²

This planet-wide emergency manifests in the lack of natural refuges for living species, pointing toward the urgent need to take actions that regenerate life and habitats – without increasing the number of refugees. Neoliberal states have cut out a role for themselves as ‘managers of return on capital’, whereby economic growth indicators stem from a notion of progress undergirded by extractivist developmentalism, through the exploitation and appropriation of nature. Feminist authors such as Braidotti, Haraway, Butler, as well as Cabnal critique these types of power relations, where a ‘masculinized subject’ human being has power over other forms of life on the planet.

The time has come to learn the lesson that human and non-human agents can promote life, by leaving behind the Capitalocene, and going beyond a logic centered on the appropriation, domination, and exploitation of nature, underpinned by patriarchal and class relations.

Successfully placing the right to adequate food and nutrition at the center of collective action, through human agency, will allow us to conceive of ways to intervene on ‘food processes’ in their entirety. This proposal allows us to reaffirm the crucial interrelationship between food and nutrition on the one hand, and between food and health on the other. Healthy ecosystems are vital for good and healthy nutrition, which in turn contributes to building adequate immunology for living beings. This point of view goes beyond the narrow actions of positivist science, which only focus on finding medication and/or vaccines against pathogens, which in themselves are problematic and sufficiently criticized.²³ A more holistic proposal builds on ancestral knowledge, and on the participation of communities that preserve biodiversity and protect seeds,²⁴ so as to aspire to enable the emergence of other forms of defending biosis.

16 In what follows, we refer to ‘agency’ as a collective exercise that recognizes individuals immersed in their identities, as co-responsible for the permanent construction of reality. This is an ongoing process, not a predetermined one. Agents are cooperative and recognized as subjects, and when acting they are immersed without hierarchy with non-human agents on the planet.

17 See Haraway, Donna. “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantacionocene, Chtulucene: Making Kin”. *Environmental Humanities*, 6 (2015).

18 Karen Barad is a pioneer of the concept of “agential realism”. As members of faculty in the History of Consciousness department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, she and Donna Haraway have drawn on the philosophy of Judith Butler to take a step towards “performativity”. That is, highlighting where phenomena occur, and where exclusion dynamics are evidenced.

19 The Anthropocene and Capitalocene categories were coined by Noboru Ishikawa, Anna Tsing, Donna Haraway, Scott F. Gilbert, Nils Bubandt, and Kenneth Olwig in a publication for the *Ethnos* journal in 2014. Though the term ‘anthropocene’ had previously been used by Nils Bubandt, this publication integrated it definitively within the social sciences.

20 This term was used by Donna Andrews, Kiah Smith and M. Alejandra Morena in: “Enraged: Women and Nature”, *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*. “Women’s Power in Food Struggles” (2019): 8.

21 According to Donna Haraway, biota and biosis should be understood as the force of the living.

22 In opposition to biota, the term “abiosis” has also been used to designate the suppression of life forces. “Abiosis” has also been used in the two cases following proposals by the authors mentioned in footnotes 19 and 21.

23 See Salcedo Fidalgo, Hernando. “La vacunación es un experimento”, *El Espectador*. November 27, 2014. Available in Spanish at: www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/vacunacion-un-experimento-articulo-530130.

24 Among these we have not only the people who produce from family and community farming, particularly women, but also those who have organized, as in Colombia, with the explicit purpose of protecting seeds and who call themselves ‘guardians’.

SIX PROPOSALS TO BE IMPLEMENTED IMMEDIATELY

Given the urgency to act collectively, and in line with the right to food and nutrition, we wish to conclude this analysis with a series of proposals that reclaim our agency within the food world order:

- Collectively block the advance of so-called modern food systems, by means of a collective political action that demands of states to unquestionably leave behind the corporate food model. This is only possible through peasant, Indigenous, family and community agriculture, and agroecology led by women, who have demonstrated their capacity to feed the world.²⁵
- Decentralize the exclusive gaze on the human species and on the economic and social patriarchal model, promoting instead our individual and collective influence towards a ‘kinship’²⁶ that incorporates the forces of all genders, all forms of life, and of biosis.
- Replace the consumption of goods by the generation of inputs that promote biotic strength and positive resilience in all areas – environmental/ecological, social, spiritual, economic and cultural – by means of policies of care as a collective imperative, centered on a social reproduction that builds on the role of women.
- Defend our commons, such as ‘real’ food,²⁷ water, space, and biota, to ensure they are exchanged and shared, outside market interests.
- Resort to a form of governance based on equity and polycentric governance that offers adequate food and nutrition to everyone, at any point of the life cycle, recognizing food sovereignty as a goal through coordinated forms of power between diverse centers and spatial levels.
- Reshape an international alliance for biosis, an alliance that prevents the United Nations system from collapsing, before giving way to a new pillar of unity between peoples for planetary life, and where the right to adequate food and nutrition prevails as a guiding axis for the defense of biosis.

²⁵ This argument was strengthened by the following article: Muller, Adrian, et.al, “Strategies for feeding the world more sustainably with organic agriculture”. *Nature Communications*, 8 (2017).

²⁶ Haraway. *Supra* note 17. We refer by this term to the idea of “making kin” coined by Donna Haraway. It refers to the bond to build with other living beings, to make humans part of the whole biota, with a sense of kinship.

²⁷ *Supra* note 12.

In this moment of history during which we must reconsider our current lifestyles, it has become imperative to take these actions (among others), lest we definitely stop life from prevailing over short-lived material interests and over a mirage of civilization.



IN BRIEF

The SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic declared by the World Health Organization in January 2020 has sparked a critical debate about its relationship to ‘food processes’ in the era of capitalism. On the one hand, the pandemic sheds light on the transmission of infectious agents caused by so-called ‘modern food systems’, which have made biodiversity more fragile and promoted cross-species transmission from animals to humans. On the other hand, it demonstrates that the ‘corporate food process’ has already created a favorable environment – in the form of non-communicable chronic diseases – for a fatal outbreak of disease. Beyond the mainstream scientific response that centers on medication and vaccines, the article puts forward an exit strategy to the crisis via six proposals that build on the notion of food agency. This includes doing away with the patriarchal, developmentalist model that underpins corporate food patterns, thereby prioritizing collective care led by women through family and community agroecology, and promoting planetary life in the wider framework of food sovereignty.



KEY CONCEPTS

- The cross-species transmission of infectious agents, as seems to be the case with the virus responsible for this pandemic, is known as zoonosis and is related to ecosystem fragility.
- Research led by a panel of experts at the UN Committee on World Food Security have devised a systemic model in order to explain food processes – defined as food systems – which is comprehensive but insufficient.
- ‘Food process’ is a more comprehensive and holistic concept that allows for a distinction between the dominant corporate food pattern, based on agribusiness, and partly responsible for non-communicable chronic diseases, and the collapse of nature.
- The current need of living species to adapt to human aggression seems to privilege ‘inverse resilience’, i.e. a negative form of adapting that takes the shape of disease.
- Contemporary researchers and authors have suggested the terms Anthropocene and Capitalocene to denote the planetary consequences of harm caused by humans to the planet through an extractivist and patriarchal system that limitlessly exploits nature.



KEY WORDS

- SARS-CoV-2
- COVID-19
- Anthropocene
- Capitalocene
- Food systems
- Corporate food pattern
- Biosis
- Agency
- Extractivism
- Climate collapse
- Biodiversity
- Pandemic

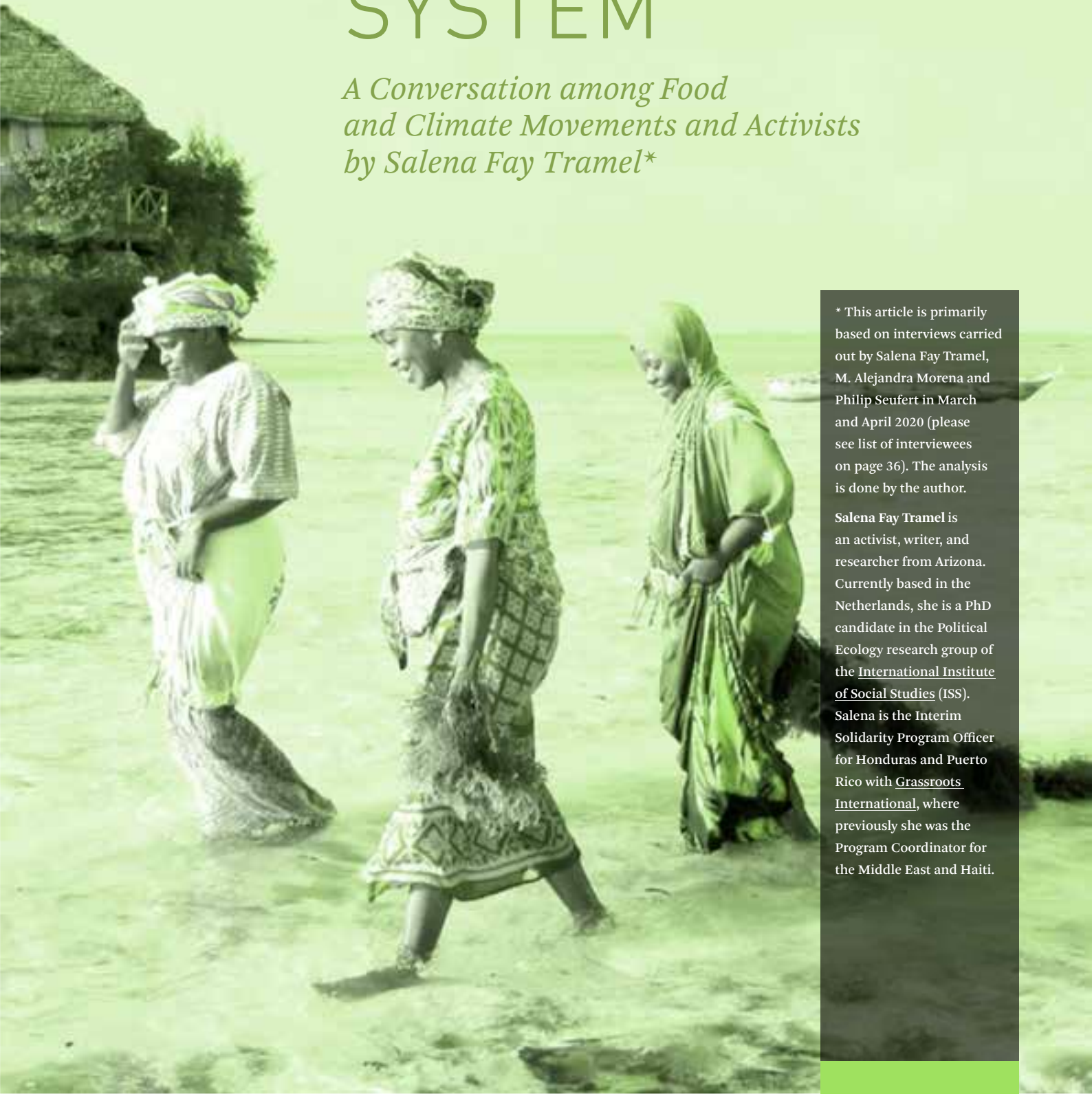


CONVERGING TO OVERCOME CRISIS AND CHANGE THE SYSTEM

*A Conversation among Food
and Climate Movements and Activists
by Salena Fay Tramel**

* This article is primarily based on interviews carried out by Salena Fay Tramel, M. Alejandra Morena and Philip Seufert in March and April 2020 (please see list of interviewees on page 36). The analysis is done by the author.

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“[T]his political moment is a perfect storm of two opposing pressure systems, human health in an era of pandemic, and planetary health in the throes of climate change. Transformation is inevitable, but what that change looks like is up to us.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS |

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PHOTO | © Salena Fay Tramel

Ecological and economic shocks in global capitalism are nothing new, even if they have a tendency to catch us off guard. The third decade of the 21st century has opened like the pages of a masterfully crafted suspense novel, its villain a highly contagious and ever-multiplying virus. Modern industrial life as we know it, depending on an intricate series of human interactions, grinds to a halt like a tired steampunk clock. Ghost planes empty of passengers slip through transatlantic flightpaths while hospitals across grids of cities below overflow with the ill. Some of us lean into our computer screens like the portals they have increasingly become, trying to make sense of this peculiar political moment. Others have no time for such musings; the frontlines of the COVID-19 battlefield have widened along the existing trenches of race, class, gender, and generation.

While some journalists spill ink about ‘getting back to normal’, and others lament that ‘it will never be the same again’, communities and activists on the frontlines of climate change and resource grabbing have been experiencing the uneven shocks of the capitalist system for some time now.¹

These ruptures can happen in a geographically limited area: a cyclone, an earthquake, or an oil spill. They can alternatively proliferate across place and space once set into motion, like the 2007-08 food price, finance, energy, and fuel crises that blazed through borders like wildfire. Or indeed like a contagious disease and its manifold impacts.

¹ For more information, please see: O’Connor, James. *Natural Causes: Essays on Marxist Ecology*. New York: Guilford, 1998.

Movement Generation, a U.S.-based collective of grassroots organizers, movement builders, and popular educators, has a useful framework for understanding large-scale change that they describe as ‘shocks, slides, and shifts’.² A slide, as it is conceptualized in this framework, indicates a process of disruption just like a shock – but less abrupt. For instance, global warming and ocean acidification are less sudden than an overnight emergency, but can pose even more danger. Once a slide has been set into motion, it causes a chain reaction that is hard to stop, just like the kinetic energy that sends a row of dominoes toppling to its end.

When a chronic slide like climate chaos comes into contact with an acute shock, like a food price crisis or a sudden outbreak of disease, a shift becomes necessary to break the impasse. Shifts can go either way. In the last decade, we have witnessed alarming trends in shifts towards increased violence, white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism. Many of these have occurred in response to the interlinked issues of natural resource extraction and climate change denial and mitigation. At a global level, this is evidenced by the false solution of ‘green grabbing’, land grabbing done in the name of environmental protection – quite literally, “selling nature to save it”.³ Shifts have also manifested in various strands of nationalism, authoritarianism, and right-wing populisms within states as responses to a faltering and overarching neoliberal project.⁴

But there are other kinds of shifts taking place, and those are the ones that social justice movements are using to win longstanding struggles for access to and control over natural resources. Within and across radical movements that have historically worked by sector, activists are engaging in difficult conversations to construct sophisticated convergences for systemic change. Put simply, if capitalism is routinely producing economic and ecological shocks along its accelerated descent into an unlivable future, then why not use this occasion to build political power from the grassroots to replace that system with something better?

This article is about what is needed to win those shifts for justice and people’s sovereignty, and what stands in the way. A fundamental assumption and starting point of this article is that the climate crisis has presented an existential threat that has mobilized movements working on a range of issues to intertwine their struggles in resistance to resource grabbing and climate change. In order to bring the political interactions that are taking place within and across movements to life, its content is based on twelve interviews, six of which were organized in pairs and the remaining six individually. These conversations were carried out with social movement leaders of women’s, peasants’, fishers’, Indigenous Peoples, youth, environmental, and workers’ organizations from five continents in March and April of 2020.

All of these social movements share in common overt and proactive political agendas that struggle against power, privilege, and patriarchy. Climate and food were used as starting points, areas in which the activists interviewed had been engaging for years. Our conversations were organized as open spaces for exchange around what grassroots movements see as the way out of the seeming gridlock of a multifaceted political moment, and how stronger bonds can be soldered to achieve food sovereignty and climate justice in broader struggles for system change. The remainder of this article is organized around four key shifts that came up as common themes for how to get there: feminisms, agroecology, water, and just transition.

2 For more information, please see: Movement Generation. “Communities Across U.S Stand With Those Impacted by Sandy”. Available at: movementgeneration.org/communities-across-us-stand-with-those-impacted-by-sandy/; and Justice Funders. “State of the Movement 2018: 03 Mateo Nube”, February 2018. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6nWP1y2kGI&feature=youtu.be.

3 Fairhead, James, Leach, Melissa, and Ian Scoones. “Green grabbing: a new appropriation of nature?” *Journal of peasant studies*, 39(2), (2012): 237-261.

4 Scoones, Ian et al. “Emancipatory rural politics: confronting authoritarian populism”. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(1), (2018):1-20.

FEMINISMS

When the flames of the food price crisis subsided across Africa a decade ago, the continent was left charred by deep wounds carved into its territory in the form of redoubled resource grabbing. This great African land grab was unique in that its proponents praised it for solving multiple crises of hunger, unemployment, and climate change. But feminist activists acquainted with the ever-changing costumes in the masquerade of extractivism would not get swept away in the grandeur of its latest ball.

Ruth Nyambura is one of them. “We started the African Ecofeminist Collective just over five years ago to bring together young feminists working at the intersection of ecology, land, food, and extractivism,” she said via phone conference from Kenya. “The food and energy shocks brought on a big boom in mining, and we formulated our struggle against that on two levels,” she explained, “trying to figure out the political economy of all of it, while also working on the intimate spaces.”

The African Feminist Collective has spent time tracing the historical latticework of women, food, and environment that stretches over the continent like a revealing map of patterns. “Our women see the intersectional analysis of food in our region,” offered Ruth. “We are aware that most of it is produced by African women, in rural areas and also in cities, and those food producers are largely older women,” she added.

That history carries with it deep meaning as the women of the African Feminist Collective tackle the challenge of climate change. “There is a tendency to forget the colonial history when trying to address the effects of climate change on women and on our ecosystem and the interconnected challenges of shrinking land plots and the collapse of the public sector,” said Ruth. “But we must apply this when we analyze,” she summarized, “because the climate crisis needs to be seen as an expression and afterlife of the colonial policies that the African continent has been contending with for more than a hundred years.”

Arieska (Arie) Kurniawaty, a feminist organizer with the Indonesian women’s advocacy network Solidaritas Perempuan, shared Ruth’s emphasis on intersectionality and attention to history when addressing the root causes of the food and climate crises. “We talk about women’s rights,” Arie said, “since for us feminism means talking about power imbalances from the family up to the global level.” She explained that in the Indonesian context, feminists organized women and their wider communities into the struggle in ways that were slow and not too confrontational.

Capitalist responses to climate change mitigation have provided a political opening to do so. Indonesia’s cornucopia of natural resources has made it a hotspot for carbon trading schemes across forests, fisheries, and farmlands. The island archipelago has recently been leapfrogging across other countries in Southeast Asia and globally; in 2017, it achieved the coveted economic marker of a trillion-dollar economy and it is now the largest in the region. But at what cost, and for whom?

“Of course we have to reduce greenhouse gasses,” Arie said, “but privatized projects like REDD+ actually limit women’s access to forests, so we have to work together to convince our government that they are false solutions.” She shared that forests are where women go to get food and medicine and also serve as irreplaceable spiritual

and cultural spaces. Solidaritas Perempuan equips rural women with time-tested human rights-based tools such as the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW, 1979), as well as new ones such as the Voluntary Guidelines for Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT, 2012), adopted at the reformed UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

Overall, Arie sees the evolving Indonesian feminist movement as one that has potential to push back against the impunity of transnational corporations and a dangerous right-wing political system that is broadening its reach. Solidaritas Perempuan also works on raising awareness on feminist issues with social movements of food producers and Indigenous Peoples that are aligned on its analysis politically, but lack gender sensitivity. Arie summarized: “patriarchy and capitalism collectively impoverish women, and the feminist movement is a liberation movement for power imbalances in all peoples’ lives. Now is the time to reclaim shrinking spaces across regions and continents.”

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean and away from its shores, where the militarized border of the U.S. and Mexico slices through the exquisite Sonoran Desert ecosystem, is Yaqui territory. Andrea Carmen belongs to the Yaqui peoples, but her commitment to Indigenous issues and movements is not bound by tribal affiliation. As the longtime Arizona-based Executive Director of the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), she holds down many spaces.

Andrea cut her teeth in the women’s movement as a university student in the 70s. At that time, second wave feminism had reached high tide, and was largely focused on the resolution of workplace inequality. While wage parity became a cause célèbre for white feminists in North America and in Europe, many Indigenous women were still busy dressing the infected wounds inflicted by settler colonialism. Andrea, for instance, was working to draw attention to the ongoing forced sterilization of Indigenous women.

“I understand feminism from the European perspective, and it makes sense in their context, but as Indigenous women we need to look at it in another way,” said Andrea, “Mother Earth gave birth to all of us and created respect, so that forcing a binary identity upon everyone is not what we need.” She elaborated: “In our Indigenous movement we do not have, to my experience, lack of strong women leadership since women are extremely respected as knowledge holders. We have different challenges.”

The knowledge that Andrea shared speaks to the necessity of a plurality of feminisms to cut off harmful systemic expressions of patriarchy, colonialism, and neoliberal growth. Nurturing Indigenous, Black, peasant, queer, and other grassroots feminisms allows those most targeted by a system built on interlinked forms of oppression to construct what is necessary to replace it.⁵ We have been able to highlight the violations we are experiencing, but also the ways we can contribute to solutions,” said Andrea, adding, “respect must be given to Indigenous practices and structures.”

AGROECOLOGY

The Peruvian highlands of Ayacucho, descending into the Amazon rainforest on one side and the jagged Pacific coast on the other, exude revolution like steam from the calderas of the volcanoes for which the region is known. Nearly 200 years ago, when Peru was a royalist stronghold of the Spanish crown, the Bolivarian independence movement won a decisive battle in Ayacucho, safeguarding the entire South

5 For more information on gender diversity and intersectionality, please see: Gioia, Paula. “Coming Out! Gender Diversity in the Food System”. *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2019):34-41. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/rtfn-watch11-2019-eng-34-41.pdf.

American continent's freedom from Iberian rule. Today, different kinds of threats have made their way through the Andean mountain passes of Ayacucho.

The Quechua people living in Ayacucho have survived many attempts at their erasure, in no small part through holding tight to traditional agricultural systems that protect their natural ecology. Tarcila Rivera Zea is one of these guardians, and a leader in the Center of Indigenous Cultures of Peru (CHIRAPAQ) and founder of the Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas (ECMIA). She has dedicated her life to influencing policy from the local to the global levels as an advocate for fellow Indigenous women, and an important way of doing that has been through the lens of food. "The struggle of Indigenous Peoples is the right to natural resources, and we have to be clear that this is our starting point," she said.

Tarcila explained that the climate crisis was exacerbating problems of access to native crops in a region already undermined by neoliberal trade policies. She insists: "If we value and prioritize healthy production, from corn and potatoes to herbs and medicines, and then create a fair market for them, the impact of climate change will be less." Tarcila emphasized that her work through CHIRAPAQ has several tiers and has progressed from the right to food to food sovereignty to climate justice, and today includes all three simultaneously.

Agroecology is one pillar that connects food sovereignty to climate justice. It is a key shift that social justice movements see as the way out of the quagmire that is the industrial food system and other forms of natural resource control and extraction. Most peasants and Indigenous Peoples have been perfecting the art of agroecology for generations, through constant innovation based on deep knowledge of the living world.⁶ With anemia and malnutrition on the rise in Tarcila's homeland due to corporate capture of the food system, CHIRAPAQ is making sure that agroecological responses from the grassroots start with local production and end with local consumption. "We can use agroecology to articulate the voices of Indigenous women from the local to the global," she said.

⁶ For more information on the link between agroecology and feminism, please see: "Without Feminism, There is No Agroecology". *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2019):42-50. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/without-feminism-there-no-agroecology.

But what, exactly, does agroecology mean in practice? In 2015, a group of food sovereignty and climate justice activists gathered in the small Malian ecovillage of Nyéléni to put their answers to that question on the same page. It was not the first time the peasant movement of Mali had hosted such an event at Nyéléni with their global counterpart La Vía Campesina. Back in 2007, just as the food price crisis was ramping up, social movements met there to discuss food sovereignty 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".⁷ Then in 2011, when Mali was experiencing some of the worst instances of land grabbing globally, social movements went back to Nyéléni to denounce the phenomenon and clap back against it with food sovereignty.

⁷ For more information, please see: Nyéléni Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty, 2007. Available at: www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290.

The agroecology gathering in 2015 put it all together: when the slide of the climate crisis came into contact with the shock of the food price crisis, the shift that the capitalists sought was one towards land grabbing with a friendly new environmental façade. This strategic alliance of social movements, however, was not about to let them get away with another heist. Saulo Araujo, who attended the agroecology meeting in Nyéléni, said, "Agroecology is not a concept or a technological fix, it is a process of what needs to be done to restore balance, especially in times of crisis."

An agronomist by training, Saulo's work supports initiatives around food sovereignty and climate justice led by social movements. Originally from Brazil, he currently directs the Global Movements Program at WhyHunger in the U.S. and is active in both the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance and the Climate Justice Alliance. Saulo explained: "People are reclaiming their ancestral knowledge and protagonism in food sovereignty through agroecology. Solidarity among communities is an act of resistance in which we share knowledge, support one another and build grassroots internationalism as the pathway to the permanent forms of crises that we live in."

It is important to underscore that agroecology, much like feminism, is not a one-size-fits-all remedy. In fact, it is exactly those quick fixes like REDD+ and the Blue Revolution⁸ that agroecology is countering through highly organized political resistance.

An example of this work is taking place in Puerto Rico, a gorgeous little archipelago laid out over the Caribbean like a trio of emeralds on a jeweler's glass countertop. A quick glance at a map gives one the impression of an isolated paradise, complete with its own tropical rainforest. But a momentary scan through the pages of its history tells a different story. First, the island was wrested from the hands of the Indigenous Taíno peoples by Christopher Columbus and his marauders, and it was then acquired by the U.S. as booty after the Spanish-American war. Today, the island remains an unincorporated territorial possession of the U.S., or in other words, one of the oldest colonies in the world.

Jesús Vázquez, a Puerto Rican activist with Organización Boricúa de Agricultura Ecológica (Boricúa), a movement of *jíbaras* and *jíbaros* (peasant farmers) sees agroecology as the shift needed to break away from expensive and unhealthy food imports from the U.S. and suffocating austerity measures, also imposed by the 'mainland'. "We are thinking a lot of our ancestors, the Taíno peoples, and people everywhere who want to go back to the land and use it productively without destroying or exploiting it," said Jesús.

A growing network of agroecology activists in Puerto Rico that includes Boricúa is promoting the straightforward logic that if Puerto Rico once grew most of its own food, not to mention the food that was extracted to satiate its colonizers – coffee for Spain, and sugarcane for the U.S. – it can do it again. Jesús explained that Boricúa borrowed the *campesino-a-campesino* (peasant-to-peasant) methodology from La Vía Campesina, the international peasant movement of which Boricúa is a member, and adapted it to the unique needs of the Puerto Rican people. "We call this method agroecological and solidarity brigades, and they are essential to how we organize." Jesús offered.

These brigades move from farm to farm to support not only farmers, but also the wider community. Such strategies are part of Boricúa's commitment to a multi-sectoral view. "Food and agriculture are the essence of sustaining life, so we know we have to have broader alliances, with unions, with workers, agricultural workers, health workers, and others," said Jesús. "We do this work in different regions in Puerto Rico and lift each other up across the reach of our movements", he added.

WATER

Mention Palestine in mixed company, brace for impact. With so many complicated layers of oppression suffocating so many people in the context of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, it would be easy to brush off this hotly contested

⁸ For more information on 'Blue Growth' initiatives, please see: Barbesgaard, Mads. "Privatization and Corporate Capture of Global Fisheries Policy". *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2016):34-37. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/%07privatization-and-corporate-capture-global-fisheries-policy.

corner of the Mediterranean as an anomaly. After all, the ‘conflict’ plays out in a tiny geographic area, against a distracting backdrop of seemingly irreconcilable religious divisions. Certainly, the Palestinian struggle for freedom – not unlike any other struggle for freedom – has its unique history and features. But its contemporary politics boil down to control over natural resources, and chief among those is water.

The Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC) is one of a multiplicity of Palestinian social movements filling the gaping hole that is the absence of sovereignty across the occupied territories. “Israel uses some 85% of our Palestinian waters,” Saira Abbas⁹ said, from UAWC’s headquarters in Ramallah. “The occupying forces do not allow us to harvest rainwater from the sky, and they also prohibit us from managing underground water by blocking us from accessing springs or building or rehabilitating artisanal wells,” she explained.

⁹ Name has been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Practicing food sovereignty through agroecology in rural Palestine in the shadows of encroaching settlements is no easy task, but it is one that UAWC is committed to nonetheless. “Our best work at the junctures of climate, food, and water is through our seed bank,” said Saira. UAWC has maintained a seed bank since 2003; in it, they safeguard rare heirloom Palestinian seeds that have been passed from one generation to the next like an elderly matriarch’s cherished case of jewels. “Not only do these Indigenous seeds make it easier to go back to the land and protect it through cultivation,” Saira offered, “they hardly use any water and shield us from climate change.”

UAWC insists on the importance of internationalism and solidarity in normalizing the plight of the 20,000 peasant farmers and fishers it represents across Gaza and the West Bank. It is a member of La Vía Campesina, and having a political relationship with the global movement has allowed Palestinian activists the opportunity to host learning exchanges in their territories and also participate in those that take place abroad. “Together, we are showing the whole world the important role of water in agroecology” said Saira. “And we can help people understand that water is a driver of the occupation that we seek to end,” she added.

Some of La Vía Campesina’s most important recent work has been spearheading the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) and getting it passed; the General Assembly adopted the human rights-based instrument in 2018. UNDROP outlines rights to water for personal and domestic use and highlights its importance for peasants and other populations that protect natural resources and whose livelihoods depend on them. Article 21.2, for instance, stipulates: “They have the right to equitable access to water and water management systems, and to be free from arbitrary disconnections or the contamination of water supplies.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Available at: digitallibrary.un.org/record/1650694?ln=en. For more information, please see: Claeys, Priscilla and Marc Edelman. “The United Nations Declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas”. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47(1), (2020):1-68.

Even though social movements of various sectors strive to strengthen the aspects of their work that relate to water, for fishers and fishworkers, water not only sustains life, but also provides livelihoods. It is in this spirit that the World Forum of Fisher Peoples organizes small-scale fishing movements from across the world. One of their most active members is in an often-forgotten West African state where rivers snake through the red earth to meet the sea.

The bizarre borders of The Gambia are such that the country has the appearance of a long crooked finger jutting out of the Atlantic Ocean over Senegal as if it were

pointing eastward over the vast Sahel. This strange topography is a remnant of a British colonial water grab in Indigenous African territory that was already occupied by the French. Since 1965, The Gambia has been independent; however, the water grabbing continues unabated.

The National Association of Artisanal Fisheries Operators (NAAFO) is the World Forum of Fisher People's Gambian member organization that is pushing back on water enclosures on a number of fronts. Fatou Camara explained that her movement is adapting the food sovereignty framework to meet the unique needs of The Gambia's riverine and coastal communities. "Fish is a highly nutritious affordable protein for our people," she said, "and destructive industrial fishing and coastal tourism are a threat to fishers." Fatou represents NAAFO internationally within the fisheries working group of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, an umbrella for movements that has been instrumental in co-drafting global governance policies like the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (VG-SSF, 2014).

Back at home in The Gambia, Fatou works on implementing political mechanisms such as the VG-SSF at state level, with an eye on gender justice. "Most of the activities that have to do with fishing and climate justice are done by women, so we want our role to be prioritized within the fisheries movement," she said. Additionally, Fatou recognized that land tenure rights were an obstacle for all Gambian women, and hoped to create linkages with other sectors looking to win those rights. She said: "We want to work with women in other sectors so that we can build our collective power."

One of the most awe-inspiring displays of collective power using water as a framework for system change took place deep in Sioux territory in 2016-17. More than 280 Indigenous tribes gathered at Standing Rock, a reservation on the vast windswept Dakota Plains where the poverty rate is three times higher than the U.S. average, to block the construction of a massive oil pipeline in the area.

Although the congregation was ultimately forcibly dispersed and the pipeline went ahead, the water protectors were on the political map to stay. The events at Standing Rock had acted as a generating station, pumping high voltage energy across a new electrified grid of alliances. New protest camps sprung up in Minnesota and Louisiana to evoke treaty rights¹¹ to their territorial waters. And in Navajo Nation, the largest reservation in the U.S. that is mostly located in the arid deserts of Arizona, the battle cry of 'water is life' was used to work across the water-energy-food nexus.

Janene Yazzie, who is from Navajo Nation, and works at the IITC, explained that desertification is increasing and sand dunes are spreading across her homeland due to climate change. That slow encroachment has been paralleled by extractive activities in sacred mountains, coal mining, fracking for natural gas, and a legacy of uranium mining. Janene explained: "International Indian Treaty Council works with Indigenous communities to build models of not only food sovereignty, but also water sovereignty, and then find the pathways necessary to lift up those grassroots struggles at the international level."

An example of this work is making sure that energy partnerships and land development are tackled from a rights-based approach using tools such as the ones compiled in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) that stipulates, among other things, the right to water as a key natural

¹¹ Treaty rights are binding agreements between two nations or sovereigns. For a simple analysis, please visit: indianlaw.org/content/treaty-rights-and-un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples.

resource and the right to uphold treaties such as the ones that theoretically govern Navajo Nation. “At the community level, this is intergenerational work,” said Janene. “We hold the urgency to protect our traditional knowledge holders, of the practices, languages, and protocols that are necessary to inform what it means to restore our self-sufficiency, our sovereignty, and who we are as Indigenous peoples,” she elaborated.

JUST TRANSITION

The just transition framework came out of trade union organizing and environmental justice when anti-globalization movement was in its heyday in the late 90s. Some North American and European proponents of neoliberalism were luring the former colonies with the toxic elixir of stabilization, structural adjustment, and export-led growth. The blue-collar workers and environmentalists calling for economic and ecological transition at that time were well aware that it was tied to breaking down barriers related to race and class.

Fast forward more than two decades, and just transition in practice is as diverse as the communities implementing its core principle of replacing extractive economies with regenerative ones.¹² “We are inspired by many different forms of nonviolent direct action, from Ghandi to the civil rights movement, to the anti-apartheid movement, to the suffragettes,” said Esther Stanford-Xosei, a London-based African heritage climate justice and reparations activist with Extinction Rebellion’s Internationalist Solidarity Network. “We know that land grabbing and dispossession was and is connected to food plantation economies,” she explained, “and that extraction of resources in our homelands is Britain’s new form of colonization.”

Esther emphasized that healing a wounded planet must include reconciling the wrongs done to people in the process of breaking it down. This starts with reparations to those enslaved and killed by the colonial project. Esther does this work in her South London community through the Stop the Maangamizi! Campaign, which is targeted at the British parliamentary level by campaigning for the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry for Truth and Reparatory Justice.

“Food is a central issue that has been at the core of colonization, and our reparations lens starts with that history,” Esther explained, “There is a clear link from food to land to the ecocide that we are now witnessing.” For her, transforming the food system and reparations are intertwined. “Ecocide and genocide are interconnected processes that have targeted both African and Indigenous peoples,” said Esther, “so reparatory justice, including debt repudiation, has been advocated by racially and colonially oppressed peoples in the global North and South.”

Through a tightly woven social movement network, Esther sees intersectionality as the way forward.¹³ “It is also important for white communities to explore their struggles of land dispossession and class-based oppression of their working class,” she offered. “We are elevating our perspectives, solutions, and methodologies to merge our respective people’s rebellions,” Esther added, “and part of that work is winning hearts and minds in Europe.”

As Esther so powerfully described, common ideological stances of social justice movements are informed by class and identity; in turn, those ideologies feed into political strategies, like just transition. Khwezi Mabasa explained that food and climate movements need to build inside-outside strategies to see tangible outcomes

¹² For more information, please see: Climate Justice Alliance. “Just Transition: A Framework for Change”. Available at: climatejusticealliance.org/just-transition/.

¹³ For more information on intersectionality, please see: Woods, Deidre. “Invisible Women: Hunger, Poverty, Racism and Gender in the UK”. *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2019):27-32. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/invisible-women-hunger-poverty-racism-and-gender-uk.

in their work. “We must engage with the state, and also with corporate capital, since both are dispossessing people and undermining food sovereignty,” he said over the phone from South Africa, “from a strategic perspective, we need different pillars of organizing to transform the food system.”

Khwezi first found himself at the intersections of food and labor as a policy educator and coordinator in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU); today, he is pursuing doctoral work that is centered on a gendered analysis of South Africa’s contemporary agrarian crisis. His work cuts across alternative political economy, racial justice, and feminisms. “Black South African women have historically been subsistence farmers, and their work has basically sustained the social reproduction of the working class during Apartheid and even after it,” Khwezi explained. “This is important because their forgotten work is part of a broader livelihood strategy held up through community and household gardens,” he added.

South Africa’s position as a regional economic powerhouse, and the extractive activities that got it there, were not lost on Khwezi. He said that race is sometimes used as an economic weapon to make way for mining activities. The country’s platinum belt, for instance, has some of the highest concentrations of the precious metal in the world. “When big national and international corporations want a mining license, they must show that they are contributing to South Africa’s policy goals like racial redress, so they forge partnerships with the Black elite,” Khwezi said. “Some sections of the former oppressed become the oppressor,” he summarized.

Cape Agulhas, at the tip of the continent in South Africa not too far from where Khwezi lives, is the place where the oceans turn back on themselves. The warm waters of the Indian current meet the frigid ones rushing upward from the Antarctic and the two systems push against one another like dancers spinning from the energy of centripetal force. This oceanic choreography is as fluid and predictable as the lifecycles of humans and the social movements they construct to keep them moving. Such are the politics of generation.

“There is so much to deal with and we don’t have very much time,” said Chiara Sacchi, a youth activist with Jóvenes por el Clima (*Youth for Climate*) in Argentina. The more Chiara shared about what it means to be 18 years old and coming of age in the era of both climate chaos and a major pandemic, the more her voice boomed. “All of our problems in Argentina are systemic,” she explained, “and individual changes are not going to be enough, so we must demand public policies that can make a big change, from the root of the problem.”

Jóvenes por el Clima is separated by different interests into modules, and Chiara has joined two of them: climate change and rural areas. “Argentina is a country that is constantly using natural resources, through agribusiness, through deforestation, and through mining, but we are organizing as young people to stop this,” she said.

Chiara puts the principles of just transition into practice through her organizing work. One aspect of that work is chipping away at the industrial food system, to replace it with one where consumers in cities connect directly with small-scale producers in the countryside. “We are establishing a dialogue, and that works best when it starts from the municipal level, neighbor to neighbor, and this way we pres-

ent another vision that changes the game”, Chiara offered. “And then those big political moments open up, and we all get together and march on the capital and show our faces to the world,” she added.

SYNTHESIS

In this political moment that is as much delineated by an impending fallout as it is defined by the pandemic itself, an image of a painting by Filipino activist artist Federico ‘Boy’ Dominguez has been making its way through some virtual activist circuits. The painting depicts a scattering of boats assembled from different denominations of currency, adrift in a thrashing sea of exaggerated sapphire waves. It shows social stratification at its worst, where cartooned passengers nervously cling to the sides of their overcrowded paper boats; a closer look reveals other people abandoned alone in the violent sea waving in distress at those in the boats, signaling upwards towards relief. It serves as one of many reminders that whatever is going on right now is profoundly uneven.

Indeed, this political moment is a perfect storm of two opposing pressure systems, human health in an era of pandemic, and planetary health in the throes of climate change. Transformation is inevitable, but what that change looks like is up to us. Social justice movements that are already familiar with these kinds of shocks and slides, especially those working at the intersections of resource grabbing and climate change mitigation, have put forth some bold proposals about the shifts that are sorely needed to break the impasse.

Key among those are the frameworks of feminisms, agroecology, water, and just transition. These shifts were never conceptualized as silver bullets; they look different across scale and space, and vary according to factors such as race, class, gender, and generation that have been used as levers of oppression within the capitalist system. Each of the frames is focused on the centrality of territory and community control over it. And each of these reference points are linked to and reinforced by the others. For instance, feminisms are as much a part of just transitions as water is a component of agroecology.

From the painful jolts of globalization that defined the last two decades of the old millennium, to the convergences of crises that have characterized the first two decades of the new one, food sovereignty and climate justice movements have worked – increasingly so, together – to uphold the master frame of system change. The massive effort of changing the system was never intended to be an individualized one, like a mythological Atlas balancing the weight of the world over his shoulders. It is a highly collective and ongoing process that is exemplified by millions of little fires lighting up a moonless sky.



IN BRIEF

Social justice movements are using food sovereignty and climate justice as entry points for radical systemic overhaul. Although many grassroots organizations have historically worked by sector, activists are engaging in deep conversations to construct sophisticated convergences to win longstanding struggles for natural resources and solve multiple crises. These conversations show synergies within and across movements, the most vibrant of which are work on feminisms, agroecology, water, and just transition. This profound moment of political dialogue also unearths tensions, many of which are being addressed through an intersectional approach to alliance building that accounts for overlapping systems of oppression like race, class, and gender. Transformation is inevitable at this time of reverberating global economic and environmental shocks, but what that change looks like is up to us. As capitalism's descent into an unlivable future accelerates, social justice movements are showing humanity once more that another world is possible, necessary, and already in the works.



INTERVIEWEES

- Andrea Carmen, International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), Yaqui peoples;
- Ariessa Kurniawaty, Solidaritas Perempuan, Indonesia;
- Chiara Sacchi, Jóvenes por el Clima (*Youth for Climate*), Argentina;
- Esther Stanford-Xosei, Extinction Rebellion Internationalist Solidarity Network (XRISN), United Kingdom;
- Fatou Camara, World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) fisheries working group, The Gambia;
- Janene Yazzie, International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), Diné peoples;
- Jesús Vázquez, Organización Boricuá de Agricultura Ecológica (Boricuá) / La Vía Campesina (LVC), and Climate Justice Alliance (CJA), Puerto Rico;
- Khwezi Mabasa, former Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) social policy coordinator, South Africa;
- Ruth Nyambura, African Ecofeminist Collective, Kenya;
- Saira Abbas¹⁴, Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), Palestine;
- Saulo Araujo, WhyHunger / U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance, United States;
- Tarcila Rivera Zea, Center of Indigenous Cultures of Peru (CHIRAPAQ) / Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas (ECMIA), Peru.

¹⁴ Name has been changed to maintain confidentiality.



KEY CONCEPTS

- Nurturing grassroots feminisms allows those most targeted by a system built on interlinked forms of oppression to construct what is necessary to replace it.
- Agroecology is a process of what needs to be done to restore balance through food sovereignty and climate justice, not a one-size-fits-all remedy.
- Sometimes treated as an afterthought in debates about natural resources, water must be addressed urgently and head on.
- Just transition encapsulates ways forward at the impasse of resource grabbing and climate change mitigation.



KEY WORDS

- Climate change
- Ecological destruction
- Climate justice
- Food sovereignty
- Feminisms
- Agroecology
- Water
- Just transition
- Agribusiness
- Corporate power
- Capitalism
- Racism
- Patriarchy



LAND, CLIMATE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE: AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF THE IPCC REPORT ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND LAND

*An Interview with Marta Guadalupe Rivera Ferre
by Katie Sandwell*

This article is based on an interview carried out on February 24, 2020.

Marta Guadalupe Rivera Ferre is the director of the Chair in Agroecology and Food Systems of the [University of Vic](#). She has worked on the potential of local traditional agri-food knowledge in adaptation to climate change, and has participated as lead author in the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report and Special Report on Climate Change and Land. Her recent areas of work include agri-food research from the perspective of feminist theories and theories of the commons.

Katie Sandwell is Program Staff in the Drugs and Democracy and Agrarian and Environmental Justice projects at the [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#). Her areas of work include just transition, food sovereignty, emancipatory visions of human rights, and democratic control of resources. She holds degrees in philosophy and environmental studies, focusing on social movements and food sovereignty.

TNI is an international research and advocacy institute committed to building a just, democratic and sustainable planet. For more than 40 years, TNI has served as a unique nexus between social movements, engaged scholars and policy makers.



“Every narrative responds to a mental model, and every narrative builds a political future. So, every narrative is political.”

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PHOTO | © Astrud Lea Beringer

Land plays a critical role in the processes that sustain human and non-human life on our planet. How land is used, by whom and for what purpose will have critical impacts on our collective future. In August 2019, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – the UN body for assessing the science related to climate change – published its Special Report on Climate Change and Land.¹

This report tackled the complex relationships between climate and land, bringing together world-renowned scientists to explore the connections between our food and agriculture system and the changing climate.

In this interview, we talk with one of the lead authors of the chapter on food security to better understand the linkages between climate, land, and the right to food and nutrition. We explore the process behind the report, its strengths and limitations, and some big questions about how we can manage and use land for a more just and sustainable future.

This report is incredibly impressive and comprehensive. You were also part of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). What is it like being part of an undertaking like this? What was distinctive about the IPCC process?

When I was part of the IAASTD I was working on a chapter with some colleagues who were completely convinced that transgenics/GMOs were the technology that would solve all our agriculture and food related problems. Before I met them,

¹ IPCC. *Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems*. IPCC, 2019. Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/>.

I had a kind of non-rational belief that researchers defending these arguments were somehow paid by big multinationals. When I met these colleagues, I had to change my view: they were saying this because they really believed it. They are very good people who really want to solve these problems, but they have a specific legitimate narrative and discourse, based on their own lives, knowledges and experiences.

You find this everywhere in science and decision-making. Participating in these diverse spaces with different kinds of researchers showed me that I have to respect those views – I have to stand for my own view and perspectives, but I also have to respect others. I try to show them alternative visions, of course, but this experience has changed my attitude towards colleagues who have opposite views about agriculture and food. This was common to both the IPCC and the IAASTD.

But, in the IPCC especially, probably because of the current context of climate emergency, and advances in systems thinking, scientists were really open to new perspectives, trying to acknowledge that what we have been doing is not working: ‘business as usual’ is not possible anymore.

Still the IPCC (like the IAASTD) is part of an inter-governmental process. The reports have to be approved by governments. So, while they are always evidence-based and purely scientific, sometimes you cannot say exactly what you want, and how you would like to. Wording is very important, and there may be specific words that some governments will not approve. But, you can often develop the concepts or processes behind these words to say what you need to, without using a sensitive term. You have to have these type of things in mind when participating in these processes, like in many other kinds of inter-governmental processes. When a sensitive word is introduced; that is already an important advance. For example, food sovereignty appears in the last IPCC report. That’s amazing!

You were working on the chapter on food security, what kind of engagement did that working group have with the other chapter working groups?

This report took three years of work for the authors. In that time you have four face-to-face meetings. You work remotely with your chapter team throughout these years, but in the face-to-face meetings you have to try to integrate and coordinate with the other chapters, to make sure there is coherence, that the report has some kind of narrative, and that all the legitimate views and findings are included. For instance, if there is no scientific agreement about something that has to appear in the document. All this coordination effort is done in these four, weeklong meetings, which are very intense!

You have done a lot of research on agroecology and traditional knowledge. I was glad to see agroecology mentioned, and profiled as a possible solution, but I noticed the focus was quite technical, without some of the social and political dimensions that are often brought into the discussion elsewhere. Can you tell me about the dynamics behind that? Is that a necessary feature of this kind of report, or could reports like this be strengthened by including more political and social-scientific angles?

Well, it has a lot to do with the dynamics of assessment reports, and how they are structured. The IPCC has three working groups: one focuses on the biophysical dynamics of climate change; one on adaptation; and one on mitigation, including how this will all be tackled in terms of policies. So, in a way, the IPCC is quite fragmented.

Within agriculture and food, the scientific community has been calling for integrated assessments. The special report on land was, in fact, an attempt to produce a more integrated assessment of agriculture and food, through the entry-point of land. But producing an integrated report, and working together with experts on adaptation and on mitigation, is still new and challenging.

In this report, you have chapters on desertification (chapter 3) and land degradation (chapter 4), and the chapter on food security (chapter 5), in which I participated. Then synergies and trade offs are covered in chapter 6, and policies in chapter 7. So, while you do cross-chapter meetings and try to integrate, to make sure there is coherence, still different authors write different chapters. So my chapter addresses agroecology, but only in the context of food security.

We looked at food security, in all its dimensions, and how they are impacted by climate change, as well as how food systems impact climate change in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. Then, we had discussions on synergies and trade-offs, where we talked about agroecology. We wanted to show how some agricultural and agroecological practices, like capturing organic matter in the soil, intercropping, crop rotation, etc. can contribute to both mitigation and adaptation. So, our focus was on showing: if we put the focus on agroecology, we can have a more integrated response [to climate change]. We also made the link with local/neglected varieties, and with Indigenous knowledge. So our more technical focus was the result of the structure of the report, the authors that participated, and the focus of our own chapter.

In the supplementary materials – but not the main text – we do have some information about and examples of how civil society movements are part of food security governance at the global level. But this is part of the process, you have to lose some things along the way. Agroecology is also mentioned in chapter 6 on synergies and tradeoffs, and chapter 7, on policies.

Did you feel during the process that there were any ‘blind spots’ or important areas that were outside your ‘mandate’ to consider? For example, many land activists today are very concerned about increasing land concentration at the global scale, but this doesn’t appear in the chapter on food security. Did this feature in your discussions? Do you think this shows us something about the process?

This is covered in chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 6 explores 41 potential options for mitigation and adaptation, for land degradation, desertification, and food security. They analyze different synergies, trade offs and associated costs. So, for example, they show that bioenergy can be an option for mitigation but that large-scale projects can compete for land and harm food security for local people. So, bioenergy is better pursued in local, small-scale ways, if we want to do it in a coherent and integrated way.

In chapter 7 there is a specific section on land tenure where land grabbing is discussed. It shows the different visions regarding the topic but also how the land grabbed may be associated with monocultures and unsustainable land use practices, with negative consequences for adaptation, mitigation and food security. Secure land tenure is key to support adaptation. We also wrote a cross-chapter box there, which addresses gender, and problems around land tenure for women. We show that differential vulnerability to climate change is related to inequality in rights-based resource access, established through formal and informal tenure systems. Due to ingrained patriarchal social structures, women face multiple barriers to participation and decision-making, including around land-based adaptation and mitigation. So, I am not sure about the extent of the discussion of land concentration itself, but the issue of land grabbing definitely appears in the report.

But, this is not an NGO or a civil society report, it is a governmental report and it has limits. Still, it is important that these issues are described. That they appear in this kind of document means that they cannot be so easily dismissed as just a concern of movements or civil society. It makes it impossible to deny that these things are happening. This information collected in a scientific space joins other findings from civil society and can be a valuable tool for affected communities when advocating for their rights.

Yes, it can be a very important source of legitimacy! In the chapter on food security you show a lot of ways that countries and other actors might lead adaptation or mitigation efforts to protect food security in the face of a changing climate. As activists, we know that making these changes is rarely as straightforward as we might wish. What do you see as the biggest obstacles to adopting the solutions and alternatives you identified?

There are many kinds of obstacles, including material ones, but I think the most critical obstacles are really mental. We have had decades of development policies, visions, and perspectives. This is a linear way of thinking, focused on growth. It sees technology as the solution to our problems, and sees Indigenous local knowledge as ‘backwards’.

We need to change this narrative. There are other narratives out there, but we need to make them more visible, so that they can really emerge as alternatives. It is really problematic that the mainstream, accepted narrative is not seen as political. When you provide a different narrative, even one based on research, people say, “oh, that is politics”. But the other one is also politics! Every narrative responds to a mental model, and every narrative builds a political future. So, every narrative is political. If I support a future based on economic growth, if I support a future built on the current model of development, this is politics, even if I have a scientific basis. When I speak about food sovereignty, people see it as politics despite the fact that it is based on scientific findings. Why is only this seen as political? Defending the status quo is also politics!

This is a big political and mental barrier. Policies respond to a mental model, a view of the way we should go. So, policies can be a problem, but we need to see from where these policies emerge, and change that.

Is it fair to say, then, that part of the role of food sovereignty movements is to frame a different kind of narrative, and a new discourse?

Yes, yes, totally. And I also see it as a kind of horizon: when you think about where you want to go, it is important not to lose sight of your final political objective. But, at the same time, you need to understand that you might never get all the way there, or not in your lifetime. Dialogue, negotiation, changing people’s minds, is a very slow process.

But an important change I have witnessed in the last few years is the recognition that ‘evidence-based’ means that we also need to put on the table when there is no scientific consensus. That is very important. In the IAASTD, that was one of the reasons why corporate actors pulled out: they didn’t see their arguments in favor of GMOs in the report. This is such a strength of scientific processes and spaces. If there isn’t scientific consensus about an issue, that in itself is important. So, in these international reports, we were able to include all the different, divergent discourses around controversial topics. This can help to open up broader social and political discussions about what kinds of solutions we want to support.

Thinking about linear and progressivist narratives, many activists have concerns about the way that land-based climate adaptation and mitigation strategies can intensify pressures on land. They do that especially by framing traditional users as backward and inefficient users of land and resources in comparison with other ‘sustainable technologies’. I know this is addressed in chapters 6 and 7 but did it also come up in your conversations?

This was an important issue, though not exactly in these terms. One key issue was Indigenous and local knowledge. There is a lot of very place-specific, context-specific knowledge, and strategies like inter-cropping, crop rotations, crop association, and working with neglected and under-utilized varieties, which can be important for land-based adaptation and mitigation. But what are the barriers to putting these solutions into practice? Land tenure turned out to be really important. Lack of respect for traditional and informal agreements about land tenure in some contexts is critical. Indigenous local knowledge is often linked to small-scale farmers, who face challenges around access to land and competition for land.

You see this also in chapter 6, where they look at land competition that arises when some mitigation strategies, like large-scale bioenergy, compete for land and can promote land grabbing, undermining communities' food security. So, in the report, the narrative begins with: which practices do we need? We need all these practices that sequester CO₂ but also promote adaptation, and draw on Indigenous local knowledge. The land tenure problem comes onto the scene as a barrier to implementing those solutions, rather than starting with land tenure as a problem in itself.

How do you see the role of reports like this and bodies like the IPCC in contributing to these processes and discussions? Where do you see the opportunities to take up these issues further, in future international spaces or processes?

There is demand from scientists to introduce more social sciences, and social issues. Evidence shows that by focusing only on technology or natural sciences-based evidence, we cannot solve our urgent crises. This increased openness towards social science makes it possible to put these things on the table – Indigenous knowledge, land tenure – because they are part of the social science debate, as well as civil society. This is growing more and more, but at the same time the IPCC is a big structure, a kind of machine, and making small changes takes a lot of time.

There are other international spaces like the IPBES, the platform for biodiversity and ecosystem services, which are more flexible. I work with the Indigenous local knowledge group of scientists in the IPCC, and we are pushing to include Indigenous elders as part of the IPCC process, to really put scientific and Indigenous knowledge on an equal footing, or at least to open a space for it. Spaces like the IPBES have opened some more room and have taken the first steps in that direction. These are also UN spaces, but in the IPCC it is very, very difficult. This is really an issue of epistemic justice. This structure is based on knowledge, so it should be objective, putting all the different knowledges at the same level.



IN BRIEF

Scientific processes like the UN Panel on Climate Change help to shape the global consensus about what is necessary, and what is possible. They inform the work of policy makers around the world.

However, the process of creating scientific knowledge is never simple, or politically neutral. We spoke with Marta Guadalupe Rivera Ferre, one of the lead authors of the chapter on food security in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report on Land and Climate (2019), to understand the process behind this report and some of the weaknesses and possibilities in the international scientific discussions of land, climate, and food.

The IPCC Report on Land and Climate laid out the current state of scientific understanding on the many complex relationships between the way land is used globally, and the impacts on the global climate.



KEY CONCEPTS

- International spaces like the IPCC try to meet the highest standard of scientific knowledge, integrate the views of scientists from different fields, and respond to political realities.
- Scientists in these processes work together to integrate a vast body of complex knowledge.
- Scientists involved in the process inevitably bring their own background and assumptions, including about what is political, and what is not.
- Food sovereignty, local Indigenous knowledge, and agroecology challenge some of the underlying assumptions that have shaped scientific knowledge in modern history.
- Including other kinds of knowledge, such as local Indigenous knowledge and contributions from the social sciences and civil society, can help to push for a vision of just and sustainable land use.



KEY WORDS

- Land
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)
- Food sovereignty
- Agroecology
- Climate change
- Indigenous knowledge
- Scientific knowledge
- Land grabbing
- Gender/Gendered access to land

IS VEGANISM THE SOLUTION TO CLIMATE CHANGE?

*A Dialogue among Food Activists
by M. Alejandra Morena**



* This article is based on interviews carried out by M. Alejandra Morena with Vanessa Álvarez González, Maresa Bossano, Line Niedeggen, C. Sathyamala and Marité Álvarez in February 2020.

M. Alejandra Morena is a feminist human rights practitioner, originally from Argentina. She is Women's Rights and Gender Coordinator and Editor-in-Chief of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* at [FIAN International](#) in Heidelberg, Germany.

[FIAN International](#) is an international organization that has been advocating for the human right to food and nutrition for over 30 years. It supports grassroots communities and movements in their struggles against right to food violations.

“Now more than ever, in tumultuous uncertain times, it is vital to strengthen our own movements and carry out a dialogue between different movements – with openness, understanding, empathy and respect.”

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PHOTO | © Alisdare Hickson

Our food habits and diets are currently at the center of debates around climate change mitigation. Mainstream media increasingly focus on the impact of consumption of meat and other animal products on CO₂ emissions.¹ The Special Report on Climate Change and Land by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)² includes a policy recommendation to reduce meat consumption, describing “healthy and sustainable [low meat] diets” as a major opportunity for “reducing GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions from food systems and improving health outcomes”.³ One of its authors claims: [w]e don’t want to tell people what to eat [...]. But it would indeed be beneficial, for both climate and human health, if people in many rich countries consumed less meat, and if politics would create appropriate incentives to that effect”.⁴ This sparked headlines such as: “U.N.: Humans Need to Stop Eating Meat to Save the Planet”.⁵

Behind sensationalist headlines, however, lies a complex picture. Some years back, a popular documentary on the meat industry claimed that animal agriculture produced a striking 51% of global GHG emissions⁶ – a figure since largely debunked. Current UN estimates are closer to 15%.⁷ Any global figures of this nature vary according to the methodologies applied, and are bound to obscure important context-specific differences, such as production models. Nevertheless, there is mounting consensus that intensive industrial meat and dairy production are comparatively resource-intensive.

Beyond scientific debates, there is also growing public interest in how the food we eat impacts climate change. In some parts of the world, more people are embracing

¹ Please see: Carrington, Damian. “Huge reduction in meat-eating ‘essential’ to avoid climate breakdown.” *The Guardian*, October 10, 2018. Available at: www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/10/huge-reduction-in-meat-eating-essential-to-avoid-climate-breakdown.

² For more information on this report, please see article “Land, Climate, and the Construction of Scientific Knowledge: An Insider’s View of the IPCC Report on Climate Change and Land” in this issue of the *Watch*.

vegan diets, often for environmental reasons.⁸ This seems to be especially the case in urban areas in the Global North, where the vegan and climate movements are becoming increasingly intertwined. For instance, various Fridays for Future (FFF) activists throughout Europe are vegan. In contrast, in rural areas of the Global North and more generally in the Global South, veganism is not a widespread trend, except for among a small proportion of the middle and upper classes.

In this issue of the *Watch*, we take a critical look at the issue of veganism, in the context of the right to food and nutrition and the environment. We ask: What is attracting more and more people to vegan diets – is it the climate crisis? Can veganism be a key solution for addressing climate change? Where are the intersections among the food sovereignty, climate and vegan movements? Is veganism at odds with the struggle for food sovereignty, or in synergy with it? To tackle these questions, we invite five activists to share their perspectives with us. Here they are presented in dialogue with one another.

Vanessa Álvarez González, an eco-feminist, anti-speciesist and vegan activist from Spain, works as communications and press officer at the energy cooperative *La Corriente*. Vanessa participates in various collectives, including *Ecologistas en Acción* and the *Red Ecofeminista*. Maresa Bossano has worked in the community food sector for 15 years in the UK, where she has managed the *Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Network UK*, and run an organic vegan café, as well as coordinated a national food cooperatives project, and a ‘Five a Day’ program. Line Niedeggen, a climate activist, organizes climate strikes with *Fridays for Future* in Heidelberg, Germany. Line is currently studying a Master’s degree in physics at Heidelberg University, specializing in environmental physics. C. Sathyamala (Sathya), from India, is a public health physician and academic researcher at the *International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)* in The Netherlands. Straddling between scholarship and activism, Sathya is part of the health and women’s movement in India. She holds a Master’s Degree in epidemiology and a doctorate in social sciences. Last but not least, Marité Álvarez is a traditional pastoralist from Northern Argentina. She is a member of *Pastor América*, a member organization of the *World Alliance of Indigenous and Mobile Peoples (WAMIP)*, and coordinates the Working Group on Sustainable Agricultural Development of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSM) for relations with the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

WHAT IS VEGANISM AND WHAT MOTIVATES VEGANS?

Over the past years, veganism is increasingly in the spotlight. It sparks a lot of emotions, and there are myriad misconceptions. So what is veganism, and why do people become vegan? Vanessa says that veganism is “a movement, an ethical and political position that defends that we cannot continue using non-human animals – be it for food, clothing, transportation or medicine”. Her motivation to become vegan was initially empathy for both human and non-human animals, which she felt from an early age. Additionally, she believes in sovereignty, justice and respect towards our home planet and the beings that inhabit it. To her mind, veganism is tremendously radical, pushing for collective solutions against capitalism, including de-growth.

Maresa became vegetarian aged 16 because she believed it was wrong to kill animals to eat, and then turned vegan after finding out how milk and eggs are produced. She had always been interested in food and cooking, and was inspired as a child by her aunt, who was a talented cook and grew her own veggies. For Line, who grew up on an organic farm in Germany, what drives her to being vegan is “living the most

- 3 Shukla, P.R. *et al.*, eds. “Technical Summary” in IPCC. Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems. 2019. Available at: www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/4/2019/11/03_Technical-Summary-TS.pdf.
- 4 Schiermeier, Quirin. “Eat less meat: UN climate-change report calls for change to human diet”. *Nature*, August 8, 2019. Available at: www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02409-7.
- 5 Latza Nadeau, Barbie. “U.N.: Humans Need to Stop Eating Meat to Save the Planet”. *The Daily Beast*, August 8, 2019. Available at: www.thedailybeast.com/un-stop-eating-meat-to-save-the-planet.
- 6 Hancox, Dan. “The unstoppable rise of veganism: how a fringe movement went mainstream”. *The Guardian*, April 1, 2018. Available at: www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/apr/01/vegans-are-coming-millennials-health-climate-change-animal-welfare.
- 7 FAO. “Key facts and findings”. Available at: www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/.
- 8 Hancox. *Supra* note 6.

climate-friendly way possible” – in other words, cutting emissions. This is also the motivation of many vegan or vegetarian Fridays for Future activists in her circle. She recognized that there is a lot of suffering on many farms around the world. She understands that labeling oneself is risky and difficult, as you are “judged and have to break from the ‘normal’ in a place like Germany where some people see eating meat as a religion or cultural belief”. Nonetheless, she believes it is necessary, if veganism is to become culturally accepted. Vanessa adds that, in times of uncertainty, some people actually want to forge an identity. Especially among the youth, being part of a social group – to have a sense of ‘belonging’ – may make them turn to veganism.

The relationship between veganism and feminism is a heated debate in some circles. According to Vanessa, veganism is largely a women’s movement.⁹ In her view, this is related to our upbringing, empathy and care towards others. She also emphasizes the empowering dimensions of veganism, and how veganism and feminism intersect through an ecofeminist lens. She herself moved from environmentalism, through feminism, to eco-feminism, and believes that “if you as a woman become aware of the oppressions that you suffered because of your gender and turn to feminism, you can more easily develop empathy for animals”. And just as occurred with feminism, Vanessa notes that there is a tendency for veganism to be ‘perverted’ and ‘demonized’ by the system.

⁹ According to various studies, the proportion of female vegans and vegetarians seems to be significantly higher across different parts of the world. In the US, for instance, a survey of 11,000 vegan people showed that 76% were women. Similar trends were found in Australia and Sweden. Please see: Gorvett, Zaria. “The mystery of why there are more women vegans”. *BBC Future*, February 18, 2020. Available at: www.bbc.com/future/article/20200214-the-mystery-of-why-there-are-more-women-vegans.

Maresa equally mentions that, although this is changing (for instance with some male vegan body-builders), meat has been classically/stereotypically associated with manliness: “to be a strong, fit, healthy man, you must eat meat!” What’s more, some young women don’t eat animal products due to body image and health concerns, or because they think it will make them slimmer or more attractive, like some famous people and bloggers who eat plant based diets, she says.

In this context, a distinction is drawn between plant-based diets and veganism. The former refers only to diet and involves eating *primarily* plant-based foods (though this may still include some animal foods); the motivation behind adopting such diets is often mainly related to health. On the other hand, as described above, veganism is seen by many as a deeper philosophy and ethical position. These different perspectives and motivations help to explain why some who avoid animal products might consider more carefully, for example, where the food they eat comes from and how it is produced, while others might be content with eating ultra-processed meat alternatives or avocados from far away, as further explored below.

PRODUCTION MODELS MATTER – SO DO CLASS AND CULTURE

Line emphasizes that the problem lies in the size of industrial agriculture and livestock keeping, not in animal production per se, and that “we need both – we need more people to be vegan, and more people to be sustainable with livestock, and this is both very possible”. There is mainly a need for people to reduce their meat and dairy consumption in the Global North, where it is exorbitantly high. Line adds that “if everyone would eat 50% less meat, it would be equal to 50% of people turning vegetarian”. More importantly, according to Line, “it isn’t about everyone becoming vegan but about changing to systems that are more sustainable”.

Sathya highlights that aggregate numbers on emissions do not capture important differences between small-scale and industrial animal agriculture. She therefore questions blanket statements that meat consumption is one of the main causes for emissions, at least in some parts of the world, and the disproportionate weight

some are seemingly placing on this, as compared to, for instance, the fossil fuel industry and other corporate sectors. In India, she argues, farms are mostly small-scale and may have an animal or two – and are therefore not major contributors at an individual level to climate change. She asks: Can survival emissions be equated with luxury emissions?¹⁰ What purposes is veganism serving at an international level in the overall discourse?

In the conversation at hand, our three vegan guests all emphasize that they don't expect *everyone everywhere* to become vegan – and that this may not be necessary or possible for some people in some regions in the world. They don't actually see themselves as vegan activists or as part of a vegan movement as such, and they don't proactively place veganism at the center of their activism. Their living environments are also diverse. Line recognizes that in her activist circle in Heidelberg many are vegan or vegetarian, including many FFF activists who made the switch after joining. Vanessa and Maresa, on the other hand, live in villages where there aren't many other vegans.

Associating veganism with 'elitism' is not uncommon, as emphasized by Sathya. She points out that in India, for instance, vegetarianism is practiced by a dominant group, yet, to her knowledge, veganism is not, as many depend on eggs and milk, and yoghurt is central to the diets of most vegetarians. Also, in the Global North, those who identify as vegans are often largely based in urban areas and middle-class. Indeed, as Maresa admits, those struggling to afford food for themselves and their families may not have a choice, as they may lack access to different products and shops. The crux of the matter, for Sathya, is that to be able to eat "healthily" as a vegan, you need to be able to "afford an expensive diet, which is not an option for the poor". The intersection between veganism and healthy diets goes beyond the scope of this piece.

On the affordability of vegan diets, Vanessa asks a counter-question: How is it possible that some people – including those in "the South of the North" – cannot afford to access local, healthy, seasonal food, such as pulses and vegetables?" She further asserts: "At the end of the day, what is portrayed as an elitist thing pertaining to a white, highly educated minority, is another trap of the system, and hides the fact that poor people do not have access to quality food". In our system, the only affordable option for many people is fast food and soft drinks.

Finally, Sathya brings up cultural dimensions of food and diets and shares some paradoxes from India, marked by the caste system. Her research shows that some groups and individuals who profess not being violent against animals are oppressing humans in the name of vegetarianism. What is more, cases of extremism in certain upper-caste Hindu groups have been observed in which those who do not consume meat are "killing humans who transgress their food taboos". In this case, the basis of non-violence as a philosophy behind non-animal diets is transgressed, exposing the system's hypocrisies. The "food hierarchy in India mimics the caste hierarchy – one of the most violent you can think of", she says.¹¹ In this context, even though she is not a habitual meat eater and did not grow up eating beef or pork in her family, she chooses to eat meat every now and then for nutrition, but mostly for political reasons. She views this as offering resistance and supporting those who are oppressed by dietary fundamentalism.

¹⁰ Please see: Narain *et al.* *Climate change: perspectives from India*. UNDP, November 2009. Available at: www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/undp_climate_change.pdf.

¹¹ For more information on this issue, please see Sathya's article: C Sathyamala. "Meat-eating in India: Whose food, whose politics, and whose rights?". *Policy Futures in Education* 17:7 (2019): 878–891. Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1478210318780553.

ANIMAL-BASED AGRICULTURE AND CLIMATE JUSTICE: CAN WE OVERCOME THE BINARY?

In this exchange of ideas, opinions varied on whether livestock should have a place in agriculture, and whether meat and dairy production can be environmentally sustainable and respectful to animals. Vanessa believes that it is mostly not possible to keep animals sustainably due to the dominant system, which serves much of the population and requires large extensions of land to produce livestock. Also, from an ethical point of view, she believes we should steer away from an anthropocentric view of nature and refrain from using animals altogether, with the exception of certain contexts, such as in the case of Indigenous Peoples. Similarly, Maresa deems that apart from a few exceptions, such as hunter-gatherer societies, most of the world cannot produce animal products and still live in tune with nature. There is some leeway for using animals in farms, but not for food. According to Line, as mentioned above, livestock can be kept sustainably, and more people should engage with this alternative.

Sathya shares examples from her experience in villages in India, where the way animals are kept and treated is often very different to the West. In one village case study, animals such as cows and buffaloes are used for milk and goats for meat, and farmers' lives are entwined with their animals. During her fieldwork, one woman spoke about becoming 'depressed' because her cow died due to a snakebite. With a specific philosophy and ideology, she says, it is possible to keep animals in a respectful and sustainable way. And this is largely the case with widespread small-scale farms in India, with a few exceptions in the last few decades, such as the transformation of what was a backyard activity into large-scale poultry industry.

Marité, a livestock herder, shares her experience on the importance of animal-based agriculture. Pastoralism isn't merely a way of production, but a *way of life* for her community and her family in the South American Gran Chaco, a region that covers Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia. Like their ancestors, they keep goats, cows and pigs, and have also recently started bee-keeping. They practice transhumance and adapt to the environment without changing it, she feels. Each territory has its own biodiversity, and as pastoralists, they move with the seasons as small family units. Some pastoralists also live off of fishing in some seasons, and many grow vegetables. Their eating habits change throughout the year, according to the territorial availability of different animals, fish and vegetables, based on traditional practices. "Our food sovereignty is provided by Chaco's '*monte*' (the grasslands) and rivers", Marité states. She adds: "What I cook starts with the territory and ends on my plate. Food is life. It is the starting point."

She and her fellow pastoralists see themselves as part of the landscape, and they move to allow it to replenish and regenerate. For them, keeping livestock means not invading or harming others or nature. Marité's organization defends food sovereignty, territory, land and water, and their way of production, so by default, they also defend climate justice. The way they see it, food sovereignty and climate justice are inextricably linked, so it is vital to avoid the blanket assumption that livestock keeping is a major contributor to climate change.¹² "We must put people, human rights and food sovereignty at the center, and the rest will follow", Marité affirms. She adds: "Climate justice has been in my veins since I was in my mother's belly. It was the same for my mother in her mother's belly. And for my grandmother. And my great-grandmother. It is part of who we are".

¹² For more information on a pastoralist perspective on measuring environmental impacts of livestock system, please see: Manzano, Pablo. "Niveles de referencia en sistemas ganaderos: claves para identificar impactos". *Remedia Network Blog*, October 17, 2019. Available in Spanish at: redremedia.wordpress.com/2019/10/17/niveles-de-referencia-en-sistemas-ganaderos-claves-para-identificar-impactos/.

With the arrival of intensive livestock keepers, however, their territories are being reduced. Many traditional livestock keepers are selling their lands (or rather, the right to occupancy, as they do not have formal land titles) at low prices because they have been persuaded that nomadic pastoralism is ‘backwards’. As droughts and floods increase, some see no other option as they struggle to cope with the impacts of climate change. What’s more, women tend to suffer the most in wet weather due to the harm it causes to the animals they keep (goats). Climate justice and food sovereignty are linked, Marité asserts: “If my environment is destroyed, I am deprived of my food sovereignty and of my food system”. Indeed, for those who grew up with livestock keeping, it is the only thing they know; it provides them “with dignity, food and a roof over their heads”. Families who lose their traditional livelihood often end up living in poverty in urban areas and become dependent on government programs.

Sathya also emphasizes the critical question of livelihoods. In India, for example, the fisherfolk population encompasses 4 million people, over 860,000 families.¹³ Indeed, for groups such as traditional livestock keepers, fisherfolk or pastoralists, their livelihoods depend on having access to grazing land, rivers, lakes, oceans and natural resources. They need these to produce food and generate an income to feed themselves and their families.

We must also remember, as Marité insists, that small-scale producers have a spiritual connection to nature, individually and collectively. Before they enter the territory, they have an inner dialogue and ask for permission. The *‘monte’* is also a living entity, a being, just as she herself is life. Each part of the whole is equally life. In this respect, meat and lettuce are of equal value. Marité cannot conceive of the landscape and agriculture as two separate entities, nor of having to choose whether to herd cows or to grow lettuce – integrating livestock and agriculture is thus essential. In her worldview and context, it is hard to grasp how vegans relate to food, and where their food comes from. In Marité’s cosmovision, farming with nature is after all a holistic approach to food production.

THE REAL DRIVER OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Our world faces not just climate change, but also environmental destruction, including the loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, pollution, and water scarcity. Despite the sometimes diverging and nuanced perspectives of the activists in this conversation, they all point to the underlying cause: a perverse system.

Vanessa and Line quote the slogan of the Fridays for Future movement: “System Change, not Climate Change” and emphasize the urgent need to get out of the capitalist system, a main feature of which is consumerism. In the North, as Line says, we consume “too many fossil fuels, too many animal products, going on vacations too often, buying too many clothes”. Marité adds that also in countries like Argentina, especially in cities and urban areas, people do not have time to think about, for instance, where their food comes from. We must “consume, consume, consume, non-stop”. Societies create a comfort zone where we become attached to our little routines: “work, go out, go shopping, and copy-paste.” It is hard to get out of the “orbit of our well-oiled lives”.

Agribusiness and corporate power are also dominant in our current system. Marité denounces that power and resources are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few. Even though there is divergence on the role of livestock in agriculture among

¹³ International Collective in Support of Fisheries. “Fisheries and Fishing Communities in India”. Available at: indianfisheries.icsf.net/.

the vegan and non-vegan interviewees, there is a common critique of agribusiness, including industrial agriculture largely reliant on monoculture and agrochemicals. Vanessa points out how problematic it is that smallholders are disappearing, to pave the way for large-scale crops such as palm oil, avocado, soy, beetroot and other crops. Marité, in a similar vein of thought, condemns intensive livestock production, where some farmers own up to 3,000 cows, compared to the around 800 cows they own as an extended family of over 23 people. She argues that the “concentration of industry has a harmful effect on society”, leading to a situation that compares to slavery; agribusiness fails to feed the world: it has merely “created a new ‘caste’”. In her eyes, the real struggle is against the neoliberal model that promotes capital accumulation.

Unfortunately, as Vanessa points out, agribusiness worldwide is propped up by public policies. In Europe, subsidies for agriculture and livestock production under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) fail to target those families who work the land, and go instead to the sugar industry, big supermarkets, corporations and even construction companies.¹⁴ Under the auspices of ‘generating jobs’, subsidies end up in the wrong hands. Conversely, small agroecological producers must go to great lengths to certify their products as organic. “Why do *they* have to do that, and not the other way around?”, she asks.

14 Please see: Jarreta, Daniel. “Política Agraria Común (PAC) Tejerina planea evitar que las constructoras sigan recibiendo subvenciones agrícolas”. *El Confidencial*, December 22, 2014. Available in Spanish at: www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2014-12-22/tejerina-planea-impedir-que-las-pro-motoras-reciban-subsidios-agricolas_590146/.

Another critical aspect brought up in this dialogue is globalization. As Sathya points out, in our problematic system of production, pigs in China are fed with soy from Brazil, and then Chinese pork is exported throughout the world. The problem is structural.

In Argentina, as Marité describes, food aid is composed of ultra-processed food – powdered milk, pasta, sugar, canned tomatoes with preservatives. The agribusiness promoted in our capitalist system, which causes ecological destruction, negatively impacts our diets, nutrition and health. In other words, it is making both humans and our planet sick. Under the influence of industry, people are forgetting what real nutrition means: children can’t differentiate the value of a grape vs. a “Cheeto”¹⁵, she stresses. Vanessa also mentions childhood obesity as a growing issue in Spain, caused by lack of access to both healthy food and education on food and nutrition.

15 Ultra-processed cheese-flavored puffs. Marité referred to a “Chizito”, the former name of this brand in Argentina.

Various interviewees equally highlighted the oppression of women by the dominant system. Peasant women’s work is largely rendered invisible, even though they fulfill a big portion of both productive work in the farms *and* care work – in their homes, communities and movements.¹⁶ There is a strong connection between climate justice, sustainable farming and feminism, Line adds. Women are more vulnerable to climate change impacts. She suggests that “you don’t have to be vegan to be a feminist, but you have to empower women everywhere and stand up for them, and improve their education on sustainable land use”.

16 For more information, please see: Andrews, Donna, Smith, Kiah and Morena, M. Alejandra. “Enraged: Women and Nature”. *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*, 2019. Available at: www.right-to-food-and-nutrition.org/files/rtfn-watch11-2019_eng-6-15.pdf.

Furthermore, they all underscore that the food system mistreats both animals and humans alike: Vanessa and Marité denounce the extremely poor working conditions of workers in slaughterhouses, which for example in Spain are often migrant workers with few other options. Indeed, those who work throughout the food chain face various forms of structural violence. Sathya reminds us, for instance, that farmer suicide rates in India are alarmingly high. These are all victims of our perverse system.

CHALLENGING FALSE SOLUTIONS

In this age of crises – interviewees concur – many misleading false solutions are proffered. While the vegan participants identified their diets as their main contribution to combatting climate change, due to lower greenhouse gas emissions, they all recognized that this simply doesn't fit the bill. Line puts it clearly: “some people may become vegan to do their part in helping the change we need, yet it is difficult when they do and think this is enough; the main thing is not to be silent and vegan, but to raise our voices”.

Vanessa also explains that eating a plant-based diet in Europe defeats the purpose if this means eating avocados from Mexico or quinoa from Peru or Bolivia, or consuming meat alternatives that are ultra-processed foods, wrapped in plastic, and produced by major corporations like Unilever. We must look at how all products are produced, including non-animal-based ones, Maresa notes. Some of those who eat plant-based diets do not see the difference between small-scale and large-scale, monoculture-based farming, she says – yet this is a crucial distinction to make. For instance, palm oil, used in vegan burgers and other vegan products, destroys rainforests.

Generally, Vanessa contends, solutions are not merely based on changing our individual patterns of consumption, by exchanging X product with Y product. The same goes for swapping plastic bags with cloth bags, or plastic cutlery with corn-based cutlery. This is a form of ‘greenwashing’, and another ‘trap’ of a system that promotes individualism. Sathya agrees, and cautions against an uncritical promotion of veganism, which could act as a façade as well as deflect from the larger causes. While individual change is of course necessary, it simply is not enough.

In a 2018 report, the World Economic Forum acknowledged that the industrial food system has failed, yet proposed new technologies as a solution, including “alternative proteins”.¹⁷ Since veganism is growing, at least in the Global North, big investors are moving quickly to invest in meat-free or plant-based ventures, such as alternative meats.¹⁸ Among the many issues this raises, lab-produced food is energy-intensive, as underscored by Sathya.

On that note, Sathya also warns of a push to separate food production from the land.¹⁹ In some countries such as UK, USA (and India is also following suit)²⁰ they are already growing with hydroponics. Most notably, the biotechnology industry is moving fast. One of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's fourteen “Grand Challenges in Global Health” was to grow a “single staple plant species”, one plant that would have protein, carbs, and everything needed for human nutrition.²¹ Even if this project didn't kick off, we must not lose sight of such developments, which largely add to the challenge of how we produce food. If food is no longer grown on soil, then the entire food system can be (even) more easily controlled and it will bring about cataclysmic changes in relation to land. She maintains that we should not move into so-called alternatives without seeing the big picture, and seeking holistic options. In view of this widespread ‘techno-optimism’, Vanessa also cautions: the solution cannot come “from those who are pushing us into the abyss”. Many technological advances benefit only a few – yet the answer must be collective and fair for everyone.

17 For more information, please see: Filardi, Marcos Ezequiel, and Prato, Stefano. “Reclaiming the Future of Food Challenging the Dematerialization of Food Systems”. *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*, 2018. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/1_eng_reclaiming_the_future_of_food_challenging.pdf.

18 Hancox. *Supra* note 6.

19 For an analysis of the impact of digitalization and dematerialization of food on the right to food and nutrition, please see: *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* 2018, “When Food Becomes Immaterial Confronting the Digital Age”. Available at: www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/rtfn-watch-2018_eng.pdf.

20 For more information, please visit: hydroponicsspace.com/top-7-countries-that-use-hydroponics-their-production-size-revealed/.

21 Please see point 9 under goal 7 “Improve nutrition to promote health” in Gates Foundation. “Fourteen Grand Challenges in Global Health Announced in \$200 Million Initiative”. October 14, 2003. Available at: www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2003/10/14-Grand-Challenges-in-Global-Health.

CONVERGING AROUND SYSTEM CHANGE

Despite the difference in contexts, worldviews and backgrounds of our interviewees there is consensus on one thing: we must transform the inequitable, capitalist, and patriarchal system to face the current climate and ecological crises, and other ongoing multiple crises, and achieve nutritious, affordable food for all. And to do so, we must be clear in our analysis, and go to the root of the problem. Second, we must be clear in our collective visions.

Here are some elements of what a different system could look like. Fundamentally, people must be able to decide what food they produce and how. All five respondents partaking in this rich debate converge around the importance of food being produced by small-scale producers in an agroecological manner, along with the promotion of local and regional markets to keep transportation chains short. This is key to achieving climate justice, considering that industrial large-scale agriculture is a major polluter – be it industrial agriculture or livestock. Agroecology is the way forward to cool down the planet.

To achieve these common goals, we must apply multiple strategies. We must demand that governments adopt policies to support small-scale producers so that nutritious food is accessible for all – and not just the elite – and apply necessary regulations, for instance on pesticides. We must stop the concentration and grabbing of land and natural resources by a few and the pushing of megaprojects at the expense of food sovereignty, nature and biodiversity. We must fight corporate power, and the power imbalances *and* the greenhouse emissions it creates.

To make these demands, we must use our voice – especially in democracies where we have a chance to do so. We must do so on the streets, as the FFF movement is doing, and through our votes, Line urges. We must make sure that politicians do not get reelected if they do not use their power in the right way, in line with our goals. Marité calls for affected people's real participation in decisions that impact their lives – and highlights that states must implement the manifold global instruments that support civil society in their struggles.

We must undoubtedly work as a collective – our guest activists already emphasized above that individuals alone cannot achieve much. Yet it is still important to educate society, and to question our behavior, regarding for instance the impacts of the Global North's consumerism on other parts of the world. Generally, we as consumers all over the world can start questioning where our food comes from, and we can choose to support small-scale, sustainable producers.

The current youth climate movement, of which veganism is a popular component, has achieved a great deal of attention, and it's worth noting that the longer-established food sovereignty movement has not been able to achieve this unprecedented level of publicity. But even though they may come from new and different realities, they are building on the work done before them. Now more than ever, in tumultuous uncertain times, it is vital to strengthen our own movements and engage in dialogue between different movements – with openness, understanding, empathy and respect. We must find the nuances in complex issues that can too often be presented in simplistic and polarizing ways, as this will not bring us any closer to change. Only by having these difficult conversations and trying to find common ground can we effectively move forward. Otherwise, we might fall into various types of 'fundamentalisms', criticized by all in this five-way dialogue.

We do not need to join in all aspects of all struggles, agree on everything or ‘colonize’ other spaces. Ultimately, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each corner of the world has its own context-specific vision of food sovereignty, Marité argues. Line echoes her on climate justice:

We should not make this debate about whether veganism is the perfect thing or eating meat is. We will never agree on a climate-masterplan – there is no one single solution. Instead, we need to find joint solutions for the common challenges we face, yet these must be localized solutions for local communities in different countries to be able to become more sustainable, make the circle smaller and not depend on big players anymore. The bandwidth of motivations, beliefs and ideas is what we need to make sure everyone can be part of this transformation. People and countries are different – and all must be seen and have their say.

This article is just one example of how activists and practitioners from around the world can engage in a rich and meaningful conversation: our five interviewees look forward to further discussions and debates for a common struggle for climate justice and food sovereignty.



IN BRIEF

Our diets are currently at the center of debates around climate change mitigation. Mainstream media increasingly focus on the impact of meat consumption on CO₂ emissions. Beyond scientific debates, there is growing public interest in how the food we eat impacts climate change. In some parts of the world, more people are embracing vegan diets, and the vegan and climate movements are becoming increasingly intertwined. For instance, various Fridays for Future activists throughout Europe are vegan.

In this article, we take a critical look at veganism. What is attracting more and more people to vegan diets – is it the climate crisis? Can veganism be a key solution for addressing climate change? Where are the intersections among the food sovereignty, climate and vegan movements? Is veganism at odds with the struggle for food sovereignty, or in synergy with it? To tackle these questions, five activists shared their perspectives with us.



KEY CONCEPTS

→ Veganism may be described as “a movement, an ethical and political position that defends that we cannot continue using non-human animals – be it for food, clothing, transportation or medicine”. Several motivations drive people to endorse veganism, including empathy for animals and environmental reasons.

- There are different positions among interviewees on whether livestock should have a place in agriculture, and whether meat production can be environmentally sustainable.
- Yet it is argued that the debate should not be about whether “veganism is the perfect thing or eating meat is”, as there is “no one single solution that fits all”.
- Instead, we need to strengthen our own movements and engage in dialogue with others, joining forces for the common goal: transforming the capitalist patriarchal system to face the current crises and achieve food sovereignty and climate justice.
- For this, we must raise our voices and demand that governments adopt policies that curb climate-damaging agribusiness and support small-scale producers to produce nutritious, affordable food for all – in an agroecological manner that cools down the planet.



KEY WORDS

- Veganism
- Climate change
- Ecological destruction
- Climate justice
- Food sovereignty
- Models of production
- Agroecology
- Agribusiness
- Corporate power
- Capitalism
- Patriarchy





Nowhere else is the interconnectedness between humans and nature more evident than in food. And yet we have been swept up in a delusion of separation, which today is at the root of a deep ecological crisis. The rapid spread of the coronavirus at the beginning of this year is yet another sign that modern human societies are devastating the planet, and that we need to transform our relationship with the rest of the living world.

The production and availability of nutritious, healthy and culturally adequate food depends on functioning ecosystems, but also on our ability to recognize human rights *and* the intrinsic values of other living beings, from animals and plants to microorganisms. Food not only keeps us healthy and enables us to respond to global threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also central to our human nature as social beings. Yet the modern world, marked by capitalism and by patriarchy, treats humans and the rest of nature as two separate spheres. There are deep-seated links between the ways in which societies violate human rights and mistreat nature. Our current economic and political system feeds on the exploitation of humans and nature to generate profits, which manifests most clearly in the perpetuation of inequalities, global warming and the rapid loss of biodiversity.

This year's *Watch* brings us back to the source of the illusion of separation between human societies and the rest of nature, which serves the power of a few over the many. Authors in this issue invite us to join the dots, and explore a new generation of human rights and environmental law that reimagines interrelatedness. They provide answers on how we can collectively shift the paradigm from separation to connection through an ongoing convergence of struggles.

The articles in this edition call for an overhaul of how we produce, distribute and eat food – if we are to regain control and radically transform our societies – but also, of how we collectively resist the exploitation of nature. Building upon long-standing struggles of small-scale food producers' organizations and Indigenous Peoples for food sovereignty and agroecology, today's movements show us that ecological concerns are inseparable from socio-economic realities, including the political and ecological roots of our food systems. In these struggles, a fundamental approach will be to embrace diversity, build strong alliances and make peoples' voices heard in all of the spaces where decisions are made.

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