

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, CLIMATE ACTION & LOCAL RESILIENCE

IMAGINING A REGENERATIVE, COMMUNITY LED &
COOPERATIVE APPROACH TO LOCAL FOOD

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Food Sovereignty, Climate Action and Local Resilience

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This pamphlet on Food Sovereignty, Climate Action and Local Resilience follows on from [A Question of Scale](#): “Imagining a cooperative, community-led approach to regional resilience”. In that framing paper we explored the potential of the Social and Solidarity Economy, Doughnut Economics, Just Transition, The Commons, Community Wealth Building, Federated co-ops as approaches to help us address the climate and ecological emergency.

The process to co-create this pamphlet began with a first draft distributed to local food, community and coop advocates, who were then invited to a webinar to discuss the four areas of emphasis and identify the blockers and enablers of this regenerative and community led approach. The harvest of the session, along with links to initiatives in the field, and an info-graphic were then added.

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Green Foundation Ireland aims to create an awareness of the importance of an ecological and sustainable Ireland through education and community projects.

Since 2000, the Sustainable Ireland Cooperative Society who operate as Cultivate has played a key role in furthering ecological sustainability and community resilience in Ireland.

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Introduction

Climate action is vital. And yet there is a risk that, taken alone, climate action could mean those with economic power keep it, all the while avoiding the bigger, systemic changes required to face our social and environmental challenges. We argue here for climate action that works within a local resilience and food sovereignty framework so that it is grounded in a societal transformation rather than solely an economic reorientation of direction.

We are currently faced with huge, complex conundrums which our existing social and political structures are struggling to resolve. Climate change is among the environmental crises which offers us the opportunity to shift from an extractive economy based on debt and endless growth to a circular one based on wellbeing, co-operation and regeneration of our natural world.

On the ground, people are finding ways of addressing these structural problems and are building community-led solutions. Our food and agricultural systems are one of the first places people are engaging with, and they are doing so within the Food Sovereignty framework.

[Food Sovereignty](#) addresses how our food is produced, distributed and consumed, and relates this to how our societies organise, control and distribute the vital resources of our planet. It is a framework first proposed by the peasant farmers of Via Campesina which has started a conversation across the world, rooted in the people and places where it occurs, and reflecting those realities.

Our current food and agricultural system functions through the application of ever more industrial systems to natural processes. This system, which we are encouraged to believe is normal, in fact obscures an abundance of hidden social, environmental and cultural costs, and operates beyond

the [ecological limits](#) of our regions, localities and planet. It has had hugely detrimental impacts on natural cycles and ecosystems which are easier to break than repair.

The production of crops where it is cheapest to do so (in terms of labour, weather, soils, etc.) has created monocultures rather than polycultures of both crops and farm types, and has forced diversified, small scale local producers to compete with agribusiness companies on global markets for the chance to feed their communities. It has also led to many crops being produced using exploitative labour conditions, often with undocumented and vulnerable migrant labour.

At the same time ecosystems across the planet – both on land and in our oceans – are under huge pressure due to our food production and land use systems. Agrichemical use is part of [potentially catastrophic biodiversity loss](#) and the [nitrification of lakes](#) and rivers, and the increasing mechanisation of farming systems has eroded farm biodiversity and encroached into wild areas and habitats.

These pressures are made ever more acute due to climate change. On top of their environmental impacts, our current food production and distribution systems are rigid, fragile and vulnerable to shocks.

The global food distribution system is also not the best way to ensure access to healthy and nutritious food. URGENCI in their recent report '[Enacting Resilience: the response of local solidarity-based partnerships for Agroecology to the Covid-19 crisis.](#)', highlight the urgent need to localise our production and consumption food patterns to provide this.



“The crisis also amplified the connection between production of and access to local food, climate change, and the potential of sustainable agroecological practices of small-scale family farms to provide healthy, nutritious food for all. The relocalisation of our food systems and grounding them more strongly in direct short supply chains between producers and consumers can play a key role in ensuring that solidarity economy and food sovereignty – two of the critical levers in this essential struggle for the survival of humanity – become recognised and normalised around the world”

URGENCI

The harder we look at how food and agriculture systems function, the clearer it becomes that the changes required to those systems will require changes to how our economic, financial and trade laws operate as well as social and cultural changes to how we interact

What to do about this?

In the absence of a genuine long-term vision for the reform or renewal of these systems from governments, as well as [lobby pressure neutering EU efforts](#) to rein in agri-food excesses, community and farmer-led alternatives are growing and expanding, even if the institutional framework to support them remains completely inadequate.

Across Europe and the world, farmers and citizens are exploring ways of producing and distributing food which have positive environmental outcomes, increase community wealth and resilience, and provide long-term livelihoods. These approaches work within an ecological ceiling and a social foundation, as outlined in the concept of [Doughnut Economics](#), which must underpin economic exchanges and human interaction into the future.

Beyond our local context, the Food Sovereignty movement provides a global political framework for change based on social justice, solidarity, empowering women and reorganising international trade and economic relations. The Nyéléni Europe Forum in 2011 marked a first step in building a European movement for Food Sovereignty. Ten years on, we can begin to explore the challenges and opportunities in building Food Sovereignty in Europe and beyond today. We will here use four areas of emphasis:

- 1. Production: Using the land for local and regional needs.**
- 2. Organising processing and distribution locally and regionally.**
- 3. Livelihoods: How do we ensure all participants in our food and agricultural systems make a fair living from their work?**
- 4. Trade and Solidarity: Ensuring Food Sovereignty is not just about “eating local and eating well” but also linking our actions to the broader picture.**

Production - Using the Land For Local and Regional Needs

Farmers practicing agroecology are aware of the need to stimulate and enhance soil biology, prioritise biodiversity on their farms and take measures to fix broken carbon and water cycles. A restructuring of land use to encourage small scale local production of food, fuel and fibre offers the most comprehensive solution to the interlinked issues of climate change, biodiversity loss and over-consumption – [agroecology can feed Europe](#).

These land use systems, embedded in community-led, co-operative approaches to organising short supply chains, processing and distribution provide the foundations for the new economic and social structures which our future requires. The integration of social and cultural aspects into food production embodies the agroecological approach to farming and food.

Small scale production systems are [more productive per hectare](#) than field scale sys-

tems, and provide opportunities to reduce external inputs by stacking diversified production systems, such as horticulture combined with poultry for meat or eggs, with fertility being recycled back into the farming system.

Regenerative farming systems use practices, such as holistic planned grazing, min- and no-till production in cereal and legume crops, as well as extensive use of cover crops and rotations, with successful outcomes in terms of production and soil health.

More diversified and integrated land use systems which produce inputs for other farms in the region (seed, feed and other produce) can provide a more regionally focused food and agricultural system which is interdependent, while providing diversified land-based livelihoods.

BLOCKERS - WHAT IS PREVENTING THE CHANGES WE NEED TO SEE?

- Low prices for farmers encourage industrialisation, technology and debt; get big or get out.
- Farm subsidies support specialised commodity production in different regions and farms have been set up to feed into that system, while cutting out smaller scale producers.
- Lack of information from agricultural research and education systems to provide pathways to farmers for change.
- Agribusinesses have extensive investments in downstream processing and distribution which they will try to protect.
- Small farms struggle with access to finance, labour and expertise and often receive little or no subsidies or supports, while new entrants struggle to access land.

ENABLERS - WHAT IS HAPPENING AND CAN HAPPEN TO ACCELERATE CHANGE?

- Public money and supports need to prioritise the transition to agroecological production, particularly small scale production.
- Increasing awareness in the general public and among policy makers of the impacts of farming and land use systems on climate change and biodiversity.
- Vibrant farmer and citizen movements are building exchange and education networks across Europe and within local regions.
- Growing markets for locally produced food as citizens recognise the benefits of agroecological, small scale production systems.
- Farmers are moving forward with research and peer-to-peer learning to share solutions and opportunities on the ground.
- Local and green procurement as part of community wealth building can drive changes in production

WHAT CAN CITIZENS AND COMMUNITIES DO?

- Recognise and understand that citizens create culture and can transform food and agricultural systems by interacting with them in a different way.
- Support farmers in Food Sovereignty movements and organisations in working for political changes, as well as with their (collective) spending power and other resources where possible.
- Engage with policy makers and institutions responsible for all legislation governing food production, local land use and environmental protection.
- European Innovation Partnerships and other ways for farmers to come together and operate collectively on important shared agroecological tasks.

Organising Processing and Distribution Locally and Regionally

The changes required to our food and agricultural systems and broader economy to take transformative climate action and create a system which balances our impact on the planet will open up a huge number of new, diversified livelihoods and reassessments of conventional employment, collective activity and co-operative organisations.

Farmers and citizens are already developing a multitude of systems for developing and organising short supply chains, such as through [Community Supported Agriculture](#), local markets, box schemes, [solidarity initiatives](#), direct selling and other initiatives, which aim to reorganise food distribution so farmers receive a fairer price for their production and citizens can become more involved in their food systems.

These projects decentralise food chains, ensure solidarity and fair prices, and provide the building blocks for a new local food infrastructure based around community scale food production, distribution and processing.

Co-operatives have traditionally played an important role in European agriculture. While many older co-ops have transitioned to agribusiness companies, a new wave of smaller scale, more locally-orientated collaborations, producer groups and [co-op-](#)

[eratives](#) can bring the benefits of pooling resources, including increased bargaining power, in the hands of producers, while giving citizens a chance to directly support the kind of agricultural production they want to see.

Localised food systems will require an enabling environment which provides supportive regulations and mechanisms for establishing or protecting food systems which are embedded in local and regional economies.

Some short supply chain initiatives include [solidarity pricing](#) to ensure access for low-income participants as well as labour contributions and other non-monetary exchange systems which further attempt to break down established consumption patterns and habits.

Citizens are also developing online, open source alternatives for marketing, distributing and selling food into local markets, including through the [Open Food Network \(OFN\)](#) – an open source, community-owned online tool for citizens to connect directly with producers and small scale processors. This can suit a number of otherwise forgotten regions – it can be hard for farmers' markets to be viable in small towns and villages, but there are time and produce efficiencies

with OFN which show how appropriate technology can be utilised for social good. For example, producers don't wait all day to sell, they only come with what is sold.

New local government initiatives based around [community wealth building](#) may offer potential for developing local and regional public procurement policies to further strengthen and promote local production and distribution.

BLOCKERS - WHAT IS PREVENTING THE CHANGES WE NEED TO SEE?

- Retail concentration driven by supermarkets and unfair pricing mechanisms.
- Advertising and consumer culture continue to dominate distribution systems and influence consumption habits.
- In some areas a critical mass of production/farmers does not exist to (re)develop co-operative processing facilities.
- Investment and funding prioritises commodity rather than local food production.
- Lack of infrastructure, space and opportunity for alternative time and work environments.
- Lack of small scale processing and distribution options (abattoirs, dairies and other facilities).
- Red tape, bureaucracy, health and safety and insurance inhibits innovation.
- Farmers locked into conventional models by CAP payments, available infrastructure funding, and debt lead to path dependency and the continuation of business-as-usual regarding fertilisers, pesticides and more. For example, producer organisations in fruit and vegetables need to have a turnover of at least €2.5 million [to be recognised](#).

ENABLERS - WHAT IS HAPPENING AND CAN HAPPEN TO ACCELERATE CHANGE?

- Provide direct investment and supports to stimulate local food production (labour, finance, access to land).
- Funding for locally focused markets.
- Supports for appropriate technology.
- Shorter working week would free up labour to grow and share food.
- New digital platforms, such as the Open Food Network, may offer solutions for some farmers and producers.
- Farmers are learning about alternative distribution and direct selling, and are experimenting with online sales.
- Increasing awareness of just-in-time supply chains and exploitative labour conditions has been heightened by recent events.
- Policy coherence with a focus on interrelated social and ecological needs.

WHAT CAN CITIZENS AND COMMUNITIES DO?

- Skilling up for a resilient local future.
- Civic engagement – citizens need to get involved in organising their local food systems through volunteering in their local community.
- Build a food culture that appreciates local food – grow, produce, share, celebrate.
- Organise with other people in their locality to discuss how to access locally produced food and engage with local farmers.
- Some citizens are helping facilitate local food networks through engaging in local groups.

“We work towards the decentralisation of food chains, promoting diversified markets based on solidarity and fair prices, and short supply chains and intensified relations between producers and consumers in local food webs to counter the expansion and power of supermarkets. We want to provide the building blocks for people to develop their own food distribution systems and allow farmers to produce and process food for their communities. This requires supportive food safety rules and local food infrastructure for smallholder farmers. We also work to ensure that the food we produce reaches all people in society, including people with little or no income.”

URGENCI

Livelihoods: How do we ensure all participants in our food and agricultural systems make a fair living from their work?

A new economic and social framework based on the solidarity economy can create more livelihoods (and ensure better livelihoods) from our food systems – bringing a just transition to existing farmers and food providers locked into industrial production, and creating opportunities for more people to participate and engage in co-operative food production.

Many short supply chain initiatives attempt to resolve labour issues in the supply chain by making sure farmers receive fair prices for their production, but the exploitative nature of labour in the agribusiness sector in Europe remains.

Cheap food on supermarket shelves comes with many hidden costs, with the focus of-

ten on the environmental and transport impacts of production and transport. However, industrial food production and distribution systems across Europe often function on the back of exploitative, poorly paid labour. Workers are often forced into illegal work agreements and exposed to dangerous working conditions and long hours, in [horticulture](#), [fisheries](#), [meat processing](#) and other areas. Labour intensive fruit and vegetable production, mostly in southern [Europe](#), and industrial meat processing and seasonal work in other parts of Europe shares similar characteristics. Meanwhile, many farmers across Europe earn far less than the average industrial wage and are paid below the costs of production for their produce.

BLOCKERS - WHAT IS PREVENTING THE CHANGES WE NEED TO SEE?

- Industrial production systems are dependent on cheap labour and often “import” labour within Europe.
- Mass production keeps prices artificially low and makes it difficult for local/smaller scale producers to compete.
- Falling proportional spend of household income on food (versus rent/loan repayments, etc.).
- Increasing tendency for agri-industry to move production outside Europe entirely to countries where labour prices are lower (for example, Morocco).

ENABLERS - WHAT IS HAPPENING AND CAN HAPPEN TO ACCELERATE CHANGE?

- Increased transparency along the supply chain can help highlight where cheap labour is used.
- Public money needs to be spent on public goods.
- Social conditionality on public supports for agriculture.

WHAT CAN CITIZENS AND COMMUNITIES DO?

- Learn and share about the production systems behind the food you eat or buy.
- Focus on foods from systems that have better basic standards, including transparency and social conditionality in food production.

Trade and Solidarity: Ensuring Food Sovereignty is not just about “eating local and eating well”

While there is a natural tendency to focus on the practical local solution of supporting small scale production and shortening supply chains, there are other structural inequalities and injustices embedded into our food system which must be challenged. Creating an alternative production system where the local community can provide food for itself and a farmer is well paid for their work is a good achievement, but is only part of the bigger picture of societal change embedded in the concept of Food Sovereignty.

Trade relations and [ongoing imbalances in financial and capital control](#) over food systems are at the root of many of the inequalities which exist between countries today. European and American corporations in-

terested in expanding their market share in energy or service industries encourage their governments to use agriculture as a bargaining chip in trade negotiations. Industrial scale commodity production often wins out – with Europe, as the world’s largest food importer and exporter, being particularly active in using food as a geopolitical tool.

Agriculture has increasingly narrowed our production of staple crops, prioritising maize, wheat and rice over local alternatives, while oil based protein crops provide the basis for the industrialisation of the meat and dairy industries.

Challenging the global trade regime and the bilateral trade agreements which en-

trench trade relations and which negatively affect peasant farmers on both sides is a vital part of the picture of Food Sovereignty and the global conversation that needs to be had about how to protect, encourage and support biodiverse, agroecological and small scale production not just in our backyard, but across the world.

BLOCKERS - WHAT IS PREVENTING THE CHANGES WE NEED TO SEE?

- Public understanding of global trade and investment remains low and impacts are felt over long periods rather than instantly, so cause and effect can be difficult to identify.
- Transnational corporations are consolidating control from production to distribution, including the entry of technology companies into the organisation of food systems.
- Global governance of food systems through multilateral UN based institutions is under threat from new private sector led alliances (for example, the World Food Summit process).
- Personal choices still tend towards convenience rather than local and seasonal food.
- Trade legislation at EU and wider levels prioritises agri-industrial and corporate interests.

WHAT CAN CITIZENS AND COMMUNITIES DO?

- Link impacts of food industrialisation and climate change.
- Increase interest and understanding of imports and exports of food.
- Support local and promote short supply chain initiatives.
- Broad advocacy coalitions from trade, farming and environmental areas to fight for better international trade relations, linking in with supportive transparent institutions such as the [EU Ombudsman](#).

ENABLERS - WHAT IS HAPPENING AND CAN HAPPEN TO ACCELERATE CHANGE?

- Local Food Policy.
- Create a binding social treaty on food sovereignty.
- Need to rebuild global citizen movements centred on concepts of prosperity beyond growth and a wellbeing economy.
- Increased understanding of the damage caused by hollowing out of domestic production sectors by the global economy.
- Increasing relocalisation movements and instinctual return to prioritising local economies in crisis situations.
- Marketing and advocacy to understand trade agreements – what do we import and why? What do we export and why?


Conclusion

When we talk about our food and farming systems, or climate change, or our economic systems, we often use the word “crisis”. The roots of this word are closer to “decision” than calamity or disaster. There is no doubt we are at a decisive point – and human beings have perhaps never been faced with crises or decisions like those of today which are so complex and interconnected. At this point, regardless of what path we take into the future, building local economies and resilience will be absolutely vital in order to maintain our communities.

In one sense there is great hope because, as the problems are increasingly obvious, so too do we have solutions to hand – small scale biointensive agroecological farming systems, regenerative approaches to production and ecosystems, innovation of all sorts in distribution, communication

and organisation and, perhaps most importantly, an informed citizenry who can access information and share and interact with one another.

What is required is a decision – a strong, clear decision to move away from a model of food production and distribution which does harm, and move towards one which builds local resilience and food sovereignty. This decision must be taken not just by individuals and communities but also by the bodies and institutions which purport to represent their interests, and by the governance structures we have established to organise ourselves. A move towards food sovereignty is also a move towards reducing our carbon emissions, towards mitigating the impacts of climate change in our communities and towards reducing our impact on the planet and on the hopes and aspirations of future generations.



ENSURE ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

ENABLE FOOD SECURITY


PRODUCE FOOD LOCALLY

FIX CARBON AND WATER CYCLES

IMPROVE SOIL HEALTH

ENHANCE BIODIVERSITY

CLIMATE ACTION



CONNECT PRODUCERS WITH CONSUMERS

CREATE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR LOCAL DISTRIBUTION

SHORTEN SUPPLY CHAINS

MAKE LOCAL FOOD AFFORDABLE

PRACTICING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY



PROMOTE SOLIDARITY ACROSS BORDERS

ADVOCATE FOR LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

MAKE FAIR TRADE AGREEMENTS

LOBBY FOR POLICY CHANGE

LOCAL RESILIENCE



MAKE PRODUCE WITH LOCAL INGREDIENTS

CREATE AND SUSTAIN LOCAL LIVELIHOODS

STRENGTHEN LOCAL ECONOMIES

PROVIDE A FAIR WAGE TO PRODUCERS

Signposts to Initiatives in the Field

Talamh Beo

An alliance of farmers, growers and land workers on the island of Ireland which aims to ensure a living landscape where people and ecosystems can thrive together. Talamh Beo is Ireland's only member of the European Coordination Via Campesina – itself part of Via Campesina, the international movement of farmers with more than 180 member organisations in 82 countries.

Land Workers' Alliance in the UK

A union of farmers, growers, foresters and land-based workers with a mission to develop a food and land-use system based on agroecology and Food Sovereignty, where producers can work with dignity to earn a decent living and everyone can access local, healthy and affordable food, fuel and fibre.

European branch of Via Campesina

Rooted in the right to Food Sovereignty, Via Campesina's main objective is the defence of farmers' and field workers' rights, as well as the promotion of diverse and sustainable family and peasant farming. These principles, in turn, demand food and agricultural policies in Europe based on legitimacy, fairness, solidarity and sustainability.

Seed Sovereignty UK and Ireland Programme

Supporting the development of a biodiverse and ecologically sustainable seed system in the UK and Ireland. With genetic and agrobiodiversity as its central focus, the programme supports the broad range of agroecological farming operations that exist, incorporating all seed grown within these systems, enhancing current initiatives by supporting and developing networks, addressing gaps in knowledge and skills, and raising awareness of the need for change.

Food Sovereignty Ireland

Food Sovereignty Ireland is a network of groups and individuals working for a change in food and agriculture systems in Ireland in which production and distribution protect the environment and the rights of all people to access resources such as land, seeds, and knowledge.

Urgenci

URGENCI is an urban-rural network, generating new forms of exchange fostering peer-based solidarity among CSA actors to actively contribute to the Food Sovereignty movement worldwide. The network promotes all forms of partnership between producers and local consumers as a solution to the problems associated with global intensive agricultural production and distribution. The network brings together citizens, small farmers, consumers, activists and concerned political actors at global level through an alternative economic approach called Local Solidarity-Based Partnerships between producers and consumers. It is a way of maintaining and developing small scale organic family farming and of achieving local food sovereignty for each region and community worldwide.

Community Seed Banks in Europe

Community seed banks have been founded since the early 1980s in many parts of the world. CSB in Europe are mostly based on seed savers', gardeners' and farmers' networks. They maintain and develop agricultural biodiversity, enhance access to seeds and plants adapted to local conditions, provide training and sensibilisation activities and thereby contribute to sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty.

Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture, as a way to contribute to a greater solidarity between urban and rural communities, is equally empowering for both the community and the farmers, and offers solutions to common problems facing producers and consumers worldwide.

CSA Network Ireland

The national network for Community Supported Agriculture farms supporting the activities of CSAs in Ireland and empowers both farmers and communities to be actively engaged in their local food system.

Irish Seed Savers Association

Protecting Ireland's food crop heritage for future generations, Irish Seed Savers focuses on the conservation of heirloom vegetable seeds and Irish heritage apple trees. Irish Seed Savers Association maintains the country's only public seed bank, with over 600 non-commercially available varieties of seed and house the national collection of Irish heritage apple trees in our orchards, with over 180+ unique varieties.

Cloughjordan Community Farm

Cloughjordan Community Farm is a community-led social enterprise based in the ecosystem of Cloughjordan Ecovillage that ensures food security locally, while demonstrating a viable model for small scale community supported agriculture. CCF's Open Food Hub provides sustainable routes to market for small producers through the utilisation of a virtual marketplace, and provides digital training and mentoring to farmers, producers and other food hubs across Ireland.

Open Food Network

The Open Food Network is a global network of people and organisations working together to build a new food system. The network develops open and shared resources, knowledge and software to support local food economies. OFN believes a sustainable and resilient food system needs to reconnect producers and consumers, and aims to empower people and communities and give them the tools and knowledge to develop the food systems they need for their community. The OFN flagship project is an open source software platform that makes it easy to create innovative, independent, community food enterprises. The software can be used by farmers setting up their own online stores, but it is designed to help farmers collaborate and sell together, and to create thriving, viable enterprises. People have used the power of this feature to create food collectives, manage food hubs, to take their farmers' market online with pre-purchases to give stallholders more secure sales, and more. OFN now operates in 20 countries see

OFN Ireland <https://openfoodnetwork.ie/>

OFN France <https://www.openfoodfrance.org>

OFN UK <https://openfoodnetwork.org.uk/>

OFN Katuma - Iberian Peninsula <https://app.katuma.org/>

OFN Belgium <https://www.openfoodnetwork.be/>

OFN Germany <https://www.openfoodnetwork.de/>

OFN Italy <https://app.openfoodnetwork.it/>

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