



# U.S. FOOD SOVEREIGNTY ALLIANCE



## OUR HISTORY

# Definition of Food Sovereignty

**Food sovereignty** is a term coined by La Via Campesina, a global movement of over 200 million small-scale farmers, peasants, farmworkers, and other food producers in over 70 countries, at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, Italy. Since its introduction, the definition was solidified in the Declaration of Nyéléni at the first global forum on food sovereignty in Mali, 2007.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems (Nyéléni 2007).

## Table of Contents

<b>Definition of Food Sovereignty</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Preparing the Soil</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Sowing the Seeds of Sovereignty</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>The Rains</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Stems and Roots</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Fruits of the Collective Labor</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Pruning</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>New Sowing</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Laying the Foundation, the Struggle Continues</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Remembering Those Who Sacrifice in the Struggle: Our Mística</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>How to Participate and Collaborate with the Alliance:</b> .....	<b>Back Cover</b>



NYELENI 2007  
FORUM SUR LA  
SOUVERAINETE ALIMENTAIRE

*Sélingué (Mali) 23 au 27 Février 2007*

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**Tony Sadler**  
**WhyHunger**



## Preparing the Soil

The U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance is part of a global strategy to expand the reach of food sovereignty organizing by nourishing stronger alliances between rural and urban communities. That strategy was embraced and developed during the International Forum for Food Sovereignty that took place in Selingue, Mali, in 2007, led by La Via Campesina International and supported by the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty (IPC). Social movements led by fisherfolk, farmers, women, pastoralists, farmworkers and Indigenous Peoples, as well as consumers, scholars and grassroots support organizations from around the world convened to debate strategies to advance food sovereignty globally. Out of hundreds of representatives from more than 80 countries, a dozen or so represented the United States. In the conversations in Mali, it was clear that a coordinated action within the U.S. was a necessary step to disseminate the concept and practice of food sovereignty, amplifying the leadership of local food producers in policy making spaces in the U.S. and globally. For the U.S. delegates and their global allies, a convergence space among different sectors in the U.S. would build solidarity and strengthen the advocacy of food producers to challenge the growing consolidation in the food system.

At that time, the U.S. had entered into a deep economic crisis and a new election cycle. After returning from Nyéléni, the organizations gained a new mandate and sense of accountability ▶

### What is La Via Campesina International and the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty?

La Via Campesina International is a global social movement led by rural families. Currently, the organization represents over 200 million food producers and rural people. La Via Campesina is responsible for the crafting of the concept of “food sovereignty” and is one of the founding organizations of the International Planning Committee of Food Sovereignty (IPC). The IPC is a coordination space of global social movements and allies to amplify the views of rural and urban families around food sovereignty in global policy spaces. The U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance is a regional process of IPC.

to global movements. Meanwhile, financial speculation during the economic crisis in the Global North generated a global food crisis. Over 3 billion people worldwide were earning less than \$2.00 per day. The skyrocketing price of food plunged hundreds of thousands into food insecurity. The deep roots of the hunger crisis were planted in poverty, compelling individuals to take action in the form of a three day solidarity fast with those experiencing hunger. At the convergence of Nyéléni and the food crisis, ally organizations created the U.S. Working Group on the Food Crisis in an effort to unite groups across the food movement to think and act critically about the root causes of hunger.





## Sowing the Seeds of Sovereignty

Members of the U.S. Working Group on the Food Crisis decided to deepen their organizing and outreach to different sectors in the U.S.. With the support of international allies, mostly members of La Via Campesina, the organizers embraced the idea of coordinating a People's Movement Assembly on Food Sovereignty at the 2010 U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan. Under the darkening sky and an impending storm rumbling toward the city of Detroit, at dawn Indigenous women performed a water ceremony on the Detroit River on the edge of the Social Forum canopy field, spiritually preparing for the day's activities, including the Peoples Movement Assembly (PMA) food sovereignty gathering under a large tent. A city abandoned by federal policies, Detroit is an important example of resilience. Residents had begun to farm the urban landscape, sowing the seeds of change in places once deserted. PMA organizers toured the city a month in advance and invited Detroit folk to join the Food Sovereignty PMA. After the storm warning, all but the Food Sovereignty organizers vacated the canopy area, motivated to build the struggle for food sovereignty in the United States. Under that tent, the founding documents were established, bringing the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance to life.

That fall, reunited on Bourbon Street in New Orleans with a freshly established purpose to build a movement around food ▶

### International Solidarity:

The “spirit of the alliance” was evident in the “international solidarity” on display in the presence of farmers and farmworker movements connected to international movements and the leaders from Honduras, Haiti, and Palestine that had come to offer their support and insight at the birth of the USFSA.

sovereignty in the United States, members and friends of the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance stood in solidarity with their partners, Restaurant Opportunities Center, protesting discrimination and wage theft at a local restaurant. On World Food Day (October 16th), the different sectors of the food system joined hands, showing the strength of solidarity in the face of injustice. The U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance was officially launched in action, determined to practice their values as part of their assembly. Leaders met in workshops to build on the energy towards change. A discussion on uniting urban and rural communities highlighted the role of the USFSA in constructing direct partnerships between different groups, laying the foundations of the “potential for revolution of the food system in the U.S. and beyond” “in a clear display of solidarity, courage and defiance.”



**It formed a base of the sort of stance that the Alliance... would take in the future, standing with the people who are not being paid fairly for their labor in providing food for the rest of us.”**

— Lisa Griffith, NFFC



## The Rains

Coincidentally following what turned out to be the last meeting of the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) in Oakland, California, in 2011, the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance held its first National Assembly. As a young alliance with a diversity of organizations, the significance of committing to build deep relationships of trust between members became evident. Although representing different sectors, ethnicities, races, and parts of the country, the common goal of food sovereignty challenged different individuals to consider the perspectives of other members, particularly lifting up a conversation around race as a priority of the USFSA.

As new members looked around the room, they could see a desire to support each other. However, that support needed a foundation of understanding and trust. At that assembly, the USFSA recognized the need for deeper introspection around racial justice and healing, and decided to prioritize that work as well as three external issue working groups: immigrant rights & fair trade, land and resource grabs and land reform, and the rights of Mother Earth. Across each issue rested the uniting push towards food sovereignty, “understanding that we all have the ▶

## Addressing Racism and Building Trust:

“If we’re actually going to authentically be an equitable initiative, then it’s going to take some growing pains, and some mistakes, so having enough people around, enough diversity to really be truly equitable and yet, be united enough to be effective.”

— *Simone Senogles,*  
*Indigenous Environmental Network*

same struggle in the area that we are located.” The work of the USFSA is to build a process that is rooted locally, connected globally and intersectionally, and to find those connections between one another that unite us.

The first assembly in Oakland and the subsequent internal conversations around racial healing represented a major milestone for the USFSA as a collective. The intentionality to build across sectors demanded the use of participatory methodologies that would honor the different perspectives in the USFSA.

One of the methodologies the USFSA has been using over the years is the dialogue of ways of knowing (“dialogo de saberes”) used by La Via Campesina. Through dialogue, the USFSA was able to take steps to advance understanding about racism and promote racial justice, but it was clear that the USFSA needed to continue to deepen this work.





## Stems and Roots

The USFSA continued growing despite its challenges and limitations. In 2013, the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance took the responsibility to serve as the steward of the Food Sovereignty Prize, an initiative previously sustained by several members of the USFSA through the CSFC's International Links Sub-Committee.

In opposition to the World Food Prize, established by Norman Borlaug, the father of the Green Revolution, the Food Sovereignty Prize recognizes both international and national organizations making significant strides towards food sovereignty. The U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance awarded the 2013 Food Sovereignty Prize to the Haitian peasant coalition Kat Je Kontre (Four Eyes Together) of Haiti and its ally the Jacques Dessalines International Brigade of La Via Campesina International. The inspiring civil rights leader Shirley Sherrod joined the ceremony to anoint the moment as a marker in the struggle for freedom. Participants recall the opening *mistica*, a sacred spiritual practice through ceremony to connect to the divine aspect of the movement, which emphasized the beautiful diversity that the ceremony brought together. Since then, the Food Sovereignty Prize offers members of the USFSA the opportunity to gather together and celebrate one another in the midst of the struggle, lifting up the successes of organizations both domestically and internationally to inspire hope and build power.

With one National Assembly already under their belt, the USFSA convened for the second time in Tampa, Florida in 2013, with growing ▶

familiarity and grounding principles. In alignment with their vision to put concepts into practice, the USFSA joined the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in a march demanding better working conditions in the fields. The USFSA reverberated the voices of farm workers in Florida in support of their own member organizations representing farmworkers. The power of farmers marching in solidarity with farmworkers heartened many within the USFSA who often felt isolated or separated by the division of labor on U.S. farms.

Intent on building upon the work already done, the USFSA's work groups took this opportunity to spend significant time in-person to assess the work they had done so far, and plan next steps for the coming period. The intersectionality inherent in food sovereignty demonstrated itself in the narratives of four key leaders, two of whom we now count among our ancestors: John Kinsman of Family Farm Defenders, Charity Hicks of East Michigan Environmental Action Council in Detroit, Enrique Lopez of Community to Community Development in Washington state, and Simone Senogles of Indigenous Environmental Network, based in Bemidji, Minnesota. They initiated a powerful dialogue through a "fishbowl" conversation, exploring the multiple elements and connections between key sectors in the struggle for food sovereignty, including the importance of white farmers standing up for racial justice, and the work that everyone can do together to uproot racism and build a stronger movement. The building blocks of understanding began to stack towards relationships of trust and the green shoots of the USFSA's stems started to peek through the rich soil.



**We shouldn't be recognizing techno-fixes to agriculture or manipulation of seeds and corporate control of seeds...We should be honoring the true methods of farming that are in harmony with the earth and that are feeding communities."**

—*Holly Baker, Farmworkers Association of Florida*



## Fruits of Collective Labor

In reflection of the priorities put forth by the Alliance, one of the working groups - the Mother Earth Rights and Defense of the Commons - composed a report on seed saving practices collected from members across the USFSA.

The process of the project mirrored the values of the USFSA by tapping on the knowledge of members to dive deep into the subject matter, valorizing local and Indigenous knowledge and the practice of sovereignty.

The working group practiced patience and flexibility while gathering information to produce a document that respectfully honored the traditions and stories of members of the USFSA in their own voices. The USFSA published the report in 2014 as a concrete contribution to the field of seed sovereignty that lifted up the experience of members of the USFSA. ▶



**I think that the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance is good at modeling justice and equity in the way they do things, not just their subject matter.”**

—*Simone Senogles, Indigenous Environmental Network, in regards to the Seed Sovereignty Report*

“Through the Land and Resource Grab Working Group”, the USFSA fostered a dialogue with communities groups around land access and land justice and organized for two years a national day around land and food sovereignty to highlight the views and struggles of rural and urban communities around the work in reclaiming land rights in the U.S.

The roots of the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance dig deep into the ground, originating from the international struggle for food sovereignty.

Ultimately, the USFSA is “a global process inside of the United States.” To draw connections between domestic and international food sovereignty struggles, the USFSA awarded the 2014 Food Sovereignty Prize to the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, a farmer organization in Palestine and Community to Community Development, a farmworker support organization in Washington State.

These groups were recognized in conjunction to highlight the land loss experienced by both the farmers in Palestine and the farmworkers that have migrated to the United States from Central America. The root cause of both struggles is driven by the capitalist greed for access to resources and markets.

Although operating in different locations, the success of each organization cultivates a space for mutual learning, deepening the community around the struggle.



**The U.S. Food Sovereignty Prize highlights all the good work that everybody is doing. It’s national and international, and we highlight everything. We have good food, good music, good conversation. It’s kind of like the world that we want to see.”**

—*Rosalinda Guillen, Community 2 Community*



Photo Credit: Tony Sadler

## Pruning

A few days before the 2014 Food Sovereignty Prize in Des Moines, Iowa, the USFSA organized a “dialogue of ways of knowing” with the participation of the awardees. The discussions that transpired underscored the need to strengthen the work of the USFSA by “looking within.” Participant members in the event in Iowa agreed that it was time to do an internal assessment of the work. As a means of evaluating the progress and determining the state of the USFSA at its 5-year anniversary, the members were consulted through a survey process to ensure equity and continue movement. The assessments exposed areas of improvement the USFSA could address to stay true to its vision and operating principles.

In the heart of corn and soybean country, USFSA members traveled from all parts of the country to gather in Des Moines, Iowa for the III National Assembly in 2015. Partnering with Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, members organized a solidarity action against an impending oil pipeline in the local area. They stood ▶



**I think that was really a key meeting [the III National Assembly] because people really felt that organizing regionally was going to pull the people and the groups together in a more cohesive way to address changing food systems in their areas.”**

—*Holly Baker, Farmworkers Association of Florida*

against the exploitative extraction of resources that continues to threaten the water and air necessary for all life on Earth. The results of the assessment process were presented at the Assembly, stirring conversation around future growth.

The USFSA determined that the current structure was not serving their vision of frontline leadership. Creative collaboration and strategic planning led to the introduction of a new structure for operation. Following the principle of frontline leadership, USFSA members recognized the need to practice more participatory democracy as an organization and decided to devolve into a regional structure. This shift marked a potential new “infusion of energy” into the USFSA, distributing responsibility for growth and organizing to the regions. The new structure is paving a way forward in practicing frontline leadership with resource support from grassroots support organizations (GSOs). Putting the power back into the community level, this decentralization emboldens frontline members to step into collective ownership of advancing food sovereignty within their communities and regions.

As part of its III National Assembly, the USFSA celebrated the 2015 Food Sovereignty Prize ceremony sewing “a beautiful thread in the struggle for black land” by honoring the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH). The connection between black farmers in the U.S. South and Indigenous Afro-descendant peoples of Honduras presented the stark reality of land loss in contrast to the celebration of effective direct actions taken by OFRANEH to reclaim their land and the health of the Federation in protecting black land ownership in a struggle that still continues today. A rallying cry of this prize was “Black Land Matters.”



**I feel like [frontline leadership] will enable us to have more active participation and have more input from the community, which is really important to me.”**

—*Kathia Ramirez, Farmworkers Support Committee/CATA*





## New Sowing

The USFSA continues sowing the seeds of sovereignty through alliances with national and global organizations. In 2014, the USFSA became a member of the Climate Justice Alliance (CJA), its sister organization, and over the years has collaborated with CJA to build a shared analysis of the intersection between food sovereignty and climate justice.

Members of the USFSA have facilitated CJA's Food Sovereignty and Food Justice Working Group and the USFSA participated in CJA's activities such as its 2016 Annual Meeting in St. Louis, Missouri.

In 2017, the USFSA took another important step to build alignment with the It Takes Roots Alliance - formed by CJA, Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, the Indigenous Environmental Network and the Right to the City Alliance - by sending an 18-person delegation to the 2017 People's Climate March in Washington, DC. The U.S.

The U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance's participation in the People's Climate March in DC affirmed the Alliance's cross-sectional values and uplifting of the struggle for climate justice experienced by farmers, farmworkers and fisherfolk organizations.

In the same year, the USFSA celebrated the 8th edition of the Food Sovereignty Prize by connecting organizing initiatives led by Zimbabwe Small Holder Organic Farmers' Forum (ZIMSOFF) and the Northeast Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA) in the United States, highlighting the complexity and diversity of ▶

struggles on land and sea that are connected through a vision of sovereignty, human rights and international solidarity.

The USFSA is "walking the talk" of building international solidarity, highlighting connections through the annual editions of the Food Sovereignty Prize. Also, it has established important alliances with grassroots organizations and social movements through learning exchanges in South Africa and Mexico, and other relationships with movements for food sovereignty around the world.

In the spirit of strengthening grassroots initiatives, in 2015, the USFSA provided financial support to the Farmworker Association of Florida's (FWAF) first Campesino a Campesino Agroecology Encuentro. FWAF partnered with Rural Coalition and La Via Campesina to advance food sovereignty by utilizing agroecological farming methods. Two years later, the USFSA financially supported four regional agroecology learning exchanges in four different regions of the U.S. These learning exchanges not only spread knowledge, but also deepened understanding across people groups, building a strong foundation for solidarity.



**Specifically, it was really good to be in that space [the It Takes Roots Alliance participation in the People's Climate March] of Native Americans leading and Black Lives Matter present and the Food Sovereignty Alliance right there and valued as part of the movement."**

—Doria Robinson, *Urban Tilth*



## Remembering Those Who Sacrifice in the Struggle: Our *Mística*

Like social movements often do, the USFSA carries the wisdom and strength of those who came before us and passed away, as well as those who continue to make personal sacrifices for the ongoing struggle. That shared and living history strengthens us for the bigger fights still to come. We celebrate the lives of those who have fallen since we began this collective struggle.

## Laying the Foundation: The Struggle Continues

The USFSA is entering into a new phase as a collective with the organization of regional assemblies that will bring together members and allies alike in preparation for the IV National Assembly. It is beginning a new democratic process to build a shared analysis and reaffirm a vision for the alliance between “the city and the countryside (and the oceans) around food sovereignty and justice”. The regional assemblies follow the praxis of social movements’ convergence spaces where various sectors meet and the unity is forged among the different ways of seeing and experiencing the struggle. In this intense process of dialogue, the USFSA members anticipate strengthening grassroots-led processes and a common platform.

The path leading to this point demanded courage, trust and commitment from USFSA members and allies. With a new structure in place, the USFSA will need to find ways to maintain and nourish it. And it is important to recognize that the life of a collective is in the individual members. The new structure of the USFSA was the first step to lay the foundation to form new “persons.” Next, Alliance should put its energy towards building a political education process that will energize and train individuals in the struggle for food sovereignty. ▶



**John Kinsman**, the founding leader of Family Farm Defenders, began his activism picketing alone against the use of GMO growth hormone in milk cows, a cause that led him to join Europeans and then leaders from across the world in raising the alarm against proprietary GMOs in agriculture. He worked tirelessly to build bridges between family farmer groups and with farm workers, between urban and rural, between black and white. His witness was a beacon of hope through our movement. **John Kinsman: ¡Presente!**



**Charity Hicks** was a mover and shaker with the Detroit food justice and food sovereignty movement who perished far too soon. She was a beloved part of our leadership, and a talented connector in the movement, who encouraged all of us to Wage Love. “She was a very special person who really brought grounding to movements in Detroit and in the Black community, while remaining connected to an international vision.” **Charity Hicks: ¡Presente!**



**Brother David Andrews** spent much of his life as a Catholic priest turned food sovereignty activist, and contributed in his last years on Mother Earth to the food sovereignty movement and to USFSA as part of Food and Water Watch. “As a man of faith, he brought spiritual witness and action for justice on behalf of people of the land.” **Brother David: ¡Presente!**



**Kathy Ozer**, former veteran Executive Director of the National Family Farm Coalition played such a huge role in the formation and development of the alliance, whether on the coordinating team, the work on the land and resource grabs and land reform working group, or by coordinating food provision for USFSA events from local farmers. “She... always maintained that international spirit” in connecting the struggle of U.S. farmers and farm workers to their counterparts internationally. **Kathy Ozer: ¡Presente!**

# How to Participate and Collaborate with the Alliance

- To learn more, visit the Alliance's website at [usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org](http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org).
- Like our Facebook page to receive updates.
- Explore the possibility of having your organization join the Alliance and/or participate in one of the Regional Assemblies.
- Continue organizing in your community and building power at local, national and international levels.
- Connect your organization with the Alliance and other organizations dedicated to food sovereignty and food justice in the U.S. and abroad.
- Make a donation to the USFSA through our website.



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