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Food Sovereignty as an Inward Policy for Promoting Food and Nutrition Security

A Systematic Review for a Village-Level Case from Benguet, Philippines

Reymond Denver Q. Buenaseda, Julieta A. Delos Reyes, and Lady Litz M. Aquino

Food Security Program

ISSN 2619-7448 (PRINT)
ISSN 2619-7456 (ONLINE)

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UP CIDS Discussion Paper Series is published by the

University of the Philippines
Center for Integrative and Development Studies

Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni
Magsaysay Avenue, University of the Philippines
Diliman, Quezon City 1101

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ISSN 2619-7448 (Print)
ISSN 2619-7456 (Online)

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"Harvest on the move: a farmer carries freshly harvested chayote from Atok, Benguet, en route to the La Trinidad Vegetable Trading Post (LTVTP)."

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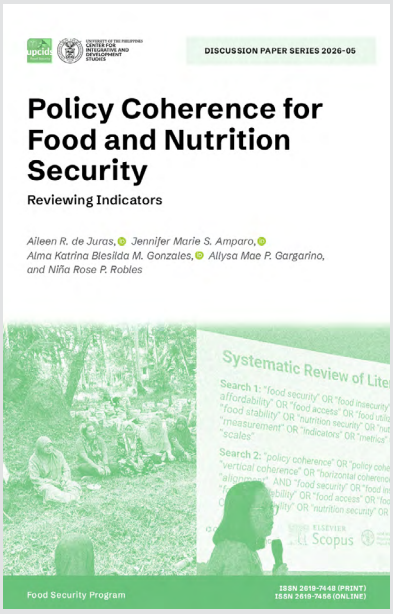

DISCUSSION PAPER

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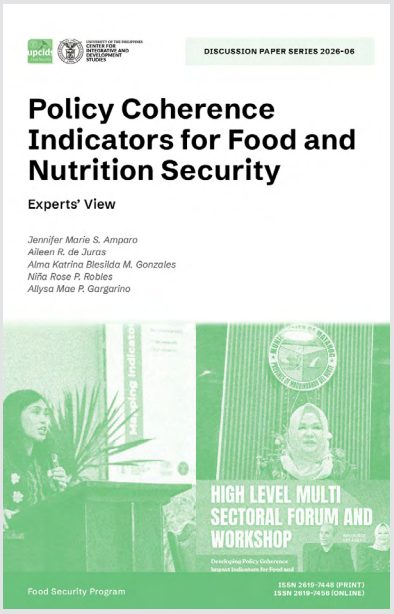

DISCUSSION PAPER

Policy Coherence Indicators for Food and Nutrition Security: Experts' View

Food Sovereignty as an Inward Policy for Promoting Food and Nutrition Security

A Systematic Review for a Village-Level Case from Benguet, Philippines

Reymond Denver Q. Buenaseda[1], Julieta A. Delos Reyes[2], and Lady Litz M. Aquino[3]

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Key Highlights

- **Policy Landscape**

  Over the past three decades, food sovereignty has evolved from a state-centered concept to a people-centered, rights-based framework. While it exists alongside food security, it is different as it focuses on participation, equity, and empowerment at the grassroots level and questions market-oriented approaches.

- **Main Argument**

  This paper argues that food sovereignty offers a transformative pathway towards ensuring resilient food system through prioritizing community control over resources and decision-making processes.

- **Methodology**

  This study utilizes a systematic literature review based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. A total of 115 publications from 1996 to 2025 were analyzed to see the conceptual evolution of food sovereignty, as well as what strategies have worked and what challenges have come up.

  We looked at 115 publications from 1996 to 2025 to see how the idea of food sovereignty has changed over time, what strategies have worked, and what problems have come up.

- **Findings**

  - Food sovereignty arises from grassroot social movements that augment, but also challenge, mainstream food security efforts.
  - Key domains include democratic control of land, seeds and natural resources; agroecological practices aimed at restoring ecological balance; and strengthening of local networks.
  - Results indicate that food sovereignty makes community resilience where institutional structures facilitate local actions.
  - Governance challenges persist, particularly the exclusion of key stakeholders from policy-making processes.

- **Conclusion**

  Food sovereignty can be seen not just an idea but also as a concrete practice with measurable impacts on sustainability and resilience. The situation in

Topdac, Atok, Benguet shows compatibility with food sovereignty, making it an interesting case for further empirical research.

- **Policy Recommendations**
  - Improve participatory governance by involving indigenous people and small-scale farmers in policy formulation
  - Encourage and institutionalize agroecological practices using appropriate programs and incentives
  - Strengthen local food systems by developing community-level networking and knowledge sharing
  - Recognize grassroots efforts as an integral part of national and local food policies
  - Promote culturally sensitive food systems suitable to local conditions and culture

Introduction

Food sovereignty outlines the rights and privileges of communities and nations to shape their own food systems. It highlights the need for access and control over agricultural resources including land, seeds and water, and the freedom to produce and consume healthy, culturally acceptable and ecologically sustainable food for all members of the community. In contrast to food security which emphasizes the availability of food through local production and importation, food sovereignty underscores the importance of who produces food and how they produced it within local communities. The strategies of the former are market-based and reinforce power structures, while the latter supports agroecological, small-scale, and culturally-based food systems.

The concept of food sovereignty has been popularized in the 1990s by the social movement La Vía Campesina, setting it as an alternative to the effects of neoliberal globalization and the dominance of transnational agribusiness. Originally, food sovereignty emerged as a political and social right in 1996 at the World Food Summit emphasizing the right of each country to produce and generate their own capacity to provide basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity (Azzariti 2021). This definition was enhanced in 2007 through the Nyéléni Declaration, shifting the focus of the concept from states to people and included ecological and cultural dimensions (Wittman et al.

2010). Food sovereignty received an important international recognition with the 2018 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP), which placed it in the context of human rights more generally, and specifically, rights of rural and indigenous communities that are marginalized by national policies in agriculture (Azzariti 2021).

Food sovereignty is both a dynamic and complex concept varying according to time, place, and circumstance. It represents the particular geography, history and politics of each place, as well as the hopes and aspirations of marginalized groups that struggle for equitable and democratic ownership of their food systems (Jarosz 2014; Wittman et al. 2010). Recognizing the dynamic and complex nature of food sovereignty, this paper aims to track the conceptual evolution of food sovereignty, synthesize food sovereignty strategies and challenges faced by local communities, and rationalize the digging deeper into Topdac, Atok, Benguet, Philippines as village-level case for adopting food sovereignty for resilient food security. The paper employs a systematic review of the existing literature using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Literature Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework and identified 115 papers from 1996 to 2005. To provide a case of food sovereignty practice in the Philippines, a survey of 73 households was conducted from September to October 2025 in Topdac—a village in the municipality of Atok which is situated in Northern Philippines.

The key strategies revolved around several domains including the democratic control of land, seeds and natural resources; agroecological practices aimed at restoring ecological balance; and strengthening of local networks, indigenous governance systems, and women-led initiatives.

Methodology

A systematic literature review (SLR) was done to examine existing literature and provide a synthesis of previous studies in a more structured and comprehensive way. An SLR is usually conducted to establish basic information that can serve as a foundation for further research on a particular topic of interest. It provides a structured and comprehensive way of collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant studies, ensuring that the review is both transparent and replicable. The review process used a modified PRISMA (Page et al. 2021) and the developed SLR framework by Carrera-Rivera et al. (2022). The review process was divided into four broad stages as follows: Stage I: Planning; Stage II: Identification and Databasing; Stage III: Database Screening and Refinement; and Stage IV: Inclusions.

Stage I: Planning

Stage I was started by specifying the scope of research using the PICOC framework, effectively directing the search strategy by identifying keywords, key phrases, and synonyms (Table 1). PICOC stands for Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, and Context. The population component included indigenous communities, local food producers, and agricultural supply chain actors such as farmers, traders, and consumers as the primary actors of the food sovereignty discussion. For the intervention, the keywords helped to capture the initiatives and policies that focus on enhancing autonomy, resilience, local capacity, cultural preservation, and self-sufficiency, such as approaches like import substitution. The comparison aspect identified the difference among indigenous and non-indigenous groups, among various environmental contexts, and among developing and developed nations. The outcomes related to food sovereignty were self-sufficiency, food access and dietary diversity, malnutrition reduction, and community resilience. Lastly, the study considered a global context taking into account that the concept of food sovereignty originated from Latin America but later spread widely across the globe.

Table 1. Identifying keywords and key phrases for SLR scoping using the PICOC Framework

Element	Description	Keywords
Population	Indigenous communities, local food producers, food supply chain actors (e.g. farmers, marketing intermediaries, consumers, traders), food systems	"indigenous communities", "food system", "agri-food supply chain actors/players"
Intervention	Initiatives or policies aimed at progressing food sovereignty, supporting autonomy, resilience, and cultural preservation	"Autonomy", "resilience", "preservation of local culture", “self-sufficiency”, “local capacity”, “import substitution”
Comparison	Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities vs. non-IP groups; food sovereignty in different environmental settings; developing vs. developed countries	"IP vs non-IP", "developing vs developed countries"
Outcome	Self-sufficiency in agricultural and food production, food sovereignty, food security,	“self-sufficiency ratio”, “food sovereignty”, "food security", "malnutrition", "dietary

Element	Description	Keywords
	improvements in food access, dietary diversity, community resilience, and malnutrition	diversity", "community resilience"
Context	Latin America (origin of the movement), ASEAN countries, Southeast Asia, and other comparable regions, with references to both Western and Asian settings	"Philippines", "ASEAN", "Latin America", "Southeast Asia"

Stage II: Identification and Databasing

After scoping, relevant studies from 1996 to 2025 were gathered from online databases and repositories using varied search engines. The year 1996 was chosen as the starting point of the review because the concept of food sovereignty was popularized by La Vía Campesina at the 1996 World Food Summit. The set of keywords and key phrases, synonyms, and Boolean operators used are shown in Table 2. Every search query contained a gist concept (e.g., food sovereignty) and corresponding variants (e.g., resilience, autonomy, self-sufficiency ratio). Search queries were expanded by using Boolean operators (OR within sets, AND across sets) to offer both coverages, in the form of inclusion of synonyms and related words, and precision, in the form of logical connectors that assured the connections between the concepts.

Table 2. Keywords and synonyms for each PICOC item

Keywords	Synonyms and Related Keywords
Food Sovereignty	Food Sovereignty, Autonomy, Resilience, Self-determination, Preservation of local culture, Self-sufficient, Local Capacity, Import Substitution"
Food and Nutrition Security	Food Security, Nutrition Security, Availability, Access, Utilization, Stability, Agency, Self-sufficiency Ratio, Dietary Diversity, Community Resilience, Malnutrition
Food System	Food System, Indigenous Communities, Agri-Food Supply Chain Actors/Players, Food Environment, Food Value Chain, Food Distribution, Food Logistics, Producers, Consumers, Marketing Intermediaries, Traders, Local Food Producers, Agricultural Actors, Farmers

Keywords	Synonyms and Related Keywords
Food Culture	Food Culture, Food Traditions, Food Heritage, Traditional Knowledge, Food Preparation Practices, Culinary Practices
Food Supply Chain	Food Supply Chain, Agri-food Supply Chain, Agricultural Chain, Food Processing
Policy and Governance	Food Policy, Regulation, Public Policy, Institutional Framework, Policy Implementation, Inward Policy, Import Substitution
Best Practice	Success Stories, Case Studies, Lessons Learned
Challenges	Challenges, Barriers, Limitations, Constraints, Issues, Risks, Problems, Difficulties
Comparison	IP vs non-IP, Developing vs Developed Countries
Context	Philippines, ASEAN, Latin America, Southeast Asia

ScienceDirect, JSTOR, and Scopus databases were chosen to provide coverage of peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. In contrast, Google Scholar was added due to its broader scope of coverage, which includes both theses and reports, as well as working papers and policy documents. Collectively, these works form the gray literature which are also equally important.

The identified studies were exported in BibTeX format from the online databases to Zotero. BibTeX captures the entire citation information (e.g., author, title, year of publication) for a work and is readable by most reference manager applications. In this study, Zotero was used as the reference manager. It automated the organization of records into folders wherein each database comprised one folder. A total of 893 records were retrieved from ScienceDirect. Most of the research was dedicated to issues and challenges (451); the next largest count delved on the connection of food sovereignty and food security (102), followed by food policy research (74). There were 684 records identified from Scopus and most searched results concentrated around case studies on food sovereignty (350) followed by studies that cut across food sovereignty, food systems and governance or policy (99). JSTOR retrieved 229 articles, with a unique focus on historical, cultural, and indigenous knowledge. The result is indicative of the specific value of JSTOR in capturing literature that places food sovereignty in the context of cultural heritage and identity and traditional knowledge structures, which are less prominent in other databases. Utilizing Google Scholar, 167 records were found including peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, policy reports and other types of gray literature, thus expanding the range of perspectives beyond those available in subscription-based databases.

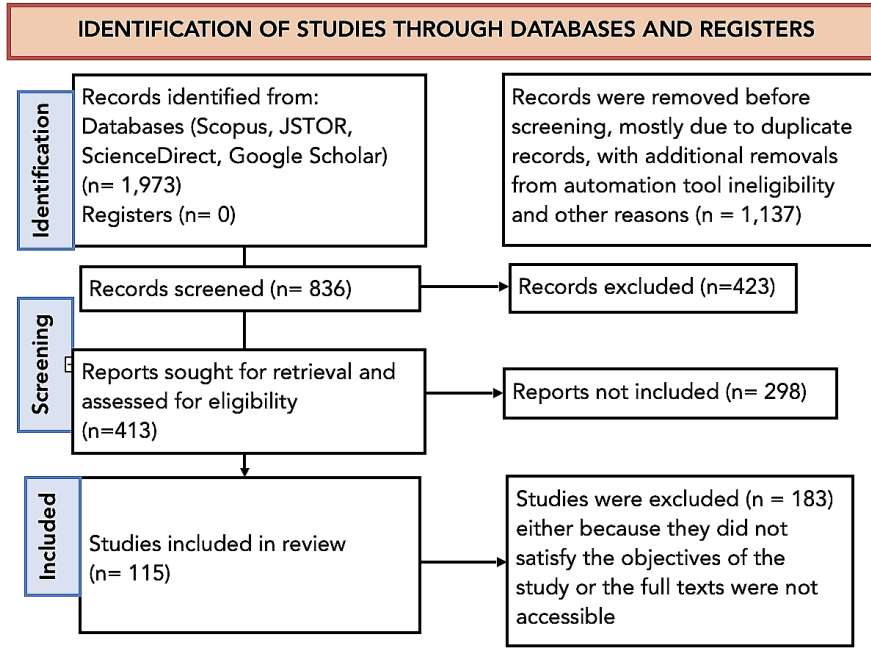

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection and Inclusion

Duplicates were removed using Zotero. This operation minimized redundancy since the same study may show up in multiple databases. As seen in Figure 1, the search yielded a total of 1,973 references and after de-duplication, the number was cut to more than half (836). There were 336 references left in ScienceDirect, 313 in Scopus, 153 in Google Scholar, and 34 in JSTOR. Substantial references were removed from ScienceDirect, Scopus, and JSTOR since scholarly outputs such as journal articles and book chapters appeared across these three databases.

Stage III: Database Screening and Refinement

After de-duplication, the first refinement process removed papers with irrelevant themes based on abstract with particular focus on research objectives. From Zotero, the 836 papers were then pooled in an Excel database for further removal of remaining duplicates, eventually trimming down the number of papers to 413.

Stage IV: Inclusion

Finally, at this stage, the review analyzed the full-text literatures and systematically recorded data using the extraction form for analysis and synthesis. The study then excluded papers wherein the authors had no institutional access and those that are considered irrelevant to the research objectives after the full text has been read. Table 3 shows that after the four stages, only 115 papers were considered for synthesis. The majority (110) of the papers considered in this systematic review are published journal articles followed by book chapters or sections (4), and a thesis (1). Nine chapters in a book or an entire book were excluded since the full texts are not accessible.

Table 3. Distribution of papers by database and stage in the SLR process

Database	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
ScienceDirect	893	336	165	16
Scopus	684	313	130	64
JSTOR	229	34	29	6
Google Scholar	167	153	89	29
Total	1,973	836	413	115

The final Excel spreadsheet includes fields such as database, title, authors, year, country, objectives of the study, study design, abstract summary, inclusion/exclusion decision, and notes to be consistent in organizing study characteristics, forming the evidence base for synthesis and analysis. If the paper is aligned with the second objective, another column is added to classify which domain of food sovereignty is widely discussed. The study adopted the domains developed by Pimbert and Claeys (2024) which integrates the food sovereignty principles discussed in the World Food Summit in 1996 and Nyéléni Declaration in 2007.

This review applied descriptive analysis using frequency tables to show the distribution of the 115 selected papers by geographic scope, research objective, and domain of food sovereignty discussed.

Results and Discussion

Consistent with expectation, food sovereignty is well-studied in the Americas primarily because the social movement concerning food sovereignty is rooted in Latin America (Table 4). The idea of food sovereignty acquired international political recognition through the La Vía Campesina movement, which defined the concept in 1996 at the World Food Summit held in Rome. Since then, at least eight countries have institutionalized food sovereignty including Brazil (2006), Nepal (2008), Venezuela (2008), Ecuador (2008), Bolivia (2009), Nicaragua (2009), Indonesia (2012), and Dominican Republic (2016).

Table 4. Distribution of 115 selected papers by geographic scope

Scope	Count	Percentage
North and South America	45	40
North America	31	27
South America	11	10
Both	3	3
Global*	34	33
Asia	14	12
Europe	10	9
Africa	10	9
Oceania	2	2
Total	115	100

Note: Global scope refers to studies which included countries coming from at least two continents.

Studies on food sovereignty started to pick up after 2010 with two conferences on food sovereignty serving as a pivotal point: September 2013 in the United States and January 2014 in the Netherlands. These conference papers, together with other papers on food sovereignty, were then published in the *Journal of Peasant Studies, Geoforum, Globalizations, Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, and *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, to name a few. As seen in Figure 2, the greatest number of papers considered in the synthesis is in 2022 with 16 papers followed by 2020 and 2021 with 13 papers each.

A total of 43 papers tackled the concept of food sovereignty, while 61 papers focused on food sovereignty strategies and challenges. There were 11 papers that bridged the concept of food sovereignty from its theoretical underpinnings

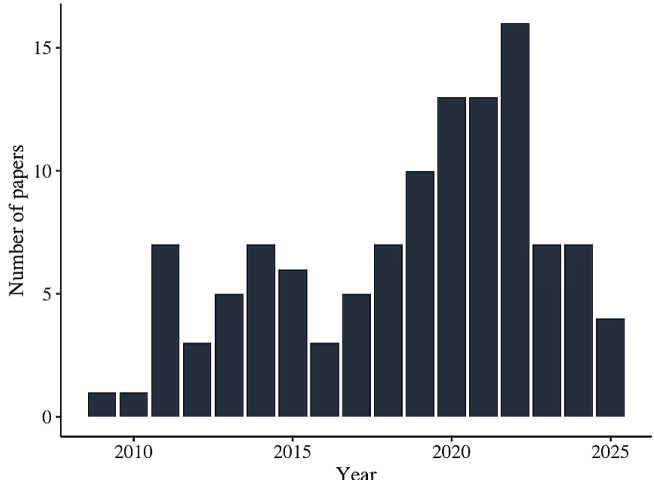

Figure 2. Distribution of 115 selected papers from 2009 to 2025

towards practice. Based on study design, most papers are case studies, policy analysis, and several systematic literature reviews.

Conceptual Evolution of Food Sovereignty

Food Sovereignty: A Movement Borne Out of Farmers' Struggles

In the 1990s, the definition of food sovereignty was mainly based on self-sufficiency at the national level and the freedom to control all aspects of food systems (Clark 2016; Pimbert and Claeys 2014). The La Vía Campesina movement was founded as a form of protest against the threats posed to the livelihoods of peasants and their food systems through the adoption of market-driven agricultural policies (Clark 2016). Food sovereignty is consistently described as a peasant-led political movement. Brenni (2015), Calvario (2017), Gürcan (2018), and Jansen (2015) have situated the origins of food sovereignty within long-standing class conflicts between small-scale farmers and dominant agribusiness actors. According to Nicholson and Borras (2023), food sovereignty emerged from the real struggle of peasant farmers and the working class through grassroots mobilization and rural resistance, not from academic theory.

With the growth of the movement, one of the significant turning points was the Nyéléni Declaration in 2007. The Nyéléni Declaration was an international meeting of farmers, indigenous people, workers, women's groups, and consumers who came together to advocate for social justice and sustainability.

The name Nyéléni pays tribute to the village in Selingue, Mali where the gathering happened. This event also produced the most widely used definition of food sovereignty which refers to the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and the right to define their own food system. It challenged the industrial food system and emphasized the idea of resisting the dependence on market forces and the importance of land rights as the basis of sovereignty (Tilzey 2017; Claeys 2014). This historical grounding provides an important backdrop for understanding food sovereignty as a movement-based concept.

In 2011 onwards, a more radical tendency within the food sovereignty movement reformulated food sovereignty as a class-based political project aimed at deep social change (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Tilzey 2017). In particular, it proposed the redistribution of power, the management of water, seeds, and land as commons, as well as the common control of the means of production. Consequently, the focus of food sovereignty has shifted from merely reforming the food system to fundamentally reshaping society by confronting issues of ownership and access inequality.

Food Sovereignty and Food Security: Do They Go Together?

As mentioned in the World Food Summit in 1996, food sovereignty is a prerequisite for genuine food security. This means that food sovereignty is a necessary condition for food security. It is argued that food security efforts need to be complemented by food sovereignty principles (Arthur 2012). While food security and food sovereignty are frequently considered separate, sometimes-conflicting concepts, empirical literature have shown that they can be reinforced in practice, especially in the case of implementation of agroecological approaches (Weiler et al. 2015; Sampson et al. 2021).

Several authors view food sovereignty as a critique of dominant food security frameworks. Rather than relying on free trade and market liberalization, food sovereignty emphasizes local control over food systems and exposes how global agrifood markets can disadvantage small-scale farmers (Pimbert 2009; Ruiz 2016; Huambachano 2019; Farfan et al, 2023). While neoliberal approaches assume that trade improves access to affordable food through specialization, food sovereignty highlights how this model weakens community authority over food and livelihoods. In this sense, food sovereignty challenges food security strategies that define hunger mainly as a problem of supply and distribution and treat food primarily as a commercial good (Jones et al. 2015; Weis 2020).

Apart from studies that see food security and food sovereignty as either synergistic or antagonistic, there is also an argument that food sovereignty is a concept broader than food security. It is beyond food security because it recognizes culturally meaningful food, governance of indigenous people, and sustainable relationships with ecosystems (Blanco et al. 2022; Ray et al. 2019; Rowe et al. 2024). According to Patel (2012), real food sovereignty exists when women have equal power to decide how food is produced and shared. Food sovereignty thus requires a gender-sensitive and socially differentiated approach (Park et al. 2015). This domain of food sovereignty will be elaborated in the discussion of food sovereignty strategies.

Food Sovereignty is Political

Food sovereignty is shaped by the state, its laws, and market governance (Trauger 2014). Food sovereignty therefore requires a strong developmental state, but it needs to redistribute the power to communities (McKay et al. 2014). As observed in the earlier discussions, food sovereignty emanates from the struggles of a community. The concept, when scaled up beyond local context, is shaped and constrained by institutional interplay and governance across levels (Leventon and Laudan 2017).

The challenge lies when the government is selective, adopting only those elements compatible with state-centric and market-oriented governance frameworks while more transformative, community-led dimensions remain marginalized (Thompson 2019). Even in countries where food sovereignty is institutionalized, implementation seems to be lacking or limited. In Nepal, food sovereignty did not translate into real policy change even if it was written into their constitution as a fundamental right (Sharma and Daugbjerg 2020). In Bolivia, programs, particularly in public school food procurement, are market-oriented and prioritize commercial competitiveness. This does not fit the way indigenous and small scale farmers produce food, which is based on subsistence, sharing, traditional knowledge, and communal organization hence, local farmers are marginalized, and food sovereignty fails to materialize at the community level (Mercado and Hjortso 2023).

Food Sovereignty as a Dynamic Process

Food sovereignty is an evolving process continuously developed by institutions, grounded on reciprocity and shared responsibility for providing food (Suhardiman et al. 2025). The concept is being refined through everyday practices rather than a fixed or predefined outcome (Gruberg Cazón 2019).

The above discussion on the conceptual evolution of food sovereignty is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Summary of the conceptual evolution of food sovereignty

Conceptual evolution of food sovereignty	Sources
Farmers' struggle as the trigger towards food sovereignty movement	Hopma and Woods (2014), Jansen (2015), Shilomboleni (2017), Nicholson and Borras (2023), Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011), Claeys (2014), Tilzey (2017)
Food sovereignty and food security in synergy	Arthur (2012), Weiler et al. (2015), Sampson et al. (2021)
Food sovereignty as opposed to food security	McMichael (2011), Gürcan (2011), Jones et al. (2015), Ruiz (2016), Huambachano (2019), Weis (2020), Farfan et al. (2023)
Food sovereignty is beyond food security	Patel (2012), Park et al. (2015), Ray et al. (2019), Blanco et al. (2022), Rowe et al. (2024), Hirth et al. (2025)
Food sovereignty is political	McKay et al. (2014), Trauger (2014), Leventon and Laudan (2017), Thompson (2019), Sharma and Daugbjerg (2020), Mercado and Hjortso (2023)
Food sovereignty is a dynamic process	Gruberg Cazón (2019), Suhardiman et al. (2025)

Food Sovereignty in Practice

Food sovereignty strategies are aimed at enhancing the local capacity of the community to be self-sufficient through the democratic control of natural resources, food production, and consumption. These initiatives are based not only on the intangible policy promises, but also on the practice of food sovereignty by showing practical and place-based actions rooted in local contexts. These strategies reflect the eight domains of food sovereignty as developed by Pimbert and Claeys (2024). These domains originate from the seven principles from the World Food Summit in 1996 and six pillars of the Nyéléni Declaration in 2007. Table 6 shows the distribution of 72 selected papers which demonstrated food sovereignty strategies. Similar to Sampson et al. (2021), the authors acknowledge that a study may refer to multiple domains and so only the principal domain is assigned to each study to avoid double counting.

It is not surprising that 28 percent of the studies dealt with the democratic control of natural resources. These studies focused on community seed banks, seed exchange, community land and ownership reclamation, and resource management in general. This is followed by studies concerning the transformation of food systems through agroecology (i.e., healing the metabolic rift).

Table 6. Distribution of 72 selected papers which tackled food sovereignty strategies

Domain	Count	Percentage
Guaranteeing rights to lands, seeds, and natural resources and control over the means of production	20	28
Healing the metabolic rift	16	22
Supporting local organizations and networks and the convergence of struggles	12	17
Democratizing governance	10	14
Achieving gender and intersectional justice	8	11
Decolonizing knowledge and research	5	7
Rethinking economics	1	1
Total	72	100

A key principle of food sovereignty is ensuring the rights to land, seed, and nature because it has a direct transformative effect on the power relations of food production and ecological management. Studies on community land ownership and land reclamation indicates that collective tenure empowers the decision-making of land use by farmers thereby limiting dispossession via land markets and reinforces the ability to have diversified and agroecological production systems that are based on local needs (Rocha and Liberato 2013; Wires and LaRose 2019). Meanwhile, farmers' control over seeds is reflected in community seed banks, seed exchange networks, and participatory breeding, which then results in increasing agrobiodiversity and supporting crops adapted to local environments (Tschersich 2021; Nishikawa and Pimbert 2022; Das and Mallick 2024; Duthie-Kannikkatt et al. 2019). When farmers retain control over the decision-making process on landscape management, biodiversity is maintained through daily management practices (Temudo 2011). These

approaches are supplemented by the indigenous ecological knowledge systems, which introduce land and resource governance to the framework of the customary rules, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and ethical relations to the ecosystems, so that the management of the resources could be culturally rooted and regenerative (Harkoma and Forbes 2020).

The second most important principle based on the number of papers which tackled food sovereignty strategies is on healing the metabolic rift. This domain ensures that agricultural production is based on sound ecological practices. Considering the number of studies, home gardens and urban farms are the most common food sovereignty practices. Home gardens and community-operated farms which exist in both rural and urban environments produce multiple vegetable varieties and fruit types, along with traditional foods which various communities use for their dietary needs. This practice results in decreased need for food purchases from markets (Boone and Taylor 2016; Mallick et al. 2024). The vacant urban spaces containing community gardens and cooperative farms enable underprivileged community members to work together in growing food while they exchange knowledge and build their power to control food distribution systems (Colson-Fearon and Versey 2022).

The practice of subsistence farming establishes food sovereignty by enabling households to grow food for self-consumption, choose crops based on household needs, rely on seasonal and local foods, and adhere to traditional diets, which indicate autonomy over food choices and culturally appropriate livelihoods (Sánchez Martínez et al. 2024). At the household level, subsistence-based food production strengthens food sovereignty by ensuring food is produced and consumed locally to fulfil their nutritional and cultural needs without having to be reliant or tied to global markets (Fontana et al. 2022). This orientation is supported by traditional agroecological practices, including crop diversification, intercropping, organic management of soils, and land rotation, which improve the soil fertility, agrobiodiversity, and production stabilization without the use of chemicals (Parraguez-Vergara et al. 2018; Shilomboleni 2017). This is further supplemented by various agroecological models, such as the concept of Zero-Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF), which focuses on the development of on-farm products instead of buying external products, thereby helping to reduce costs on farms, eliminate debts, and minimize external dependencies(Meek 2018). On a large scale, other government-backed initiatives like the development of Organoponópicos, as practiced in socialist Cuba, are also capable of helping to increase urban organic farming through nutrient management, thereby ensuring a linkage between nutrient supply to cities through natural techniques like localized food production (Gürcan 2014).

Beyond individual farms, food sovereignty is strengthened through landscape and collective agroecological strategies that align food production with respect to the environment. Agroecological networks and cooperative landscape management allow farmers to organize crop production, exchange agroecological information, and jointly manage the soil nutrient and biodiversity, thereby eliminating the necessity of using external inputs (Ceddia et al. 2024). Rainwater harvesting, mulching, and on-farm water storage, are some of the water-conserving methods to support stable food production that help in ensuring an adequate supply of water to the farm in cases of changing climate conditions and seasonal fluctuations in rainfall (Hafif 2016). Diversified agroforestry systems also enhance food sovereignty by planting trees and crops, and in some cases raise livestock to enhance soil fertility, water conservation, and biodiversity alongside growing food to serve the local population (Jacobi 2016).

Food sovereignty is also advanced by strategies that support local organizations and networks thereby reducing dependence on market-oriented food systems. Local food networks and farmers' markets establish direct interactions between producers and consumers, thereby empowering farmers to determine production decisions based on local needs (Lutz and Schachinger 2013; Lapegna and Perelmuter 2020). Reducing reliance on both agricultural inputs and commodity exchange in general enables farmers to enhance agroecology without undue commodity pressures (Wach 2021).

The three domains of food sovereignty mentioned above are reinforced by collective governance arrangements and institutional support. Food sovereignty policies and legal frameworks support small-scale producers, regulate food distribution, and prioritize domestic food provision, creating enabling environments for localized food systems (Godek 2021). An example of such a farmer organization and association is Eco Ruralis in Romania, which democratizes food systems by organizing farmers, sharing knowledge, protecting access to land and seed, and giving farmers a stronger political voice than the state (Velicu and Ogrezeanu 2021). Another example of food sovereignty in practice is the indigenous forms of governance built on customary practices. The systems control land use, seed storage, and agricultural periods and preserve food production within a system that is culturally important and ecologically viable (Huambachano 2019).

State-supported forms of collective engagement also help in food democratic governance. The concept of cooperative or collective ownership and control over farmland and state-backed systems for local food distribution arrangements, such as those found in Cuba, help in owning and controlling

farmland and facilitate the stabilization and balancing of food distribution through mechanisms such as coordinated systems (Gürcan 2014). At the level of communities, systems such as rice banking based on principles of collective decision-making and rules are found to present themselves as practical examples of democratic food governance, helping in the promotion and attainment of food availability and reduction in dependency and demand for external systems and types of food and relief or assistance (Suhardiman et al. 2025).

Gender and power relations shape food sovereignty. Policies and regulations fail to recognize women's everyday food activities, such as tending to home gardens, gathering shellfish, and processing food, despite these being crucial for household and community food systems. Turner et al. (2022) refer to these routine, everyday assertions of control as "quiet sovereignty." Gender-responsive policies seek to minimize these disparities by considering the different roles and constraints of women and making possible more equitable participation in food governance (Ghale et al. 2018). Women- and indigenous-led initiatives, especially in agroforestry and community food systems, illustrate that key leading voices of women strengthen agroecological practices, and at the same time support livelihoods and traditional food systems of local communities (Santafe-Troncoso and Loring 2021; Stein and Carter 2018). Feminist and participatory agroecology approaches resist top-down, expert-driven models of development by valuing women, lived knowledge, and collective capacity to create change (Bezner Kerr et al. 2019).

Finally, food sovereignty is maintained through local networks and shared knowledge while developing alternative food systems that unite different social and political movements. The combination of grassroots food programs with producer cooperatives and small-scale fisheries and indigenous seed movements establishes food production connections to broader social justice efforts which protect cultural food traditions and safeguard the environment (Tursunova et al. 2020; Guell et al. 2022; Raja et al. 2023; Dower and Gaddis 2021; Katikiro and Mahenge 2022; Kim 2022). The decolonization process of knowledge involves critical food systems education and agroecology training, as well as participatory research and intergenerational learning, which empowers communities to gain more decision-making power while educational programs meet the specific needs of local communities (Meek 2018; Rivera-Ferre et al. 2021; Gruberg Cazón 2019; Ibarra et al. 2023; Johnston and Spring 2021). As for Nugent et al. (2022), Stella et al. (2019), and Steckley (2024), initiatives that integrate food and health considerations with alternative food planning approaches contest dominant development paradigms by redefining success to include equity, cultural relevance, ecological sustainability, and local self-determination.

Table 7. Domains of food sovereignty and corresponding strategies identified in the literature

Domain of Food Sovereignty	Strategy	Sources
Guaranteeing rights to lands, seeds and natural resources	Community land ownership and reclamation	Rocha and Liberato (2013); Wires and LaRose (2019)
	Seed commons (community seed banks, seed exchange, participatory breeding)	Tschersich (2021); Nishikawa and Pimbert (2022); Das and Mallick (2024); Duthie-Kannikkatt et al. (2019)
	Farmer-led agrobiodiversity management	Temudo (2011)
	Indigenous ecological knowledge in land and resource management	Harkoma and Forbes (2020)
Healing the metabolic rift	Home gardens and community-run urban farms	Boone and Taylor (2016); Mallick et al. (2024); Colson-Fearon and Versey (2022); Kesselman (2015)
	Subsistence-oriented food production for self-consumption	Fontana et al. (2022); Sánchez Martínez et al. (2024)
	Traditional agroecological practices (crop diversification, intercropping, organic soil fertility, land rotation)	Parraguez-Vergara et al. (2018); Shilomboleni (2017)
	Zero-Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF)	Meek (2018)
	State-supported agroecology and urban organic farming (organopónicos)	Gürcan (2014)
	Agroecological networks and cooperative landscape management	Ceddia et al. (2024)
	Water-conserving agroecological practices	Hafif (2016)
	Diversified agroforestry systems	Jacobi (2016)
Supporting local organizations	Grassroots community food programs (gardens, produce boxes, farmers' markets, farm trips)	Tursunova et al. (2020); Guell et al. (2022); Raja et al. (2023)

Domain of Food Sovereignty	Strategy	Sources
and networks and the convergence of struggles	Producer cooperatives as Indigenous food sovereignty strategy	Dower and Gaddis (2021)
	Collective action in small-scale fisheries	Katikiro and Mahenge (2022)
	Indigenous seed movements and community-based seed governance	Kim (2022)
Democratizing governance	Food sovereignty–oriented public policies and legal frameworks	Godek (2021)
	Farmer organizations and peasant associations	Velicu and Ogrezeanu (2021)
	Indigenous land-based governance systems	Huambachano (2019)
	Cooperative land ownership and state-regulated local food distribution	Gürcan (2014)
	Community-managed rice banks	Suhardiman et al. (2025)
Achieving gender and intersectional justice	Women's everyday food-sovereignty practices	Turner et al. (2022)
	Gender-responsive food systems and policy frameworks	Ghale et al. (2018)
	Indigenous women-led agroforestry and food initiatives (Chakra Mamas)	Santafe-Troncoso & Loring (2021)
	Women-led community food systems and gardens	Stein et al. (2018)
	Feminist and participatory agroecology challenging technocratic development	Bezner Kerr et al. (2019)
Decolonizing knowledge and research	Critical Food Systems Education (CFSE)	Meek (2018)
	Agroecological education for food sovereignty	Rivera-Ferre et al. (2021)
	Transdisciplinary and participatory research cycles	Gruberg Cazón (2019); Ibarra et al. (2023)
	Peer-to-peer and intergenerational learning (learning circles)	Johnston and Spring (2021); McEachern et al. (2022); Young et al. (2024)

Domain of Food Sovereignty	Strategy	Sources
	Produce-prescription and food–health programs	Nugent et al. (2022); Shostak et al. (2025)
Rethinking economics	Local food networks and farmers' markets (direct producer–consumer relations)	Lutz and Schachinger (2013); Lapegna and Perelmuter (2020)
	Reducing market dependency for both agricultural inputs and outputs	Wach (2021)
Reinventing discourses on modernity	Alternative food planning tools and food sovereignty assessments	Stella et al. (2019); Steckley (2024)

Governance-related Barriers to Food Sovereignty

One of the major challenges identified in the literature is weak governance in terms of rights to land, seeds, or natural resources. This limits communities over food production control (Calvario 2017). When people do not have secure access to land, they are restricted from one of their main sources to earn a living. The concentration of land ownership leads to continued increase of inequality and exclusion. The current state and market systems tend to prioritize large-scale agriculture and industries, pushing aside small farmers and indigenous communities resulting in food production controlled by outside entities and less by the local communities that rely on it (McMichael 2011; Rotz et al. 2023).

These governance failures are intensified by climate change and environmental pressures, especially for indigenous and tribal groups living in protected or marginal areas (Mallick et al. 2024). Policies often restrict community use of natural resources without offering alternatives to aid them in adapting to these conditions, increasing dependence instead of self-reliance. While the benefits of agroecology as a solution are explained, its success also depends on how institutions empower these groups to make decisions in their farming practices (McMichael 2011; Rotz et al. 2023; Chaifetz and Jagger 2014).

According to Godek (2021), indigenous peoples too are often not included in decisions regarding agri-food policy-making, perpetuating top-down measures that are irrelevant to local context. Governance problems are also evident in extractive development models that damage indigenous food systems. Blanco et al. (2022) argue that governance issues are evident in extractive activities and

development models that damage indigenous food systems, such as mining, contaminating land and water. Meanwhile Gruberg Cazon (2019) finds that food sovereignty efforts also fail when imposed by institutions rather than co-developed with communities, reducing their legitimacy and disregarding local knowledge. Ceddia et al. (2024) further argue that profit-driven food systems generate long-term dependency rather than sustainability for farmers. These challenges are compounded by water scarcity and weak resource management systems that reduce production capacity (Hafif 2016), as well as by limited policy support that keeps agroforestry initiatives small-scale and fragmented (Jacobi 2016). As Merritt et al. (2024) conclude, market-based approaches often conflict with food sovereignty principles by prioritizing profit over rights and participation, thereby undermining social and economic justice.

Table 8. Challenges to Food Sovereignty

Food Sovereignty Challenges	Sources
Lack of secure rights to land, seeds, and natural resources; land concentration and unequal access to land	Calvario (2017)
High vulnerability of tribal livelihoods to climate change and environmental stress in protected or marginal areas	Mallick et al. (2024)
Global food systems and free trade policies reduce local control over food production and markets	McMichael (2011); Rotz et al. (2023); Chaifetz and Jagger (2014)
Indigenous communities are excluded from agri-food policy and program decision-making	Godek (2021)
Contamination and loss of indigenous food systems due to mining and extractive activities	Blanco et al. (2022)
Food sovereignty initiatives fail when imposed by institutions rather than co-created with communities	Gruberg Cazón (2019)
Profit-driven food systems reduce farmers' independence and long-term sustainability	Ceddia et al. (2024)
Water scarcity and weak resource management limit agricultural production and resilience	Hafif (2016)
Agroforestry initiatives remain small-scale and fragmented due to limited policy and market support	Jacobi (2016)
Market-based strategies conflict with food sovereignty principles and undermine social and economic justice	Merritt et al. (2024)

Topdac Community: A Possible Village-Level Food Sovereignty Case

Capitalizing on the learnings from the conducted SLR, the following discussions provide why a deeper evaluation of Barangay Topdac, Atok, Benguet as an area for promoting food sovereignty is seen as necessary.

Barangay Topdac is a village located in Atok, an upland municipality in Benguet, Philippines. A survey was conducted asking qualitative questions on the strategies adapted by households for food security in the said community. Responses were examined to check whether these strategies align or are consistent with those in the previous studies covered by the SLR.

Strategies identified by the systematic review included crop diversification, less reliance on agro-chemicals, and small-scale food production at the household level (e.g., home gardens). These were also evident in Barangay Topdac, as can be gleaned in Figure 3. Peer learning among other farmers was the most mentioned source of information among the 54 producers (33.33 percent), then proper use of fertilizers and/or pesticides (20.29 percent), and then the use of social media such as YouTube (15.94 percent). The use of organic farming was 13.04 percent, and training with technicians and feed suppliers was 8.70 percent. Minimal reporting was for crop rotation and/or intercropping (4.35 percent), home gardening (1.45 percent), and traditional media, including television and radio (2.90 percent) (Table 9).

On the consumption side, respondents associated food produced by local farmers with reduced chemical use and perceived health benefits. All 11 consumer-respondents mentioned the lack of or little use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and preservatives and referred to locally produced food as "natural and organic." Five out of eleven consumer-respondents are also producers, practicing home gardening and therefore have firsthand experience on food production and on directly managing chemical inputs on their farms. Their perceptions on local food being healthier and less reliant on chemicals is shaped by their own farming practices. These perceptions increase their willingness to support the local produce, which strengthens local food networks and organic and local food preferences.

Despite the above practices, food sovereignty is not a direct institutional goal in Barangay Topdac. The community still depends on food supplied by outside sources, which implies that the strategies that would be in line with food

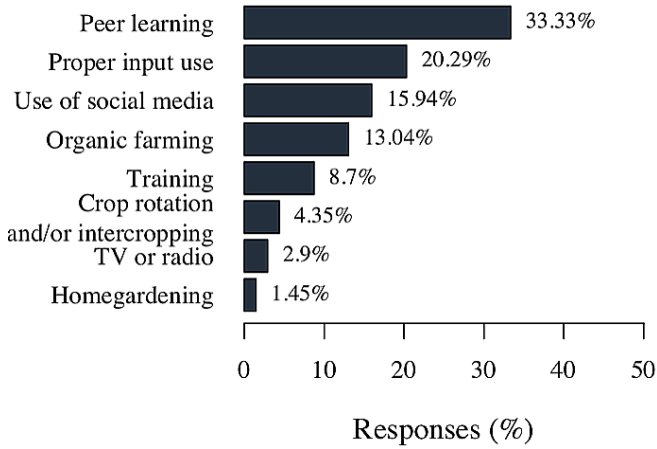

Figure 3. Food sovereignty-related practices and knowledge sources among 54 farmer-respondents in Barangay Topdac, Atok, Benguet

sovereignty are still not framed institutionally. However, the observed activities of the producers and consumers demonstrate functional alignment with the principles of food sovereignty that are outlined in the existing literature. This consistency between SLR-derived themes and field observations in Topdac can serve as an inspiration how food sovereignty can be built naturally out of ordinary farming and consumption activities, without the explicit policy support.

Table 9. Role and farming practices among 11 consumer-respondents in Barangay Topdac, Atok, Benguet

Category	Subcategory	Count	%
Role	Consumer–Producer (home gardening)	5	45
	Consumer only	6	55
Practice	Practicing organic farming	2	18
	Not practicing organic farming	9	82

Conclusion

Bibliometric patterns show that while food sovereignty is well researched globally, it remains unevenly distributed across regions, with strong concentrations in Latin America, North America, and Europe and comparatively few studies in Southeast Asia, Africa, and small island contexts.

Although a substantial amount of literature exists, access to books or book chapters as well as journal articles related to food sovereignty remains a challenge. While some community-based and institutional reports exist, they are not translated in English, masking important details that can perhaps improve proper contextualization of food sovereignty.

Nevertheless, the findings of the systematic literature review reveal that food sovereignty has transformed from a state-directed conception of national self-sufficiency to a people-centered approach based on rights, ecological sustainability, and democratic control over food systems. It is conceptualized in the literature both as a political project based in farmers' and indigenous struggles and a practicable tool for enhancing food and nutrition security through localized food systems. Food sovereignty approaches are at household, community, and institutional levels and include home gardens and urban farms, as well as subsistence-oriented and agroecological practices, seed commons, community land governance, cooperative marketing systems, and indigenous- and women-led initiatives. Food sovereignty serves as a strategy that prioritizes local food production, culturally appropriate food options, reduced reliance on unstable global markets, promoting diversity in diets, and community resilience. However, significant challenges persist, mostly stemming from governance. Weak protection of land, seed, and resource rights, marginal inclusion of indigenous peoples and small-scale producers in policymaking, extractive development models, profit-driven food systems, and market-oriented policy frameworks continue to constrain community control of food systems.

The application of these insights to the case of Barangay Topdac in Atok reveals functional alignment between theory and practice. Local producers and consumers already practice food sovereignty-related strategies such as reduced use of chemicals, small-scale household food production and knowledge exchange via peer learning and informal networks. However, these practices are not institutionally framed as food sovereignty policies and the community is still somewhat dependent on external food sources. This implies that food sovereignty in Topdac is currently an emergent and practice-based process, not a formal development goal.

On a policy level, it is important to reinforce democratic food governance. Access to land and the right to seeds, a more participatory approach towards crafting of food sovereignty policies, and agroecological approaches that support the actualization of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty signifies a dynamic and context-specific path to food and nutrition security, and further research is needed to evaluate long-term nutritional outcomes and

identify governance reforms that best enable food systems that are anchored in place, just, and sustainable. Given the learnings from the SLR and the still limited information initially gathered in Topdac, Atok, Benguet, it is highly recommended that a more thorough and ground-based assessment for migrating to food sovereignty be performed in this upland barangay.

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