

# Food Sovereignty

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**FOOD SOVEREIGNTY** is variably defined by different people, communities, and organizations, with a strong focus on localizing food systems where food providers have control over their resources and put into question issues of control and social justice.<sup>6</sup> With grassroots origins embedded in La Via Campesina in the 1990s,<sup>1,2</sup> food sovereignty was defined at the Declaration of Nyeleni in 2007 by over 500 indigenous people, farmers, and landless people from over 80 countries as the “right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”<sup>3</sup> White Earth tribal member and writer Winona LaDuke defines food sovereignty as “an affirmation of who we are as indigenous peoples and a way, one of the most surefooted ways, to restore our relationship with the world around us.”<sup>5</sup>

## KEY POINTS

1. **Food sovereignty is about upholding the basic human right to culturally appropriate food** and advocating for people to determine where their food comes from and how it is procured and produced.
2. **Food sovereignty can support sustainability** by localizing food systems as well as supporting ecologically sound agriculture, livelihoods, food justice, empowerment, equity, and access to healthy and culturally desirable foods.
3. **In the United States**, food sovereignty is especially relevant to Native American tribal nations whose traditional food systems were disrupted or lost during and after European colonization.
4. **Communities around the world**, including Native American tribal nations, are working hard to achieve food sovereignty.

Artwork by Sashay Camel



## HOW FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IS MEASURED

There are numerous environmental, economic, and social indicators for measuring food sovereignty that overlap with many food system indicators such as ecological knowledge, perceptions of empowerment, power dynamics, access and ownership of resources, food security, food access, and health outcomes. Food sovereignty is variably measured by each community in ways that are culturally relevant and make sense to them.

## WHY FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN THE FOOD SYSTEM IS IMPORTANT

Food sovereignty makes an important contribution to the development of sustainable food systems, given its focus on the environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability.<sup>3</sup> Environmentally, food sovereignty supports agroecological principles of procuring and cultivating food in ways that support biodiversity and healthy ecosystems, such as through traditional ecological knowledge and management. Economically, food sovereignty supports localizing food

systems and livelihoods of smallholder farmers by keeping profits local. Socially, food sovereignty supports traditional ecological knowledge involved in food production. Food sovereignty also supports ‘food justice’, a movement to address injustices disproportionately affecting people based on class and race,<sup>4</sup> which can include the resistance of food aid and reduction of reliance on external food and seed resources. Food sovereignty seeks to empower small and subsistence farmers along with other underrepresented stakeholders in the food system including farm workers, women, and children. As a movement, food sovereignty tries to reclaim local power in the food system by building unity and solidarity through social relationships and sharing of local knowledge.

In the United States, the food sovereignty movement is especially relevant to Native American tribal nations, that have been systematically marginalized and largely stripped of their traditional food systems. Native American communities around the country are taking action to reclaim food sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> Among its food sovereignty actions, the Blackfeet Nation is working to reintroduce bison, develop a beef and bison processing facility, and increase the presence of local and traditional foods. These community-level efforts have the power to economically revitalize the Blackfeet Nation while also improving human health and transitioning agricultural practices to become more environmentally sound.

Enterprises can also take steps to strengthen food sovereignty. For example, the Sioux Chef team led by Chef Sean Sherman and Executive Director Dana Thompson seek to revitalize Native American Cuisine and decolonize the food system by re-establishing Native foodways through training, food service, research and development, and outreach.<sup>8</sup> Native American Natural Foods, LLC is another Native American food enterprise dedicated to supporting food sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> Their main product, the Tanka Bar made of prairie-raised bison, incorporates traditional values of the Oglala Lakotas on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, including a deep commitment to helping the People, the Buffalo and Mother Earth. The production of Tanka Bars aligns with Native American ancestral knowledge while providing an option to make a healthy food choice that provides economic benefits to the Pine Ridge community.

## CONSUMER PRACTICES TO SUPPORT FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

1. **Support local agricultural and food businesses.** Local products help support the economy of your community and keep purchasing power within the community.
2. **Cultivate, harvest, and process your own food.** This can be as simple or complex as you want. It serves to put you in control of what food you are eating and how it is produced.
3. **Explore traditional foods of your culture or where you live.** Try preparing a traditional meal and learning why it is culturally important.
4. **Choose to buy from historically marginalized groups** such as Native-owned companies that are contributing to their community’s food sovereignty, particularly when buying traditional foods.

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