



A CASE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

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www.sustainableharvest.org/blog

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Elliott is pictured here with SHI participant farmer Reinila Guerra during his visit to the community of La Estancia, Panama in August 2015.

Achieving food sovereignty for the nearly [500 million smallholder farming families](#) around the world is key to establishing a just, resilient, and healthy future for this planet. To adequately confront the devastating and rapidly accelerating effects of the climate crisis, we must break free from the confines of the current food system, dominated largely by the interests and cheap commodities of a mammoth-sized conventional agriculture industry, and embrace pro-environment and pro-people solutions.

Food Sovereignty, What's That?

Food sovereignty is a complex, multi-disciplinary concept, but its importance is straightforward. [La Via Campesina](#), an international peasant's movement, originally coined the term at the 1996 World Food Summit as a critique of the crippling effects of neoliberal policies on small-scale farmers around the world at the time.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

[-La Via Campesina](#)



“Food sovereignty” asks us to reflect on how the more ubiquitous term, food security, falls short. In its simplest terms, food security refers narrowly to an individual’s direct access to food within the current food system. By contrast, food sovereignty recognizes access to healthy food as a human right. That right implies that people are not mere consumers of food provided by external forces but rather, active participants and stakeholders in the food they grow, consume, and sell. Food sovereignty demands that individuals, communities, and regions should be the ones making decisions about how to engage and nourish their bodies within their local food system. It’s an entirely different worldview from the current norm.

Who are Smallholder Farmers?

Smallholder farmers produce an astonishing 80% of the food consumed on the planet and smallholder farms (often called family farms), broadly defined by the United Nations Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) as a land size of two hectares or less, represent [nearly 80%](#) of the world’s farms.

Although these farms play an integral role on the global agriculture scene, smallholder families are generally impoverished and disadvantaged, especially in terms of access to markets, healthcare, education, infrastructure, and utilities. Adding to this, smallholder farmers often live precariously on the front lines of climate change, where the growing number of extreme and significant weather events take a disproportionately disastrous toll on the local environment and, in turn, farmers’ livelihoods.



Pedro Justino from the community of La Pedregosa, Panama is one of 500 million smallholder farmers across the world. This photo of his organic garden was taken after nearly five years of partnering with SHI

Increasingly, however, experts have come to recognize that smallholder farmers hold the key to creating a just and sustainable food system. A [report](#) from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) casts light on this important transformation, “with their immense collective experience and intimate knowledge of local conditions, smallholders hold many of the practical solutions that can help place agriculture on a more sustainable and equitable footing.” Achieving food sovereignty is at the root of these solutions.

Throughout my time at Sustainable Harvest International (SHI), I have had the enormous privilege of sharing innumerable meals and cups of coffee with farmers and their families throughout Central America. Time and again, I’ve heard farmers describe their transformational journeys toward achieving food sovereignty. During my most recent visit



to the central Province of Coclé, Panama in February of 2020, before the onset of the global pandemic, I had the opportunity to visit with several families currently participating in Sustainable Harvest International's multi-year, five-phase [regenerative agriculture extension program](#). Since there is no better way to understand the importance of food sovereignty than to hear from farmers themselves, let me share the stories of just two individuals I visited during that trip.

Feliciano's Backyard Food Market

Feliciano Rodriguez, from the small community of La Candelaria, is a gentle man that I'd visited many times before this. He's the elder patriarch of a large family. On the morning of



Feliciano Rodriguez in his organic garden in La Candelaria, Panama.

the day I visited, Feliciano had graduated from SHI's program. His smile was big and infectious as usual that afternoon. As we slowly walked through the cultivated plot of land behind his house, we talked about his recent accomplishment of completing the program and the changes he's seen on his land.

We stopped for a moment; I took in my surroundings. What was once an area of tall weeds and scrub brush now was a well-organized series of vibrant, organic vegetable gardens, a simple greenhouse, and a small fishpond. I counted no less than 15 different crops. Feliciano

acknowledged with pride how he'd transformed his land, pointing to the chili peppers in front of us, and all the way to the last row of yuca in the back of his property. Here was everything his family needed throughout the year to sustain themselves. It wasn't, however, always this way. He explained that he and his family no longer need the costly trip to the market to purchase everything beyond the few staples he always grew. Nor are they limited to consuming only what's available in stores that often sell products that come from outside the country. The Rodriguez family has created their own produce market in their own backyard. More importantly, Feliciano is able to grow exactly what his family wants, and what they decide is best for the health of their family and their environment.

Calixto's New Path Forward

Not long before my visit to Calixto Hernandez's farm, the community of Perocabé had just begun their multi-year partnership with SHI. On a short walk up a steep hill from his home, Calixto showed me the small piece of land he owns. His father tagged along in support, about ten feet behind. Standing in the middle of his sloped, nearly barren field, he explained to me why he decided to join SHI's program and what his new plans were for his family's tired plot of land. He said he wanted to try something new, break away from the expensive, unhealthy, and confining reliance on agro-chemicals that he knows all too well. He wants something more for his family and the environment around them. He wants diverse and healthy crops and to build back the forests. He and his father had worked the



land the same way for years and were tired of dwindling yields, tired of feeling trapped in a never-ending poverty cycle. They were, simply, exhausted.

The young plantain plant growing in fresh organic compost next to where he stood that hot morning, and the other ones that dotted the hillside, along with a mix of fruit trees, hardwoods, and root vegetables like yuca, were all recently transplanted. It was the first time this field saw something other than a basic grain like corn or beans, and Calixto was cautiously optimistic, quietly excited – as if he didn't want to outwardly express his hope of a new future for fear of jinxing it. What we were looking at that day, however, was more than just the start of an agro-forestry system. It was a significant shift in how this land had been cared for and had provided sustenance to his family in the past. It represents a new pathway forward for Calixto and his family toward achieving food sovereignty. The decision to make this change was his and his family's. They're enacting a plan for a healthier and more diverse diet that'll use local materials and organic ingredients for compost, and seeds from the community that are rooted in local knowledge, culture, and tradition. Calixto's new sense of agency and control was palpable that morning.



Calixto Hernandez has big plans to transform his family's plot of land by partnering with SHI. Photo taken in Porecabé, Panama in February 2020.

These farmers' experiences reflect the realities of so many others around the world. While it's difficult to witness the many injustices hampering a hardworking family's right to choose the food they consume, I'm humbled and hopeful when I see how families are now exercising their right to produce and consume the healthy and nutritious food they want.

SHI + Food Sovereignty

Democratic participation in local food systems is the necessary foundation for achieving food sovereignty. SHI is dedicated to working with farmers and their families so they can take back control over how they consume and produce food. By choosing to participate in SHI's program, partnering families in [Belize, Honduras, or Panama](#) have already embarked on this process.

Food Sovereignty is a key tenet of SHI's structured approach and one of [five core impact areas](#). Through SHI facilitated one-on-one trainings, group workshops, and farmer-farmer visits, participant families choose to implement what is right for them and their land. This can look like many things: establishing a new vegetable garden, making organic composts and fertilizers with local materials, establishing an integrated agroforestry system learning to collect and propagate native seeds, among many other activities promoting



inclusivity in one's local food system. These projects, implemented early on in partnership, set the groundwork for lasting, positive impacts that bring about change for generations to come.

Building Resiliency

The hopeful stories of Feliciano and Calixto aren't isolated, but rather two of many throughout SHI's history and around the world. More must be done, though, if we truly believe in a more just future for this generation and all those to follow. The global pandemic, along with the continuous barrage of extreme weather events related to climate crisis, exposes the vulnerabilities and inequities in our current food systems. Food sovereignty is the way to achieve real resilience in communities: giving a sense of agency over people's future and hope for the viability of their land. In uncertain times such as these, especially for those living at the front lines of the climate crisis in the Global South, this matters more now than ever.

[Will you support our work in promoting food sovereignty and building resilient communities?](#)