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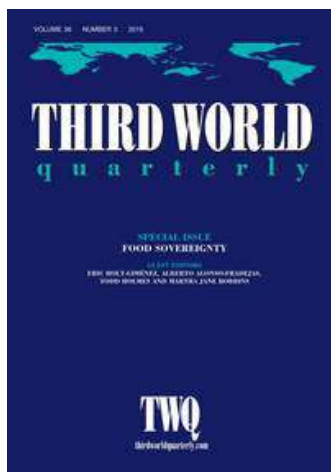
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Food sovereignty, food security and fair trade: the case of an influential Nicaraguan smallholder cooperative

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The relationships among trade, food sovereignty and food security are underexplored. I conducted qualitative research with an influential cooperative to identify lessons that food sovereignty (FS) scholars could learn from fair trade and food security, and explore linkages among these projects. First, most co-op leaders and farmers view these projects as complementary, not contradictory. Second, state-led agrarian reforms and co-ops increase access to land, markets, water, forests and pasture, which have reduced – but not eliminated – seasonal hunger. Third, these diversified fair trade coffee-exporting smallholders could be part of a FS agenda. However, the split in fair trade suggests that only specific versions of fair trade are compatible with FS. Fourth, capable cooperatives can enhance fair trade and FS goals, and food security outcomes. Fifth, organised smallholders resisting the fair trade split could learn from the FS social movement's strategies. Food insecurity remains a persistent challenge to both approaches.

Keywords: agrarian change; organic coffee; sustainable food systems; common property; Central America; empowerment

Introduction

Two recent conferences analysed the rise of food sovereignty and assessed the implications of this evolving concept, practice and social movement. The definition offered at a Yale University conference holds that food sovereignty is 'the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food systems, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecological ways in and near their territory'.¹ The food sovereignty social movement (FSM) agenda is expansive and changing. It prioritises land and water access, sustainable peasant agriculture, biodiversity, justice, gender equity, participatory democratic governance, and rural and indigenous peoples' collective human rights.² The FSM works against land-grabbing and centralised corporate

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and state control of the dominant industrial food systems. Many early FSM statements contrasted food sovereignty with food security, and promoted the production of food crops and sales to local markets, often arguing against the international commodities trade.³ Several recent publications question the dichotomies of food sovereignty (FS) vs security and food sovereignty vs international trade.⁴ In summary, increased academic attention to FS has launched a generative dialogue with social movement leaders and highlighted the need for additional field research.

The conceptual and empirical relationships among fair trade, food sovereignty and food security are underexplored. In this paper I contribute to bridging this gap through a case study focused on the experiences of a smallholder fair trade coffee-exporting cooperative in northern Nicaragua's highlands. My aim is to explore what food sovereignty scholars and advocates could learn from an analysis of the governance debates in the fair trade system, the case study of an influential smallholder co-op, and potential linkages among these projects. The paper is organised around the following research questions: (1) Which institutional changes do a community of smallholders identify as generating the most significant influences on their autonomy and food security? (2) How have smallholders and cooperative staff members interpreted and practised fair trade, food sovereignty and food security? (3) What strategies did an influential fair trade cooperative employ to navigate the recent split between Fair Trade USA and Fairtrade International? (4) In this broader historical context, how significant are links to these contested global fair trade networks for efforts to achieve food security and food sovereignty?

The paper argues that the juxtaposition of fair trade, food security and food sovereignty as competing terms is more perplexing than helpful to policy dialogue on questions of farmer empowerment, hunger alleviation and agricultural sustainability in the global food system. Instead of analysing these terms as rival categories, I explore a relational interpretation and practice by analysing the case of a cooperative that must simultaneously navigate cleavages in the governance of the global fair trade system as well as attend to farmer demands for food security and sustainable livelihoods. In response to these questions, I develop the case study and then discuss lessons learned.

The question of trade in food sovereignty

In 2014 Burnett and Murphy published an important article analysing the ambiguous position that global trade holds in the food sovereignty agenda. After pointing out that 'trade remains important to the realization of the livelihoods of small-scale producers, including peasants active in the Food Sovereignty movement, [and that] it also matters for food security', they argue for the development of a more pro-international trade FSM strategy.⁵ Although the FSM claims to work against a free trade system they characterise as dominated monopolistic corporate power, global commodity systems and agricultural dumping, less is said about the entangled relationships connecting global commodity systems and incipient food sovereignty alternatives in everyday practice.⁶ The Nyéléni Declaration (2007) includes a short segment about trade, stating: 'Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as

well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition'.⁷ Recent statements from FSM organisations have affirmed the importance of market access for smallholders and women, lobbied against multilateral trade agreements under negotiation (eg the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), and demanded changes in global trade policy to support food sovereignty, sustainable peasant agriculture and agrarian reform as the way to eradicate hunger.⁸

The FSM will continue engaging international trade debates but the strategic direction appears to be undecided. Burnett and Murphy's provocative suggestion that the World Trade Organization (WTO) and not the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is the appropriate forum for this strategic engagement is beyond the scope of this paper. If the FSM chooses to engage global trade negotiations more directly, it will probably push national governments to use the WTO or FAO as a forum to support agreements similar to the recently announced US–India agreement at the WTO, which allows countries to maintain national food reserves for food security purposes.⁹ This plan could influence the effectiveness of government-led attempts to address price volatility and the food security of millions (possibly tens of millions). More research is needed to understand how this type of national government-led food sovereignty strategy interacts with the community-based and civil society-led approaches to construct FS from the bottom up. This article complements Burnett and Murphy's global food policy analysis and advances the debate with nuanced producer and agrarian civil society perspectives. For example, their proposition that the FSM agenda is broadly consistent with fair trade does not clearly distinguish between the different versions of fair trade.¹⁰

Free trade vs fair trade

Like food sovereignty, fair trade originally emerged as a response to the exploits of the global free trade system. In contrast to FS, pioneering fair traders did not eschew global trade but sought to develop fairer North–South partnerships that enhanced market access and paid better prices to marginalised smallholder and artisans. Today scholars conceptualise fair trade in different ways, including as an ethical consumer marketplace linked to rural development projects, an ineffective neoliberal fantasy, and as an alternative food system working 'in and against' the dominant commodities market.¹¹ The globally accepted definition states that fair trade is a trading partnership based on dialogue, transparency and respect that seeks greater equity in international trade; it claims to prioritise smallholder and worker empowerment and requires that traders pay minimum prices and social development premiums to producers who meet established standards.¹² Historically fair trade was about both reforming free trade and eventually replacing it with an 'alternative' fairer system. The creation of a third-party certified market became the primary avenue for this work. Certified Fairtrade coffee is the mainstay of the international network of fair trade labelling organisations that have expanded rapidly since the development of a product-based certification approach in 1988. Fairtrade International now reports total retail sales for all products of US\$7.3 billion, and 670,000 coffee smallholders affiliated with co-ops certified to export into these markets. Fair trade coffee accounts for about 3% of the global coffee industry.¹³

Questions about the governance of fair trade have evolved over the past 20 years, often in response to pragmatic debates about how to increase producer access through market growth, impact and inclusion. The early and persistent question asks: what are the impacts of fair trade among participating farmers?¹⁴ Later, researchers questioned how fair trade could scale up without compromising its core values.¹⁵ As larger corporations started to sell certified Fairtrade products, the markets expanded (now topping 1.4 million producers and workers) and academics increased their scrutiny of Fairtrade governance.¹⁶ These governance questions became increasingly pressing when Fair Trade USA split from Fairtrade International.

'Big tent' Fairtrade

In the previous two decades smallholder farmers and food justice advocates collectivised power and used fair trade in an attempt to build a fairer and more sustainable market. Initially this market growth represented a tangible alternative to the low prices paid to producers in the anonymous commodity markets. Fair trade coffee, chocolate and other foods quickly became available as certifiers developed criteria that allowed mainstream firms, such as Starbucks and Nestlé, to sell 'Fairtrade'. In the early 2000s the low international prices in the coffee commodity markets made the price floor offered by certified Fairtrade markets a tangible, though limited, alternative model. The collaborative work of smallholders, advocates, cooperatives and businesses to launch and expand a global fair trade system sought to transform unfair trade relationships into 'a different kind of market', which empowers small-scale farmers, workers and consumers.¹⁷

From 2007 to 2011 tensions in the 'big tent' version of Fairtrade remained elevated as high commercial coffee prices coincided with declining economic returns for producers' sales through Fairtrade. At the same time Fairtrade's product quality requirements increased. A number of debates erupted, concerning the floor price, price premiums paid to farmer organisations, the possible inclusion of large coffee plantations, and the degree of power that organised farmers should have in governing the system (ie how many seats, if any, should representative smallholder organisations have on Fairtrade International's board of directors). There were also arguments about the aspirational goals of this system: is fair trade about increased market access to the existing global grade system, or is it about creating an alternative to a fundamentally unfair trade system?

The US-certified fair trade market has expanded vigorously since the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy launched TransFair USA as a certification and product licensing nonprofit organisation affiliated with the global network of fair trade labelling organisations then called FLO (later called Fairtrade International). TransFair USA hired Paul Rice as the founding CEO in 1998. After significant market growth in the early 2000s this organisation often critiqued its European counterparts over slower market growth and the high costs.

The split emerged when TransFair USA announced its separation from Fairtrade International, changed its name to Fair Trade USA, and launched 'Fair Trade for All' on 15 September 2011. Fair Trade USA promised to make fair trade flexible for business and to double sales by 2015.¹⁸ Several key

components of this proposal include, the development of a new standard for unorganised smallholders, the inclusion of large coffee plantations, and increasingly flexible standards that apply to Northern businesses.

Fair Trade USA vs Fairtrade International

Big tent fair trade collapsed as social movement organisations and many smallholder cooperatives became increasingly disillusioned with the mainstreaming strategy and undemocratic governance structure common to Northern certification agencies, particularly Fair Trade USA. The corporate model of Fairtrade offers less power to smallholders, since minimum prices have not kept up with the spiralling costs of sustainable production, and new large-scale entrants were able to usurp existing relationships with importers, roasters and retailers built by smallholder producer organisations and alternative trade allies. Hybrid approaches linking social economy-oriented cooperatives to more small- and medium-sized 'socially responsible' companies have provided smallholder organisations with expanding markets, increased access to credit and grassroots development projects, education and women's rights. The solidarity-oriented alternative trade model represents a third version of fair trade. It consists of 100% fair and alternative trade organisations in the North (eg worker cooperatives, such as Equal Exchange, and mission-driven, not-for-profit organisations, such as SEERV) and many, but not all, of the producer cooperatives in the South. These are the founding alternative trade organisations that launched their system more than 40 years ago.¹⁹

From a food sovereignty perspective an analysis of fair trade divisions suggests procedural justice questions about the lack of voice and vote for farmers, workers and consumers in governance and standards development. There are no seats designated for alternative trade groups on Fair Trade USA's board of directors. While producers have three seats on Fairtrade International's board, small-scale producers lack proportional representation. In the past five years Fairtrade International has made several significant governance changes, including making smallholders 50% owners of their global regulatory system and electing a smallholder representative from the Dominican Republic as the new president of their board of directors.²⁰ Despite recent reforms in this direction, Fair Trade USA's board of directors still does not include representation from smallholder fair trade cooperative networks or civil society.

Food security and the food sovereignty social movement

FSM organisations have historically defined FS in opposition to free trade strategies to achieve food security, and to the use of the term 'food security' itself.²¹ There are multiple interpretations of food security and food sovereignty, and a dichotomy between the terms is misleading. Food security is a concept that describes the condition of access to adequate food, while the latter term is more explicitly a political agenda for how to address inadequate access to food and land rights in a way that simultaneously promotes sustainable peasant agriculture and farmer empowerment.²² A relational approach between these terms opens the possibility of incorporating food security insights into FSM strategies. Key

ideas underpinning the food access approach to food security are credited to Sen's entitlement theory, which explains how households use multiple relationships, including wage labour, other income sources, food production and exchange, to bring food into their house.²³ Like fair trade and food security, food sovereignty is also an evolving concept, a discourse, and an emerging set of alternative farming, fishing and food distribution practices. In a recent meeting of the Committee on World Food Security in Rome delegates from leading FSM organisation La Vía Campesina (LVC) continued to insist on food sovereignty as the primary strategy, but instead of opposing food security they called on states to improve food security outcomes.²⁴

The largely rural membership of many organisations that formed the early stages of the FSM, which now includes many urban agriculture initiatives too, was spurred by the fact that more than two-thirds of food-insecure people live in rural areas.²⁵ The most common form of rural food insecurity is seasonal hunger. These lean months often correlate with harvest size, agricultural calendars, climate, higher staple food prices and the availability of rural employment and income.²⁶ Several frameworks analyse the causal forces that link poverty and hunger.²⁷ One explanatory framework analyses the historic political economic processes that shape the 'social spaces of vulnerability' to hunger, and focuses on hazards exposure, sensitivity and efforts to access food when crops fail or prices spike.²⁸ The social space of vulnerability changes over time as the historical political-economic forces influence the local institutions that shape household access to land, water, markets and credit, compromising their ability to cope with hazards and put food on the table.

Fair trade aims to empower producers and promote sustainable livelihoods, and FS aims to secure rights and eliminate hunger, but evaluative research is relatively sparse. Little published research empirically measures the local food security impacts and farmer empowerment processes among households and organisations affiliated with FSM organisations, although a recent publication examines if FS could happen among a group market-oriented smallholders in Indonesia.²⁹ Furthermore, researchers have not examined the intermingling of fair trade networks and food sovereignty concepts within smallholder cooperatives and farming communities. A growing body of research assesses the household food security outcomes among farmers linked to fair trade, organic and conventional commercial coffee markets. The findings from Latin America consistently show mixed results. Households selling a portion of their coffee to Fairtrade reported several tangible benefits (eg higher prices or increased access to credit and technical assistance) in some cases, but persistent food insecurity in most cases.³⁰ Another study found that farmers affiliated with co-ops receiving significant development assistance from corporations purchasing their fair trade coffee reported shorter periods of seasonal hunger from 2007 to 2013, although the attribution of these changes remains unclear.³¹ A large-scale survey recently completed in Ethiopia and Uganda found sparse evidence for positive fair trade impacts on poverty reduction, and poor working conditions on certified coffee, tea and flower farms and processing plants.³² The following case study considers an influential cooperative with a long history of selling a high percentage of its coffee to Fairtrade markets. The co-op and affiliated farmers have started to engage FS concepts, but it is not affiliated with the larger FSM.

Approach, methods and study site

This study is guided by an embedded single case study method.³³ The units of analysis include the fair trade system as it intersects with PRODECOOP, a primary-level cooperative, and affiliated farmers. There are several generalisable aspects and other potentially unique characteristics in this case. This case is generalisable since millions of smallholders in Central America and worldwide must navigate seasonal hunger, low levels of formal education, poor drinking water and sanitation infrastructure, and vulnerability to climate change.³⁴ These communities faced food price spikes from 2008 to 2010, and changes in coffee markets.³⁵ This case is of unique interest because PRODECOOP's general manager has a leading role in coordinating the organised smallholder resistance to Fair Trade USA's decision to split from Fairtrade International and because Fair Trade USA's CEO, Paul Rice, launched his career with this same cooperative.³⁶

My involvement with PRODECOOP started in 2000 through evaluation work of a project to improve coffee quality, during the 1999–2005 coffee crisis. The farm and community-level research started with a community-based participatory action research project that united a university researcher (myself) with not-for-profit organisation staff (both a local Nicaraguan NGO and an international NGO) and PRODECOOP. The partnerships represent a shared production of knowledge, local empowerment and design strategies to reduce seasonal hunger, increase access to healthy food and promote sustainable agriculture among 1000 affiliated families.³⁷

My qualitative data collection methods included focus groups, participatory workshops and participant observation during farmer field days and in meetings. I reviewed internal documents and reports from PRODECOOP and communicated with staff members. These approaches integrate international community development and evaluation work with reflexive ethnography and mixed methods.³⁸ I also combined interviews and several community-based mapping activities that are broadly similar to those of other research projects mapping common property with resource users.³⁹ Most key informant interviews, workshops and focus groups were conducted in July and December 2013. I collected data on the overall context through participant observation during July and December field visits from July 2009 to December 2013. Focus group and interview participants were recruited purposefully to include voices of men and women, old-timers, community leaders and young adults.

The study area includes regions identified by PRODECOOP staff as the most food insecure, located in Estelí, Madriz and Nueva Segovia. Although most of Nicaragua's coffee is produced in the Districts of Matagalpa and Estelí, the Segovias region included in this study has an outstanding reputation for coffee quality and significant threats associated with the anticipated impacts of climatic change. The nested case study focuses on a primary-level cooperative in the highlands of the Condega, Estelí. The terrain consists primarily of small mountains, mesas and hills, ranging from 700 to 1550 meters above sea level. There is a rainy season lasting from May to October, followed by a dry season. The vegetation consists primarily of tropical dry forests at lower altitudes and semi-humid and mixed oak and pine forests at higher altitudes. Most farmers in the study area produce a combination of cash crops (coffee), subsistence crops (corn and beans), fruit trees and occasionally tubers and vegetables.

PRODECOOP and fair trade

La Promotora de Desarrollo Cooperativo de las Segovias (the Promoter of Cooperative Development in the Segovias, PRODECOOP) is the flagship Nicaraguan cooperative involved in fair trade. Most of the farmers and rural organisers who founded PRODECOOP trace part of their inspiration to the ideals of Nicaragua's 1979 popular revolution. After the Sandinista government lost the 1990 elections, a small group of young agricultural and social development professionals organised with small-scale coffee farmers struggling to survive the dramatic changes affecting rural Nicaragua. They initially formed an NGO called Colibri and then founded PRODECOOP in 1994. PRODECOOP sold its first coffee containers to alternative trade organisations in Europe and the USA (Equal Exchange). These alternative trade organisations would later link with others to create the international certified Fairtrade coffee system. Farmers risked part of their crop (and with it their vital income and food security) when they committed this coffee to PRODECOOP before receiving payment. The alternative trade organisations risked losses as they purchased coffee from a new organisation with no prior experience of exporting. This trust facilitated the birth of an alternative agri-food system that sought to distribute value more fairly, to increase transparency and to empower communities.

PRODECOOP is a dynamic, effective organisation and I attribute this to its farmer leadership, politically astute, capable and solidarity-oriented administrators, the high quality coffee produced and processed in this region, and support from allies involved in fair trade networks. PRODECOOP's commercialisation staff uses its reputation for quality, reliability and consistency to negotiate better prices from importers and roasters. The co-op's general manager now claims that this is more important than any certification. However, Fairtrade and organic certifications continue to matter and historically these standards informed the norms and practices within PRODECOOP, while also providing access to markets, price premiums and credit, and contributing to its efforts to secure millions of US dollars in funding for community development projects. PRODECOOP generally pays affiliated farmers coffee prices that are 20%–30% above national averages.

These complexities make it difficult to attribute specific benefits to Fairtrade markets and the associated international development networks. However, the vigorous debates that PRODECOOP's leadership made following changes to international Fairtrade standards demonstrate that fair trade was worth a fight. Furthermore, the co-op's annual reports also show that Fairtrade's social development premium (now at 0.20/lb of exported green coffee) totalled about \$800,000 in 2012–13.⁴⁰ Grants and donations from coffee companies and allied non-profit agencies have been significant, often totalling over \$1 million in a single year. These grants and donations fund women's rights, organic production, coffee quality improvements, food security and farm diversification projects. The Fairtrade price floor can make a significant difference when international commodity prices fall. In the early 2000s PRODECOOP paid farmers \$100/sack of Fairtrade organic coffee vs the \$40/sack paid by intermediaries selling to commercial markets. The significance of the aforementioned action strategies is best interpreted in a broader historical context offered by the experiences of the rural community.

Histories of conflict, hunger and uneven access

In response to the first research question, I conducted a detailed case study in a rural community where the majority of the households are currently affiliated with PRODECOOP. In focus groups and interviews, residents recounted their history from the 1960s to the present. The story follows changing access to food and land as residents transitioned from dependent farmworkers and sharecroppers labouring for a cattle-and-coffee plantation owner to armed combatants fighting to topple the Somoza dictatorship and the local plantation's *patrón*, who dominated their lives and usurped their rights. After the revolution in 1979, the national government seized the plantation through the agrarian reform programme. Initially the state formed and directed a co-op of local residents, but later the title was turned over to a locally managed co-op. As male residents became increasingly involved with the 1980s war against the 'counter revolution', gender roles started to change in some places. In the 1990s the wars ended, but food insecurity persisted. Pests and droughts, which often coincided with El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) years, led to crop failures and contributed to an annual average of three to five months of seasonal hunger. Local intermediaries controlled coffee and corn-market access. Thus, increased farmer sovereignty was not initially matched by substantial gains in food security. Seasonal hunger decreased from the 1970s to the 1990s but it persisted even after the local co-op started selling to fair trade markets affiliated with PRODECOOP in 1994 started exporting to Fairtrade coffee markets.

Residents agreed that the five most important common-pool environmental resources were: water sources (streams, creeks and springs); forests for water conservation, tree fruits and firewood; animal habitat; pastures for livestock; and seeds and genetic resources. The title for the *milpa* agricultural plots (for planting corn, beans, squash and other crops) was collectively held, but farmers managed this land individually. The next sections analyse changing patterns of access to these environmental commons, household food security, and farmer autonomy during the previous six decades.

The hacienda and dependency in the 1960s and before

Although elderly residents reported less violence than found in the armed appropriation of coffee land from indigenous communities in Matagalpa, they mentioned uneven and manipulated land deals, explaining how hacienda owners became *tierra tenientes* (landlords with large holdings) by offering local residents new clothes and cattle in exchange for their land titles.⁴¹ One said, 'the indigenous people had a community focus but then the hacienda came and with it exploitation'. They also reported friendships between the hacienda owner and the Somoza dictators. The hacienda owners controlled access to forests and drinking water. There was rarely enough food in most households. Their uneven exchange entitlements tell a powerful story: 'We earned 4 *Córdobas* a day, and we needed to buy the corn from the company store on the hacienda at 10 *Córdobas* for 25 lbs'.

Violence, famine and seeds of resistance in the 1970s

With very limited access to natural resources and 80%–90% rural illiteracy rates, malnutrition was common, even though farmers reported consistent rains and

were able to grow some food in sharecropping arrangements. Early childhood death was common, as one community experienced in the early 1970s: 'Families in the 16 houses of this community lost 30 children, nearly two per house from malnutrition compounded with diseases and illness, such as measles, diarrhoea and chickenpox'. The suffering associated with the cyclical periods of seasonal hunger deepened when drought slammed the community and led to local famine in the early 1970s, a crisis also reported in other northern coffee growing communities.

The hacienda dominated the local political economy during this decade, 'denying us our rights' and controlling access to forest firewood and fruits. Several community residents petitioned the hacienda owner, asking him to work with the government and open a school for the 30-plus school-age children. Although the law supported this right, the residents were promptly threatened and blacklisted, prompting them to join the armed resistance.

Agrarian reform, war and the state run cooperatives in the 1980s

Broad-based popular and armed resistance converged to topple the Somoza dictatorship on 19 July 1979, and the Sandinista government subsequently consolidated its power. The government seized resources controlled by Somoza and his cronies that accounted for up to 25% of the country's productive assets.⁴² The hacienda passed into the hands of the new agricultural ministry. Initially the government managed land and labour. If a worker picked bananas and mangoes from the shade trees above the coffee, the manager (who in some ways was like a more humane *patrón*) would say nothing, 'but deductions for that picked fruit appeared on paychecks'. Food security and seasonal hunger remained a challenge but government donations were common, though not necessarily consistent. By the mid-1980s the government had transferred the title for 1540 hectares as a single commonly-held property from the state-run enterprise to this local cooperative. Once the new resident-led board of directors took control, residents could access the forest, including firewood, fruit and water, without permission or financial penalty. Some reported higher deforestation rates during this period; these reports are still unverified.

A limited peace, land loss and affiliation with PRODECOOP in the 1990s

Food access changed again with the end of the 1980s wars following the Sandinistas' electoral defeat in 1990. However, in October 1991 a group of re-armed rural residents attacked the cooperative, killing one local member and burning the existing infrastructure, including crop storage facilities, coffee and farm equipment. The goals of this attack are still unclear, but could have been linked to a large plantation owner's efforts to recapture land 'lost' during the agrarian reform.

During the early 1990s the cooperative's board initially organised agricultural labour collectively. Periods of seasonal hunger sometimes expanded beyond the expected June, July and August, and overall residents perceived that they were shorter than before. Residents also reported harvesting wild foods, such as *flor de izote* (*Yucca guatemalensis*), *hojas de blede* (an uncultivated Amaranth) and

fruits from the forests and coffee shade trees on the co-op's common-property forest. Many also obtained food in exchange for their weapons through government-backed pacification programmes in the path from swords to ploughshares.

Property divisions, empowerment and the persistence of seasonal hunger in the 2000s

Co-op-led collective action declined after the loss of 320 hectares of common property to a corrupt microfinance organisation that had invested in a cattle project with the cooperative's board of directors. In the mid-2000s the assembly of 93 members elected a new board of directors, and PRODECOOP later channelled international development funding from the coffee industry to this community for water projects, seed banks and farm diversification. Monthly cooperative meetings with no external agents present often drew over 50 participants, of whom at least 30% are female. In contrast to these collective efforts, the cooperative also continued to divide into individual private property rights. This occurred first in the area of basic grain production, but extended in the mid-2000s to coffee growing plots.

Calculations using geospatial data found that the cooperative lost 1.6% of its forest cover from 2000 to 2012 – better than the net change of a 5.9% loss in Nicaragua (based on the 2013 Global Forest Change project from the University of Maryland). Most of the deforestation in the cooperative occurred in order to plant corn and beans, to harvest firewood, and to sell trees for construction. More research is needed, but the transition from collective to individual land tenure may have contributed to deforestation in some places, and it probably limited the access of the poorest households to fruits and famine foods on previously commonly held property.

One focus group within the larger workshop asked four female participants to respond to the five thematic prompts and to record their experiences during the 1990s. They promptly deviated from the instructions and, after a thoughtful discussion, wrote their own consensus-based history. Their representative stood up and read the following statement, which I excerpt here: "We had no land. We worked on rented land. The poor life made it very difficult to study. As parents we were subordinated to the rich...Only those with money could pay a real teacher.' After getting the land title and joining the co-op, the narrative continues:

First we have the land, fertilising the land, receiving training and [exercising our] power to make use of it, and to be able to respond to the lean months. Today we are free to study. Today we own our own plots...Today, as a woman, as a mother, I am free to speak, to decide and to make our own decisions, and we are no longer oppressed.

The broader history from the 1960s to the present illustrates the fundamental importance of agrarian reform in improving food and land access. This is a core part of an FSM strategy. The narrative also suggests the key role of a popular revolution, and the initial state-based intervention to create the co-op, which was a requirement for accessing usufruct rights on this collective land title. Finally, it shows how affiliation to PRODECOOP generated benefits such as

support for land tenure, technical assistance for organic coffee production, and better coffee prices from sales to Fairtrade and organic markets. PRODECOOP also used fair trade-friendly coffee roasters and development assistance organisations to channel aid to this local cooperative, which supported building the co-op's offices, training for sustainable agriculture and a community-based grain bank.

Despite a willingness to invest in collective action supporting access to global coffee markets, local foods, drinking water, education, seeds and farm inputs, the local institutional history shows that most rural residents were dissatisfied with the forced collectivisation of agricultural land management during the early phases of the agrarian reform. Interviews with farmers and co-op staffers show that in this community the basket of individually held property rights has consistently expanded during the past 25 years. The broader political economic and local socio-cultural reasons for this pattern, which are common in peasant communities worldwide, are beyond the scope of this paper.

Local interpretations of food security and food sovereignty

Farmers and PRODECOOP staff members often interpreted food security and food sovereignty in similar ways and as complementary projects. However, the farmers emphasised empowerment and co-op staffers focused on FS methods, and not the FSM. One staffer stated: 'Food security is when there is enough food for a full meal for everybody, every day of the year. Food sovereignty means that we produce sufficient amounts of our own healthy food, preserve quality, and do not rely on external inputs.' Farmer perceptions tended to focus more on production and autonomy. Some farmers were unfamiliar with the term, but most conveyed that it was about the need to secure land tenure, freedom to choose which crops to plant, and their ability to save and share locally adapted seeds.

As an organisation PRODECOOP began integrating concepts from FS, fair trade and food security. In partnership with local and international NGOs it developed cooperative-led grain banks, which purchase, store and redistribute corn and beans to affiliated farmers and local residents. This strategy uses the cooperative's structure to manage these enterprises and apply fair trade principles to set prices, while prioritising food access. Farmers also participated in community-based seed banks. The idea for the seed banks came from participation in a farmer-to-farmer exchange, as many reported that seed banks increased their sense of sovereignty. However, more research is needed to analyse how participation in these seed-saving initiatives affects crops yields and seasonal hunger.

PRODECOOP's general assembly recently approved a comprehensive 10-year strategic initiative to promote food sovereignty and food and nutritional security. This plan references Nicaragua's 2009 food sovereignty law as its conceptual framework. When asked to explain the role of cooperatives in food security, one staffer said, 'Food security requires solidarity. We need it for soil conservation works, seed exchanges, and to make organic inputs. Many families are unable to do all of this on their own, but several families united together as a brigade can handle it. Furthermore, this strengthens the social ties as the community collectively learns the problem areas.' Although PRODECOOP's

staff members promote many FS-related principles and express interest in the technologies (eg bio-fertilisers and local seed banks) used by FSM organisations, they stated that their alliances are with the ‘cooperative movement’.

Smallholder cooperatives navigating Fairtrade International and Fair Trade USA

The Latin American and Caribbean Network of Smallholder Fair Trade Producers (known as the CLAC for its Spanish initials) is the largest voice for organised smallholders involved in certified Fairtrade, representing more than one million individuals.⁴³ PRODECOOP’s executive director, Merling Preza, remains active in the CLAC leadership discussion as well as in those with the Fairtrade Foundation and Fairtrade International’s newly formed US affiliate office, called Fairtrade America. In this capacity she frequently led the opposition to Fair Trade USA’s split from Fairtrade International and the former’s modification of standards to include large coffee plantations. Soon after Fair Trade USA’s Paul Rice announced the split from Fairtrade International in September 2011 and launched ‘Fair Trade 4 All’, Preza spoke on behalf of the CLAC, saying, ‘It hit us like a cold bucket of water’.⁴⁴ Subsequent statements show a fundamental difference in the interpretations of fair trade, specifically concerning issues of collective empowerment, Fair Trade USA’s governance framework and its proposals to certify large coffee estates and unorganised smallholders (selling through private or transnational exporters). The CLAC also raised concerns about the lack of representation from organised smallholders on Fair Trade USA’s board, and lauded Fairtrade International’s decision to expand organised smallholder representation in its governance and ownership structures. Preza stated that PRODECOOP had refused to coordinate activities with Fair Trade USA for a while (18 December 2013) and then noted broader challenges:

There has been an evolution as [fair trade] has practically passed from being a movement to being a certification that generates any quantity of rules. This is very distinct from when we were a movement for transparency and more direct relationships focusing on knowing the small-scale farmer and understanding why they live in their current situation in which the market does not compensate for their work. Fair trade was born of the necessity of the farmer who had only a small quantity of coffee and no access to the market. Things continued to change with increased access to the market, but all the changes in recent years have focused on verification, traceability, and the environment, this gave fair trade more focus on economic and environmental issues than social concerns (Merling Preza).

As political conflicts among fair trade certification agencies endured, most cooperatives adopted a pragmatic strategy to maintain existing market share and expanded their political advocacy. PRODECOOP continued exports to coffee roasters that supported Fair Trade USA’s decision to split away from Fair trade International, supported reforms within Fairtrade International and initially disassociated itself from Fair Trade USA. For example, representatives from the CLAC celebrated when Nestlé signed an agreement Fairtrade International instead of Fair Trade USA. However, Preza remains concerned about unfair competition when Fairtrade-certified transnational firms, particularly exporters,

undercut cooperatives, noting that ‘*si pones el ratón con el gato, el gato va comer el ratón*’ (If you put the mouse and the cat together, the cat is going to eat the mouse). In the past three years Preza also shifted away from global market access and fair trade governance debates and started to focus PRODECOOP’s strategy on farmer livelihoods and food security.

Discussion and conclusions: lessons for food sovereignty and fair trade

This discussion synthesises six lessons learned. Cooperative staff and farmers have started to integrate ideas from fair trade, food sovereignty and food security to achieve their organisational and livelihood goals. The historical analysis of agrarian change and rural hunger shows the significant influence of the political-economic context, local institutions and agrarian reform as rural residents have increased their autonomy and access to food and land, advancing towards FS goals; however, improved food security has not immediately followed. The FSM should not overlook tools that enable fairer avenues of market access. However, the increasingly muted producer voice in certified fair trade governance debates suggests that mainstream versions of fair trade (eg Fair Trade USA) conflict with the FSM’s normative goals. The creation and sustenance of capable and democratic smallholder cooperatives can advance FSM goals and improve food security outcomes. Under the right circumstances, access to Fair-trade markets could strengthen producer associations. However, the PRODECOOP case could be unique given the history of the Nicaraguan revolution and significant support from international development organisations. Fair traders could learn from the oppositional politics, mobilisation strategies and tactics that the FSM regularly musters in defence of farmer autonomy. Finally, both fair trade and FS share the challenge of improving food security outcomes in the context of climate variability. Efforts to achieve this common goal could benefit from tactical and possibly strategic alliances for action.

Taken together, continuities in farmer struggles to increase their autonomy and access to food and natural resources, local interpretations of food security and sovereignty, and PRODECOOP’s strategic action plan to address rural hunger demonstrate how co-ops and producers find synergies among these terms. The second point illustrated by this case is that increased autonomy is not necessarily followed by improved food security outcomes. After the agrarian reforms and affiliation with PRODECOOP, these community members report that livelihoods and gender equity improved. PRODECOOP supported the transition to certified organic coffee production, often selling over 80% of the local cooperative’s coffee to Fairtrade markets, and it channelled international development assistance. Seasonal hunger persisted. Although considered less significant than the agrarian reform, residents concurred that these recent institutional changes and the increased market access favoured their livelihood goals.

The findings of this study concur with recent suggestions that the FSM consider advocating trade policy changes and complementing its critical analysis of smallholder commodity production with a benefits assessment.⁴⁵ However, my study of fair trade governance and local resistance indicates the need for greater attention to power imbalances and questions of representation when analysing the FSM’s strategic options to influence agricultural trade negotiations, even in

the certified market place. For example, the increasingly muted producer voice in Fairtrade governance exposes incompatibilities between Fair Trade USA and other mainstream approaches to this project and the FSM's political goals. However, alternative trade organisations, producer co-ops and regional smallholder networks, such as the CLAC, will find synergies with the FSM priorities focused on smallholder empowerment, rights, food access and agricultural biodiversity conservation.

The fourth lesson concerns the key role of effective local institutions in advancing the overlapping goals of all three projects, provided that these institutions support farmer empowerment, sustainable agriculture and food security. Although there are no panaceas, effective local intuitions (eg smallholder cooperatives) are often a key factor in the sustainable governance and management of commonly held environmental resources, such as water, biodiversity, forests and pastures.⁴⁶ Agricultural production and marketing cooperatives could also address the exchange, donation and production dimensions of food access.⁴⁷ Furthermore, co-ops are the basic unit for representing producer interests in agricultural, environmental and food policy debates. This highlights the need for investments to create dynamic, capable and accountable smallholder cooperatives.⁴⁸

This case study shows how state-led agrarian reforms helped to create the primary cooperative in the 1980s and how this later intersected with the international fair trade networks and regional organising efforts that created PRODECOOP. Farmers reported several changes, including an increased sense of empowerment, a better coffee price and gradual food security improvements, although challenges persist. Deforestation rates on the cooperative's property are below national averages.

These experiences and the cases of other smallholder co-ops in northern Nicaragua have implications for fair trade standards and the FSM's agenda of supporting local institutions. Although the FSM frequently critiques the lack of democracy in global food policy making, it is not obvious how it proposes to strengthen democracy and operational capacity within its affiliated organisations. Producer unions, co-ops and associations have a more democratic structure than the corporate ownership patterns that LVC critiques, but many local institutions are fragile and local elites can usurp power. Farmers and scholars have also criticised the lack of fair representation in Fairtrade governance debates.⁴⁹ In contrast to the FSM, Fairtrade standards include criteria that explicitly claim to enhance smallholder co-op capacity (eg price premiums for social development that are allocated by a cooperative's general assembly). More research is needed to assess the degree to which links to Fairtrade markets and the associated inspection and certification processes influence the capacity of export cooperatives and other local institutions. The evidence thus far is mixed.⁵⁰ Multiple factors explain the rise of PRODECOOP and its persistent challenges, but history shows that Fairtrade has made a difference for both the organisation and the cooperative and farmers involved in this case study. However, this case could be exceptional in this respect and caution should be exercised when generalising to all 2300 households affiliated with PRODECOOP, elsewhere in Nicaragua, and certainly to other continents. The varied histories, configurations and politics of agricultural cooperatives in different contexts suggest that studies of agrarian

change, coffee quality and market access precede the attribution of local outcomes to certified markets.

Changes to fair trade standards raise questions about future impacts and governance. Fair Trade USA's new standard allows plantations to export certified coffee. Fairtrade International does not permit this, although both allow transnational companies to export into certified markets. A degree of competition for farmer participation among co-op exporters can stimulate bottom-up accountability through competition for farmer coffee and membership. However, the entrance of large plantations into Fairtrade value chains will confuse consumers and could stimulate a race to the bottom as co-ops start to skip the costly meetings associated with attempting to run a democratic association.⁵¹ Depending on the local response, this would probably decrease the effectiveness of local institutions and limit their efforts related to food security or environmental management. Astute smallholder cooperative managers and smallholder representatives, such as Preza, express frustration with the lack of democratic governance and empowered partnership of the mainstream fair trade model: 'I don't discount what Fair Trade USA and Paul have done to build the market, but it is the way they think for us...I don't like it when people think for me. I want us to think together.'

The historic experiences of resistance and agrarian reform lived by the smallholders in this study, and Preza's role representing both PRODECOOP and the CLAC in the fight for a fairer fair trade, show that Burnett and Murphy underestimated peasant aspirations, when they stated that several examples 'demonstrate smallholder farmers resisting radical and ideological change and instead looking for practical opportunities'.⁵² Indeed, the smallholders and co-op leaders interviewed in this study are interested in practical strategies (eg continuing to sell their coffee at better prices to large companies, using new bio-pesticides, or exploring alternative marketing channels), but most local leaders have developed a sophisticated political analysis and they are arguably more likely to influence an 'outsider's' ideology than to be unwilling subjects of external ideological manipulation. Furthermore, many of these farmers recognise that radical changes (eg land reforms, changing the structure of local agricultural and credit markets, domestic violence prevention campaigns and female asset ownership) were needed to achieve their current sense of empowerment, and more than a few are still willing to struggle for a more transformative and revolutionary food system.

Can fair traders engage with the FSM to avoid a bait-and-switch as farmers, advocates and consumers lose the power to influence Fair Trade standards and meanings? The split is growing within fair trade, as movement-based organisations and smallholder organisations have become increasingly disillusioned with the undemocratic governance structure among many Northern certification agencies, particularly Fair Trade USA. The diverse approaches to fair trade can be mapped to different types of fair trade. While minimum prices fail to keep up with the spiralling costs of sustainable production, and new large-scale entrants usurp export platforms that smallholder producer organisations had painstakingly developed, the corporate model of fair trade risks offering fewer benefits (eg declining real minimum prices) and less power to smallholders. Caught in the middle – and pulled in both directions – hybrid approaches have provided smallholder organisations with increased access to credit and have supported grassroots development projects.

After the split between Fairtrade International and Fair Trade USA representatives from PRODECOOP engaged in open conflict with their previous allies from Fair Trade USA. However, the negotiations with the coffee roasters who also backed these changes were partially constrained by the commercial sales and donations that the roasters provided to the co-op. This could be one reason that the co-ops never coordinated the types of oppositional protest commonly used by the FSM. Nor were rights-based demands made to government agencies. Although they launched their own competing certification system, it would potentially have been more effective to mobilise mass protests and file complaints with governments. These tensions among the radical, reformist and neoliberal approaches to food system change will continue.⁵³ Tactical alliances and method-sharing for practical action illustrate one way that the more reformist approach of many fair trade enterprises could engage the FSM's more radical agenda.

Fairtrade, FS and other strategies for global food system change face the challenge of improving food security outcomes, reducing farmer and farm worker marginalisation, and conserving the environment. The persistence of rural hunger and the failure of mainstream trade and development projects contributed to the rise of the FSM's increasingly high-profile efforts to transform food systems. Although an initial read might identify synergies between fair trade and food sovereignty approaches to changing global food systems, the split within fair trade shows that a careful assessment of the ethics, organisational models and the many governance structures should precede the formation of strategic alliances. Both approaches aim to strengthen dynamic smallholder cooperatives, but not all stakeholders or versions of fair trade share the FSM's commitment to smallholder empowerment and sustainable agriculture. All strategies will also be tested based on their ability to eliminate hunger, secure human rights and sustain diverse agricultural ecologies.

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Notes

1. "Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue." Conference held at Yale University, September 14–15, 2013. <http://www.yale.edu/agrarianstudies/foodsovereignty/index.html>.
2. La Vía Campesina (LVC), "Main Issues 2014."
3. Patel, "Food Sovereignty."
4. Agarwal, "Food Sovereignty, Security and Democratic Choice"; and Clapp "Food Security and Food Sovereignty."

5. Burnett and Murphy, "What Place for International Trade in Food Sovereignty?," 1065.
6. LVC, "Stop the Free Trade Agreements."
7. Declaration of Nyéléni.
8. LVC, "CFS in Rome."
9. Murphy, "What you Need to Know about the India–US Agreement," November 20, 2014, <http://www.iatp.org/blog/201411/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-india-us-agreement-at-the-wto#sthash.N6Z39kfS.dpuf>.
10. Burnett and Murphy, "What Place for International Trade?"
11. Walton, "What is Fair Trade?"; and Fridell, "Fair Trade Slippages."
12. See Fairtrade International's website, <http://www.fairtrade.net/>.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Reynolds, *Poverty Alleviation through Participation*; and Jaffee, *Brewing Justice*.
16. Bacon, "Who decides what is Fair?"
17. Ibid.; Reynolds, "Mainstreaming Fair Trade"; Jaffee, *Brewing Justice*; and Wilson and Curnow, "Solidarity™."
18. Fair Trade USA, "Fair Trade USA Resigns."
19. VanderHoff Boersma, "The Urgency and Necessity of a Different Type of Market."
20. Jaffee, *Brewing Justice*.
21. Fairtrade International, "Fairtrade Producer elected Board Chair."
22. Jarosz, "Comparing Food Security and Food Sovereignty."
23. Clapp, "Food Security and Food Sovereignty." See also Patel, "Food Sovereignty."
24. Sen, *Poverty and Famines*.
25. FAO, "The State of Food Insecurity."
26. Devereux et al., *Seasons of Hunger*.
27. Watts and Bohle, "The Space of Vulnerability."
28. Bacon et al., "Explaining the 'Hungry Farmer Paradox'."
29. Li, "Can there be Food Sovereignty Here?"
30. Mendez et al., "Effects of Fair Trade."
31. Caswell et al., *Revisiting the 'Thin Months'*.
32. Cramer et al., *Fairtrade, Employment and Poverty Reduction*.
33. Yin, *Applications of Case Study Research*.
34. Jha et al., "Review of Ecosystem Services."
35. Bacon et al., "The Hungry Farmer Paradox."
36. Denaux and Valdivia, *Historia de PRODECOOP*.
37. Bacon et al., "The Hungry Farmer Paradox."
38. Mikkelsen, *Methods for Development Work*.
39. Bauer, "On the Politics and Possibilities of Participatory Mapping."
40. PRODECOOP annual reports.
41. Austin et al., "Role of the Revolutionary State."
42. Agarwal, "Food Sovereignty, Food Security and Democratic Choice."
43. Coscione, "La CLAC y la Defensa del pequeño productor"; and CLAC/Fairtrade, "Comercio Justo."
44. "Merling Preza makes the Case against FT4all." Interview with Michael Sheridan, November 9, 2011. <http://coffeelands.crs.org/2011/11/merling-preza-makes-the-case-against-ft4all>.
45. Burnett and Murphy, "What Place for International Trade?"
46. Dietz et al., "The Struggle to Govern the Commons"; and Agarwal, "Food Sovereignty, Food Security and Democratic Choice."
47. Bacon et al., "Explaining the 'Hungry Farmer Paradox'"; Agarwal, "Food Sovereignty, Food Security and Democratic Choice"; and Sen, *Poverty and Famines*.
48. Poole and Donova, "Building Cooperative Capacity."
49. Jaffee, *Brewing Justice*.
50. Ibid.
51. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, "Food Crises, Food Regimes, and Food Movements."
52. Burnett and Murphy, "What Place for International Trade in Food Sovereignty?," 1072.
53. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, "Food Crises, Food Regimes, and Food Movements."

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