

**Envisioning the Future of Food Across North-South Divides: Transregional Food Networks and Movements**

**Veranstalter:** Forum for Transregional Studies, INKOTA-netzwerk, MISEREOR, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, and the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 1199: „Processes of Spatialization under the Global Condition“ at the University of Leipzig  
**Datum, Ort:** 01.12.2016–03.12.2016, Berlin  
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How should food production and consumption be organized? Powerful corporations promoting agro-industrialist approaches to food and food security hold not only substantial power in the food system, they also increasingly control the debates about the future of agriculture and food. At the same time, people around the world are striving to find alternatives to the current food system. Driven by the goal to reconfigure the way food and agriculture are organized within society, a wide array of alternative food movements and networks have been emerging in recent years. While all such movements aim at reshaping the way food production and consumption are organized within society, the interlinkages and alliances between these groups building alternatives to the current food system all over the world have rarely been addressed in research.

Placing questions about transregional interlinkages and emerging synergies between food movements around the world at the center of the discussion, Sarah Ruth Sippel (University of Leipzig, Germany), Nicole Larder (University of New England, Australia), Cornelia Reiher (Free University Berlin, Germany), and Felipe Roa-Clavijo (University of Oxford, UK) brought together researchers, food practitioners, and activists from many parts of the world for a two-day exploratory workshop „Envisioning the Future of Food Across North-South Divides: Transregional Food Networks and Movements“ (December 1-3, 2016) at the Forum for Transregional Studies in Berlin.

The workshop opened with a roundtable discussion jointly organized by the

Forum for Transregional Studies, INKOTA-netzwerk, MISEREOR, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, and the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 1199: „Processes of Spatialization under the Global Condition“ at the University of Leipzig. As an event reaching out to a broader audience concerned about how we produce and eat food, the round table addressed questions of alliance-building between activists, organized civil society, and critically engaged academics while exploring the particular challenges and opportunities of joint knowledge production in order to shape alternative food systems.

The round table started from the assumption that knowledge production about the world is never neutral but always part of a political project shaped by the circumstances of its production. Activist farmer Lynne Davis, NGO campaigner Benjamin Luig, Prof. Dr. Sony Pellissery, and Prof. Dr. Cornelia Reiher discussed with Jan Urhahn, from INKOTA-netzwerk, strategies for generating knowledge, the role of agriculture and food in our societies, the power structures involved in knowledge production, as well as ways to overcome these challenges and to mobilize alternative narratives.

In the two-day workshop that followed, nine thematic panels framed by a key note address and a concluding session, as well as multiple rounds of open discussion, gave participants the opportunity to build knowledge bridges, exchange views and interests, and build networks for future collaboration. The contributions from panellists and speakers provided theoretical insights and empirical case studies focusing on a wide range of regional contexts, urban and rural spaces, as well as different actors ranging from producers and consumers to state actors and civil society.

*Putting the focus on transregional synergies between agri-food networks and movements*  
The opening address by Sarah Ruth Sippel set the tone for the first day of the workshop. While agri-food movements and networks are increasingly being recognized as a critical social force shaping the future of the current food system, she demonstrated that there is an apparent „North-South“ divide running through the literature. Urban,

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consumer-driven movements of the „Global North“ campaigning for progressive change towards food and environmental justice are juxtaposed with the producer-driven movements of the „rural poor“, which are voicing radical demands for food sovereignty in the „Global South“. Some observers have even come to the conclusion that „one group of people [the Global North] may defend an idea, others [the Global South] are defending their life and their livelihoods“ (Rivera-Ferre et al. 2014, p. 315–316). With the aim of transcending these „North-South“ dichotomies in the literature, Sarah Ruth Sippel argued for both a new empirical perspective that focuses on the transregional synergies between different regional contexts and a critical reflection on the concepts and preconceived spatial notions that shape our perspectives on food movements in different regional contexts in the first place.

The contributions that followed were centred around three overarching themes: (1) the relationships between the actors involved in food movements as well as critical reflections on the concepts and spatial representations with which research often frames these movements; (2) the models of change brought about by food networks and movements, from piecemeal, incremental change to radical reconfigurations of the food system; and (3) the potential for synergies and alliance-building between producers and consumers, both locally and in a transregional context.

*Food movements and involved actors: critical reflections on concepts and framings*

A number of contributions addressed questions pertaining to the various actors involved in food movements and the changing relationships between them. Complex power relationships between the state, the private sector, and civil society (Julia Dennis, German Chancellor Fellow; Alexander Day, Occidental College, USA) were as much emphasized as the alliances between civil society and local communities (Anne Siebert, Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany) or the crucial role of women in food movements (Sony Pelissery, National Law School of India University, India). At the same time, panelists problematized concepts and terms such

as „food sovereignty“ or „alternative movement“, which are often used to frame food movements, pointing to their normative character and limited ability to capture the wide range of goals and activities of these movements. There were also lively discussions about how the theoretical concept of multiple modernities (Markus Keck, Georg August University of Göttingen, Germany) and more constructive sociological imaginaries of food (Michael K. Goodman, University of Reading, UK) could help to overcome some of the divides and dead ends in the literature on agri-food movements.

*Progressive or radical change?*

The second overarching theme of the workshop focused on the kind of change brought about by agri-food networks and movements. Based on empirical case studies, Sophia Albov (University of Helsinki, Finland), Carol Richards (Queensland University of Technology, Australia), Katharina Schiller (Wageningen University, Netherlands), and René Trappe (Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg, Germany) highlighted the trajectories and potentials for change that food movements have developed in Finland, Australia, Nicaragua, and China. Incremental cultural, social, ecological, and spatial changes to the agricultural landscape were as much a focus of discussion as were challenges of „scaling up“ alternative ways to organize food and agriculture to society more broadly, thereby opening up pathways to fundamentally alter the dominant agri-food regime. The presented case studies pointed to the varying levels of influence agri-food networks and movements have attained within the food system as well as to the complex political and institutional configurations that make change more viable in some cases than in others.

*Local, regional, and transregional interlinkages*

The analysis of alliances and interlinkages between different groups of actors provided a third lens through which workshop participants framed their research on agri-food networks and movements. Contributions by Jane Dixon (Australian National University, Australia), Paula Fernandez-Wulff (University of Louvain, Belgium), Nicolette Larder (University of New England, Australia), Pra-

jal Pradhan (Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Germany), Cornelia Reiher (Free University Berlin, Germany), Felipe Roa-Clavijo (University of Oxford, UK), and Emilio Travieso (University of Oxford, UK) underlined the complexities of these interlinkages. Emerging synergies and alliances (or the need thereof) between producers and consumers were not only identified in regional contexts (e.g. urban-rural) but also in transregional ones. Processes creating linkages and connections between different groups and movements were as much part of the discussion as were explorations of the effects these interlinkages have had on food relationships between producers and consumers, both locally and across the „North-South“ divide. Yet, panellists also identified a number of problems and tensions inherent in the emerging transregional synergies, including the strong nationalistic undertones of some movements or the destabilizing impact of highly volatile, nutricentric consumer demands on producer livelihoods.

Overcoming the mainstream niche and North-South divide?

Concluding that there is a plethora of explorative niches within the agri-food system, the workshop has not yet come to terms with reframing the North-South divide in the research on food movements and networks. However, many discussions showed the potential for breaking with certain notions that have been taken for granted. For instance, seeing farmers in the Global North as being equally exposed to incremental financial, ecological, and climate risks, helps to fundamentally question the construction of the Global North as profiting from power asymmetries in the global food system. Furthermore, if empowerment towards social and environmental justice is a normative orientation for agri-food research, scholars should not adopt the notion of food sovereignty without careful deliberation. For instance, it needs to be discussed whether and how food sovereignty might create synergies beyond the North-South divide and who the holders of sovereignty are in the light of potential tensions between the right to land of peasants and indigenous groups on the one hand and land as being part of the global com-

mons on the other. What is more, the claim for sovereignty is not appropriated by social inclusion and progressive movements alone. It is also used by reactionary-conservative movements or in conjunction with nationalist and racist claims over territory.

For the members of the social business Yomol A'tel in Chiapas, Mexico, food sovereignty means the freedom to live as they wish, including how they go about producing food and organizing their self-determined economic relations to capitalism (instead of opposing it completely). Food sovereignty can also be associated with nationalism as in the case of the anti-free trade movements in Japan. When reconsidering these aspects, the nexus between citizenship and science has to be scrutinized together with the relationship between academic and alternative food movements. The discussions also showed that food movements cannot only be conceptualized as self-determined and 'bottom-up'; on the contrary, some may be embedded in state politics and social contexts. Furthermore, niche markets can also have unintended stabilizing effects on the mainstream economic setting. Last but not least, the mainstream of 'conventional' food production and the role of the politics of technology and finance should not be ignored when focusing on the 'alternatives'.

With its exploratory character, flat hierarchies, and ample room for discussion and exchange, this workshop has promoted building knowledge bridges and networks between a diverse and international group of scholars. The workshop will therefore serve as a stepping stone for future collaboration and joint exploration of themes around agri-food networks and movements.

\* The report is also published at Trafo - Blog for Transregional Research (<https://trafo.hypotheses.org/5876>).

Tagungsbericht *Envisioning the Future of Food Across North-South Divides: Transregional Food Networks and Movements*. 01.12.2016–03.12.2016, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 10.03.2017.