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Editorial: Diverse economies and food democracy: implications for sustainability from an interdisciplinary perspective

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Diverse economies and food democracy: implications for sustainability from an interdisciplinary perspective

Social movements have long argued for democratizing decisions about how food is produced, processed, distributed and consumed, and scholarly interest in such issues has recently been increasing. Yet questions remain as to what food democracy practically entails, how it is related to similar concepts such as food sovereignty, and how it affects the environment. When publishing the call for papers that build this Research Topic, we wanted to support a deepening of the discussion on these three challenges by bringing together new perspectives on food democracy, understood as forms of joint decision-making by food producers, consumers, public authorities, and stakeholders, at various scales.

The 11 papers of this Research Topic cover multiple aspects of food democracy, five with a conceptual focus (Jani et al., Plank et al., Leitheiser and Vezzoni, Anderson, Tilzey) and six that present conceptually-informed empirical case studies (Degens and Lapschies, Pungas, Hoinle and Klosterkamp, Horstink et al., Middendorf and Herzig, Lukwa et al.).

Jani et al. outline the methodology of a Horizon EU project called FEAST highlighting the complexity, heterogeneity and fundamentally unpredictable character of agro-food system transformations, as well as the justice aspects involved. The authors argue for food democracy as a heuristic in the sense of “solutions that can flexibly account for different contexts, preferences and needs.” By interpreting food democracy substantively and related to problem-solving potentials of democratic procedures not limited to voting and formal representation, “[w]ithin food systems,” they state, “food democracy could be a heuristic solution that provides the processes and can form the basis for driving just transitions.”

Plank et al. shed light on the intricacies of such processes. Moving away from the language of governance employed by Jani et al., they propose a new theoretical model for food regime change integrating critical state theory, the social capital concept, and territorial approaches. By drawing attention to the role of the state in the context of shifting articulations of cooperation and conflict with regard to agro-food systems and their transformations, Plank et al. address an important lacuna in much food system research.

In a somewhat similar way, [Leitheiser and Vezzoni](#) grapple with the question of how to better address the real-world complexity and ambivalence of agro-food system transformation going beyond generic claims regarding alleged alternatives. By developing a novel framework for investigating the kinds of citizenship different types of approaches to food system change perform and promote, [Leitheiser and Vezzoni](#) are able to unpack the diversity of transformation initiatives. In doing so, they also sharpen our understanding of the concrete meaning of food democracy.

[Anderson](#) takes a more explicitly political view of agro-food system transformation and the role of democracy for it, emphasizing the crucial distinction between substantive and formal democracy that [Jani et al.](#) also address. By asking about the character of the public that is supposed to be the democratic sovereign, [Anderson](#) points out “that food democracy requires the existence of alternative ways of producing and obtaining food beyond the outlets owned by the largest corporations, and must try to establish and maintain alternative social innovations,” as the concept of food sovereignty is advocating.

This perspective is theoretically further elaborated and grounded in critical state theory in the paper by [Tilzey](#). Similar to [Anderson](#), [Tilzey](#) questions a superficial understanding of food democracy that neglects societal relations of domination and exclusion, instead arguing “for a ‘radical’ political agroecology as substantive food democracy,” further pursuing the articulation of food democracy and food sovereignty. [Tilzey](#) investigates the potentials, challenges and partial successes of “the precariat, peasantry, and indigenous people of the global South that may be pivotal” as “counter-hegemonic classes” exploiting “weaknesses in the state-capital nexus.” Food democracy, in the deepened, substantively enriched, radical understanding of both authors, is fundamentally contradicting and thus incompatible with the commodification of food.

Moving to the empirically grounded studies in the Research Topic, [Degens and Lapschies](#) provide an in-depth analysis of an alternative mode of producing and obtaining food, such as those advocated for by [Anderson](#). Their paper critically reviews the potential of German CSAs to democratize food systems. Drawing on Dewey’s concepts of the public and democratic experimentalism, they argue that CSAs constitute diverse food democratic experiments in themselves, and yet whilst the CSA movement strives to be as inclusive as possible, the practical and pragmatic challenges of building solidarity between those in very different positions (e.g., consumers, compared with growers) remain entrenched.

Staying with the topic of non-corporate food systems, [Pungas](#) provides insights into the dacha cooperatives and gardeners in Eastern Estonia, who still produce fresh and healthy food through self-provisioning, without being “professional” farmers or smallholders. Working with concepts of participatory, deep, thin, strong and open democracy, [Pungas](#) notes that dachas encompass essential characteristics of the “Western” concept of food democracy but cautions against excessive optimism and romanticization of such local food communities as they tend to remain exceptions and risk extinction unless valorized and reshaped through public discourse.

Picking up on the role of the local state, [Hoinle and Klosterkamp](#) explore the concept of food justice and its interlinkages with food democracy in relation to public catering in Southern Germany. They argue that school food is an inherently social justice issue, and that local municipalities, via public food procurement could provide an important leverage point for promoting sustainable food, accessible to all. They find that the means to facilitate more just and sustainable access to school food are still underexplored and the actual spaces for democratic participation to foster such developments are missing; the voices of pupils and parents are often unheard and the care work involved in food preparation is largely un-recognized in society more widely.

Continuing the theme of democratic participation, [Horstink et al.](#) provide a richly detailed study of Odemira, in Portugal, a region they characterize as the “epitome of the clash of agricultural models in Europe.” Drawing on participatory rural appraisal methodology, the authors argue that despite the EU’s green objectives, there is still heavy investment in destructive monocultures. In the case of Odemira, traditional, peasant, smallholder farmers are increasingly being cut off from access to markets, essential resources like water, and technical and institutional support. The research identified tension between political support for the neoliberal capitalist hyper-industrialization and hyper-specialization of agriculture aimed at global markets, and the lack of democratic, institutional or legal mechanisms for local small-scale farmers to influence decision-making.

Deepening attention to economic activities, [Middendorf and Herzig](#) draw on an integrative literature review to argue that actors engaged in economic activities and striving for food sovereignty have been overlooked in food sovereignty discourse. They suggest this could be because the historical origins of the movement focused on primary producers and so supply chain actors, such as food processors were often neglected. This blind spot around supply chain perspectives may also stem from negative associations with corporations, or with food processing in general. The paper synthesizes the literature into i) the conditions that shape economic activities striving for food security, ii) economic-related characteristics of actors and iii) organizational characteristics. The authors thus position their paper as a first step in including the organizational level and role of economic actors in food sovereignty studies and food system transformation.

In South Africa, [Lukwa et al.](#) examine the role of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), known locally as stokvels. These are informal, often women-led savings and borrowing groups and the study explores their potential to address dietary changes and promote healthier eating practices in low-income, urban settings. Based on stakeholder interviews, the paper argues that stokvels are perceived as vital social and economic entities, but due to their informal nature, they are not often able to partner with formal institutions. The findings suggest that stokvels are not necessarily aligned with food security and nutritional objectives, and highlights that their focus is often economic benefits and immediate food availability rather than the long-term health value of the food procured.

This SI explores the concept of food democracy through conceptual and empirical studies but leaves critical gaps, particularly regarding the environmental implications of such

systems. Key questions remain: Does small-scale, democratically organized food production reduce GHG emissions, biodiversity loss, or nutrient runoff? Under which conditions might respective potentials be unlocked? Can these systems scale to meet global food demands, or do they for example require conditions like dietary shifts in overconsuming regions—facilitated by integrated and systemic perspectives? Additionally, questions about the agricultural yields of these systems, as well as their stability and resilience over time, remain critical for evaluating their viability as alternatives to industrialized food systems. Beyond these socio-ecological considerations, there is a need for research that delves deeper into the mechanisms of triggering, sustaining and scaling systemic change, in particular under increasingly authoritarian political economic conditions, for which some of the papers of this SI might provide relevant theoretical tools. How can initiatives to democratize food systems expand under such conditions, or, conversely, can they serve as catalysts for broader societal transformation toward a more democratic, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable future?

The topic of food democracy points toward a planetary perspective but the SI reproduces the geographical bias in published research featuring Global North cases. Five of the contributions investigate cases in Europe (Horstink et al., Hoinle and Klosterkamp, Pungas, Degens and Lapschies, Middendorf and Herzig) and only one in Africa (Lukwa et al.). Anderson and Tilzey refer to the USA and Latin America, respectively. How can research and publications practices be changed in order to address this imbalance in future?

This SI provides examples that might challenge the pessimism of Adorno's famous quote from *Minima Moralia*, suggesting that change is indeed possible. However, this situation also compels us, as editors, to reflect critically on the context in which we operate. The increasing commodification of scientific knowledge and the use of public funds to benefit private companies are trends that cannot be ignored. Despite these challenges, this SI provides numerous insights, conceptual advances and rich empirical case studies, and we hope these will inspire further critical inquiry into food systems that are democratic, equitable, and environmentally sustainable.

Author contributions

AE: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MK: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AM: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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A correction has been made to this article. Details can be found at: [10.3389/fsufs.2025.1723510](https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2025.1723510).

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