

## Land foreignization in the USA and the transnational cooperation of social movements: the role of USFSA<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The present article seeks to analyze the foreignization of lands in the USA and the social reactions to the phenomenon, focusing on the transnational performance of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA). The research seeks to answer why social movements and organizations cooperate transnationally against the phenomenon of land grabbing. To reach the proposed objectives, qualitative research and the deductive method of analysis was developed. As for research techniques, the bibliographic and documentary review were used to characterize the phenomenon of land grabbing in the USA and to build the theoretical framework. Data collection was carried out through field research in Washington D.C. and semi-structured interviews with USFSA member and partner organizations. The results of the research reveals that the main reason why movements and organizations cooperate transnationally against the foreignization of lands is due to the need for global action to face global opponents.

**Keywords:** Foreignization of lands; United States; land grabbing; transnational movements; land investments.

### Resumo

O artigo analisa a estrangeirização de terras nos EUA e as reações sociais ao fenômeno, focando na atuação transnacional da US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA). Buscamos contribuir para o entendimento sobre a cooperação transnacional de movimentos e organizações sociais contra o fenômeno do *land grabbing*. Para suprir os objetivos propostos, foi desenvolvida uma pesquisa de natureza qualitativa. Revisão bibliográfica e pesquisa documental foram utilizadas para caracterizar o fenômeno do *land grabbing* nos EUA e para construir o referencial teórico. A coleta de dados foi realizada por meio de pesquisa de campo em Washington D.C. e entrevistas semi-estruturadas com organizações membros e parceiras da USFSA, presencial e virtualmente. Os resultados da pesquisa apontaram que a principal razão pela qual os movimentos e organizações cooperam transnacionalmente contra a estrangeirização de terras é devido à necessidade de ação global para fazer frente a adversários globais.

**Palavras-chave:** Estrangeirização de terras; Estados Unidos; *land grabbing*; movimentos transnacionais; investimentos em terras.

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## **La extranjerización de la tierra en los Estados Unidos y la cooperación transnacional de los movimientos sociales: el papel de la USFSA**

### **Resumen**

El presente artículo busca analizar la extranjerización de tierras en Estados Unidos y las reacciones sociales al fenómeno, enfocándose en el desempeño transnacional de la Alianza por la Soberanía Alimentaria de los Estados Unidos (USFSA). Buscamos responder por qué los movimientos y organizaciones sociales cooperan transnacionalmente contra el fenómeno del acaparamiento de tierras. Para cumplir con los objetivos propuestos, se desarrolló una investigación cualitativa y el método de análisis deductivo. En cuanto a las técnicas de investigación, se utilizó una revisión bibliográfica y documental para caracterizar el fenómeno del acaparamiento de tierras en Estados Unidos y construir el marco teórico. La recopilación de datos se llevó a cabo mediante una investigación de campo en Washington D.C. y entrevistas semi-estructuradas con miembros y organizaciones asociadas de la USFSA. Los resultados de la encuesta señalaron que la principal razón por la que los movimientos y las organizaciones cooperan transnacionalmente contra el estrangulamiento de la tierra se debe a la necesidad de una acción global para hacer frente a los adversarios globales.

**Palabras-clave:** Extranjerización de tierras; Estados Unidos; el acaparamiento de tierras; movimientos transnacionales; inversiones en tierras.

### **Introduction**

Land foreignization, also known as land grabbing or *acaparamiento de tierras*, is a complex contemporary phenomenon that has gained academic and political prominence for exposing asymmetries in the international political economy and for its negative repercussions on populations and the environment. Despite some conceptual and theoretical divergences, there is a reasonable consensus in the literature that the current global land rush – whose antecedents date back at least to the beginning of the colonization era – entered a new period of intensification in the 2000s, especially around 2007, when the international system was marked by the occurrence of the fourfold global crisis. The international crises involving the energy, climate, food and financial sectors contributed to substantial increase in investments in foreign lands by countries and multinational companies, triggering an outbreak of land grabbing (SCHUTTER, 2011; WHITE et al., 2012; SOMMERVILLE et al., 2014; PEREIRA, 2017; FAIRBAIRN, 2020).

In opposition to foreignization, social movements and organizations seek in transnational cooperation additional power resources to face the raids they consider harmful. Although this type of transnational cooperation is often observed when lands in peripheral countries are undergoing a process of foreignization – the case of Mozambique seems to be one of the most successful (see ARAGÃO, 2017) –, our interest turned to whether the reverse also occurred in the leading world economic power, that is, if the cooperation of

peripheral social movements and organizations were also valued and useful in central countries, such as the United States, which also experiences foreignization (LIMA, LOURENÇO, 2018).

To carry out this task, we established the following objectives: 1) to analyze foreignization of lands in the USA; 2) to review literature on transnational cooperation of global civil society; and 3) to analyze social reactions to land foreignization in the USA. Findings point, generally, that transnational social cooperation was indeed a strategy of the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA or Alliance) to oppose the seizure of US land either by individual foreign actors or in partnership with nationals. Based on this, we sought to assess how transnational cooperation is understood by this actor, including in terms of a power resource in the dispute over territory.

In addition to literature review and document analysis, research methods included data collection through semi-structured interviews conducted during field research in Washington, D.C., either face to face or virtually, with USFSA member and partner organizations.<sup>2</sup> In order to plan the interviews, an analysis model was previously developed (QUIVY & CAMPENHOUDT, 2005), which is a research strategy in Social Sciences that consists of building concepts and hypotheses that will be tested and confronted with observable data.

Following literature review and selection of the theoretical approaches that underpinned the analysis of data collected, we applied the technique of thematic or categorial analysis (QUIVY & CAMPENHOUDT, 2005), which consists of breaking down texts of the selected theoretical references into analogically similar units or categories, that is, based on the reading of theoretical references on transnational movements, we selected the themes or categories that are used in such approaches to analyze the phenomenon in question. After selecting the units or categories, we selected the aspects or elements that make up a certain category.

Categories help to provide a structured answer to the proposed question. The categories extracted here are based on three perspectives: transnational rural movements (WARREN, 2000; ROSSET & TORRES, 2002; YEROS & MOYO, 2005; BERNSTEIN, 2005; MARTINIELLO & NYAMSENDÁ, 2018), globalization from below (BRECHER, COSTELLO & SMITH, 2000; DELLA PORTA et al., 2006; WILLIAMS, 2007) and transnational advocacy networks (KECK & SIKKINK, 1998). Based on these approaches, five analytical categories were extracted: context, social composition, strategies, transnational cooperation and outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> Field research started on February 2, 2020. However, on March 11, 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis was decreed, and mobility was reduced in that country. From then on, interviews were conducted virtually.

**Table 1: Analytical categories.**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Studied aspects</b>
C1: Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land grabbing in the USA;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social conflict;</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
C2: Social actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• USFSA;</li> <li>• Social composition;</li> <li>• Organizational framework;</li> <li>• Requirements and claims;</li> </ul>
C3: Action strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action strategies;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political sway;</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Relationship with the government;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional participation;</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Influence over public policies formulation;</li> </ul>
C4: Transnational cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Search for international allies;                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transnational action;</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
C5: Outcomes achieved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcomes achieved;</li> <li>• Proposed alternatives.</li> </ul>

Source: Elaborated by the author, by applying the thematic or categorial analysis to qualitative data (QUIVY & CAMPENHOUDT, 2009).

The thematic unit *context* was the first category identified in the theoretical references, since these papers analyze transnational movements within a context in which land grabbing and its consequent social conflict take place. Such references also consider it important to explain collective action based on the analysis of *social actors*, since actors' social composition can determine their stance in the context in question. *Action strategies* constitute another relevant unit / category for analyzing transnational movements, as they help to understand how movements respond to the contentious context. *Transnational cooperation*, in turn, appears in the analyzes as an important factor to explain the performance of these movements, as acting across borders and the search for international allies allows for boosting their achievements. Finally, *achieved outcomes* also appear as a key issue when the reference texts propose to analyze transnational movements, since they point to movements' success as proponents of social changes.

Thus, by applying categorial analysis, that is, extracting units and categories from selected theoretical texts, we defined as key categories to analyze a transnational movement the following: context, social actors, action strategies, transnational cooperation and achieved outcomes. Based on these defined categories, we developed an instrument for data collection, the interview script, containing questions focused on these five categories. In other words, we sought to understand and explain the transnational movement carried out by the US Food Sovereignty Alliance with the support of categories extracted from the theoretical references. Data collected revealed a convergence between the explanatory elements of the theories and the Alliances' actual performance.

The article is organized as follows: in section two we discuss foreignization in United States; in the third section we discuss the theoretical-conceptual approaches on

transnational rural movements; section four presents the results of the analysis of USFSA and, in the last section, we present the final considerations.

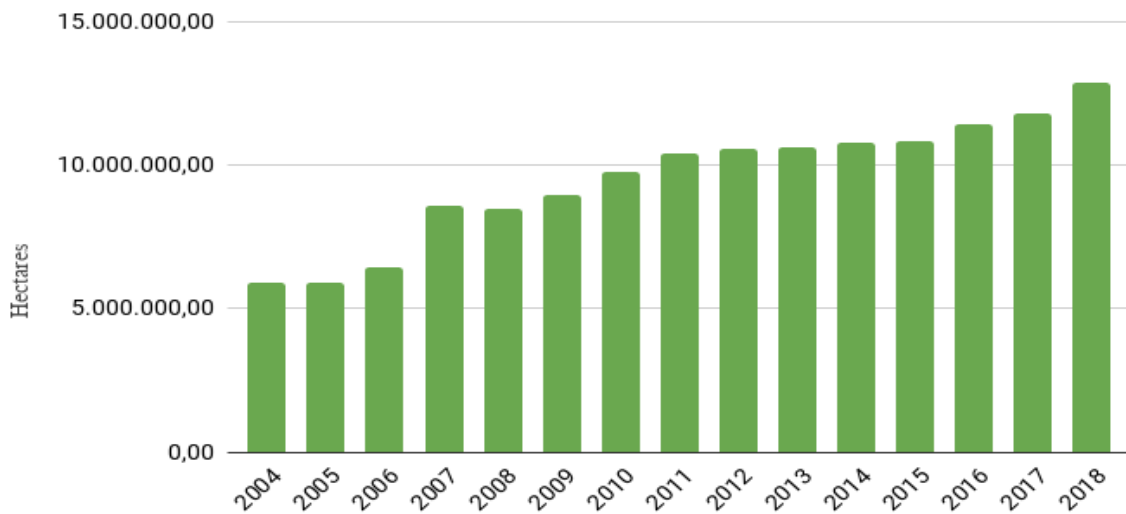
### **Foreignization in the USA: a developed country as a target of large-scale land investment process**

The main targets of land foreignization are countries considered to be peripheral in the international system, which are located in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Notwithstanding that, the phenomenon of land grabbing also affects developed countries such as the United States. Thus, seeking to contribute to fill the gap in analyses of land foreignization in developed countries, we aim to characterize the United States while a target of such process. To that end, we use data from the Foreign Holdings of U.S. Agricultural Land 2018 report, provided by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in compliance with AFIDA (The Agricultural Foreign Investment Act) of 1978, which is the American legislation that governs land purchase by foreigners in the country.

A significant increase in foreign investments in North American lands was observed between 2006 and 2007, corroborating literature on the subject that points out an increase in international demand for land in the context of the fourfold world crisis. According to USDA report data (2018), about 31.8 million acres of US farmland are owned by foreigners – a figure that represents about 12.9 million hectares and 2.5% of US land. The main areas of investment identified in the report are forest land (53%), investments in land for agricultural production (20%) and pasture (25%) (USDA, 2018).

The USDA report (2018) highlights that land ownership by foreigners remained stable between 2000 and 2006. Then, in 2007 a significant change was observed, when 1.4 million hectares were no longer owned by US citizens. Chart 1 illustrates the advance of foreign investments, as well as the periods of substantial variation between 2004 and 2018, the period corresponding to data provided by the USDA:

**Chart 1: Land foreignization in the USA (2004-2018).**



Source: elaborated by the author using data from USDA's Foreign Holdings of Agricultural Land reports from 2004 to 2018.

Among top investors in farmland in the US are Canada, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and the UK, which together account for around 34% of transactions. Canada owns around 3,439,827 hectares of the land in foreign hands, which corresponds to 26% of land transactions (USDA, 2018).

There was a rise in land investments by companies in the financial sector. The National Farm Coalition (NFFC) (2012a) and Thomson (2017) explain that three factors make US land attractive: low interest rates, high commodity prices, and the approximately 25% rise in land value in 2012. Fairbairn (2020) adds that the food crisis and concerns about water scarcity contributed to increase these investments.

The role of investment companies is also important to explain land rush in the US. The NFFC (2012) highlights the role of AEW Capital Management in encouraging aggressive investments in US land by conducting a survey on the advantages of investing in US land. According to AEW (2011), the main advantage are the attractive returns, since agricultural land has guaranteed a return of 10% to 13% in the last two decades, with little volatility, thus reducing risks involving investments.

In this context, Fairbairn (2020) estimates that investments in North American agricultural land may reach 15 billion, a value deemed negligible when compared to total Wall Street transactions. Nevertheless, it deserves attention due to both its growth trend and the social repercussions for traditional communities. Considering the financial sector, TIAA-CREF, an American pension fund, also appears as an important stakeholder in this process. Despite being a domestic company, it holds about US\$ 23 trillion in assets, of which five to 15 billion are directed to investments in the agricultural sector. Furthermore, it

announced a new corporate investment company called Global Agriculture LLC, whose composition has US, British and Canadian capital (NFFC, 2012b).

The trend towards increased investments in agricultural land by foreigners in the US, encouraged by companies such as AEW and by political actors as profitable investments, is a process that has met the resistance of civil society organizations such as the NFFC and rural community-based representatives, which have been warning about the externalities of that phenomenon.

## **Social movements opposing globalization**

In this section, we present the three main theoretical approaches and corresponding concepts that contribute to analyzing transnational cooperation in opposing land foreignization. Three main perspectives are discussed: that of transnational rural social movements (YEROS & MOYO, 2005; SCHERER-WARREN, 2000; ROSSET & TORRES, 2002; BERNSTEIN, 2005; BORRAS JR., 2010; MARTINIELLO & NYAMSENDA, 2018), the approach called globalization from below (BRECHER, COSTELLO & SMITH, 2000; DELLA PORTA et al., 2006; WILLIAMS, 2007) and the approach of Transnational Advocacy Networks (TAN), which presents the concept of boomerang pattern (KECK & SIKKINK, 1998). Each theory provides arguments that are considered valuable explanatory elements in our analysis.

### *Transnational rural movements*

The first approach, which deals with transnational rural movements, considers rural movements to be the cradle of opposition to neoliberal globalization (MOYO & YEROS, 2005) and proposes the concept of food sovereignty as an alternative to the agribusiness production model. According to its authors, neoliberal globalization, characterized by an intensive and extensive agricultural model, tends to hamper access to land for smallholder farmers who are not incorporated into this production process.

Moyo and Yeros (2005) argue that there was a revival of rural movements in the 1990s as a reaction to both austerity measures and incentives to mobility of investments at a global level, which affect traditional communities, especially those in rural areas. Other authors, as Scherer-Warren (2000), Rosset and Torres (2002), Bernstein (2005), Martiniello and Nyamsenda (2018), corroborate that argument suggesting that contemporary rural movements arise in opposition to neoliberal tendencies that produce externalities, especially for the rural poor.

The main claim presented by those movements is related to agrarian reform, that is, to democratization of access to land, and their main strategies for reaching this goal are related to land occupation. As to redemocratization of the decision-making system referred to agrarian and food issues, rural movements seek to demystify the view of land as a commodity, and perform actions based on collective land tenure.

The emphasis on disseminating food sovereignty – understood as the right of peoples to have access to culturally healthy and ecologically produced food, and to decide democratically and autonomously on how to produce such foods – is a fundamental aspect that congregates collective action in the field. The concept of food sovereignty was firstly used by Via Campesina and represents a counterpoint to the neoliberal concept of “food security” disseminated by FAO and other international organizations, which for decades defended agricultural exports as the best way to provide food to the world. Food sovereignty, thus, is a concept that stems from rural social movements and counteracts the industrial agriculture model, governed by large corporations (MCMICHAEL, 2016).

It is also important to highlight, among the approaches on transnational rural movements, Borras Jr.'s (2010) approach to Transnational Agrarian Movements (TAM). The author lists Via Campesina, the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) and the International Land Coalition (ILC) as the main coalitions that represent TAM. Borras Jr. argues that there has been an effort to make room for civil society demands related to agrarian development at international forums and that, to some extent, in the 1990s such demands were accepted by intergovernmental and non-governmental agencies.

The main contribution of the approach to rural movements transnational action is to identify the different social constituents of the coalitions and how such differences are useful to understand the stances and demands of each movement. According to Borras Jr. (2010), class analysis is considered a key factor to identify the ideological and political differences of the TAM. Therefore, actors such as IFAP and ILC, whose social base comprises higher social classes such as medium and large-scale farmers linked to agribusiness, have a closer relationship with International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and advocate for agrarian policies rather oriented towards the concept of food security and industrial agriculture. On the other hand, transnational coalitions such as Via Campesina and the IPC for Food Sovereignty, whose social composition comes from poor and landless peasants, make political demands for redistributive agrarian reform and food sovereignty (BORRAS JR., 2010).



*Globalization from below*

The second approach, whose main authors are Brecher, Costello and Smith (2000), Della Porta et al. (2006) and Williams (2007), also presents elements that help to understand the transnational role of social movements. The authors present the perspective of globalization from below, or bottom-up globalization, proposing that, in response to the externalities of the initial globalization promoted by states and multinational companies, another kind of globalization emerges promoted by actors at the grassroots of civil society. The authors argue that the movements cooperate to confront the international corporate actors and neoliberal precepts that emerged in the first wave of globalization. Networking action can be considered as the main characteristic of such transnational contention.

As a reaction to problems stemming from neoliberal globalization, actors in the global civil society, including NGOs and social movements, started to cooperate internationally, especially in the 1990s. The phenomenon became known as “globalization from below” or “bottom-up globalization” (BRECHER, COSTELLO & SMITH, 2000; VIEIRA & MENEZES, 2005; DELLA PORTA et al., 2006; MILANI & LENIADO, 2007; VIEIRA, 2011; BUDINI, 2010; WILLIAMS, 2007).

Also called global justice or globalization of human rights, this grassroots globalization is considered by researchers in the area to be key for confronting corporate actors in the international system. Brecher, Costello and Smith (2000), who were among the first in adopting the term globalization from below, explain that although such movements start from different struggles, such as local campaigns against genetically modified plants, protection of indigenous peoples and union organization in poor countries, their interests tend to converge through a process that the authors call a positive confluence, in which the movements become aware that their struggles are global and start to construct a common global movement.

So, Brecher, Costello and Smith (2000) conceive globalization from below as a movement by which, just as corporate and political elites organize to promote their agendas, grassroots actors also connect their struggles to promote their demands and interests within the global economy. The authors explain that the factor uniting movements and influencing transnational cooperation is the common goal of achieving sufficient democratic control over states, corporations and markets. This aspect of pursuing democratic control, which characterizes movements that promote globalization from below, is also present in the perspective of transnational rural movements that seek democratization of access to land.

Della Porta et al. (2006) emphasize that the various dimensions of globalization influence the formation of a global civil society that acts transnationally through international institutions. Thus, transnational movements can be seen as a response to the increasing

institutionalization of world politics. In view of this, they propose the concept of global social movement, which is understood as supranational networks of actors that define their causes as global and organize campaigns and protests that encompass more than one State. The authors identify three conditions for the existence of a global movement: the construction of a global identity, a repertoire of non-conventional actions and the existence of organizational networks. The common interpretation of reality can be conceived as the fundamental factor that characterizes a global social movement.

In his study on contemporary cooperativism, Williams (2007) also contributes to characterize the perspective of globalization from below, which he understands as a set of diverse movements, groups and organizations that seek to reconfigure the global economy in order to develop a socially fairer system. Such groups carry out arrangements that transcend national and regional borders. Actors such as the WTO, World Bank and IMF, which play a key role in leading economic globalization, tend to limit the participation of certain social sectors. In response, cooperatives of producers, housing and financial sectors, among others, develop an effort to build a third way of action between untamed capitalism and centralized socialism. Williams considers this third way to be healthier because it allows greater participation in benefits.

Therefore, globalization from below can be deemed as a movement that emerges due to the need to oppose the status quo, whose model is not participatory. The democratic aspect appears again as something fundamental in the organization of movements that aim at improving the levels of participation of marginalized actors through formulation of global policies.

### *Transnational advocacy networks*

The last approach that we consider important for understanding the phenomenon of transnational movements is Transnational Advocacy Networks (TAN), developed by Keck and Sikkink (1998), which proposes that lack of political openness in domestic sphere impels organizations to reach international spheres in order to achieve goals at domestic level.

According to Keck and Sikkink (1998), transnational networks arise for three main reasons: when there is a lack of dialogue between domestic groups and rulers around a given problem; when activists or political entrepreneurs engage in network action for considering this can boost the reach of campaigns; or when there are international channels for interaction, such as conferences, that make room for the consolidation of action networks. This approach presents the concept of *boomerang pattern* to characterize the transnational dynamics of connection between organizations and social movements. Being characteristic of transnational advocacy networks, the boomerang pattern of action emerges when

domestic NGOs or groups seek international allies to pressure their states from international arenas, as international connections can amplify their demands, granting greater legitimacy to their claims and actions.

Transnational advocacy networks are characterized by open and fluid relationships between well-informed actors who are committed to working in specific areas on behalf of others. Such networks tend to be political in nature and use information as a central factor in their relationships, promoting the exchange of information and individuals within their arrangements. The main contribution of these networks, according to the authors, is related to their ability to propose changes in values and principles within the scope of debates related to human rights, women's rights, children's health, indigenous peoples etc. Keck and Sikkink also highlight the role of these networks in proposing alternatives and information that redirect debates in the international arena. Thus, TAN are responsible for creating categories or frames that can be deemed frameworks within which the organizations operationalize the information and alternatives that form the basis of their campaigns.

The three selected approaches present important elements that help understand the transnational cooperation between movements and organizations, especially in opposing land grabbing and on other agrarian issues. To better understand this opposition, we sought to analyze the performance of USFSA, which is a North American coalition of rural and non-rural organizations that seek to spread the notion of food sovereignty within the US.

### **Reactions from US civil society: the transnational role of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance**

To understand social reactions to land grabbing in the United States, we sought to analyze the performance of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance, the main coalition of rural and grassroots movements that, although being domestic, has international connections. Therefore, the USFSA can be considered the main expression of transnational cooperation in opposition to land foreignization in the United States. Based on the categories described in Table 1, this section presents a systematic description of the main results achieved from field research. Generally, there was a confluence between the selected approaches and the empirical outcomes of this research. The approaches selected in this study propose that cooperation between grassroots movements and organizations, or from below, is a response to the actions of corporate and central actors in the scope of neoliberal economic globalization.

## *Context*

The main aspects analyzed in this category refer to land grabbing and the conflict of interests produced by such process. The interviews showed the development of the phenomenon of land foreignization in the USA, as well as social conflicts generated by this context.

According to NFFC (2020), a national coalition of American family farmers, American agricultural land has become the target of international pension funds and, in this context, it highlights the operation of TIAA CREF fund, which has made heavy investments in the US. ActionAid USA (2020), an organization fighting poverty and injustice, reports about the USFSA's involvement and solidarity in local struggles in Detroit, Philadelphia and California, where black and smallholder communities face difficulty in accessing land for farming. The organization also emphasizes the existence of a kind of *urban grabbing*, characterized by disputes over land for farming also in urban regions that were once large industrial plants.

The process that limits access to land has exacerbated another problem that is part of the context of North American society: food insecurity. WhyHunger (2020), one of the founding organizations of the Alliance, warns about the incidence of food insecurity in about 15% to 18% of the population. A *New York Times* article titled "How Hunger Persists in a Rich Country Like America" corroborates this data by informing that about 37 million people experience food insecurity in the country (LEBLANC, 2020).

In addition to food insecurity, another aspect is important in the North American context: the lack of political openness, especially at the federal level, reported by all the interviewed organizations. ActionAid USA explains: "[...] at the federal level it has been quite difficult. It takes a lot of time, resources and capacity to have influence on D.C., it exceeds the capacity of many groups" (ACTIONAID USA, 2020).

The trend in this context is to get worse, as around 162 million hectares of land will be for sale due to population aging. Rural movements are worried about the use of these lands. Thus, the organizations propose the collective purchase and tenure of land as an alternative to guarantee what the movements consider a "just land transition" (THAPAR, 2020).

The valorization of food sovereignty as a response to the context of land grabbing and large-scale investments in land is presented as the main guiding element of reaction by the analyzed groups.

### *Social composition*

USFSA is an American alliance of farmers, created in 2010, which seeks to disseminate the concept of food sovereignty within the US and aims to end poverty, rebuild local food economies and improve democratic control over political decisions regarding the food system (USFSA, 2018).

In this analytical category, three aspects were addressed: social composition, organizational framework and demands and claims. Regarding social composition, a diversity of actors was identified. ActionAid USA (2020), an organization that actively participated in the founding of the Alliance, reported that groups such as rural worker organizations, urban primarily working-class groups, organizations from black, Latinos, indigenous and immigrant communities (often undocumented immigrants) constitute the social base of the coalition. The list of its founding members also reveals this diversity: Agriculture Missions, Community to Community Development, Food First, Food Chain Workers Alliance, Grassroots International, Maryknoll Office for Global Consensus, National Family Farm Coalition, Pesticide Action Network of North America, Presbyterian Hunger Program, WhyHunger.

In terms of organizational framework, the Alliance has different collectives that discuss specific topics at regional and national levels. The result of such discussions, however, is channeled to the national general assemblies. The USFSA is formed by grassroots organizations and NGO that meet at periodic general assemblies to decide the actions to promote food sovereignty, and whose decisions are taken by consensus.

A relevant aspect that emerged during field research regarding the organizational framework is the Alliance's effort, through its 2015 structural reform, to put grassroots organizations at the forefront of the agenda. With this they seek to improve their participatory method and confer greater legitimacy to their actions. In their interviews, ActionAid USA (2020) and WhyHunger (2020) revealed that the most significant changes took place in the coordination body and that the grassroots organizations came to be at the forefront of coordination; within the scope of the secretariat, NGO that have professionalized human resources and financial resources began to develop support for logistical operations of grassroots organizations.

As to their demands and claims, USFSA members seek to promote food sovereignty and democratization of both access to land and decisions regarding the agrifood system. ActionAid USA (2020) highlights that the demands and claims refer to pursuit of food justice and healthy eating, promotion of seed banks, ban of large fishing vessels and of structural racism and fight against agribusiness power.

Therefore, these data corroborate the approaches of transnational rural movements, especially as put by Yeros and Moyo (2005) and Martiniello and Nyamsenda (2018), who

argue for greater participation in agrifood system decision-making through dissemination of food sovereignty as an alternative to agribusiness and privatization of food production, transport and distribution processes.

The Alliance, thus, manages to unite the demands of diverse groups such as black and indigenous people, small farmers and immigrants, into a common demand for food sovereignty. In this context, the perspective of globalization from below proposed by Brecher, Costello and Smith (2000) helps approach the movement's dynamics, through the concept of positive confluence, since movements start from different struggles, but their interests converge by defining a common interest.

The TAM theory, proposed by Borras Jr. (2010), also presents important elements related to findings on the social composition of the Alliance. The perspective proposes that analyzing the social base of the movements helps understand their political stance. In this case, the fact that the Alliance has a diversified social base and grassroots movements helps explain the organization's political positions regarding the promotion of food sovereignty to the detriment of activities related to agribusiness.

### *Action strategies*

Generally, we identified as key USFSA strategies: political education, the boomerang pattern of action, discreet lobbying, learning exchange and transnational action. As for strategies to promote food sovereignty, USFSA website shows actions that seek to stabilize prices for both farmers and consumers, at local, national and global levels, by fighting food speculation and consolidating strategic domestic reserves.

In addition, it highlights the search to equalize power of actors in food systems by reducing corporate power over public policies in the agri-food sector and by convening stakeholders' representative councils for food policies at local and state levels (USFSA, 2020). This latter recommendation, the convening of councils, helps characterize the actions aimed at public policies carried out by USFSA member and partner organizations and is related to the pursuit of greater democratic control, which is highlighted by the perspectives studied here.

Another relevant strategy is political awareness developed by the organization, whose main element is the dissemination of the concepts of food sovereignty and agroecology (NFFC, 2020). This strategy also appears in discussions about transnational rural movements. Via Campesina, creator of the concept, seeks to disseminate agroecological practices by means of transnational action and international arenas that allow exchange of information between organizations. The strategy is important, as it helps in the

convergence of movements and in legitimating USFSA's actions. Furthermore, it seeks to strengthen the practices of grassroots movements.

In this sense, agroecology promotion constitutes a legitimate convergence point for the different movements that form USFSA. This aspect of defining a common point shared by diverse actors is corroborated by Keck and Sikkink's (1998) approach that considers that a shared goal is a fundamental aspect for the formation of transnational action networks.

The NFFC (2020), in an interview, explains that promoting agroecology is challenging because of US international statements that tend to marginalize these more sustainable practices. To offset that, the movements created the Food Sovereignty Prize, an award offered by the Alliance for the best practices in food sovereignty at national and international levels. WhyHunger (2020), one of the Alliance's main allies in fighting land grabbing and promoting food sovereignty, explains that the award seeks to denounce the World Food Prize, financed by agribusiness companies.

The development of an internal information system that launches action alerts and statements on US foreign policy related to agri-food issues is also part of the range of actions made possible by USFSA. During the interview, NFFC explained that this was the way found by individual members to strengthen their sway on political debates, and this formal internal space allows members to connect with and count on the support of allies and circulate information, in the sense of adopting measures in a timely manner in the face of policies formulation.

Discreet lobbying also features in USFSA's range of strategic actions. Regarding this, the role of IATP, a member of the Alliance, is worth highlighting. It is an institute that works with advocacy focused on trade policy issues, developing analyzes and proposing alternative policies related to the agricultural sector. In addition, it seeks to politically influence local legislation on issues as pesticide regulation and school feeding programs, besides acting nationally by organizing briefings with members of the US Congress. IATP also works at the transnational level by participating in international debates on trade policies linked to the agricultural sector. Furthermore, they seek to exchange information with organizations from the global South to better understand their struggles and express solidarity with them. During the interview, IATP reported on the importance of acting in coalitions and highlighted the role of organizations from the global South in proposing policies and alternatives.

The discreet lobbying strategy of IATP and of the Social Network, as well as the construction of an internal information system are in line with the approach of Keck and Sikkink (1998), which proposes that transnational networks tend to have few activists and use information strategically. During the interviews, we observed that few activists take action and information is strategically used.

Transnational action can also be considered a relevant strategy for USFSA. The organization has, among its collectives, the International Relations collective, which demonstrates its effort to act transnationally and seek international allies. In this regard, NFFC (2020) explains that the USFSA is considered a space for collective action that seeks international allies, such as international farmers' organizations, and such connections use the Alliance space to find intersectional solidarity and build collective power. Transnational cooperation strategy will be addressed in more details in the next category.

### *Transnational cooperation*

The category that deals with transnational cooperation, which can also be considered an action strategy used by the organizations, allows analyzing the search for international allies and the process of transnational action of these networks. In general, we observed that what leads organizations to cooperate transnationally is related to the need to respond globally to global challenges.

USFSA member organizations and their partners were categorical in stating that global challenges need global action. In this context, agribusiness power appears as the global challenge faced by organizations that find in international arrangements the answer to fight global challenges. According to NFFC (2020), there is a recognition by the Alliance's organizations that the struggles go beyond North American borders and that US agribusiness actions have an international impact on rural communities. WhyHunger (2020), in this context, explains that "neoliberalism is a global phenomenon, so the response to it must be global" (WHYHUNGER, 2020). ActionAid USA (2020) and NAMA (2020) also support this argument of the need for a global response. The first one reports that its approach to the Alliance was due to the perception that both worked with rural issues and had agribusiness and large-scale agriculture as challenges at the local level. NAMA, in turn, considers land grabbing and ocean grabbing as global phenomena in which actors transcend borders to displace and exploit resources.

The aspect of responding globally to global problems is related to propositions in the literature pointing to the formation of a common identity that encourages transnational action. Such identity is based, according to information collected in interviews, on the fact that the movements have opponents in common. In this regard, Brecher, Costello and Smith (2000) propose the existence of a positive confluence, while Della Porta et al. (2006) point to the construction of a common identity as a condition for the emergence of a global network. Keck and Sikkink (1998), in the context of the tactical typology, explain that symbolic politics foresees the creation of a common identity that precedes the emergence of a transnational advocacy network.



The globalization from below and TAN perspectives are also important to explain the transnational performance of these movements, by highlighting the aspect of their international solidarity and the construction of a collective movement based on a common problem. According to USFSA member organizations, the search for foreign allies also aims at expressing solidarity to common problems.

Regarding the search for foreign allies, the interviews reveal that this action aims at acquiring know-how from international allies. NFFC (2020), ActionAid USA (2020) and WhyHunger (2020) state that organizations and movements in other countries, especially in the global South, are seen as learning sources and this aspect is also a strategic way to diminishing North American exceptionalism that is part of the culture of the country. According to ActionAid (2020), the connection established with organizations in the South improves learning from local communities abroad that are part of the context of struggle for land. WhyHunger (2020), an organization that also participated in the genesis of USFSA, presents a practical example that illustrates this aspect by revealing that the Alliance is inspired, especially regarding the issue of expanding democratic participation, in arrangements of Brazilian civil society such as the CONSEA and the Brazilian Association of Agroecology. The IATP, in turn, highlights the importance of Brazilian groups such as MST in mobilizing people and promoting changes in the scope of trade negotiations.

The NFFC, regarded as one of the main organizations of the Alliance, became the first member of Via Campesina in North America. According to NFFC (2020), the Alliance also holds joint events with Via Campesina, such as the *Encuentro de Agroecología* or webinars held in a collaborative way, in addition to the production and dissemination of statements proposed by the organizations. In terms of the relationship with MST, the NFFC (2020) explains that there is exchange through joint ventures and participation in events, as well as exchange of members through Friends of the MST in the USA.

### *Positive outcomes of USFSA operation*

The main results achieved by the USFSA are related to the creation of a space for dialogue between different actors within the US. In addition, international solidarity and dissemination of the concept and practices of food sovereignty appear as important factors among the coalition's achievements.

As for the creation of a space for dialogue, USFSA aims at promoting interaction between different actors in discussions on agrarian issues. NFFC (2020) explains that, despite not being measurable, the promotion of dialogue is one of the best outcomes of USFSA, saying that the Alliance tries, for example, to show large-scale farmers what agricultural policies can mean for the lives of native people or Latin American immigrants.

Another significant outcome concerns the political awareness promoted by the organization, especially regarding dissemination of the concept of food sovereignty. In this regard, NFFC (2020) argues that the Alliance's work contributes to the improvement of interpersonal relationships and to the intersectional understanding of the political economy of food sovereignty. In this context, WhyHunger (2020) reaffirms that the valorization of the concept of food sovereignty, which emerges from rural movements in the Global South, is a form of deconstructing North American exceptionalism.

The development of international solidarity is another relevant aspect within the positive outcomes of the Alliance. A relevant factor in this regard is that US citizens themselves, within organizations and movements, demonstrate their opposition to land grabbing and sympathize with struggles in communities outside the US. In this context, NFFC (2020) adds that the accountability capacity of US citizens, within the scope of international arenas, is much more effective compared to that of citizens of countries that receive the investments.

The dissemination of food sovereignty practices is also among the main positive results of USFSA. Besides promoting a more sustainable and inclusive agricultural model, the alternatives are aimed at collective land tenure. WhyHunger (2020) highlights the three most common practices of food sovereignty: the Community Land Trust (CLT) that constitutes non-profit organizations to collectively manage land on behalf of a community, thus enhancing democratization of land, even if still providing for access to land through the market; and the Community-supported Agriculture (CSA), an initiative in which consumers order organic baskets and pay farmers in advance, thus reducing the distance between farmers and consumers, strengthening the local economy and valuing food from agroecological agriculture.

Based on these results, we can observe their relationship with theories of transnational rural movements, which claim that, in practice, such movements have a strong focus on political awareness and on the proposition of alternatives. The perspectives of globalization from below and transnational advocacy networks are also related to these outcomes, as they highlight the aspect of international solidarity and the development of a collective movement that establishes a common problem, such as issues involving land investments. Furthermore, they also highlight the role of global movements in proposing alternatives; in the case of USFSA, the promotion of food sovereignty and agroecology.

## **Final remarks**

In our view, the selected approaches have important explanatory elements to understand the performance of USFSA as a transnational cooperation against land

foreignization: the lack of political openness domestically leads to acting in international arenas and to the need to confront international corporate actors globally. However, we found that the approaches of transnational rural movements and globalization from below are more effective for understanding the dynamics of USFSA and transnational rural movements in placing grassroots organizations at the center of decisions. The TAN approach, in turn, is important for explaining how NGOs and social movements seek international allies, as is the case with USFSA, when there is no dialogue at the domestic level. The approach, however, is rather focused on the performance of advocacy networks, that is, organizations that advocate for the movements and do not place them at the center of the decision-making processes or at the center of the opposition.

Despite USFSA's difficulty in maintaining NGO and philanthropic organizations only as logistical support for the action of grassroots movements, we understand that there is an effort in practice to encourage local rural movements to play a leading role. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to identify this tendency in the arrangements of movements related to areas such as human rights, the environment and women's rights.

We also consider, based on our analysis, that transnational cooperation can be deemed a strategy of rural social movements that cooperate because of three main reasons: the need to confront international corporate actors; the need for legitimacy and for strengthening actions, achieved through international solidarity; and the existence of technological resources that allow connection between the movements.

This type of transnational arrangement against the phenomenon of land foreignization, despite its limitations, shows positive aspects such as the dissemination of the concept of food sovereignty within the USA, the main country from where policies related to the food and agricultural sector originate, and the shared information and practices regarding the adoption of food sovereignty and agroecology. Added to the greater valorization and solidarity in relation to grassroots movements and traditional communities, these aspects help reverse, albeit slowly, the changes in the agrarian sector fomented by the expansion of agribusiness, whose main feature is the separation between human beings and the land.

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### **Declaration of Individual Contribution**

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The scientific contributions present in the article were built together by the authors. The tasks of conception and design, preparation and writing of the manuscript, as well as critical review were developed in a group. The author Erbenia Lourenço de Oliveira was especially responsible for the theoretical-conceptual development and for the acquisition of data and their interpretation and analysis.

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