



# Solidarities from Below in the Making of Emancipatory Rural Politics: Insights from Food Sovereignty Struggles in the Basque Country

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## Abstract

Exclusionary and regressive politics are on the rise globally. How do food sovereignty struggles help counter these forces? We ground our analysis on how EHNE-Bizkaia, a Vía Campesina member organisation in the Basque Country, conceptualises and practices food sovereignty. Inspired by Massey's 'politics of place beyond place' and Featherstone's work on left politics and solidarity, we shed light on the ways that this organisation mobilises food sovereignty to establish political bonds between those marginalised by neo-liberalism, helping to construct political identities and enact forms of subaltern agency that challenge uneven power relations and geographies. We argue that 'solidarity from below' is key in building an emancipatory rural politics rooted in class-based alliances, intersectionality, and internationalism as well as non-exclusionary notions of sovereignty. The article provides theoretical and empirical insights on what constitutes an emancipatory politics of food sovereignty that has the potential to act as a counterforce to right-wing populism.

## Introduction

The post-2008 economic crisis catalysed the (re-)emergence of radical politics from both the left and populist, far-right spectrum of politics. Right-wing populism, expressed by regressive and exclusionary nationalist/gender/race politics is on the rise; in some countries, it has a strong rural constituency, as was evident by recent elections in Europe, the USA, and elsewhere. How are rural social movements in some places contributing to block the emergence and proliferation of these forces? How does food sovereignty help to build an emancipatory rural politics antagonistic to right-wing populism? We address these questions by looking at food sovereignty

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struggles in the Basque Country. We explore the ways that food sovereignty potentially offers opportunities to counter the emergence and expansion of exclusionary nationalist oppositions to neo-liberal globalisation.

Food sovereignty, as defined by the transnational agrarian movement *Vía Campesina*, aims to build a society 'free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations' (*Vía Campesina* 2007). Akram-Lodhi (2015, p. 567) argues this 'requires transcending the social conditions and relations of capitalism and developing a post-capitalist agrarian – and non-agrarian alternative'. While recent calls have been made to recognise food sovereignty struggles as plural and diverse (Desmarais and Wittman 2014; Schiavoni 2017), there is a need for more research that provides theoretical insights on what constitutes an emancipatory politics of food sovereignty.

Drawing on Featherstone's (2008, 2012) notion of 'solidarity from below', we argue that establishing political bonds between marginalised social groups, through which social actors then construct political identities and enact forms of subaltern agency aimed at confronting and challenging uneven power relations and geographies, is crucial to advance the emancipatory project of food sovereignty. In a context of rising right-wing populism, we claim that advancing food sovereignty through 'solidarity from below' helps to cultivate a left politics throughout society that thwarts the growth of exclusionary spaces of politics and forms of identity. As such, we suggest that 'solidarity from below' is the basis of what Borras (2019) sees as necessary for the construction of a class-conscious left-wing political force as counter-current to right-wing populism. This involves engaging in a politics based on class-based alliances, intersectionality and internationalism; it also entails the construction of non-exclusionary notions of sovereignty, thus rejecting all forms of ethno-nationalism.

The article focuses on the Basque Country for three main reasons. First, food sovereignty is central in configuring rural politics and influencing the nature of activism in Basque society at large. Second, in the Basque Country, food sovereignty is also linked to the goals of self-determination, thus bringing into discussion the connections between food sovereignty, political sovereignty, and nationalist politics, especially when considering how inclusion/exclusion, and ethnicity issues are addressed. Third, the Basque Country is currently an exception to the growth of right-wing populism in Spain, and Europe more generally. By analysing this case, we also aim to contribute to debates on the conditions that favour or impede the emergence of right-wing populism, particularly in rural areas. We ground our analysis on the historical and leading social actor of Basque food sovereignty: *Euskal Herriko Nekazarien Elkartasuna*, (EHNE)-Bizkaia, a small farmers' union and member of *Vía Campesina*.

This article draws on qualitative research conducted between 2013 and 2018 in the Basque province of Bizkaia. Calvário and Desmarais, separately, were participant observers of EHNE-Bizkaia activities at different periods in 2013 and 2014. Calvário conducted 28 interviews with EHNE leaders and agroecological producers while Desmarais interviewed 12 EHNE-Bizkaia leaders and representatives of non-governmental organisations. In 2015, Desmarais and Azkarraga organised research involving group interviews with 46 Basque youth who had recently started to grow food and 10 interviews with established producers.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, Azkarraga interviewed

3 EHNE-Bizkaia leaders on specific questions regarding class, gender, and sovereignty. In the article, we use the real names of the interviewees.

The article is structured as follows. Section 'Solidarity from below and emancipatory politics' elaborates on the relationship between solidarity from below and emancipatory politics. Section 'Basque food sovereignty struggles: engaging in emancipatory rural politics' analyses how EHNE-Bizkaia conceptualises and practices food sovereignty, and how it builds 'subaltern geographies of connection' and navigates class, generational, gender, race, and sovereignty issues. Section 'Conclusion' concludes by discussing how EHNE-Bizkaia's work constructs an emancipatory politics of food sovereignty and how this contributes to impede the emergence of right-wing populism.

### **Solidarity from below and emancipatory politics**

In this article, we adopt Borrás's (2019, p. 3) broad understanding of contemporary right-wing populism as being:

a regressive, conservative, or reactionary type of populism that promotes or defends capitalism in the name of 'the people'; in its current manifestation, it is also xenophobic, nationalist, racist, and/or misogynistic.

For him, the boundaries between right-wing populism and the populism embodied in food sovereignty discourse and movements are permeable: although ideologically opposed, both address broadly similar issues and adversaries, and compete for the same social base of 'ordinary people'. The challenge, Borrás argues, relies on building a global class-conscious, anti-capitalist and socialist-oriented united front, as a countercurrent to right-wing populism. Food sovereignty movements, he adds, can become a potent social force in this effort because of their abilities to cross class lines and forge alliances with urban sectors such as, among others, workers, impoverished communities, migrant and refugee groups, and consumers. These alliances, he stresses, must be forged between the middle and working classes increasingly marginalised by neo-liberalism, while dealing with gender, race and generational divides.

For Borrás, internationalism is also key. This involves an understanding that

social class and other identity struggles are fought in local communities, but that solidarity struggles are necessary, and necessarily cross-border in character, because of the international interconnection of the causes, conditions, and consequences of the multiple crises caused by capitalism. (Borrás 2019, p. 26)

We engage with Featherstone's (2008, 2012) and Massey's (2005, 2009) works on left politics, solidarity, and space as an analytical lens through which to examine how food sovereignty movements engage with some of the main axes identified by Borrás (2019) as crucial in the struggle against right-wing populism: class-based alliances; messy social identities involving cross-cutting divides of generation, gender, race and nationalism; and internationalism.

Featherstone's (2008, 2012) notion of 'solidarity from below' centres on the creation of political bonds within and between marginalised and oppressed social

groups. It is also about shaping political identities and forms of agency oriented in a progressive, radical, emancipatory direction, thus constituting a way of politicisation and building social mobilisation. For him, solidarity is a 'powerful source for reshaping the world in more equalitarian terms' (2012, p. 4), as it embodies 'a transformative process which works through the negotiation and renegotiation of political identification' (2012, p. 37). We add that solidarity from below is also critical for preventing/opposing the growth of right-wing populism.

For Featherstone, the forging of solidarities is not a 'given', i.e., an innate outcome of belonging to a social position such as class, gender, nationality or ethnicity. Rather, solidarities are actively constructed through political activity. This has four implications. First, solidarities are constructed through uneven power relations and geographies – they are about practices of negotiating racialised, gendered and classed spaces of encounter. These practices are not unproblematic. They can entrench existing political identities, relations of power, and further marginalise others, or they can create new ways of relating through which to challenge, rework, and bring into contestation prejudices and cut across and/or refuse powerful divides. Featherstone (2012, p. 21) calls for an engagement 'with the power relations through which solidarities are crafted and conducted as a necessary condition for foregrounding the contested processes through which solidarities are generated'. Second, solidarities are expansive and not bounded within particular groups. This highlights the existing divisions and fragmentations between marginalised social groupings and the ways in which political links and bonds can be built. Third, ways of articulating solidarity are contingent and embedded in context, and as such they are always partial, limited, and situated. This recognises 'that histories and geographies exert pressure, set limits and constitute possibilities for the construction of political identities' (Featherstone 2008, p. 7). Fourth, constructing solidarities is a generative process. This involves practices that generate, shape, and (re)make shared values and identities, fashioning new relations, linkages and knowledges. Through solidarity, new outcomes may emerge.

The making of solidarities also has a spatial dimension. Featherstone (2012, p. 29) calls for taking seriously the ways in which 'subaltern geographies of connection' are fashioned through the solidarity work of building political relations to contest geographies of power. Similarly to Massey's (2005, 2009) 'politics of place beyond place', this is a call to view solidarity not as a process of scaling up local political activity, but as enmeshed in networked relations.

As Massey (2005) contends, to understand the formation of political identities and politics, and the ways these can be changed, it is necessary to place local struggles within the complex 'power geometry' of spatial relations. For her, space is relational; it is an essential part of the character of, and perpetually reconfigured through, political engagement. As such, Featherstone (2008, 2012) argues, place-based politics must be viewed as being shaped by connections with other social actors, places and struggles. That is, rather than viewing struggles as only formed in particular places, then networked, this approach invites us to look at 'the ways in which place-based politics is produced out of negotiations with trans-local connections and routes of subaltern activity' (Featherstone 2008, p. 4).

Thus, analysing how political relations are built through solidarity work allows for a better understanding of the terms on which political antagonisms are

constructed. Following Massey's insights and Featherstone's perspective, an analysis of food sovereignty struggles focuses on the ways in which solidarities from below are constructed and engage in 'a politics of place beyond place' to challenge uneven spatialities and socio-ecological inequalities. In the following section, we analyse the food sovereignty struggles of EHNE-Bizkaia.

### Basque food sovereignty struggles: engaging in emancipatory rural politics

Over the last decades, increased agrarian modernisation led to further deagrarianisation and abandonment of farmland in the Basque Country. In the provinces of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Araba (the Autonomous Basque Community), from 1999 and 2009, the number of farms fell by over 33 per cent, and currently only 10 per cent of farmers are under the age of 40 (European Commission 2015).<sup>2</sup> While food sovereignty in the Basque Country emerged from *baserritarras*' (the Basque term for peasants) struggles to secure livelihoods, it then rapidly spread throughout society. Nowadays, a plurality of social actors – ranging from youth groups, women's organisations, labour unions to community groups – embrace food sovereignty as a mobilising frame for social change. Meanwhile, some municipal governments use it to determine local policies, while the Basque government's Cooperation Agency for Development requires that all rural development projects and programmes it supports must indicate how these relate to food sovereignty.<sup>3</sup>

Several factors specific to Basque society help to explain why food sovereignty has had so much adherence. First, *baserritarras* are an essential part of the Basque cultural identity, as they played a crucial role in maintaining Basque language and culture especially during the Franco dictatorship. Second, various communal and non-mercantilist social customs and institutions are historically entrenched in Basque shared values and identities, and several of these remain alive today or are being actively reshaped in both rural and urban areas.<sup>4</sup> Third, 'sovereignty' has been and remains a key struggle for Basques. Struggles for Basque self-government have a long history stemming back to the nineteenth century (Letamendia 2014, p. 10). During the 40 long years of the Franco dictatorship, an alliance between anti-fascist conservative nationalists and Popular Front parties continued, while the struggle against Franco's violence and repression gave rise to more radical forms of Basque resistance, including the leftist organisation ETA that opted for armed struggle. The unilateral abandonment of armed struggle in 2011 led to the confluence of left-wing political forces in the struggle for a democratic and inclusive Basque state, through the formation of a broad radical left political coalition in 2012.

This historical context contributes to a better understanding of why Basque nationalism has had a strong left-wing (and plural) front in which the struggles for sovereignty have been connected with the desire for a more equal society. Although the centre-right Basque Nationalist Party (*Partido Nacionalista Vasco* PNV) has ruled the Basque Autonomous Government for most of the years since democracy, this left-wing nationalist expression still remains strong. Today it is the second political force in the Basque Parliament elections and it is particularly strong in small and medium-sized towns and in rural areas, unlike in other places in Europe. In recent years, there has also been a reinforcement of a broader concept of sovereignty that

includes movements struggling for food sovereignty and energy sovereignty, among others. EHNE-Bizkaia has been one of the Basque actors that has insisted on this expanded conception and interrelation of sovereignties.

The Basque Country is an exception to the recent growth of the far-right (*Vox*) and ultra-liberal (*Ciudadanos*) forces in Spain, and Europe more generally. In Spain, as Franquesa (2019) explains, anti-austerity mobilisations and electoral forces arising from them (like *Podemos*) have helped to keep right-wing populism at bay, until recently. However, as he points out, the urban character of these movements has failed to pay attention and expand to rural Spain, which constitutes a fertile ground for right-wing populism. The particularities of the Basque Country shed light on why regressive and exclusionary politics thrive in some areas and not in others. Here, anti-austerity mobilisations were less relevant than in other parts of Spain. Comparatively, the impacts of the economic crisis were less severe, as is the current immigration pressure. Importantly, despite adopting neo-liberal policies, the centre-right Basque government also implements distributive policies that help mitigate negative impacts, including during the economic crisis. For instance, the Basque government's minimum income scheme is advocated by *Podemos* as an exemplary policy to fight poverty and social exclusion, also contributing to the economic integration of immigrants. Moreover, the PNV also has adopted other progressive social policies, namely towards gender equality and LGBT + rights. In other words, in the Basque Country, the political centre has not collapsed as it did in Spain and other European countries, thus creating less space for the rise of right-wing populism. A second relevant factor is related to the 'memory' work in Basque society around anti-fascism, conducted by both the centre-right and left. Thirdly, since 2012, a radical left political coalition has joined together various social and political forces; it represents an alternative to austerity and neoliberal politics thus acting as a space of mobilising discontentment towards the left in the cities and the countryside. Finally, the left is active not only in disputing spaces of representation, but also socially, in creating social mobilisation and self-organised spaces of cultural and political activity. That is, the left cultivates a culture of solidarity, participation and collective action throughout society, thus limiting the possibilities for the emergence of right-wing populism. In the countryside, EHNE-Bizkaia is part of this effort, as we will analyse below.

### *Constructing 'subaltern geographies of connection'*

The leading social actor of Basque food sovereignty is EHNE-Bizkaia. Born clandestinely in 1976, EHNE-Bizkaia has a history of left-wing political activism to 'defend baserritarras and dignify their work', as Unzalu Salterain, the current coordinator of the organisation, explains. It now represents about ten per cent of farmers in the province of Bizkaia (Calvário 2017). Throughout much of its existence, EHNE-Bizkaia has adopted an 'outward-lookingness', as Doreen Massey would put it. This has involved the political work of establishing solidarity connections between sectors, social actors and at different scales. This outward-lookingness has helped shape EHNE-Bizkaia's vision and practice of food sovereignty, so much so, that from the outset, EHNE-Bizkaia has been very clear about the importance of 'bringing

together common struggles', as Andoni García, a long time EHNE-Bizkaia leader explains. This reflects both a strategic orientation and a practical need, as nowadays agriculture employs just over one per cent of the working active population in the Autonomous Basque Community.<sup>5</sup>

**Movement building: connecting peasant place-based struggles.** Two years after it consolidated itself as an organisation, EHNE-Bizkaia joined forces with the provincial agrarian unions of Gipuzkoa and Araba to create the confederation EHNE (Aldai 2017). Subsequently, EHNE expanded to include the whole Basque region in Spain when the union from Navarra also joined up in 1986. Several of our interviewees explained that this convergence aimed to strengthen the organisations' capacity to analyse agrarian change and policies, engage in protest, and respond to the sector's problems. Although EHNE spoke as one voice, each organisation maintained its own structure and autonomy.

After Spain joined the European Economic Community in 1986, EHNE reached across borders. By 1992, EHNE had joined the *Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Agricultores y Ganaderos* (COAG) in Spain, and the *Confédération Paysanne Européenne* (CPE). EHNE also contributed significantly in the Congress of the *Union Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos* (UNAG) in Nicaragua in 1992, which was the precursor to the formal creation of *Vía Campesina* a year later (Desmarais 2007).

Representatives of EHNE-Bizkaia were often at the forefront of EHNE's international work. EHNE-Bizkaia played a key leadership role in consolidating the *Vía Campesina* and the political project of food sovereignty. Paul Nicholson, former EHNE-Bizkaia coordinator, was the General Coordinator of *Vía Campesina* as a representative of the CPE from 1993 to 2008. Subsequently, for the next four years, he was one of the European Regional Coordinators on the International Coordinating Commission. Later, at the Sixth International Conference of *Vía Campesina* held in Jakarta in 2013, another representative of EHNE-Bizkaia, Unai Aranguren, was elected in this role. This international experience helped to radicalise EHNE-Bizkaia.

Throughout this trajectory, EHNE-Bizkaia brought together disparate place-based peasant struggles in their home territory and internationally. They did this by cutting across powerful uneven geographical global North/South divides to establish common ground for the collective construction of a political project to challenge the imposition of a pernicious global agri-food system. Whereas EHNE-Bizkaia representatives infused *Vía Campesina* debates with the lived experience of Basque farmers, Andoni stressed that EHNE-Bizkaia worked to ensure that an international perspective was also integrated into the local work of organisation. Indeed, EHNE-Bizkaia's active involvement in *Vía Campesina* means that 'in this organisation, we breathe internationalism', Ana Gonzalez, a former member of the EHNE Bizkaia's staff team, argues. As she puts it,

Often, the answer doesn't come to you alone and you often go round and round in circles without seeing a way out. But, when you go elsewhere and understand another reality, live with other peasants, this gives you ideas. It also allows you to see what creates inequality and generates poverty. Cultivating the values of empathy, solidarity and social justice means that you then understand the world, not only from your own local reality.

This kind of internationalism that strives to connect across different realities and struggles is not a given. Instead, it is a way of learning and a way of being in the world to which EHNE-Bizkaia dedicates substantial resources to cultivate among its membership. Organising exchanges is one of the key strategies that the organisation has adopted to foster what Featherstone (2012, p. 29) would call 'subaltern geographies of connections'. On a yearly basis EHNE-Bizkaia organises one or two peasant-to-peasant exchanges involving men and women; these last from 7 to 14 days and involve travelling to a neighbouring region in Spain, elsewhere in Europe, or further away in the Americas. The benefits of the exchanges were highlighted by many of our interviewees. For Ana, the exchanges

enrich our understandings and knowledge substantially and mean that we now have a much richer and more political discourse since it now reflects learnings from other places. The exchanges have also strengthened *Vía Campesina* itself because there is greater understanding that food sovereignty must be a global struggle of peasants from both wealthy and impoverished countries and that this unity is necessary. It is necessary because the existing global economic and political system continues to seek divisions, and above all, it seeks to redefine or destroy the peasantry as a social protagonist.

While EHNE-Bizkaia's multi-scale political work with EHNE, COAG, CPE and *Vía Campesina* acted to further radicalise EHNE-Bizkaia, this kind of political engagement also created tensions within EHNE. After years of, 'fighting against [the intensive capitalist model], with few convincing results', as Unai put it, by the mid 2000s, EHNE-Bizkaia shifted to a more proactive focus on agroecology, short-supply chains such as the community-supported agriculture network *Nekasarea*, and attracting new young peasants in the face of an increasingly ageing sector. With this shift, the union combined a prefigurative politics with a contentious politics of social protest, while continuing to demand progressive policy reforms (Calvário and Kallis 2016).

After a long, and difficult process of internal disputes, which led some leaders and members to abandon the organisation, EHNE-Bizkaia's change of politics led it to split from EHNE in 2010.<sup>6</sup> By moving away from EHNE, EHNE-Bizkaia was freer to embrace food sovereignty more wholeheartedly, and to pursue its goal of expanding food sovereignty throughout *Euskal Herria*, a region encompassing seven Basque provinces in Spain and France. Subsequently it strengthened solidarity ties with its sister organisation in the French Basque region, the ELB.<sup>7</sup> The two organisations share information, experiences, and analysis of how best to promote peasant agriculture centred on small-scale, diversified, agroecological production methods. And, when needed, they also join together in collective action to defend their interests. Unzalu explains that it is not a question of 'joining both unions to form one single organisation'; instead, the relationship is more about 'working together to collectively define one kind of unionism'.

EHNE-Bizkaia's experience points to an important first site of struggle for those who are working on food sovereignty: embracing food sovereignty might well demand internal restructuring and convergence among diverse social forces. For EHNE-Bizkaia and ELB, this includes creating new political spaces to foster alliance-building and expand solidarity ties beyond the traditional agricultural union



structure. This 'outward lookingness' led the two organisations to work with others to convene, in 2011, a new social actor, *Etxalde*.

*Etxalde*, led by peasants across Euskal Herria, also includes other social actors involved in food sovereignty initiatives. Much of the work of *Etxalde* is 'to connect [food sovereignty] initiatives that exist and promote new ones' (Etxalde 2015), while seeking to build alliances with other social and political forces. It functions more like a social movement, rather than like an agrarian union, in that it is more open, horizontal and flexible.

**Alliance building: cultivating rural-urban solidarities.** EHNE-Bizkaia embraces alliance-building as an integral part of implementing food sovereignty. As Ana explains:

I think that food sovereignty is not possible without social struggle. There is no food sovereignty without being involved in the development of the people who surround peasants. So it is not only a question of how we produce food (...) it is also about how to involve the community (...) in a social project. That is, basically, it is about always seeking the criteria of equity and social justice.

EHNE-Bizkaia cultivates solidarities with the increasingly marginalised middle and working classes; it defines itself as a class-based union and as Unzalu explains, it is 'part of the working-class movement and unionism'. For the organisation, the baserritarra is not an entrepreneur, but a self-employed worker, who can also hire other workers. In EHNE-Bizkaia, the affiliation is individual and not linked to farm-holdings, meaning that baserritarras and farmworkers can be members with the same rights. EHNE-Bizkaia's view of the baserritarra is informed by an understanding that baserritarras, and workers in general, have been particularly marginalised by neoliberalism. As Unzalu clarifies, baserritarras 'are not part of the rich middle class (...) despite the promises of the intensive model'. In his view, both the working classes and the workers' movement are key to effecting social change and transforming the food system. EHNE-Bizkaia relates with workers mainly by establishing links with the workers' movement, and constructing common interests between baserritarras and wage labour in food provision. Although the union defends non-exploitative labour relations, how farmworkers and food workers fit into its project of food sovereignty is less well articulated.

According to Unzalu, EHNE-Bizkaia has 'fluid relations' with all Basque workers' unions, and it participates in the Social and Economic Council, a consultative body of the Basque government and parliament. However, he adds, EHNE-Bizkaia has greater affinity with the group of Basque workers' unions that has a strong sovereignist/nationalist character, represents the majority of workers, and shares a more radical politics centred on social mobilisation and collective action.<sup>8</sup> Following the 2008 economic crisis, EHNE-Bizkaia also helped to create a broad front in 2013 that joined together Basque workers' unions and diverse social movements and organisations in the fight against austerity policies. This front elaborated a common left-wing political programme that advanced demands for an alternative model of society in Euskal Herria. EHNE-Bizkaia had an active voice in this whole process and its historical experience in working with other movements and organisations was of

added value, Unzalu comments. Through these connections, EHNE-Bizkaia pushed for food sovereignty while inserting agrarian and rural issues into the agenda of the workers' movement and gained solidarity at various moments of baserritarras' struggles, and vice-versa.

Introduced by EHNE-Bizkaia in 2007, *Nekasarea* is a network of community-supported agriculture groups that provides a unique space for building solidarity between baserritarras and urban consumers, while expanding food sovereignty ideals to urban areas. Each group is coordinated by a producer of vegetables, who collects other products like milk, meat, eggs and bread from different producers and delivers the weekly agroecological food basket. Consumers have to sign a one-year contract at a pre-agreed price after a three-month trial. The price is determined to be fair to producers and affordable to consumers. In *Nekasarea*, consumers assume the commitment to secure baserritarras' income, while producers organise their production to feed them adequately. In 2012, *Nekasarea* had 700 households divided into 27 consumer groups, and 80 baserritarras (EHNE-Bizkaia 2012).

A key aim of *Nekasarea* is to ensure that baserritarras make a decent living, but as Andoni explains, this 'is about producing food for the entire population, not elites'. In doing so, EHNE-Bizkaia attempts to establish connections with the working and impoverished classes, and build a class-conscious project of food sovereignty. However, market-based alternatives pose severe limitations to ensuring the right to food, while the ability to participate in networks such as *Nekasarea* places conditions (time availability, access to information, etc.) only accessible to some sectors of the population. Also, many producers only manage to set prices low while accommodating the burden of higher costs of living namely by increasing self-provision and adding working hours in an already labour-intensive model (Calvário 2017). Consequently, Unzalu suggests a 'restructuring of the entire agrifood system' away from corporate control, with the intervention of the state, is required.

Building solidarity in *Nekasarea* also means helping to sustain everyday life in harder times. Isabel Alvarez, the key EHNE-Bizkaia staff-person who worked with *Nekasarea* for almost ten years, explained that in some cases solidarity ties within the network mean that

If for some reason food provision was compromised, for example by damage to greenhouses due to climatic conditions, then the associated group of consumers would help repair the greenhouse and the other producers provided the food baskets until the affected farmer was able to continue production. Likewise, if a consumer could not cover the costs of the food basket, it was both producers and consumers that covered for that person based on the idea that locally-grown healthy and safe food is not a privilege but a human right. (Azkarraga and Desmarais 2017, p. 212)

These rural-urban connections involve a crucial symbolic dimension. In Unai's view, food sovereignty has enabled baserritarras to recover their 'dignity' and 'hope'; he says, baserritarras now feel that their work is valued by others in society, and that this is 'a project with a future'. *Nekasarea*, he recounted, helped shift a sense of inferiority among peasants to feeling 'pride' in being a baserritarra, something that before was somewhat 'derogatory' because it was considered backward. Also, he adds,

producers and consumers mobilise in this network because they 'feel that they are participating in a project for social change'.

Currently, due to internal as well as strategic factors, EHNE-Bizkaia is rethinking the *Nekasarea* project. Deliberations at the XI Congress of EHNE-Bizkaia held in November 2018 (EHNE-Bizkaia 2018) prioritised directing baserritarras' production towards local consumption, including all forms of commercialisation. These include consumer groups like *Nekasarea*, but also other structures such as farmers markets, local commerce, and supermarkets. The Congress deliberations identified that in the last years, consumer groups, collectives and cooperatives have proliferated in the Basque context. Local food has also appeared in force in local commerce and big supermarket chains. Although the union welcomes the increased recognition by consumers of locally produced food, it also points to some important risks. Many local initiatives are disconnected from a larger political project and thus might reinforce the precarious situation of producers. Given that the majority of consumers frequent large supermarkets, EHNE-Bizkaia is now calling for rules that protect both baserritarras and consumers. This position, however, jeopardises the construction of food sovereignty since it may well legitimate agribusiness and corporate power in the distribution of food, and it misses the important solidarity-building and politicising work of alternative networks like *Nekasarea*.

Another alliance-building strategy that EHNE-Bizkaia has pursued, includes broadening its activity beyond baserritarras. EHNE-Bizkaia regularly organises training courses open to the public on a range of topics such as urban agriculture, medicinal plants, among others. These attract the interest of many, mostly from urban areas. It also organises public talks and publishes materials, such as the *Baserri Bizia* magazine (recently replaced by the *Etzalde* publication), in addition to brochures, leaflets and books, mainly as a 'diffusion tool' to all society, Unzalu comments. Also, in the international exchanges mentioned above, EHNE-Bizkaia usually invites representatives from non-governmental organisations, municipal governments, or other sectors. These exchanges provide unique spaces for dialogue and debate, offering opportunities for building mutual understanding, trust and respect –all necessary components of alliance-building.

EHNE-Bizkaia's alliances stretch far beyond the Basque Country and Euskal Herria. The organisation participates in the *Plataforma Rural*, a broad coalition in Spain that brings together diverse rural and urban social actors –including organisations of farmers, environmentalists, youth, consumers, fair trade activists, international development non-governmental organisations, and progressive Christian based associations – that use food sovereignty in efforts to build a 'living rural world'. According to Paul Nicholson, the *Plataforma Rural* 'is not only a space for exchanges, it is an instrument of struggle' (cited in Vivas 2006) as evidenced by its success in converging diverse interests and social actors to engage in collective actions against genetically modified organisms and industrial agriculture while demanding agrarian policies that recognise people's rights to land, water and public services in the countryside. At the international level, EHNE-Bizkaia also played a leadership role to broaden the global food sovereignty movement beyond Vía Campesina by organising the Nyéléni Global Forum on Food Sovereignty, and the Nyéléni Europe Forum for Food Sovereignty.

*Reworking political identities while confronting powerful divides*

For EHNE-Bizkaia, food sovereignty is about the ‘right to decide what and how to produce, distribute and consume’ (Bizilur and Etxalde 2015, p. 7). EHNE-Bizkaia conceives food sovereignty as an ‘integral, open and alternative’ political project (Bizilur and Etxalde 2015, p. 10). ‘Integral’ because, while it emerged from the peasant movement and defends peasant economies and the right to food, it requires effecting critical change of broader socio-economic relations. This is not only about ‘transforming what we eat’ but also about ‘transforming the reality in which food production and consumption occurs’, which includes ‘the societal values, the ways of organising society, the public sphere and policies, and the building of alternatives in the more micro-level’ (Bizilur and Etxalde 2015, p. 10). The ‘open’ aspect refers to the dialogue that it seeks to facilitate with other political ideas such as feminism, solidarity economies, and the commons; food sovereignty is a ‘solid approach’ that builds ‘on pathways that are defined together with other people, not on closed prescriptions’ (Bizilur and Etxalde 2015, p. 10). And food sovereignty is ‘alternative’ because it proposes an ‘alternative social and economic model’ and as such, it ‘confronts head on the neo-liberal idea that there are no alternatives’ (Bizilur and Etxalde 2015, p. 11).

Thus, EHNE-Bizkaia’s way of conceiving food sovereignty substantiates a radical critique to neo-liberalism (and capitalism more generally). Below, we shed light on how food sovereignty embodies a practice of solidarity-making and transforming political identities among baserritarras and other sectors. First, we explore how EHNE-Bizkaia addresses the potential fragmentation among baserritarras who practise different models (industrial vs. agroecology), many of whom are divided across generational lines. Then, we examine how it approaches powerful divides of gender and race, and shapes a non-exclusionary nationalism – all crucial questions in opposing right-wing populism.

**Constructing a collective peasant identity.** When EHNE-Bizkaia shifted to agroecology, it also prioritised the rejuvenation of agriculture by supporting the entry of new baserritarras. To further this goal, as of 2007 the union began offering training courses in agroecology. Between 2008–2012, EHNE-Bizkaia helped 50 new agroecological baserritarras to establish themselves on the land, and by 2017 more than 1,000 young people had participated in their agricultural training courses (Azkarraga and Desmarais 2017, p. 201). EHNE-Bizkaia also sought to take advantage of the new lifestyle aspirations of many Basque youth who saw rural spaces and growing food as revolutionary (Azkarraga and Desmarais 2017).

More than half of EHNE-Bizkaia’s affiliates are lifelong farmers who are over 50 years old and practice conventional farming. The others engage in agroecological farming and their background varies from being children of farmers and landless rural workers, to having no background in farming (Calvário 2017). Most baserritarras who participate in *Nekasarea* are new and young producers. However, as Unzalu indicates, the overwhelming majority of EHNE-Bizkaia members, whether or not they practice agroecology, are committed to food sovereignty and there is no conflict within the union. He stresses that ‘many of our members have reflected on why they are in the intensive model, but they face great difficulties in conducting structural

changes in their farm-holdings'. These producers, he continues, 'don't feel there is a contradiction in being part of an organisation that defends a model that they are not practising', because they recognise that 'it is important to have an organisation of the collective that leads towards an alternative'. They also know, he adds, 'that the union is here for the whole sector, not to defend the practices each one does'. The capacity to reflect in this way, he concludes, 'is a sign of [political] maturity'.

Our empirical research revealed conflicts, among producers supported by EHNE-Bizkaia, that appeared to be more related to generational differences. The conflict, according to Unai, is due to a 'cultural shock' between lifelong farmers and young baserritarras, as both have different lifestyles and ideas. Whereas the former criticise the latter for 'knowing little about agriculture, and they are partly correct as young people coming from the city often have an idyllic, bucolic view of agriculture', the latter criticise the older generation for their use of chemical products, he explains. EHNE-Bizkaia attempts 'to unite both so that lifelong farmers can transmit their knowledge, while young people can transmit their hope and political views', he affirms. Unai also pointed to the fragmentation that sometimes occurs between those engaged in alternative models, as people have different criteria. Some producers are 'more purists' in the ways of farming, while others prefer to produce at 'ethical prices', he explains. EHNE-Bizkaia seeks to cut across differences and potential divisions by encouraging those who are practising alternative models to converge around a collective idea of peasant agriculture, that can work as an 'umbrella' to all those differences, he points out. Uniting old and new baserritarras, and those practising different agroecological farming models is an on-going strategic area of work that requires much attention and dedication of time.

While the attraction of new peasants has succeeded in many fronts, access to land remains a significant barrier to the rejuvenation, and indeed survival, of small-scale agriculture. Thus, land reform is one of EHNE-Bizkaia's main struggles. In a landscape dominated by small private property ownership and intense urban development, connected to real estate interests, EHNE-Bizkaia is demanding policies to protect agricultural land, e.g., to create a public land bank to rent plots of land at low prices, with priority to young agroecological farmers; and to favour communal land, and collective forms of land use. Although some gains have been achieved in these domains, the struggles to structurally change the property regimes and accompanying food system are on-going.

**Transforming identities around food sovereignty.** EHNE-Bizkaia seeks to politicise producers, urban consumers and other sectors around food sovereignty ideals mainly through training activities and the ways it cultivates solidarities from below. The diverse training activities developed by EHNE-Bizkaia either for new entrants in agriculture, already established farmers or other groups, explicitly includes an ideological, or 'political' component, Unai stressed. According to him, this involves explaining how the global food system works, who benefits from it, and what alternatives exist or can be created that recognise food as a human right rather than a commodity. Whereas there are 'people who understand us well when we talk of food sovereignty, globalisation or capitalism, to others it is more difficult', he contends. But the purpose is 'to make people conscious, to give them

information and to empower their capacity to decide', Mikel Kormenzana, a former coordinator of EHNE-Bizkaia, indicates. Also, politicisation of baserritarras is sought by soliciting them to give public talks and take the lead in activities centred on exchanges of information and knowledge.

The politicisation of spaces where producers and consumers meet is also critical. This is at the core of *Nekasarea*, Mikel argues. For him, this 'is not a project of commercialisation', but rather 'a project for socio-political change which advocates an alternative model, is strong in the political, and is collective'. The collective dimension is achieved, by working like 'a network', he comments; 'this is very important politically because it clashes with the specialisation and individualisation imposed by the industrial model. Here, we are diversifying and collectivising'. Embodied in *Nekasarea* is the idea that producers base their productive and commercialisation activities on cooperation and solidarity relations rather than on individual interests and competitiveness. For instance, baserritarras collaborate with each other to fill the food baskets for each consumer group. They also help each other by covering supply deficits when necessary, and they share knowledge, seeds, farming tools, etc. Importantly, Unai adds, producers are responsible for politicising their own consumer groups:

Producers have to feed consumers' heads as well as their stomachs. Firms are already delivering food baskets at home, with lower prices; our difference is that we are a political project that seeks to construct an alternative to the current economic system.

In *Nekasarea*, producers and consumers are also called to self-organise within the network and to work collaboratively. The network has three commissions (one consists of producers, the other consumers, and the third involves both producers and consumers) to coordinate work, and discuss practical and political issues. Each meets regularly at least once a month, and all three convene together every three months. Once a year there is general assembly joining all baserritarras and consumers together. There are some challenges in the effective functioning of these structures, however, since not all consumers and producers are willing to engage in this more participatory, and relational work that goes beyond commercialisation. This has required intense work from EHNE-Bizkaia.

To politicise consumers, EHNE-Bizkaia presents the political aims of *Nekasarea* before they join the network and attempts to help consumer groups be more 'outward-looking', namely by organising public talks and participating in protests. Mikel gives the example of his consumer group in the municipality of Orduña which organises a monthly forum on agroecology. These events are open to the local community and address issues ranging from, among others, genetically modified food and green deserts, to the situation of women in the countryside. Whenever possible, the events include invited speakers from member organisations of *Vía Campesina* who share their experiences and struggles. Every year, the group also coordinates the participation of the local community in events such as national mobilisations against genetically modified food and the celebrations of the International Peasant Day. Mikel stresses that the objective of these initiatives is to provoke debate and to 'socialise the political'.

Mikel went on to explain that essentially *Nekasarea* aims to 'make people think critically', thus 'making it harder for agro-industry and the politicians who support it to thrive and co-opt alternatives'. Since this is a 'political project for social change', he adds, 'stimulating a process of debate is key; a model is easy to replicate, but it is so important to create spaces for debate'. But paying constant attention on the politicisation of actors demands many resources, including time.

The solidarity ideal embedded in food sovereignty has had generative effects beyond EHNE-Bizkaia and *Nekasarea*. Agroecological producers have created their own spaces of encounter to support each other in peer-to-peer processes. Frequently, established baserritarras help new entrants by assisting in preparing the land, among other activities. New baserritarras have also formed local 'agro-assemblies' in different municipalities as a pathway to developing common strategies to address their economic needs, support new entrants, and, in some cases, advance food sovereignty (Azkarraga and Desmarais 2017). However, some of these self-governed spaces have emerged in isolation from the substantial work and expertise of EHNE-Bizkaia, and ultimately do not share the 'rules of engagement' that are so critical to ensure the conditions and relations of solidarity that are central to EHNE-Bizkaia's project of food sovereignty (Azkarraga and Desmarais 2017). Moreover, many of the self-governed spaces have not converged into a common political space, like *Etxalde*, that facilitates ways to overcome localism and join forces in solidarity with other social actors. In addition, many of the new peasants do not affiliate in EHNE-Bizkaia, potentially threatening the renewal of the union. Although all of our interviewees recognise the important work of the union, some ideologically rejected hierarchical forms of organisation like trade-unions, whereas others argued they lacked time for militancy. In fact, alternative models are time-consuming and demand much attention in addition to the daily activities on the farm thus effectively placing limitations to a more active political participation (Calvário 2017). All these issues pose important challenges for EHNE-Bizkaia: how best to rebuild imaginaries of collective action while adapting forms of organising that fit and emerge from the needs and the aspirations of the subaltern? *Etxalde* has emerged as a response, but it has yet to more fully capture the interest of many involved and working on food sovereignty.

**Embedding feminism in food sovereignty.** For EHNE-Bizkaia, transforming asymmetrical gender relations in the countryside is a central part of its struggles. Agriculture in the Basque Country remains male-dominated, and the struggles for women baserritarras' equality and equity are on-going. In family farm-holdings, typically the man is the head of the family. This has practical implications as women's work is considered as family-support that is not legally or statistically recognised. This means women face numerous challenges to be economically independent and they have few rights to social protection schemes, thus making them more vulnerable to all forms of violence. Socially and historically, the work of women baserritarras has been made invisible. Consequently, EHNE-Bizkaia works to give visibility to the work of women baserritarras and to guarantee their full access to labour and social rights. The union also stresses the importance of increasing women's entry in agriculture and enhancing their participation in the leadership and work of the organisation, while also fighting to end violence against women in the countryside.

EHNE-Bizkaia understands gender equity and food sovereignty as inseparable. As was deliberated in its last Congress:

food sovereignty is the most just and efficient proposal to (...) continue constructing in Euskal Herria equality rights between men and women... We insist that the role of baserritarras is to produce food, while we work to correct the historical gap in the recognition of women baserritarras in promoting sustainable agriculture and healthy food. From that recognition, we must continue to denounce and construct the conditions to eradicate the male chauvinist violence we suffer as society and particularly women, threatening directly their lives and dignity. Any process of entry in agriculture must start from the (equality) equity between women and men. (EHNE-Bizkaia 2018, p. 41)

There are signs that EHNE-Bizkaia's shift to agroecology and local markets are opening up more possibilities for women baserritarras. Alazne Intxauspe, one of EHNE-Bizkaia's recently elected young women leaders, claims that 'food sovereignty and agroecology have the face of women. While women are very diverse, it is a model in which, in general, women feel more comfortable and empowered'. Agroecology 'is recovering and recognising much of the traditional work done by women baserritarras, for instance, on reproducing seeds, transforming food, and growing vegetables', a young woman baserritarra commented. For some women, becoming a baserritarra was also a way out of gender discrimination in the labour market where women mainly get 'secondary' and 'precarious and badly paid jobs', as some interviewees tellingly put it. Other interviewees pointed out that the entry of new women baserritarras is also breaking traditional gender roles on the farm.

EHNE-Bizkaia's struggles for women's equality and equity also have been informed by a politics of solidarity-building as women members and leaders of EHNE-Bizkaia reached across sectoral and geographical borders to counterparts in nearby and far-away places. For example, EHNE-Bizkaia's Maite Arestegi represented the European region on the original *Vía Campesina's* Women's Working Group that was formed in 1996. In that capacity, she worked with counterparts in Europe, Asia, the Americas and later Africa to define the interests and needs of women in the *Vía Campesina*, create lines of communication among women, and develop strategies and mechanisms for women's equal participation and representation in the movement (Desmarais 2007, pp. 162–163). Other women from EHNE-Bizkaia participated in the four International Women's Assemblies that contributed to two significant changes in *Vía Campesina*: reaching gender parity, and launching the Stop Violence Against Women Campaign. Throughout this work, women of EHNE-Bizkaia worked with women from diverse cultures and different contexts to help shape *Vía Campesina* and food sovereignty in fundamental ways.

The women of EHNE-Bizkaia also work across sectors by participating in feminist movements in the Basque Country, Euskal Herria, Spain and beyond. For example, they actively engaged in the powerful feminist strike held in Spain in March 2018 (García *et al.* 2018) by closing the EHNE-Bizkaia office and marching in the streets. They are also engaging in exchanges with the World March of Women, a transnational feminist movement that is now debating the meaning and practice of food sovereignty (Masson *et al.* 2017).



On a more practical level, EHNE-Bizkaia together with *Etxalde* has organised workshops for municipal technicians who work on gender equality, to raise awareness on the specific realities of women baserritarras and rural women. Additionally, every year, on Women's Day, EHNE-Bizkaia organises a group visit of women baserritarras to one of their farms. The aim is to create spaces of encounter, promote exchanges of knowledge, and break isolation. In *Etxalde*, women baserritarras along with rural and urban women working on food sovereignty join together in the group *Etxaldeko Emakumeak*. This is a space of debate, analysis and mutual-aid that works to empower women, raise consciousness and critical thinking, and influence the proposals, strategies and actions of the food sovereignty movement. Usually four times a year, this group engages in *auzolan* (communitarian work) on the farm of one woman baserritarra, promoting networks of mutual-aid, recognition and feelings of belonging, while establishing bridges between rural and urban feminist perspectives. The group is also working with several municipalities to promote local policies that improve the participation and quality of life of women baserritarras. Finally, it conducts analysis of relevant policies from a feminist peasant perspective.

This embeddedness and connection with feminism and other struggles for social equity is part of what makes the project of food sovereignty radical. As Ana explains:

You can't only concentrate on denouncing, or just building alternatives since this is the other extreme into which you can fall. I don't think that transformation can exist without solidarity. And, solidarity means that you become involved in other struggles.

**Addressing race and shaping a non-exclusionary nationalism.** EHNE-Bizkaia fights racism and xenophobia by establishing solidarity links with immigrants, both ideologically and practically. In recent years, migratory pressure has increased in Spain since it is an entry door to Europe in the Mediterranean. This makes it a potential site for racist conflicts, and fuel for right-wing populists. If the geographical location of the Basque Country in the north potentially makes it less prone to these forces, its border with France may indicate otherwise. In this context, EHNE-Bizkaia adopts a discourse that considers immigrants as people who were forced to migrate due to factors such as the destruction of local economies and food systems resulting from land grabbing, the biofuel conglomerate, or free trade agreements; in many ways, migrants are the visible face of the negative outcomes of the current global food system. Similarly to Basque baserritarras, EHNE-Bizkaia considers that immigrants too have been marginalised by neo-liberal policies in their own countries. Consequently, to address issues of immigration or the so-called current refugee crisis, 'the solution cannot be limited to discussing the capacity [of each country] to host refugees' (EHNE-Bizkaia 2016, p. 32), as is being done in Europe. Instead, EHNE-Bizkaia calls for the reordering of the global food system to guarantee the right to food in each country, starting with the right to produce enough food to feed its own population. By establishing similarities between baserritarras and immigrants, EHNE-Bizkaia is challenging the marginalisation of both and cultivating solidarities.

EHNE-Bizkaia also adopts a politics of welcoming immigrants and refugees in the Basque Country. EHNE-Bizkaia argues that agriculture can play an active role in the

social integration of this population since many were peasants before leaving their home countries. In practising its politics, EHNE-Bizkaia collaborates in the Artea Project. This project, promoted by the Platform *Ongi Etorri Errefuxiatuak* (Welcome Refugees), feminist groups and baserritarras in the small rural town of Artea, welcomes immigrants and refugees by providing accommodation in two self-managed buildings, healthy food and decent work. The project is strongly inspired by food sovereignty goals: migrants are supplied with a weekly agroecological food basket from local farmers; they have access to jobs in agriculture or linked to the transformation of food, crafts, etc.; and they manage a restaurant daily supplied with local products while also selling these products to neighbours. Currently, the project houses 48 people of ten nationalities, both documented and undocumented. For Unzalu, this type of project is a 'huge practical leap' in the approach to immigration, as it is not about 'assistance' or 'charity' but about providing the conditions for migrants to be sovereign over their own lives as well as building solidarities within local territories on inclusive terms.

EHNE-Bizkaia's approach to immigration also reflects its notion of 'sovereignty'. For the union, the construction of practical projects aims to advance on the ground 'the right to decide of peoples and territories, hence the centrality of the word *sovereignty*' (Bizilur and Etxalde 2015, p. 18). In its view, food sovereignty contains and intersects variegated sovereignties: sovereignty over natural goods such as land, water, forests, seeds, and the like; energy sovereignty to overcome the model of fossil dependency and deal with the climate and energy crisis; sovereignty over local food systems, understood as the ability to decide where and how food is produced, transformed and distributed; sovereignty of women, involving the confrontation of patriarchy; sovereignty over knowledge and the commons, overcoming individualism, and recovering traditional peasant practices (Bizilur and Etxalde 2015, pp. 18–31). Collectively constructing and intersecting these sovereignties constitute ways of imagining and experimenting alternative models of society and self-government for whoever lives in Basque territories, regardless of origins or ethnicity; that is, it is not based on exclusionary forms of identity.

These alternatives inform new modalities of Basque struggles for political sovereignty. EHNE-Bizkaia is part of the wide constellation of social, political and labour organisations that defends the self-determination of Euskal Herria, and food sovereignty is linked to a form of non-exclusionary nationalism based on popular sovereignty and social equality while welcoming minorities and immigrants, thus rejecting ethno-nationalism. In fact, contemporary forms of Basque nationalism, on the centre-right and the left, are not based on race/ethnicity criteria. As a minority language, the affirmation and recovery of *euskera* and Basque culture is a fundamental part of any policy in favour of cultural diversity. More strongly on the left, this politics is combined with anti-racism, the welcoming of refugees, and interculturality. The Artea project symbolises this precisely. Here, both immigrants and local communities forge links based on equality, solidarity, and mutual respect while constructing hybrid identities accompanied by new cultural patterns. Transforming identities through solidarity-building is an antidote to the emergence of exclusionary forms of nationalism based on the reification of identities and culture.

## Conclusion

Our analysis of how EHNE-Bizkaia conceptualises and practices food sovereignty in the Basque Country sheds light on what kind of left politics and emancipatory project food sovereignty can help to construct and mobilise. Our research indicates that this is a political project that has the potential to counter the emergence and expansion of exclusionary identities and politics that are central to right-wing populism.

In a context where mainstream agrarian policies and demographics of small-scale and family farmers are not working in their favour, as is the case of many countries in Europe and North America, EHNE-Bizkaia opted to work at increasing and expanding its social base. Rejuvenation of agriculture and alliance-building have been key to this process; equally important was the radicalisation of its politics through food sovereignty. In doing so, EHNE-Bizkaia established links between the local realities of baserritarras and small-scale farmers struggles elsewhere, and consequently joined forces internationally and locally. This involved a particular type of internationalism and movement-building, learning from others, and transforming its own politics at home. By integrating agroecology and solidarity economies into its politics and practice, it engaged in a direct critique of the industrial, corporate-led, agro-food system and attracted the interest of the youth, urban consumers, and other non-agrarian sectors.

EHNE-Bizkaia's critique involves a social justice dimension, and embodies a politics of connectivity with the increasingly marginalised middle and working classes. Not without difficulties and challenges, EHNE-Bizkaia's 'outward-lookingness' and efforts to bring together common struggles in the agrarian sector and beyond has yielded productive results. Young baserritarras are entering agriculture, increasingly conscious urban consumers are supporting agroecological baserritarras, and new territorial dynamics are emerging with the creation of agro-assemblies and other self-managed spaces. EHNE-Bizkaia is also an influential actor, both socially and politically, in the Basque Country, Euskal Herria, and beyond. It continues to play a key role in *Vía Campesina*, ECVC, COAG, and *Plataforma Rural*; it is also recognised as an important social actor among its Basque counter-parts such as the workers' movement, social movements, NGOs, and within the country's institutional political arena.

It is EHNE-Bizkaia's conceptualisation and practice of food sovereignty that pulls this politics together and radicalises it. It does this by putting uneven and unequal power relations at its core. For EHNE-Bizkaia, food sovereignty constitutes a common political project around which diverse agrarian and non-agrarian social actors can converge and unite. In the Basque case, this involved the emergence of a new social movement, *Etxalde*, in which many are placing much hope. While there is considerable potential in *Etxalde*, it will take persistence and a lot of 'hard work and invention' (Massey 2009, pp. 136–142) to reconcile the different interests among diverse actors to build a strong, united, visible and powerful community of resistance. Although the experience of EHNE-Bizkaia is context specific, it may inspire and offer suggestions to other agrarian movements elsewhere, particularly to those in similar agrarian contexts in the global North that are facing abandonment of farmland, declining demographics, and ageing of family farmers.

In this article, we stress that an emancipatory politics of food sovereignty involves constructing solidarity from below. That is, establishing connections, links, and alliances around the transformative project of food sovereignty entails a process of transforming political identities and relationships among subaltern social actors. This is a process through which to challenge, rework, and bring into contestation prejudices that (often may) divide and fragment marginalised social groupings. This is precisely what EHNE-Bizkaia attempts to do. For EHNE-Bizkaia, food sovereignty means consolidating a multi-scale peasant movement and facilitating alliance-building between peasants and non-agrarian actors. To be emancipatory, however, these bonds must also embody the transformative project and politics of food sovereignty that challenge uneven power relations and geographies. Critically, this means navigating and contesting classed, gendered and racialised inequalities and spatial divides. EHNE-Bizkaia's experience indicates that intersecting peasant identities and movements with the working-class, workers' movements, feminism and anti-racism, while paying attention to generational issues and other potential divides, helps cultivate a left culture of solidarity from below that builds non-exclusionary notions of sovereignty, thus limiting spaces for the growth of regressive politics. This offers important lessons: engaging in a politics of solidarity as a way of intersecting, and most importantly transforming identities and relations is key in blocking the emergence and spread of right-wing populism.

Our analysis of EHNE-Bizkaia also demonstrates that the process of solidarity-making is not linear. To advance food sovereignty and embrace a politics of solidarity from below, EHNE-Bizkaia's first site of struggle was within the union itself. By cutting connections with EHNE, EHNE-Bizkaia more freely shaped the ways in which it sought to build solidarities and political bonds with counterparts within Euskal Herria and beyond. This adds to Featherstone's (2008, 2012) theory since constructing and expanding solidarities from below towards an emancipatory project and politics, may demand, in some moments, reassessing some already established connections. A break of these connections, however, does not imply that they are lost, instead they are, or can be, reconstructed in new ways.

By mobilising Featherstone's (2008, 2012) notion of 'solidarity from below' and Massey's (2005, 2009) understanding of 'politics of place beyond place', we have provided a lens through which to analyse the emancipatory potential of food sovereignty struggles, as they develop in particular contexts. This approach calls for analyses that pay attention to the interconnections between place-based struggles and space in the shaping of identities and politics, and to the ways that solidarity-building navigates existing political identities and entrenches, or instead challenges, powerful divides. In our discussion, we have insufficiently engaged with intersectionality, both theoretically and empirically. Certainly, investigating the relationship between solidarity from below and intersectionality is an important line of inquiry for the further study of emancipatory politics as it could lead to a deeper understanding of how political identities are constituted, entrenched, contested, and transformed. In the Basque context, solidarity from below is about transforming, creating and expanding social relations within a political project of food sovereignty that emphasises mobilising a social majority. It is only then, we suggest, that food sovereignty is an emancipatory politics and has the potential to foreclose the rise of right-wing populism.

## Conflict of interest statement

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The group interviews with the Basque youth were conducted by Amaia Nicholson, a young Basque woman and activist who had taken some of the EHNE agroecology training and knew the farming community well. She conducted all of the interviews in *euskera*. Her contacts in the region and knowledge of youth activists working on food sovereignty were critical to our research.

<sup>2</sup> For additional data see <http://www.reterurale.it/downloads/RDP/Spagna/rdp%20pae si%20baschi.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> The Basque Government's position and policies *vis-a-vis* food sovereignty are contradictory since it continues to promote conventional agriculture. Also, it is not clear how the Cooperation Agency for Development interprets food sovereignty.

<sup>4</sup> In Basque society, historical forms of effective resistance to capitalist modernisation persist, along with a strong community base. For example, the relations and institutions of reciprocity typical of the traditional rural world have survived in many towns of the Basque Country even to this day. The sociologist Andreas Hess (2009) characterises Basque society as *reluctant to modernise*, as demonstrated by the persistence of the *baserri*, a small unit of family agrarian production that includes the house, their land and the usufruct rights to common property; fishermen's associations that represent artisanal fishing against industrial fishing; the *txokos*, gastronomic societies based on common property, collective management and democratic functioning. Also, Basque experiences like the internationally known Mondragón cooperatives, have been explained in similar terms, that is, as the modern translation of historical practices, forms of sociability and traditional institutions based on egalitarianism, democracy, community values and collective forms of ownership (see Azkarraga 2017).

<sup>5</sup> For more detailed statistics see <http://www.lanbide.euskadi.eus>.

<sup>6</sup> There are numerous and complicated reasons for the split, but due to limited space we cannot explain this further. We do want to highlight, though, that various EHNE-Bizkaia members we interviewed recalled years of feeling frustrated and somewhat blocked as EHNE's strong discourse of food sovereignty was not accompanied by actions and policy demands aimed at transforming the industrial agricultural model. The split also resulted in difficult relations between both organisations after more than 20 years of collaboration in building a common project.

<sup>7</sup> The ELB is the Basque branch of the Confédération Paysanne in France. See Itçaina and Gomez (2014) for a study of food sovereignty in the French Basque Country.

<sup>8</sup> The group, known as the Basque trade union majority, has historically been composed by the ELA (Eusko Langileen Alkartasuna / Solidarity of Basque Workers), LAB (Langile Abertzaleen Batzordeak / Commissions of Nationalist Workers), ESK (Ezker Sindikalaren Konbergentzia / Convergence of Union Left), Steilas (Euskadiko Irakaskuntzako Langileen Sindikatua / Trade Union of Teaching Workers of the Basque Country), Hiru (Transporters' Union of the Basque Country) y EHNE. After EHNE-Bizkaia split from EHNE, *Etxalde* began to appear as part of the group in the place of EHNE-Bizkaia.

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