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## Ancestral Food, Sustainability, and Food Sovereignty in Michoacán, Mexico: an Analysis under Principle 7 of the Earth Charter



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## Introduction:

A common denominator of expressions about food sovereignty is the capacity and right of a country to design, develop, and implement its policies for the production, distribution, and consumption of healthy, nutritious, fresh, and culturally appropriate food, where intermediation or hoarding is minimized. We believe that food sovereignty must go beyond ensuring food for the inhabitants of a region; it must be articulated with the culture of a people, as well as with respect and care for the community of life, maintaining the balance of the ecosystems where such foods are produced, ensuring social and economic justice and inclusion, avoiding violence, and promoting peace, from a more ethical perspective proposed by the Earth Charter [2000]. Therefore, it is essential to understand that the path to sustainability requires understanding and achieving food sovereignty.

Within the framework of the research project "Towards food sovereignty in lacustrine regions of Michoacán from social responsibility: impact from the actors," approved and funded by the National Council of Humanities, Science, and Technology [CONAHCYT] and derived from the collaboration agreement with the Honorable Municipality of Quiroga, Michoacán, the "1st Ancestral Food Fair of Quiroga and its communities: towards food sovereignty" was held on September 24, 2023, at the Ecotourism Center Cerro Sandio. The objective of this fair was to promote conservation through the dissemination of ancestral food, prepared by cooks with local products from the lacustrine region of the municipality, as a

demonstration of their food sovereignty and contribution to sustainability. The activity involved the communities of San Andrés Tziróndaro, Santa Fe de la Laguna, El Calvario, and San Jerónimo Purenchécuaro, from the municipality of Quiroga, and the Collective of Research and Advocacy [CII], located in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. The objective was to promote their local foods, such as fish, mushrooms, corn, and traditional local beverages such as mezcal, pulque, and seasonal fruit waters. This article provides an overview of this project and its evaluation, which was carried out using the Earth Charter as a reference, particularly fundamental principle 7 of the second Pillar, "Ecological Integrity." Sustainability, food sovereignty, ancestral food, and the Earth Charter.

Via Campesina, in a statement in 2003, states that food sovereignty should include:

- Prioritizing local agricultural production to feed the population.
- Access for peasants and landless people to land, water, seeds, and credit.
- The right of peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to decide what they want to consume and how and who produces it.
- The right of countries to protect themselves from excessively cheap agricultural and food imports.
- Agricultural prices linked to production costs.
- The participation of people in defining agricultural policy.
- The recognition of the rights of peasant women who play an essential role in agricultural production and food.



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The social and economic characteristics necessary for food sovereignty are obvious, but the environmental dimension and ethical sensitivity for the conservation of the ecosystems that provide the environmental services on which life depends and guarantee food sovereignty in the territories are often overlooked.

Therefore, sustainability is a necessary condition for food sovereignty to achieve the well-being of the population from this perspective, it implies mainly respect, social responsibility, and care for the community of life. Maintaining the integrity of ecosystems, promoting social and economic justice, as well as favoring inclusion, democracy, non-violence, and promoting peace in decision-making, are substantive conditions for achieving food sovereignty.

From this paradigm, how is the sustainability of the food system understood? In 1997, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) published the book on Production and Management of Food Chemical Composition Data in Nutrition,

and particularly in chapter 4, an article is presented "Situation of Food Security in Latin America" where the authors Cecilio Morón and Alejandro Schejtman define food sustainability "as the capacity to ensure, within a certain period, that the levels of sufficiency, stability, and autonomy achieved do not imply such a deterioration of renewable and non-renewable natural resources that it makes impossible to sustain the desirable conditions of the food system in the long term, affecting the food security of future generations". (Moron & Schejtman, 1997, pp. 29).

Although this definition attempts to encompass the social dimension to mitigate hunger and shows environmental concern, the absence of the cultural dimension is observed. Consequently, key components of social and economic justice are not visible in this FAO reflection. It seems to be a relatively new concept in the world, although on more than one occasion, it has been explored unwittingly, as already demonstrated by indigenous populations.



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The definition of food sustainability is constantly evolving; it highlights and intertwines the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political dimensions primarily, although often from the cultural dimension, the spiritual dimension has its presence when dealing with indigenous peoples. In this sense, food sustainability not only focuses on agricultural productivity but also on a series of other activities that revolve around the food chain.

From the perspective of the Earth Charter, food sustainability is understood as a process that, from the generation of raw materials [extraction], transportation, intermediate product [production], packaging, use-consumption, and final disposal, respects and cares for the community of life, maintains the balance of the ecosystems where the raw materials were cultivated or developed. Its processes are socially and economically fair, maintaining inclusion in decision-making and process execution, which does not generate violence and contributes to peace.

On the other hand, in Mexico, there is a special effort to value and rescue ancestral food as an essential part of our culture and identity. However, the current preparation process of ancestral food is not always carried out sustainably or healthily, nor responsibly with the environment, since raw materials, inputs, and materials have an ecological footprint that would need to be quantified.

So, what does sustainability imply in food sovereignty? It implies sustainable agriculture that respects ecological principles of diversity, interdependence, and self-sufficiency. It is based on a fair and equitable distribution of nature's goods, recognizing and defending the human and collective rights of communities, and promotes the direct participation of communities in the management of their territory, in policy definition and decision-making.

It implies looking responsibly at the environmental dimension, as it is where environmental services are provided that guarantee the different processes of sovereignty, the social dimension to address hunger as part of the health it promotes, prioritizing social and economic justice without a doubt, inclusion, democracy, tolerance, and the construction of peace. It implies an agriculture that is creative and intelligent, harmonizing social, economic, environmental, cultural, political, and spiritual needs. It is with this perspective that we approach this project and the evaluation of the 1st Ancestral Food Fair of Quiroga and its communities: towards food sovereignty.

The Ancestral Food Fair, from a perspective of the sustainability of food sovereignty: an analysis under the 7th principle of the Earth Charter, was presented as an opportunity to promote local foods that characterize the ancestral food of the indigenous communities of



San Andrés Tzirondaro, Santa Fe de la Laguna, El Calvario, and San Gerónimo Purenchécuaro in the municipality of Quiroga, based primarily on food from local agriculture, hunting, fishing, and gathering, as well as traditional beverages such as mezcal, pulque, and seasonal fruit waters, with the prominent use of corn, beans, chili, and squash. The central objective of the fair was to promote conservation by disseminating ancestral food prepared by local cooks with local products from the lakeside region of the municipality, as a demonstration of their food sovereignty and contribution to sustainability. Through the lens of the 7th principle of the Earth Charter, this effort allows us to observe and appreciate its sustainability.

Although since the beginning of this project, three months before the fair, constant meetings were held with municipal authorities and the CII to plan and organize the fair, as well as to provide recommendations to carry out an environmentally friendly event. It was observed that material attachments to the lifestyles of the new generations, caused by the capitalist consumption system, have taken root and become part of their customs supposedly to facilitate their lives. This reflects significant environmental impacts, such as the use of single-use disposables and unhealthy products in the manufacture of their foods, among others.

Information gathering during the fair was carried out through dialogue with the participants in the fair, as well as with attendees and inhabitants of the community in the context of the

preparation and consumption of food. Observation of the kitchen stalls, and especially of the behaviors during the manufacturing, consumption, and design of the offered foods, was continuous and substantive for this report. Special attention was paid to the use of local products, how they processed their foods, how they displayed them for sale, and how they were consumed.



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In this regard, the analysis is based on the second pillar, "Ecological Integrity" of the Earth Charter, related to "adopting patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard the regenerative capacities of the Earth, human rights, and community well-being" with five action principles that guide the analysis of activities such as the one described in this article.

These action principles are: reducing, reusing, and recycling materials used in production and consumption systems and ensuring that residual wastes can be assimilated by ecological systems; acting with moderation and efficiency in the use of energy and striving to increasingly rely on renewable energy resources, such as solar and wind; promoting the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies; internalizing the total





Action Principle 7.b. Act with moderation and efficiency when using energy and strive to increasingly rely on renewable energy resources, such as solar and wind.

The stands installed at the fair used gas or firewood; no alternative energy was observed. It is pertinent to note that this type of energy contributes to climate change, so it is advisable to consider new alternatives based on solar or wind energy or to be responsible for conserving forests for sustainable use of timber resources as energy and incorporating new technologies to reduce the use of firewood.

Action Principle 7.c. Promote the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies.

The Fair rewarded the most representative dishes that were made with local products and met the ancestral and representative characteristics of the region. The awarded chefs were given a portable Patsari stove as an alternative to sustainable cooking for two reasons: first, it reduces wood consumption by up to 60%, and second, it minimizes smoke in the home, benefiting the health of the cook and the family sharing the household. Eight stoves were awarded through an allied project of the National Research and Advocacy Projects [PRONAI] Ecomovil 321271 of the National Autonomous University of Mexico [UNAM] and through the PRONAI of food sovereignty and social responsibility 321309, of the Michoacana University of San Nicolás de Hidalgo [UMSNH].

Action Principle 7.d. Internalize the total environmental and social costs of goods and services into their selling price and allow consumers to identify products that meet the highest social and environmental standards.

It was identified that the products for sale generally met social, environmental, and cultural characteristics. However, it was noted that information about the purpose of the fair, the meaning of food sovereignty, and sustainable food was not entirely clear.

Action Principle 7.f. Adopt lifestyles that emphasize quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world.

The Fair showed the possibility of adopting and rescuing a form of nutrition that is on the verge of extinction due to the effects of globalization, by promoting the preparation of their food from local products and environmentally friendly technologies. It was observed that although the spices and condiments used, such as cumin, cloves, cinnamon, and bay leaf, are not produced locally, they complement the flavors. Additionally, they were cooked with refined grain oils; however, some vendors also used lard.

## Conclusions

Achieving food sovereignty and sustainability will indeed be a challenge while promoting the rescue of ancestral food. We must strive to achieve the necessary synergies to rescue and develop the capacities of the inhabitants of this lake region to feed their population, all while harnessing their local food knowledge





without harming their natural resources and preserving the culture of each region through gastronomy, which gives cultural identity.

Thanks to the organization of this event and its aims, a process of raising awareness among the involved communities was initiated, along with the enjoyment of smells, flavors, and smiles. During the event, a sense of gratitude and kindness among the participants was perceived, as well as a perception of what we can achieve as humanity to build just, sustainable, and peaceful societies.

Despite the efforts made to achieve a "successful" event to showcase healthy and sustainable food, it is understood that these efforts were not enough to influence the transformation of consciousness in favor of a cleaner planet. However, it was demonstrated that ancestral foods can be on the path to sustainability through more responsible and healthier preparation in harmony with the region's environment. These are the first steps, and it is clear that

we must further influence this transformation, where egos that crave individualism are transformed by solidarity and by undoing the neoliberalism that has contaminated indigenous customs. Therefore, it is necessary to design an education and training program for sustainable development.

Innovation is not separate from sustainability, so an additional effort will need to be made wisely to conserve ancestral cuisine, allowing for food sovereignty and sustainability.

Unlike ancestral food, which is categorized as healthy and sustainable nutrition, current food consumption driven by globalization is notable for its impact on population health, leading to malnutrition that exacerbates chronic degenerative diseases such as obesity, hypertension, hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism, and diabetes, primarily.

The Fair, as a laboratory for social observation, identifies opportunities and social innovation, in which solidarity,



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respect, care, tolerance, compassion, inclusion, respect, and justice are values that we must continue to work toward to achieve more just, sustainable, and peaceful societies.

We cannot say that the "1st Ancestral Food Fair of Quiroga and its communities: towards food sovereignty" event was sustainable, but the steps taken were substantive and will inspire future events where the community collectively and responsibly appropriates this and other initiatives on food sovereignty.

The utility of the Earth Charter as an evaluation instrument for sustainability is appreciated, primarily using principle 7. This allows us to observe, from a different perspective, the lifestyle reflected through Purépecha cuisine, understood as the pre-Hispanic diet of the Purépecha people based on corn, beans, chili, and squash, supplemented with products from agriculture, hunting, fishing, and gathering. Furthermore, it allows us to understand the values that contribute to well-being in order to adopt production and consumption patterns that must be preserved and serve as a reference for other projects that need to assess their progress towards sustainability.



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