

Analyzing power relations and their role in food system sustainability – two case studies from Bolivia

Johanna Jacobi
Centre for Development and Environment, Institute of
Geography
University of Bern
LASA 2020



Yateirenda village in the Gran Chaco region, Bolivia

A multidimensional, global food crisis

- Hunger (821 million), overweight (1.9 billion) obesity (672 million)
- Edible crop harvest around 4600 kcal/capita/day, enough for 10 billion people
- 53-80% produced by small farmers, pastoralists and fisherfolk
- Industrial agriculture uses 70% of agricultural land and freshwater resources, and causes 19-29% of global greenhouse gases

→ Hunger is caused by poverty and inequality, not scarcity

→ Need to «double food production by 2050» only applies if feed and fuel is prioritized over food, and if loss, waste, and overconsumption are not addressed.

The Political Ecology of Food:

Re-include the issue of power into the analyses

Much research on food disconnected from political and/or ecological implications

Robbins (2004): PE: “empirical, research-based explorations to explain linkages in the condition and change of social/environmental systems, with explicit consideration of relations of power”

More critical ‘food studies’ - scholarship:

- Understanding place-based socio-natures
- Addressing politics of scale and inequality
- Co-production of knowledge and change

Research study:

“When We Stand up, They Have to Negotiate with Us”: Power Relations in and between an Agroindustrial and an Indigenous Food System in Bolivia

Setting: Chaco region, near Santa Cruz: Guarani people (indigenous group), surrounded by agribusiness (soya, sessame, chia, maize, sorghum, sugar cane...)



Left side: Soybean field and sugar cane transport near Santa Cruz, Bolivia Right side: Guaraní women in the village of Yateirenda near Santa Cruz preparing *achi* (maize flour), 2017

Indigenous territories and private landholdings

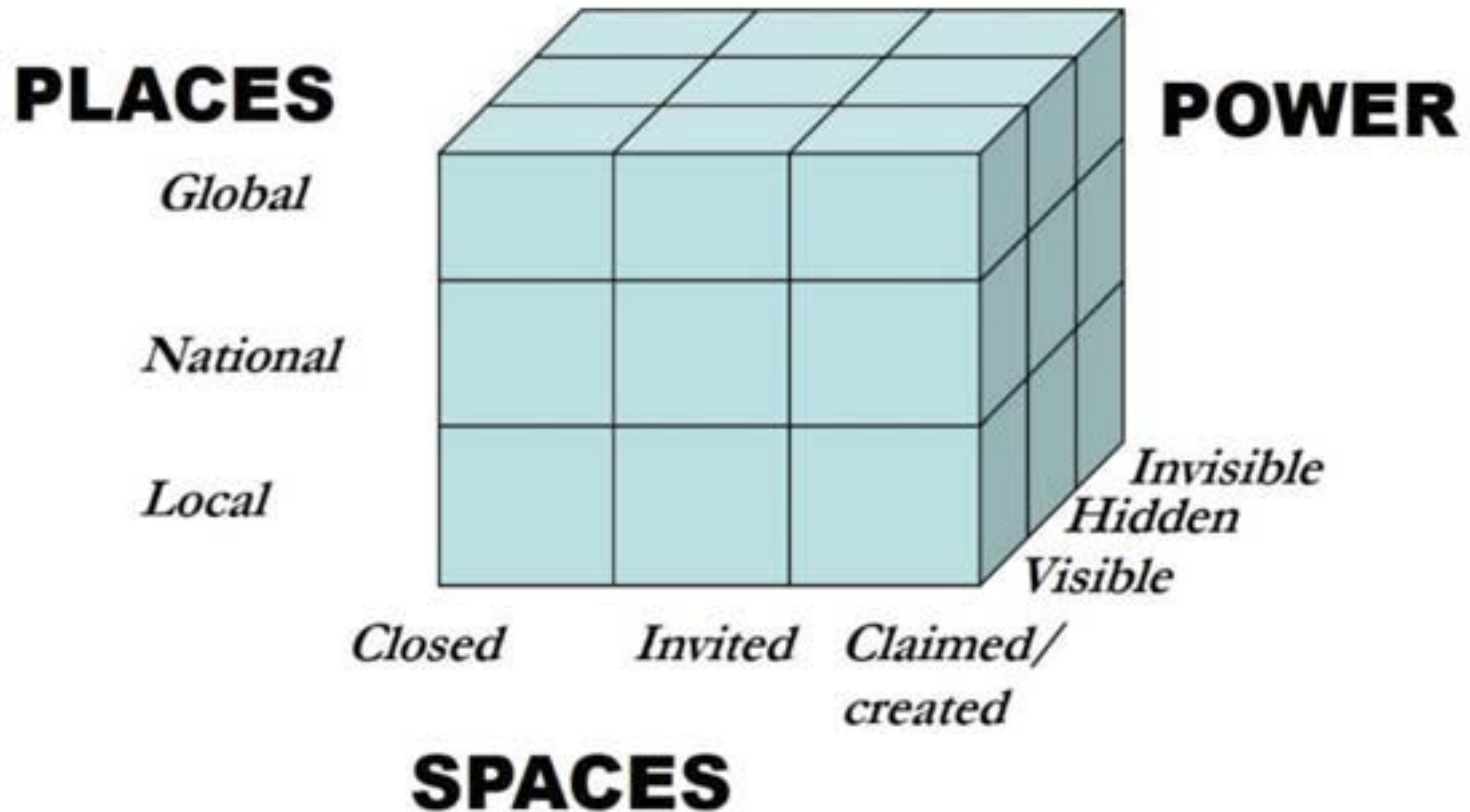
Indigenous Communal Territories (TCOs) recognized in 1996 (inalienable, indivisible, irreversible and collective)

But: private property within is also recognized; titling process very slow (3.1% titled so far)

There are five private landholdings within the TCO over 5000 ha which is against the constitution

Only 12% in the municipality are Guaranies; 44% are Mennonites (who engage in industrial ag)

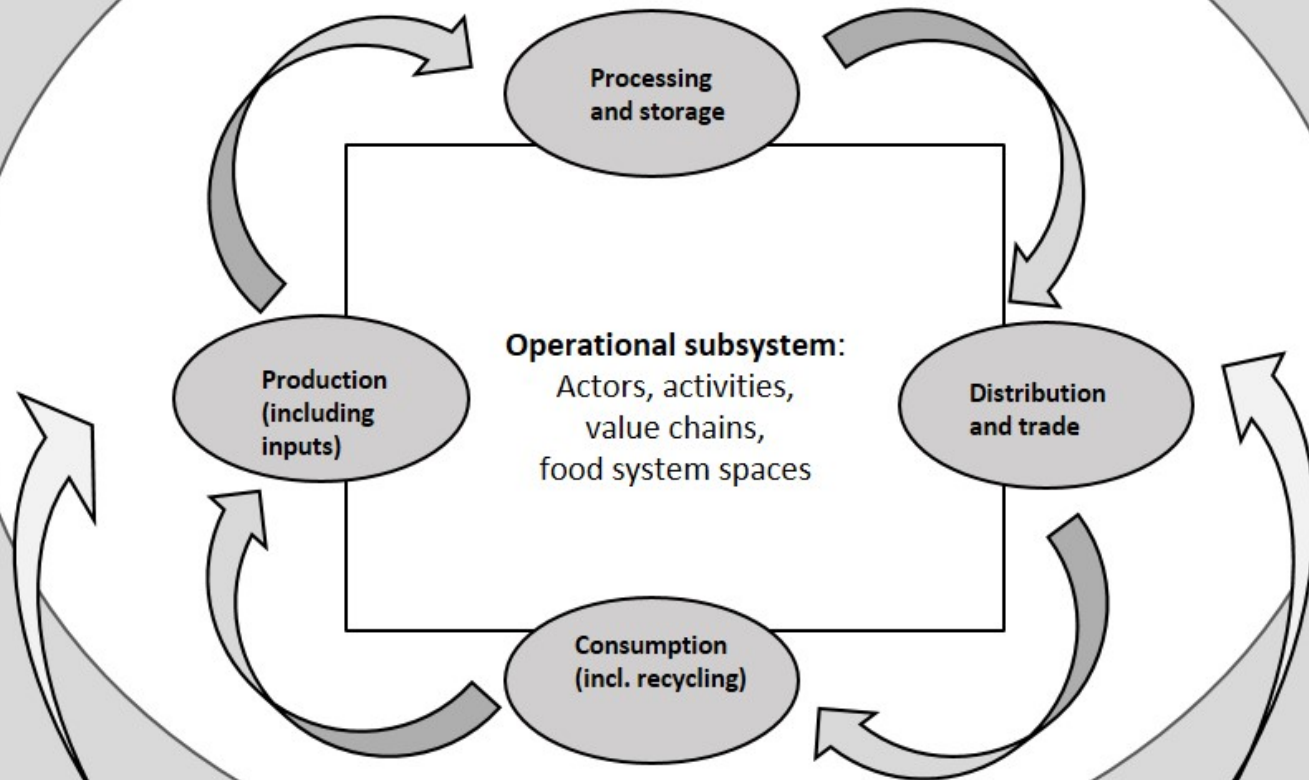
How to analyze power relations in food systems?



Gaventa /IDS 2006: The power cube framework

Natural Resources Subsystem: Soil, water, biodiversity

Political subsystem: Public policies, laws, rules and regulations, private-sector rules and voluntary regulations (soft and hard laws)



Information and Services Subsystem:
Knowledge, research, extension,
financial and logistical services

Methods

- Food system mapping
- List of actors (based on value chain analysis)
- 31 interviews with exemplary actors in two food systems
- Participation in events, and analysis of press releases
- Observation, conversations during the process
- Complementary analysis on the right to food
- Codification according to the variables of spaces, places and forms of power, related discourses, strategies

Main results

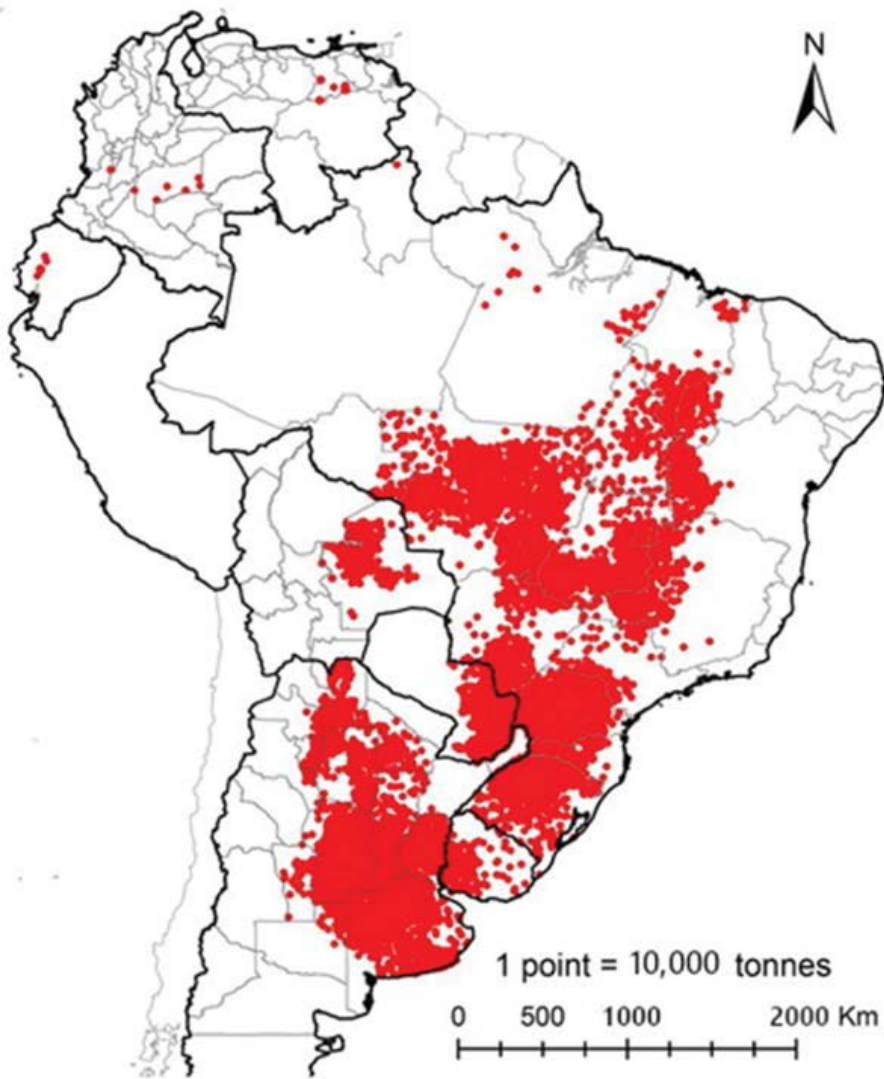
Spaces of power: **Closed** and in parts invited in the agroindustrial food system; consumption is increasingly claimed by consumers

Claimed/created in the indigenous food system: Indigenous territory

Forms of power: Visible/Guaranies: Legal land title and parastatal, recognized governance system who receive a budget

Hidden power undermines visible power in many aspects (illegal pesticides, illegal crops, land concentration...)

Invisible power: Diversification logic and local resistance, e.g. women's kitchen gardens



«Places of power»: The supranational «Soy Republic» (Oliveira and Hecht 2016), and industry advertisement (Syngenta, 2003)

Negotiation and resistance strategies

TCO provides grounds for negotiation, e.g. for trespassing the land

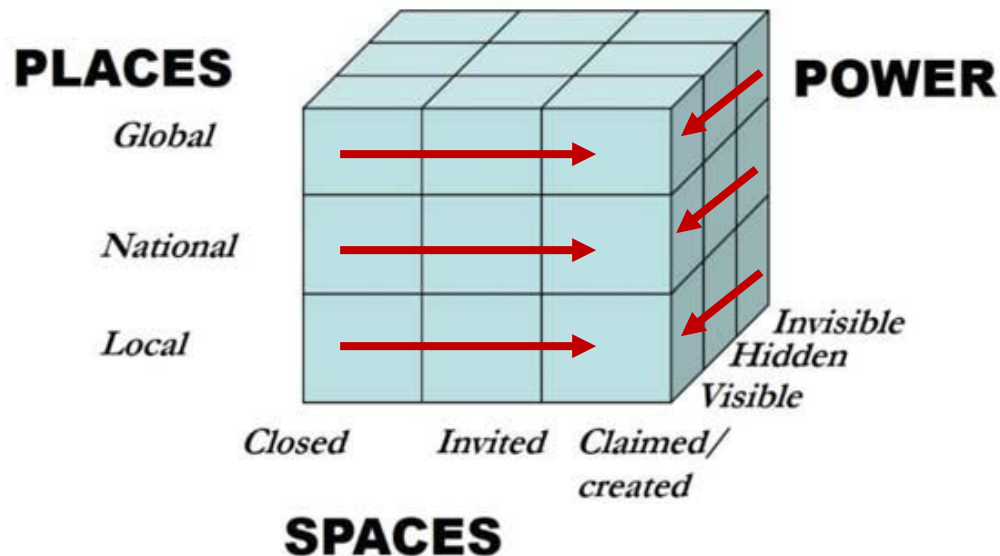
Oil and gas exploitation: August 2015: Roadblock and violent conflict

Own food production and food traditions, place-attachment



Conclusions

- Legal basis provides visible power in a created space (indigenous food system)
- CSR-sustainability approach in a closed space (agroindustrial food system)
- Democratization and accountability processes can shift hidden forms of power to visibility, and closed to claimed spaces



Thank you!



Johanna.jacobi@cde.unibe.ch