Citizen voice and state response in the context of food system transformations

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the dynamic interplay between food activism and state responses, focusing on the diverse ways and strategies used by food movements to advocate for food systems transformation. More so, in a context of growing corporate control in food systems, food activism has been promoting just and sustainable alternatives. State reactions have been evolving, ranging from repression to policy change, to, in some cases, collaboration. Through a combination of summative content analysis of key themes across the literature and a thematic exploration of case studies, the paper highlights key trends in food activism and examines how governments have responded to them. By analysing the interactions between citizens and governments, this paper offers insights for both activists and policymakers seeking to build more inclusive and participatory food governance structures, in their efforts to transform food systems.

1. Introduction

Modern history bears witness to diverse expressions of citizen voice and agency within the food system. From the cries for bread that echoed in the 1789 French Revolution to the more recent (2008 to 2020s) financial and food crises, farmers and consumers globally have articulated their grievances through protests and citizen action. This includes Indian farmers seeking better procurement prices for their produce or Belgian farmers seeking protection from cheap imports (Sutton et al., 2013; Hassenstab, 2024; Bujdei-Tebeica, 2024). The 1960s turn to industrial agriculture, positioned as the only solution to 'feeding the world', gave rise to grassroots movements advocating for food grown sustainably by smallholders without chemicals or later, genetic modification (Toulin and Haydu, 2022). In parallel were consumer campaigns to eat vegan, local and 'slow,' and local initiatives to support alternative food governance initiatives, such as cooperatives (Lorenzini, 2019). Since the 1996 World Food Summit, both peasant and consumer movements have consistently pushed for food sovereignty – to collectively 'change how the world understood poverty and hunger' (AB, 2021), expressing politics through production practices, purchasing power and direct action. Alongside these struggles, the intensification of

inequality in land and asset ownership has spurred farmers and communities to mobilize for land access, exemplified by large-scale movements like Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST), as well as smaller, localized efforts such as urban community gardens that reclaim spaces for food cultivation and collective empowerment (Edelman et al., 2014). The scale and frequency of these actions and movements points to the growing scrutiny of the global food system for its role in perpetuating inequality, environmental degradation, and food insecurity (IPES-Food, 2017).

These actions all capture what can broadly be understood as food activism – the expression of citizen voices within, and concerning, food system injustices – including questions of labour and power – by asking who decides or controls the ways in which food is produced, distributed, and/or consumed, for who, and by who (Counihan and Siniscalchi, 2013). Much of the literature on food activism, embedded within the wider social movement literature, is concerned with expressions of citizen agency, spanning from short-term reactive protest to the generation of alternative food system pathways based on principles of cooperation and justice, how this is shaped by unequal power relations at different scales, between different groups of people, and how it changes over time, in response to shifts in the larger political economy landscape

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(Blair & Winters, 2020; Borras et al., 2008; Brass, 2016; Motta et al., 2021; Nabari, 2021).

Studies examining the evolution of food activism demonstrate how peasant movements advocating for land rights are now resisting corporate control over food systems (Beriss, 2019; Clapp, 2023; Counihan and Siniscalchi, 2013; Alkon and Guthman, 2017), or shifting from issues of hunger and food insecurity to systemic transformations that emphasize rights, sustainability, justice, and participatory governance (Desmarais, 2017; Gottlieb and Joshi, 2013; McMichael, 2014; Timmermann and Felix, 2015). Examples vary from Indigenous struggles for land recognition (Passmore, 2014), to mobilisations around the human rights of farmworkers and fair labour practices for migrant workers (Thompson, 2021). While a useful tool for mobilisation and social solidarity, human rights frameworks, here the 'Right to Food' (Elver, 2023), haven't always adequately responded to the responsibilities of private and transnational actors, leading movements such as La Via Campesina (LVC) to claim 'new human rights' such as to land and territory, to seeds, and to set prices for agricultural products (Edelman and James, 2011; Larking, 2017), with 'food sovereignty' too seen as a 'new human right' (Claeys, 2015: 454).).

Food activism is driven by multiple factors and motivations including human rights, as noted above, economic imperatives (e.g., hikes in food prices, inflation, unemployment) (Sutton et al., 2013; Hassenstab, 2024), a concern around changing food practices (Lewis, 2018; Music et al., 2022), the quality of food and its safety for health and life (Pesci and Brinkley, 2022), and the desire for system change. Anticipating state responses to the demands of food movements is increasingly important, as an enabling factor in reformatting how the food system produces food and what, as a consequence, is consumed. Despite its importance, state responses have however not been the subject of much research. Our main objective in this paper is therefore to fill this gap by examining the range of state responses to food activism and the dynamic interplay between them, in order to identify potential strategies and pathways that can lead to food system transformations.

Only a subset of this literature directly explores how governments respond to food activism, for example, national policy reforms following the farmers' protests in India (Hertel, 2015) or the Seed Law passed by the National Assembly in Venezuela (Felicien et al., 2020), discussed in further detail in section 4. Responses from governments appear to be shaped by the political context, economic interests (including for example trade, investment and market stability) (Friedrich et al., 2019), and the perceived threat to the status quo, particularly national security and political stability. Fear of social unrest, especially in election years, can lead States to respond to civil society movements demand for change, as those can influence public opinion and electoral outcomes (Schneider et al., 2014), and ignoring them can lead to political instability.

Fowler (1991) noted that states adopt a range of strategies from legislation to administrative cooperation or even political appropriation to benefit from the contributions of NGOs, and the 'human face' they bring to development, while ensuring their political containment. The underlying motives behind state's responses to food movements then include attempts to stabilise social or economic conditions, or deal with public opinion and media scrutiny by pacifying citizens' demands (Hossain, 2018). More recently, State responses to food activism have also been driven by growing sustainability and equity related concerns, and a commitment to systemic change, emphasised by the broader international agenda around sustainable development (Burch, 2011). For instance, issues of urban industrialisation and pollution have been raised by communities, lobbying governments to set policies and interventions in place (Özatağan et al., 2021), or highlighting the inequity of post-colonial laws for local populations (van den Berg et al., 2018).

An important element appears to be the growing push to make governance processes within food systems more just and equitable (Clark et al., 2021; deWit and Iles, 2016). Not only should these processes become free from sectoral interests, and be built around the obligations of states (Claeys, 2015), they should also aim to include actors who have until now been marginalised, such as, women, minorities, and indigenous people (Tribaldos and Kortetmaki, 2022). It has been argued that unless more inclusive governance mechanisms are set in place, it will not be possible to reverse historical patterns of exploitation, uneven wealth distribution, and inequitable access to food and resources (Conti et al., 2025a). A key mechanism for strengthening justice and inclusion is the active involvement of diverse and even unconventional stakeholders (e.g., civil society organisations, activist groups) in decision-making processes (Baudish et al, 2024). This broader involvement at different levels (local, regional, but also national and global) would ensure that state responses are more aligned with local needs and preferences (Hammelman et al., 2020; Mausch et al., 2024).

Using the example of the Slow Food Movement, Altuna et al. (2017) demonstrate how innovative meanings can be constructed through a process of collaboration, in this case, between social movements, led by civil society organisations (CSOs), policy-makers and companies (Hendrikx & Lagendijk, 2022). The process of negotiation and contestation between citizens and governments is then key to achieving change in policies and/or practice (Fraser, 1989), foregrounding the importance of the collective agency of social movements as a driving force for food systems' transformations (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). In this context, it might be critical to avoid hostile and violent confrontations and instead promote agreement and collaboration between the different stakeholders.

This paper contributes to the broader debate on food activism and its role in food systems transformations by systematically reviewing the literature to showcase patterns of state responses to food movements, ranging from overt repression to meaningful collaboration, reflecting the tensions between grassroots demands and state agendas. They are also dynamic, changing over time, from outright repression to dialogue as in the case of the Indian farmers' protests (Singh and Shergill, 2021). What is less clear is how state responsiveness varies across geography, more so in a neoliberal era with strong corporate interests. We seek to offer new perspectives on what drives state responses to food movements through refining our understandings of the complex interactions between diverse food system actors pushing for transformation and systemic change.

After setting out our conceptual framework and methodology in the next section, we move in section three to unpacking the key themes and actors that constitute our conceptual framing. Section four presents an in-depth, thematic analysis exploring the nature of state responses to food activism. We discuss emerging issues and challenges in section five and offer a few concluding suggestions in section six.

2. Concepts and methods

2.1. Key concepts used for the review

In this section, we set out the core concepts of food systems, actors and transformations that guided our review. We then explain our conceptual framework, developed iteratively during the screening process, to explore how interactions between food movements and governments shape the trajectory of food system transformations.

A food system is defined as including 'all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the output of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes' (HLPE, 2020: 11). At present, food systems are neither sustainable in terms of their level of global greenhouse gas emissions, nor are they able to meet contemporary nutritional challenges (Schneider et al., 2023). There have therefore been calls for the radical transformation of food systems. Such a transformation needs to recognize the complexity of relationships between the food system and related systems and sectors such as health, environment, energy, the economy and socio-cultural systems, focus on all forms of malnutrition and propose context-specific solutions (HLPE,

2020: 14). Food actors include a range of stakeholders from activists to scholars, civil society organisations to movements for food justice, all experimenting with and seeking to develop a diversity of solutions to facilitate food security and nutrition for all across different contexts.

From the literature reviewed, we identified several forms of food activism, that we group into five types, diverse groups of food actors, that we grouped into four categories, and eight forms of state response (Fig. 1). We used this framework to examine the agency of grassroots movements and the types of responses from states. We recognise that these movements can achieve success in other important ways, not examined here, such as generating environmental benefits, fostering community, and shifting cultural narratives, as seen in the Zapatistas movement in Chiapas (Mexico) (Bellante, 2017).

This study adopted a rapid review design in order to synthesise a broad collection of material on food movements using a simplified and timely approach (Tricco et al., 2015). We analysed the data at two levels: first, a larger set of studies that helped us characterise citizen's voice, the stakeholders involved, and the regional spread, enabling us to iteratively develop the conceptual framework used; and second, a smaller set of cases that explicitly discussed state responses to food activism.

2.2. Search strategy

Web of Science was the sole database used to search for articles, given this was a rapid review and also the search brought up a sufficient number of articles (searches were done by author 3). The search terms focused on retrieving various aspects of food-related activism, policies, and movements. Specifically, the terms "food activism," "food protest," "food riot," and "food strike" were included to capture different forms of social and political action related to food, incorporating a broad spectrum of food-related movements, actors and ideologies. The phrase "right to food" combined with "citizen" and "policy" was also included to investigate policy discussions around the right to food. No date restrictions were applied to the search. The full search strategy can be seen in Supplementary Materials Table 1.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
Papers were included if they met the following criteria:
1. Articles, editorial material, books, book chapters, reviews and proceedings papers.
2. Articles that provided either conceptual or empirical data on how citizen agency was expressed within food systems.

Papers were excluded if they were:
1. Book reviews
2. Not relevant to the research question, that is, food activism and state responses may be mentioned, but were not the core focus of the paper.
3. Published in languages other than English

2.3. Screening and data extraction

The initial search retrieved 2181 studies. After duplicates were removed, 1788 article titles were screened for title relevance (by author 3). The title screening resulted in 887 articles being retained, those which could potentially reveal something about how people push for change within food systems. Examples of titles retained included 'The dynamics of collective violence: Dissecting food riots in contemporary Argentina' or Shopping for change? Neoliberalizing activism and the limits to eating non-GMO.' Titles which largely focused on food in relation to human health, genetics, biochemistry, agronomy and animal behaviours were removed.

The abstracts of these articles were then screened by two reviewers (author 3 and 5) removing those which mentioned food movements, but where this was not the core focus of the paper. An example of this included "Anti-racist practice and the work of community food
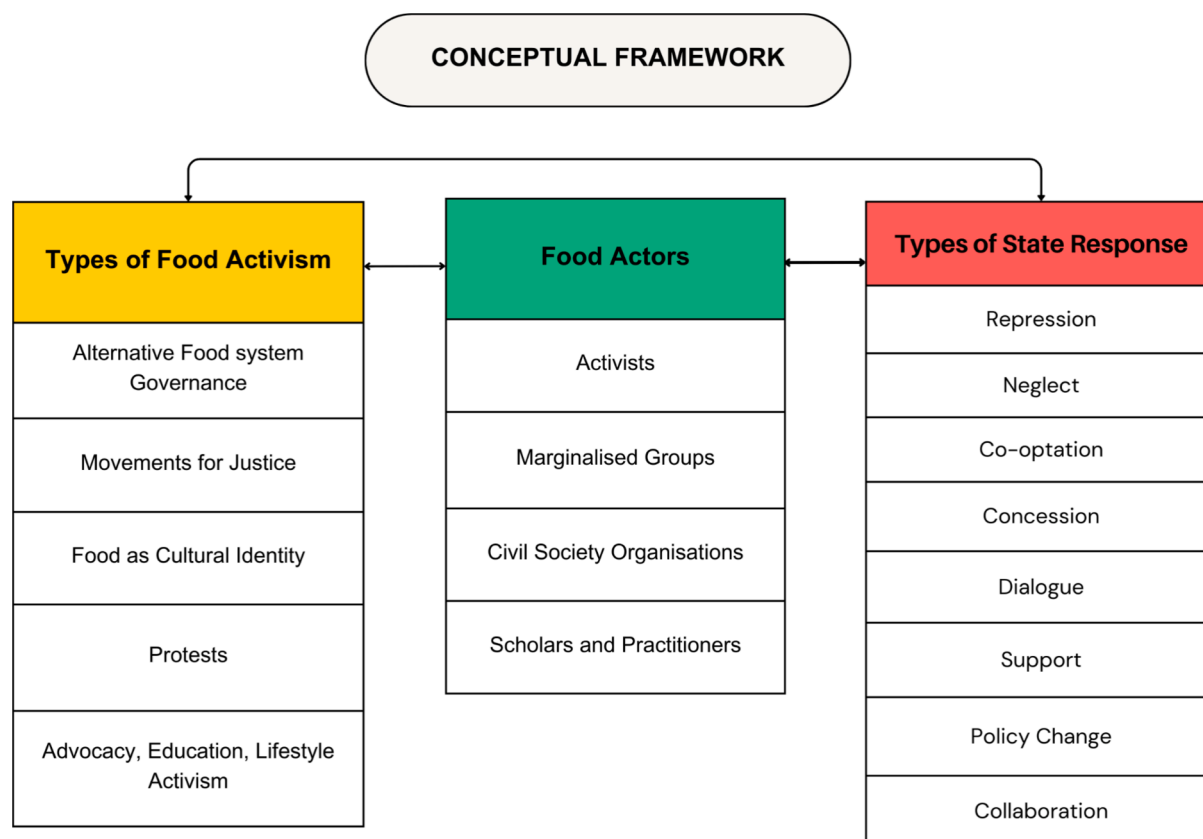

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework: relationship between types of food activism, the actors involved and the nature of state response.

organizations" where the paper talked about racism, but not protests linked to food. A second reason for exclusion was when the papers were not contextualised within food systems, for example, "Humanitarian aid beyond bare survival: Social movement responses to xenophobic violence in South Africa" or "The Contentious Roots of the Egyptian Revolution" which talked about protests (e.g., for democracy) but not food. This resulted in 389 articles being retained for a summative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

2.4. Summative analysis of food movements

The 389 abstracts were subject to a preliminary inductive coding based on variables of interest: the type of food action/movement, region, time period, part of the food system, key stakeholder groups, movement triggers and state response (done by authors 3 and 5). A data extraction sheet was created to characterise and analyse the selected studies. Some articles referenced multiple categories within each variable, leading to multiple thematic codes being created. These were then clustered into a series of umbrella themes, and groups of stakeholders, that informed the development of our conceptual framework (Fig. 1).

The primary codes and clusters are presented in Supplementary Materials Tables 2 and 3. These codes allowed the authors to perform a thematic analysis, following Moallemi et al.'s approach (2023).

2.5. Qualitative review of state responses

88 articles discussed state responses to food movements and were identified for full text screening through the process of summative analysis (done by authors 2 and 4). Where the articles discussed the same case study, they were combined, and where an article discussed more than one case study, it was split, resulting in 79 distinct cases for the analysis of state responses (Table 4 in Supplementary Materials). Additional codes were created inductively for the qualitative review of these cases to better specify the stakeholders, the methods they used, their demands and motivations, how states responded, and why they responded in particular ways. The data from the full-text screening was summarised in an Excel sheet.

Several ambiguities arose during the coding process, as a state's response could evolve over time transitioning from repression to dialogue or even collaboration. In these cases, initially the analysis
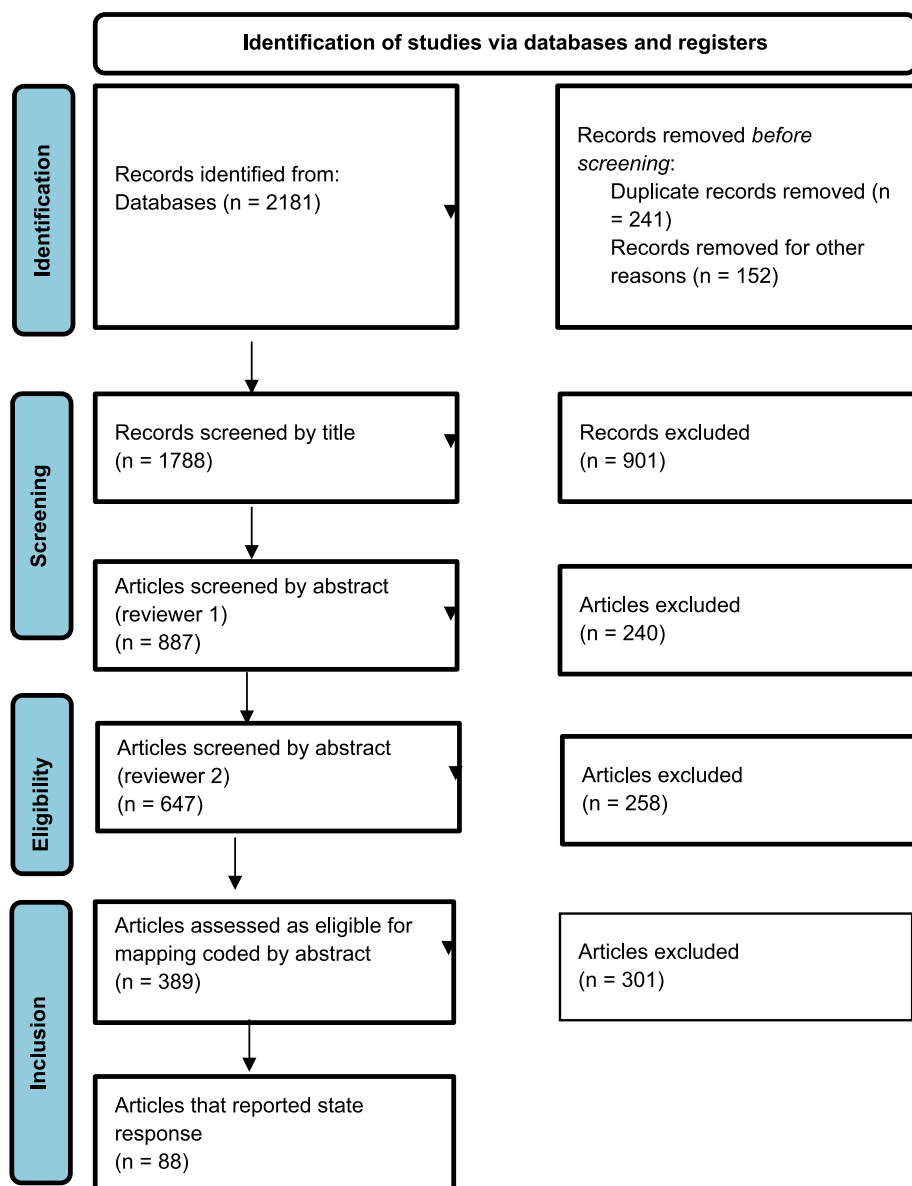

Fig. 2. Screening and selection of articles.

identified multiple codes sequentially to capture the evolution of the state's response, with careful documentation of the timeline of interactions. Later, for the purpose of creating the results tables, only the final outcome was selected. In the case of the Right to Food Campaign in India (Hertel, 2015), for example, despite initial repression, the movement ultimately achieved a successful policy change, leading to the coding of this outcome under "policy change". Similarly, if the state engages in discussions and offers minor concessions, the choice of code may depend on whether the primary intent was to engage in dialogue or to offer a substantive compromise. All these instances of doubt were resolved through discussion between a smaller group of authors, informed if needed by additional contextual evidence (authors 1, 2 and 4). While the identification and resolution of doubts during the coding process captured the complexity of the subject matter at hand, a consistent and nuanced approach to data categorization was taken to address it, and the choices made acknowledged.

Fig. 2 charts this process of search, screening and data extraction, which helped us develop our conceptual framework more fully.

2.6. Limitations

We would like to acknowledge a few limitations of the methodology, including the conduct of searches in only one database, the Web of Science, the exclusion of non-English language papers, and the extraction of data for characterising the studies from the paper abstracts.

3. Food activism, actors and state responses

In this section, we present our key results, characterising food activism and the actors involved. In Section 4, we turn to a deeper exploration of state responses and the interactions between different types of food activism, actors and the state.

3.1. Types of food activism and the expressions of citizen agency

Since 2011, there has been a rapid rise in the number of papers focusing on the five types of food activism identified in the initial screening: Alternative Food System Governance, Movements for Justice, Food as a Cultural Identity, Protests, and Advocacy, Education and Lifestyle Activism (Table 1). The number of papers per year continue to increase.

3.1.1. Alternative food system governance (Governance): Creating equitable, democratic, and community-centred food systems

Governance was the most common form of activism in the papers reviewed since 2011, with 33 per cent each from North America and Europe (Table 5 in Supplementary Materials). Alternative food system governance models refer to citizen-led initiatives to create more equitable, sustainable, and community-centred food systems through collective agency (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). These initiatives, ranging from food policy councils (Boden & Hoover, 2018) to community-supported agriculture (CSA) (Mert-Cakal & Miele, 2020), or food hubs (Tornaghi, 2017), offer new ways of organising food production, distribution, and consumption that prioritise local control, social justice, and

environmental stewardship and are direct agents of change in the democratisation of food systems.

Food policy councils play a pivotal role in this landscape, bringing together stakeholders from across the food system – farmers, consumers, policymakers, and advocates – to collaboratively develop and implement food policies that reflect the needs and values of local communities (Boden & Hoover, 2018; Clendenning et al., 2016; Noll, 2020). They operate at multiple levels, often more successful at a city or regional scale, than that of the federal state (Music et al., 2022; Walker, 2016; Michel et al., 2022). Food sharing and community kitchens exemplify the growing movement toward collaborative food provisioning, where communities come together to share resources, skills, and meals, addressing food insecurity by redistributing surplus food, reducing waste, and creating spaces for care and mutual support (Phillips & Willatt, 2020). Food hubs, farmers' markets and Farm-to-Table movements strengthen the connection between producers and consumers, promoting transparency, fair pricing, and the consumption of seasonal, local food (Pesci & Brinkley, 2022). All these initiatives represent a shift towards more decentralised, participatory, and sustainable ways of organising food systems, based on values of community resilience and care. While they do face challenges, such as long-term instability (Kump & Fikar, 2021), their diffusion is nonetheless on the rise.

3.1.2. Movements for justice (Justice): Food sovereignty as a catalyst for change

A large number of papers (40 per cent) on movements for justice come from the Americas: North America followed by Latin America (Claeys, 2015; Felicien et al., 2020; Calcagni, 2023) and Asia (Hertel, 2015), and this group of papers has also seen some of the largest growth since 2011. Several food movements demand the centring of justice within the food system, calling for food sovereignty, or the prioritising of equitable, sustainable, and localised alternatives (Patel, 2009). Movements for justice operate at multiple scales – local, national, and global – and challenge the increasing dominance of the industrial food system by advocating for policies that support small-scale farmers, Indigenous practices, and ecological sustainability (Larking, 2017). Their agency lies in their ability to 'localise' human rights, mobilise communities, influence public discourse, and pressure governments to enact policy changes that reflect the values of equity, sustainability, and food justice. For example, La Via Campesina (LVC) has managed to successfully institutionalise 'the rights of peasants' and 'the rights to food sovereignty' in ways that activists can adapt them to their local contexts (Claeys, 2015). Advocates of agroecology leverage and reshape the existing standards and practices of science; seeking to influence the policy, legal, practical, and civic arenas, centering attention on the ethical legitimacy of food systems (deWit and Iles, 2016). Furthermore, these movements are often long-standing struggles motivated by social inequalities and, as many cases from the US illustrate, they are pushed forward by unionised farmworkers (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021) and/or with the support of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Thompson, 2021).

Table 1
Types of food activism by year and theme (n = 389).

	1981–1990	1991–2000	2001–2010	2011–2020	2021–2023	Total
Governance	1	1	6	67	28	103
Justice			1	66	23	90
Identity			5	59	21	85
Protest	1	1	5	32	9	48
Advocacy			7	26	12	45
N/A			6	12		18
Total	2	2	30	262	93	389
	(0.2/year)	(0.2/year)	(3/year)	(26/year)	(31/year)	

3.1.3. Food as Cultural Identity (Identity): Changing the social and material structures of the food system

Similar to governance, food as cultural identity was also most common in papers from North America and Europe (55 per cent). Food is more than sustenance; it is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, social practices, and material realities. The movements that centre food as a form of cultural identity, including Slow Food (Altuna et al., 2017; Leitch, 2003), organic food, local food (Beriss, 2019; Mount, 2012), and Indigenous gastropolitics (Fresno-Calleja, 2017), emphasise the role of food in preserving cultural heritage, resisting industrialisation, and promoting alternative ways of living that are in harmony with nature. These movements are not merely about altering diets; they challenge the homogenisation of food cultures brought about by globalisation and industrial agriculture. They also seek to transform the social and material structures that shape how food is produced, distributed, and consumed (Altuna et al., 2017). They emphasise the importance of quality, sustainability, and a closer relationship between producers and consumers, promoting the idea of "food miles" as a measure of environmental impact (Mount, 2012) and food choices as integral to broader struggles for environmental and social justice. For some Indigenous communities (e.g., Pacific Islanders), food becomes a powerful tool for asserting their sovereignty, preserving their cultural heritage and resisting colonial narratives (Fresno-Calleja, 2017).

3.1.4. Protests: Mobilising numbers to make people's voice heard

Almost half the papers from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (for example Ketchley et al., 2023; Soffiantini, 2020) were on protests and given the smaller number of papers emerging from these regions overall, there were fewer in this group compared to the ones discussed earlier. Protests play a critical role as a strategy to foster change, serving also as powerful expressions of collective dissent against unjust food systems (McMichael, 2014). They either emerge abruptly or are used as tactics by social movements, but they generally represent a form of activism, through riots, strikes, and sit-ins, that brings visibility to the struggles of marginalised communities, pressuring governments and corporations to address their demands. Protests, as seen in the global food riots of 2007–8, are often the most visible forms of resistance, erupting when communities face acute food crises, e.g., price hikes or shortages, disproportionately affecting the poor (Berazneva & Lee, 2013; Hossain, 2018). These often spontaneous, sometimes violent actions are expressions of deep-seated frustration with systems that prioritise profit over people's basic needs. Strikes are a form of organised protest, where agricultural workers or food industry employees collectively withdraw their labour to demand better wages, working conditions, or fair prices for their produce. Strikes disrupt the food supply chain, drawing attention to the exploitation of labour, as evident in the modern gig economy during the pandemic (Hussain, 2023). By halting production and distribution of food, workers forced stakeholders to engage with their demands, making it clear that the system cannot function without their labour. In essence, these protests, challenging the structures that perpetuate food injustice, are vital for mobilising public support, drawing media attention, and compelling those in power to listen to the voices of the people seeking a more equitable and sustainable food system.

3.1.5. Advocacy, education and lifestyle activism (Advocacy): Empowering individuals and mobilising policy change

Although less common than the other types of food movements, there is growing attention to this category of movements especially in Europe and North America. Advocacy, education, and lifestyle activism are crucial components of the broader movement for building sustainable food systems. These approaches focus on raising awareness, influencing public opinion, and changing individual and collective behaviours to challenge the dominant industrial food system and promote alternatives (Anderson et al., 2019). These campaigns raise awareness of issues like food insecurity, climate change, and the exploitation of farmworkers, using tools such as petitions, public demonstrations, and media outreach to influence decision-makers (Friedrich et al., 2019). Online activism using social media platforms has emerged as a powerful tool for amplifying these messages, enabling activists to reach global audiences, share information quickly, and coordinate actions across diverse locations (Schneider et al., 2017). At the same time, education is key for these efforts, empowering individuals and communities with the knowledge needed to make informed choices about the way we produce, consume, and think about food.

3.2. Food actors driving movements

All the types of activism above are driven by diverse sets of stakeholders, each bringing unique perspectives, resources, and strategies. This rich tapestry of actors can be broadly categorised into four clusters: activists, marginalised groups, civil society organisations, and scholars and practitioners (Table 2).

3.2.1. Activists

Activists including students, consumers, and ordinary citizens constitute the largest group of stakeholders and are spread across the different forms of food activism, especially protests. Working in coalitions and partnerships for food justice, these actors engage in a wide range of activities, from organising protests and strikes to participating in local food initiatives like community gardens and farmers' markets. Particularly, urban citizens, often disconnected from food production, are increasingly involved in advocacy and education efforts that promote sustainable consumption and food justice (Noll, 2020). Activists are key in raising awareness, mobilising public opinion, and pressuring governments and corporations to adopt more equitable food policies.

3.2.2. Marginalised groups

As the second largest group of actors, marginalised groups, including peasants, women, Indigenous peoples, people of colour (POC), and migrants, focus on broader movements for justice, alternative food system governance and to a lesser extent food as cultural identity. They are likely to be too vulnerable to engage in outright protest. Marginalised group participation is most prevalent in North America, followed by Latin America, but lowest in the MENA region and Australia-Pacific, due perhaps to poverty combined with conflict in the former and high levels of social protection in the latter (Table 6 Supplementary Materials). These groups are often the most affected by inequities in the global food system, facing land dispossession, labour exploitation, and food insecurity (Smith, 2019). Peasants and small-scale farmers are on the

Table 2
Food activism by actor/stakeholder (n = 389).

	Advocacy	Governance	Identity	Justice	Protest	N.A	Total
Activists	28	34	32	22	45	11	172
Marginalised Groups	11	26	22	35	3	5	102
Civil society organisations	4	29	19	20	0	0	72
Scholars and Practitioners	1	10	8	4	0	1	24
N.A	1	4	4	10	0	0	19
	45	103	85	91	48	17	389

frontlines of the fight for land rights and sustainable agricultural practices (McMichael, 2015). Women, who play a central role in food production and family nutrition, often lead grassroots movements advocating for food sovereignty and agroecology (Borghoff Maia & Teixeira, 2021). Indigenous peoples bring vital knowledge of traditional food systems that are closely tied to land stewardship and biodiversity (Fresno-Calleja, 2017). Migrants and POC, who frequently face discrimination, also play crucial roles in urban gardening actions, labour struggles, and campaigns against exploitation in the food industry (Noll, 2020).

3.2.3. Civil society organisations

Civil society organisations, dominant in Europe and North America, many of them engaged with broader development, focus on alternative forms of governance, but do support movements for justice and cultural identity. Including cooperatives, NGOs, unions, and not-for-profit organisations, this group of actors serve as the backbone of food movements. These organisations offer resources, expertise, and platforms for collective action and can provide critical support to marginalised groups, activists and other actor coalitions (Carrad et al., 2023). Cooperatives empower communities by creating alternative economic models to capitalism; NGOs often lead advocacy campaigns, research initiatives, and educational programs that address various aspects of food systems (Brass, 2016); unions advocate for the rights of workers in the food industry (Chesta et al., 2019); and not-for-profits bridge the gap between civil society and government, pushing for food policies that reflect the needs of local communities (Thompson, 2021).

3.2.4. Scholars and Practitioners

Scholars and practitioners are a diverse group including scientists, academics, media, chefs or businesses, mainly based in the global North and involved in shaping alternative forms of food governance and food as cultural identity. They contribute to the food movement in different ways. Chefs, for example, through the farm-to-table movement and other culinary initiatives, promote local and sustainable food, using their influence to shift consumer preferences and support small producers (Beriss, 2019; Pesci & Brinkley, 2022). Academics and scientists contribute through research, education, and policy analysis, providing clear and objectively presented information that form the intellectual foundation for many aspects of the food sovereignty movement (Croney et al., 2012). Businesses, particularly those committed to ethical practices, play a dual role: while some contribute to the industrial food system's challenges, others, such as small-scale food enterprises and cooperatives, actively work to create fairer and more sustainable food networks (Daye, 2020).

Having set out the first two elements of our conceptual framing, characterising food activism and food actors, we turn now to a more in-depth exploration of how states respond to food activism, the third pillar of our framework.

4. Thematic qualitative analysis of state responses to food activism

Drawing on 88 studies (23 per cent of the papers reviewed), we explore how governments responded to food activism. Within this group, movements for justice and protests, concentrated in Latin America and Africa, appear to evoke a higher rate of response (33 % and 31 % respectively) than other forms of citizen action, due perhaps to the urgency of their demands and the tactics adopted (Table 3). This is followed by responses to demands for alternate forms of governance (21 per cent), mainly in North America and Europe (Table 5 in Supplementary Materials).

Based on our summative analysis, we identified eight distinct typologies of state responses to food movements, from repression at one end to collaboration on the other. The most common form of response appears to be maintaining the middle ground by providing concessions

Table 3
Food activism by state response.

	Yes	No	Percentage with some state response
Governance (n = 103)	22	81	21
Justice (n = 90)	30	60	33
Identity (n = 85)	12	73	14
Protests (n = 48)	15	33	31
Advocacy (n = 45)	8	37	18
N/A (n = 18)	1	17	5
Total	88	301	23

Table 4
How the state responded.

State response	Number	Per cent
Repression	8	10
Neglect	12	15
Co-optation	6	8
Concession	18	23
Dialogue	11	14
Support	5	6
Policy change	15	19
Collaboration	4	5
Total	79	100

(23 per cent). Policy change followed next in 19 per cent of the papers reviewed. Neglect and repression, however, together constitute one-fourth of the responses, while dialogue and support a fifth (Table 4). As noted earlier, state responses often changed over time, pointing to the complexity embedded in the processes of interaction, not just the final outcome. We highlight this complexity in our analysis.

4.1. Repression

States, in some contexts, may perceive food movements as a threat to the status quo and respond with repression. While this response was only visible in 10 percent of the papers reviewed, it nevertheless represents a manifestation of violence by the state, both physically through the criminalization of activists and restrictions on protest, but also structurally through policies favouring agribusiness interests (Gustafson, 2020; Rudolfsen, 2021). The criminalisation of land defenders in Latin America, particularly in cases involving Indigenous communities resisting agribusiness expansion, illustrates how states may resort to violence or legal action to suppress dissent. This tactic often aims to intimidate activists and weaken the movements, but such repression can also fuel further resistance and international solidarity, as in the case of hunger-strikes of Mapuche activists in Chile (Passmore, 2014). Analysing the relationship between food prices, societal organisation, repression, and urban unrest in Africa from 1990 to 2014, Rudolfsen (2021) found that higher food prices are more likely to lead to unrest in contexts where societal organisations face moderate rather than high levels of repression. Repression is then clearly a strategy to mute citizen voice and agency, especially of activists participating in protest movements (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5
State responses by type of activism.

	AFSG	MJ	FCI	P	AELA	Total
Repression		2	1	5		8
Neglect	4	3	1		3	11
Co-optation	5	2				7
Concession	3	7	1	5	2	18
Dialogue	3	7		1		11
Support	3		1	1		5
Policy change	7	3	2		3	15
Collaboration	1	2	1			4
	26	26	7	12	8	79

Table 6
State responses by actor.

	Activists	Marginalised groups	Activists and Marginalised groups	Civil society organisations	Activists and Civil society organisations	Civil society organisations and Marginalised groups	Scholars and Practitioners	Scholars and Practitioners and Civil society organisations	NA	Total
Repression	6	2								8
Neglect	1	4	1	2		1	1			10
Co-optation		4		3						7
Concession	9	5	1	2			1			18
Dialogue	4	2		3	1					10
Support	1			2			2			5
Policy change	6	4		2	1		1			14
Collaboration	2							2		4
	29	21	2	14	2	1	5	2	3	79

4.2. Neglect

In 15 percent of the cases explored, concentrated in Europe and North America (Table 7, Supplementary Materials), the government chose to ignore or downplay the demands and initiatives of food movements and activists, particularly those of marginalised groups (Table 6). Neglect as a response often involves a minimal engagement with the concerns raised by food sovereignty advocates (Thompson, 2019), and the failure to address systemic issues like land rights, access to resources, or environmental sustainability (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021). A good example of the neglect of marginalised groups participating in movements for justice is the lack of acknowledgment of the demands of Florida farmworkers in labour-intensive crops for better working conditions during the pandemic. Despite being essential workers, they suffered from exploitative working conditions, and their workers' protections were rolled back under the Trump administration (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021). In this case, the rise in farmworker activism, strikes, and mutual aid efforts to demand better working conditions, health protections, and fair wages was ignored. Neglect can over a period of time lead to the marginalisation of vulnerable groups and local food systems, allowing corporate interests to dominate the food landscape unchecked. This is exemplified in Southern Oregon, where local communities in Jackson and Josephine Counties sought to ban GMO cultivation through ballot initiatives, only to be overruled by Oregon's SB863, a pre-emptive seed law that centralized seed regulations and undermined local autonomy (Daye, 2020). Despite a successful local vote, a corporate lawsuit blocked the ban, highlighting how state neglect and corporate interference intersect to erode democratic principles. This absence of state action vis-à-vis advocacy efforts can stifle the momentum of food movements, making it difficult for them to achieve meaningful change.

4.3. Co-optation

Some governments may adopt the language of food sovereignty or agroecology without making substantive changes to the industrial food system. This can manifest as superficial support for sustainable practices, such as the incorporation of agroecological elements into existing policies, without addressing the systemic issues highlighted by grass-roots movements (Anderl & Hißen, 2024). The Senegalese government's initiatives of state-led reforestation and soil restoration, for example, couched in the language of sustainability, were used as a political tool to appease movements such as the Federation of Diender Agropastoralists rather than to implement real, structural changes (Bottazzi and Boillat, 2021). While examples of co-optation are not many in our review (8 percent), and mainly located in North America, they involve movements promoting alternative forms of food governance, led by CSOs and/or marginalised groups (Tables 5 and 6). Support for such initiatives often involves economic incentives to attract capital, hidden behind the 'green' phrasing (Walker, 2016). This manifests especially in urban

agriculture, where public and private partnerships (PPP) are increasingly common, sometimes translating into the neoliberalization of social services, and eco-gentrification and racialisation of spaces (Pettygrove & Ghose, 2018). This response can be particularly frustrating for movements, as it often results in diluted initiatives that fail to address the core issues.

4.4. Concession

Concession (18 case studies, Table 4) as noted earlier emerges as the most frequently observed state response, visible across regions, indicating the state's readiness to make compromises under sustained pressure from movements. When the state responds with concession, it makes specific compromises or grants certain demands of grassroots food movements, often to avoid conflict. As Tables 5 and 6 show, protests and justice movements led by activists are the most successful in achieving concessions. These might include partial policy changes (Claeys, 2015), e.g., implementing land reforms, providing subsidies for small-scale farmers, or adopting agroecological practices in national agricultural programs, as in the case of the MST in Brazil (Dunford, 2015). While concessions can lead to tangible benefits for food movements, they are often partial, aimed at appeasing activists without fully addressing the systemic issues within the food system. Concessions can result in incremental progress over time, but may also be a way for the state to maintain overall control while giving just enough ground to reduce opposition (Taylor, 2013).

Not all concessions, however, yielded the anticipated outcomes. The Seed Law in Venezuela is a case in point, illustrating how state responses can shift over time, from initial dialogue and concessions to co-optation (Felicien et al., 2020). Despite the government's formal commitment to participatory democracy, presenting this law as a response to the demands of peasants and activists, significant tensions arose between state officials and social movements. Activists, marginalised groups and professional actors formed coalitions to vigorously assert their right to be involved in the law-making process, often facing resistance from state actors reluctant to relinquish power. Although the National Assembly engaged in a formal public consultation, social movements organised their own constituent debates, leading to competing versions of the law. Ultimately, the Seed Law was passed in 2015, four years after the first movement proposals. Some key provisions reflected the movements' demands, but it also included loopholes and clauses that favoured patenting and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), thereby diluting its impact. Concessions often represent a middle ground, where the state seeks to reduce opposition while maintaining its broader agenda.

4.5. Dialogue

Dialogue (11 instances) represents a more engaged form of interaction, where states enter into discussions with food actors, especially activists and CSOs from justice movements, even providing active

assistance to achieve a shared goal. Governments actively engage with food activists through open communication, consultations, and collaborative discussions. This approach involves recognizing the legitimacy of a movement's concerns and working together to explore and co-create solutions. Movements united under La Via Campesina, the world's largest grassroots organization, have initiated dialogues that enable states to better understand the needs and perspectives of small-scale farmers, Indigenous communities, and other marginalized groups (Bjork-James et al., 2022). Such engagement has the potential to foster more inclusive and participatory policymaking, as evidenced by achievements like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants at the international level, and the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in several states and cities of the US. However, significant resistance remains in integrating critical issues such as climate debt and the rights of nature into global climate negotiations, highlighting ongoing challenges in these processes of dialogue.

Other illustrative cases of dialogue are the establishment of food policy councils (FPCs) in some European countries (Sieveking, 2019) and in the US (Range et al., 2023), where the state and civil society work together to develop more inclusive food policies. Power imbalances have to be negotiated, such as the underrepresentation of farmers' groups, compensated through institutionalized transparency, with open meetings and publicly accessible minutes, or the strategic involvement of FPC representatives in municipal working groups to improve the city's school catering (Sieveking, 2019). Short-term public funding for coordinators helped sustain early momentum, but long-term equity in decision-making remains an ongoing challenge. While dialogue does not always lead to immediate policy changes, it can foster a collaborative environment where the voices of marginalised groups are heard. This was the case in Chile, where the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women has pushed the political establishment to listen to their demands when changing Chile's constitutional foundations (Calcagni, 2023). At times, such processes of dialogue and consultation can however also be symbolic and frustrating, leading to few concrete changes.

4.6. Support

While cases of support are few (6 percent), they often reflect governments' recognition of the potential of food movements to contribute to national goals such as food security, environmental sustainability, and rural development. State support can include financial aid, legal recognition, or favourable legislation to empower grassroots initiatives, especially those of civil society organisations. An example is the US government recognising the autonomy of municipalities in urban agriculture initiatives, following the mobilisation of food policy networks advocating for alternate forms of governance, and making this a crucial part of the country's food security strategy. The number of food policy groups rose from 7 in 2000 to 284 in 2017 (Santo & Moragues-Faus, 2019). Supportive state actions can significantly amplify the impact of food movements, enabling them to achieve broader societal goals such as *trans*-local governance. In some instances, state support and recognition is critical to the very functioning of food movements. According to McMichael (2015), food sovereignty movements require state complicity to control land grabs, involving both practical territorial recomposition (selling /leasing land, eviction, resettlement) and participation in or subjection to new transnational protocols (agricultural investment, certification schemes, and carbon markets).

4.7. Policy change

Policy change (19 per cent) is the second most common form of state response in the cases reviewed, half of them relating to demands for alternative forms of governance, though largely confined to Europe and North America, and in some instances movements for justice. When the state responds with policy change, it enacts new policies or amends

existing regulations in direct response to the demands of grassroots food movements. It indicates a more substantial governmental commitment to address the systemic issues raised by these movements, as in the case of the Indian Right to Food (RTF) Campaign, the only case from Asia. The adoption and implementation of the National Food Security Act in India, guaranteeing the right to food to all citizens alongside programs specifically targeting marginalised groups followed years of advocacy and campaigning by activists and civil society groups (Hertel, 2015). This outcome reflected a critical shift in the state's response, from initial resistance to eventual compliance, thanks to two key factors, namely, sustained mass mobilization that raised the political costs of inaction and the landmark People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) vs Union of India litigation started in 2001, which legally redefined food security as an enforceable right rather than a discretionary welfare promise. By leveraging judicial and institutional channels alongside ongoing struggles for the rights' implementation, the movement, through persistent activism, transformed their moral claims into binding legal obligations (Hertel, 2015). The first step in the process of negotiation leading ultimately to policy change is the recognition by the state of the legitimacy of the needs claims being advocated for by food movements (Fraser, 1989). By institutionalising the demands made by the Right to Food Campaign, the Indian state not only acknowledged the legitimacy of the movements' concerns but also worked to integrate their principles into the broader framework of the food system.

In Bolivia, from 2006 to 2013, the advocacy of women and peasants organised through civil society organisations such as Agroecología Universidad Cochabamba (AGRUCO) and the "Asociacion de Organizaciones de Productores Ecologicos de Bolivia" (AOPEB), strengthened the governance of Indigenous agriculture and promoted the commercialization of agroecological products. Their iterative process started by framing agroecology as both a cultural imperative and a development alternative; they promoted Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) and "ecological schools", and influenced policies through direct CSO involvement in jointly developing draft policy proposals for an "ecological Bolivia". Their efforts, rooted in direct action, capacity-building, coalitions, and strategic engagements with state institutions led the government to issue several laws in support of non-timber forest production, sustainable family farming, and peasant, Indigenous and native organisations (Catacora-Vargas et al., 2017). Such legal reform can lead to significant, lasting impacts, contributing to embedding principles of food sovereignty and food security within contemporary food systems (Claeys, 2015), strengthening in turn alternative forms of democratic governance within them.

Policy change is a response visible in the case of lifestyle activism too, such as the Slow Food Movement, which has gained institutional backing for its efforts to promote sustainable, local, and high-quality food production and consumption, while focusing on local identities and reviving agricultural traditions (Hendrikx & Lagendijk, 2022). For instance, Slow Food's 'Thousand Gardens for Africa' program, which fosters school gardens, has received international cooperation and sponsorship from public organizations, aligning with broader goals like the SDGs, public health, and cultural preservation. Similarly, in Italy, Slow Food's initiatives against fast-food culture have been supported through policies and grants that favour local food systems (Ibid.).

4.8. Collaboration

While constituting only 5 percent of our cases, collaborations are the closest step to the creation of more resilient and equitable food systems, as they combine grassroots insights with state resources and power. Collaboration between the several Ministries of the Government of New Zealand and the Indigenous movement 'Te Taiao in Aoteatora' in protecting Maori values and activities and integrating cultural and spiritual connections to air, land, water, and fire, perfectly exemplifies this approach, reinforcing the idea of food as cultural identity (Sharma et al., 2021). This collaboration emerged through decades of Maori activism

and the Treaty of Waitangi, followed by alliance-building with policy-makers, leveraging the 2019 Wellbeing Budget's political opening to institutionalize Indigenous perspectives through formal agreements like the *Te Taiao* strategy, a roadmap for biodiversity conservation.

States may engage in meaningful collaborations with food movements and activists, going beyond policy-making, to implement changes, sometimes even including them in government structures. Clark et al. (2021) exemplify this response with the discussion of several case studies where CSOs, in coalition with professional actors, succeeded in creating new governance spaces. Some of these are: in Correns, France, a formal space for power-sharing was established by the mayor who recognised the peasants' claims; in Ohio, USA, 'Local Matters', a CSO, pushed the government to collaborate on a Food Action Plan. Collaboration can help address knotty problems like land reform, but equally enable the development of local food networks and food policy councils. It could even entail forms of food constitutionalism to reshape the power structures of decision making, as in relation to the EU legal framework (Escajedo San-Epifanio, 2015). It is perhaps due to their transformational potential, a possible threat to state power, that examples of collaboration on the ground remain few and far between.

5. Discussion

This study provides insights into the diverse strategies employed by governments in addressing or resisting the demands of food movements and offers new analytical categories to frame these discussions. Building on existing literature, we explore emerging issues and tensions in the evolving relationship between food movements, food actors, and the state, highlighting key configurations that facilitate change.

5.1. Addressing power dynamics: Corporate influence on state responses

Our results suggest limits to state power in the face of growing corporate influence, particularly within the gig economy and industrial agriculture in a globalised, neoliberal world (Chesta et al., 2019; Hussain, 2023; Clapp, 2023). While social movements and food activism continue to mainly target the state, they are gradually recognizing the constraints on state responses due to corporate pressure or emerging state-market tensions. The case of delivery workers' struggles in Italy, where initial efforts at dialogue were eventually met with neglect as platforms like Foodora rejected governmental concessions to the workers unions, exemplifies this shift in power dynamics (Chesta et al., 2019). This situation highlights how, in the current context, corporations increasingly hold sway over food systems, and while the state might offer some level of support to movements, this is frequently counterbalanced by its parallel support for industrial agriculture and corporate interests. This double-sided stand often translates into middle of the road 'concessions', leading to some tangible, though partial benefits for food movements, aimed at appeasing activists rather than addressing the systemic issues within the food system (Felicien et al., 2020). Concessions can result in incremental progress, but also constitute a way for the state to maintain overall control while meeting corporate interests.

5.2. Building solidarity across geographies

The identified articles indicate that policy change, while a relatively common response, is more frequently observed in wealthier countries of Europe and North America (Table 7 of Supplementary Materials). This may reflect the stronger institutions, better resources, and higher levels of civil society engagement in these regions, which create a more conducive environment for food movements to influence policy. However, this also raises concerns about global inequalities in the effectiveness of food activism. In low-middle income countries, where movements face significant political, economic and socio-cultural barriers to influence, there is a big discrepancy between the adoption of

policies and their implementation (Hudson et al., 2019; Trotter et al., 2022). While previous studies have acknowledged regional differences in food activism (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2013), this study quantifies these disparities and highlights the role of international solidarity in addressing them, as in the case of the concessions on peasant seeds rights in Mali, where legal actions and grassroots mobilisations were supported by international solidarity seed networks (Coulibaly et al., 2020).

5.3. Decentralising food system governance

Decentralisation and democratisation of food system governance are emerging as major themes in processes of food systems transformation (Schneider et al., 2025). Food Policy Councils (FPC), by institutionalising the participation of diverse actors – government representatives, CSOs, and grassroots movements – are able to influence and facilitate dialogue and change, contributing to the development of policies that better reflect the needs and aspirations of local communities. Apart from their economic, social and environmental sustainability goals, a key element of FPCs is the democratisation of governance processes (Michel et al., 2022). One among many, the case of the US government recognizing urban agriculture initiatives underlines the potential of FPCs to drive meaningful change in food governance systems in line with local interests and preferences (Range et al., 2023).

Dialogue emerges as a crucial mechanism through which food movements can engage with the state. This review suggests that successful dialogues are often facilitated by large, well-established CSOs, such as La Via Campesina or Slow Food, favoured by widespread recognition and the consequent ability to exercise political pressure. These organisations have the "power to convene" and mobilise, and the organisational capacity to enter governmental structures and advocate for inclusive food policies effectively (Clark et al. 2021). However, this also raises questions about the inclusivity of such dialogues: as the comparison of two cases in Johannesburg illustrates, smaller, less formalised groups may struggle to gain access to formal spaces of influence, potentially reinforcing power imbalances within food movements (Gaventa, 2006; Warshawsky, 2013).

5.4. Drawing attention to 'new human rights': The centrality of land access

Access to land remains one of the most significant challenges for food sovereignty movements, particularly in the Global South. Democratic land control is crucial for achieving the goals of these movements, yet it is often the most difficult to secure. Several authors (Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2019; Tilzey, 2019) emphasise that without equitable access to land, the broader objectives of these movements (e.g., sustainable farming and food security) are unlikely to be realised. This challenge underscores the need for a more robust global framework that recognizes land and territory as 'new human rights' (Claeys, 2015), prioritising land reform and the rights of small-scale farmers, women and Indigenous communities. Once again, while mainly in Europe and North America, as in the case of urban gardens and food policy councils, states are beginning to recognize the rights of citizens, peasants and indigenous peoples as custodians of land, contributing to both human and planetary health.

5.5. The reproduction of class and racial privilege

While alternate food movements often champion ideals of justice and sustainability, they are not immune to the reproduction of existing social hierarchies and may reinforce class and racial privilege (Reynolds, 2015). For example, movements that focus on organic or local food often cater to more affluent, predominantly white communities, leaving marginalised groups on the periphery. Urban agriculture interventions similarly reveal tensions around the gentrification and racialisation of spaces: poorer groups may secure employment, but not nutrition, as the food produced is sold to high income consumers in order to make a net

profit (Rao et al., 2022; Pettygrove and Ghose, 2018). States see such movements as contributing to shifts in individual lifestyles or meeting sustainability goals without challenging its power, so often respond through concessions or even supportive policies. It then becomes doubly important to adopt an intersectional approach that actively works to challenge and dismantle, rather than perpetuate, social and economic inequalities within the food system, alongside geographic inequalities (c.f Alkon and Guthman, 2017).

5.6. Forming coalitions for food system change: Challenging government inaction

Movements that arise in response to government inaction often encounter significant barriers to achieving their objectives. Governments tend to be less responsive when the movement's motivations are rooted in critiques of state inaction, as seen in the cases of the farmworkers in Florida (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021) or delivery workers in Italy (Chesta et al., 2019). The neglect of movements challenging state inaction points to a broader issue of democratic accountability and responsiveness in food system governance. Moreover, state inaction can lead to the marginalisation of vulnerable groups and local food systems, and stifle the momentum of food movements, allowing corporate agribusiness interests to dominate the food landscape unchecked (Daye, 2020).

But this also suggests that governments are more likely to engage with movements that align with existing policy agendas or present less of a challenge to the status quo. This finding reveals the importance of citizen engagement in policy processes, but equally the need for movements to build broader coalitions that do not simply elicit a state response, but concretely drive food system change. We find different food actors coming together in more inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogues, central to ensuring that a broad range of interests, preferences and needs are heard. These dialogues could prompt new political and state interventions that are better aligned with local contexts as well as civil society visions of food systems (Conti et al., 2025a). The need for broad-based coalitions to bring about sustainable and equitable changes in food systems, transforming them to serve the interests of both people, especially the marginalised, and the environment, resonates with a growing body of literature on just transformations.

6. Conclusion

This paper, based on a review of the existing literature on food movements and state responses to them, has sought to provide an analysis and reflection on the complex and diverse responses of governments to different types of food activism and what this means in terms of transforming food systems. Grassroots activism plays a critical role in creating counter-narratives to the mono-cultural development narrative of states. These are expressed through myriad social realities centering on low-input, ecological farming, to local food provisioning (both rural and urban), and are both shaped by and shape the dynamic and complex interactions with states (Edelman et al., 2014). Food actors must navigate the political landscape, balancing the need to maintain their autonomy and radical vision with the practicalities of engaging with state institutions (Patel, 2009).

This dynamic interplay can lead to various outcomes. In rare cases, the interaction between food movements and states can result in hybrid models of governance that integrate grassroots initiatives with state-led programs, leading to more participatory and decentralised food systems (McMichael, 2014). The interactions between food movements and governments can also create feedback loops that drive systemic change: positive state responses can empower grassroots movements, leading to increased mobilisation and further demands for change. While we have not included the temporality of state-society relationships in our quantitative analysis, but rather focused on the state response to citizen action at a particular point in time, what is clear from our in-depth thematic analysis of state responses is that change occurs over a period of time, at times incrementally, making it important for food movements to remain vigilant, keeping critical issues on the agenda. Some of the emerging empirical findings from this review suggest areas for further research: the efficacy of international solidarity (Passmore, 2014), the impact of land struggles in subverting capitalist property relations (Tilzey, 2019), and the risk of reproducing class and racial privilege (Pettygrove & Ghose, 2018), for example. Better understanding such interactions is urgent, given the rising threat of conflict and violence between the citizens and the state (Oruta, 2024).

There are clearly lessons to be learnt for both food activists and states. First, persistent geographic and social disparities reveal that some food movements might be more successful in high income countries or amongst wealthier populations. This highlights the need for more place-based, inclusive, participatory food governance mechanisms in order to realise broadly conceived social justice goals (Sonnino et al., 2016). Second, given the dynamic relationship between food movements and state responses, sustained activism, taking on board intermediate feedback, alongside national and international solidarity to hold governments accountable, are key pathways to systemic change. Third, power relations change as new actors, in particular large corporations, gain control over state policies, taxes and tariffs. While aware of corporate power, food movements need to develop, in line with the discourse of 'new human rights', robust strategies for addressing this threat, with and beyond state action.

The future of food activism will likely depend on the ability of movements to build coalitions that foster greater inclusivity and justice for all. For this, however, proactive efforts will be needed to find "common denominators" of acceptable values and priorities that can be agreed upon by diverse groups of food system stakeholders (including governments, agriculture and food research organisations, international agencies, and even the private sector) (Conti et al., 2025a). Only if such efforts are made, will these movements be able to find greater resonance and relevance for food system change, building what a recent paper has labelled "transformation alliances" (Conti et al., 2025b). The presence of these alliances will remain a critical factor in determining the trajectory of global food systems and the realisation of food and nutrition security for all.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Nitya Rao: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emma Marzi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Isabel Baudish:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Amar Laila:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Costanza Conti:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Christina C. Hicks:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2025.102879.

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