

FOOD JUSTICE TOPIC STATEMENT¹

“The path to freedom is collective. We cannot do this individually.”

— LaDonna Redmond, Foreword to Monica M. White,
Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement

RESOLVED: When the pursuit of food justice requires a choice between competing approaches, food sovereignty should take priority over an individual right to adequate food.

Food is necessary for human survival and dignity, yet persistent domestic and global food insecurity demonstrates that producing enough food does not by itself ensure that people can obtain adequate food or exercise meaningful control over the systems that feed them. In the United States, tens of millions of people continue to live in food-insecure households, while globally conflict, displacement, economic instability, climate disruption, and failures of infrastructure expose millions to severe hunger.

Food justice therefore asks questions extending beyond whether enough food exists. Who can reliably obtain adequate food? Who controls the land, resources, institutions, and markets through which food is produced and distributed? Whose knowledge, preferences, and culture shape food systems? Who bears responsibility when individuals go hungry? And should justice primarily guarantee each person’s access to food, empower peoples and communities to govern their food systems, or accomplish both?

The resolution places two influential approaches to these questions in conversation: food sovereignty and the individual right to adequate food.

Food Sovereignty

The resolution uses food sovereignty consistently with the understanding developed through the international food-sovereignty movement. The 2007 Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty described food sovereignty as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

Food sovereignty accordingly places those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the center of food systems. It values food providers, strengthens local food systems, brings control of land, water, seeds, and other productive resources closer to communities, develops knowledge and skills, and works with nature.

Food sovereignty thus asks more than whether people have food. It asks who exercises power over the food system itself and often makes more specific claims about how production, trade, ownership, and agricultural development should be organized. A community may have access to inexpensive food through global markets while local farmers lose land, agricultural knowledge disappears, corporations consolidate control over seeds or distribution systems, and residents become increasingly dependent on institutions they do not govern. From a food-sovereignty perspective, access without meaningful agency may remain an incomplete form of food justice.

Monica M. White’s *Freedom Farmers* provides an important foundation for understanding these questions. White examines Black agricultural cooperatives and community institutions that used farming, land, economic cooperation, and institution-building as strategies of resistance, self-reliance, and self-determination. Her framework of collective agency and community resilience emphasizes the

¹ Generative artificial intelligence was used to provide drafting, editing, and organizational assistance in preparing this topic statement. The underlying research, source selection, substantive analysis, and ideas are original to the author.

capacity of communities not merely to receive assistance but to build institutions capable of shaping their political and economic futures.

The Individual Right to Adequate Food

The individual right to adequate food begins with the person as the rights-holder. Every individual possesses a claim to adequate food and should not be left hungry, malnourished, or deprived merely because governments, markets, communities, or other institutions fail to secure that right. Unlike food sovereignty, which developed primarily as a political and movement framework, the right to adequate food has developed substantially as a legal and human-rights framework applicable to individuals regardless of occupation, residence, or membership in a food-producing community.

This should not be confused with a narrow right to emergency food assistance. International right-to-food frameworks contemplate obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill access to adequate food. They can require institutions to refrain from interfering with people's existing access to food, protect people from deprivation by others, strengthen people's ability to secure food for themselves, and provide food directly when necessary. Depending upon the jurisdiction, the right may be expressed through constitutions, legislation, courts, administrative systems, social programs, international obligations, or combinations of these mechanisms.

Nor does adequate simply mean enough calories to prevent starvation. Adequacy may concern nutritional sufficiency, safety, accessibility, dietary needs, cultural acceptability, food preferences, dignity, continuity of access, and sustainability for present and future generations. The right can also implicate the conditions necessary for people to feed themselves with dignity, including access to productive resources and meaningful participation in decisions affecting food access; it therefore should not be reduced to a governmental obligation simply to distribute food.

The individual right to adequate food may therefore be more important than food sovereignty even outside emergencies. A locally governed food system might systematically disadvantage women, migrants, landless residents, minorities, people with disabilities, urban consumers, or persons who lack political influence within the community. A community might choose agricultural policies that preserve local producers but make nutritious food prohibitively expensive for its poorest residents. Local production might be unable to provide sufficient dietary diversity. An individual-rights approach can insist that collective autonomy, tradition, market structure, or local control cannot justify allowing particular persons to experience inadequate food.

The right to adequate food therefore offers its own structural account of justice. Institutions remain accountable to each person whose fundamental needs are at stake. A legally or politically meaningful entitlement may redistribute resources, constrain governmental and private conduct, prohibit discrimination, establish rights to productive resources, and create a durable minimum below which no individual should be permitted to fall. Because it is primarily a guarantee of a right rather than a single prescribed agricultural model, it may permit varied institutional arrangements so long as those arrangements respect, protect, and fulfill adequate food for all.

Priority and the Nature of the Clash

The word priority is central to the resolution. Priority does not mean exclusivity, and neither side must reject the competing approach.

We recognize that food sovereignty and the right to adequate food can coexist. This debate concerns what justice requires at the difficult margin where they cannot.

The approaches may not only complement one another but can be institutionally intertwined. A right to adequate food can sometimes provide a legal mechanism for advancing food sovereignty, while food sovereignty may help determine what meaningful realization of the right to food requires. The resolution therefore does not assume that the approaches are inherently opposed. It asks which principle should govern when their demands cannot be fully reconciled.

The approaches may diverge not because one values food access and the other does not, but because food sovereignty is generally more willing to prescribe who should control food systems and how production, ownership, trade, and agricultural development should be organized, while the individual right to adequate food is more willing to permit varied institutional arrangements so long as every person's access to adequate food is secured.

Food systems can confront difficult trade-offs among affordable access for consumers, viable livelihoods for producers, ecological sustainability, and community control. Food-sovereignty policies seek to reconcile these goals, but circumstances may arise in which they cannot all be maximized simultaneously. Protecting local producers, restricting imports, redistributing land, favoring cooperative ownership, limiting corporate concentration, or imposing ecological restrictions may strengthen community autonomy and producer livelihoods while also increasing prices, reducing available supply, or limiting access to foods that cannot be produced locally.

A particularly important conflict may arise between the interests of food producers and food consumers. Policies that raise farm-gate prices, restrict imports, or protect domestic production may improve farmer livelihoods and strengthen local control while increasing the cost of food for low-income consumers. Conversely, imports, subsidies, centralized distribution, industrial production, or large-scale private supply chains may make food more affordable or reliable while weakening local producers, concentrating control, or increasing dependence on external markets.

The conflict may also concern authority rather than scarcity. Protecting community self-determination may require respecting collective decisions that disadvantage particular individuals, while enforcing an individual right to adequate food may require governments, courts, or other outside institutions to override those decisions. In such cases, the issue is not simply how much food is available, but who has the authority to decide how food systems operate and whose claims prevail when collective autonomy and individual entitlement collide.

The relationship between the approaches also makes integration itself part of the controversy. Legal recognition of an individual right to adequate food can sometimes advance food-sovereignty goals by protecting access to land, seeds, water, sustainable production, participation, and self-provisioning. The Negative may therefore argue that a sufficiently robust right-to-food framework can incorporate many of food sovereignty's benefits without subordinating a universal individual entitlement. The Affirmative may respond that incorporation is incomplete where legal rights leave underlying ownership, market power, trade rules, or decision-making authority substantially unchanged.

A genuine conflict may therefore arise from scarce resources, institutional authority, legal rules, trade policy, competing rights, land use, food prices, environmental restrictions, ownership, or decision-making power. Hunger alone does not establish such a conflict, nor does demonstrating that a particular food policy is beneficial. Teams should identify circumstances in which pursuing food sovereignty and securing an individual right to adequate food generate meaningfully competing claims, institutional priorities, or material consequences.

- How should food justice balance a universal individual entitlement to adequate food against collective authority over the systems through which food is produced and governed?

- Is justice primarily secured by guaranteeing an outcome below which no individual may fall, or by redistributing power so affected peoples can determine how food is produced, owned, exchanged, and governed?
- When securing universal individual access requires accepting food-system arrangements that weaken local producer or community control, or when strengthening that control makes adequate food materially less affordable or accessible to some individuals, which claim of justice should receive priority?
- Does food dignity principally require securing each person's ability to obtain adequate food, securing meaningful control over the conditions through which people feed themselves, or some combination that may become impossible in a particular conflict?

These questions make the approaches genuinely competitive without pretending that they are naturally antagonistic.

Importantly, this is not simply a short-term versus long-term debate. Food sovereignty may sometimes provide the better immediate response, just as an individual right to adequate food may provide the better long-term institutional framework. Either approach may respond to emergencies or pursue structural transformation. The distinction concerns competing conceptions of justice and priority rather than competing time horizons.

Scope of the Debate

The resolution is not limited to the United States or to any single legal system. Debaters may draw upon local, national, regional, or international examples. Food sovereignty developed through transnational movements, while the right to adequate food developed significantly through international human-rights law and has been implemented differently across jurisdictions.

At the same time, this is not a general debate about every food policy or every cause of hunger. A relevant controversy should demonstrate a genuine conflict between the approaches identified in the resolution. Teams should explain why the particular circumstance requires a meaningful choice in priority rather than merely showing that one approach produces a beneficial outcome.

The resolution does not require the Affirmative to demonstrate that food sovereignty should prevail in every conceivable situation. Teams may examine categories of conflict or representative contexts in which an actual priority choice exists. The comparison remains the same: when the two approaches cannot be fully advanced together, which should receive priority in the pursuit of food justice?

The resolution also raises an important question about who constitutes the relevant “people” under food sovereignty. Communities are internally diverse. Farmers, consumers, women, children, landless persons, migrants, Indigenous peoples, minorities, and others may possess different interests and different levels of power. Food sovereignty may provide historically marginalized peoples meaningful authority over the institutions affecting their lives. An individual right may protect persons whose interests are nevertheless overlooked within collective decision-making. Determining which concern deserves priority is part of the controversy presented by the resolution.

Illustrative Affirmative Case Options

- **Land access and redistribution:** Prioritize community or farmer control over land rather than preserve concentrated ownership merely because existing markets deliver food.

- **Protection of local producers:** Defend farmers and local food systems against trade policies that lower consumer prices but destroy agricultural livelihoods and increase dependency.
- **Corporate concentration:** Resist systems that increase production while concentrating control over land, seeds, processing, technology, or distribution.
- **Agricultural cooperatives:** Favor cooperative ownership and community economic autonomy over systems that meet consumption needs while perpetuating dependence on outside institutions.
- **Participatory governance and community control:** Prioritize meaningful participation by affected producers, consumers, and communities in food-system decisions when centralized governmental, corporate, or international decision-making could more efficiently secure food access but leaves those affected with little authority over the policies governing them.
- **Cultural and traditional food systems:** Protect culturally significant foods, knowledge, and production practices when standardized approaches may improve access while undermining community control or cultural continuity.
- **Ecological sustainability and future generations:** Prioritize locally governed, sustainable production when maximizing present availability would degrade land, water, biodiversity, or future productive capacity.

Illustrative Negative Case Options

- **Protection from community exclusion:** Guarantee adequate food to individuals marginalized by the community or institutions exercising food sovereignty.
- **Food affordability:** Permit imports, subsidies, or larger-scale distribution when protecting local producers would make adequate food materially less affordable to poor households.
- **Nutritional adequacy:** Ensure that every person can obtain a diverse and nutritious diet when locally controlled production cannot reliably provide it.
- **Enforceable governmental accountability:** Give individuals a legal or institutional claim against governments that fail to prevent hunger rather than rely primarily on collective political participation.
- **Equality within food systems:** Protect women, minorities, landless people, lower-status groups, and others whose needs may be subordinated to prevailing community interests.
- **Mobility, migration, and urbanization:** Protect migrants, refugees, displaced people, and highly urban populations whose access to food cannot reasonably depend on membership in a stable agricultural community.
- **Famine, conflict, and humanitarian emergencies:** Guarantee immediate access to adequate food even when doing so requires external production, international supply chains, or institutions outside local control.
- **A universal minimum:** Maintain that collective autonomy is unjust if particular individuals remain unable to obtain adequate food.

Division of Ground

The Affirmative may argue that food justice cannot be reduced to whether individuals receive sufficient food. Access may coexist with dependence on corporations, distant markets, concentrated landownership, or institutions that affected communities cannot control. A system may successfully deliver food while reproducing the political and economic relationships that make communities vulnerable. Justice may therefore require redistributing power and enabling communities to determine the systems through which they feed themselves. The Affirmative may further argue that a general individual entitlement remains incomplete when it leaves unresolved who owns productive resources, who controls markets and technology, and whose priorities structure agricultural policy.

The Negative may argue that collective control cannot itself be the final measure of food justice. A sovereign food system may still leave particular people hungry, priced out, nutritionally underserved, discriminated against, or politically powerless. The right to adequate food applies to all individuals, including urban residents, migrants, landless people, and food producers, and may itself support access to productive resources, sustainability, dignity, and participation. Justice may therefore require treating adequate food as a universal individual entitlement that governments, communities, and markets cannot override rather than prescribing a particular model of agricultural organization.

The Negative may also argue that the two frameworks overlap so substantially that food-sovereignty goals can often be pursued through a robust right-to-food regime. The Affirmative may answer that overlap does not eliminate the difficult cases in which guaranteeing access through existing markets, ownership structures, technologies, or trade relationships preserves forms of dependence or concentrated power that food sovereignty regards as unjust.

The central controversy is therefore neither food sovereignty versus feeding hungry people nor long-term transformation versus short-term relief. Both approaches can respond to immediate needs, both can pursue structural change, and each may incorporate elements associated with the other. Instead, the resolution asks what should receive priority when a universal individual entitlement to adequate food and more specific claims about collective control, producer power, agricultural organization, trade, or ownership cannot be fully reconciled.

Selected Scholarship

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Contextual framing also draws on current U.S. Department of Agriculture food-insecurity statistics and 2026 reporting on global hunger and climate-related food insecurity.

About the Topic Scholar

Dr. Monica M. White is a leading scholar of food justice, food sovereignty, environmental justice, and Black agricultural traditions. She is an associate professor of Environmental Justice at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, founding director of its Office of Environmental Justice and Engagement, and past president of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. Her research examines how Black communities have used agriculture, cooperative institutions, and community-based food systems to confront hunger, inequality, and exclusion while building collective agency and community resilience. Her award-winning book, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*, recovers the history of Black farmers and agricultural organizations as important sites of resistance and provides a foundation for understanding contemporary food justice and food sovereignty movements. She also contributed the chapter “Sisters of the Soil: Urban Agriculture in Detroit” to *Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice*, examining Black women’s urban agriculture in Detroit as a form of political agency, resistance, empowerment, and community-building. Dr. White’s scholarship is particularly relevant to this year’s Social Justice Debate because it explores how control over food systems, land, production, and community decision-making can itself be an essential dimension of food justice. Dr. White has also worked with the National Black Food and Justice Alliance’s HBCU Project, supporting the development of agroecology centers at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.