Protest Food

Nine different stories of how food is used as a medium of solidarity, strength and resistance around the world today.

By Pepi Ng

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About

PROTEST FOOD is an independent and community-sourced zine that documents how food has played a large part in several resistance movements and projects around the world.

I created PROTEST FOOD as one of the three components of my undergraduate senior thesis project from Parsons School of Design, Design and Technology program. However, I've always been interested in food's role in preserving cultural heritage, building community, and resistance movements.

Volunteers from Tibetan Womens Association New York New Jersey giving out Amdo Bhaley, a traditional Tibetan bread, during Tibetan Uprising Day Rally, New York, March 10, 2025.

Friends making dumplings together, Lunar New Year 2023.

Food finds a footing in so many parts of one's personal, social, emotional and political life- from getting to know someone new over a cup of coffee, to cooking or having dinners with loved ones, to offering food in festivals and rituals, to understanding cultures from the way they cook, to sharing food in ground-up initiatives and political organizing, to mutual-aid kitchens and community fridges, to hunger strikes, to food being cooked and shared during protests, uprisings and revolutions.

Food is a topic of contention because it is necessary for survival. Food is often used as a weapon or control over a population. Food has also been commercialised as a commodity, to drive profit (and exploitation) by greedy large corporations. Access to healthy food and food education is monetized and is weaponized along the lines of race, gender, and class.

Folding zines and drinking root soup at La Morada Mutual Aid Kitchen. You can read about La Morada in this book.

At the same time, food has also historically been a subtle vehicle for political expression, often carrying messages of dissent when direct action is risky or repressed. We have seen many communities reclaiming food traditions and customs to heal, connect and resist cultural erasures.

The goal of PROTEST FOOD is to highlight how food has been consistently used as an accessible and universal entry point into resistance and cultural preservation. However, this zine has its limitations; during its creation, I realized how difficult it is to actually get to know communities outside of the spaces I'm familiar with - specifically, outside Singapore (where I was raised) and New York City (where I currently live).

I feel immensely lucky to have the opportunity to make this book, and I learnt so much. I tried many new cuisines, foods and recipes and got to talk to street vendors, community leaders, professors, students, and organizations around the world. Through this process, I learnt so much more about different cultures and what mutual aid and food sovereignty means to different communities.

My first attempt at Palyanytsya, traditional Ukrainian sourdough bread, inspired by my conversation with Felicity Spector from Bake for Ukraine.

Ideally, I would have been able to spend more time with each project and initiative to really get to know each community with greater depth. However, due to the time constraints of my studies, the document that you are reading is less holistic than I would have hoped, but I plan to continue this project with further editions to cover a wider range of ground-up initiatives, restaurants, projects, movements, artworks, etc.!

Food is something that everyone can relate to. Through the simple, everyday acts of cooking, sharing, and eating, we can build solidarity. My project aims to document food's role in collective movements and care throughout history, space, and time. Hopefully, PROTEST FOOD can be an accessible, relatable resource and an inspiration for ongoing collective action for you and those in your community.

- Pepi Ng

A woman gathering passionfruit seeds to be grown, at Finca Santa Marta, an agricultural cooperative in Cuba. I visited Cuba for two months as part of my Study Abroad Program.

An anti-extradition mooncake made by a Hong Kong Bakery in 2019. (Image source: South China Morning Post)

Anti-Extradition Mooncakes

Tasty symbols of defiance in Hong Kong

Trigger warning: police brutality, violence

Mooncakes are small, round pastries with a golden crust often imprinted with intricate geometric patterns and auspicious messages. They typically contain sweet or savory fillings such as lotus seed paste, red bean, mung bean, pork, salted egg yolk, or rose, depending on the region.

Traditionally baked, gifted, and eaten during the Mid-Autumn Festival—the 15th day of the eighth month in the Chinese lunar calendar, when the moon is believed to be at its fullest—mooncakes are a symbol of unity, reunion, and completeness. This festival is celebrated not only in China but also across East and Southeast Asia, including in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, and beyond, with each culture offering its own unique variation of the mooncake.

Mooncakes.

Given these connotations, it is almost unthinkable to see mooncakes adorned with expletives and protest slogans—yet that is exactly what emerged in Hong Kong during the 2019 anti-extradition protests.

Anti-extradition mooncakes. (Image credit: Atlas Obscura.

“Freedom C*nt” Mooncakes

In response to the controversial extradition bill proposed in 2019, independent bakers and bakeries in Hong Kong began creating and selling subversive mooncakes, stamped with bold slogans and irreverent messages. Some were inscribed with phrases like “No withdrawal, no dispersal” (不撤不散), “Hong Konger” (香港人), “Add oil” (加油—a Cantonese expression of encouragement), and even “Freedom C*nt” (自由閪), a vulgar phrase originally used by Hong Kong police officers that was reappropriated by protesters with biting irony.[1]

A Hong Kong Bakery creating the mooncakes. (Image credit: Atlas Obscura.)

Anti-extradition mooncakes. (Image credit: Atlas Obscura.)

These mooncakes were more than just pastries—they were edible messages of hope, humor, defiance, and cultural solidarity. In a city where food plays a deep role in identity, these protest mooncakes became a unique, localized form of resistance and a way for people to participate in political discourse through something deeply rooted in tradition.

The 2019 Extradition Bill and Mass Mobilization

Hong Kong, a former British colony, was handed back to China in 1997 under the “one country, two systems” framework. This arrangement promised Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy, maintaining its independent judiciary, open internet, and civil liberties—features that distinguish it from mainland China.

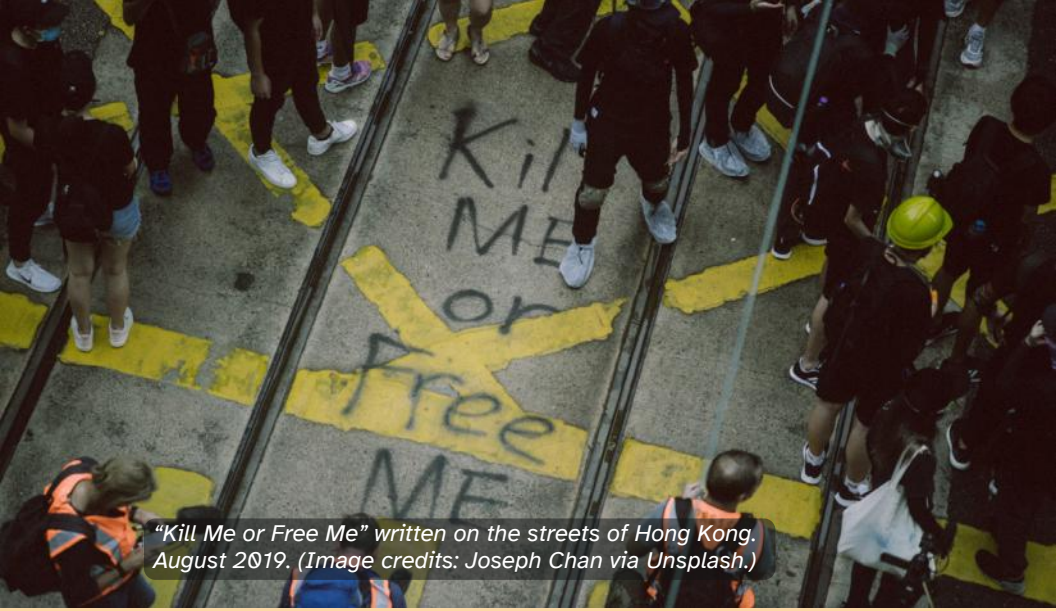
However, this autonomy is set to expire in 2047, and the Chinese government has increasingly encroached on Hong Kong’s freedoms in the years since the handover.

A sign reading “No China Extradition” in a Hong Kong Protest, June 2019. (Image credits: Joseph Chan via Unsplash.)

One area in which The People's Republic of China has been cracking down on Hong Kong's freedoms was through the **2019 Extradition Bill**. This bill would allow Hong Kong to detain and transfer people wanted in countries and territories with which it has no formal extradition agreements to be extradited to mainland China.[2]

A protest sign outside Hong Kong Government Headquarters, June 2019. (Image credits: Erin Song via Unsplash).

Pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong claim that this law would risk exposing Hong Kongers to unfair trials, detention and violent treatment. They also argued that the bill would give China greater influence over Hong Kong, and could be used to target activists and journalists.



"Kill Me or Free Me" written on the streets of Hong Kong. August 2019. (Image credits: Joseph Chan via Unsplash.)

After the bill was announced in April 2019, massive protests erupted.

On June 16, up to 2 million people—nearly a third of the city's population—marched peacefully through the streets.

Even after Chief Executive Carrie Lam formally withdrew the bill in September 2019, protests continued to swell in response to broader frustrations about Beijing's tightening grip on Hong Kong and rampant police brutality.[3]

Protestors faced an onslaught of tear gas, rubber bullets, water connons, pepper balls, baton charges and gun shots from riot police. A protester suffered a ruptured eye after being shot by what appeared to be a bean bag projectile,[4] an 18-year old was shot in the chest with a live bullet and an estimated 2,600 others were injured.

2 million protesting in Hong Kong, 16 June 2019.
(Image credits: Manson Yim via Unsplash.)

The police also sieged Chinese University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Polytechnic University- locations where student protestors gathered. At least 400 students were injured in both schools.

Lam's administration denied police wrongdoings, and denied protestors' demand for an independent commission of inquiry into alleged incidents of police misconduct during the protests.[5]

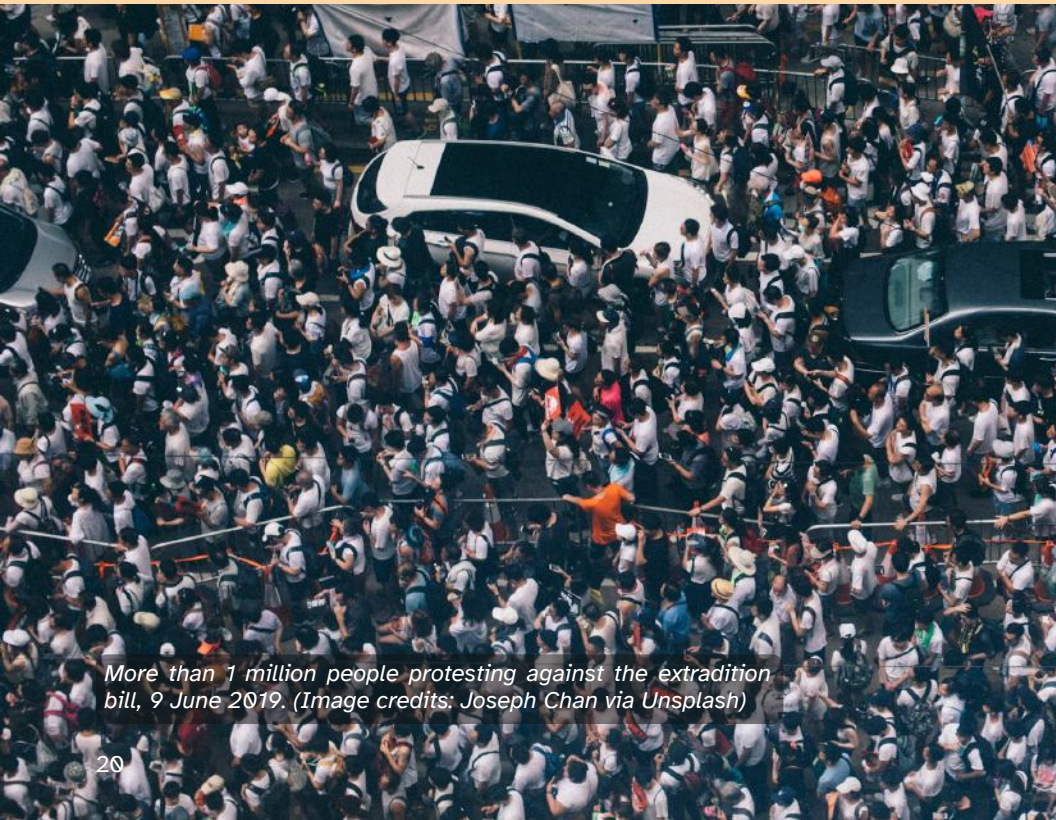
Though the protests dwindled due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to crack down on Hong Kong's civil liberties and freedoms.

Hong Kong's "Lennon Wall" of solidarity and encouraging messages. The biggest, central message in this image reads: "Thank you young people", August 2019. (Image credits: Joseph Chan via Unsplash)

Ongoing Crackdown by the Chinese Government

In 2020, Beijing imposed a sweeping and draconian national security law on Hong Kong to crack down on dissent.

As of August 2022, more than 10,000 Hongkongers have been arrested in connection with the 2019 protest movement, and nearly 3,000 have been prosecuted. In November 2024, 45 more Pro-democracy leaders were sentenced to imprisonment.[6] Independent media outlets like Apple Daily were forcibly shut down, and the electoral

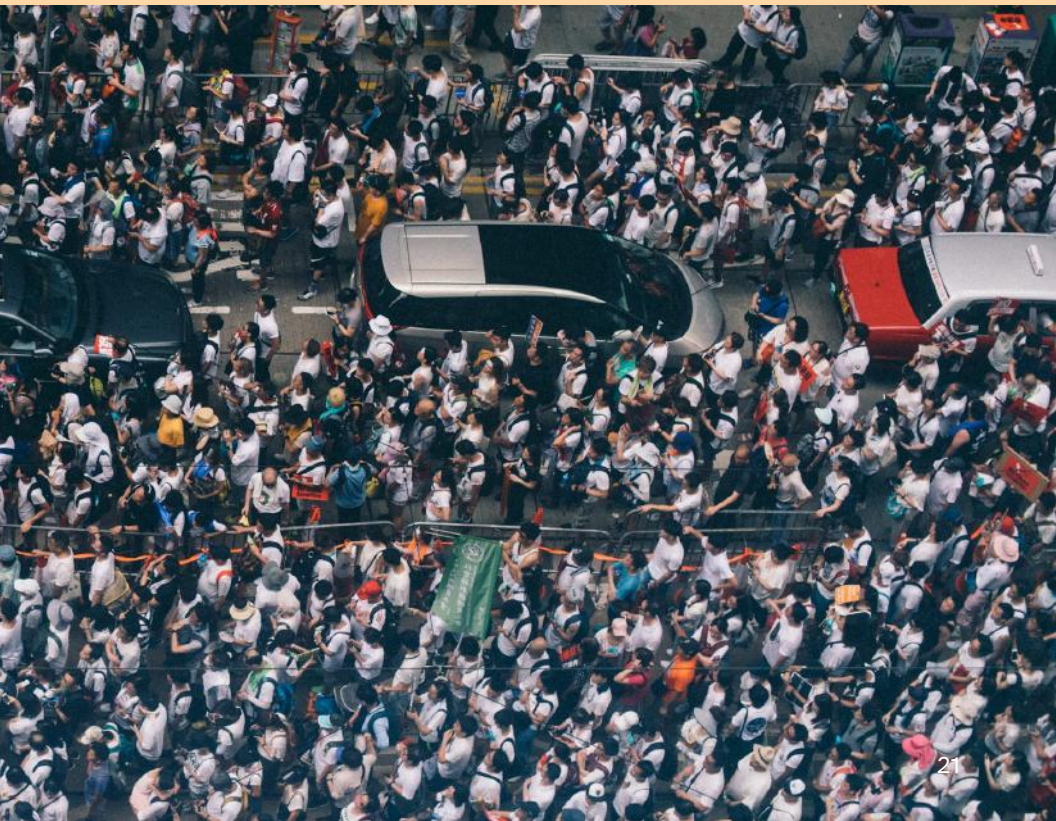


More than 1 million people protesting against the extradition bill, 9 June 2019. (Image credits: Joseph Chan via Unsplash)

system was drastically overhauled to exclude pro-democracy candidates.

As part of my research for this project, I reached out to Hong Kong journalists, bakers, and individuals who had been involved in creating or selling protest mooncakes. I was met either with silence or vague denials—"I don't know what you're talking about"—a chilling reflection of the fear and self-censorship that has taken hold in the years since the protests.

This silence stood in stark contrast to the remarkable organization and public unity seen in 2019.



Revolutionary mooncakes

Interestingly, the idea of using mooncakes for political resistance is not new. According to legend, during the 14th century, Chinese rebels used mooncakes to smuggle secret messages coordinating an uprising against the ruling Mongols.

The protest mooncakes of 2019 are an echo of this revolutionary past—proving once again that food can be a powerful medium of communication. In a time of surveillance, censorship, and fear, these mooncakes offered a discreet, culturally resonant, and deeply human form of resistance. It is thus perhaps fitting - almost poetic- that mooncakes were chosen as a medium for protest. After all, they are traditionally symbols of reunion, harmony and unity.

Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Mooncakes. (Image credits: Cook with Kathy)

Mooncakes. (Image credits: Choo Yut Shing via Flickr)

To use them as mediums of solidarity and resistance speaks to how deeply values of solidarity remain in the hearts of Hongkongers today.

Inspired by these mooncakes and Hong Kong's resistance, I recently created a project where anyone can customize their very own "Protest Mooncakes" with 3D printed letters, numbers and symbols- I detail the recipe in the next page.

DIY Protest Mooncakes (Vegan)

SERVES 12

Inspired by Hong Kong's anti-extradition mooncakes, I hosted a workshop where people get to create their very own "Protest Mooncakes"! Here's how you can make your own.

3D-printed stamp, letters and numbers and edges

Mooncake mold

Vegan Custard Filling

2 cups plant-milk

1/2 cups cornstarch

1/3 cups sugar

1/8 teaspoon turmeric

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

½ lemon only the peel

Mooncake skin

5 tbsp glutinous rice flour

3.5 tbsp white rice flour

2 heaping tbsp wheat starch

3 tbsp sugar

3/4 cup non-dairy milk

1.5 tbsp vegetable oil

(1) Prepare mooncake skin

Combine sweet rice flour, white rice flour, wheat starch, and sugar in a shallow, heat-proof bowl. Add soy milk and oil, and stir with a whisk until no lumps remain. Let rest for 30 minutes. Steam in a steamer over boiling water for 25-30 minutes until dough becomes slightly translucent.

Remove from heat and stir vigorously, then invert onto an oiled surface or a piece of parchment paper, and knead (either folding with a spatula or with gloved hands) until smooth and elastic. Place in the refrigerator to harden for at least two hours.

(2) Prepare vegan custard

To a saucepan off the heat, add all the ingredients.

Whisk until all lumps are gone.

Whisk on medium heat until the liquid thickens into a creamy custard. It can take between 2 to 5 minutes, depending on the quantities.

When you have almost reached the consistency you like, remove the pan from the heat and discard the lemon peel. Keep whisking for another minute off the heat. The custard will continue thickening.

Refridgerate overnight.

(3) Create your own message on the 3D printed stamp

Create a 4-letter protest message using the 3D printed numbers, letters, and edges and fit them into the holes of the 3D-printed stamp.

Assembling the mooncakes:

Divide the cold mochi dough into 12 equal pieces, 25g each. Shape the cooled filling into 12 balls of equal size.

Flatten a piece of dough onto a sheet of parchment paper, place another piece of parchment paper on top, and roll out gently into a round. Uncover and place a ball of custard filling in the center of the round, then gently wrap the dough upwards and around the filling, pinching edges at the top to seal. (Coat your fingertips liberally with the dusting flour to prevent sticking!)

Dust the mooncake mold and stamp (the mini mooncake size is for 50g) with flour, then shake to remove excess.

Fit your customized 3D-printed stamp into the mold.

Place the ball into the mooncake mould, stamp firmly, and push gently to remove, and enjoy your own protest mooncake!

Recipe for the vegan custard filling from The Plant Based School;
Recipe for Mooncake skin from The Plant-Based Wok.

All 3D models for the mooncake stamps can be downloaded on my website at http://protestfood.com/workshop.html

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La Morada's store front

La Morada

An Oaxacan mutual-aid kitchen and sanctuary for refugees and immigrants

308 Willis Ave. Bronx, New York 10454

When I first visited La Morada Mutual Aid in the South Bronx, I was met with an immense sense of generosity, kindness, and love. Natalia Mendez, co-owner and chef of La Morada, asked about my dietary restrictions and quickly prepared a vegan meal consisting of tortillas, beans, rice, pico de gallo, and fresh radish slices. She also served me a cup of hot cinnamon tea with honey. Their warm hospitality was overwhelming—it felt like visiting family I hadn't seen in a long time.

The meal that Natalia made for me

As I ate, members of the La Morada team were busy arranging tables to efficiently prepare and pack the free food they distribute to the community. Natalia set up a station to peel and cut bananas, while others unloaded a dozen large boxes filled with assorted bread donated by local organizations. They swiftly packed large plastic bags with bread, ready to be given to anyone who stopped by. After finishing my meal, I volunteered to help and was amazed by the sheer volume of food donated to La Morada.

Station set up to peel and cut bananas

"Refugees Welcome" and a watermelon, symbol of Palestinian Liberation, painted on La Morada's door front.

About La Morada

La Morada opened in 2009 as an Indigenous Oaxacan restaurant run by the undocumented Saavedra-Mendez family in the South Bronx. They are known for their authentic Oaxacan food, offering a wide variety of dishes, including moles, enchiladas, carnitas, tacos, milanesas, tlayudas, stuffed chiles, sopes, cecinas, nachos, and quesadillas.

Beyond being a restaurant, La Morada serves as a safe refuge for refugees and immigrants.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, they briefly closed but soon reopened as a mutual-aid soup kitchen upon realizing that the pandemic had worsened the borough's already high food insecurity rates. Natalia began preparing what she called "the root soup," made from beets, carrots, potatoes, and other root vegetables.[7]

On the first day, the soup was gone in an hour. The second day, they made enough for 400 people. By the third day, 600 people arrived. The numbers continued to grow, and by the end of the week, they had distributed 5,000 meals.

La Morada also helped hundreds of people register for COVID-19 vaccinations and even served as a vaccination site. Since then, they have focused on expanding their mutual-aid food network.

The Saavedra-Mendez family launched a GoFundMe campaign to support the kitchen and partnered with local organizations like Rethink Food[8] and New York farms[9] to receive and redistribute excess food that would otherwise go to waste.

Natalia's root soup

Their mission is not only to provide food but to offer nourishing, healthy meals to those in need.

Boxes containing bags of bread that will be given out to community members who came by the kitchen

They have cleared out their dining area to store boxes of donated produce and set up tables for volunteers (like me) to help package meals for distribution. Every day, they provide approximately 500 meals to families in need, particularly those living without gas.[10] They also serve essential workers and individuals recently released from detention.

The back of La Morada's front door

Immigration Activism

The Saavedra-Mendez family has been vocal and transparent about their immigration status, hoping to uplift the voices and stories of undocumented immigrants.

Natalia's daughter, Yajaira Saavedra, co-owner and chef of La Morada, is a beneficiary of the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program,[11] which grants young immigrants brought to the U.S. as children the right to work and protection from deportation. President Trump tried to end DACA during his first term in office, but the Supreme Court ruled against Trump's attempt. Now that it's President Trump's second term in office, DACA is once again on a lifeline.

Yajaira's parents crossed the Sonoran Desert in 1992 and have been living in the U.S. without authorization ever since. A year later, Yajaira and her brother Marco followed. In 2021, Marco applied for political asylum.[12]

Marco's mural of his great aunt in Oaxaca, in a room of corn , pumpkin flowers and beans

Communal dinner prepared by La Morada at The New School, together with ODA. (Image credits: Professor Alexandra Delano)

Having firsthand experience with the struggles of immigration, La Morada actively participates in advocacy efforts for immigrant rights and protections. A year ago, I was enrolled in a class called “Transnational Border Lab”, a collaboration between students at The New School and activists and artists affiliated with Otros Dreams en Acción (ODA) in Mexico City.

ODA is an organization dedicated to mutual support and political action for individuals who grew up in the U.S. but now find themselves in Mexico due to deportation, the deportation of a family member, or the threat of deportation. As part of their Visa Justice Mobility Campaign, ODA traveled from Mexico City to my school's campus.

For our communal dinner, my professor, Professor Alexandra Delano, ordered food from La Morada. Marco personally delivered the food from the South Bronx to our Manhattan campus. We lined up several tables to create a long communal dining space and ate together.

Zines prepared by ODA as part of their Visa Justice Mobility Campaign

A Safe Haven Amidst the Trump Presidency

As President Trump took office again in 2025, he renewed his threats against immigrant communities, promising “mass deportations.” He has since ordered U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to aggressively increase arrests under the “expedited removal” program,[13] effective January 21, 2025. Under this program, immigration officers can deport individuals without allowing them to appear before a judge.

Trump has also set quotas for ICE officers, pressuring them to ramp up arrests and raids[14]—a move that increases the likelihood of indiscriminate and violent enforcement tactics. According to The New York Times, there have been 23,000 arrests and 18,000 deportations across the US in February 2025 alone.[15]

Collage of posters on their door

A banner reading "No deportaciones / No deportations" in La Morada

Despite these threats, La Morada's owners, most of whom are undocumented,[16] remain undeterred. They continue to operate as a safe haven for asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants.

Their commitment extends beyond providing nourishment; they offer emotional support to those in need and continue to advocate for undocumented individuals' rights.

Beyond Immigration

La Morada speaks out on issues beyond immigration. They have actively participated in and supported movements for prison abolition, Black Lives Matter, permanent housing for all, police accountability, environmental justice, Palestinian sovereignty, and more.[17]

Saavedra has also addressed the harmful effects of gentrification in the Bronx, highlighting how it displaces lower-income families and small businesses.

By cooking and serving Indigenous Oaxacan food, the Saavedra-Mendez family deliberately preserves their traditions, resisting the continued Spanish colonization of Mexican cuisine. In an interview with Eater New York, Saavedra expressed her hope to "push back against the stereotypes of marginalized groups' food being unhealthy." [18]

Serving food that reconnects with Indigenous ingredients and cooking methods is, in itself, a form of resistance.

Support La Morada

La Morada is financially sustained through the affordable meals and catering services they provide, customer tips, and donations. Volunteers are welcome to drop by at any time to assist.

You can donate to their GoFundMe here:

La Morada's Green Mole

SERVES 6-8

Recipe from Las hermanas de la milpa: comienza con la calabaza cookbook by chef Natalia Méndez of La Morada restaurant.

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4 very green poblano chiles, chopped and seeded

6 - 8 jalapeño peppers, chopped and seeded

4 serrano peppers, chopped

4 whole green onions, chopped

A sprig of coriander

A teaspoon of cumin, chopped

2 - 3 leaves of epazote, chopped

3 cloves of garlic, chopped

3 tomatillos, chopped

Half a cup of squash seeds, peeled and sautéed (not too toasted)

First, we need to make sure to remove the seeds from the poblano and jalapeño peppers. The serrano peppers, we can chop them with seeds and everything.

Then, we will chop the chiles and the other ingredients into pieces: green onions, tomatillos, epazote, cilantro, cumin, garlic.

Then, we will add all of these ingredients to the blender, without cooking. We have to make sure that the mixture is very well blended, like a smoothie. I don't use the strainer for my sauces, because herbs and vegetables lose some substance when we strain them; I just make sure they are well blended.

When our mix is ready, we will add everything to a saucepan with hot oil. As soon as the mix releases the first boil, we will turn off the heat and remove the saucepan from the heat so that the green mole stays very green.

I want to say something else about the cumin: each dish, as I have already said, is like an orchestra with a soloist or a lead singer. In the green mole, the soloist is the cumin. That is why preferably, we use it whole, not powdered. Those who have a demanding palate can easily distinguish one mole from another. If cumin is lacking, they will be able to say, "no, this is not green mole, this is pipián". And also, the opposite, because the pipián has no cumin. Some people say they are the same thing. I say, these moles may be brothers or cousins- they are from the same family, but they are not the same. As in everything, in the mole there are also nuances.

Rice, beans and stuffed poblano chiles with green mole, served by and at La Morada

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Photos of the Saavedra-Mendex family hanging in the restaurant

Gaza Soup Kitchen. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

Gaza Soup Kitchen

Nourishing Resistance in the Face of a Genocide

Trigger warning: genocide, airstrikes, death

About Gaza Soup Kitchen

Gaza Soup Kitchen is a grassroots organization founded in Mashroo Beit Lahia, Gaza, in 2024 by brothers Hani and Mahmoud Almadhoun. Hani is the Director of Philanthropy with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), where he has raised millions of dollars for over two decades.

However, in February 2024, Hani realized that despite his efforts to raise funds for UNRWA, his own family in North Gaza was still starving due to the Israeli Army's deliberate destruction of land and blockade on food and water. His family members resorted to grinding livestock feed into makeshift meals, and this painful irony struck Hani deeply.

Palestinian children waiting for meals from Gaza Soup Kitchen, 9 Jan 2025. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

In response, Hani, Mahmoud, and some friends took bold action.

With just four large pots, some firewood, and foraged greenery, they began cooking hot meals for their neighbors. On the first day, they fed 120 families.

Mahmoud, a chef, coordinated the activities on the ground, while Hani supported the organization from the United States by raising funds. Hani started a GoFundMe campaign and called it Gaza Soup Kitchen.

Chef Mahmoud at Gaza Soup Kitchen. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

The project quickly gained incredible enthusiasm and support from all over the world. Within weeks, more volunteers joined, and they were able to source food from local farmers to feed the entire neighborhood.

The Assassination of Mahmoud Almadhoun

On November 30, 2024, Gaza Soup Kitchen announced that Mahmoud had been targeted and killed[19] in an Israeli drone strike that morning while on his way to deliver produce to Kamal Adwan Hospital in North Gaza.[20]

Since October 7, 2023, 46,707 Palestinians have been killed and 110,265 have been injured, as of January 15, 2025, according to Al Jazeera.[21] Five days later, on December 5, Amnesty International concluded that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

Painting of Chef Mahmoud at a memorial service in Washington DC, 7 December 2024. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page, painter unknown.)

A chef from Gaza Soup Kitchen holding pastries, in front of a poster remembering Chef Mahmoud. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

Following the news of Mahmoud's death, there was an outpouring of support on social media. Gaza Soup Kitchen would regularly post videos of their daily operations and Mahmoud would always end the videos with the Arabic words "mostamreen" (مستمرين), meaning "we will continue," — that is exactly what Gaza Soup Kitchen has been doing.[22] They expanded their operations throughout Gaza. There are now four soup kitchens run by Gaza Soup Kitchen, serving about 2,000 meals a day to Palestinians.

I had the honor of speaking with Abed Ajrami, a board member of Gaza Soup Kitchen, via video call. Abed is from Jabalia Camp in North Gaza but is currently based in Houston, Texas. He shared his experiences as part of Gaza Soup Kitchen.

Starvation as a weapon

The Israeli government has long controlled Gaza's lifelines.[23] Since October 7, 2023, Israeli forces have been using starvation of civilians as a method of control in Gaza, under the guise of warfare, which is considered a war crime under the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.[24] Throughout the genocide, Israeli forces deliberately blocked water, fuel, food, and other forms of aid from entering Gaza.[25]

The problem wasn't the scarcity of food—Abed shared that, throughout the war, there were "miles and miles" of aid trucks carrying food, waiting to enter Gaza from the Rafah border crossing in Egypt. However, because Israel prevented these trucks from entering Gaza, much of the food began to rot.[26]

Gaza Soup Kitchen operations, 12 Dec 2024.
(Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

“You get people starving on one side of the border, and food rotting on the other side,” Abed said. “Several babies and children died from malnutrition. A lot of diseases spread because of the lack of food... You don’t realize the importance of food until it hits you.”

Children holding a pot of soup from Gaza Soup Kitchen, 17 Dec 2024. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

Sourcing ingredients for Gaza Soup Kitchen

Abed explained that most of the ingredients used to cook meals were sourced locally, from nearby farmlands. However, farmers were also struggling to sell their produce. Chef Mahmoud would purchase the produce from local farmers and turn it into meals for the community.

Many crops grow quickly during seasonal rainfall, and Abed shared two Palestinian dishes made from vegetables harvested during wet seasons.

“One of the famous ones is called Khobiza,” which is made from Palestinian Common Mallow. “Another one is Rijlah,” a red lentil stew made with purslane, onions, tomato paste, and meat.

Khobiza from Gaza Soup Kitchen, 4 December 2024

However, Israeli forces have also been deliberately destroying agricultural land. According to a UN analysis of satellite imagery, as of November 2024, more than 90% of cattle have died, and about 70% of agricultural land has been destroyed since October 7, 2023.[27]

“Farmers sometimes didn’t feel safe venturing out to water and care for the plants,” Abed recalls. “But as a member of the Gaza Palestinian-American Association (GPAA), I helped fund projects that promote seed preservation and conservation. We funded a farmer who was also an agricultural engineer to educate fellow Gazans on how to obtain seeds and plant them, so they could harvest their own produce like basil or molokhia, even in tent camps.”

“So, throughout the camps, people planted seeds to get a few meals here and there. It helped people grow locally-sourced food, even in the middle of a refugee camp.”

Gaza Soup Kitchen, 5 April 2025. (Image source: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook Page)

Vegetable parcels delivered to tents of families in Deir al-Balah area, 16 January 2025. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

Food supply after ceasefire

The first of three phases of ceasefire began on January 19, 2025, after 15 months of genocide. Part of the ceasefire agreement included allowing food shipments and supplies into Gaza.

“After the ceasefire, a lot more food was allowed through Egypt in the South... However, in North Gaza, where my family is, there is no water... You need to walk over rubble to reach people’s homes,” Abed explained. He also noted that the Jabalia refugee camp in North Gaza has less food than the South, simply because the South is closer to Egypt.

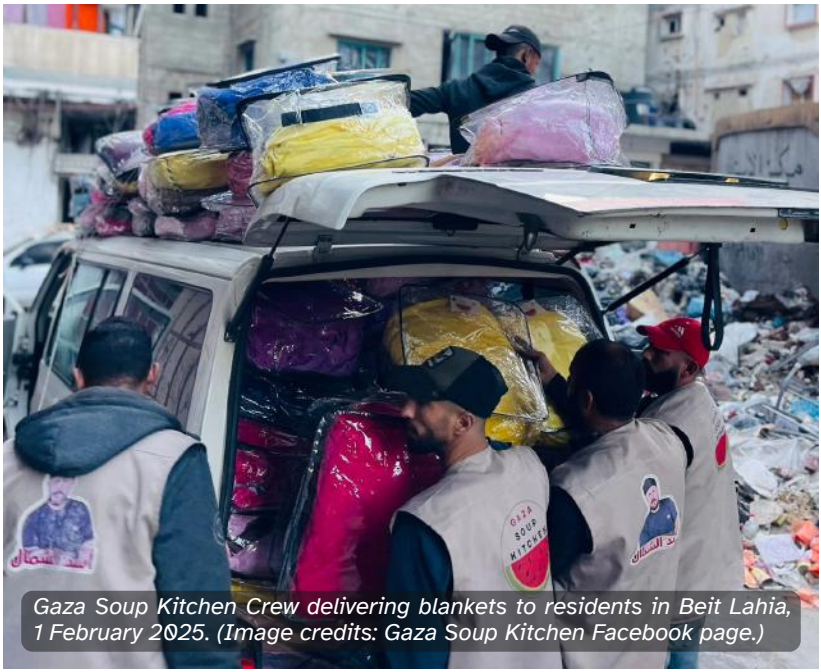
Sweets handed out by Gaza Soup Kitchen after ceasefire announcement, 19 Jan 2024. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

People lining up for food from Gaza Soup Kitchen, 5 April 2025. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

However, the ceasefire has been extremely fragile.

On February 5, 2025, U.S. President Trump spoke about “taking over the Gaza Strip” and advocated for the forcible transfer of around 2 million Gazans to neighboring countries. On March 2, 2025, Israel halted all humanitarian aid entry into Gaza to pressure Hamas to accept a new ceasefire proposal. On March 18, 2025, Israel ended the casefire with Hamas and renewed its air and ground offensive.[28]

Grief and glimpses of hope



Gaza Soup Kitchen Crew delivering blankets to residents in Beit Lahia, 1 February 2025. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

Abed shared that since the war began, he has lost count of how many relatives he's lost. "My estimate is between 80-100," he said. He explained how each martyr's death felt unbearable at first. "And then, after a while, the news just keeps coming... you almost become numb."

He also described how being displaced, suffering through famine, and living in fear while surviving in tents amidst rain, cold, and heat has been incredibly hard and traumatizing for Gazans.

"Those who are alive now envy those who died early in the war—that's how bad things have gotten."

Abed taught me an Arabic word and emotion called “qaher” (رەق). While there may not be any direct English translation, he describes qaher as a mix of anger and frustration fueled by injustice, oppression, racism, and dehumanization. He explained that his biggest challenge is balancing the feeling of qaher with trying to stay calm and focus on the positive.

When I asked Abed what keeps him going, he spoke about the small glimpses of hope that shine through—children smiling as they receive warm meals, receiving emails of solidarity from strangers, seeing and participating in protests for Gaza, and helping others become aware of the situation. “It makes all the work I do worth it, knowing I’m actually making a difference.”

Muslims protestors praying on a large Palestinian flag, during a protest in New York City, 7 October 2024.

Chef Faten from Gaza Soup Kitchen making meals for families in Beach Camp, 29 November 2024. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

Support Gaza Soup Kitchen

Gaza Soup Kitchen is now a registered charity and non-profit organization in the USA. You can donate directly to Gaza Soup Kitchen through their website at gazasoupkitchen.com. Your donation will help contribute to a hunger-free Gaza.

Gaza Soup Kitchen prepares hummus and pickles, 8 March 2024. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

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Chef Faten from Gaza Soup Kitchen cooking samakia, 7 April 2024. (Image credits: Gaza Soup Kitchen Facebook page.)

Annual Black Trans Woman Cookout, organized by Qween Jean, Gia Love and Gabrielle Souza (Executive Director of The Okra Project), September 2023. (Image Credits: Stephanie Keith)

The Okra Project

Food Soveriegnty for the Black Trans Community

Trigger warning: slavery

From stewed okra and tomatoes to bite-sized deep-fried okra to the classic Creole gumbo, okra is a staple ingredient in many American Southern dishes. However, the origins of these culinary delights can often be traced back to the dark history of the transatlantic slave trade. West African women would braid and hide okra, along with rice, cotton, and molokhia seeds, into their hair before being forced onto transatlantic slave ships. Bringing seeds from their homeland was an act of survival—a way to carry sustenance, culture, and a piece of home through the horrors of enslavement.[29]

Gumbo with Okra. (Image credits: jeffreyw, licensed under CC BY 2.0.)

Okra served more than just culinary purposes. Enslaved people roasted and brewed the oily seeds as a coffee substitute. The leaves were mashed into a clay-like substance to apply to inflamed areas of the body, while the slimy mucilage within okra pods was used to coat the uterine passage to induce abortions.[30]

Today, okra is not just a hallmark of African-American cuisine, it also embodies health, prosperity and nourishment for the community.

From The Okra Project's website.

From left, organizers Gabrielle Souza, Gia Love and Qween Jean at the Black Trans Woman Cookout, September 2023. (Image credits: Stephanie Keith.)

The Okra Project, named after the cultural significance of the okra plant, seeks to nourish the Black Trans community through mutual aid and community-driven efforts.

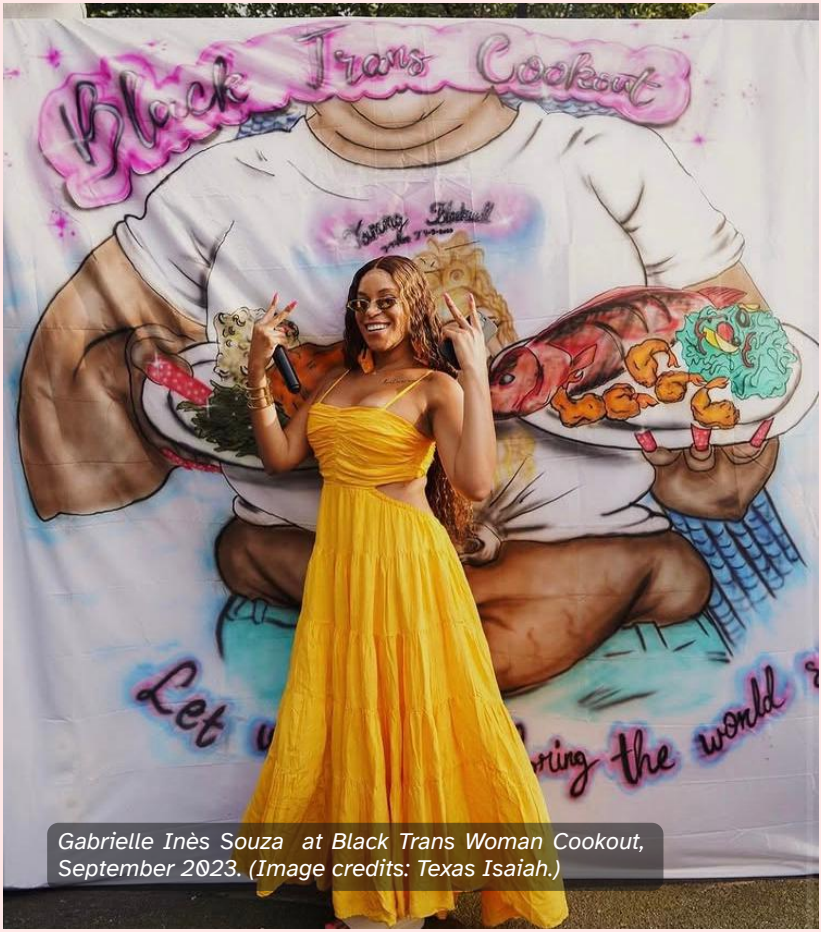
Since Gabrielle Inès Souza became executive director in 2023, the organization has expanded its initiatives, operating numerous funds that support the Black Trans community, including food, housing, transportation, and mental health assistance. Gabrielle graciously shared her story, her advocacy work, and her hopes for the future with me.

Food Sovereignty for Black Trans Community

Black LGBTQ+ individuals find themselves at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, as anti-Blackness and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments often compound, leading to larger-scale economic difficulties.[31] According to the Food Research & Action Center, trans adults experience food insecurity at nearly three times the rate of non-trans adults, and more than a third of transgender people of color often or sometimes do not have enough to eat.[32]

The Okra Project directly addresses these disparities. Founded in 2018 by actress Ianne Fields Stewart, the organization was created to combat food insecurity and isolation within the Black trans community.[33] Initially, The Okra Project hired and trained Black trans chefs to cook culturally specific meals for community members in their homes.[34]

Black Trans Woman Cookout, September 2023. (Image credits: Stephanie Keith.)



Gabrielle Inès Souza at Black Trans Woman Cookout, September 2023. (Image credits: Texas Isaiah.)

In 2023, Gabrielle took on the role of Executive Director and restructured the organization's initiatives to align with its newly established pillars of nourishment, safety, and wellness. After gathering community feedback, she redirected funds from the original chef initiative toward a Grocery Assistance Fund, allowing individuals to purchase their own groceries. The Okra Project also previously partnered with UberEATS on the Rides and Meals Fund to provide safe transportation and access to convenient, nourishing meals.

To Gabrielle, food sovereignty means ensuring Black, trans and queer individuals have consistent, direct, culturally-affirming and accessible access to nutritious foods, free from systemic barriers and external control.

“My philosophy has always been putting money and resources directly into the hands of those who need it most. This allows people to utilize [the money] in the ways they see fit,” Gabrielle shares.

“When you start giving resources and autonomy to people in that way, it allows them to create their own meals, order their own groceries that they want”.

Black Trans Woman Cookout, September 2023. (Image credits: Stephanie Keith.)

“Food sovereignty isn’t just about feeding people, it’s about dismantling the systemic barriers that prevent Black, Brown, trans, and queer individuals from having agency over their own nourishment and wellbeing. It’s about allowing [them] the agency to choose their meals and choose what they want in their homes.

Nourishment Beyond Food

Complete sovereignty cannot be achieved without autonomy over housing, healthcare, well-being, and safety. Beyond providing food and grocery assistance, The Okra Project collaborates with CareView to provide hygiene products and offers utility relief and rental assistance to those in need.

The consistent discrimination faced by Black trans individuals also deeply affects their mental and physical health. Gabrielle has partnered with BetterHelp, an online mental health platform, to provide free therapy services for community members, offering anywhere from six months to a year of therapy sessions at no cost.

Black Trans Woman Cookout, September 2023. (Image credits: Stephanie Keith.)

Black Trans Woman Cookout, September 2023. (Image credits: Stephanie Keith.)

Finding solidarity and community is crucial for survival, resistance, and fulfillment. The Okra Project partners with its sibling organization, Black Trans Liberation, to organize community-based events and direct-action initiatives. Together, they have hosted TransGiving and TransMas (a play on Thanksgiving and Christmas) and the Black Trans Women CookOut, where Black trans women like Gabrielle take the lead. “Under this current Trump presidency, these community events will be needed more than ever,” Gabrielle states.

The Okra Project continues to expand its mutual aid services. Each program application asks applicants about their needs and how initiatives can be improved. “A lot of our programming is built on what the community needs. Being a Black, trans femme, I’m in the community, so I keep an ear to the ground,” Gabrielle shares.

“Staying active and engaged with the community is really the heart of our work, allowing [community members] to be our steering committee.”

Black Trans Woman Cookout, September 2023. (Image credits: Texas Isaiah.)

Navigating Corporate Collaborations

As someone with organizing experience navigating hyper-capitalist America, I constantly question the ethics of partnering with corporations that hold monopolistic power and wealth. Many companies engage in symbolic Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts or seek tax write-offs while failing to address systemic issues. Moreover, corporate tax write-offs decrease the amount of funds available needed to sustain public goods and services, and often exacerbate existing racial and income inequalities.

At the same time, corporations have vast resources that could be redistributed to local communities.

Gabrielle Inès Souza (far right) at Torch Awards, 2023. (Image credits: The Okra Project's Instagram page)

Black Trans Woman Cookout, September 2023. (Image credits: Stephanie Keith.)

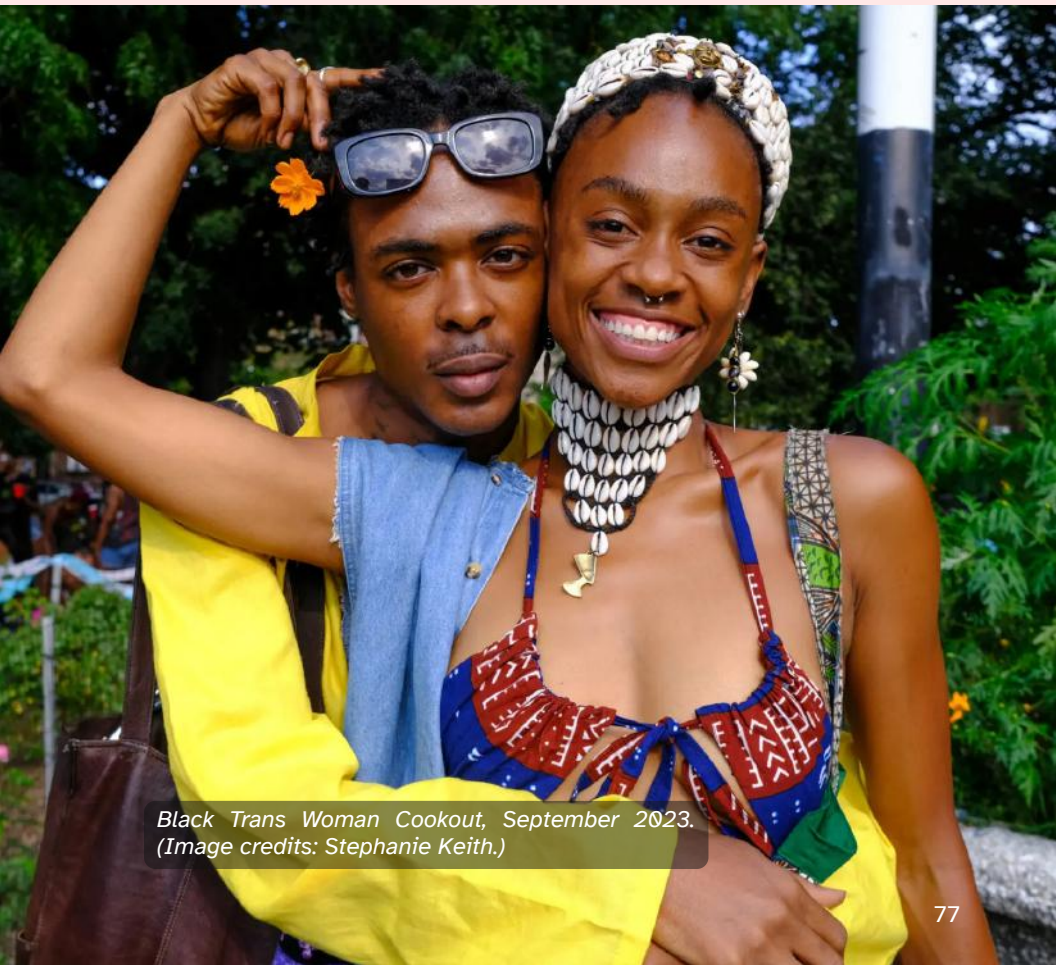
For example, The Okra Project's partnerships with UberEATS and BetterHelp have tangibly benefited Black trans community members. I was curious about Gabrielle's perspective on this dichotomy. She offered a nuanced view: critiquing corporations and accepting their funding are not mutually exclusive.

"I battled with that, to be honest," Gabrielle admits. "I had to get out of my head about it because if I turned down the dollars, then the community suffers, right?"

"I can accept the check and still critique [the corporation]. They want a tax write-off? That's fine—write it off and give me the check so I can provide for my community."

“I don’t necessarily have to build very close or tight-knit relationships with those types of businesses... I know who they are and what they are. But I find it more beneficial to still accept the money so I can still serve my community”.

The Okra Project has shown that, with transparency, authenticity, and meaningful engagement, corporate partnerships can be beneficial. “Hearing stories from community members who say, ‘This program helped me visit my ailing grandmother’—those moments really highlight what we do at The Okra Project,” Gabrielle adds.



Black Trans Woman Cookout, September 2023. (Image credits: Stephanie Keith.)

Honoring Black Trans Resilience

Within hours of returning to power in Jan 2025, United States President Donald Trump issued a broad executive order that seeks to dismantle crucial protections for transgender people, and denies the validity of gender identity itself.[35] The order states that the US government will only recognize two sexes, male and female, and pledges to withhold federal funding from any programs that promote "gender ideology".

It also mandates the removal of terms like "Black," "BIPOC," and "transgender" from school curricula and federal websites. Trump has halted gender-corrected passports,[36] restricted youth's access to gender-affirming healthcare,[37] attempted to ban transgender people from military service,[38] and banned trans women and girls from participating in women's sports.[39]

"Flowers Now" Concert Series by Michael Love Michael, in collaboration with The Okra Project, 8 September 2024. (Image credits: Brett Lindell.)

As anti-trans rhetoric and legislation reach unprecedented levels, mutual aid, resource redistribution, and community care are more critical than ever. It is essential to honor the work Black trans organizers, activists artists, and communities have done to fight for liberation.

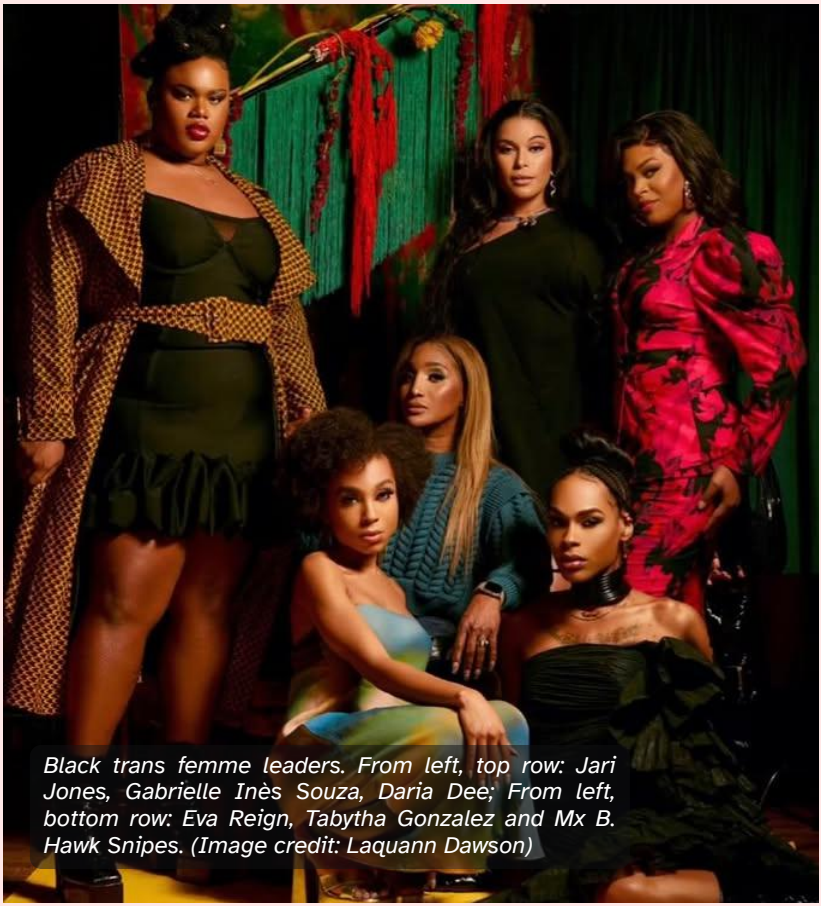
Many elements of queer culture—drag, fashion, ballroom—are rooted in the creativity and resilience of the Black community.

"Flowers Now" Concert Series by Michael Love Michael, in collaboration with The Okra Project, 8 September 2024. (Image credits: Brett Lindell.)

And this community is here to stay. The freedoms we enjoy today are thanks to Black queer individuals, past and present. It is our duty to continue highlighting the stories of Black, Brown, queer and trans individuals, continue mobilizing and organizing to defend the progress we've made and will continue to make in the future.

“My career in activism began because of my own struggles around gender identity and things I was experiencing,”

My own lived experience is something that keeps me going and keeps me active. Wanting better for the future generations of Black and Brown, trans and queer people is my driving force,” Gabrielle shares.



Black trans femme leaders. From left, top row: Jari Jones, Gabrielle Inès Souza, Daria Dee; From left, bottom row: Eva Reign, Tabytha Gonzalez and Mx B. Hawk Snipes. (Image credit: Laquann Dawson)

Support The Okra Project

It is crucial to continue amplifying and carrying forward the history, voices, and stories of Black queer individuals. Supporting The Okra Project ensures that vital resources reach those who need them most.

Donate to The Okra Project here:

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Yuri from Khatynka Pekarya craft bakery in Bucha, Ukraine. (Image credits: Bake for Ukraine website.)

Bake for Ukraine

Baking Solidarity, One Loaf at a Time

Trigger warning: war

During the French Revolution in October 1789, women from the marketplaces of Paris led the March on Versailles in response to skyrocketing bread prices and shortages. Similar events have occurred throughout history: the Richmond Bread Riot in Virginia (April 1863), the Egyptian Bread Riots (1977 and 2008), the Tunisian Revolution (2011), and the Sudanese protests (2021). The slogan “Bread and Roses” became a rallying cry during the 1912 textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, while “Bread, Work, Freedom” has been widely used by Afghan women in protest over the past three years.

A contemporary illustration of women taking to the streets of Versailles in hopes of capturing bread in 1789. (Image source: Gallica Digital Library.)

Bread is more than sustenance—it is a symbol of survival, labor, food and economic security and community (the word ‘companion’ comes from the Latin word of bread).

When access to food, fair wages, financial stability or identity is threatened, rebellion often follows.

In the ongoing war and occupation of Ukraine, Bake for Ukraine is carrying out one such act of resistance—delivering free bread, baking supplies, and equipment to those in need.

Bake for Ukraine’s operations. (Image credit: Bake for Ukraine’s website). (Image credits: Bake for Ukraine website.)

Initiators of Bake for Ukraine. From left: Maria Kalenska, Olga Graf and Lena Vorozheykina. (Image credits: Bake for Ukraine website.)

Operations

I had the immense honor of speaking with Felicity Spector, a UK-based journalist, producer, writer, and passionate home baker, about her experience running Bake for Ukraine over the past three years of war.

The initiative was founded almost immediately after the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, by a group of former colleagues from the food equipment industry. Their mission is to secure Ukraine's local food supply and support small bakeries and farmers affected by the war's devastation. They collaborate with bakers worldwide to raise funds, ensuring Ukrainian bakers have access to flour, yeast, and essential tools to keep their businesses running. At the same time, they aim to preserve Ukrainian food culture by sharing traditional bread recipes.

Bake for Ukraine's Mobile Bakery. (Image credits: Bake for Ukraine.)

Bake for Ukraine also operates a mobile bakery, bringing fresh bread directly to frontline communities where food is scarce.

However, operating in a war zone is incredibly dangerous. The team ensures that their mobile bakery is painted neutral colors and carefully plans their routes to avoid potential targets. Despite these precautions, a drone strike once landed near one of their bakeries in Odesa.

“Anywhere is a target in Ukraine—churches, schools, hospitals,” Felicity says. Fortunately, no one was harmed, and the team has since relied on local knowledge to determine the safest locations for their operations.

Impact on Community

The deliveries bring more than just food—they bring joy and resilience to war-torn communities.

“One woman was kissing the loaf of bread—she was so excited to have it,” Felicity recalls. “Another woman insisted on giving us a big jar of cucumbers.”

“The people who have the least always want to give back.”

A Ukrainian woman kissing a loaf of bread. (Image credits: Bake for Ukraine.)

Ukrainian Palyanytsya. (Image credits: Bake for Ukraine.)

For Bake for Ukraine, providing high-quality, homemade sourdough bread is essential—not just for nutrition but to build a sense of mutual aid and dignity. “Just because they’re receiving aid doesn’t mean they should get food that nobody else would eat… This is not a charity thing,” Felicity emphasizes.

Attacks on Ukraine's Food System

Before the invasion, Ukraine was the world's seventh-largest exporter of wheat.[40] Since 2022, Russia has systematically attacked Ukraine's grain storage and export infrastructure, threatening the country's food and economic security.

"One farmer I met was waiting for a grant because all his tractors had been destroyed," Felicity shares. "Each one costs around a quarter of a million dollars, and without them, large-scale harvesting is impossible."

Getting the mobile bakery ready. (Image credits: Oleksandr Baron, from Flour Power by Felicity Spector via Substack.)

Ruins in Downtown Kherson. (Image credits: Flour Power by Felicity Spector via Substack.)

Today, Russia occupies roughly a quarter of Ukraine's land and has blocked Ukraine's Black Sea ports, halting exports. Russia has also been accused of stealing nearly 6 million metric tons of Ukrainian wheat, selling it as Russian grain.[41]

Compounding the crisis, landmines now affect nearly 25% of Ukraine's territory, making farming perilous. Ukraine is now the most mined country in the world.[42] [43]

Demining efforts require an estimated $34.6 billion and could take decades, but Ukrainian farmers refuse to give up.

“Talk about nerves of steel,” Felicity says. “They just want to get back to their land and start working again.”

Bake for Ukraine Mobile Bakery operations. (Image credits: Flour Power by Felicity Spector via Substack.)

Palyanytsya baked by Bake for Ukraine volunteers. (Image credits: Flour Power by Felicity Spector via Substack.)

Reclaiming Ukrainian Culture Through Palyanytsya

Since Russia's full-scale invasion, over 1,000 cultural heritage sites in Ukraine—museums, religious landmarks, libraries, and historical buildings—have been deliberately destroyed. This erasure of Ukrainian identity echoes Soviet-era attempts to suppress national traditions.[44] [45]

"The Soviet Union tried to get rid of Ukrainian cultural symbols, calling them either bourgeois or peasant culture," Felicity explains.

To counter this, Bake for Ukraine is preserving and spreading recipes for Palyanytsya, a traditional Ukrainian bread. Beyond nourishment, it is a powerful symbol of resistance and identity.

Interestingly, Russian soldiers reportedly struggle to pronounce “Palyanytsya,” leading Ukrainians to use it as a shibboleth to detect infiltrators at the start of the invasion.

“It became like a password to prove you were Ukrainian,” Felicity notes.

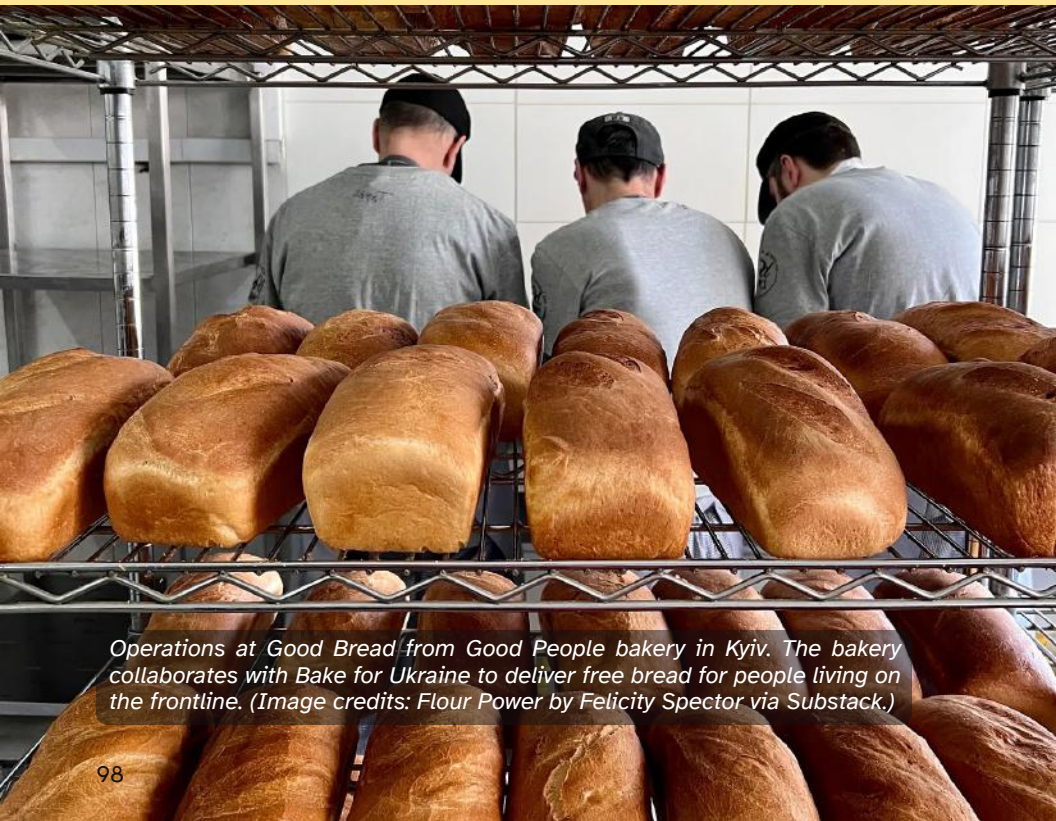
The first Ukrainian-manufactured missiles are also named Palyanytsya—a testament to how this bread has become a totem of national pride.

Ukrainian Palyanytsya. (Image credits: Bake for Ukraine's Instagram.)

Future Goals: Baking as Trauma Relief

Bake for Ukraine is currently planning on expanding its mission to help former Ukrainian soldiers held in Russian captivity by offering baking therapy workshops. Many of these soldiers, held for over three years, suffer from severe Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“They were in really bad shape… but after a few hours in the bakery, they looked visibly relaxed,” Felicity shares. “It gave them something to focus on, something to enjoy.”



Operations at Good Bread from Good People bakery in Kyiv. The bakery collaborates with Bake for Ukraine to deliver free bread for people living on the frontline. (Image credits: Flour Power by Felicity Spector via Substack.)

Operations at Good Bread from Good People bakery in Kyiv. (Image credits: Flour Power by Felicity Spector via Substack.

Beyond emotional healing, the workshops teach practical skills that could help reintegrate soldiers into civilian life.

“We hope to provide a structured way for them to overcome trauma while also learning a trade they can use to find work,” Felicity explains.

Support Bake for Ukraine

As the war continues, Bake for Ukraine is not just a humanitarian initiative, it also helps preserve Ukrainian cuisine, culture, and identity in the face of destruction and erasure.

Bake for Ukraine is accepting donations- all donations are directed to support bakeries in Kyiv, Butcha, Kerson, Odesa and Kharkiv by supplying necessary ingredients, providing and maintaining essential equipment and paying salaries to bakers.

Donate to Bake for Ukraine here:

Bake for Ukraine's team, in front of their mobile bakery. (Image credits: Bake for Ukraine's Instagram.)

Endnotes

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Ukrainian Palyanytsya

Recipe taken from Bake for Ukraine's Bakery Kit, available on their website bakeforukraine.org

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120 g stiff wheat starter with 50% hydration

40 g wholegrain wheat flour

375 g all purpose wheat flour (13% protein)

230 g water

11 g sugar

50 g whole milk

7 g salt

35 g butter (or ghee) at room temperature

Mix starter, milk and water in a bowl of a food processor. Then add flour and mix until well combined for a few minutes. Cover the bowl and let it autolyse for 45 minutes. Then add butter, sugar and salt and mix the dough at speed 2 until smooth for around 10 minutes. The final dough is nicely smooth and not sticky.

Fold the dough like an envelope from the outside to the inside, transfer it to a slightly oiled container and cover with a lid. Let the dough rise for 3-4 hours at room temperature, fold the dough 2 times during this period.

Transfer the dough to the table sprinkled with flour, shape into a boule (round ball) and transfer it to a round proofing basket, sprinkled with starch or coarse flour and leave for bulk fermentation for another 2 hours at room temperature or ideally about 8-12 hours in the fridge.

Transfer the dough to a baking sheet and make a razor cut at an angle of 45°, resembling a smile. Bake with steam on a well-heated pizza stone for 20 minutes at 250 °C and for another 20 minutes at 210 °C without steam.

Let the Palyanytsya cool down on a rack.

Ukrainian Palyanytsya. (Image credits: Bake for Ukraine's Instagram)

Volunteers from Vegetables Without Borders in the kitchen. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook)

Vegetables Without Borders

Cooking Up Community from Surplus and Solidarity in Rotterdam

Rain or shine, volunteers from Vegetables Without Borders (Dutch: Groenten Zonder Grenzen) Rotterdam always find a way to cook up a warm vegan meal.

Every Tuesday, they fill wheelbarrows with leftover produce from the central Rotterdam Blaak farmers' market. Typical ingredients leftover from the farmers market include tomatoes, onions, corn, avocado and other fruits. On Wednesdays, they transform this surplus into a nourishing meal, providing a free meal for anyone who stops by.

Volunteers from Vegetables Without Borders collecting leftover produce from Blaak Farmers' Market. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

However, one stormy afternoon, heavy rain kept vendors away, leaving far less leftover produce than usual. The Vegetables Without Borders team found themselves with an unusual main ingredient: bananas. Skeptical at first, the volunteers got creative and stirred up a banana soup unlike anything they had ever made before. To everyone's surprise, the soup turned out to be delicious, and the crowd loved it.

The bananas that volunteers collected from the farmers' market, and made soup with. (Image credits: Martina from Vegetables Without Borders.)

One of the meals cooked by volunteers from Vegetables Without Borders. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

For the past eight years, Vegetables Without Borders has carried this same unwavering commitment and ingenuity, turning surplus food into shared meals every week, no matter the circumstances. From tomato bruschetta to mango chutney, avocado mousse to chestnut mushroom soup, the team never fails to bring delicious dishes to the table.

They have created a self-sustaining community where everyone can come together over a weekly bowl of soup, some bread, and other delightful surprise dishes from volunteers.

Martina, pictured in the wheelbarrow.
(Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

I had the privilege of speaking with Martina, a long-time volunteer and organizer at Vegetables Without Borders for the past six years. We discussed Rotterdam's culture, her experience with the initiative, the challenges the team has faced, and her hopes for its future.

Combating Food Waste and Insecurity in Rotterdam

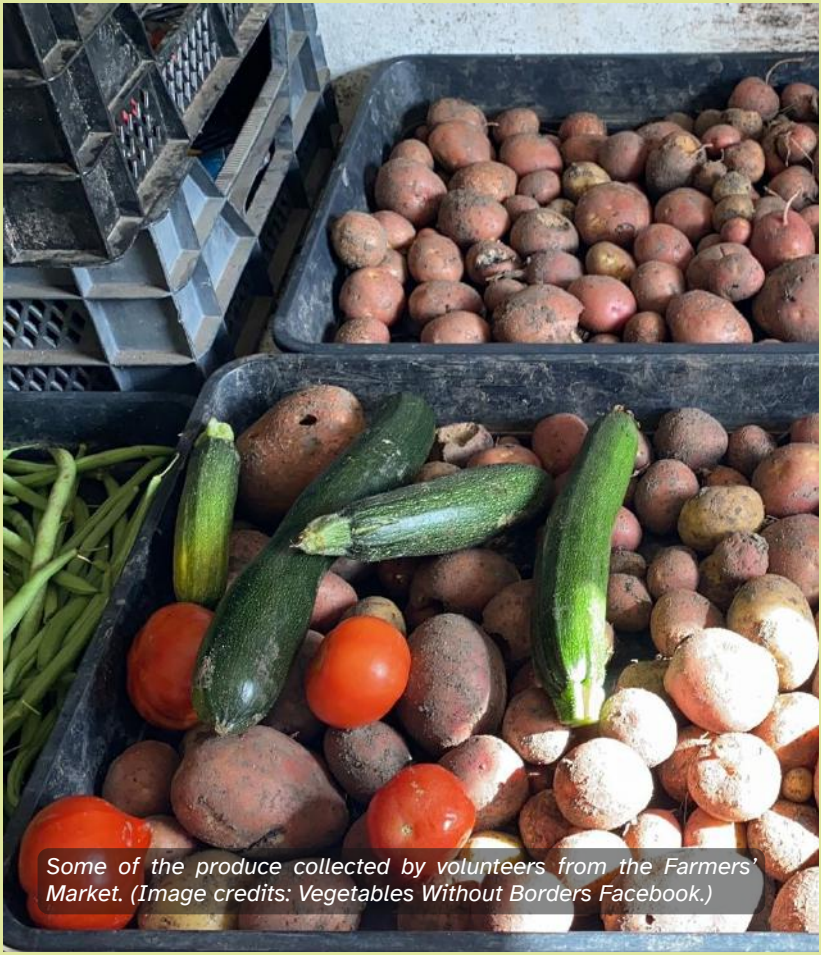
“Like in every big city, when you live in a more gentrified area, it’s harder to see issues like food insecurity,” Martina says.

Similar to many parts of the world, Rotterdam has a large working-class population that struggles to feed themselves and their families, yet may not qualify for food bank assistance.

One of the meals cooked by volunteers from Vegetables Without Borders. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

At the same time, there is often a significant surplus of fresh, nutritious produce from vendors at the Blaak Rotterdam Central Market at the end of the day. Vendors then face a “trash tax” to dispose of their unsold food.

Recognizing this gap in the social safety net, Vegetables Without Borders founders Myrthe and Balthazar saw an opportunity to redistribute surplus produce to those in need—while also helping vendors avoid disposal fees.



Some of the produce collected by volunteers from the Farmers' Market. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

Some of the produce collected by volunteers from the Farmers' Market. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

They secured a community-focused municipal center just minutes from the market, where they could store food and cook for free every week. From there, the team got to work transforming the space into a welcoming hub.

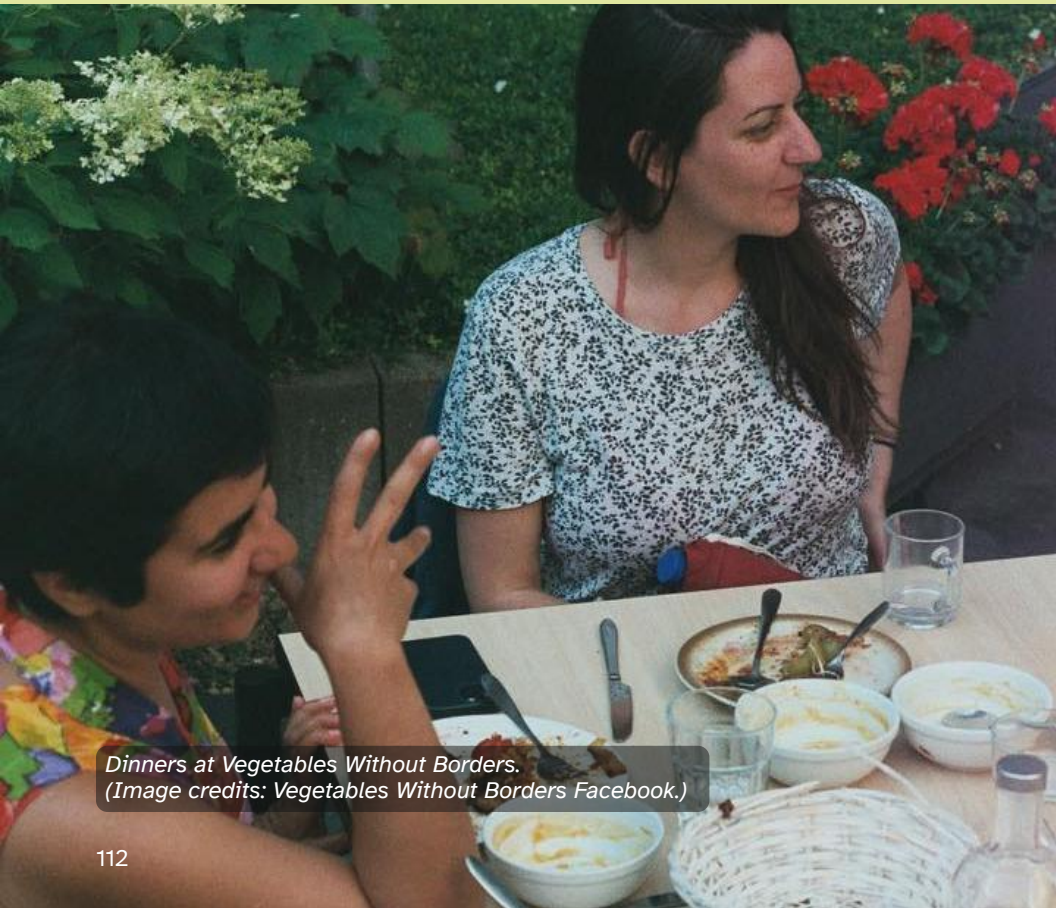
Each week, volunteers prepare enough food to feed 40 to 50 people.

"While we are a small organization, when you consider that we've been active for eight years, we've served a lot of meals and provided food for a lot of people," Martina reflects.

Open to Everyone

One of Vegetables Without Borders' core missions is to provide accessible meals for everyone, regardless of age, income, or background.

"We don't have a target audience," Martina explains. "People with money who feel lonely can come. Students who just moved to Rotterdam and don't have friends can come. We have some homeless people who join us. Elderly residents [living nearby] who feel isolated can come."



Dinners at Vegetables Without Borders. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

While fostering a diverse community is rewarding, it also presents challenges. “With such a wide range of people, conflicts inevitably arise,” Martina acknowledges. Volunteers sometimes have to mediate between individuals with different perspectives and ideologies.

“We’ve had many discussions about inclusivity and safety. Should we allow everyone, or is safety a priority?” Martina says. “Ultimately, we prioritized safety. In some cases, we had to ask individuals not to return because others felt unsafe.”

These decisions are never easy. “It’s heartbreaking because those we turned away also need a sense of community,” she admits. “But we don’t have the resources to handle every situation.”

One of the volunteers at Vegetables Without Borders. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

Adapting During COVID-19

Like many food-related initiatives worldwide, Vegetables Without Borders had to pause its usual operations during the pandemic. The farmers' market shut down, the team lost access to the municipal center, and hosting large communal dinners became impossible.

Determined to continue their mission, the team quickly adapted. They partnered with supermarkets and local shops to redistribute unsold food. They also secured a new neighborhood space and collaborated with a social worker who provided a list of individuals ineligible for food bank assistance but in urgent need.

Cartons of food packed and to be delivered to residents during the pandemic. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

Each week, volunteers packed food cartons filled with rescued groceries and delivered them to those in need.

During this time, they also worked with another community space that helped cook meals for a wider audience. The Vegetables Without Borders team helped pack these home-cooked meals into containers for distribution.

A volunteer packing boxes of food to be delivered to residents during the pandemic. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

Cartons of food packed and to be delivered to residents during the pandemic. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

However, as pandemic restrictions lifted, the initiative returned to its original vision and eased back into its normal operations. “One of our core values is creating community. We didn’t want to become a delivery service—that’s too impersonal. We love bringing people together to cook and eat,” Martina explains.

Challenges of Running a Grassroots Organization

As with many volunteer-driven initiatives, sustaining a nonprofit without funding presents ongoing challenges. Volunteer numbers fluctuate with the seasons, and there's a constant cycle of people coming and going.

A volunteer from Vegetables Without Borders. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

A volunteer from Vegetables Without Borders. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

“We experience periods where we have very few volunteers and we struggle to keep going. There are other periods in which a lot of people are involved and we have a lot of guests as well”, Martina shares. The team adapts based on their available capacity—sometimes limiting dinner attendance due to space constraints, other times making do with fewer ingredients.

“What has really changed over time is how we organize ourselves,” Martina says. They now use a WhatsApp group where volunteers sign up for market pickups or kitchen shifts. This non-hierarchical structure gives everyone a sense of ownership and responsibility for the initiative. “It’s also helped guarantee more stability—everything runs more smoothly now,” Martina adds.

Aspirations for Vegetables Without Borders

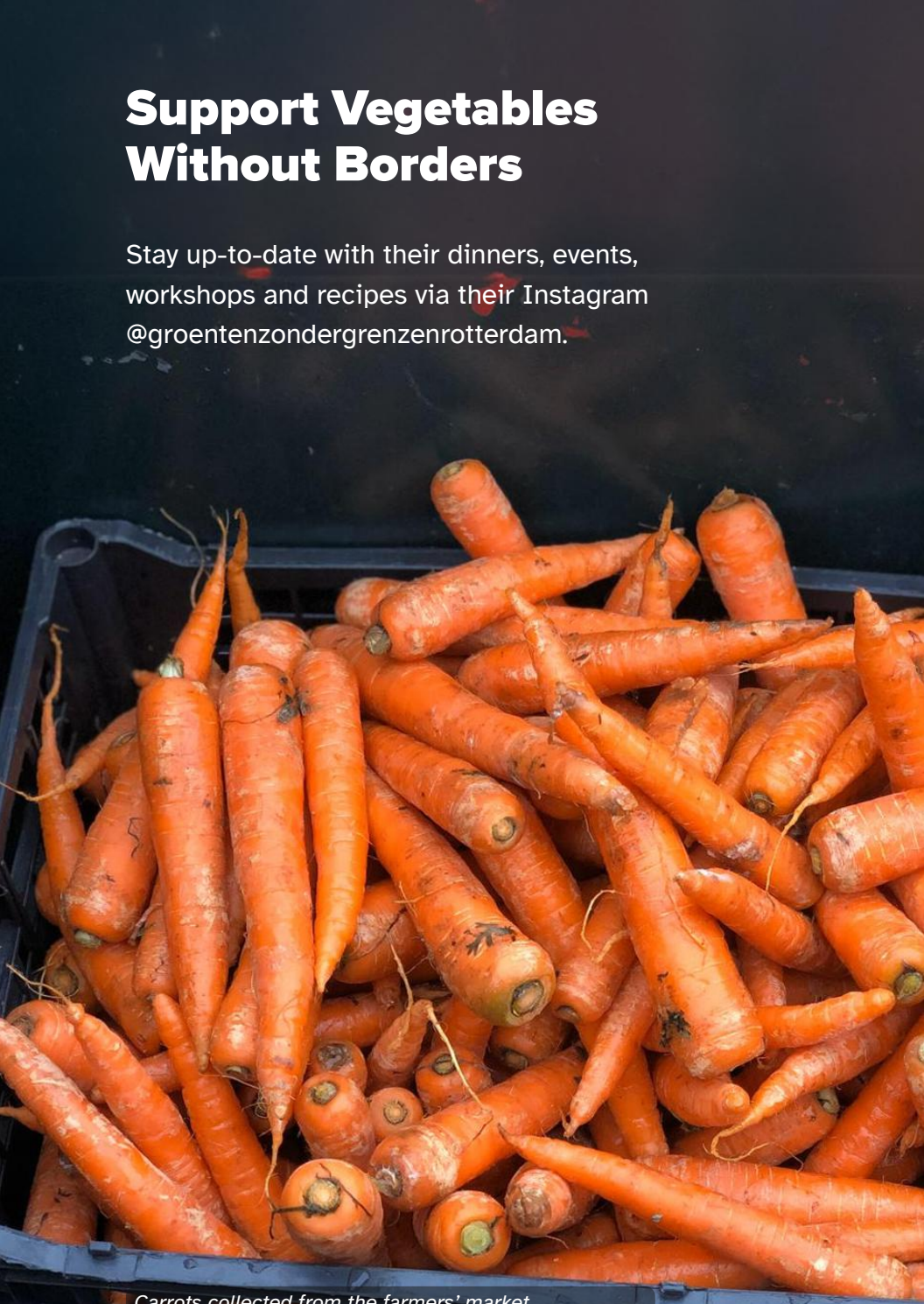
Looking ahead, Martina hopes Vegetables Without Borders can secure a space of their own—one that offers more autonomy and flexibility. While the municipal center has been generous, its design and limitations make it difficult to host other initiatives, such as movie screenings or workshops. The nature of the space also makes it challenging to organize politically driven events.

For now, though, Vegetables Without Borders remains a vibrant, welcoming community where anyone and everyone can enjoy a full-course meal, make new friends and have meaningful conversations every Wednesday evening.

Soup made at one of the dinners at Vegetables Without Borders. (Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

Support Vegetables Without Borders

Stay up-to-date with their dinners, events, workshops and recipes via their Instagram @groentenzondergrenzenrotterdam.



Carrots collected from the farmers' market.
(Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

Vegan Bread Pudding

Recipe taken from Vegetables Without Borders' website.

(leftover) bread

(leftover) fruit

Plant milk (such as coconut, oat, soy, almond, or rice milk)

Spices of preference (such as cinnamon, gingerbread spice, vanilla, cardamom, or ginger)

Optional: sweetener (such as rice-, agave- or maple-syrup)

Optional: topping (such as nuts, seads, or bits of dark chocolate)

Preheat the oven to 180 degrees Celsius.

Cut the old bread in cubes and spread them evenly on the baking tray or in the oven dish.

Cut the leftover fruit and spread these in between the bread cubes.

In a bowl mix the plant milk with spices and optional sweetener.

Pour the mixture on top of the bread and fruit until these are just covered.

Lastly, sprinkle the topping on top.

Bake in the oven for approximately 25 minutes.

Bread Pudding from Vegetables Without Borders.
(Image credits: Vegetables Without Borders Facebook.)

A member of KENASVIT, March 2009. (Image credits: Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, March 26, 2009. Taken via Flickr.)

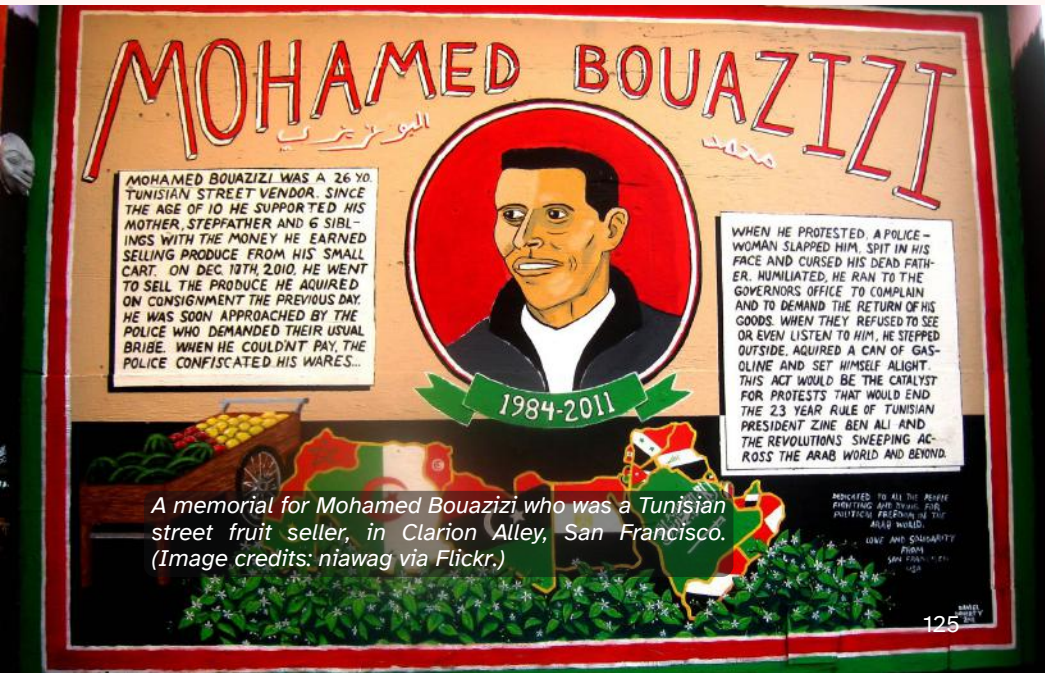
Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders

The Fight for Street Vendors' Rights in Kenya

Trigger warning: self-immolation

Street vendors around the world exist at the intersection of economic precarity, contested public space, and state oppression.

Representing the working class, they often lack legal protections and are frequently subjected to harassment and repression by authorities. This was evident in Hong Kong's 2016 "Fishball Revolution," when protests erupted after authorities cracked down on unlicensed street food vendors during Lunar New Year celebrations—reflecting broader public outrage over political repression and Beijing's tightening control. Similarly, the 2011 Arab Spring was ignited by the tragic self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit vendor harassed by police. His act symbolized the deep frustration and desperation felt by many in Tunisia's working class.



A memorial for Mohamed Bouazizi who was a Tunisian street fruit seller, in Clarion Alley, San Francisco. (Image credits: niawag via Flickr.)

In response to these challenges, many organizations around the world work to protect and promote the rights and livelihoods of street vendors. One such organization is the Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders (KENASVIT).

KENASVIT seeks to transform street vending and informal businesses into more recognized, stable enterprises.

Street Vendors in Kenya. (Image credits: Martha Thompson, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Economic Justice program with KENASVIT via Flickr.)

Through training programs, access to credit, dialogue with local authorities, and policy advocacy, the organization aims to reduce harassment and discrimination against informal traders in Kenya.

I was privileged to speak with Anthony Kwache, the National President of KENASVIT, who shared insights on Kenya's street vending culture and the organization's work.

Street Vendor in Lamu, Kenya. (Image credits: Huseinali22 via Creative Commons.)

Street Vending in Kenya

Street vendors in Kenya are typically self-employed and operate either stationary stalls or mobile setups. They're found along busy streets, sidewalks, pavements, and bus stops—locations with high foot traffic. Others operate in temporary structures or municipal markets provided by local governments. Vendors often determine their own hours; some work all day or night, while others target specific time windows, such as evening rush hour.[46]

As the cost of living continues to rise, more Kenyans are entering the informal labor market to supplement their wages and income.

Approximately 84% of Kenya's workforce is engaged in informal labor,[47] with street vendors making up the largest segment,about 21% of all informal workers.[48] In urban informal settlements, street vendors play a vital role in food access.[49] In Nairobi, for example, research by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) found that over 80% of households face food insecurity, with most relying on food from informal vendors. Vendors are often preferred due to their proximity, affordability, and flexibility—many allow residents to purchase food on credit.[50]

Informal workers in Kenya selling second-hand clothes. (Image credits: Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Economic Justice program with KENASVIT, via Flickr.)

A Street Food Vendor in Lamu, Kenya. (Image credits: Ham2022 via Creative Commons.)

Despite their importance, street vendors are routinely overlooked and targetted by policymakers. They face a host of challenges: lack of proper storage, unsafe working environments, health and food safety concerns, financial barriers to obtaining permits, and frequent harassment and evictions by local authorities.

How KENASVIT Helps Street Vendors

KENASVIT unites informal traders across Kenya to strengthen their collective bargaining power and advocate for their rights. A key aspect of their work involves active listening—understanding the specific needs of street vendors and presenting those concerns to relevant government officials. For example, in 2012, KENASVIT helped draft the Micro and Small Enterprises Bill, a groundbreaking piece of legislation that officially recognized the informal sector's contributions to Kenya's economy.

A Street Food Cart in Nairobi, Kenya. (Image credits: Job wafula via Creative Commons.)

The organization also hosts educational seminars and workshops for vendors. These have included sessions on the National Disability Act, the National Health Insurance Program, and women's constitutional rights. They also offer training in negotiation and leadership to empower vendors as organizers and advocates.[51]

KENASVIT, 2011. (Image credits: KENASVIT's Facebook page.)

Members of local urban alliances affiliated with KENASVIT. (Image credits: Unitarian Universalist Service Committee via Flickr.)

For many, street vending is their primary or sole source of income.[52] KENASVIT is thus also committed to providing practical economic support such as accessible loans and low-interest saving schemes to help vendors recover from emergencies and maintain their businesses. Additionally, they assist traders in finding direct sources of raw materials—reducing reliance on brokers who often inflate prices.

Empowering Women Street Vendors

In Kenya, women face limited access to formal employment and food retail spaces, many of which are dominated by large corporations- some of which are local, others multinational. As a result, many women turn to informal food vending, relying on social networks for both capital and labor.

Women Street Food Vendors in Nairobi, Kenya. (Image credits: Emily Onyango via Creative Commons.)

Disabled and women members of the Machakos Urban Alliance, affiliated with KENASVIT. (Image credits: Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Economic Justice Program via Flickr.)

An estimated 93% of women-owned businesses operate within the informal economy, and women supply food to about 90% of urban consumers in informal settlements.[53]

However, women still remain marginal in political leadership roles, even within the food vending industry.[54] Moreover, they face unique challenges such as heightened safety risks, limited access to credit, and training,[55] all while juggling gendered family obligations alongside their business responsibilities.[56]

KENASVIT has been working with Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), a global network supporting informal workers, to promote women's leadership. They organize dialogue forums with women and marginalized groups to enhance their access to public services, and they offer targeted leadership training to ensure women vendors are empowered to represent and advocate for themselves.

A member of the Machakos Urban Alliance, affiliated KENASVIT. (Image credits: Unitarian Universalist Service Committe, Economic Justice Program, via Flickr.)

A street vendor in Mombasa, Kenya. (Image credits: Erasmus Kamugisha via Creative Commons.)

Support KENASVIT

KENASVIT's work is made possible through collaboration with academic institutions, NGOs, and the broader public. Supporting street vendors starts with recognizing their contributions to our cities and economies. Share KENASVIT's mission, support policies that protect informal workers, and continue to engage with and uplift the vendors in your own neighborhood.

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Louisiana State Penitentiary. (Image credits: msppmoore via Creative Commons.)

Prison Agriculture Lab

Uncovering the Hidden Labor Behind America's Food System

Trigger warning: sexual abuse, violence, slavery, death, abuse

If you've ever purchased food from the brands shown below, it most likely contains ingredients sourced from forced labor programs in U.S. prisons.

According to a two-year long Associated Press (AP) investigation, more than $200 million worth of agricultural products were sold on the open market between 2018 and 2024.

These goods are found in supermarkets across the country, including Target, Aldi, and Whole Foods, and they land in our kitchen pantries and cabinets. Some of the food produced in prisons is also exported to countries such as the Netherlands and China.

Mississippi State Penitentiar, a prison farm. (Image credits: WhisperToMe via Creative Commons.)

Sullivan Correctional Facility and its prison farm. (Image credits: rchrdcnnnghm via Flickr.)

Prison Agriculture in the U.S.

There are more than 1,100 state-run adult prisons in the U.S.. At least 662 of these prisons run agricultural programs, according to a first-of-its-kind dataset tracking prison agriculture created by the Prison Agriculture Lab. Such programs involve:

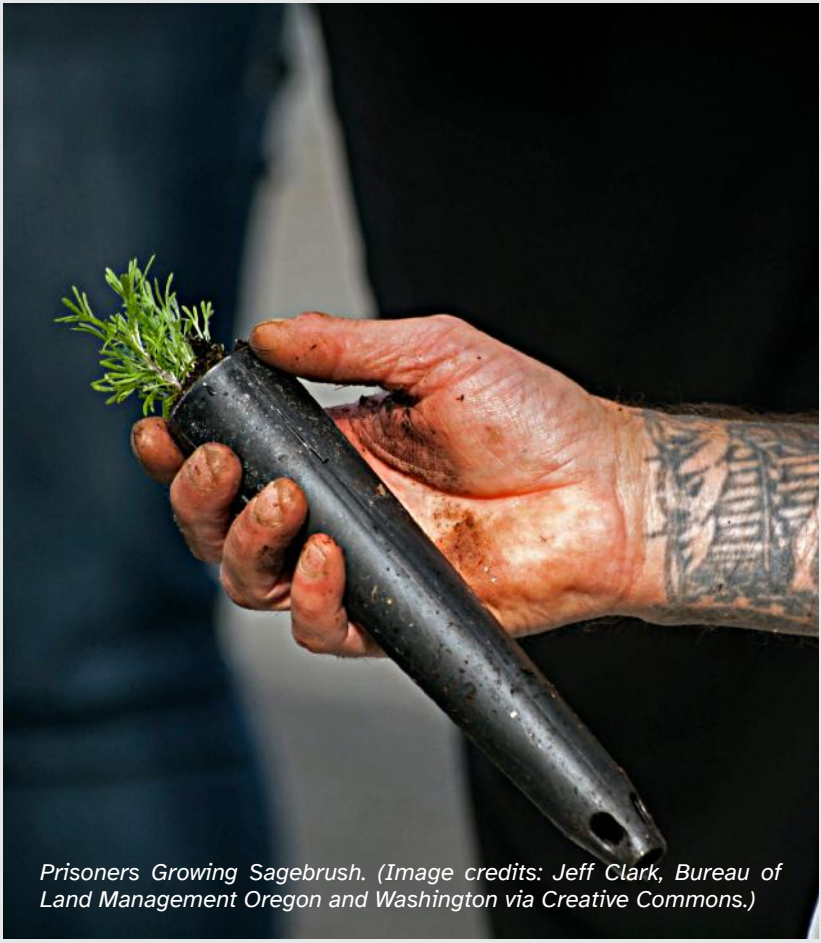
- **Animal agriculture** (e.g., livestock and poultry operations)
- **Crop and silviculture production** (e.g., large-scale vegetable, fruit, and nut farming)
- **Food processing** (e.g., transforming raw agricultural materials into food and beverage products for human or animal consumption)
- **Horticulture and landscaping** (e.g., greenhouse and garden production of vegetables and plants)

Exploitation in prison agriculture systems

Some of these agricultural programs are tied to mandatory work, where workers are either paid close to nothing or not paid at all.

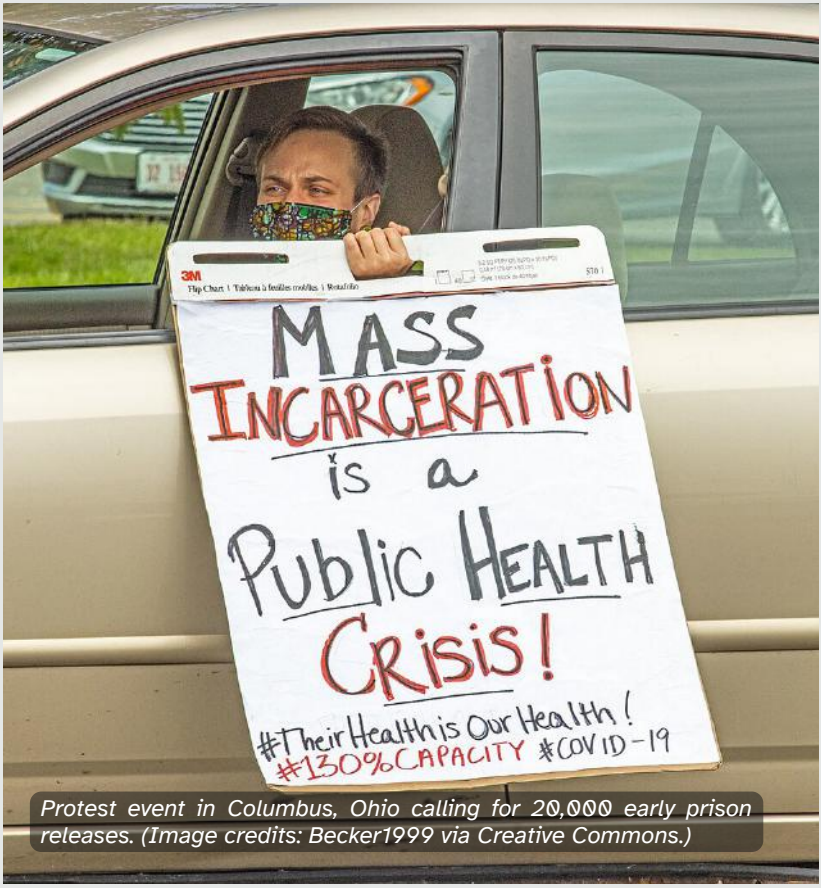
At Louisiana's infamous Angola Prison, incarcerated workers aren't eligible for pay during their first three years of labor. After that, they may earn as little as $0.02 per hour, according to a complaint filed by a prisoner at Angola. Meanwhile, the American prison system generates $74 billion annually, funded by both the U.S. government and American taxpayers. With anti-immigration policies reducing the availability of migrant laborers, agricultural industries have turned to prisons to fill the labor gap.[57]

Camp H, a prisoner housing facility in Angola Prison that is no longer in service. (Image credits: Lee Honeycutt via Creative Commons.)



Prisoners Growing Sagebrush. (Image credits: Jeff Clark, Bureau of Land Management Oregon and Washington via Creative Commons.)

Prison laborers in agricultural programs often work under brutal conditions. They are not only unable to consume the food that they grow, they also receive little to no training and face significant hazards. In some cases, they do not have access to clean drinking water or sunscreen and are forced to work even if they are disabled or sick. They often lack protective gear and modern agricultural tools, only exacerbating an already dangerous work environment.



Protest event in Columbus, Ohio calling for 20,000 early prison releases. (Image credits: Becker1999 via Creative Commons.)

A report by The Counter revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, prison laborers were forced to continue working without proper precautions, leading to widespread infections and deaths. Between April and May 2020, 414 confirmed COVID-19 cases and two deaths were reported at the food production factory in Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell, Washington.[58]

The AP investigation also found that people were injured or maimed on the job, while women prison laborers were sexually harassed or abused, sometimes by civilian supervisors or correctional officers.[59] Some prisoners were even killed on the job.

Women prisoners at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, 1930. (Image credits: Mississippi Department of Archives and History via Creative Commons.)

Frank Dwayne Ellington, sentenced to life with the possibility of parole after stealing a wallet at gunpoint, was one such worker. On October 29, 2019, he was assigned to the “Kill Line” at Koch Foods of Ashland’s poultry plant, one of the country’s largest poultry-processing companies. While scrubbing a machine, a rotating toothed disc caught his forearm and pulled him in, killing him instantly.[60]

Koch Foods Facility. (Image credits: Koch Foods.)

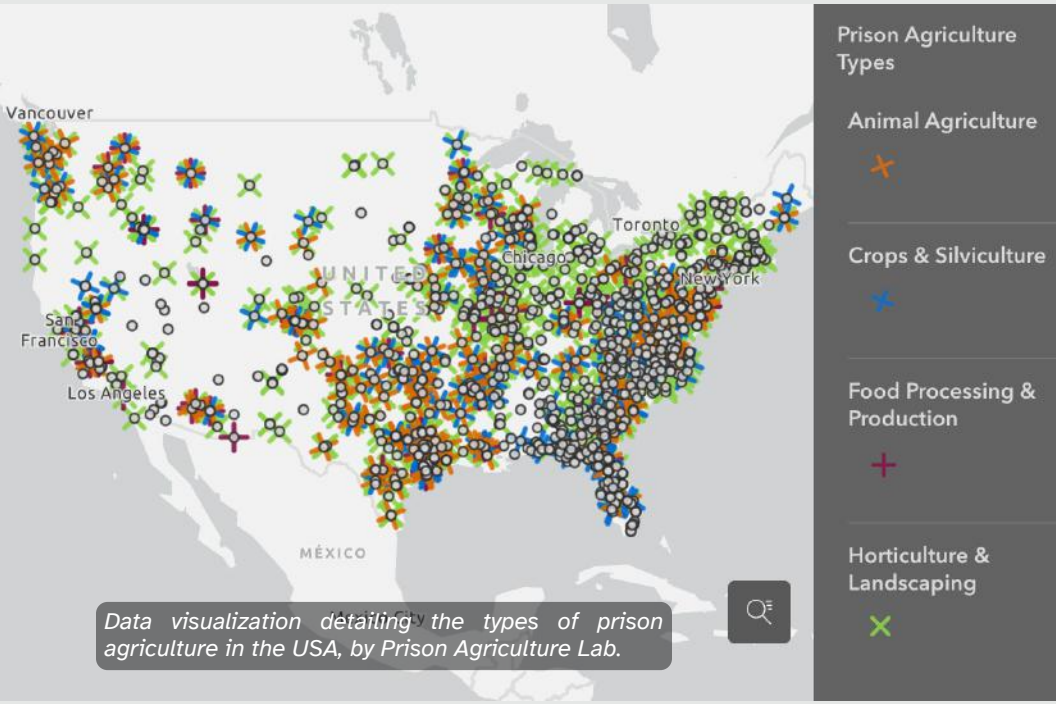
Prisoners Growing Sagebrush. (Image credits: Jeff Clark, Bureau of Land Management Oregon and Washington via Creative Commons.)

Despite such risks, incarcerated workers lack job protections and cannot quit or join unions. Many fear advocating for better conditions due to potential retaliation, including solitary confinement, parole denial, or loss of family contact privileges.

About Prison Agriculture Lab

Founded in 2019, the Prison Agriculture Lab is a collaborative space for research, storytelling, and activism challenging the inequities of prison agriculture programs. The lab has produced digital projects, including story maps, satellite image galleries, data visualizations, podcasts, publications, and a zine to raise awareness and foster dialogue on this issue.

I had the opportunity to speak with Joshua Sbicca, director of the Prison Agriculture Lab and Associate Professor of Sociology at Colorado State University, about his work over the past five years and upcoming projects.



Data visualization detailing the types of prison agriculture in the USA, by Prison Agriculture Lab.

Prison labor advervitsed as “rehabilitative”

Agriculture programs are often framed as “rehabilitative” that provide incarcerated people with job skills, but such supposed outcomes are often connected to a profit-driven, exploitative, and abusive prison system that aims to keep operational costs low.

The most restrictive inmate housing unit in Angola Prison. (Image credits: Lee Honeycutt via Creative Commons.)

Female prisoners sewing in Mississippi State Penitentiary Penal Farm. (Image credits: Mississippi Department of Archives and History via Creative Commons.)

“Exploitation and rehabilitation work concurrently to reproduce racial capitalism,” Sbicca says. “It’s a soft glove [rehabilitation]... that the prison system puts on to justify what it’s doing”.

Black and Latinx individuals are disproportionately imprisoned due to systemic racism and profiling.[61] Many prison laborers work on former slave plantations, such as Angola Prison in Louisiana, enduring extreme heat and dehumanizing conditions. Rather than aiding rehabilitation, these conditions further harm incarcerated individuals upon release.

Prisoners Growing Sagebrush. (Image credits: Jeff Clark, Bureau of Land Management Oregon and Washington via Creative Commons.)

“[Prison agriculture] is used explicitly as punishment on top of the punishment of being incarcerated”, Sbicca adds.

Furthermore, prison officials determine who is assigned to various work programs, reinforcing a hierarchical system that undermines any true rehabilitative intent.

A New Form of Slavery

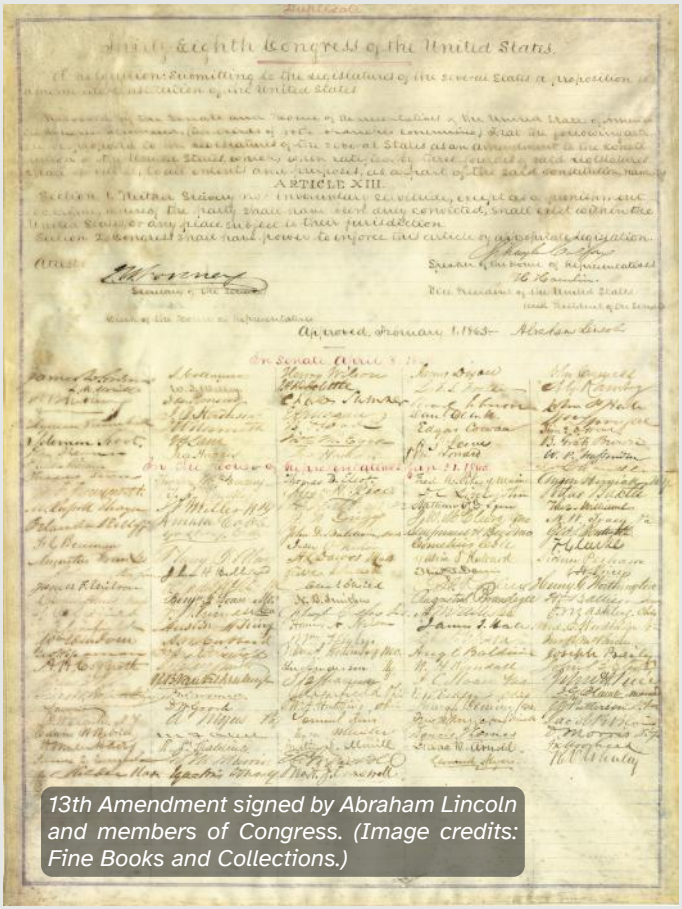
The struggles of prisoners at Angola highlight how prison labor functions as a modern form of slavery.[62]

While many believe slavery ended after the Civil War, the 1865 13th Amendment permits slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment for a crime.

New offences like “malicious mischief” were vague, and could be a felony or misdemeanor depending on the supposed severity of behavior. These laws sent more Black people to prison than ever before- The criminal justice system has been strategically employed to force Black people back into a system of extreme repression and control.[63]

A prison guard rides a horse alongside prisoners as they return from farm work detail at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. (Image credits: Gerald Herbert via AP Photo.)

In recent years, some states have taken action. In 2022, Alabama, Oregon, Tennessee, and Vermont voted to ban involuntary servitude as criminal punishment. In 2024, Nevada followed suit, but California voted to continue allowing slavery in prisons.



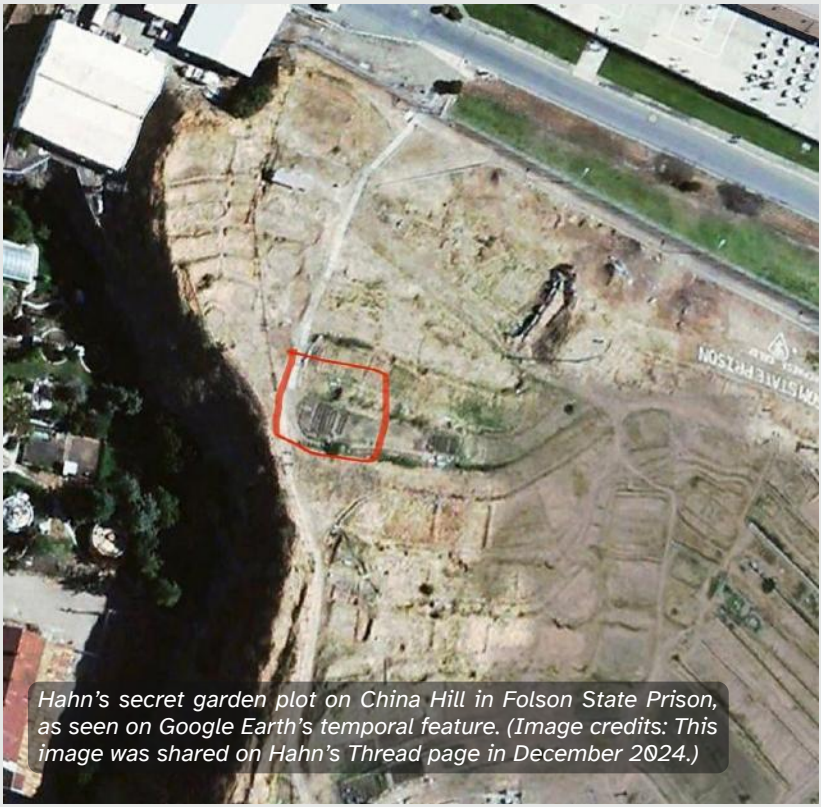
13th Amendment signed by Abraham Lincoln and members of Congress. (Image credits: Fine Books and Collections.)

Amplifying Voices of Incarcerated People

One of the Prison Agriculture Lab's upcoming projects focuses on amplifying the stories of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. Highlighting food sovereignty efforts within prisons is also crucial.

Sbicca shared the story of Matthew Hahn, who smuggled fresh vegetables into cell blocks and secretly grew a garden in prison. Hahn used his harvest to cook meals and make prison burritos with fresh jalapeños.

A screenshot of a portion of Matthew Hahn's thread detailing his vegetable garden in prison.



Hahn's secret garden plot on China Hill in Folson State Prison, as seen on Google Earth's temporal feature. (Image credits: This image was shared on Hahn's Thread page in December 2024.)

"We weren't able to smuggle in entire meals. No. But we did smuggle in memories. Taste memories. Memories of freedom." Hahn writes on Threads.[64]

Hahn is no longer in prison, but was previously incarcerated for residential burglaries.

Sbicca also shared the story of Lawrence Jenkins, an incarcerated farmer, educator, artist, and activist in Washington state. Jenkins developed a system where prisoners could rent small plots of land to grow their own food. To support this initiative, he established a sub-account where family members of incarcerated individuals could donate funds, which would go directly to the farming operation rather than the prison. As a result, prisoners began eating fresh produce they never expected to have access to again. They used ingredients they grew themselves to cook meals and recreate recipes that were culturally significant to their upbringing, families, and homelands.

Lawrence Jenkins tending plants on the prison property. (Image credits: Edge Effects.)

As the initiative expanded, Jenkins and other prisoners started donating plant starts to schools, community centers, and shelters.

Inspired by the Black Panther Party's Survival Program—which provided food, clothing, and transportation from the 1960s to the 1980s—Jenkins sought to build a regenerative agricultural system that prioritized the needs and well-being of his community over profit. This project not only empowered Jenkins and his fellow prisoners to work together, but it also gave them autonomy over the food they were growing, cooking, and eating.[65]

Lawrence Jenkins at work in the sagebrush nursery last summer. (Image credits: Gretchen Graber for Sustainability in Prisons Project, The Evergreen State College and Washington State Department of Corrections.)

Lawrence Jenkins with his art.
(Image credits: Freedom for Lawrence.)

Jenkins is currently serving a 28 year prison sentence in Washington state and is preparing to embark on his freedom journey for post-conviction relief and/or clemency.

Satellite images of prisons with agriculture. (Image credits: The Nation.)

Not Just Agriculture

The exploitation of prison labor extends far beyond the agricultural industry. Our nation incarcerates more than 1.2 million people in state and federal prisons. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than 76% of incarcerated workers say they are required to work or face additional punishment such as solitary confinement, loss of family visitation or denial of opportunities to reduce their sentence.

Male prisoners in a field, 1911. (Image credits: Mississippi Department of Archives and History - Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman) Photo Collections.)

Incarcerated workers have no right to choose what type of work they do and are subject to arbitrary, discriminatory and punitive decisions by prison administrators who select their work assignments. More than 80% of prison laborers do prison maintenance work, while another 8% are assigned to public works projects including maintenance of cemeteries, school grounds, parks and road work, construct buildings, clean government offices, clean up landfills and hazardous spills, undertake forestry work and more.

An inmate collects eggs inside the hen house. (Image credits: Bruce Ackerman/ Ocala Gazette.)

An inmate weeds around cabbage. (Image credits: Bruce Ackerman/ Ocala Gazette.)

Despite the essential nature of this labor, prisons spend less than 1% of their budgets paying incarcerated workers, while allocating over two-thirds of their budgets to prison staff salaries.

This stark disparity reveals a deliberate exploitation of incarcerated people as a source of cheap, expendable labor—one that fuels a system where punishment and profit are tightly intertwined.[66]

For example, during the catastrophic January 2025 wildfires in Southern California, 783 incarcerated individuals[67] were deployed as frontline firefighters, risking their lives amid deadly and unpredictable flames. In fact, incarcerated firefighters make up as much as 30% of California's wildland firefighting force—yet they are paid as little as $5.80 to $10.24 per day.[68]

An incarcerated firefighter fight the Rim Fire in California in 2013. (Image credits: U.S. Department of Agriculture.)

Incarcerated firefighters clear a fire line near Santa Barbara, California in December 2017. (Image credits: U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Brian Ferguson via Creative Commons.)

How You Can Make a Difference

1) Tracking the food supply chain from prison agriculture

A current project of the Prison Agriculture Lab is tracing the companies that are buying prisoner-produced products across the country. However, Sbicca notes that transparency remains a challenge. **“The prison system is designed to keep information hidden and only share what the system wants to be shared,”** he says. Gathering data through official channels is difficult, requiring creative approaches to uncover these supply chains and put a dollar figure on benefits companies receive from cheap prison labor.

Understanding these connections would provide data for campaigns against businesses and supermarkets profiting from prison labor.

Prisoners Growing Sagebrush. (Image credits: Jeff Clark, Bureau of Land Management Oregon and Washington via Creative Commons.)

2) Boycott the companies that produce food using prison labor

According to The Counter, between 2017 and 2020, Hickman's Family Farms, Dairy Farmers of America, and Taylor Farms[69] were among the top private customers of prison-produced food.

Reducing consumption of animal products and adopting a **plant-based diet** could also lessen the demand for prison agricultural products, thereby cutting into prison profits. Since environmental and animal rights issues are intertwined with prison labor, understanding food sourcing deepens our connection to the environment and ethical consumption.

Coyote Ridge Corrections Center. (Image credits: Jeff Clark, Bureau of Land Management Oregon and Washington via Creative Commons

Coyote Ridge Corrections Center. (Image credits: Jeff Clark, Bureau of Land Management Oregon and Washington via Creative Commons

3) Engage in prison abolition networks

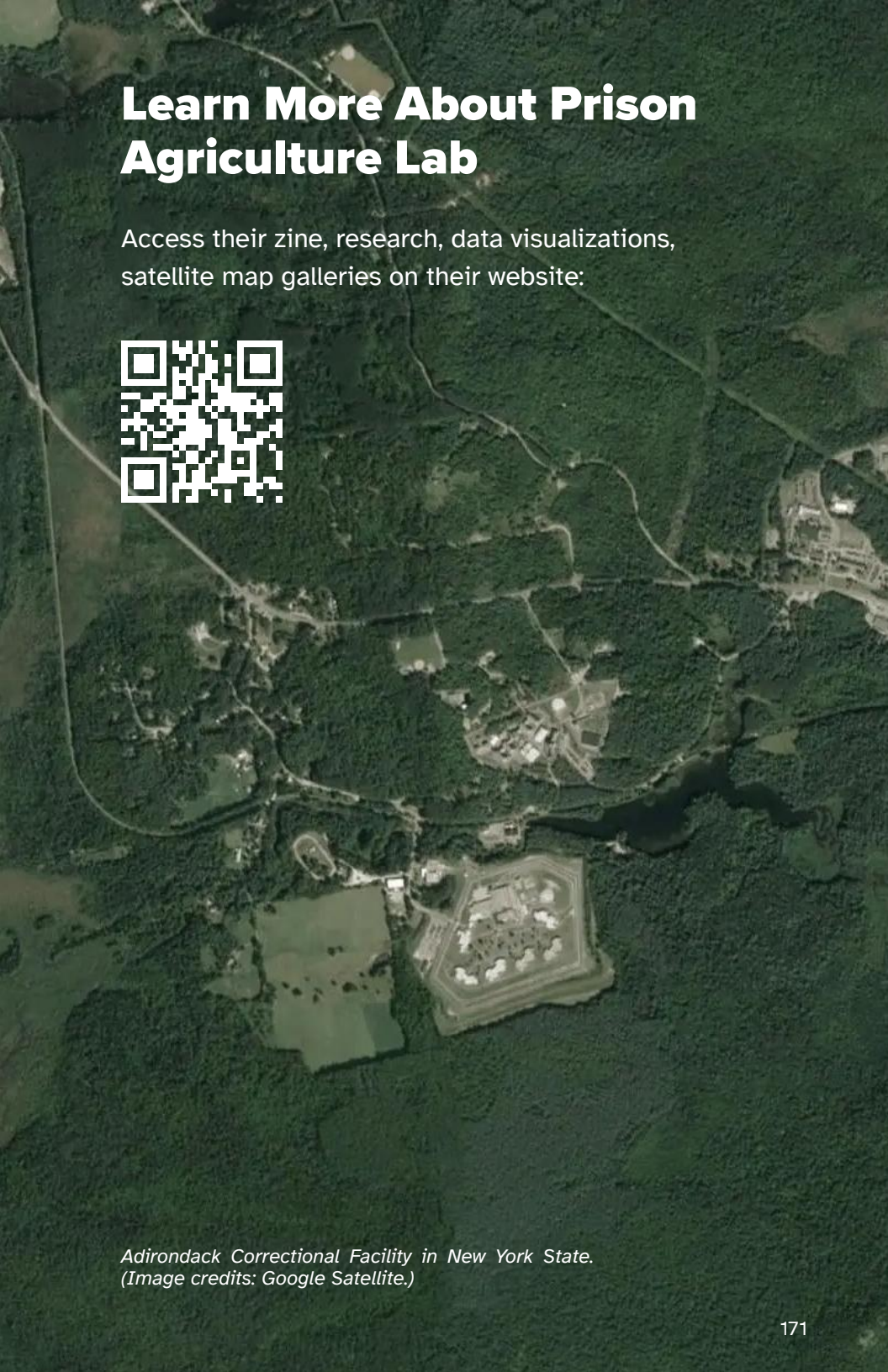
Sbicca emphasizes the importance of supporting local organizations working directly with incarcerated people. “There are efforts in Louisiana to end practices on the farm line at Angola, and they’re coming from prisoners themselves. There are ways to support those efforts from people on the inside,” he explains.

Additionally, supporting movements to ban slavery under the 13th Amendment can significantly aid the fight against exploitative prison labor.

By raising awareness, boycotting companies that profit from prison labor, and supporting abolitionist movements, we can challenge and dismantle exploitative prison agriculture systems.

Learn More About Prison Agriculture Lab

Access their zine, research, data visualizations, satellite map galleries on their website:



Adirondack Correctional Facility in New York State. (Image credits: Google Satellite.)

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Sagebrush grown by prisoners. (Image credits: Jeff Clark, Bureau of Land Management Oregon and Washington via Creative Commons.)

Food Sovereignty Ghana. (Image credits: Food Sovereignty Ghana's Facebook page.)

Food Sovereignty Ghana

Protecting Indigenous Agriculture and Advocating for Autonomy in Ghanian Food Systems

My first exposure to agriculture was through my grandparents in Malaysia. My maternal grandmother in Johor Bahru would harvest pisang emas (Malay for petite golden bananas), chilies, limes, medicinal plants, and lady's fingers from her garden and use them in her cooking. Every Chinese New Year, my paternal grandmother in Ipoh would also cook a large pot of soup with vegetables she had harvested from her backyard. Later, I gained firsthand experience in regenerative farming and tending to livestock when I lived and volunteered on an organic farm in Vermont for two weeks. While I do not have a garden now, every experience with agriculture has connected me more deeply to nature and helped me understand the significance of having control over food quality and quantity, rather than relying on external, for-profit food systems.

Pisang Emas. (Image credits: Pew Nguyenvia Unsplash.)

This desire for autonomy in food production is not just unique to me, it is central to the livelihoods of millions of farmers worldwide, including those in Ghana, where agriculture remains the backbone of the economy and culture.

In Ghana, a majority of the labor force is engaged in agriculture,[70] mostly on traditional smallholder farms that rely on indigenous knowledge and practices.[71] However, these traditional farming systems are increasingly under threat from external forces, particularly multinational corporations and philanthropic organizations promoting the use of genetically modified (GM) crops. Critics argue that the introduction of GM crops could cause Ghanaian farmers to lose control over their indigenous agricultural systems while also creating irreversible environmental and health risks.

Ghana urban agriculture. (Image credits: IWMI/Nana Kofi Acquah.)

Food Sovereignty Ghana. (Image credits: Food Sovereignty Ghana's Facebook page.)

One of the most prominent organizations advocating against GM crops is Food Sovereignty Ghana, a civil society organization established in 2013. They champion environmental, social, and food justice in Ghana. I had the opportunity to speak with Edwin Kweku Andoh Baffour, the Director of Communications at Food Sovereignty Ghana, to learn more about their work, indigenous farming practices, and the Ghanaian agricultural system.

Concerns Surrounding GM Products

In July 2024, Ghana's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research launched the first GM cowpea for commercial cultivation in the country.[72] That same year, Ghana also approved the commercialization of 14 GM products, including maize and soybean varieties.[73]

While proponents of GM crops argue that they offer solutions to challenges such as pest resistance, drought tolerance, and increased yields,[74] many local grassroots organizations claim that GM crops impose a corporate-controlled seed and chemical agricultural system on smallholder farmers. They argue that these crops appropriate indigenous seed varieties and threaten Africa's rich and complex biodiversity.[75]

Cowpeas at the weekly market of Chiana, Ghana. (Image credits: Axel Fassio/CIFOR.)

Food Sovereignty Ghana also contends that there has not been sufficient research on the health implications of consuming GM products.

“There has not been adequate risk assessment. We don’t know any Ghanaians who have been tested for long enough to conclude that this GM cowpea does not affect their lives in any adverse way, so we’ve been advocating against it,” Edwin shares.

“Cowpea is a staple in Ghanaian cuisine. There are at least eight types of dishes made from this bean. Genetically modifying cowpeas poses a real threat to our food security.”

GM Crops as a Modern Colonial Project

As corporations patent GM seeds—essentially altered versions of indigenous seeds—Ghana has adopted the Plant Variety Protection Act (2020), which criminalizes the exchange, saving, or sale of patented seeds with a minimum prison sentence of ten years.[76]

This means that generations of peasant and small-scale farmers who have traditionally preserved and shared seeds could now face a decade-long prison term.

Food Sovereignty Ghana protesting the Plant Variety Protection Act, also known as Plant Breeders Bill. (Image credits: Food Sovereignty Ghana's Facebook page.)

Food Sovereignty Ghana protesting the Plant Variety Protection Act, also known as Plant Breeders Bill. (Image credits: Food Sovereignty Ghana's Facebook page.)

The primary beneficiaries of this law are the four multinational corporations that control half of the global seed market and 75% of the global agrochemicals market: Germany's Bayer (which acquired Monsanto), the U.S.'s BASF and Corteva (formerly DowDuPont), and Switzerland's Syngenta (a subsidiary of China's ChemChina).

There is also evidence of lobbying between the U.S. and the Ghanaian government.

According to The Guardian, a leaked cable revealed that the U.S. government was heavily involved in drafting Ghana's 2011 Biosafety Act, which provided a framework for the introduction of GM foods in Ghana. In return, the U.S. government offered aid.[77]

Former Vice President Kamala Harris in Ghana, 2023.
(Image credits: Official U.S. Embassy photo by Andrew Ekuban.)

The philanthropic Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, along with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has funneled at least $141 million into the African Agricultural Technology Foundation—$46 million of which has gone directly to Bayer. During former U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris' trip to Ghana in 2023, she pledged to "boost" agricultural production on the African continent and announced a $7 billion public-private investment aimed at introducing "new technologies" to agriculture.

These financial commitments have often been framed as efforts to combat food insecurity—reminiscent of the colonial "civilizing mission" used to justify Western imposition on indigenous societies.

"The Europeans have decided they don't want to use [GM products] . . . which is fine, they're not facing malnutrition and starvation. [But] the Africans, I think, will choose to let their people have enough to eat," said Bill Gates to The Wall Street Journal in 2016.[78]

Food Sovereignty Ghana's rally to challenge the commercialization of genetically modified crops. (Image credits: Food Sovereignty Ghana's Facebook Page.)

The Plant Variety Protection Act has sparked significant controversy among Ghanaian farmers and activists, who feel their biodiversity, seeds, and resources are once again being exploited for the benefit of foreign corporations.

Food Sovereignty Ghana has previously taken legal challenges on GM crops and the Plant Variety Protection Act, but the Supreme Court dismissed their case.

Food Sovereignty Ghana protesting against GMOs. (Image credits: Food Sovereignty Ghana's Facebook page.)

Food Sovereignty Ghana protesting the Plant Variety Protection Act, also known as Plant Breeders Bill. (Image credits: Food Sovereignty Ghana's Facebook page.)

Edwin shares his perspective:

"Ghana's food system is a reflection of the colonial regime that we went through. The GM agenda is something that's foreign-influenced and foreign-driven. Unfortunately, the Ghanaian government feels obliged to accept [GM crops] because they come with conditions for other aid. The basic fact is that 90% of Ghanaians have no clue what GM even means. So the fact that [corporations] are actually changing one of their staple foods, the cowpea, shows that the initiative didn't come from the Ghanaian people. The parliamentarians have just been lobbied to accept this position."

“A large percentage of GM products come from the U.S. and the U.S. is a country that lots of Ghanaians have an aspiration to visit and follow. It’s a big world leader. The media is always trying to make us seem like we are against science- like we want to pull Ghana backwards, keep Ghana in the dark ages, but they don’t let people know that [their government] has been lobbied.”

Food Sovereignty Ghana protesting against Monsanto, a prominent company in the development and distribution of GMOs. (Image credits: Food Sovereignty Ghana’s Facebook page.)

Honoring Indigenous Farming Practices

Beyond advocating for stricter regulations on GM products, Food Sovereignty Ghana also works to empower indigenous communities and preserve traditional knowledge. While foreign-imported food products are often cheaper due to lower production costs, they are typically mass-produced through exploitative labor practices and environmentally harmful methods.

Food Sovereignty Ghana believes that the most nutritious and climate-resilient foods come from local communities.

Ghana urban agriculture. (Image credits: IWMI/Nana Kofi Acquah.)

Edwin explains:

“Food sovereignty is not about importing food from far away. Food must come from as close a source as possible, from the communities we live in,”

“This way, you’re more likely to know how the food is grown. What if there are chemicals put on the food, rivers being destroyed because of cheaper, imported forms of food production?”

Rice to be milled. (Image credits: scottgunn via Flickr.)

Ghana urban agriculture. (Image credits: IWMI/Nana Kofi Acquah.)

“Food sovereignty recognizes indigenous knowledge of communities. It empowers communities to use resources that are around them. For example, we’re talking about farmers using neem leaves to create natural pesticides and herbicides, without being reliant on the international value chain”.

I asked Edwin if he had any unique indigenous farming practices that he resonates with. Edwin highlighted the ***Zaï*** (or ***tassa***) farming technique from Ghana’s Sahel region, where small holes are dug next to seeds to create reservoirs that retain water, even in arid conditions. This method helps crops survive in dry environments.

Ghana agriculture. (Image credits: Hamish John Appleby / IWMI.)

He also described how cowpea seeds are sometimes being planted as a cover crop- meaning that they are used to cover the soil rather than to be harvested, in order to protect and improve the soil.

“Smallholder farmers around the world have a very interdependent relationship with nature- they will always have respect for the land and respect for the water bodies,” Edwin adds.

Dangers of Pesticides

Food Sovereignty Ghana has also campaigned against the use of hazardous pesticides, particularly glyphosate-based herbicides. Originally patented by Monsanto in 1974, glyphosate is now widely used in hundreds of products, despite its links to cancer and other health concerns. The World Health Organization has classified it as a probable carcinogen, and many countries have banned it.[79]

However, glyphosate remains widely used in Ghana, harming farming communities and ecosystems. Farmers who once earned additional income from mushrooms, beekeeping, and snail harvesting have suffered significant losses due to the destruction of soil fertility and biodiversity caused by chemical-intensive agriculture.

Food Sovereignty Ghana challenging the constitutionality of the Plant Variety Protection Act in the Supreme Court. (Image credits: Food Sovereignty Ghana's Facebook page.)

Cowpeas, maize, soybean at a market in Tamale, Ghana. (Image credits: Africa RISING/ Charlie Pye-Smith.)

Education and organization

Food Sovereignty Ghana has not only been challenging the introduction of GM products in court, they have also been doing organizing and educational work on the ground.

“We go to farming communities, villages and towns to speak to farmers, to listen to their complaints,” Edwin says. “Farmers currently have no clue what GM means, let alone able to defend and say that [GM food] is a threat to my local community. So there’s a lot of education that is still required.”

Currently, most natural habitats in Ghana also unfortunately now are being replaced with large hectares of monocrops such as cocoa, palm, and rubber plantation, for the sake of maximizing efficiency, yield, and profits. This has led to environmental degradation and is a threat towards indigenous biodiversity.[80] To prevent further worsening effects on the land, Food Sovereignty Ghana has been working to empower farmers on how to build more resilient and self-sustaining farms using their own resources at home.

“We need to keep educating the farmers that there is an alternative to this big, Western style of farming, where you have 400 hectares of one monocrop. Monocropping is going to have irreversible effects if we don’t implement a plan which respects the environment and the surroundings where these farmers live”.

Members of Rural Women’s Farmers Association of Ghana. (Image credits: Global Justice Now via Flickr.)

Support Food Sovereignty Ghana

The Global North often portrays African nations as “poor” and in need of saving while simultaneously extracting their resources, labor, and wealth.

This pattern of exploitation has a long history marked by colonialism and ongoing global inequalities. It also extends to agriculture, where indigenous food products from Ghana like fonio, moringa, and baobab are branded as expensive “superfoods” in Western supermarkets, yet the Ghanaian farmers who grow them see little profit.

Hot peppers harvesting in Kassena Nankana District Ghana. (Image credits: Axel Fassio/CIFOR.)

As Ghanaian farmers continue to resist corporate control over their food systems, organizations like Food Sovereignty Ghana play a crucial role in advocating for sustainable, self-sufficient agriculture rooted in indigenous knowledge. By supporting local farmers, preserving biodiversity, and resisting the commercialization of food, they strive to ensure that Ghanaians—not foreign corporations—determine the future of their food sovereignty.

You can stay up-to-date with what Food Sovereignty Ghana is working on by following their Facebook page here:

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Hot peppers harvesting in Kassena Nankana District Ghana. (Image credits: Axel Fassio/CIFOR.)

Check out my online archive

A hand-coded, interactive archive documenting food's role in social movements globally and historically. You can contribute and submit your own examples of how food is used as a form of resistance in your personal lives as well. This archive is meant to be a participatory, evolving record of lesser-known food-resistance movements.

I hope my archive serves as a resource and inspiration for ongoing collective action.

View my online archive at protestfood.com

PROTEST FOOD

An archive of all the ways food is related to advocacy, solidarity, resistance, strength and protest

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Argentina

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USA, Cuba

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Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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Wah Yee Tang Cake Shop, Hong Kong

Tear Gas Ice Cream (2020)

Hong Kong

Salt March (1930)

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Farmers Protest (2020-2021)

India

Bakudapan Food Study Group (2020-current)

Indonesia

World's Largest Hummus (2010)

Lebanon

Orang Laut

Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore

Mont Lone Yay Paw

Myanmar

Milk Tea Alliance (2020-current)

Myanmar, Thailand, Taiwan, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong

Braiding Rice Seeds into Hair (1670 - 1860)

West Africa

Free Breakfast Program (1969 - 1980)

USA

Soul Fire Farm (2010 - Current)

Albany, NY, USA

Black Farmer Fund (2020 - Current)

Northeast states, USA

People's Kitchen Collective (Current)

Oakland, California, USA

Food Not Bombs (1980 - current)

USA

Black Church Food Security Network (2015 - current)

Baltimore, MD, USA

FIG NYC (2021 - current)

NYC, NY, USA

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