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of  
scholar-  
activists

## The Transnational Institute at Voedsel Anders

In February 2014 the “Food Otherwise” / “Voedsel Anders” Network<sup>1</sup>, supported by more than 30 dynamic organizations and initiatives, organised an interactive two day event called Voedsel Anders or “Food Otherwise: Towards fair and sustainable food and agriculture systems”. The organisations involved work on issues



Photo by Sander de Kraker

ranging from the environment, to young farmers, to international solidarity or development; their activities range from farming and research to advocacy and activism, and yet they share a commitment to transforming our food and agriculture systems. The Voedsel Anders Conference reflected, in its workshops and its attendees, this diversity of approach and unity of purpose.

The conference was conceived in September 2013 when a group of individuals and organizations who were members of the Voedsel Anders network came together to discuss the pressing need for an event where an alternative vision of food and agriculture could be expressed. The group envisioned a space for dialogue where a new view of agriculture could emerge from the

diversity of the movement itself. Key to the vision was the desire give different groups of farmers, students, academics, and activists a space to share their own knowledge and practice and make their voices heard.

Interest from the general public far exceeded organisers’ expectations and more than 800 people ultimately converged at the University of Wageningen from the Netherlands, Belgium, and beyond to build new connections, learn more about diverse initiatives, and draw inspiration from each other. Dozens of speakers led a huge variety of workshops and for two days the University of Wageningen was filled with stories of food and agriculture systems that are already “otherwise” as well as intense discussions about how to continue to grow the movement.

Food Otherwise reflected not just an alternative vision of the food and agriculture system, but also an alternative vision of conferences: art, music, dance, reflection, story-telling, and drama were all featured, helping to create an exciting and invigorating event and give new energy to discussions.

The Transnational Institute was delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to this important conference by supporting the organisation of the event, hosting a stall in the information fair, presenting a mini-lecture, and helping to organise several workshops during the two-day conference (see Box on page 8).



Photo by Joyce Fabriek

<sup>1</sup> The main organisation group for the conference was made up of: Leonardo van den Berg (Otherwise), Janneke Bruil (ILEIA), Tjerk Dalhuisen (Aseed), Guus Geurts (Platform ABC), Daniel Gomez (TNI), Greet Goverde (Platform ABC), Nathalie van Haren (Both Ends), Caren Krul (Boerengroep), Loes van Loenen, Romée Marchand, Henk Renting (RUAf), Astrid Vredegoor, and Petra Rietberg (Louis Bolk Institute) with support from Nina Holland and Karla Mulder.

## During the conference...

- Vandana Shiva and Pablo Tittone planted the symbolic first tree in the Netherlands Institute of Ecology (NIOO)'s new Food Forest
- Fresh, hot, vegan meals were cooked by volunteers over open fires outdoors, an effort organized by the mobile vegetarian kitchen Rampenplan
- Insights from workshops accumulated on an interactive wall, where participants could leave comments, contact information, inspirations, and requests for information
- Our facilitator, Evelijne Bruning, regularly hopped off the stage and dashed through the audience to gather peoples' perspectives, as well as conducting dozens of straw polls, having people raise their hands according to age, role in the food system, beliefs, experiences, etc.



Photo by Egle Draugelyte

- Participants were encouraged to talk to new people, exchange stories and perspectives, and follow up with each-other after the end of the conference
- A theatre group performed fantastic dramatizations of some of farmers' struggles today
- Francesco Melita, story-teller, shared his Calimero feelings with an audience who understood what it is like to feel "they are big and I am small," but inspired us to move beyond those feelings by "speaking with urgency and a smile"
- The thought-provoking photo exhibition "Food Here and There, maybe we can learn from each other" was displayed, juxtaposing images of global North and South
- A traditional indigenous Peruvian dance was performed, complete with traditional costumes and crowd participation
- Volunteers baked and distributed hundreds of delicious brownies to keep everyone's spirits up during tough discussions
- A group visited the organic cow-sharing farm Veld en Beek to get a close-up look at a sustainable dairy system that is putting control of the food system back in the hands of people
- More than 40 workshops in English and Dutch let participants delve into in-depth discussions of everything from manure application strategies to international trade policy
- Videos were screened to audiences who could make themselves comfortable on hay bales (or more conventional seating) in two main halls
- Dozens of organizations created an information fair with stalls where participants could browse information and make new connections
- Groups of passionate people gathered everywhere, in workshop rooms, hallways, and university cafes to share inspirations, information, and ideas



Photo by Sander de Kraker

## Plenary Sessions

Between workshop sessions, conference attendees gathered together to listen to a series of inspiring keynote speakers. Video recordings of the plenary sessions are available in their original languages on the Voedsel Anders website here: [http://www.voedselanders.nl/en/voedselanders\\_en/Start.html](http://www.voedselanders.nl/en/voedselanders_en/Start.html)

### **Pablo Tittonell**

Pablo Tittonell, of Wageningen University, opened the conference with a discussion of obstacles and opportunities for fair and sustainable food systems and, particularly, the question of what role science might play in advancing these systems.

He began by exploring the issues facing food systems today: the continued prevalence of hunger together with rising obesity rates globally, the enormous waste in today's food system, the diversion of agricultural resources away from food production and towards biofuels and animal feed, the degradation of soils internationally, and a variety of other environmental threats.



Photo by Burghard Ilge

Dr Tittonell then introduced the principles of agroecology and offered four basic principles for scientists that would allow them to meet these challenges more effectively: learn from nature, be inspired by local knowledge, make use of biodiversity in different ways,

and use the newest knowledge and technologies possible. He stressed that in some environments food crops like maize produce poor yields, even with intensive fertilization, but natural systems can be remarkably productive. How can we learn from and harness this kind of productivity?

He offered a number of case studies. Research on traditional companion planting has shown this technique can dramatically increase yields, especially in poor soils. Other agroecological research has produced innovations like using

ducks, azolla, and tilapia to dramatically boost rice yields. These technologies are not panaceas, but they suggest the strength of an alternative approach that works with, and draws inspiration from, natural systems and traditional practices.

Given the possibilities of these systems Dr. Tittonell discussed the question of what attitudes, arguments, and approaches prevent change, citing the provocative example of corporations who argued that the abolition of slavery would push food costs unreasonably high.



Theater Performance – Photo by Sander de Kraker

Finally, he concluded with a discussion of the gap between organic and conventional production. He argued that yield gaps between the two systems are dwarfed by the “funding gap”: conventional farming receives more than 90% of research funding globally. For example while the Dutch government allocated 4 million euros in one year for funding organic research, Monsanto alone spent 980 million dollars on research. This funding gap suggests that, with more time and more research, we can “close the gap” and create novel, non-chemical solutions for more productive and sustainable farming.

### **Hanny van Geel**

Hanny van Geel, member of the steering committee of the European Coordination Via Campesina, argued that we need to place farmers in the centre of our debates on food and agriculture. She herself was born and grew up on a farm in The Netherlands and has been active in farming all her life. During this time, she has witnessed many changes. Farms have become bigger and more mechanized, animal husbandry has become fully industrialised, and many farming enterprises are now dependent on migrant labour from Eastern Europe.



Photo by Burghard Ilge

She reflected on the role of The Netherlands in the global food system. While The Netherlands is proud of its position as the second largest exporter of agricultural products in the world, this has not been a story of unmitigated success. Not only does it stem from a colonial past, it is occurring against the backdrop of an enormous squeeze on small farmers throughout The Netherlands and Europe. Since 2005, 25% of EU farm holdings have disappeared.

The disappearance of family farming in Europe is being actively facilitated by laws and regulations that are strongly influenced by the interests of large multinationals. She points to the example of a newspaper heading that brazenly declares “If you don’t have a cow anymore, you can buy milk”. She also argued that the current free trade negotiations between the EU and the US (see Box, page 9) will exacerbate this trend, in addition to forcing European consumers to accept American products and their definitions of “health”. These negotiations are being carried out in a deeply undemocratic way and will have major implications for all European farmers and consumers.

**“Food is a human right”**

Ms van Geel concluded with a call for a global food system built around solidarity and the recognition of food as a human right. Referring back to the title of the conference ‘Food Otherwise’, she asked why peasant agriculture was seen as “other” when 70% of the world’s population today is fed through small-scale agriculture. She looked forward to a future where the “seeds and sprouts” we see at conferences like this grow into hearty plants and we no longer call this system ‘otherwise’.

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“Life is created by life, respect that go back to organic” photo by Joyce Fabriek

**Vandana Shiva**

World-famous author and activist Vandana Shiva drew on her background in India and around the world to answer the question “Why do we need a different food system?”. She explored the history of chemical agriculture and the way that wartime chemical-industrial capacity was “repurposed” for agriculture. She argued that these chemicals encourage monocultures and discourage the use of ancient, sustainable practices like companion planting, by changing the ways that plant systems and living soils function.



Photo by Sander de Kraker

Dr Shiva stressed the ecological damage that has been done, from soil degradation and water pollution, to loss of biodiversity in crops, to decline of pollinators and wild insects, by chemical-intensive, monocultural, ‘industrial’ agriculture. She argued that this damage results from a way of thinking about food that measures the success of a farm by the yield of a single crop,

“Monopolies, centralization, monocultures go hand and hand and they are the instruments of power. We have to create instruments of democracy, diversity, resilience.”

these ways of thinking. Fleshing out this concept and its alternatives, she argued that changing agriculture requires changing our selves, our communities, and our political processes, as well

breeds plants for convenience of packaging rather than nutrition or taste, and can only think in terms of a handful of highly-profitable commodities. Vandana Shiva famously coined the term “monocultures of the mind” to describe

as our seeds and our technologies.

Dr Shiva highlighted the centrality of democratic processes, free unbiased research, and the freedom for farmers to own, develop, and save seed as the keystones of a new food system. These processes and technologies are all under threat from the current dominant agricultural system, which is itself struggling to survive in the face of stagnating global yields and accumulating ecological damage. She ended with a call to action, telling us “We have a short window to reclaim our bread and our freedom, or we will have neither bread, nor freedom”.

A vigorous discussion followed the presentation, with the audience eager and engaged and Vandana Shiva fielding difficult questions with a beaming smile and compelling advice. She urged us not to build a new system from scratch but to support the millions of peasants around the world who are already producing in a sustainable, ecologically-aware way, and to resist the ongoing attempts to erode their rights to seed, to land, and to self-determination

## Seed Freedom and the EU Seed Law

During the conference Vandana Shiva also presented, with Dutch organization ASEED, at a more intimate workshop addressing the proposed European Seed Law that would impose mandatory registration of all plant varieties, along with other dubious measures. The proposed regulation would weaken farmers’ rights to breed, save, and cultivate their own seed. Since the beginning of industrial agriculture the FAO estimates 75% of cultivated varieties have disappeared off the market. At the same time just five companies control approximately 60% of the global seed market. This legislation could exacerbate both of these trends.

Presenters argued that ‘seed sovereignty’ or access to healthy, local, agroecologically-produced, and non-genetically modified seed is a precondition for genuine food sovereignty and is vital for building resilient agricultural systems that can survive climate change. The Seed Freedom Movement is growing globally, supporting the freedom of farmers to be co-creators of their seed, rather than merely passive consumers of genetic material reduced to yet another commodity.

### Francesco Melita

The second day of the conference opened with an inspiring presentation by story-teller and biologist Francesco Melita who shared the story of his struggles with his “Calimero Feelings”: the feeling that “I am small and they are big and it isn’t fair”. He shared how inspired he was by Vandana Shiva and, in particular, by her ability to “convey urgency with a smile”. He told us that if we can tell our truth with a smile, people will listen: “Vandana Shiva said yesterday: The Agroecology movement has grown without lobbyists...because it has knowledge of connectiveness...large networks of small groups connecting each other...sharing their knowledge”

The audience left with the feeling that, in the words of attendee Else Konning, [together we are not so small after all](#).



Photo by Joyce Fabriek

## Olivier De Schutter

UN Special Rapporteur on the Right To Food, Olivier De Schutter, synthesized many of the



Photo by Joyce Fabriek

major themes of the conference. He argued that the groundwork of modern food policy was laid in the 1960s, when fears about rising populations and stagnating production created a focus on increasing production at all costs. Today the demographic situation has

changed and the project to eliminate hunger by increasing production has failed, producing continuing hunger, nutritional deficiencies, obesity, negative environmental impacts, and a growth in rural poverty. We need a new kind of global food policy to address this new situation.

Four key directions are more urgent and compelling today than increasing production: (1) increasing sustainability by embracing agroecological approaches and strategies that focus on resilience, soil health, and knowledge-intensive input-light production techniques (2) increasing the sustainability of consumption by asking difficult questions about the use of land for animal feed and biofuel production (3) addressing problems of waste and inefficiency that lead to more than 1.3 billion tonnes of food being wasted annually (4) reducing poverty by replacing low-cost food with adequate social protections.

**"We need democracy at all levels. We need to recapture the food systems in order to move away from the current inertia of the food systems that were shaped fifty years ago"**

Finally Dr De Schutter addressed the question of "lock-ins," areas where the current system is especially entrenched and difficult to change. He identified four kinds of lock-ins that are keeping the food system on its current path: (1) social-technical lock-ins: an enormous

global infrastructure has been developed for the food system (2) social-economic lock-ins: many actors have a huge financial interest in the continuation of the current system (3) social-cultural lock-ins: we have developed a taste for cheap processed food and lost many traditional food skills(4) social-political lock-ins: the food system is dominated by a few major actors who are in a position to veto any dramatic change.

Food Democracy is key to transforming our food system and breaking out of these lock-ins. We need to establish ways for citizens to control their food systems locally, nationally, and internationally.

## Sieta van Keimpema



Photo by Joyce Fabriek

Sieta van Keimpema of the European Dairy Board discussed the pressures on European farmers leading to the loss of young farmers: the fastest growing age-group of farmers in the Netherlands is those over 80. She stressed that a vision of cheap, export-targeted production is driving farmers off the land and is not what many

consumers today want. Finally, she ended with a discussion of TTIP, the trade agreement currently being negotiated

**"We have democracy still. And we have to use it to get Food Democracy and a good system for farmers in the world."**

between the EU and the US (see Box, page 9), and stressed that this agreement would entrench a vision of high-volume export-led production in every sector and would spell the end of food democracy in Europe, giving corporations the remarkable power to sue governments who interfere with their profits through environmental or consumer-protection legislation. She ended with a rousing call to action saying: "We have

democracy still. And we have to use it to get Food Democracy and a good system for all the farmers in the world”

### **Gert Engelen**

Gert Engelen of the Belgian NGO Vredeseilanden talked about developments surrounding agro-ecology and sustainable food initiatives in Flanders. He commented positively on the fact that agro-ecology was now receiving considerable attention, including from more mainstream actors. This favourable attention, however, is not yet translating into changes in practice. Local food projects take less than 5% of the turnover in the food industry. There is a need to scale up these positive examples. Although there are no blue-prints, Gert pointed to an initiative he has launched with some of the ‘big kitchens’ in Belgium (social catering services that supply institutions such as hospitals and prisons), looking with them at how their food procurement practices can be made more sustainable. We need to build a community around our agricultural and food system which means that we need to engage, seek partners, experiment and think about new and creative ways to scale up and expand.

### **Leen Laenens**

In addition to the key note speakers, a key note listener, Leen Laenens, chair of VELT, was invited onto the stage to share her impressions of the conference. She gave an overview of the many ‘right questions’ that were asked throughout the plenary sessions and in the workshops. She highlighted key issues for the food movement: What is standing in the way of change? What can we do to support farmers and especially young farmers? What should the relationship between farmers and consumers or “co-producers” be? How can we build global networks for action? What would a just financial system, supporting a fair and sustainable food system, look like? How can we change the food system at all levels, local, national, and international. How do we foster food democracy?

After 2 days of hope, passion, love, energy and connection, she above all asked us to not let go of one another and to keep in touch!

**“Let’s continue to toll the agroecology bell, especially in the agriculture cathedrals [like] Wageningen”**

## **The Transnational Institute at Voedsel Anders**

TNI was happy to be involved in three workshops (see Box on page 8) and one mini-lecture on issues relating to food sovereignty and land rights. TNI and FIAN Netherlands organised the workshop “Land Grabbing, Land Concentration and People’s Struggles in Europe: the need for action and options for change”. Sylvia Kay (TNI) provided an overview of a number of burning European land issues, with infographics and



Photo by Joyce Fabriek

statistics drawn from the [study](#) published by TNI for the Hands off the Land network and the European Coordination Via Campesina on the state of the land in Europe. Astrid Bouchedor (FIAN Belgium) illustrated the implications of these trends for small producers, and young and aspiring farmers, focussing on the French and Belgian contexts. An interactive discussion followed on how new policy tools – foremost the FAO Tenure Guidelines – could help address these issues and reform European land governance.



TNI researcher Sylvia Kay, representing TNI’s Agrarian Justice team, also delivered a mini-lecture on Food Sovereignty: The State of the Art. She talked about the core dimensions of the concept, its transformative and mobilising potential, and suggestions for strengthening the movement. In doing so, she reflected on some of the key ideas and questions raised at the [Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue](#) colloquium held on January 24, 2014 at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague.

This theoretical overview was complemented by the workshop Food Sovereignty in Practice organised by Otherwise and ILEA, in which the focus was on concrete examples of food sovereignty in action. Sylvia (TNI) talked about how to invest in and for food sovereignty, illustrated through the examples of ‘accumulation from below’ in Zimbabwe, and benefits from investment in agro-forestry systems in southern Africa. Leonardo van den Berg (Otherwise) presented the case-study of a Brazilian coffee grower’s personal transition from dependence to autonomy while Camiel Donicie (FIAN Netherlands) talked about the threat posed by a large-scale forestry plantation project to the food

sovereignty of local farming communities in Mozambique.

Finally Roeline Knottnerus, a TNI affiliate, presented, together with Olivier de Schutter, and Guus Geurts (ABC), on agriculture and trade policy. At this critical juncture, with a major trade deal between the EU and the US in negotiation, this session focussed particularly on the European Alternative Trade Mandate campaign in the Netherlands. Over fifty civil society organizations across Europe are working together to advocate for a new vision of trade, including food and agricultural trade. The vision elaborated in the Alternative Trade Mandate does not focus on protecting the profits of transnational corporate industry, but instead puts forward core principles relating to human and labor rights and environmental protection as the drivers of EU trade policy. The speakers at this session explained the need for the ATM, elaborated the mandate in more detail, and discussed the question of how a new mandate might be made a reality.



Eating Together - Photo by Egle Draugelyte



Finally, the issues facing young farmers in Europe today were a recurring theme throughout the conference. The Conference hosted

the premiere of a short documentary film, part of the Future Farmers in the Spotlight travelling film series. This series, edited by Juliane Haufe and Joris van der Kamp, aims to showcase examples of young farmers who have set up successful, sustainable, and innovative farming initiatives in Europe. Check out these video portraits on their [website](#) and be inspired!

Food Sovereignty in Practice	Land Grabs & Peoples’ Struggles in Europe	The Alternative Trade Mandate
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Work towards gender justice</li> <li>2. Put farmers at the centre</li> <li>3. Stop destructive investments</li> <li>4. Hold (your) banks accountable</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Land grabs and land concentration are happening in Europe</li> <li>2. The FAO Land Tenure Guidelines are one tool that might help stop them</li> <li>3. The struggle around land is ongoing and there are many ways to be involved</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. For decades trade has been organized for profit, with many negative effects</li> <li>2. The Alternative Trade Mandate provides a different vision of trade</li> <li>3. Join the ATM campaign to push for trade policy that respects people and the environment</li> </ol>



## TTIP: Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership

Presenters at several workshops and in the plenary sessions raised major concerns about the TTIP, a significant trade deal currently being negotiated between the European Union (EU) and the United States (US). The estimated content of the deal, lack of transparency in negotiations, and corporate lobbying have given rise to fears that the food and farming sector will be adversely impacted. The negotiators' agenda of 'regulatory coherence' is a key threat: the agreement aims to reduce regulatory differences by meeting at the lowest common denominator. Safeguard frameworks such as the precautionary principle, food-labeling policies for GMO-based products, EU standards and restrictions regarding use of hormones in agricultural products will be downsized. Factory farming is likely to be further intensified in the new 'transatlantic global market', forcing more farmers off their land and concentrating agriculture in a much smaller number of much larger farms.

A particularly worrying aspect of the TTIP agreement is its inclusion of Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS), a mechanism granting far-reaching rights to private companies, jeopardizing safeguards for the environment and citizens. If included in the deal, this would enable corporations to claim damages in private arbitration if they deem their actual or expected profits to be adversely affected by changes in a regulation or policy. Investor-state dispute settlement is becoming increasingly controversial, even within governments, as mining and energy firms use it to challenge public policies and claim massive financial compensation from states.

## Conclusion

The Voedsel Anders/Food Otherwise conference provided an exciting opportunity for farmers and urban agriculturists, activists, students, organisers, academics, and citizens to come together around the question of food and agriculture. The incredible popularity of the conference and the diversity of its attendees, who came from all age groups and walks of life, is a sign of the growing feeling that our food system is vitally important to all of us.

Some major issues emerged repeatedly throughout the conference and workshops: the importance of supporting young farmers in Europe; the significance of small farmers, family farms, and peasants in Europe and around the world; the enormous possibilities of agroecology and related approaches that learn from nature; the importance of diversity in our plants and our communities; the need for democratic control of food systems; the pivotal roles of both seed and land in our food systems; and the threat posed to European food sovereignty by the ongoing TTIP negotiations. Throughout the conference a vision emerged of what kind of systems we should support and encourage, and what kinds we should oppose. In the words of Vandana Shiva "Monopolies, centralization, monocultures go hand and hand and they are the instruments of power. We have to create instruments of democracy, diversity, resilience." This conference was one such instrument, and participants left it feeling inspired to continue the work of developing other kinds of food and agriculture systems, and strengthening the food movement.

## Read More, Do More

Visit the Voedsel Anders website for more information and resources, to watch videos of plenary sessions, and access reports on and responses to the conference from attendees and organisers:

Dutch Website: <http://voedselanders.nl>

English Website: <http://voedselanders.nl/en>

Join and get involved in the Voedsel Anders facebook community in either language to keep up to date on other events as well as videos, reports, reviews, and articles from the conference:

[www.facebook.com/voedselanders](http://www.facebook.com/voedselanders)

To learn more about the work of the Transnational Institute, visit <http://www.tni.org/>

To keep up to date with the activities of the Transnational Institute's Agrarian Justice team visit <http://www.tni.org/subscribe> to subscribe to our newsletter.

## Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the Voedsel Anders/Food Otherwise Network. Please view a full list of affiliates on the website here: [http://www.voedselanders.nl/en/voedselanders\\_en/Start.html](http://www.voedselanders.nl/en/voedselanders_en/Start.html)

Our thanks go out especially to the central organizing committee: Leonardo van den Berg (Otherwise), Janneke Bruil (ILEIA), Tjerk Dalhuisen (Aseed), Guus Geurts (Platform ABC), Daniel Gomez (TNI), Greet Goverde (Platform ABC), Nathalie van Haren (Both Ends), Caren Krul (Boerengroep), Loes van Loenen, Romée Marchand, Henk Renting (RUAF), Astrid Vredegoor, and Petra Rietberg (Louis Bolk Institute) with support from Nina Holland and Karla Mulder.

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