

Proposal for the creation of a free chair of food sovereignty

Abstract

Open Chairs are spaces typically aimed at both students and the general community, and can include activities such as lectures, seminars, practical workshops, participatory research, and community projects related to food sovereignty. The development of an Open Chair in Food Sovereignty is a significant project that involves careful planning and collaboration with diverse stakeholders. Websites of universities, research centers, and organizations related to sustainable agriculture, agroecology, and food sovereignty in the country and the region will be consulted. In the current context, where issues related to food, access to land, and production models are becoming increasingly relevant, food sovereignty emerges as a central concept for promoting fair, sustainable, and democratic food systems. This approach is especially pertinent in the Catamarca region, characterized by its agroecological diversity, the presence of peasant and indigenous communities, and the challenges linked to extractive agribusiness. Within this framework, we propose the creation of a Chair in Food Sovereignty at the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (FCA) of the National University of Catamarca (UNCA). This initiative aims to be an interdisciplinary, participatory, and collaborative space, focused on strengthening the link between the university, rural communities, and social actors in building more equitable and sustainable food systems.

Keywords: agroecology, agricultural policies, food policies, agricultural policies

Volume 13 Issue 2 - 2026

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Received: March 14, 2026 | **Published:** May 07, 2026

Introduction

The “Free Chair of Food Sovereignty” is a term that suggests the existence of an academic or learning space focused on food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty (FS) is a concept that refers to the right of peoples to define their own agricultural, food, and agrarian policies without external impositions. It is based on the idea that local communities should have control over the production, distribution, and consumption of food to guarantee food security and promote sustainability. Therefore, FS focuses on the availability, form, and purposes for which food is produced.¹

FS is presented as a key concept in the global debate on the right to food, social justice, and environmental sustainability. In the Latin American context, and particularly in the province of Catamarca, these issues are intertwined with the need to strengthen the autonomy of communities in food production and consumption.

The term “Agricultural Societies” (AS) was introduced in 1996 at the World Summit of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) by La Via Campesina, the global alliance of small-scale farmers, agricultural workers, fishers, landless people, and Indigenous peoples.² It refers to the idea that each people or community should guarantee its population’s food supply through its own agriculture. Therefore, it should not depend on the international market or large corporations involved in food commercialization. Furthermore, AS also focuses on the production of organic food, meaning it is based on a diversified peasant production system that considers biodiversity, the productive capacity of the land, cultural value, the preservation of natural resources, and other factors. The goal is for food to be healthy, free of all types of agrochemicals, of good quality, and appropriate to each culture. From this perspective, the aim is to combat hunger and poverty and to fight for social rights.¹

In short, food sovereignty is the right of peoples and all individuals to nutritious and culturally appropriate food that is accessible, produced sustainably and ecologically, and their right to decide their own food and production system; that is, the right of individuals, nations, and international communities to determine their own food and agricultural policies.^{2,3} Food sovereignty is, above all, an opportunity. An opportunity to stand in solidarity with farmers for their right to choose their future and also for our right to choose our own.³

The need to implement alternative ways of thinking about food, which in turn benefit local development, leads us to reflect on the concept of food security and its contribution to local development. Without food, full development is impossible, as hunger creates a vicious cycle between health and productivity. More effort is still needed from small-scale groups and territories, and it is essential to share experiences, facilitate exchanges, and demonstrate solidarity, commitment, and creativity. These are essential requirements for a movement that aims for the well-being of society and local development.²

One of the challenges is to generate public opinion and participate in citizenship education processes in agroecological agriculture (SA) that value the various benefits associated with agroecological production. The Open Chair of Food Sovereignty is both a strategy and an opportunity in this regard. For Medland,³ food sovereignty is education and recognition as much as action.

An “Open Chair” generally refers to an academic space that operates more flexibly and openly, fostering active participation and the collective construction of knowledge. In this context, an Open Chair of Food Sovereignty could be an educational space that promotes the study, discussion, and practice of these issues, with a focus on autonomy and sustainability in food production. The objective is to contribute to the development of more comprehensive

and participatory knowledge about food production and sustainable agriculture.

These spaces are typically aimed at both students and the general community, and may include activities such as conferences, seminars, practical workshops, participatory research, and community projects related to food sovereignty.

In the curriculum of the Agronomic Engineering program at the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences of the National University of Catamarca, there is a lack of specific spaces that comprehensively and critically address the dimensions of food sovereignty. This limits the training of professionals capable of facing the challenges associated with the sustainability of the food system and social justice.

The incorporation of a Chair in Food Sovereignty could constitute a significant academic innovation, promoting interdisciplinary reflection and the active participation of students around a sustainable, inclusive, and equitable agri-food model. Within the curriculum of the Agronomic Engineering program at the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (FCA) of the National University of Catamarca (UNCA), the creation of a “Free Chair of Food Sovereignty” (FS) aims to establish an academic or learning space focused on FS.

In a world where FS and the sustainability of agricultural systems are issues of growing concern (ECLAC, 2021), it is imperative that future agronomic engineers possess up-to-date knowledge and a deep understanding of FS.

There is a lack of awareness among agronomic engineering students and professionals regarding the importance of FS and its relevance to agricultural practice. The current curriculum lacks specific content related to FS, preventing students from acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to promote fairer and more sustainable food systems. Without a deep understanding of the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of food production, agricultural engineers may not be able to design contextualized and relevant solutions for local communities.

Integrating a “Free Chair of Food Sovereignty” into the Agronomic Engineering curriculum will allow students to address these challenges by providing them with a space to critically explore current problems related to food production, learn about alternative community-based approaches, and develop skills to promote food justice and sustainability in their future professional practices.

This problem statement provides a framework for understanding the need for and purpose of integrating a chair of food sovereignty into the Agronomic Engineering curriculum and establishes a solid foundation for the design and implementation of this initiative.

In Argentina, free chairs are academic spaces within public universities and, to a lesser extent, private ones, that allow for the treatment of topics not always addressed by formal programs, with a critical, interdisciplinary approach open to the community. There is no specific national legislation on free chairs, but their existence and operation are supported by a set of regulatory and institutional frameworks. Furthermore, each national university has its own University Statute, which often includes provisions regarding university extension programs, experimental or open courses, community relations, etc.

This work aims to design and present a well-founded proposal for the creation of an Open Course on Food Sovereignty within the curriculum of the Agronomic Engineering program at the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (FCA) of the National University of Catamarca (UNCA). The purpose of this course is to promote critical analysis,

academic training, and community action related to the principles of food sovereignty, environmental sustainability, social justice, and the autonomy of peoples in the production, distribution, and consumption of food.

Materials and methods

This research will be framed within a qualitative approach, incorporating elements of participatory action research (PAR), which combines scientific research with social action and the active participation of the actors involved in the process. It focuses on solving practical problems and improving social reality through collaboration between researchers and participants.⁴

The sources of information consisted of a bibliographic and documentary review on food sovereignty and elective courses at the Academic Secretariat of the National University of Catamarca and the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences. In addition, an analysis of the current curriculum at the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences of the National University of Catamarca (FCA-UNCA) was conducted.⁵

Interviews were conducted with the Academic Secretaries of the University and the Faculty, as well as with the Dean of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences of the National University of Catamarca.

Research reports, academic articles, and news related to food sovereignty education were sought to obtain up-to-date information on specific courses and programs. A program was designed in accordance with the identified needs and available resources, promoting a participatory and practical approach that encourages student involvement and learning in the field of food sovereignty.

Results and discussion

As stated by the authorities, the Dean, and the Academic Secretaries of the University and Faculty, within the National University of Catamarca, and particularly within the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, there is no precedent for the creation and operation of Open Chairs.

To analyze the institutional and academic context of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (FCA) of the National University of Catamarca (UNCA) in order to identify opportunities and challenges for the implementation of an Open Chair in Food Sovereignty, it would be useful to consider the following aspects:

- Institutional mission of the National University of Catamarca
- Institutional context of the FCA of UNCA
- Existing academic offerings
- Scientific research
- University extension activities
- Relations with the surrounding community.⁶⁻¹⁵

Pedagogical and methodological proposal for the implementation of the chair adapted to the needs of the FCA-UNCA

Why is this chair necessary?

- Food sovereignty is a strategic approach that addresses the challenges facing Catamarca: rural poverty, loss of biodiversity, rural abandonment, land concentration, and food dependency.

- Public universities have a duty to support and strengthen local processes that promote the right to food, local development, and socio-environmental justice.

- This chair aims to train committed professionals, engage in dialogue with communities, and generate relevant and context-specific knowledge.

The Chair of Food Sovereignty is conceived as an academic space that:

- Integrates scientific and traditional knowledge, fostering dialogue between the university and rural communities.
- Promotes critical and transformative education, empowering students and communities to build fairer and more sustainable food systems.
- Acts as a driver of social change, promoting public policies and agricultural practices focused on equity and sustainability.

The creation and development of a Chair in Food Sovereignty can have a profound and transformative impact on professional training within an institution like the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences at UNCA. It will affect the comprehensive and critical training of agricultural science professionals, as it introduces interdisciplinary approaches, integrating knowledge from agronomy, economics, sociology, anthropology, law, and health. It also promotes a critical view of the dominant agri-food model (agribusiness, monoculture, genetically modified organisms), offering alternatives based on social justice, agroecology, and cultural respect. Furthermore, it develops the capacity to think beyond the market, prioritizing the right to food, access to land, and the empowerment of local producers.

It is estimated that there will be a reevaluation of local knowledge and peasant practices, as it reconnects future professionals with ancestral, agroecological, and Indigenous knowledge, often excluded from traditional curricula. This strengthens the dialogue of knowledge between the university, rural communities, and Indigenous peoples. This will contribute to training professionals who are more sensitive to and committed to the territories where they will work.^{16–22}

It will also strengthen social commitment by reinforcing the professional's ethical and political responsibility, promoting food justice and equity. Furthermore, it promotes a human rights approach to education, aligned with the mission of public universities, and helps train professionals who not only produce food but also understand the social, cultural, and environmental consequences of those decisions.

It is expected to stimulate contextualized research and innovation, as it opens new lines of research focused on family farming, agroecology, alternative food networks, public policy, and sustainability. It also encourages the development of outreach projects and theses with real territorial impact and a participatory approach. And, above all, it promotes the generation of situated knowledge, useful for Catamarca and the Northwest region of Argentina, beyond standards imposed from outside.

It is believed that the connection with social movements and public policies will increase, as the link between the university and civil society (producers, cooperatives, farmers' markets, rural schools) is strengthened. This will lead to the promotion of synergies with social movements and public programs such as government procurement, family farming, and school feeding programs. Crucially, it will prepare professionals to intervene in public policy from a perspective of sovereignty and equity.

The Chair of Food Sovereignty can be a key tool for contributing to the strengthening of food sovereignty in the Catamarca region and Northwest Argentina (NOA) through educational, political, and community-based initiatives.^{23–27}

It will contribute to the training of transformative actors, educating students, producers, technicians, and teachers with critical awareness, the capacity for action, and a strong connection to their communities. Peasant and Indigenous knowledge will be incorporated into the teaching and learning process, and values such as food self-sufficiency, agroecology, and social justice will be promoted. In short, it will cultivate professionals committed to fair and sustainable food systems.

It will also contribute to strengthening family and peasant agriculture by providing local producers with technical and organizational tools to diversify crops, improve yields without agrochemicals, and defend their access to productive resources. This highlights the strategic role of family farming in Catamarca's food security. This, in turn, contributes to people remaining in rural areas and reducing rural exodus.

It makes a significant contribution to the connection between the university and the region, facilitating dialogue between academia, rural communities, farmers' markets, cooperatives, and social movements. It also promotes participatory rural extension practices with a rights-based perspective. This strengthens local networks for the production, distribution, and fair consumption of food.

Another contribution to consider is the promotion of short supply chains and solidarity markets, through the support of farmers' markets, local public procurement (such as the Shelf Space Law and the Family Farming Law), and school and community gardens. This is coordinated with municipalities, schools, and social organizations and will influence the generation of circular economies, healthy food, and fair prices for producers and consumers.

The impact on public policy is also estimated. This is because a Chair of Food Sovereignty produces diagnoses, reports, proposals, and evidence to improve state programs related to food, nutrition, public procurement, and rural development. Furthermore, it can be coordinated with provincial policies (Ministries of Production, Family Farming, Education, and Health). This influences decisions that affect the right to adequate food in the region.

For a Chair of Food Sovereignty to be sustainable over time, it is essential to plan a series of sustainability strategies from the outset to ensure continuity, impact, and institutional and community engagement.

Therefore, progressive institutionalization is important to guarantee that the Chair has support within the Faculty and the University. A formal resolution from the Governing Council creating and regulating the Chair should be promoted. Furthermore, it should be included in the Faculty's Extension, Research, or Academic Plan. A responsible coordinator with institutional recognition should be appointed. The presentation of annual activity reports will become increasingly important to justify its continuity.

Diversified funding will be strategic. Multiple sources of economic and material resources should be sought. Participation in extension and research grant opportunities (UNCA, SPU, INTA, INTI, FONTAR) should be pursued. Logistical or material support should be obtained from local governments, municipalities, and agricultural organizations. Self-funded events (fairs, raffles, fundraising sales) should also be organized to cover minor expenses. It will be beneficial to create alliances with NGOs, foundations, or already funded university projects.

Encourage broad and community participation. It is important to ensure that diverse stakeholders take ownership of the space.

Include producers, farmers, Indigenous communities, and consumers in the design and delivery of content. It is also important to form an interdisciplinary team (faculty, students, extension agents, technicians, and graduates) and promote an advisory council or coordination committee to guide the program and guarantee territorial representation.

A significant challenge will be the development and production of knowledge. Create and systematize materials that broaden its reach. It will be valuable to develop educational materials, audiovisual resources, and publications that document experiences. Systematize best practices and share them with other universities or social organizations. Likewise, promote final projects, research projects, theses, and internships related to the topic.

An interesting strategy is to connect with external networks. Forge alliances for exchange and mutual strengthening. It will be important to integrate into national and international networks of independent professorships (such as the Network of Independent Professorships in Food Sovereignty – REDCALIS), participate in conferences, congresses, and meetings (such as the National Meeting of Independent Professorships at the University of Buenos Aires, the National University of Jujuy, or the National University of La Plata), and establish agreements with municipalities, the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA), rural schools, and health centers.

Evaluation and continuous improvement are essential. Learning from practice is key to continued growth. Therefore, it will be important to define impact indicators (number of participants, connections created, resulting projects, publications). Participatory evaluations (surveys, interviews, assemblies) with those involved in the professorship should also be conducted. Consider reformulating content and dynamics year after year according to the context and lessons learned.

Food sovereignty is an important topic in higher education and social movements in many countries. Several educational centers, universities, and non-governmental organizations have established programs and professorships that focus on these issues. The presence of this professorship may vary depending on the region and country (Appendix).

Conclusion

Based on the proposed objective, this work successfully designs and substantiates a comprehensive proposal for the creation of a Chair in Food Sovereignty within the Agronomic Engineering program at the FCA-UNCA (Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, National University of Catamarca). This proposal is grounded in an interdisciplinary and participatory approach, integrating academic training with critical reflection and engagement with the local community.

The developed proposal not only addresses the identified institutional needs and available resources but also aligns with current challenges related to environmental sustainability, social justice, and the right to food. Furthermore, it promotes the incorporation of new perspectives in the training of future professionals, strengthening their capacity to understand and address complex problems related to agri-food systems.

In this sense, the Chair is configured as a strategic space to foster dialogue among different forms of knowledge, active community participation, and the collective construction of knowledge, contributing to the training of agronomic engineers committed to food sovereignty and sustainable territorial development.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

Author declares there is no Conflicts of interest.

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