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Food Security and Food Sovereignty: Getting Past the Binary

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It has become fashionable among some critical food studies scholars to counterpose food sovereignty to food security. Those taking this approach have associated all that they find unpalatable about the current mainstream, dominant industrial food system with the concept of food security, while presenting food sovereignty as a friendlier alternative. Lucy Jarosz's article highlights this binary and while she suggests that the two concepts are not in fact solely oppositional, she suggests that tensions between them concepts are not likely to dissipate anytime soon.

This short commentary seeks to delve deeper into the points of tension between food security and food sovereignty that Jarosz raises. I argue that the oppositional frame within the literature is problematic in several ways. First, in assessing food security, critics have inserted a rival normative agenda into a concept that is in fact much more open-ended. Second, proponents of food sovereignty make questionable claims in articulating the normative agenda that they attach to food security. Given these problems, the juxtaposition of food security and food sovereignty as competing concepts is more confusing than helpful. We should instead engage in more constructive policy dialogue on how best to address hunger and other pressing issues facing the global food system.

Is the Oppositional Frame Real or Manufactured?

Food sovereignty is an explicitly normative concept that seeks to encourage political mobilization around peasant rights. First popularized by the peasant movement La Via Campesina in the early 1990s, food sovereignty promotes agrarian and food rights for hundreds of millions of peasants around the world through a highly prescriptive agenda. It is an agenda that centers itself in particular on reducing global food trade and reorienting food systems around local production grounded in agro-ecological principles (see Wittman et al. 2010). There are indeed very

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worthwhile ideas in this suggested path that could go a long way toward addressing inequities and environmental degradation associated with the current global industrial food system.

I do not wish to critique the food sovereignty agenda here. What I do wish to critique is the frequent presentation of the concept of food sovereignty as being in direct opposition to the concept of food security. My concern is that the *concept* of food security, which is itself is more descriptive than normative, is unfairly being conflated with only one strand of the *discourse* on how to achieve it – the mainstream neoliberal agenda. Food security as a concept, including much of the scholarship that examines it, deserves more credit than it is being given.

Food security is itself a fairly recent concept, first articulated in the food policy world in the mid-1970s, a time of turmoil on global grain markets, rising hunger, and importantly, the height of the Cold War. Although food security as a concept emerged at a time when there was pressing concern about global hunger, its definition did not incorporate an explicit normative agenda in the same way that food sovereignty does. The 1974 World Food Conference defined it as: “availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices” (FAO 2003). The concept describes a condition, adequate food intake, and articulates its attributes. Its converse, food insecurity, describes conditions under which hunger and undernutrition occur. Food security originally was articulated as both a concept that applies at both global and national scales. But within a decade it was widened in its scope to a condition that could apply at the individual, local, and regional levels as well.

Jarosz notes that food security in the post World War II era was often equated with sufficient food supply at the national or global level. But it is important to remember that the path-breaking work of economist Amartya Sen (1981), and later Sen’s writings with Jean Drèze (Drèze and Sen 1989), helped to build a broader understanding of hunger and food security. Their work showed that hunger is deeply dependent on people’s ability to *access* food, which is determined by their ability to obtain resources to produce it, buy it or trade things for it. In other words, having enough food to feed a population within a country’s borders, or even globally, is no guarantee that everyone will be well fed. This insight provides important lessons for policy. In 1986, an influential World Bank report, *Poverty and Hunger*, provided a definition of food security that put access at the center: “access of all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (World Bank 1986, p.1).

In the following decades, further refinements in our understanding of the conditions in which hunger occurs incorporated nutritional dimensions as well as other factors. The 1996 World Food Summit expanded the definition of food security, and with the addition of the word ‘social’ in 2001, remains the most widely used and authoritative definition of the concept today: “Food security exists when all people,

at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 2001). The FAO now also frequently refers to four pillars of food security: availability, access, utilization and stability, when explaining the concept (FAO 2008).

Food security, as shown by this most broadly accepted definition of the concept, is descriptive rather than prescriptive. La Via Campesina, as Jarosz points out, initially saw food sovereignty as a “precondition to genuine food security” in its 1996 declaration on food sovereignty (Via Campesina 1996). Patel notes that the expanded definition of food security by governments at the 1996 World Food Summit was in fact influenced by the introduction of the term food sovereignty by La Via Campesina at that meeting (Patel 2009, p.665).

In recent years, however, as powerful organizations and governments outside of the FAO began to articulate a policy agenda for achieving food security that did not incorporate the normative project of food sovereignty, the debate shifted. Disillusioned with the mainstream approach, a number of critical food studies scholars appear to have abandoned the concept of food security altogether and at the same time began to conflate it with the mainstream agenda that they so dislike. In other words, they began to reject the very concept that the movement itself helped to shape just a decade earlier.

This shift resulted in growing reference to a stark oppositional frame that has since become commonplace in the food studies literature, where food security is equated with one ‘discourse’ or model, while food sovereignty stands for another. An example of this is Schanbacher in his recent book, *The Politics of Food: the Global Conflict between Food Security and Food Sovereignty*: “Ultimately, the food security model is founded on, and reinforces, a model of globalization that reduces human relationships to their economic value. Alternatively, the food sovereignty model considers human relations in terms of mutual dependence, cultural diversity and respect for the environment” (Schanbacher 2010, p.ix).

I agree that there are very different, and quite polarized discursive frames on how to address the problems in the food system today. But abandoning the descriptive concept food security, and then pinning an oppositional normative agenda to it, is not particularly helpful to that broader debate over how to address the gross inequities in today’s food system. The concept of food security was in fact originally critiqued by food sovereignty advocates for *lacking* guidance on how food should be produced, and where it should come from (Patel 2009). Now it is portrayed as having a specific agenda. To complicate matters, both the concepts of food security and food sovereignty have shifted in meaning considerably in recent decades, as Jarosz notes (see also Patel 2009). To perpetuate a binary from two moving targets only adds to the confusion, and risks stifling meaningful debate about different possible agendas to end hunger and create fair and equitable food systems.

Questionable Claims

The critics' insertion of a normative agenda into the concept of food security can be questioned on several specific points that are frequently made to support this assertion. As I outline below, these arguments are debatable and often obscure important details. As such, they only serve to confuse the broader conversation on global food policy directions.

First, food security is critiqued for being 'productionist' in orientation. This critique is somewhat odd, since food sovereignty itself is focused primarily on issues relating to food production. It is true that the early understandings of food security did indeed prioritize food availability over other aspects, as Jarosz points out. But as noted above, following the work of Sen and Drèze in the 1980s, food security definitions began to prioritize 'access' as a key component of the concept. The 2001 FAO definition of food security, the most widely cited and commonly accepted definition used in policy circles today, clearly emphasizes access as a central component. Given this shift away from a supply-focused definition, it is difficult to see how the concept can currently be cast as productionist.

Critics are, however, correct that the current mainstream policy agenda for addressing hunger does seem to prioritize food production over access. Indeed, measures to increase food production are prominently featured in the World Bank-sponsored Global Agriculture and Food Security Program and the G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, among other initiatives supported by powerful actors. This agenda should be critiqued for its flaws, and I actively engage in this critique myself (Clapp and Murphy 2013; Clapp 2014). But I think it only confuses matters to conflate the *mainstream agenda* that prioritizes production with the broader and more open-ended *concept* of 'food security'. There is a great deal of research that falls under the heading of food security, work focused on access to food, nutrition and stability, that is not part of the mainstream production-oriented agenda. This work should not be overlooked.

Second, a number of authors, including Jarosz, argue that food security embodies a neoliberal trade and market orientation that sits in direct opposition to the food sovereignty approach that favors more localized food systems and greater self-sufficiency. Although the 2001 FAO definition of food security cited above does not refer in any way to trade, critics nonetheless assert that such an agenda is implied in the definition by virtue of its focus on access (in some cases, 'economic'). The fact that access could just as easily refer to self-production as it could to the purchase of food on markets seems to be missed in this critique, despite the fact that the FAO definition explicitly states "*physical, social and economic access.*"

My point is not to deny that a free trade agenda was pushed by agencies such as the World Bank starting in the mid-1980s. This included a liberalization of agricultural trade under programs of structural adjustment, a point highlighted by critics who connect this process to the World Bank *Poverty and Hunger* report noted above (see

also Fairbairn 2010). But even that report is ambiguous on the trade question. It notes that trade can be useful in stabilizing a country's food supplies, but it also states that "using trade for stabilization is not the same as instituting a free trade regime" (World Bank 1986, p.46). The key issue for me is not the extent to which the World Bank pushed a free trade agenda (clearly it did in its other publications around that time). It is whether the concept of food security inherently implies that agenda. There is little in the 1986 World Bank definition of the term that indicates that it does. Rather than spending time trying to establish a link between the definition of food security and a free trade agenda, the task of critics should be to expose the inequities in the global agricultural trading system. At the same, this critique should be sensitive to the concerns of many small farmers who continue to rely on international trade for their livelihoods (Burnett and Murphy 2014).

Third, critics have also claimed that an emphasis on the 'individual' within food security analysis is further evidence of its neoliberal inclinations (see also Jarosz 2011; Fairbairn 2010). The 1986 World Bank report is again cited as evidence on this point because it mentions purchasing power as an important determinant of food access. This point is hardly surprising given the report's publication just a few years after Sen's work that highlighted the importance of this relationship. Critics, however, argue that the individual scale of analysis that focuses on purchasing power is problematic because, for them, it mirrors neoliberalism's emphasis on individual decisions made in the marketplace over collective policy choices. Although Sen's analysis emerged at roughly the same time as the rise of neoliberalism, there is no particular reason to assume that the former is a product of, or even serves, the latter.

In fact, an individual lens on hunger brings hugely important insights that can assist in crafting better public policies to address the problem. The reason the concept of food security was expanded to include individuals in the 1980s was precisely because national-level food supply does not give an accurate picture of how food is distributed within a society. Even focusing on the household does not reveal the kinds of mal-distribution that can occur under one roof. There are often large inequities in food access that occur along gender lines even within families, where women and girls in some societies typically consume less, and thus suffer more from problems of undernutrition, than do men and boys (Maxwell 1996). A dismissal of the individual lens for analyzing hunger can mask these important insights, which in turn can hinder policymaking that better supports those individuals who are marginalized within societies, and within households. Moreover, at the same time that an individual lens for analysis is useful, the definition of food security offered by the World Bank, and subsequently the FAO, in fact implies a collective frame for the broader condition, with its emphasis on "all people, at all times."

The Risks of an Either-Or Approach

What if we were to heed the calls of the critics to do away with the concept of food security? Can the concept of food sovereignty take its place? Replacing one concept

with the other, I would argue, risks losing valuable insights into the conditions of hunger and undernutrition. The seven principles of food sovereignty, as noted by Jarosz, focus largely on food and land rights, environmental protection and prioritization of domestic food production over international trade. These goals are largely tied to the agrarian and food rights of peasant producers. Without downplaying the importance of those rights, it is worth noting that the food sovereignty agenda says very little about how exactly to ensure equitable access to food for all (including non-producers), or about nutrition. Its views on how to design appropriate safety nets for the most marginalized members of society, and what constitutes a nutritionally adequate diet, are not articulated in any detail.

Food sovereignty's relative silence on these issues is not surprising, since the movement concentrates mainly on a producer-rights agenda. Still, the movement, as well as the scholars that advocate its agenda, could more openly acknowledge that many people, including farmers, do rely on markets for at least some of their food, that access to food is uneven due to differences in incomes, that many people do not have access to adequate nutrition, that there are gender inequities in food access, and that even transitory episodes undernutrition can have lifelong impacts on a person's quality of life (on many of these points, see Agarwal 2014). I doubt that many advocates of food sovereignty would argue that these are non-issues. But it does not mean that the food sovereignty movement and its advocates should necessarily take on this broader agenda, either. It can, and should, work with and learn from those scholars and practitioners working on these important food security issues, rather than dismiss their contributions. Food security work, likewise, has much to gain from the insights of the food sovereignty movement.

Both food security and food sovereignty are useful as concepts to help us understand, debate and formulate policies to address the most pressing issues of hunger and inequality in the global food system today. The challenge is to engage in a more constructive and meaningful dialogue about the *approaches* on the table that are being put forward by very different ideological camps. Only then can we map out the kinds of policy changes that will be required to realize improved outcomes (Akram Lodhi 2013). To do this, we must move beyond the false binary that conflates the current mainstream normative agenda with the more descriptive and open-ended concept of food security. In short, we should not throw out the food security baby with the mainstream agenda bathwater.

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