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**ATLAS OF THE GREAT IRISH FAMINE, 1845-52**

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## Food security, food poverty, food sovereignty: Moving beyond labels to a world of change?

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Around one billion people in the developing world do not have enough to eat, while tens of millions more in wealthier countries suffer from food poverty. Food insecurity is generally taken to mean a dietary intake of insufficient and appropriate food to meet the needs of growth, activity and the maintenance of good health. In addition to those suffering from chronic hunger many millions more experience food insecurity on a seasonal or transitory basis. Prolonged periods of insufficient food intake results in protein-energy malnutrition with loss of body weight, reduced capacity to work and susceptibility to infectious, nutrient-depleting illnesses, such as gastro-intestinal infections, measles and malaria. Even mild undernourishment in children can lead to delayed or permanently stunted growth. There are almost 200 million children in the world displaying low height-for-age with almost half of the children of South Asia failing to reach the weights and heights considered to represent healthy growth [1].

In a context where the world produces enough food for all, why has it proven so difficult to reduce the number of hungry and malnourished people in the world? And why, given the undertakings that were made at the 1996 World Food Summit to cut the number of malnourished people (then 840 million) by half by 2015, does that objective look entirely unrealistic? Moreover, since that Summit, the number of overweight and obese people has rapidly overtaken the number of hungry with the greatest proportion in developing countries. It might be argued, then, that mal-nourishment, meaning badly nourished, concerns both the underfed and overfed and raises profound questions about health, well-being and food security across the nutritional spectrum.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to explore what we mean by food security and to ask whether it remains a sufficiently robust and useful concept. For it is apparent that contemporary economic uncertainties and increasingly complex, turbulent and unpredictable environmental futures not only makes the goal of strengthening food security ever more vital, but highlights the need for fresh and critical thinking in ensuring that all people, especially the poorest, gain greater control in meeting their food needs. Ultimately, how we feed ourselves in the years to come will require a broader and more robust conceptualisation of food security than we have had hitherto. The notion of food sovereignty may make a valuable contribution to this thinking.

## **Food Security**

It has been suggested that there are approximately 200 definitions and 450 indicators of food security [2] and this diversification of meaning reflects its wide interest as an object of study across a broad spectrum of academic disciplines (including the social, agricultural and nutrition sciences) and its application as a policy tool in various sectors of government. Although hitherto it had been largely confined to use in relation to the poorest countries, more recently food security has found its way into policy circles and documents concerned with food systems in countries of the North. Rising oil and food commodity prices have caused many countries that have long considered themselves highly food secure to take stock of their reliance upon global supply chains that deliver a high proportion of their food needs. Within the last couple of years food security has become closely tied to concerns over international land leasing arrangements, climate change, freshwater depletion and 'peak oil'.

Food security first appeared at the 1974 World Food Conference where it was defined 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" [3]. The definition reflects the circumstances of the early-to-mid 1970s where drought across many major grain-producing regions of the world led to heavy demand on international grain markets. Famine stalked the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, as well as South Asia, and encouraged the popular view that food insecurity was both demographically induced ('overpopulation') and environmentally determined (caused by drought, flood or soil erosion).

The unfolding humanitarian disasters of the 1970s and 1980s, in which more than two million people died, did stimulate detailed analyses of the intersection of hunger, poverty, conflict, environmental degradation and the

coping strategies of those affected. While detailed local-level studies revealed the limitations of overly deterministic causal relationships, they recognized that problematic long-term trends might combine with 'trigger' events (eg drought, armed conflict or economic crisis) to tip already stretched local societies into acute distress. Thus a local society vulnerable to seasonal food insecurity, marked by a hungry period before the next harvest, might be tipped into a situation of structural malnutrition and chronic food insecurity by such an event. Understanding the circumstances experienced by the most vulnerable was a particular feature of the analysis of Amartya Sen.

In his book *Poverty and Famines*, Sen (1981) demonstrated that hunger and starvation are not an inevitable consequence of a decline in the *availability* of food but, rather, reflect the circumstances of people not being able to secure access to food. This can be explained, argues Sen, by understanding people's entitlement relations. On the basis of their initial endowments in land, other assets, and labour power, a person has entitlements to his own production, the sale of labour for wages or the exchange of products for other goods (e.g. food) [4]. Under 'normal' conditions these entitlements provide the basis for survival. But new circumstances may unfavourably impact upon them, such as the occurrence of drought. Here, with the prolonged failure of rains and in the absence of irrigation, field crops simply shrivel and die. For local people who ordinarily earn wages by working in those fields and whose labour is no longer needed, at least until the return of the rains, their main entitlement to food (their wages) collapses and they become highly vulnerable to hunger. A similar predicament confronts those with a few livestock. In the absence of adequate grazing, animals weaken and their value drops. Meanwhile, under the law of supply and demand (exacerbated by the opportunism of intermediaries) grain prices soar, and the exchange rate of grain for animals deteriorates rapidly. This is a situation faced by all who must purchase their food needs and who experience a collapse in their entitlement relations.

Thus the 1980s witnessed a growing interest in household-level food security using livelihood- and gender-analysis to understand how vulnerable individuals and households cope with environmental, economic and political uncertainty whether chronic or on seasonal, periodic or irregular time scales. Moreover, recognizing the influence of external factors, such as economic shocks, on local food provisioning systems underlined the importance of appreciating the interconnections between the individual, local, regional, national and international levels. Initially, food security was concerned with basic foodstuffs, principally high calorie staples such as cereals and tubers, to resolve problems of protein-energy malnutrition. By the late 1980s, however, health and nutrition research had highlighted that nutritional well-being could not be assured from

calorie consumption alone, with the role of disease better recognised as impairing the capacity of the body to absorb nutrients, as well as an improved understanding of micro-nutrients (eg iron, iodine) to human well-being.

By the time of the 1996 World Food Summit, the definition of food security had further evolved to reflect social and cultural influences over food preferences. Thus:

Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life [5].

As part of this summit, Heads of State agreed the Rome Declaration designed to achieve food security for all, and pledged an immediate target of 'reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015' [6]. Yet, as we have seen, rather than moving toward the target of 400 million people, the ranks of the hungry have swelled beyond the 840 million of 1996. However, this is not from lack of hand wringing, as food security has increasingly come to be seen as part of a wider concern not just for human welfare but as a basic human right. In the WFS Plan of Action, a call was made for the implementation of Article 11 of the 1967 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which affirms 'the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing'. Yet while a specialist Right to Food unit now exists within the FAO, the numbers of hungry and undernourished continue to grow. This demonstrates a fundamental problem with food security: that despite the efforts to enshrine the human right to adequate food, there is no effective mechanism to ensure its fulfilment.

International human rights instruments are concerned primarily with the responsibilities of states to their own people, not to people elsewhere. The principle of national sovereignty, which underpins international law, generally restricts the intervention of foreign governments even when states may be failing to provide for and to protect their own citizens. Consequently, food security persists largely because of a failure of government at national level and a lack of international political will. This suggests that despite ongoing efforts to establish a legal right to food within international law, ultimately more immediate and practical solutions for strengthening food security are more likely to be found at local level.

## Food Poverty

Despite a belief that most hungry people are located in the developing world, there is some awareness of food poverty in the most developed countries. Here, people's relationship to food is arguably more complex still: on low wages or welfare benefits, people lack sufficient money to buy appropriate food; yet they are surrounded by the thousands of products of the modern food system. Moreover, many of their fellow citizens are striving to reduce, rather than increase, their calorie intake. Hunger and food insecurity are prevalent in the United States, with 11 percent of all households regarded as food insecure by the Department of Agriculture, with higher rates amongst African-American (22.4 percent) and Hispanic (17.9 percent) households [7].

Food poverty can be considered a measure of both absolute and relative social deprivation. Absolute poverty means that people do not have enough money to pay rent, heat their living space ('fuel poverty'), buy clothes, afford transport and generally look after themselves, including buying sufficient food. Relative deprivation refers to circumstances where people lack the resources needed to enjoy the living conditions and amenities, and to access the types of diets that are customary, in the society to which they belong. Accordingly, food poverty can be linked to three proximate determinants.

The first relates to people having sufficient money to acquire an adequate quantity and quality of food; where shopping for food is driven by the need to maximise calories, and to achieve the sense of 'feeling filled' for every euro spent. The purchase of cheaper food may consequently be more affordable but is often the least healthy and may be a major determinant of obesity. Secondly, people may lack access to shops selling food at reasonable prices. With many of the large chain supermarkets relocating to edge of town sites requiring access to a car, and with many low-income inner city communities marked by limited mobility, the term 'food deserts' has been used to describe the resulting loss of access to fresh, healthy and competitively priced food. A third aspect of food poverty concerns the ability of people to make appropriate purchasing choices and then to prepare that food in socially acceptable ways to deliver nourishment. For example, being trapped in a long-standing situation of food poverty frequently engenders a sense of disempowerment, a lack of interest in cooking and results in above-average consumption of ready-made food and snacks. Indeed, given that much of the urban landscape in the world today is dominated by symbols and signs for fast food and carbonated beverages, it is unsurprising that food poverty has also become linked to the issue of obesity and diet-related ill-health. While such outcomes should not be regarded as inevitable and also reflect the wider everyday geographies of people's lives such as living in environments that do

not facilitate physical activity (access to outdoor recreation, green space, sense of security in the community), there is nevertheless clear evidence that social and economic deprivation is closely correlated with food poverty [8].

While the existence of food poverty in wealthy, highly developed countries testifies to the failure of welfare policy and even to effective, socially inclusive national governance, its solution requires more than enhanced handouts. This is why food security has to be approached as an issue of social justice as well as a matter of human rights. For the Community Food Security Coalition in the United States food security is a condition in which

all community residents obtain a safe, culturally-acceptable, nutritionally-adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance, social justice, and democratic decision-making. [9].

Such a definition demonstrates how the meaning of food security has evolved: from circumstances where an aggregate supply of calories at national or regional level was once sufficient guarantee that hunger was eliminated; to a situation deeply entwined with human rights and the struggle of communities to define their own particular food needs. In this regard food sovereignty has emerged as an important notion.

## **Food Sovereignty**

Food sovereignty is most closely associated with civil society organisations (CSO) and social movements engaged in the struggle against globalisation, but in recent years is a term that, if not quite mainstream in Washington, has certainly entered the vocabulary of agri-food policy analysts and advisors. It offers a counter-hegemonic perspective on food that is rooted in a rights-based framework that effectively insists upon food being treated as a basic human right. It has been widely proclaimed and reaffirmed at meetings and fora held in parallel with events such as the World Food Summit of 1996 and its follow up in 2001, and a host of other gatherings around the world. Although it has become the widely adopted slogan of a broad-based and non-hierarchical movement, food sovereignty is most closely associated with the CSO, La Via Campesina (meaning peasant way in Spanish), the International Peasant Movement. [See Plates 1 & 2 featuring the banners of farmers organisations]

Food sovereignty is largely formulated as an alternative policy proposition to liberalised industrial agriculture and is based upon a number of

core assumptions. First, it attaches almost primordial significance to the family farm which itself is located within a community-based rural development model. Clearly this has to be underpinned by access to sufficient land so that agrarian reform features as one of Via Campesina's core principles by which the landless and the marginalized are given ownership and control of the land they would work. While enormous disparities in landholding do exist in many countries and agrarian reform might help to improve the efficient use of land, experiences of reform in other countries have demonstrated that reallocation of land is no guarantee of food security (in the absence of tools, seeds, water etc). Increasingly there is a need to rethink land tenure institutions beyond individual property rights, with forms of common pool resources management offering a more collective solution while ensuring greater social inclusion and equity.

A second principle that emerges from a study of food sovereignty is the significance attached to sustainable methods of production, utilising indigenous biodiversity (seeds and livestock breeds) and reducing dependence upon agrochemicals. [see plate 3: seeds] Here, much greater attention is placed upon utilising farmers' existing agricultural knowledge and locally adapted technologies. The term *agroecology* often features, as shorthand to denote a wide range of practices that have built upon tried and trusted indigenous methods and which operate in tandem with local resource constraints and possibilities. Interestingly, while critics of such an approach would argue that only the most modern technologies, led by the life sciences, can offer a future of greater food output, recent reports have tended to be much more cautious in proclaiming the advantages of the latest seeds and higher levels of inputs. The recently published report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD 2009) makes interesting reading in this context, arguing for a rethinking of past policy assumptions in order to address the need for food and livelihood security under increasingly constrained environmental conditions. [10]

A third and final core principle of food sovereignty concerns its very proclamation of *sovereignty* in a globalised world. In this respect it appears as both defender of the nation state, as constituting the sole legitimate authority to determine policies that affect its people; and critic of the globalisation project in general and its key agencies in particular. Since the introduction of structural adjustment programmes in the early 1980s by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and further intensified by the foundation of the WTO in 1995, agriculture and food have been subject to powerful neo-liberal forces and a slew of international agreements, such as Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) amongst many



others, aimed at internationalising domestic food provisioning systems. As the proponents of food sovereignty argue:

Global trade (rules) must not be afforded primacy over local and national developmental, social, environmental and cultural goals. Priority should be given to affordable, safe, healthy and good quality food, and to culturally appropriate subsistence production for domestic, sub-regional and regional markets” (Peoples’ Food Sovereignty Statement, nd). [11]

Food sovereignty, then, is not simply another definition of food security but provides a radical challenge to many of the existing assumptions about the way food and agricultural policies have and might continue to be developed. Its perspective is not that of the academy or of those in FAO headquarters in Rome, but of the rural poor, the hungry, and food insecure. As Windfuhr and Jonsén (2005) note, there is no one fully-fledged food sovereignty model with a set of policies available for governments to implement. [12] Yet, although there will be many vested interests deeply and violently opposed to much of what the notion represents, it is being developed by civil society organisation and social movements all over the world to improve the governance of food and agriculture and to address the core problems of hunger and food insecurity. [Plate 4: Preparing millet pancakes]

### **More local level action**

Food security has become inseparably linked to calls for social justice, human rights and community empowerment and, with the rise of the Via Campesina and other CSOs, with the demand for recovering food sovereignty. Such demands cannot be separated from the utter failure of the international community to meet the target of halving the number of hungry by 2015 set by the World Food Summit of 1996. Indeed, such failure calls into question not only the effectiveness but the legitimacy of the existing institutional architecture of the world food system. Despite the High-Level Conferences on World Food Security, such as the one held in Rome in June 2008, and the formation of a High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis chaired by the UN Secretary-General charged with catalyzing urgent action (FAO 2008), it may be that food security needs rather less global leadership and more local level action.[13] For, arguably, it is at the local level where the notion of food security is best grounded: how to achieve access to adequate food that is culturally and nutritionally appropriate throughout the year and from year to year, that provides for health and well-being.

Such an approach would embrace more publicly-funded, rather than privately-led, investment in agricultural research, where less emphasis would be placed on finding a magic bullet associated with gene technology, and more on building adaptive capacity, resilience-enhancing systems of production and locally appropriate technology portfolios. [Plates 5 and 6] Finding ways to improve adaptation will be the key to building food and other dimensions of human security within a warmer, more crowded and more complex world. [14]

This approach would necessarily rework understandings of food security, including those that are derived from specific local circumstances, and embark from a commitment for social justice, environmental sustainability, and sound nutrition. It might be that food security would be facilitated by less, rather than more, globalisation. Indeed, it might go further and argue for food sovereignty: effectively the right of local farmers to grow food for local consumers, rather than exclusively agri-commodities for export. Without retreating into autarchy, it might enshrine the basic principle that each country should endeavour to produce enough food to feed its own people. While this may seem like a radical set of measures, it is apparent that trade liberalization in food and agriculture has not delivered global food security to date, and that the diverse challenges ahead should be a cause to reflect upon a change of direction.

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