

THE INSTABILITY OF FOOD SECURITY: IS IT ANOTHER CONTEXT FOR EMERGING SOCIAL CONFLICTS?

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Abstract: In this article, we argue that the three factors of, a) ineffectiveness of legal systems, b) the intervening of the national states in producer-consumer relationships, and, c) global approaches mixed with rule making policies of international institutes, would create vulnerable food conditions and cause a harsh and new form of social conflict. As a matter of fact, when we consider the food security as a political, and even a legal issue, we would naturally find both the national states and the global community responsible for neglecting the most tormenting form of social conflict. We are going to say that the food insecurity in the form of a crisis would create many new conflict zones across the globe. Given to the fact that legal systems and the international organizations are trying to remove the conflicts from the surface, viewing these conflicts from a different perspective may help dealing with the problem.

Keywords: Food Insecurity, Global Economic, Poverty, Social Conflicts.

Once we would have admitted that the society is formed of different social layers, we acknowledge the existence a general concept of social conflict. Such expressions as social classes, poverty line, layers, conflict zone, and etc. are representing the general trend among the intellectuals to introduce society as a ground accepting any kind of political and economic unbalance. Among these is the problem of hunger which can be considered as old as humanity. Four hundred and fifty people die in each hour because of hunger and poor food conditions. (Laffin, 1971)¹ Economists consider non-stop growth of world population responsible for this problem. We can imagine that the different parts of social entity in developing and non-developed countries may suffer from a kind of insecurity

regarding this issue, if not starving basically. As Jayati Ghosh suggests, this human-made crisis can not be the product of balance or unbalance between offer and demand in the marketplace, but originates in the marketing policies and the programs of privatization and liberalization of economy which all countries more or less are concerned with. (Ghosh, 2008) This crisis is not a new phenomenon, it has been existing from decades. We only discover its new facets recently. Some people as Jacques Dough, the secretary of FAO consider it as the result of incorrect policies enacted during the last two decades. (Ibid.)

The states, facing such a crisis could adopt various kinds of policies and methods to reduce the stresses of poor food conditions and to alleviate the sufferings of local people. But in the more extended level of global politic and economic challenges a different situation dominates. Though it is assumed that the gap between poor and rich countries is decreasing and the material distinctions between them are essentially fading, the realistic analysis of the social and economical outputs of UN, World Bank, and IMF represents a total different picture of the current processes and shows how deeply seems the gap between the two groups.

POVERTY AND CONFLICT

We have always been facing a circular debate in deciding whether poverty could cause social conflict or the poverty is the main result of social conflicts. Today, there are many issues that can be considered in relation to the societal instabilities.

Societies change, and the people's needs change. The old patterns which were used to describe the social conflicts during the twenty century have been replaced by the norms that have roots in politics and the behavior of powerful states rather than people in a local level. So are the poverty and the crisis we call it, and frequently has been called the instability of food and water supply security. The crisis may show itself in certain parts of the world, but cannot be neglected. That the poverty as a social dilemma may

¹ This rate is back to 40 years ago. Economic programs and the global and local policies during the time have never been alleviating the hunger, nor preparing a better ground for eliminating the issue, but intensifying it.

affect the public order or change the basic norms which in turn form the group trends is a common view. We argue that poverty, despite the huge amount of struggles done to reduce it, in its new forms and by the general anecdote of accusing the reach countries has created a variety of contradictions among those who have try to define it.

Today, we need no more to be concerned with the problem of poverty. We need to be aware of the crisis of nutrition poverty and to have concern about the nations who would be suffering from unsafe food and water conditions.

The new crisis may make nations and states face to face and urges the sovereign states to counter the demanding international rules.

FOOD SECURITY: DEFINITION AND DIMENSIONS

Food insecurity which is defined in some cases as hunger, in its various forms may cause conflict alongside the other deep side effects.

Hunger leads to weak immune systems that make people more vulnerable to ill health. And ill health prevents breadwinners from working and leads to expenditure on medical treatment, thus increasing poverty. And children that are malnourished experience stunting in their mental and physical development, the effects of which last throughout their lives. Thus hunger traps families into an endless cycle of poverty and passes onto the children of the poor the likelihood that their development will be damaged. Such poverty also means that the children of the poor rarely have the chance to go to school and thus their poverty will be passed on to yet another generation. (Short,2001)

The effects are talked about here may be limited to the level of urban life and individual conditions. The actions must cover an extended ground that may include the nations and the global zones in which hunger and food insecurity can cause political and cultural conflicts. The above author says: "Of course we must take account of our global capacity to feed the population of the world. But old ideas that focus on national self-sufficiency in food rather than national capacity to purchase the food that is needed, are deeply outdated. And those who focus their efforts simply on increasing agricultural production must be under no illusions that they will therefore help the poor to obtain food". (Id.)

As to the definition of food security many organizations and authorities depending on their concerns regarding this issue have suggested different views.

According to one, food security is defined as access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life and includes at a minimum: a) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and b) the assured ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways (e.g. without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, and other coping strategies). (LSRO, 1990)² When it is talking of a template situation of food security, it tries to explain an approach that should prevent the familiar forms of social conflict that appear as some kinds of crimes.

Ontario Public health association defines it as a communal strategy which may ensure secure access to adequate amounts of safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate food for everyone, produced in an environmentally sustainable way, and provided in a manner that promotes human dignity. (OPHA, 2002)³ When we refer to the community based situation of the hunger and food safety, we may find that most of the social conflicts and unrests and cultural paradoxes which are seen in the current world are perhaps due to the food insecurity.

In order for such conflicts to be avoided, the better food situation can be attributed to the strategies that are directed towards community as a whole. It is for that reason that the concept of food security in international scope is generally considered at least at the nation wide ground. The other description proposed by Public Health Association of British Columbia says: "community food security exists when all citizens obtain a safe, personally acceptable, nutritious diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes healthy choices, community self-reliance and equal access for everyone". (PHABC, 2004)⁴

It is important to understand that the three concepts of hunger, malnutrition, and poverty are related to unstable food security. **Hunger** is usually understood as an uncomfortable or painful sensation caused by insufficient food energy consumption. Scientifically, hunger is referred to as food deprivation. (FAO, 2008)

Simply put, all hungry people are food insecure.

Malnutrition results from deficiencies, excesses or imbalances in the consumption of macro- and/or micro nutrients. Malnutrition may be an outcome of food insecurity, or it may relate to non-food factors, such as: (a) Inadequate care practices for children, (b)

² Life Science Research Office (1990)

³ Ontario Public Health Association (2002)

⁴ Public Health Association of British Columbia (2004)

Insufficient health services; and (c) An unhealthy environment. (Id.)

While poverty is undoubtedly a cause of hunger, lack of adequate and proper nutrition itself is an underlying cause of food insecurity.

It is always confirmed that the different aspects of the issue should be noticed and according to these the developmental programs are advised. However, the fact that has been underestimated all the time is the social and cultural effects that may be produced due to food insecurity.

THE DIMENSIONS OF FOOD SECURITY

In the current situation we can not say the all people at all parts of the world and at all times have easily economic and physical access to sufficient safe food and nutrition. This may be due to some factors in different levels. But first of all, it seems necessary to offer an analysis of the concept and view the basic dimensions of the food security.

According to some official reports, the food security may consist of for essential elements or dimensions, including: (a) Physical availability of food, (b) Economic and physical access to food, (c) Food utilization, (d) Stability of the other three dimensions over the time. (FAO,1996)

The lack of each of these elements, whether it may have political, legal, economic or even cultural backgrounds, means an unstable and insecure condition of people's nutrition that can exist for a long time depending on the stability of its causes.

In the afore-mentioned FAO report, two kinds of food insecurity have been diagnosed that would extend during the time, if no proper action is enacted.

1. Chronic food insecurity is a long-term and persistent syndrome and occurs when people are unable to meet their minimum food requirements over a sustained period of time. This kind of food insecurity may result from extended period of poverty, lack of assets, and inadequate access to productive or financial resources. (Id.)

Though there should exist many possible ways to overcome such a dilemma, the global society and the local government have to view it from a different perspective. Realizing the full picture of food insecurity and the developmental programs to treat it is a half-way function that the first half of it is something doesn't go further from writings on paper.

Typical long-term development measures which are used to address poverty such as education or access to productive resources are of this kind. It is usually forgotten that performing the same programs

themselves can bring about social and cultural problems that end to harsh conflicts.

2. The short-term and temporary food insecurity which is called transitory may occur when there is a sudden drop in the ability to produce or access enough food to maintain a good nutritional status. Transitory food insecurity is relatively unpredictable and can emerge suddenly. This makes planning and programming more difficult and requires different capacities and types of intervention, including early warning capacity and safety net programs. (Id.)

In any case, the advised programs by the international organizations like FAO and the global concerns must be directed toward modifying political and economical patterns that can cause such shortcomings. From an activist perspective also the eradication of hunger and poverty are closely linked. Our strategies for poverty reduction and food security must also be closely linked.(Short,2001) This is the general approach. But what can the international society and sovereign states do with local people and with the social problems originating from food insecurity.

FOOD CRISIS AND LEVELS OF CONFLICT

Practically, the different levels of food insecurity are dealt with according to what economically can be done. Consider these words: "It is deeply shameful that hundreds of millions of people in the world are food insecure and often go to bed hungry. But let us be clear that hunger will not be eradicated simply by increasing food production globally, nationally, or at household level. Even in the richest countries there are poor people, living on the streets, often with alcohol or mental illness problems, who scabble through waste bins for food. In most developing countries, there are rich elites that live well and frequently there are food exports whilst some go hungry. I strongly suggest that we would make greater progress if we focus on improving the lives of the poor rather than overall agricultural production in developing countries". (Id.)

These words somehow made a hint to what could be done to alleviate the sufferings which might cause more severe conflicts in the realm of social life across the globe.

Generally speaking, the various programs with economic, political, agricultural and even legal approaches which have been performed during the last two decades were mostly aimed for decreasing the number of the poor and alleviating the harshness of food crisis. In so far as related to the political and legal aspects of the issue, there always exist some considerations in these actions that naturally lead to

conflicts in national and international levels. Many causes and factors can produce social conflicts, but here we argue that the poverty generally and the instability of food security in particular would cause such conflicts.

At three levels the conflicts in the cultural and political form can be identified.

A. CONFLICTS IN INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Dividing the world into two main poles of progress and wealth named North and South is so familiar that school children may understand it. It is important to determine that the gap between the north with 1/3 of the world population and the poor south with the other 2/3 has been widening or not.

From a realistic viewpoint, the political and economic interests are preferred to resolving any global issue. So, with a huge amount of the hunger in hand it would be expected that the hidden conflict between developed and non-developed countries appears in the harsh form at any time.

Such problems as increasing food prices in developing countries, climate changes and environmental pollutions, and contesting in exploitation of natural resources would prevent the two groups from providing useful solution for food crisis.

The last years of 20th century has given us some statistics that shows the deepness of the conflict between political, economic and cultural approaches of the two groups.

In the new Millennium, many international goals have been driven to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. But in reality, these goals were affected by other issues that combined with each others produce conflicts in international domain.

If some programs should provide easy access to nutrition, the projects of international organizations regarding public education and healthcare may be influenced. How the international society could reconcile these goals in long-term?

There is a correlation between these and neglecting each part of the programs can produce conflict between international poles regarding the others. While the reduction of poverty and hunger would directly help the achievements of other goals, so, too would progress towards achieving the third goal, to promote gender equality and empower women. (UN, 2008)

B. CONFLICT IN THE CULTURAL LEVEL

Cultural differences may seem as the outer layer of social life in different societies representing the effects of customs, ethics, beliefs, and lifestyles. Today, one of the most salient features of social life in developed, developing, and non-developed countries are the main gradients of nutrition and people's access to food materials.

In other words, cultural differences have manifest themselves in the form of the food conditions. People in non-developed countries do not have access to their traditional resources of nutrition. In this way the vulnerability of food security extends to cultural dimensions of social and individual life.

Poverty in the forms of unavailability of food gradients or their high prices and not having enough money to buy them and the deprivation in general meaning and in one word, economic poverty, appears as cultural and political poverty.

Cultural conflicts would emerge in different forms and bring about some behaviors as symbols of xenophobia. The attitude of local people in some developing countries toward foreign tourists is on example of such behavior. In some cases the terrorist acts against tourists and foreign citizens may be justified as a kind of cultural conflict that symbolize the protest of these people who see the welfare of the people of developed countries and the deprivation of their people.

C. CONFLICT IN THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Undoubtedly, the strongest factors which would affect the social status and intensifies the poverty are the policies adopted by local government. These policies can arise from legal adjustments, economic programs, political interests and social changes.

The projects directing food crisis and aiming poverty eradication in the national level usually have no exact assessment of the problems and neglect some classes and their needs.

Recent literature on the political economy of civil war has pointed at the complex interaction of food insecurity and conflict. The conflict challenges are not limited to the economic area. Legal enactments and political changes can urge the masses to come face-to-face with the government for their needs. Livelihood is the main excuse that produces conflict between people and the state.

It is argued that conflict and institutional variability

can cause intensified struggle for access to livelihood opportunities and put existing food system in the country under stress, turning them from predictable mechanisms of production, processing, distribution and consumption into very volatile, unpredictable and uncontrollable system of survival. (Pingali, Alinivi and Sutton, 2005)

It is believed that the people's attitude toward livelihood and their understanding of food insecurity is totally related to the institutional, organizational, and developmental acts that are lead by local authorities. In case of natural disasters such as famine and climate changes, they are dependant on supports provided by government too. In this way, rather than strengthening the availability of food and people's access to food, the political famine theory urges that interventions should focus on state reconstruction, good governance and accountability. These recommendations would also apply in food insecurity situations, because, as Keen has stressed, "a lack of lobbying power within national (and international) institutions" is the main reason for food insecurity in many weak states and conflict environments today. (Keen, 1994)

These conflicts are seen in different parts of the world specially in non-developed country, a fact that apparently present the distance between what international institutions aim to do and the sufferings of people in those territories.

The conflict caused by food insecurity can also affect the other economic and social areas. Several reasons explain the dramatic deterioration of the food security situation. Generalized insecurity (specially, in rural areas) has led to a decrease in production, a limitation of trading opportunities and the reduction of financial means.

Various forms of crimes arise from such a situation too. Generally, because of social and economic inequality (which in some cases manifests the insecurity of livelihood means) members of the lower class are forced to commit larceny and burglary, engage in robberies, and sell drugs as a means of social and economic survival. (Siegel, 2006)

CONCLUSION

The reality is that many people are hungry in countries that have more than enough food to feed every one. (Short, 2001) Maybe this is one of the problems that produce conflict in economic and social level. The conflict related to the different aspects of poverty and food insecurity is not limited to a certain society or a part of the world. International strategies, cultural differences which largely originate from geo-strategic divisions, and the

local programs can affect the basic material dimension of life (nutrition) and cause conflict. International institutions must consider the cultural and political attitude of local people in their programs. In national level the local governments must discuss their plans with local people. In general, food insecurity and the poverty if dealt with as a uniform project in the three afore-mentioned levels would bring us nearer to the safe solutions.

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