

Food under Globalization: To what extent are Developed Nations 'Food Secure'?

ABSTRACT

The issue of food security is associated more often than not with developing nations. This essay will focus solely on developed nations and their ability to be 'food secure' under globalization. This however is not done so as to neglect the food security crises of less Developed Nations. It will instead try to emphasize the causal problems of a globalized food system. In doing so it aims to highlight how developed nations advocating agri-trade liberalization and 'comparative advantage', simultaneously create national food supply chain insecurities along with global food insecurities.

Introduction

Food insecurities have been a concern of developing nations for decades. Since the 1970's international discourse has been framed around reducing hunger through trade liberalisation of the agri-sector, often linked to the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980's (Bananomi, 2012). And yet the overall numbers of those suffering from chronic hunger and malnutrition have seen little significant decline. The FAO (2013) states that "*progress continues.....but the rate of progress appears insufficient to reach international goals for hunger reduction in developing regions – the 1996 World Food Summit (WFS) target, which is to halve the number of hungry people by 2015*". Nevertheless the solutions advocated, albeit broadened to include issues of food safety, nutritional value and sustainability, continue to preserve the "*neoliberal agenda where market efficiencies determine results*" (MacMillan et al, 2012 pp182) and support the continued growth of a globalized food system fed by intensive production.

From the viewpoint of the industrialized nations, the food price hikes of 2007-2008 have resulted in a shift in debate focusing on the ability at the household level of nations such as the UK, US and Canada to be food secure. In addition discourses on the subject in the media suggests that net importers like the UK are at risk; low agri-production and low incomes in Romania deny some households adequate access to food and net exporters like Ireland, focusing on its comparative advantage are vulnerably dependent upon the ability and efficiencies of international food supply chains for non-meat products. In spite of this, academic research on European nations' and food security is limited to non-existent. Nonetheless this essay aims to highlight the inherent contradictions of this globalized food system.

Food Sovereignty – UK

“Food sovereignty is the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce the staple foods of its peoples, respecting their productive and cultural diversity” (Menezes, 2001 pp.29)

There has been a growing concern since the onset of food price hikes in 2007-2008 of ‘national food security’ in developed nations such as the UK. Any discussion by governments concerning issues of food sovereignty or self-sufficiency risks being labelled anti-trade or advocating agricultural protectionism (MacMillan, 2012). For this reason the Department of the Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs in the UK states that discussion on *“UK self-sufficiency is fundamentally misplaced and unbalanced”* (Defra, 2006, pp.27) and so discourse continues to argue for a market approach as issues of food security are best addressed by *“improved trading relationships, rather than a drive for self-sufficiency”* (2002, pp.10).

Debate tends to focus on long-term environmental pressures and flexibility to short-term market shocks (MacMillan et al, 2012) such as the food price rise of 2007-2008. New debates have emerged around increased competition for food (GFS, 2012) and the ability of the food supply chain to meet these demands. What follows are some quotes from an ERSC-funded Public Policy Seminar in March 2012 with stakeholders from the Global Food Security (Research Partnership). Using these quotes, this essay aims to show the general trend of debates around Food Security and how the advice of internationally-funded groups, such as the GFS (UK), on how best to achieve exclusively pursues this general ethos of continued trade liberalization and of optimising comparative advantage:

“[the] UK is heavily dependent on imports..... Disruptions to the supply of imports will have serious knock-on effects.....Food self-sufficiency in the UK is not an option....The government has no food reserves of its own, and overall reserves within the UK run to just a few days....Within the food chain, the UK has come to rely overwhelmingly on large supermarkets and their logistics networks.....Opportunities exist to build greater resilience into the food system through changes to farming, social and financial systems. Greater resilience can be built into plants.....Insurance, too, offers an opportunity to build greater resilience through financial systems.....Better

understanding is required of the mechanisms by which shocks and perturbations impact the global food system". (GFS, 2012)

This highlights the inherent contradictions surrounding discourses of UK food security. The UK only produces enough food to feed 60% of its population and any disruptions to imported supplies could have disastrous effects. For example, *"the price spikes of 2008 and a 5.2 per cent rise in the average UK food bill between July 2010 and July 2011"* (GFS, 2012) have given rise to claims by NGO's that food insecurity in the UK is prevalent. Oxfam states that *"a record 500,000 people are turning to food banks because they are finding it too hard to afford the food they need"* (Oxfam Media Briefing, 2014). Barnardo's carried out a study in November 2013 involving 118 of its service stores and found that *"90 per cent of services reported referring families and young people to food banks in the past 12 months - 94 per cent of those services making referrals to food banks stated that the number of referrals made over the past 12 months had either stayed high or increased"* (Peachy et al, 2013).

Despite these trends and concerns the official stance of the UK government remains the same: in a global world, self-sufficiency is not an option and therefore responses do not address the inherent limitations and contradictions of a globalized food system. By continuing this policy of 'free trade', imports/exports and comparative advantage, the UK, albeit not alone in this, is simultaneously creating national and global food supply problems. For example, UK food production relies heavily on oil dependent mechanised systems – the UK's (EU enforced) policy of increasing use of (and consequently demand for) bio-fuels to ameliorate its carbon emissions has, in many cases, led to increasing amounts of land being taken over for bio-fuel production (Trostle, 2008) in developing nations. This reduces the land in cultivation for food and drives up both local and global food prices. (TheGuardian, 2011)(ActionAid, 2012) (Oxfam, 2012). All this increases the risks of food insecurity for low-earners both nationally and internationally.

Through the exploitation of its comparative advantage of being a 'grass-land system' for beef/dairy production (Benton, 2013), the UK also simultaneously creates food insecurity nationally and internationally. Nationally, such intensive systems are inextricably linked with increased environmental degradation and long-term depletion of natural fertility; while in the short-term, high exports of food require high imports to compensate. This leaves it open nationally to the vulnerability of the global market and food supply chain. In addition, intensive production of beef requires increased animal feed, which is mostly in the form of imported maize, driving the price of that commodity up and availability as human foodstuff down, a cost borne disproportionately by developing nations, . For instance up to 50% of corn production in the US is exported for animal feed (Ciegis et al, 20120 citing Leibtag, 2008) deflecting food away from those most in need.

Economic access – Romania

Using the World Food Summit's definition of food security understood to mean *"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"* (1996), one can demonstrate evidence to suggest clear food security issues in Romania.

Food security of the EU-27 is deemed adequate to feed its population as a whole. (Alexandri, 2012) However there is evidence to suggest that, in some individual countries, citizens are at risk of food insecurity arising out of limited economic access. A study carried out by the global investment bank Nomura ranked Romania 12th on its Food Vulnerability Index. Romania is a net importer of cereals and was heavily affected by the 2007 grain price rise, hence the cereal supply is subject to market forces and volatile (Alexandri, 2012). In addition, incomes in Romania, even with economic growth recorded between 2004 and 2008, remain low for some and hence these groups are subject to issues of 'purchasing power' (Alexandri, 2012) given that *"the highest share of food expenditure,(20-30%) was (is) in Romania* (Ciegis, 2010 pp.236).

Comparative advantage and food supply – Ireland

Ireland is a net exporter of food. Recent reports claim Ireland produces enough food to feed about 36million people (The Guardian, 2011). Agriculture in Ireland has seen economic growth despite the recession (EU Presidency, 2013), for the reason that it exploits its comparative advantage and focused intensive production of beef and dairy for export. Intensive agriculture is linked to environmental degradation and reports by the EPA show pollution to waterways as a result of agriculture (EPA, 2012), affecting long term water security. In addition this focus on beef and dairy means Ireland now imports most its fruit and vegetables from the UK and the resultant loss in Irish vegetable growers to competition (The Independent, 2012) have left Ireland vulnerable to the food supply network. Nationally future food insecurities could develop if the food supply chain was disrupted or failed. Add to this the loss of knowledge, seeds and soil fertility to exploitive comparative advantage and intensive, polluting methods.

Furthermore concentrated production of beef and dairy results in increased imports of maize. Maize imports to Ireland in 2012 amounted to almost 3million kilograms (UN data, 2012), affecting food security internationally. By facilitating the expansion of western diets based on meat and dairy into to developing, Ireland may well be contributing to high food prices and *"denying poor people elsewhere access to grains and other components of basic diets"* (Ciegis, 2010 pp.231).

Conclusion

The extent to which developed nations are food secure is not yet sufficiently threatened to discuss the “*limitations of contemporary policies*” (Young, 2004 pp7). Although evidence to suggest food poverty exists in the UK and Romania, the EU as a whole is classified as food secure. As Young suggests; “*it is difficult not to conclude that the global food system as currently managed is ethically unjustifiable and unsustainable*” (2004, pp.14). The biggest threat to food security in developed nations is that by seeking to achieve food security within the context of globalization they are merely exporting their food security issues and thereby inevitably compromising the long term security of the global system on which they have chosen to depend.

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