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Defining World Hunger

SCALE AND NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY IN INTERNATIONAL FOOD SECURITY
POLICY DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Through a reading of policy texts centering upon food security published by the World Bank and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, I problematize the concept of food security by showing how its definition and its scale have changed over time. I use scale as an analytic frame to highlight how changing definitions of food security serve neoliberal ideology. The scaled definitions of food security move from an early emphasis upon the attainment of food security at the international and national levels to a micro-level focus upon households and gendered individuals. The most recent changes link individuals to global modalities of governance with an emphasis upon the instrumentality of agricultural productivity in economic development strategies. Considering the contested and dynamic construction of scale in relation to the changing definitions of international food security reveals the political and ideological dimensions of these dynamics and their contradictions with the material history of hunger over the last thirty years.

Keywords: scale, food security, development, discourse

Introduction

“Food security” is a term often used interchangeably with “hunger.” Groups and organizations situated across a broad spectrum of political positions employ the term not only to define food access but also to respond to the problem of world hunger. Multilateral, internationally influential organizations such as the World Bank, as well as small-scale nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to social justice, equity and sustainability, construct definitions of food security in relation to geographic scale, employing global, national, local and individual levels (World Bank 1986; Allen and Hinrichs 2007). My objective is to problematize “food security” by

examining how its definitions and its scale have shifted over time in international food policy texts. These changes have political, economic and material outcomes in particular places, and serve to further entrench neoliberal ideology as defining the problem of world hunger and shaping the responses to it. Understanding how and why these scales shift is revealed through an investigation of international food policy discourse within the context of the geopolitics of food production, distribution and consumption.

This paper explores the changing definitions of “food security” in its relation to scale in publications of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Bank over the last thirty years. The scaled definitions of food security have changed from an early emphasis upon the attainment of food security at the international and national levels to a micro-level focus upon households and gendered individuals. The most recent changes link individuals and households to global modalities of governance and technical interventions in agriculture, which are defined and privileged as generating income rather than producing food security as food self-sufficiency at the national level (World Bank 2008). The changing definitions of food security, and their accompanying shifts in scale, have political, economic and material implications and outcomes on people’s wellbeing and upon the structures of production, distribution and consumption characterizing the global food system. Over time, the subsequent development policy interventions emanating from these changing definitions have deepened poor countries’ dependence upon staple food grain imports of wheat, corn and rice from wealthier countries, exacerbating food insecurity rather than alleviating it. Examples from sub-Saharan Africa illustrate these outcomes. This dependence was most strikingly revealed in the global crisis of 2007 when world prices of wheat, rice and corn skyrocketed in response to biofuels production, bad weather, hoarding, speculation, and spiking fuel prices, which increased food production and transport costs.

Considering the contested and dynamic construction of scale in relation to the changing definitions of international food security reveals the political and ideological dimensions of these dynamics and their contradictions with the material history of hunger. Previous research has noted the changing definitions of food security over time ([Maxwell 1996](#); [Carr 2006](#)), but an examination of scale in relation to food security discourse reveals how food security comes to represent neoliberal ideology and its attendant political geography of food. Through a thematic focus upon the changes in international food security policy, I demonstrate how global governance defines the world hunger problem and constructs scale in response to it.

I trace the changing definitions of food security and its scalar dynamics through a close reading of eight relevant documents published by the FAO and World Bank from the late 1970s through 2008 (FAO 1979, 1983, 1996, 1997, 2009; World Bank 1986, 1988, 2005). The World Bank and the FAO are two of the most influential organizations involved in international food security policy. The World Bank, along with its sister institutions the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), regulates global finance and trade. The World Bank and the IMF restructure national debt so that nations avoid bankruptcy and continue to

make payments to service their debts (Harvey 2005; Roberts 2008). The World Bank emphasizes investments in industrial and agricultural development through market integration and trade liberalization (Weis 2007). World Bank member countries each contribute to funding the institution, and voting rights are proportional to funding amounts. The United States, Canada, European Union and Japan have historically dominated its leadership and development discourses. Most of its lending capital comes from private institutions (George 1976).

The FAO provides information and makes recommendations to governments in the fields of agriculture, forestry and fisheries and fosters international cooperation (Shaw 2007). The organization's mission is to alleviate and eliminate world hunger. The FAO was one of the first global institutions to use the term "food security." Its participants include foundations, grassroots organizations, professional associations, other UN agencies and governments. Its budget has been declining and is based upon the contributions of its 189 member countries. The organization has no independent authority or funding, but it does provide an important space for civil society to participate in information gathering and recommendations as to international and national food security policy (Jarosz 2009). Both the World Bank and the FAO publish widely read and influential annual publications as well as studies related to agricultural development and food security. I chose these organizations because their publications, recommendations, and actions are influential in international food policy discourse. The World Bank's influence is very powerful as it sets the mainstream agenda in understanding and responding to poverty and hunger in the world through its lending programs and development agenda (Goldman 2005). The FAO's diverse constituency and wide-ranging publications reveal both divergences and convergences with World Bank development discourses and programs as the mark of civil society is increasingly imprinted in a number of its publications within and outside the FAO (Jarosz 2009). I chose these eight publications because the concept of food security is central to each of them and articulates a particular institutional definition of the term at key historical moments over the past thirty years.

My criterion in choosing these documents is the centrality of the concept of food security to each publication. The term appears first in UN documents and the most important definitions and changes in World Bank discourse appear in the 1980s. In addition, I have chosen the flagship annual reports of the World Bank and the FAO published shortly before and after the world food crisis, which broke in the international media in 2007, in order to compare the uses of the term in relation to that crisis and to update the examinations of the dynamics of food security definitions. I situate my readings of these institutional documents in relation to the historical, political and economic processes constituting structural adjustment and neoliberal rural development programs as promulgated by World Bank policy and FAO discourses.

This analysis shows that as the construction of scale in international food security policy shifts from an emphasis upon the international level of world regions and nations to a focus upon poor households and individuals, the boundaries between the haves and have-nots, the powerful and the vulnerable, are deepened.



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This paradox does not mean that a focus upon the poorest and most vulnerable is not effective, but indicates that as international food security policy places an increasing emphasis upon the individuated acquisition of food in the global market as the desired response to hunger, socioeconomic inequality within and among nations is increasing. This suggests a structural issue as to how food production and distribution is controlled. Within an emphasis upon individual access, food security becomes dependent upon global markets and individual purchasing power and productivity. This can obscure structural mechanisms while focusing upon individual and household poverty alleviation through technical means such as access to seeds, credit and fertilizers. At the same time, this approach recognizes that poverty and hunger are two sides of the same coin and acknowledges the commodification of food. That is, food security is largely based upon the individual's ability to produce or purchase food and is not a human right.

The next section outlines current, relevant research on the construction of scale within geography in order to situate my discussion of the changing definitions of scale in international food security policy and identify the theoretical contributions of this study more explicitly. The remainder of the paper offers a reading of relevant documents in relation to changing definitions of food security and the dynamics of the construction of scale.

The Social and Political Construction of Scale

Scale defines concepts (such as world hunger or local poverty) geographically and is in itself a key concept within geographic analysis. Definitions of scale as a category, entity or conceptualization vary and are widely debated within human geography (K. Jones 1998; Marston 2000; Brenner 2001; Kurtz 2003; Paasi 2004). As Adam Moore (2008: 204) observes, "Possibly the only point about which geographers are in agreement is that scale is not a fixed or given category, rather it is socially constructed, fluid and contingent" (after Marston 2000). Rather than conceptualizing scale as a material entity, I define the social construction of scale as part of representational and discursive processes and material practices (K. Jones 1998; Kurtz 2003). Scale is one way of representing reality in the service of sought-after political and economic intervention, thereby legitimating or challenging dominant representations or commonly accepted interpretations. The construction of scale and the transformation of sociospatial relationships are characteristics of the capitalist political economy (Pred and Watts 1992; Marston 2000). The construction of scale is political and power-laden, fusing ideologies and practices in dynamic and historically-specific ways (Delaney and Leitner 1997: 205). Production, reproduction and consumption practices and processes are central to the construction and reworking of scale (Marston 2000; Moore 2008). Theorizations of scale identify the state, capital and political actors, such as unions, political parties and NGOs, as key components of scale-making. The interactions among these components are crucial in understanding scale construction in particular places and times (Brown 1995; McCarthy 2005). Households and the processes of social reproduction are also key components of scale construction. Marston (2000) discusses how middle class urban women in the United States have employed the

micro-scale of the home in the construction of their political identities. This has enabled them to exert influence in the arenas of production, social reproduction and consumption within and beyond the household

The construction of scale in relation to agricultural production and food consumption shapes policy discourses, meaning and knowledge production, and recursively shapes environmental, social, political and cultural relations (see also Moore 2008: 213–14). Governance, in the form of policy discourse and material interventions in the social and political relations of production and reproduction in the name of economic development, contributes to this recursive construction of scale. Scaled, discursive formations around a key concept such as “food security” change historically and employ scale differently over time in response not only to the changing patterns of capital accumulation, state interventions (or nonintervention) and the oppositional movements emerging from organizations and groups concerned with political empowerment, social justice, labor and environmental issues, but also in relation to ideology and the global institutions of governance. These institutions not only construct scale, but through these constructions link individuals in the Global South to the global modalities of power located in the Global North.

The production, distribution and consumption of food are central to a wide range of productive and reproductive activities. International food policy constructs the scale of these activities and shapes material interventions in food production and reproduction through rural development and food aid programs. This textual and critical discourse analysis of international food security policy focuses upon the scalar dimensions of discourse and policy interventions in order to better understand how the construction of scale shapes the political economy of hunger. The “scaling” of hunger and food security has shifted attention from national and regional levels of self-sufficiency in grain stocks to individual purchasing power and investment strategies which serve to further the neoliberal agenda dedicated to free market strategies of poverty alleviation. Connecting the individual to the global food system and international markets deepens the commodification of food and conditions food access to revenue, capital and individual income and wages. This discursive shift in policy documents devolves responsibility for addressing hunger increasingly upon rural women. This is in line with the construction of neoliberal subjects as entrepreneurial individuals who are responsible for accessing food from the world market as it is shaped by the international modalities of international institutions, transnational agribusiness and the consumption demands of the wealthy and middle classes primarily located in Western Europe, North America and Japan.

Examining the discourses of the FAO and the World Bank over the last three decades reveals how these institutions of global governance have scaled and defined food security in different ways over time. This case study involves a theorization of scale that examines the scalar and historical dimensions of discourse and practices rather than solely focusing upon practices happening at different scales. Focusing upon changing food security definitions and discourses as scaled in specific ways at particular historical moments reveals the politics of the social construction of scale in historical context.



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Scaling and Defining Food Security: 1979–2008

This section examines the construction of scale in food security publications by the FAO and the World Bank from the FAO's introduction of the term in the late 1970s through the present day in order to reveal the scalar shifts as the definitions of the term change over this time period. This chronological reading of food security texts reveals how responses to world hunger have also shifted over time from an emphasis upon national self-sufficiency to individuated access and poverty alleviation.

Food security initially referred only to food grain production and the distribution of grain to Africa, Asia and Latin America (Leathers and Phillips 2004). In the 1970s, grain prices skyrocketed and world grain supplies hit new lows. Five years of devastating drought in the West African Sahel and record-breaking US grain sales to the Soviet Union were key proximate triggers to growing concerns about food security. The earliest definitions of food security appear in UN publications, with one of the earliest appearing in a World Food Conference report published in 1975, wherein food security is defined as, "availability at all times of adequate world supplies of basic food-stuffs... to sustain steady expansion of food consumption...and to offset fluctuations in production and prices" (quoted in Maxwell 2001: 14).

In 1979, the FAO published *The Struggle for Food Security*, which defined food security as a universal problem that demanded better distribution of the world's food supply through reducing disparities in income and landholdings. In this publication, food security is scaled at the national level and defined as developing national self-reliance to meet the needs of developing countries and their growing populations (FAO 1979: 9). The study advocates establishing regional food reserves for countries to draw upon in times of national shortfalls and encourages universal adoption of national cereals stocks (FAO 1979: 33). Food security is constructed along national and world regional scales and emphasizes national self-sufficiency in grain reserves.

For the FAO, Rwanda was a success story in this regard. Under the sponsorship of the international NGO, Catholic Relief Services in 1974, community silos were built in a dozen rural communities, giving farmers a place to store their crops in order to stabilize prices, reduce losses due to inadequate storage facilities and ensure national food-self-sufficiency (FAO 1979: 38). In response to world grain shortfalls and skyrocketing food grain prices in the 1970s, world food security depended upon increasing national and regional food stocks and storage (this defined self-sufficiency in the text) and increasing food aid with attention to landlessness, poverty and land tenure equity. "Social change must precede or parallel increased food production" (FAO 1979: 42). The political problems of social and economic inequality and disparities of land tenure featured in this publication are on a par with increased production and the concept of self-sufficiency.

The FAO established the World Food Council to implement national programs of food grain storage and self-sufficiency. In 1979, the round of talks invoked by the World Food Council broke down. There was no agreement as to the size of reserves,

which price levels would indicate when reserves should be built up or drawn down, or specific guidelines and funding for poor countries to build up their storage capacity and national reserves. At the eighth meeting of the World Food Council in 1982, developing nations proposed that 12 million tons of grain be stockpiled for use in poor countries when cereal prices rose. The United States, Canada and Australia, the world's largest grain-exporting nations, expressed reservations about this plan. The Reagan administration stated that the plan would upset the law of supply and demand (*New York Times* 1982). Robert Anderson, chairman of the Atlantic Richfield Company and a member of the World Food Council, noted, "The United States' position in the world grain markets is larger than OPEC's collective position in the oil markets ... Sixty percent of the grains and half of the oilseeds shipped in world trade each year originated in the United States" (*New York Times* 1980). Five companies, Cargill, Continental, Louis Dreyfus, Bunge and Andre, three of which were based in the United States, controlled the world grain trade at this time (Morgan 1979).

Ultimately, national self-sufficiency in food was discarded. The power of the grain companies as well as the market-led development strategies of the Reagan administration overcame the efforts of poor countries attempting to stockpile grain in line with this definition of food security. This deepened the vulnerability of nations such as Nigeria, where wheat bread is a staple food. Nigeria was self-sufficient in food in the 1960s, but during the oil boom of the 1970s, wheat imports grew at roughly 20 per cent per annum ([Andrae and Beckman 1985](#)). This growth in wheat imports was mirrored by a corresponding drop in the production of indigenous staple food crops such as millet, beans, yams and cassava, and the contraction of domestic agriculture. As the terms of trade declined in the 1980s and the world oil economy contracted, food imports absorbed an increasing proportion of the state's revenues. For example, in 1983, nearly one-quarter of Nigeria's earnings were spent on wheat imports as the definition of food security moved from one of national self-sufficiency to market dependency.

From National Self-Sufficiency to Global Market Dependency in the 1980s

In 1983, the FAO published *Approaches to World Food Security*. In a reversal from the 1979 publication, *Approaches to World Food Security* noted that international food security rested upon the stockholding policies of major exporting countries. This definition resonates with the failure to institute national cereal reserves proposed by the FAO in 1982. Food security is located in the Global North and is tied to the capital accumulation strategies of states and of transnational grain companies. The report further states these stockholding policies were "accidental byproducts of PL-480" (FAO 1983: 6). In 1954, the US Congress linked US grain surpluses to domestic and international food aid and development programs through the passage of Public Law 480. Geopolitical considerations, especially Cold War policy concerns, were pivotal as to which nations received how much grain as part of a development program or as food aid. But how "accidental" was this? Critics argue that food surpluses in the developed countries and food shortages in



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developing countries were hardly accidental, but were carefully considered geopolitical strategies (George 1976). These surpluses were instrumental in feeding urban populations in developing countries and instituting cheap food policies for industrial development strategies popular in the 1970s and 1980s (George 1976; L. Young 1997; Lawson 2007). Imported wheat, corn and rice undercut domestic production of food grains and deepened some of the developing countries' dependence upon imports—some of which were not indigenous food grains that were easily grown in local and regional eco-systems, as illustrated by Nigeria's deepening dependence upon imported wheat. The United States could also use food as a weapon, denying food grain to countries that were not responsive to US policy. For example, in 1970, the majority of subsidized food shipments to Chile were stopped after Salvador Allende was elected president; they were also one of the first forms of aid to resume after his US-backed fall in 1973 (Morgan 1979). As Earl Butz, Secretary of Agriculture during the Nixon and Ford administrations said, "Hungry men listen only to those who have a piece of bread. Food is a tool. It is a weapon in the US negotiating kit" (Patel 2007: 91).

As grain surpluses continued to accumulate in North America, Western Europe and Australia, food aid was conceived of as "freedom from hunger," and development strategies utilizing imported grain surpluses were dubbed "development through food" in this publication (FAO 1983: 7). These were foundational concepts guiding the distribution of food grain in emergencies through the UN's World Food Program, established in 1960 and undergirding international development strategies that stressed urban, industrial development in the Global South and provided cheap food to urban residents and workers while ignoring the development of rural agrarian economies.

In *Poverty and Hunger: Issues and Options for Food Security in Developing Countries*, the World Bank provides the following influential definition of food security: "Food security has to do with access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life" (World Bank 1986: v). Schlomo Reitlinger and Jack van Holst Pellekaan, the lead authors of this publication, change the scale of food security from a national focus to a focus on the micro-level of individuals, particularly the 700 million hungry people living in the "developing world." Interventions come top-down from "the international community," which is separate from the "developing world." These interventions include accelerating economic growth through structural adjustment policy and investment, poverty alleviation, and the coordination of food aid with other forms of economic aid (World Bank 1986: vi). The introduction by A.W. Clausen, then Bank President, and former President and CEO of the Bank of America, suggests that "probably no nation can be 100 percent food secure" (World Bank 1986: vi). Therefore, Clausen reasons, the resources used for food security must be "cost-effective" and "each country has to decide how much food security it wants and how many resources it can dedicate to that purpose" (World Bank 1986: vi). This statement implies some degree of national food sovereignty in deciding how to address poverty and hunger. But there is a contradiction between state sovereignty in food security decisions as defined in this publication and the erosion of state decision-making power in the

wake of structural adjustment interventions into national economies, involving, among other things, a rapid escalation in the costs of fertilizers and other inputs as well as rising food prices in the market (George 1987; [Bello et al. 1999](#); [Mohan et al. 2000](#)).

In stating that it is impossible to eradicate hunger, Clausen's remarks and the definition of food security in this report construct a discourse of trade-offs between alleviating hunger and fulfilling the World Bank's loan conditions. But states had little autonomy to contest structural adjustment conditions, which resulted in, among other things, a rapid and astounding increase in food prices and ensuing food riots around the world ([Walton and Seddon 1994](#)). In the relevant FAO and World Bank publications of the 1980s, national self-sufficiency in food is rejected as a defining feature of food security. In the 1986 World Bank publication, food security does not come from achieving food self-sufficiency in a country, or from a rapid increase in food production (World Bank 1986: 10). Food security is a matter of achieving economic growth and alleviating poverty. Cost-effective levels of food security are attained through economic growth, by exporting in line with each nation's comparative advantage, and increasing the purchasing power of households and individuals. Comparative advantage stipulates the production and export of goods and services for which a particular nation is particularly suited. In the case of staple grains, it would involve the continuing control of key grains such as wheat, soybean and corn by firms based in the United States, Canada, Western Europe and Australia. Food security is defined in terms of the lack of purchasing power—the inability of states and individuals to purchase the food they need, rather than an issue of food supply, social or economic inequality or land ownership. The issues of the ability of states to address hunger is circumscribed by the material outcomes of the of structural adjustment conditions imposed by the World Bank across Africa, Latin America and South Asia during this period. So as this publication argues for the agency of individual nation-states in deciding how much food to import, structural adjustment conditions curtail this agency through cuts in imports, social services and currency devaluation. This results in significant spikes in food prices and growing numbers of food riots around the world ([Walton and Seddon 1994](#)). This contradiction between food policy discourse as constructed at the global and national levels and the realities of structural adjustment results in a deepening of malnutrition and rising food prices among nations dependent upon significant grain imports as poverty increases.

This publication also defines food security at the local level in relation to the household: "Food security is achieved only if all households have the ability to buy food. There is no necessary link between self-sufficiency and food security" (World Bank 1986: 31). National food stocks are not as cost-effective as the ability to purchase food in the globalized market. The report aligns "food security" with development and argues that food security alone cannot define the problems of agricultural development:

The term "food security" came into use about ten years ago to describe a broad range of development issues. It is perhaps natural to put new labels on old



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problems that defy easy solutions, but the price of combining loosely related subjects under a new name can be high. For example, redefining problems of agricultural development and general development as problems of food security does little to increase understanding of either issue. (World Bank 1986: 13)

Food security is understood as no different from mainstream development issues and thus is constructed as requiring the same remedies of structural adjustment, trade liberalization and integration into global capital markets as a way to meet national food needs. Food is deeply commodified in this definition. The moral and social dimensions of food security as articulated in earlier FAO publications fall away here, and food security becomes both individualized and an object of cost-effective choice for developing nations. However, that choice is effectively contradicted by structural adjustment conditions, which restructure national economies outward toward debt repayment and countries' deepening integration into the world grain trade through continuing dependency upon grain imports. This serves to reinscribe the food flows of the globalized food system and the boundaries between the haves and the have-nots. Control of corn and wheat flows remains with the Global North.

The case of Zimbabwe is instructive. Upon its independence from Britain in 1980, Zimbabwe's food and agricultural policy focused upon small farms and boosting regional food security (L. Young 1997). The nation built up stocks for domestic food shortfalls in the event of adverse weather conditions or harvest shortfalls, and it was known as the breadbasket of Southern Africa. As the market-based definitions of food security began to shape international food security policy, the World Bank encouraged Zimbabwe to sell its food stocks, arguing that it was more cost-effective to buy grain on the international market using revenues from exports. Following the World Bank's directions, Zimbabwe found itself having to purchase considerable amounts of grain from the world market in the wake of a devastating drought (L. Young 1997). There was a notable rise in childhood malnourishment from 1982 to 1984 that was linked to structural adjustment conditions (Davies and Saunders 1987). Surveys have confirmed linkages between the rise in malnourishment among children and the increase in infant mortality in Zimbabwe in the 1980s (Cornia *et al.* 1987).

According to *Poverty and Hunger: Issues and Options for Food Security in Developing Countries*, if food security is redefined as a lack of individual purchasing power, "financing investments that directly raise incomes of the poor should receive high priority" (World Bank 1986: 50). While recognizing the important link between hunger and poverty, this definition of food security deepens food's status as a commodity and emphasizes the acquisition of capital and increased income as key aspects of food security. The issues of socioeconomic inequality, landlessness, class and ethnic divisions, conflict and disease are absent. This is a neoliberal response to hunger: one can eat if one can buy or grow adequate food. Food security is dependent upon adequate personal income, markets and upon the workings of the globalized food system. Here scale is constructed so that those identified as poor, as measured by their incomes, become the focus of food security interventions.

While the focus upon poverty as a cause of hunger is important, the poor are responsible for alleviating their hunger by making more money. This stance does not take into account the price spikes in the cost of food in the 1980s due to structural adjustment conditions or the increase in the costs of fertilizer and medicines necessary for an active agricultural labor force. Taken together, the political economy of hunger, the changing discourse of food security, and the construction of food security at the scale of “the poor” focuses attention upon individuals’ lack of purchasing power or access rather than addressing the capitalist political economy and the unequal relations of production and consumption in the workings of the global food system. Paying attention to the construction of scale in this report reveals how this focus defines neoliberal approaches to hunger through a focus upon individual incomes rather than examining the political, economic and social constraints reproducing poverty across scales.

Poverty and Hunger: Issues and Options for Food Security in Developing Countries (World Bank 1986) identifies South Asia and Africa as the most food insecure world regions and asserts that accelerating agricultural development will contribute to raising rural individuals’ ability to purchase food and contribute to the growth of national agricultural exports, thereby accelerating economic development (World Bank 1986: 6). Subsequently, *The Challenge of Hunger in Africa: A Call to Action* defines Africa’s food situation as “serious—and deteriorating” (World Bank 1988: 3). Following the 1986 publication, this text also calls for targeting specific groups of hungry people and tailoring programs to their needs. Food security is defined in a circular manner, as an “input” critical for economic growth as well as an “output” of that growth (World Bank 1988: 5). Thus, food security programs reinforce economic growth and involve trade-offs between fostering that growth and eliminating hunger (World Bank 1988: 5). In this way, economic growth is thereby privileged over hunger eradication through the assertion that nations acknowledge that some anti-hunger programs are not cost-effective, as Clausen outlined in his introduction in 1986. Food storage by private traders is defined as the most efficient and cost-effective means of addressing shortfalls rather than government owned and regulated grain stocks (World Bank 1988: 10). Because of the erosions of food security under structural adjustment conditions, food aid is necessary and vital to address lack of food purchasing power. The struggle against hunger is yoked to economic rationalities, not social change or moral imperatives as it was previously articulated in FAO publications of the late 1970s.

The cover of this report depicts an African woman feeding a child and identifies women as essential to food security in Africa, because most of the people of Africa live in rural areas, and because most rural women are farmers. They are responsible for feeding their children either through farming or trading. Women and their children—especially in female-headed households—are particularly vulnerable to hunger. In a box set off from the rest of the text, titled “Women and Population Growth: Two Neglected Elements of Food Security,” women and population growth are identified as central to achieving food security in Africa. This is because the majority of African farmers are women who are responsible for



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feeding their children. Women's nutritional status is also highly influential upon their children's levels of nutritional health. "Specific efforts are needed to reorient government programs to serve women better, particularly in agriculture (World Bank 1988: 6). The report offers three recommendations to increase women's agricultural productivity in order to attain food security. Women's workloads could be reduced by the introduction of technological innovations in food processing. Increasing the numbers of women in extension services and providing women with land tenure would enable access to the latest knowledge about agricultural practices as well as providing needed control over land resources. Thus, "while agricultural production and economic growth determine how much food and income there is to go around, population growth affects how many mouths there are to feed" (World Bank 1988: 6). At the same time that women are pivotal in the fight against hunger, they are also co-contributors to population growth, which undermines the technical recommendations related to increasing their food production (World Bank 1988: 6). However, there is no discussion of why rural people may see having children as advantageous in terms of additional household labor power or in their caring for elderly parents (Mamdani 1972). High mortality rates caused by HIV/AIDS deaths and the ensuing labor shortages in agriculture, the variability of population growth rates over the continent, and the cutbacks in health and reproductive services due to lack of funding also shape population growth rates and people's desires to have children (Blaikie 1992; UN Population Fund 1999).

The World Bank's 1986 policy study on food security constructs hunger as a problem of development that is alleviated by economic growth and the ability of countries to address hunger by buying food within the globalized food system, wherein the grain trade is dominated by wealthy nations and controlled by a handful of large agribusiness firms. Groups and individuals most vulnerable to food insecurity are identified, and obtaining food is linked to increasing revenues at the individual and at the national levels through increasingly linking domestic agrarian economies to globalized agriculture, which is most responsive to the wealthiest people and states. The shifts in the definitions and scale of food security between the FAO's (1979) *Struggle for Food Security* and the World Bank's 1986 and 1988 publications are striking as food security is defined in the terms of market exchange and capital accumulation through the construction of scale at the level of poor people located in the regions of South Asia and Africa. Ultimately, scale is constructed so that it is embodied by the gendered individual—the poor rural woman in the ambiguous position of being necessary to the attainment of food security through her gendered responsibilities, but who also threatens food security by contributing to population growth.

This definition and construction of scale continues to be reinforced in related publications from the UN and the World Bank in the new millennium. For example, "Food Security, Poverty and Women: Lessons from Rural Asia," published by the UN International Fund for Agricultural and Development, explains the shift in scale as necessary, because when food security meant national self-sufficiency it could bypass the poorest:

It was soon realized however, that this gave a very limited view of the food security problem. A large segment of a population could be living in hunger even if the country had sufficient food for the aggregate times ... Adequacy at the aggregate level does not necessarily ensure adequacy at the household or individual level. (International Fund for Agricultural and Development 2006: 1)

In a general way this statement is accurate, but when taken with the World Bank's 1986 publication, this scaling of hunger to the local level of individuals and households without consideration of the global and national relational histories between former colonizers and their colonies, as well as the political and economic relations shaped by structural adjustment conditions and the debt crisis, and by the patterns of US grain in aid and development packages, ignores the political and economic mechanisms enabling and constraining individual and household food security. The focus upon a depoliticized, ahistorical household's economic income in a time when incomes were rapidly being eroded by currency devaluations mandated by debt restructuring makes intervention possible, but makes poverty alleviation difficult.

The sustainable livelihoods analytic approach is focused upon the household and individual levels. This approach examines how people use resources to construct their livelihoods ([Swift and Hamilton 2001](#)). The livelihoods approach also examines contextual and institutional settings as well as the capabilities of livelihoods to cope and recover from stresses and shocks and how livelihoods maintain and enhance their capabilities and assets in both rural and urban settings ([Scoones 1998](#); [Swift and Hamilton 2001](#)). As with an emphasis upon individual food security, this approach may reveal intra-household vulnerabilities and micro-geographies of resource access and control, but can miss larger structures and processes shaping food production, distribution and access ([Bryceson 1999](#)).

Food Security and the Gendered Individual in the 1990s

At the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, the FAO's definition of food security mirrored the World Bank's. Food security for all the world's people meant increasing food production for the world's hungry and implementing policies that make it possible for them to grow or buy the food they need. In *World Food Summit: Renewing Global Commitment to Fight Hunger*, the FAO (1996: 1) defined food security as "access at all times to the food required for a healthy, active life—for all the world's people." This definition omits a consideration of the conditions and social relations of production and reproduction across scale. Food is placed at "the top of the global agenda alongside peace and stability" (FAO 1996: 1). One major goal set by the 1996 World Food Summit was to halve the number of chronically hungry people in the world by 2015, a decrease of about 400 million people. This commitment was signed by 185 nations, while Cuban President Fidel Castro, echoing the sentiments of a number of nongovernmental organizations such as Food First, called the goal "shameful" because it was not dedicated to eliminating world hunger (Food First 2002: 1).



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With food export prices up 30–50 percent, the specter of dwindling food supplies amid a growing population emerges in this report. The FAO’s response to food security issues is now almost indistinguishable from the World Bank’s. Both institutions focus upon agriculture as a driver of economic development with the economics of food aid and trade as dominant responses to world hunger. Individuals are now responsible for feeding themselves either through the market or their own labor. In one departure from the World Bank publications, the FAO (1996: 1) calls for the involvement of “all people in decisions and actions that affect their food security” but does not detail how this broad-based participation would come about.

Women’s contributions to food security are identified and gendered in the FAO’s 1997 publication, *Rural Women and Food Security*. Women’s knowledge about indigenous species and genetic plant resources is foundational to biodiversity, which is recognized as “essential to food security” (FAO 1997: 13). Women’s responsibilities for food preparation and caring for households in terms of producing and attaining food are identified. By the mid-1980s, the publication notes, nearly one-third of rural households were female headed and African women “now constitute the majority of smallholder farmers, provide most of the labour and manage farms on a daily basis” (FAO 1997: 13). This statement draws from a World Bank discussion paper (Saito *et al.* 1994). The FAO’s recommendations are similar to those of the World Bank, which are to bring women more firmly into rural development initiatives, through the integration of women into development strategy (Kabeer 1994). Feminist critics of this stance point out the importance of gendered power relations as shaping women’s marginalization in farming as well as in development programs and strategies. They argue that a sole focus upon women without considering gender relations and gendered access to food-producing resources overlooks an important constraint upon women’s actions and decisions.

With the exception of *The Struggle for Food Security* (FAO 1979), food security discourse at the global level promotes economic growth, increasing agricultural productivity and a targeting of the poor—especially women—as the pathways to freedom from hunger throughout the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. National self-sufficiency and food security are delinked, and women’s labor is critical for food security at the micro-level of the household because of their roles as caregivers and farmers. Although the focus upon women and hunger is very important, the lack of consideration of gendered power relations seriously hinders women-centered development projects. The problem of hunger is individualized and rendered an economic and technical problem (see also Li 2007). Interventions are premised upon the idea that there are people (rural women) whose situations must be improved through an ideology of technical applications that measure progress (Ludden 1992; Li 2007: 15–16). But as feminist political ecology research has demonstrated, resource access issues are deeply embedded in social relations that are gendered, classed, raced and power-laden (Agarwal 1989; Rocheleau *et al.* 1996; Schroeder 1999).

At the end of the 1990s, food security is indistinguishable from neoliberal development discourse, which emphasizes competitive entrepreneurial

individuality, deregulation of international trade, an economic definition of poverty alleviation, and the privatization and downsizing of social services (Peck and Tickell 2002; Goldman 2005). At the same time, international food security policy discourse defines food access in terms of individuals' and nations' abilities to pay for it in the global and corporate controlled marketplace. Individual responsibility for maintaining food security devolves upon rural women in their roles as farmers and caregivers without addressing the politics of gender relations but acknowledging women's lack of political power to enhance their access to resources. But it is important to recognize women's important roles in social reproduction, which invariably centers upon feeding others, as these publications do. This integration of poor rural women with the global food system and with mainstream development interventions reveals how gendered individuals are linked to definitions of food security at the micro-scale of the individual body. Class and location position this body, but the crosscutting oppressions of race, ethnicity and marital status are omitted, as are the historical and structural dimensions of women's vulnerabilities and poverty. Women are thereby integrated into food security as economic actors and in terms of their gendered responsibilities, and the micro-scale of the body is integrated with the macro-scale of institutions of global governance. Food security is defined as the work of the poor rural woman who remains to be integrated into commercial agriculture and who is defined by her care-giving work and responsibilities. This deflects analytic attention away from how food security is conditioned by social relations of production and reproduction, and that women are involved in these relations in a diversity of geographically and historically mediated ways.

Food Security, Globalization and Governance: 2002–2008

Most recently, globalization and governance have served to redefine food security at the international scale. This suggests another reworking of scale, which bypasses states and locates good governance in the powerful institutions that have been defining international food security policy over the last thirty years. In *Governance and Food Security in an Age of Globalization*, Paarlberg (2002), an advocate for the use of genetically modified seeds in Africa and a consultant to the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development, asserts that poverty and hunger reduction depend upon good governance at the national level—the role of states in the provision of basic public goods such as rule of law and investment in infrastructure and furthering private investment. He criticizes South Asian governments for disconnecting their food markets from the global economy and pursuing strategies of “self-sufficiency” to the detriment of food security, and points to the region's significant rates of malnutrition as evidence for his argument. He argues that African governments possess weak civil and criminal justice systems and are riddled by corruption and civil strife—the opposite of the good governance required to provide food security. These examples of bad governance discourage private investment and encourage capital flight. (But see Ferguson (2006) who argues that corruption and civil strife have actually encouraged investment in resource extraction in Africa.) According to Paarlberg's argument, good governance



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encourages integration into the global economy and thereby ensures food security. He further asserts that hunger is localized and produced by lack of access to social services, education and forms of ethnic/caste and gender discrimination as well as landlessness and violent conflict. “Most of these local problems must be corrected through improved governmental performance at the national level, one state at a time” (Paarlberg 2002: 2). He proposes that the motto for improving food security should be to “think locally, then act nationally.” But by blaming the state, this analysis sidesteps the ways in which the global food system operates and links the overfed and underfed nations of the world, and it also bypasses the problem of rapidly increasing social and economic inequalities within and among nations (E.M. Young 2004; Patel 2008). This argument maintains the World Bank prescriptions of food security, while now shifting the blame to individual states. [Paarlberg \(2002\)](#) advocates that the World Bank should retain a leading role in technical assistance and food security strategies, focused primarily on poor countries. “We believe food security is inherently a global public good, it requires a multilateral response for which the World Bank is uniquely equipped” (Paarlberg 2002: 2). The case for global forms of governance to attain food security emerges in this publication. The striking omission of hunger in wealthy countries such as the United States enables a focus upon the Global South and leaves the broader issue of world hunger and global poverty unacknowledged.

The FAO’s *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2004*, a progress report on one of the central Millennium Development goals of halving world hunger by 2015, notes that efforts to reach this goal have fallen short, and more people were malnourished in 2000–2002 than in 1995–1997 (FAO 2004). This publication acknowledges that conflict and war have impacts on hunger, but the impacts of HIV/AIDS upon food security are not acknowledged. In contrast, the World Bank’s study, “Enhancing Food Security in Afghanistan” (World Bank 2005) does not mention the impacts of war, displacement and disease upon agricultural production, the deterioration of the infrastructure and credit access at all. These factors are rarely mentioned in definitions of food security in Africa and elsewhere. The FAO response is now to “scale up action to scale down hunger” (FAO 2004: 32). This means instituting large-scale programs that increase productivity, provide infrastructure, manage forest and fishery resources, and develop markets. These actions are all defined as income-producing for small farmers and the rural landless—two groups the FAO has identified as comprising 70 percent of the people in the Global South who are poor and hungry. Political objectives such as the role of democracy in sustainable food systems or citizens’ choices as to how their regional and national food systems should be constructed are omitted from the purview of global governance. Global governance means large-scale programs reminiscent of mainstream development programs and discourses.

Recent studies ([Li 2007](#); West 2006) focused upon governance and governmentality as they concern rural development and environmental conservation have noted the ways in which global governance through international institutions such as the World Bank and NGOs such as the Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund now constitute key sites of governance with direct and often

negative and coercive impacts upon the livelihoods of rural people. This overview of the discourses of food security suggests some parallels with the emerging critique of what Goldman (2005) calls “green neoliberalism.” The assertion that global institutions such as the World Bank can effectively address food insecurity reproduces the status quo of global governance in rural development strategies under structural adjustment conditions over the past twenty years. The construction of scale now links global governance to the gendered individual living in the Global South in food security discourse.

The World Bank’s 2008 annual report, *Agriculture for Development* conceives of agriculture as an instrument for development. Food security merits no sustained attention in the report, but is mentioned in a sidebar, “Focus C: ‘What are the links between agricultural production and food security?’” (World Bank 2008: 4). Agriculture is the key to increasing food supply, rural incomes and nutritional quality. Investments in agriculture are essential to food security. These investments include improved irrigation systems and the development of drought-tolerant crops (World Bank 2008: 94). Productivity is scaled at the national level, as the world is generally seen as food secure and nations are ranked regionally and singly in a hierarchal measure of hunger in annual food security reports as well as within this report (World Bank 2008: 94). The report notes that dependency upon imported foods has increased, with alarming levels of over 40 percent noted in Guinea-Bissau, Yemen and Haiti, while world prices fluctuate. A number of countries (Ethiopia is notable) remain too poor to purchase the foods their citizens need, despite World Bank mandated deregulation and liberalization of their markets. So it is now agriculture rather than trade that is emphasized in attaining food security and attention returns to the national level in hierarchies reminiscent of the modernization theory of the Cold War era. This report notes patterns of declining international investment in agriculture throughout the 1990s when food security was premised upon integration into global markets and food purchases from those markets. Food self-sufficiency and domestic subsidies continue to be rejected (World Bank 2008: 112), while technological innovation through genetic engineering and resource conservation and sustainable development are objectives. Global issues such as climate change and international trade herald a “new global agenda” (World Bank 2008: 260). Key players are the FAO, the WTO, the World Bank and the international NGO community, as well as the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations and global agribusiness. This report recognizes agriculture as a public good (although falls short of advocating food as a human right) and announces in an era of global governance of agriculture involving old and new players.

The US Agency for International Development, the key federal agency involved in international food security issues, responds to food security through “country-led partnerships and investments in market-driven agriculture to provide reliable access to nutritious food and raise incomes of the rural poor” in line with the World Bank’s approach (USAID 2010). Increasing agricultural productivity through research and technology, access to inputs markets and trade with an emphasis upon small-scale women farmers forms a centerpiece to the agency’s food security agenda in its seminars, training programs and Borlaug Fellowships programs. The



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role of the United States is also important in understanding the development and evolution of the emphasis of technical improvements and economics in defining food security.

Perhaps the most hopeful and significant departure from an emphasis upon increasing productivity through technological means and emphasizing market-based solutions comes from the FAO's *State of World Food Insecurity 2009* annual report. This report calls for a "right to food approach" (FAO 2009: 2), which is defined as people's control over resources which allow them to produce or obtain access or entitlement to food as well as improved governance at the international, national and local levels, which suggests the importance of political and economic institutions in constructing food rights. Flavio Valente, Secretary General of FoodFirst Information and Action Network, cites the institution of the Zero Hunger Program in Brazil to illustrate how the right to food approach can be instituted at the national, regional and local levels:

The new Federal Government, elected in 2002 in the midst of a serious social crisis, defined a rights-based fight against hunger as one of its central political banners. One of the Government's first measures was to reconstitute the National Council of Food and Nutrition Security, with the mission to guarantee the realization of the right to adequate food by instituting the Zero Hunger Programme as a strategy geared to reach those Brazilians most affected by food and nutritional insecurity and hunger. (Valente 2009: 45)

The food rights approach has been a key response to world hunger within FAO publications since its inception (Jarosz 2009). More recently, in the World Food Summit Declaration of 1996 the goal of a food rights approach was to create the basis for food security at the individual, household, national, regional and global scales (FAO 1996). The Declaration affirmed the right of people everywhere to have access to safe, nutritious and adequate food as well as the right to be free from hunger. The year 2015 was set as the target date for halving the number of hungry people in the world from the prevailing level of 800 million (Shaw 2007: 351). As per the custom, the agreed targets were not legally binding. Yet despite the voluntary nature of the published guidelines, the position of the US government throughout was to oppose any right to food approach. It was the only country of the 190 attending to oppose the human rights approach, a position it reaffirmed at the meetings in 2002.

The FAO's World Food Security Committee underwent reform in 2009, allowing space for civil society organizations and representatives to present their viewpoints and approaches to world hunger. This inclusion is evident in the current report, as indicated by Valente's comments on Brazil's hunger eradication program as implemented through its national food security policy council.

Redefining Food Security

Definitions of food security are multiple, continuously evolving and contested. Some counts put the number of definitions at over two hundred (Smith *et al.* 1993; Shaw

2007). Over time, the definition has moved from one of national levels of production to a multi-faceted issue involving access, control, governance, poverty, gender and human rights across geographic scale in line with evolving conceptualizations and linkages between hunger, poverty, economic development and growing levels of socioeconomic inequality within and between nations. The newest challenges to responding to hunger now concern the rise of genetically modified foods and the attendant debates surrounding their cultivation, the impact of climate change upon the world's poorest and most vulnerable people, and the social and environmental instability of the global food economy (Weis 2007; [Chand 2008](#); [Collier 2008](#); [IAASTD 2008](#)). These challenges follow in the wake of the 2007–08 world food crisis when the increases in the prices of staple foods such as rice and wheat doubled, increasing the ranks of the world's hungry by 100 million people ([Chand 2008](#); [Bello 2009](#); [FAO 2009](#)). These challenges are met with evolving definitions of food security as illustrated by the food sovereignty and food rights approaches. Food sovereignty is an alternative paradigm for food and agriculture which emphasizes the right of peoples to define their own food production, distribution and regulation systems that promote food and food trade policies and practices that serve people's rights to food ([Desmarais 2008](#); [Pimbert 2009](#); [Via Campesina 2009](#)). Food sovereignty's focus is upon small-holding farmers, fisherfolk, and pastoralists' concerns about resource access and control. The food as a human right approach is exemplified in the documents published by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter. This approach is aimed specifically at those most vulnerable in the wake of the current food price hikes and those who might not benefit from the responses centered upon increasing productivity and introducing genetically engineered seeds and food (de Schutter 2008).

These redefinitions also emphasize a restructuring of the world food economy away from a meat-centric production system whose social and environmental costs are externalized, to one that is small-scale and agro-ecologically diversified. It is constructed to serve local and regional communities first and address local food insecurity and hunger ([Altieri 2002](#); [IAAST 2009](#)). The debate about how best to address world hunger and world food price volatility currently emphasizes a multi-scalar approach but with differing emphases. The mainstream approach advocates increasing productivity through technological research and agricultural development as it casts the problem as one of supply and demand and keeping food prices low while keeping volumes high. A rights-based, participatory democracy approach emphasizes the problem of world hunger as one of equity, distribution and control and access of food-producing resources rather than a problem based solely upon scarcity. This approach claims that the industrialization and corporitization of agriculture contribute to food price volatility. Proponents on both sides of the debate agree that fair trade in agricultural commodities remains a major obstacle in assuring food security (Runge *et al.* 2003; [Patel 2007](#); [Bello 2009](#)). The billions of dollars and euros spent in subsidizing food grains and other agricultural commodities in the US and EU remains a significant obstacle in insuring global food security.



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