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Crisis of legitimacy and challenges for food policy

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Looking into the food system through the lens of food security, the first decade of the 21st Century was a period of broken promises, distrust, as well as fear and anxiety due to multiple crises in the financial markets—in the agri-food sector and in global politics. I will argue that this economically and politically volatile environment and the widespread distrust of major international and national agencies in terms of governance has led to a global legitimacy crisis, which I consider one of the biggest obstacles in mobilizing the public for social change and policy reforms.

These failures become clear when we consider past pledges that were made to address world hunger. Emerging during the mid-1970s, food security remained as a public policy priority and a popular discourse defining the conditions of food provisioning in modern society (Koç, 2013). At the World Food Summit of 1996, food security was defined as a condition that exists "when all people, at all times, have physical, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 1996). As I outline below, the global community has failed to ensure food security for all.

Failed promises and global distractions

One of the notable developments of the 20th Century was a series of retreats from the previous global priorities set at forums such as the World Food Summit (WFS) and the Kyoto Protocol. Failure to meet established targets had significant consequences for long-term food system

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reform. The most significant of these broken promises was the WFS objective of cutting food insecurity in half by 2015 from 800 million to 400 million (Koç & Bas, 2012).

Even before the turn of the century, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) had already lowered the higher standard set by the WFS from the reduction in the number of people experiencing hunger to a proportion of those experiencing hunger in the developing world, a much lower number. The new targets were to halve both the prevalence of underweight children under five years of age (MDG 1.8) and the proportion of population below minimum level of dietary consumption (MDG 1.9).

The follow up to the WFS, which was supposed to take place in November 2001, was delayed following the tragic events in New York on September 11 of that year. When it was eventually convened in June 2002, the WFS promise of 2015 was replaced with the new target of no more than 440 million hungry people in 2030.

Wars and civil wars in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Somalia, Libya, Syria, Congo, and Western and Central Africa resulted in huge numbers of death and lost livelihoods. These events have shaken the already fragile trust toward politicians and the U.N. system. Unilateral interventions and violations of the Westphalian principles made the U.N. system unworkable, while condemning millions of refugees or internally displaced people to poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition. According to U.N. High Commission for Refugees, the numbers of forcibly displaced people around the world in 2009 was estimated as 43.3 million people (UNHCR, 2009), which destabilizes production, distribution and access to food for peoples in conflict zones as well as neighbouring regions.

These wars destroyed the relative optimism of the post-Cold War era. In many parts of the world, ideas of progress, dreams of enlightenment, and principles of modernism gave way to xenophobic nationalisms, theocratic fundamentalisms, conspiracy theories and distrust for progressive solutions. Concerns about climate change, food security and demographic pressures could be easily dismissed with this cynicism.

Like the WFS goals, another broken promise of the 2000s was the Kyoto Protocol. While most nations continued to talk about their commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the United States failed to ratify Kyoto after signing it. In 2011, Canada, Japan and Russia stated that they would not take on further Kyoto targets.

As a major contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions, reforming the agrifood system would require taking effective measurements towards sustainability. Instead, we had biofuels as the green alternative to fossil fuels, without looking at its environmental sustainability and impacts on food security. Feeding our engines with edible grains and fats meant less of them would be available as food or feed.

Partly fueled by speculation in commodity markets, but mostly for the opportunity of producing grains and tropical fats as biofuel/biodiesel, land-grabbing initiatives resulted in large-scale transnational land acquisitions by agribusinesses, countries, and speculative investors primarily in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America (Blay-Palmer & Koç, 2010). As of July 2015, Land Matrix (2015) database reported over 959 concluded land deals over 35

million hectares of land globally. These initiatives are criticized for threatening biodiversity, depleting water resources, causing deforestation, and denying access of local small producers to commons (Desmarais & Handy, 2014; Margulis, 2013; McMichael, 2012).

The food crisis

In 2008 we had a full bloom food price crisis. Previous research identified the role of multiple potential factors ranging from poor weather conditions to US interest rate policies, increasing meat consumption in the developing world, low grain reserves, rising biofuels, high oil prices, and speculation in commodity markets (Clapp & Cohen, 2009; Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). By 2011, the FAO's Food Price Index was more than double its level in 2000. Rising food prices created food access problems for the urban poor, especially in import dependent countries in the Middle East and North Africa, leading to social unrest (Bellemare, 2015).

By 2009, the FAO's estimate of food insecurity had exceeded 1 billion. Millions of people from Haiti to North Africa, Middle East to South Asia were fighting for their bread on the streets. The food price crisis was a serious challenge to political leadership even in seemingly stable countries such as Egypt (Clapp & Helleiner, 2012). Former Mexican corn producers working in the maquiladoras, former Haitian rice producers trying to make a living by selling pica in Port-au-Prince, Egyptian peasants who already lost their land to cotton barons and trying to make their living in Tunisia and Libya as day labourers could not figure out the complexity of the global system. Trade liberalization was supposed to bring in cheap U.S. corn and cheap Miami rice instead of producing more hunger.

In 2010-2011, the FAO decided to delay their estimates as they claimed they were "re-calibrating" their methodology. The new methodology proved to be effective in reducing numbers of undernourished to an average of 867 million for the 2010-2012 period, at least on paper. While the methodology for SOFI 2012 was rightfully criticized by experts (Lappé, Clapp, Anderson, Pogge, & Wise, 2013), it was not the first case in utilizing statistics for cosmetic progress. The U.N.'s Millenium Development Goals was also criticized for its effort to show progress through statistical manipulation (Pogge, 2013).

I do not want to underestimate achievements. There was significant progress towards the WFS goals at least in some parts of the world. Since 1990, 63 countries have reached the MDG-1 and 22 countries have achieved the WFS target. The latest FAO figures released in late 2014 estimates the "chronically malnourished" as 805 million for 2012-2014. However, global figures could blind us to some important regional differences. Despite significant achievements globally, the chronically undernourished still constitute 23.8 percent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa and 20.1 percent in the Caribbean region (FAO, 2014, p. 8).

Even in countries that showed progress towards WFS goals, we see significant patterns of hunger and malnutrition. This raises the question of whether the problems with food security calculations were due to methodological issues or they were conceptual in nature.

A global legitimacy crisis

To sum up, while we can identify significant new developments in the agrifood system in the first decade of the new century, these are mostly the outcomes of past institutional arrangements and processes. The food price crisis of the 2000s cannot be understood in isolation from these past developments such as the decades-long neglect of the agricultural sector, increasing corporate control, and liberalization of both agricultural trade and financial markets.

Secondly, looking at the food system alone will not allow us to see the interrelated nature of problems we deal with. I know I am stating the obvious, as we all are aware of the fact that food system problems are part of broader interrelated systemic problems. Yet, our attempts to develop effective food policies often carry a naïve optimism that changes in the food system could be possible by adopting effective food policies. As the crisis of the 2000s shows, food security policies mean little without policy changes in global trade, finance, environment and health.

Thirdly, we should contextualize structural problems and policy solutions within their *zeitgeist*, the spirit of times. Shaped by dominant ideologies, myths, public anxieties, popular discourses, the *zeitgeist* provides a mindset that shaping the conjectural specificity where individual and institutional actors play their roles. The first decade of the 21st Century was a period of real or imaginary fears: Y2K, 9-11, SARS, H1N1, Ebola. This was also a decade of speculations, conspiracy theories, and distrust of both major social institutions and leaders. If the 1920s and 1930s were marked by charismatic leadership, the first decade of the new century was marked with distrust of leaders, politics, governments, corporations, banks, unions, the army, lobbies, advocacy groups, the U.N. system, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

In this context, what we are experiencing is bigger than a global food crisis. It is a global legitimacy crisis. If the first decade of the new century gives us some ideas about the future decades to come, with widening inequalities, a failing regime of international diplomacy and cooperation, a global economy shaped by corporate greed, decline of state power and local sovereignty, increasing private regulation, and with alarming signs of climate change, then there seems to be little room for optimism. Increasing concentration of capital in the agri-food system, intensification of commodification of land, decreasing water and food, decline in rural livelihoods, peak oil, climate change and demographic pressures all require urgent and effective policy responses.

Conclusion

The 21st Century began with a series of broken promises, and various forces have distracted us from the problem of world hunger. Conflict, environmental degradation, and the food/financial

crisis have either distracted us from the underlying causes of the problem or have provided false solutions. Failure to address key climatic, economic, political and societal challenges at the national and international levels, and lack of trust to key institutions of governance, media, and civil society create an environment of hopelessness, distrust and cynicism leading to a global legitimacy crisis.

Many of us who are convinced about the need for comprehensive and structural changes in food policies are equally convinced about the need for a paradigm shift (Lang & Heasman, 2004). This, of course, depends on our capacity to speak truth to power, but also to our ability to mobilize and convince the general public. In an environment of distrust, this is not an easy task. The legitimacy crisis creates a serious threat to social change.

To mobilize the public to understand the need for a paradigm shift—and to demand effective food policies that would respond to environmental, social and economic priorities—we need to pay as much attention to politics of food as we pay attention to food policy. We cannot deliver effective policies without effective politics. For this, quoting Antonio Gramsci, we need "the pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will" (Gramsci, 1999, p. 395).

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