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Section II

Progress on the right to food

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The idea of the human right to food as a legal framework to address inequalities in the global food system has become increasingly mainstreamed at the level of political discourse and public policy. Indeed, claiming the right to food on the part of individuals and collectives is now firmly entrenched in struggles for food security and food justice around the globe. The articles in this section provide a sober assessment on the successes and failures of the right to food approach. This includes a careful consideration of the various purposes and uses of the right to food, ranging from a legal doctrine to normative framework for political action to an institutional resource that enables the elaboration of new human rights.

International human rights lawyer Smita Narula observes that despite the mainstreaming of the right to food, this right remains largely one on paper as it has yet to result in meaningful change on the ground. She observes that a drawback to this approach is the nearly single-minded focus by many lawyers and human right activists to target their efforts mostly on State and corporate behaviour while omitting the responsibilities of consumers in the global North to deeper scrutiny; Narula reminds us not to forget that the consumption choices by a minority global North has major consequences on food systems and thus on the right to food of farmers, agricultural labourers and rural people of the global South.

Priscilla Claeys identifies similar weaknesses, however, she shows that the right to food has developed into an important “consensus frame” that has served as a centrifugal force fostering alliance-building among human rights activists, non-governmental organizations

(NGOs) and transnational peasant movements. These new alliances are both redefining the meaning of the right to food and its application as a tool for global social justice. In his article Philip McMichael explores a new dimension of global political struggles over the right to food in the context of international negotiations on principles for responsible investment in agriculture (rai) at the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS). McMichael illustrates how the efforts of the World Bank and private sector actors to co-opt the right to food to justify a “right to invest” is inducing transnational peasant movements to counter with a “right to produce” discourse. These articles illustrate the fluidity and continued political salience of the human right to food.

Nadia Lambek’s concluding synthesis paper provides a longer-term perspective on the changing normative and political terrain occupied by the human right to food. Lambek reminds us that the right to food is a work in progress as the concept is constantly adapted and refined to address challenges in specific contexts and in response to wider global developments. She expresses optimism of what can, and scepticism of what cannot, be achieved by the right to food approach. Lambek concludes by pointing to the urgent need of all actors to support the capacity of national and local institution to implement the right to food on the ground.