

Beyond access: integrating food security and food sovereignty models for justice

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Abstract

This paper situates itself within the conversations about food security and sovereignty. Food security requires that ‘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’ (FAO 1996). Food sovereignty focuses on the right of people and countries to determine their agricultural policies and food cultures, a critique that comes from populations that have been historically oppressed and marginalised. The growing literature on food justice is moving away from models that focus purely on making communities food secure to models that incorporate a wider range of issues beyond trade policies and commodity distribution. In order to understand this trend within the food justice literature, this paper argues that food security is based on a particular model of justice, distributive justice, which limits the sovereignty and autonomy of communities as food producers and consumers. The authors argue that focusing on a purely distributive model of justice, as instantiated by food security models, is an incomplete method for obtaining deeper and more significant forms of justice. For example, replacing salmon with a variety of commoditised foodstuffs can lead to the breakdown of cultural traditions and the increase of food born diseases. So, while in terms of access these communities are food secure, the replacement of traditional foods and the cultural methods for obtaining these foods has led to various other injustices. As such, the authors argue that food security is a necessary part of food justice and food sovereignty, but food security on its own and as the primary model for alleviating hunger is insufficient for creating sustainable communities and limiting harms. This paper relies on an expanded conception of justice common to Indigenous cosmologies, which disallow for exclusionary and divisive categories and practices.

Keywords: agricultural philosophy, indigenous philosophy, environmental ethics, applied ethics, political philosophy

Introduction

For over half a century, combatting worldwide hunger and malnutrition has been a priority for global development programs. In fact, access to food is often considered a condition that must be established before various other issues are addressed, such as myriad environmental, healthcare, and political goals (Schanbacher 2010). Today, a wide range of non-government organisations, charities, and government agencies run programs aimed at bringing about greater access to food or ‘food security.’ This term is often used by these organisations to signify various development efforts that share the common goal of eliminating hunger. However, previous strategies that predominantly utilise market-based mechanisms have recently been critiqued (Lyson 2004, Pimbert 2008, Morales 2011), sparking the development of an alternative model called ‘food sovereignty’ (Schanbacher 2010). Food sovereignty is comprised of a diverse array of social movements (such as small-scale, landless farmers,

indigenous rights movements, etc.) that critique the theories at the heart of previous food security efforts, the policies informed by this model, and the effects of market-based initiatives. Indeed, in the current literature, there appears to be a conflict between food security and food sovereignty models as mechanisms for alleviating global hunger. This paper situates itself within these conversations, exploring what motivates the current conflict in the literature in an attempt to break down the dichotomy between food security and food sovereignty. While we draw upon case studies, it should be noted here that the paper is largely theoretical in scope.

Specifically, this paper will explore the ways in which the conflicts between food security and food sovereignty are not simply about food or market-based mechanisms, but fundamentally concern competing conceptions of justice. We argue that efforts to alleviate hunger that predominantly accept limited concepts of justice, such as the distributive justice model, may cause unintended harms in various contexts. For example, focusing on food security alone might lead to harmful judgments and assumptions about certain communities' preference for nutritionally 'valueless' food, without paying attention to the ways in which certain cultural narratives and traditions have important relationships to and histories of food that not only ground their cultural identities and worth, but also act as a touchstone of cultural remembrance and healing. Conversely, solely focusing on the end goal of making communities food secure might be inadequate in providing communities with the autonomy necessary to make them sovereign food producers and consumers, an idea that is especially important in historically long oppressed and discounted populations. However, adopting a more holistic concept of justice as the foundation for food programs could help dissolve the tensions between food sovereignty and food security. When viewed through the lens of a more expansive conception of justice, food security becomes an integral part of food sovereignty, complicating the rigid distinction between food security and food sovereignty. Adopting one of the many Indigenous models of justice makes it impossible to see these two concerns as separate. However, before presenting this argument, we first give a brief definition of our key terms: food security and food sovereignty.

Food security and food sovereignty

Today, many multinational organisations and government agencies (such as the World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF)) use the term 'food security' to signify the large-scale project of eliminating malnutrition and hunger worldwide (Schanbacher 2010). While 'food security' was coined after reconstruction efforts post World War II and was originally understood to focus on the national level or state level, more recently this term has come to apply to individuals, as well. According to the Food Agricultural Organization (FAO), a nation is food secure 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' (FAO 1996). Within this definition, lack of food security is largely understood as an 'access' issue and thus encompasses a wide range of social goals aimed at increasing access or removing distribution barriers, such as the eradication of poverty, emergency access to food staples, public and private investment in 'developing' countries, and the creation of stable environments through the eradication of war, terrorism, and other disruptions. While these goals are laudable, several scholars (Pimbert, Schanbacher 2010, Wittman et al 2010) and local movements (such as *La Via Campesina* and those represented in the Declaration of Nyeleni) have critiqued food security efforts because such projects were historically built upon the idea that 'economic growth, via

market mechanisms, provides the most suitable solution for curbing poverty and achieving food security' (Schanbacher 2010). For example, both Pimbert (2008) and Morales (2011) argue that, while we live in an era where industrial agriculture produces record quantities of food, the modern food system, built on market-based distribution, is associated with increasing food insecurity, social exclusion, malnutrition, and deepening poverty, especially in the developing world.

Due to these critiques, an alternative method of addressing hunger is steadily gaining support: Specifically, food sovereignty is the *right* of people and countries to define their agricultural policy without the above negative effects. It organizes food production and processing 'according to the needs of local communities, giving priority to production to local consumption' (Schanbacher 2010). Definitions of food sovereignty place a wide-range of other issues above trade policies and simple commodity distribution, such as sustainability, equal land access, ecological impact, protection of heritage breeds and seeds, and the creation of a more 'just' food system. It is concerned with the idea that in many ways food and eating (and all that that entails) is an integral part of human identity and self-actualization.

Differing conceptions of justice

Food security and food sovereignty rely on different conceptions and models of justice. Food security with its focus on access and distribution of certain material goods represents a distributive model of justice. Distributive justice locates justice in the process of equitable distribution of goods to all people. While this model captures a particular type of injustice, namely material inequality, distributive justice alone is not sufficient for guaranteeing the just treatment of individuals and communities. For example, imagine situations where citizens are given identical and equal shares of the corn, but despite this material equality some citizens are still viewed as lesser than other citizens. In this case, distributively, justice has been served, but injustices still abound at different levels. Political philosophy as a literature has been moving away from purely distributive accounts of justice because it recognizes the inadequacy of this single model alone. Nancy Fraser makes the distinction between socioeconomic injustice that is generally remedied by redistribution and cultural/symbolic injustice that should be remedied by transformative methods, which aim to not only change bad or unjust outcomes, but also the structures that produce and reproduce them (Fraser 1997). While Fraser asserts that these differing types of injustice interact and influence each other in complicated ways, they still capture distinct aspects of justice such that examining one without the other is problematic.

Food security could also be understood through the lens of a capabilities model of justice that sees the equal access to an acceptable quality of food as a basic capability, which needs to be met in order for other higher order capabilities to be achieved. However, as we see from our exploration of the limits of distributive justice, a basic capability is the groundwork for other capabilities or just a piece of the project for justice. Similarly, focusing solely on distributive aspects even within the service of other forms of liberation (ultimately) can ignore procedural concerns. Procedural models of justice are concerned with 'the fairness of who gets to participate, and to what extent, in the decision-making processes used to allocate risks and goods' (Whyte 2011). Models that focus purely on distributive models might be enacting other harms by excluding members of communities from the procedural and decision-making processes that let them define and realise what justice means for them. For example, making a community food secure might still involve negative colonial attitudes of excluding

previously and currently oppressed populations from the formation of sustainable and culturally relevant local food systems and outcomes.

Food sovereignty as a theory and project expands itself beyond the purely distributive model and could be argued, as we do here, to be a model that encompasses and entails food security. We are not arguing that food security is irrelevant; rather we are arguing that food security is a necessary, but insufficient requirement for justice. Food sovereignty focuses more on the larger structures and procedures that problematically create injustice and one of those injustices is food insecurity. In terms of solutions, then, food sovereignty has to be sensitive and aware of the different models of justice and the different ways in which harms can be perpetuated.

A multifaceted understanding of the different ways in which harms are perpetuated and the ways in which solutions are formed through different models of justice means that we can no longer talk about food security and food sovereignty as if they are mutually exclusive categories. We can explore the real world implications of these separations between categories by seeing how solutions offered may suffer or indeed instantiate more harms through attempting to maintain these separations. The next section of this paper uses a case study to illustrate how food security may be inadequate to address various food related harms in particular contexts.

A case study: the Columbia River salmon contamination

Amerindian tribes living around the Columbia River have cultivated a special relationship with the salmon of the river since the beginning of their history (Lambert 2008). In fact, the land surrounding Columbia River's Celilo Falls was a large trading area, where as many as 5,000 people would gather to trade the fish. Historically, tribes of the Northwest continually struggled to maintain fishing rights in the face of powerful political interests, such as timber, farming, mining, and hydroelectric power (Lambert 2008). Today, tribal people of this region continue to use traditional fishing methods to harvest salmon from the Columbia River for a variety of purposes, such as commercial, ceremonial, and subsistence practices. According to the Tribal Fish Commission, 'Salmon is important and necessary for physical health and for spiritual well being' (CRITFC 2011). However, the waters of the Columbia River are now contaminated and dams impede the natural migration patterns of the salmon. Tribal members have noticed that the fish are sick and/or deformed, with curved spines and unusual tumours. An Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) study found concentrations of mercury, Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs), and Dichlorodiphenyldichloroethylene (DDE) in salmon and concluded that a person eating an average of 48 meals a month from the contaminated catch will be 50 times more likely to develop cancer. Despite these findings and a push to replace fresh salmon with canned fish and other processed foods, tribal members still practice traditional methods of harvest and consume the fish.

From a food security standpoint, agricultural production in the Northwest region of the United States could adequately address the loss of food reserves due to salmon becoming unsafe to eat. In fact, according to Hormel and Norgaard (2009), the strategy of replacing traditional foodstuffs with processed food, such as canned fish, is the current strategy being implemented to address the contamination of fish in the Columbia River. This potential band-aid fits FAO's definition of food security, as the tribes could be given access to 'safe and nutritious food' that would meet their dietary needs (FAO 1996). Thus, if we focus only on

distributive justice or providing access to an adequate amount of ‘food,’ then the problem appears to be solved in an acceptable manner.

However, as Hormel and Norgaard (2009) argue, providing communities with processed foods while destroying local food traditions produces a multiplicity of harms. This argument can be extended to models of food security, in general. Specifically, we argue that models based on distributive concepts of justice miss key ethical components of the contexts that they are applied to. Here it is important for tribal members to have access to food that is safe to eat, but the salmon contamination issue is not simply a matter of distribution or food access. Humans and salmon have a long-standing relationship that is of both cultural and spiritual significance that cannot be displaced and, indeed, could be disrupted by the implementation of possible solutions that utilize food security models. Efforts to rectify the situation based on more holistic conceptions of justice, such as those that form the basis for food sovereignty movements, would be more sensitive to the wide array of justice issues (such as ecological, social, cultural, health, etc.) that tribal members are facing in this situation. Proposed solutions made by the tribes themselves include various strategies to mitigate the effects of the contamination for the better health of all involved, including the river basin ecosystem, the salmon, and the people (as well as the commercial viability of the fisheries). This is an excellent example of hunger mitigation efforts founded on a more robust theory of justice. We can now examine more holistic models of justice based on the cultural heritage and cosmologies of Indigenous peoples, which begin from a place of relationality that makes these rigid distinctions between ideas like food security and food justice more difficult to create/maintain.

Indigenous models of justice

Generally, Indigenous models of justice focus on the aspect of relationality of all things. In this way, the multiplicity of Indigenous models of justice offer a more holistic view of the cosmos such that justice involves right relations established and maintained amongst and between the cosmos. As Barbara Wall states, ‘Western philosophical concepts generally reflect a discursive process of thinking that results in a dichotomous way of conceiving the world—for example, universal/particular, one/many—emphasizing distinctness rather than interrelatedness across concepts of meaning’ (Wall 2001). While there are various approaches in Western thought, this general penchant toward differentiation and distinctness has already been observed in the separation of food security and food sovereignty as well as the differing conceptions of justice outlined above. In contrast, the Navajo people’s cosmology entails a conception of justice ‘that is relationship-centered, not based on a political authority beyond an individual’ (Wall 2001). For example, taking the Navajo conception of justice (or a Western concept that does not reflect the discursive process, such as one created using poststructuralist theory), we can reinterpret how harm and repair is articulated. Since injustice is conceived of as any relations that are not in balance with the entire cosmos, it is easier to understand how food security divorced from food sovereignty, as a process oriented toward justice, is insufficient.

In terms of the Columbia River case study, divorcing the outcome of the salmon contamination from the context through which it arose, which encompasses myriad harms, is yet another form of injustice. Not understanding the centrality and cosmological significance of salmon to the Indigenous peoples in that area means that the proposed solution is not only inadequate, but also offensive. If we rely solely on a Western, distributive model of justice in

assessing this situation, we would not only not foresee this harm, but we would also not be able to articulate how and why there might be more to be done.

Using this more relational model of justice informed by the rich history and practices of Indigenous peoples (or another model not grounded in distribution, such as a model coming out of care ethics), we find fewer tendencies toward the distinctiveness that leads to unjust outcomes and unforeseen harms being carried out in the name of ‘justice.’ By interrogating the relationship between food security and food sovereignty, we have determined that food security is an important aspect of what it means to practice food sovereignty, food justice and overall justice, or right relations within and among the entire cosmos. This integration allows us to come up with more sustainable, less harmful solutions to the complex harms we face regarding food and food justice in our world.

Conclusion

As the case study illustrates, conflicts between food security and food sovereignty are not simply about food or market-based mechanisms, but concern competing conceptions of justice. Efforts to alleviate hunger that accept limited concepts of justice may cause unintended harms. Focusing on the goal of making communities food secure might be inadequate for providing communities with the autonomy necessary to make them sovereign food producers and consumers. When viewed through the lens of more expansive conceptions of justice, such as Indigenous forms of justice, food security becomes an integral part of food sovereignty, complicating the rigid distinction between food security and food sovereignty. Hence, food security is a necessary, but insufficient requirement for justice. In terms of solutions, then, food sovereignty has to be sensitive and aware of the different models of justice and the different ways in which harms can be perpetuated.

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