The Politics of Hunger and Malnutrition-A Cause for Conflict

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Abstract: *Throughout the history of the human species, at its most elemental level, food has been a game against nature while politics emerged from divergent material interests facing scarcity – who gets to eat what, how often, and through what means of acquisition or entitlement? Over time the scale of polity has shifted phenomenally from local divisions of the grain pile, for example, in India's archetypal Jajmani system to an imagined international community in the Millennium Development goals of the United Nations (UN). The first goal of the global vision of the UN was the elimination of poverty and hunger. In this article, hunger and malnutrition are examined as having the potential to cause conflict among humans in various societies in the world.*
Index Terms - **Component, formatting, style, styling, insert.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the human species, at its most elemental level, food has been a game against nature while politics emerged from divergent material interests facing scarcity – who gets to eat what, how often, and through what means of acquisition or entitlement? Over time the scale of polity has shifted phenomenally from local divisions of the grain pile, for example, in India's archetypal *Jajmani* system to an imagined international community in the Millennium Development goals of the United Nations (UN). The first goal of the global vision of the UN was the elimination of poverty and hunger. It sought to, by the year 2015, to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger – although this target remains elusive (Herring, 2015: 4). In terms of food politics, a wide range of actors will seek to influence outcomes, often conflicting with each other. While consumers would expect food prices to be low, farmers would want them to be high. Those representing farmers will vie amongst each other to whom the largest subsidies would go – for example, to producers of imported products versus exported products. In developing countries, subsidies are often granted to export-oriented farmers, however, on the other hand in develop or rich countries, farmers who compete with imports are favored (Paarlberg, 2010: 6).

The Politics of Food

Food in recent year has become one of the pervasive issues in political struggle. In terms of politics the media often warns of a global food crisis due to rising prices in food and droughts which induce shortages in food, whilst the developed world faces an ever mounting health concern stemming from overeating and continued redirection of food grains towards biofuel production (Lavin, 2013: 1). At the same time food has become increasingly entangled

in controversies at the transnational level in terms of access to food. These controversies have placed food in the forefront of political debates both at the national and international levels. The phrase 'Politics of Food', just a few decades ago, would, have drawn attention to a limited number of problems that might have fallen within the domain of the bureaucracy of the state. It would have denoted a set of issues such as food security, social inequality, nutrition policy and agricultural policy. At the micro level, food security could also mean the gendered inequality in terms of distribution of food and labor within the household. At the macro level (state), it could have been applied to the study of unfair trade, the dominance of multinational corporations and food as a human right. Most importantly the phrase 'Politics of Food', would have denoted access to food at different levels of scale and the problems associated with matching access to needs (lein & Nirlich, 2004: 1).

Food Security and The Politics of Food Security

Human societies throughout time have struggled to ensure that people have access to adequate food in order to lead active and healthy lives. Events in the early twenty first century has clearly demonstrated that despite global efforts, providing adequate food to all peoples remains an urgent problem situated at the nature, society and technology nexus. Rising food prices have motivated unrest in many parts of the world and an increase in the number of people who are undernourished is seen (Mcdonald, 2010: 1). The notion of food security has evolved over time and the First World Food Conference that was held in 1974, focused its attention on the availability of food both at the international and national levels. Food security was thus defined 'as the availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices'. In this context it is worth noting that towards the late 1970s and the early 1980s, when the Green Revolution failed to bring substantial reduction in food insecurity despite increased availability of food, Amartya Sen brought out his most powerful critiques of the food availability argument with his entitlements and depreciation thesis (Sen, 1981). It thus led to the addition of demand-side perspective to redefine the concept of food security as ensuring that all people have access to basic food requirements both physically and economically at all times. In the mid 1990s, two more elements were added to the concept of food security: (i) not only was access to food important at all times its safety and nutritional value also were important; (ii) social and cultural acceptability of different types of food was also taken into consideration (Mukherjee, 2012: 1-3).

In the modern age of globalization, food politics remains situated at the local level. This is because most of the food that is produced in a country is consumed within that country. In most cases the food is consumed by the same subsistence farmer who produced it. Despite globalization, in Africa, only 15 percent of total cereals consumption is satisfied from imported supplies. Only six percent of wheat consumption and one percent of rice consumption is supplied through imports in south Asia. These developing countries that are home to millions of poor and hungry people purchase very little from the world market as they cannot afford it. Typically, the heaviest users of world food products are rich countries and rich countries import from other rich countries. However, these rich countries place restriction on foreign supplies of food staples and national governments guard their authority over these products. In any case, the upper hand usually rests with the nation-state. The politically managed and non-globalized quality of most food systems is also visible through their nutritional outcomes which differ dramatically across the world. The wealthy countries are agriculturally productive and well-fed whereas the less wealthy countries are less productive and home to farmers who are not well nourished. 60 percent of all citizens in the sub-Saharan Africa are all farmers who are undernourished. In south Asia, there are about 400 million farmers who earn

only about US$1 per day and approximately 25 percent are malnourished. The needs of these people remain unmet because both the colonialists and then their own national governments have invested too little in the development of the rural economy ((Paarlberg, 2010: 4-5).

Hunger, Malnutrition and Conflict

In the context of hunger malnutrition and conflict, there can be two distinct ways of explanation that can be offered (i) conflicts leading to food insecurity and (ii) food insecurity leading to conflict. In general food security implies that all people at all times have physical access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. This includes availability of sufficient quantity of food, access by individuals to nutritious food on a regular basis, among others, where problems with any of these dimensions can be termed as leading to food insecurity. Food insecurity has often been associated with outbreaks of social unrest or more severe forms of conflict (Bora, Ceccaci, Delgado and Townsend, 2010: 2) . On the other hand, conflict itself has been the in many instances the primary cause that interferes with one or more dimensions that provide for food security (ibid: 2). In May 2005, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) reported that armed conflicts had become the leading cause of food insecurity. In 2005, forty-five countries and territories were suffering with food insecurity due to armed conflicts. These included twenty-two countries with active conflicts, nine receiving refugees from neighboring wars, and fourteen where conflict had ended. However, the effects of the conflicts continued to contribute to food insecurity. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other UN agencies reported that about fifty five million people were left in need of food due to these conflict with more than half of these people living in the sub-Saharan Africa (Messer & Cohen, 2007: 301). The year 2014 served as a stark reminder that conflicts often worsen food and nutrition insecurity. The destruction of infrastructure coupled with disruptions to access to markets often makes goods and services extremely expensive or altogether unavailable. In addition to this, investors and tourists abandon conflict-affected areas and clashes between the conflicting parties force millions to flee either to safer places within their own countries or in neighboring countries which often results in contracting of economies, instability and insecurity spilling over borders, along with the rise in food insecurity. It is clear then why conflicts threaten seriously our efforts to achieve the ambitious development goals that the international community has been discussing since 2015, including the goal of eradicating hunger and malnutrition by the year 2025. Although countries like Bangladesh, Brazil, China and Vietnam have demonstrated that rapid reduction in hunger and chronic child malnutrition is possible, it is however, a general perception that reaching these goals may be difficult to achieve particularly where countries are affected by civil conflict and political instability (Breisinger, Ecker & Trinh Tan, 2015: 51).

Food insecurity leading to conflict

In January1994, just when the North American Free Trade Agreement came into force, the Zapatista rebellion erupted in Mexico and into the world political-economic scene. While making their demands and communicating to the world through the internet, they demonstrated that food security, globalization and conflict are interconnected (Gilberth & Otero, 2001). However, it is still not clear whether lessons from this rebellion has been fully grasped by global policy makers – that globalization and free trade agreements will have winners and losers and in the absence of supportive public policies, these losers when organized and resourced, take up arms. Trade, agricultural and food policies should not look to eliminate commercial barriers but it should also include the rights to food access, land and water, livelihoods, healthcare and education. The Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), the new Human

Security Unit of the United Nations and the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) right to food initiatives all look to establish a more economically integrated politically peaceful world, based on the better implementation of rational, economic political and legal norms (Messer & Cohen, 2007: 298).

While exploring the links between food insecurity and conflict, it would be useful to place our focus on regions that are more vulnerable to food insecurity than others and where food insecurity has been a catalyst of conflict. These regions include the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. In the year 2011, several MENA countries were seriously affected by conflict and remained so in 2013. Most of these countries have been experiencing rise in food prices and when there is increase in food prices, the impact on household spending is enormous and its effect is magnified politically and socially in two ways. Then is food insecurity a cause for conflict? The answer is yes. Food insecurity when caused by rising food prices heightens the risk of civil conflict, protest, rioting and communal conflict. Conflicts may appear in different forms (i) communal conflict between two or more distinct communities that neither targets nor directly involves the state, (ii) civil conflict between the state and an opposition group and (iii) urban unrest. Food insecurity can motivate participation in armed civil conflict at the individual level, however, acute food insecurity may also diminish conflict because there is limited resources available for militants and thereby hinder active political participation and food denial is often a strategy used in counter insurgency operations (Hendrix & Brinkman, 2013: 4). Thus the causal link between food insecurity and conflict is both complex and ambiguous while the reciprocal relationship is well established.

In terms of communal conflicts, it tends to cluster around areas or regions where land, water and resources are scarce (for example the Sahel). Recurrent droughts have often undermined cooperative relationships between the pastoralists and sedentary farmers as pastoral encroachments of land have increased in recent times like in Sudan. Because marginal lands are used in herding activities, these conflict often occur in the backdrop of chronic or frequent food insecurity and are increased by poverty and political exclusion. Urban protests and riots have received attention following the food crisis in 2007-08 and during the Arab Spring. In connection with the food crisis of 2007-08, a study reported ((Heady & Fan 2010) that there were varying degrees of violent conflict and mostly urban protest occurred in fourteen out of fifty-three African countries. It concluded that food riots are more likely to occur in authoritarian states with few political freedoms and with a high incidence of economic and human poverty. Lagi et.al (2011: 2) formulate an interesting hypothesis to the effect that in food-importing countries with widespread poverty, political organizations may be perceived to have a critical role in food security. Failure to provide for food security undermines the very existence of the political system and once this occurs, protests emerge reflecting a wide range of dissatisfaction that broadens the scope of the protest. Thus increase in food prices is likely to lead to large-scale unrest in regimes where the government has actively intervened in food prices while taking into account past price controls and consumer subsidies. Thus Hendrix and Brinkman (2013: 8) argue that these interventions create expectations that will make consumers to look at their governments in terms of their ability to stabilize consumer prices.

Conclusion

As old as humanity conflict is a salient feature of the human society (Florian, 2015). Even in a situation of non-availability of arms or tools of violence, Morgenthau states that men will fight even with their bare fists (Morgenthau, 1948). This presupposes that human beings will continue to fight as long as they possess emotions that has the potential to love or hate, happy or sad, pleased or angry. This also brings us to the conclusion that as long as humans have other humans around them, there is every possibility that there will be disagreements because their interests differ and their interests clash with each other. Conflict thus manifests itself in disagreements, hatred, destruction, killing and war which in most cases can be posited as those that arise due human beings' needs and claims over certain resources.

Although the study of conflicts is so common, theorizing about conflicts emerged as an important field only after the end of the Second World War. In recent decades, many theories about conflict have emerged which explain that it is very much part of human life. Understanding conflict is determined by the way one thinks about the nature of the conflict. Definitions about conflict move backwards and forwards in which conflict is perceived as negative or positive process. While some present conflict as a natural phenomenon, others perceive it as an abnormal happening, there are yet others who consider conflict as a necessary condition for the development and growth of individuals and societies. In this essay, the focus is to examine food insecurity as the root cause of conflict in modern societies. In this context, it would be pertinent to use the term conflict analysis to mean the systematic study of the causes motivating actors and the dynamics of conflict. Dealing with any conflict would require that it would first be analyzed and understood. Before any intervention can be initiated in the context of conflict, conflict analysis is the most important step that needs to be carried out in order to gain a clear and deep understanding of the origin, nature and dynamics of the conflict in question. Conflict analysis therefore is not only collection of information and evidence about a particular conflict, but it also involves the interpretation and evaluation of the collection information about that particular conflict. Conflict analysis thus helps in the identification of the following: (i) type of the conflict, (ii) causes and consequences of the conflict, (iii) components and actors involved in the conflict and (iv) the levels in which the conflict takes place (Ohana, 2012).

Economics is defined as the science of wealth, and wealth as the sum of things that have value, it would seem that the central theme of science would be value. However, economists use the term value depending upon scarcity; hence value would never exist without scarcity. Therefore, it would be good to assume that everything which is scarce has value. Thus with this qualification we can also assume that value and scarcity are always together and can never be separated. Scarcity therefore means insufficiency to satisfy wants. It must be noted that even though a thing is available in abundance, if there is not as much as is required then it is scarce, on the other hand if a thing is, even though rare, available more than wanted then it is not scarce. Thus, the fact of scarcity implies the existence of a lack of harmony or conflict between humanity and nature. This stage of disharmony between humanity and nature visible in the form of scarcity results in the disharmony between human being. When there is scarcity, we can assume that there will be two persons wanting the same thing and subsequently there will be antagonism of interests. This antagonism of interests between human beings will result in questions that would need to be settled – questions of right and wrong, of justice and injustice, and such questions would not arise in any other circumstance. On the other hand, when there is no conflicting interests between human beings we do not concern ourselves with

it. However, when they are imperfect, we are compelled to concern ourselves with it even if we wish not to. Thus there is a profound belief in some that underneath all these disharmonies is a deep desire to fulfill human interests (Carver, 1908: 628-30).

In conclusion it can be agreed that civil conflict is rarely grounded in single grievance or simple causes it represents the accumulation of a complex set of interrelated factors. While food insecurity and poverty may be the stimulants or root causes for political instability or conflict, neither hunger nor poverty can be seen in vacuum. Other aspects of the political social and economic factors affect the degree to which food insecurities and grievances more generally are expressed violently. Finally, in the context of hunger, it will be interesting to recall Rousseau – What is the purpose of political association? The security and prosperity of its associates (Rousseau, 1762 p.116). Paul Collier in 2008, stated that politicians and policymakers have the capacity to bring food prices down (Collier 2008). Thus, the state has a responsibility to provide for its citizens those things that are necessary for their decent living and sustainable growth.

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