

## 33. Food rights and wrongs

*Naomi Hossain*

The green revolution and integrated world food markets were supposed to relegate scarcity to the history books, yet food riots erupted in dozens of countries in 2008 and 2011. These events starkly dramatized the inequalities built into the world food system, in which food and commodity corporations profit from the price spikes that put people at risk of hunger and malnutrition. While the spectre of starvation through famine has largely receded, food injustice has a new face – the phenomenon of chronic undernourishment alongside rising obesity, as calorie-dense ‘Western’ diets spread to societies that until recently grew their own plant-based foods. While ancient problems of seasonal hunger and crop failure still plague the smallholders of the world, poor people now buy more food than they grow, exposing them to finance, trade and climate shocks. In terms of control over the food people eat, the system is growing ever more unequal, increasingly dominated by big food corporations and the international commodity trade.

Understandings of the world’s globalizing food system are polarized, and the changes are themselves contradictory. The extent to which the world food system is contributing to inequalities in livelihoods, nutrition, food quality and human well-being can be concealed by the abundance of cheap staple and processed foods. Is global food security improving thanks to open trade regimes, agricultural modernization and nutrition science? Should we celebrate the fact that fewer than 1 billion people are hungry (FAO, 2012)? Or should we worry that food regimes during the past century have increased food inequalities, industrialized food production, commodified eating, and eradicated peasantries and cuisines (McMichael, 2009)? While there is little agreement about the effects of financialization, all observers worry that food insecurity could worsen with climate change and water and energy crises.

But while the US\$8 trillion agro-food industry grows apace, so too does resistance to the increasing lack of control that most people have over this fundamental aspect of everyday life (Clapp, 2012).

Broad international movements with wide popular support are mobilizing around food sovereignty, peasant rights, and the right to food, while numerous consumer movements campaign on issues from food safety and food justice to ‘slow food’, localism and fair trade (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009). People across the globe seem willing and able to organize against growing inequality in the food system, as they have done throughout history (Bohstedt, 2014).

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■ **Naomi Hossain** (Bangladesh) is a political sociologist at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), currently focusing on the political economy of subsistence crises. Recent projects include comparative research on adjustment to the food crisis ([www.ids.ac.uk/project/life-in-a-time-of-food-price-volatility](http://www.ids.ac.uk/project/life-in-a-time-of-food-price-volatility), funded by UK Aid and Irish Aid) and food riots ([www.ids.ac.uk/project/food-riots-and-food-rights](http://www.ids.ac.uk/project/food-riots-and-food-rights), funded by DFID/ESRC). Her book about the consequences of Bangladesh’s 1974 famine, *The Aid Lab: Explaining Bangladesh’s Surprising Success*, will be published by Oxford University Press in 2016.

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