



Problematising justice definitions in public food security debates: Towards global and participative food justices



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ABSTRACT

In the current environment of austerity, social justice concerns are increasingly permeating the food security agenda. However, there is a need to clarify what it means to create socially just food systems conceptually and practically. To address this gap, this paper proposes an analytical framework to embed a more complex conceptualisation of justice in food security debates that also serves as a bridging device across competing narratives. This framework is mobilised to analyse the framing process of the UK media, which plays a key role in developing narratives that provide audiences with schemas for interpreting events. Results show the emergence of eleven frames which highlight different solutions to deliver food security. The application of the justice analytical framework evidences the contingent relationship between food security and justice claims and discusses how these food security frames address differently what counts as a matter of justice (including economic, socio-cultural and political dimensions) and who counts as a subject of justice, tackling issues around delimitation of scales and sites of justice. The analysis reveals polarised positions between whether the sites subject to justice should be individuals or structures and uncovers how political and global elements of justice are largely by-passed in food security debates. These conceptualisations of justice and associated policy recommendations neglect the potential for people to participate fully in the conditions and decisions that give rise to particular distributions of goods and bads in the first place; limiting the construction of shared responsibilities to deliver global and participative food justices.

1. Introduction

Rising levels of obesity sitting alongside staggering undernutrition numbers situate food insecurity – or the inability of people to regularly access sufficient nutritious and culturally acceptable food – as one of the main social challenges of our time. Increasingly, the delivery of good food for all has been regarded as “impossible without social justice” (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015:3). Given the multifaceted processes and the complexity that characterises food security dynamics, developing a successfully resilient and equitable global food system requires high levels of interaction between diverse stakeholders and a commitment to flexibility and learning in order to produce effective collective responses (Misselhorn et al., 2012). However, so far, solutions and conceptualisations – envisaged from policy, academic spheres and lobby groups – have mostly revolved around oppositional narratives (e.g. efficiency vs sufficiency, productivist vs demand-led) reproducing old dichotomies (e.g. production vs consumption, rural vs urban, local vs global, protectionism vs free trade, etc.) that are unable to address the systemic nature of the global food crisis and its unjust outcomes

(Freibauer et al., 2011; Sonnino et al., 2014; Lang and Barling, 2012). This paper explores further how these competing food security narratives support or hinder the creation of socially just food systems conceptually and practically.

Recently, there has been a growing body of work around food security framings that aims to unblock this polarised debate and gain an in-depth understanding of narrative formation and its policy implications. Framing is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52). Of particular interest is Mooney and Hunt's (2009) examination of food security as a consensus frame - that is, as a term that finds broad acceptance and consent but that is used to make different claims which result in divergent policy positions to address food insecurity. These can range from supporting genetic engineered technology to advocating for land reform. In the UK context, Kirwan and Maye (2013) use the food security consensus frame to scrutinise the relationship between scale and framing, paying particular attention to the polarisation between the

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‘official’ UK discourse – which supports sustainable intensification, market liberalisation and risk management policies (see also MacMillan and Dowler, 2012) – and the side-lined proposals of local food systems advocates. These studies highlight how food security discourses have the capacity to produce social realities (see also Nally, 2014), which then translate into targets for policy interventions having implications for people’s wellbeing (Sonnino et al., 2016).

Despite the insights gained from previous framing analysis, an emerging food security agenda is calling for an examination of the relationality and potential convergence of different narratives and associated interests in order to deliver good food for all (Jarosz, 2014; Hopma and Woods, 2014). For example, Sonnino et al. (2016) recently analyse the distinct governance frameworks embedded in food security narratives in order to investigate their potential integration. However, there is a need to explore further key concepts that can serve as bridging devices in the entrenched food security debate, and how those concepts are mobilised across different constituencies and deliberation spaces (i.e. academia, policy arenas, social movements and the general public). In this paper, I contribute to this agenda by focusing on social justice, a concept that has recently been recognised as one of the necessary starting points to analyse, and explore solutions to, food insecurity (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015: 3).

Furthermore, in the context of economic crisis and austerity measures, both food security and social justice have also become more prominent in public debates of developed countries such as the UK, fuelled by reported increases in food poverty and inequality (see for example Oxfam and Church Action, 2013; Kneafsey et al., 2013). Particularly, social justice has become a fuzzy and ubiquitous word to qualify food poverty or food security challenges, seldom defined in the academic literature, policy arenas or media outlets. For example, Godfray et al. (2010:818) state in an agenda setting Science paper that the food security challenge now also requires the delivery of social justice outcomes. Similarly, the European Commission (2010:1) argues that “global health improvement depends on greater social justice”; or as Oxfam (2013:7) puts it, the answer to hunger and poverty “it’s simply justice”. The limited engagement of these assertions with the rich literature on (social) justice¹ poses a risk of generating a new consensus frame where ‘justice’ is invoked as an abstract call for fairness. As Loo (2014) identifies, scholars’ efforts have been concentrated in understanding distributive food disparities leading to a narrow conceptualisation of justice that tends to by-pass the root causes of inequality. By unpicking the connections between food security and the justice literature, through this piece of research I set out to address recent calls for a more rigorous scholarship that engages in clarifying what it means to create socially just food systems (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015).

This paper aims to problematise the concept of justice in order to foster progress in current food security debates. The main objective of this piece of work is to embed a more complex and reflexive conceptualisation of justice that allows critical evaluation of existing narratives and provides new elements to help in unblocking entrenched food policy positions. Questions such as what are the different conceptualisations of justice in food security debates, how different food security narratives converge and diverge around particular justice dimensions, and how these distinct justice definitions underpin support for particular policy solutions; are instrumental to assessing the potential contribution of notions of justice to the food security agenda. For that purpose, section two presents a literature review on justice and its intersections with food security, outlining an analytical framework to examine key elements in the process of constructing justice definitions.

¹ In many cases authors such as Fraser and Young use indistinctly the notion of justice and social justice. There are authors who advocate the use of justice when applied to individuals and social justice when referring to society. In this paper I use justice in order to integrate all the possible subjects and matters of justice.

This framework illustrates the way in which different perspectives address what counts as a matter of justice (including economic, socio-cultural and political dimensions) and who counts as a subject of justice, tackling issues around delimitation of scales and sites of justice.

In order to understand how different justice definitions are mobilised, I apply this analytical framework to the UK public food security debate. The analysis of media outlets constitutes an innovation given the lack of food security frame analysis of non-policy communications (with some exceptions, see Wells and Caraher (2014)). Furthermore, the mass media constitutes a key framing actor (see Herman and Chomsky, 1988), actively intervening in people’s environment by creating public narratives that provide audiences with schemas for interpreting events, that is, framings (Iyengar, 1994; Pan and Kosicki, 1993). For example, Sampei and Aoyagi-Usui (2009) found a direct correlation between newspaper coverage on climate change and an increase of awareness of the public, which was instrumental in the implementation of environmental policies by the Japanese government to cut emissions. The framing and presentation of events and news in the mass media can thus systematically affect how recipients of the news come to understand these events galvanising support for specific policies or interventions. Or in other words, “frames influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts, and other considerations, endowing them with greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame” (Nelson et al., 1997:569).

The UK media analysis consisted of two-steps. First, 475 text units were analysed from eight main British newspapers² published in the 2010–2014 period. The text units were selected from the lexis-nexis database by entering ‘food security’ or ‘food poverty’ as key words which resulted in a total of 2572 articles. The text units were selected according to their relevance, source, topic and number of articles in that source. Following Candel et al. (2014), an inductive frame analysis was applied using the qualitative software NVIVO to code problem definitions, proposed solutions and moral bases displayed in the different newspaper articles. The eleven resulting frames were discussed through semi-structured phone interviews with six experts representing non-governmental organisations and institutions working on sustainable development/sustainable food, trade unions, anti-poverty campaigners, academics and agricultural experts. These interviews were instrumental in the establishment of connections among frames and in the discussion of their relevance in public and political debates. Section three discusses these eleven food security framings constructed in the UK media with the objective of gaining an in-depth understanding of narrative formation and its policy implications. Section four presents the second analytical phase, where these eleven frames are further examined under the justice framework proposed to understand how food security debates operationalise different definitions of justice. Using justice as a bridging concept, section five discusses the emergence of two main justice narratives in UK popular debates and their (dis)connections with the justice literature. Finally, section six outlines the conclusions of the paper highlighting how superficial approaches to justice can hinder the delivery of good food for all.

2. An analytical framework to problematise justice narratives

Food security is widely acknowledged as “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”(FAO, 2002). This definition appeals to basic notions of equality. In fact, food security is increasingly associated with notions of sustainability and justice, acknowledging that food systems that are environmentally sound but socially unacceptable would not be resilient in the future and vice versa

² The newspapers selected were the Guardian, Telegraph, The Sun, The observer, The Independent, The evening standard, Daily Mail and The Mirror.

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