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Ethical issues for human nutrition in the context of global food security and sustainable development

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ABSTRACT

One of the great dilemmas of our time is how we will secure and provide plentiful, healthy and nutritious food for all, do so in an environmentally sustainable and safe manner, while addressing the multiple burdens of undernutrition, overweight and obesity and micronutrient deficiencies. The food security directive focuses predominantly on ensuring the world is producing and consuming enough calories in bulk to reduce hunger and safeguard survival, as opposed to a goal that includes nutrition for well-being and development. To advance the dialogue, it is necessary to consider the ethical questions that swirl around integrating nutrition into the food security paradigm. The health, environmental, economic, and societal costs will be substantial if we do not change our course of action when it comes to feeding the world. Yet solving this problem is riddled with ethical and moral implications. Key ethical issues to consider include how to make societal decisions and define values about food security that impact nutrition outcomes, and the ethical trade-offs between environmental sustainability and ensuring that individual dietary and nutritional needs are met. Such complex issues underscore the need to articulate the broader ethical landscape of the nutrition debate within global food security.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Eating is an ethical act

Wendell Berry wrote, “Eating is an agricultural act” (Berry, 1990). With approximately 800 million people suffering from food insecurity, one out of every three people burdened with some form of malnutrition, and a saddled global food system, the view that “eating is also an ethical act” resonates well (FAO, 2013). Through the act of eating, we are more than just consumers. Eating often involves moral decision-making rooted within the context of cultures, traditions and social structures that impact human nutrition and health outcomes in a globalized way.

1.2. Malnutrition remains a deep challenge

Inadequate nutrition has been described as “a scourge in our world” (DFID, 2011). Not getting the right amount and type of food and nutrients, inadequate health care, and disabling environment, can lead to undernourishment and/or obesity—both of which have serious, deleterious effects on health, development, and productivity. Inadequate nutrition contributes to early deaths for mothers, infants and young children, and impaired and often irreversible physical and brain development in the young. This in turn can lead to poor health into adulthood, which affects not only individual well-being but also the social and economic

development of nations (Black et al., 2013; Hoddinott et al., 2013).

We are witnessing multiple burdens of malnutrition, with some countries, communities and households suffering from combinations of undernutrition, overweight and obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies. Stunting, which reflects chronic undernutrition during the early stages of life, causes children to fail to grow to their full genetic potential, both mentally and physically (Fig. 1). Although stunting in children under five years of age has declined from 40% to 26% since 1990 (Black et al., 2013), an estimated 160 million children remain moderately or severely stunted (UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank, 2015). Wasting in children under five years of age has decreased 11% since 1990 (Black et al., 2013), but still, 50 million children suffer (UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank, 2015).

A staggering 2.1 billion people suffer from overweight and obesity globally (Ng et al., 2014) and of that an estimated 41 million children under five years of age are overweight, and two-thirds of those children reside in low- and middle-income countries (Black et al., 2013; UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank, 2015). These growing rates of overweight and obesity worldwide are linked to a rise in non-communicable diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes—life-threatening conditions that are overburdening health systems (Fig. 2). Deficiencies of essential vitamins and minerals (micronutrients) continue to be widespread and have significant adverse effects on child survival and development, as well as adolescent girls and women’s health.

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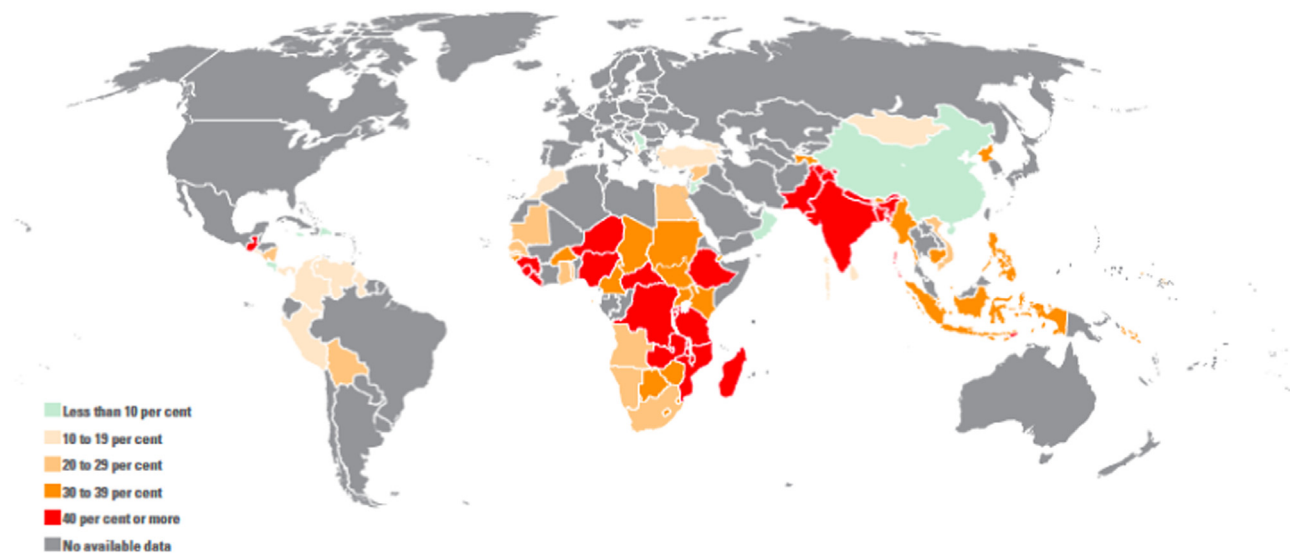


Fig. 1. Global prevalence of stunting in children under five years of age (UNICEF, 2013).

1.3. Delineating the ethical issues for human nutrition

The nutrition aspects of the debate about feeding the world *well* and sustainably are deeply rooted in ethics. This paper does not focus on just one ethical issue in addressing nutrition in the context of achieving food security and more broadly within the sustainable development agenda. Instead, it provides a review of some of the pressing ethical concerns that shape policy, action and accountability in the nutrition field. The paper attempts to highlight disagreements about what values should be taken into account, what trade-offs between values are justifiable, and what strategies are ethically acceptable. While not intended to bring about concrete answers to these issues, it is hoped that tangible progress on ethical issues and disagreements is possible even in the absence of consensus about agreed values.

The ethical questions highlighted in this paper include:

- How do societal decisions, measures and values about food security ensure inclusivity of nutrition?
- Is there a right to adequate nutrition, and if so, what are the

obligations and responsibilities of different actors to progressively realize that right?

- What moral obligations do states bear to fulfill the right to nutritious food for their citizens, particularly the most vulnerable?
- What are the ethical trade-offs between environmental sustainability and ensuring individuals' dietary and nutritional needs?
- What ethical obligations, if any, do we have with respect to the consumption of certain nutritious foods, such as resource-intensive foods from animal sources?

Such issues do not have easy answers and, for that reason, merit serious thought. Articulating the broader ethical landscape of the nutrition debate within global food security is a necessary first step. Considerations relative to the assignment of obligations and responsibilities to public and private actors involved in nutrition and global food systems are another important element in the debate.

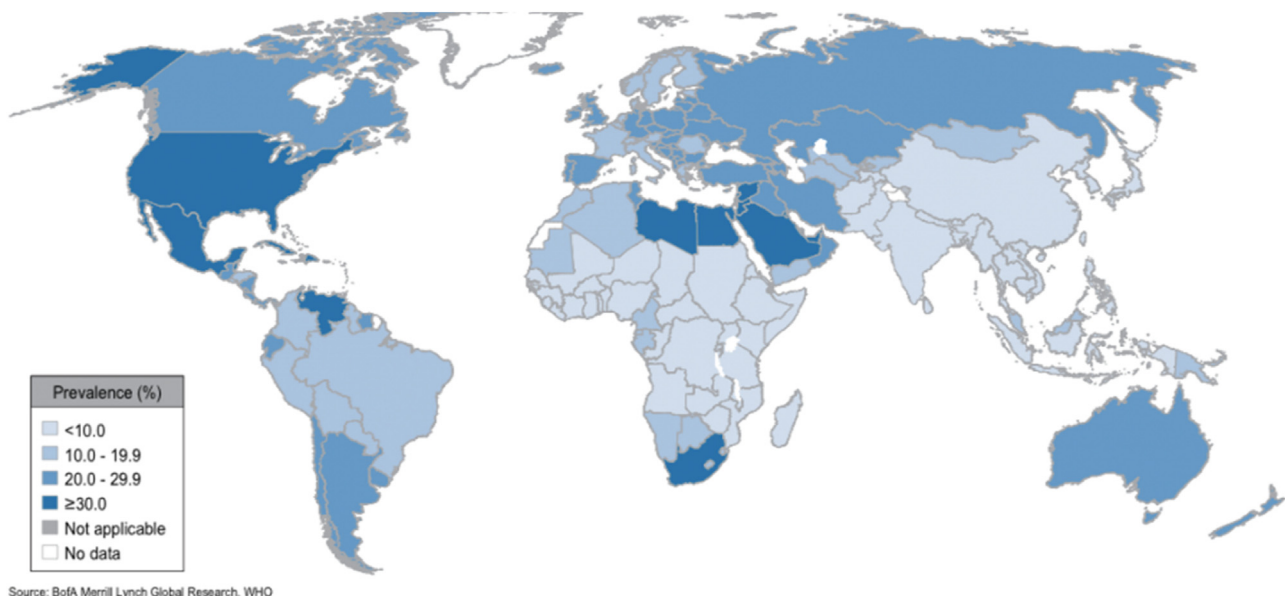


Fig. 2. Global prevalence of overweight and obesity among adult women (WHO, 2013).

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