



## Regionalizing food security? Imperatives, intersections and contestations in a post-9/11 world

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### A B S T R A C T

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In the early 21st century, food security has become an urgent public concern, arguably more entangled with social, political and environmental problems at multiple scales now than in the past. This paper examines approaches to food system change emphasizing regionalization, rather than either localization or globalization, to consider framings of food security. An enlarged food security risk frame—one that starts with food safety crises and the threat of agrifood terrorism but also recognizes new, more diffuse threats to food availability likely with global environmental change, provides common ground now for diverse institutional interest in regional food systems models. Combining discursive approaches to food security with territorial and relational conceptualizations of the region and regionalization, the paper develops a comparative analysis of three emerging regionalization initiatives in the United States: 1) work by the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (a civil society organization); 2) the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative; and 3) the Walmart Corporation's Heritage Agriculture initiative. It finds that institutions with markedly different histories, interests and power can align with a widening, ascendant food security risk frame. However, their approaches to regionalization reflect varying combinations of territorial and relational priorities, and suggest uneven implications for other food security concerns, such as community and food access.

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### 1. Introduction

Dueling narratives of abundance and scarcity have long competed within the story typically told about food security. In the early 21st century, however, scarcity has presented some compelling new plot lines. The international food price crisis beginning in 2007–2008, accumulating and unpredictable climate and economic stressors on agriculture worldwide, large scale land acquisitions by international investors for the production of food and energy crops, and the grim 2009 tally of one billion hungry people on the planet are just some of the issues now putting food security and insecurity squarely on international and national agendas. Scarcity may have made a swaggering return to current food security narratives, but its return is complicated by important new twists in the tale. Complex and unprecedented processes of globally connected environmental and social change are now underway, yet they remain uncertain and contested in their specific timing, location and impacts. These changes may compound recognized food safety risks—whether from accidental

contamination of food supplies or deliberate disruption of supply chains through terrorist acts. New twists in the tale of food security destabilize old ideas about solutions being mainly a matter of having abundant production somewhere that can meet consumption scarcity anywhere.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, concern about the complexities and uncertainties of future food provisioning and supply now draws food, alongside health and environment, onto national and international securitization agendas that once centered primarily on containing military threats (Balzacq, 2011; Trombetta, 2011).

These current shifts concerning the scope, meaning and importance of food security can be connected to ongoing questions about the objectives and processes of food system change and their correspondence to patterns of scale (Born and Purcell, 2006; Mount, 2012). The form, organization and scale relations of the present food system, as well as visions for food system change, facilitate and support some food security priorities, but not others. Many discussions of food system change still see such change as movement in one of two directions: toward full global integration of markets, which are guided and undergirded by agri-

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<sup>1</sup> See Cribb (2010) for a representative example of the growing number of scarcity inflected narratives on food and agriculture.

technoscience or toward devolved communities and localities, which practice sustainable agriculture, the products of which are traded in personalized and ethical markets. Yet academic work on global environmental change and food systems increasingly considers the importance of organizational and material resources at the regional level, especially for understanding and addressing problems of food insecurity (Ericksen, 2008, 2009). Similarly, some agrifood system practice on the ground now implicitly and sometimes explicitly advocates moving, not to global or local, but to regional-level coordination and planning to address the diverse goals of food system change more effectively (Clancy and Ruhf, 2010; Marsden, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to investigate how different institutional interests in a regional food systems approach reveal both alignments and contestations within shifting understandings of food security.

In this paper, I examine three emerging efforts in the United States now aimed at regionalizing food systems and supply undertaken, respectively, by 1) a sustainable agrifood NGO, 2) the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and 3) the Walmart corporation. I discuss the territorial and relational dimensions of their regionalization processes, and link these to how food security is foregrounded, framed or forgotten. By locating “framing activity in a multi-organizational field” (Mooney and Hunt, 2009:492), I highlight both contested claims and unexpected alignments in the meaning of food security, from food availability to food access, within the currently emerging space for regional food systems in the United States. The paper begins by examining current contextual changes and ongoing discursive debates related to food security and argues that risk framings of food security have acquired broader salience in the U.S. context, particularly in the post-9/11 years. The next section situates the growing interest in regional as distinct from local or global food systems within wider conceptual discussions about the nature and significance of the region. The three different institutional examples of initiatives to regionalize food systems and food supplies are presented next, emphasizing links between regionalization, food systems change, and how food security is framed. A comparative analysis of how institutional position, power and interests shape food security framings within and across the three regionalizing initiatives follows and the paper concludes by considering the tensions and prospects for food security when regional food systems are being shaped by institutions with such varying legitimacy, power and resources.

## 2. Food security: context, discourses, frames

The political and policy importance of food security has intensified in the early 21st century with the unfolding of inter-related crises including natural disasters, pronounced food price spikes starting in 2007–2008, food shortages and related civil unrest in various parts of the world (Lawrence et al., 2010). McDonald (2010) details now familiar drivers of climate change, population increase, new technologies, and shifting consumption preferences that interconnect globally and combine to produce distinct and growing food security challenges. The current structures, flows and externalities of an increasingly globalized, productivist food system are seen to result in new nutritional challenges (not only malnutrition or hunger, although they remain critical), to contribute to threatening patterns of global environmental change and to increase the likelihood and magnitude of food safety crises. From this perspective, increased industrialization and tightly coupled links within a more globalized food system will generate other social and environmental problems that then amplify and extend the problem of food insecurity. The character and scale of the global food system create conditions that can exacerbate food security itself and contribute to a wider set of human, national and international

security challenges, ranging from migration and refugee crises to conflict management and peace-keeping operations to disaster response and recovery (McDonald, 2010). Thus construed, the present and growing challenges of food security affect increasing numbers of people worldwide, either directly or indirectly. Food security has become a more resonant and urgent public issue, arguably more entangled with social, political and environmental problems at multiple scales in our era than in the past (Falcon and Naylor, 2005; Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009).

Although the context of food security threats may be changing, formal definitions of food security have centered, with minor variations, on the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) definition where “food security exists 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” (U.N. FAO, 1996). The FAO’s actual focus has evolved, shifting from near exclusive emphasis on food availability in the 1970s to greater emphasis in the 1980s on food access to more recognition of food utilization issues in the 1990s (Koc, 2011). In the U.S., activist claims have challenged and revised initial governmental definitions of food security. When the federal government first adopted the term “food security” in the 1980s, it emphasized nutritionally adequate food access “through normal channels” (Allen, 2007: 21). In the mid-1990s, agrifood civil society organizations advocated for fuller specification of *community* food security as “all persons obtaining at all times a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local non-emergency sources” (Allen, 2007: 21).

Food security thus demonstrates a discursive fungibility that corresponds to changes in the global political economy, national politics and social movements (Maxwell, 1996). For example, food security for both the FAO and the World Bank evolved from an emphasis on assuring national food supply, even national food self-sufficiency in the 1970s to the prevailing neoliberal focus on individual and household choices and preferences in the context of globalizing markets (Jarosz, 2011). Thus aligned with poverty alleviation and effective market demand, food security squares with neoliberal agendas centered on market solutions and constitutes at best a reformist project (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). MacMillan and Dowler’s (2012) examination of the shifting historical discourses and current imperatives surrounding food security in the UK underscores the fungibility, expansiveness and importance of the concept, noting that renewed UK interest in national food security reveals the influence of international policies’ neoliberal tendencies, but also possible openings for addressing sustainability and social justice concerns.

Recognizing historical shifts in general international and national food security discourses is instructive. Field-level contest between different social actors and institutions regarding food security is also important for understanding patterns and possibilities of food system change. Mooney and Hunt’s (2009) application of framing theory provides a systematic analysis of “contested claims” about food security in order to deconstruct its ostensible consensus frame. Instead of relatively discrete and coherent meanings of food security that tend to displace one another over time, food security in a given period or context may have multiple, active meanings that co-exist across organizational fields (Mooney and Hunt, 2009). The resulting contest between these meanings, from a social movements perspective, provides both friction and fuel for social action. Mooney and Hunt’s (2009) framing account thus provides large, if sometimes complicated conceptual space to food security. Their approach may make food security overly encompassing in light of the more recent rise of alternative notions of food justice and food sovereignty (Anderson and Bellows, 2012). Examining the prospects for regime change in

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