



## Consumers and food security: Uncertain or empowered?

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### A B S T R A C T

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Provoked by concerns about climate change, resource depletion and economic recession, the concept of food security has experienced a renaissance in international policy and research agendas. Despite this interest, the problem of food insecurity in wealthy countries has still not received enough attention. We argue that it is worthy of research and policy focus, because by examining the experiences and perceptions of food security amongst the 'global rich', we can develop more critical understandings of the implications of neoliberal constructions of the consumer as a driving force in moves towards more secure food systems. The paper draws on empirical data from shoppers in the United Kingdom to make three key arguments. First, it is important to retain the issue of economic access to food at the heart of discussions of food security, so that the concept is not reduced to the problem of how to increase agricultural productivity. Second, it is necessary to recognize the importance of food quality to consumer perceptions of household food security. Third, consumers do not necessarily share the neoliberal view that consumer choice is the engine for sustainability and food security. On the contrary, consumers in our research were well aware that food prices and the choices made available are shaped by forces beyond the control of individual shoppers. Overall, they expressed uncertainty about what food security means, about the causes of problems in the food system and about who should be responsible for ensuring access to affordable food for healthy living, for all.

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### 1. Introduction

Food security has risen up national and international policy agendas since 2007–8 when food prices rose rapidly and, combined with global economic recession, provoked civil unrest in many regions. The events of 2008 directed attention to underlying problems in the agro-food system, and provided an opportunity for scientists and campaigners alike to voice their concerns about the unsustainability of current food supply arrangements. Predictions about the impacts of climate change, resource depletion and population growth received political attention and prompted a renewed debate about how to feed current and future generations, with a strong focus on how to increase agricultural productivity without increasing environmental degradation (e.g. Schmidhuber and Tubiello, 2007; Beddington, 2009, 2010; Charles et al., 2010; Naylor, 2011). With good reason, much of this recent attention to

food security has been concerned with the persistent problem of hunger in low income countries. Indeed, the general trend of rising food prices ([World Food Programme, 2011](#)) and continuing threats to rural and farmer livelihoods in the global South, have cast doubt on the realism of achieving the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of hungry people by 2015.

Whilst the most immediate attention has been focused on poor regions, wealthy countries have also become increasingly concerned with issues of agricultural productivity and global trade; their aim in general is to ensure that their future food supplies, as well as demand for their agricultural exports and bio-technology products, will be sustained through the efficient functioning of world commodity markets ([MacMillan and Dowler, 2011](#)). Within this context, relatively little attention has been paid to aspects of consumption and household food security. It is notable that hunger in wealthy countries remains a "striking omission" ([Jarosz, 2011: 132](#)) from international debates about food security, even though current definitions of the term usually include reference to issues of 'access' and 'affordability', as well as availability. This silence about hunger amidst plenty persists despite a long tradition of research

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which has documented the existence of food poverty and its impacts (Lang et al., 2009), and acknowledged that food insecurity is a “real and significant public health issue” in high income countries (Gorton et al., 2011: 1; Dowler and O’Connor, 2011). In 2009, for example, the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) annual household food security survey found that 17.4 million households – some 50.2 million people – in the US had been food insecure at some time during the previous year (Nord et al., 2010). In the UK, the Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey (LIDNS) found that only 51% of low income households regularly ‘had enough of the kinds of food they wanted to eat.’ Almost 40% worried their food would run out before money for more was obtained and nearly 20% said they regularly reduced or skipped meals because of lack of money (Nelson et al., 2007; Holmes, 2007). Another example is New Zealand, where 20% of households with children were found to be food insecure (Ministry of Health NZ, 2003).

Our starting point in this paper then is to suggest that, despite these indications of household food insecurity in wealthy countries, the problem has not received enough attention. Within this context, the paper’s overall aim is to focus attention on the perception and understanding of food security amongst householders in the UK<sup>1</sup>. Whilst consumers are mentioned in national policy documents as being an important part of the food system, relatively little research in the UK has explored what those shoppers think about ‘food security’: what it means to them and whether it is a matter of concern. Also, the rhetoric of food security has not been used as widely in the UK as it has in the United States or Canada, and assessments of household food security have not been systematically undertaken. Recognising this, and within the context of UK food price inflation which peaked at 14.5% in 2008 (DFID/Defra, 2010), the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in 2009 commissioned research to assess consumer understanding of, and reactions to, changing food prices and food security, as well as consumer expectations of Government in these areas. Crucially, Defra wanted to know how people were reacting to the rising food prices and they specifically wanted to understand more about the potential triggers for panic buying. This paper reports some of the main findings from this research, using the empirical data as a lens through which to reflect on the ways in which consumers are positioned – and position themselves – in relation to the UK’s neoliberal policy discourses on food security.

We use our empirical material to illustrate three equally important arguments. Firstly, it is important to retain the issue of economic access to food (i.e. affordability) at the centre of discussions about food security so that the concept is not reduced to the problem of increasing global agricultural productivity. Although access to food has historically been recognized as a vital component of food security, much of the current debate about global food security is dominated by the idea that food production must increase to feed the growing population. The need for increased productivity is often used to support arguments in favour of sustainable intensification (Marsden, 2011), yet as Tomlinson (2011: 2) argues, this ‘need’ for hugely increased production is far from universally accepted. She suggests that it is a discursive device used by dominant institutions with “prior ideological commitments” to a particular way of framing food security. The argument we want to support in this paper is that a narrow focus on agricultural productivity risks marginalizing the continued experiences of significant numbers of people in the developed world who do not enjoy food security. Moreover, and as so often recognised and repeated since Sen’s (1981) seminal observation, increasing

agricultural productivity alone will not banish global hunger. It is therefore important to keep ‘access’ to food at the forefront of our thinking about food security, not only because it is necessary to draw attention to the continuing inequalities in wealthy countries, but also to challenge the tendency for neoliberal discourse to imply that the global North has somehow got things ‘right’ in relation to food, and the global South should really follow the same model.

Secondly, and linked to our first point, our research serves as a reminder that the food security concept must recognize the importance of food quality, understood in its broadest sense as combining concerns about nutrition, safety, taste and social acceptability. Whilst food is plentiful in developed countries, our evidence suggests that despite such abundance, lower income consumers in the UK feel that they must compromise on nutritional quality, or will be forced to in the future if prices continue to rise whilst incomes do not. This compromise in turn is likely to contribute to a reduction in the enjoyment and pleasure derived from food shopping and consumption, linked to the awareness of one’s inability to choose from the ‘better’ quality brands and products. Moreover, it is known that food insecurity amongst low income consumers is characterised by anxiety about how to provide healthy food for families, either now or in the future (Dowler et al., 2001; Attree, 2005). This in itself is another reason for avoiding a narrow focus on productivity and availability, and we argue that our research supports the need for holistic conceptualisations which foreground the experiential and emotional dimensions of food security.

Our third key argument is that by examining the understanding and perceptions of food security amongst the ‘global rich’, we can develop more critical awareness of the implications – and limitations – of neoliberal constructions of the consumer as rational economic choice maker. In this paper we present qualitative data which provides an insight into the complex and contradictory ways in which consumers perceive *themselves* as actors within contemporary food systems. We find that consumers talk with a sense of uncertainty about what food security actually means, about the causes of problems in the food system, and about who should be responsible for access to appropriate, affordable food for healthy living, for all.

## 2. Constructing global food security – where is the consumer?

The concept of food security has traditionally been applied to the problem of hunger in poor countries. However, as Jarosz (2011) demonstrates in her detailed reading of policy documents published by the FAO and the World Bank from the late 1970s until 2008, the scalar focus of food security definitions has changed. In common with others (e.g. Maxwell, 1996; Shaw, 2007) she argues that, from the earliest definitions in the 1970s, which proposed national self-sufficiency in grain reserves as a solution to hunger in poor countries, there was a shift in emphasis to individuals’ capacity to acquire food in a global market place. Food security thus came to be seen as an issue of *access* as well as availability (Maxwell, 1996, 2001). This shift occurred within the context of the creeping domination of neoliberal policies which put an end to the efforts of poor countries to stock pile grain. Instead, the world’s largest grain-exporting nations (e.g. United States, Canada, Australia) wanted markets to be opened up so that they could export their surpluses. Poor countries often had to accept cheap grain imports as part of structural adjustment packages, which pushed nations to borrow money to invest in rapid industrialization in an attempt to increase the purchasing power of households and individuals, so that people could buy food from the international market instead of relying on subsistence or local production. Jarosz (2011) notes that this shift had important implications,

<sup>1</sup> A focus on actual experiences of food insecurity is provided in Dowler et al., (2011).

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