

# THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD



# IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

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**Publisher** The *IDS Bulletin* is published by the Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK.  
Tel: +44 (0)1273 606261.

**Cover photo** Supporters of India's Congress party beat plates during a protest against what they say is a rise in the prices of essential food items, in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad, 14 July 2014. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, elected in May amid anger over persistently high inflation, particularly food inflation, has ordered a crackdown on hoarding to hold down food prices and set limits on the export of staples, such as onions and potatoes.

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**Information for subscribers** The *IDS Bulletin* is published in six issues per year.

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# IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

Volume 50 | Number 2 | July 2019

## The Political Economy of Food

Editors **Jody Harris, Molly Anderson, Chantal Clément and Nicholas Nisbett**

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### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Sofaya Hussein, Annie Lowden, Alison Norwood, and the *IDS Bulletin* team for their excellent management of the process of getting these articles commissioned, written, reviewed, and produced. We would also like to thank the reviewers who provided invaluable feedback to authors on each of the articles. Finally, we would like to thank all who participated in the 2018 workshop ‘Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges’, whose ideas and debates have shaped the content of this *IDS Bulletin*.

### **Funder acknowledgements**

Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.



Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019:  
‘The Political Economy of Food’  
DOI: 10.19088/1968-2019.112

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# Introduction: Valuing Different Perspectives on Power in the Food System<sup>\*†</sup>

Molly Anderson,<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Nisbett,<sup>2</sup> Chantal Clément<sup>3</sup> and Jody Harris<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract** In this introductory article, we highlight debates that emerged in the IDS–IPES–Food workshop on the political economy of food as a way of introducing the articles that follow. In exploring how different groups view power in food systems, we conceptualise a ‘mainstream’ narrative emerging from embedded agricultural and economic thinkers and practitioners, and contrast this with a multiplicity of reactions to and critiques of that narrative. In aiming to understand power in the food system, we recognise that there are many different disciplinary, epistemological, and ideological entry points into the study of power, and that seeking a single approach will likely limit the insights that different disciplines and research orientations can bring to the study of food systems. We argue that we must first better understand power at its different levels, forms, and spaces, and then use this understanding in order to transform food systems via equitable processes which work towards the interests of all.

**Keywords:** food systems, political economy, food sovereignty, agroecology, power, food security.

## 1 Why we must understand power to transform food systems

Power in the food system is a slippery concept that changes depending on one’s vantage point. The CEO of a major retail chain in the global North might claim that consumers hold the real power in a system that operates from ‘fork to field’, driving the choices that savvy business people must make in order to stay in the retail game. A poor woman in Haiti left with no choice but to feed her children mud-cakes to fill their bellies might perceive that power is held primarily by those who distribute food aid after disasters. An activist advocating for greater food sovereignty might say that power is held mostly (or most problematically) by large corporations encroaching on the rights of communities around the world through land-grabs, water-grabs, and forced adoption of technology or quality standards that place farmers at a major disadvantage.

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This issue of the *IDS Bulletin* examines different perspectives on power in the food system, and the web of actors, relationships, activities, and institutions that play a major role in shaping them: in other words, the political economy of food systems. In this introduction, we highlight some of the debates that emerged in a workshop on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges', held in Brighton, UK in June 2018 and co-organised by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS).

There are many different disciplinary, epistemological, and ideological entry points to the study of power. The aspect that holds these various perspectives together is the understanding that power is critical, including power *over* others and power *to* meet the goals of a household, organisation, or community, as well as the more subtle forms and spaces of power in food systems investigated in the workshop and in this *IDS Bulletin*. Different understandings of both political economy and power can enrich each other: seeking a single approach will likely limit the insights that different disciplines and research orientations can bring to the study of food systems.

IDS and IPES-Food are interested not only in the current state of food systems, but also in their capacity to improve the inadequacies seen in most modern food systems and to move towards greater sustainability – as measured through outcomes including more democratic participation in decision-making, more equity in wellbeing, greater environmental resilience, and better nutrition and health for all. Each of these outcomes will require redistributing power among food system actors. An analysis of food systems must therefore include power as an aspect of political economy, in order to understand how power relations develop over time and affect different food system actors. In particular, we are interested in the effects on those who are relatively powerless due to ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, or other reasons for marginalisation, who predictably cannot realise their rights to access sufficient quantities of healthy food nor to participate in decision-making about the food system. The transformation that is envisioned here may be instigated by a wide variety of actors, but always involves a shift in power relations away from dominant actors who reinforce the embedded inequities and lock-ins that keep current unsatisfactory systems in place.

To understand the drivers of transformation and to investigate solutions to these embedded inequities, a reflexive approach that includes recognising the power of the analyst must also be part of political economy analysis. Transdisciplinarity becomes even more crucial in this context. The goals of transformation must be identified and articulated, and the value of different pathways towards those goals must rest on evidence produced by scientists and actors beyond the scientific community. The perspectives of these other actors are vital, as they include the people who will need to implement these actions. Although we do not pretend to give an overview of political economy as

a field nor an exhaustive analysis of all political economy approaches to food systems, we present different perspectives that emerged during our workshop and the various paradigms that influence them.

## **2 How do different groups view food systems power?**

### **2.1 Conceptualising a mainstream**

For alternative perspectives to exist, there must be a recognised mainstream for them to rebut. In food systems research and practice, the mainstream consists of a broad group of economic and agricultural development thinkers, food security scholars, donor agencies, and private foundations who have shaped food system policymaking in governmental and intergovernmental (United Nations) spaces for at least the past 60 years. Although dominant visions have taken on the need to protect environmental quality and gender equity to varying degrees, we would argue that what unites this diverse group of actors is adherence to a predominately ‘productionist’ perspective that stresses the need to significantly increase food production and calorie availability through agricultural production efficiencies, large new capital investments, and new technologies usually focused on staple grain crops and oil seeds (see, for example, World Bank 2007; FAO 2009; Beddington 2010; and other examples in Tomlinson 2013).

Innovations based within this perspective – including hybrid seeds, large-scale irrigation projects, and subsidies for synthetic fertiliser – had marked success in increasing yields in some regions during the ‘Green Revolution’, and members of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa hope to replicate this success in Africa.<sup>5</sup> ‘Sustainable intensification’ and ‘climate-smart agriculture’ are popular terms in this mainstream, implying increasing productivity and adapting to climate change without further degrading natural resources (e.g. Conway 1999; Pretty, Toulmin and Williams 2011; Rockström *et al.* 2017). As they relate to nutrition, dominant perspectives tend to give primacy to strategies that provide additional nutrients to a growing global population through increased food production or through supplementation or fortification processes rather than by substantive changes in how poor people and producers access and direct their own food systems. Considering both food production and consumption, the focus has been on the role of technology and efficient resource management to meet food system needs; that is, food and nutrition are technical rather than social or political issues (Scott-Smith, forthcoming) – or, as Olivier De Schutter (this *IDS Bulletin*) argues – this perspective relies overly on Earth systems and physiological/behavioural conceptions, often grounded in quantitative science, in many cases ignorant of long histories of social and political thought in other traditions.

A result of this technocratic focus has been the downplaying of power relations in mainstream research and policy, obscuring or ignoring the root causes of food system inequities through the chronic disempowerment of poor and marginalised people – both politically and in their access to resources, services, and the wealth of the state.

Such approaches 'portray systems without actors; they see food chains without power; and they take the institutional framework as given, rather than as constructed and as the result of particular path dependencies or conflicts' (De Schutter, this *IDS Bulletin*). Much work based in the mainstream has taken poverty (and more recently gender disparities) as independent variables in analysis, rather than as structural factors underpinning major power imbalances and their intermediary outcomes (e.g. colonialism, discrimination, and lack of accountability of governments to their people) (Harris and Nisbett 2018).

The mainstream includes a spectrum of views on economic development and trade, including at one extreme, belief in unfettered free trade, the primacy of the market, and the rules of supply and demand to distribute value along the supply chain. Less extreme views include various market-oriented practices, including voluntary corporate social responsibility schemes and quality standards systems such as organic certification. While such schemes are often initially developed by proponents of sustainability and equity, they have more recently been studied for their risk of co-optation by corporate interests or for how they may unwittingly perpetuate 'distancing' between producers and consumers (Blay-Palmer 2008; Chernev and Blair 2015; de Colle, Henriques and Sarasvathy 2014; Howard 2016). In other words, market-based strategies are being criticised for failing to spark essential shifts in business practices necessary to provide real equity across the value chain and fundamentally re-orientate themselves away from high-capitalist forms of natural/bio-resource extraction.

Because of the failure of mainstream research and policy to grapple with power inequities in the food system, the power of dominant food system actors is often reinforced or overlooked. Put into practice, this lack of scrutiny has led to the largely unchallenged increase in private sector funding to reshape food systems – through public–private partnerships, or corporate social responsibility mechanisms – in response to reductions in public funding for food and agriculture. Such privatisation of agricultural research and interventions has negative consequences for farmers and the public (Anderson 2019) and has combined with broader political trends towards subsidy regimes aligned with the interests of large agribusiness (De Schutter, this *IDS Bulletin*). Fundamentally then, mainstream approaches rarely engage in an explicit critique of the socio-political systems within which food systems exist. Without this critique, current food system trajectories continue to rely on minor tweaks to existing practices and policies that only improve singular outcomes. Lacking ambition, these changes fail to affect the more fundamental power relations that reproduce existing systems and will not engender the kind of transformation advanced by IPES-Food and IDS.

## 2.2 Reactions and critiques

Political economy as understood by sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists stems from different traditions and reactions to these mainstream approaches. In his presentation at the IPES-Food and

IDS workshop and in his article included here, Desmond McNeill (this *IDS Bulletin*) points out that these different approaches can be – at least in international relations – linked to two key traditions: realism and constructivism. The former adopts an agent-based rational choice framework (more in line with the mainstream economic approaches outlined above), while the latter takes on a structural Marxist view (more prominent in academia but outside of mainstream economics). These in turn reflect broader theoretical debates on structure and agency in many social and political disciplines. The constructivist- and Marxist-influenced approaches have dedicated more time to exploring the various actors; interests (e.g. profit, security, wellbeing, solidarity, and so forth); sources of power (e.g. economic resources, legal mandate, discursive power); and scales (e.g. local, national, global) involved in shaping structural or system dynamics.

It is through these approaches that scholars have dealt most explicitly with power in the food system over the last century – enabling both micro-studies of power in particular policy settings (see, for example, Harris, this *IDS Bulletin*; O'Brien and Nisbett, this *IDS Bulletin*) or the ability to step back and consider the power dynamics responsible for broader structural change. An important example of the latter is the concept of food regimes, understood as massive upheavals in agricultural and food production in relation to the development of global capitalism to explain who holds power and how they exert it. Introduced by Friedmann and McMichael (1989), two major cyclical transitions were defined: a first food regime (1870–1914) describes the period of British hegemony in the world economy, and a second (1945–73) identifies the period of US dominance in the post-war economy. Since the early 1970s, many have postulated the emergence of a third 'corporate food regime', including McMichael (2005), although some also propose the growth of an ecological or 'green' food regime (Campbell 2009). Gliessman, Friedmann and Howard further explore the history of agroecology and changing food paradigms in this *IDS Bulletin*.

In the past, sociological and political science approaches have tended to emphasise social drivers of change, often to the exclusion of ecological drivers. Newer works, however, have incorporated major ecological drivers such as climate change and natural resource scarcity into their analyses. Some of the most dynamic developments in this regard have been in the field of political ecology, which combines social theory with an interest in ecological systems to question dominant representations of the environment, ecological systems, and human/nature interaction – in opposition to the 'apolitical perspective and depoliticizing effects of mainstream environmental and developmental research and practice' (Le Billon 2001: 563). This has been important, for example, in understanding and countering dominant framings of socioecological crises such as famine which underplay the way in which power differentials can work both to create such crises and then to obscure or misrepresent them as outcomes of 'natural' and 'inevitable' forces. Such work in political ecology joins earlier, 'biopolitical' approaches

influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, which, alongside (and influencing/and influenced by) feminist literature, consider the way in which power operates through attempts to categorise and control the body and its functions, as well as the representation of people's bodies.

These modes of analysis have been important in questioning dominant representations or public health interventions on obesity (e.g. Guthman and Dupuis 2006) as yet further ways of maintaining societal control over the bodies of women, the poor, or simply the mass population in the service of capital accumulation. More recently, a 'post-humanist' turn in many social sciences, influenced in part by science and technology studies (STS), feminist literature, and the work of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, has gone further in questioning the human or social bias of much of the social and political sciences. These perspectives stress the fact that natural forces or materials can affect other systemic elements without always being mediated by conscious human agency (Coole and Frost 2010). Such approaches suggest exciting new directions for the future study of power in the food system grounded in an ontology that recognises ecological and material agency (Nisbett 2019).

Another stream of work within political economy approaches to food has been transformative food system theories. Such works have attempted to integrate an understanding of the socio-political and ecological root causes of current trends and thus seek pathways to the transformation of food systems. These theories have tended to consider the actions of governments and civil society more than marketplace drivers, with particular emphasis on the role of governance. Indeed, food system transitions scholars draw heavily on governance literature to better understand the different 'constellations of actors' that can create and encourage sustainable food systems and the policies that support them (Duncan 2015: 340).

While some critical scholars focus primarily on the consequences of abuses of power by dominant actors in the food system (Howard 2016; Patel 2012; Clapp 2016; Fuchs, Kalfagianni and Arentsen 2009), others consider the transformative role governance – particularly collaborative and co-governance schemes at various levels – can play to spark food system transformation (Andrée *et al.* 2019; Mount 2012; Barling and Duncan 2015; Candel 2014). In this vein, a majority of political economy scholars assume that higher levels of participation by non-governmental actors – namely civil society organisations, social movements, and certain private sector actors working alongside government institutions – are necessary to ensure the transition towards sustainable food systems. Further than this, Hossain and Scott-Villiers (this *IDS Bulletin*) identify mechanisms through which the purchasing and protest power of low-income consumers and citizens have shaped food systems after food price crises.

In seeking to further address power disparities in food systems, a number of scholars have also turned to the study of alternative food

systems for their opposition to conventional corporate-led, industrialised food systems. In particular, alternative food system research considers how these systems may redress power imbalances by giving democratic control back to marginalised food system actors by re(building) relationships of proximity and trust between them (Sonnino and Marsden 2006; DuPuis 2006; Lyson 2004; Hinrichs 2003). Bringing more nuance to these debates, a number of critical food system scholars have also more recently questioned the degree to which alternative food systems truly lead to transformative change by exploring how these systems may instead unwittingly reproduce systems of economic exploitation and lack of political accountability.

More specifically, critical political economy scholars are considering the ways in which dominant food systems continue to co-opt alternatives (e.g. by normalising paradigms which value the individualisation of responsibility) and how the state plays an active role in maintaining dominant paradigms (Levkoe 2011; Tarasuk 2001; Allen *et al.* 2003; Guthman 2008; Connelly, Markey and Roseland 2011). Many alternative food systems operate either within urban settings or at the rural–urban interface, and scholars have examined their ability to redress marginalisation and inequity (Reynolds and Cohen 2016). Closer to home, Emily O’Brien describes how a food system lens has been successfully applied to strategising around food system inequities in developing a citywide food strategy, as part of the work of the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (O’Brien and Nisbett, this *IDS Bulletin*).

Social justice scholars also have more recently entered debates on the political economy of food systems, calling for greater acknowledgement of issues relating to inequality, race, and gender in achieving food system sustainability (Allen 2008; Guthman, Morris and Allen 2006; Hinrichs 2000; Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Mooney and Hunt 2009; Cadieux and Slocum 2015). These thinkers encourage the use of a social justice lens to better understand the social and political actions, discourses, and structures that shape and perpetuate food poverty and inequality, and how to identify possible solutions to these challenges (Schanbacher 2017). Social justice thinkers also frequently encourage participatory and transdisciplinary research methods to democratise and create greater inclusivity in the collection and analysis of data (e.g. university–community partnerships, participatory action research). They promote greater cooperation between the scientific community and social actors, not only to identify the current challenges food systems face, but also the potential opportunities for food system transformation, and the priorities and values on which these should be based (IPES-Food 2015).

Finally, even what constitutes knowledge and evidence can be interrogated. Picking up on the topic of a previous IPES-Food report on the food–health nexus, Rocha and Harris (this *IDS Bulletin*) focus in particular on the political economy of knowledge and evidence in this area. Using an example of food policy in Mexico on sugar-sweetened beverages, the authors describe the ideas of evidence-based policy and

its limitations, and comment on power and the political economy of knowledge in this contested field.

This very brief overview of different perspectives on political economy approaches highlights some key perspectives that might be applied in understanding power and politics in food systems work and has drawn from the articles that follow, which are drawn in turn from a stimulating two days of discussion at the IDS–IPES-Food workshop. The articles begin with an introduction to political economy approaches before moving on to articles focusing on four key themes that have been the subject of IPES-Food reports and a larger body of work by both IPES-Food and IDS scholars and activists. Two case studies – Zambia and the city of Brighton and Hove (UK) – then help situate applications of power analyses or structural approaches to food and nutrition at national and local levels. A final set of articles (Anderson and Leach; Duncan *et al.*, both this *IDS Bulletin*) then consider some of the ongoing questions that emerged from the workshop and which will form the agenda for future work and methodological questions around understanding power in the food system. These questions remain; some will be addressed by articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, and others will require more reflective and empirical work going forward.

#### Notes

- \* Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges', and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.
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- 5 See <https://agra.org>.

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# The Political Economy Approach to Food Systems Reform<sup>\*†</sup>

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**Abstract** The political economy approach to food systems steers away both from approaches that focus on biogeochemical flows and the embeddedness of food systems in the biosphere, and from classical economists' approaches that address the role of prices in relating supply and demand. This article discusses what is specific to the political economy analysis, which places power at the centre of its inquiry; and it lists the challenges this approach faces in its attempt to contribute to the reform of food systems.

**Keywords:** food systems, political economy, entitlements approach, right to food, governance.

## 1 Introduction

A political economy approach to food systems is one that places actors, and the power relationships between them, at the heart of its analysis. In Section 2, I provide an interpretation of this theoretical gesture, and highlight the added value of framing food systems reforms through the political economy lens in Section 3. I then identify three major challenges the political economy approach faces today, which may be part of its next research agenda. These are how to understand the relationships between the different elements of the food systems – their technological, economic, cultural, and political components – in order to ensure the deep transformation of the food system that the current situation requires (Section 4); how to conceptualise power in food chains (Section 5); and how to design transitional governance so that changes can take place, in a coordinated and mutually supportive fashion, at different levels of governance, from the local to the international (Section 6). I conclude briefly in Section 7.

## 2 What is the political economy approach?

The political economy approach to food systems can best be understood in contrast to the approaches that currently still dominate the literature on how to address the challenges of hunger and malnutrition. In part because of its dependence on natural resources and on weather-related events, food production has often been approached with

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019 'The Political Economy of Food'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

the tools of the natural sciences, agronomy in particular; even the (now more fashionable) Earth systems approach has maintained that close connection between food production and the sciences of nature (National Research Council 1988; The Global Environmental Change Programmes 2001; Billen, Lassaletta and Garnier 2014). Similarly, food consumption has largely been treated in relation to the physiological needs of individuals, rather than related to how tastes are shaped by advertising, social norms and habits, and the pressures of contemporary life.

Such approaches to food systems see the challenge primarily in quantitative terms. Even where they aim to incorporate a concern for food access for the poor, beyond the immediate concern for food availability, their chief concern remains to ensure that supply matches demand in order to keep prices within certain margins, thus depoliticising the debate about reform.

In contrast, the political economy approach to food systems *denaturalises* and *politicises* the question of food systems reform. The entitlements approach pioneered by Amartya Sen (1981) represented an important step in this direction, since it sought to move beyond the naive view according to which hunger and malnutrition are exclusively or primarily about increasing production. The political economy approach radicalises this initial shift. Not only does it move away from a focus on production and on satisfying the physiological needs of the individual, as if these were merely technical problems which the prowesses of technology could adequately address, but it also challenges the usual assumptions about the formation of prices reflecting the intersection between supply and demand.

At the macro level, in contrast to this tenet of classical economics, the political economy approach insists that prices really reflect the exchange value of commodities as determined by the purchasing power of the richest groups of the population (rather than the use value, reflecting how food satisfies the basic needs of the poor). At the micro level, at the different segments of the food chain, it notes that prices reflect the bargaining power of the actors involved, as defined by the range of options at their disposal. But these perspectives about price formation and the meaning of value are generally ignored in studies that see price variations as reflecting scarcity, or has having their source in the skies or in the soils: it is against this depoliticisation that the political economy approach is launched.

A political economy approach to food systems thus moves away both from descriptions that focus on the biogeochemical flows involved in the production, trade, and consumption of food, and from economic models focused on variations of supply and demand as they are linked by prices. Both these classic approaches to food systems are silent about the question of *agency*. They portray systems without actors; they see food chains without power; and they take the institutional framework

as given, rather than as constructed and as the result of particular path dependencies or conflicts.

In contrast, actors, power relationships between actors, and the institutional framework within which actors operate and through which they interact, are central to a political economy approach. Such an approach starts by moving from the impacts (impacts of food systems, for instance, on soil management or climate change, on the health of the population, or on rural development) to the causes. It asks which policy or set of policies, adopted by which actors, may be responsible for the impacts. In that regard, the *démarche* of the political economy approach is very similar to that which is encouraged by the use of a human rights framework: that framework too insists on empowerment, participation, and accountability in food systems reform, encouraging states to adopt legislative or policy frameworks to introduce elements of food democracy and to involve civil society groups in the design and implementation of food policies (De Schutter 2014a).

### **3 The added value of the political economy approach**

In part, the rise of the political economy approach to food systems is the result of the failure of the other explanatory frameworks to provide an adequate diagnosis of how to address the challenges food systems face. In the post-Second World War era, food insecurity was framed as having its source in a failure of agricultural productivity to match population growth and the increased demand resulting from urbanisation and associated shifts in diets (De Schutter 2011a, 2017). Such framing thus saw increased levels of production and the growth of agricultural productivity as the key challenges to be met: this explains the focus on mechanisation, on large-scale irrigation, on the use of new (so-called ‘high-yielding’ or ‘improved’) plant varieties, and on the intensive use of external inputs (pesticides of course, made even more necessary after monocultures became the norm, but also nitrogen-based fertilisers).

Driven by such technological advances conveniently summarised under the ‘green revolution’ label, the amount of calories per capita on a global scale has been impressive since the start of industrial agriculture in the 1920s in rich countries, and in the 1960s in most of the developing world (Everson and Gollin 2003). Yet, these advances have proven insufficient to eradicate hunger: the absolute number of hungry people has remained more or less stable throughout the years, although the relative number may have declined. Indeed, the 2017 State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report alerted the world that 2016 saw the first increase in the number of hungry people in a decade (though largely as a result of conflicts and climate change-related weather events) (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2017).

Even where food intake is sufficient, moreover, inadequate diets can result in micronutrient deficiencies such as a lack of iodine, of vitamin A, or of iron. Globally, over 165 million children are stunted – so malnourished that they do not reach their full physical and cognitive

potential – and 2 billion people globally lack vitamins and minerals essential for good health (De Schutter 2014b). In the 1990s, it is this failure of the green revolution that led organisations working on children, particularly the United Nations Fund for Children (UNICEF), to highlight the importance of adequate caring and feeding practices for the utilisation of the food consumed (its absorption by the body). Health and nutritional outcomes, these organisations came to realise, depend as much on child caring (including breastfeeding, adequate storage and preparation of food, and hygiene practices) as on food intake, and therefore a decisive factor in adequate nutrition is 'the provision in the household and the community of time, attention, and support to meet the physical, mental and social needs of the growing child and other family members' (Gillespie and Mason 1991; see also Longhurst and Tomkins 1995; and Haddad and Oshaug 1998).

Moreover, beyond the immediate causes of malnutrition, these organisations insisted on its underlying causes (at the household level) and on its basic causes (at the societal level): only by examining intra-household relationships and the choices made by the community was it possible to understand why, in a world of plenty, children continued to starve, or to have their development stunted (UNICEF 1998; Smith *et al.* 2003). Together with Sen's entitlements framework, this attempt to work on the underlying and basic causes of malnutrition was a major contribution to the rise of the political economy approach to food systems reform, in particular because it forced observers to question the institutional frameworks in which such systems are embedded.

While its successes in the eradication of hunger and malnutrition were mixed, 'green revolution' approaches have also caused severe environmental impacts, leading to the pollution of soils and groundwater, the erosion of biodiversity, and the growth of greenhouse gas emissions due to a loss of carbon content of the soil: though Rachel Carson had already cautioned against such impacts in the early 1960s (Carson 1962), it is only in recent years that these trends – that threaten the very resource base on which we rely for our food, including the natural fertility of soils – have been taken seriously. The green revolution also encouraged dietary transitions that reduced diversity for many groups of the population, leading to the growth of non-communicable diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart diseases, and gastro-intestinal cancers linked to poor diets (WHO 2016; Swinburn *et al.* 2019).

Perhaps the most disturbing failure of green revolution approaches is that they have failed to reduce rural poverty, instead encouraging growth of inequalities and agrarian concentration in rural areas (Griffin 1974; Stein 2010). Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, it now appears that, far from being scale-neutral, the green revolution technologies favoured farmers who had enough land to make it worth investing in the acquisition of machinery and irrigation systems; who had access to capital, allowing them to buy the external inputs required to 'benefit' from the introduction of modern technologies in agriculture;



and who had access to markets and long supply chains, allowing them to specialise into certain monocultures and to meet the expectations of major buyers of raw agricultural commodities.

As a result of the increases in production, the price of food could be kept down despite the substantial increase in demand. But some groups of food producers lost. Small-scale farmers generally were pushed out from farming, or (in poor countries) relegated to a form of subsistence agriculture because, under existing market conditions, and due to the lack of investment in the public goods that would have supported them, they are less competitive and unable to achieve economies of scale (Griffin 1974; Freebairn 1995; Stein 2010). In many developing countries, moreover, farmers with no title to the land they cultivated were unable to have access to credit, since they could not mortgage the land: they lost out, and women were disproportionately affected.

In the mid-nineties of the past century, the rise of food sovereignty as an alternative paradigm for agricultural development and food systems reform provided an opportunity to reverse these trends. Food sovereignty was initially invoked by the transnational movement of small-scale farmers, the *Vía Campesina*; but starting with the World Food Summit convened in Rome in 1996, it soon became a claim of a large range of social movements, who were opposed to the pressures resulting from the liberalisation of trade in agricultural products and from the globalisation of supply chains (Claeys 2012, 2014; and on the emergence of the *Vía Campesina*, Desmarais 2007).

Although the rise of food sovereignty during the past 20 years has faced strong resistance, it has offered a powerful counter-narrative to the mainstream discourse about food systems and how to improve them. It has moved the debate from the chiefly technical question of how to pursue the growth of agricultural productivity, to the political economy questions of who controls food systems, who benefits from the current organisation of food systems, and what are the obstacles to change. The following sections discuss three major lock-ins highlighted by the discussion launched since the rise of the claim to food sovereignty.

#### **4 Co-evolution and resistance to change**

A first insight from the political economy approach is a diagnosis about the source of the inertia of dominant food systems. The mainstream food systems, it argues, is the result of the co-evolution of a number of elements, that – because they are the product of a shared history and fit under the same dominant narrative – perfectly fit with one another and have become mutually supportive (Shove 2003; Shove and Walker 2007). The storage, processing, and communications infrastructures that have developed have supported primarily the production of major commodities, meant as inputs for the food manufacturing industry and large domestic markets or export markets; research and development of new plant varieties focused on a limited number of crops, such as maize, soybean, rice, and potato, while many other plants (particularly food

plants cultivated for local consumption by farmers in the global South) were comparatively neglected (IPES-Food 2016).

These socio-technological choices in fact favoured large economic actors, the largest farms, and the big transnational agri-food corporations in particular, which were best equipped to achieve the economics of scale made possible by the expansion and globalisation of markets. It is these actors which benefited the most from agricultural policies, including the Common Agricultural Policy in the European Union, which grant subsidies on the basis of the volumes produced or later, with the 'decoupling' of subsidies to avoid distorting production, on the basis of the surface owned (IPES-Food 2019). Big commodity buyers and food manufacturing companies were ideally placed to pit farmers against farmers, as their foodshed (the range of suppliers they source from) expanded, and to impose on farmers compliance with certain standards that made it even more difficult for small-scale producers to compete. As economic globalisation was deepened by the lowering of barriers to trade in agricultural products, investments in research and development and in infrastructure were increasingly made in the interest of export-led agriculture. This primarily benefited the largest agri-food corporations controlling global supply chains, which gradually were able to strengthen their dominant position by network effects, by standard-setting, and by their ability to control the logistics of supply chains (Naseem, Spielman and Omamo 2010). In contrast, the needs of small-scale farmers, producing food crops to feed their own communities or to serve local markets, have been largely neglected. This concerns the development of new plant varieties, in which rewarding private plant breeders by strengthening intellectual property rights regimes has largely become a substitute for the funding of public research centres (De Schutter 2011b; Howard 2015). But it also relates to the building of communication and storage facilities, to agricultural machinery, or to the dissemination of agricultural knowledge by extension services.

The mass production of refined grains and of processed foods allowed by these developments fits perfectly well with lifestyle changes, and the new appetite of consumers for foods that are tasty and easy to prepare, although they are often also the least nutritious and the least healthy – since there is typically a tradeoff between the length of shelf life and the distance travelled by foods and their nutritional qualities. Finally, because the large food manufacturers and retailers, with their superior logistical networks and their ability to pay less at all segments of the food chain, can produce foods at a low price for consumers, they can relatively easily capture political influence, since they promise 'solutions' that allow politicians to ignore demands for stronger social justice: in practice, cheap food worked as a substitute for welfare policies that would have made quality diets affordable for all households. Of course, this 'cheapness' is in fact largely based on an illusion: the real costs of food production are shifted onto the taxpayers paying for the agricultural subsidies and to the next generation which

shall pay for the mounting health-care costs linked to poor diets and for the environmental damage caused by industrial agriculture. But most governments, until now, have been too short-sighted, or perhaps too captive, to have an interest in dispelling the illusion.

This is how, in the mainstream food regime, technological choices combine with economic choices and cultural evolutions strengthen the dominance of the largest actors, allowing them to capture the political process. These actors promise to produce at a low price to consumers, thanks to the economies of scale they can achieve, the strong bargaining power they have *vis-à-vis* suppliers and agricultural raw materials, and their superior logistics: for governments, to support these actors is to support mass consumption, and thus to alleviate the impacts of growing inequalities and poverty.

What is most striking in a system resulting from such co-evolutions, is that, considered in isolation, each component of the system can be perceived as legitimate, even though the system as a whole is perceived as unsustainable: indeed, technological choices, the weight of the largest actors, food culture, and even the policymaking, can all be defended on the basis that they are the best adapted to the system as it has evolved. In Darwinian terms, one would speak of the survival of the fittest: the fittest technologies, the fittest companies, the fittest culinary cultures, the fittest political system – the fittest, in all these examples, to the objective of increasing calorie availability *per capita* and keeping prices for consumers down.

It has become a cliché in recent literature in food systems to refer to the ‘consumerist turn’: consumers henceforth, we are told, would be driving the system ‘fork to farm’, influencing the practices of retailers and producers rather than being shaped by them (Spaargaren, Oostevier and Loeber 2012: 18–19). But the reality is both more depressing and more complex: since eating habits and culinary practices are shaped by the foods that are on offer, in addition to the other components of the food environments – from advertising to working times and from social norms to the organisation of space – we are caught, rather, in a cycle in which such habits and practices cannot change without the whole system changing. The problem is systemic, the political economy approach argues: so should be the solutions.

### **5 The measure of power in food chains**

The political economy approach to food systems insists on the need to address power in food chains. This is in part because of a basic concern with equity: since small-scale farmers are gradually being squeezed out of business in rich countries, and constitute a large proportion, perhaps even a majority, of the hungry in the global South, strengthening their position in food chains would make a significant contribution to the ability of peasant agriculture to develop, as well as to the reduction of rural poverty. But addressing the question of power in food chains is not simply a matter of protecting the weakest party in the relationships

between the different actors of food systems; it also is in the general interest. A significant portion of the waste in food chains, for instance, has its source in the practices of supermarkets and food manufacturers towards their suppliers, whether these buyers encourage overproduction before deciding, at the last minute, that they will not need to order all the food that has been prepared for them, or whether they reject some produce on purely cosmetic grounds, or because it is nearing its sell-by date (Stuart 2009, chapters 2 and 3).

It is also power in food chains, and our failure to address it, that explains how the growth of private standards in global supply chains disproportionately affected small-scale food producers: while motivated initially by the need to reassure consumers about the safety of their food and about the environmental sustainability of how it is produced, and while allowing certain efficiency gains, the setting of private standards by the dominant players in the agri-food systems has had exclusionary effects on smallholders, whose specific constraints have not been considered in the establishment of such regimes, and who are provided no avenue to complain (Dolan and Humphrey 2004; Maertens and Swinnen 2009; Boro de Batisti, MacGregor and Graffham 2009).

So, power in food chains must be addressed. But such power is difficult to conceptualise, let alone to measure. This difficulty may be another reason why it is difficult to tackle: in the absence of an objective measure of power, any attempt to make food chains more equitable will inevitably be denounced as ideologically biased, as if the existing status quo were by definition less suspect.

A common way to define power in food chains is by referring to the concentration rate (CR) at any particular segment of the chain in any particular chain. For instance, in a background document titled *The Food Supply Chain* published in 2017, the European Commission notes that,

concentration in the food processing industry and retail sectors is much higher than in the agricultural sector. The market share of the top five firms (or C5 concentration ratio) in the EU food industry was at an average of 56% in 2012 in 14 of the EU's Member States. At the same time, in 13 Member States the share of the top five retailers exceeded 60% (European Commission 2017: 2).

The implication of such a finding is that the suppliers of raw agricultural materials (the farmers) are at a disadvantage in negotiating with the commodity buyers and the retailers, since the latter are far more concentrated than farmers are, and thus have a much greater ability to coerce farmers into making certain concessions or into accepting certain conditions. Indeed, the document was prepared in part in order to provide background explaining the proposal of the Commission for a Directive on unfair trading practices in business-to-business relationships in the food supply chain (European Commission 2018).

It is this classic measure of power that is used in the visual representations of food chains, which the fair trade movement made popular, presenting such food chains as having an hourglass shape: a very large number of farmers, a relatively small number of commodity buyers, food manufacturers, and retailers, and a very large number of end consumers. (In fact, such models now increasingly include, at the top of the figure, the increasingly concentrated input providers – seed and agrochemical companies, which are now forming a single sector following a range of mergers and acquisitions.) This seems a convenient way of defining power, and it lends itself well to such visualisation exercises. Such a representation is misleading, however, and the attempt to measure bargaining power as derived from the CR in particular segments of the food chain is a gross oversimplification for a number of reasons.

First, such a measure is insufficiently precise to capture the various forms of relationship between suppliers and buyers along the chain. Yet, these relationships are extremely varied, between the extremes of vertical integration (in which the buyer totally controls the upstream segment) and of relationships as they may develop on the spot market, in the absence of any long-term contractual agreement between buyer and seller.

Second, how much bargaining power any single actor has also depends on a range of variables that cannot be captured by the CR alone. Consider, for instance, the relationships between the producer (the farmer) and the buyer of raw products. At the microeconomic level, what matters is whether any particular farmer has access to storage facilities (and thus may choose when to sell), or to local processing plants; whether she has the means to transport her produce to the city, or depends instead on a middleman (the ‘aggregator’, as such an intermediary is called in India) to that end; whether she joined a cooperative; whether she receives reliable information about market prices, and so forth. None of these elements are captured in a simple quantitative measure of the CR at different segments of the food chain.

Third, the strength of the bargaining positions of different actors at any particular segment of the chain depends not only on the concentration rates at the segments to which each actor belongs, but also on the shape of the downstream market. For instance, if a particular buyer has achieved a quasi-monopsonistic position in the market (i.e. for the seller concerned, there is in practice no other buyer he can turn to), the bargaining position of that monopsonistic buyer shall of course be particularly strong. The risks of that power being abused are far more significant, however; not if the buyer’s dominant position *vis-à-vis* the seller is combined with a monopolistic or dominant position of the same buyer downstream, but instead if the buyer faces strong competition in the downstream market. Perhaps paradoxically, the more any particular player is in a dominant position not only as a buyer but also as a seller on the downstream market, the more his dominant position *vis-à-vis* the producer whom he sources from shall be compensated by the absence

of competition that he faces, as a supplier of the downstream market. The reason for this is simple: if the buyer faces strong competition on the downstream market, he cannot easily afford to make concessions to the supplier, since he may then lose out to his competitors. If, on the contrary, he faces no such competition, he can treat the suppliers more equitably, without having to fear that this may result in market losses downstream, because of the slight increase in prices that this may cause.

Fourth and finally, it is not only *actual* competition (as measured by the CR), but also *virtual* competition, that matters: any buyer will be hesitant to abuse his dominant position as buyer if he fears that new actors may enter the market, proposing more favourable conditions to the suppliers. Fair buying practices buy the loyalty of the suppliers, minimise temptations of side-selling, and make it less likely that competitors shall enter the market and seek to divert the suppliers into alternative supply chains.

These various sources of complexity make it very difficult to measure power in food chains: whereas unfair trading practices can be listed and prohibited, ensuring complete 'fairness' in the bargaining process is an infinite task. Indeed, in negotiations, each party per definition seeks to impose its terms on the other, and the strength of each party's position shall depend on the range of alternative choices that party has. Power is ubiquitous: it is what bargaining is all about. The fact that there is no agreement as to how it should be measured, however, and that classic measures are deeply unsatisfactory, is a major obstacle to ensuring equity in food chains.

## **6 Multi-level governance**

A final obstacle to effectuating change in food systems is that such systems typically are influenced by actions taken at different levels of governance, from the private governance by retailers imposing their own standards on suppliers (Backer 2007) to the international agencies such as the World Trade Organization promoting the growth of global trade and the adoption of global regulatory standards facilitating such trade, and including municipal/local levels of government, regions, and states.

The allocation of competences across these different layers of power varies of course, from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, although some regularities may probably be found across most world regions – for instance, public schools and the associated purchasing policies generally fall under the remit of local authorities, whereas the setting and enforcement of food safety standards are generally left to the national government, often in accordance with international guidelines. Land zoning is typically done at the local or regional level, but support to farmers generally depends on the national level. The trend towards decentralisation on the one hand, and delegation of powers to international organisations on the other hand, nevertheless appears to be a general phenomenon: states are being emptied out. Dona Freeman describes as 'de-democratisation' the current process in which central

states delegate more powers to local authorities, privatise a number of services or standard-setting functions to corporate actors, and submit to disciplines in joining international regimes (Freeman 2017).

The impacts on food systems reforms are deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, the triple ‘de-democratisation’ we currently see occurring may reduce the risk of power being abused by the central government, since such processes in effect disempower the state – therefore also making it more difficult for certain interest groups to capture the state for their own benefit. On the other hand, however, this fragmentation of power makes it more difficult to achieve reform, since any attempt at reform at one level of government may be obstructed (whether prohibited or discouraged) by the other levels.

### **7 Conclusion**

There exists a long and respectable tradition of political economy approaches to agricultural development. Over a span of about 30 years, for instance, Robert Bates and colleagues with whom he teamed documented the perverse role of governments in African agriculture, basically robbing farmers from the product of their work and exploiting them shamelessly in order to feed growing cities, or to export commodities on global markets in order to have access to hard currencies (Bates 1981, 2005; Azam, Bates and Biais 2009). In the same vein, Michael Lipton famously denounced the ‘urban bias’: the tendency of governments to favour the urban populations, on which their political stability depends, at the expense of the livelihoods of the rural dwellers – who, because they are often poorly educated and spread over large territories, often find it difficult to be organised (Lipton 1977). Contrasting the situation in Africa with that of South Asia, Birner and Resnick discussed in minute detail the essential role governments played in the successes of the ‘first’ green revolution, in the 1960s and 1970s (Birner and Resnick 2010).

Power, however, does not reside only with governments; it is pervasive within food systems, and it is perhaps private power that now deserves the greatest attention, because it lacks any accountability. The challenge of the political economy to food systems is to address private government: the unchecked power of incumbents in mainstream food systems, who oppose all change, and have managed to translate their economic dominance into political influence. This requires that we reassert the duty of states to control the dominant actors of the agri-food system, but that we also insist on democratising the state to make it fully accountable to the population groups that the mainstream food systems have marginalised. This new phase is only just beginning.

**Notes**

- \* Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
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- 1 Olivier De Schutter, Co-chair of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) and a member of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

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# Reflections on IPES-Food: Can Power Analysis Change the World?\*

Desmond McNeill<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** The major way in which IPES-Food seeks to achieve change is by preparing and widely disseminating reports on different aspects of the global food system, which are rigorous in both empirical and analytical terms. These reports are heavily critical of the productionist approach, demonstrating its negative impacts on the environment and human wellbeing. They use a political economy lens to analyse how powerful actors promote both this approach and the narrative that supports it. The five major reports so far published build on the work of the first, where a number of ‘lock-ins’ are identified, such as path dependency, export orientation, and the expectation of cheap food – as well as the fundamental ‘concentration of power’. IPES-Food is well placed to have political impact; and there is room for the power analysis to be made still more comprehensive and theoretically rigorous, while ensuring that the reports are still widely read and cited.

**Keywords:** IPES-Food, food system, productionist approach, political economy, power, narrative, health, environment, multinational corporations.

## 1 Introduction

The ambition of IPES-Food (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems) is to use ‘knowledge for change’: to challenge a global food system which is not only inequitable but also damaging to health and the environment.<sup>2</sup> In our publications, we have sought to do this largely by analysing the exercise of power.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this brief article is to examine the work to date, and more specifically the five major reports that have been produced, to assess their potential for convincing an influential, but not necessarily academic, audience of the need for change.

The major focus of criticism in these reports has been the ‘productionist’ approach (Lang and Barling 2013) that promotes

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019 ‘The Political Economy of Food’; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

large-scale farming and places emphasis on increasing productivity through, for example, greater use of fertilisers and pesticides. Much of the material in the reports is devoted to drawing causal links between this approach and its negative impacts on the environment and human wellbeing. These are crucial arguments, but I will in this article focus primarily on how IPES-Food uses a political economy perspective to analyse the power dynamics that maintain this situation.<sup>4</sup> Here, I find it helpful to distinguish between the 'productionist' approach itself – applied especially by big business – and the 'discourse' or 'mindset' (De Schutter 2017) that underpins it.

While IPES-Food does not adopt a Marxian approach,<sup>5</sup> it is notable that – like Marx – we do seek to question a dominant discourse that seems obvious, self-evidently correct. Marx sought to challenge the idea that profit as the return on capital was a somehow 'natural' phenomenon – not subject to question.<sup>6</sup> In much the same way, in the realm of food and agriculture, the 'productionist approach' is widely regarded as self-evidently correct. Many people today are starving and the world population is continuing to grow rapidly; ergo, all our efforts must be put into maximising production, using all forms of modern technology available. It has proved hard to challenge such an apparently compelling narrative.

In another respect, however, our work is rather different from that of Marx, whose analysis was of the whole capitalist system, and the fundamental structural relationship between capital and labour. Although we emphasise the significance of the market, our reports are not so much concerned with deep structures but rather with numerous complex relationships between many different actors, and processes. To analyse the intersection of the capitalist system with the food system is a very challenging task. This raises a question which I believe has proved very relevant for IPES-Food: how comprehensive, and how complex, should our analysis be if our reports are to be accessible to a wide readership rather than a very specialised group.

In this brief article, I will address these questions, based on the reports so far produced. I suggest, in line with my introductory remarks, that what is especially notable is that they emphasise the dominant role played by big business in applying the productionist approach, and on the role of big business and others in promoting the productionist narrative. I conclude that we can and should further develop our power analysis of the food system, but that the level of ambition with regard to comprehensiveness and theoretical sophistication should be tempered by the need for our reports to continue to be widely read, and utilised.

## **2 Political economy in IPES-Food reports**

Within the broad field of political economy, IPES-Food does not explicitly adopt a specific approach. The reports, to varying extents, include in their analysis actors, interests, and sources of power. And they focus on different levels: the global, the national, the local.

In summary, it is fair to say that an eclectic approach is favoured, combining perspectives from both ends of a theoretical spectrum within the discipline of political science that ranges from realism to constructivism.<sup>7</sup> The former emphasises the role of actors and agency (and is well suited to studying the role of big business in promoting a productionist food system). The latter is more associated with structures, and with discourse, and is more suited to analysing the power of the narrative.

Our first Thematic Report 1 (June 2016) was entitled *From Uniformity to Diversity: A Paradigm Shift from Industrial Agriculture to Diversified Agroecological Systems* (IPES-Food 2016). To judge by its reception, this was an extremely clear and compelling document. I will not attempt a summary, but rather concentrate on the power component of the argument. The report identifies eight ‘lock-ins’ of industrial agriculture, summarised graphically in Figure 12 of the report (*ibid*: 45).<sup>8</sup>

The lock-ins are as follows: path dependency, export orientation, the expectation of cheap food, compartmentalised thinking, short-term thinking, ‘feed the world’ narratives, measures of success, and concentration of power.

A subsequent diagram (Figure 13) (*ibid*: 59) ‘Power imbalances in food systems’ has the subtitle ‘framing the questions and providing the solutions’. This reveals the extent to which IPES-Food power analysis is focused on business and the productionist narrative (as confirmed in the subsequent reports discussed below). The diagram does specify several different actors (processors, traders, and retailers; policymakers; input agribusiness; large-scale farmers; small-scale farmers) and it includes some sources of power other than discursive (e.g. subsidies to farmers, and purchases by them). But the text that precedes Figure 13 refers primarily to discursive power (including the power to influence policy); and the focus is almost entirely on agribusiness.

Input agribusinesses are able to take centre-stage in **framing the problems** [all emphases in the original] (e.g. underlining the global productivity challenge) *and* **providing the solutions** (e.g. new ranges of input-responsive crops and breeds), thus securing demand for their products, while ensuring that power and influence continue to flow their way.

**Lobbying policymakers** to ensure favourable policy frameworks is another channel used to exert power...

...This power can also be brought to bear by **leveraging influence to secure research focuses** – and findings – that are favourable...

Another important channel for bringing this influence to bear is by **co-opting the alternatives**... A prominent variant of food security narratives now insists that we need conventional *and* organic agriculture in order to feed the world (IPES-Food 2016: 58).

Subsequent reports adopt, and to varying extents supplement, this analysis. While the first report is concerned almost solely with the global level, two of the others refer to national and local levels also.

Thematic Report 2 (October 2017) is entitled *Unravelling the Food–Health Nexus: Addressing Practices, Political Economy, and Power Relations to Build Healthier Food Systems* (IPES-Food 2017a). Here again, it is the power of the productionist narrative that is primarily emphasised:

Power – to achieve visibility, to shape knowledge, to frame narratives, and to influence policy – is at the heart of the food–health nexus, and will therefore be central to this analysis (*ibid.*: 10).

The bulk of this report, and also the one that follows, is concerned with tracing causal links to show what problems arise and how these can be traced back to industrial agriculture. These so-called 'channels of impact' are:

- **Occupational hazards:** people get sick because they work under unhealthy conditions.
- **Environmental contamination:** people get sick because of contaminants in the water, soil, or air.
- **Contaminated, unsafe and altered foods:** people get sick because specific foods they eat are unsafe for consumption.
- **Unhealthy dietary patterns:** people get sick because they have unhealthy diets.
- **Food insecurity:** people get sick because they cannot access adequate, acceptable food at all times (*ibid.*: 12).

As the report notes, such analysis can never be fully comprehensive:

Given their complexity, it is impossible, at any one time, to fully describe global food systems to identify all the pathways that have consequences for health – not least because many of the pathways are indirect, with factors outside food systems also playing an important role (*ibid.*: 13).

After analysing the negative effects of industrial agriculture, the report then turns to the issue of power; again focusing especially on the narrative.

Power – to achieve visibility, to frame narratives, to set the terms of debate, and to influence policy – is at the heart of this nexus. Indeed, as the industrial model is further entrenched, a narrow group of actors is able to exercise ever-greater control over data provision and scientific research priorities, as well as continuing to shape the narratives and solutions (*ibid.*: 77).

The report identifies five ‘leverage points’, where action might be initiated to remedy the situation. The first three relate to promoting alternative ways of thinking: encouraging food systems thinking; reasserting scientific integrity and research as a public good; bringing the alternatives to light. The fourth is more directly aimed at policy: adopting the precautionary principle. The fifth – building integrated food policies under participatory governance – is more explicitly ‘political’, insofar as it emphasises the potential role of less powerful actors.

Thematic Report 3 (October 2017): *Too Big to Feed: Exploring the Impacts of Mega-Mergers, Consolidation and Concentration of Power in the Agri-Food Sector* (IPES-Food 2017b) takes up the issue briefly described in Thematic Report 1. It begins with well-documented evidence of the huge degree of market concentration across the whole of agribusiness before turning to the question ‘Why do these pose risk to the development of sustainable food systems?’ Thus, as with the previous report, it presents a lengthy and detailed causal analysis linking a phenomenon – in this case consolidation and concentration – with its negative impacts. These are nine in number: redistributing costs and squeezing farm income; reducing farmer autonomy in a context of ‘mutually-reinforcing consolidation’; narrowing the scope of innovation: defensive and derivative R&D; hollowing out corporate commitments to sustainability; controlling information through a data-driven revolution; centralising environmental risks and eroding resilience; allowing labour abuses and fraud to slip through the cracks; and shifting policies and practices away from the public interest.

Thus, in this report again, the dominant narrative is in focus. Indeed, as consolidation intensifies, data-driven and high-tech solutions are being promoted as the only pathways to sustainability, generating the same types of solutions at the expense of alternatives. And again, the key actors are giant firms in the agri-business sector, though one additional and important actor emerges from the analysis of financialisation, namely passive investors.

The two other reports issued so far are case studies. These give the opportunity to move the analysis below the global level.

Case Studies 1 (June 2017): *What Makes Urban Food Policy Happen? Insights from Five Case Studies* (IPES-Food 2017c) is concerned specifically with issues of food governance, at the level of the city. This is particularly interesting because here, at least by comparison with the international and national levels, institutions whose task it is to promote the public good have a relatively wide range of instruments at their disposal – if they are willing, and politically able, to use them.<sup>9</sup>

The case studies show how, in particular circumstances, it has been possible to overcome the forces either of inertia or of actual resistance by self-interested parties. The stories are very varied, but in several cases, change is attributed largely to the actions of a single person or

small group. Political commitment, backed by funding, is crucial. The state, or in this case local authorities, can apparently act effectively to counter the power of business; in fact, local firms can be allies in bringing about change.

In Case Studies 2 (October 2018), *Breaking Away from Industrial Food and Farming Systems – Seven Case Studies of Agroecological Transition*:

The cases cover a variety of scales (single farmer, community level, regional and national) and geographical locations (Europe, North America, Central America, Africa, Asia)... [as well as a range of entry points]... (income diversification, climate adaptation, rural development), with a range of actors taking the lead in different cases (international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), producer organizations, research bodies, governments) (IPES-Food 2018: 9).

The report adopts

[a] view of food systems as an interconnected whole... [referring]... not only to market transactions and connections between different points in the food chain (e.g. agriculture and food retail), but also to a broader web of institutional and regulatory frameworks, and the prevailing conditions in which science and knowledge are generated (*ibid.*: 8).

The report documents how, in spite of substantial barriers to change, farmers, researchers, consumers, NGOs, and many other food system actors have found ways to drive transitions in food and farming systems. Thus, in addition to analysing different levels, this report introduces some less powerful actors that nevertheless have shown an ability to counter the dominance of big business.

### 3 Discussion

I will end by briefly reflecting on the power analysis of IPES-Food as found in these five reports. Relating to the elements of the 'eclectic' approach outlined above, I shall ask: how much do these reports tell us about the actors, their interests, and their sources of power – in promoting a productionist approach and its associated narrative? And at what levels?

Who, according to these reports, are the powerful actors? Clearly, the most dominant are big firms; primarily agribusiness, but also supermarkets and large-scale retailers. A few others are briefly noted: two international organisations (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the European Union (EU)), some individual countries (e.g. the USA, Brazil), and city authorities (e.g. in Toronto). Organised labour is referred to, but only to note their relative weakness in contrast to agribusiness. There is rather little mention of the many other actors that could be included in a more comprehensive account – such as foundations, NGOs, and civil society, bilateral donors, international research bodies, thinktanks, the media, and so forth.



What are the interests of the dominant actors? On the rare occasions these are explicitly referred to, they are identified as economic, and more specifically, profit.

As to the sources of power, these too – in the case of big business – are primarily stated as economic. Their ability to frame the questions and provide the solutions is based on their market power, as also their economic power to lobby, and to finance research. Regulatory power is briefly mentioned, in relation to the state, and reference is made to reforming the scope of anti-trust rules and expanding global regulatory oversight.

One may conclude that there are ways in which the power analysis could be extended. To do so with regard to power over the narrative, and even associated policymaking, might not be too challenging a task. This could begin by extending the analysis to include a wider range of actors. In the process, other types of interest would no doubt emerge, although these will in many cases be variants of economic interests; for example, for some international organisations, their primary interest is survival in the face of near bankruptcy. And other forms of power may also prove significant: for example, the moral authority of some NGOs, the disruptive powers of civil society, or the authority of the state to enact and enforce legislation.

But could, and should, our analysis be still more comprehensive – examining in greater detail not only power over the narrative but also power over the productionist based system? I suggest that there are two ways in which the degree of complexity in our reports has so far been kept in check. One is by separating, as far as possible, what I have called the ‘causal’ analysis (of the links between industrial agriculture and its deleterious effects) from the power analysis. This, I suggest, is both valid and necessary. The second is by, to some extent, distinguishing (at least implicitly) between power over the narrative and power over the productionist-based system, and focusing very largely on the former.

A greater challenge would be to seek a more comprehensive analysis of the food system, from global to local, that incorporates the power dimension in all its various manifestations. Here – as I indicated at the outset – we would need to consider our audience. There are already many, quite complex, studies of the food system in what might be called ‘apolitical’ terms; and academics have developed highly sophisticated theories and terminologies relating to the analysis of power. In seeking to draw on both of these sources, it will be necessary to sacrifice a good deal of comprehensiveness and theoretical sophistication if our ambition of using ‘knowledge for change’ is to be successfully achieved.

### Notes

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- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges', and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.
- 1 Desmond McNeill, Former Director at the Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM), University of Oslo, Norway, and current member of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food).
- 2 IPES-Food also has the ambition of adopting a transdisciplinary approach, implying that 'knowledge' is not to be limited to 'expert knowledge'. I will not, however, have the space to discuss the implications of this here.
- 3 While we share a common purpose, the members of IPES-Food are varied regarding their backgrounds, motivations, and perspectives. I will therefore be cautious in making broad assertions about what 'we' in IPES-Food believe, and base my claims as far as possible on IPES-Food documents.
- 4 'IPES-Food employs a holistic food systems lens and focuses on the political economy of food systems, i.e. the differential power of actors to influence priority-setting and decision-making': see [www.ipes-food.org/about/](http://www.ipes-food.org/about/).
- 5 Some of its members may, however, favour the Marxian-inspired theory of food regimes.
- 6 Marx, however, asserted that this notion was promoted by economists, whom he described as the 'hired prizefighters' of capitalists (Marx 1954: 25).
- 7 My own preferred approach (Bøås and McNeill 2004), which draws in part on neo-Gramscian writers such as Robert Cox, is also eclectic. It is somewhat similar to that of John Gaventa (2006), although he does not include 'forms of power' in his famous 'power cube'.
- 8 For reasons of space I cannot reproduce the figures here, but all these reports can of course be found on the IPES-Food website.
- 9 As an anonymous reviewer rightly notes, a political economy approach should be able to untangle the vague 'political will' terminology.

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# Envisioning New Horizons for the Political Economy of Sustainable Food Systems\*†

Jessica Duncan,<sup>1</sup> Charles Z. Levkoe<sup>2</sup> and Ana Moragues-Faus<sup>3,4</sup>

**Abstract** This article considers how political economy can expand to contribute to the contemporary study of sustainable food systems, raising new questions for researchers, practitioners, and social movement actors engaged in collaborative efforts to transform dominant foodscapes. Our discussion and analysis draw on the outcomes of a workshop of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) on the political economies of sustainable food systems in June 2018. The workshop participants identified five cross-cutting research issues and related methods worthy of focus: *multiple forms of knowledge, technology and innovation, expansion or scaling sustainable innovations, the role of the private sector, and democratic governance*. We conclude by positing ways forward that contribute to the evolving political economy of sustainable food systems.

**Keywords:** food sovereignty, food studies, food systems, governance, interdisciplinary, political ecology, political economy, power, sustainability.

## 1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, political economy has served as a key theoretical framework for critical scholars to analyse food systems dynamics (see, for example, Bernstein 2017; Bernstein 2010; Buttel 2001; Fine 1994; Friedmann 1993). This evolving approach aims to address the differential power relations across all aspects of food systems – from harvesting and production, to distribution, consumption, and waste management – along with related influences and impacts. On 4–5 June 2018, 45 food systems academics and practitioners from different geographies and disciplines met in Brighton, UK, to participate in a workshop on the political economies of sustainable food systems, hosted by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The workshop focused on four themes that were intended

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019 'The Political Economy of Food'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

to establish new directions for research and practice: diversity and innovation; the food–health nexus; the politics of consumption; and, food sovereignty and agroecology. Based on a series of presentations and discussions, the group identified five cross-cutting research issues to further advance the political economy of sustainable food systems and proposed innovative methods to address them. This article presents the key ideas that emerged from that workshop and reflects on possible contributions to the contemporary study of sustainable food systems for researchers, practitioners, and social movement actors engaged in collaborative efforts to transform the dominant foodscapes.

The article is organised into five sections. Following the introduction, we present a brief review of the evolution of the political economy of food systems, including some criticisms. In Section 3, we provide a synthesis of ideas that emerged from the workshop. The discussion in Section 4 analyses the workshop's outcomes, paying particular attention to the trade-offs of political economy approaches and the limitations of this analysis for sustainable food systems. Here we highlight key elements that underpin political economy approaches and suggest ways that they might contribute to building more equitable and sustainable food systems. By critically engaging with the outcomes of these discussions, we provide insights into how political economy approaches might contribute to addressing food systems challenges today and into the future. We conclude with some suggestions for the evolving approaches to the political economy of sustainable food systems and reflect on what is gained and lost by adopting a political economy analysis. Specifically, we argue that while there are significant gaps in the ways that political economy has addressed sustainable food systems, scholars should continue to engage with political economy in order to critically address the flows of power throughout food systems. Integrating innovative theoretical and practical perspectives along with methodological tools offers new and exciting horizons for the political economy of sustainable food systems.

## **2 The political economy of food systems: evolution, key themes, and criticisms**

### **2.1 A political economy approach**

Political economy is a widely used approach in social science. Despite its popularity in food studies in the last decades, many authors seldom provide a clear description of how they use the concept. Many of these analyses share a focus on power relations and the resulting socio-material inequalities. A useful starting point to anchor this approach is provided by Collinson (2003) who points out that political economy analyses concentrate on 'the interaction of political and economic processes in a society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time' (*ibid.*: 10). Adopting a similar definition, Bernstein (2017) summarised the primary concerns of a political economy analysis into four key questions: Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it? Here, he highlights the

analytic utility of these questions, which can be applied ‘across different sites and scales, from individual farming households through village, local and national socioeconomic units of investigation to the world economy’ (*ibid.*: 8). Moreover, these questions aim to uncover the key relations of power in respect to social interactions and the ways they impact and influence decision-making across food systems.

A political economy approach for food systems is distinguished by its analysis of food as part of both political and economic processes. Moreover, the dynamics of food systems are understood in terms of relations of power and not simply material goods and outcomes. Political economy approaches incorporate a wide historical and geographical perspective, helping to explain why and how power changes over time, and how the activities of one group affect others (Collinson 2003: 10). As such, when applied to food systems, political economy approaches are used to understand the economic and political dynamics that affect issues such as access, availability, production, harvesting, and consumption.

## 2.2 The evolution of political economy and food systems

Political economy was adopted as a key approach in food studies in the 1980s when scholars began to explore dominant food systems and the myriad relationships between people, capital, and space that contributed to ill-health, inequity, and ecological degradation (Buttel 2001; Marsden *et al.* 1996; Friedmann 1982). A political economy approach has also been mobilised to understand food systems processes at different scales, with a particular focus on agriculture, such as the study of farmers’ strategies through a range of structuralist approaches which include exploring the *agrarian question* and the class position of farmers (Watts and Goodman 1997). Over time, food studies scholars have adapted political economy approaches to address a range of gaps and emerging issues. Some of these shifts have been consistent with specific disciplines and study areas, while others have been unique to the studies of food systems. For example, in the early-1990s, the consumption turn in food studies (part of the broader cultural turn in geography and other disciplines) offered new approaches and tools for analysing power relations and addressed questions of value and quality across the food chain.

Along with the emergence of post-structuralist trends in food studies, the consumption turn highlighted gaps in the political economy scholarship that had been focused primarily on a structural analysis of agricultural production (Buttel 2001). Many critics reported an insufficient engagement with feminist theory, postcolonial theory, critical race studies, and social constructivism (Galt 2013). Adapting to the new perspectives, political economy approaches began to directly address the agency of food producers, retailers, and consumers, along with the role of culture and identity within food politics (Goodman and DuPuis 2002; Lockie and Kitto 2000). These approaches expanded the scope of political economy by stressing the need to address issues of identity and incorporate behavioural perspectives. In so doing, they provided new ways of accounting for agency in theorising change.

Building from this, some scholars argued that political economy approaches had failed to appreciate new ecological conditions within the food system and had an overly passive conceptualisation of nature (Galt 2013; Boyd, Prudham and Schurman 2001). For example, Goodman (1999) wrote that the focus on human agency brought about by the consumption turn had failed to recognise the role of non-human actors in food systems and lamented an omission of nature in explaining prospects for societal change. Many of these critical elements are addressed by the increasingly popular field of political ecology (Perreault, Bridge and McCarthy 2015), which more fully integrates ideas of nature into its analysis and is expanding in many directions including themes such as urban political ecology, feminist political ecology, and the political ecology of food. Recently, Moragues-Faus and Marsden (2017) identified ways that political ecology perspectives can underpin a revised critical food scholarship based on understanding place-based socio-natures, addressing the politics of scale and inequality, and co-producing knowledge and change.

While political economy approaches have been a useful tool to critique socioeconomic and political dynamics, exposing how power operating at multiple scales impacts lived experiences and reproduces inequalities and injustices, many have noted that critique alone is insufficient to transform current food systems (Leff 2015; Walker 2006). Other tools and engagements are required to nurture more sustainable and equitable food systems. As we expand upon below, some political economists have recognised the importance of hybrid approaches championed within post-structural and cultural geography to understand food system dynamics, and have expanded to other thematic areas beyond food production. These more symmetrical perspectives included the use of Actor Network Theory to supersede structure/agency dichotomies (Wilkinson 2006; Lockie 2002; Busch and Juska 1997) and embracing socioecological perspectives and related concepts such as socio-natures or metabolisms to bridge society and nature (Moragues-Faus and Marsden 2017). However, critics have cautioned to avoid bypassing socioeconomic and political issues and actively reproducing social inequalities (Gibson-Graham 2006b; Winter 2003; Gregson 1995).

### **3 New directions in the political economy of food: insights from IPES-Food and IDS workshop**

The establishment of IPES-Food in 2015 was rooted in the ongoing challenges of finding new ways of thinking about research, sustainability, and food systems. IPES-Food is made up of interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners from across the globe that engage in policy-oriented research and action to shape the ongoing debates about food systems reform.<sup>5</sup> In June 2018, IPES-Food partnered with IDS to organise a two-day workshop, held at the University of Sussex, on the political economy of sustainable food systems. Academics and practitioners from across the globe were invited to participate and share their expertise and experiences. Based on a series of presentations



and thematic discussions from leading food systems thinkers, the workshop served as a forum to share existing research and perspectives and solicit critical feedback with an aim of enriching emerging political economy approaches.

In advance of the workshop, the organising committee identified four themes that were intended to establish new directions for the political economies of sustainable food systems. These included: diversity and innovation; the food–health nexus; the politics of consumption; and, food sovereignty and agroecology. Building on these themes at the workshop, two open-space sessions provided an opportunity for critical engagement and interactive discussions. In these sessions, participants identified key elements missing from the initial agenda and suggested five cross-cutting research issues to advance political economy of sustainable food systems debates: multiple forms of knowledge; technology and innovation; expansion or scaling sustainable innovations; the role of the private sector; and, democratic governance. Through a series of discussions focusing on these five issues, the group identified key challenges and new research questions, as well as innovative methods and research processes that could be mobilised to move them forward.

In what follows, we present a synthesis of the four themes proposed by the IPES-Food organising committee, followed by a presentation of the five cross-cutting research issues that emerged through the workshop. Our analysis in the following section builds on workshop documents recorded by the IPES-Food Secretariat and from the three authors who also acted as the lead organisers and facilitators of two open-space discussion sessions.

### **3.1 Four themes for the political economy of sustainable food systems**

Building on the evolving debates surrounding political economy and sustainable food systems, in advance of the workshop, IPES-Food identified four themes to highlight the opportunities and challenges of research on sustainable food systems while also considering how to affect food systems change. First, *diversity and innovation* were identified as fundamental to sustainable food systems and that further research should focus on both the positive and negative impacts of different food production systems as well as the power relations that maintain the dominance of industrial agriculture. A political economy approach enables an assessment of the historical trends related to diversity and innovation while also remaining mindful of the way more marginalised groups innovate and make use of those innovations. Presentations also noted that a political economy approach could help to understand how designers of innovation control and/or influence the ways that environments are shaped. In addition, participants put forward that it was crucial to develop a framework for assessing new technologies, highlighting that innovations relating to digital technology can be leveraged to promote open source and citizen science.

The second theme, *the food–health nexus*, aimed to address the health impacts of food systems and the multiple, interconnected pathways that generate human and economic costs (see also IPES-Food 2017). This includes the food system's effects on vulnerable communities as well as their linkages with other socioeconomic processes reproducing inequality. Power is at the core of the food–health nexus and political economy can help to uncover relationships between public health concerns, food industry interests, and determining which interests are prioritised in policy spaces. The ensuing discussion highlighted that political economy approaches are useful insofar as they ask questions about agency and structure, also providing useful tools to confront neoliberalism, multistakeholderism, and public–private partnerships that skew decision-making and limit democracy. Beyond only material interests when it comes to the food–health nexus, theories of knowledge, the politics of knowledge, embodied knowledge, and political ecology are key to understanding change and to analysing what information is privileged and prioritised, and what is ignored.

*The politics of consumption* was identified as the third theme for a political economy of sustainable food systems. Consumption is a broad concept that includes challenges to current food systems (i.e. both over- and under-consumption) as well as possible pathways for sustainable food systems (i.e. conscious consumption). Under-consumption of food was thrust back onto the political and research agenda following the 2007/08 food price crisis. Here, a political economy approach proves useful for analysing, 'namely the confrontations between how "the elite" vs "the masses" meet their food needs (e.g. as it relates to forms of invisible power)' (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 10). The gendered component of consumption, and by extension, food practices, can be exposed when applying a political economy approach by expanding the measurement of value of work beyond income. The ensuing discussion highlighted that a political economy analysis can also help to 'situate the politics of consumption within broader socioeconomic trends while also allowing for the inclusion of an international relations analysis' (*ibid.*: 7).

The fourth theme was *food sovereignty and agroecology*, identifying the growing influence and impact of social movements and civil society groups in both the research and practice of sustainable food systems (see also IPES-Food 2016). These concepts represent sets of practices and movements and have become a prominent focus of agrarian political economy (Galt 2013; Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe 2010; Perfecto, Vandermeer and Wright 2009). A political economy approach allows for a relational approach that recognises 'that what farmers do in one part of the world is heavily influenced/dependent on what is going on in other parts of the worlds' (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 18). This allows for coherence between research methods and objects of research, given that food sovereignty as a concept, framework, and movement highlights the agency of marginalised groups and those usually seen as powerless to advance the transitions they wish to see.

### 3.2 Towards a new research agenda: cross-cutting research issues

In this subsection, we present the five cross-cutting research issues that emerged as key to advancing a political economy of sustainable food systems. These issues were not necessarily new, but were identified as priority areas requiring more focus and research.

The first cross-cutting research issue was related to the need for recognition that there are *multiple forms of knowledge*, and that further political economy of sustainable food systems research should speak in terms of co-created knowledge rooted in diverse epistemological positions and worldviews. For example, academics are increasingly engaging practitioners through sustainable food systems research that puts communities first (Levkoe *et al.* 2016). The discussion highlighted the opportunity to understand this through the framework of ‘ethnospheres’ (meant to parallel the biosphere) – the cultural web of human existence, or the totality of human ideas, stories, inspirations, intuitions, and so forth, and how they related to ways of knowing and being. Today, the ethnosphere is being severely compromised through a loss of languages, cultural diversity, and other factors that restrict human possibilities. While knowledge is often presented as static, in actuality, it is mobile and in a constant state of change. In turn, research needs to better understand, enact, and study culture and knowledge as dynamic.

The second cross-cutting research issue was related to *technology and innovation*. Participants highlighted the need for political economy of food systems research to consider technologies that enhance control for those most marginalised by the dominant food system and that serve human needs rather than driving change for the sake of technology itself. The group also identified a need to recognise that all technologies are not necessarily appropriate or sustainable for all types of farming. Moreover, technology is not viable unless it is understood and adapted by farmers/fishers/harvesters themselves. A deeper investigation of what food producers/harvesters want and how technologies can better serve communities will enable better choices and technological adaptations.

Along similar lines, researchers can draw attention to current threats to public research, which is being replaced by private sector interests and funding (e.g. to open new markets and expand the reach of capital) and stimulated by intellectual property rights through patents. More public (and democratic) research funding is needed to explore a greater diversity of technologies and innovations and to ensure they meet the needs and contexts of food producers. Here, political economy tools can be effectively used to expose the politics of technological development. This is evident, for example, in Kloppenburg’s (2005) critical analysis of plant breeding and biotechnology through the political economy of science and research.

The third cross-cutting research issue was linked to questions of *expansion or scaling sustainable innovations*. When it comes to food systems sustainability, innovation needs to consider the possibilities of going

deeper, rather than simply expanding. While these options are not mutually exclusive, it remains unclear whether they can be done simultaneously. For example, some agroecologists are in favour of scaling up infrastructures and landscape transformations. It was also noted that producer movements have attempted to scale out with context specificity, using shared principles while also implementing governance mechanisms to maintain diversity (see, for example, Claeys and Duncan 2018). The discussion raised further questions such as: What are the core values and relationships that need to be scaled? Can you scale up while retaining values of community production relations? Addressing these questions requires more research and meaningful consultation and will prove central to advancing a political economy for sustainable food systems.

Related to the issue of scale, there are research challenges when it comes to assessing the impact of innovations. There is a great deal of pressure, notably from funders, to demonstrate impact which is usually presented in terms of scales and numbers. For this reason, new technologies tend to be appealing because they can be easily scaled through universal applications. Participants recognised that more effort was needed to develop reliable tools for measuring a diversity of impacts, particularly with regard to community-led innovations which are often overlooked.

The fourth cross-cutting research issue related to *the role of the private sector*. Of particular interest in terms of future research was the trend of large corporations working towards sustainability. It was noted that there is a need for stronger political support for, and research on, possible pathways for these actors to pursue, along with ongoing analysis of the implications of industry-led sustainability. At the same time, participants called for more research into possible incentives to tackle path dependencies, to help mainstream private sector actors shift their practices (e.g. branding, market differentiation, risk management, and so forth), and related implications. On the other end of the spectrum, more research needs were identified around policies to foster social business investments. It was noted, for example, that at present, social enterprises are not rewarded for increasing positive externalities, and thus are not incentivised to develop into sustainable business, often reverting towards a charity model. In turn, political economy research is needed to highlight the contributions (economic and otherwise) of social enterprises as well as support systems to ensure their continuation.

At the same time, concerns were raised that in the growing number of participatory food policy processes, from the local level through to the global, the private sector and civil society are assumed to be equal participants. This, despite the fact that the private sector already holds a great deal of power and influence in determining food system outcomes. Participants called for careful reflection and investigation into the implications of the organisation, outcomes, and implications of these platforms. Further research and testing of governance mechanisms that enable desired representation and ensure diversity are also needed,

along with expanded definitions of actors that fall under the label of the private sector, including small- and medium-scale businesses.

The fifth cross-cutting research issue identified was related to the importance of *democratic governance*. Key here is the idea that decision-making processes at all scales must be participatory and transparent, but also include mechanisms to mitigate power imbalances and ensure equity of voice – specifically ensuring space for civil society. However, it was also noted that governance has become an overly technocratic concept and too often serves as a catch-all idea. Participants argued that research into food systems governance often falls back on an apolitical network analysis of the key actors informing policymakers (e.g. the market, state, and civil society) while failing to address issues of power and agency. Governance research aiming to build sustainable food systems must acknowledge that evidence-based policymaking does not always work and, moreover, not all evidence is considered equal. Moving forward, a key task for researchers is to better understand the multiple interactions between actors, resources, knowledge, and contexts that lead to (un)successful policies.

### 3.3 Methods and approaches

The lines of political economy are increasingly blurring its contours. We note the continued use of established political economy tools (i.e. food regimes) but also a recognition of the need to continue to expand and evolve the approach, as illustrated above. In what follows, we review some of the methods and complementary approaches that emerged at the workshop and which are deemed fundamental to a future sustainable food systems research agenda.

First, discussions around an expanding political economy approach for sustainable food systems reinforced the importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. This offers a primary way of accounting for different knowledges and learning from experiential knowledge alongside academic knowledge. There is also the need to value historical approaches that map cultural flows and layers of accumulation, and which help to elucidate how narratives and socioecological conditions are created (and how to get rid of those that do not serve normative objectives).

From the workshop, there was consensus that a political economy approach focusing on the dynamics of power is useful for analysing and deconstructing dominant discourses and to identify and challenge power structures across food systems. Specific strategies identified for researchers seeking to address power relations included: confronting dominant actors; leading by example; strengthening the ‘power base’; supporting food democracy to empower communities; making visible invisible forms of power (e.g. occupying digital public spaces); defining new narratives that value social innovations; researching how diversity can dilute/moderate power; and, waiting for the system to collapse which would enable new forms of power to emerge (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 4). Towards this

end, Gaventa's (2005) power cube was proposed as an innovative tool to analyse the effects of various forms of power to monitor and evaluate change in power dynamics over time. The use of this tool could help to build awareness of what drives various processes, and to find entry points for action. By recognising various forms of power (i.e. visible, hidden, invisible) as well as various spaces and scales of power, the power cube provides a clear analytic tool to support a political economy approach.

Power maps (see, for example, Schiffer 2007) were also identified as useful tools for reflecting on behaviour over time. These maps support a better understanding of interactions between various systems' actors and processes; help to identify leverage points; and, develop a vision for alternative pathways and how to achieve them. They can also be used to make predictions and test assumptions by modelling interactions, in turn, leading to systems modelling. During the workshop, it was demonstrated how systems modelling and political economy analyses can be complementary, as power is often absent from systems thinking (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 20).

Subject-centred methods such as interviews were also highlighted as a traditional but still relevant method for expanding political economy. For example, research by Hossain and Scott-Villiers, as part of the 'Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility' project,<sup>6</sup> uncovered how people adjusted to higher food prices after the crisis in 2007. The authors made use of yearly return visits to 23 urban and rural communities in ten countries, and analysis of national and international food data.

Given new social-technical trends, critical digital studies (see, for example, Kroker and Kroker 2008) were also cited as offering useful tools to support a political economy analysis. Critical digital studies support a political economy approach by introducing methods for researching the relations between technology and society, and providing a way to think about the potential of digital platforms to shape food systems.

Finally, transformation labs, also called living labs (see, for example, Voytenko *et al.* 2016; Bal *et al.* 2014) were cited as a way of creating an enabling environment for scaling innovations. These projects are designed as user-centred, open-innovation platforms, often operating at a local or territorial level (e.g. city-region), and aim to integrate research and innovation processes in real time through academic–community relationships.

These methods could be further complemented by other critical approaches. Workshop participants highlighted five key examples that could further enrich a political economy analysis:

- 1 Post-capitalist and diverse economies:** Gibson-Graham's (2006a, 2006b) work on post-capitalist politics has bloomed into a diverse and community economies approach that proposes an economic

and political language to understand and assess innovations outside capitalist parameters (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2017; Community Economies Collective 2001). Increasingly, the diverse economies framework has been utilised in food studies to avoid reproducing neoliberal narratives (Larner 2003), and to inspire new political opportunities (Sarmiento 2017; Cameron and Wright 2014; Crossan *et al.* 2016; Harris 2009).

- 2 **Feminist perspectives:** Feminist perspectives have enriched food studies and political economy perspectives for decades. The feminist focus on everyday practices, affective/emotional relationships, and micropolitics of control can help to elucidate the multiscalar co-constitution of inequalities, from the body to the community or international level, as well as contribute to understanding the reproduction of neoliberal globalised food systems (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013; Elmhirst 2011; Truelove 2011). Participants identified feminist approaches as being particularly useful to explore embodied ways of knowing. Recent debates situate the focus on the intersectionality of gender, class, race, and other subjectivities as a key prism to understand the historical constitution and current reproduction of foodscapes (Moragues-Faus and Marsden 2017).
- 3 **Co-production of knowledge and nature:** Co-production is championed by diverse theoretical perspectives, from political ecology to social innovation. In the workshop, participants were particularly aware of the need to mobilise this concept as a means to incorporate nature more fully in political economy debates. For that purpose, political ecology perspectives were considered particularly useful, along with other concepts such as socio-natures, insofar as they examine the historically situated process through which nature and society are materially and discursively co-productive of one another (Aeberhard and Rist 2009; Alkon 2013).
- 4 During the discussion, participants spoke about how a political ecology framework can help us better understand how human interactions relate to all things (e.g. other species, environment, and so forth), leading to less anthropocentric studies of planetary dynamics (Zimmerer and Bassett 2003). Along these lines, participants also reflected on the usefulness of panarchy as a conceptual framework to study how economic growth and human development depend on ecosystems and institutions (Gunderson and Holling 2002). The framework can account for contradictory characteristics of complex systems (e.g. stability and change).
- 5 Finally, participants discussed ways that political economy might better incorporate a decolonising approach to research that recognises the impact of dominant food systems on indigenous peoples and traditional territories (Grey and Patel 2015; Kepkiewicz and Dale 2018). When discussing food systems, it is essential that researchers acknowledge that political economy approaches are

rooted in colonial knowledge, and uncritical use can risk further epistemic violence (Teo 2010). This means addressing the power relations inherent in the control and ownership of land, water, and seeds that has been appropriated from indigenous peoples through violence and disposition, displacement, and genocide. The history of the dominant food system is synonymous with the history of colonialism and consolidation of power (Mintz 1986). Furthermore, colonial structures (i.e. settler-colonialism) and exploitative relationships are reproduced in everyday practices – including through research. Decolonisation must involve a process of supporting indigenous resurgence, self-determination, sovereignty, and nationhood, the repatriation of indigenous land, and the reimagining of all our relationships to land and water (Corntassel 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012). Researchers of sustainable food systems must better recognise and address this.

#### **4 Discussion: political economy as a tool for sustainable food system change**

In the last decades, political economy has provided a fertile ground for food studies to flourish; however, more efforts can be made by food systems scholars to further unpack the power relations that make up unsustainable and unjust food systems, as well as the agencies to transform them. By and large, political economy has been limited by its abilities to provide and explore potential solutions and alternatives to the dominant food system (Walker 2006): unveiling power relations is not enough to transform socioecological systems and their related foodscapes. This limitation could be overcome if political economy practitioners actively engage with more diverse theories of change, not only tracing power relations but also contributing to greater methodological diversity and actualising more just and sustainable futures.

The trade-offs associated with a totalising approach to capitalist relations, as is often the case with political economy, calls for a greater recognition of diversity – that is, acknowledging and empowering diverse forms of knowledge, bodies, cultures, actions, contexts, and socioecological relations that make up food systems. Along the same lines, political economy has been widely influenced by structuralist theories to explain socioeconomic transformations which devalue other forms of agency and agents, such as nature (Robbins 2012; Walker 2005). A political economy for sustainable food systems might look beyond specific Western and human-centric worldviews that tend to exclude a wide range of perspectives and cosmologies, such as those enacted by indigenous ways of knowing (Leff 2015).

The structuralist focus of a political economy has contributed to pin-pointing the failure of individualistic neoliberal approaches to socioeconomic development; however, in order to overcome the trade-offs associated with this structuralist approach, political economy research could rework a new structuralism that embraces diversity and postcolonial perspectives, as well as acknowledge the co-constitution of



society and nature. This means developing ways to create productive connections between structural approaches, collective action, and the politics of identity. New forms of structuralism could critically engage with more fluid understandings of transformations such as those posited by community economies (Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2017) and assemblage theory (Kennedy *et al.* 2013), and contribute to devise new ways of fostering sustainable and just food innovation.

Reinforcing our call to engage with the diverse economies framework, and recognising that political economy tools can help to foster reflexive practices within social movements, it is also important to be aware of how political economy research might also feed capitalocentric narratives – the idea that capitalism is everywhere and therefore impossible to escape (Cameron and Wright 2014). In other words, we must be cautious not to fall into a deterministic or reductionist understanding of power and capitalist relations when undertaking political economy research. In applying a political economy perspective, we need to acknowledge the broad range of alternative food initiatives as well as everyday forms of resistance seeking to transform current unjust and unsustainable foodscapes, as highlighted by feminist and post-capitalist scholars (Gibson-Graham 2006b; Truelove 2011).

Some have argued that previous research has focused too heavily on alternatives, such as grass-roots food initiatives, alternative food networks, and/or re-localisation projects (Sharzer 2012). Taking these suggestions seriously, it is essential to conduct additional research into where power is concentrated, but also to approach alternatives with a more critical lens, to better understand the impact and implications of these projects in communities, along with internal power relations and the potential reproduction of forms of exclusion and/or exploitation of specific groups (Guthman 2008). Towards this end, political economy researchers could engage further with community-based and participatory approaches as they provide opportunities to critically assess the power dynamics inherent in the research processes itself. Researchers could also stress the need to reflect on the ways that action research might support or limit progress towards more sustainable and equitable food systems, along with the need to incorporate other types of research approaches to unpack food system dynamics (Levkoe, Brem-Wilson and Anderson 2018).

Alongside this research, more work on these and other powerful actors is needed (George 2015), and could build off existing research exploring the power of corporate actors in the food system (Howard 2016; Fuchs and Clapp 2009). Political economy analysis raises questions around how and what knowledge is produced as well as contestation around the processes through which knowledge is legitimated and appropriated by different interests. This leads to further questions related to co-production, such as, how do we conduct research with/on the powerful? Are action research or co-productive processes the best approach to research in every circumstance?

The recognition of everyday politics and actions as a force for transforming food systems leads to a reassessment of the key roles of the state, private sector, and social movements as championed by political economy perspectives. When undertaking related studies, researchers may need to move beyond the limits of the state either standing back or stepping in. Here it could be useful to think in terms of 'third spaces' that exist 'between the horizontality of the market and the verticality of the state, a commons managed by communities; a new planned economy but not state led' (IPES-Food Secretariat 2018: 18). This is not to suggest a limited role for the state, but a more fluid understanding of the state's agency and its relations with different actors, especially civil society. States play, and should continue to play, a fundamental role in ensuring human and economic resources for transition.

### 5 Conclusions

Political economy has played a fundamental role in the evolution of food systems research. At the same time, as an approach, it has continued to evolve, but not without critique. In this article, we have demonstrated that while there are gaps in the ways that political economy has addressed sustainable food systems, food systems scholars should continue to engage with political economy in order to critically address key relations of power. More specifically, we have presented cross-cutting research issues that emerged from a workshop of food systems experts that serve to not only address some of the critiques, but also to posit a research agenda that expands the scope of the political economy of sustainable food systems. This agenda can draw heavily from political economy, but the complexity of contemporary food systems requires expanding beyond a traditional political economy approach towards a more hybridised methodology and set of tools. As we progress in developing this refreshed political economy of sustainable food systems agenda, we should be aware of trade-offs associated with this lens, as identified throughout our analysis in this article. Mainly, we need to devise ways of conducting critical analysis of all food system actors to uncover power relations, while avoiding the reproduction of a totalising perspective of capitalism that does not engage with alternatives and overlooks diverse perspectives and approaches. This means building on the strong tradition of focusing on power dynamics and agency in all its forms and contexts while better accounting for a diversity of worldviews, scalar relations, embodied and historic experiences, and intersectionality to devise more sustainable and equitable food systems.

### Notes

- \* Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth

of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on ‘Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges’, and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.

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- 2 Charles Z. Levkoe, Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Food Systems, Associate Professor, Lakehead University, Canada.
- 3 Ana Moragues-Faus, Research Fellow, Sustainable Places Institute, Cardiff University, UK.
- 4 We would like to acknowledge the collaboration between the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) and the Institute of Development Studies that provided the foundations of this article. These contributions would not have been possible without the engagement of the food systems academics and practitioners that participated in the June 2018 workshop in Brighton, UK. Further, many thanks to Francis, Aidan, Pau, Tzipi, and Ashira for enduring many long discussions and late-night writing. We hope this article contributes to a more equitable society for you and all children of the world.
- 5 See [www.ipes-food.org/about/](http://www.ipes-food.org/about/).
- 6 See [www.ids.ac.uk/projects/life-in-a-time-of-food-price-volatility](http://www.ids.ac.uk/projects/life-in-a-time-of-food-price-volatility).

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# Evidence-Based Policymaking in the Food–Health Nexus<sup>\*†</sup>

Cecilia Rocha<sup>1</sup> and Jody Harris<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract** This article examines the role of evidence in influencing food and nutrition-related public health policy, and starts to chart a way through the political economy of knowledge and evidence within this nexus. We propose an analytical framework for untangling the influence of food industry interests and public health concerns in the policy process, presenting a guiding structure for how an issue might move between contested and uncontested policy spaces, finding that the inherent uncertainty in public health research on complex food systems presents opportunities for contestation by different interest groups. We then use our framework to understand the political economy of the recent sugar-sweetened beverage tax in Mexico, in which public health policies have been adopted despite going against an apparent interest of elements in the food industry. This kind of evidence, given the right framing, has the potential to break some current deadlocks in creating healthier food systems.

**Keywords:** evidence-based policy, issue framing, food and nutrition policy, sugar-sweetened beverages, taxation, Mexico.

## 1 Introduction

Evidence-based policymaking, initially applied in medical policy but increasingly promoted in other social policy fields, is a movement that seeks to place scientific knowledge and its associated epistemological assumptions at the centre of political decision-making (Biesta 2007). Proponents of this approach are aiming for what they identify as the best outcomes, maximising public values such as reducing health impacts or enhancing wellbeing; but there are other approaches to policy processes that prioritise, for example, outcomes favoured by specific interest groups, or that prioritise a participatory process over any particular outcome (Stirling 2012; Clarence 2002). Whichever approach is prioritised, the framing of an issue sits between the evidence that is produced and the political decisions that are taken; the way an issue is framed by different parties at different times is a powerful piece of the policy process, and in a practical field such as nutrition or public health it will determine who gets involved, and how solutions are decided

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019 'The Political Economy of Food'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

(Shiffman 2007; Gillespie *et al.* 2013). Theories of knowledge and the politics of knowledge are therefore key to understanding why certain information is privileged over others in food, nutrition, and health policy.

To this end, this article examines the role of evidence in influencing food system policy, and starts to chart a way through the political economy of knowledge and evidence within this nexus. In Section 2 of this article, we propose an analytical framework for untangling the influence of food industry interests and public health concerns in the policy process. In Section 3, we discuss the issues in establishing enough evidence for action (written policy creation) in an environment of conflicting interests and ideas. In Section 4, we look at an example in which public health policies have been adopted despite going against an apparent interest of, or even active opposition from, elements in the food industry. In the conclusion we summarise our findings in relation to power and the political economy of knowledge and evidence in food system policy. This article is based on the report *Unravelling the Food–Health Nexus* (IPES-Food 2017) and reflections from a subsequent workshop held at the Institute of Development Studies in 2018 to discuss the role of political economy in food systems research.

## **2 A framework for assessing how evidence impacts policymaking**

Generic models of how policy is made and implemented generally start with issue framing (Lasswell 1971), proceeding through a cycle of agenda setting; policy formulation and legitimation; implementation; and evaluation and review. This fairly linear view of evidence-into-policy, where evidence informs agenda setting, has also been adopted in much health sciences reasoning, including within the evidence-based policy world (Fafard 2008). These stages are generally acknowledged to exist in any policy process, even if the order of the process is more iterative than linear; for instance, continued issue framing and agenda setting often accompanies (rather than precedes) each of these stages, as learning is fed back and original policy aims are subverted or changed (Keeley and Scoones 1999). As issues are framed and agendas set and re-set, one piece of the complex puzzle is the role of evidence, and its use to inform policy. The role of evidence varies at different stages in the policymaking cycle, with different coalitions of policy actors (including researchers) creating different narratives around evidence to resonate with policymakers' values and interests in different contexts, and to seek policy influence (Fafard 2008). Policy in the critical tradition is seen through the lens of power, and in particular who has the power to define agendas through defining the language and knowledge used in policy systems (Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). The relative power of different actors' narratives on a given issue is therefore critical to how evidence is used, and where different issues sit between the different actors involved will determine aspects of the debate. In other words, issue framing and agenda setting is a dynamic process, in which different groups and their chosen issues may change their political prominence over time, and it is this feature that opens opportunities for influencing policymaking.

In attempting to discern the issues shaping this confrontation and its ultimate results in terms of food and nutrition policy, we need to recognise that food systems are complex, and that this complexity makes for a difficult process in the development of accepted evidence. This complexity increases the challenge in evaluating whatever evidence is available, and often delays the adoption and implementation of proposed actions to address health problems associated with food systems. One role of research and evidence practitioners and advocates is therefore to frame an issue in such a way that it increases its legitimacy, moving it up the political agenda. Evidence and the way it is framed into narratives can help different groups and issues reach prominence in political circles (Mitchell, Agle and Wood 1997), and hence be more likely to get a policy response. Groups and issues can also fall off the policy agenda; for example, when a particular piece of scientific evidence is less widely accepted or is successfully refuted, allowing public resources and public attention to be redirected to other goals. Policies can be created but also revoked as evidence emerges or is framed differently.

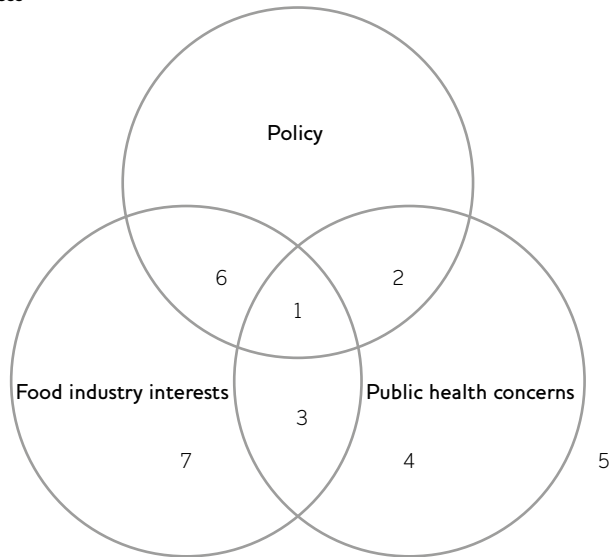
The 2017 report by IPES-Food argues for a systemic approach to look at the health impacts of food systems. It shows that food systems affect health through multiple, interconnected pathways, generating severe human and economic costs. Many of the most severe health impacts can be traced back to some of the core industrial food and farming practices, for example chemical-intensive agriculture; intensive livestock production; the mass production and mass marketing of ultra-processed foods; and the development of long and deregulated global commodity supply chains (IPES-Food 2017). Public policy in these areas, however, does not seem to be developing with the efficacy and urgency that public health practitioners and scientific experts in this field are demanding. The scenario is then set for confrontation between two main camps attempting to influence food and nutrition policy: food industry interests and public health concerns. We present below a framework for understanding these interactions in the policy space.

The Venn diagram in Figure 1 is used to represent different stages of public and political awareness through which a particular health issue might move, before policy on that issue is created. In evidence-based policy theory, the successful creation and framing of evidence will help move an issue into public health concerns (from area 5, outside of the framework, to areas 4 or 3) and then to public policy (areas 2 and 1).

In the diagram (Figure 1), public health concerns associated with evidence-based policymaking are represented in five areas:

- Area 5: Represents issues that are not yet identified as public health concerns (and, thus, are not being considered for policy). Research and information (the accumulation and framing of evidence) can move some of those issues to within the circle of public policy concerns.

**Figure 1 A proposed framework to represent different stages of public and political awareness**



Source Authors' own, created by Cecilia Rocha.

- Area 4: Represents issues that are of current public health concern, that do not seem to conflict with food industry interests, but are not yet addressed in policy. The pathway for these issues could be to move to area 2 with appropriate advocacy.
- Area 3: Represents public health concerns that are not yet addressed in policy, and openly conflict with food industry interests. Success by public health policy or food industry advocates would move these issues to area 1.
- Area 2: Represents issues that are addressed in policy, which do not have an apparent conflict with food industry interests.
- Area 1: Represents public health concerns that are addressed in policy, which are in explicit conflict with food industry interests. These are either public health policies, which go against food industry interests; or policies favouring food industry interests, which go against public health concerns.

Other areas (6 and 7) indicated in the diagram represent food industry interests that are not in apparent conflict with public health concerns: food industry interests which are favourably supported in policy (area 6); and those that are not yet represented in policy (area 7). Success by food industry policy advocates would move issues from area 7 to area 6.

An example of how a policy issue moves through this framework is illustrated through the public health concern with sugar: 50 years ago sugar was not a predominant public health issue (area 5). Over time,

as scientific evidence about health impacts associated with sugar consumption such as diabetes, obesity, and other metabolic change mounted, excess sugar consumption moved to be a public health concern (area 4). While one could entertain the possibility of public policy being made without conflict with industry (area 2), the reality shows strong industry push-back on advocacy against excess sugar consumption as a health issue, both in contexts where there is no policy (area 3) and in a few cases where there is sugar policy (area 1). The case of sugar in Mexican health policy is explored further in Section 4 as an example.

### **3 Establishing evidence as a basis for policymaking**

When is evidence enough to influence policy? For many food-related health impacts, there are strong associations with food systems practices, but it remains difficult to isolate specific causal channels. This opens up space for confusion and the creation of narratives questioning whether the evidence available is sufficient for creating or enacting policy.

Much of the issue relates to the continuous evolution of the views on establishing causality in epidemiology, the scientific discipline which underpins the majority of public health research (De Vreese 2009; Parascandola 2011). While the goal of epidemiology is to identify causes of disease so that the disease or its consequences might be prevented (informing public health efforts), its definition of ‘cause’ has undergone some significant transformation in the past 60 years (Broadbent 2009). In the classic definition, causation was deterministic, in the sense that the presence of one agent led to a given disease (‘A causes B’). This single-cause view was (and continues to be) very suitable for the study of infectious diseases, in which the presence of an agent is necessary and often sufficient to establish causation (e.g. tubercle bacillus is a necessary cause for tuberculosis).

However, the single-cause model does not work well for the analysis of the complex and multi-causal health issues associated with food systems. Take, for example, the case of chronic diseases (e.g. diabetes). Causation in chronic disease requires a multifactorial analysis of one or more agents (causes), the host (individuals’ characteristics), and the environment. Diseases are attributable to various (sometimes overlapping) causal mechanisms. There is a web of components acting together, no one of which may be sufficient or necessary to cause a given disease (Krieger 1994; McGwin 2010). In modern epidemiology, those different component causes are risk factors affecting the probability of the disease to occur in a population.

In many of the channels through which food systems can impact health, there are clear associations between food systems activities and specific health impacts (IPES-Food 2017). In some cases, studies are still needed to strengthen the suspected risk. This is particularly true for the associations between diets and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The incidence of NCDs is highly contingent on a person’s genetics

and general health status. Causality at the individual level remains difficult to prove. Indeed, difficulties of this type plague the evidence base on diet-related health impacts. They reflect the dual complexity of nutritional/dietary pathways: difficulties in isolating the effects of different dietary components, and difficulties in isolating diets from a range of other lifestyle-related and socioeconomic drivers of NCDs.

However, the point of a systemic, epidemiological analysis is that these factors need not be isolated. Channels of impact grouped under the umbrella of 'unhealthy dietary patterns', for example, are characterised by the complex and multifactorial nature of all diet-related conditions, with obesity playing an important mediating role in the epidemiology of many NCDs (Butland *et al.* 2007; Grundy 2016; Wang *et al.* 2011). The question of whether and to what extent these causal pathways actually need to be singled out in order to provide a sufficient evidence base for policymaking is misleading and misplaced in the case of public health. The focus is prevention of diseases at the population level, not at the individual level. Risk assessment at the population level (probabilistic account in terms of average effects) does not translate to individual levels (De Vreese 2009). That is to say, even if reduction in the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), for example, can lead to a decrease in obesity rates at the population level, and a lower rate of diabetes, many individuals in this population may still become obese, and many may develop diabetes, even without consuming SSBs.

The negative health impacts of food systems are multifactorial and at the population level. They are caused by many agents, which often reinforce each other, through various mechanisms. It is thus inappropriate to look for a solitary, unique, and definite cause for these conditions. It is also wrong to extrapolate that the lack of 'proof' on a causal chain between exposure and disease onset at the individual level negates an established risk factor (cause) for the condition at the population level (Laubach 2016). Just because it may not be possible to establish that high sugar consumption caused the diabetes of a particular individual, it does not mean that high sugar consumption is not a risk factor for diabetes. For disease prevention, we need to identify and determine the importance of specific risk factors (not the cause) by the accumulation of evidence from many different studies and study types (Hill 1965; Ioannidis 2016).

It is the collective strength, consistency, plausibility, and coherence of these studies that establishes a given agent as a major risk factor in a disease. What we have then is the probability of an agent affecting the incidence of a disease in a population – but not the certainty of a given agent in a given context. This uncertainty opens the door for contestation and interpretation of evidence, with different groups, with different interests, framing evidence in different ways to influence how it might inform action.

### 3.1 The role of the food industry in framing evidence

Given the importance not only of the evidence itself, but also of how the evidence is framed, it is unsurprising that both sides of the debate wish to set the narrative. To this end, there is increasing evidence of the role of some corporations in the agri-food industry in influencing debates around nutrition and health through funding their own research (Brownell and Warner 2009; Nestle 2015, 2016). Major discrepancies have been found, for example, between the results of industry-funded and non-industry-funded studies on the health impacts of sugar consumption and SSBs (Bes-Rastrollo *et al.* 2013; Vartanian, Schwartz and Brownell 2007). Explicit attempts from the 1960s onwards to divert attention from sugar onto fat as a heart disease risk factor were recently uncovered, and are seen to have significantly derailed decades of medical research around sugar (Kearns, Schmidt and Glantz 2016; O'Connor 2016). Popkin and Hawkes (2016: 175) conclude that it is only studies funded by the sugar and beverage industries that continue to cast doubt on the evidence – shown through extensive meta-analyses – of substantial weight gain and cardio-metabolic risks from SSBs.

Industry funding of professional associations has also been alleged to heavily influence the framing of prominent public health debates (Nestle 2015; Simon 2013, 2015). For example, the scientific objectivity of the American Society for Nutrition (ASN) and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND) has been called into question on the basis of strong ties to the food and beverage industry (Simon 2013, 2015). This has major implications since the ASN is the publisher of three widely read nutrition science journals, the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, the *Journal of Nutrition*, and *Advances in Nutrition*, in which many industry-funded studies are published. Meanwhile, the 'Nutrition Fact Sheets' produced and publicised by the American Dietetic Association (ADA) have been called into question on the grounds of industry partners having paid for the right to co-write them (Brownell and Warner 2009).

Industry influence over the framing of the research agenda and the terms of the broader scientific debate has also been identified through a range of additional practices: employing individual researchers as consultants or inviting them to sit on company boards in order to signal objectivity and legitimacy; publicly critiquing established evidence and sowing doubt about its validity, often through the use of front groups; and, using corporate social responsibility programmes as marketing campaigns (e.g. to shift the focus from obesogenic diets onto the importance of active lifestyles by sponsoring sporting events) (Nestle 2015). These practices have been increasingly identified in relation to nutrition science with major implications for shaping evidence, narratives, and understanding.

### 4 Tipping the scale towards public health policy: Mexico's tax on SSBs

Parts of the food industry are very powerful, illustrated through the classic 'hourglass' depiction of the food system with a pinch-point of a few thousand transnational input suppliers, processors, and marketers between billions of food producers and consumers (Hossain 2017).

Routinely, these groups fiercely oppose policy that they perceive to go against their economic interests. It therefore may be useful to consider cases in which policy favouring public health has been developed and implemented against those interests (area 1 of our framework). What were the factors tipping the scale against these powerful interests, and hence what can we learn about the role of public health evidence in the political economy of the food–health nexus?

The case of Mexico's tax on SSBs illustrates how the balance of political economy can shift in specific cases in relation to the role of evidence, and how that evidence is framed. The 2013 adoption of an excise tax on SSBs brought Mexico to the forefront of public health policy development. It is also a case study in the successful leverage of scientific evidence, civil society engagement, philanthropy, and public awareness-raising efforts to overcome corporate opposition in a country where private companies (and the soda industry in particular) hold significant political influence (Rosenberg 2015), including through their support of educational and research institutions (Camp 2006).

The path towards governmental action began through an accumulation of evidence concerning the role of sugar consumption in the rise of obesity in the past decades, moving the issue from area 5 in our framework (issues not yet identified) to area 4 (issue of public health concern). Eight years prior to creating the tax, the Mexican National Institute of Public Health (INSP) published the 2006 National Survey on Health and Nutrition (ENSANUT), which revealed that the prevalence of obesity had drastically increased and become one of Mexico's leading health burdens (Bonilla-Chacín *et al.* 2016). According to the survey results from 2012, 34.4 per cent of school-age children, 73 per cent of adult women, and 69.4 per cent of adult men in Mexico were either overweight or obese (Barquera, Campos and Rivera 2013). Furthermore, the INSP documented that caloric beverages represented over 20 per cent of energy intake by Mexicans, and highlighted the stark increase (226 per cent increase among children and 252 per cent among adults) in the consumption of caloric beverages between 1999 and 2006 (*ibid.*). By 2013, Mexico had become the leading country worldwide in both consumption of SSBs (with an estimated intake of 163 litres per person per year) and in obesity rates (*ibid.*). The public health community used this evidence to frame SSBs as a key driver of obesity, and obesity as a major public health challenge in Mexico.

Confronted with this realisation, between 2007 and 2009, the Ministry of Health began to stimulate knowledge generation on possible policy actions to reverse this trend, sparking dialogue among different government branches and other public health institutions, including the INSP (Bonilla-Chacín *et al.* 2016). An early focus was set on recommendations for healthy hydration (Barquera *et al.* 2013). This process of awareness-raising and consensus-building around the need for government intervention culminated in the 2010 National Agreement for Nutritional Health (ANSA), which included a Strategy



against Overweight and Obesity with 117 proposed activities and 249 actions (Bonilla-Chacín *et al.* 2016). However, few of the proposals translated into concrete programmes; pressure by the food industry, insufficient government resources for implementation, and a general lack of accountability have been blamed for relative lack of action at that stage (Barquera *et al.* 2013). This represents a failure to effectively move from area 4 in our framework (issue of public health concern) to area 2 (public health-focused policy). During these early attempts at policy, the issue had moved instead to area 3 (issues contested between public health and industry interests). An explicit dispute between public health concerns and food industry interests was at play, with each framing the evidence differently: the food industry maintaining that SSBs in moderation could be part of a healthy diet; and the public health community insisting that SSBs were significantly contributing to the problem of obesity.

At the same time, the obesity epidemic and a concurrent undernutrition problem had simultaneously started to attract considerable attention from a number of civil society organisations whose core issues ranged from children's rights to food sovereignty to water rights. Leading among those was the advocacy group El Poder del Consumidor (Consumer's Power), which fought against industry pressure and supported pro-consumer policies (Rosenberg 2015). Rallying around the need for better nutrition, these organisations formed a loose coalition called the Alianza por la Salud Alimentaria (Alliance for Healthy Eating), which issued policy proposals, circulated educational information, delivered media campaigns, and lobbied public officials (Bonilla-Chacín *et al.* 2016).

In 2012, general elections loomed and the incoming party of Peña Nieto had one focal policy: tax reform. Politically savvy Alianza leaders identified a unique window of opportunity and swiftly agreed on one policy priority: introducing a tax on SSBs. In the months leading up to the election, they ran a sophisticated media campaign that focused on the health dangers of SSBs. They also found allies within the incoming Senate, including Senator Marcela Torres Peimbert, who had previously worked in the public health sector. Only days after Peña Nieto took office, Torres Peimbert presented a comprehensive proposal drafted by academic and civil society organisations that called for a 20 per cent excise tax on SSBs. Though excluded from the 2013 budget proposal, and despite furious industry opposition, the idea of an SSB tax received increased traction both in the National Development Plan and during civil society fora and events in 2013, and a one-peso-per-litre tax (representing a 10 per cent price increase) was finally included in the Law on the Special Tax on Production and Services (IEPS) in October 2013, along with an 8 per cent *ad valorem* tax increase on high-calorie foods (Bonilla-Chacín *et al.* 2016), moving the issue to area 1 of the framework (public health concerns positively addressed in policy, in explicit conflict with food industry interests).

The availability of robust international and local evidence of links between SSB consumption and obesity, as well as evidence on the effects of an SSB tax on consumption including updated nationally representative data through ENSANUT, were essential in the final success of the tax proposal. Most importantly, the framing of that evidence in terms of the health benefits of SSB taxes by public health advocates led to considerable public support (Rosenberg 2015). A strong intersectoral coalition of medical, governmental, and scientific institutions dedicated to evidence-based policymaking (Barquera *et al.* 2013), together with a powerful civil society umbrella organisation (Alianza por la Salud Alimentaria), provided the support for sophisticated media campaigns, professional lobbying efforts, and extensive public education, spreading that knowledge throughout society.

The battle in Mexico is now in area 1 of our framework, with much of the food industry disputing and/or attempting to reframe the evidence once again. Four years after the Mexican legislation was introduced, more jurisdictions (Chile, France, Hungary, Portugal, South Africa, United Kingdom, Ireland, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Thailand, Dominica, Barbados, Belgium, and some cities in the United States) are now or soon will be implementing some form of tax on SSBs (Cornelsen and Smith 2018; Paarlberg, Mozaffarian and Micha 2017). The evidence generated from these experiences so far indicates that the tax does reduce purchases (Redondo, Hernández-Aguado and Lumbreras 2018; Wright, Smith and Hellowell 2017), although the complexity of diets and the interpretation of epidemiological data make it difficult to establish how the reduction in SSB consumption is impacting health. As discussed in Section 3 of this article, this uncertainty opens the door for contestation.

The sugar and SSB industry takes the fact that 'causality cannot be established' to define the tax as a 'smoke and mirrors trick' by governments (American Beverage Association 2016). The industry has mostly given up on contesting the evidence on the links between sugar consumption and obesity, moving its framing instead to questioning the effectiveness of the tax policy or the intentions of governments imposing the tax (which it portrays as a 'tax grab'). It often argues that the tax is regressive since, in many countries, a larger proportion of SSB consumers are at the lowest socioeconomic level, without acknowledging that some of the highest declines in consumption have indeed been among this population (Haskins 2017; Dana and Nadler 2018).

In many ways, keeping the tax on SSBs as a legitimate tool for promotion of public health (and in area 1 of our framework) depends on further evidence and how that evidence is framed; not only on the impact of a reduction in SSB consumption on health, but also on how the tax revenues generated through this policy can be used to achieve health results in a fair way. How this evidence is generated – and how it is framed on different sides of the debate in different contexts – will be an important piece of this policy process going forward.

### **5 Conclusion: evidence-based policy in the food–health nexus**

Knowledge is power; but framing matters. Both classical theories of the policy process and critical theories of knowledge and ideas are important in understanding the role of evidence in the food–health nexus. The existence of credible indicators of a problem (evidence) has been found to be a vital piece of political commitment-building for issues such as nutrition and health in multiple countries (Pelletier *et al.* 2011). But beyond this, the way an issue is framed, and even the types of knowledge held to be valid in policy debates, also underpin policy processes (Leach, Sumner and Waldman 2008).

In the case of sugar and its connection to obesity and NCDs, in the past five decades we have seen growing evidence making this an issue of public health concern, with issue-framing narratives creating a sense of urgency in the past decade as obesity reaches what are framed as crisis levels throughout the world. Food industry opposition has grown as proposed solutions (policies) have gone clearly against industry economic interests. And while evidence and advocacy alone are not sufficient, the strength of evidence and its diffusion through advocacy, public education, and media campaigns have played an important role in counteracting the power of corporations in some cases. This is how taxes on SSBs became a legitimate and supported policy in many jurisdictions, such as in Mexico. The way evidence and data are framed contributes to defining the urgency of competing issues, and framing the policy options for what should be done in response (Harris 2019). It is the strength of further evidence, and its diffusion through society, that can counteract new framings by the food industry as it attempts to discredit progressive food policy.

The 2017 report by IPES-Food draws our attention to how the prevailing power relations and narratives in food systems help to shape our understanding of the impacts they generate. In other words, the report asks why evidence gaps persist, why impacts are systematically reproduced, and why certain problems are not politically prioritised. Power – to achieve visibility, to shape knowledge, to frame narratives, and to influence policy – is at the heart of the food–health nexus, and shapes both which policy options are available and promoted, and what research is undertaken to uncover these issues. Moving forward, research on the nexus between food and health and the intersections between public policy and private interests should explicitly aim to understand the political economy behind policy debates, unpacking the language used and the implicit belief systems and interests promoted. The framework we present above might help to structure this work. It is this type of evidence that is lacking in current debates in many contexts, and it is this kind of evidence that, given the right framing, can break deadlocks in food systems.

### Notes

- \* Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges', and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.
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- 2 Jody Harris, Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, UK.

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# Purchasing and Protesting: Power from Below in the Global Food Crisis\*†

Naomi Hossain<sup>1</sup> and Patta Scott-Villiers<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract** The IPES-Food framework calls for closer attention to power relations across the levels of the global food system, and to feedbacks and cycles throughout the system. This article responds to this call with an account of how the purchasing and protest power of low-income consumers shaped and was shaped by local, national, and global food systems, through their responses to global food price spikes during 2007–12. Drawing on two multi-country mixed methods studies of how people adjusted to higher food prices and of food-related protests, the article identifies key common mechanisms through which people's responses fed into larger processes of change. These include a sharp shift towards more precarious work, a greater reliance on markets and mass-produced and industrial foods, and an increasingly common set of grievances and protests about cost and quality, and about the responsibilities of public authorities to protect basic provisioning against the volatilities of the market.

**Keywords:** consumer power, food crisis, protests, global food crisis, precarity, participatory research, unpaid care work.

## 1 Introduction

It is commonplace to refer to 'consumer power' in relation to purchasing decisions among discerning consumers in developed economies, while the food decisions made by people on low and uncertain incomes in developing economies are usually seen as constrained by poverty, rather than an exercise of their power as consumers. And yet decisions taken by millions of people on low incomes about what to eat have lasting effects on the global food system, locally and in aggregate. This influence was evident during the global food crisis between 2007 and 2012, when millions of poor people responded to high and volatile food prices in ways that transformed their participation in the global food economy. The range of responses in the majority lower-income sections of a range of developing economies involved decisions about how to earn money to pay for the rising costs of food and other essentials, and

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019 'The Political Economy of Food'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

how to manage the feeding of households once new ways of working had been found. This process of rapid change came with a political angle. People complained and protested, and these protests had a variety of different effects on food policy at various levels; these in turn affected the food systems of which they were a part, creating a powerful demand for cheap food through the market.

In sum, people at the sharp end of the global food crisis demonstrated both purchasing power and, in more select instances, the power of protest; the effects of this power have, we argue here, been transformative of the global food system in profound ways that need to be better understood. By examining the agency exerted by low-income people during the global food crisis, this article speaks directly to the framework proposed by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) calling for the analysis of barriers to food system reform (IPES-Food 2015). It draws attention to how the multitude of individual responses to changing food prices filtered through the food system, in what people consumed and how, and in their grievances about changes in the food system. In so doing it highlights 'reinforcing and balancing feedback loops, tensions between the different components and flows of food systems, and interactions that are cyclical, multi-layered and multi-scale' (*ibid.*: 3). The IPES-Food report argues that mapping (and thereby simplifying) the interaction of people, organisations, institutions, and processes involved in producing, brokering, and consuming food across contexts and levels is crucial to understanding the trajectories of change in the system, and thus to knowing how to act strategically to reform it. This article responds directly to this call by focusing on consumers on low and precarious incomes who, mainly by virtue of their numbers, exert a peculiar kind of power on the global food system while also being held in its thrall.

In particular, we are responding to the need expressed in the IPES-Food framework for 'detailed assessments of the power relations, the knowledge politics and the political economy of food systems, from the national to the global level' (*ibid.*: 6). We focus on these power relations here from the perspective of those at risk of hunger and malnutrition, identifying two sets of mechanisms through which their responses impacted on the global food system. First, by drawing on the accounts of people from across different countries, occupations, and cultures, it identifies mechanisms through which their relationships to the food system changed over time, with price pressures recreating them as wage-earning consumers in the market for cheap and convenient ways of eating. Second, it identifies the mechanisms – environmental, relational, and cognitive – through which some people came together to demand public action on what from their perspective were disastrously malfunctioning food markets, corrupted by political influence or cartel power.

On aggregate, the multitude of individual responses to the new conditions of the food system has produced a sharp shift towards

greater reliance on markets and mass-produced and industrial foods than in the past. This increasingly shared reliance on those markets and foods has brought with it an increasingly common set of political grievances about cost, quality, and the responsibilities of public authorities to protect people's rights (in a broad moral economy rather than an international human rights legal framing) to food.

## **2 Research approaches**

To explore the political economy of the food system from the point of view of low-income consumers and protestors, we draw on findings from two comparative studies. Each examined experiences of and responses to volatile and rising staple food prices between 2007 and 2012, to make sense of shifts in value relations between people, food, and the institutions in-between. 'Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility'<sup>3</sup> studied 23 rural and urban sites in ten countries across the developing world,<sup>4</sup> exploring and analysing responses with up to 1,500 participants for three years. 'Food Riots and Food Rights'<sup>5</sup> studied the triggers, modes, and effects of protests and rights-claiming around food in eight sites in four countries over the same period.<sup>6</sup> Both studies were concerned with what people did in response to food price shocks, and each demonstrated different faces of consumer reaction and analysis of power.

The two longitudinal case studies at household, community, and policy levels allowed an investigation of feedback loops in relationships between consumers and institutions triggered by rising and volatile prices. In the larger of the two studies, 'Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility', cases were built from annual interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation activities, and analyses of trends in secondary economic data. Decisions about eating, shopping, farming, paid work, unpaid care work, and welfare were connected to the responses of governments and the private sector. The study also explored accountability relations and perspectives on the right to food. It identified patterns and mechanisms at work among consumers on low and precarious incomes, in the ways in which they adjusted to, resisted, rejected, and thereby contributed to changes in the food system.

Meanwhile, the 'Food Riots and Food Rights' study turned its attention to the waves of subsistence protests that occurred in the same period, the media coverage of which underlined a sense of crisis and influenced global and national discourse and action. Echoing earlier such episodes, the often-violent and always-complex protests brought to mind the contentious politics of food crises past, such as those that marked the European transition to capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Thompson 1971; Bohstedt 2016). In keeping with the 'history from below' perspective foregrounded by these authors, our research listened to different people at the sharp end of what turned out to be a similar transition towards a commodification of the relationship with food and the labour market for large numbers of low-income people worldwide.

The 'Food Riots and Food Rights' study set itself to understand the conditions that gave rise to unruly crowd actions during the 2007–12 global food crisis period in Bangladesh, India, Kenya, and Mozambique, and to understand what difference they made to power relations in the food system. The study listened to protestors and activists, and assessed whether and how they succeeded in persuading policy and political elites of the need for action, or of the political costs of inaction, on food issues.

Both studies involved broadly participatory research strategies: listening to people's complaints about rising food prices and their analyses of their causes (Hossain, King and Kelbert 2013; Hossain and Kalita 2014), how they adjusted, including what and how they ate (Hossain *et al.* 2015; Scott-Villiers *et al.* 2016), their claims on public authorities (Hossain, te Lintelo and Kelbert 2015), and collective struggles to assert rights to specific kinds of food, sometimes through protest or riot (Hossain and Scott-Villiers 2017). This was not easy research, and the researchers continue to reflect on the most ethical and robust methods for such analysis (Hossain and Scott-Villiers 2019). But we feel it offers a valuable insight into the interactions between the local and the global in the making and re-making of the global food system.

Here we re-examine this body of work through the lens of 'consumer power'. There are three ways of viewing consumer power: as consumer sovereignty, cultural power, and discursive power (Denegri-Knott, Zwick and Schroeder 2006). Consumer sovereignty suggests that consumers freely and rationally choose products, influencing suppliers to make available the most appropriate commodities at the lowest prices. Although studies of real markets demonstrate that choices are never fully free and suppliers never entirely responsive (Sirgy and Su 2000), the argument helps highlight that there is power in aggregate mass consumption decisions. A second view is that consumer power is cultural, working as resistance to oppressive economic or regulatory forces, for instance, determining where people decide to buy their food and what they protest about.

Denegri-Knott *et al.* (2006) suggest a third perspective, discursive consumer power, that points to how people and markets co-create each other through changing norms of interaction. The idea rests on Foucauldian theories of power-knowledge in which subjectivities are created, in this instance, among consumers, producers, marketeers, and government institutions as to what is true, right, effective, normal, and possible. Power to decide on what needs to be done is diffused throughout a system as much through self-discipline and normality as through coercion. Changes to the discourse come about through collective political challenges and through individual and aggregate shifts in consumer understanding. Our research suggests that all three of these theories of consumer power can help to explain the 'choices' made by people on low incomes. Aggregate individual behaviour can affect food markets, mostly by consolidating the production and

provision of low-value, high-energy commodities for low-income people, yet resistance is also evident in how people bend the market to meet their objectives, and new norms are formed through political and economic action around food.

### **3 The global food crisis**

In the first three months of 2008, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations food price index increased by 53 per cent (FAO 2009), while domestic prices for staples (rice, maize, and wheat) were up by over a quarter compared to 2007 (UN 2011). Wheat prices doubled in the five years to 2008, followed by a trebling of rice prices in a matter of months (Headey 2011). News headlines screamed ‘Global Food Crisis’, raising widespread concerns about population growth and scarcity not witnessed since the early 1970s, as food riots erupted in dozens of countries (Hossain 2018). Capital flows from developing markets into the US market in the decade before the financial crisis had created unsustainable bubbles, famously in sub-prime housing finance markets (Caballero, Farhi and Gourinchas 2008). Response to the bursting of these bubbles saw capital shift into commodities such as oil and staple foods, creating high levels of volatility. As the crisis spread to whole economies, and capital was withdrawn, commodity markets slumped (*ibid.*). Droughts in major grain-growing areas drove up wheat prices again in early 2011 and 2012. More subsistence protests followed in the Middle East, Latin America, and elsewhere (Lagi, Bertrand and Bar-Yam 2011; Bar-Yam, Lagi and Bar-Yam 2015).

#### **3.1 Adjusting to high food prices: work, care, and eating after the global food crisis**

Although this was an ongoing rather than new food crisis (Lang 2010), there is no doubt price spikes were experienced as a fresh shock for those who already spent most of their earnings on food. Millions struggled to maintain basic consumption – cutting down and cutting out, replacing nutritious foods with filling staples, borrowing food or cash, taking on more work, including risky or undesirable jobs, in some instances selling assets, migrating, or breaking up families. By one World Bank estimate, 105 million more people were at risk of moving into poverty, amounting to a ‘loss of almost seven years of poverty reduction’ (Ivanic and Martin 2008: 415).

In our research, two mechanisms of adjustment emerged as common across contexts and respondents. The first was an intense pressure to raise incomes in order to remain adequately fed. People put more effort into income-earning, working longer and labouring harder, travelling further, risking more, and accepting more precarity and risk in working conditions. They earned more money as a result, but spent more on food, shelter, and getting work. Overall, the global food crisis pushed a large number of people into greater wage dependence for their basic subsistence (Scott-Villiers *et al.* 2016).

This interacted with a second mechanism, which was an equally intense pressure to extract more value from whatever was consumed. This meant greater attention to conserve income through food purchasing and preparation, at the same time as women were under more pressure to earn incomes, and had less time and energy to spend on feeding the family. Understandings of 'value' in relation to foodstuffs changed towards an emphasis on energy gained and effort saved. Adults sought ever more cost-sensitive solutions to feeding the family that allowed for their paid and unpaid work burdens, while people noted at the same time a rise in purchased and processed foods in their own and their community's diets, and worried about their nourishment and the implications for their health. The two mechanisms combined to influence what food people ate and what food they bought on a vast scale (*ibid.*).

### 3.2 Work and wages

By the end of 2014, wages in the areas we had studied had risen in response to higher food prices, but many people found that wage rises barely covered subsistence costs, and did not keep pace with cost of living rises. They kept looking for more income. People reported taking on additional jobs, expanding the size of the unprotected, precarious informal sector. In formal sector occupations, people noted that while rates of pay increased, the mode of work also changed, in effect de-formalising. Workers entering global value chains saw increased efforts to extract more time and labour, increasing speed and improving quality (Phillips 2011, 2016). Examples from our research were from export sector workers in the manufacturing zone near Jakarta in Indonesia who reported more 'flexible' contracts and output-based payment systems; pressure to raise output was high, but job security declined. In Bangladesh, export garments worker struggles pushed up the minimum wage, but workers were then faced with more pressure to raise output with more overtime and harder and faster labour. Over the period and in all sites, seasonal and temporary migration rose, often at great risk. Guatemalan respondents saw more people were migrating north, including many who had gone to Canada legally for strawberry picking, and who had returned with good earnings. Many who had gone illegally to the US either never returned, faced criminalisation, or returned without earnings.

In rural sites, agricultural wage labour rates eventually rose, particularly where new technology and irrigation had been introduced, and seasonal demand for labour had grown. Rising food prices did not, however, attract young people to smallholder farming, which they viewed as a difficult, costly, and unreliable livelihood (Leavy and Hossain 2014). The different impacts of the greater commodification of food in people's lives were highlighted in the Cochabamba valley in Bolivia, where those with the resources to invest were benefiting from the development of the agro-food industry. By contrast, workers in the plantations and packing plants were 'working to eat', and were flexible labour, replaced annually. Some of the change in the agricultural sectors in these sites, such as a marked increase in small-scale industrial chicken

production, was in response to increased demand for cheap food from growing urban populations.<sup>7</sup>

Rapid price rises drew more people into micro-enterprise. Women did more trading in agricultural produce in Burkina Faso, Kenya, and Zambia, raising livestock in Chuguexa Primero in Guatemala, and selling cooked food in sites in Java in Indonesia. But demand and input prices were too unreliable for these to provide a regular income. Informal enterprises with low or no costs to entry saw large numbers of entrants; charcoal burning in Kenya and Zambia, for instance, which was increasingly risky as the authorities had clamped down. In Burkina Faso, informal gold-mining became an even more attractive – if highly risky – alternative to subsistence farming for adventurous young men. Each diversification pushed people towards greater mobility and connectedness: mobile phones, transport, and credit were frequent themes in discussions of work and the search for a chance to earn an income.

#### **4 Changing food habits**

The food price rises and new work patterns changed diets, with different impacts on men, women, and children. Men were understood to eat out more while on the job. Many women noted that time-consuming traditional foods could no longer be prepared as a matter of routine, and spoke of convenient processed foods as offering good value in terms of price, speed, and effort, as well as appeal to fussy children with a taste for junk food. Working parents often bought cheap filling meals for the family at the end of a busy day. While people enjoyed cheap and tasty new foodstuffs, especially children and the young, many adults worried about the health and nutritional impacts of the new ways of eating (Hossain *et al.* 2015).

Also new and modern in people's lives were the novel, strange, and foreign foods, often conveniently processed and packaged, that meant alternatives to customary items. The changes people identified were consistent with a rapid global nutrition transition away from cereal and plant-based foods towards fattier, more sugary, and in general more 'Western'-style diets. The role of food as essential nourishment was competing for many with the functions played by its newer marketed forms in offering choice and sensation, saving time, effort, and cost, and creating status and identity. People approached the problem of what to eat increasingly from the point of view of consumers seeking multi-dimensional value. Even among people who sometimes faced the prospect of hunger, considerations of convenience, novelty, taste, safety, nutritional value, status, and identity influenced what they ate. In all countries and most sites in this study, people spoke of traditional dishes in decline, due to changes in availability, cost, and preparation time (*ibid.*).

Of staple consumption, people in every site told of a move from relative diversity in grains (sorghum, millet, *teff*, quinoa) towards the major monoculture crops of maize, rice, and wheat. Regional diversities in

staple foods were also said to be declining. In cities with developed food markets and consumer tastes, people reported a growing preference for more highly processed and packaged staples, such as the Bangladeshi and Indonesian communities where children were said to be rejecting rice in favour of noodles or fried 'Western' foods (*ibid.*).

These adjustments are arguably an example of sovereign consumer power on a mass scale, operating not as demand for quality, but for cheapness, immediacy, and taste. The choices people made about food were often made with a sense of optimism, despite difficult circumstances. Cultural consumer power was also widely evident. People described 'everyday tactics... in navigating, subverting, manipulating, and utilising increasingly corporate-controlled and commercially structured spaces' (Denegri-Knott *et al.* 2006: 960). Mostly a sign of stress, but nonetheless powerful, the unregulated practice of buying in bulk and decanting oils, sugar, flour, and other basics into cheap plastic bags and used plastic bottles was widespread, as was reuse of cooking oil to fry fast food, downgrading of ingredient quality, and deployment of suspicious preservatives. Other resistance was more encouraging, including the ways in which urban families were supplied with food from their relatives' farms.

While the research did not investigate the quantitative connection between shifts in food, work, and care choices, and the consolidation of almost absolute market dominance of large monocultures and processed food, the broad linkage is clear. People on low and uncertain incomes, faced with rapidly rising food prices, spending more time in search of cash, changed their diets and cooking habits and thus consolidated not only their relationship with the cash market and food as a commodity, but also contributed to the shape of the production and supply system. They joined, with a mix of regret and enthusiasm, in consolidating a production system that reduces micro-nutritional value, promotes the pleasures and dangers of sugars, salts, and artificial additives, and supplies people in a hurry with speed, energy, and modernity.

### **5 Protesting high food prices: food riots and other struggles over food rights**

While the 'Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility' study documented mechanisms by which people all over the world adjusted what they ate, bought, and how they worked, the 'Food Riots and Food Rights' project looked at a more select set of mechanisms through which conflicts within the food system were negotiated, focusing on instances when people came together to demand public action to protect their legal or moral rights to food. It explored discourse, identifying claims among people on low and uncertain incomes for a moral economy, or ideas about how food markets should work and the responsibilities of ruling elites to ensure that they do (Thompson 1971). Protests took a wide range of forms, for which the term 'food riot' is often used. This is an inadequate label for what was in fact a range of 'unruly actions of the crowd to assert a right to food' (Hossain and Scott-Villiers 2017: 4), where



unruliness did not necessarily entail violence so much as disruption, and where the right to food was less a legal entitlement than a broader expression of the moral economy and its relationship to the political.

While ‘Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility’ looked at people’s relation to the market, the lens of the ‘Food Riots and Food Rights’ project was on ‘the ways in which common people interacted with their rulers over subsistence... permitted and shaped by pre-existing social and political networks, both among rioters and between them and their rulers’ (Bohstedt 2016: 1036). These ‘politics of provisions’ consist of ongoing negotiations beneath the surface of politics as well as occasional protests and riots. They recognise that food and other subsistence policies are formed both by current and past policy imperatives and power relations, and by legacies of past struggles. Such negotiations mainly come to sight when a systemic shock gives rise to overt contention or conflict. Actual riots are rare, and are never (to our knowledge) the physiological response of the hungry, occurring rather when the organisational and political conditions align (Bohstedt 2010). They reveal much about popular grievances with the food system, about the scope and support for people to cope with or adjust to shocks, and about the real forces arrayed for and against food system reform. In the countries studied, the various different protests revealed the underlying moral economy. In most of the cases, protests and complaints were less about resisting the commoditisation of food, than about demands that governments should make affordable food available.

### **6 Mechanisms through which food riots ‘work’ in the food system**

During the years of the food crisis, around half the price rises were attributed to the effects of government interventions, attempts to forestall problems that encouraged speculation, hoarding, or other inflationary effects (Pinstrup-Andersen 2014). Protection for people on low incomes was patchy and unreliable. People relied primarily on their families at a time when their families were also over-stretched and basic social relations were strained. The inadequate responses were seen to trigger a wave of so-called ‘food riots’, as (mainly) urban populations protested against failures to stabilise prices and, in some cases, official efforts to withdraw consumer subsidies (Schneider 2008; Patel and McMichael 2009; Berazneva and Lee 2013; Bohstedt 2014; Hossain *et al.* 2014; Sneyd, Legwegoh and Sneyd 2015; Sneyd 2017). In some cases, knee-jerk subsidies benefited politically powerful large-scale farmers, millers, or traders more than low-income consumers, as in Kenya and Zambia in the early part of the food crisis (Chapoto 2014; Nzuma 2014; Musembi and Scott-Villiers 2015).

Following McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001), we classified the mechanisms by which protests called the food system into question as environmental, relational, or cognitive. Environmental mechanisms arise from the context and included the sudden and unprecedented rises in the price of staple foods, identified clearly as a key factor in other studies of food-related protest at this time (Arezki and Bruckner 2011;

Brinkman and Hendrix 2011; Berazneva and Lee 2013; Hendrix and Brinkman 2013; Smith 2014; Bellemare 2015; Hendrix and Haggard 2015). Protests clustered around periods when prices peaked, suggesting that food riots worked to force governments to introduce price controls or other interventions to bring food costs down. In India, where food prices rose gradually and were not subject to spikes emanating from the global system, food-related protests during the period focused on specific policies relating to food provision. Here, the environmental mechanisms were supplied by larger national and state-level political struggles around the right to food, and not by global food prices (Joshi, Patnaik and Sinha 2017). The local presence of a state actor with responsibilities for realising the right to food mattered: in West Bengal in India and in Ikutha and Mathare in Kenya, protests centred around corruption or unfairness among the public authorities responsible for delivering subsidised or free food. Proximity evidently shaped what made a meaningful object of protest: there were no protests against the global food system, even though most price rises were triggered and amplified by global rather than national conditions.

The extent to which protestors' grievances were amplified through media and popular culture and transferred to other populations, towns, or regions was another environmental mechanism. Media coverage amplified protestors' grievances and attracted public attention in Bangladesh, Cameroon, and Mozambique, and shaped both elite and mass perceptions of the legitimacy and significance of such protests, affecting the nature of response (Hossain 2018). Social media helped 'scale-shift' localised food riots into a national movement in Cameroon (Sneyd 2017). In Kenya, innovative, theatrical protests eventually attracted the attention of the media, enabling the Bunge La Mwananchi and Pawa254 groups to reach a national audience with their protests (Nyamu Musembi and Scott-Villiers 2017).

Relational mechanisms determined whether or not people came together to protest food prices. Protestors tend to be already connected to each other, through occupation, neighbourhood, or histories of community politics (Bohstedt 1988; Auyero and Moran 2007). In Madhya Pradesh in India, political events claiming the right to food were led by the Adivasi Adhikar Manch, an organisation of indigenous people with a decade of mobilisation over education, land, and fair prices for forest produce (Joshi *et al.* 2017). Protests about food prices sometimes built on pre-existing protest groups or organisations, as happened in Kenya when citizen movements 'hijacked' national events with colourful performances (Nyamu Musembi and Scott-Villiers 2017). In Maputo in Mozambique, protests started in the areas around transport hubs, where commuters were suddenly faced with sharp rises in fares to places of work (Brito, Chaimitie and Shankland 2017). Garments workers near Dhaka in Bangladesh came together through their common places of work, becoming mobilised by activists spreading the word near work, on public transport, or through text messaging (Jahan and Hossain 2017).

Food-related protests were also connected with discursive shifts. A key change was in how protestors naturalised their concerns with reference to basic human needs and rights. The language of the moral economy made it possible for particular groups to connect their own concerns to those of the wider society, drawing sympathy and increasingly the chances that their actions would be ‘certified’ as legitimate objects of government action. The garments workers of Bangladesh are a good example of this. Their struggles over low wages both pre- and post-dated the 2008 food price shock; nevertheless, at that moment of national food crisis, they articulated their grievances about low pay with specific reference to high food prices, demanding the government ‘bring prices down, [to] let us survive’. Urban workers tend to be prominent in such protests because food price spikes produce a particularly rapid shift in the ‘value relations’ between labour and subsistence (Araghi 2003), moving against the interests of worker-consumers. In articulating their grievances about price rises, labour organisers seek to challenge the delinking of labour from a reasonable living, highlighting the failure of labour market forces to ensure workers’ basic provisions.

Other cognitive mechanisms included the demonisation of food trade interest groups, who were widely considered culpable for out-of-control food prices. Protestors pointed a finger at oligopolies or powerful groups, but also drew attention to more proximate culprits among local grain traders or ration-dealers. Those who profited from food trade – but had not grown food themselves – were often framed as exploitative. This created a target for and helped to legitimate protests. In Kenya, the maize flour millers and brokers were seen to have benefited from the government’s maize flour subsidy, supposedly intended to benefit the poor, entering ‘the lexicon of Kenyan scams in the media, the social media chat and the word on the street in the informal settlements’ (Nyamu Musembi and Scott-Villiers 2017: 139). The demonisation of food traders can be seen as an attempt to de-certify their interests and concerns as legitimate in the ‘politics of provisions’.

A relationship of accountability between citizens and the state in relation to protection against food shocks also played a key role. This was true in both India and Bangladesh, where major famines had shaped national liberation struggles decades earlier and left a legacy in national institutions. The mechanism worked in different ways, depending on the institutional accountability for food security, and on whether and how protestors were positioned to demand answers from the state. Here, the environmental mechanism was again important, since the national position in global value chains influenced which policies were implemented.

Brokerage, or the forging of new alliances that enable weaker or less organised groups to access the organisational resources of stronger ones, also clearly made a difference to the impacts of food riots. Most of the cases studied here were instances in which protest groups were brokered into more effective or more powerful networks, often in

opposition politics, labour organisations, or civil society, sometimes with connections to transnational actors.

Protests are a dramatic form of discursive consumer power. When even quite small groups of 'rioters' make a noise about food and the costs of living, they bring the moral economy into the light, and with a suitable political opportunity, can elicit elite acknowledgement of the subsistence rights of the masses. A key conclusion of the study was that food riots frequently 'worked', drawing elite attention to violations of moral economic principles about the roles of public authorities in protecting against food crises, and making it costly for political elites to appear careless about the pressures facing citizens. Although not all government responses were effective, in all contexts mass protests influenced government intervention. Riots had political effects which could translate into changes to food and welfare policy, including increased social protection, export bans, tariff suspensions, fertiliser subsidies, and so on. In key instances, such protests motivated or reinforced protectionist policies, or encouraged investments in food system industrialisation or green revolution solutions to hunger and food insecurity. Within the IPES-Food framework, food riots matter because they shift power relations around food.

### **7 Conclusions**

By focusing on the mechanisms through which people on low and uncertain incomes around the world adjusted to and resisted food price hikes, we have drawn attention to ways in which system dynamics are influenced from below during times of stress. By showing the means by which consumer actions influenced, and were influenced by, prices, markets, policies, and political bargaining processes, the analysis highlights the value of the systemic political economic framework proposed by IPES-Food for understanding the global dynamics of the food system (IPES-Food 2015).

Across a range of cultures, places, and political economies, the common experience of rapid rises in the price of staple goods was of a sharp uptick in the commodification of relationships between people and food. The multitude of everyday actions and reactions to rising prices reinforced higher order processes such as agro-food industrialisation, global food market penetration, rural dispossession, environmental degradation, agrarian and labour market change, urbanisation, and change in gender relations. Specifying the nature of consumer response is valuable, we argue, because it helps us make sense of internal food system impacts and feedback effects, such as rising obesity in the developing world. It also draws attention to the importance of food system dynamics in shaping wider socioeconomic conditions of labour markets, migration, public policies, and reproductive labour, and how these, in turn, affect consumer power.

While people everywhere adjusted to higher food prices by changing how they earned and what they ate, it would be inaccurate to view

them as victims without agency in this process. There were positive choices towards a more commoditised life. Some resisted the risks that reliance on the markets could mean, taking collective action to protest shocks to the foundations of everyday life, and to demand public action for protection, part of Karl Polanyi's 'double movement' of increased market forces in social life met by a pushback demanding protection of the social against the market (Polanyi 1957). The responses they generated were not always lasting or just, healthy or environmentally sound; much depended on whether political elites were responding out of short-term political exigency, or shared in the popular moral economy about the rights and responsibilities of elites with respect to the governance of the food supply. Paying attention to the effects of consumer power and protest power highlights the importance of national political economy in shaping how the global food system is transmitted into people's lives. It also points to the (occasional) power of the masses to shift elite political priorities around the food system, allowing low-income consumers to affect the global food system. This analysis crucially helps us move 'beyond simplistic dichotomies between the governors and the governed of food systems, or between holders of economic and political power' (IPES-Food 2015: 6) which have impeded understanding of the political sources of change in national food policy.

Consumer power emerges as a systemic process, necessarily contingent. For understanding its effects in the global food system, it is arguably most valid to look at what vast numbers of people choose to do, even if they are not wealthy, rather than to focus on the decisions of a tiny proportion of higher-income consumers who we traditionally think of as having 'consumer power'. The choices of better-off consumers are less constrained, but their impact is relatively small. The angle from below sheds light on some of the most widespread elements of consumption within the food system and shows where food system reform and reinforcement are already underway. Low-income consumers come across as making rational economic choices under pressure, subverting and reorganising the market in a myriad of culturally informed adaptations, and raising the cost of government inaction via protests and media spectacle. These forms of consumer power promise rich potential for more strategic food system reform via informed consumer choice and the politics of provisions.

### Notes

- \* Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches,

- Agendas and Challenges', and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.
- 1 Naomi Hossain, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
  - 2 Patta Scott-Villiers, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
  - 3 The 'Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility' project was funded by UK Aid and Irish Aid. See <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/food-livelihoods/food-price-volatility-research>.
  - 4 Bangladesh, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Guatemala, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, and Vietnam.
  - 5 The 'Food Riots and Food Rights' project was funded by ESRC-DFID research project number ES/J018317/1; see [www.ids.ac.uk/projects/food-riots-and-food-rights/](http://www.ids.ac.uk/projects/food-riots-and-food-rights/).
  - 6 India, Bangladesh, Kenya, and Mozambique.
  - 7 We are reminded of Patel and Moore's work, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (2018, Verso), which begins with a brilliant exposition on battery chickens as the zenith of human cheapening of nature, work, care, food, energy, money, and lives.

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# Agroecology and Food Sovereignty<sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract** We propose that agroecology provides a framework for understanding 'levels' for the transition to sustainable food systems. If we agree that agroecology includes social and political dimensions of governing territorial food systems, then it must be linked to movements for food sovereignty. However, the concentration of power in food and farming systems locks in industrial logic, posing immense barriers to agroecological and social transition. This creates a tension between efforts at convergence of food system innovations from below, versus co-optation of grass-roots language and practices by private and public actors who are committed not to changing the logic of industrial agriculture, but instead to reducing its harm. We suggest agroecological and food sovereignty movements consciously embrace this tension as a dance of creativity and appropriation. If this dance can be made generative rather than deadly, it can open pathways for transition to new ways of seeing, experiencing, and getting food.

**Keywords:** agroecology, *buen vivir*, transition, sustainability, food sovereignty, power, social movements.

## 1 Introduction

What would societies and landscapes look like if food systems were designed to promote a good life – what many in Latin America call *buen vivir*? To ask this question is to appeal to common sense – what else should our food system activities be for? It is also to reveal how far from this goal are our present ways of growing and eating, and all the steps in between. It means asking why and how values of wellbeing are marginalised by goals of efficiency (to maximise what?) and profit (whose?). Movements for agroecology and food sovereignty in distinct ways undertake to move the growing, marketing, preparing, and sharing of food in the direction of health for land and people. They connect food, land, and cultures in specific places, and create networks to share and coordinate activities across these places.

Agroecology and the food sovereignty movement have deep affinities – despite a rocky history of conflicts within and between social movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). From its

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019 'The Political Economy of Food'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

modern beginnings in Mexico in the mid-1970s (Gliessman 2016a), to many of the recent agroecology movements around the world (e.g. Campesino à Campesino, La Via Campesina, Slow Food), people have been using agroecology to build strong local food systems rooted in local knowledge, culture, and food production and consumption practices. With its holistic, ecosystem focus, agroecology has supported research, practices, and social change processes needed for moving the entire food system towards sustainability, from the seed and the soil to the table, despite the barriers that keep all parts of the food system locked in to the centralised, industrial model of food production and consumption (IPES-Food and Frison 2016). The science and practice of agroecology are more effective as a tool for change when implemented within a framework of food sovereignty, as this requires engagement with power in many parts of the industrial food system. And since its alignment with agroecology (Gliessman 2015), the food sovereignty movement has deepened its focus on territorial and cultural integrity to include collaboration between farmers and scientists to enhance farming in tune with ecosystems.

## **2 What is agroecology?**

Agroecology is the application of the science of ecology (the science of how nature works) to the study, design, and management of sustainable food systems; the integration of the diverse knowledge systems generated by food system practitioners to serve social movements that are promoting the transition to just and sovereign food systems (FAO 2018; Gliessman 2015). In other words, agroecology is understood in this chapter as a science, a practice, and as a social movement within the food sovereignty movement, in line with the action-oriented description of agroecology agreed upon at the Nyéléni convention held in 2015 (International Forum for Agroecology 2015). Diversified agroecological systems, as defined by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems and Frison (2016; IPES-Food 2018), encompass wide-ranging practices with a clear direction of travel: diversifying farms and farming landscapes, replacing chemical inputs with ecologically-based materials and processes, reducing waste by closing material cycles, reducing fossil-fuel energy use by maximising biomass accumulation and internalising energy flows, optimising biodiversity, and stimulating interactions between different species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agroecosystems, and secure and just livelihoods. The ecosystem concept, with all of its flows, cycles, and reciprocal feedbacks and interactions, is key to how diversified agroecosystems operate.

## **3 How does agroecology promote transition to sustainability?**

We adopt Gliessman's (2015, 2016b) framework for classifying 'levels' of food system change. The first three levels describe the steps farmers can take on their farms to convert from industrial or conventional agroecosystems. Two additional levels go beyond the farm to the broader food system and the societies in which they are embedded, and point towards food sovereignty for everyone involved. Although the

five levels taken together can appear to be a stepwise process, in reality, multiple entry points and interacting processes can (and must) work in concert with agroecology to ensure food system transformation (IPES-Food 2018):

**Level 1: Increase the efficiency of industrial/conventional practices in order to reduce the use and consumption of costly, scarce, or environmentally damaging inputs.**

The primary goal of change at this level is to use industrial inputs more efficiently so that fewer inputs will be needed and the negative impacts of their use will also be reduced. Most conventional agricultural research has taken place at this level, through which considerable modern agricultural technologies, inputs, and practices have been developed. This research has helped farmers maintain or increase production through such practices as improved seeds, optimum planting density, more efficient pesticide and fertiliser application, and more precise use of water. So-called *precision agriculture* is a recent focus of research at Level 1. Although this kind of research has reduced some of the negative impacts of industrial agriculture, it does not help break its dependence on external material inputs and monoculture practices. Breaking away from this dependence is a key goal of food sovereignty, while retaining the logic of industrial agriculture is at the heart of such practices as *sustainable intensification*.

**Level 2: Substitute alternative practices for industrial/conventional inputs and practices.**

The goal of this level of transition is to replace external input-intensive and environmentally degrading products and practices with those that are more renewable, based on natural products, and more environmentally sound. Organic farming certification, as currently practised, is a good example of this approach. For instance, some farmers use nitrogen-fixing cover crops to replace synthetic nitrogen fertilisers, some use rotations and companion planting for natural controls of pests and diseases instead of industrial pesticides, and others use organic composts for fertility and soil organic matter management. However, at this level, the basic agroecosystem is not usually altered from its more simplified form; hence, many of the same problems that occur in industrial systems also occur in those with input substitution.

**Level 3: Redesign the agroecosystem so that it functions on the basis of a new set of ecological processes.**

At this level, fundamental changes in overall system design eliminate the root causes of many of the problems that continue to persist at Levels 1 and 2. The focus is on prevention of problems before they occur, rather than trying to control them after they happen. At this level, research on whole-system conversions provides an understanding of key yield-limiting factors. Agroecosystem structure and function is better understood, and appropriate changes in design can be implemented. Problems are recognised, and adjustments made in internal site- and time-specific design and management approaches,

instead of solely by the applications of external inputs. A good example is the reintroduction of diversity in farm structure and management through such actions as ecologically-based rotations, multiple cropping, permaculture, agroforestry, and the integration of animals with crops. When diversification is a key focus in the transition, elements of food sovereignty begin to appear both in independence from outside purchased inputs, as well as in an increase in products and services that a more diverse agroecosystem can provide.

These first three levels were the focus of agroecology during its early development as a science, with a primary focus on farm-based changes (Gliessman 1997). But as the development of alternative markets (Gliessman 2007) and the food sovereignty movement aligned with agroecology (Gliessman 2015), two more levels have been added. Farmers began to build networks with other farmers, and consumers began to seek more direct relationships with the producers of their food. What was a more technical farm movement became a more social food movement.

**Level 4: Re-establish a more direct connection between those who grow our food and those who consume it.**

Food system transformation occurs within a cultural and economic context. At a local level, this means that those who eat must value food that is locally grown and processed, and support with their food purchases the farmers who are attempting to move through Levels 1–3. This support becomes a kind of 'food citizenship' and can be seen as a force for food system change. Communities of growers and eaters can form direct food networks in places across the world to build new and sustainable food cultures and economies. Food once again must be grounded in direct relationships. An important example is the current food 're-localisation' movement, with its growing networks of farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture schemes, consumer cooperatives, and other marketing arrangements that shorten the food chain. Similar connections can be made to shorten food chains over long distances, such as fairly traded commodities like coffee and cacao (case study 2 in IPES-Food 2018). Sovereignty can begin to appear for the farmer, the eater, and everyone in between as direct relationships turn into stable food networks.

**Level 5: On the foundation created by the sustainable farm-scale agroecosystems achieved at Level 3, and the new relationships of sustainability of Level 4, build a new global food system, based on equity, participation, democracy, and justice, that goes beyond sustainability to help restore and protect earth's life support systems on which we all depend.**

By thinking beyond Levels 1–4, Level 5 involves change that is global in scope and reaches beyond the food system to the nature of human culture, civilisation, progress, and development. Leaving the change process to the market, as it might appear if we only change market systems at Level 4, is not enough. The depth of change is more than mere conversion or transition, and enters into the realm of full reform or transformation in how we live and our understanding of what a good

life is (see *buen vivir* below). Within Level 5 thinking and action, there are ways to build upon farm-scale and farmer-driven change processes to a full re-thinking, shifts in values, and changes in the spirit and the heart of how we all relate to each other and to the earth that supports us. Basic beliefs, values, and ethical systems change.

The expanding awareness of the centrality of farming and food to societies as a whole extends to other facets of environmental and social relationships. This is a paradigm shift focused on how agriculture and food can help reduce our ecological footprint, even make food and farming regenerative of ecosystems, including a shift from obsession with growth to embracing what it really means to live sustainably. The important role that food systems can and must play in mitigating and adapting to climate change as a global issue is one example of the value of Level 5 thinking; another is enhancement of cultivated and wild biological diversity (Perfecto, Vandermeer and Wright 2009); another is by contributing to the ecosystem services normally provided by nature that keep our air, water, and soil systems healthy. The growing food justice movement, where everyone in the food system enjoys the benefits of equity, justice, security, and sustainability, is yet another. All of these elements together contribute to the development of food sovereignty.

What will our food system with sovereignty look like when Level 5 thinking and action guides the changes that need to take place? What are the incentives needed to stimulate these changes? Can this thinking bring about needed changes in policy, support systems, funding, and choice? Can Level 5 thinking determine steps at other levels, depending on where the farmer or the food system is at the moment? Level 5 change also requires confronting power in the globalised food system in which pursuit of profit locks in the opposite of agroecology and food sovereignty – concentration, simplification, and exclusion. This puts the need to shift from a regime subsidising industrial inputs and practices to one that places agroecology and food sovereignty front and centre.

#### **4 What is food sovereignty?**

Food sovereignty is an aspiration widely shared by movements in cities and countrysides, in the North and in the South. It aspires to justice, autonomy, and living in balance with the rest of nature (Friedmann 2016). Growing food is how we work with the land and other beings, and how we nourish human bodies and human cultures. Growing food and feeding bodies are both fundamental to the ways societies work, yet are marginal to dominant theories and policies which have long privileged industry – and now industrial agriculture. Food sovereignty is one of the ways to move the food system back to the centre of consciousness and action.

Food sovereignty challenges the claim by corporations to ‘feed the world’. It has been suggested that small farmers produce more than 50 per cent globally and 70 per cent in the global South of all the diverse plants and animals people actually eat (Samberg *et al.* 2016).

This is especially the case when including production that is not marketed through documented channels, is directly exchanged, or is consumed locally. Although definitions of 'small farms' vary, it is important to counteract the false impression from global statistics where the only 'foods' counted are the crops that enter into international trade. By contrast, the handful of grains and oilseeds traded by corporations largely feed animals and vehicles instead of people, and when they feed people it is processed foods of dubious nutrition (De Schutter *et al.* 2015). Yet maize, soy, palm oil, and wheat are the main crops included in measures of food insecurity, and sudden increases in their prices are what is meant by food crises. The spread of these crops as monocultures pushes out small, diverse farms and makes it difficult for many people to obtain the diverse fruits, vegetables, and animal products needed for nutritious diets. Food sovereignty poses the goal of connecting growers and eaters with each other and with the earthly relations that sustain us all. Reconnection is crucial to evolving and emerging cuisines that in turn support living cultures. Crucial to reconnection is recognition of the fact that being a farmer is an important occupation, one that carries with it knowledge crucial to sustaining ecosystems and cultures, and that farmers must be supported to guide the evolution of the diverse crops they plant, tend, and harvest.

The idea of food sovereignty has evolved since it was publicised over two decades ago by La Via Campesina, a transnational network of farmer-led organisations. The most widely used definition of food sovereignty is from the 'Declaration of Nyéléni',<sup>4</sup> by delegates from more than 80 countries at a forum in Mali:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations (Nyéléni 2007).

This definition includes a goal of renewing food systems for future generations, and thus connected it to agroecology even before aligning the two formally in 2015. It also includes a statement of what locks in the dominant food system to relations of power and exclusion:

[Food sovereignty] defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers (*ibid.*).

The Nyéléni declaration continues in language that leaves open what sovereignty looks like for different places, and how to balance prefigurative with oppositional politics; that is, the creation of new ways of organising food systems with resistance to powerful interests pursuing the dominant system:



Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution, and consumption based on environmental, social, and economic sustainability (Hoey and Sponseller 2018).

### **5 How are people trying to create food sovereignty?**

Strategies to create social autonomy and ecological integrity are necessarily diverse because of specific natural and cultural contexts. The diversity of strategies mirrors and anticipates the goal of a food-sovereign world whose unity is based on a diversity of places. Autonomy and cooperation build on existing conditions in each territory, and people in those territories seek ways to mutually support strategies and initiatives. One model is the ‘water protectors’ who connect with the food sovereignty movement, and show how governance by self-organising communities might mirror the hydrosphere – each stream is unique and flows into larger bodies of water, which flow into the oceans, move as vapour into the air, and fall as rain.

Within this diversity, it is possible to distinguish two pathways towards a shared goal, depending on the starting point. One pathway is for farmers and territories made marginal by the dominant system. They have knowledge of their places, and how to grow, share, trade, and use wastes in their ecosystems. However, often these ecosystems and social relations have been degraded and pushed to the margins by expanding industrial and other land uses; land, social relations, and knowledge have been lost as communities have been disorganised and transmission across generations has been disrupted by migration, land concentration, adoption of chemical methods, and dependence on buying and selling in far-flung markets dominated by powerful corporations. These farmers and territories need support to move along a distinct pathway towards food sovereignty, which includes reconstituting territorial markets, renewing rights to land and water, and protecting themselves against outside forces that undermine them (IPES-Food and Frison 2016).

This means public policies to enhance farmer knowledge and control over seeds and protecting territorial markets, which are where most food is channelled and where most small farmers meet customers in ways that support the link with cultural cuisines (Civil Society Mechanism 2016). Most of all, it means public policies to secure tenure for small farmers; it means finding a balance between protecting customary land from conversion into saleable units through formal titles (Ho and Spoor 2006) – and at the same time protecting individual rights especially for women and youth (Prindex 2018; ILC LEMU 2018). The challenge of protecting land and supporting small farmers is that current institutions and policies promote capitalist monopolies, overproduction, and monocultures, with all their ecological harms and exploitative labour practices.

The other pathway to food sovereignty is for industrial farmers who are currently locked into debt, chemical dependency, and contracts

to agrofood corporations, all requiring that they produce single crops, and ever narrowly specified crop varieties. Rural communities have lost people, social relations and institutions, knowledge, and health of land and water. The extent and forms of this loss depend on how long farmers have been locked in, what kinds of subsidy and other policies are in place, and what kinds of contracts with agrofood corporations have shaped their farming practices. Farms became bigger by consolidating land from neighbours, and the mix of activities that characterised rural villages and towns disappeared – education, health, even access to goods for personal life or to continue to produce crops and livestock, could be had only at a distance, if at all, and only for cash. These farmers and territories need to begin to close broken cycles. For instance, shifting to Level 2 (see above), US farmers have begun to use cover crops to replace soil nitrogen and renew soil ecologically, thus withdrawing some of their dependence on purchased inputs, bank debt, and technological advice to continue on the treadmill of chemicals and degradation (Blesh and Wolf 2014).

Both need a different type of agricultural science than the one that agrofood and chemical corporations, and for the most part also governments, have promoted. The agrochemical industry, which now calls itself part of the 'Life Sciences Sector', used to be called the pesticide industry. The common use by critics of the term 'agrottoxins' rather than 'agrochemicals' suggests the war of words in which food sovereignty is engaged. The agronomy (and its measures of single-crop yields) are sponsored by both agrochemical corporations and most public sector research. It leads to monocultures, whose dependency on chemical inputs and whose need to dispose of wastes is intrinsically linear. In place of linear systems which lead to depletion somewhere outside the territory and to dumping of wastes also somewhere outside, farmers need the science of agroecology, which supports a return to cycles in which everything is used and re-used. For example, instead of separating animals and crops, animals large and small can help to replenish soil nutrients, to control pests, and more, while parts of crops or land not usable by humans can feed them (De Schutter 2009). This requires a shift of public research towards ecological science, and for top-down advice towards collaboration between formal science and the practical place-based knowledge of farmers (IAASTD 2009).

At the same time, since most of the world's people now live in cities, food sovereignty is about reconnecting all participants in the food system to the places they live (Friedmann 2011). We can only know how to do this, and how to connect well across places by experimenting in the shadows of the dominant system. One of the promising approaches for use of urban rural land is the concept and practice of *commoning*. Eight principles for creating successful commons have emerged from the comprehensive comparison of cases from across the world, past and present by Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues (Walljasper 2011). These begin with defining clear group/community boundaries and matching rules governing use of common goods to local needs and conditions; they then focus on what we now call governance –

participation, autonomy, community monitoring and enforcement, and dispute resolution; most important, they envision a different world of territorial politics consisting of nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system. At the same time, in settler regions such as North and South America, commons were introduced as part of colonial appropriation of indigenous lands; therefore, its relation to cosmovisions expressing deeper and wider ways of living is to be explored, possibly in relation to *buen vivir*.

Numerous grass-roots experiments anticipate the possibility for food sovereignty. The oldest are organics and fair trade, two certifications that resulted from efforts to reduce the negative impacts of highly concentrated, industrial food systems, which are now largely captured by the dominant system (Jaffee and Howard 2010). Organics invented modern certifications, which have now morphed into traceability along extended corporate supply chains. Fair trade created links between responsible consumers and farmers, now subject to corporate control and greenwashing (Friedmann 2005). Closing broken connections between urban and rural places is undertaken by a wide array of practices, including urban agriculture, community-supported agriculture, farm and food cooperatives, urban or regional food policy councils, recently reaching global politics through networks of cities under the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, and important initiatives to regulate corporations and support small farmers through the Civil Society Mechanism of the Committee on Food Security (McKeon 2015).

Yet corporations become ever more adept at co-opting what works for them in alternative food systems, especially as public awareness has grown about health and environmental costs of industrial food and farming (Friedmann 2005). They adapted to the growing success of organic by changing standards from a focus on building soil health into a list of prohibited substances; that is, an ‘input substitution’ model. This means that some toxic substances were reduced; but large-scale, simplified single-crop operations remained in place (Rosset and Altieri 1997). They adapted to the increasing success of fair trade by, for instance, encouraging the leading certifier in the US to allow this label on the products of large coffee and cacao plantations, although it had previously been limited to small-scale farms for these crops (Jaffee and Howard 2016). Organic food sales are now dominated by global food processors such as General Mills and Danone, and fair-trade sales are dominated by global processors and retailers such as JAB and Starbucks. The same can be said of no-till farming, now mainly for GM crops but anticipated by the critique of chemical-intensive agriculture by The Land Institute (Crews *et al.* 2016).

## **6 What is preventing a transition to food sovereignty and diversified agroecological systems?**

Public debates over ‘solutions’ to the problems that confront food and agricultural systems are frequently steered in directions that do not lead to fundamental changes. Such ‘managerial’ approaches often fail

to examine underlying drivers, and therefore limit the possibilities for actions that can be taken (Hornborg 2011; Friedmann 2017). The problems themselves are typically framed in terms that lead logically to continuing on current paths, albeit with increased production, less waste or improved waste disposal, and/or the wider application of new technologies. Lack of food, for example, is defined not as a problem of unequal distribution of calories, or of the focus on feed crops rather than the mix of foods humans need, but instead as a problem of insufficient production. The focus on increasing production of what is already produced requires the application of technologies that further industrialise and centralise food systems – the same systems that fail to effectively distribute a current level of production that could easily provide enough calories for everyone (Chappell 2017). It means continuing to produce the wrong mix of crops to nourish the world's human population, and threatens to deepen the problems of land degradation (despite more precise applications of nitrogen or pesticide) and of resistance by pests and weeds that compete against crops. The power of corporations locking in this trajectory towards improvements rather than transformation is now deeply embedded in the debt cycle that locks in farmers and governments to existing practices (Streck 2017).

This is not an accident, but a result of concentrating power in the hands of fewer and fewer people and corporations, who then actively oppose efforts to reduce their influence. It includes disparaging and sabotaging promising alternatives, such as food sovereignty and agroecology, with rationales that deflect attention away from the disproportionate benefits elites receive from unequal power relations (Freudenburg and Alario 2007). The concentration of power reinforces a number of 'lock-ins' that lead to vicious cycles of debt, chemical dependence, and unequal diets for rich and poor consumers, further reducing the possibilities for moving towards more sustainable alternatives (IPES-Food and Frison 2016).

Power can be defined broadly as 'the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others' (Wrong 1995: 2). Concentrated power enables a very small number of people to shape and re-shape society in ways that strengthen their dominance and catalyse increasing inequality. They are aided by institutions such as corporations, governments, media, foundations, thinktanks and education systems, and elite individuals may move easily between these different types of organisations (Domhoff 2014). Importantly, this influence is frequently hidden, exercised indirectly, and even 'naturalised' so that the majority of people take it for granted and do not question it (Gramsci 1971; Gibson-Graham 2006; Streck 2017).

Power can be very difficult to measure, but Nitzan and Bichler's framework of Capital as Power (2009), suggests that it can be quantified when viewed from the perspective of capitalists themselves. For publicly traded corporations, their market capitalisation is technically the current share price multiplied by the number of shares outstanding.

However, market capitalisation may also be viewed as capitalists' consensus expectations that people will continue to acquiesce to a particular firm's power in the future, after discounting for potential risks (*ibid.*). By this metric, power in dominant food and agricultural industries (as well as other industries) has increased dramatically and continues to rise (Howard 2016). The top 25 firms in the world by market capitalisation, for example, include the retailer Walmart, the food processor Nestlé, and the beverage firm Coca-Cola – all three have more than doubled their market capitalisation in the last 25 years, and most other leading firms have achieved similar growth rates.

Executives in these firms must seek to gain additional power relative to other dominant firms, or they will lose shareholders (primarily the world's wealthiest individuals) and become vulnerable to takeover. This system fuels consolidation, particularly when firms are unable to achieve sufficient growth within their own organisational boundaries. Instead, they must bolt on increased power and market share by buying out other firms. Anti-trust laws enacted in many nations in the early 1900s once slowed this process (Lynn 2009), but by the end of that century such regulations had been drastically reshaped to allow very large buyouts. In 2016, for example, the world's leading beer firm, Anheuser-Busch InBev, acquired its second largest competitor, SABMiller, for US\$103bn, after making only minor divestments to obtain approval from regulators in the US, the EU, and China – this resulted in control of approximately 28 per cent of global beer sales.

Interestingly, mergers and acquisitions frequently result in a market capitalisation higher than the sum of the separate firms before their combination. Such a valuation does not make sense if this only reflects the material and human resources embodied in these firms, and instead suggests an expectation of increased influence over society (Nitzan 1998). Improvements in efficiency and/or rates of innovation are typically promised to result from increasing economic concentration, but abundant empirical evidence suggests that it usually has the opposite effect (Adams and Brock 2004). Firms accumulate their power through strategic sabotage (Veblen 1923), which undermines the autonomy of others, not only in the economic realm, but by reducing innovation and efficiency throughout society (Bichler and Nitzan 2017).

Even alternatives that work very hard to avoid the dominant system are therefore inescapably influenced by it; for instance, facing stronger regulatory barriers and receiving far fewer subsidies (or none) in comparison to the largest food and agricultural firms. This process creates a vicious cycle, further increasing the political power of the largest firms, and strengthening their ability to re-shape subsidies in their favour. The governments of Brazil and China, for example, financed low-cost loans that enabled dominant meat processors headquartered in these countries to buy out even larger competitors on other continents. These firms, JBS and WH Group respectively, have become powerful lobbyists in the US, the EU, and Australia.

Subsidiaries of both firms are eligible for bailouts from the US government resulting from its recent trade war with China, even though the WH Group is itself headquartered in China (Meyer 2018).

Many subsidies are more indirect or hidden, such as government-funded infrastructure for industrial-scale storage and transportation, or regulatory environments that allow the real costs of industrial food systems to be shifted to everyone else (Carolan 2018). The expansion of soy production in Brazil, for example, results from clearing biodiverse ecosystems, including the Amazon rainforest and the neighbouring Cerrado savanna. Government-constructed roads and ports have accelerated this deforestation, and the majority of soybeans are exported as livestock feed to other continents (where environmental regulations are stricter, and production costs are higher), particularly East Asia and Europe (Oliveira and Hecht 2016).

Regulatory barriers that hinder food sovereignty and increase the difficulty of using agroecological practices are also increasing. The global seed industry, for instance, has over the past few years become dominated by just four firms (Bayer, Corteva, ChemChina/Syngenta, and BASF), which resulted from the combination of what were 30 separate agrochemical firms just a few decades ago. Concurrently, the ability to exchange seeds freely has become more restricted via laws that threaten farmers with fines and jail terms for non-compliance with protection for patented seeds (Howard 2015; GRAIN 2015). Similarly, new food safety regulations designed for large corporations have put small retailers and local farmer cooperatives at risk, and narrowed retail outlets for small-scale and agroecological producers (DeLind and Howard 2008; GRAIN 2011).

More broadly, powerful institutions have reshaped society to encourage the attrition of resources, skills, and knowledge needed for self-reliance – this process erodes the foundations needed to create successful alternatives. One example is ‘deskilling’, a term that applies not just to labour, but to household food production, preparation, and consumption (Jaffe and Gertler 2006). Educational institutions that are heavily funded by food processors, for example, have steered people towards eating more highly processed foods, such as canned soups, instead of fresh foods (*ibid.*). These actions have not gone unopposed, however, and initiatives to encourage ‘reskilling’, such as gardening, seed saving, homebrewing, and canning, are on the rise (Barnes 2014). There has also been some success in shifting educational purchases towards healthy foods sourced from local producers, certified, for instance, by the ‘Food for Life’ certification by the British Soil Association (Stahlbrand 2016; Morgan and Morley 2014).

In the face of persistence by those with power to protect the status quo, if resistance to particular practices becomes high enough, or alternatives become successful enough, they must be willing to adapt, indeed to take advantage of selected innovations from below to improve their

performance. This adaptation is focused in directions that enable their power differentials to be maintained or increased, even if it involves ameliorating some of the collateral damage inflicted upon society or ecosystems with previous practices. Co-optation is therefore a two-way process in which alternatives become incorporated into the mainstream, thus partially achieving social movement goals, but at the expense of elements that are most threatening to existing power relations (Jaffee and Howard 2010), and those most promising for a transition to agroecology and food sovereignty.

How can the food sovereignty movement confront the power of the industrial food system so that sovereignty can be achieved? As for organic and fair trade, agroecological innovations will continue to face pressures of co-optation. Powerful institutions seeking to protect their profits and power are working to reduce agroecology to merely a set of tools for Level 1 or Level 2 changes. They are narrowing its scope to ‘sustainable intensification’ or ‘climate-smart agriculture’, and attempting to make it compatible with technologies (e.g. genetic engineering) that are monopolised by dominant corporations (Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2016). Seed/agrochemical giants, for instance, have been spending billions of dollars to acquire biological control firms since 2012, such as Bayer’s purchase of AgraQuest and Prophyta, BASF’s purchase of Becker Underwood, and ChemChina/Syngenta’s purchase of Pasteuria Bioscience. The trend of increasing power also tends to elicit more resistance, however, as previously hidden socioecological impacts become more visible and limits to public acquiescence are reached (Bichler and Nitzan 2012).

## **7 Conclusion**

Efforts to achieve food sovereignty and diversified agroecological systems have the potential to dismantle concentrations of power, particularly if they pay sufficient attention to the means used to achieve their goals. This will require fostering decentralisation, horizontal proliferation, cooperation, and transparency. To develop mutually reinforcing ‘virtuous cycles’, where one part of the food system connects directly with others, will require embodying our ideals as much as possible. Actions in this direction include both everyday practices of good growing, good markets, and good eating, and shifts in laws and regulations away from those made to support industrial agriculture and lock in corporate control. It means reconnecting all the elements of growing and eating that have been broken apart and turned into profit opportunities to build corporate control over ever more complex supply chains (Cronon 1991).

Most of all, this transition will require deepening links between agroecological science and practice, and the social movements working for food sovereignty. Case studies of transition towards agroecology in the latest report from IPES-Food (2018) provide examples that include the goal of food sovereignty. Linking agroecology and food sovereignty as social movements is key to confronting the power of the industrial food system. This requires analysis of power, both of corporations

and states sustaining the present dangerous trajectory of 'sustainable intensification' (Level 1), and of social movements living and working towards a new relation with nature, including our own better selves. How humans get our food is at the heart of what is wrong and what is right about how we relate to each other, to the ecosystems we inhabit, and to the earth. Other struggles for just and loving relationships (e.g. women's empowerment, renewed social and economic roles for youth in the countryside, etc.) are stronger when they pay attention to how we feed ourselves. Growing, sharing, and preparing food can serve as the entry point for cooperation, allowing us to experiment with community-wide participation in food systems.

An ongoing dance of creativity and appropriation exists between grass-roots inventiveness and corporate and government co-optation. If this dance can be made generative rather than deadly, it can open pathways for transition to new ways of seeing, experiencing, and getting food. Many people are discovering what is needed and inventing livelihoods to meet them. Many fail or become reforms of the dominant system, but together there is promise to transform it. The food sovereignty movement and practitioners of agroecology can navigate this dance by focusing on land use, democracy, cultural vitality, and health, as it seeks to re-centre society on sustainable food and farming. We propose that actions and words be guided by a reconnection of rural and urban, of food and farming, and of agriculture and conservation of other species (Perfecto *et al.* 2009); that is, of humans with the rest of nature. Food sovereignty aspires to the autonomy of places and networked relations among places, so that biocultural regions – both in long occupied places and in diasporic ones – can evolve democratically from farm and urban garden to the biosphere.

It is useful to remember that most of the farmers of the world can be considered 'indigenous' to the places where they grow food, with an inherited or acquired respect for nature, and for themselves as part of nature. This connotation can become romantic or nostalgic, but it can also be a way to appreciate how much of nature and culture has been deeply compromised by industrial agriculture, which after all is only a few decades old, and how much restoration of balance requires a new way of seeing, experiencing, and getting food. We can see the sophisticated practices of abandoned civilisations, for instance, in the Amazon, where archaeologists have discovered that what was once assumed to be 'natural' fertility was created by farmers with *terra preta* or dark soil, and where it was supposed only foraging existed (Fraser and Clement 2008). Indigenous cosmologies have entered into popular thought and even laws in parts of Latin America as the idea of *buen vivir*. We would do well to consider the advice by Gudynas (2011) to seize the opportunity of *buen vivir* to imagine how to live well with each other and the earth.



## Notes

- \* Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on ‘Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges’, and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.
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- 3 Philip H. Howard, Associate Professor in the Dept. of Community Sustainability, Michigan State University, USA.
- 4 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ny%C3%A9%C3%A9ni>.

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# Building a Sustainable Food City: A Collective Approach<sup>\*†</sup>

Emily O'Brien<sup>1</sup> and Nicholas Nisbett<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract** Brighton – a city on the south coast of the UK with a vibrant food scene but also home to some entrenched inequalities – presents an excellent local case from which to explore some of the wider issues considered in this *IDS Bulletin* on the political economy of food. This article explores some of the issues facing the city and local food systems from the perspective of Brighton and Hove Food Partnership, a leading organisation behind the city's food strategy, one of the first in the UK. Brighton's experience shows how local organisations can put food at the centre of wider social issues and forge action plans that work across sectors to address the underlying inequities in food systems together. This should be of relevance not only to other cities in the UK, but others wanting to work at the heart of the food system in local contexts elsewhere.

**Keywords:** food, food system, local action, systemic, multisectoral, cities, inequality.

## 1 Our city in broader context

Those of us living in the UK and working on global food insecurity and malnutrition have often had cause to think twice about our international focus in recent years. The kinds of key indicators that we consider as indicative of failed food, health, and broader political systems in other parts of the world are now heading in the wrong direction within our own national borders. Whilst we might not be surprised to see rates of child and adult obesity on the rise, it is equally surprising and depressing to see growing numbers of households forced into food poverty, child poverty, and even now a rise in child mortality (Office for National Statistics 2016), the likes of which we have not seen in the UK for over 100 years.

Writing about the global situation, global researchers spend a lot of time complaining about the invisibility of malnutrition (Gillespie *et al.* 2013) – an attribute that makes it hard for its sufferers to recognise their position and to act collectively to gain some foothold or power over the circumstances shaping their lives or those of their children. Similarly,

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019 'The Political Economy of Food'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

in Brighton, the home to IDS and the IDS–IPES–Food workshop, poverty and inequality are easily rendered invisible by the city's seeming affluence, high house prices and bustling, vibrant town centre and seaside. Social exclusion joins spatial exclusion in the way in which many of the city's poorer areas are hidden from city day trippers by the position of the city in the hills of the South Downs, whilst their food poverty is obscured by our booming café and restaurant scene.

But Brighton's problems of poverty, inequality, food insecurity, and unsustainability are severe. Brighton has the highest number of rough sleepers outside of London (Brighton and Hove Health and Wellbeing Board 2017) and in the last year, 20 homeless people died on the city's streets.<sup>3</sup> Food insecurity and malnutrition, including obesity, disproportionately and regressively affect Brighton's poorest (the poorest children are 12 times more likely to be obese than the wealthiest) (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership 2018b). The amount of food waste produced by the city and its broader 'food footprint' (land and resources used by the food system) are also far out of proportion to its population (*ibid.*). In short, the city highlights the case for urgent action at a local level, in addition to the global action discussed in the rest of this issue.

Global nutrition and food research has also focused frequently on the role of civil society actors and organisations in shaping food systems for the better. This has played a role in countries ranging from Brazil to India to Peru (Hall 2006; Khera 2013; Mejía-Acosta 2011; Pande 2008; Requejo 2014). The city of Brighton and Hove, similarly, has a dynamic voluntary sector, a range of civil society organisations, and local, enterprising small businesses committed to creating a just and sustainable food landscape for the city. Key in bringing these actors together in the past 15 years has been the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership – a small and committed organisation that brokers partnerships, strategies, and action plans to improve Brighton's food environment via action taken locally. Most innovatively, for an organisation working on food, the partnership has taken a systemic approach to tackling food issues and food poverty – bringing the links between wage poverty, housing, disability, sustainability, and food to the mainstream, within the city and beyond.

IPES–Food and IDS invited Emily O'Brien to present at the workshop and then commissioned the following case study to bring Brighton's experience to a broader and more global audience. We have departed from much of the *IDS Bulletin* here in that the following write-up is not framed in terms of academic theory or political economy. But it needs no such introduction – the experience of the partnership, its work, future plans, and some of the challenges it faces in its systemic approach, is drawn from its immersion in the local political reality. This case is therefore a must-read for those considering options for action in and on the food system in local and global contexts, in line with the political economy and systemic approaches adopted by others in this issue.



## 2 Introducing the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership

The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership is an independent non-profit organisation. We see ourselves as a hub for information, inspiration, and connection around food. We have the ambitious aim to achieve systemic change by bringing together partners from the public, private, and voluntary sectors to take varied action on different aspects of food, simultaneously at different levels.

In practice, this means pulling together a collective action plan, in which many partners each own or play a part in a series of actions, right across the food system, from food waste to health to sustainability, and taking in food poverty, the economy, and community food work. There is also a strong focus on embedding food into other policies and practice; for example, the city's public health and economic strategies, and planning guidance. We believe it is important to work at different levels, from directors in the local authority down to the smallest community or faith group, and including the individuals who live and work in the city. We are only as strong as our network of Champions.

We were one of the first cities in the country to have a food strategy and action plan (in 2006, refreshed 2012 and 2018<sup>4</sup>). Our action plan for a healthy, sustainable, and fair food system was developed collaboratively (for detail, see below) with key partners including the city council; public health; NHS Trusts; universities; local businesses; and organisations in the community, voluntary, and faith sectors. The food culture in our city is an important factor with a thriving restaurant scene and 75 community gardening projects. The city's 18 food banks, whilst an indicator of our food poverty, represent an incredible response from the community to this problem. There are also many lunch clubs and other places where people can share a meal. We estimate that in our city of approximately 280,000 people, half a million shared meals are served each year. This cross-sector partnership approach to a breadth of food issues has been heralded as a leading example across the UK, inspiring other similar approaches as a founding member of the UK's Sustainable Food Cities network, which now includes over 50 other locations.

We were also one of the first cities in the country to have a collective food poverty action plan (2015–18), which brought partners together to agree a collective approach and commit to 78 actions on everything from welfare benefits to cookery, 93 per cent of which progressed. Again, we have influenced other areas, with the Greater London Authority and subsequently the national Food Power programme, a network of food poverty alliances, subsequently offering funding and support to areas to take a similar approach.

Apparently, this is all highly effective. We were the first city in the UK to gain a Silver Sustainable Food Cities award and we are now applying for Gold. However, this level of complex partnership working and collective action planning is never easy. Our new 2018–23 action plan has eight overarching aims covering the whole food system, and

contains 200 individual actions with nearly 100 partner organisations involved in delivery, including 26 separate city council departments. It came out of a year's consultation including a commitment to include 'less heard' voices such as those of migrants and rough sleepers via facilitated focus groups. It is not easy to assemble (for an inside view, see my blog which likens the process to 'knitting spaghetti'<sup>5</sup>) and once it is written, it is hard to keep a handle on progress. The yearly or so requests for updates from partners is itself becoming a job, let alone the challenge of trying to prove our wider impact as outlined below.

And because food is always complex, sometimes there can be tension and contradictions. Our ultimate vision is 'healthy, sustainable, and fair food for all', but what do you do when these three do not coincide? For example, we know that good food, sustainably and ethically produced, costs more. The era of cheap food is, from the perspective of environmental sustainability, disastrous. And yet for many in our city, a move from cheap food without a raise in income will impact heavily on their ability to afford a healthy diet. We undertake regular research on food poverty and household food-insecurity levels and so we know that around one in five people in our city anticipate difficulty paying for basic living costs in a typical year, rising to around one in three if they have a health issue or disability (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership 2018a).

We are a high-cost but often low-income city. In deprived areas, life expectancy is up to ten years less than in affluent wards (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership 2012). Fourteen areas of Brighton and Hove are in the bottom 1 per cent for income deprivation nationally (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership 2015), yet its very affluence means that it is an expensive place to live for people on a tight budget, with housing costs amongst the highest in the country and without the higher level of Local Housing Allowance support (housing benefit) that applies in London. We have a high proportion of people renting energy-inefficient housing stock, and a high proportion of households where people live alone, all factors contributing to a lack of money in many people's pockets when it comes to budgeting for food.

So, for our strategy and action plan, we look for the crossover areas. Becoming a 'Veg City', that is, where everyone in the city can access and eat more vegetables, is an aspiration that cuts across health, sustainability, and food poverty agendas. It is also a more positive way to frame messages that to the public can seem negative ('eat less meat', 'eat less sugar'). But vegetables need to be affordable. A farmers' market is a wonderful thing but if a particular market, because of price or location, is inaccessible to all but the most affluent, then it does not deliver our 'fairness' agenda – we believe that good food should be for everyone, so work with retailers in disadvantaged areas is a less obvious 'solution' but just as important.

Another crossover area that we prioritise is 'shared meals'. Eating together – for example, at lunch clubs – along with other forms of food sharing,

can be a vital way to combat both food poverty as well as social isolation, alongside boosting healthy eating and tackling inequality. And again, it has a positive focus which engages and inspires partners and residents.

In terms of our role, we focus on bringing partners together – we call it ‘putting unlikely people in a room together’, although that ‘room’ is just as likely to be a warehouse or a community project. However, we also bring leadership, aiming to encourage, inspire, and sometimes ‘chivvy along’. A lot of our time goes on facilitation, consultation, and conversations. For us, it is also important that, as well as our more strategic work, we also run practical food projects, teaching people to cook, to eat a healthy diet, to grow their own food, and to waste less food. We hold a lot of the city’s knowledge around food, and our newsletters, website, and directory are the ‘go-to’ places to find out about food events and activity. We run two demonstration gardens in local parks, a community orchard, and have recently opened a high-profile community teaching kitchen<sup>6</sup> in a busy location near to Brighton train station. Our activities also include:

- **Support to individuals:** for example, teaching cookery; supporting people to volunteer on food projects.
- **Support to community food groups:** including shared meals, food-growing projects, food banks, and community cafes – with training, small grants, and volunteer signposting.
- **Training for professionals:** for example, for early years, care homes, and city council staff.
- **Communications and campaigns:** e-news/social media (5,000-plus residents), Sugar Smart City Campaign/Love Food Hate Waste.
- **Policy influencing and strategic delivery:** influencing policy and strategy to include food. Sitting on citywide partnership boards. Co-ordinating the Good Food Procurement Group, bringing together the city’s largest caterers. Undertaking research, for example on healthy ageing and food.

Although our work is rooted in one geographical area and is for local benefit, we do share our successes so that they can be replicated in other areas, and hence our work has a wider impact. We do so through case studies, our website, and in more recent years through conferences, webinars, email groups, and one-to-one and group mentoring facilitated by national networks.

Our approach, summarised in our latest (2018–23) action plan, is illustrated in Figure 1. It is, by necessity, a complex one. This is because food is complicated and strategic work on food systems is even more so. We limit some of that complexity by focusing on one geographical area – the city of Brighton and Hove – and the areas surrounding it. However, even at that micro-level, to invent a system of joined-up

Figure 1 Brighton and Hove Food Partnership vision



Source Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (2018b), reproduced with permission.

integrated working in a world which is not set up to enable those connections is a constant challenge.

Additionally, despite its centrality to all our lives, we find that food is often simply overlooked. Part of that is due to fragmentation. Food tends to be divided up at both national government and local authority level, with health services in one department, nutrition and obesity in another, and agriculture in a very distant corner – possibly, but not always, alongside environment – and social issues, including poverty, entirely separate. But there also seems to be something deeper, where food is simply forgotten. Once you start looking, it is astonishing how many policies have a food-shaped hole in them. Part of our work is to put food at the centre simply so that it becomes visible again, restoring food and food systems to a level of visibility proportional to its impact.

A knock-on effect is that by focusing on food, which is tangible and which everyone can relate to, this can help to bring attention to wider issues. We talk about food being a 'lens' or of putting on our 'food goggles', as illustrated by the infographic in Figure 2, from our food poverty action plan.

Again, this reach is not without challenges. Where do we draw the line? Should a food organisation be worrying about housing costs? Advice services? Welfare benefits? Another challenge is that although we believe in our model of change, it is hard to evidence effectiveness. Whilst we are able to evaluate very effectively the impact of the services that we run, such as our community cookery sessions, and our support to community food organisations and networks, this approach does not translate easily to the complexity of a citywide action plan. We believe very strongly that by many different partners taking even quite small

Figure 2 An example of ‘food goggles’ – food poverty and its prevention



Source Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (2018b), reproduced with permission.

actions on many different fronts simultaneously we can gradually bring about systemic change. We know at a gut level (no pun intended) that this works. It is no surprise that when we undertook an internal exercise to develop our organisational values, ‘We believe in the power of food’ was one of them. But how do we show that systemic change?

One reason why it is very hard to measure the success (or not) of a citywide approach is because food is dispersed and cuts across so many silos. Taking a whole system approach means thinking about change simultaneously in the private, voluntary, and public sectors, and for individual residents. It involves supermarkets and other retailers. It means government departments, health services, 26 separate local authority departments – concerned with planning, welfare benefits, nutrition and public health, agriculture, the environment, outdoor events, social care, transport, environmental health, and the economy – who rarely, if ever, think of themselves as being connected. And then there are restaurants, some of them local, some of them part of large national and international chains. And distribution chains and transport authorities. How do you begin to assess overall the impact of such a complex approach?

Additionally, even where there is evidence of impact, there are issues with attribution. In general, due to the high levels of complexity, we can only talk about contribution rather than attribution. For example, childhood obesity figures in Brighton and Hove have consistently outperformed comparative national figures, holding steady when others have seen increases. But how much of a role does our collective approach to food play in those figures? There are so many other factors to be considered including physical activity, or the culture of the city, or maybe it is all down to something random we have not thought of?

Therefore, over the last few years, we have been working more closely with academic colleagues, especially at the University of Sussex, to develop an outcomes framework, by which we aspire to measure the impact of a citywide approach to food by focusing on key areas, including some of the mechanisms developed locally, combined with nationally collected data on the economy, health, and the environment.<sup>7</sup>

We are at an early stage, but we are already seeing some results which we can point to. For example, for the last five years, a question incorporated into a city council annual survey (the 'City Tracker') shows levels of household food and fuel insecurity holding steady – which we see as a success, given the challenging external environment in which cities such as ourselves are operating. We have also identified some more aspirational ways to measure impact and look forward to continuing to deepen our links with the research community to make these a reality.

### Notes

- \* Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges', and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.
- 1 Emily O'Brien, Policy and Partnerships Manager, Brighton and Hove Food Partnership, UK.
- 2 Nicholas Nisbett, Research Fellow and co-leader of the Health and Nutrition Research Cluster, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 3 [www.theargus.co.uk/news/16972509.at-least-20-homeless-people-died-on-brightons-streets-in-a-year/](http://www.theargus.co.uk/news/16972509.at-least-20-homeless-people-died-on-brightons-streets-in-a-year/).
- 4 <https://bhfood.org.uk/food-strategy>.
- 5 <https://bhfood.org.uk/cooking-up-a-food-strategy-for-brighton-and-hove/>.
- 6 See <https://bhfood.org.uk/cookery-school/>.
- 7 For further information, see <https://bhfood.org.uk/research-outcomes-and-impact/>.

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# Power in the Zambian Nutrition Policy Process<sup>\*†</sup>

Jody Harris<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** This article presents an example of a power analysis in the nutrition policy process in Zambia, using the ‘power cube’ framework. Here, nutrition policy priorities were found to have been shaped by a global epistemic community relying on the hidden and invisible power of technical language and knowledge to frame policy options which resonated with their own beliefs about malnutrition. Actors in the Zambian nutrition policy process worked largely in closed spaces of power, with policy options set and selected by small policy elites. Striking in their absence from either invited or claimed spaces of power were the malnourished themselves, or their communities or representatives, who did not have a clear voice in Zambia’s nutrition policy process and therefore were without power. Further analysis of power is needed to better address glaring nutrition inequities and policy gaps such as those described in Zambia.

**Keywords:** nutrition, policy, power, Zambia.

## 1 Introduction

Malnutrition in its various forms continues to be a significant public health, economic, and equity problem in every country in the world: child stunting affects 150 million children (though falling); hunger affects almost 1 billion people (rising again after falling in recent decades); and overweight and obesity affect 2 billion adults and underpin more deaths in low-income countries than any other factor (and rising) (Development Initiatives 2018). Though the Sustainable Development Goals include targets on reducing the prevalence of both hunger and stunting (UN 2017), international organisations and national governments have struggled to create effective responses to these linked crises (Morris, Cogill and Uauy 2008; Bryce *et al.* 2008).

At country level, the politics of policy processes can be a significant hindrance to progressing a coherent response to these issues (Morris *et al.* 2008). There may be more pressing issues which governments choose to pursue (Pelletier *et al.* 2012); and there can be conflict among different framings of the issue between and within policy communities

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019 ‘The Political Economy of Food’; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

(Béné *et al.* 2019). Woven throughout these policy processes are power relations, but the interpersonal or institutional power which operates within these systems has been little explored (Nisbett *et al.* 2014). Drawing on emerging streams of work on nutrition in anthropology and political science, there have been calls for more explicit analysis of the role of power in the politics of nutrition policy (*ibid.*), which this work explores in the context of nutrition policy change in Zambia.

## 2 Research approach

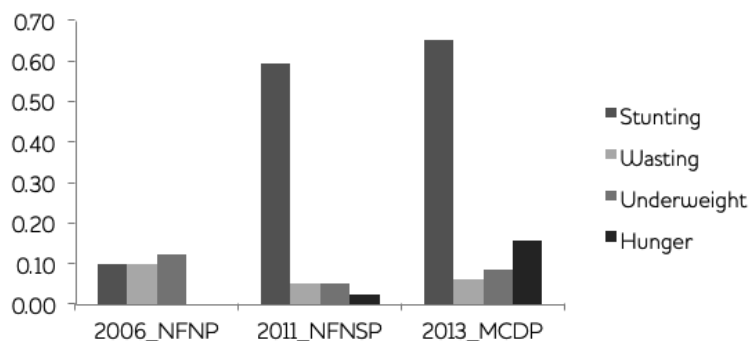
This article emerged from a study of nutrition policy processes in Zambia aiming to investigate how and why certain international nutrition ideas and approaches have found their way into national nutrition policy and practice in Zambia (Harris 2019). Zambian nutrition policy and the community comprising its actors were explored over the course of a six-year engagement in the country (2011–17), with data collected through key informant interviews, document review, and social network analysis.

Zambian policy and programme documents relating to nutrition action were reviewed, with analysis including simple word counts to assess the prominence of different concepts, and narrative synthesis whereby commonalities and changes among the written content in different documents over time were identified and summarised. At the same time, 70 interviews with 61 different respondents over six years were undertaken, asking initially about the setting of agendas for nutrition following key global health agenda-setting frameworks (Shiffman 2007; Shiffman and Smith 2007), though interviews were open-ended and explored further topics that emerged in conversation. Respondents comprised international actors, some with links to Zambia (n=17); national actors from a range of donor, United Nations, civil society, government, academia, and private sector organisations working on aspects of nutrition (n=25); and local government and civil society actors in one district of Zambia where a key pilot project for nutrition was being undertaken (n=28).

Primary thematic analysis of interviews was through coding using NVivo 11 software (QSR International) with initial codes taken directly from the guiding framework but further codes derived *in vivo* from the data. Synthesis of these data streams involved bringing these different analyses together under an established framework covering different aspects of power (discussed below) to identify recurrent or important themes. This process was implemented in order to build a grounded explanation of how and why certain international nutrition ideas and approaches have found their way into national nutrition policy and practice in Zambia.

## 3 Change in the Zambian nutrition policy process

In Zambia, 40 per cent of children under age five are stunted, down from a high of 52 per cent in 2002; 6 per cent are wasted; and 6 per cent are overweight (CSO, MoH and ICF International 2014).

**Figure 1 Changing national nutrition policy focus over time**

Notes Metric: mentions of four major nutrition outcome measures in written Zambian nutrition policy; Calculation: word count for each nutrition issue, divided by number of pages in the document.

Source Author's own.

Forty-five per cent of the population are classified as undernourished (hungry), particularly at certain times of the agricultural season, a figure that has been above 40 per cent for decades (von Grebmer *et al.* 2018). A recent micronutrient survey found significant deficiencies in multiple vitamins and minerals in women and children (those who were studied) (NFNC 2014). There are therefore multiple forms of malnutrition affecting the health and wellbeing of the Zambian population.

The document review for this study showed that there is a long history of action on aspects of malnutrition nationally, including in-patient and community treatment of acute wasting in children; a nationwide vitamin A supplementation programme; attention to nutrition in HIV care; and growth monitoring to detect underweight in children in a national network of clinics. Nutrition programmes have generally been undertaken in the health sector to promote health and childcare behaviour change, and treat clinical forms of malnutrition. Only recently were these disparate programmes underpinned by policy, with the 2006 National Food and Nutrition Policy (NFNP), subsequently operationalised in the 2011 National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan (NFNSP), and the 2013 Most Critical Days Programme (MCDP). Content assessment of this written nutrition policy before and after 2008 (Figure 1) shows a clear increase in the number of mentions of stunting relative to other nutrition issues, suggesting that the idea of stunting significantly overtook other nutrition issues nationally over this time (Harris 2019). This is also clear from the content of the policies and strategies as they evolved over time, with the 2013 MCDP operationalising only the first of 11 strategic directions in the 2011 strategy document, focusing on stunting reduction. A majority of nutrition-related budgetary commitments also turned towards stunting reduction programmes over this time (de Kemp, Faust and Leiderer 2012). On multiple fronts, therefore, stunting has become the dominant

concept in Zambian nutrition policy and practice, over and above other nutrition issues affecting the country.

Investigating this altered direction with interview respondents, it was clear that this change and consolidation around a single aspect of nutrition over the past decade was not felt to be of national genesis, but rather came from international actors working on nutrition in Zambia, in particular international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), donors, and the UN Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement:

*I think the global movement that has brought stunting to the fore... I do not think that it came necessarily from Zambia, saying we have got a challenge of stunting. I think it's because of the SUN movement and everybody now trying to focus on stunting. (National government key informant interview (KII) 2015\_09)*

Nutrition donors (notably DFID, UNICEF, and Irish Aid) have also described how they worked with the Zambian government to narrow the nutrition focus to stunting, given that the stunting issue was becoming the major focus of international efforts (Grütz, Sadlier and Brunet 2014).

Review of the international nutrition literature and the international interviews shows that indeed this turn to stunting originated in the international research and activist community. In 2008, a special issue of the influential international health journal *The Lancet* was published (*The Lancet* 2008), which drew together decades of global research on nutrition and is broadly credited (along with the advocacy of actors in the international nutrition community, and external shocks such as the 2008 food price crisis) with putting nutrition back on the international development agenda after many years of low interest and funding (Harris, forthcoming). This publication and others subsequently have advocated the metric of child stunting (significantly low height for a child's age) as the key measure of undernutrition in the world, because significantly stunted height is shown to correlate with limited brain development and poorer health and income in later life. Because of the multi-causal nature of stunting through food, health, and care determinants, researchers and advocates have suggested that interventions to reduce stunting need to explicitly engage multiple sectors outside of nutrition's traditional base in the health sector (Ruel and Alderman 2013). These core ideas of much of the international nutrition community – the primacy of stunting and the importance of multi-sectoral intervention – have since been integrated into the development community's international and country strategies.

In this research, the agenda-setting interventions to bring international ideas into national policy and practice that were mentioned most by respondents were direct advocacy and funding for the issue of nutrition and its possible solutions; the provision of technical assistance in the construction of policy; and the role of international evidence in

framing nutrition. Evidence was a theme in interviews, with respondents citing the role of key research in shaping what makes it into policy, in particular widely promoted academic nutrition papers, and the availability and interpretation of nutrition data in the country. The key piece of evidence mentioned by respondents was *The Lancet* (2008) undernutrition series. The SUN movement has established both an advocacy arm (CSOSUN, a civil society organisation) and a funding arm in Zambia (the SUN donor fund, managed by the NGO Care International over the time of this research). Overall, the ‘what to do’ advocacy message for nutrition has largely been supplied by the international community, focusing on stunting, through these advocacy organisations on the ground.

A particular stand-out position in this work, notable because it differed from other framings, was a respondent from an international donor who described various reports that were written by international consultants but that ‘will come out as an NFNC [government] document’ (International donor KII 2015\_37). This illustrates most clearly the international influence on practice and policy that comes through technical assistance, and the framing of policy documents and ideas as national when in fact they are largely coming from international experts. In Zambia, international involvement with policy agenda setting and formulation was noted, particularly with UNICEF assistance and donor input in writing the original 2006 nutrition policy:

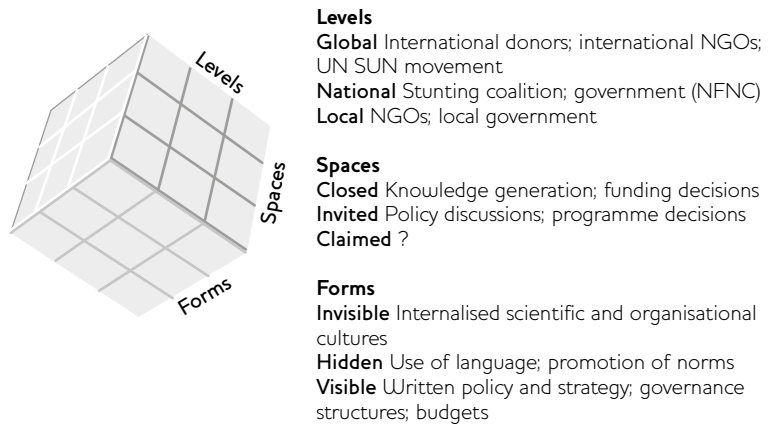
*[The NFNP] was very consultative in that every partner put in what they felt would be their role, with the guidance of the NFNC of course, and a lot of – along the way with a lot of [sic] international support at one point or another during the development of the document. (Government KII 2015\_07)*

#### **4 Power in the Zambian nutrition policy process**

Malnutrition in various forms are critical issues in Zambia. While hunger has been the historic preoccupation of the country, and a variety of nutrition programmes have been undertaken in the health sector, Zambia’s alarming child stunting figures have recently been highlighted. Since Zambia’s first national nutrition policy was created in 2006, subsequent strategy and operational documents and budgets have markedly changed their focus to prioritise child stunting over other nutrition issues in the country. Analysis shows that this change in direction was brought by the international community active in Zambian nutrition policy and practice, stemming from a turn to stunting within that community.

Given that international nutrition sits squarely within broader international development efforts, and given the central role of international development in the political life of most low-income countries, it follows that the concepts and narratives propagated by those working in the international development community are likely to have influenced how nutrition policy and action play out nationally. Those influencing Zambian national nutrition policy can be described

Figure 2 Levels, spaces, and forms of power in Zambian nutrition policy processes



Source Author's own analysis, adapted from Gaventa (2006).

as an epistemic community, understood as 'networks of professionals (possibly from different disciplines and backgrounds) with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain' (Haas 1992: 3). These epistemic communities apply their specialised knowledge and interpretations in providing information to decision-makers, offering input into policy decisions. Global epistemic communities bring their ideas and beliefs to national level, influencing different groups to share their framings.

Underlying many of the findings that have been summarised above is an implicit notion of power: power as holding and defining certain forms of knowledge, power to promote certain discourses, power as central to intervention in national policy processes, and power to define policy agendas. As the analysis for this study was undertaken, the topic of power emerged clearly as a factor influencing the Zambian nutrition policy process. To start to unravel the actors and interdependencies in the policy process, calls have recently been made for more explicit attention to the role of power in international nutrition, and in global health more broadly (Shiffman 2014; Shiffman and Smith 2007; Nisbett *et al.* 2014). A particularly useful conceptualisation of power in the policy process, which acknowledges a range of different definitions of power while maintaining analytical utility, is the 'power cube'.<sup>2</sup> This three-dimensional representation expresses the different forms that power might take, the different levels at which power dynamics can occur, as well as different spaces in which it might manifest (Gaventa 2006; Lukes 1974). These forms, spaces, and levels of power can be applied to assess power in the nutrition policy process in Zambia (Figure 2).

In this analysis, much power over the shaping of recent national nutrition policy is held by global epistemic communities with a presence in Zambia through international development organisations.

At international level, this community shares broad beliefs about what should be done for nutrition, beliefs that are rendered visible through normative publications produced and disseminated by these groups. At the national level in Zambia, this community interacts with national government entities to bring these ideas into written policy and strategy.

Transfer of policy ideas through academic publications and subsequent technical assistance can be interpreted as closed – but visible – spaces of knowledge generation, where certain types of knowledge count most. The kinds of language used and the technical framing of nutrition within these debates may have limited the way that nutrition can be spoken about in different fora, and allowed for the promotion of certain norms above others, notably a scientific approach based on the findings of certain nutrition studies. This framing in turn stems from the invisible power exerted by the scientific culture that has shaped what is seen as valid knowledge in the field of nutrition, with evidence from field trials and economic analyses privileged in policy discourse, and organisational cultures and systems perpetuating a largely technical and bureaucratic approach to nutrition policy at the expense of more political or inclusive framings (Harris, forthcoming). Power in the nutrition policy process has therefore been generated by largely international groups through the hidden power of the technical language used in academic and policy debates; and the often invisible scientific cultures which shape what is seen as valid knowledge to feed into these debates.

The expertise of global epistemic communities is important and brings valuable insight from certain perspectives, but it is only part of a possible solution, and the types of action promoted are constrained by the forms of knowledge seen as valid in generating understanding of the issue and its solutions. Through these technical framings, most spaces in this analysis were maintained either closed to all but those sharing similar constructions of knowledge, or spaces where specific additional actors may be invited to participate in policy debates, with technical framings shaping the actions promoted. Notably, this work could not identify any claimed spaces of power in the nutrition policy process in Zambia; whether because of technical or scientific approaches closing spaces, or lack of engagement precluding invited spaces, national groups normally powerful in Zambian civil society (such as the churches and traditional leaders) are largely silent in the national nutrition policy debate. Those national NGOs that have participated have done so through CSOSUN, which has already taken its policy framing from the international community, and no policy actors mentioned national NGO groups as influential.

Also conspicuous in their absence – at the local or national level or in claimed or invited spaces of power – are the malnourished themselves, or the communities from which they come, who do not seem to have a clear voice in Zambia's nutrition policy process, and therefore find themselves without power. Communities such as the

poor or malnourished are invoked by international groups in taking certain policy positions, particularly by NGOs with their presumed interaction with communities, and the UN and donors in advocating policies that they feel would be pro-poor. In practice, however, there is little participation of citizens or the malnourished and their framings in nutrition policy debates. The amount of political accountability owed to this group in the policy network map undertaken for this research (Harris 2019) makes them potentially powerful actors if they could be mobilised, however.

Appealing to and explicitly including this broad community constituency – whether framed as the electorate, citizens, or the malnourished – and including their own understandings and ideas of what is required to address nutrition issues in their communities, might present options that those working in the nutrition policy space had not previously considered. Nutrition policy research has so far only narrow engagement with theories of power, limiting our understanding of the role of power in these processes. Available work in this area suggests theoretical avenues including, but not limited to, the power cube (Hossain 2017; Nisbett *et al.* 2014), and suggests that a more nuanced understanding of power relations would support not only policymakers but also policy advocates (Blay-Palmer 2016). Internationally, the nutrition community is more aware of power imbalances when considering global food system issues; for example, the history of improper marketing of breastmilk formula, the undue influence of processed food manufacturers over obesity policy, or skewed political power in global trade agreements. There is currently too little empirical work analysing power in national nutrition policy processes to draw coherent parallels with the findings of this work, but there is a clear call for better understanding of power relations in multiple food and nutrition issues.

This study has presented a preliminary analysis of power in national policymaking for nutrition in Zambia, but further work is needed. Overall, these types of analysis allow us to put empirical flesh on the theoretical bones of a framework such as the power cube, and to systematically map aspects of power at work on a given issue; but also to see which aspects of power are absent and so suggest avenues to improve both equity in policy processes, and the policies themselves. This is necessary to better address glaring nutrition inequities and policy gaps such as those described in Zambia.

#### Notes

- \* Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in



working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on ‘Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges’, and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.

- 1 Jody Harris, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 The power cube approach: [www.powercube.net/](http://www.powercube.net/).

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# Transforming Food Systems: The Potential of Engaged Political Economy\*<sup>†</sup>

Molly Anderson<sup>1</sup> and Melissa Leach<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract** A food systems approach is critical to understanding and facilitating food system transformation, yet gaps in analysis are impeding changes towards greater equity, sustainability, and emancipation. Gaps include analyses of interdependencies among food system activities, of narrative politics, and of the behaviour of food system components using dynamic methodologies. Other problems include inappropriate boundaries to the system, insufficient learning across scales, lack of integration of social and ecological drivers and trends, and inadequate attention to the intersectional impacts of marginalisation. Both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work is necessary to overcome these problems, and, fundamentally, to understand power in food systems. Transdisciplinarity allows an engaged political economy in which social actors, including those who have not benefited from adequate food, livelihoods, and other services that food systems provide, are involved along with academics in co-creating the knowledge necessary for transformation. This engagement requires humility and respect, especially by academics, and explicit power-sharing.

**Keywords:** engaged political economy, transdisciplinarity, food systems, transformation, system analysis.

## 1 Introduction

Power dynamics affect every food system activity, and political economy approaches such as those included in this *IDS Bulletin* are useful for revealing how they function and how they might be changed to the advantage of people living in poverty and marginalisation. Sustainability, equity, and wellbeing for all require fundamental shifts in power relations between people and populations, beginning with recognition of the ways that food systems provide for or withhold benefits from certain people. The most basic function of food systems is to provide nourishment for people, yet power dynamics exclude at least 821 million people from regular access to enough food to meet their most basic caloric needs, by the most conservative metrics (FAO *et al.* 2018).

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 50 No. 2 July 2019 'The Political Economy of Food'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

Dominant trends in food production are also damaging ecological and earth system processes, contributing up to half of greenhouse gas emissions, decimating biodiversity, degrading topsoil, and throwing nutrient cycles out of balance – in short, making massive contributions to overshooting planetary boundaries (Steffen *et al.* 2015). At the same time, dominant food production processes are keeping workers and farmers in a state of powerlessness and poverty, and violating human rights. Trends in food consumption are likewise negative in many respects, resulting in surging prevalences of overweight and obesity in almost every country (WHO 2018), while some countries have regressed since 2014 in their prevalence of undernutrition (FAO *et al.* 2018). Current global food system configurations are thus undermining many of the Sustainable Development Goals (Oliver *et al.* 2018). In this context, it is difficult to overstate the urgency of food system changes.

Existing power relations lock food systems into negative patterns, so the far-reaching changes needed in production, consumption, waste disposal, and other activities require radical shifts in power rather than incremental changes. While academics and policy agencies alike are now calling for food system transitions (e.g. European Environment Agency 2017), too often the focus is on technical changes and tweaks to parts of the system, neglecting the deeper power dynamics that create and perpetuate inequity and unsustainability. Rather than (technical) transitions, the need is for deeper transformations, as is increasingly recognised both for global food systems (Oliver *et al.* 2018) and for sustainability and equity more broadly (Leach *et al.* 2018; Scoones *et al.* 2018; Scoones, Leach and Newell 2015). Transformation is inevitably profoundly political, requiring power and political economy to be addressed head-on.

Yet as we argue in this article, how 'food systems', 'power', and 'political economy' are understood and addressed can take many forms. These choices have consequences for whether and how research, policy, and actions are able to stimulate and enable transformative changes towards greater sustainability, equity, and wellbeing or whether they reinforce existing power relations. We reflect on the challenges and opportunities for research and its mobilisation into policy and practice, and argue that engaged, transdisciplinary research among groups acting as equal partners is essential for changing power dynamics and can be a lever for transformative change. Furthermore, policies and actions that emerge from research, or that are informed by research, must be carefully integrated in an iterative cycle of co-learning and evaluation, with particular attention to learning from people who have been marginalised in and by the dominant food system.

In the IDS–IPES–Food workshop, we were not seeking a single political economy approach but rather insights from different approaches. An agreed-upon point of departure was the intellectual poverty of a neoliberal framing of food and agriculture, which has held ideas and possible government interventions to improve sustainability and

equity in an ideological and political straitjacket. We see little potential that neoliberalism, in all its many guises, will lead to solutions to the problems it has largely been responsible for creating – a point also underlined by Bonanno and Busch in the introduction to their edited *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Agriculture and Food* (2015). In focusing on power, our participants stressed the importance of material political economy approaches, but also the need to go beyond these to theories of knowledge, politics of knowledge, and how knowledge is embodied (well presented in feminist analysis). We identified a host of new research questions as well as coming back to familiar yet not thoroughly resolved conundrums such as the tension between sustainability and affordability; that is, whether food prices must increase to allow sustainable production, and if so, how everyone will be able to access healthy, sustainable foods.

## **2 Understanding food systems**

We begin from the concept of the food system, which encompasses all food system activities; the interrelationships of components and actors, and the institutions that regulate those activities, components, and actors. While the most common depiction of the food system is static, the interrelationships of components can be seen more fruitfully as dynamic flows of materials, money, nutrients, or power itself. In the workshop, Hans Herren demonstrated food systems models that the Millennium Institute has created to show how the food system affects the majority of the Sustainable Development Goals; trying to achieve these goals without reforming the food system is futile, but approaching them through food system reforms will have synergistic effects. Modelling is a useful tool to create scenarios of inaction as well as alternative actions in food systems, where impacts are non-linear and system behaviour is complex, resulting in counter-intuitive results of interventions. Modelling must be based on transparent assumptions which can be tested, however; it is a powerful tool, but does not provide useful answers without accurate data.

In the workshop, Molly Anderson showed how power is generated and maintained in the neoliberal food system through influences on purchasing, voting, and the actions of elected representatives. Given the strength of dominant institutions and food businesses within neoliberal political and economic societies, the simple advice to ‘vote with your fork’ only goes a little way; preferential (wealthy) consumer selection of healthy, organic, or otherwise quality-labelled food is quickly overpowered by advertising, lobbying, and campaign financing by food businesses that are operating to maximise profits in the short term and roll these back into their businesses. She showed how systems analysis can help to understand trade-offs among system components.

Key advantages of a food systems analysis are that it brings production and consumption (as well as other food system activities) into the same framework and clarifies trade-offs and paradoxes in policy and interventions. Food system activities cannot be studied as if they have

no impacts on each other; creating and implementing transformational practices and policy requires an understanding of this interdependence of activities and how power affects each. Mainstream development work has often ignored these interdependencies, focusing for instance on agricultural practices, markets, or consumption in isolation. Yet unintended blowback from interventions may actually push a society backwards; for example, when women producers of household subsistence crops are bypassed and their household power decreased because development agencies focus on male producers of cash crops. Similarly, the decisions of the CGIAR (formerly, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) to put the majority of nutrition funding into biofortification has had opportunity costs, marginalising and disempowering research and dissemination on food system-based nutritional improvements, such as polycultures in agroecology.

Food systems can be conceptualised at scales from the local to the international. Often an apparent dilemma, such as ensuring affordable food for people on low incomes while simultaneously ensuring decent incomes for producers, is created by focusing on the wrong scale for solving the problem. If this particular issue is viewed from the national level, many possible solutions are apparent. These range from subsidies for low-income people to be able to purchase healthy food, to mandated state procurement from low-income producers, to removal of policies which allow an excessive concentration of buyers and the externalisation of environmental and social costs, erasing fair marketplace competition that might reward small-scale agroecological producers in markets if market access were not predetermined by size.

As these scale examples suggest, food systems and food system change can be viewed from different perspectives. The character of 'the system', and whether its states and processes are positive or negative, desirable or undesirable, depend on who one is, and the interests and values one holds. Different producers and consumers, government, and business actors may hold very different perspectives. As work by the STEPS Centre has argued, systems should thus be conceived not as singular, but as heuristics, open to diverse framings and narratives (Leach, Scoones and Stirling 2010). Indeed, as Molly Anderson argued in the workshop, exploring diverse narratives about food systems in a participatory manner can itself be a useful exercise that lays bare and facilitates interrogation of different interests and knowledge politics. Work on the 'narrative politics' of food systems is a gap that warrants more attention.

Several further gaps in food systems analysis are impeding transformational research, activities, and policy. The first gap is the adoption of a dynamic methodology that can address behaviour over time of the different components of the food system. This might involve modelling, but needs to begin with a clear conceptual understanding of the interrelationships within the system, and must also appreciate complexity. Models are simplifications, but they must retain the critical

components and flows to be useful. The second gap is related to the choice of components to include: understanding where to set food system boundaries for analysis. As mentioned above, boundaries that are set too narrowly can constrain solutions or pose intransigent quandaries. But boundaries that are set too broadly, to encompass elements of the food system that are related only indirectly to the stocks and flows under consideration, will muddy the analysis.

Appropriate boundary-setting is made more difficult by the enmeshing of food systems in energy, finance, health, and other systems. For example, while diet-related diseases are rising in significance in all industrialised and many poor countries, the drivers and solutions to this massive problem lie outside food systems in the factors that lead to inequitable wealth and access to resources. When the boundaries of the system are unclear, there is a tendency to individualise problems and ignore their root causes.

The third gap is learning across scales, and understanding the extent to which specific solutions can be ‘scaled up’ or ‘scaled out’. While many people are understandably eager to see promising solutions replicated or augmented, the social, historical, and cultural context of each place must be taken into consideration. Agroecologists such as Steve Gliessman in his workshop presentation warn us to pay attention to context: to implement a viable agroecological system requires understanding local constraints and assets. Agroecological solutions can all adhere to shared principles, such as the ten elements of agroecology developed in regional workshops held by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO 2018), but it is not possible to reduce them to a checklist of activities that can be followed by anyone anywhere. One size cannot fit all, and more iterative approaches of ‘adaptive scaling’ attuned to social and ecological specificities often will be required. The contextual nature of agroecology brings up a point to which we will return later: local knowledge and participation are essential in creating durable solutions.

A fourth gap in food systems research is full integration of social and ecological drivers and trends. These have too often been analysed, and methodologies developed to study them, by siloed researchers who may know that other kinds of data are important but who do not have the tools to collect or work with those data. Food systems are the epitome of socioecological systems and have always included both social and ecological/biophysical inputs and dynamics, yet analytical tools and concepts of socioecological systems that truly integrate social and ecological science perspectives are not yet mature.

The realisation that food systems are sites for socioecological analysis has come late to ecologists. For example, the Ecological Society of America only recently added a section on agroecology and still has no clear ‘home’ for food systems. The British Ecological Society has a Special Interest group on Agricultural Ecology, but again nothing on

food systems. Oliver *et al.* (2018) nevertheless highlight the important lessons to be learned from socioecological analyses to understanding and addressing what they term 'undesirable resilience' in global food systems. Meanwhile, rich analyses of socioecological systems and resilience in other fields have often been dominated by ecological science concepts, and are slower to fully incorporate social science analytics around equity and power. Leach *et al.* (2018) seek to overcome this gap in offering a more fully integrated approach to equity in the Anthropocene, with potential applicability to food systems issues.

A fifth gap in food systems research is the analysis of influences associated with gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and other forms of difference and discrimination. While the powerful role of gender and discrimination of various kinds has been recognised, populations are too often still treated homogeneously as if the same drivers affect everyone in the same ways. Data on food security, resource ownership, and access are not necessarily disaggregated by the factors that lead to disempowerment; and people who are marginalised seldom have a role in creating the tools for data collection or actually collecting and interpreting the data. Gender and other sources of marginalisation must be taken into account when analysing not just food production but also the effects of trends in food preparation, consumption, labour relations, and care. Such differences and factors are also essential to understand broader dynamics such as those associated with migration, displacement, and land grabbing – and why amidst these, some people cannot fight back to hold onto their territories.

IDS and IPES-Food have worked in various ways to fill these gaps, thereby helping to understand how food systems operate, how and for whom, and how change in food systems happens. We describe some of the directions pursued by the two groups in the next section. Food systems are the essential framework for analysis used by both groups, but political economy is not equivalent to systems analysis. Systems analysis at its best advances our transactional understanding of how political influence works, how decisions are made, and who benefits or loses from those decisions. These factors help illuminate whether and how change happens, and whether it is incremental or transformational. However, a fuller understanding of change can come from deeper attention to questions of power.

### **3 Transforming food systems: emerging interdisciplinary approaches**

Soon after its formation, IPES-Food articulated a 'new science of food systems' as one of its first actions (IPES-Food 2015). This emphasised the need for systemic approaches, and including analyses of power in any study of food system change. Since then, the group has identified and analysed various lock-ins that prevent societies from transforming food systems, despite their negative consequences to health, quality of life, and ecological integrity (IPES-Food 2016). Concentration of all food system activities (sometimes by the same actors working across activities in vertical integration) is in the middle of these lock-ins and



contributes to each. The workshop provided an opportunity to build on and extend these analyses and approaches.

In the IDS–IPES-Food workshop and in complementary literature, we see a diversity of approaches to food system power and transformation. The plurality of approaches provides multifaceted lenses for examining social and political change, identifying different entry points for change, and understanding resistance to change. Thus how we understand and address power in food systems shapes the visions we can bring to food system transformation.

The relationship between power and innovation offers one valuable lens. For example, the presentations by John Thompson and Dominic Glover from IDS examined the role of innovation as a social choice that can be fuelled by diversity, pointing towards integrated seed sector development (in Thompson's case) and to changing how innovations are designed (in Glover's case) to better serve their agents. Emile Frison's presentation addressed innovation as arising from different ways of knowing, pointing to better integration of traditional and scientific knowledge. Subsequent discussion reflected the three 'D's of diversity, direction, and distribution of change identified in the STEPS Pathways approach (Leach *et al.* 2010; Stirling 2009), emphasising how innovation (in food systems as in other areas) can proceed in different directions with distributional implications for who gains or loses, whether according to gender, ethnicity, place, or other aspects of difference. Fostering diversity in plural innovation pathways can be a strategy to confront and undermine incumbent power and lock-ins to single, dominant systems.

A further conceptual lens focuses directly on the analysis of power. Here, workshop discussions drew usefully from the concept of the power cube<sup>3</sup> as presented by John Gaventa. This highlights how different forms (visible, invisible, and hidden) and spaces (closed, invited, and claimed) of power work together to facilitate or obstruct transformations. Foundations for an interdisciplinary political economy approach have deep intellectual roots, going back to the work of Karl Polanyi, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and other scholars who in different ways critiqued capitalism as a political/economic system during the early stages of industrialisation. Within recognised disciplines such as economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science, many people have grappled with the prerequisites and processes of social transformation, as introduced in a broad-brush survey within Anderson *et al.*'s article in this *IDS Bulletin*.

But only in the last few decades have cross-disciplinary groups come together to analyse transformation as a subject in its own right. Here, diverse approaches have emerged, aligned with different theories of change. A recent review by the STEPS Centre (Scoones *et al.* 2018) distinguishes between 'systemic', 'structural', and 'enabling' approaches in transformations to sustainability; a categorisation with relevance to our discussion of food system transformations.

Systemic approaches identify particular features of 'systems' (like 'levels' or 'actors') as targets for focused instrumental change, usually initiated by policy. One of the most influential concepts here comes from the field of sociotechnical system transitions. The 'Multi-Level Perspective' (MLP, first introduced in Geels 2006) depicts niches of innovation moving into the dominant sociotechnical regime and changing its culture and science, influenced by the exogenous sociotechnical landscape. While the MLP has generated a large number of applications, it is not a very satisfactory explanation of the political economy of food systems. It fails to explicate why some niches succeed and others fail, and how the existing power dynamics of the landscape can repel transformation. More recent applications have extended the approach to focus more on the social and political dimensions of change (Geels 2014), as well as tackling how change is resisted. But a focus on particular system categories – like 'actors' and 'levels' – is retained, as is a commitment to policy change through incentives, investments, and policy initiatives.

Structural approaches focus on deeper changes in the perceived underlying foundations of politics, economy, and society. Included here are classical political economy analyses such as those of Marx and Gramsci, both of whom emphasised the overturning of established structures through revolutionary change. Structural-historical approaches emphasise the importance of history; Polanyi begins with this in his analyses, highlighting how key moments, or conjunctures, are important in generating crises and tensions, but also new inspirations and movements for change. History is also fundamental to food regimes analysis. In contrast, the MLP pays little attention to history, and thus to the unique contextual configurations of niches and landscapes. Historical analyses of transformations have a common concern with wider structural change, occurring through radical, sometimes revolutionary, shifts in power and control at key moments.

In contrast again, 'enabling' approaches refer to those emphasising diverse forms of agency (the deliberate exercise of will) in choosing directions for and bringing about transformative change (Scoones *et al.* 2018; O'Brien 2015). Here, opportunities are recognised for transformations that originate in smaller actions, including by excluded and marginalised people. Plural forms of power may be exercised in diverse spaces, including through individual and collective action. Much work in both IPES-Food and IDS has taken such approaches to explore how transformations can emerge 'from below', including through social movements such as those around food sovereignty. In the workshop, for example, Yan Hairong provided an example of a community cooperative leading change in China, fostering women's empowerment, renewed social and economic roles for youth in the countryside, and the decommodification of food. This kind of transformation will inevitably take different forms in different settings, and is often characterised less by control, than by an unruly and often adversarial politics of citizen mobilisation.

These different approaches might be seen to suit different aspects of food system transformation, and different contexts. For instance, our workshop discussions considered whether a single transformation theory applies well to food systems in both the global North and South. Our participants hypothesised that the MLP fits transitions in the global North better, where there is usually a powerful incumbent regime. Politics in the global South are seen more as connecting or mobilising agonistic politics, leading to strategies for mobilisation. Managerial-style transition theories do not fit these more polycentric politics or dispersed rural settings, where there is a need to go beyond formal governance to understand and address diverse, informal social and political institutions. Yet, we also acknowledged that such distinctions may be overblown – as we see citizen mobilisation emerging in all settings, albeit taking different forms. We may also find that the global North/South distinction is less useful for the political economy of food systems as consumption patterns converge around the world, with the expansion of supermarkets and the networks of feedlots, global supply chains, and globalised food manufacturers that turn raw ingredients into foodstuffs. Yet despite this convergence, stark contrasts remain: for example, the demand for nutrition-based foods results in nutraceuticals and fitness foods in wealthy countries, and Plumpy’Nut or other ready-to-use therapeutic foods for famine victims in poor and conflict-ridden countries.

Across these different approaches, we can point to important cross-cutting distinctions in understandings of power and transformation; more will become apparent over time. Whether change is initiated from the bottom or the top makes a big difference in who is ultimately enabled (or emancipated) or further controlled and limited in their options. Sources of, and diverse politics of, knowledge also figure as cross-cutting distinctions, posing questions around whose knowledge counts and who benefits from that knowledge. At the extreme, for instance, the transformative power of indigenous cosmologies rooted in the deep interdependence of humans with their surroundings contrasts powerfully with big-data-driven assumptions of the World Economic Forum or futuristic visions of technological innovation such as lab-grown meat and robots working in fields. Arguably, the latter will only exacerbate the existing rift in our two-tiered food system, in which wealthy people have access to the best and most sustainable food options, while poor people make do with unhealthy food that is produced in environmentally and socially destructive ways.

We suggest cross-cutting principles to guide this interdisciplinary approach to food system transformation. There will always be plural pathways within the broad parameters of sustainability, equity, and justice, reflecting the diversity of contexts and histories, and retaining this plurality is essential. Yet those parameters must be set conscientiously to avoid a kind of ‘political economy relativism’ that accepts different approaches too readily. The ends of transformation must be determined in a participatory way, with the voices of people who are systematically disempowered within the current dominant food system elevated and

amplified. The indicators of success that we choose must reflect those ends, and not be used merely because they are relatively easy to measure or have been used before. We must be wary of the self-reinforcing nature of trajectories of change that limit the array of alternatives and allocate power to incumbents, and keep questioning the boundaries set on what is possible. And finally, in analysis as well as in interventions, respectful collaboration is needed to ensure that different perspectives are aired and assumptions are constantly tested.

#### **4 Engaged political economy – opportunities and challenges**

Both IDS and IPES-Food have been adamant about the need not just for interdisciplinary approaches to the political economy of food systems – those that integrate social and ecological science, for instance – but also for transdisciplinary approaches that directly involve people from affected communities in figuring out how to make change. For IPES-Food, this means that a substantial proportion of panellists must come from non-governmental organisations or work directly with social movements; and all panellists must recognise the unique added value of incorporating social movement perspectives in choosing which issues to address, analysing those issues, and developing recommendations for how to deal with them.

Social movements often comprise or represent the people who are most affected by the negative consequences of food systems, whether these are hunger, rights violations of workers, pollution from industrial livestock facilities, or dispossession of land through government- or corporate-sponsored land grabs. Therefore, they bring especially important perspectives to problem identification and analysis, and the search for and implementation of solutions. For IDS, transdisciplinary work aligns with the Institute's distinctive 'engaged excellence' approach to development studies, applied across all the issues it works on (Leach, Gaventa and Oswald 2017). In this, the high quality of work (excellence) depends on it linking to and involving those who are at the heart of desirable change, whether citizens, civil society actors, or enlightened businesses and government agencies. Participatory action research approaches, Transformation Labs, and research approaches co-designed and delivered with marginalised people are amongst examples of such approaches in action.

Building on and illustrating these commitments, in this *IDS Bulletin* and through the workshop we co-sponsored, we see the seeds of an 'engaged political economy' approach to food system transformation. Engagement immediately brings up questions about advocacy versus objectivity: since both IPES-Food and IDS are interested in directional change and clear that they see specific changes as desirable, are they compromising their ability to be dispassionate observers of transformation and clear-headed analysts? Our response is that knowledge is always socially constructed, which means that no scholarship is truly 'objective' – or to put it another way, a more robust approach to 'objectivity' lies in acknowledging and making explicit

one's partiality; this is a route to what feminist critics of science such as Harding (1995) term 'strong objectivity'. Furthermore, scholars can also be activists without diminishing their ability to conduct useful and insightful analysis. Many participants in IPES-Food and IDS identify themselves as activists or practitioners; they see the richness of experience gained from direct interaction with activists improving their scholarship, rather than detracting from it.

Just as interdisciplinary work allows new insights into social transformation, in comparison with work from single disciplines, so transdisciplinary work permits scholars to apprehend transformation from much closer to the perspectives of social actors, be they farmers, members of civil society, consumers, business owners, or policymakers. It is in co-construction of knowledge that we can most clearly see pathways to lasting social and political change.

Characteristics of an engaged political economy include alliances between researchers and activists or blended identities of scholars and activists; strong contributions from practitioners; recognition of different yet equally valid ways of knowing, and active seeking-out of knowledge based on different cosmologies or locales. This requires a blurring of boundaries set by professional societies and institutions, which commonly overvalue 'scientific' knowledge and research published in certain journals at the expense of local, indigenous, and interdisciplinary knowledge. And although we are convinced of the added value of transdisciplinarity and participatory action research, it is important to note that many institutions of research and higher education do not provide supportive environments for this work, nor recognise in promotions or other institutional reward structures the added time that it requires. This form of work requires respect for researchers and practitioners with diverse backgrounds and styles of work. It also requires humility, reflexivity, and the capacity to hear and respond to challenges to one's cherished assumptions. That is, to confront power in the food system, one must also confront the assumptions and hierarchies that divide researchers from different disciplines and divide researchers from practitioners.

Some of the most pervasive and pernicious assumptions that must be confronted are those underlying neoliberal economic and political systems, such as the beliefs that people make rational choices and that allowing self-interest to dominate will result in the greatest good for society. Acceptance of unlimited wealth by individuals as tolerable – or even laudable – and failure to impose curbs through social policy on personal aggrandisement have resulted in the vast inequities that are now apparent in the food system. We are not saying that power always and necessarily corrupts, but that failure to be reflexive about one's own power as an analyst, to recognise abuses of power, and to rein these in have led to unsustainable and inequitable operations that continue to favour the few.

There are many implications of an engaged political economy for how research can be done. We are not alone in looking for ways that food systems research should change, of course: Levkoe, Brem-Wilson and Anderson (2018) recently examined how a commitment to food sovereignty pushed their research to focus more on people, equalising power relations, and orienting towards transformation. Scholars within the Agroecology Research-Action Collective and others working on food sovereignty, such as the Centre on Agroecology, Water, and Resilience at Coventry University, have recognised that the kinds of research and dissemination that dominate institutions of higher education do not suffice to enable food system transformation. This recognition inspired Maywa Montenegro de Wit and Alastair Iles to explore how to legitimise agroecology research (2016). Participatory research is at the forefront of changing research approaches through mutually beneficial collaboration which changes the researcher as much as the conditions under which the research takes place and the ensuing results. But this orientation to research is still not mainstream, even though the challenges that food systems face are seldom amenable to being solved through other research approaches and certainly not to a search for a single correct solution.

Because of the socioecological nature of food systems, their complexity, and differences across regions and populations, we need new tools and heuristics that can help with analysis. The power cube, as an early approach to analysing power and figuring out appropriate ways to disrupt it, has been widely adopted; other tools will help to pry open other facets of power in the food system.

Engaged political economy deals with resistance to incumbent power as well as analysis. At present, the middle of the food chain (consisting largely of big, vertically and horizontally integrated corporations that control processing, manufacture, distribution/trading, and retailing) drives the future of farmers through controlling price and quality specifications, and the options available to consumers through controlling what is displayed on supermarket shelves. Political economy must interrogate that power, beginning with questions about who should be considered as part of the 'private sector'. Should this include commercial farms, small-scale businesses, social innovators, and co-operatives? In fact, there is a great deal of diversity among private entrepreneurs in values, how they operate, and their impacts. Yet the largest corporations have undue power to control the terms of debate and sit in the forums where food system futures are debated. They have cosy relationships with many governments, which act to support private interests rather than their citizens.

There are many options available for tackling power imbalances, including confrontation, negotiation, leading by example, waiting for new forms of power to emerge and supporting them, empowering communities with food democracy, exploring invisible power such as digital public spaces, and building new narratives that value social innovation. Existing

food system power must be distributed more equitably, but how that will happen most effectively has little agreement. Evidence can be a useful tool for political advocacy, but will not shift policy processes on its own. Framing, and discourse to get the framing right, are therefore important in driving change towards sustainability and equity.

Engaged political economy is also needed in the realm of food system governance. Although ensuring health and healthy food systems is a governmental responsibility, many governments have abdicated from that role. In many societies, a breach of trust in government is driving the creation of alternative food systems. The breach of trust is due most often to governmental negligence in reining in corporate power and political influence, such as by failing to implement anti-trust law that should have prevented the rapid consolidation of agribusinesses that has occurred over the last couple of decades. Increasing the power of civil society in governance provides a counterbalance to excessive corporate influence (Andrée *et al.* 2019) and can be a watchdog when government is failing to prioritise the public good. Businesses are also trying to respond to the demand for healthier food systems, but do not generally see health as their primary responsibility. Good governance is critical for ensuring accountability: if nobody owns or stewards the system and its ends, nobody is accountable. While state-led entrepreneurship can be critical to lay down the infrastructure needed for new food systems, co-governance that includes civil society is needed to ensure that innovation and transformation serve their intended purposes.

### **5 Gaps and future challenges**

Wide literatures are emerging which are relevant to the political economy of food systems. They address some of the issues covered in this *IDS Bulletin* and many more. What we heard at this workshop was broad and insightful, but was largely a function of the people we invited. They gave generously of their time and thoughts, but we are sure that bringing a different group together would have generated a different set of insights.

The presentations and discussion at the workshop and in this *IDS Bulletin* highlight many issues and areas of evidence, but also many gaps, questions, and challenges for the future. For instance, more work is clearly needed to track how systemic, structural, and enabling approaches to transformation might be applied to food systems, and combined in different settings. Innovation is also an important future focus. We hope that the study of innovation will broaden to encompass more social innovation, which we see as a promising step towards sustainability, justice, and equity. The role of technological innovation is perhaps more contentious: mobile phones in the hands of African farmers may deliver much-needed market or weather information, but at what cost? And what are the opportunity costs of investment in sophisticated technology for farmers rather than social innovation? Can technological innovation be open, such that it does not make users dependent on their devices or the creators of those devices for updates and input? Can it spur people to be more creative rather than

passive recipients of technology? At the least, it is clear that we need frameworks to assess technological innovation before wide adoption, by figuring out its potential for positive transformation and discerning the side-effects of such adoption.

Some of the other next steps that we envision for engaged political economy are more experimental spaces such as Transformation Labs, building on those set up by the STEPS Centre; an interactive platform to document transition and transformation initiatives; critical examination of funding flows for agricultural and food systems research; and the emergence of new transdisciplinary thinktanks that study food system transformation opportunities from the ground up and where top-down and bottom-up initiatives connect. Other next steps look comparatively across sectors: thus we need to understand better how and why policies resulting in positive changes for health, nutrition, gender equity, environmental stewardship, and other aspects of sustainability have worked, how, and for whom, and to bring these insights back to food systems. And still further steps are institutional: to prepare more scholars for engaged political economy, we need institutions of higher education that can create space in their curricula for training, mentoring, and field experience. The steps we envision build on each other and must be implemented in integrated ways to get the most possible benefit from them.

More broadly, there is a need to bring together approaches to political economy and power analysis, systems models, and transdisciplinarity as discussed in previous sections. While there is growing recognition of the opportunities (and challenges) associated with each of these, too often they are discussed separately. Food system transformation brings both an imperative and a lens to integrate them.

This work is difficult but necessary. The options ahead are stark: on the one hand, a continuation of dysfunctional systems of nourishing ourselves at the expense of wellbeing and the environment, and on the other hand, food systems that can serve as wedges into more equitable, harmonious, and sustainable societies. We hope that this *IDS Bulletin* will encourage other scholars and activists to take up this vital work, to enrich it, and carry it further.

#### Notes

- \* Funding for this *IDS Bulletin* was provided by IPES-Food in furtherance of their aim to apply a political economy approach in understanding and reforming food systems.
- † This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches,



- Agendas and Challenges’, and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.
- 1 Molly Anderson, William R. Kenan Jr Professor of Food Studies, Middlebury College, Vermont, USA.
  - 2 Melissa Leach, Director, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
  - 3 [www.powercube.net/](http://www.powercube.net/).

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# Glossary

- ACC-SCN** United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination – Sub-Committee on Nutrition [Switzerland]
- ADA** American Dietetic Association
- AND** Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
- ANSA** Acuerdo Nacional para la Salud Nutricional [National Agreement for Nutritional Health]
- ASN** American Society for Nutrition
- CGIAR** Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research [France]
- CR** concentration rate
- CSO** Central Statistical Office [Zambia]
- CSO** civil society organisation
- DFID** Department for International Development [UK]
- EEA** European Environment Agency [Denmark]
- ENSANUT** Encuesta Nacional de Salud y Nutrición de Medio Camino [National Survey on Health and Nutrition]
- EU** European Union
- FAO** Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [Italy]
- GM** genetically modified
- HPG** Humanitarian Policy Group [UK]
- IAASTD** International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development [USA]
- IEPS** Impuesto Especial Sobre Producción y Servicios [Special Tax on Production and Services]
- IFAD** International Fund for Agricultural Development [Italy]
- IIED** International Institute for Environment and Development [UK]
- ILC** International Land Coalition [Italy]
- INSP** Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública [National Institute of Public Health of Mexico]
- IPES** International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems [Brussels]
- JSNA** Joint Strategic Needs Assessment
- KII** key informant interview
- LMU** Land and Equity Movement of Uganda
- MCDP** Most Critical Days Programme [Zambia]
- MLP** Multi-Level Perspective
- MoH** Ministry of Health [Zambia]
- NCD** non-communicable disease
- NFNC** National Food and Nutrition Commission [Zambia]
- NFNP** National Food and Nutrition Policy [Zambia]
- NFNSP** National Food and Nutrition Strategic Plan [Zambia]
- NGO** non-governmental organisation
- PPRR** Principles, Practices, Rights, and Responsibilities
- Sida** Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
- SSB** sugar-sweetened beverage

**STS** science and technology studies

**SUM** Senter for utvikling og miljø [Centre for Development and the Environment, Norway]

**SUN** Scaling Up Nutrition

**UNICEF** United Nations Children's Fund [USA]

**WFP** World Food Programme [Italy]

**WHO** World Health Organization [Switzerland]

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**Periodical ID statement** The *IDS Bulletin* (ISSN 0265-5012 print) is published bi-monthly in January, March, May, July, September and November. Mailing agent: Gary Edwards, Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK. Tel: +44 (0)1273 606261 idsbulletin@ids.ac.uk

**Postmaster** Send all address changes to *IDS Bulletin*, Gary Edwards, Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK. Tel: +44 (0)1273 606261 idsbulletin@ids.ac.uk

**Journal customer services** For ordering information, claims and any enquiry concerning your journal subscription please contact Gary Edwards, Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK. Tel: +44 (0)1273 606261 idsbulletin@ids.ac.uk

**Print details** Printed in the UK by Nexus Design & Print Ltd, Studio 38, Adur Business Centre, Little High Street, Shoreham-by-Sea BN43 5EG, UK.

**Delivery terms and legal title** Prices include delivery of print journals to the recipient's address. Delivery terms are Delivery Duty Unpaid (DDU); the recipient is responsible for paying any import duty or taxes. Legal title passes to the customer on despatch.

**ISSN** 0265-5012 (print), 1759-5436 (online)

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**Transforming Food Systems: The Potential of Engaged Political Economy**  
Molly Anderson and Melissa Leach

‘We must first better understand power at its different levels, forms, and spaces, and then use this understanding in order to transform food systems via equitable processes which work towards the interests of all.’