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Purchasing and Protesting: Power from Below in the Global Food Crisis[*][†]

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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

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'[3] studied 23 rural and urban sites in ten countries across the developing world,[4] exploring and analysing responses with up to 1,500 participants for three years. 'Food Riots and Food Rights'[5] studied the triggers, modes, and effects of protests and rights-claiming around food in eight sites in four countries over the same period.[6] 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.[7]

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 rises 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

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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 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/.

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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