

**IDS Working Paper 581
FEC Working Paper 001**

Food Equity: A Pluralistic Framework

Lídia Cabral and Stephen Devereux

December 2022

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) delivers world-class research, learning and teaching that transforms the knowledge, action and leadership needed for more equitable and sustainable development globally.

About the Food Equity Centre

The Food Equity Centre brings together researchers, policy makers, practitioners and activists to collaborate in developing solutions to inequities in food systems. It addresses the urgent need for research and action towards fairness, justice, and inclusion, at a time when global crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have exposed the scale of food insecurity and structural issues that leave people in poor food environments vulnerable to disease and malnutrition.

Food Equity Centre members and partners work on diverse aspects of food security and social justice, including food systems, nutrition, social protection, food sovereignty and the right to food. Through research, knowledge sharing and mutual learning between countries in the Global North and Global South, it aims to break down silos between researchers, activists and local communities. The Centre will generate contextualised knowledge and actionable solutions contributing to transformative change that leads to equitable and sustainable food systems globally.

The Food Equity Centre combines partners from different global regions and different research and practice traditions, working together to address food equity. Institutional partners include the Institute of Development Studies (UK); Centre for Food Policy, City University (UK); Programa de Pós-Graduação de Ciências Sociais em Desenvolvimento, Agricultura e Sociedade, Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro (Brazil); Centre of Excellence in Food Security, African Centre for Cities, and PLAAS (South Africa); and the World Vegetable Centre (Thailand, and global).



© Institute of Development Studies 2022

IDS Working Paper Volume 2022 Number 581
 FEC Working Paper 001
 Food Equity: A Pluralistic Framework
 Lídia Cabral and Stephen Devereux
 December 2022

First published by the Institute of Development Studies in December 2022
 ISSN: 2040-0209 ISBN: 978-1-80470-070-9
 DOI: [10.19088/IDS.2022.083](https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2022.083)

Suggested citation: Cabral, L. and Devereux, S. (2022) *Food Equity: A Pluralistic Framework*, IDS Working Paper 581, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/IDS.2022.083](https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2022.083)

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

This paper was funded and produced as part of the IDS Strategic Research Initiative.



This is an Open Access paper distributed under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence** (CC BY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited and any modifications or adaptations are indicated.

Available from:
 Institute of Development Studies, Library Road
 Brighton, BN1 9RE, United Kingdom
 +44 (0)1273 915637
ids.ac.uk

IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England
 Charity Registration Number 306371
 Charitable Company Number 877338

**IDS Working Paper 581
FEC Working Paper 001**

Food Equity: A Pluralistic Framework

**Lídia Cabral and Stephen Devereux
December 2022**

Food Equity: A Pluralistic Framework

Lidia Cabral and Stephen Devereux
December 2022

Summary

Food systems are characterised by inequities in every component, from production through to consumption. This paper seeks to make sense of various perspectives and concepts that account for the multiple forms of inequity. We unpack the notion of food equity by outlining distinct and diverse theorisations of equity in selected fields of study and exploring their influences in the food domain, by reference to prominent food concepts such as food aid, food security, food systems, food justice, and agroecology. By comparing different perspectives, we derive a framework for the analysis of food equity. This framework asks questions about whom to target, at what scale, temporality, and whether equity refers to outcomes, processes, or both. It also highlights the need to interrogate how equity is pursued *vis-à-vis* established structures of power. This is a pluralistic framework, in recognition of the distinct ethics and politics associated with the range of equity perspectives and food concepts reviewed. Methodological and ethical considerations in researching food equity are identified as areas for further exploration.

Keywords

Food; equity; justice; power; politics.

Authors

Lidia Cabral is a social scientist working across disciplines. Her work centres on food politics, the knowledge politics of development, histories of agri-food science and technology, and South–South relations. Her work has been mainly in South America and sub-Saharan Africa, especially Brazil and Mozambique.

Stephen Devereux is a development economist who works on food security, famine, and social protection. His research experience has mainly been in eastern and southern Africa, especially Ethiopia, Namibia, and South Africa.

Contents

| | |
|-------------------------|----------|
| Acknowledgements | 7 |
|-------------------------|----------|

| | |
|-----------------|----------|
| Acronyms | 7 |
|-----------------|----------|

| | |
|------------------------|----------|
| 1. Introduction | 8 |
|------------------------|----------|

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 2. Perspectives on equity: a selective review | 10 |
| 2.1 Welfare economics | 10 |
| 2.2 Capabilities | 11 |
| 2.3 Class-based inequities and agency | 12 |
| 2.4 Feminist perspectives | 13 |
| 2.5 Environmental and more-than-human justice | 14 |
| 3. Equity in prominent food concepts | 16 |
| 3.1 Food aid | 16 |
| 3.2 Food assistance | 17 |
| 3.3 Food security | 18 |
| 3.4 Food entitlements | 19 |
| 3.5 Food systems | 20 |
| 3.6 Food rights | 20 |
| 3.7 Food justice | 21 |
| 3.8 Food sovereignty | 22 |

| | | |
|-------------------|--|-----------|
| 3.9 | Agroecology | 23 |
| 4. | Contrasting food concepts from an equity lens | 25 |
| <hr/> | | |
| 5. | A pluralistic framework of analysis | 30 |
| 5.1 | What (is the nature of) equity? | 31 |
| 5.2 | How to achieve equity? | 31 |
| 6. | Conclusion | 33 |
| <hr/> | | |
| References | | 35 |
| | | |
| Figure | | |
| Figure 5.1 | Food equity: a pluralistic framework | 30 |
| | | |
| Table | | |
| Table 4.1 | Connecting food concepts to equity perspectives | 26 |

Acknowledgements

We thank Ian Scoones for kindly reviewing an earlier version of this paper and providing helpful suggestions. We also thank Food Equity Centre (FEC) colleagues who participated in the FEC annual symposium in September 2022, and specifically for the insightful comments offered by Claudia Job Schmitt, Melissa Leach, and Renato Maluf. Finally, we acknowledge fruitful interactions and discussions with FEC comrades at IDS: Ayako Ebata, Jody Harris, Ben Jackson, Nick Nisbett, and Patta Scott-Villiers.

Acronyms

| | |
|------|---|
| CSA | Community Supported Agriculture |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations |
| FEC | Food Equity Centre |
| HLPE | High-Level Panel of Experts |
| NEF | Nutrition Equity Framework |
| WFP | World Food Programme |

1. Introduction

Food systems are characterised by inequities in every component, from production conditions through to consumption outcomes. These include the uneven access to land and natural resources by large, industrialised farms and small, peasant holdings that results in the unequal distribution of wealth and income. They relate to how non-humans (animals, water sources, soils, and ecosystems) are subject to violence through extractive and unsustainable production processes. They refer to how particular social groups are trapped in income/asset poverty and social identities that constrain their access to sufficient and adequate food, while others have the choice of sustainable and healthy diets. Underlying all of these inequities are imbalances in power relations between diverse actors at multiple scales (Leach *et al.* 2020).

The Food Equity Centre (FEC) is an interdisciplinary network of individuals and institutions from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, who are engaged in work on the interface between food security and social justice.¹ The Centre aims to generate knowledge and solutions for transformative change that leads to equitable and sustainable food systems. Current research themes include justice and ethics within food system livelihoods; the normalisation and ‘slow violence’ of avoidable hunger; the transmission of dietary deprivation across generations and geographies; and a territory-focused approach to localised food inequities.

This Working Paper is a framing paper that grounds the work of the Centre, by exploring the concept of food equity. It is aligned with current work involving FEC colleagues on the complementary concepts of food politics (Leach *et al.* 2020) and nutrition equity, encapsulated in the Nutrition Equity Framework (NEF) (Nisbett *et al.* 2022). ‘Food politics and development’ draws on theoretical approaches to power analysis, arguing for a ‘transformational politics of food’ to achieve more sustainable and equitable food systems (Leach *et al.* 2020: 2). The NEF identifies ‘processes of unfairness, injustice and exclusion as the engine of nutrition inequity across place, time and generations’, and argues for ‘action on the socio-political determinants of nutrition... through “equity-sensitive nutrition”’ (Nisbett *et al.* 2022: 1).

In this paper, we seek to make sense of the multiple ways in which inequities are experienced in relation to food. We unpack the notion of food equity by, first, outlining distinct and diverse theorisations of equity in selected fields of study (Section 2), then documenting their influences in the food domain by reference to nine prominent food concepts – food aid, food assistance, food security, food entitlements, food systems, food rights, food justice, food sovereignty, and

¹ See [Food Equity Centre webpage](#).

agroecology (Section 3). We juxtapose different perspectives of equity (Section 4) and from here derive a pluralistic framework for the analysis of food equity (Section 5). Our proposed framework draws attention to questions about whom to target, at what scale, issues about temporality, and whether equity refers to outcomes, processes, or both. It also highlights the need to question how equity is pursued *vis-à-vis* established structures of power. In the conclusion (Section 6), we also draw attention to methods and ethics in researching food equity.

2. Perspectives on equity: a selective review

Equity is a normative concept that refers to the pursuit of fairness and equality of opportunity. It is distinct from equality as equity accounts for the fact that not everyone has the same opportunities and needs, and that societal imbalances require adjustments for fairness to be achieved. This may expose difficult trade-offs, as seen in tensions in university or job access criteria; for example, between affirmative action targeting minorities versus selection based exclusively on merit. How should such trade-offs be handled? What criteria should guide the quest for fairness and equality of opportunity, and who should be targeted – individuals, social groups, social identities, other entities? What perspectives and whose perspectives should determine such criteria?

Equity has been theorised across disciplines and fields of study and practice.² In the development field, the term has long been used in connection to matters of income and wealth distribution. In 2006, the World Bank dedicated its annual *World Development Report* to equity and development. Drawing on economic theory, this report defined equity based on two principles: (i) equality of opportunity, reflecting an individual's own efforts and merit rather than inherited privilege; and (ii) avoidance of absolute deprivation, by protecting the neediest in society, without prejudice to the principle of equal opportunity for everyone (World Bank 2006). Although recognising the diversity of perspectives on equity, the report engaged with economic theorisations on distributive justice for the individual, that have shaped welfare economics and policy for a long time. We consider this perspective and then proceed to review other perspectives on equity, moving from a focus on individuals (and their capabilities) to a focus on collectives, as defined by class, gender identity as well as human/non-human categories.

2.1 Welfare economics

Neoclassical economic theory assumes that individuals behave rationally in order to maximise their utility, subject to constraints such as cognitive limitations and uncertainty, which result in decision-making under 'bounded rationality' (Simon 1957). Welfare economics applies utility theory to answer this question: 'Which market structures and arrangements of economic resources across individuals and productive processes will maximise the sum total utility received by all individuals?'³ When this idealised state is achieved, the economy is 'Pareto

² McDermott *et al.* (2013) provide a useful review.

³ See, for example, [Investopedia – Welfare Economics](#).

efficient', which means that no reallocation of resources can make one individual better off without making at least one other individual worse off.

In reality, however, multiple Pareto efficient distributions of wealth and income are possible, so welfare economists devised 'social welfare functions' to guide public policy. For example, welfare economists could advocate for raising the statutory minimum wage, if they believe that the increased utility for low-wage workers more than offsets the consequent economic costs to employers and the possibility that some workers might face reduced utility by becoming unemployed. But Arrow's 'Impossibility Theorem' demonstrated that social preferences cannot be deduced by aggregating individual preference rankings (Arrow 1950). The major challenge, which is also why welfare economics has generally fallen out of favour, is that such analysis is inherently subjective. Interpersonal utility comparisons are needed, and assumptions must be made about the value to assign to the wellbeing of different individuals, to reach robust conclusions about total utility, equity, and social justice across a society (Johansson 1991).

2.2 Capabilities

Sen's concept of capabilities (Sen 1993, 1985) underpins most contemporary theorising and operationalisation of poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon. This approach shifts the focus from means (e.g. income, measured by income poverty) to ends (i.e. an individual's capability to function). Sen argues that capabilities reflect wellbeing better than just utility, and that poverty should be defined as a lack of capabilities needed to function in a given society.

Income is just one input to capabilities. Others include production, transfers, and social connections. These inputs create a capability set in a given social context through individual conversion factors. Social context matters because, as Townsend (1985) pointed out, even basic needs such as food are conditioned by the society in which people live. Capabilities themselves are inputs that frame outcomes, since they represent the opportunity set of achievable functionings – what a person can succeed in 'doing' or 'being' – while achieved functionings follow from the choices individuals make out of their opportunity set (Robeyns 2005).

Martha Nussbaum proposed a list of ten Central Human Capabilities, the first three being: life; bodily health; and bodily integrity. Bodily health includes 'being able... to be adequately nourished' (Nussbaum 2003: 41), which relates directly to nutrition security and food equity.

Like Sen's complementary contribution of entitlement to food (discussed below), capabilities can be criticised for its methodological individualism, being underpinned by Sen's liberal emphasis on individual freedoms (Sen 1999).

On the other hand, inequities in functionings and capabilities can only be understood from a recognition that structural inequalities limit people's ability and freedom to pursue and maximise opportunities. Nonetheless, capabilities share with absolute poverty measures a preoccupation with describing inputs and outcomes of wellbeing, rather than analysing the social and political drivers of inequitable outcomes.

2.3 Class-based inequities and agency

Whereas the above perspectives focus on distributional justice related to the individual, inequities related to social classes and class-based imbalances are central concerns in Marxist thinking. The capitalist system is perceived as having historically generated unfair, class-based concentration of wealth and power. The ruling class, which owns capital, exploits the working class or proletariat that it employs, by paying low wages. There is contention, however, on the role for policy and the state in regulating or correcting class-based inequities.

Some Marxists have seen the welfare state principally as a controlling agency of the ruling capitalist class. Others have seen it as the 'Trojan Horse' within which socialist principles can be carried into the very heartlands of capitalism.

(Pierson 1999: 175)

Despite the emphasis by some on state-led redistribution to the benefit of the working classes (and, in fact, some of these politics emerge from demands by labour movements), others see the institutions of the welfare state as interfering with the revolutionary process of transforming capitalism into socialism by buying off the proletariat and accepting the system as it stands (Pemberton 1983; Pierson 1999).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the complex debates about state and justice in Marxist scholarship (van de Veer 1973; Pemberton 1983). The two key points we wish to highlight here are: (i) the emphasis on collective experiences of inequity, as in social classes, and (ii) the interrogation of the ability of the established institutions in the capitalist system (such as the state) to correct inequities that are inherent to that system. Some branches of Marxism have indeed emphasised the working classes' own agency in the revolutionary process, eschewing the state as mediator in this process. Workers' unions, agrarian and labour movements are key actors in such popular revolutionary processes.

2.4 Feminist perspectives

Feminist scholarship has also offered rich contributions to the theorisation of equity and justice through a gender lens. 'Equity feminism' has specifically advocated for equal treatment for women and men and it is particularly influential in the United States, where it centres on equal rights arguments (Paglia 2018). It contrasts with other strands of feminism that focus on gender identity and diversity. Black (2019), for example, advocates for 'social feminism' that emphasises gender subjectivities and differences rather than similarities. Social feminists believe it is 'possible to retain the integrity and value of the female world along with what is valuable in the now dominant male option. In policy terms, therefore, they concentrate on increasing the influence on public life of women *as women*' (Black 2019: 72, original emphasis).

Some strands of feminism have drawn extensively from Marxist thinking, associating inequities based on gender identity to the structures of power in the capitalist system, seen as dominated by androcentric and heterosexual ontologies. Nancy Fraser's 'parity of participation' combines the Marxist call for redistribution with an emphasis on recognition (Fraser 2013, 2007). The distribution of material resources must allow everyone to have independence and voice. But participatory parity also requires that everyone is equally respected. Both redistribution and recognition are needed for participatory parity to be in place.

The first brings into focus concerns traditionally associated with the theory of distributive justice, especially concerns pertaining to the economic structure of society and to economically defined class differentials. The second brings into focus concerns recently highlighted in the philosophy of recognition, especially concerns pertaining to the status order of society and to culturally defined hierarchies of status.
(Fraser 2007: 27–28)

Feminist thinking has also drawn a link between capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy in their common framing of humans and nature as separate. Ecofeminism has connected the domination of nature to the domination of women (Merchant 1982; Warren 2000; Mies and Shiva 2014). Shiva's (1991) critique of the Green Revolution in India, for example, exposed the logic of domination of modern agricultural science and highlighted that '[l]oss of diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monoculture, uniformity and homogeneity' (Shiva 2014: 164).

Links between gender, social justice, and ecological justice have also been drawn. Warren (2000) argues that an inclusive notion of social justice must account for the social and the environment together and both distributive and

non-distributive issues. Building on Young (1990), Warren contends that framings of social justice have been exclusively focused on distributional justice and that this has primarily considered material goods. Nonmaterial goods, such as recognition, definition of labour and power, tend to be treated as ‘static things, rather than functions of social relations and processes’ (Warren 2000: 181). Also, the distributive perspective focuses on individual rights and welfare and pays less attention to social groups and communal beings as well as humans as relational selves that are embedded in social and ecological communities. From a non-anthropocentric ontology, justice towards ‘Earth others’ is seen as part of justice towards humans.

2.5 Environmental and more-than-human justice

The understanding of humans and nature (or Earth others) as intertwined and co-constituted is central to political ecology. This field of study is also influenced by political economy perspectives in its emphasis of unequal power relations that shape and change the human–nature interplay (Blaikie 1985). Some political ecologies have taken a macro perspective on historically constituted food regimes and the social and environment contradictions they generate (Tilzey 2018). Others have pursued more localised analyses, such as studies on land enclosures for biodiversity conservation and on their implications for indigenous rights and people’s livelihoods (Adams and Hutton 2007).

Environmental justice, specifically, articulates concerns about fairness regarding both the natural and the social. It emerges in connection to urban political ecology and its attention to disempowered communities (often on the basis of race and class) and how they are particularly exposed to environmental vulnerabilities and harms; for example, by living in marginal lands or close to dumping grounds or industrial zones (Robbins 2012; Warren 2000).

Another distinctive trait of political ecology is the emphasis on both material and discursive struggles (Bryant 1998). Political ecology considers the politics of knowledge, interrogating, for example, how environmental narratives are constructed, by whom, and based on what worldviews (Moragues-Faus and Marsden 2017). It questions both narratives of sustainability, as in ‘climate-smart agriculture’ (Taylor 2018), as well as uncritical views of the local as a scale of sustainable and ethical practices (Brown and Purcell 2005), as in some arguments about alternative food networks (DuPuis and Goodman 2005). Its critical interrogation of knowledge and narratives (and a degree of relativism) is combined with a strong normative stance (Forsyth 2008). Middleton (2015) proposes a political ecology grounded in indigenous thinking.

Political ecology is broadly concerned with the struggles of marginalised populations, and political ecologists ‘seek not just to explain social and environmental processes, but to construct an alternative understanding of them,

with an orientation toward social justice and radical politics' (Perreault, Bridge, and McCarthy 2015: 8). This quest for justice and radical change is one that is seen as part of a continuous struggle, rather than a static achievement (Low and Gleeson 1998).

Summing up this section, besides a contrast in terms of sphere of focus (individual vs collectives), there is also a clear distinction between positive approaches to equity that simply characterise and measure individual wellbeing outcomes – e.g. in terms of income poverty or capability deprivation – and normative approaches that analyse the structural (socio-political) drivers of inequitable outcomes in terms of group-based identities (class, gender, species) and socially unjust relations between these groups (i.e. capitalists and workers, men and women, human and non-human). In both cases, however, the implications for food equity are similar: poor and capability-deprived individuals are likely to be at greater risk of food inequities, as are those groups that fall on the wrong side of unequal power relations.

It is worth noting that the normative approaches reviewed above often use the term 'justice' rather than 'equity', thereby underscoring the need to address injustices. In this paper, we use the term equity to also encompass such perspectives on justice. We therefore adopt an expanded notion of equity that refers to the pursuit of fairness, equality of opportunity and justice, in relation to the individual as well as collective beings, and considering both wellbeing outcomes and the structural factors that shape those outcomes.

3. Equity in prominent food concepts

Concerns about equity are strongly present in the food domain, particularly in nine concepts that are prominent in the development field: food aid, food assistance, food security, food entitlements, food systems, food rights, food justice, food sovereignty, and agroecology. Underpinning each of these is a distinct understanding of what justice and fairness mean and how this can be pursued. In the discussion below, the concepts are organised (subjectively) from more liberal to more radical, meaning that food aid, food assistance, and food security are descriptive terms or have liberal connotations – there is no intention to disrupt or challenge the status quo – while food rights, food justice, food sovereignty, and agroecology aim at structural transformation of social norms and the social–natural interplay.

3.1 Food aid

Food aid has been defined as ‘the provision of food commodities for free or on highly concessional terms to individuals or institutions within one country by foreign donors’ (Barrett and Maxwell 2005: 255). Food aid would appear to be equity-enhancing and redistributive, since it involves free or subsidised transfers of food from surplus producers to countries and people facing food deficits, ostensibly provoked by humanitarian concerns to save lives and reduce hunger and suffering. However, poorly designed and inappropriate uses of food aid can damage recipient households and economies, by distorting and undermining agricultural production, trade, employment, and diets.

At the global level, food aid has been criticised as self-serving, especially in the post-Second World War years, when ‘surplus disposal’ by European and North American countries in low-income food deficit countries (LIFDCs) was justified as ‘feeding hungry people’, when the primary objective was to encourage over-production in the global North, by subsidising European and North American farmers in order to protect consumers in those countries. ‘While the rhetoric of American food aid has always emphasised its altruistic appearance, the design and use of US food programs have always been driven primarily by donor-oriented concerns, not by recipient needs or rights’ (Barrett and Maxwell 2005: 35).

Relatively recent innovations in official development assistance (ODA) and humanitarian programming recognise the limitations of food aid as either a developmental or humanitarian instrument. This started with the monetisation of food aid and ‘triangular transactions’, when food aid was either sold or purchased from neighbouring countries, to avoid disincentivising local producers and traders. ‘Purchase for progress’ and ‘home-grown school feeding’ actively

support local production, by purchasing from farmers in recipient countries rather than farmers in donor countries (HLPE 2012). Food vouchers increase demand for food from both local farmers and local traders, generating virtuous cycles of economic growth through localised income multipliers, while fresh food vouchers aim to increase dietary diversity, promote consumption of micronutrient-rich food items, and reduce all forms of malnutrition (Pietzsch *et al.* 2012).

3.2 Food assistance

The rapid spread of social protection as a policy discourse has been associated with a profound shift in favour of cash transfers and against food aid, even in food crises, where markets permit. Even the World Food Programme (WFP), still the largest multilateral agency for delivering food aid, has embraced cash transfers as a complementary tool, under a broader framing of ‘food assistance’. ‘Food assistance refers to the set of interventions designed to provide access to food to vulnerable and food-insecure populations. Generally included are instruments like food transfers, vouchers and cash transfers’ (WFP 2010: 4). Cash transfers are seen as equity enhancing because cash provides more choices to recipients, allowing them to choose the food they purchase and to meet their urgent non-food as well as food needs. Cash transfers also avoid the disincentives associated with food aid.

Food assistance is not limited to low-income, aid recipient countries. In middle-to-high-income countries, food banks remain important channels for provision of assistance to low-income households. Food banks source food donations from government agencies, private sector actors (including food system actors such as supermarkets), and private individuals, and distribute this to food-insecure individuals through soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and other channels. However, this food is often processed and packaged rather than fresh and nutritious. Farm-to-food banks and food pantries that apply nutrition standards to their procurement procedures are emerging as an alternative that aims to source healthier food and distribute it in more dignified ways (Health Care Without Harm 2018). A survey in the US during the Covid-19 pandemic found that food-insecure respondents who utilised a food pantry reported consuming significantly more fruit and vegetables than those who did not (Bertmann *et al.* 2021). A survey in Canada recorded lower levels of food insecurity among people using food pantries that offered a choice of food items from displays, instead of being given pre-packed hampers (Rizvi *et al.* 2021). A study in the UK found that the ‘pandemic acted as a catalyst for dramatic and mostly positive changes to the provision of food aid’, beyond a paternalist model towards an approach to food provisioning that foregrounds individuals’ food choices and rights (see also 3.6) and community responses (Ranta *et al.* 2022). This evidence suggests that the ‘choice model’ of food pantries offers equity improvements over conventional food banks, both in processes and in outcomes.

3.3 Food security

The definition of food security has evolved over several decades, as the understanding of its complexity has deepened. Initially, food security was a supply-side concept that was equated with food production and national self-sufficiency because food insecurity was equated with scarcity and food deficits. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' (FAO) 'input-output model' inspired investments in high-yielding and drought-tolerant varieties of staple grains, such as wheat and rice during the 'Green Revolution'. The FAO's preferred measure of national food security is the 'prevalence of undernourishment' (PoU), derived from national 'food balance sheets' that estimates total kilocalories available in a country (production + stocks + imports - exports - post-harvest losses) and divides the total among the population using a distribution function based on consumption surveys (FAO *et al.* 2022: Annex 1b).

Amartya Sen's concept of 'entitlement' to food (discussed below) decisively shifted the focus from **availability** of food to **access** to food. A food deficit is never experienced equally by all members of a society, because access or entitlements to food are distributed unequally. It follows that adequate food availability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for household or individual food security. Crucially, Sen (1981) also demonstrated that hunger and famine can occur in contexts of adequate food availability, which explains the persistence of food insecurity and malnutrition even in contemporary middle- and high-income countries. Constrained access to food is determined primarily by income poverty and wealth inequality, which in turn are central to any analysis of (in)equity.

A third pillar of current definitions of food security is **stability**, which implies that access to food must be continuous and uninterrupted. Seasonal hunger, for example, occurs in smallholder communities that depend on a single annual rainy season, if the harvest is inadequate to feed farming families throughout the year until the next harvest. Seasonality in food production translates directly into seasonality in food consumption – 'feast and famine' in a single year. Seasonal hunger is also experienced by farm workers in commercial agriculture. Seasonal workers have no employment during the winter months and limited access to savings or other sources of livelihood (see **FEC Working Paper 2: Devereux *et al.* 2022**). Two mechanisms for addressing this form of employment inequity are seasonal unemployment insurance, and public employment programmes. Although food-for-work has acquired a negative reputation as inequitable 'workfare' programmes, well-timed and well-designed public works can provide employment and income that bridges the gap between farming seasons.

Utilisation was later added as a fourth pillar, and relates to biological processing of nutrients. The concept of food security has also expanded to 'food security and nutrition' or 'food and nutrition security', recognising that food is an input to

the desired outcome of good nutrition. It is possible for someone to be 'food secure' but 'nutrition insecure', meaning they consume enough food but are malnourished, perhaps because unsafe water causes diarrhoea and nutrients consumed are lost. Food and nutrition equity therefore requires equitable access to essential services, such as clean water and hygienic sanitation facilities.

Recent reports by the High-Level Panel of Experts on food security and nutrition of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security propose adding agency and sustainability as the fifth and sixth pillars (HLPE 2020, 2017).

Agency is explicitly concerned with equity between people, because it,

refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to make their own decisions about what foods they eat, what foods they produce, how that food is produced, processed and distributed within food systems, and their ability to engage in processes that shape food system policies and governance. (HLPE 2020: xv)

Consumers and other actors in food systems should have some control over their food; they should not have crucial decisions about food taken for them.

Sustainability can be conceptualised as addressing intergenerational equity, because it requires food systems to ensure 'food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition of future generations are not compromised' (HLPE 2017: 23).

3.4 Food entitlements

Sen's concept of 'entitlement to food' was conceived as a methodological tool for analysing how groups of people can become vulnerable to famine if they lose their access to the four legal sources of food: production, trade or exchange, labour, and transfers (Sen 1981). Although the word 'entitlement' was understood by some as having moral or even rights-based connotations, this is misconstrued. Entitlements are grounded in property rights; they are not related to any normative notion of individual need or social justice. A person is entitled to the food that they produce, can afford to buy, work for, and are given. This methodological individualism has been criticised as ahistorical and apolitical, for failing to question the distribution of property rights in a given society, which is often highly inequitable (Devereux 2001).

To take one example: in post-apartheid South Africa, hunger and malnutrition remain overwhelmingly concentrated among the black majority population, who were systematically dispossessed of their land, discriminated against in the labour market, and provided with inferior education and health services. However, an entitlement analysis would simply reflect that a child in a poor, urban black family displays stunted growth, because her unemployed parents cannot purchase adequate food with the Child Support Grant that might be the

only income the household receives. This inequitable outcome can only be redressed by tackling the original source of unequally distributed entitlements, for instance by intervening in the labour market through Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment, and by intervening in the distribution of productive resources through land expropriation without compensation.

3.5 Food systems

In its simplest form, a food system is a descriptive mapping of the food supply chains, food environments and consumer behaviour that, together, shape the food security and nutrition outcomes of human populations in specific contexts at specific times. Food supply chains are all activities that move food ‘from farm to fork’ – production, storage, processing, marketing – and associated actors – farmers, agribusiness, traders, and so on. Food environments include aspects such as physical accessibility, affordability, and food safety. Consumer behaviour is about food choices, which are influenced by drivers such as cultural preferences, budget constraints, food industry advertising, and health messages, among others (HLPE 2017).

Beyond this mapping, however, considerations of equity permeate food systems throughout. The ‘cartelisation’ of the global grain trade and the ‘supermarketisation’ of food retailing point to the dangers of a concentration of power in the hands of a few, who can manipulate supplies, prices, and diets to the disadvantage of millions of other actors in the system – as reflected, for instance, in the rising incidence of farmer suicides in India (Patel 2013).

It is therefore acknowledged that food systems should be ‘equitable and inclusive’, by ensuring that all people within the system have equitable access to resources, markets, livelihoods, and food. Equity between food system participants needs to be actively promoted, including through ‘civil society and peasant mobilisations for equitable access to resources and social justice’ (HLPE 2020: 2), especially for vulnerable or marginalised groups such as small-scale producers, indigenous peoples, and women. One example is fair trade arrangements that aim to enhance equity in international trade, by ensuring that low-income producers in the global South earn higher incomes by raising prices for wealthier consumers in the global North.

3.6 Food rights

At the global level, the ‘right to food’ has been promoted by the United Nations. In 2004, the FAO adopted ‘Voluntary guidelines to support the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security’ (FAO 2005), following a resolution of the World Food Summit in 2002. In 2000, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) appointed the

first UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, with a mandate to promote and monitor people's right to food around the world.

At national level, many countries have promulgated a 'right to food' or have the right to food specified in their Constitution. Justiciable rights empower citizens and civil society actors to mobilise and hold governments accountable to realise these rights. In India, for example, the People's Union for Civil Liberties in Rajasthan petitioned the Supreme Court to compel the government to uphold the constitutional right to food. This led to the passing of the rights-based Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which guarantees every household in rural India up to 100 days of work each year in their community at the local minimum wage, to ensure access to food for all. Also, in 2013 the Indian Parliament passed the National Food Security Act. This so-called 'Right to Food Act' guarantees access to subsidised food for 75 per cent of the rural population and 50 per cent of the urban population.

3.7 Food justice

Whereas food rights refer to individual entitlements, the notion of food justice refers to whole food systems. Gottlieb and Joshi (2010: 6) define food justice as 'ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly'.

The concept has strong currency in the global North, particularly in North America, in connection to a progressive food movement advocating for the localisation of food systems, reducing the distance between food growers and consumers, and improving marginalised consumers' access to good quality, healthy food. Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) trace the historical links between the US food justice movement and movements for racial, environmental, and labour justice unfolding since the 1960s. Racial inequality in food access, particularly in urban settings, is often a central concern for food justice (Cadieux and Slocum 2015).

Food Policy Councils, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and farmers' markets are examples of initiatives aligned with the pursuit of food justice. Food Policy Councils emerged across the US and Canada in the 1990s as multi-stakeholder policy spaces bringing together local and state governments, local businesses, and civil society actors to improve local food systems (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). They also developed in other parts of the world, notably in Brazil, where the National Food and Nutritional Security Council (CONSEA) helped to establish a food rights framework and shaped innovative public policies targeting disadvantaged and marginalised producers and consumers, including the Food Acquisition Programme (PAA) and the National School Feeding Programme (PNAE) (Grisa and Schneider 2015).

CSA, urban allotments, and farmers' markets put the emphasis specifically on proximities between food production and consumption, combining concerns for environmental and social justice at the local scale. Often referred to as alternative food networks, these initiatives value relations of trust between food consumers and producers as conducive to more equitable practices that are ecologically sound and ethical (Jarzębowski, Bourlakis and Bezat-Jarzębowska 2020; Watts, Ilbery and Maye 2005). To best confront powerful actors that dominate globalised food systems, food actors operate in networks formed around common values and connections to places (Losch and May 2022).

While this notion of food justice continues to be strongly associated with progressive urban movements in the global North, it overlaps significantly with the 'more Southern' concept of food sovereignty that we review next, particularly in the opposition to globalised food system and the corporate food regime (McMichael 2014; Patel 2009). Cadieux and Slocum (2015: 2) refer to food sovereignty as food justice's 'radical sister from the global South' while Holt-Giménez (2011: 2) talks about radical food sovereignty and progressive food justice as 'the arms and legs of the same food movement'.

3.8 Food sovereignty

Food sovereignty has been championed and widely used by food social movements across the global South, prioritising the rights of small-scale and indigenous farmers, in contrast to food justice's distinctive concern for urban racialised food inequities (Cadieux and Slocum 2015). The Declaration of Nyéléni, adopted by organisations from 80 countries present at the international Forum for Food Sovereignty held in Mali in 2007, defines it as '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' (La Vía Campesina 2007). Food sovereignty connects struggles for food rights, recognition, and inclusion by social movements across the globe, while contesting the concentration of wealth and power in globalised food systems.

Emerging first out of struggles for redistributive agrarian justice, the concept has widened its scope to become a 'big tent' sheltering different agendas and actors striving for justice (Patel 2009). Masson, Paulos and Bastien (2017: 61) refer to it as a 'multidimensional political project'. Its goals are no longer about land distribution or fair market transactions alone but about recognition of different ways of experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation in the food system, by people as well as nature. This evolution has been shaped by an expanded understanding of justice in food systems.

Feminist movements and scholarship have contributed to extending the justice agenda in food sovereignty to concerns about oppressive patriarchy and

ethnocentric epistemologies. They have interrogated Western binary thinking about food relations and have drawn attention to non-commodified forms of work and the role of women in care and social reproduction (Sachs 2013).

Ecofeminism has linked the domination of women with the domination of nature, challenging ways of knowing rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Merchant 1982; Mies and Shiva 2014). For example, Shiva's (1992) analysis of the Indian Green Revolution likens industrial monocropping with a patriarchal capitalist regime that disregards the value of agrobiodiversity and the role of women as its custodians.

Women and feminist movements have constructively engaged with the food sovereignty movement to enlarge its justice framework, as illustrated by the alliance between La Vía Campesina and the World March of Women, which is argued to have re-signified food sovereignty as a feminist issue (Masson *et al.* 2017). This alliance materialised in their joint organisation of the Nyéléni Forum in 2007 (Wittman, Desmarais and Wiebe 2010). Two key issues emerged at Nyéléni: 'women's access to land and the affirmation of women's essential knowledge of food production and preparation – both directly linked to women's autonomy as a condition for food sovereignty' (Nyéléni International Steering Committee 2008: 23). An emergent 'feminist politics of food sovereignty' (Conway 2018) stresses how gender equity and food issues are intertwined and reinforces the centrality of gender within the food sovereignty movement.

3.9 Agroecology

Agroecology is closely aligned with food justice and food sovereignty, although the concept has distinct historical roots. The term agroecology first emerged in connection to technological concerns about soil biology and pest management in farming (Wezel *et al.* 2009). In the 1980s, it morphed with a movement fighting for alternatives to the Green Revolution and industrial agriculture (seen as detrimental to the environment and health), which started in agronomy but was taken up by student and activist organisations, particularly in Latin America (Niederle *et al.* 2019). Grass-roots movements for agroecology took shape and connected the agenda of natural resource management with social equity aspects in food production (Rosset and Altieri 2017). Since the turn of the century, agroecology further expanded to relate to the entire food system, connecting aspects of production, distribution, and consumption, gradually uniting with the notion of food sovereignty.

Nyéléni, Mali again provides the backdrop for social movements to debate food justice, this time centred on agroecology. The International Forum for Agroecology, held in 2015, defined it as 'way of life and the language of Nature', rather than a set of technologies or production practices, thus suggesting an ontological change in the way food is understood. The Nyéléni Declaration on

agroecology highlights diversity of food production practices linked to diverse territories and diverse ways of knowing. It stresses the value of collective rights and collective self-organisation and action. It rejects the commodification of food and nature, and seeks to challenge the concentration of power (La Vía Campesina 2015).

Agroecology is also increasingly tied with gender equity and feminism. Building on indigenous thinking, it invokes perspectives on human connectedness with nature. Indigenous women are referred to as ‘bearers of culture, defenders of nature, managers of home economies and gardens, and invisible subsistence providers’ (Copeland 2019: 834). Feminist perspectives emerging from indigenous cosmologies have stressed how women’s bodies experience forms of disempowerment by how they are assigned particular roles in the food system.

Notwithstanding its strong adoption by social movements, agroecology has also permeated high-level governance spaces, with the potential to shift policy on food equity. FAO (2018) has established the ‘10 elements of agroecology’, recognising agroecology to be not just about technical-ecological principles but also about social justice. HLPE translated these elements into 13 principles to guide transformation to agroecological food systems and thereby achieve resource-use efficiency, system resilience, and social equity and responsibility (HLPE 2019). Social equity and responsibility are understood here to include the co-creation of knowledge; the respect for culture and identities associated with food and diets; fairness in trade, employment and definition of intellectual property rights; greater proximity between producers and consumers; recognition that smallholders and peasant producers are managers of natural and genetic resources; and more participatory decision-making processes.

Summing up, most of the concepts discussed in this section are explicitly concerned with food equity, insofar as their intent is to correct for inequitable outcomes in food access, livelihoods, and agency. Some of these – food aid and food assistance – are (liberal) policy instruments that redistribute food from surplus to deficit countries, areas or people, while (more progressive and radical) others – food rights, food justice, food sovereignty and agroecology – aim to increase control by vulnerable people over their food, and draw attention to how natural systems are also subjected to exploitation and injustices. This can be framed as an ideological struggle between benevolent paternalism versus radical transformation. But even ‘neutral’ terms – food security, food entitlements and food systems – are implicitly concerned with food equity, to the extent that food security for all is seen as a socially desirable outcome, that all people have adequate entitlements to food at all times, and that food systems ‘should’ be sustainable, equitable, inclusive, empowering, respectful, resilient, regenerative, healthy, and nutritious (HLPE 2020).

4. Contrasting food concepts from an equity lens

How do the selected food concepts relate to the equity (and justice) perspectives reviewed earlier? What understandings of equity are most present in their framings? Table 4.1 synthesises the main ideas discussed above and highlights how the nine food concepts interpret equity. Commonalities and differences between equity perspectives and food concepts relate to what is being distributed, to whom, and under what underlying circumstances.

What is to be distributed? In all the equity perspectives and food concepts reviewed, the quest for equity is linked to a form of distribution that allows moving from a state of lack of/little fairness to one of greater fairness. What varies, however, is the nature of what is being (re)distributed. Equity is achieved through a provisioning process that may involve the distribution of material (cash, food, land, or other resources and assets) or nonmaterial goods (rights, capabilities, or recognition), or a combination of both. For example, food aid concerns the distribution of food to individuals who do not have access to it or cannot afford enough of it. A feminist agroecology blends the material with the nonmaterial – for example, seeking compensation of women’s role in food utilisation (e.g. through adequate remuneration) as well as a recognition of their knowledge and place in nature.

To whom? Another differentiating element in the perspectives and concepts reviewed is whether the focus is placed on the individual or a group. Is the pursuit of equity achieved through support to the individual (and individual choice of turning assets into capabilities) or support to a collective (and their group affirmation and responsibility)? The first two equity perspectives in Table 4.1 tend to centre on measuring inequality in relation to individual (or household) circumstances; the pursuit of equity (meaning the conversion of assets, entitlements, and capabilities into outcomes) is her/his (or the household’s) responsibility. Food aid and cash transfers reflect these understandings of equity as they are directed to individuals or households. The bottom three perspectives emphasise collectivities, although they define them in different ways – class, gender, non-humans. Food justice and food sovereignty are about empowering social groups seen as vulnerable or disadvantaged in the food system, such as poor urban consumers, peasants, smallholders, pastoralists, and indigenous communities. Feminist food sovereignty highlights gender and sexuality as the basis for marginalisation. Agroecology adds in the entanglements between the social and the natural in experiences of marginalisation; for example, how agrarian and labour injustices are intertwined with ecological degradation in industrial commodity production systems.

Table 4.1 Connecting food concepts to equity perspectives

| Equity perspectives | | Food concepts and their equity emphases |
|--|---|--|
| Liberal tradition – welfare economics | Individual rights to equal basic liberties, equity as turning outputs into outcomes as part of individualistic utility-based process; equity is pursued by providing equality of opportunities to all and supporting the least advantaged; Rawls' theory of justice and Roemer's equality of opportunity (link to Sen's capabilities) | <p>Food aid and food assistance: typically targeted at people who are acutely or chronically food insecure, therefore intrinsically redistributive. In practice, often paternalistic (not rights-based) with high exclusion.</p> <p>Food security: emphasises access to adequate and appropriate food for all, but in practice focuses on supporting the food insecure, e.g. to reduce the prevalence of child stunting and seasonal hunger.</p> |
| Capabilities and rights | Structural inequalities hamper individual ability to pursue opportunities; individual entitlements and capabilities (Sen); strengthen individual entitlements and capabilities to achieve welfare. Human rights as entitlements to strengthen capabilities. | <p>Food entitlements: identifies how groups of people can lose their access to food from production, trade or labour, and might need transfers to survive.</p> <p>Food rights: a justiciable (legally enforceable) right to food makes states (as duty-bearers) liable to meet the food and nutrition needs of all citizens and residents (as claims-holders).</p> |
| Marxist perspectives on class | The capitalist system has historically generated class-based concentration of wealth and power; the institutions of welfare have interfered with the revolutionary process of transforming capitalism into socialism by buying off the proletariat (accepting the system as it stands); need to strengthen collective | <p>Food systems: power imbalances between actors can exacerbate class- or group-based inequalities.</p> <p>Food rights: are not just individual, but also collective or group-based, and challenge concentrations of wealth and power by individuals and corporations.</p> <p>Food justice: distance between food growers and consumers disadvantages both small producers and poor consumers;</p> |

| Equity perspectives | | Food concepts and their equity emphases |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| | action and redistribution for social justice. | <p>lack of access to healthy food by poor urban consumers.</p> <p>Food sovereignty: questioning concentration of wealth and power in food systems; emphasising redistribution of resources (e.g. land reform) and of power to enable peasants, indigenous, smallholders and other predominant but marginalised actors and communities in the food system to define their own food and agricultural systems (e.g. what to produce, where to sell, in what terms, what to eat, etc.).</p> |
| Feminist perspectives | Inequalities based on identities moves Marxist focus on redistribution to a focus on recognition; pursue identity-based justice, while challenging structures of power dominated by androcentric and heterosexual ontologies; Fraser's 'parity of participation' principle indicates that both redistribution and recognition are required for social justice. | <p>Food entitlements: entitlement to food is gendered because access to productive resources (e.g. land) is skewed in favour of men, but responsibility for providing the family's food often falls on women.</p> <p>Food rights: emphasizes on the gender-based rights violations, gendered divisions of labour and unrecognised and uncompensated care functions in food provisioning.</p> <p>Food justice: emphasis on racialised inequities in the food system.</p> <p>Food sovereignty: emphasis on recognition and distribution of power for women's autonomy; distinctiveness of women's role and knowledge in food production and preparation.</p> <p>Agroecology: ecofeminist perspectives on the interconnection between humans and nature; indigenous cosmovisions on the disempowering of women's bodies.</p> |

| Equity perspectives | | Food concepts and their equity emphases |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Political ecology | Extent to pursuit of justice to non-humans and blur the boundaries between humans and nature; therefore, justice needs to consider nature's agency and how humans and nature are co-constituted; though offering a multi-scalar perspective, the territory (natural and social) is a key domain of interest. | <p>Food security: the sustainability pillar emphasises protecting the environment for future generations.</p> <p>Agroecology: environmental justice for disempowered communities (e.g. agroecological food in urban slums); redistributing power in relation to knowledge systems, asserting the value of experiential knowledge; justice as a continuing struggle (transition) rather than static achievement.</p> |

Under what circumstances? There are also commonalities and differences based on whether the provisioning of (material or nonmaterial) goods operates within established institutions and systems or power (such as the state or the capitalist system) or whether the pursuit of equity requires their transformation. The top two equity perspectives in Table 4.1 focus on the distribution of goods under existing institutions and laws. They do not fundamentally challenge the structures, institutions and worldviews that created inequities in the first place, but operate for justice within existing power regimes. The bottom three equity perspectives challenge (to lesser or greater extent) established institutions and systems as well as, in one case (political ecology), perceived natural laws. These institutions and systems of power can be referred to as regimes of power. Following the formulation proposed by Watts and Peluso (2013), regimes of power can be decomposed into regimes of rule, accumulation, and truth. Regimes of rule concern governance processes and institutions through which control is exercised. Regimes of accumulation pertain to relations of production, including tenure arrangement and labour regimes that determine who gets what and how it is distributed. Regimes of truth relate to the politics of knowledge, and what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge prevails.

The World Bank (2006) equity report mentioned earlier in the paper, which centres mainly on the first two perspectives, acknowledges that pervasive power dynamics (related, for example, to income disparities or gendered social norms) create inequality traps, but the remedy to address these are to be found within existing structures rather than requiring transformative change. Also, inequity is viewed in the report as undermining the pursuit of efficiency and prosperity in the system, so addressing it is part of maintaining the fundamentals of the economic system in place. Concepts such as food aid and food security have been

operationalised by governments and development agencies and thereby do not seek the transformation of power regimes governing food systems. On the contrary, critics of food aid contend that it has been instrumentalised to maintain the status quo, by ensuring that no more than survival needs are met, which is not sufficient to achieve food justice. However, proponents of food rights have, in some contexts, challenged existing structures of power. For example, the existence of a justiciable right to food in India has empowered civil society to initiate public interest litigation against the government, to enforce, *inter alia*, the introduction of cooked midday meals in primary schools (Drèze 2009).

Perspectives on social justice that draw on Marxist thinking point to regimes of accumulation that are unfair and call for the material rupture with the establishment in the pursuit of fairness. Agrarian reform, for example, can be a radical, disruptive, and sometimes violent process that seeks to redistributive land to correct structural injustices rooted in history (Bernstein 2003; Wolford 2010; Scoones, Marongwe and Mavedzenge 2010).

Movements for food justice and food sovereignty tend to express an opposition to regimes of rule materialised by the state. As noted by Cadieux and Slocum (2015: 7), 'they are suspicious of the possibility for co-optation and appropriation that comes with state-NGO engagements and often organise outside the space of the state'.

Feminist scholarship highlight inequalities related to gendered roles and identities and challenge the capitalist system as based on patriarchal regimes of rule, truth, and accumulation. Feminist food sovereignty emphasises recognition and distribution of power for women's autonomy and the distinctiveness of women's roles and knowledge in social reproduction (e.g. in food production and preparation).

Political ecology questions regimes of power that are anthropocentric, while highlighting how disempowered communities are most affected. Agroecology calls for environmental justice for disempowered communities and for a redistributing power in relation to knowledge systems (or regimes of truth), asserting the value of experiential knowledge.

In sum, how these various perspectives understand power relations in the food system marks a fundamental distinction in their conceptualisation of food equity and ways to pursue it.

5. A pluralistic framework of analysis

The discussion above provides the basis for elaborating an analytical framework that encompasses these diverse understandings of (food) equity, by asking:

- What is the nature of equity?
- How to get there?

Figure 5.1 provides a graphical representation of the key pieces and lines of questioning of our framework on food equity (as explained below). This framework is qualified as pluralistic in recognition of the distinct ethics and politics associated with the equity perspectives and food concepts reviewed earlier.

Figure 5.1 Food equity: a pluralistic framework



Source: Authors' own.

5.1 What (is the nature of) equity?

Defining the nature of equity requires clarifying target groups, scale of action, and whether the focus is on outcomes and/or processes and temporality.

Equity for whom? Should the focus be on individuals, on collectives, or both? How to consider intersecting identities and intersectional forms of vulnerability and marginalisation? How to treat nature and non-humans in equity considerations?

At what scale? What is the scale of focus (the body, the household, the city/village, the territory, the regional, the national, the global)? Or how to consider inequity as multi-scalar and scales as interconnected? Consideration of multi-scalar inequities?

Equity as outcome or equity as process? The state of equity can be measured through different outcome indicators on deprivation, lack of opportunity, inequality, etc. But equity also refers to processes of distribution, struggles for access to resources and recognition of identities and rights that seek to correct unequal outcomes. Perspectives focusing more on equity as status may prioritise the design of interventions focused on equity outcomes. Perspectives highlighting equity as a process tend to work more on the structures and power dynamics that mediate interventions and the contested processes of defining the equity outcomes to be prioritised.

Temporality? Linked to the above, this refers to considering equity as a foreseen achievement (static) or a continuous (never finished) struggle.

Our proposition is complementary to that proposed by McDermott, Mahanty and Schreckenber (2013). They, too, are concerned with defining the elements related to the substance of equity, also considering target groups, scales, and political decisions in setting parameters for equity. This latter point connects to what we now discuss as the directionality of change, or how transformative the nature of change is. Our difference is only in emphasis: McDermott *et al.* are preoccupied with equitable outcomes while protecting ecosystems, which we model as one aspect of our preoccupation with realising the human right to food for all.

5.2 How to achieve equity?

The perspectives on equity reviewed above can be placed on a spectrum based on the extent to which they conform to or challenge regimes of power. At one end we place perspectives that seek corrective or **remedial** action to address imbalances in distributions. At the other end we place those perspectives that seek more profound change and envision **radical** transformation of existing

regimes of power that produce inequities in the first place. Different types of actors with different objectives and power can be associated with distinct perspectives on this spectrum. Governments and development agencies usually undertake remedial action, whereas popular social movements try to drive more radical change for social justice.

This framing relates to what Holt-Giménez (2011) classifies as reformist, progressive, and radical approaches towards food system transformation. According to his formulation, reformist approaches are efforts to improve food security championed by aid agencies and some food policy councils working with or within the state, including food aid, food banks, fair trade, and organic certification. Progressive approaches are those associated with alternative food networks, solidarity economies, and movements for the right to food. Radical approaches are linked to food sovereignty and rights-based movements for justice towards marginalised identities and communities, such as those embodied by La Vía Campesina, the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty, and the Global March for Women.

The question then is whether these various approaches are complementary or whether they compete with or compromise one another. Holt-Giménez (2011) suggests incompatibilities between reformist approaches that reproduce the corporate food regime that progressive and radical movements seek to challenge. In their power-centred analysis of the politics of food, Leach *et al.* (2020: 14) call for 'multiple trajectories of system change', opened to a diversity of pathways though attentive to distributional implications and inclusiveness of voices and perspectives. Diversity and plurality of knowledge and approaches should therefore not come at the cost of fairness in the distribution of material and non-material goods.

6. Conclusion

This paper derived a framework for analysing food equity by reference to five distinct conceptualisations of equity and how they have been taken up by nine prominent food concepts. Although this was not an exhaustive review of the vast literature on equity and food, it allowed us to identify significant commonalities and differences in how food equity is understood and practised. All the food concepts reviewed understand the pursuit of equity as a form of distribution of goods. But there are important differences in relation to the focus on individual or collective groups or identities, the nature of what is to be distributed (material and nonmaterial goods), and, crucially, whether the distribution is done under regimes of power or whether (and to what degree) it seeks to transform these.

The proposed framework offers a heuristic tool for the conceptualisation of equity and interrogation of competing normative positions. The distinction between remedial and radical highlights the extremes in competing perspectives on food equity. In the real world we find examples of multiple, often contradictory, approaches in use. Diversity and plurality are in theory good yardsticks but only those approaches that confront power structures and their historical roots can be truly transformative. Cadieux and Slocum (2015: 15) say that '[i]f food justice means anything, it may stand for nothing — or, worse, serve to undermine the credibility and rigor of substantive food justice practices'. The same could be said about food equity. If it means anything, it may stand for nothing. This paper's proposed framework is therefore a tool for intellectual clarification of a concept that is fundamentally normative, so that food equity does not end up as another empty signifier.

The paper has not explored methodologies associated with theoretical perspectives on equity or food concepts. This deserves further reflection in a separate paper. There is a need to consider what (innovative combination of) methods can best assist the understanding of equity and the processes to achieve it. Different research traditions associated with particular equity perspectives and food concepts have their preferred methods of enquiry. But there is scope for innovation in combining and intersecting – for example, combining standard quantitative measurements of inequality and deprivation (e.g. in food distribution and access) with ethnographic methods on lived experiences with exclusion and marginalisation.

Ethical considerations are also essential in equity studies. Research on equity needs to be intrinsically equitable in the way it is conceived, implemented, and accessed, to ensure that power inequities are not replicated between researchers from the global North and the global South, or between researchers and respondents. This concerns, for example, who is involved and on what

terms in the research across all stages, a sense of proportionality in how resources are used and distributed, and a consideration of ways of compensating for the time and effort of research participants, particularly those who experience forms of inequity most directly.

To conclude, food equity is diversely interpreted according to disciplines, social positions, values, and ideological beliefs. This paper sought to clarify some of the differences in framing (as terminology can be deceptive) as well as to explore the common ground, particularly in seeking complementarities and cross-fertilisation between different perspectives. Ultimately, equity is ‘in the eye of the beholder’, but the pluralistic framework proposed here aims to provide a way of navigating the trade-offs and identifying where opposing interests can be reconciled, and where power needs to be confronted directly.

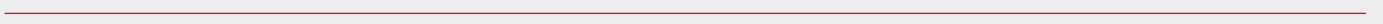
References

- Adams, W.M. and Hutton, J. (2007) 'People, Parks and Poverty: Political Ecology and Biodiversity Conservation', *Conservation and Society* 5.2: 147–83
- Anand, P. and Sen, A. (1994) *Human Development Index: Methodology and Measurement*, Human Development Report Office Occasional Paper, New York NY: United Nations Development Programme
- Arrow, K. (1950) 'A Difficulty in the Concept of Social Welfare', *Journal of Political Economy* 58.4: 328–46
- Barrett, C. and Maxwell, D. (2005) *Food Aid After Fifty Years*, London: Routledge
- Bernstein, H. (2003) 'Land Reform in Southern Africa in World-Historical Perspective', *Review of African Political Economy* 30.96: 203–26
- Bertmann, F. *et al.* (2021) 'The Food Bank and Food Pantries Help Food Insecure Participants Maintain Fruit and Vegetable Intake during COVID-19', *Frontiers in Nutrition* 8: 673158
- Black, N. (2019) *Social Feminism*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press
- Blaikie, P.M. (1985) *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*, Longman Development Studies, London: Longman
- Brown, J.C. and Purcell, M. (2005) '**There's Nothing Inherent about Scale: Political Ecology, the Local Trap, and the Politics of Development in the Brazilian Amazon**', *Geoforum* 36.5: 607–24 (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Bryant, R.L. (1998) '**Power, Knowledge and Political Ecology in the Third World: A Review**', *Progress in Physical Geography: Earth and Environment* 22.1: 79–94 (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Byres, T.J. (2009) 'The Landlord Class, Peasant Differentiation, Class Struggle and the Transition to Capitalism: England, France and Prussia Compared', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36.1: 33–54, DOI: [10.1080/03066150902820453](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150902820453) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Cadioux, K.V. and Slocum, R. (2015) 'What Does it Mean to Do Food Justice?', *Journal of Political Ecology* 22.1: 1–26, DOI: [10.2458/v22i1.21076](https://doi.org/10.2458/v22i1.21076) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Conway, J.M. (2018) 'When Food Becomes a Feminist Issue: Popular Feminism and Subaltern Agency in the World March of Women', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20.2: 188–203, DOI: [10.1080/14616742.2017.1419822](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2017.1419822) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Copeland, N. (2019) 'Meeting Peasants Where They Are: Cultivating Agroecological Alternatives in Neoliberal Guatemala', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 46.4: 831–52, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2017.1410142](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1410142) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Devereux, S. (2001) 'Sen's Entitlement Approach: Critiques and Counter-Critiques', *Oxford Development Studies* 29.3: 245–63
- Drèze, J. (2009) 'Democracy and the Right to Food', in P. Alston and M. Robinson (eds), *Human Rights and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- DuPuis, E.M. and Goodman, D. (2005) 'Should We Go "Home" to Eat?: Toward a Reflexive Politics of Localism', *Journal of Rural Studies* 21.3: 359–71, DOI: [10.1016/j.jrurstud.2005.05.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2005.05.011) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Fairbairn, M. *et al.* (2014) 'Introduction: New Directions in Agrarian Political Economy', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41.5: 653–66, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2014.953490](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.953490) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- FAO (2018) ***The 10 Elements of Agroecology: Guiding the Transition to Sustainable Food and Agricultural Systems***, Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (accessed 12 December 2022)
- FAO (2005) *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realisation of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security*, Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2022) *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022: Repurposing Food and Agricultural Policies to Make Healthy Diets More Affordable*, Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

- Forsyth, T. (2008) 'Political Ecology and the Epistemology of Social Justice', *Geoforum* 39.2: 756–64, DOI: [10.1016/j.geoforum.2006.12.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2006.12.005) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Fraser, N. (2013) *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, Brooklyn NY: Verso
- Fraser, N. (2007) 'Feminist Politics in the Age of Recognition: A Two-Dimensional Approach to Gender Justice', *Studies in Social Justice* 1.1: 23–35, DOI: [10.26522/ssj.v1i1.979](https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v1i1.979) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Gottlieb, R. and Joshi, A. (2010) *Food Justice: Food, Health, and the Environment*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press
- Grisa, C. and Schneider, S. (eds) (2015) *Políticas Públicas de Desenvolvimento Rural No Brasil*, Porto Alegre: Editora da UFRGS
- Health Care Without Harm (2018) *Delivering Community Benefit: Healthy Food Playbook* (accessed 11 September 2022)
- HLPE (2020) *Food Security and Nutrition: Building a Global Narrative Towards 2030. A Report by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition*, Rome: Committee on World Food Security
- HLPE (2019) *Agroecological and Other Innovative Approaches for Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems That Enhance Food Security and Nutrition*, HLPE Report 14, Rome: Committee on World Food Security (accessed 12 December 2022)
- HLPE (2017) *Nutrition and Food Systems. A Report by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition*, Rome: Committee on World Food Security
- HLPE (2012) *Social Protection for Food Security. A Report by the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition*, Rome: Committee on World Food Security
- Holt-Giménez, E. (2011) 'Food Security, Food Justice, or Food Sovereignty? Crises, Food Movements, and Regime Change', in A.H. Akon and J. Agyeman (eds), *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press
- Holt-Giménez, E. and Shattuck, A. (2011) 'Food Crises, Food Regimes and Food Movements: Rumbblings of Reform or Tides of Transformation?', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38.1: 109–44, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2010.538578](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2010.538578) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Jarzębowski, S.; Bourlakis, M. and Bezat-Jarzębowska, A. (2020) 'Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC) as Local and Sustainable Systems', *Sustainability* 12.11: 4715, DOI: [10.3390/su12114715](https://doi.org/10.3390/su12114715) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Johansson, P. (1991) *An Introduction to Modern Welfare Economics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- La Vía Campesina (2015) 'Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology, Nyéléni, Mali: 27 February 2015', *Development* 58.2: 163–8, DOI: [10.1057/s41301-016-0014-4](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-016-0014-4) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- La Vía Campesina (2007) 'Declaration of Nyéléni', in Nyéléni Village, Selingue, Mali
- Leach, M. *et al.* (2020) 'Food Politics and Development', *World Development* 134: 105024
- Losch, B. and May, J. (2022, forthcoming) 'Place-Based Approaches to Food System Resilience: Emerging Trends and Lessons from South Africa', in press
- Low, N. and Gleeson, B. (1998) *Justice, Society and Nature: An Exploration of Political Ecology*, London: Routledge
- Masson, D.; Paulos, A. and Bastien, E. (2017) 'Struggling for Food Sovereignty in the World March of Women', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44.1: 56–77, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2016.1187137](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1187137) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- McDermott, M.; Mahanty, S. and Schreckenber, K. (2013) 'Examining Equity: A Multidimensional Framework for Assessing Equity in Payments for Ecosystem Services', *Environmental Science and Policy* 33 (November): 416–27, DOI: [10.1016/j.envsci.2012.10.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2012.10.006) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- McMichael, P. (2014) 'Historicising Food Sovereignty', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41.6: 933–57, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2013.876999](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2013.876999) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Merchant, C. (1982) *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, London: Wildwood House

- Middleton, B.R. (2015) 'Jahát Ja'totòdom: Toward an Indigenous Political Ecology', in R.L. Bryant (ed.), *The International Handbook of Political Ecology*, Northampton MA and Cheltenham: Edward Elgar
- Mies, M. and Shiva, V. (2014) *Ecofeminism*, London: Zed Books
- Moragues-Faus, A. and Marsden, T. (2017) 'The Political Ecology of Food: Carving "Spaces of Possibility" in a New Research Agenda', *Journal of Rural Studies* 55: 275–88, DOI: [10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.08.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.08.016) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Niederle, P.A. et al. (2019) 'A trajetória brasileira de construção de políticas públicas para a agroecologia', *Redes (St. Cruz do Sul Online)* 24.1: 270–91, DOI: [10.17058/redes.v24i1.13035](https://doi.org/10.17058/redes.v24i1.13035) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Nisbett, N. et al. (2022) 'Holding No-One Back: The Nutrition Equity Framework in Theory and Practice', *Global Food Security* 32 (March): 100605
- Nozick, R. (1974) *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Oxford: Blackwell
- Nussbaum, M. (2003) 'Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice', *Feminist Economics* 9.2–3: 33–59
- Nyéleni International Steering Committee (2008) *Nyéleni 2007: Forum for Food Sovereignty—Final Report*, Selingue, Mali
- Paglia, C. (2018) *Free Women, Free Men: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, Edinburgh: Canongate Books
- Patel, R. (2013) *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*, New York NY: Melville House
- Patel, R. (2009) 'Food Sovereignty', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36.3: 663–706, DOI: [10.1080/03066150903143079](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150903143079) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Pemberton, A. (1983) 'Marxism and Social Policy: A Critique of the "Contradictions of Welfare"', *Journal of Social Policy* 12.3: 289–307, DOI: [10.1017/S0047279400012861](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279400012861) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Perreault, T.; Bridge, G. and McCarthy, J. (eds) (2015) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, London: Routledge
- Pierson, C. (1999) 'Marxism and the Welfare State', in A. Gamble, D. Marsh and T. Tant (eds), *Marxism and Social Science*, London: Macmillan Education
- Pietzsch, S.; Calo, M.; Jacob, J. and Morel, J. (2012) 'Fresh Food Vouchers: Findings of a Meta-Evaluation of Five Fresh Food Voucher Programmes', *Humanitarian Exchange* 54: 24–27
- Ranta, R.; Mulrooney, H.; Nancheva, N. and Bhakta, D. (2022) *Rethinking Food Banks: How Crises are Recasting Food Aid in the UK*, IDS Opinion, blog, 21 July (accessed 16 September 2022)
- Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*, original ed., Cambridge MA: Belknap Press
- Rizvi, A. et al. (2021) 'The Impact of Novel and Traditional Food Bank Approaches on Food Insecurity: A Longitudinal Study in Ottawa, Canada', *BMC Public Health* 21: 771
- Robbins, P. (2012) *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell
- Robeyns, I. (2005) 'The Capability Approach: A Theoretical Survey', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 6.1: 93–117
- Roemer, J.E. (1998) *Equality of Opportunity*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press
- Rosset, P.M. and Altieri, M.A. (2017) *Agroecology: Science and Politics*, Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing
- Sachs, C. (2013) *Feminist Food Sovereignty: Crafting a New Vision*, Conference Paper 58, New Haven CT: Yale University
- Scoones, I. (2016) 'The Politics of Sustainability and Development', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 41.1: 293–319, DOI: [10.1146/annurev-environ-110615-090039](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-110615-090039) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Scoones, I.; Marongwe, N. and Mavedzenge, B.Z. (2010) *Zimbabwe's Land Reform: Myths & Realities*, African Issues, Woodbridge: James Currey/Boydell & Brewer
- Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Sen, A. (1993) 'Capability and Wellbeing', in M.C. Nussbaum and A. Sen (eds), *The Quality of Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Sen, A. (1985) *Commodities and Capabilities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

- Shiva, V. (2014) 'Women's Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation', in M. Mies and V. Shiva (eds), *Ecofeminism*, London: Zed Books
- Shiva, V. (1992) 'Women's Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation', *India International Centre Quarterly* 19.1/2: 205–14
- Shiva, V. (1991) *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*, London: Zed Books
- Simon, H. (1957) *Models of Man, Social and Rational: Mathematical Essays on Rational Human Behavior in a Social Setting*, New York NY: John Wiley and Sons
- Taylor, M. (2018) 'Climate-Smart Agriculture: What Is It Good For?', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45.1: 89–107, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2017.1312355](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1312355) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Tilzey, M. (2018) *Political Ecology, Food Regimes, and Food Sovereignty – Crisis, Resistance, and Resilience*, London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Townsend, P. (1985) 'A Sociological Approach to the Measurement of Poverty: A Rejoinder to Professor Amartya Sen', *Oxford Economic Papers* 37.4: 659–68
- Veer, D. van de (1973) 'Marx's View of Justice', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 33.3: 366–86, DOI: [10.2307/2106949](https://doi.org/10.2307/2106949) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Warren, K. (2000) *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield
- Watts, M. and Peluso, N. (2013) '**Resource Violence**', in C. Death (ed.), *Critical Environmental Politics*, Oxon: Routledge (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Watts, D.; Ilbery, B. and Maye, D. (2005) 'Making Reconnections in Agro-Food Geography: Alternative Systems of Food Provision', *Progress in Human Geography* 29.1: 22–40, DOI: [10.1191/0309132505ph526oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132505ph526oa) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Wezel, A. et al. (2009) 'Agroecology as a Science, a Movement and a Practice: A Review', *Agronomy for Sustainable Development* 29.4: 503–15, DOI: [10.1051/agro/2009004](https://doi.org/10.1051/agro/2009004) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- WFP (2010) *Revolution: From Food Aid to Food Assistance*, Rome: World Food Programme
- Wittman, H.; Desmarais, A. and Wiebe, N. (2010) 'The Origins and Potential of Food Sovereignty', in H. Wittman, A. Desmarais and N. Wiebe (eds), *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting Food, Nature and Community*, Cape Town: Pambazuka Press
- Wolford, W. (2010) 'Participatory Democracy by Default: Land Reform, Social Movements and the State in Brazil', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37.1: 91–109, DOI: [10.1080/03066150903498770](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150903498770) (accessed 12 December 2022)
- World Bank (2006) *World Development Report 2006: Equity and Development*, Washington DC: World Bank (accessed 12 December 2022)
- Young, I.M. (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press





Delivering world-class research, learning and teaching that transforms the knowledge, action and leadership needed for more equitable and sustainable development globally.

Institute of Development Studies
Library Road
Brighton, BN1 9RE
United Kingdom
+44 (0)1273 606261
ids.ac.uk

Charity Registration Number 306371
Charitable Company Number 877338
© Institute of Development Studies 2022