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IDS Working Paper 582
FEC Working Paper 002

Challenging the Normalisation of Hunger in Highly Unequal Societies

Stephen Devereux, Gareth Haysom, Renato S. Maluf and Patta Scott-Villiers

December 2022

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IDS Working Paper Volume 2022 Number 582
FEC Working Paper 002
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First published by the Institute of Development Studies in December 2022
ISSN: 2040-0209 ISBN: 978-1-80470-076-1
DOI: 10.19088/IDS.2022.086

Suggested citation: Devereux, S.; Haysom, G.; Maluf, R.S. and Scott-Villiers, P. (2022) *Challenging the Normalisation of Hunger in Highly Unequal Societies*, IDS Working Paper 582, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/IDS.2022.086

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.

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Institute of Development Studies, Library Road
Brighton, BN1 9RE, United Kingdom
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Charity Registration Number 306371. Charitable Company Number 877338.

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Summary

This paper starts from an empirical observation that levels of hunger or food insecurity in middle-income and high-income countries are often higher than might be expected, and in some cases are rising rather than falling in recent years. We document levels and trends in selected food security indicators for three case study countries: Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. We argue that, given the availability of resources and state capacity to eradicate hunger in these countries, a process of 'normalisation' has occurred, meaning that governments and societies tolerate the persistence of hunger, even when a constitutional and/or legal right to food exists that should make hunger socially, politically, and legally unacceptable. We further argue that one driver of normalisation is the way food (in)security is measured; for instance, the assumption that structural hunger cannot exist in countries that are self-sufficient or surplus producers of food. We suggest that high levels of structural hunger are predictable outcomes in societies characterised by high levels of income and wealth inequality.

Next, we develop a simple analytical framework for exploring the normalisation of hunger. Just as famines occur because of failures to intervene to prevent them, so hunger is tolerated because key stakeholders do not exercise their power to eradicate it. We identify four sets of actors who potentially hold such power, but whose failure to act effectively allows hunger to persist: the state; civil society; the public; and hungry people themselves. In each case study country, we ask four questions. Firstly, why are public interventions by governments and opposition parties to combat hunger inadequate, even in upper-middle and high-income countries? Secondly, what advocacy is being done by civil society actors (non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, the media, academics) on behalf of those suffering hunger? Thirdly, what attitudes towards hunger and hungry people are held by members of the public? Fourthly, why do not hungry people themselves take direct action (e.g. protests or food riots) to demand action by governments? We conclude by outlining a research agenda to explore the issues raised in this paper further.

Keywords

Food equity; food security; slow violence; structural hunger; Brazil; South Africa; United Kingdom.

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Contents

Acknowledgements 7

Acronyms 7

1. Introduction 8

2. Conceptual framing 11

3. Analytical framing 13

4. Case study #1: Brazil 15

5. Case study #2: South Africa 19

6. Case study #3: United Kingdom 27

7. Conclusion and research questions 32

References 34

Figures

Figure 1.1 Hunger thematic group: research questions and case study countries 9
Figure 3.1 Actors and anti-hunger actions 14
Figure 4.1 Trends in food security and food insecurity levels in Brazil, 2004–22 17
Figure 5.1 Food insecurity and hunger in South Africa by household size, 2020–21 20
Figure 5.2 Seasonal food insecurity in the Northern Cape, South Africa, 2018 22
Figure 5.3 Months of inadequate food provisioning, Cape Town, 2007 23
Figure 6.1 Three-day emergency food supply parcels, Trussell Trust, UK 27

Tables

Table 1.1 Indicators of inequality and hunger in case study countries 10

Acknowledgements

We thank Scott Drimie for reviewing an earlier version of this paper and providing helpful suggestions. We also thank Food Equity Centre colleagues who participated in the FEC annual symposium in September 2022, and specifically for insightful comments offered by Ayako Ebata, Jody Harris, Melissa Leach, Paulo Petersen, and Ian Scoones.

Acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
EBIA	Escala Brasileira de Insegurança Alimentar
HIC	high-income country
IBGE	Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics
MAHFP	Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning
MIC	middle-income country
MST	Landless Workers Movement/ Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra
NFCS	National Food Consumption Survey
NIDS-CRAM	National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey
Rede PENSSAN	Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security
SANHANES	South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey

1. Introduction

Food insecurity, hunger, malnutrition, and famine are all outcomes of the failure of societies and food systems to ensure adequate access to food for all people at all times. The question this working paper addresses is: what explains these adverse outcomes, especially in middle- and high-income countries such as South Africa, Brazil, and the UK? Large numbers of citizens and residents of these countries are unable to meet their basic food needs. The persistence of relatively high levels of hunger should be considered as unacceptable everywhere, but especially in countries where many factors are in place which should prevent this from occurring. For instance, South Africa and Brazil both have a right to food as well as active and adversarial civil societies and media, holding the government accountable for not delivering on the social contract implicit within the constitution. The persistence of significant levels of hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition in these countries suggests a level of tolerance and acceptance of these adverse outcomes, which we describe as 'normalisation'.

Throughout this paper we use the word 'hunger' as an umbrella term covering various manifestations of food insecurity, from seasonal hunger to chronic undernutrition (proxied by stunting) and acute undernutrition (proxied by wasting), to food crises and mass mortality famines.

Different approaches and disciplines frame the challenge of hunger differently. We appreciate that the framing of hunger may fail to effectively account for the nutritional value of diets. The term hunger has also been challenged as it is generally ascribed to an individual experience rather than wider systemic issues requiring systemic governance responses. We acknowledge these different positions, all of which hold merit. In the paper we draw on a variety of different indicators to assess and measure the state of hunger and deprivation. We have, however, used the word 'hunger' deliberately as it aligns with wider framings. Our intention here is to use this as a tool to frame all related dietary deficiencies, as well as wider deficiencies in public support.

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; hunger and famine; the transmission of

[1] See **Food Equity Centre webpage**.

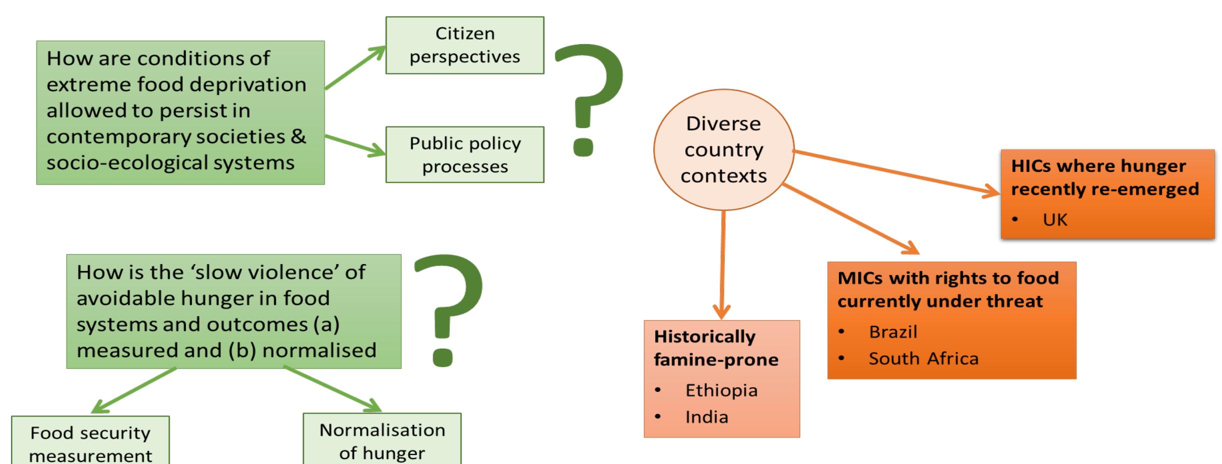
dietary deprivation across generations and geographies; and a territory-focused approach to localised food inequities.

The FEC thematic group on ‘hunger’ is preoccupied with two related research questions:

1. **How are conditions of food deprivation allowed to persist in contemporary societies and socio-ecological systems?**
   This question will be addressed firstly through an analysis of food systems’ inequalities, social injustice, and public **policy processes**, and secondly by soliciting **citizen perspectives**.
2. **How is the ‘slow violence’ of avoidable hunger in food systems and outcomes recognised and measured?**
   This question will be addressed by understanding the drivers of **normalisation of hunger**, and by critically engaging with the politics of **food security measurement**.

These questions will be researched in three country contexts where levels of hunger are high and/or rising: Brazil, South Africa, and the UK. If resources permit, we will add a fourth, and possibly a fifth, historically famine-prone country – Ethiopia and/or India (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Hunger thematic group: research questions and case study countries



Source: Authors’ own.

Using the ratio of pre-tax national income earned by the top 10 per cent relative to the bottom 50 per cent as a proxy for inequality, income inequality among our five countries is lowest in high-income UK (1.8) and low-income Ethiopia (2.9) and highest in upper-middle-income South Africa (11.3) and Brazil (6.1) (Table 1.1). Using the prevalence of moderate and severe food insecurity as an indicator of hunger, Ethiopia has the highest prevalence (56 per cent in 2018–20) but South Africa is not very far behind (45 per cent), despite its per capita income being seven times higher than Ethiopia's.

Table 1.1 Indicators of inequality and hunger in case study countries

Country	GDP per capita (current US$)	Share of pre-tax national income (2018)			Prevalence of moderate and severe food insecurity	
		Top 10%	Bottom 50%	Ratio	2014–16	2018–20
UK	47,334	35.9%	20.3%	1.8	6.3%	3.9%
Brazil	7,519	59.8%	9.8%	6.1	18.3%	23.5%
South Africa	6,994	65.4%	5.8%	11.3	42.9%	44.9%
India	2,277	57.1%	13.1%	4.4	*14.7%*	*15.3%*
Ethiopia	944	45.5%	15.8%	2.9	56.2%	56.3%

Source: Authors' own, based on data from World Inequality Database; FAOSTAT.
Note: For India (italicised), prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) is used as the indicator of food insecurity.

2. Conceptual framing

We draw on the concepts of 'normalisation', 'slow violence' (Haysom 2020), and the 'politics of provisions', among others. Normalisation[2] of hunger applies to people's and societies' experiences and apparent acceptance of high levels of food deprivation; and to the ways that hunger is measured and depoliticised; and also, to the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate hunger.

Why isn't hunger politicised?[3] Why aren't there more food riots? Why aren't supermarkets invaded? Why aren't governments toppled? Why do people suffer in silence? At a less dramatic level, why aren't hunger and deprivation problematised – why don't they become focus points for social mobilisation?

One reason is that the 'slow violence' of chronic hunger is invisible. Originally used to describe ecological destruction, slow violence describes unseen, inequality-driven suffering that 'is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales' (Nixon 2001: 2). One of these repercussions is a general acceptance of food systems that generate grossly inequitable outcomes, not least levels of hunger that should be regarded as socially unacceptable.

Amartya Sen once observed that 3 million Indians die of hunger-related causes in India every year, equivalent to the number who perished during the Great Bengal Famine in 1943. But deaths from chronic hunger attract less public and policy attention and less media outrage, because hunger is a slow, unseen process that affects dispersed individuals, while famine is a relatively rapid, highly visible event that affects connected groups of people.

Another explanation is that hunger is often depoliticised or even normalised, in several ways. One tactic is blame-shifting. For example, parts of the nutrition community effectively blame poor women for making poor food choices for themselves and their families,[4] in contexts where they are struggling to balance low incomes and competing demands. This allows governments to distance themselves from their role as duty-bearers to eradicate hunger, which is relegated to a domestic or private (women's) issue, rather than a public (social) issue that requires political attention and public action. Obesity is also

---

2 The Integration Syndicate in South Africa refers to 'tolerance' of hunger rather than 'normalisation'. In political terms, why is hunger tolerated?

3 'Politicising hunger' identifies the political drivers (e.g. social inequality, skewed patterns of development) rather than technical or economic drivers (e.g. low agricultural productivity, market failures, food systems failure), and calls for government or public action, sometimes mobilised by social movements.

4 Consider how some outcomes of failed food systems, for example diet-related non-communicable diseases, are often referred to as lifestyle diseases when more often they are diseases of poverty.

simplistically blamed on individual food (over-)consumption choices, when statistically it is often correlated with poverty and unbalanced 'poor people's' diets.

The measurement of food insecurity is also often used to neutralise the severity of the issue (Haysom and Tawodzera 2018). Food production and 'food balance sheets' are measurements that have socio-political implications. The Brazilian Scale of Food Insecurity has become a powerful political instrument, depending on who uses it for what purpose. In South Africa, the perception that the country is 'self-sufficient' is problematic because it leads to complacency – we have enough food, so we can't have hunger. Or, if someone is hungry despite adequate food supplies and surplus production, it must be their fault – again, blame is individualised.

Similarly, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' (FAO) 'food balance sheet' methodology counts the available kilocalories in a country and divides the total among the population. Although the FAO uses an imputed distribution function to allocate kilocalories among the population and estimate the 'prevalence of undernutrition', there is nonetheless an inbuilt bias towards aggregate food availability as the main driver of individual food and nutrition security.

The United Nations has developed the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC), a five-phase standardised scale of acute food insecurity ranging from 'minimal' (phase 1) to 'famine' (phase 5). Building on, *inter alia,* the concept of 'famine scales' (Howe and Devereux 2004), a famine is 'officially' declared only when the crude death rate (CDR) in an area exceeds 2/10,000/day, and global acute malnutrition (GAM, or wasting) exceeds 30 per cent.

In 1998, Mark Bradbury wrote the paper *Normalising the Crisis in Africa*, which documented how the international community was failing to respond to situations that would previously have been declared as food crises. 'This normalisation is characterised by a creeping acceptance of higher levels of vulnerability, malnutrition and morbidity' (Bradbury 1998: 330). Bradbury gave an example from Sudan:

> In 1989, malnutrition rates of between 10 per cent and 20 per cent (<80 per cent WFH [weight-for-height]) were sufficient to trigger the major relief intervention that became Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS). Now rates above 30 per cent among displaced populations in northern Sudan are considered normal.
> (*ibid.*: 330)

How did this happen? What levels of suffering do citizens, governments, and the international community tolerate, and why?

3. Analytical framing

We hypothesise that hunger should be unacceptable in upper-middle-income countries like Brazil and South Africa, and in high-income countries like the UK, because hunger should be seen as unethical and as an intolerable social injustice. Just as contemporary famines occur because they are not prevented – because of failures of public action, not just failures of harvests and markets – so hunger persists because of failures of public action to eradicate hunger. The persistence of hunger in relatively wealthy countries therefore exists as a puzzle – a food equity or food justice deficit – that needs to be explained. We break down the puzzle and our analysis as follows.

1. **Hunger exists:** Significant levels of hunger exist in all countries, including contemporary Brazil, South Africa, and the UK. (Hunger will be defined and quantified in each country.)
2. **Response failure #1 – Direct action:** Why don't hungry people themselves take political action (e.g. protests or food riots) to demand action by governments?
3. **Response failure #2 – Non-state action:** What are civil society actors (non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), but also the media and engaged academics) doing on behalf of those suffering hunger?
4. **Response failure #3 – Public attitudes:** What attitudes towards hunger and hungry people are held by members of the general public in each country?
5. **Response failure #4 – State interventions:** Why are government interventions to combat hunger either absent or inadequate, even in upper-middle and high-income countries?

Just as famines occur due to multiple failures – food availability (e.g. a production shock), access to food (e.g. poverty), and response failure (no food aid) – so hunger persists because all actors who could prevent or eradicate hunger fail to do so, from the hungry themselves to the state (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Actors and anti-hunger actions

Outcome	Actors	Actions
	State	**Laws and policies and programmes:** e.g. right to food; *Fome Zero*
	Non-state	**Mobilisation and advocacy:** civil society; media; academics
	General public	**Public attitudes:** empathy ⇔ indifference
Hunger	Hungry people	**Protests:** food riots

Source: Authors' own.

4. Case study #1: Brazil

How can it be that Brazil, one of the world's leading food producers, has rising food insecurity? Self-reported hunger in Brazil was around 4 per cent of people facing severe food insecurity in 2014 under the *Fome Zero* strategy, and Brazil was applauded by the international community for almost overcoming hunger through effective government interventions. This success had its origins in the 1990s, with the social construction of a political movement around food insecurity and food sovereignty in Brazil (Leão and Maluf 2012). In effect, President Lula was given authority to introduce Zero Hunger by social movements like the Landless Workers Movement (MST), so it came from the bottom up (through agroecology movements, etc.). Then Lula opened the space for public participation and co-construction of Zero Hunger. Then it cascaded down, so the mayor of Belo Horizonte, for instance, could take the city in a certain policy direction.

By 2022, however, hunger had risen to about 15.2 per cent. What explains this reversal? Is this an example of 'normalisation'? Does it matter how it is measured?

The Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security (Rede PENSSAN) carried out two national surveys to assess food insecurity in Brazil in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the first in 2021 and the second in 2022. These surveys were based on a nationally representative sample of households in the five macro-regions of the country. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with 2,180 households on 5–24 December 2020 (1,662 urban households and 518 in rural areas) and 12,745 households from December 2021 to April 2022 (10,361 urban, 2,384 rural). The information was collected using the eight-item version of the Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale (Escala Brasileira de Insegurança Alimentar – EBIA) with reference to the three months preceding the interview. Information about employment was also collected, with reference to the previous 12 months. As the EBIA has been used by the Brazilian government since 2004 to monitor food insecurity in periodic national surveys, it was possible to compare the findings regarding food insecurity levels in 2020 and 2022 with those of national surveys conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) between 2004 and 2018.

The results of the survey show that, in the three months prior to data collection, less than half of Brazilian households (41.3 per cent) were food secure. While 58.7 per cent of households were experiencing some level of food insecurity, 15.2 per cent of households were facing hunger (severe food insecurity). The situation was worse in rural areas, where 18.6 per cent of households were affected by hunger. Severe food insecurity is more than three times as high in

households considered to be in water insecurity compared to those with access to water. Out of a total of 211.7 million Brazilians, 125.2 million were experiencing some level of food insecurity, 92.1 million had to eat less, and 33.1 million were facing hunger.

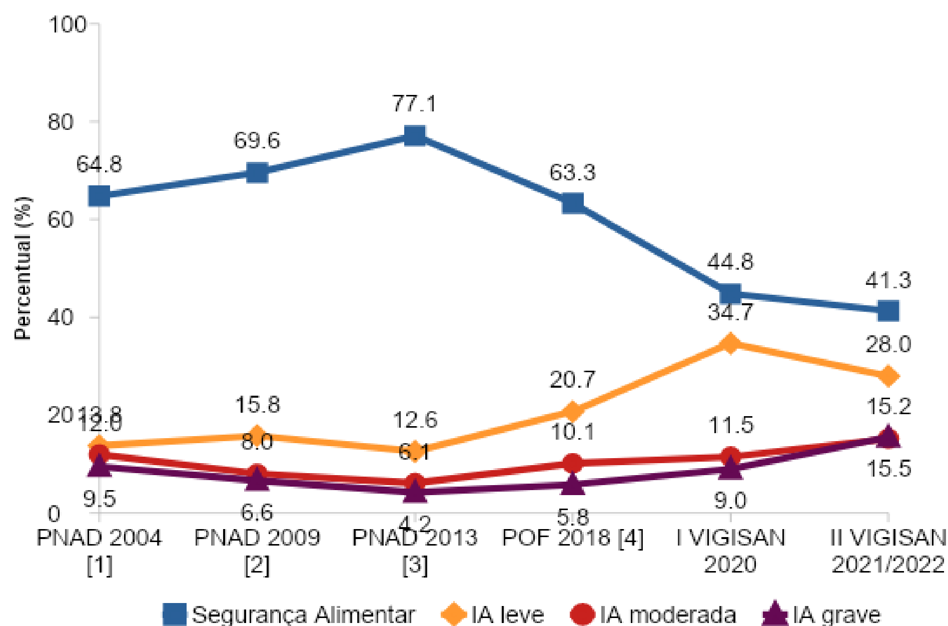
Households with income of up to half of a minimum monthly salary per capita faced severe food insecurity at levels 2.5 times the national average. The study also pointed to persistent inequalities among regions, including disparities in household income, which are important determinants of food access. Residents of 25 per cent of households in the North and Northeast reported monthly incomes of less than half of a minimum monthly salary per capita, compared to 10 per cent in the South-Southeast and Central West regions. Regarding the head of the household, severe food insecurity was six times greater when the household head was unemployed and four times greater if engaged in informal work compared to those with some kind of formal employment. Severe food insecurity was higher among households headed by women, or by men or women self-declared as being black or brown, or with fewer years of schooling.

As expected, the Covid-19 pandemic was found to have had a negative impact on the food security of families, with notable differences that reflect the marked social inequalities in Brazil. Among households where the pandemic had led to job loss or increased debt, nearly 20 per cent were facing severe food insecurity. Households with residents who had applied for and received government emergency assistance were affected by moderate or severe food insecurity at levels three times the national average. In rural areas, households that reported lower prices for the products they sold faced moderate or severe food insecurity at twice the rate of rural households that did not. The highest proportions of job loss, reduced family income, deepening debt, and cuts in expenditures on basic necessities – all due to the pandemic – were found in the North and Northeast regions. In these regions, close to 60 per cent of households applied for and received emergency assistance, compared to about 50 per cent in other regions of the country.

Particularly noteworthy was the trend in food security observed since 2004, when the IBGE first began collecting data using the EBIA (Figure 4.1). Periodic national surveys documented progressive improvement in food security from 2004 until 2013. However, results of the national 2017–18 Household Budget Survey pointed to a reverse in this trend. Growing unemployment, informal-precarious and low-paid work, attacks on social rights and setbacks in public policies since the parliamentary coup in 2016 largely explain the reversal of the trend from 2017–18 onwards, to which were added the socially unequal impacts of the pandemic. The even steeper deterioration in the past two years, aggravated by the pandemic, led to moderate and severe food insecurity back up to levels documented in 2004. This reverse in progress exacerbated in recent

years, reveals how the Covid-19 pandemic has added to the existing economic and political crises to significantly erode the right of the Brazilian population to an adequate and healthy diet.

Figure 4.1 Trends in food security and food insecurity levels in Brazil, 2004–22



Sources: Authors' own, based on data from the following surveys, reanalysed for the eight-item scale: [1] National Household Survey (Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios – PNAD) 2003–4 (IBGE); [2] PNAD 2008–9 (IBGE); [3] PNAD 2013–14 (IBGE); [4] Family Budget Survey (Pesquisa de Orçamentos Familiares – POF) 2017–18 (IBGE); [5] National Surveys of Food Insecurity in the Context of COVID 19 (I and II VIGISAN; Rede PENSSAN).

Regarding the two questions posed for the country case studies, they can be addressed in the Brazil case as follows:

1. To what extent does a focus on the normalisation of hunger contribute to interpreting its resurgence in contemporary Brazil?

The main determinants of the reversal of the 'virtuous trend' that prevailed between 2002 and 2014 were marked by the economic crisis since 2014/15, aggravated by the political crisis that culminated in a parliamentary coup in 2016. Progressive increase in unemployment, interruption of the appreciation of the official minimum wage, expansion of uncertain and poorly paid work, setbacks in social protection, and retraction of support for family farming are the roots of the growing restriction of access to food for an increasing number of Brazilian families. In addition, the progressive dismantling of fundamental public policies to achieve the positive results registered until 2014. The advent of the pandemic

and the (non-)treatment given by the government aggravated the process that was already underway. All this in the context of one of the most unequal societies in the world.

Could this be a case in which economic and political elites sought to re-establish historical patterns in Brazilian society that 'normalise' hunger and social inequalities? The answer to this question requires considering specific characteristics of food policy in Brazil and the respective actors and conflicts, which in each country are very similar to other types of policies under the respective political regimes (Paarlberg 2010).

2. What elements of the slow violence of avoidable hunger contribute to the normalisation of hunger in Brazil? Do food security measures and indicators account for this relationship?

The slow violence that generates avoidable hunger originates from factors that promote social inequality of different types, most of them of a systemic nature and some related specifically to food systems. Equally important is the orientation of public policies both aimed at food and those of a more general nature, especially economic policies that affect employment and income.

This implies the need to resort to measures capable of covering the multidimensionality of phenomena such as hunger and poverty; that is, it forces the construction of a matrix of indicators analysed in their interrelationship. This reason makes the EBIA, with recognised importance, an indicator that, in addition to the quality of revealing people's perception of the condition of their families, should be used in a complementary way to other indicators. Consequently, violence present in socioeconomic and political factors comes to the fore, at the same time that 'silver bullet' solutions are rejected as false and that cover up institutional violence.

5. Case study #2: South Africa

The right to food is enshrined in the South African Constitution, finalised in 1996, shortly after the transition to democracy. The overarching theme of the Constitution was to ensure equity in a range of areas, as part of a wider process of redress. The Constitution includes a Bill of Rights, Section 9.2 of which calls for the need to 'promote the achievement of equality, to advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination'. This clause is aligned with others that require programmatic responses to enable greater equity in society (such as affirmative action), and add weight to other clauses such as the rights to social protection, water, and housing. Clauses specifically aligned to the broader framing of hunger include Section 27.1(b): Everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water; and Section 28.1(c): Every child has the right to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health-care services and social services.

Despite these provisions, the legacies of slow violence and exclusion persist in South Africa, an upper-middle-income country where hunger is, nonetheless, widespread (van der Berg *et al*. 2022). Table 1.1 (above) revealed that close to half the population (45 per cent) experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2018–20, twice the prevalence in upper-middle-income Brazil. South Africa presents significant prevalence rates of all three forms of malnutrition – undernutrition, overnutrition, and micronutrient deficiency – and three discrete forms of hunger: chronic, seasonal, and acute. Three disturbing facts highlight each of these three:

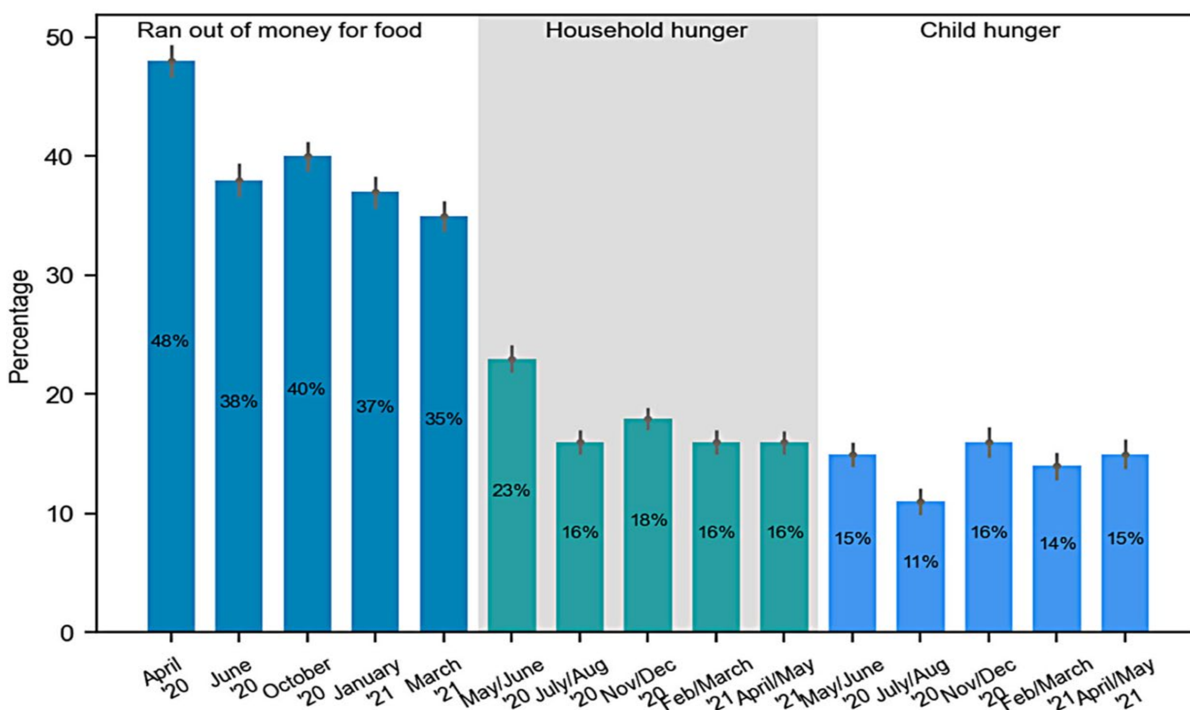
1. Child stunting, an indicator of **chronic undernutrition**, has plateaued at around 25 per cent (one in four children under five years old) in South Africa since before the democratic transition in 1994 (Devereux *et al*. 2019).
2. Most farm workers on commercial wine and fruit farms in South Africa suffer **seasonal hunger** during the winter months every year (Devereux and Tavener-Smith 2019).
3. Several children in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa died of **severe acute malnutrition** in February 2022 (Ellis 2022).

During the recent Covid-19 pandemic, food insecurity in South Africa rose significantly, as a result of lockdown-related restrictions on mobility, reductions in income driven by contraction of the economy and employment, and suspension of the National School Nutrition Programme's meals at school (van der Berg *et al*. 2022). For some, this rapid increase in hunger, and more broadly, food insecurity, was seen to be something new. However, as Battersby (2020) argued, the pandemic exposed the veneer of food security, masked by a number

of factors, but especially the coping strategies adopted by household food providers in poor neighbourhoods (mostly women).

During the pandemic, a series of surveys were carried out to track, amongst other things, hunger and food-related challenges experienced by households. These were the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM). Five phases of surveys were carried out. The first wave of the NIDS-CRAM survey, collected in May and June 2020, provided strong evidence of drastic increases in household and child hunger during the initial period of the pandemic. The second wave showed improvement in all three measures of food insecurity measured in the survey, although both adult and child hunger and running out of money for food remained disturbingly high. Waves 3–5, surveyed in November/December 2020, February/March 2021, and April/May 2021 respectively, showed a significant reduction in households running out of money for food since the first wave, but not a substantial further reduction in hunger levels (van der Berg *et al*. 2022) (Figure 5.1).

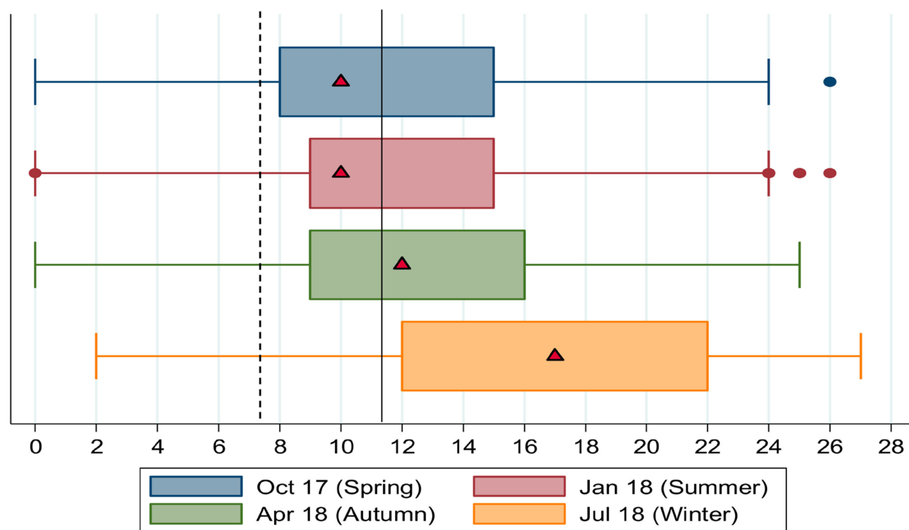
Figure 5.1 Food insecurity and hunger in South Africa by household size, 2020–21

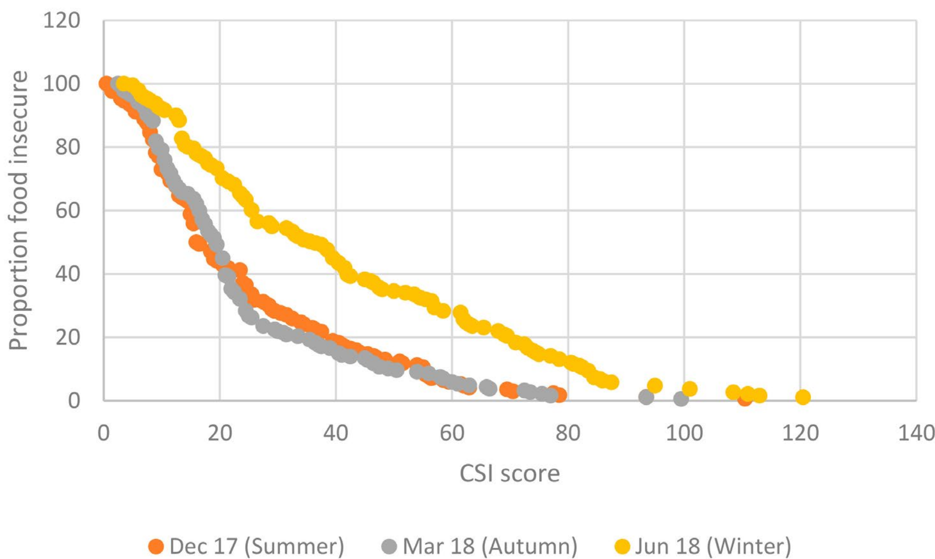


Source: © Van der Berg *et al*. (2022: 7) (NIDS-CRAM Wave 5 data), **CC BY-NC-ND 4.0**.

Hunger has always been present in South Africa, with various indicators pointing to a food system (and a state) that does not effectively address the needs of society. The 1999 National Food Consumption Survey (NFCS) indicated that the dietary intake of children was inadequate in energy, micronutrients, and fibre (Labadarios *et al*. 2005). The 2005 NFCS – Fortification Baseline (NFCS-FB) reported that the national prevalence of stunting, underweight and wasting was 18 per cent, 9.3 per cent, and 4.5 per cent respectively (Kruger *et al*. 2007). In 2014, the South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (SANHANES-1) assessed food and nutrition indicators across South Africa. The SANHANES findings showed that in formal urban areas 44.6 per cent were deemed food insecure but in the informal urban areas 68.5 per cent were food insecure (SANHANES 2013: 22). These figures aligned with data from the 2012 General Household Survey which reported that nationally 12.6 per cent of the households were vulnerable to hunger and that 21.5 per cent and 26.1 per cent of households reported having limited access and more limited access to food respectively. This meant that 60 per cent of all households experienced some form of food insecurity (StatsSA 2013).Seasonal hunger is widespread in rural areas of South Africa, particularly among farm workers because of the seasonality of employment opportunities in the agriculture sector, but it is underreported in the media and unnoticed in government policy framings. Research in the Northern Cape province found that seasonal farm workers registered higher levels of food insecurity in the winter months when they have no agricultural work, under several food security measurement indicators: Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP), Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), Dietary Diversity Index (DDI), and Coping Strategies Index (CSI) (Devereux and Tavener-Smith 2019). This seasonal hunger is ‘invisibilised’ and ‘normalised’, because people with power do not experience seasonality, and are probably unaware that many South African citizens and residents face severe hunger during the winter months.

Figure 5.2 Seasonal food insecurity in the Northern Cape, South Africa, 2018



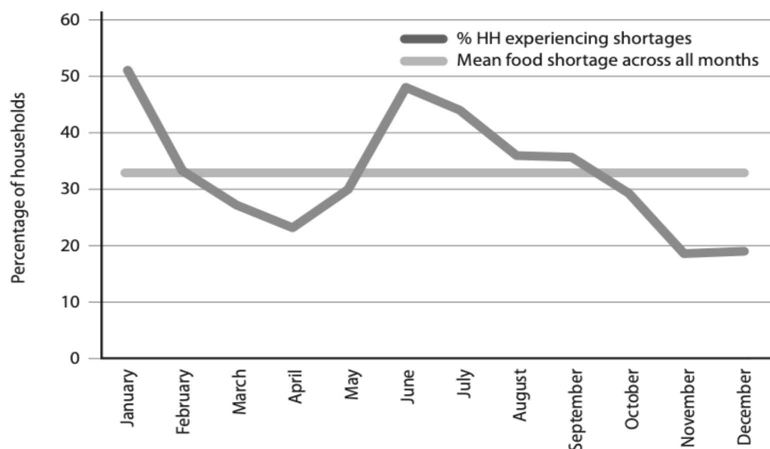


Source: Devereux and Tavener-Smith (2019), CC BY 4.0.

Seasonal hunger is even evident in urban settings. Figure 5.3 highlights the hungry seasons encountered by poor residents in Cape Town, as reflected per the MAHFP scores. These cycles are only in part linked to seasonality. The January spike in inadequate food access is linked to the start of the year, closure of most businesses over the period 15 December – 15 January, and costs associated with the start of the new year – school fees, uniforms, etc. This is colloquially referred to as 'Janu-worry' in Cape Town. The high MAHFP over May–August is associated with winter months and the reduction in income, not linked to agricultural cycles, but to the casualised economy and reduced income

from casual work in the construction (4.8 per cent of gross value added (GVA)) and tourism industries (linked to wider business reporting at 29 per cent of GVA) (CoCT 2019).

Figure 5.3 Months of inadequate food provisioning, Cape Town, 2007



Source: Battersby (2011: 16). © AFSUN, reproduced with permission.

Like the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment, and inequality, hunger in South Africa is deeply structural and is rooted in its long history of economic and social injustice. The depth and persistence of hunger in South Africa cannot be viewed as a consequence of short-term policy or economic failures. Hunger in South Africa originates in the racialised trajectories of exclusion associated with more than three centuries of colonialism and apartheid policies.

The extractive economic ambitions of the colonial period, through to the discovery in the late 1800s of diamonds in Kimberly and gold around Johannesburg and subsequent phases of industrialisation, meant that the South African food system was never designed to be developmental, pro-poor, or health promoting. Instead, it was bifurcated and deeply inequitable.

Control over food was central to the capitalist and political strategy of both the post-South African War British government (i.e. after 1902) and the apartheid state (i.e. after 1948). Extracting maximum value from black labour required paying them as little as possible, and forcing labourers to accept low wages by undermining and effectively destroying alternative livelihoods, including agriculture and food production by black farmers in the rural 'reserves' (later 'homelands' or '*bantustans*') (Haysom *et al*. 2020).

Food was needed to maintain and reproduce the unskilled and semi-skilled black labour force that was demanded to work on the farms and in the mines. The food

system was designed to ensure that the general population was adequately but not necessarily well fed, mainly through the consumption of cheap staples. White commercial farmers were supported to produce adequate food through subsidies and other measures, including the systematic elimination of competition from black commercial farmers. White farmers enjoyed preferential access not only to land, but also to agricultural research and development, infrastructure, and extension services, as well as protection of domestic markets from international competition (Vink and van Rooyen 2009). The black labour force needed to be productive, white farmers needed to be promoted, and there should be no uprisings of black workers because of hunger. Influx control and the 'homelands' policy confined blacks to ecologically marginal rural areas – essentially labour reserves – except when their services were needed in urban areas.

This history led to a 'normalisation' of food poverty in South Africa, with nutritionally depleted diets among the majority of the population, and associated outcomes, specifically high levels of childhood stunting and rapidly increasing diet-related non-communicable diseases. This slow violence has its origins in the significant structural economic and political changes that started in the late nineteenth century, but were compounded by the racialised economic and development strategies that followed.

The food system in South Africa shifted in the late 1960s, with the emergence of large supermarkets that steadily displaced smaller retail outlets in urban areas, such as convenience stores (corner 'cafes', butchers, bakeries, greengrocers) and mobile vendors (milk deliveries, street traders). South Africa has been described as an early adopter of the supermarket revolution (Weatherspoon and Reardon 2003; Das Nair 2018). The rapid spread of supermarkets was not only a transformation in the retail environment, it consolidated control over the entire food system by the politically hegemonic white minority, from state-supported white commercial farmers to wealthy white businessmen, enabled by apartheid policies that prevented the emergence of black competition in either the production or the retail sectors. Even today, the majority of South Africans are fed by food produced by white farmers and processed and marketed by white-owned corporates (Greenberg 2017).

The democratic transition in South Africa in 1994 marked a political transformation that saw power shift, away from the privileged white minority towards the dispossessed black majority. It also marked the introduction of a rights-based approach to economic, social, and political life, encapsulated in the Constitution and Bill of Rights (1996), which specifically required the government to take all necessary measures to eradicate hunger.

As mandated duty-bearer, the state is ultimately responsible for ensuring that no person in a country goes hungry – yet hunger persists. If the state is not delivering on the constitutional right of every child to 'basic nutrition', why is this?

Possible explanations include: (1) lack of resources (constrained public finances); (2) lack of capacity (inability to deliver); or (3) lack of political will (no genuine commitment).

Lack of fiscal resources is not an adequate explanation. The government collects a lot of tax revenues and is continuously berated by the public, the media, and the Auditor-General for mismanagement and inappropriate spending of state funds. Lack of state capacity could be a partial reason. There is no lack of analysis and understanding of the problem, and rhetorical commitments, policy statements, and a range of relevant programmes are in place. However, partly due to the ANC's cadre deployment policy and weak oversight and accountability mechanisms, skilled and capacitated cadres in a position to deliver programmes effectively and efficiently are limited scarce, leading to the complaint that a gulf exists between policy on paper and implementation in practice.

South Africa has a National Food and Nutrition Security Plan covering the period 2018–23, which is located within the Presidency, suggesting that the government gives high priority to food insecurity and malnutrition. However, by mid-2022 the Plan 'has not yet been funded; nor has it yet convened the Council (its first "strategic objective") that is meant to oversee its implementation' (Sulcas 2022).

Clearly, lack of political will, or inadequate commitment, is an important contributory factor. Some of the determinants relate to political incentives. At the collective level, a concerted attack on hunger is unlikely to either win or lose the ruling party large numbers of votes. The ANC gets punished by the electorate for service delivery failures, but it does not lose votes in elections because of the persistence of hunger. Hunger has not been politicised. At the individual level, ANC officials do not have indicators of hunger on their performance monitoring, accountability for poor performance is limited, and the rewards for corruption and theft of public resources are high. This was seen during the Covid-19 response, when many local officials stole food parcels intended for distribution to the hungry during the lockdown.

Civil society, funded largely by private donations from citizens – an indicator of public concern about hunger – works on two fronts to tackle hunger.

First, by delivering food directly, and many NGOs, such as Gift of the Givers, are doing this. Second, by pressurising the state to deliver on its mandate. NGOs and the media campaign vigorously on this. Between March and July 2022, the online newspaper *Daily Maverick* ran a series of articles about hunger in South Africa under the strapline '#FOODJUSTICE'.

One article – *Seven Children Starve to Death, Others Fight for Their Lives While Malnutrition Ravages Eastern Cape* – reports on deaths from severe acute malnutrition of several children in one hospital in one of the poorest provinces of South Africa, despite the distribution of food parcels by the government and

fortified foods by NGOs to vulnerable children (Ellis 2022). A second article – *Hunger Warning: Severe Acute Malnutrition Stalks the Land* – reminds the reader and the government that in South Africa, 'all children have an unqualified, immediately realisable right to "basic nutrition". Put another way, in theory it's illegal for children to starve, or even to be malnourished' (Heywood 2022).

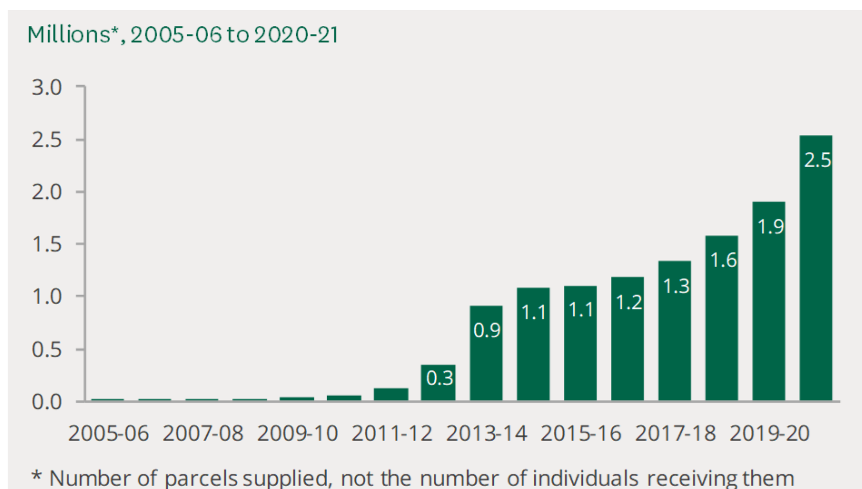
6. Case study #3: United Kingdom

Despite being the wealthiest country of our five case study countries (Table 1.1), hunger has not been eradicated from the UK. In 2013, hunger in the UK was described in the *British Medical Journal* as a 'public health emergency' (Taylor-Robinson *et al*. 2013), yet the problem has since worsened. A study by UNICEF in 2017 found that one in five children in the UK were food insecure (UNICEF 2017).

In 2022, hunger is rising: 9.7 million adults experienced food poverty in the UK in September 2022 (Goudie 2022). Current political turmoil brought about by economic policy has stimulated precipitous falls in the value of sterling, which along with spiking energy costs and the cost of the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit led to sharply rising prices and increasing food insecurity and hunger. In 2021. there were over 2,000 food banks in the UK, dispensing more than two million emergency food parcels (Irvine *et al*. 2022).

Though it has been argued that poverty and hunger are brought about by unemployment and thus the solution is economic growth, a brief look at the statistics suggests that it is a problem not only of employment but also of extreme inequality. In 2018, the Trussell Trust, a UK charity that supports a network of food banks across the country, told the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty that 'one in six people referred to their food banks was in work. One pastor said 'The majority of people using our food bank are in work... nurses and teachers are accessing food banks' (Alston 2019).

Figure 6.1 Three-day emergency food supply parcels, Trussell Trust, UK



Source: Irvine *et al.* (2022), **Open Parliament Licence**.

Although the percentage of people affected by hunger in the UK is much lower than in the other case study countries, this issue features prominently in the media and is highly politicised, with opposition politicians and religious leaders regularly criticising the government of the day for allowing hunger to persist despite the UK being one of the world's richest countries. In 2019, Human Rights Watch identified government cuts in welfare spending as the main reason why thousands of parents cannot feed their children adequately (Human Rights Watch 2019).

At the end of the sixteenth century, England faced famine after several years of disastrous harvests. The UK Parliament, under Queen Elizabeth I, proclaimed the Poor Laws, a series of policies that detailed how government should provide relief to people who were 'vagrant, involuntarily unemployed or helpless' (McIntosh 2011). They established the rights of poor people to relief, but also emphasised the provision of tools and materials for putting the unemployed to work. This basic formula of relief and discipline has continued to this day. The Poor Laws were followed by statues that set the price of bread and sanctioned those who sold underweight loaves or adulterated staple grains.

Throughout the eighteenth century, profound transformation of Britain's agricultural system and expansion of grain sales to international markets catapulted many rural dwellers into food insecurity. The right of people on low incomes to a fair price for good quality staple food was eroded and an 'age of riots and insurrections' followed (Thompson 1971). Rural dwellers, referring often to the ancient promise to protect them with fair market conditions and reasonable prices, invaded country markets *en masse* to set a fair price of staple grains by force. Thompson's analysis of their claims suggests that they felt their rights to food security to be sufficiently violated to be brave enough to protest. He argued that the rioters expressed a belief in a 'moral economy' by which the governing elites and their dependent poor cajoled and threatened one another, to maintain the price of reasonable quality bread at an affordable level. For the poor, if prices rose, they felt entitled to riot.

By the mid-nineteenth century, with prices now allowed to move as they would within a commitment to free market economics, and as the industrial revolution brought ever greater extremes of poverty and inequality, the British government introduced a revised poor law, which ushered in a harsher regime of charity and discipline by which indigent people were sent to workhouses where they were fed and forced to do hard labour (Bohstedt 2016). Meanwhile other laws made riot and insurrection a capital offence. Food protest became a matter of meetings and petitions and only occasionally in the subsequent centuries did it reach the level of riotousness seen in the eighteenth century. At the same time, rural poverty was assuaged by the rapid growth of industrial employment and the

concomitant growth of labour unions and forms of negotiation between the low paid, business and the state.

While food access has long been a live political issue in UK, it was only in the mid-twentieth century, when Britain emerged first from the great depression and then from the Second World War with a new, though temporary, sense of egalitarianism, that the politics of food led to large-scale remedies in the form of a welfare state, employment law, and progressive taxation. However, the later twentieth century saw a movement away from welfarism, worker equality, and redistributive taxation and towards a neo-liberal approach that gave free rein to the market, generating inequality and normalising hunger and poverty. UK could be said to have returned to a mode when unions are no longer able to bargain in favour of the low paid, and where charity and private sector subsidy is once again the primary system of welfare.

In August 2022, the UK government's Food Standards Agency published a report stating that one in six people in UK is using a food bank to collect free food to help feed their households (Food Standards Agency 2022a). They also reported that in June 2022, one in four households reported skipping a meal or cutting down the size of meals, because they did not have enough money to buy food, a figure that has risen steadily since June 2021 (Food Standards Agency 2022b). A 2020 study found 'gaps in understanding' of the ways in which food insecurity works for people on low and uncertain incomes in UK, and it also noted 'systemic weaknesses in the current system of emergency food aid' (Barker and Russell 2020).

Almost all food assistance was, and still is, provided by the voluntary sector (charities, church organisations, community groups and so forth), and there has been no explicit state support for people who face acute food shortage. The only exception to this is the provision of free school meals for children. Government has provided indirect support by offering tax breaks to businesses such as supermarkets, supporting them to offload their surplus or out-of-date food to food banks managed by charities and volunteers. Barker and Russell noted that the Covid-19 crisis, which had amplified food difficulties for millions in UK, revealed the vulnerability of reliance on charities for filling the gaps, because their limited budgets were reduced by lower donations and their capabilities stressed by ever-rising demand.

Food bank use had been rising consistently since at least the global financial crisis in 2008. In 2010, government introduced major austerity measures to compensate for its quantitative easing response to the global financial crisis. Public spending was reduced and the social security safety net reformed and reduced. Yet austerity has been shown to lead directly to increases in food insecurity and use of food banks (Jenkins *et al*. 2022) and food insecurity has been shown to be directly associated with the level of inequality (D'Odorico *et al*.

2019). In other words, inequality, austerity, and food insecurity work together as a self-reinforcing system.

In the face of widespread media and public criticism for the effects of the ‘rising cost of living’, the UK government announced in September 2022 a subsidy (potentially amounting to £100bn over six months) to energy supply companies to cap the price of electricity to homes and businesses across Britain, supporting the energy suppliers to keep operating through difficult times. This support will also benefit those who use most electricity. ‘Half of the giveaway will go to the top half of the income distribution’ (Adam *et al.* 2022). Although it will help the lowest income tenth about 14 per cent of their household spending, it will not help the poorest from slipping further into fuel and food poverty. With inflation running at 10 per cent per annum and pay levels for those on low incomes remaining static, much of that 14 per cent will simply disappear. Government is anxious to avoid being seen to prioritise a welfarist approach, instead wishing to be seen to invest in growth via private sector initiatives.

There is no legal obligation for the UK government to have policies to prevent hunger or tackle food poverty (Dalmeny *et al.* 2017), nor does the government collect consistent data on food insecurity (Pool and Dooris 2022). There has been much debate in UK charity and food policy circles as to the best response to government failures to take account of the right to food for its citizens and there is widespread appreciation that austerity policies have helped to shift responsibility for people’s welfare from the state to charity (Caraher and Furey 2018). One excoriating report suggests that state funding of industry food distribution and reduction of direct cash welfare for the poorest means that the work of charities and volunteers has sustained decades of replacing rights with charity and fed the continuation of an unjust food system (Spring, Garthwaite and Fisher 2022). This ‘marketisation of food charity’ (Möller 2021b) has helped increase the influence of the food industry over food policies that affect people on low incomes while giving the impression that food poverty is being addressed (Caraher and Furey 2022; Möller 2021b).

A British person does not have a legal right or legal power to demand fair access to good quality and nutritious food. Her hunger, if it happens to her, is not tracked by the British government in any consistent way. While the UK has a Food Standards Agency responsible for, and with powers to sanction, the quality of food sold in the market, there is no food security, or food rights agency with similar powers. Her hunger is considered her own fault. As we have seen in the rapid run through history above, British reliance on a combination of charity, a harsh social protection regime and a belief that hunger is the fault of the individual has a long history. In Nancy Fraser’s terms, recognition is withdrawn from the hungry malingerer, redistribution is minimised in favour of austerity

measures and the promises of a free market, and representation is undertaken by the charities that give aid.

The food banks to which hungry people turn exist within a larger field of governmentality, in which individual hungry people are disciplined in a Foucauldian sense (Möller 2021a). Their hunger is assuaged, at the price of accepting their moral responsibility for being poor, and for accepting and adopting new strategies for improving themselves and accepting welfare conditionality. While food bank volunteers and managers do not necessarily wish to patronise their clients, they find themselves in the invidious position that while filling a gap in what should be the responsibility of government, they contribute to a system in which each hungry person is held responsible for her own situation. Their hunger is thereby normalised as the flip side of personal responsibility and economic independence.

Möller suggests that we should think beyond the unquestioned truths of what is normal, and consider how to 're-politicise and de-essentialise charitable solutions' (Möller 2021a: 866). It suggests that in food research and advocacy, as much as in food charity, we should exert more critical reflexivity. The power dynamics which were set in place during Britain's agricultural and industrial revolutions are loaded on the side of a politics of free markets and growing inequality which facilitates a growth-oriented private sector. In good years this may deliver enough jobs, income, and food for most people, despite its reliance on low wages and job-insecurity. But in bad years such as the UK is currently living through, people go hungry. None of this bodes well for the right to not be hungry in the UK, or for a gentle solution to the slow violence of growing hunger and its inevitable damage to people and society.

7. Conclusion and research questions

All five of our case study and potential case study countries have demonstrated an aversion to the persistence of hunger, in different ways. There are recent markers of this in each country. The Government of **Brazil** launched a concerted Zero Hunger campaign in a unique partnership between government and civil society. The post-apartheid government in **South Africa** established Africa's biggest social grant system, including the Child Support Grant that transfers cash to 12 million (two thirds of all) children under 18 and the National School Nutrition Programme that includes daily school meals for 9 million children. In the **United Kingdom**, hunger features prominently in public discourse, with civil society (media, religious leaders, academics) doing their best to hold government accountable. **India** established the world's largest public employment programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, in response to a Supreme Court ruling that the constitutional right to food had been violated when a citizen died of starvation in Rajasthan. The Government of **Ethiopia** introduced the largest social protection intervention in Africa outside South Africa when it launched the Productive Safety Net Programme, in an effort to break Ethiopia's dependence on the international community for humanitarian food aid to address both chronic and acute food insecurity.

Despite this evidence of political (government) and public (civil society) concern about hunger and intent to end it, hunger persists in all five of our case study countries. Why is hunger tolerated, even in high-income (UK) and upper-middle-income (Brazil, South Africa) countries? Have Ethiopia and India successfully eradicated the threat of famine, at the cost of accepting high levels of chronic hunger?

Legal frameworks are insufficient to ensure redress. In the case of South Africa, for instance, despite having both a progressive constitution with a specific articulation of the right to food, other rights and legal processes enable a far wider remit. Moreover, at the time the constitution was promulgated, leadership in the country (state and civil society) had one of the most supported 'licences to act' in radical and progressive ways embodied in the goals and aspirations of Mandela's 'rainbow nation'. Despite this unique opportunity, the poor were failed, and hunger persists. Brazil and the United Kingdom are different, but both have had moments where radical change was possible and for various reasons, equity has not been enabled.

Follow-up research will explore these and related questions, by critically interrogating each country's historical experiences of hunger, how hunger is conceptualised and quantified in each country, policy responses to chronic and acute food insecurity, and public attitudes towards persistent hunger, as captured by citizen surveys capturing public opinion where these exist, and proxied by civil society actions including the provision of food by non-state actors.

Following this first phase of secondary research, we will develop a common conceptual framework and a template for exploring these questions and filling knowledge gaps, that will be applied in primary data collection across all our case study countries, as resources permit. While academic study of hunger is not new, we will apply a food equity lens to this cross-country comparative work. We will also engage with recent and ongoing developments that are impacting on food security globally, notably the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, both of which have compromised national and global food systems and increased people's experiences of food inequities and hunger.

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