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Pathways to Equitable Food Systems

June 2023

Front cover image: Kumasi Central Market, Ashanti Region, Ghana
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Authors: Lídia Cabral, Stephen Devereux, Steve Metcalfe, Nicholas Nisbett and Sophie Robinson

Editing: Dee Scholey
Design: Barney Haward
Proofreading: Paula McDiarmid

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Institute of Development Studies
Library Road, Brighton, BN1 9RE, UK
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Contents

Executive summary

Globally, our food systems are highly inequitable.

In a world with enough food, hunger is becoming normalised for large numbers of people, while diets are worsening and obesity is rising.

Racialised minorities are more at risk from obesity than other groups; indigenous communities have poorer diets than majority populations. Many of the 4.5 billion people working in food systems endure low-paid, insecure jobs. Small-scale farmers and women are often the most vulnerable.

In rural areas communities can be forced off their land and in urban areas, people on low incomes lack access to good-quality food.

These inequities are a result of deliberate choices made by powerful entities, and a product of social and economic norms. But by understanding the power imbalances within food systems and identifying the underlying causes of vulnerability, we believe that it is possible to develop pathways which can tackle these inequities.

Bringing together studies from Africa, Europe, Latin America and Asia, this report identifies four ways to address inequities:

Place more emphasis on bringing together community- and government-level actions which can specifically target inequity. Inequities can be tackled when communities and governments work together, with a shared understanding of what is needed to overcome challenges such as hunger, poor nutrition or low-paid work in the food sector.

Pursue multiple approaches to tackling challenges within food systems, rather than investing heavily in single initiatives, which are likely to lack inclusivity and lead to lock-ins. Single 'solutions' or innovations can exacerbate inequities rather than addressing them.

Pay closer attention to who will benefit most from proposed solutions, challenging initiatives where they do not explicitly support marginalised people. Technological innovations to improve food security usually benefit those who already hold powerful positions, and top-down 'development' programmes can often exacerbate inequities.

Find spaces for the voices of those suffering from inequity. A lack of democracy in food systems is a core reason for many of the inequities analysed in this report. Challenging the dominance of businesses, and bringing civil society voices into policymaking, are crucial steps.

Introduction

From the 1960s until the mid-2010s, hunger was on the decline around the world. And yet over the last seven years, despite record food production levels, that trend has reversed, with around 828 million people affected by hunger in 2021 (UN News 2022). At the same time, more than 1 billion people are living with obesity (WHO News 2022).

In every country (Webb et al. 2018), poor diets are a problem and, in many countries, hunger co-exists with non-communicable diseases related to obesity (Patel 2008). Even in the world's largest economy, the United States, some 34 million people – 10% of the population – live in households that suffer food insecurity (FRAC 2021).

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the fragility in today's food systems. Ukraine is one of the world's major producers and exporters of grain, and countries as far away as Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Lebanon have been adversely affected by the war, given their significant dependence on imported wheat from Ukraine (Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic saw a dramatic increase in global hunger; and rising prices, partly triggered by the Ukraine conflict, are heaping further misery on consumers. In addition, climate change, through stressors such as ongoing droughts as well as rapid-onset shocks such as the catastrophic floods in Pakistan, threaten food production and livelihoods.

According to the World Food Programme, 349 million people in 79 countries are facing acute food insecurity in 2023, more than double the number in 2020 (WFP 2023).

In 2015, the world set a goal to eliminate hunger by 2030. But not only are we unlikely to reach that goal, the position at the halfway point is actually worse than at the start of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) era.

The problem is not one of supply. There is enough food to go around, but it does not reach the right people. Overconsumption is a growing problem, as is food waste - with some 931 million tonnes of food wasted by households, retail establishments and the food service industry (UNEP 2021).

In fact, by some estimates the current level of food production is sufficient to feed the 9.7 billion people projected to be living on Earth by 2050 (Berners-Lee et al. 2018), if dietary habits change significantly.

Instead of focusing on food production, there should be more attention on the inequities in food systems, which are shaped by a global political economy encompassing structural issues of finance, trade, and debt, as well as global climate change and failures of global governance. The result is that certain people are denied access to affordable nutritious food, because of who they are (IPES-Food 2023). Groups such as indigenous people, low-income city residents, children, racialised minorities, and women-led households are all at greater risk of going hungry or being under-nourished.

But the inequities in food systems go beyond access to food. Millions of people, including commercial and small-scale farmers, depend on the food system for their livelihood; and again, we see inequity in how people are able to generate a living from the system. Some, due to their relatively privileged position in society, are able to earn a good living, while others are forced to work long hours for low wages with few labour rights.

This report, *Pathways to Equitable Food Systems*, analyses the nature of inequities in food and examines the extent to which power imbalances have resulted in certain groups being disadvantaged by unjust and inequitable food systems.

The report is aimed at policymakers, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), social movements and grass-roots organisations, activists, and thinktanks who are working to render food systems more equitable.

The report proposes a focus on power imbalances and identifies ways in which marginalised social groups can be placed at the centre of food system transformation, to increase their access to nutritious food and strengthen their livelihood opportunities.

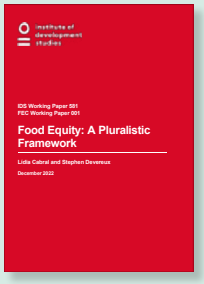
The report is based on decades of research conducted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) with our partners across themes such as the politics of food, agri-food science and technology, livelihoods, and nutrition. Through this varied portfolio of research, we have identified consistent challenges which restrict the fairness of food systems around the world.

Our aim in bringing this analysis together into one report is to spark new debate about how food systems work, and catalyse action to tackle the deep, structural flaws in how food is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed. We believe this action is fundamental if food systems are to be made more equitable for the world's population.

Moving towards food equity

To guide the analysis in the report, we use a new pluralistic framework devised by IDS (Cabral and Devereux 2022) to help analyse what food equity is and how it might be achieved. This framework asks questions to help understand the multiple forms of inequity experienced in the food system.

Equity for whom?



Learn more **Food Equity: A Pluralistic Framework**

Inequities can be experienced by individuals or by social groups with common characteristics or collective identities (children, women, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, racialised communities, smallholder farmers, etc.). When defining and measuring equity, and devising policy responses to correct inequities, a question to ask is whether the focus should be placed on an individual, a social group, or both. Food aid or cash transfers, for example, are distributed to individuals; whereas food sovereignty movements aim to empower social groups seen as vulnerable, such as smallholders.

At what scale?

Food inequities can be found at all scales – from local to global. How wide is the focus – for example, is it specific to a household, or a village or city, or even broader to encompass an entire nation or region?

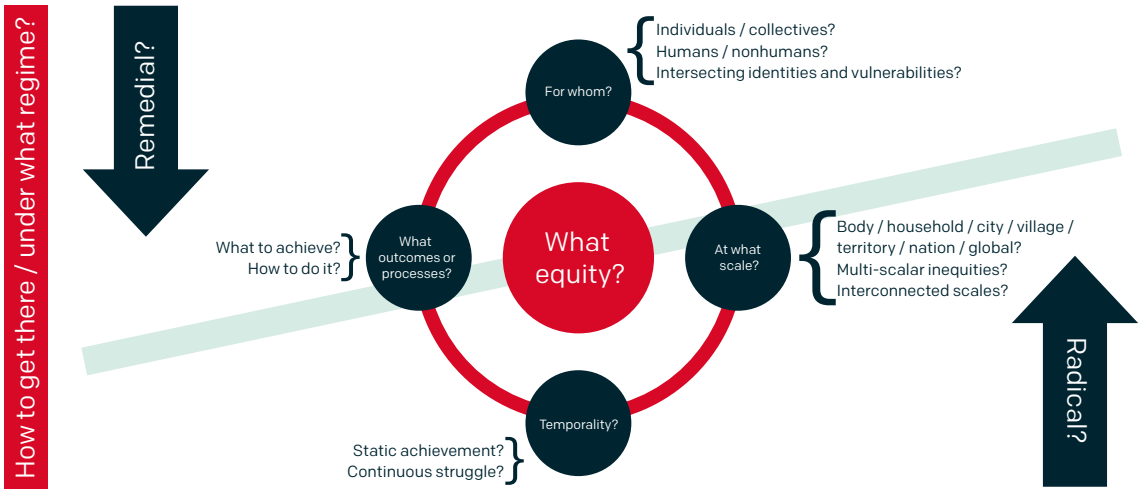
Equity as an outcome or equity as a process?

Equity can be understood as an outcome – improved access to food, or a more secure livelihood for individuals or groups marginalised in the food system. But equity is also about processes, for example, struggles to improve distribution, or improved recognition of identities and rights. Viewed in this way, food equity can be about challenging power dynamics as much as they are about ensuring that someone can put food on their table.

Temporality?

Linked to the above, on what time frame is the effort based? Does it see the achievement of equity as a one-off event – e.g. the provision of a specific welfare benefit – or as a longer-term struggle for improved rights?

Figure 1 Achieving food equity: a pluralistic framework



Measures to achieve equity in food systems can be placed on a spectrum, depending on whether they largely adhere to, or challenge, power structures.

At one end, measures can be remedial: seeking to mitigate imbalances through limited redistribution. At the other end, measures can be radical: seeking to fundamentally transform the power structures which are responsible for generating inequitable food outcomes. As a general rule, governments and development agencies tend to be more cautious, seeking to correct issues through remedial action; whereas social movements are more radical, seeking transformative action.

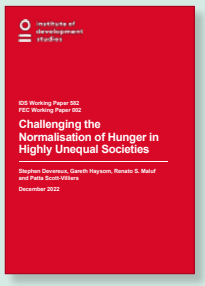
This report next identifies four themes that illustrate the pervasiveness of food system inequities: hunger, diets and nutrition, livelihoods, and territories. It then looks at common threads behind these inequities, analysing some of the structural reasons behind these inequities. We argue that without addressing these structural challenges, food systems will remain inequitable.

In the final section of the report, we explore how developing different pathways to change, rather than relying on one single approach, can help challenge the status quo and assist us in moving to a more equitable food system.

How are food systems inequitable?

The normalisation of hunger in unequal societies

What explains hunger in middle- and high-income countries? Large numbers of people in countries such as Brazil, South Africa, and the UK are unable to meet their basic food needs, and the extent to which this has become accepted in day-to-day life suggests that hunger has been 'normalised' (Devereux et al. 2022).



Learn more **Challenging the Normalisation of Hunger in Highly Unequal Societies**

Hunger should be unacceptable anywhere and everywhere. An analysis of experiences in these three countries reveals four types of response failure that have led to this inequity: inadequate or ineffective direct action by those who are hungry, by non-governmental organisations and civil society, and by government policies and programmes, compounded by public attitudes of indifference or even blame towards those who go hungry.

In Brazil, half the population currently face some degree of food insecurity, and 33 million are in a situation of hunger. Historic inequities mean food insecurity affects certain groups more than others: households identifying as black or brown, households led by women, and families with children.

Food insecurity is one issue; the increase in ultra-processed foods, which is directly linked to increased risk of obesity and non-communicable diseases, is another.

A reversal in supportive policymaking from around 2016 has contributed towards the challenges that many Brazilians are facing with food security and healthy diets. Civil society organisations are trying to push back, and the recent change of government holds out the prospect of a return to Brazil's 'zero hunger' ambitions, but there is a long way to go.

In the UK, 9.7 million people experienced food poverty in September 2022, and in 2021, there were over 2,000 food banks in the UK. The challenge is not to do with unemployment, but rather, inequality. The issue is highly politicised, although there is a widespread view among the public (not only in the UK) that hunger is the fault of the individual.

There is no legal obligation – unlike in many other countries – for the government to pursue policies to prevent hunger, and there is a deep

reliance on charities to plug the gaps left by an inadequate welfare system. A new Food Strategy for England, published in 2022, represented a failed opportunity (Ebata 2022) to build a more equitable food system.

In South Africa, in contrast to the UK, the right to food is enshrined in the Constitution. Yet hunger is persistent, with nearly half the population suffering moderate or extreme food insecurity in 2018–20. In rural areas, seasonal hunger is common among farm workers – because work opportunities are seasonal – but the media and government do not prioritise this problem. Those in power do not experience seasonality and may well be unaware that much of the population goes hungry during every winter.

Hunger in South Africa is rooted in its long history of economic and social injustice. The food system was designed to ensure that the black labour force was adequately but not necessarily well fed, and to protect and promote white farmers. As a result, food poverty became normalised. The emergence of supermarket chains since the 1960s exacerbated this trend, enabling these powerful corporate actors to consolidate their control of the food system.

Despite the dramatic changes that have taken place since the end of apartheid in 1994, hunger persists. Our analysis is that this is not because of a lack of money. Rather, a lack of political will is a major contributory factor. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) party does not lose votes because of hunger. Hunger has not been 'positively politicised'. Civil society is attempting to change this, for example, with one online newspaper running a "#FoodJustice" campaign during 2022.

Inequities in diets and nutrition

The human right to food is not limited to a specific quantity of calories or protein. It is a right to all the nutritional elements that are essential for a healthy life (OHCHR and FAO 2010).

In discussions on food justice and rights, the second dimension is often overlooked. And yet, inequities around diets are crucial ways in which people are disadvantaged by the food system.

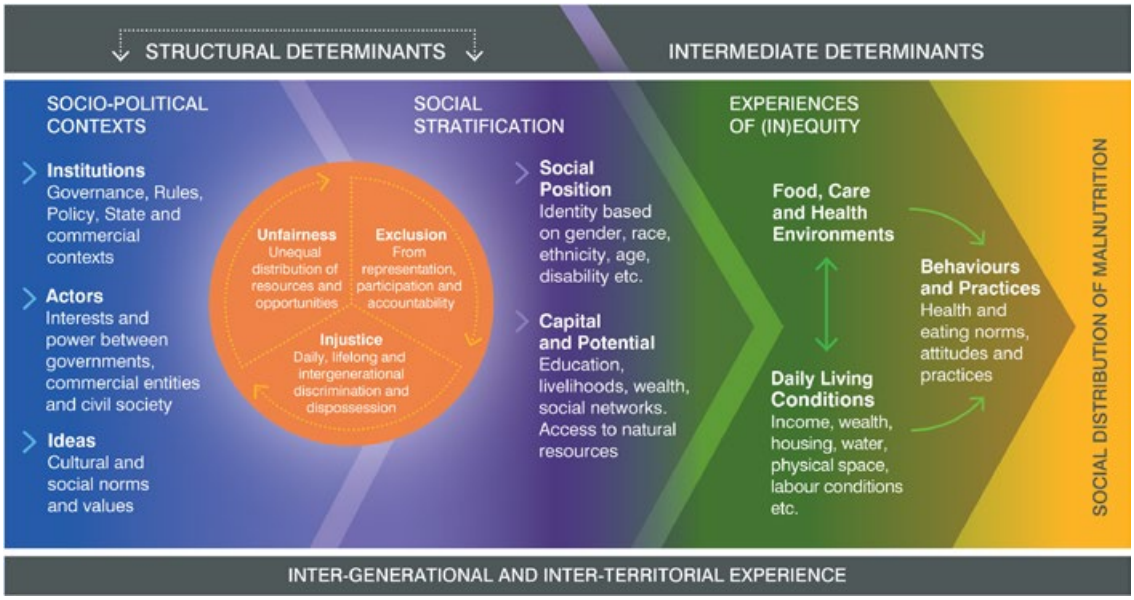
Research into malnutrition and undernutrition often focuses on individual nutrients, missing the wider issue of how social and economic systems affect diets and result in certain groups being disadvantaged, just because of who they are.

Poor nutrition can be seen at both ends of the wealth spectrum, causing new policy dilemmas for governments. In Zambia, for example, hunger and

deficiency persists among the rural and urban poor, while the urban rich are suffering from rising levels of overweight, obesity, and non-communicable diseases (Harris et al. 2019). Public policy in the country is struggling to keep up with this change, with the national food policy focused primarily on issues such as child stunting and micronutrient deficiencies, rather than identifying actions to combat rising obesity.

Daily and intergenerational forms of unfairness, injustice, and exclusion act as an "engine of inequity" shaping people's experience of their food, health and care environments, as well as their daily living conditions. Inequalities in malnutrition can therefore be traced back to their social and political causes (Nisbett et al. 2022).

Figure 2 The Nutrition Equity Framework



Source: © Nisbett et al. (2022), CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Work to apply the Nutritional Equity Framework across four countries – Brazil, South Africa, the UK, and Vietnam – found that marginalisation on the basis of ethnicity or race could be a major driver of poor diets and nutrition, often due to historical structural factors (Battersby et al. forthcoming). For example, in Vietnam and Brazil, indigenous ethnic communities have much poorer diets than the majority population; while in the UK and South Africa, black children are more likely to suffer from obesity than white children.

Policies designed to target specific vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities or low-income groups have been unsuccessful in the four countries studied.

Deprived daily living conditions, such as poor housing or lack of access to water or electricity, are a common causal factor. Crucially, historical factors such as land use and ownership, and governance or policies have played a role in shaping inequitable diets and nutrition. In South Africa, the colonial and apartheid years produced a highly unequal food system which has continued into the post-apartheid era through market deregulation and trade liberalisation. While the South African government has been largely supportive of corporate control of the food system, the UK government has tried – but largely failed – to make progress on how unhealthy foods are taxed and marketed.

Public policies have had some successes in tackling these issues, notably in Brazil where between the 2000s and early 2010s, reductions in extreme poverty and food insecurity were achieved. (Unfortunately, much of this progress was subsequently undone from 2016, due to a reversal in supportive policymaking.) However, in general, policies designed to target specific vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities or low-income groups have been unsuccessful in the four countries studied. In Vietnam, research found that rather than simply trying to incorporate minorities into mainstream programmes and systems, policies need to do more to take into account the particular needs and preferences of these groups.

In the Indian state of Odisha, a range of nutrition (and health) services from the government are intended to boost food security and provide safety nets. Yet, our research identified that access to these services is hampered or enabled by two levels of gatekeepers, front-line service providers and high-level officials; and that identity, poverty and education disparities all produce food inequities (Mitchell et al. 2023).

A key finding in both Vietnam and Brazil was that civil society groups have played an important role in advocating for improvements in public services and in rights for particular marginalised groups. A peculiarity of the Brazilian approach was the way in which civil society played a leading role in the expansion of public institutions during the first (2003–10) government of Lula da Silva – an approach that looks to be re-established during his third term in office (Oliveira and Moncau 2023).

Inequity in food systems livelihoods

Some 4.5 billion people around the world depend on food systems for their livelihood, and many of them are socially and economically marginalised (UN DESA 2021). In many countries, food systems livelihoods make up the principal form of work for people – for example, in West Africa, the food economy has been calculated as accounting for 66 per cent of total employment (Allen, Heinrigs and Heo 2018).

The concept of sustainable livelihoods has long been seen as critical for realising the SDGs (Scoones 1998). Food systems offer the opportunity for marginalised people to create income opportunities, but these are limited due to inequities. Understanding the true nature of these inequities is crucial if we are to improve the social and economic wellbeing of those working in food systems.

Measurable outcomes from livelihoods such as income, health, and nutrition status tend, for obvious reasons, to get more attention. But non-measurable outcomes such as general wellbeing, and a sense of place, are also crucial (Battersby, Bellwood-Howard and Ebata, forthcoming).

Many of those most affected by systemic inequities are small-scale farmers who are highly vulnerable to food insecurity and the escalating impacts of climate change. Small-scale farmers face difficulties in accessing land, credit, and resources because of existing social, economic, and political structures. But instead of addressing these systemic issues, interventions are often targeted at individual farmers.

For example, in many countries, livestock diseases threaten the livelihoods of those who depend on animals. Policy responses to this issue in Myanmar have focused on behaviour change, encouraging individual farmers to enhance their knowledge on livestock diseases. But research indicates that structural constraints such as a weak veterinary system and low access to cheap credit are preventing farmers from acquiring the knowledge they need to keep their animals safe and healthy (Ebata et al. 2020).

Although most livelihood opportunities in food are related to agriculture, this is not always the case – and indeed, responses that are overly focused on agriculture can miss other important inequities. In West Africa, for example, non-agricultural work accounts for 22 per cent of all jobs in the food system, in areas such as food processing, food marketing, and food away from home (Allen et al. 2018). Food systems analysis tends to focus on production and consumption, and to neglect processing and distribution. Inequities in these areas differ greatly from inequities that people working in farming face.

In cities in low- and middle-income countries, most people working in food retailing are vendors – usually women – in markets, small shops, or as hawkers selling street food. Our experience has been that local governments do not commonly separate out food-based trade from other forms of trade. The result is that food retailers face heavy regulation in terms of public health standards but without any supportive infrastructure that would help retailers meet their food storage and preparation needs. This absence of food-sensitive policymaking inevitably makes food-based retailers more vulnerable.

Other urban livelihoods inequities might be surprising. For example, women market traders in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, face a significant inequity around the prohibitively high costs of using public toilets (Siebert and Mbise 2018). Paying close to 20 per cent of their daily gross income in toilet fees inhibits women from earning a dignified salary and growing their enterprise.

Box 1 Case study: Linkages between insecure employment and hunger in South Africa's Northern Cape

Seasonal food insecurity is a well-known phenomenon in much of rural Africa where the agricultural year divides into two periods: post-harvest, when food is abundant, and pre-harvest, when food is scarce and prices are high (Devereux and Tavener-Smith 2019).

However, our research in South Africa's Northern Cape has identified a different issue: seasonal hunger arising from a lack of stability of livelihoods.

Farmworkers in South Africa often earn the lowest wages of all formally employed persons in the country, frequently below the legislated minimum wage rate for the sector.

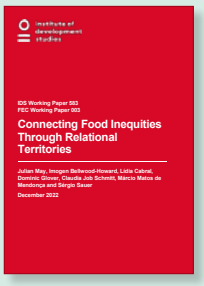
Seasonal food insecurity is rising because the agricultural labour force in South Africa is undergoing a process of 'casualisation' – a shift away from workers living on farms with permanent contracts, towards seasonal or casual workers living off farms with short-term contracts or no contracts at all. Women are less likely than men to have permanent contracts, which leaves them especially vulnerable to seasonal food insecurity. Even during the farming season, employment opportunities are irregular, uncertain, and precarious.

These changes are increasing the inequities around livelihoods in the food system, demonstrating that more attention must be paid to the vulnerability of farm workers as well as that of small-scale farmers.

Territorial inequities

Food, through the nature of its production and connection with the land, is inextricably tied up with space and territory (May et al. 2022).

In rural areas, land-based inequities are common, pitting often powerless communities against investors which often count on state support (Scoones 2022). In Brazil, a vast territory known as the Cerrado and covering about 24 per cent of the country, has for half a century been a hot spot of land and resource grabbing in the name of agricultural modernisation to feed the country and for export (see case study, Box 2).



Learn more
Connecting Food Inequities Through Relational Territories

Territorial inequities exist in urban areas, where poor neighbourhoods lack space for small-scale urban food production, as documented in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro (May et al. 2022).

Territorial inequities are also at play in trade and consumer habits. In cities, affluent communities are dotted with shops selling high-quality fresh food, even out of season. In contrast, low-income areas lack access to affordable and good-quality food sources. These differences play out in nutrition outcomes for richer and poorer communities.

Analysing food networks can reveal territorial inequities. In South Africa's Breede Valley Municipality, a highly productive agricultural region, food networks contain a mix of short local value chains, longer chains into the national economy, and networks which are integrated into high tech global food chains (May et al. 2022). These networks compound inequities, with wealthy farmers producing high-quality commodities for export, and the majority of the population (mostly black and coloured) facing high levels of food insecurity.

Markets also demonstrate elements of territorial inequity. In local farmers' markets, which develop in an attempt to decommodify food, the balance of power may still reside with well-off consumers rather than farmers, as noted by Hinrichs (2000) in a study on US experiences.

On the other hand, periodic markets in Ghana, highly accessible for smallholder farmers and well embedded in sociocultural systems, are much more equitable than other markets where barriers to entry are significant (May et al. 2022). The most basic form of participation in the markets requires only small amounts of capital (Bellwood-Howard et al. 2021), offering a route for women and poor, small-scale farmers to trade.

Learn more
Frontier Territories: Countering the Green Revolution Legacy in the Brazilian Cerrado

Our analysis also highlights how food system inequities connect different territories. The inequities in Brazil's Cerrado region (see Box 2) are connected to food system inequities in other parts of the world. In South Africa, low-income consumers buy frozen chicken which has been fed on soybean grown in the Cerrado. This benefits low-income consumers, initially at least; but in the long term, it may affect the livelihoods of those in the poultry business in South Africa.

A territorial perspective on inequity helps to explain how food inequities are experienced in connection to specific locations that may be rural or urban. It also helps to trace connections between experiences of inequity – for example, following the international journey of food commodities (such as soybeans and poultry) allows us to see how inequities in production in one part of the world are connected to inequities in consumption in another. Highlighting these inequitable connections can help galvanise support for food system equity at a global scale.

Box 2 Case study: Agribusiness and territorial inequities in Brazil's Cerrado

In Brazil's Cerrado region, small-scale farmers are being forced off their land by aggressive strategies used by agribusinesses, supported by government policies (Cabral, Sauer and Shankland 2023).

The Cerrado has long been hailed as the cradle of an agricultural modernisation project that turned Brazil into a global agri-food giant. Yet the Cerrado's decades-long expansion project in the name of production efficiency has greatly exacerbated the land inequality, poverty, and injustice already present in the region. Half a century of violence in the Cerrado has created a legacy of inequity, at odds with the apparent successes of soybean production.

Land grabbing, a series of actions to appropriate large areas of land and natural resources, has been sanctioned by the state through land registration processes and environmental policy reform. Fire has also been used as a tool to expand the agricultural frontier, as well as arson attacks on communities.

Brazil has a long history of resistance against these territorial inequities, with many social movements championing agrarian justice. In frontier zones such as the Cerrado, the intensity of conflict is particularly strong.

Inequities exacerbated by Covid-19

During Covid-19, many feared that the pandemic would lead to severe food crises and famine across the world. These worst-case scenarios were largely avoided but since 2020 the pandemic has exacerbated the inequities of current food systems, and latest estimations show that 150 million more people are affected by hunger (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2022).

Learn more **Building a Better World: The Crisis and Opportunity of Covid-19**

Despite there not being a shortage of food, measures put in place to slow the spread of Covid-19 such as lockdowns, market closures and curbs on movements exposed the vulnerability of food systems on both the consumption and production sides. The measures profoundly restricted the availability and access to food for the poorest and most vulnerable and resulted in many consumers being unable to access fresh produce (FAO 2020).

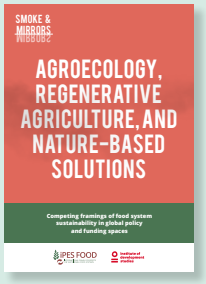
For many it meant that their ability to earn an income to purchase food was removed overnight. Small-scale retailers lost outlets for their businesses, many of whom are women (Kawarazuka, Béné and Prain 2018; Skinner 2016) and this negatively affected not only the retailers themselves but also those downstream in the value chain, such as traders, food processors, and farmers. In some countries, the policy responses to Covid-19 particularly disadvantaged informal retailers (Battersby 2020).

During the pandemic, we also saw some specific food inequities among the most marginalised and food vulnerable populations, such as those in conflict-affected areas. In Yemen, for instance, where 14 per cent of the population (UNHCR 2023) are displaced, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) suffered from the pandemic exacerbating pre-existing structural issues, which caused food prices to be even higher during the Covid-19 crisis. Young children in many parts of the world have also been particularly negatively impacted by the limits to nutritious and healthy foods for pregnant and breastfeeding women during the pandemic. An increased reliance on ultra-processed foods among children and the physical activity restrictions during multiple Covid-19 lockdowns could also cause long-term future health problems.

What drives food inequity?

The rise of corporate power

It is widely understood that the challenge of ensuring the world has enough food is not just about food production (IPES-Food 2022). Food is a deeply political matter, with questions of how food systems work, and who gains or loses dependent on power relations between many different institutions.



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Crisis after crisis has revealed that modern food systems are neither sustainable nor equitable, with profound and intergenerational consequences for human wellbeing, health, and prosperity.

A rising number of states in the twenty-first century lack the power to protect their citizens even against mass starvation, as forces beyond their control threaten to reverse decades of progress in preventing famine. Nations looking to ensure food security are finding it harder to tackle, on their own, recent crises such as climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, or the impact on global supply chains caused by the war in Ukraine, even though the global food system has shown some resilience against these shocks.

At the same time, the influence of the private sector in food systems has grown – not just around key stages of the global food supply chain but over national and international food and agriculture policies (Leach et al. 2020).

The statistics on how the private sector controls the food supply chain are stark. Four companies control 90 per cent (Harvey 2022) of the global grain trade, and four corporations control more than 50 per cent of the world's seed (Shield 2021). In the US, 70 per cent of agricultural land is controlled by just 20 per cent of farms, and nearly two-thirds of the retail market is controlled by just four firms (Foodprint 2018).

The US may represent one extreme of corporate control of food, but other countries are following suit. In Brazil, for example, the last few years have seen an increase in agribusiness influence, a topic explored further elsewhere in this report.

Big businesses are also increasing their influence on global policymaking. The UN Food Systems Summit in 2021 faced claims of corporate capture by prominent civil society groups. The Summit was based on principles of

'multistakeholder inclusivity', allowing the most powerful actors to influence discussions, often in a way that was not transparent. As many noted at the time, the Summit did not properly analyse the political economy drivers of undernutrition and obesity (Nisbett et al. 2021a) and therefore was unable to show how corporate influence over food and policy agendas, including at these key global events, can limit the operating space for effective policy.

This sense that a narrow set of actors are shaping policy in food systems was seen again during the UN Climate Change Conference in 2021 (COP26), and Part One of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity COP15 in 2021 (CBD).

It is widely understood that powerful groups get to influence decision-making. A less visible concern is around the politics of knowledge – that powerful groups get to shape the knowledge on which decisions are made. Powerful interests get to sideline inconvenient facts and significantly influence what is seen to be true.

By understanding how meaning is created, by whom, and whether it is disputed, we can identify attempts by powerful institutions to shape knowledge.

At the Food Systems Summit, COP26 and Part One of COP15, the attempt by agri-food corporations to reshape knowledge was a concerning feature (Cabral, Rainey and Glover 2022). Vague phrases such as 'nature-based solutions' and 'regenerative agriculture' were pushed, at the expense of the concept of agroecology – a term which has an internationally approved definition, created through a widespread consultation led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

While agroecology has a clear commitment to social justice as well as environmental issues, nature-based solutions and regenerative agriculture take a more restrictive interpretation of sustainability and are largely focused on environmental balance and resource efficiency.

Our research suggests that agri-food businesses are appropriating terms such as 'regenerative agriculture' and 'nature-based solutions' to advance the current industrial system and avoid challenging the status quo. Amid these concerns, we believe it is vital that knowledge politics are examined further.

More needs to be done to scrutinise how this language is being used, by who and for what purpose, and who gains or loses as a result. This work is part of generating a more equitable politics of knowledge for food system transformation.

Citizen power in a world of rising food prices

While our research highlights serious issues with the growing power wielded by businesses, often with support from governments, it is clear also that citizens are not passive victims. Their actions are shaping food systems – sometimes helping to make them more equitable but sometimes in ways that lead to growing inequity.

An unprecedented wave of protests was seen in 2022 sparked by rising food and especially energy prices. More than 12,500 protests were recorded in over 148 countries, with the largest number in Western Europe (Savage 2023). What will be the impact of food price rises that we are currently seeing, and what change will these protests bring? Insights from citizens' responses to the last period of food price rises a decade ago may help us understand.

Learn more **The Political Economy of Food**

It is commonplace to refer to 'consumer power' in relation to purchasing decisions among individuals in high-income economies. Food decisions made by people on low and uncertain incomes in less wealthy countries, on the other hand, are usually seen as constrained by poverty, rather than an exercise of their power. And yet, decisions taken by millions of people on low incomes about what to eat can have a lasting effect on the global food system.

Research into food price spikes from 2007 to 2012 across ten countries (Bangladesh, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Kenya, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Zambia) identified ways in which people's responses to increasing food costs fed into larger processes of change (Hossain and Scott-Villiers 2019).

Sometimes, consumer power was able to contribute to positive changes. In many cases, rising food prices led to protests. The nature of these protests differed; for example in Kenya, issues around maize were a catalyst, while in Bangladesh, protests were led by garment workers.

These protests often produced political changes which could translate into changes to food and welfare policy, including increased social protection, export bans, tariff suspensions, fertiliser subsidies, and so on.

In Bangladesh, where workers in the garments industry had for many years protested against low wages, the rapid food price rises from 2007 gave additional meaning to their grievances (Jahan and Hossain, 2017). Workers were able to secure some concessions from the government during the food crisis, including a rise in the minimum wage. The food crisis also prompted

the creation of at least one important new social protection scheme, the Employment Guarantee for the Poorest, although it seems that the provision fell well short of what was needed.

In Kenya, though, protests from 2008-2011 were largely unsuccessful, with the government being able to ride out protests centred around the so-called Unga (maize) Revolution (Musembi and Scott-Villiers 2017).

In India, protests were less linked to specific food price rises, and more connected to a general mobilisation around the right to food, aimed at creating food security for all. This rights-based discourse did seem to find its way into policymaking, with the government increasingly accepting of the argument (Joshi, Patnaik and Sinha 2017).

Sometimes, however, consumer responses to rising food prices had the effect of undermining equity in food systems.

One of the key impacts seen across the study was how the food price rises produced a sharp shift towards greater reliance on markets and mass-produced and industrial foods than in the past.

This shift towards processed food, lower in nutritional value than people's previous diets, likely had adverse impacts on people's health – exacerbating food inequities.

People in every country surveyed told of a move from relative diversity in grains (sorghum, millet, teff, quinoa) towards the major monoculture crops of maize, rice, and wheat. In some countries studied, the demand for cheaper food led to an increase in industrialised food production. To help pay for increased food costs, adults had to take on additional work, and this led to dietary changes. Men ate away from home more, while working. Traditional food, often time-consuming to prepare, became less popular, while convenient processed food became a more appealing choice. This shift towards processed food, lower in nutritional value than people's previous diets, likely had adverse impacts on people's health – exacerbating food inequities.

The study showed that although people everywhere adjusted to higher food prices by changing how they earned and what they ate, it would be inaccurate to view them as victims without agency in this process. This analysis crucially helps us move beyond simplistic dichotomies between the governors and the governed in food systems, or between holders of economic and political power.

Linkages between technological innovation and inequality

In an era when hunger is again on the rise, and when food is becoming more expensive, several countries are revisiting the ideas of the Green Revolution in a bid to increase food production. But what impact is this development having on inequities in food systems?

The Green Revolution was an agricultural intervention unfolding in the period from the 1940s to the 1980s which saw the development and transfer of technologies intended to increase food production through the introduction of high-yielding crops. At the same time, reduction in malnutrition in countries such as India suggested that the Green Revolution was working (Bevis and Negi 2020).

We now know, however, that the yield increases of the new crops were not as impressive as they seemed and that other factors were also at play such as the extensive use of agrochemicals, unsustainable groundwater extraction, and supportive government policies (Sharma 2019).

Nonetheless, many African countries still aspire to a Green Revolution that can produce increased agricultural efficiencies.

Our research has identified 'epic narratives' of the Green Revolution, where repeated narratives – no matter how misleading – are reproduced over time in an attempt to influence the future. Across countries including Brazil, China, and India, the Green Revolution has been presented as resulting from a strong, state-led sense of urgency and purpose which motivated highly trained scientists to deliver great scientific feats, such as new wheat, rice, and soybean varieties that were high yielding and pest resistant (Cabral, Pandey and Xu 2021).

This narrative was spearheaded by leading players in agricultural science and technology, reflecting their desire to preserve their credibility and position in the system.

The epic narratives around the Green Revolution favour technological over social innovations, and place national priorities as more important than local needs. The sweeping aside of local needs and traditional approaches to food production contributes to the continuing inequities in food systems and outcomes.

In recent years, a focus on seeds and seed systems has been rising up the agricultural policy agenda. Seed systems are a major contributor to food

security; a sustainable seed system will ensure that high-quality seeds are available and affordable for farmers (FAO 2023).

In many circles, public–private partnerships have been seen as an important way in which seed systems can be strengthened. But in Africa, these public–private partnerships often result in a narrowing of choice of seeds and crop types (Scoones and Thompson 2011). In addition, they often ignore informal seed systems, which often serve most low-income farmers, meaning that this important group remains out of reach of new initiatives and investments. Innovations in agri-food that result in more top-down control, greater profit for multinationals, and less choice for small-scale farmers undermine any efforts to build a more inclusive, equitable food system.

It is routinely claimed that Argentina, the world's third-largest producer of genetically engineered (GE) crops, saw a significant increase in crop productivity due to GE technology. However, our analysis suggests that this interpretation is misleading – and in fact, innovations based on conventional plant breeding have been at least as important as GE technology in explaining the growth in Argentinean soy production from 1995–2015 (Marín, Stubrin and van Zwanenberg 2023). Policy interventions based on the mistaken assessment of the impact of GE technology have resulted in companies specialising in conventional plant-breeding techniques being unfairly crowded out of the market.

The experience of the GE soybean in Argentina is just one example of a 'lock-in'. A lock-in is a situation where a technology choice becomes irreversible due to separate processes in different parts of the food system, such as supply chains or policies, which become interlocked. As a result, other potential solutions are difficult to implement.

Learn more
Food Politics and Development

Lock-ins are often pushed by those who stand to benefit from the use of a technology, such as the private sector, but depend on action from other stakeholders such as regulators or policymakers. In food systems, synthetic fertilisers and GM crops are significant lock-ins. Lock-ins often limit the transformative action that is needed for the food systems to become more equitable, resulting in poor people being kept poor and vulnerable (Leach et al. 2020).

Narrow technological fixes are widely seen by policy, business, and scientific communities as the only way to progress. But too often, they ignore the deep-rooted social, political, and economic structures which disadvantage certain groups of people and are at the heart of failures in the food system.

A cattle ranch in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, part of the huge agricultural expansion which has taken place in the Cerrado.

PHOTO: © LALO DE ALMEIDA/FOLHAPRESS/ PANOS PICTURES

Pathways to change

Too often, the narratives of powerful actors and institutions dominate the interventions that are created to tackle problems around inequality and lack of sustainability. As we saw in the previous section, these narratives often do not serve the needs of everyone.

Video
What are pathways to sustainability?

To counter this, a pathways approach to change can include the needs, knowledge, and perspectives of poor and marginalised people (Leach et al. 2010). The pathways approach recognises that different people understand systems in different ways. How a smallholder farmer, for instance, thinks of an agricultural system would differ greatly from how a multinational company thinks of the system – to say nothing of a government policymaker, biotech firm, or commercial crop exporter.

Some of these actors might consider the future of agriculture to be linked to Green Revolution notions of productivity in the name of national food security; others might consider it to be based more around the need to develop locally rooted solutions that respond to the specific issues faced by different communities.

Therefore we need to ask the following questions about proposed pathways:

- What **Directions** are different pathways headed in? What goals, values, interests, and power relations are driving particular pathways – and how might they be re-oriented?
- Is there a sufficient **Diversity** of pathways? Are these diverse enough to resist powerful processes of lock-in, build resilience in the face of uncertainty, and respond to a variety of contexts and values?
- What are the implications for **Distribution**? Who stands to gain or lose from current or proposed pathways, or alternatives? How will different pathways affect inequities of wealth, power, resource use, and opportunity – across various axes (gender, ethnicity, class, place, and so on)?
- What are the implications for **Democracy** – encompassing equity of opportunity for voice and inclusion, and processes that enable and enhance this, whether formal or informal? (Leach et al. 2020).[1]

Our view is that equitable system transformation requires such questions about the four Ds to be asked of any proposed pathway. Multiple pathways, based on multiple perspectives, help address diverse needs and contexts, but democratic deliberation is needed to choose between them, and ensure that the pathways that support the most vulnerable are prioritised.

1 The 4Ds framework builds on Stirling's (2009) 3Ds, adding a fourth 'D' for Democracy.

Pathways to more sustainable agriculture

Evidence so far overwhelmingly concludes that our food systems are not working to nourish our populations, ecosystems, or economies. One way to potentially address many of these problems in the mainstream food system is by taking agroecological approaches, particularly when combined with concepts of food sovereignty, which localise control, and place producers and consumers at the centre of decision-making. But how can food producers move to agroecological systems, especially given the ways in which powerful institutions protect the status quo, as outlined in the previous section?

For transitions to be sustainable and equitable, we need to make sure that those who currently face inequities are central to the process of change. The process needs to be led and owned not by outside experts or researchers but by the people most directly affected by and typically excluded from decision-making within the current food system, such as small- and medium-scale farmers, workers involved in harvesting and food processing, cottage manufacturers, and consumers across socioeconomic classes.

One way to do this is through Participatory Action Research methods. This puts those who are normally excluded from decision-making at the centre of thinking about pathways to transitioning to more sustainable approaches, and helps them to identify challenges and ways forward.

In Senegal, Nicaragua, and the UK, we used participatory approaches in collaboration with small groups of farmers to identify how to support more ecological farming approaches that could also contribute to equitable diets for consumers and dignified livelihoods of farmers (Bichler et al. 2020). To start, they created food systems maps to identify the most relevant research questions to set. Then after the research was undertaken, the farmers analysed the findings through reflection and equitable discussion, opening out a topic rather than trying to get quick conclusions or answers.

The farmers built new collaborations and developed actionable strategies to transition to more sustainable and just food systems, spanning from local to national levels. Farmers who participated in the research, many of whom are leaders within their communities and within their national contexts, also reported improved analytical capabilities, new knowledge, improved confidence, and an understanding of and enthusiasm for more inclusive and participatory ways of working. One farmer in Senegal stated, 'It was the first time I experienced a project like this, [a project] that changed the community.'[2]

2 A farmer from Casamance, 2017.

Working in countries spanning global North and global South contexts led to new insights about the common challenges faced by farmers who seek to produce food ecologically and for local consumption. Access to land, for example, was a common constraint, though manifested differently in each of the countries, and local versus global commodity markets was also a concern for farmers in each country.

We also found that the framings of the issues changed over time among the farmer groups. While initially their own positionalities were more central to their framing of the challenges, by the end of the research a wider, systemic perspective emerged, with more potential for sustainable and inclusive food systems transformations.

Box 3 Case study: An open-source response to market concentration in seed systems

A response to limited seed diversity, access and technological lock-ins in Argentina has come from Bioleft, a participatory breeding initiative inspired by the open source movement. Based on collective intelligence and open knowledge, Bioleft aims to link local and scientific expertise to strengthen the role of farmers in seed breeding and exchange (Marín, van Zwanenberg and Cremaschi 2022).

It is contributing to alternative pathways of agricultural development, such as those based on agroecological or other practices which do not require significant amounts of external input (such as chemicals or GM seeds).

Using both legal and technological routes to support the creation of these new pathways, it has developed two tangible outputs: a set of legal material transfer agreements inspired by open source ideas, and a digital platform. Bioleft's work is generating a greater availability of biodiverse and resilient seeds, strengthening food sovereignty and supporting more sustainable and equitable forms of agriculture.

Bioleft was founded by Anabel Marín, a Research Fellow at IDS, and has now become an initiative driven by a team of around 50 people in Argentina, including plant breeders, social scientists, farming association representatives, and a small seed firm, connected to the global network of open source seed systems (GOSSI).

Just food transitions in cities

Today, 55 per cent of the world's population live in cities and this is expected to rise to 80 per cent by 2050, with the majority of this urban expansion concentrated in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Venditti 2022).

Alongside this urban transformation, there is also a nutrition transformation, with city populations' diets changing rapidly and new forms of malnutrition and related non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers, becoming more prominent. Therefore, understanding how to support transitions to more equitable food systems and nutrition security in cities in the global South is increasingly urgent, particularly as urban nutrition has been neglected within broader food and nutrition security literature, which has largely had a rural bias.

An Action Research project set up a mutual exchange and learning network to compare conceptions of, approaches to, and strategies for just transitions in food systems as seen by civil society organisations based in Brazil, Sierra Leone, the UK, and Zambia. An initial comparison of findings between two organisations based in the cities of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and Brighton in the UK (Cabral 2021) found three common themes regarding equitable transitions towards more sustainable food systems.

Firstly, revaluing food was found to be important – highlighting the view that society, and specifically young people, need to understand food beyond just the bodily need to eat. In Brighton, this included understanding seasonality, learning how to reduce food waste, and making ethical consumption decisions. In Rio de Janeiro, community gardens were not just sites for growing healthy food but were also places for educating young people and refuges for women who experienced hardship during the pandemic.

The second theme was that of connecting intersecting injustices that relate to different parts of the food system, for example, linking debates about food poverty and urban food deserts to debates about agroecology and localising food production.

Thirdly, the research found that using experiences of solidarity as engines of progressive change was important, particularly harnessing the local food networks set up in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. A strong sense of solidarity powered the food networks in Brighton and Rio de Janeiro and this intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Brighton, individuals motivated by a sense of civic and moral responsibility organised to support those in need, supported by municipal institutions. In Rio de Janeiro, solidarity was seen as a form of collective resistance (shaped by class, gender, and

race-based identities) against intensifying oppression and violence. These differences in enacting solidarity matter in terms of developing just transition pathways.

Learn more

Blog

Just food transitions from the bottom up in Brazil and the UK

Lídia Cabral
Research Fellow

The project identified that just food transitions are not about fixing failures of the current system in an effort to 'build back better'. They are, instead, about pursuing fundamentally different pathways that reconceptualise food and food relations. While discussions in both cities suggest a strong role for civil society organisations and movements in uniting struggles to drive change, there are context-specific differences in imagining the role of the state as an enabler of such transitions.

Our research with partners focusing on the poorest residents of cities in Africa and Asia living 'off-grid' has found that the failure to recognise the interdependence of food and nutrition and infrastructure leads to greater food and nutrition insecurity in urban contexts. For example, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, the Colombo Urban Lab showed this failure led to decisions in 2022 to increase electricity tariffs by 75% in the midst of an ongoing economic and energy crisis in the country. The tariff hike without any social security support for households meant that not only did people shift to meals that were fast to cook but low in nutrition, but also left them with less money to spend on fresh produce. This greater food insecurity impacts those on low incomes the most, deepening existing inequities for women in low-income households in Colombo who are more likely to be overweight, with higher instances of blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and anaemia compared to their rural counterparts (Perera 2022).

The research in cities across South Africa, Ghana, Zimbabwe, India, and Sri Lanka has so far uncovered examples of sustained, daily strategies and 'improvisations' by those who are most affected, stretching resources and constantly innovating to meet their needs (Living Off-Grid Food and Infrastructure Collaboration, forthcoming). But it is important that these are seen for what they are: time-consuming and precarious ways of making do in the absence of proper public and private provision – rather than something to be celebrated. For future food systems that provide equity in urban settings, it is essential to understand these critical dependencies of urban food systems, and view the path to everyday food equity much more holistically – involving elements such as local authorities, planners, engineers, and fuel and energy provision.

Box 4 Case study: Brighton, a sustainable food city?

Farm produce for sale at a street market in Hove, Brighton and Hove.

PHOTO: © SIMON BENSON/SHUTTERSTOCK

Brighton, a city on the south coast of the UK, is a relatively affluent city but despite this, it has pockets of food poverty (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership 2018). The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership is an independent non-profit organisation working to make Brighton's food environment more equitable via local action. Working in partnership with many other actors in the city's food sector, activities include supporting individuals through cookery classes, community food groups, training for professionals, communications, campaigns and policy influencing, and strategic delivery. In 2006, the organisation published the first comprehensive citywide action plan on food, which was updated in 2012 and 2018.

Research highlights key mechanisms that contributed to positive work on food equity in Brighton. These include a commitment to early years intervention such as breastfeeding promotion; a supportive local political context; the ability to tailor interventions to community needs; governance structures and capacity that enable cross-sectoral collaboration; and a citywide framing of food issues and solutions in the context of a whole systems approach (Salm et al. 2023).

Learn more

A whole system approach to childhood obesity: how a supportive environment was created in the city of Brighton and Hove, United Kingdom

This whole systems approach is showing tangible results. In 2021, Brighton was the first place in the UK to be awarded a Gold Sustainable Food Place Award, recognising outstanding achievements on a range of key food issues. Data from the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) shows that levels of child overweight and obesity in Brighton are lower than national and regional levels.

Yet, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have shown that these gains are fragile and that there is still much to be done to deliver on equitable sustainability.

What lessons have emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic?

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic sparked widespread community-led innovations globally. Grass-roots level initiatives were able to self-organise and respond quickly and effectively, often helping those most in need that more formal top-down processes struggled to reach. So, what lessons can we learn from community action during the pandemic to help us build more resilient and equitable food systems in the future?

Examples include a movement of self-organising, neighbourhood-level community action networks known as Cape Town Together (CTT) in South Africa. These networks were formed in March 2020 by a small group of public health people, activists and community organisers who saw the need in the city for a collective, community-led response to Covid-19. Initial work included an online toolkit encouraging people to form autonomous, self-organised, neighbourhood-level networks to respond to local need, including setting up Covid-safe community kitchens and food distribution schemes (Price 2022).

In the Philippines, community-led responses built on the Homeless People's Federation Philippines Inc (HPFPI), setting up community kitchens in four cities during Covid-19. It included one in Iloilo City run by a poor community of indigenous people from the Ati tribe, providing one good meal each day to everyone in the community, using donations of vegetables and protein sources they grew in their own gardens.

In Peru, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the food insecurity situation of many people living in cities. The most vulnerable faced great difficulties in accessing food, while food market vendors also struggled to keep their businesses afloat. In response, community-managed kitchens, led by women, and which have frequently appeared in times of crises in Peru, were established. They played a very important role in providing affordable and subsidised food in poor urban neighbourhoods during the pandemic (Fort and Gatellier 2022).

These examples show the significance of community groups and social networks, and the important role that women play in community responses, and suggest that investment in such networks could play a valuable part in tackling food inequities, particularly in times of crisis.

Shoppers in a supermarket in Cape Town, South Africa. In many countries, supermarkets wield immense power within food systems.

PHOTO: © TOMMY TRENCHARD/PANOS PICTURES

Recommendations

In a world with enough food, rising hunger, worsening diets and record levels of obesity reflect gross failures and inequities in global, national and local food systems.

Addressing these failures requires understanding and responding to the underlying drivers of vulnerability, which as this report shows, is very often rooted in issues of social injustice. We need to go beyond measures that can alleviate hunger or malnutrition and focus on the causes that have got us there in the first place.

The 4Ds framework of Directions, Diversity, Distribution and Democracy can help us understand how to achieve this, helping analyse the nature of the power and politics behind food inequities and highlighting how transformative progress towards more equitable food systems can occur.

Directions

Recommendation: Place more emphasis on bringing together community- and government-level actions which can specifically target inequity

In many countries, governments seem to be insufficiently motivated to tackle hunger; corporates such as supermarket chains and multinationals have disproportionate power in food systems; and the general public often blames individuals rather than seeing hunger as a systemic issue. Governments may introduce policies designed to focus on agricultural production at the expense of equity or develop untargeted schemes which do not address the needs of the most vulnerable.

Some local communities are adopting a systems approach to tackle food poverty. The work in Brighton to coordinate community and City Council actions is making a difference to children's health. Providing governments with a greater understanding of how inequity can be tackled can help drive more effective policymaking and support efforts at the community level.

Diversity

Recommendation: Pursue multiple approaches to tackling challenges within food systems, rather than investing heavily in single initiatives, which are likely to lack inclusivity and lead to lock-ins

Our experience has shown that where a small group of actors propose a 'ground-breaking' solution or innovation to tackle a given challenge, then intense scepticism is a suitable response. Lack of diversity in any component of a food system is risky. Narrow technological fixes can lead to food systems becoming 'locked in' to specific approaches, such as the dominance of genetically modified crops despite suggestions that positive impacts are overstated.

Allowing groups to choose their own diverse pathways is crucial. Exploring alternatives with farmers, as IDS explored with farmers interested in agroecology in Senegal, Nicaragua and the UK, gives a greater chance of being able to create more resilient, sustainable forms of agriculture.

Distribution

Recommendation: Pay closer attention to who will benefit most from proposed solutions, challenging initiatives where they do not explicitly support marginalised people

The benefits of technological innovation are very rarely equitably distributed. Multinationals, states, and commercial farmers are more likely to benefit from new technology than smallholder farmers and farm workers.

Open-source systems can distribute the benefits of innovation more widely. The Bioleft seed exchange, for instance, ensures that biodiverse, resilient seeds are widely available to all farmers.

Urban development programmes, despite aiming to provide improvements to food systems in cities, can often disadvantage those on lower incomes. We need to challenge city authorities to place urban food justice at the heart of their decision-making.

Democracy

Recommendation: Find spaces for the voices of those suffering from inequity

Rural communities typically lack voice or power to protect their interests, and in many contexts, corporate actors enjoy support from the state which sanctions the use of violence to repress dissent. Global policy debates are dominated by corporate actors in the name of multistakeholder inclusivity, drowning out grass-roots voices.

Where people are not given a formal voice, they may be forced to gain power through direct action in order to push for changes in food policy.

At the global, national and local levels, more democracy is needed in debates around food systems. We need to challenge the dominance of businesses in global policy fora and bring civil society organisations into national government policymaking.

This report has shown the extent to which power and politics hold sway over food systems which are deeply unfair. Much of the report shows the extent to which food inequities are entrenched, often the product of decades of cultural practices or efforts from different groups to gain, and hold on to power.

But it has also shown that there are grounds for optimism. When power imbalances are challenged, and when more democratic solutions are pursued, then more equitable food systems are possible. By focusing more attention on these promising pathways, we can do more to ensure that marginalised communities can have access to food and decent livelihoods in food systems.

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Library Road
Brighton, BN1 9RE
United Kingdom
+44 (0)1273 606261
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