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Towards a New Social Justice Agenda: Understanding Political Responses to Crises

Food riots across the developing world in 2008 sent powerful messages about the limits to people's tolerance of acute economic insecurity. Yet political responses of this kind are mainly treated as the inevitable social convulsions after economic shocks – as natural, almost physiological responses to hunger. This briefing proposes that these political responses to crises can provide insights into popular perspectives on the global political issues of the day: global economic uncertainty, the moral limits to market freedom, and responsibilities of governments to protect against risk. Understanding such perspectives could inform emerging debates within development and help shape a new social justice agenda.

Food riots are not just about hunger

The global financial crisis has highlighted the need and created an opportunity for a progressive new social justice agenda. For those concerned with development and economic justice, it has driven questions of markets and morals to the fore. What should the limits to market freedom be? Who should set those limits? How should moral questions of needs and rights enter these political debates?

Popular perspectives have coloured these political debates. In the US, financial sector excesses have been the subject of 'populist rage' in the mass media, famously on Jon Stewart's *The Late Show* in March 2009. Popular anger has satirised the trail of connections that transmit commodity, financial and environmental crises from the rich North

to the poor South. For instance, protestors outside the April G20 meeting urged us to 'eat the rich'.

In 2008, a wave of political protest, most notably a series of food riots, swept across developing countries. This was no surprise given the economic downturn and high food prices on top chronic poverty and insecurity. But the scale of these riots, some in defiance of powerful state forces, signal something more serious and profound than a simple angry response to hunger, writ global.

But how are the political responses to global economic uncertainty in the developing world being read – if at all? This briefing argues that those interested in crafting a new social justice agenda could gain grounded perspectives from an understanding of the political response to crises.

Popular perspectives on the limits to markets

The world became less peaceful last year according to the Global Peace Index report for 2009, as intensified conflict, food and fuel price rises, and global economic downturn struck (Institute for Economics and Peace 2009). It may be inevitable that social and political upheaval accompany economic shock. But while macroeconomic indicators are painstakingly, regularly analysed, the political signals are harder to read. Food riots may signal the limits to popular tolerance of a politics that leaves people unprotected against these economic tsunamis. Popular perspectives on the limits to markets and the purpose of development could and should contribute to a sharper debate about the rightful limits of markets and the responsibilities of governments to protect against economic uncertainty.

“ Political responses to crises can provide insights into popular perspectives on the global political issues of the day. ”

Dominant readings of food riots

Mass demonstrations and food riots took place between 2007 and 2009 in an estimated 30 countries. Credible references can easily be found online to demonstrations, protests and food riots in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Bolivia, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Mauritania, Madagascar, Mexico, Morocco, Mozambique, Pakistan, Philippines, Senegal, Somalia, Uzbekistan, and Yemen. Two West African countries and Haiti saw governments topple as a result of the food and/or financial crises in the last year. In Bangladesh, the siege of barracks and gruesome massacre of army officers by their subordinates in February 2009 was initially explained by frustrations around inadequate pay in a time of food inflation.

To date, the dominant reading of these food riots has been as knee-jerk, almost physiological responses to need. For example, a leading New York University economic forecaster in the blogosphere described the financial crisis as a 'contagion':

If cargo trade stops, the wheat doesn't get exported. If the wheat doesn't get exported, the mill has nothing to grind into flour. If there is no flour, the bakeries and food processors can't produce bread and pasta and other foods. If there are no foods shipped from the bakeries and factories, there are no foods in the shops. If there are no foods in the shops, people go hungry. If people go hungry their children go hungry. When children go hungry, people riot and governments fall. (Roubini 2008)

Other accounts of food riots are similar stories of people being driven to violent action by desperate hunger. A Telegraph newspaper story situated the Egyptian bread riots of March and April 2008 within this personal account:

'I've been here since six this morning, it is now nine o'clock and still no bread,' Asma Rushdi shouts in front of a tiny state-owned bakery in the overcrowded and impoverished area of Bulaq Dakrur in Cairo.

She is only allowed to spend one Egyptian pound (9p), which will get her 20 pieces of the subsidised flat

round bread baladi – the staple of the Egyptian diet.

For Asma, who has to feed her family, including four children and two in-laws, from her husband's monthly salary of £200, 'bread is everything'.

(*The Telegraph* (8 April 2008) 'Egyptians riot over bread crisis')

'Food riots' are recognisable as such everywhere. The food riot is known by its focus – access to food staples – and the forms it takes: un-mediated popular protests, local groups commandeering food supplies for distribution or to sell on at a 'fair' price, or looting. Many feature women, highlighting the domestic urgency of basic food. They can be loosely organised or spontaneous, but also sometimes violent and violently repressed. The widespread nature of food riots fuels a uni-dimensional, physiological explanation of why they occur, suggesting something universally human (natural) about the impulse to riot in response to food insecurity. But as we know from famines, active protest is not the automatic response to even serious food shortages, just as the absence of protest is unsafe evidence that people are passive (Thompson 1991).

Popular protest and the political landscape

What can we learn from a closer reading of food riots? European social and economic history reveals two themes of current relevance:

1. *The timing of food riots has often been linked to changes in economic policy* European food riots peaked in the eighteenth century during rapid moves towards market orientation; in England, the classic moments were during the passage of laws like the English Corn Laws, intended to free up grain markets. Until this point markets had been subordinate to society but from this point the imperatives of the market began to take increasing precedence over societal needs (Stewart 2006). And as the nature of the relationship between markets and people changed, so did relationships between people and the authorities (the state, the local lord, the parish). Protest tended to erupt less around 'political'

(parties, elections) than around 'bread-and-butter' (the price of basic food) concerns (Thompson 1991).

2. *Food riots have often featured ideas about social justice*

Thompson's well-known analysis of food riots in eighteenth century England identified a legitimising notion behind food riots: the 'moral economy', a set of ideas to do with justice, 'just prices', people's rights to subsistence, and the responsibilities of authorities to protect those rights.

These ideas had their roots in older moral principles, but they are not so much 'natural' rights as they are politically negotiated, in response to the predations of the market on people's rights to food. If anything, these ideas were brought into existence in opposition to ideologies of market, and had no independent life before then (Thompson 1991). When framed in opposition to free market forces, the 'moral economy' is a political statement, commenting on fairness in rights to food, its distribution, and on accountability for food supply failures. The Indian Right to Food campaign is possibly the most advanced contemporary political articulation of such opposition within the chronically food insecure poor countries.

Accounts of crisis: rapid research on crisis in five countries

The origins of this briefing are in rapid research conducted in early 2009 into the impacts of and responses to the food, fuel and financial crises in ten poor communities in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya and Zambia. In February 2009, the reverberations of the food and fuel crises were still being felt, as food prices had yet to return to 2007 levels. Some reported the nutritional and social symptoms of acute food insecurity; farmers painted a picture of uncertainty. In the more globally integrated economies, there were job losses in some export industries amidst reports of declining labour standards in others. Early signs of social fragmentation and rising insecurity included people getting together less to celebrate, mourn and save than pre-food crisis, and more livelihoods on the margins of legality, including some rising crime rates.

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Similar trends can be seen today. Developing countries have been embracing free market forces since at least the 1980s. This has been accompanied by an unprecedented era of popular protest against structural adjustment programmes. But the speed of change in current times is significant: the pace at which agricultural producers shifted into bio-fuel production; the suddenness with which smaller countries' inability to protect national food staple supplies was revealed; and the rapid rise in interlinked fuel and food prices that followed. Together these factors amounted to an instant emergency. Yet the causes of the food crisis were barely predicted; the scale of the shock, and the sense that is not over, mean it remains difficult to fully comprehend.

Evidence of a contemporary moral economy

These reflections on the crucially political nature of food riots as responses to economic shock were prompted by a glimpse into how people were responding to the food, fuel and financial crises in a five-country rapid research project in 2009 (see Box 2 *Accounts of Crisis*). This was participatory and qualitative research, but not designed specifically to explore people's political responses. At the time of the field research, in February 2009, the ten communities studied were feeling the effects of the financial crisis. Global policy priorities ranked the financial crisis over the food crisis. Yet in these communities, the financial crisis was overshadowed in day-to-day life by the grinding effects of unimaginably high food prices. Three findings emerged from this rapid research process, which add to the notion of a contemporary moral economy.

A sense of economic uncertainty

There was a palpable sense of uncertainty about the economic future. The food price crisis had been a literal shock to many. Repeatedly, people gave detailed accounts of changes so large and sudden that clear explanations remained elusive. In some cases, currently high food prices could be explained in part through seasonality, drought, cyclones and political

conflict, all visible, known factors that have caused food price rises historically. But the extreme nature of the food price rises with no evidence of physical food shortages left a sense of unease about how food markets were working. Some people clearly stated they did not understand what was going on. They were aware that industrialised countries were experiencing economic downturn, anticipated a worsening situation, and wanted to learn more.

Uncertainty about the economic future emerged clearly from farmers. In Kenya, a farmer explained that famine conditions leading to crop theft to feed hungry families discouraged the effort of planting. In Zambia and Bangladesh, access to fertilizer was unpredictable. In Indonesia, rubber farmers, and in Zambia and Bangladesh maize and rice farmers were uncertain about which way prices were going to move. This uncertainty around agricultural production tallies with the Food and Agriculture Organization's concerns about volatility in agricultural product markets. People are right to feel uncertain, because globally, it seems, the future of food is uncertain.

A sense of global economic connectedness

There was a sense of the connectedness of markets, signalling awareness of global economic integration. A Kingston shopkeeper said:

Bread, butter, buns [are] sold here, even though the price of flour gone up. The dollar is up so the prices are up. Margarine etc goes up every week, though its not mentioned in the press. Things don't go like by \$50 anymore. It's like \$500, \$300 each week. Increase by 400 per cent each week.

In Jakarta and Dhaka, where export industries were important employers, local livelihoods were linked to global markets for toys, electronics and clothes. In rural Bangladesh, men noted that high food prices internationally had pushed local food prices up. In Zambia, people connected with copper mining and in

Indonesia, people connected to the rubber trade, had experienced the impacts of dropping global demand or prices. International remittances to Jamaican communities had been hit by economic downturn in the -North

Awareness of global economic integration does not mean acceptance or consent. No doubt citizens of rice-exporting countries supported policies to restrict external sales when food prices peaked. And there is awareness that markets may not work well. In Zambia and Indonesia, people explained that food prices were 'sticky'. In Bangladesh, a history of famine and relief led to people believing that the innate venality of grain-dealers was keeping food prices high. People also cited failures to regulate grain markets to explain why food prices failed to return to 'normal'.

We did not find strongly 'traditional' or parochial attitudes towards the economy (although this does not mean they do not exist). For many, global markets are not strange worlds or abstract concepts, but daily realities. It is possible that for some in these countries, global integration has meant new economic opportunities, however skewed towards the rich. Where welfare states or social protection systems are limited, economic opportunities through entry into global markets may well be welcomed.

A sense that governments failed to protect against economic risk

There was a widespread (not universal) sense that government had failed to act to protect people against food price rises. Where governments had acted, coverage was often limited, or missed those in greatest need. In some places, there was no visible official support whatsoever. In most cases, support from local informal charity, family and neighbours, and informal local credit were the most reliable and regular sources of support. But these had been undermined by the universal nature of the crisis. The urban 'non-poor' countries seem to have been hit particularly hard by the food price hikes (Evans 2008), an experience they will have shared with their poorer compatriots.

Towards a New Social Justice Agenda

“ We need a way to monitor not only what shocks are coming, but also the political context. ”

Implications for policy and practice

Times of crisis evoke political responses which merit closer inspection. While the politics of food insecurity differ across national contexts there are reasons to read food riots not as the angry automatic response of hunger, but as grounded political expressions of the urgent need for a response to economic uncertainty.

Insights into popular perspectives on the global political issues of the day could usefully inform thinking behind a new progressive social justice agenda. The current global crises present champions of social justice with a real opportunity to shape such an agenda based on issues that people living in poverty are already mobilising around. To achieve this we need a way to monitor not only what shocks are coming, but also their political context. Any mechanisms for monitoring need to take into account:

- people's sense of economic uncertainty about the future
- people's sense of their connectedness to global markets and how this affects their economic security
- how people feel about the capacity and willingness of their government to act responsibly to protect them against economic shocks.

Further reading

Evans, Alex (2008) 'Rising food prices: drivers and implications for development', *Food Ethics* 3.2: 3-7

Hossain, N. (2009) 'Accounts of crisis: poor people's experiences of the food, fuel and financial crises in five countries', mimeo, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

Roubini, N. (2008) 'Systemic Risk Contagion and Trade Finance: Back to the Bad Old days', Blog on Finance and Markets, RGE Monitor (www.rgemonitor.com/financemarkets-monitor/)

Thompson, E. P. (1991) *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, London: Penguin

Credits

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For other briefs on the crisis see www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus11

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