

# THEM BELLY FULL (BUT WE HUNGRY)

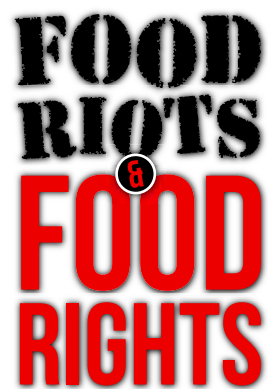
FOOD RIGHTS STRUGGLES IN BANGLADESH,  
INDIA, KENYA AND MOZAMBIQUE

SYNTHESIS REPORT OF A DFID-ESRC PROJECT, 2012-14

FOOD RIOTS AND FOOD RIGHTS:  
THE MORAL AND POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR HUNGER



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Institute of  
Development Studies

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All errors of fact and interpretation remain those of the authors. The views in this report are the authors' alone, and not those of their organisations or their funding organisations.

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report synthesises the findings from the four country case studies produced for the project. It is intended as a summary introduction to the main findings of the research, and a preliminary comparative analysis across the four cases. Further analysis and more outputs, blogs, papers and books and follow-up research are planned. Please visit <http://foodriots.org> for more information.

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

**BJP** Bharatiya Janata Party

**CPM** Community Party of India (Marxist)

**Frelimo** Mozambique Liberation Front

**MP** Member of Parliament

**MDM** Democratic Movement of Mozambique

**NFSA** National Food Security Act

**PDS** Public Distribution System

**RMG** Ready-Made Garments

**RTF** Right to Food

**WFP** World Food Programme

**WTO** World Trade Organisation

*We're not fooled any more by the same old story  
We're coming out to fight the scum  
The thieves  
The corrupt ones  
Shout along with me for this lot to get out  
Shout along with me because the people have given up  
crying  
(...)  
This is Maputo, no one really knows how it happened  
The people who yesterday were sleeping, today are  
wide awake  
All because of the miserable salary you pay  
The people are leaving their homes and smashing the  
first  
window they see  
Because the cost of transport has gone up  
The cost of bread has gone up  
(...)  
Mr President, you left the luxury of your palace  
You finally noticed that life's not easy here  
Only now did you call a meeting of your Council of  
Ministers  
But the people haven't been sleeping, we came together  
a long  
time ago  
We've barricaded the streets  
We've halted the minibuses  
No one is getting past  
Even the shops are shut  
If the police are violent  
We'll respond with violence*

Azagaia, 'Povo no Poder / Power to the People', 2008 (Portuguese lyrics from <http://www.vagalume.com.br/azagaia/povo-no-poder.html> – our translation)

*Cost of livin' gets so high,  
Rich and poor they start to cry:  
Now the weak must get strong;  
They say, "Oh, what a tribulation!"  
Them belly full, but we hungry;  
A hungry mob is a angry mob.*

Extract from Bob Marley and the Wailers, 'Them Belly Full (But We Hungry)', 1974, *Natty Dread*, Island/Tuff Gong

# SUMMARY

## *Food rights or food riots?*

The green revolution and the global integration of food markets were supposed to relegate scarcity to the annals of history. So why did thousands of people in dozens of countries take to the streets when world food prices spiked in 2008 and 2011? Are food riots the surest route to securing the right to food in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The research synthesised here interrogates this moment of historical rupture in the global food system through comparative analysis of Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique in the period 2007-12. This was a period of intensely volatile food prices as well as unusual levels of food-related popular mobilisation - unruly political events like riots but also more organised action like the Right to Food Movement in India. During the global food crisis of 2007-08 alone, 'food riots' (or subsistence protests) were reported in up to 30 countries. In many, including the four in our study, the food crisis triggered changes in domestic food security arrangements. Did popular mobilisation effect or influence such changes? Did new policies and programmes institutionalise action to address hunger in a time when food markets have become markedly more globalised and volatile? What beliefs and expectations drive people on low and precarious incomes to protest – in the face of the possibility of violent repression and the challenges of organising? How do they organise to demand protection against food crises?

The core insight of the research is summarised in the title: Them Belly Full (But We Hungry) refers to the moral fury aroused by the knowledge that some people are thriving while – or because – others are going hungry. This anger rejects gross inequalities of power and

resources as intolerable; it signals that food inequalities have a particularly embodied power – that food is special. Food unites and mobilises people to resist.

## *Studying the politics of provisions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

There are many ways of making sense of these issues. Our approach was to take an actor-centred view of these events. We gained a sense of the scale and type of protests through media content analysis; conducted in-depth work with selected protest movements and communities to explore their motives for and means of organising; and reconstructed the logic of the policy response through interviews with policymakers and practitioners about the events of this time. This combination of ideas about how and why authorities should act, the triggers for protests, means of organising, diversity of official responses and previous history of results from riotous bargaining comprise the 'politics of provisions' (Bohstedt 2010; 2014). This multi-disciplinary approach was led by classic political sociology concerns about state-society relationships, but was also informed by other theoretical and methodological approaches.

## *Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Mozambique*

We selected four countries as case studies of the politics of provisions because their pair-wise similarities and contrasts made comparative analysis (in theory) possible. All have large absolute numbers and proportions of under-nourished, food insecure people. Bangladesh and India share political histories of famine, colonial rule and mass resistance, as well as much in the way of agricultural and food policy. Kenya and Mozambique are relatively poor sub-Saharan African countries with high levels of aid dependence. The international media labelled Bangladesh and Mozambique as sites of food riots during our period, while India and Kenya both featured social movements and civil society activism to establish the right to

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food to greater (India) or lesser (Kenya) extent. The global food price spike of 2008 hit Bangladesh, Kenya and Mozambique far harder than India, which is domestically self-sufficient with respect to staple food grains – and is the main source of rice imports for Bangladesh. The poorest and the low paid urban poor were hit hard in all four countries.

### ***The Rumbles of The Belly***

The research found that political struggles over provisioning rumble on in the background; the contribution of this research is to capture these politics at the interesting and important moment when the rights and responsibilities around food were under negotiation and contestation. Each place experienced very different political struggles, and yet there were similar motifs, including a repeatedly retold story of the superior morality of the 'right' to subsistence against the 'right' to profit from hunger. These movements and struggles can be situated within their ideological and organisational heritage to show that these politics of provisions are perennial struggles. They are not the momentary product of a price spike or period of price volatility, however dramatic that may have been. They are also deeply ideological and strategic, not the reflexive violence (wrongly) ascribed to the hungry. But they are also usually tacit, and often go unnoticed. The rumbling politics of provisions are only audible in the moments of crisis, and then too, usually only when crisis erupts in actual protests or riots about prices (or rations, etc.). Protests and riots are relatively rare – or rarer, at least, than levels of poverty, inequality and oppression might suggest should be the case.

What we are studying here is not new, but our research is uniquely well timed: it is rare to be able to look so closely at these processes as they are in negotiation, and rarer still for the protagonists to be able to recall their motivations. Much of what we know about the politics of provisions comes from the historical analysis of food riots, and relies on the accounts of dead people in societies long gone. But

in the timing of our looking at these issues, we have been granted unique glimpses of the domestic moral and political economies that bind and motivate contemporary food policies as these were negotiated. It has also given us some fresh ideas about what triggers the local eruptions that prompt re-negotiation at precisely these moments of global crisis.

We started this work with the intention of answering what we thought was the key question at this time: did food riots – or popular mobilisation – increase accountability for hunger? The answer is a qualified 'yes': qualified particularly in relation to the important exception (and instructive example) of Kenya and with varying degrees of responsiveness and accountability. But we have also understood more about the elements of our hypothesis. 'Yes' does not mean that food riots forced policymakers into new provisions against hunger in the simple linear model we had originally proposed. We now know much more about both the popular mobilisation and the official repertoires of response they elicit or interact with. We now think that popular mobilisations around subsistence are, in the absence of politer channels of discontent and at a time when 'crisis' is the new normal, vital parts of a functioning machine of public accountability. Popular mobilisation mainly works when someone is listening and responding, so in a material sense, the reverse hypothesis may also be valid: accountability for food security causes popular mobilisation around food because there is no point protesting if you think there is no reason to expect a response.

All of this makes sense if you accept our argument about the politics of food in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: that the politics of provisions are functional for (a minimal, negotiated degree of) food justice. Based on our interpretation of how people argue the rights and responsibilities associated with food, we conclude that the state-society relation is founded upon, among other things, the assurance of a minimal degree of food justice, a concept that captures much more than simply a legal right to food. It is also broader than 'food security'

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precisely because it comprises both a sense of assured access and the more political notion of fairness. In other words, a minimal legitimacy of the state involves at least a moral right to access food. And our focus is less on the static terms of a social contract (which are entirely context-specific) than on the perennial dynamics of negotiation, affirmation and contestation required of a functional politics of provisions in a changing world food system.

Our research focuses on the ruptures in those politics, at the moments when their functionality is no longer fit for the conditions (and of course, food markets are evolving fast) and/or when the terms of the agreement are in flux or dispute. We theorise that six collective, widely-held beliefs combine to create the conditions for a rupture in the form of a food riot or subsistence protest:

- I. We face hunger, while – or because - others profit (this makes the point about fairness, not just physiological hunger)
- II. Food is special – nourishing our cultural and social being, and the single most important item of consumption (this emphasises the importance of quality and control over what we eat, and refuses a view of food as merely nutritious fuel for animal bodies)
- III. We can live with injustice, exploitation and corruption – but not if they strike us in the belly
- IV. We fear that this situation will deteriorate/see no sign of authoritative action
- V. From their past performance, the public authorities have power and can act if so motivated
- VI. We have some organisational means to express our collective discontent.

Even with these conditions in place, a specific trigger tends to be

present, a specific instance of outrage against the moral economic logic within which these beliefs make sense. And riots – in the sense of violent outbursts – tend to occur when protests are met with violence.

When we say we detect a connection, a causal link between popular mobilisation and food policies that are reliable and fair, we are not saying that policymakers design policies to keep rioters happy. Of course this does sometimes happen, but the effects are typically short-lived and weak (for instance, the bungled attempt at subsidising *unga* maize meal in Kenya, the similarly failed effort to issue subsidised rice through outlets in garments factories in Bangladesh, or the promise of a subsidised ‘basic basket’ that was quickly dismissed as a ‘government lie’ by the urban poor in Mozambique). Instead, popular mobilisation reboots the moral economy, reminding the public and their policy elites that they have rights and responsibilities and that legitimacy is at stake. These ruptures can help re-establish the mandate for public authorities to act in crises, clarifying what is expected of them, and how. Protests provide a rough reckoning of the impacts of crises and of the policy responses to them – monitoring as voice rather than as bureaucratic data systems. And the sheer shame of being known to have failed to adequately feed your population – state failure on food security as equivalent to the emasculating failure of the breadwinner to put meals on the table – is, for most rulers, sanction enough.

### **Implications**

#### **Methodological lessons**

A key lesson is that media content, international and national, cannot be relied on for ‘data’ of protests and similar events. Our research design had not fully factored in the variability and idiosyncrasies of

## SUMMARY

reporting, and we concluded that national media coverage was:

- closely shaped by expectations of what constituted ‘news’: in Kenya, coverage could be limited or events ignored because no official response was expected and readers were thought to be uninterested;
- subservient to the discourses and interests of government, in contexts such as Mozambique where economic and political power are highly concentrated;
- biased against reporting rural protests;
- biased against ‘trouble-makers’ (e.g. industrial workers);
- biased towards events featuring violence; and
- formulaic in their accounts with a narrow range of descriptors and limited direct reporting of protestors’ viewpoints.

We also found that

- many protests were not covered at all;
- protest coverage often failed to capture the material grievances at issue; and
- histories and backstories of protest campaigns or groups were generally ignored.

As most research on food riots and others protest relies heavily (until the advent of social media, necessarily) on print media, there are good reasons to be suspicious of the accuracy of the pictures these depict. These are often caricatures of struggles with strategic and thinking agendas, which interact and influence politics and policy.

### ***Food riots as early warning of state failure***

A final word on the rationale for our research: we conclude that international press reports of food riots in (30 or so, depending on

source) countries around the world are unreliable. In our early efforts to make sense of the prevalence of these events in our four case study countries, we looked at national media content for a simple timeline of events. We found that assumptions about ‘food riots’ dissolved easily into more complex diffuse protests and struggles around subsistence - neither always riots, nor always just or mainly about food. The national media see the complexity and hesitate to describe these events as food riots.

This is because in the international media ‘food riot’ has come to signify a serious breach in basic governance functions. Arguably, the term serves less as factual reportage of a political event than as early warning of a failing state. This may be why in our initial searches of media content for ‘food riot’ we arrived at the conclusion that a ‘food riot’ almost invariably occurs elsewhere. The Bangladeshi media reported food riots in India and sub-Saharan Africa; the Indian press labelled Bangladeshi garments workers’ protests ‘food riots,’ but witnessed none at home. A ‘food riot,’ in that sense, is a pointed accusation.

### ***‘Scaling’ the politics of provisions***

The politics of provisions work at a country level, but this means they are ‘mis-scaled’ if the problems people face result (as they largely do) from the global food regime. Yet even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its complex global food economy – or perhaps because its governance is so abstract, distant and unknowable – the achievement of food security is a matter of nationhood, reaching back into colonial history, nationalist struggles and the socialisms of the post-colonial period. The popularity of food policy is ultimately tested against the founding myths of nation, so it is no surprise that protectionist responses to food crises predominate. The nation that eats together stays together. And democratic transitions are a moment when hungry people are able to register their discontent, to greater or lesser (Kenya) effect. People believe their voting behaviour matters, and that their voting intentions influence policy choices.

## THEM BELLY FULL (BUT WE HUNGRY)

What does the global nature of recent price shocks mean for a politics of provisions centred on the nation? The global nature of food systems means taking seriously the need for a properly global politics of food. This means a world moral economy, an international right-to-food movement, and a global response to food crises. But there are several challenges here:

### WHAT TO ORGANISE AROUND AND FOR:

- A global politics of provisions means internationalising an ideology or moral economy built around nationhood and national affiliation. This has happened to a degree in transnational anti-globalisation struggles such as the food sovereignty movement. But (as this report has tried to avoid showing) an ideological alternative to globalised financial capitalism that is both rooted in local realities and universally resonant risks a normative blandness that will bury the seriousness of the politics in platitude.
- Transnational organising around the global food regime is dominated by producer politics, and there is undeniably a delinking of local and national struggles at the food consumption end of the food politics spectrum from the more internationally-networked producer politics. We currently lack a functionally global food consumer movement, despite the many moves in this direction.

### WHO AND WHAT TO TARGET:

- Conceptualising globalisation to politicise a response; the complexities of global food markets and their abstract, virtual nature renders the target of political protest invisible, moving, unreachable. The practicalities of political organisation are not made impossible by globalisation, but the tried and tested means of the food riot does not easily translate into transnational organising.
- Whose behaviour, specifically, needs to change? Global

policymakers are generally deaf to the meanings of food riots, unsophisticated in their understandings of domestic politics, insulated from electoral incentives. Global food policymakers need to be able to hear – and fear – food riots; food rioters need to find better ways of making them listen.

### HOW TO ORGANISE

- Protestors need to create political spaces in which rights claims can be made and translated into language that policy elites can understand – as successful shifts in discourse by the UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food demonstrate.
- But global policymaking has not always been well supported by civil society organising or by international research. Research on ‘food riots’ has rarely amplified protestor voice, and more usually reduced the understanding of causes to the mechanics of price levels and dynamics. Aid-funded civil society often avoids subsistence protests or food rights campaigning. These are contentious issues, and donor governments are wary of subsistence-related struggles because of their historic association with the left and their unruliness. Aid donors’ usual distance from contentious and unruly politics, as well as their investments in pro-market reforms, help to ensure that they and the civil society groups they fund are distanced from struggles over food policy.
- A really key actor is the media: as we have learned from the Indian movement, sympathetic, informed journalism can be the vanguard of a successful food rights struggle

# WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS

In the museum of poverty envisioned by Nobel Peace Prize Winner Muhammad Yunus, the food riot should be Exhibit A. A staple of popular politics during 18<sup>th</sup> century European transitions to capitalist democracy,<sup>1</sup> the food riot is surely an anachronism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: the global integration of food markets and the green revolution were supposed to relegate scarcity and shocks to the annals of history.

Yet in 2008 and 2011, world food prices spiked and global market integration meant food costs jumped in almost all countries around the world. An unknown number of people in dozens of countries protested in waves of international revolt unseen since the European spring of 1848.

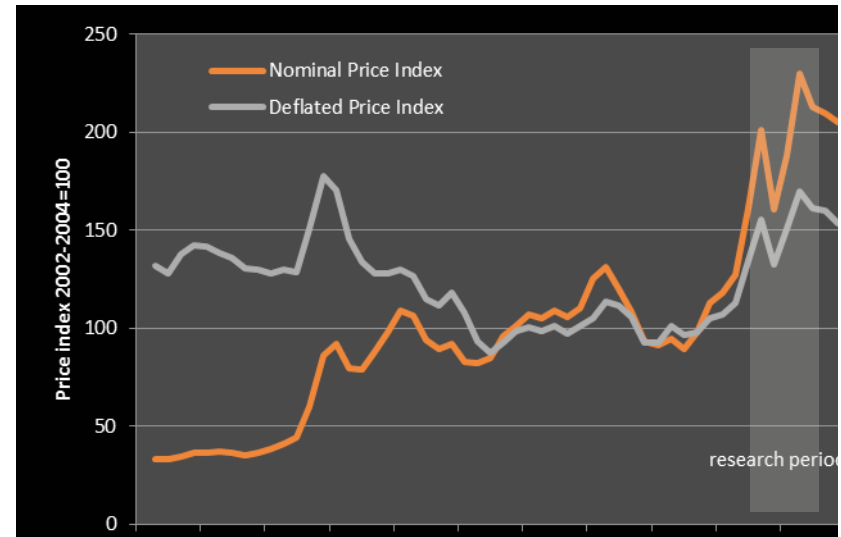


FIGURE 1 WORLD FOOD PRICES, 1960-2014

Source: FAO Food Price Index <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/> [accessed 16 October 2014]

That world food prices spiked and a wave of unruly politics occurred are accepted, but their causal connections have not been interrogated in depth across multiple countries: did people protest because of food price spikes? Or merely at the same time? What did their protests achieve? Governments reacted, but were they influenced by protests? Did their actions secure people's rights to food or were they unaccountable? Do we conclude that people must riot for their food rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

## Crisis as the new normal

These questions arise now because the 2008 and 2011 food price spikes and riots marked a rupture in the transition to global capitalism that echoed comparable moments in the history of European capitalist development. Two decades of cheap food had followed the turbulent

period of 'structural adjustment' to market-oriented development policies in the 1970s and 1980s. Food and fuel prices started to rise just before the 2008 global financial crisis struck, against a backdrop of high-level failures to tackle climate change.<sup>2</sup> This 'perfect storm' of events was matched by a tsunami of uprisings and unrest across the world in 2008. When prices spiked again in 2010-11, food, fuel and financial crises interacted with deeper-rooted sources of discontent to trigger protests across the world: against youth unemployment and authoritarian rule in Africa and the Middle East; rapidly rising inequality and austerity regimes in Europe and North America; and precariousness in relation to basic subsistence, as economic development forced people into greater reliance on volatile markets for their everyday needs. This was an unusually restive international backdrop in which to take crisis management decisions. 'Crisis', it was said in policymaking circles, 'is the new normal'.<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not the rupture of 2007-12 was a crisis or merely light shining through the cracks in the world food system, it forced a recognition of food security as a political matter. Although political variables in crisis response decision-making were generally feared by technocrats as populist drivers of counter-productive protectionism (Timmer 2010), the treatment of global food security as a technical and economic challenge, as framed within development policy, looked increasingly abstruse. The rupture highlighted the fragility of the right to food in a time of economic volatility. It also raised questions about the scope and responsibility for action when global food markets are volatile: who should act? What, realistically, can they do?

### The hunt for a politics of provisions

For the research team, observers of the global food regime and of governance, power and popular politics, our gut reaction was that the protests marked the outer limits of people's tolerance of uncertainty in their most basic needs. Public authority and legitimacy, the very

bases of rule, were endangered by the failure to protect people from food price spikes. This is because the terms of the social contract, the settlement with which the political elite legitimates its rule, rest implicitly on an assumption of protection against subsistence crises.<sup>4</sup>

The chronic hunger of the unorganised poorest does not challenge this legitimacy with quite the power of a food crisis that threatens basic subsistence among the wider society. These questions stay unasked if food prices are low and stable, and people have other things to worry about – unemployment, communal, political or sexual violence, disasters and climate events, corruption or crime. But if spikes are the new normal, people need a more responsive, accountable food regime.

Where could a more responsive, accountable food regime come from? What might it look like? We discounted the possibility that experts can design a system to meet these requirements, given the failure of technocrats and international aid donors to achieve this over a half century of attempts to follow through on promises to end world hunger. Instead, and learning from the history of the development of capitalism, we expected this would emerge out of a 'politics of provisions' (Bohstedt 2010) – an enduring, repeat process of negotiation over mostly tacit understandings of rights and responsibilities. The specifics of those rights and responsibilities will shift with the times, but the form will remain the same. In a functional politics of provisions we would expect people to be able to communicate their beliefs about how food markets should run and what public authorities should do in times of price spikes or scarcity. We would also expect the public authorities to share those beliefs at some level, and be equipped and inclined to respond.

A politics of provisions that is functional for food justice is arguably most urgent in times of volatility and adjustment (such as now), when shocks are most likely. Bohstedt's study of subsistence protests in England's three century transition to a market economy helps us make sense of the different elements of these politics (2010):

## WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS

- Shared ideas about how provisioning should happen and what public authorities should do to protect it (the ‘moral economy’ as defined in Thompson 1971);
- triggers and political opportunities for subsistence protests
- the means and modes people have to organise, and their political ‘repertoires’; and
- the political and policy responses of the public authorities.

The politics of provisions functions to keep governments responsive and accountable – at least to those suffering the effects of shocks –

- when moral economy ideas are at least partly shared by the ruling classes;
- when repression is not so great that affected groups are unable to express their discontent;
- when the public authorities can ‘read’ those protests properly; and
- when a reasonable political and policy response is feasible – practically, fiscally and administratively.

It is helpful to think of this as an accountability mechanism, whose workings become invisible when it is functioning at its best to prevent failures by public authorities to act on subsistence crises. Food riots signal failure.

### Moral economy in a global era

Documenting and understanding the moral economy of contemporary protestors is of core importance to these matters. Unless their motivations and shared beliefs are uncovered, there is the risk of reducing food rioters to bellied bodies. The failure to recognise these as political protests with ideological bases and often also with programmatic agendas would be both bad scholarship and bad policy – an unstrategic deafness to a message that is about more than just a struggle for subsistence in the contemporary food system.

A key concern of this research was to make sense of the motivations and shared beliefs, if any, behind these protests. From the extensive literature about the moral economy in relation to subsistence crises, we asked: to what extent do such shared beliefs reflect concerns about how food markets should work, about rights to food, and about how public authorities should act? Put another way, were people merely angry and hungry, or were their ideas and practices also informed by faith in notions of a moral economy?<sup>5</sup>

In studying these issues we are particularly interested in how the globalisation of recent food crises influences such ideas and their contemporary relevance. Food rioters in 18<sup>th</sup> century England protested in actual marketplaces, blocking grain exports or setting prices in shops. But what if the actual origin of price spikes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the global ‘market’, and the marketplace needing correction is not in Kolkata but Chicago? Of whom should demands for action then be made? The globalisation of food trade has implications not only for normative ideas about how markets should work, but also for who is expected to act, and to whom protests are targeted. Whereas the public authorities may have been local or national when French *sans-culottes* rioted, it is not clear national or local authorities have the same degree of power over food markets in 21<sup>st</sup> century Port-au-Prince. Would it be more rational for food rioters to denounce the World Trade Organisation or the World Bank for promoting the globalisation of the food-agriculture system? Would it be reasonable or realistic to expect them to draw such connections? Why would we expect an agricultural economist in Washington DC to have reason or means to respond to such protests – or to even know that they have happened? Whereas a local official or politician is held to account (if only through their command of authority) when subsistence crises occur, the global technocracy at whom at least some part of these protests may be rationally assumed to be aimed, are immunized against popular politics – at least at country level.

The governments of small countries with highly integrated food markets may lack the power to protect people against food price changes that arise in global commodity markets. Or they may use this as an excuse to explain inaction. Can moral economy ideas survive persistent failures by public authorities? The moral economy in the historical past was fed by its successes; what if food riots fail, or are put down, or become so routine that they are safely ignored? How meaningful can protests and the associated ideas about the moral economy be if their target is a national government that is faced with volatile global food markets?<sup>6</sup>

### The Right to Food and food sovereignty movements

The politics of provisions are already global, through the Right to Food and food sovereignty movements. Both of these important developments in the global politics of food have strong moral economy dimensions, through their normative emphases on how provisioning should be governed. The food sovereignty movement has gained momentum in the past decades specifically through localised grassroots resistance to the globalisation of food, and to defend the values of local control and production systems. Underlying the discourse of food sovereignty, is a notion of systematic transformation and structural change, where it is argued that people are poor not because they are not 'included' (e.g. in markets), but because the terms of their inclusion are embedded in highly unequal, exploitative and oppressive relations (McMichael and Schneider 2011). Food sovereignty calls for the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic food, respecting cultural and productive diversity. This approach is strongly embedded in moral principles of entitlement and redistribution, where resource-poor farmers (especially historically disadvantaged groups composed of women, agricultural workers, indigenous people, landless labourers, etc.) move beyond being framed as 'beneficiaries' towards being in control of the food system (Pimbert 2006). The approach talks explicitly about the power politics of the food system through a rejection of the

corporate food regime and agri-food monopoly power (McMichael 2009), to demand the right of people to define their own food and agriculture. It focuses on large-scale redistributive land reforms, family farming, regionally based food systems, democratisation of agriculture through community rights to water and seed; and opposes development-induced land displacement, land-grabbing and northern agricultural subsidies (La Via Campesina 2011). Moral economic principles regarding the just and equitable distribution of resources, locally and at a global geopolitical level, is foundational in the discourse of food sovereignty. The food sovereignty approach calls for the Right to Food under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to encompass a broader meaning beyond access to food to include an empowerment agenda for marginalised food producers (Mechlem 2004). Food sovereignty is a prerequisite for the right to food.

As the country case studies for this research show, these values were often articulated in various forms in the local food-related struggles we document and analyse. More aligned with our present focus on consumption (rather than production), the Right to Food movement gives us reasons to focus on recent protests and their meanings. If claims to food within the moral economy rest on custom or tradition, how might a legally enforceable human right to food change that? And how might claims based on custom and tradition be translated into a right to food in the first place? To what extent might the institutional and legal basis shape the ideas about how food markets should function? Does a legal right to food pre-empt the need to riot? Do riots seek to establish the legal, enforceable right to food?

# HOW WE DID THIS RESEARCH

## Research questions

With these motivations in mind, the research was designed to answer the following three main questions:

- i. To what extent did grievances about hunger and food price volatility feature in popular mobilisation in 2007-12?

Specifically, what were the grievances, how were they framed and articulated, who mobilised, when and how?

- ii. To what extent were mobilisations between 2007-2012 underpinned by ruptures in moral economies?

Specifically, what are people's expectation of state and market vis-à-vis food? What is the language, dynamics, customs and histories of moral economy thinking and its influences on political life and culture, with particular reference to globalisation?

- iii. What was the political and policy response?

What were the impacts of and response to food price volatility in 2007-12? Did responses amount to increased institutional accountability for hunger?

## Research design

There are many ways of making sense of why people protested and with what effect. The dominant approach in international development

research takes big datasets and analyses correlations between price, political, and protest variables. Big 'n' studies tend to 'sophisticate and quantify evidence which is only imperfectly understood' by relying on 'spasmodic' explanations of why people riot. It is our view that in the absence of an agent-centred understanding of these events, the study of riots reduces political actors to bellied bodies. Our motivations were to understand these riots not as the reflexes of angry hunger but as embodying political perspectives on how food markets should work.

The (undeniably helpful) big picture painted by big 'n' studies runs the risk of becoming cartoonish (protestors cast as mere bellied beings responding to the material stimulus of hunger). But this picture is also coloured by its reliance on media sources as 'data'. Social historical approaches to the study of food riots were of course constrained by the limits of historiography: they could not go and interview people who had participated in protests, and were inevitably reliant on documentary sources. But we are not so constrained, and careful recent work by Sneyd *et al.* supports our own findings about the serious dangers of over-reliance on media accounts of protests as a source of 'data'. No matter how big the sample, the problem of bias remains imprinted indelibly on these data.

Our choice of four in-depth country case studies is based on our assessment of quantitative approaches as both too confident about the value of big 'n' data and too uninterested in actors' interpretations and contexts. We gain only a partial account from these about why or how people protest (or not) when prices spike, nor do they shed much light on the political economic logic of the policy response (or failure to respond).

Our position was that we need an actors'-eye view of these events, and so we focused on;

- gaining a sense of the scale and type of protests through media content analysis to construct 'political event catalogues';

## THEM BELLY FULL (BUT WE HUNGRY)

- interrogating these political event catalogues through in-depth work with selected protest movements and communities to explore their motive for and means of organising; and
- attempting to reconstruct the logic of the policy response through interviews with policymakers and practitioners about the events of this time.

This combination of data collection and analytical strategy aimed to bring together the ideas, triggers, means of organising, and repertoires of response that comprise the politics of provisions. This multi-disciplinary approach was led by classic political sociology concerns about state-society relationships, but borrowed theoretical and methodological aspects of social history, anthropology, development studies, human rights and political science.

While we sought depth and interpretive understanding in each case, we also prioritised the need to make general sense of our findings. We needed to move beyond descriptive analyses of what had happened and why in Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique to surmise what that meant for other similar people in comparable places and times. For this reason, the research was designed to include a comparative analysis. This synthesis report sets out some of the chief findings from that comparative analysis.



## FOUR STRUGGLES FOR FOOD RIGHTS



**BANGLADESH**



## BANGLADESH: THE FOOD RIOTS THAT NEVER WERE

In 2008, the international media listed Bangladesh among the low-income countries that saw food riots during the global food price crisis. The most notable of these events took place in the pre-monsoon heat of April 13<sup>th</sup>, when workers in the export-oriented garments sector took to the streets in a graphic flash of anger at low pay in a time of high and rising staple food prices. Around that time, the Government of Bangladesh set in motion efforts to stabilize food prices, to protect those hit hardest by the spike. These efforts were not simple matters: the crisis was global, not easily managed by a single country government. Meanwhile, India, the main source of Bangladesh's rice imports, closed its borders to protect its own citizens. Yet the Bangladesh authorities ultimately succeeded, and their policy choices and the institutional architecture that made them possible affirmed Bangladesh's reputation for effective and responsive food (if not nutrition) security policy.

This research set out to find out whether these events were causally related: did these 'food riots' trigger or activate these responsive and effective food security policies in any sense? For contemporary Bangladesh, we hypothesized that there were both strong moral economy and powerful political economy reasons to believe that food riots may have played such a triggering role. Garments workers had the means and motive to organise. Policymakers and politicians had the incentives and the institutions with which to respond. To tackle these issues, the research used a multi-sited research methodology that integrated a) catalogues of the numbers and types of protests that occurred, using media content analysis; b) close-grained case studies of the motivations and organization of protest groups using primary qualitative research; and c) semi-structured interviews with key policymakers, activists and scholars, designed to reconstruct the policy thinking of the time.

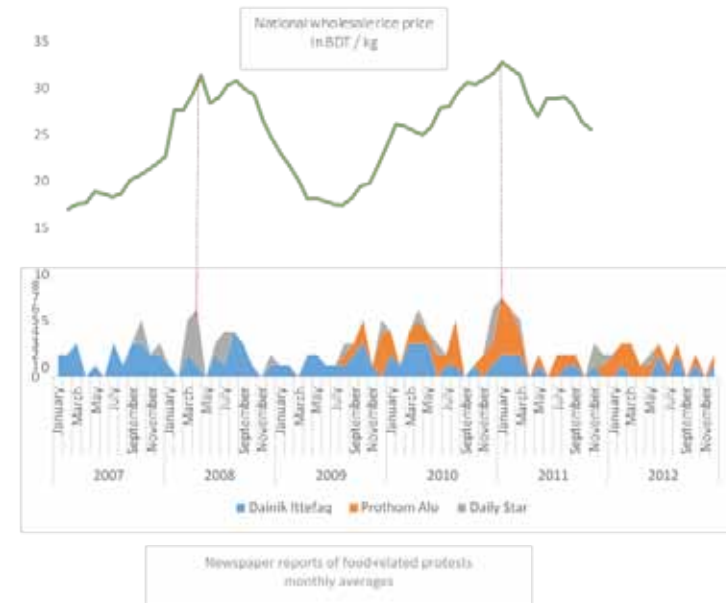


FIGURE 2 RICE PRICE AND PROTESTS IN BANGLADESH, 2007-12

## THEM BELLY FULL (BUT WE HUNGRY)



PICTURE 1 Gaibandha Town, November 2013. This woman has just bought her regulation 5kg of oms rice. People often complain of the quality, but she is showing us that, today, it is good.

The results of the research failed to validate the proposition that riots engendered accountability for hunger in this time and place:

we found no strong evidence that any of the protests, even the most visceral and important, the garments workers' protests, had directly influenced the policy response. But this was not because popular protest had no power in this context. Instead, it reflected the fact that protest was, in the main, less urgent than elsewhere. The garments workers' protests highlighted the plight of low paid urban workers during the food crisis, but for most of the rest of the population, the official machinery was already working to address the situation in its usual mode. If anything, the research findings suggest the causality went in the opposite direction – that the existence (over a longer time period) of relatively effective policies and institutional architecture for response, and an associated expectation of public action during subsistence crises, meant that it made sense for garments workers (and a small number of other groups) to protest at this time. Their basic survival was threatened, they were able to organize, and they had reasonable expectations that their actions would elicit a response.

That the Government of Bangladesh is moderately responsive to acute food shocks does not mean it has resolved its serious and substantial problems of hunger and under-nutrition. That is clearly not the case, in particular for the third of the population subsisting below the ungenerous poverty line (BBS 2011; World Bank 2013). But what Bangladesh does appear to have achieved is a degree of institutionalised responsiveness which, under regular conditions, and in comparative perspective, works reasonably effectively to prevent mass descent into hunger (FAO 2014). The poorest and the chronically hungry never, in any case, protest. This means it is the protection of the middle sections of the poor and the vulnerable non-poor against that sudden descent which defuses the possibility of riot.

Looked at closely, both the 'food riots' and the policy response turned out to be more ambiguous and contingent than their headlines

## FOUR STRUGGLES FOR FOOD

suggested. What the long lenses of the global media framed as ‘food riots’ looked different up close and through the filter of domestic politics. Arguably, these were not food riots in any common sense of the term. As for the policy response, while over the medium term this was sound enough, for those facing hunger it was too late and perhaps also too little. That the government of the moment was an unelected military-backed caretaker regime lent the perception that the lagged response reflected the absence of powerful electoral pressures for action. Tellingly, the popular assessment of the situation was that a democratically-elected (‘political government’) would have responded faster and better (though it is not clear whether this is correct). In any case, by the time the official response was in gear, the strong supply response from local farmers helped push the rice price back down in 2009 (M. Hossain and Deb 2010; M. Hossain 2010). By 2011, the Government was better prepared for the spike, and was able to stabilise domestic prices and improve access to staples through Open Market Sales.

The garments workers’ protests did not cause the policies that helped people to manage the food price spike, but our analysis suggests that these events were correlated: both were rooted in the moral and political economy of subsistence crises in Bangladesh. Our analysis of the 2007-12 period is a mere snapshot of a more dynamic historical cycle of interaction between popular mobilisation and policy responses. During this period, ‘food riots’ did not trigger the policy response, but over the longer term the causality seems to run in the other direction. Garments workers protested because they were excluded from the protections enjoyed by other Bangladeshis, and because they had good reason to believe that responsive and effective policies could also be established for them. Their struggle – framed as wages and workers’ rights, not food rights – continues.

We conclude that ‘food riots,’ or subsistence protests, did not occur on any significant scale in Bangladesh because the extraordinary

sacrifices they require were less needed here than in some of the other countries. It is important to emphasise again that the poorest and most hungry do not, in this context, protest (N. Hossain 2005). But for those organisationally and personally equipped to mobilise, there is a functioning ‘politics of provisions’ that ensures that ruling elites cannot ignore mass subsistence crises like 2008 – or at least they cannot do so without incurring a disempowering loss of legitimacy. For politico-historical, electoral and possibly ecological reasons, the compact between the Bangladeshi masses and their ruling elites centres on the protection of subsistence during shocks. The memory of the 1974 famine casts a long shadow over food policy here, serving as a constant and painful reminder of the fragility both of subsistence and of political legitimacy in this context. The politics of provisions in Bangladesh work to keep basic food security, albeit not nutrition or chronic hunger, atop the political and policy agenda. Few Bangladeshis need to risk actual food riots because most of those likely to protest and exposed to such shocks receive the protection they need, more or less when they need it. By the time a riot occurs, it is already too late: the threat of the loss of legitimacy is powerful enough to drive a reasonable policy and political response.

INDIA



## INDIA: THE RIGHT RESPONSE

The Indian experience stands in contrast to the other cases we explored. First, India did not witness the food price volatility that corresponded with global price hikes. The period from 2007-2012 was characterised instead by a steady increase in national prices, which rose along with global prices, but failed accompany the decline in global food prices. By 2013, food price inflation in India was the highest the country had seen in three decades.

Second, and consequently, popular mobilisation did not take the form of food riots, with the exception of West Bengal (see below). Rather, rising inflation and narrowing access to food (from forests and rural patronage links) led to popular mobilisation around food, led by opposition parties as well as social movements like by the Right to Food Campaign initiated in 2000. Food prices have historically been a political issue in India, but the Right to Food Campaign has given it a particular form and visibility in recent years. Finally, popular mobilisation was mainly rural.

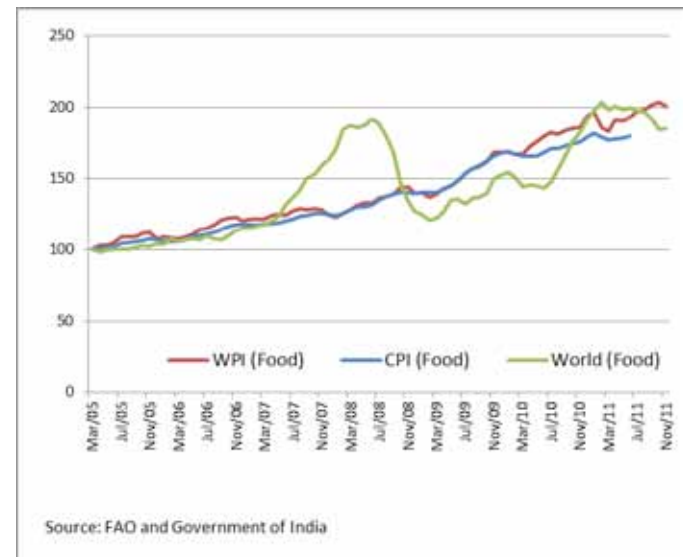


Photo Credit: Right to Food Campaign

FIGURE 3 FOOD PRICES, INDIA AND THE WORLD, 2005-11

Given the diversity of India, we chose to focus mainly on mobilisation around food insecurity and malnutrition in one state, Madhya Pradesh, which represents the archetypal strategy for organising a right-to-food movement at the grassroots and linking it up to policy strategizing at the national level. Against this backdrop was the unusual case of the violent riots in West Bengal, where angry villagers burnt private shops with licenses to sell subsidized food, and rose up against the perceived corruption of shop dealers in cahoots with the ruling Left Front government.

Thus the main plot of the Indian story, of which the Madhya Pradesh narrative is an example, suggests that citizens, to varying degrees, place accountability for hunger squarely at the doorstep of the Indian state; and state officials, at least rhetorically, acknowledge this responsibility. Popular mobilisation has taken place in India against rising food prices (despite little food price volatility) in varying forms, and ultimately some institutionalisation of such accountability has

## THEM BELLY FULL (BUT WE HUNGRY)

occurred through the passage of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013.

PICTURE 2 MARCH TO A FOOD CORPORATION OF INDIA GODOWN IN ROURKELA, ODISHA (2010) AS PART OF THE “TALA KHOLO (OPEN THE LOCKS) ABHIYAN” ACROSS THE COUNTRY DEMANDING IMMEDIATE DISTRIBUTION OF FOODGRAINS FROM GOVERNMENT STOCKS AT SUBSIDISED PRICES.



Yet the roots of this politics around food began long before 2007, and have to be located within a longer trajectory of state initiatives and popular mobilisations. Longstanding issues such as memories of famine and hunger from earlier periods, including the Bengal famine of 1943, the history of operation and expansion of the Public Distribution System providing subsidized food since the 1960s, the debates around the setting of the poverty line, the ‘Right to Food’ case that started in 2001, and the related Supreme Court orders that followed, all form part of the public imagination of both those mobilising as well as those responding to food insecurity of the poorest.

Moreover, even over this longer trajectory, while one might argue that popular mobilisation, including the Right to Food campaign, has evoked accountability for hunger in the form of the passing of

the NFSA, this is a story larger than the popular mobilisation as a response to food price inflation, or even about the moral economy underpinning access to food. The broader environment of the decades starting in the 2000s has been one where socio-economic entitlements of all kinds are being demanded as well as accepted as legitimate by the state (as reflected by the legislating of entitlements related to right to education, right to work, right to information etc.).

To put flesh on this skeletal storyline, let us start with the riots in West Bengal, which had their roots in the differential prices of subsidized vs. market grains. When wheat prices (which were usually not much higher in the market) rose as a result of inflation, there was a growing demand for the subsidized wheat. However, when this was unavailable, due to the imposition of quotas by the central government (or corruption, as it was perceived), there was widespread dissatisfaction among the slightly better off villagers, which led to spontaneous protests to demand that ration shop owners replenish the supplies they had diverted to the open market or refund the villagers. The rioters themselves had been emboldened by the opportunities opened up by the prevailing mood of ‘*poribortan*’ (change) in the state with the popular opinion turning against the ruling Left Front government and what was seen as industry-friendly policies taking land away from farmers. The policy response in West Bengal took the form of demanding larger allocations of subsidized wheat from the central government, which were denied. Later, there was a reduction in the price of rice allocated through the public distribution system on the eve of the elections. This was all there was by way of state intervention, despite the protests being sharper and more violent. This partly reflected the fact that the central government controlled the supply of non-BPL grain, and resisted claims for increased allocations by West Bengal.

## FOUR STRUGGLES FOR FOOD

PICTURE 3 FOOD RIOTS IN BIRBHUM



Photo Credit: Outlook Magazine (<http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?235898>)

By contrast, Madhya Pradesh is a more mainstream story, where food insecurity did not evoke spontaneous protests, and of how social movement activism around the right to food could activate accountability for hunger. Our research suggested that food price inflation issues were also linked to a range of other rises in cost of living and declining access to local food sources such as own farming, forests etc. In the tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh we studied, reduced self-sufficiency was resulting in out-migration. Malnutrition was an acute issue, highlighted several times in the national media. Mobilisation around malnutrition occurred in pockets, and in Satna was led by a local organization that was linked to the state and national level right-to-food campaign (a feature true of popular mobilisation around food in other states as well). These links with state and national level actors provided leverage to the mobilisation vis-à-vis local actors. Furthermore, these links

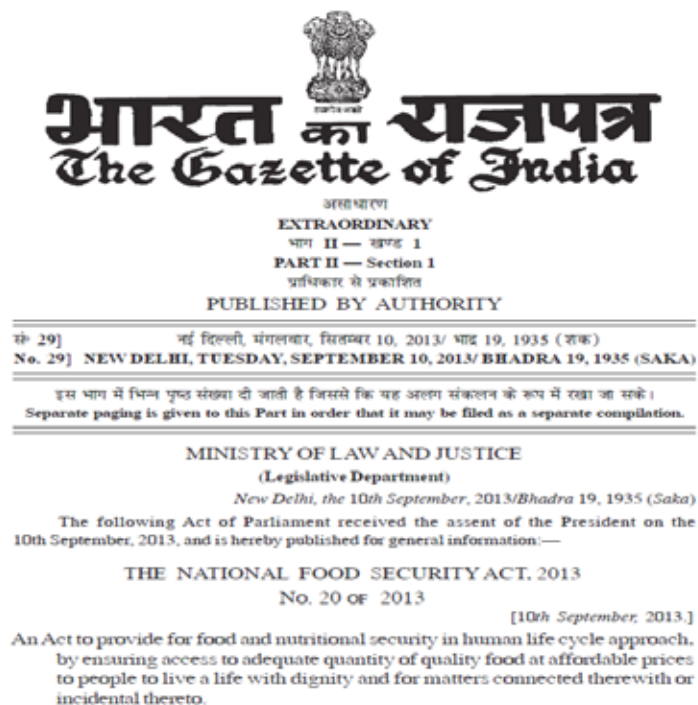
also offered new sources of information, mobilising strategies, new repertoires of action (such as public hearings) and access to media networks that enabled the organization to punch above its weight. During this period of high salience of malnutrition along with the pockets of mobilisation, Madhya Pradesh saw a slew of long-term measures in dealing with the problem of malnutrition and hunger. Thus, in both cases, while access to food formed part of the causes of mobilisation, political opportunities (often unpredictable) opened up new spaces for action.

At the national level, the Right to Food campaign gained legitimacy from hundreds of such grassroots groups, enabling it to demand comprehensive policies to ensure food security. The policy response on the part of the state has been substantial: in 2012 India finally passed the National Food Security Act, which provides a series of entitlements to food through state led programmes. Although the passing of a law does not ensure security against hunger, it has moved one step towards a robust politics of provision. The campaign was able to achieve this partly because of its simultaneous critical and constructive stance. As a senior policy maker stated:

*a campaign which is only in the mode of a critique and in the mode of setting up of rights has its limitations – it must get engaged in the difficult task of reform...it has to basically 'work the state' ... the anger of the people have to be mobilised into a constructive direction.*

Another senior policymaker noted that the Right to Food campaign engaged in 'refining the moral economy – not just showing the moral bankruptcy of the state but showing how it can be reformed...'.

FIGURE 4 THE NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY ACT, 2013



The National Food Security Act has now opened up new possibilities in the battle against hunger. Yet, India is a long way from addressing structural inequities: including (but not restricted) to the agrarian crisis, land, gender relations, and restrictions on access to natural resources that are primarily responsible for impoverishing people. This leaves us with the question whether the state response is merely to ameliorate rural distress and keep it at a manageable level in order to contain popular discontent.

**KENYA**



## KENYA: PLUNDER OR BLUNDER ?

Kenya is not prepared for another spike in global and regional food and energy prices. In 2008, Kenya suffered from the combination of post-election violence, rising prices for food and fuel internationally and poor harvests nationally, which sent the annual rate of food price inflation as high as 27 per cent. This, and a subsequent spike in 2011, sparked protests both large and small, the most visible and memorable being the *Unga Revolution*.

The cost of living began to rise noticeably in Kenya from 2002, when the new regime embraced the free market and Kenya's economy started to grow. Millions of low paid informal workers and small farmers found themselves less and less able to make ends meet in an increasingly commercialised economy. In 2005, *Bunge la Mwananchi*, (the 'ordinary people's parliament'), began agitating loudly about cost of living issues at its public meetings in Nairobi and other city centres. Activist leaders were protesting in their vibrant weekly outdoor debates as well as in behind-the-scenes campaigns in low-income neighbourhoods.

The price of maize, Kenya's staple food, depends mainly on the local harvest, although to meet its growing shortfall the country increasingly relies on imports from Tanzania, Uganda and beyond. While responding to world prices especially of oil, prices are also strongly affected by Government of Kenya policies that protect larger producers by maintaining high prices. When world food prices rose in 2008, Kenya's prices also climbed rapidly. But while world prices started to fall in mid-2008, returning to 2007 levels by the end of the year, Kenya prices continued to climb all the way through 2009.

On May 31<sup>st</sup> 2008, police broke up a *Bunge la Mwananchi*-organised demonstration and arrested leaders. Undeterred, *Bunge* continued to organize a series of protests, culminating in a high-profile disruption of Independence Day celebrations in December 2008. The name

'*Unga Revolution*', as it came to be known (*unga* is the maize flour that most Kenyans eat every day), was first heard on Labour Day 2009, when workers heckled the Labour Minister. Chants of '*unga!*' '*stima!*' (electricity!) and '*maisha ngumu!*' (life is hard!) were heard. Activists and ordinary protesters were arrested, giving immense publicity to the protest.

In 2010 Kenyans received a new constitution, including a bill of rights. For the first time Kenyans were guaranteed, among other economic and social rights, progressive realisation of a right to be 'free from hunger, and to have adequate food of acceptable quality' (Article 43 (1)(c)). But in 2011, when food and transport prices shot up yet again and once again stayed high even after world food and fuel prices dropped back, and when there was little response from government, the Unga Revolution re-emerged with repeated marches on Nairobi city centre, demanding that the right to food be respected. Media coverage of the protests tended to focus on the colourful demonstrations and the arrests, rather than giving any details of the issues and their genesis.

No protests were registered in the national press in rural areas, but our researchers learned that there had been numerous small incidences of spontaneous riot, often at moments when inadequate relief food was being distributed in ways that people felt were opaque and unfair. Meanwhile teachers and medical workers came out on strike several times during our study period, calling for a living wage, and the consumer federation took the state to court for undermining the right to food through failing to control the price of fuel.

The Government's response appeared inadequate to the inhabitants of our two research sites. Government officials responded to the protests with a mix of repression – arrests and threats – and appeasement – promises and small handouts. Short-term measures included a three-month subsidy of maize meal to urban consumers. This policy was developed without attention to how the subsidy would

actually reach consumers, whether deliberately or not is unclear, and as a result of this 'plunder or blunder', the bulk of it was promptly bought up by entrepreneurs, repackaged and sold on at high prices. Another measure, dubbed the 'maize scandal' by the press, involved the loss of an estimated 27 million dollars. Late in 2008, a year after prices had begun to rise, the government announced that imported maize which would be sold at half the cost price to gazetted millers. These millers would then sell it on at low prices to consumers. The low prices never materialised. People in Nairobi's urban slums, watching the story in the media, felt a mix of cynicism, despair and outrage. After this failure, government lifted the 50 per cent import tax on grain imports. Traders moved immediately to bring in food, importing more than a million tonnes in a month. The port and transport links jammed. It took eight months before prices finally began to fall.

Policy makers admit that the measures were driven by momentary political anxiety rather than commitment to institute a sustained accountable response to hunger that might effectively mitigate the differential impact of food price shocks on millions of people on low incomes.

Kenya's drought response and famine relief programmes have all but eliminated hunger-related deaths over the last two decades. While this is laudable, it leaves unaddressed the problem of chronic hunger or persistent undernourishment caused by high food prices. Since the price rises of 2008, Kenyans eat less, and eat cheaper but less nutritious foods. Kenya is now the African country with the fourth-highest rate of undernourishment (FAO estimates were that 26 per cent of Kenyans were undernourished in 2012): not starving, but suffering from an inadequate intake of nutrients.

Donors have supported efforts to create social safety net programmes for the most vulnerable. Examples include cash transfer programmes for the elderly, orphaned and vulnerable children, those living with HIV/AIDS, and through a Hunger Safety Nets Programme. These

have limited coverage, and heavy donor dependence raises questions on their sustainability.

The fundamental obstacle to securing affordable food is two-fold. First, skewed policies such as maize marketing interventions and production subsidies that benefit only the producers of surplus: 50 per cent of Kenya's maize production comes from only 2 per cent of farmers; and 70 per cent of Kenya's small-scale maize farmers are net buyers, meaning that they end up buying more than they sell, so the producer prices offered as an incentive by the National Cereals and Produce Board are ultimately of no benefit to them. The second factor is government failure to hold to account its own officials as well as millers and grain traders engaging in corrupt and predatory practices that drive food prices up.

Citizens' expectations of the state have been dampened by years of experience of a system that rewards the rich and makes unpredictable and inadequate gestures to the poor. This has translated into a weak moral economy around food and dampened popular mobilisation and allowed media to revel in the spectacle but not the content of protests. A system of accountability for hunger that delivers on the constitutional right to food is unlikely to be secured without a national right-to-food movement that cuts across urban and rural parts of the country in a sustained effort to eradicate predatory and corrupt practices in food markets and food aid.

# MOZAMBIQUE



## MOZAMBIQUE: BURNING TYRES, PROTEST RAP AND AUTHORITARIAN RESPONSIVENESS

After a brutal civil war ended in 1992, Mozambique became a byword for political stability and an exemplar of neoliberal reform followed by steady economic growth. The failure of this growth to reduce either the extent of food insecurity or the number of Mozambicans living in poverty – which actually rose by almost a million people in the five years to 2008 despite an average annual economic growth rate of 8 per cent – was challenged by only a few critical voices (Hanlon and Cunguara 2010). As a ‘donor darling’, the country obediently aligned itself with the dictates of the Washington Consensus and was rewarded with ever-larger volumes of aid, even as its once-robust industrial and agro-processing infrastructure was dismantled and it slipped back into dependence on primary commodity exports. The ruling party, Frelimo (the Mozambique Liberation Front), continued an authoritarian political tradition dating back to the one-party state period that had followed the end of Portuguese colonial rule. Frelimo’s grip on power was legitimated by a series of local and national election victories, financed by the wealth accrued from a virtual monopoly of business opportunities and enforced by a network of party cells that extended into every neighbourhood, state-owned company or government office.

Yet in February 2008 and again in September 2010, the ruling elite was taken by surprise and shocked into policy reversals after the capital Maputo and a number of other towns and cities were paralysed by protests. These protests followed the government’s announcement of increases in the prices of bread, urban transport (known as *chapa*) and other state-regulated goods and services. Improvised barricades and burning tyres blocked off access to central business districts. Crowds of protesters refused to leave the streets in the face of strident condemnation from the authorities and a violent response from the police. Text messages calling for

all Mozambican citizens to join a *greve* – literally a ‘strike’ – spread virally, until the government forced the mobile operators to shut down their SMS services. Rap musicians celebrated the advent of ‘people power’, and openly satirised the Frelimo elite as corrupt and out of touch. Voices of dissent spread beyond the *chapa* stops and street markets, flooded online social networks and began to be heard across the hitherto largely subservient news media. In both 2008 and 2010 the government began by denouncing the protests as either political subversion or mindless vandalism – but ended up by reversing the price rises that had triggered the initial mobilisations, and announcing a raft of policies aimed at reducing food insecurity.

During the research that we carried out in sites which had seen protests in 2008 and/or 2010 – three popular neighbourhoods in Maputo and a rural and an urban area in Chokwe, a market town in the flood-prone Limpopo valley – our interviewees and focus group participants identified a number of government policy announcements and actions as having been a direct response to the riots. Although they were mostly dismissive of these measures’ ability to make a difference to everyday food security, people saw the fact that they had been announced at all as powerful evidence of the effectiveness of the *greve* as a political strategy – and of a wider sea-change in attitudes among both the citizenry and elites, with the former waking up to the power of mobilisation and the latter learning not to take the urban masses for granted.

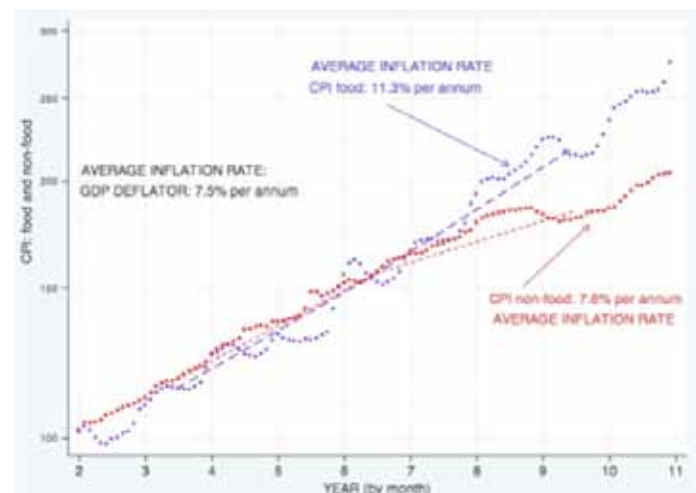
People in these areas were outspoken in their contempt for the current ruling elite clustered around President Armando Emilio Guebuza, but differentiated it from previous incarnations of Frelimo rule – especially the heroic socialist period under Samora Machel, in which hunger was remembered as an experience that was shared by rulers and ruled, as government ration shops distributed the meagre food supplies that were available in an economy ravaged by civil war and agricultural collapse. Regardless of the historical accuracy of this perception, the nostalgic refrain ‘in Samora’s day...’

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was a recurrent one in our interviews and focus group discussions, used to signify a period not only of greater economic equality but also of Presidential intolerance of corruption and self-interest among government officials.

Another refrain was the popular phrase *quem não trambuca não manduca* – ‘those who do not work, do not eat’. The moral economy in both rural and urban Mozambique is strongly marked by a perception that food security is something to be earned through hard work by everyone except the very elderly or infirm. The government’s violation of this moral economy is perceived as lying not in a failure to provide food directly but in a failure to preserve the relationship between wages and food prices. The result of this failure is that the idle children of the elite grow fat while even the hardest-working semi-skilled labourer cannot earn enough to feed a family – a situation described by one middle-aged man in the Maputo neighbourhood of Ferroviário as a ‘psychological torture’ consciously perpetrated by the government. Focus group participants recalled that food prices had also risen in the 1990s under another Frelimo president, Joaquim Chissano, but insisted that during that period wages had risen enough to keep pace, whereas since 2008 they have been outstripped by inflation. The situation is even more serious for the poorest workers, who are forced to spend a higher proportion of their wages on food, because since 2008 food price inflation has pulled ahead of the general rise in consumer prices.

**FIGURE 6 CONSUMER PRICE INDEX FOR FOODSTUFFS VERSUS OTHER GOODS IN MOZAMBIQUE, 2002-2010**



Source: Wuyts 2011

Although government spokespeople insistently tried to shift the blame for price hikes onto international markets, the protestors insisted that the government itself was responsible for the resulting squeeze on their ability to travel to work by *chapa* and still afford a basic diet. Despite the fact that most former state-owned companies have been privatised and the vast majority of workers are in the informal sector, the fact that the protests were referred to as *greves* – strikes – suggests a popular imaginary of the government as an employer refusing to allow its employees to earn a fair wage. Frelimo has undoubtedly fed this imaginary by trying to become omnipresent in social, political and economic spaces, by continuing to appeal to the legacy of the socialist one-party state and by its leaders’ tendency to make grand promises on which they have no ability to deliver – like the promise to quintuple wheat production made after the 2008 protests or the announcement after the 2010 protests that the urban

poor would have subsidised access to a 'basic basket' of foodstuffs, neither of which produced any concrete results.

In November 2012, popular mobilisation for another *greve* began in response to a fresh set of price hikes, but the government managed to avert renewed rioting by using a three-pronged strategy. The first prong was macroeconomic policy: this was based on using what an academic who was one of our key informants called an 'anti-riot exchange rate' to moderate the impact of global price rises on the local cost of imported commodities such as wheat and fuel. The second prong was dialogue: the price rises were announced well in advance and in combination with specific mitigation measures, and officials used radio phone-ins to test the popular response to these measures before their official introduction. The third prong was repression: SMS services were again restricted, and potential flashpoints were flooded with riot police on the day that the increase took effect.

Thus, between 2008 and 2012, a form of 'authoritarian responsiveness' seems to have come to the fore in Mozambique's politics of provisions, in which repression of protest is combined with increased sensitivity to the concerns of the urban poor.

This is not a responsiveness mediated by democratic institutions: donor-supported civil society efforts to build a sustained campaign on food security issues came to nothing, and a draft bill on the right to food was shelved before making its way through Parliament. Despite significant gains by the urban-based Democratic Movement of Mozambique (MDM) party in the 2013 municipal elections, and a strong challenge to Frelimo's hegemony by both the MDM and the older, mainly rural-based opposition party Renamo in the October 2014 Presidential elections, neither Frelimo nor either of the main opposition parties has incorporated concrete measures to tackle the rising cost of living into a consistent political platform.

There is therefore little sign that the protests have led Mozambique

to overcome its longstanding failure to consolidate a repertoire of peaceful and democratic modalities of citizen-state dialogue on poverty and food insecurity. Nevertheless, the government's changed behaviour between 2008 and 2012 seems to reflect an awareness that its previous cavalier disregard for the impact of price rises on the food and livelihood security of the urban poor is no longer tenable.

# WHAT WE LEARNED

## The politics of provisions in contemporary developing countries

Our most important shared findings are that a politics of provisions rumbles on in the background of each of these countries, regardless of food price spikes or inflation. These are ongoing negotiations, but they grab attention only at moments when the tacit consensus on which they rest is shaken. It is then that they need reaffirmation or adjustment, whether that is because of the rapid changes in the world food economy, or because of how people's relation to it has altered. And these politics are ideological and strategic, not the reflexive acts of hungry, angry animals. They work, to a greater or lesser degree, to keep states to an implicit bargain about protection against the extremes of subsistence shocks.

## Moral economies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

A key point about these domestic politics of provisions is that they are ongoing, an always-incomplete negotiation between rulers and ruled. Negotiations do not start at the point at which prices spike or crops fail, and they only pause when a new food security programme is enacted. As the Indian case shows, a successful social movement can politicise even chronic hunger, so that negotiations continue even when no particularly acute episode is to hand. Yet even in India, food price inflation sparked action in West Bengal, at a moment of major political unrest. The country cases are a mere snapshot of a picture that has been developing over a longer period.

At stake in these negotiations is broadly the right to protection against subsistence shocks. The specifics of the negotiations, including who has the moral authority to make which claims against whom – are

highly context dependent. But broad outlines of the negotiating positions are often similar across cases. Such protections may – and frequently do – entail curbing the power to profit from (in some instances, to cause) subsistence crises. The Indian case aside, it is interesting to note how often these rights are conceived in negative terms, as the right to protection against immoral or criminal acts popularly believed, often with good reason and media coverage, to prevent people from eating as well as they ought. In our cases, these include the suspicions that:

- Mozambican politicians are being deliberately cruel when they allow food prices to rise beyond the reach of the urban working class;
- wheat ration dealers in West Bengal continue to make illicit profits when public food allocations are cut even while grain prices rise;
- Bangladeshi factory owners profit from low minimum wages while their workers choose between rice or rent; and
- maize millers pocket a government subsidy intended to be passed onto Nairobi slum-dwellers.

Each of these has a strong popular moral sentiment expressing, variously, discontent over inequality, unfairness, exploitation and oppression, and protection of the oppressors and the corrupt by the very power-holders who are mandated to uphold and protect rights. We do hear in these rumbles, particularly in India, Kenya, and to a more modest extent, Bangladesh, claims for positive action to realise economic and social rights – demands for subsidised food most notably. In Mozambique, the protestors called for prices that are controlled by the government – notably those of bread and urban transport – to be brought back into line with the wages of the urban poor. Yet this is not an outright rejection of the market *per se*. Instead, it is mainly a claim for protection from markets that work

## WHAT WE LEARNED

only to benefit the powerful.

Let us put this another way: we can hear, in these rumbles, a view which is mistrustful of markets for the most vital elements of subsistence. This is on grounds that these frequently fail to work in favour of the poor and politically weak. These are clear calls for market regulation, and are heard even among the small shopkeepers and traders who supply the bottom end of the market:

*Things were good during Kenyatta's time because if he instructed that the price of a certain thing should go up by one cent, that is what happened. If his officers found that you had increased it by more than that, you would be punished.* [Mathare, Kenya, Roadside food sellers]

*In a way, price controls, like we had before Moi's time, would help ...The government would select basic commodities and set the price for those at a level where even the person at the bottom can afford* [Ikutha, Kenya, Retailers].

In Kenya, as in Mozambique, price controls from the pre-structural adjustment era of the 1970s and 80s were sometimes recalled nostalgically as means of controlling markets rigged in favour of the powerful. But there was no notable support for a government-run system of provisioning in general. This was true even in countries like Mozambique and India from which, with their various experiences of communist and socialist models, alternative visions of this kind might have been expected to emerge. In Mozambique, the rumble of protest was tinged with nostalgia for the austere fairness of a socialist age when access to food was managed through government ration shops. Yet the most positive memories were not of 'Samora's time' but rather of Chissano's: a period after economic liberalisation when food was more abundant and prices rose, but wages were at least able to keep pace. Even the Communist Party of Bangladesh-backed

fair markets struggle in the northern district of Gaibandha was seen as about getting markets to work better for the masses rather than as they are currently seen to do, for the elites.

There is an interesting ambivalence here worth mentioning: for at least some of these protest communities, engagement in markets, including food markets, has been partly liberating. This may be particularly true for marginalised or excluded groups (for instance, the *adivasis* in Madhya Pradesh), for whom food rights may in the past have depended more entirely on patronage relations coloured by primordial affiliations like ethnicity or caste or religion. The ambivalence of marginalised groups towards their dependence on food markets for basic subsistence comes across in both how women garment workers in Dhaka are viewed and in how they themselves discuss their motivations for protest (See Fraser 2011a). These women have experienced both the commoditisation of their rights to food and the liberation from the patriarchal bargain that fed them in the past. Their rights to food were rooted in rural family structures where they were fed (sometimes reluctantly and with weaker rights than their brothers or husbands) as daughters, daughters-in-law, wives and eventually, as mothers. Now they earn independently, (unfairly low, sometimes unpredictable) cash wages to feed themselves and their dependants in a volatile food economy. It is arguably not the trading of food for cash that matters here: people have a right to earn a living from food production, and where these issues were explored, we heard considerable sympathies for the constraints facing small farmers. Even urban consumers struggling to buy food recognised that food producers need to make a decent living – and that their production systems were also skewed in favour of grain traders, speculators and food business interests. So while not fundamentally anti-market with respect to the food trade, these struggles display a deep suspicion of market actors and market operations as rarely free and usually unfair. Because food markets are a) rigged in favour of the powerful and b) so very important

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to people on low and precarious incomes, they are in particularly urgent need of regulation. Food markets need to be tamed and subordinated - or socialised, as (Holt-Giménez and Patel 2012) have argued - to serve their primary purpose (that they feed the people before earning unfair profits).

Although the immediate action required did not in every case point to the action of central government in the first instance, the authority of the state in making new or enforcing existing rules is implied. Expectations of the central state varied widely across the contexts. For indigenous communities in the case study in Madhya Pradesh in India, the role of the state as bearing the responsibility for the realisation of the right to food was something that not many of them were conscious of before the Right to Food groups pointed this out. The moral economy there had until recent times been formulated within the customary relations of agricultural land tenure and labour arrangements. Engagement with the Movement and the state raised their expectations of it with respect to the protection of their subsistence rights. Similarly, we see in the protests by Bangladesh's garments workers a shift in the locus of responsibility for the protection of their food security from families and communities to the state, which is mandated to set minimum wages at a level at which subsistence is possible.

In both India and Bangladesh, however, the public authorities accept, to a significant degree, that they have such a role. It is notable that in Kenya, protests expressing moral claims to *unga* (maize meal) at a time of steep price rises largely fell on deaf ears; there was little or no sign that the moral economy of the Kenyan protestors was shared by the Kenyan political elite. Even protestors recognised that their rights were contingent on their identity and affiliation, noting that when 'our (from our ethnic group) president' was in power, help was available. In Mozambique, by contrast, there was no ethnic dimension to the protests, and neither were there accusations of party-political

discrimination – not least because the riots were most widespread in the Frelimo heartland of Southern Mozambique, where Maputo is located. The rioters framed their discontent in class terms: the 'them and us' element articulated in text messages and rap songs and echoed by focus group participants in poor neighbourhoods Maputo referred to a corrupt and self-centred elite that wilfully neglected the claims of the hard-working poor.

*Since this President Guebuza came in, things have been expensive. Even wages are falling (...) There's a lot of wealth, but they're eating it. Just that little group! (...) No one else gets anything.*

[Focus group participant in Chamanculo, Maputo]

The eruptions that studded these rumbling politics during the volatile 2007-12 period can be seen as efforts to contest failures or to establish or reaffirm the terms of the compact on the protection of subsistence during shocks. This worked, to greater and lesser extent, in each setting. In that sense, the 'food riots' established or served to remind public authorities of their mandate for action in crisis moments. Many of the actions then taken were short-lived or tokenistic. But they signalled an acceptance of responsibility. Another way of saying this is that these are efforts to establish a generalised accountability for protection of subsistence; this tends to be articulated most clearly when contesting the earning of immoral and/or illegal rents from, or during, crisis conditions.

### Timing and triggers: political opportunities and moments

These comments on the ideological content of contemporary politics of provisions only go so far in their explanation of why people protested at this time, at this place, and to what effect. To get deeper into this matter, we learn from our case studies that it is necessary to understand how the wider context – the food price situation in particular – interacted with and gave rise to specific triggers.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

In terms of timeframe, we lack a clear picture of the universe of food-related protests in these countries even for this period: our research quickly uncovered the limitations of relying on media sources for even the most basic event counts analysis (see Tilly 2008). Assuming media outlets are consistently biased, however, we believe we have developed a sketch of the overall prevalence of the most prominent food-related protests during 2007-12 in these countries. We have a far firmer grasp of the protests and struggles for which we undertook in-depth analysis. Combining our (biased media-sourced) political events catalogue quantitative data with our qualitative explorations, we were able to arrive at some key conclusions about the type and nature of the protests, and what they mean.

Food-related protests and organising were by no means common, even during the febrile days of 2008. Subsistence protests – protests with food or other aspects of basic needs or rights at issue – were considerably rarer than other more ‘political’ kinds of protest: partisan, communal, ethnic. Yet they were notably more common at moments of peak prices: the association seems reasonably clear. The significance of these protests does not lie in their frequency, but in their timing and the clarity of the signal they send about popular discontent. Arguably, it is precisely because people rarely come out on the streets to protest threats to their basic needs that these derive their power: they announce a very serious breach of the basic terms of the social contract.

Our in-depth analyses revealed that protests were generally linked to wider movements or prior struggles which pre- and post-dated the 2007-12 period on which we focused. In Mozambique, the key trigger of the 2008 and 2010 protests was not food price rises *per se* but the simultaneous hikes in the prices of bread and of urban transport – the *chapa*, whose rising cost had triggered rioting as far back as 1994. This highlights that the price spikes, while dramatic, were far from the only threat to subsistence people were experiencing at this

time, and/or which they were or able to organise around. It highlights that popular mobilisations have histories: a struggle around, for instance, taxes on retail food, may be traced to earlier organisation around fertilizer subsidies or agricultural price-fixing. Protests about corruption in public food distribution recalls past opposition to similar scandals. A right-to-food movement represents a maturing of earlier periods of mobilisation and protest against food injustice.

Inevitably, across the five year period in the study, political competition and transition was a feature of these political events. In West Bengal, for instance, the political opportunity structure within which the ‘ration riots’ kicked off against the backdrop of the Singur/ Nandigram agitations against land acquisition and included calls for regime *paribartan* – change in state government. Meanwhile in northern Bangladesh, small farmers and traders took the opportunity of the hiatus in ‘political government’ to take legal control of the local market from the erstwhile lease-holders, with their strong party political connections. In Maputo, the food and fuel riots were themselves implicated in the shift in urban politics away from the ruling party. It is not clear that any generalizable messages can be drawn from how these diverse patterns of political competition influenced the timing of these protests, other than that they afforded protestors the chance to embarrass incumbents and speak to future rulers – i.e. that democratic transitions create a (usually) regularly re-created political opportunity structure.

The global price spikes themselves, and the inflationary trend that came with them, were contextual factors that created the conditions under which specific triggers kicked off events. Yet Mozambique is the only case in which the price rises *per se* ‘caused’ protests, and this was only because of the combination of the country’s unique dependence on imports for both the key urban staple (wheat flour) and the fuel needed to run urban transport with the government’s crass decision to bundle multiple internationally-driven cost

increases into a single package of domestic price hikes. In India, the main struggle for the Right to Food and the policy response to that national movement were entirely delinked from the global food situation, as this was not seen as an important dimension of the headline debates about hunger and food in India. In Bangladesh, rural struggles resonated with and drew on older, bigger struggles around agriculture – over inputs, procurement, marketing, taxation. Protests appeared to occur at times when price rises were not being met by even the gestures of action by public authorities. It is important to note, of course, that states may be acting behind the scenes by, for instance, setting up new trade agreements, as the Government of Bangladesh did in 2009, or holding down the exchange rate to limit the domestic cost of imported food and fuel, as the Government of Mozambique did after the 2010 protests. But such actions were not always visible to people facing the prospect of perpetually rising prices. It seemed to be important to people that they were reassured that action was being taken, and would always be taken.

In all cases, as we saw above, specific events triggered the action by outraging public opinion, usually at times when prices were peaking. The moral economy was outraged when unchecked price rises were accompanied – or caused - by suspected or reported corruption, collusion or speculation, withheld wages (protected by state security forces), subsidy cuts or price hike announcements.

### Protestors and grievances

From our events catalogues it seems that protest groups were predominantly, but not exclusively urban; this tallies with the evidence and the assumptions of most other studies on these issues. However, we should also note that national media are more likely to report urban (capital city) protests; this was the case in particular for Kenya and Bangladesh in our study.

Rural protests also occurred but these were typically driven more by concerns of food production – subsidies, distribution of agricultural inputs, marketing or public procurement – and so were not always directly relevant to our core concerns about food consumption, with the exception of food aid distribution in drought-prone Northern Kenya and flood-hit Southern Mozambique. However, some, like the fair markets campaign in northern Bangladesh, focused on the governance of food marketing, and so united concerns about both the production of food and its consumption. Depending on how the events were reported and labelled, some of these types of rural struggle were identified during our search process. Looked at closely, conventional assumptions of a conflict of or opposed interests between (urban) consumers and (rural) producers in relation to food policy is not borne out in practice: even urban consumers recognise that small rural farmers are not the primary beneficiaries of higher prices, and a suspicion that traders and market intermediaries are the main winners of food crises appears to be common across many contexts (Hossain and Kalita 2014). In Mozambique, the rural poor are net food purchasers too, as their harvests are rarely sufficient to ensure year-round subsistence; they suffer from rising input costs when they try to produce their own food, and from rising prices when they must buy food from others.

That said, there are systematic differences between urban and rural protests. Urban people had typically more commodified relationships to food than rural people: many protestors shared the fact that their realisable rights to food depended more completely on their purchasing power than in the past. Many were recent urban migrants, with weaker ties to the land, as well as wage workers on low and precarious incomes. Urban low income groups often lack access to social protection programmes, which, under aid regimes, are often tightly poverty-targeted (but insensitive to vulnerability). And customary or informal safety nets that may operate in rural areas tend to be weak or absent for urban migrants. These groups

are rarely among the poorest and may not be worst off when food prices rise or scarcities occur, but their precariousness is particularly well revealed by commodity price shocks. (It should also be noted that the rural poor in all four countries are net consumers of food – even those who farm buy more than they grow).

Low income urban migrants also tend to be spatially concentrated and united by common occupational concerns. In Kenya, for instance, the People's Parliament, *Bunge la Mwananchi*, drew its energy from its ward chapters in Nairobi's slum communities to mount its campaign for an *Unga* (maize flour) Revolution. Just outside Dhaka, the garments workers usually organised (typically peaceful) protests at the factory level, but bigger protests were easily organised across factories by mobilisers jumping onto buses used by garments workers to spread the word. One way of understanding what these groups had in common at this time was that their relationships to state and society, and the claims they reasonably make to protect their subsistence, were in flux. Their willingness to organise reflects their need to reaffirm or renegotiate their rights to protection, as urban residents without strong claims on their communities or established rights as citizens.

Our research did not uncover any consistent gendered patterns of protest. In all cases, it is recognised that women and children bear the brunt of food price rises in terms of impacts on consumption and longer-term effects on nutrition and health. This relates to customs that dictate women usually eat last (in South Asia), gendered patterns of unpaid care work (for which women are largely responsible in all four countries), and gender segmentation in labour markets so that women are more likely to be involved in home-based or low-paid self-employed activities than formal sector jobs. Women can be particularly hard-pressed to cope when food prices rise, as women from dalit and indigenous communities in the village of Chitehara in Madhya Pradesh explained:

*I have not got a [ration] card also. I do not get anything from the quota (PDS). I just labour out and buy my food from the market. Sometimes I go to the jungle for plucking leaves and collecting mahua [a tree with multiple food and fuel uses]. At times we go hungry for the day altogether.*

*The day I go to Satna, my children remain hungry in the house waiting for me to return with the food. If the collected wood is confiscated then I have to come back to borrow some grains from the local shop on credit. Such food is very carefully rationed to everyone with a lot of water to make it last longer.*

Reading these testimonies, it is unsurprising that the poorest women, who are hardest hit by food crises, are unlikely to take to the streets: they may not have the time to protest, or the capacity to risk arrest or violence, and may depend on not being seen as 'trouble-makers' by the local elite.

In some of the research contexts we found that both women and men participated in protests, albeit not in equal numbers or always in the same ways. In Maputo, several focus group participants remarked on the presence of 'mothers' as well as (male) 'youths' on the improvised barricades that had brought the city to a standstill in 2010. In West Bengal, the highly violent ration riots, involving brick-throwing and rubber bullets, involved local men only. On at least one occasion, however, local women formed a human chain to stand between the men and the police and prevent violence. In Dhaka, the predominantly female garments industry featured violent episodes in which women lead and bore the brunt of attacks.<sup>7</sup> Yet considering the predominance of women workers in the sector as a whole (around 80 per cent), the visible involvement of young men

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suggests that men may have been disproportionately involved. This is impressionistic rather than factual and builds on what workers told us about patterns of protest. If men were disproportionately involved, this may reflect gendered patterns of behaviour less than gender segmentation within the RMG labour market: men are concentrated within knitwear, which by its seasonal nature has different and more 'flexible' working conditions, in which workers are essentially temporary contractors.

In other contexts, such as the Gaibandha fair markets struggles in north Bangladesh, class and gender interacted to shape who protested and how. There, Communist Party members related how their wives and daughters supported the struggle, while the less educated wives and daughters of the small farmers and traders with whom we spoke knew little of the struggle in which their men were involved. The perception among these men was that rural women lacked the education to understand the purpose of their movement and so were best left uninformed.

It may be less the gender roles of female protestors which are of interest here than those of the men. Some men commented on the impact of the food price rises on their breadwinning roles as fathers or as sons, indicating that this was a source of considerable stress (see also Kelbert and Hossain 2014).

The grievances around which people explicitly articulated their protests were greatly more varied than a 'food riot' would suggest. What the international media termed 'food riots' in Bangladesh at this time were primarily wage-related protests by garments workers and some other protests by low income urban groups. The 2008 riots there were unequivocally around higher wages and other labour rights (correctly recognised as the key issue by the Bangladeshi media), but they politicised their demands as due to their inability to afford basic foods, using the slogan, 'reduce prices, let us live'

(which the Bangladeshi media ignored, possibly because it made their protests more sympathetic). In Mozambique, the increase in urban transport (*chapa*) prices was as widely-cited as the hike in the cost of bread as the initial trigger for riots in both 2008 and 2010; elsewhere, farmers and consumers were similarly aggrieved about rising costs of fertilizer and irrigation and the implications for incomes and costs of living.

For these reasons, protests sought official action. This often amounted to demands to take action against market actors – food traders, merchants and intermediaries, shopkeepers, and market officials – to control retail prices or protect producer prices, prevent hoarding or speculation in times of dearth or to ensure correct distribution of subsidies and transfers. In Maputo, a fresh round of rioting in 2012 was averted in part because the government promised to clamp down on 'route-shortening', the practice by which *chapa* operators stopped short of their official destination and gave passengers the choice of continuing on foot or paying for a second ticket to continue the journey. Demands for official action could also target government policies, in particular subsidy cuts, regulatory failures, meagre social protection transfers or protection of business interests over those of consumers.



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1. Promotional material from India's Right to Food Movement citing social reform advocate Bhimrao Ranaji Ambedkar.
2. Residents of Mathare (Nairobi) discuss food prices (Photo: Patta Scott-Villiers)
3. The queue outside one of India's Fair Price Shops (Photo: Bria Yifei Yan)
4. Promotional material from Kenya's Unga Revolution
5. Police patrol the streets in Ashulia, Bangladesh after a June 2010 protest by garment workers (Photo: Andrew Biraj)

# CHANNELS OF DISCONTENT

Channels through which people might legitimately (and without resort to violence or unruly means) express their grievances were blocked or otherwise imperfect. The unruly means of the demonstration or road block or the risky strategy of riot appear to have a powerful impact in the absence of ideal conditions of democratic pluralism. But these protests and riots are patchily local, often poorly organised, and their achievements are often little more than short-lived populist responses, easily reversed or forgotten when matters quieten down. They are frequently disconnected from national organisations and networks, let alone the international groups that might give them heft. That Kenya's *Bunge la Mwananchi* has to date not been effectively linked up to global right-to-food movements highlights this point particularly well.

## *Eating and the body politic*

One route through which food discontent can be articulated is invoking shared cultural and social values around food. Food has a special status in political discourse above and beyond its material and nutritional value, and the metaphors and symbols of food and eating give protests a particularly embodied power. The outrage inspired by powerful groups profiting from the hunger of others was a familiar theme, and metaphors of 'eating' in relation to corruption relate to this sense of outrage at greed. Kenyan protestors were highly exercised by new taxes on basic foods at a time when politicians had awarded themselves large pay increases and allowances: there, the

perception of the callous neglect by the ruling elite was a spur to protest. The view of one unnamed protestor in Kenya in 2011 was that "[t]hey cannot eat when we are not eating" – the clear imperative being that food must be shared.

"You are what you eat" takes on a powerful political meaning in such contexts. For the garments workers in Bangladesh, rice, the very constitutive substance of the Bangladeshi body, was unaffordable at times. They noted this with shame. At the peak of the 2008 crisis, the Bangladeshi Army Chief General Moeen U. Ahmed, became a figure of fun at home and abroad when he put the Bangladeshi Army on potato rations (2008 was a bumper potato crop); he also used his position as the military backer of the unelected Caretaker Government to advise the nation as a whole to eat less rice, even sharing his recipes for potato dishes.<sup>8</sup>

People's views about food price rises were also formulated in light of what they meant for their wellbeing beyond the bare calculus of cost: rising prices could mean an inability to feed families or a need to resort to bad or low status foods, which is a source of social shame and emasculation of men in their role as breadwinners. The riots in West Bengal were triggered by an inability to afford wheat (not a staple) in the market by the slightly better off, thus striking at their sense of status. In Mozambique, prices of many foodstuffs rose but the one whose increased cost triggered rioting was bread: an overwhelmingly urban staple, made from imported wheat (obtained both on the international market and via food aid) that is supplied to bakeries whose prices are under tight government control. Bread is usually eaten on its own or as a sandwich with a leaf of cabbage or slice of tomato – eggs, fish or chicken were considered rare and increasingly unaffordable luxuries in our study areas. The traditional rural diet, based on maize and cassava, is rejected for both aesthetic and practical reasons: it is seen as rustic and unsophisticated, and also requires expensive charcoal and scarce time to cook. Bread, on the other hand, can be eaten as soon as it is bought, and is also a

symbolic marker of urban modernity. Food is also cultural and social, and the sharing of food habits a political matter, confirming that people do not view food as merely fuel for bodies. If an embodied feeling of shame around something as elemental as food can drive people to mobilise, this may help to explain why people can be angered by food price rises even though they are not, in the medium-term, materially or nutritionally worse off as a result.

## **Representation**

There is in general a gap of representation when it comes to low-income urban groups. A key question here is where and how have the interests of such groups been effectively represented without resort to dependence on vote banks and patronage. For instance, consumer rights groups, which might have been expected to take an interest in food marketing, were nowhere found to be working alongside organisations of low-income urban groups. Callous insistence on raising MP's salaries at a time when ordinary Kenyans were hungry meant there were no obvious targets for these grievances. As one man in a focus group of butchers and kiosk-owners put it:

*As the Members of Parliament are fighting for [an increase in] their salaries, where do you think that money is coming from? It will come from the increased cost of flour. When they tax those kinds of goods, it is going to them. They are the ones who are supposed to help us, but with how they are behaving, who will we cry to?*

In Bangladesh and Mozambique, where the right to food is not constitutionally mandated in any specific or legally enforceable sense, party politics played some role in channelling discontent. A small number of actions and protests were staged by opposition parties in Bangladesh and India, highlighting the failures and neglect of the incumbent. These were never very prominent or important,

which in Bangladesh reflected the general closeness between the two main parties on the issues of food security and social protection policies. The impression these party political protests leave is of token recognition of the hardships being faced, and a somewhat feeble effort to make political capital from it. By contrast, in Mozambique, the government's handling of the food and fuel crisis and riots intensified a sense of alienation from Frelimo that opened the way for the opposition MDM party to enjoy unprecedented electoral success in urban areas – but neither the MDM nor its fellow opposition party Renamo internalised the question of urban food insecurity enough to make it a consistent focus of their policy platforms.

The contrast between the right-to-food movements of India and Kenya help to highlight the difference between a situation in which the channels are relatively functional, and one in which they are blocked by the political economy of food policy. A key difference between the two is the relative receptiveness of the Indian Government to the institutionalisation of rights to food, chiefly articulated in relation to food subsidies and entitlements. The contrasting situation in Kenya is one in which large maize farmer and mill-owning interests are powerfully positioned to oppose any action that they perceive as reducing the protection they enjoy in regional staple food markets. But nor has the Kenyan Government yet felt the imperative to expand its new and still tiny Hunger Safety Nets Programme and similar social protection schemes to cover more than a fraction of those facing hunger. In India, failure to protect against food crises is an electoral disaster. In Kenya, electoral success is largely unrelated to food crisis; in any case, drought-related famine attracts huge international donor funds and intervention, muddying the lines of accountability for hunger.

It is possible that a social movement broader than *Bunge la Mwananchi* might be successful in such a context, yet there are no signs of any receptiveness on the part of the Kenyan government to efforts to hold them to account for food shocks. Social movements and civil society organisations grow and learn and are encouraged by their

successes. The Indian movement is a broad church: vast, networked from global to local, supported and reported on by the mass media, and with the achievements of an Act of Parliament and a series of operational schemes to show. Without some successes it is not clear how the still-new Kenyan movement can sustain momentum. In the meantime, as one policymaker said when asked what would push them to act: “we would quickly come up with something if Kibera [a Nairobi slum] was burning” – the riot may be the most effective piece in the repertoire.

Organised civil society in the sense of donor-supported NGOs and groups were weak as channels for discontent for these groups. In Mozambique, it was clear that aid-financed ‘astro-turf’ civil society actors had been failing to listen to the voice of the street, and were as surprised as the government by the upsurge of protests. Donor dependence for funding can mean donor ideas about how markets should work displace popular understandings and priorities. In Mozambique, the ‘Food Sovereignty Network’ set up by international NGOs with multilateral and bilateral donor support failed to achieve any visibility among poor urban Mozambicans, and failed ignominiously in its effort to push right-to-food legislation through Parliament. Aid financing was not notable in either the Kenyan or the Indian Right to Food movements, for better or for worse, and international NGOs were not found to be playing a prominent role in supporting protestors. Some international NGOs in Kenya and national NGOs and think-tanks in Bangladesh attempted to raise the profile of concerns about food price rises through research, dialogue and advocacy work. But it is not clear to what extent protestors were able to access or use these channels to voice their grievances, and they may instead have been shaped more directly by the concerns of civil society organisations. Civil society modes of organising, particularly those amenable to aid donor financing, were generally at odds with the market-skeptical fury of food-related protests at this time. These concerns were more amply addressed by the organisational modes and state engagements of Partha Chatterjee’s

‘political society’ (Chatterjee 2011; Chatterjee 2004).

### ***Communicating and amplifying discontent***

The mass media is the single most important means of amplifying popular discontent about food. But media biases and limitations frequently distort the message. These biases can systematically block the recognition of the scale and nature of discontent. They also mean most research on protest, based as it is on media coverage for its observations, is similarly biased and flawed. In Mozambique, for example, the weight of government influence over the media tended to stifle public debate; even the private TV channel STV, which won plaudits for running uncensored footage of the 2010 riots, was browbeaten into muting its coverage by the time discontent began to bubble up again in 2012 over a fresh round of price rises.

The political events catalogue that we developed in India through a review of two leading national-level newspapers showed 59 events related to political mobilisations on the issues of food rights during the period 2007-2012. Out of these reported events, 31 events were led/mobilised by the national political parties, mainly the main opposition Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (aka the CPM). The Right to Food movement in India has been crucial to mobilisations around food and has been a central actor in policy advocacy and formulation with the state – to a much greater extent than mainstream political parties, especially the BJP. Thus, the popular mobilisations that were recorded in the political events catalogue were not the spaces/platform through which constructive engagement on the issue of food rights between the policymakers and the people emerged. The mechanisms of contributing to policy formulations ‘from below’ seem to have lied elsewhere. This shows that the Indian media reports provide a very limited and, in fact, skewed understanding of processes of mobilisation relating to food provisioning. In Bangladesh, news outlets covered protests selectively, depending on their audience. So the newspaper which

had a wider rural readership tended to cover reports of farmer protests in relation to issues of food production such as access to quality seeds, fuels, subsidy etc., whereas newspapers with a primarily urban audience often neglected these events altogether.

Many of the ways in which popular discontent is articulated – through jokes, songs, street graffiti or online memes – are never picked up by the print or broadcast media at all. Even the outspoken stand of the high-profile Mozambican rapper Azagaia was only reported after he was taken in for questioning on suspicion of encouraging the protests in 2010 – more than two years after his song ‘*Povo no Poder*’ (‘Power to the People’), composed as a tribute to the 2008 rioters, had become a favourite ringtone on the mobile phones of rebellious urban youth.

*We're not fooled any more by the same old story  
We're coming out to fight the scum  
The thieves  
The corrupt ones  
Shout along with me for this lot to get out  
Shout along with me because the people have given up  
crying  
(...)  
This is Maputo, no one really knows how it happened  
The people who yesterday were sleeping, today are  
wide awake  
All because of the miserable salary you pay  
The people are leaving their homes and smashing the  
first window they see  
Because the cost of transport has gone up  
The cost of bread has gone up  
(...)  
Mr President, you left the luxury of your palace  
You finally noticed that life's not easy here  
Only now did you call a meeting of your Council of*

*Ministers*

*But the people haven't been sleeping, we came together  
a long time ago*

*We've barricaded the streets*

*We've halted the minibuses*

*No one is getting past*

*Even the shops are shut*

*If the police are violent*

*We'll respond with violence*

Azagaia, ‘Power to the People’ (Portuguese lyrics from <http://www.vagalume.com.br/azagaia/povo-no-poder.html> – our translation).

However, riots were capable of rendering the urban poor visible to policymakers, establishing their political importance as consumers, urban residents, and political actors. This expanded the scope and arena for state action, carving out a new role for states in protecting the urban poor. For the garments workers of Bangladesh, for instance, we argue that while their 2008 and later protests may not have had much influence on food policy, they raised the profile of a group who historically has not received any state protection from food insecurity. They were predominantly young, predominantly female, often rural migrants without husbands or fathers in charge. After this period, we can see that the Government has more fully accepted its role in protecting this group from food insecurity – although it remains hesitant in its dealings with their employers, and whose low pay scales are the primary problem.

The research also helped reaffirm that the media, in its contemporary form, becomes an active participant in the unfolding of a riot, and ceases to be an external observer. In Mozambique, the media extensively covered the issue of rise of prices of particular goods and services prior to the riots. The eruption of riots in Maputo meant that the media immediately identified this price rise as the cause. The discourses employed by the media in covering these riots –

the labelling of the 2008 riots as 'fuel riots' and the 2010 riots as 'bread riots' – glossed over other fundamental grievances of the protesters. However, this articulation of the media influenced not just an external audience, but came to be inscribed in the rioters' own perceptions and discourses, and also of those who were to join the revolts at a later stage. Similarly in Bangladesh, journalists revealed that the media exaggerated virtually all food related public gatherings as food 'protests'. For instance, a large queue of people waiting to purchase subsidised rice from a government safety net programme was reported as an agitation for essential goods. Several such instances were narrated by journalists. The media is thus firmly embedded in and integral to the mechanisms through which a political event emerges and unfolds. The fact that the media was an ideological actor and a conscious participant in the process of mobilisation complicates how we read and understand the data generated by an events catalogue.

# MENUS OF OFFICIAL RESPONSE

Price rises and volatilities since 2007 have highlighted the extreme complexities of food price changes, and the challenges faced by governments in delivering appropriate responses to them. Several of these challenges were extrinsic to their political motivations, such as the exchange rate in Mozambique, or the behaviour of rice-exporters for the Bangladesh Government. Yet these price rises and volatilities have also vividly dramatized the divergent moral and political economic logics with which food security policies are formulated. While the former have been studied reasonably closely, the latter have not. There is by now a large literature on the nature and impact of the policy responses to the 2008 and 2010 shocks, which it is not our intention to reproduce here.<sup>9</sup> Our research objectives steer us in the direction of the moral and political economies of the response, and so we continue here with our focus on the thinking and pressures underlying the responses, as recreated for us by policymakers, advisors and scholars. In particular we are interested in whether, and the extent to which, the popular mobilisation of the period could be said to have increased – and more importantly, to have institutionalised – accountability for hunger.

## *Accountability for hunger*

What do we mean by accountability for hunger? We consider policy responses to have resulted in institutionalised accountability when there is a functional system through which people at risk of hunger can effectively hold public authorities to account for failures to protect them from hunger. Adapting from (Goetz and Jenkins 2005),

we understand this to depend on:

- Clarity of mandate, broadly, understanding of rights and responsibilities for food security
- Standards against which performance can be judged
- Monitoring, or an information system that keeps policymakers aware of the risks of hunger and its performance for preventing it
- Enforcement, or the means for sanctioning failures to protect food security<sup>10</sup>

The establishment of a legal, enforceable right to food is the clearest indication that accountability for hunger has been institutionalised, and in both India and Kenya, the period of our study saw important advances in this respect. In India, the National Food Security Act was passed in 2013, while Kenya's 2010 Constitution enshrined the right to food, and was followed by the National Food Security and Social Protection policies in 2011, and a Social Protection Review in 2012 which focused on the very many shortcomings of the new policies with respect to budget, coverage and leakage. Much remains to be seen as to how these laws and policies will be operationalised, but in principle, these clearly set out the mandate of the state with respect to food. In India, the issues of standards, monitoring systems and enforcement have all been set out under the law. In Kenya, the new policies do not set standards and monitoring remains piecemeal and often externally-dependent (the World Food Programme plays a significant role in hunger monitoring in Kenya, as it does in other countries experiencing acute and chronic food insecurity problems, including Mozambique).

In neither Mozambique nor Bangladesh did the period conclude with any stronger legal or mandatory provisions for protection against hunger. As noted above, a donor-funded attempt to stimulate a right-to-food movement in Mozambique faltered before it had even got close

to securing legislation. In Bangladesh, such a movement remains at the conceptual stage, along with claims to most other economic and social rights. In Bangladesh, however, official readiness to cope with price spikes has greatly increased with the establishment of new trade arrangements with southeast Asian neighbours, and in particular with increased food grain storage capacity to enable a larger grain reserve with which to both stabilise prices and finance social safety nets. It is an open secret in the Dhaka elite that the 2007-08 military-backed Caretaker Government lost popularity because it could not tame the price of rice. Regardless of whether such criticism is fair, it serves as a reminder that legitimacy and public support is ultimately dependent on performance on the *dal-bhat* issues that matter the most.

In Mozambique, a large number of policy responses took the form of a headline-grabbing announcement followed by failure to deliver; our focus group participants and interviewees in poor neighbourhoods of Maputo succinctly labelled such policies as *mentiras* – literally, 'lies'. In 2008, for example, the government not only announced a 'Food Production Action Plan' designed to raise wheat production five-fold within three years, but also a plan to produce bread not from wheat but from cassava, in which Mozambique is self-sufficient. Neither the wheat or the cassava bread materialised; wheat production flat-lined, and although cassava production did increase, the surplus was mostly absorbed by a South African-owned firm that was experimenting with brewing cassava-based beer. Similarly, the government announced in 2008 that it would be building a network of grain storage facilities across the country to hold strategic stocks that could be released onto the market whenever prices started to spike; four years later, only two of the proposed 39 silos had been built.

Aside from the food and transport price freezes, the highest-profile policy response to the 2010 riots was the President's announcement that a 'Basic Basket' of foodstuffs would be made available to the

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urban poor at subsidised prices – but in the absence of any concrete measures to implement an eligibility registration system or set up a distribution network, this soon came to be characterised as yet another *mentira*.

Thus, what we have seen is one country in which accountability for hunger has undeniably been strengthened in legal and organisational terms (India); a second in which the mandate has been claimed but little else has yet advanced (Kenya); a third in which the mandate has been effective but not enshrined in law – and so not a full right in any meaningful sense (Bangladesh) and a fourth in which no mandate has even been formally acknowledged and a failure to deliver on more strategic policy responses has further undermined the ruling party's credibility (Mozambique). In this last case, the government nevertheless feels obliged to continue with the short-term measures it has been using to moderate the impact of price increases on the urban poor.

To what extent did popular mobilisation cause or trigger or even contribute to these important changes in food policy? It is genuinely difficult to answer this question in a robust way. Some policymakers admitted freely that some specific policy choices were made in the heated atmosphere of protests, actual or anticipated. But the kinds of actions plainly dictated by fear of protest – for instance, the botched decision to subsidise maize milling in Kenya in late 2008 or the basic basket 'lie' offered up as a response to Mozambique's protests in 2010 – were often not only populist but also poorly conceived, short lived and counter-productive. In India, it is conceivable to trace the links between the Right to Food campaign and the passage of the Right to Food Act, but it is an exception to the rule.

However, significant policy changes were also made with more enduring and positive results for food security, and they too occurred in this unsettled atmosphere with the promise of riot or at least protest hanging heavy in the air. Did this miasma of food discontent

influence food policy? It seems unlikely that it failed to influence it at all, even if some policymakers and officials sought to deny such an influence. Many policymakers and officials appeared reasonably well-informed – more knowledgeable and more sympathetic than we had hypothesised – about the conditions of hunger and food insecurity in general, and specifically about the impacts of the food price spikes and inflation on the wellbeing of the population. Protests cast a spotlight on the discontent, but the script was anyway being rehearsed in the grumbles of everyday life, at bus stops, in markets, at home. During this period, high officials in the Ministry of Food in Bangladesh were said to occasionally send ranking bureaucrats out into local markets to hear what people were saying about food prices.<sup>11</sup> A senior Kenyan official said:

*When we talk of resilience, it is not a good thing...In the case of the urban poor, it is likely they will survive, but under what cost? Children malnourished and underdeveloped, diseases and all.*

The effects of these protests are to help re-establish the mandate for public authorities to act in crises, by raising expectations about what is expected. Officials and policymakers may hold very different views about roles and responsibilities than protestors, but this is part of the negotiation. The spectre of protest made it impossible for policymakers faced with the immensity of the global crisis as in 2008 to ignore its human impacts. But they also clarified a view of the actions that active sections of the population felt strongly enough about to organise themselves to protest.

The protests also provide a rough reckoning of the impacts of crises and of the policy responses to them. While policymakers may have access to objective impact or price data on which to monitor events, these protests provide an indication of the kinds of people who are being affected, as well as of how programmes to protect people are operating, and who is being excluded from any support or protection.

To that extent, protests substitute for or supplement management information systems. Protests also provide a form of enforcement by way of sanctions. This is sometimes at the level of officialdom at which the protest is targeted – for instance, the Block Development Officer or *zilla* administrator in the West Bengal riots; failure to maintain law and order is the most egregious failure of the frontline administrative official, and so the riot serves as a highly effective signal. Reported internationally, the food riot is also a sanction against the national political leadership. As we learned in the early stages of our international media content analysis, the accusation of food riots is staunchly resisted by most elites, who prefer to see such events as more complex matters, often provoked by interested outsiders.<sup>12</sup> To be known to have had food riots in your country is a matter of shame, a statement about your failure as a ruler to adequately feed your population – the governance equivalent of emasculating failure of the breadwinner to put meals on the table. Rulers who value and need their popular legitimacy (and most depend on this for the everyday success of their rule) will experience the food riot as a sanction in itself. By this assessment, protests about food, if communicated with reasonable accuracy, provide a rough mechanism for accountability in their own right.

### ***Signs and symbols***

Gestures matter: while some of the more knee-jerk responses may have had counter-productive or temporary effects, it is clear that some policy responses were intended to demonstrate the intention or willingness to protect people. Gestures are not ‘mere’ or ‘empty’ acts because they indicate a sense of shared hardship, and of common moral economy principles. They tell people that the authorities agree with them, and feel their pain.

The acts themselves may refer to symbols – such as particular price levels or culturally sanctioned goods being protected, or at specific

seasons. When a Kenyan policymaker explains that the Parliament or Cabinet sometimes declares that ‘maize meal should not get to one hundred shillings’ he is referring to the psychological limits of certain price levels. In some instances, governments were careful to avoid displays of lavish spending when people were facing rising prices, in order to downplay inequalities and avoid outraging popular feeling. President Guebuza, whose tendency to see government as a set of personal business opportunities had helped to make him the focus of much popular anger, ordered a freeze on Ministerial salaries as part of his package of responses to the 2010 protests in Mozambique. When he was Finance Minister, Uhuru Kenyatta, the current President of Kenya, ordered government officials to exchange their Mercedes Benz official cars for Toyota Passats to save on fuel. Some ministers’ resistance to this order was cited by protesters in May 2011 as a stark illustration of their callous attitude toward their hungry constituents. The West Bengal government decision to provide rice at Rs. 2 per kilo signalled that the government was aware of the need to respond, even though the riots were about wheat.

Many of the actions taken in 2008 were clearly intended to signal a willingness to protect one’s own people, even if it were at the expense of other nations. ‘Protectionism’ is a dirty word in international trade and neo-classical economic theory, yet its potent political significance is that it signals a willingness to protect struggling consumers even when by doing so, others suffer (surplus food producers at home, rice importers and consumers abroad). The Indian rice export ban, for instance, told the Indian people that their needs came before others’. Bangladeshi journalists commented that this backfired because the Government of Bangladesh relaxed restrictions on cross-border smuggling, so that international trade in effect continued under the radar, helping to keep the price of rice down in Bangladesh.<sup>13</sup>

Banning food exports is a common demand of moral economies in many contexts. Other symbolic behaviours that respond to the moral

economy included displays of enforcement of price regulations for key food items, and noisy proclamations against profiteering, speculation, hoarding and cartels. Many of these also backfired, resulting in outcomes like mass private stockpiling in Bangladesh. The perceived insensitivity of the Mozambican government's response during the initial phase of the 2010 protests – when Ministers described the protestors as 'vandals' and 'bandits' – made the population all the more inclined to categorise their subsequent policy responses as meaningless lies. It is clear that people judge officials' responses to food price rises and protests in terms of both what they say and what they do.

### ***Nourishing the imagined community***

One hypothesis of the research was that the globalisation of the world food system would constrain the capacities of national governments to respond to popular demands. The food systems of small developing countries are more integrated with world trade than those in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, for instance. It is plausible, then, to suppose that a politics of provisions that functions to keep small developing countries food secure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to be correspondingly in gear with globalisation. Specifically, in order to make a reasonable diagnosis of why they experience food insecurity, people would need to understand the influence of global market forces. At the same time, in order to make claims on their governments that had a realistic chance of improving their food situation, they would need to understand what is feasible: what kinds of responses are within their reach, affordable, technically or administratively manageable, and what kinds of effects might they achieve?

In fact, the causes and complexities of the 2008 and 2010-11 food price spikes, volatility or inflation (depending on where you were) were poorly understood at the time, and to date continue to arouse debate and controversy. People who are neither professional trade

economists nor food policy experts understandably do not always seek to grasp the deep causes of food crises, preferring instead to focus on proximate suspected causes. These are sometimes to do with disasters or crop failures etc., but more usually (in the case of 2008 in particular) appear to involve the belief that food price spikes are unnatural and therefore deliberate, created for profit by speculators and cartels. The likely role of global financial speculation in creating the 2008 price spike shows that moral economic logics can be applied to an integrated world food economy.

However, we found that the referents for the moral economy and the targets for protestors' demands and claims were mainly national. In some instances, as with the indigenous groups in Madhya Pradesh, this marked a shift upward, from the patronage of local and customary authorities to claiming rights in and demanding action by the central state. For garments workers, it was initially factory owners and only later enforcement of workers' rights by the state that were the objects of their struggle. But on the whole, the right to food rested in membership of the national community, because it was as a citizen – as a member of the voting public in country X – that those rights could be realised. The prominence of the nation state in the moral economy of these populations makes sense, not least because of the protracted struggles each faced in achieving liberation from colonial rule, two of them having done so only within the last generation. In Mozambique's case, the memory of anti-colonial struggle was overlaid with recollection of the post-independence socialist period, characterised by harsh austerity tempered by at least a rhetorical commitment to equality and social justice. This historical legacy makes state accountability a defining relation in contemporary moral economies. As the Indian case study states:

In other words, for the most part, patronage ties have been replaced by electoral accountabilities. This is reinforced by the fact that civil society mobilisation, under the auspices of the RTF campaign, has managed to create an environment

where the state is seen as the solution to these issues. The state is the first port of call in contexts of hunger.

Food security is foundational for the state. The politics of food is a constitutive element of a polity and is extremely important for upholding legitimacy of a polity, especially if food has historically been important in how the state came into being. Hence, the discourse of shame features significantly in mobilisation around food. To be a functioning economy and state, you have to respond to food shocks. Food is an integral element of the social contract of citizens with state.

The weakness of the effort to institutionalise accountability for hunger in Kenya and Mozambique (compared to Bangladesh and India) draws attention to factors that have hampered or (in the case of Kenya) derailed the politics of provisions there. In both countries there are the complications of mass chronic hunger, a long drawn-out 'shock' arising from climate change-related events such as Kenya's drought and Mozambique's floods, and the weight of dependence on aid for its management. In Kenya this was compounded by the shock and horror of the post-election violence; the inattention, perhaps wilful, of domestic and international media to subsistence protests, possibly mindful of the risks of inflaming conflict in this context; and the tribalisation of voter alignment. Arguably, a functional politics of provisions along the lines we have sketched are mutually constituted by "doorstep conditions" of a moderately stable and secure representative state structure (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2013).

1. Street vendor in Bangladesh (Photo: Naomi Hossain)
2. Stocking a supermarket shelf with Kenya's main staple, unga
3. An Unga Revolution protest in Nairobi (Photo: Humphrey Kimani)



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# CONCLUSIONS

Our most important findings across the cases are of a rumbling politics of provisions, captured at a moment when the rights and responsibilities around food were being re-negotiated and contested. These were being staged at different levels and velocities, and with differing lead actors and repertoires in each country, and yet their scripts bore common motifs. One story line that was repeatedly retold was around the morality of subsistence and the right to profit from hunger – timeless tales of power and authority over life and death.

When we look into the backstories of these recently active movements and struggles, and situate them within their ideological and organisational heritage, it becomes clear that these politics of provisions are perennial or permanent struggles. They are not the momentary product of a price spike or period of price volatility, however dramatic that may have been. They are also deeply ideological and strategic, not the reflexive violence (wrongly) ascribed to the hungry. But they are also usually tacit. Because the politics of provisions are about the affirmation or contestation of shared assumptions about the rights and responsibilities of the public and the authorities at moments of subsistence crisis they can go unnoticed at other times, letting more contentious politics – election shenanigans, grand corruption, political violence – dominate the airwaves. The rumbles of the politics of provisions are only audible in the moments of crisis, and then too, usually only when crisis erupts in actual protests or riots in capital cities about prices (or rations, etc), which does not always happen.

Scholars of food politics in history will be the first to note that we have not discovered something new here. It is, however, rare to be

able to look so closely at these politics as they are in negotiation and rarer still for the protagonists to be able to recall their motivations with reasonable expectation of accuracy. Much of what we know about the politics of provisions comes from the historical analysis of food riots, and relies on archived accounts of dead people in societies long past. So while we have not uncovered some new form of politics, then, the timing of our looking has given us insights into the domestic moral and political economies that bind and motivate contemporary food policies. It has also given us some fresh ideas about what triggers the local eruptions that prompt re-negotiation at precisely these moments of global crisis.

We started this work with the intention of answering what we thought was the key question at this time: did food riots – or popular mobilisation – increase accountability for hunger? We now think that we have answered this question: the answer is “yes – except for in Kenya.” But we have also understood more about the elements of our hypothesis, so that our “yes” does not mean that food riots forced policymakers into new provisions against hunger, in the simple linear model we had originally proposed. We now know much more about both the popular mobilisation and the official repertoires of response they elicit or interact with. We now think that popular mobilisations around subsistence are, in the absence of politer channels of discontent and at a time when ‘crisis’ is the new normal, vital parts of the machine of public accountability. Popular mobilisation mainly works when someone is listening and responding, so in a material sense, the reverse hypothesis may also be valid: that accountability causes popular mobilisation.

All of this makes sense if you accept what we see as our main contribution to theorising the politics of food in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: that the politics of provisions are functional for (a minimal, negotiated degree of) food justice. This equilibrium position (notional) is the food security equivalent of stable national borders: of course there may be disputes with the big neighbour (some groups regularly face hungry

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seasons), but on the whole, these are manageable and tolerable and accepted (those people cope and anyway are not all that important, politically). Based on our interpretation of how people argue the rights and responsibilities associated with food, we conclude that the state-society relation is founded upon, among other things, the assurance of a minimal degree of food justice. This is not food security precisely, but it comprises both a sense of assured access and the more political notion of fairness. And our focus is less on the terms of any social contract than on the perennial negotiation, affirmation and contestation involved in a functional politics of provisions.

Our work looks at the ruptures in those politics, at the moments when their functionality is no longer fit for the conditions (and food markets are evolving fast) and/or when the terms of the agreement are in flux or dispute. We theorise that five collective beliefs combine to create the conditions for a rupture in the form of a food riot or subsistence protest:

- I. We face hunger, while – or because - others profit (this makes the point about fairness, not just physiological hunger);
- II. Food is special, nourishing our cultural and social being, and the single most important item of consumption (this emphasises the importance of quality and control over what we eat, and refuses a view of food as merely nutritious fuel for animal bodies);
- III. We can live with injustice, exploitation and corruption – but not if they strike us in the belly;
- IV. We fear that this situation will deteriorate/see no sign of authoritative action;
- V. From their past performance, the public authorities can act if so motivated; and
- VI. We have the organisational means to express our collective

discontent.

These views are by no means inherently anti-market: markets, including global markets, have been liberating as well as commodifying for people facing rapid social and economic change. Instead, these are views that are critical of the tendency for unregulated markets to work in favour of the rich and powerful. The moral economies in these views are about subordinating or socialising food markets to serve their primary purpose of feeding people, as opposed to for profit (Holt-Gimenez and Patel 2012).

Even with these conditions in place, a specific trigger tends to be present, a specific instance of outrage against the moral economic logic within which these beliefs make sense. And riots – in the sense of violent outbursts – tend to occur when protests are met with violence.

When we say we detect a connection, a causal link between popular mobilisation and food policies that are reliable and fair, we are not saying that policymakers design policies to keep rioters happy. Of course this does sometimes happen, as with Mozambique's post-2010 'anti-riot exchange rate', but we know the effects are short-lived and weak. (For instance, the bungled attempt at subsidising unga in Kenya; the similarly failed effort to issue subsidised rice through outlets in garments factories in Bangladesh; or the basic basket 'lie' in Mozambique). We are instead saying that popular mobilisation reboots the moral economy, reminding policymakers and the public that they have rights and responsibilities. These ruptures can help re-establish the mandate for public authorities to act in crises, clarifying what is expected of them, and how. Protests provide a rough reckoning of the impacts of crises and of the policy responses to them – monitoring as voice rather than bureaucratic data systems. And the sheer shame of being known to have failed to adequately feed your population – state failure on food security as equivalent to the emasculating failure of the breadwinner to put

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meals on the table – is, for most rulers, sanction enough.

### **Implications** **Methodological lessons**

A key methodological lesson from this research is that media content, international and national, cannot be relied on for ‘data’ on popular political events like riots or protests. In our research design we had not fully factored in the variability and idiosyncrasies of reporting of such events. We concluded that national media coverage could be:

- closely shaped by expectations of what constituted ‘news’: in Kenya, coverage could be limited or events ignored because no official response was expected and the readership was presumed to be uninterested;
- subservient to the discourses and interests of government, in contexts such as Mozambique where both economic and political power are highly concentrated;
- biased against reporting rural protests;
- biased against particular categories or classes of protestors (e.g. industrial workers);
- biased towards reporting events featuring violence; and
- formulaic in their accounts with a narrow range of descriptors and limited direct reporting of protestors’ viewpoints.

We also found that

- many protests were not covered at all;
- protest coverage often failed to capture the material grievances at issue; and
- histories and backstories of protest campaigns or groups were generally absent from account.

As most research on food riots and others protest relies heavily (and until the advent of social media, necessarily) on print media sources for simple event counts data, there are excellent reasons to be suspicious of the accuracy of the pictures these depict. These are often caricatures of more deeply-embedded protest movements with more strategic and thinking agendas – and more interaction with politics and policy – than event counts give them credit for (Tilly 2008).

A final word on the rationale for our research: the reporting in the international press of food riots in (30 or more, or less, depending on the source) countries around the world. We conclude that such findings are unsafe. In our early efforts to make sense of the prevalence of these events in our four case study countries, we looked at national media content for a simple timeline of events. We found that our assumptions about ‘food riots’ dissolved easily into more complex diffuse protests and struggles around subsistence - neither always riots, nor always just or mainly about food.

The difference between international and national media confirmed the seriousness of the breach in basic governance functions signalled by ‘food riots’. This may be why in our initial searches of media content for ‘food riot’ we arrived at the conclusion that a ‘food riot’ almost invariably occurs elsewhere. The Bangladeshi media reported food riots in Nepal, Pakistan and India and further afield, in sub-Saharan Africa, while the Indian press labelled garments workers’ protests in Bangladesh food riots. When Bangladeshi experts told us: ‘there were no food riots here’ it seemed that they did so with a sense of the grave implications of such a charge. Distance may bring things into focus for the short-sighted, but in the longer view, it seems to obscure. The international press referred to food riots in between 30 and 60 countries (depending on the source). As Sneyd *et al* suggest, there can be significant differences in how such events are processed domestically and internationally, as well as by the actors themselves and the journalists who cover them. The

key point is that a 'food riot' is a recognisably serious charge to lay against a country.

### 'Scaling' the politics of provisions

The finding that the politics of provisions are functional at a national and sometimes subnational level, means that they are 'mis-scaled' with respect to the problems people face as a result of the globalisation of food. We found that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its complex intertwined global food economy – or perhaps even because the forces that govern it are so abstract, distant and unknowable – the achievement of food security is a matter of nationhood. This drive reaches back into national histories: the founding myths of many a postcolonial state features the eradication of famine or callous official neglect of desperate people, often with an added layer of noble socialist sacrifice of eating well today in the struggle for a truly just tomorrow when all citizens will eat equally well. The popularity of food policy is ultimately tested against nationalist criteria, and protectionist responses to food crises predominate. Belonging to the imagined community of the nation implies sharing the food.

This bears repeating first because it bears witness to the power of democratic political competition, at least in the popular imagination. Democratic transitions offer repeated, fairly regular moments in which to reassert food rights and responsibilities. They also offer opportunities to demonstrate the withdrawal of legitimacy, of assent to rule. It is easy and usual to be cynical about what democratic politics can deliver for the masses in developing countries. And yet in three of these countries (less so Kenya) electoral power is experienced as a corrective on bad food policies. People believe their voting behaviour matters, and that perceptions of their voting intentions, presumably gauged from the temperature of public opinion, influence policy choices – even when no party explicitly incorporates those choices into its policy platform.

What does the global nature of the major recent price shocks mean for the prospects of a politics of provisions centred on national identity, national institutions and national political competition? For Fraser, a nation-centric food politics in a global food crisis is necessarily on the wrong scale, inherently incapable of hitting its targets (Fraser 2008; Fraser 2011b; see also Engels 2014). If we take seriously the global nature of food systems we need to take seriously the need for a properly global politics of food. This means a world moral economy; an international right-to-food movement; a global response to food crises.

Our research implies that there are several barriers here. One is the familiar problem of conceptualising globalisation to politicise a response: how to understand the causal chain between the commodification of global food markets and what we can afford to buy in our local market? The complexity of the world food regime is plainly a barrier to the emergence of a politics of provisions 'scaled' to the needs of global food justice, partly because attribution is difficult. It is not insurmountable, as the energetic effort of La Via Campesina to promote a global movement for food sovereignty shows. But some of the normative agendas of contemporary national and local moral economies jar with the bare facts of the international integration of aspects of many national food systems. There is a vast difference, conceptually and organisationally, between political action around actual physical marketplaces (e.g., 'redistributing' grain from traders' warehouses), on the one hand, and political action against speculation in futures 'markets' for food commodities, on the other (Edelman 2005). This is not helped by the fact that no buyer and seller ever come in contact in such markets – indeed, no physical food grains ever actually change hands. But perhaps it is not necessary to understand the world to know it needs to be changed. It is increasingly recognised that the relationship between commodity speculation in food markets and food market outcomes is so complex that erring on the side of caution, even without robust

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evidence of the effects of regulation, is easily the best policy (Spratt 2013).

A global politics of provisions may mean internationalising a moral economy built around nationhood and national affiliation, as well as politicising abstract complex global market processes. Neither of these is impossible and both, to different degrees, continue within anti-globalisation struggles such as the food sovereignty movement. Yet there is undeniably a delinking of local and national struggles at the food consumption end of the food politics spectrum from the more internationally-networked producer politics. We currently lack a functionally global food consumer movement, despite the many moves in this direction.

Another obstacle to re-scaling the politics of provisions is that it is not clear at whom protests might be aimed. One of the features of recent food riots is that global policymakers are generally deaf to their meanings, for the very good reason that they lack the sophisticated understanding of domestic politics they would need to make sense of them, as well as the electoral incentives that would sensitise them to popular discontent. The major players in global food policy spaces are predominantly international bureaucrats. Global food policymakers need to be able to hear – and to fear – food riots; food rioters need to find better ways of making them listen. This means political spaces in which rights claims can be made and translated into language that policy elites can understand – as the successes in shifting the discourse by the past two UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food demonstrate.

In this, global policymaking has not always been well supported by either civil society organising or by international research. Research on ‘food riots’ has rarely amplified protestor voice, and more usually reduced the understanding of causes to the mechanics of price levels and dynamics. As already noted, organising and research on

the rights of smallholder food producers has been more extensive and more effective than that on low-income consumers. These are not contrasted to suggest an inherent conflict of interest between consumers and producers; our research indicates this is over-played in the food policy debates, concealing the disproportionate market control typically enjoyed by large producers, traders and retailers. But the scope for identifying important shared interests around access to quality and affordable food across north and south, or even across different food cultures, seems limited.

Aid-funded civil society groups in developing countries often avoid subsistence protests or food rights campaigning, partly because they lack links to protesting groups. Where they have engaged, this has sometimes, as in Mozambique, led to national NGOs’ energy being diverted from the struggle to mobilise a grassroots indigenous movement around the right to food into donor-friendly but ultimately fruitless ‘advocacy’, so there are good reasons to tread carefully. These are contentious issues, and many donor governments are wary of subsistence-related struggles because of their historic association with the left and because of their tendency to unruliness. Aid donors’ usual distance from contentious and unruly politics, as well as their investments in pro-market reforms, help to ensure that they and the civil society groups they fund are distanced from struggles over food policy.



FIGURE 7 NEWSPAPERS, INCLUDING LEFTIST MONTHLIES, ARE PASTED ON PUBLIC NOTICEBOARDS IN GAIBANDHA, NORTHERN BANGLADESH

Right-to-food movements represent an opportunity to engage with this earthier and less civil mode of mobilising, and to connect the global to the national and the local. Our findings suggest that riots and rights movements are different sides of the same coin. Some implications of this are that when a) there is a shared understanding of the moral economy and b) functional channels to express the precariousness of access to food, then it is possible for mobilisation to make a claim for the right to food. Without these two basic building blocks however, riots present the only option to both be heard and ‘correct’ the prevailing moral economy to be more sensitive to food justice. But as the experience of Mozambique warns, aid may encourage the substitution of empty ‘astro-turf’ posturing for the messy and difficult task of strengthening the grassroots links of nascent right-to-food movements, as it sets agendas by default. What is needed is more spaces in which right-to-food activists can grow and experiment, support for human rights work that can be flexible and politically engaged, and work with media professionals to raise the profile of hunger issues. These are the key lessons from India’s Right to Food movement, which through our research, we aim to share with other countries.

# SOURCES AND RESOURCES

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1 (Thompson 1971; Thompson 1991; J. Bohstedt 2010; L. A. Tilly 1983).

2 There is by now a large literature debating (‘fatuously’, according to Paul Collier (Collier 2008)) the causes of the global food price spikes of 2008 and 2011. There is also a growing body of scholarship on the source and implications of the longer period of food price volatility and inflation of 2007-12. The causes of the price spikes are relevant for understanding how the global crisis transmitted to national food economies and the efficacy of popular protests, but this is not the space for an extended discussion of these issues, so we summarise these in our bibliographical notes.

There exists a superficial consensus about the explanatory variables – in 2008, these were primarily bio-fuel investments and rising global demand for high value food items, while in 2011, climate-related events pushed prices steeply up. There is much discussion but no consensus on the role played by financial speculation in the food crises (see Ghosh, Heintz, and Pollin 2011; Ghosh 2010), reflecting the deeply ideological cleft in the interpretations or narratives of the crises. Very broadly speaking, on the left, the ‘crisis’ was a crisis of capitalism, rooted in the financialisation and commoditisation of food markets, under-investment in agriculture, unequal global trade regimes, the dominance of ‘technical’ pro-market solutions

to political problems of distribution, policy influence, and political power. For many on the left, the 2008 price spike was no crisis, but food business as usual, with its contradictions rendered visible to policy elites. On the right, consistent with dominant international development thinking on the issue, the crisis was a moment of market adjustment to rising demand for meat, biofuel production incentives, and trade shocks. Food prices had been too low for decades, this was an overdue correction, albeit a dramatic one exacerbated by protectionist responses to popular concerns about rising prices. The political divisions in the literature on the food crisis are a striking echo of those in the literature on the 'IMF riots' of the 1970s and 1980s (see the seminal account by Walton and Seddon 2008).

Some of the more interesting analyses emphasise: broader, possibly predictable cyclical factors in world food trade (Timmer 2010); idiosyncratic trade shocks (Derek Headey 2011); agricultural under-investment leading to food import dependence (Clapp 2009); the short-term effects of longer-term agrarian change (Deborah Fahy Bryceson 2009) and of emergent food systems stresses (Lang 2010). For an account of the crisis that uses food regime analysis to place food-agriculture systems within the global capitalist economy (and therefore sees the strains and contradictions as intrinsic) see (McMichael 2009). Other helpful overviews of the global crisis and the period of price volatility and rising prices that followed are (Gilbert and Morgan 2010; Naylor and Falcon 2010; Von Braun and Gebreyohanes 2012; FAO 2009).

3 The idea that the 2008 food shock was part of a 'perfect storm' conveys the apocalyptic and Malthusian nature of the discourse of the time (Beddington 2009; Derek Headey, Malaiyandi, and Fan 2010; Held, Kaldor, and Quah 2010). Yet a consensus has increasingly emerged that the impact was probably more short-lived and dramatic than it was enduringly adverse for the people most affected. See for instance (Compton, Wiggins, and Keats; World Bank 2012; D.

Headey 2013). In particular, rural incomes, even for some of the poor, have risen at least in some places, above inflation, leaving surplus farmers definitely and others possibly, better off (Swinnen 2011). Beyond the bare nutritional and income-consumption effects of the food price rises –largely positive for rural surplus farmers and typically negative, in the short-term, for low income urban folk – food price rises had longer-term adverse implications for human wellbeing, social organisation and gender relations (Heltberg et al. 2012; N. Hossain, King, and Kelbert 2013).

On the food riots of 2008 and related subsistence protests of 2011, there are a number of event catalogues (Schneider 2008; Ortiz et al. 2013). One recent paper has situated the 2008 protests within a longer historical sweep, making it possible to see the continuities and departures of the period 2007—12 (John Bohstedt 2014). A strand of political economy analysis situates the protests within the wider food regime and popular movements for food sovereignty and food rights (Patel and McMichael 2009), while others look to wider struggles for economic justice and security (Bush 2010; O'Brien 2012; Hossain 2009). The most prominent strand of the literature from the economics discipline undertakes cross-country analysis to establish causes (or correlates) of protests, confirming that such events are associated with price spikes and a lack of alternative means of articulating discontent (i.e. non-democratic regimes; (Berazneva and Lee 2013; Arezki and Bruckner 2011; Hendrix, Haggard, and Magaloni 2009; Verpoorten and Arora 2011). See also (Lagi, Bertrand, and Bar-Yam 2011) for an account that locates the triggers of the Middle Eastern 'spring' in the food crisis. One study concludes that rising prices, not volatility per se, are associated with riots (Bellemare 2011). More recently, studies have looked closely at the protests, comparing reportage with participants' own views to get a more richly textured picture (Sneyd, Legwegoh, and Fraser 2013; Engels 2014).

4 Our early thinking on ‘unruly politics’ is summarised by our colleague (Khanna 2012). On contractarian approaches to the politics of social protection, see (Hickey 2011).

5 The seminal work on the moral economy as the theory for food rioters remains E. P. Thompson’s work on 18<sup>th</sup> century England (Thompson 1971; Thompson 1991). Our thinking has also been influenced by more contemporary uses of the concept, for instance in relation to transnational organising (Hickey 2011). See (Naomi Hossain and Kalita 2014) for more on how we have been thinking about the moral economy in the contemporary period.

6 This is what Dani Rodrik termed the globalization ‘trilemma’ – how can countries be democratic, determine their own national economic policies, while also remaining part of a global economy? (Rodrik 2011).

7 The photographic record by the Reuters’ photographer Andrew Biraj highlights the frontline role of women in the struggles. See [http://www.chipp.cn/2011-03/24/content\\_10951.htm](http://www.chipp.cn/2011-03/24/content_10951.htm) [accessed 30th September 2014].

8 (“DEVELOPMENT: If There’s No Rice, Let Them Eat Potatoes | Inter Press Service” 2014). <http://www.ipsnews.net/2008/04/development-if-there39s-no-rice-let-them-eat-potatoes/> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> October 2014].

9 For instance, research has indicated that between 30 and 50 per cent of the wheat price spike and between 45 and 100 per cent of the rice price spike can be attributed to export bans (see Baltzer 2013; Martin and Anderson 2012; Derek Headey and Shenggen Fan 2010).

10 This framework is developed in more detail in (King et al. 2014).

11 Dr Marie Jo Cortijo, personal communication.

12 The classic account of elite paranoia about external involvement in domestic protests being Rude’s account of the French and English 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century crowd. See (Rudé 1981).

13 Not surprisingly, we were unable to get official confirmation

of this interesting policy response. But if true, it says something powerful about the priorities of the Government of Bangladesh, and its willingness to sacrifice border controls for lower prices.

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