

## --between the lines--

### Ep 02: Food Riots, Food Rights and the Politics of Provisions – Naomi Hossain and Patta Scott-Villiers

Welcome to *between the lines*, a monthly podcast that explores books for a better world, brought to you by the Institute of Development Studies.

Food is essential for life and can be used as a way to understand and highlight complex social challenges.

In 2008 and 2011 there was a global food crisis. Thousands of people in dozens of countries took to the streets to protest the spike in food prices.

In this month's episode of *between the lines*, IDS researchers [Naomi Hossain](#) and [Patta Scott-Villiers](#) discuss their book: [Food Riots, Food Rights and the Politics of Provisions](#). They get behind the headlines and inside the politics of food for people on low incomes. Interviewing Naomi and Patta is [Jenny Constantine](#) from King's College London.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: So at some point, Patta and Naomi, you said that the food riots were supposed to be ancient history. What happened? Why this book?

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: We'd been brought to understand, by the kind of the general sense of progress that development had made, that integrated food markets around the world were going to mean that if any country or any community were short of food, there was always going to be a market that could supply food, and that would mean that food prices would remain even and that people wouldn't suffer from either volatility or very rapidly rising prices. But it turned out that we were wrong.

NAOMI HOSSAIN: I don't know that *we* were wrong. [*laughter from others*] But the people who thought that the integration of global food markets would mean the end of these sorts of crises. I mean look again also at all of the famines that have happened around the world in the last two years, 40 million people facing famine. It's clear that the global food system is broken and the food riots are an important symptom of that and there are others as well.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: Yes so the sort of link, I suppose, with the Arab uprisings as well was something that brought this to the fore, in terms of people understanding that there were food riots in all these countries, suddenly this was on the telly right?

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Absolutely, I mean, I think that we always . . . we feel a bit uncomfortable about using the term 'food riots', and yet it's so recognisable, people know exactly what you mean when you're talking about a 'food riot'. But actually, the Arab uprisings, I think they're a really good example of how the term is really misleading, because certainly those were triggered by issues like the price of bread, the withdrawal of subsidies for bread, but they were

about many, many more things than food. Food was a kind of a, what would you say? It's like a . . . an amplifier, it's a source of moral concern that lots of political concerns radiate out from, I think.

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Yes, it's one of the groundings for this book we're talking about, which is that food is one of the essentials of life. And there are several others, there's shelter, there's fuel, there's care and there are times when it can appear that a sudden rise in the price, or loss of access to something of that level of importance to so many people can trigger these responses, these protests, which could be riotous, could be violent, could be large numbers the population behaving politically in ways that the politicians would rather they didn't. And it's often called the sort of 'rumble of the belly', but in effect what you'll find is it's what we're calling 'the politics of provisions' in which people are turning to their government and saying, 'You are no longer providing us with the opportunities to access the absolute essentials in life and that's what governments are for.'

JENNY CONSTANTINE: So we've touched on some more recent examples of food riots, but of course there are other examples historically. Would you be able to tell us a bit more about the historical context and the food riots? I know that understanding history has had a really important role in your approach for this book?

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Yeah absolutely and I think in our joint work, Patta, and in my joint work more generally, I think social history has a lot to tell us about the ways in which societies have developed, obviously, and in particular about these moments of crisis in the transition to properly capitalist economy, where you have people who are suddenly, if you like, in the market for food, whereas before, perhaps a generation past, they were growing their own, or bartering, or whatever they used to do. Suddenly you're very much at the mercy of markets and food price changes. So it's a kind of . . . these food riots are, I think, we learned from history, a kind of a symptom of difficult transitions to capitalism, and of people claiming their state should do something to protect them against this kind of commodification of the basics of everyday life. What do you think Patta?

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Yeah, and one of the people that we've drawn on, a sort of real foundation, is E.P. Thompson and his work on what he describes as the moral economy. And he looked at 18th century food protests and riots in Britain and what he pointed out from doing this incredibly beautiful review of newspaper coverage of these events and what people were saying and what they were doing was that people were rising up and grabbing hold of bread that was going off to market or grain that was seemingly heading for the port, and what they were doing was they were arguing that the market was being allowed to remove what was theirs by ancient right. And this this sense of a moral economy was an agreement between . . . an unspoken agreement between the people and the state, whereby the state did not allow the market to become too rapacious, to be able to remove from under their very noses the food they relied on to survive.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: And I think that marks also a real shift where, if you like, the downtrodden or, you know, the people who had experienced hunger, and we see this nowadays in the UK, are somehow dismissed. So there it is, you know, hunger or food insecurity or whatever you might call it, it exists, it's just one of those things . . .

NAOMI HOSSAIN: The poor will always be with us.

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Yeah.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: You gloss over it, you accept it and you sort of move on, you know, it's one of those things that you ignore. So I think this, what you've described, is a real shift in how people understood their relationship.

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: But it's also, I mean, it's, very importantly, it's a critique of the market, it's a critique of the way the market works and its kind of failure to protect basic subsistence. And it's also a critique, therefore, of political power and how that allows or doesn't allow people to get on with everyday life. We should mention one other historian who's been really important for us, is John Bohstedt, who in fact, although he did debate with E.P. Thompson back in the day, we were lucky enough to get him a little bit involved with our work and he wrote a really rather brilliant piece on the politics of provisions that's in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, which people will want to look at, which looks at food riots over history, including the 2008/2011 episode. John Bohstedt is somebody who's been very important for our work as well.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: Absolutely. So in writing the book, is there something that really stuck out, something that surprised you?

NAOMI HOSSAIN: I mean yeah [*laughter*]. You know, I think the thing that . . . I think people can be quite . . . I think all of us can be quite dismissive of these sorts of protests. People say . . . I think people *think*, 'Oh, it's just' you know . . . 'It's hungry, angry people jumping up and down.' It's just never that, it's just never that. It takes a lot to make a protest, to make a kind of riot. I think that really the thing that surprised me now, and even now when I say it, it still surprises me, is that food riots seem to work. Not all of them of course, we only ever hear about the ones that work. If it gets to the newspapers, then it's a sign it's already working *in some way* - not necessarily to improve nutrition or to make things better, but they have a kind of political impact. Always, don't you find? You know, if they get to a scale where they're visible in the newspapers in the . . . to the elites, then they've already done their work. And this, I think was really surprising to me, it still surprises me now when I think about it.

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Yeah. And I guess what's also important is we learnt and we did all these studies in different countries and in each country there was a different form of protest and riot, and in each country there was a different form of political response. And what I hadn't understood prior to

doing this study was that the relationship between the political system, the way of rioting and protesting for the masses, for the people on very low incomes and so on, and the kinds of response, were all sort of intimately associated with one another and they built up over time. So in Mozambique you had a particular kind of *blast* of fury, followed by what the author of the relevant chapter called authoritarian responsiveness, where they come through with responses, but at the same time with a very heavy . . . a heavy hand. Whereas in other places, like India, you had riots in different places, you had all sorts of really very 'ruly' work going on in the Supreme Court. And you had a kind of system-wide response. And I suppose for me that was . . . it was surprising that you understand that riots are *part* of a political system, they're not just an outlier thing.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: No, and they're accepted as such, I think, by the powers that be. So I was in Mozambique at that particular point in time and I remember first of all in Maputo, you know the streets being empty after the riots had quietened down and the police had sort of come in, and it was eerie. The city was very, very quiet. But then, you know, fast forward, really only a few days forward, I used to work for the World Food Program, and I remember the government called in the heads of all the U.N. agencies and said, 'Right, how do we deal with this? How do we fix this? And you know, if you think of . . . because one of my questions to you was, you know, what difference did the protest make? Well, if you think of this relationship between a mass of people who often don't have much of a voice or aren't heard and suddenly the government go, 'Oh dear, how do we deal with this?' for perhaps all the wrong reasons, but nonetheless I suppose it brings about the kind of responsiveness that you might not get otherwise?

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Absolutely, I should qualify a little bit this idea that food riots work though, I think the example of Kenya which Patta and our colleague Celestine Nyamu studied is particularly interesting, because there you did have protests and they were entirely ignored as far as we can tell, by the media and the elites. There was a wonderful quote, in fact, from the Kenyan study which was . . . I don't know who it was, it was a senior bureaucrat or a politician of some sort, who said, 'If Kibera burns, then we'll do something' – so basically you *really* have to threaten the elites in Kenya for them to do something about food security for the urban poor, because it's just not a . . . it's not the way their politics works, it's not the way their political economy is configured. But in most of these other places it was configured in the way that you say, the elites suddenly thought, 'Oh god damn, we've got to do something about this.'

JENNY CONSTANTINE: I suppose it's also the visibility of it. You had mentioned this issue of one of the critical mechanisms in this being the transition from agrarian to modern economies, and the issue of the real growing dependence on food markets by urban people. Would you be able to talk a little bit more about that, in terms of how people are able to manage their food supply and this sort of shift from, as you were saying before, growing your own food to suddenly being really dependent on the market and

not always being able to manage how you interact with that market, you know, if you're on a low income, et cetera?

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Yeah, I think when you're growing your own food, back in the original days that really was you and your community and everybody's working together as much as they do, to make that work, and when things go wrong people help one another and so on. And then you get transitions – you do become dependent, for example, on fertiliser supplies, which are provided, certainly in many places across the world, by governments through subsidy programmes, but somehow that still is a different form of dependence on the state to respond to you, than when you become part of the market, where you're buying . . . your literally everyday food is coming from the market. It then seems something that's really out of your control, you can't stop the prices from going up, you can't tell what they're going to do. And as such I think it creates this whole new sense of insecurity and at the same time, one things we were learning from people, is that it also creates this sense of, 'Well, look, I'm doing my bit. I'm working hard and I'm raising some cash and I'm coming to the market and I'm trying to buy something and I can't find it or I can't afford it.' So a sense of righteousness of, you know, 'This is not right, something has gone astray or gone awry here.'

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Absolutely you're working your socks off and still can't afford the basics for your family, it's a moment of absolute outrage for many people when they when they realise that prices have gone out the . . . But I should just say on this issue of people buying rather than growing their own food, at the time of the 2007/2008 food crisis the World Bankers crunched the numbers and concluded that the majority of the poor are in fact net food buyers. So we all know about industrialised food, the food and ag system. Increasingly people who grow food are not a kind of stereotypical small farmer but they are big farmers, or industrial farms. And the majority of the *rural* poor are in fact net food buyers. So this is not just an urban issue even though the riots are urban. The riots are never rural, riots are always urban.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: We're sitting here in the Institute of Development Studies, we all work in development and we have a background in Development Studies, but thinking about food riots in particular and in the light of this study, why would you say that they really matter, for those of us who work in development or who study development issues, not just as a one off occurrence that might happen historically, but why do we need to keep coming back and looking at this and understanding both what's *been* but what might come as well?

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Food riots and protests and the associated protests about provisions, the provisions of the basics of allowing people to make their contribution to society are absolutely fundamental to most of the people in most of the world. And it's these moments of voice, it's these moments of political power which are . . . Perhaps I shouldn't say moments, because the power and the voice come out at that point and they're picked up and amplified and things are done with that voice by media. But actually, what's happening is a political relationship that's going on all the time between

ordinary people and those who have the power to have policies of redistribution and recognition and so on. So it's a crucial development issue to understand this is not about technical advice to policymakers. This is about the people saying, 'Don't forget us, we are really important, we are the citizens of this state.'

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Yeah, absolutely. And you have the English food rioters of the 18th century and the French food rioters of course, famously, around the time of the French Revolution. But what we have now in the 2000s, the 21st century, is a highly-globalized food system. And so you have these food riots actually dramatise the tensions between national self-determination and globalisation in an important way. And I think the history books – Charles Tilly is another scholar that we've really used a lot. And Charles Tilly's work on how food supply shaped the formation of European states, I think has been really important. States must have bureaucrats and they must have armies and police forces; they must have urban centres. And urban centres are, by definition, places where people don't really feed themselves. So if you can't resolve the basic problem of how to feed your cities, you have no chance of developing a functional state. That's the big long historical lesson.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: Yeah and I suppose was looking again at the title of your book, and often the shorthand when talking about your project is 'the food riots and the food rights project', because it almost says it all, and there's this wonderful alliteration there, but actually the second half of your title is really fundamental: it's the politics of provisions and although we've talked a lot about food, you've also alluded to fuel and to income and this idea, as you've said, which I find really powerful – particularly when you consider the state of affairs politically and socially economically in the UK right now and in Brazil where I'm from, where people work *really hard*. There's no deserving and undeserving poor, people work *hard*. And it's, as you say, sort of indignation that must come from working really hard and doing your bit as a citizen, and yet the politics of provisions are such that you may not be able to provide for yourself and for your family. And that, I suppose, is where the anger and the protest and the uprising that you were studying comes to the fore, because if you've done your bit and your state, or the powers that be, have not, then what's left?

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Absolutely.

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Yeah.

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Absolutely. I mean, that's one of the things we're going to . . . well, we're hoping to look at next, is the way these food crises and fuel crises get resolved, how they get resolved shapes how people view the competence or the effectiveness of their states, how it shapes political trust, short. We think it's quite likely that the ways in which people trust or don't trust their governments and their state institutions probably relates very much to how successfully they manage those politics of provisions.

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: And state institutions' ability to manage that in this day and age is quite different than it was even 50 years ago. The global forces are so much more volatile and strong and the possibility that you might lose, like for Bangladesh your vital garments industry to some other country that's offering lower wages and less stringent labour conditions is always there. So the states themselves have this tremendous pressure on them to be able to find a way of delivering on the politics of provisions. It's a different era now.

NAOMI HOSSAIN: But just one thing also I think is important to keep in mind about these protest is that it's not that people think, 'Oh, I've got nothing to do this Saturday, I'll go and join a protest.' This is . . . people take a lot of risks. These are often violent and repressive states where these things come about, or at least they're states that are quite willing to get the water canon out. Because actually a food riot is a matter of enormous shame for most states, an absolutely terrible thing. It says, 'Look, you can't even manage *this*.' You know it's like 'deadbeat dad', it's just a matter of total shame. They really don't like it to be seen, don't like to be seen to be having food riots.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: And I would say, for the citizen, for the individual as well, because if you are having to riot, if you're having to take that risk, it means that you can't provide. And so it's also an indictment of the self to some extent, no?

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Yeah.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: You talked a little bit about the work that you are doing on fuel, but you were also alluding to how this research has shaped what might be coming next in terms of your work. Would you be able to share with us a little bit about, sort of, what next?

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Well, one of the 'what nexts' has already happened in fact. We've produced a paper on energy protests, a very quick and dirty study and, again, lots of interesting people from around the world. And energy protests follow a similar, but not identical, pattern in the last decade. They happen in different sorts of contexts to food riots on the whole, or some different contexts, sometimes you get the same: Mozambique for instance, I think 2010 was both a food and fuel protest. And that's, again, the politics of provisions – because in modern life you need your bus fare or your motorcycle petrol or whatever it is, just to get to work. And you know this kind of peri-urban phenomenon, of most low-income people living on the outskirts of big cities. That's one thing. What else are we up to Patta?

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Well we're plotting, [*laughter from others*] we're pulling something together and we hope it'll be successful. It relates to this question of the legitimacy of governments and it's couched within an observation that we're seeing more and more, that the world seems to be shifting towards . . . politics in the world seem to be shifting quite strongly towards systems which are, you know, people calling for more control and more nationalism, in this way of saying, 'You, government, you need to

protect us from the forces of globalisation.’ So we’re seeing more and more of that. So we’re interested to help unpack how that’s coming about not just in Western and Northern countries, but all across the world. So we want to look at the question of the politics of provisions and how that is making a difference to the levels of trust that people have, the levels of legitimacy that people will place in their government, their sense of judgment of government’s performance and so on.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: And you mentioned the relationship between food riots and cheap food, and this very problematic nutrition transition that we’re seeing across the world –something that is not just happening in developed or developing countries, it’s really spreading, so you suddenly have malnourished and an obesity living side by side in people. Would you be able to share some thoughts on that with us? I think you’d talked about the relationship between that and the drive for cheap staples, and how that contributes to this nutrition transition?

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Well I was going to say, there’s more one project involved here, we’ve got these interlinked projects on food researching people’s responses to the stresses, particularly of these big crises 2008 and 2011. And in this parallel project, which is the Life in the Time of Food Price Volatility project, where we visited households in multiple communities across the world, repeated years, and we asked them, ‘What are you doing and how are you coping?’ And people explained to us how their entire lives really, basically, changed as a result of food prices going up so rapidly, because they needed suddenly to earn a great deal more money. People found themselves having to go out and look for more different kinds of work, and they’re often migrating, they’re moving to town, or they’re moving into smaller places to live. And what happens is their whole lives changed. They have less time. They were therefore finding themselves unable to do the kind of cooking that they might have once been able to do. The family is more fragmented. The men are in one place, the women in another – which changed the way they were able to eat. And what people told us was that they were grabbing fast food, essentially, on the street and other people who are looking for a way to make a living and to make some income were setting up little kiosks selling fast fried food. And so you got this complete shift in so many people’s diets, which led us to understand that the possibility of becoming obese and becoming malnourished in that different way, where you’ve got the calories but you haven’t got the micronutrients, was coming about not because people were being self-indulgent but actually because they were working harder.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: Gosh, it’s perverse, isn’t it?

NAOMI HOSSAIN: It is, there’s actually a chapter in the *Food Riots* book, by Lauren Sneyd about Cameroon, which shows that the food riots worked to the extent that the government had the fear of the masses in it. And how they responded, essentially, was by starting to import cheap, at the time, staples from elsewhere – basically introducing rice into the diet. Now the Cameroonian population is accustomed, it seems, to cheap rice as opposed to what they used to eat, I think, which was often sorghum and maize and



other things. And the diet is basically less diverse and presumably less nutritious, but also more vulnerable to changes in the global rice price, because they don't really grow their own rice in Cameroon.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: Yeah, so it comes back to the link between the very individual of people's lives, with the local, with national policies and politics, with this global food prices in a *highly* interconnected world and how, as a citizen, one understands the relationship between all those things and how that plays out when you just go to buy the ingredients for your dinner, is a real shift.

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: People understand it to a remarkable degree. They still hold their national governments accountable, because that's the level that they can see, but it's also the level where they know something can be done.

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Yeah, I mean, how are you going to say, are you going to protest against the WTO? No, you're not. I mean, you are if you going to Seattle and . . . but, you know, sitting in your urban settlement, you're not going to be protesting against the WTO.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: No, absolutely, my point was more about how this globalisation has shifted to such a point that the act of going to buy your dinner now represents something entirely different, and you see this entire kind of shift and chain in this quite simple domestic act of going to buy something. And so that in itself is remarkable. I feel that we might be getting close to wrapping up, so I have a question, it's the sort of interviewer's privilege I hope, [*laughter from all*] but it's a question which speaks to my own research in Brazil and in the UK. One of the book's findings was how much in common these different political cultures had when organising around food across different geographies, different histories, languages and traditions – and, of course, you mentioned the differences, but there are also these commonalities. And food justice movements, activists in countries like the UK increasingly are battling a range of food-related issues which are globalised, like we were talking about today, and this also stems, I guess, from the 2008 and 2011 food and financial crises. But I wonder what we might learn from the experience of unruly politics around food in countries like Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Mozambique and Cameroon, and particularly in light of your conclusion that food riots work?

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Well, I think one of the things that we lack in the UK currently given the situation of food poverty, the rising reliance on food banks is that people have lost the habit or the culture of holding governments to account over food. We just don't have the mechanisms, we don't have the organisations, we don't have the moral economy, frankly, we just don't expect anymore that government should protect our basic subsistence rights, I think. Don't you think that, wouldn't you agree with that? I just don't think people expect it anymore. I think they think, 'Oh I'm hungry and I have to go to the food bank and it must be my *fault* in some way.'

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Yeah, and I think that must be . . . it's affected by a kind of global communications shift that we've had, where that sense of almost powerlessness about where these problems are coming from, is such that you end up feeling like, 'It's just me. I'm the only one you can cope with it.' So you do, you turn to your government and you saw, 'What are you doing about this?' But there is a bit of a sense of, you know, a kind of loss of the local, and therefore the power to do something about it, it's true.

JENNY CONSTANTINE: So food for thought. Thank you very much both for your time, it's been a real privilege to have this conversation with you and I look forward to reading the next book.

NAOMI HOSSAIN: Thank you.

PATTA SCOTT-VILLIERS: Thank you.