Food Security and the Role of NGOs

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CHRIS BAILEY, DEC 22 2007

In 1996, leaders came together at the World Food Summit in Rome to address the rising level of malnutrition throughout the world. They feared that if no action were taken, the amount of hungry people in the world in 2010 would reach 680 million, and set a commitment to halve the amount of undernourished people by 2015. Yet ten years after the summit, the World Food Program reported[1] the amount of hungry people has surpassed the 2010 estimate of 680 million and is already at 842 million. NGOs and other activists seeking the access to food face the surreal challenge that while there is a 'right to food' contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural (ESC) Rights, this right imposes a negative obligation upon the state to *respect* the right to food, not a *positive* obligation to provide nutrition for its citizens. This has caused NGOs to increasingly focus on ESC rights, in addition to traditional political and civil (PC) rights, and campaign for the right to nutrition. But to combat hunger, they must also confront neoliberalism and the commodification of food as just another market good.

Philip McMichael (2003) has examined food security as a matter of social reproduction in an age of neo-liberalism. Food was exempt from the original GATT in 1947. After World War II, the United States and European countries developed policies to ensure food self-sufficiency by subsidizing agriculture and regulating price floors. The United States opposed the formation of a world food body under the auspices of the UN and instead pursued bilateral aid projects giving surplus food to developing countries. The EU countries developed the Common Agricultural Policy that furthered government subsidiaries in the 1960s. Overproduction in the US and EU flooded the world market with surplus food, undercutting producers in developing countries. "Reforms" in the early 1990s led to a WTO agreement on agriculture that favored traders over producers, and the concept of food security was re-conceived as the right of countries to export food. Small and medium farmers were impacted in the developed countries from the removal of price floors and many went out of business or sold to the large agribusiness conglomerates. These agreements further weakened the ability of developing country farmers to produce food because of competition from imported subsidized staples. Many instead began to produce tropical fruits for export to developed country markets. The developing world has also been confronted with the marketization of seeds. Many seed providers have developed transgenic seeds that require farmers to buy new seeds every year instead of being able to replant using the seeds

produced by their produce. Seeds are covered under intellectual property agreements that aim to prevent 'biopiracy.' Small farmers have been forced into poverty and unable to produce necessary food for themselves or their neighbours. This has sparked a rural-urban migration to cities, leading to the development of slums and escalating poverty and hunger. Many have also migrated abroad, often clandestinely, to Europe and North America where they form an underclass at the bottom of the economy. Ironically, many now work on the farms that produce the subsidized agriculture that is destroying the production of food in their home countries.

NGOs have responded to food security issues by taking increasingly rights-based and participatory approaches. Michael Windfuhr of the FoodFirst Information and Action Network has described how his organisation, other NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) are focusing on ESC rights. This focus developed after the 1996 World Food Summit. NGOs now attempt to intervene to protect small farmers from eviction, indigenous people from losing traditional lands and fishing grounds, and segments of the population from discriminatory food supply schemes. They are developing the concept of nutritional rights, as opposed to the right to adequate food, to put pressure on governments to take responsibility for supplying funding for nutrition in national budgets. The rights-based approach also allows NGOs to pressure businesses and international organisations to help secure nutrition rights. Philippa Howell (1998) focuses on a participatory approach in an Ethiopian case study how one NGO, ActionAid, is promoting sustainable and community solutions to food production. In the town of Dalocha, the NGOs used local community groups to plan for famine relief. Fearful of people becoming dependent on handouts, particularly the poorest without livelihoods, the NGO instead organised loans to members of the community so they could obtain blankets and grain. The poorest relied on other members of the community to assist them. In the studied case, the villagers were able to increase food production and 70% of the loans had been repaid to the NGO, with those unable to pay given extensions.

NGOs face many challenges in the countries they operate in. Pingali, Alinovi, and Sutton (2005) have examined food security in complex political emergencies. NGOs confront sovereignty issues over intervention and supplying food. Often conflicts have not been resolved and current or former combatants may try and raid the food relief and refugees and internally displaced people may be far from home and in areas dominated by rival ethnic groups. NGOs also face the 'CNN affect' of short attention spans from supporting funders and governments and the lack of funding and structural support to develop long term solutions to ensure greater food access. Paarlberg (2002) writing for a Washington, DC K-Street policy institute, describes the governance issues that often inhibit NGOs. In African countries, governments are often dominated by urban elites that are disconnected from rural issues and promote food policies that benefit urban populations over the rest of the country. NGOs themselves in these countries may employ urban staff and have difficulty reaching rural areas where food production occurs. Ethnic divisions often

impact the production and distribution of food. Many post-colonial countries have borders designed by the former colonizing power that divide ethnic groups and place rivals within the same state. And corruption often is the single largest governance issue that separates people for the food and solid policies they need to fully enjoy their basic human rights.

NGOs face increasing barriers in confronting widespread inequality in the availability of food. As DJ Shaw (1997) notes, the question isn't whether it is possible to produce enough food to feed everyone in the world, but if the will to exists. The proponents of trade liberalisation are correct to note that there are governance capacity issues in many developing countries. Yet the main obstacle, as noted by McMichael, is the growing power of large agribusiness and the decline of small farm producers in the developed and developing worlds will be difficult to change without mass mobilization for nutritional rights for all and a human rights approach. It may take mass social dislocation, conflict, and a flood of refugees, in Mark Duffield's terminology underdevelopment becoming dangerous, before the rich states re-evaluate their mass subsidization of agriculture. Rural areas dominated by farming in the US and the EU may very well lobby for greater support of small and medium sized farming in national policy and a shift away from commercialised agribusiness. Simple measures may also have wide impact. Krain and Shadle's (2006) account of a mock food insecurity exercise at a college conducted by Oxfam America can inform people about food insecurity and may encourage them to become involved. Yet 842 million people are currently hungry and the number will surely rise because of high birth rates in the developing world, rural to urban migration, and increasing conflict. It will take a great deal more than efforts by NGOs to solve this problem.

[1] http://www.fao.org/monitoringprogress/index_en.html

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