

Food riots and food rights: the moral and political economy of accountability for hunger

CASE FOR SUPPORT

1. Introduction

The 2008 food crisis renewed the sense of urgency around global food security, amidst concerns about resource scarcity, population pressure and climate change (Beddington 2009; FAO 2009; Foresight 2011; Godfray *et al* 2010; Oxfam 2011). The challenge of feeding the world may be tougher and more complex in the 21st century, yet at its core, it remains familiarly political: how to institutionalise public accountability and responsiveness towards the hungry (Devereux 2007; Drèze and Sen 1989; Evans 2009). This research will test what history suggests is a credible likely answer to this perennial challenge: that, under specific conditions, popular political action on rights to food can activate and institutionalise accountability for hunger (Bohstedt 2010; Tilly 1983).

The present moment both demands and lends itself to an examination of the popular political origins of accountability for food security. By no coincidence, food has been the object of a global upsurge in popular mobilisation and activism in the 2000s. This has taken the form of civil society and legal activism to establish the right to food, and of food riots on a global scale (Bush 2010; Brinkman and Hendrix 2011; de Schutter 2010; Drèze 2004; FAO 2006; ; IEP 2011; Knuth and Vida 2011; Schneider 2008; von Braun 2008). Historically, popular mobilisation around food asserted the claims of a ‘moral economy’ – a consensus about the right to adequate provision of basic needs, in contrast to the claims of the market economy – at moments when these were threatened (Thompson 1971; 1991). Women were often prominent protestors, reflecting their roles in provisioning and lack of political voice (Bohstedt 1988; Taylor 1996). During periods of economic adjustment, how governments responded to such mobilisation could be constitutive of public authority, legitimacy and order (Bohstedt 2010; Tilly 1975; Walton and Seddon 1994; also Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Berger and Spoerer 2001). Is contemporary popular mobilisation informed by a contemporary moral economy? If so, what are its claims and grievances? To what extent does it succeed in holding national governments to account within a global food regime, and under what conditions?

These are the questions the proposed research will address. To do so it will undertake comparative analysis of the causes and effects of protests and civil society activism around food in Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique during recent food price volatility (2007-12). It aims to explain the conditions under which different forms of mobilisation emerge, different official responses are elicited, and their impacts on accountability for food security. The research will influence policy by creating space for dialogue about the right to food, and improving understanding of the domestic political incentives for elites to act on food security and social protection. It falls within the theme of **Resource Scarcity, Growth and Poverty Reduction**, by addressing the mitigation of risks of social and political conflict around resource scarcity in poor and food insecure countries.

2. Background and rationale

Sharp rises in world food prices resulted in price ‘spikes’ in 2008 and 2011, and the FAO food price index has more than doubled in the last decade; food prices are unlikely to return to pre-2008 levels (Alexandratos 2008; FAO 2011; Headey and Fan 2010; Piesse and Thirtle 2009). But while the 2010-11 price spike pushed an estimated 44 million people into poverty, the poverty impacts of higher food prices are not self-evident (Benson *et al* 2008; Ivanic *et al* 2011; World Bank 2011). Higher food prices are assumed to be a boon for agricultural communities (Swinen 2010), yet smaller farmers tend to benefit less than richer farmers (Vanhaute 2011). Policies to keep food cheap typically favour vocal urban groups, but as an increasing proportion of the world’s poor live in cities, whether this amounts to an anti-poor urban bias needs revisiting (Jones and Corbridge

2010; Satterthwaite *et al* 2010; Toye 2009). And the adverse impacts on women are routinely underestimated, because the care economy - the unpaid work of reproducing society - bears the brunt of adapting to price rises. These unmeasured costs are often misread as 'resilience' (Espey *et al* 2009; Horn 2009; Hoskyns and Rai 2007; Hossain *et al* 2010a, 2010b).

Recent research confirms that price spikes were the source of social unrest, that low income countries and weakly democratic polities are particularly prone to riots, and that the relationship between global food prices and civil unrest has become stronger with market integration and the 'contagion' effect of the internet and social networking (Arezki and Bruckner 2011; Arora *et al* 2011; Berazneva and Lee 2011; Hendrix *et al* 2009). This emerging body of work makes valuable contributions, but methodological limitations mean cross-country analyses stop short of asking key questions: what are people protesting, and what do they seek to change? The historical and anthropological literatures remind us not to assume the motivating grievance is 'hunger': riots do not erupt wherever people are hungry, and so-called 'food riots' often feature other grievances - wages, taxes, corruption (Greenough 1982; ; Rudé 2005; Scott 1976; Walton and Seddon 1994). Debate about the origins of the Arab Spring suggests recent 'food riots' featured financial crisis, austerity measures and deep-seated anti-authoritarian discontent (see Anderson 2011; Barnett 2011; Bush 2010). A reasonable, historically-derived hypothesis would be that (rather than empty bellies) the grievance motivating food riots is something like a 'moral economy', or a popular consensus about the rights to adequate provisions of basic needs, and the accompanying official responsibilities to protect those rights (Bohstedt 2010; Thompson 1972).

Whereas food riots imply acute food insecurity, activism – such as the food sovereignty campaign by the peasant network *Via Campesina* and Oxfam's food justice campaign – target chronic hunger. National right-to-food movements are particularly relevant, as they seek accountability for hunger by establishing rights to food and official responsibilities to enact them. In many respects the food crisis seems an opportune moment for these moderate, liberal forms of activism (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck 2011). Yet their relationship with other, more unruly forms of mobilisation has not been investigated: do food riots, food rights mobilisation or a combination succeed in activating official accountability for hunger? From the perspective of a study of contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2006), the configuration of riots (typically the unorganised expression of the urban poor) alongside rights struggles (often led by elite civil society) offers a unique chance to explore the interactions of distinctively different political repertoires and the responses they generate.

One reason this is so important is that there is little scholarly analysis of the responses riots elicit (Wilkinson 2009). We know little about when and why different repertoires elicit repressive or ameliorative responses. Yet we can expect that in the integrated world food system of today, governments will find it difficult to respond to the demands of a moral economy: while policy experts argue for open markets, agricultural incentives, and targeted social protection, protestors often seek price controls, universal safety nets and autarkic food policies. Policies that result may be popular but ultimately counter-productive (see Demeke *et al* 2009; Timmer 2010; World Bank 2010). The challenge is for governments to reconcile domestic political pressures with global economic pressures at their most contradictory (Rodrik 2011). These contradictory pressures arise amidst elements absent from historical accounts of the moral economy: global governance and civil society, rapid international communications, and an international discourse of universal human rights, including to 'affordable' and 'accessible' food (UN 1999). Together these suggest that any contemporary moral economy is likely to be more global in its forms and claims, as well as more complex in the responses it demands.

3. Research objectives and hypotheses

With the ultimate aim of generating knowledge and debate that will strengthen accountability for hunger, **the research will test the proposition that popular mobilisation activates accountability for hunger.** The research will be designed to yield country- and context-specific case study evidence, and generic, theoretical knowledge of the institutional, socio-political and policy conditions that activate such accountability. It will facilitate dialogue between food rights activists and policymakers, and by improving understanding of ‘the politics of what works’ to address food insecurity, enable the design of policies and interventions that stand a better chance of sustained success (Hickey 2006).

The central proposition of the research will be tested through an exploration of the causes and effects of popular mobilisation around food in Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique, between 2007 and 2012. The forms of popular mobilisation to be examined include protests related to the cost of food which gain media attention and/or legal activism around the right to food. ‘Causes’ refer to the full set of possible explanatory factors identified in the literature, including the grievances, food security situation, and the differing social impacts of food price rises and volatility. It also includes the political opportunity structures (policies and threats around which claims can be made) and wider institutional features such as political regime types and organisational hosts. These causes will be analysed in relation to the central framing assumption: that a contemporary form of ‘moral economy’ informs recent forms of popular mobilisation around food. This theoretical framing ensures a perspective on the motivations for action and response that gives prominence to the agency and political culture of poor people.

The ‘effects’ of popular mobilisation refer chiefly to the effects on political and policy elites, in particular the incentives it gives them to act, and the policy responses they then make. This includes attention to the sources of legitimacy within the polity, to the nature of the social contract between (poor) citizen and state, and the international policy frameworks within which national elites operate (e.g. world trade, debates on social protection and the Millennium Development Goals). We are interested here in not only the populist outcomes – e.g.- a temporary or piecemeal safety nets – but also whether these amount to an enforceable ‘politics of provisions’, or a functioning system of accountability for hunger (Bohstedt 2010). Drawing on the Goetz and Jenkins (2005) framework for the analysis of accountability in relation to human development, we will specifically seek evidence that mobilisation events elicit official responses that: a) acknowledge or accept a mandate for action on food security; b) establish standards against which performance can be measured; c) improve systems for monitoring rights to food; and d) sanction failures or enforce actions to protect those rights. To the extent that they do, we can say that they have institutionalised accountability and responsiveness for food security.

The core proposition will be tested in relation to the following hypotheses about the causes and effects of mobilisation around food and its implications for accountability for food security:

- i. **The extent and nature of popular grievances around food price rises/volatility is inadequately grasped.** We hypothesise that public authorities are often uninformed and/or reluctant to acknowledge the extent of the negative impacts of food price volatility, even where monitoring systems exist because: a) sharp increases in the price of food affect wellbeing, which is not often measured, so that there may be psychological as well as physiological dimensions (e.g. people feel forced to eat low status or taboo foods, or experience a strong sense of injustice); b) many adverse impacts are absorbed by women’s (unmeasured) care work, and the ill-effects on women are under-estimated or misread; in addition c) there may be a reluctance to acknowledge the extent of the effects as this implies the need for action. The research will open up the possibility of a wider range of grievances, focusing on the multiple dimensions of

- experiences of the food crisis rather than on its poverty effects, narrowly defined. This wider frame will help to centre the gendered nature of the response within the analysis, focusing on whether the response acknowledges and responds to the particular pressures food price volatility creates for women and their roles in social reproduction or the care economy.
- ii. **A contemporary version of the moral economy provides the political logic for mobilisation, but globalisation limits its power.** ‘Moral economy’ ideas tend to prioritise rights to provisions over other rights in food, in particular rights to trade and profit from food. Such views tend to be articulated most clearly during moments of scarcity and rapid economic adjustment (such as the present), to prescribe roles and responsibilities of public authorities in relation to action on food security, and to hold public authorities to a rough account because they are a key source of legitimacy (Bohstedt 2010; Thompson 1972; 1991; Walton and Seddon 1994). The recent wave of food protests mirrors the historical experience with economic adjustment, and exploratory research suggests elements of moral economy thinking may be present in contemporary political cultures (Hossain and Green 2011). But a contemporary moral economy is likely to have less power to hold authorities to account in an era of global food markets. The implications for accountability and responsiveness are that if contemporary moral economies are hostile to trade in food, a popular or satisfactory response may be particularly constrained in a globalised food market; this may encourage anti-market interventions with counter-productive outcomes.
 - iii. **The extent to which popular mobilisation succeeds in activating accountability depends on the political opportunity structure.** Specifically, we would expect acknowledgement of mandates to address food insecurity, new standards and monitoring systems and stronger powers of enforcement where a) the food crisis has been transmitted particularly directly to the national context (the more direct, the more likely riots are); b) policy responses act to stabilise access to food automatically (pre-existing stabilisers will suggest civil society activism is more likely; ad hoc interventions will suggest a weakly institutionalised response); c) civil society is strong and closely connected to mass concerns; and d) there is a political history of active famine prevention. While the two forms of mobilisation – civil society action and the more unruly riots and protests – are from distinctively different repertoires with divergent histories of past actions, interactions and responses (Tilly 2008), we would also expect that e) when both forms are present, there are likely to be mutual influences which result in responses that strengthen accountability to the hungry.

4. Methodology

The research questions will be addressed through comparative case studies of the popular politics of food in Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique over the period 2007-12. This period marked a break with the preceding decades of cheap food, making it possible to examine popular ideologies and policy responses at the moment of their articulation and contestation. The choice of a comparative case study methodology reflects the need for close-grained contextual analysis of each case, as well as for testing hypotheses about the effects of political agency across a sufficiently varied range of institutional contexts to permit some generic explanation (Lijphart 1971). Each case is also of intrinsic interest, and to some extent qualifies as an ‘ideal’ case-type: in particular, India exemplifies the advances that have made in institutionalising accountability for food security.

The research has been designed so that collectively, the set also allows for analysis of the key variables within the political opportunity structure, enabling comparison a) within broad geographical regions (South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa), relevant to assessing the effects of the transmission of the food price shock; b) between different forms of popular mobilisation (more civil society and legal activism in India and Kenya; more riots and less rights-activism in Bangladesh and Mozambique) and c) across different political-institutional histories of famine prevention

(institutionalised historical lessons about the link between famine prevention and political legitimacy in Bangladesh and India; predominance of donor-driven action on famine in Kenya and Mozambique) and other forms of social protection (e.g., large-scale crisis response mechanisms present in the other countries are absent in Kenya).

The case studies will use qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, drawing on interdisciplinary approaches and insights from political anthropology and political sociology, comparative politics, contentious politics, feminist economics, social history, policy analysis, and participatory research. The empirical analysis will be designed to test the hypotheses at two levels:

Popular mobilisation. At this level, the empirical analysis will include:

- Key informant interviews with right-to-food movement leaders (c. 10-15 in each country) to explore their understandings of the nature and cause of the problem of lack of rights to food; the political opportunities that enable effective mobilisation and which elicit effective responses; the causes of and response to food riots; and interactions between food rights activism and protestors. The political language of right-to-food movements (pamphlets, speeches, websites, reports) will also be analysed.
- Analysis of food-related protests, petitions, demonstrations and other contentious political ‘performances’ during 2007-12, through construction of event catalogues based on news reports, paying attention to actors’ social profiles, particularly gender, socioeconomic status and occupation, stated grievances or justification for protests, actions or responses being claimed, from whom, and official statements or responses which followed (following Tilly 2008). The focus will be on episodes that gained national media attention, as most likely to generate a response. Where possible, data collection will take advantage of online archival searches, and include analysis of blogs and online comments on newspaper websites.
- Qualitative data on the motivations and experiences of protestors designed to unearth the everyday experience of the food crisis, and the popular ideology underlying protests or activism. Activities will include a) tracing and interviewing protest participants (where possible), b) conducting at least 10 focus group discussions with social and occupational groups matched to the profile of protest participants in each country. We will also explore experimental approaches using ICTs (e.g. text message surveys, riot mapping) to gather and analyse popular opinion of food price volatility. The research will draw on focus group protocols and participatory and visual methodologies developed in earlier exploratory research on related issues (Hossain *et al* 2010b; Hossain and Green 2011).

These activities will be triangulated against other existing survey, opinion poll and qualitative data.

Policy response. This will involve analysis of policy shifts in food and social protection over the period, through scrutiny of official documentation and public statements. Semi-structured interviews will be undertaken with a sample of 15-30 food and social protection ministry officials, bilateral and multilateral (e.g. FAO, World Bank) aid agency representatives, food security monitoring unit officials, members of the political elite, and opinion leaders (e.g., newspaper editors). Interviews will focus on reconstructing the logic behind policy shifts, through assessing understanding of the grievances, the threat to political legitimacy posed by food insecurity and popular mobilisation, and the motivations for different kinds of responses.

Qualitative data at each level and for each country will be separately coded and analysed using qualitative data analysis software (e.g. NVivo). A key stage of the analysis will involve generating a chronological analysis of the events catalogued through the study of popular mobilisation, combined with the analysis of policy pronouncements and shifts. The results of this chronological synthesis will be presented back to research participants and interviewees for their interpretation of

the causal chain. The comparative analysis across the four cases will be undertaken specifically to test the third hypothesis (that the accountability effects depend on specific features of the political opportunity structure), focusing on the variables outlined above in 3 (iii).

5. Project implementation

The research will be carried out by a multidisciplinary team with expertise in civil society and accountability (Anuradha Joshi, Luis Brito, Alex Shankland, Naomi Hossain), political and legal activism (Celestine Nyamu-Musembi, Ferdous Jahan), poverty, urbanisation and food security (Patta Scott-Villiers, Ferdous Jahan (through an ongoing DFID-ESRC project), Naomi Hossain; see CVs for details). The impact strategy will be managed by a team with strong facilitation and stakeholder participation expertise (Samuel Musyoki and Patta Scott-Villiers). The project is designed to meet the need for innovative and cross-disciplinary approaches to the complex questions it poses; at the same time, the complexity of the questions demands wide-ranging knowledge of the political, social and policy contexts of the case study countries, in addition to strong theoretical and research backgrounds. The team also includes Indian right-to-food activist-researchers and the principal advisor to the Indian Supreme Court Commissioners, who oversee the Government's food and employment programmes (Patnaik). Roles and responsibilities for all aspects of the research – design, data collection, analysis, dissemination - will be equally distributed between the Southern and UK investigators. The IDS and lead country researchers all speak languages of the countries in which they will be researching.

The Principal Investigator, Naomi Hossain, has led influential research on the social impacts of the food, fuel and financial crises since 2009, financed by DFID and Oxfam GB. The proposed research is in parallel with a four year programme that aims to scale up that project in partnership with Oxfam's food justice campaign; this is currently in preparation, to start in late 2011. The research partnership with Oxfam will deliver policy relevant outputs on the impacts of food price volatility in 10 developing countries. The present research will complement and benefit through synergies around data collection and access to policy networks and opportunities for influencing. The proposed research is a departure in its focus on a) the popular political origins of accountability for hunger; b) the theoretical advances needed to analyse national food politics in a global era; and c) the interactions between different repertoires of contentious food politics.

The research project will be implemented in six phases. **Phase 1** will involve work to refine the comparative elements of the theoretical hypotheses across the project, and will occupy the first three months. **Phase 2** will involve detailed design work for the data collection phase, including development of protocols, data sourcing methodologies and analysis plan for the event catalogue; tracing methodologies, focus group discussion and semi-structured interview sampling frames and protocols for the 'policy response' level. Phase 2 will take three months, ending with an all-team workshop to refine the design. Key project stakeholders from academic and practitioner groups will be invited as part of a Reference Group to comment on project design and progress. **Phase 3** will start the implementation of the data collection for the political events catalogue and interviews and focus groups for the popular mobilisation level. This will occupy six months. In **Phase 4**, the policy response survey will be undertaken. **Phase 5** will involve the comparative analysis of the case study results, and will cover six months. A second project workshop will be organised towards the end of Phase 5 to discuss the material generated, and its relationship to the theoretical framework. In **Phase 6** we will present research results in a project workshop at IDS and national workshops in Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique, to discuss final outcomes with project stakeholders and research participants. Working papers, journal articles, policy briefings, news stories and presentations will be prepared as and when results become available and in response to opportunities and interest by project beneficiaries.