1 Food Activism and Policy in South Africa

Introduction

Despite South Africa’s pledge to fast-track action towards food security, the severity of hunger is troubling as 6.8 million of the population remain underfed (StatsSA, 2019a: 8; Global Hunger Index, 2019). Even though over the last two decades there has been some improvement in this barometer, the country is witnessing a surge in a new form of malnutrition, obesity, which now plagues 31.1 per cent of males and 59.5 per cent of females (Cois and Day, 2015: 2; Hunter-Adams et al., 2019). The rise in obesity, coupled with insufficient diversity of diet, has been a major contributory factor of non-communicable diseases including cardiovascular ailments (Tugendhaft et al., 2015). This negative development is an indication that the hard-won political battle fought by many against the apartheid regime has not translated into food security for the country’s population (Nkrumah, 2018a).

Indeed, the contribution of citizens towards the liberation struggle imposed a political obligation on the country’s leadership to ensure their right to food (RTF). This obligation was clearly articulated by Nelson Mandela (1993; own emphasis) when he mooted that ‘[w]e do not want freedom without bread’ and ‘our liberation should guarantee human dignity, freedom from want, freedom from deprivation’. Yet, twenty-five years after the country’s turn to democracy, the realisation of RTF remains elusive (Chakona and Shackleton, 2019).

On the legal front, following the country’s negotiated transition to democracy in 1994, it adopted what could be referred to as one of the most progressive constitutions in terms of safeguarding civil/political and economic/social rights. It is one of very few constitutions globally which codifies RTF by making citizens’ access to food justiciable (Nkrumah, 2019a). To be exact, the country’s constitution obliges...
the government to take all reasonable measures to ensure that every individual has food security or adequate access to food.

Despite this landmark constitutional and political commitment, widespread chronic hunger persists in rural and urban South Africa (Hatcher et al., 2019). Why is this the case, and how can this sorry state be undone? Put differently, what factors underpin the strong rhetoric and yet weak commitments for RTF in South Africa? Do existing concepts, policies and institutions hinder or facilitate individual and household attainment of this universal aspiration? This book responds to these burning questions by analysing conceptual frameworks relating to food (in)security, key issues and challenges, and finally a review of socioeconomic policies which can facilitate people’s access to food.

While several factors may be seen as the underlying causes of the current state of widespread hunger, it may not be farfetched to indicate that there is lack of understanding or conceptualisation on what food security implies and what measures are needed to facilitate its realisation. This inspiring and lively book argues for a rehabilitation of the notion of ‘food activism’ as a conduit to improving household food security in South Africa. It contributes towards an improved understanding of the RTF, triggering discussion on the need for adoption of a more comprehensive instrument backed by a specific institution to improve people’s access to adequate food. Its point of departure from existing and on-going research on RTF is a recognition of five hypotheses: (i) RTF is attainable if the state adopts the needed legislation, sets up the right institution and provides the necessary resources for the effective operation of this institution; (ii) RTF deserves to be entrenched in one comprehensive instrument and not be fragmented and operationalised piecemeal among different government departments; (iii) given that there are many variables (unemployment, HIV/AIDS, rising food prices) militating against poor households in their attempt to access food, there is the need for the establishment of a unified government department, to achieve the RTF more holistically; (iv) issues surrounding RTF must be prioritised in the national agenda as food insecurity threatens the mental health of expectant mothers and development of foetuses; and (v) RTF is inevitable as it is meaningless to codify civil/political or other socioeconomic demands (such as education) when one is famished (Mandela, 1993).

All these hypotheses raise discursive questions on the content of existing policies which purport to achieve zero hunger, and the
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effectiveness of the institutions tailored to achieve these objectives. In keeping with contemporary thinking on the intricate nature of RTF, the book draws upon various disciplinary perspectives, and ultimately adopts Sen’s (1982) entitlement theory which conceptualises food security as a human right. The book illustrates that in the context of evolutionary thinking, food insecurity in (South) Africa and beyond is not tied to the insufficient yield or scarcity of farm produce in the local market, but rather the insufficient ability of households to access cash to buy or land to cultivate their own food. These arguments are presented in simple language, to enable not only the development expert to understand the approach to be adopted in promoting food security agenda in the (South) African context, but also for the poor and famished to understand their inherent RTF and how they could press for it. In doing this, a case study of food activism across four continents is discussed, with specific emphasis on India’s Right to Food Campaign. These cases may serve as blueprints for advocates of food security to emulate in their attempt to concretise and advance citizen’s RTF in (South) Africa and beyond. Of importance is the discussion on the rationale behind the very limited mobilisation around RTF in the country and how public action could be used to influence the adoption of a food security instrument to improve the nutritional needs of the poor, especially pregnant women who have been excluded from mainstream social grants. The strength of the book further lies in its discussion of how a strong constitutional and political mandate at the national level has not translated into food security at the individual and household levels.

It needs to be said that South Africa is neither short of policies asserting to end hunger, nor institutions claiming to have the mandate to improve access (Hatcher et al., 2019; Garekae and Shackleton, 2020). Why, then, is this book advocating for a renewed focus on RTF? The answers are directly linked to the abovementioned hypothesis. Simply put, this book is striking in three main ways: first, it uses a human rights approach to assess public policy. It challenges human rights activists and scholars to transcend issues of procedural justice in order to analyse distributional justice and the complementary role of socioeconomic policy; second, by using a human rights framework, the book analyses the shortfalls in public polices and how they can be triggered to address gender biases, income inequality and poverty. The book therefore makes an enormous contribution to scholarship
as it focuses on empowerment, the process of participation, poverty, equality and human well-being; and third, it surveys RTF from the standpoint of people, by assessing the nexus between poor socio-economic policies and their impact on community, household and individual food security.

**Historical Background to Food Insecurity: Facing an Unequal World**

Hunger is not a contemporary phenomenon. It dates back to the biblical story of Joseph in Egypt when he predicted in Pharaoh’s court that there would be seven years of bounty followed by seven years of scarcity (Rogers, 2019). This could be seen as a typical early warning system to addressing food insecurity. Subsequently, the falling of manna from heaven to replenish the Israelites fleeing from Pharaoh in Exodus can be considered as the first form of food security intervention (Bruni, 2019). Besides these biblical legacies, there are traces of food insecurity which persisted before the Hellenistic period (between the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC and the emergence of the Roman Empire). As far back as 66 BC, thousands of Romans stormed the house of then Roman consul, Marcus Cicero, in demand for food, which more prosaically, could be interpreted as a classic illustration of food activism (Alkon and Cadji, 2020).

In recent times, however, food security climbed the global agenda in the 1970s in the wake of its impact on development programmes, especially in the Global South (Heucher 2019). Nonetheless, over the last decade, it has become evident that interest in the subject has waxed and waned partly due to the evolving nature of the variables underpinning food insecurity and the evolving concept of development more broadly. Simultaneously, there has been a slow but steady shift in the conceptualisation of food security by refocusing the debate towards individual and household access to (in)sufficient food rather than (inter)national or regional food supply (Jun et al., 2019). Even though some scholars have attempted to swing back like the pendulum from consumption to supply issues, in the case of South Africa, the focus of attention has been on the poor, the food insecure and other vulnerable groups since the state is food secured (Claasen and Lemke, 2019).

When framing the issue of food (in)security and undernutrition, especially within the context of Sen’s capabilities approach, it is useful...
to assess the content of public policies through the lens of human rights standards. Human rights are framed not merely as inherent rights entrenched in a collection of legislations, but as ethical norms, and they form the foundations of political and legal commitments which have been codified as (inter)national standards and, thus, gained legitimacy as universal values. It goes without saying that basic rights are inextricably linked to capabilities which allow people to enjoy a meaningful living condition. Specifically, due to their importance in enhancing the dignity of individuals, these rights should not only be entrenched in every (inter)national instrument but serve as a guiding compass for all political regimes. The decision to use a human rights framework is reinforced by the South African 1996 Constitution which adopts human rights language in several of its provisions, especially within the Bill of Rights. In addition to serving as a useful benchmark for measuring state accountability and compliance with its treaty obligations, human rights criteria considerably overlap with the capabilities approach in their human-centred analysis.

Akin to other rights, RTF is entrenched in a plethora of international and regional human rights instruments, and at the domestic level, the 1996 Constitution. These instruments set out an expansive framework of norms relating to the duties of states and rights of individuals (and households). According to the 1966 International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, to which South Africa is a party), there are three key conditions necessary for the realisation of the RTF: maximising the use of food for effective nutrition, improving physical and economic access, and enhancing availability. In particular, article 11 of the ICESCR avows that a state could be said to be food secured when every individual has economic and physical access to sufficient food or the means for acquiring it at all times.

Nonetheless, legal provision is not the only means of realising rights, and guaranteeing rights in documents does not ultimately translate into practice. The enforcement of rights cannot be attained through legal

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2 South Africa became a party to the ICESCR in 2015.
Ensuring food security is a key policy objective for any regime. But, from a human rights perspective, alleviating hunger is not merely a policy objective, rather it constitutes a legally binding duty to adopt legislative and other (reasonable) steps to ensure its fulfilment. Indeed, access to adequate food is determined by a plethora of conditions stretching from the quality of accessible products, availability of suppliers, opportunities to produce one’s own food and prices of food in the markets, to household incomes. This, in turn, is based on the existing social strata which ensure that all have a means of acquiring food. It is, further, dependent on the availability and fair distribution of opportunities and resources such as land, water, farming instruments and access to work as a means of generating income.

The RTF, is basically an inherent right of households and individuals to have access to the means (through acquisition or own production) to feed themselves, rather than the right to a basket of mere grains or a particular number of calories. The various regional and (inter) national human rights instruments, therefore, impose an obligation on states to adopt and operationalise suitable food security interventions, which could be done by putting in place the necessary social arrangement. It is for this purpose that human rights instruments place a duty on states to fulfil the enjoyment of rights and not merely promote and respect them, either by refraining from or forestalling third parties from hindering the enjoyment of individual access. In the context of South Africa, these positive duties to progressively realise and fulfil are specifically important as millions are denied the right to access adequate food, and this trend can only be reversed through pragmatic policies and interventions which target poverty eradication and enhance development (Devereux, 2016). The duty to fulfil involves a positive obligation, which encompasses taking proactive policy measures (to ensure that people have adequate access to food), rather than the obligation not to breach this right. The instruments prescribe the duty of conduct and outcome, underscoring that states must adopt proactive steps to ensure that citizens are not starved (De Vos and Pierre, 1997). The ICESCR, in this light, however, does not spell out a specific set of measures to be adopted.

Like one’s toothpaste, soap and sandals, food is a commodity to be acquired in the market, and this obliges duty-bearers to ensure that they are sufficient and reasonably priced in the market to be accessed by the poor. Human rights instruments like the ICESCR specifically affirm protection alone.
that the steps to be adopted by states should be tailored towards making the food basket affordable, and not merely to available. The state can achieve this objective by managing or regulating several factors which are driven by market forces such as market distribution, wages and prices of grain and other agricultural commodities. For this reason, the underlying argument of this book is that states have (inter)national obligations to operationalise food programmes, monitor the prices of food or provide the poor with the means of generating income or land for own production. It is important to underscore that these recommendations should not be seen as an act of charity by the state, but an overarching duty imposed by (inter)national instrument on the government to prioritise the food needs of its citizens, even though they do not explicitly set out specific policy regimes or policy choices (including the level of market intervention) to be adopted or implemented. To substantiate this final assertion, the chapter turns to assess some of the theories underlying food security and how the present definition of this concept came about.

**Theories of Food Security?**

Since the 1974 World Food Conference (WFC), the notion of food security could be seen as evolving in three phases: (i) focus on individual access to food; (ii) food as the most fundamental of all human needs; and (iii) impact of poverty on food security. A brief discussion of these three phases will be useful.  

*Individual access to food:* This first phase took place mainly in the period 1975–85 (UN, 1975). Within this era, the term *food security* was defined by the WFC as constant supply and availability of basic foodstuffs to offset fluctuations in prices and productions, as well as sustaining a steady expansion of food consumption (Gerlach, 2015). The definition placed emphasis on supply, import stabilisation of schemes, proposals for global food stocks and a concern with national self-sufficiency (Ram *et al.*, 1975). These issues undoubtedly occupied centre stage in early scholarly work on food security. Nonetheless, from the onset, it was evident that insufficient food supply at the (inter)national level inextricably trickled down to household and individual food insecurity, as scarcity of food increases the price of available food, thereby (in)directly impacting on the capability of the poor to access these commodities (Hawkes, 1974). But this cannot be said of
a regime which has sufficient food and yet millions are starved. One literature which can be considered as leading the crusade towards shifting the question of food access from the national to the individual level is Sen’s (1981) *entitlement approach*, which argues that hunger is not caused by inadequate food in the market, but lack of means to access it. Yet, this literature was preceded by several others in the 1970s which echoed similar sentiments (Brown and Eckholm, 1974; Harrar, 1974; Rosenfeld, 1974; Ram *et al.*, 1975; Pimentel, 1976). For this reason, one cannot justifiably make the claim that inadequate food supply is the cause of food insecurity (especially in the context of South Africa), without citing lack of entitlement or access as an immediate causative factor. In contemporary times, it has been more suitable to primarily define food insecurity as lack of entitlement, with production (at best) serving as a means to an end, either by driving market prices down indirectly for consumers and directly for food producers (May, 2018). Yet, uncertainties remain, especially in terms of whether the basis of assessment should be at the household or individual level. Whereas one camp has positioned intra-household resource and power allocation as the central focus of their assessment, others place individual food security in the front line of analysis. Indeed, the first camp acknowledges the significance of intra-household concern, with focus on health conditions of mothers and children (Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2015; Burke *et al.*, 2016; Grobler, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2016; Sriram and Tarasuk, 2016). The disparity, nonetheless, lies in whether intra-household concerns are seen as more desirable assessments of health conditions or caring capacity or issues within the scope of food security. On the other hand, most sub-Saharan literature agrees with the notion that individual access to food in a household is mostly tied to the access they have to household income, as well as the control they exercise over the resources in the household (Chakona and Shackleton, 2017). Hence, the effect of hunger can be dire, especially on the reproductive health of women and growth of children. In this sense, while acknowledging the complex relationship between the (inter)national, provincial, household and individual levels, most contemporary definitions of food security zero in on individual entitlement. One definition which has adequately captured this development, and thus is widely cited, is a World Bank (WB, 1986) policy study which defines food security as access by all individuals to sufficient food at all times for a healthy and active life. This explanation draws a vital difference between transitory
(short term) and chronic (long term) food insecurity. The emphasis here is on individual food security, or one’s (in)constant access to adequate food for active participation in society and not simply for survival.

Food as primary need: Triggered by concerns of famine in Africa in the early 1980s, the second phase occurred largely after 1982. Following Maslow’s (1943) theory of needs, the conventional perception of food security within this era was of food as a lower or primary need. Food was viewed as an essential element to enhance stable and enduring strata and organisation of social life, and was essential for survival and basic to all human needs (Campbell, 1990). Yet, in recent times, the assumptions underpinning this perspective have been challenged. It has been identified that short-term nutritional consumption and food (broadly construed) is merely one of several aspirations individuals seek to attain (Regassa, 2011). According to some scholars, since food is not an ultimate objective, people often devise and follow a plethora of adaptive or coping strategies especially in times of drought (Campbell and Trechter, 1982; Corbett 1988). One observer argues that for people living in rural area and confronted with famine, forestalling food insecurity is not one of their policy priorities (Jodha, 1991). To buttress this assertion, de Waal (1991) and Webb (1993) add that, in order to avoid having to sell their animals or to preserve their seeds for cultivation in their own fields, Sudanese and Ethiopians respectively preferred to endure a substantial level of hunger during the 1984–5 Darfur famine. This conclusion seems to purport that the hallmark of this era was the quest of people to starve now in order to forestall future hunger. In other words, the essential feature of this generation was the management of risk and vulnerabilities. Hence, a society within this era was seen to be food secured only when it had established internal structures which would enable it to withstand shocks or threats to its available food resources for tomorrow or posterity. This practice brings to bear three classifications of households within this regime: (i) fragile households – those prone to shocks; (ii) resilient households – those who quickly bounce back from shocks; and (iii) enduring households – those who continuously maintain food security (Webb, 1993).

Impact of poverty on food security: This final phase may be tied to scholarship from the late 1990s to present times. It is dominated by scholarship which assesses poverty on two fronts: subjective analysis (feelings of deprivation) and objective analysis (the conditions of
deprivation) (McCurdy et al., 2010). These two models have been replicated in recent scholarship on poverty in rural areas. For instance, while Bhattacharya et al. (2004) speak of poverty as predictive of poor nutrition, Morrissey and colleagues (2016) link child malnourishment to family income. The most common definitions of food security within this phase could be grouped into three main categories, usually construed as: (i) nutritionally sufficient, reliable and a timely supply of food (Donkin et al., 2000; von Braun and Tadesse 2012); (ii) intake of less than 80 per cent of daily average requirement of calories (Powell and Bao 2009); and (iii) target levels of intake (Korenman et al., 2013). Sufficient to say that definitions framed in these contexts are problematic, on two grounds. First, they lack qualitative analysis, and second, the concept of nutritional sufficiency poses a problem. Nutritional requirement for any person is determined by factors such as individual’s behaviour, environment, work load, weight, health and age. Estimations of needed nutrition for children and average adults with similar activities might differ from one person to the next. This projection can even be further complicated by including adaptation strategies. It is, thus, a challenge to precisely estimate caloric requirements for different categories within the population. These discrepancies appear to underscore Maxwell’s (1996) projection that nutritional needs must be considered as value judgements. Granted that this deduction is correct, it triggers a puzzling question: whose assertion is correct? In other words, who is to make value judgements for nations, communities, households and individuals? As this question lingers, it suffices to consider some of the global institutional definitions which have been ascribed to food security and whether they really capture the essence of this somehow elusive concept.

**Global Institutional Response to Food Security**

Attempts by the international community to provide a comprehensive definition and a binding instrument to achieve RTF could be seen as evolving in five stages. The first, spanning from 1972 to 1980, was marked by severe famine in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and other parts of Africa (Watts, 1991). The rarest and most striking characteristic of this crisis was the similar failure in harvest and massive grain imports by the Soviet Union which led to doubling of international grain prices (Spinoni et al., 2015). This setback could not be addressed