CHAPTER 8

From Food Security to Food Sovereignty?

Kjell Havnevik

Introduction

This chapter will investigate how the concept of food security has evolved in line with changing global power relations and developmental contexts. In particular, it will inquire about the direction of the changes of the concept over time. One deficiency related to the concept of food security is its apparent inability to explain the causes of hunger. This may be an important reason why development interventions have not been able to reduce global hunger.

In 1990, the number of hungry people in the world was estimated to be 800 million. By 2013 the figure had increased to 870 million, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 13 March 2013). In 2009, it even topped 1 billion. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) objective of reducing the number of people who suffer hunger to 400 million by 2015 (down 50 per cent from the 1990 level) will not be reached. There is accordingly a ‘food security policy gap’ of around half a billion people, most of them in Africa and South Asia.

This chapter will also discuss possible ways in which the concept of food security could develop, in order to incorporate within it an understanding of the causes of hunger and to address sustainability issues. Such an approach goes beyond techniques and measurements: it requires more profound changes in the mindsets of those states/regions and institutions with the power to set the global development and food security agenda.

Such a shift will require an analysis of the power relations that exist between dominant and marginalized countries/regions of the world, as well as of the relationships within countries. A first important step is to gain insights that will make it possible to acknowledge the way in which historical developments have created deep-seated problems and divisions between and within continents and countries and their populations (Said 1978). Such problems and divisions have been (and remain) visible in exploitation, colonization, racism and gender inequality. The reproduction of these mechanisms and processes takes place through the use of stereotypes and symbolism that support their legitimation. Hence it is not the identification of images as positive or negative that should be central, but an understanding of the processes of subjectification that are made possible through stereotypical discourse (Bhabha 1983).
In order to be relevant in this broader perspective, analysis of the concept of food security over time should also address the cultural, socio-economic and political frameworks that determine and sustain the domination of some regions/countries and social classes over others and that reproduce hunger on a global scale. The conceptual analysis in this chapter rests on the author’s understanding of the broader frames and of how their corresponding stereotypes generate and maintain global inequalities and power relations. The aim is to discuss whether an alternative concept – food sovereignty – might better capture the causes, power relations and patterns of food insecurity, both locally and globally.

Such an approach is required because international institutions are downplaying the failure of policy regarding hunger. This is partly done by emphasizing that global poverty reduction (another major MDG goal: i.e. to reduce world poverty by 50 per cent in relation to the 1990 level) is likely to be attained by 2015. The main reason for this success, however, lies not in the policies of the FAO, the UN or international financial institutions, but in the fact that by virtue of their own strategies, some of the transition economies (in particular China) have lifted millions of people out of poverty.

In addition, the FAO, the UN specialized agency for food and agriculture, and the dominant international financial institutions and agencies have changed the way they report on global hunger. Instead of speaking about an increase in absolute global hunger levels, they now report the prevalence of global hunger in percentage terms. In this way, they can show that between 1990 and 2013 the level of global hunger remained static, at 16 per cent of the world’s population – though in actual numbers it has increased substantially. This is because, as the world’s population grows, so there is a corresponding relative rise in the number of hungry people (HLPE 2012: 21).

Change in the Concept of Food Security over Time

The first Global Food Summit, which took place in Rome in 1974 in the context of rapidly increasing global food prices, proposed the establishment of strategic grain reserves to stabilize world food prices. The 1974 summit also established an intergovernmental Committee on World Food Security (CFS). After the summit, the then US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, felt confident enough to proclaim that ‘no child will go to bed hungry within ten years’ (The Economist, 19 November 2009). The thinking was that natural disasters, adverse weather and climatic conditions and low agricultural production should not be allowed to affect global food provision negatively in the longer term, which