



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Sustainable  
Development  
Goals



international social science council

# World Social Science Report 2016

## Food rights and wrongs



COLOUR RAIN, Icy and Sot  
(New York, USA, 2013)

© Icy and Sot

## 33. Food rights and wrongs

*Naomi Hossain*

The green revolution and integrated world food markets were supposed to relegate scarcity to the history books, yet food riots erupted in dozens of countries in 2008 and 2011. These events starkly dramatized the inequalities built into the world food system, in which food and commodity corporations profit from the price spikes that put people at risk of hunger and malnutrition. While the spectre of starvation through famine has largely receded, food injustice has a new face – the phenomenon of chronic undernourishment alongside rising obesity, as calorie-dense ‘Western’ diets spread to societies that until recently grew their own plant-based foods. While ancient problems of seasonal hunger and crop failure still plague the smallholders of the world, poor people now buy more food than they grow, exposing them to finance, trade and climate shocks. In terms of control over the food people eat, the system is growing ever more unequal, increasingly dominated by big food corporations and the international commodity trade.

Understandings of the world’s globalizing food system are polarized, and the changes are themselves contradictory. The extent to which the world food system is contributing to inequalities in livelihoods, nutrition, food quality and human well-being can be concealed by the abundance of cheap staple and processed foods. Is global food security improving thanks to open trade regimes, agricultural modernization and nutrition science? Should we celebrate the fact that fewer than 1 billion people are hungry (FAO, 2012)? Or should we worry that food regimes during the past century have increased food inequalities, industrialized food production, commodified eating, and eradicated peasantries and cuisines (McMichael, 2009)? While there is little agreement about the effects of financialization, all observers worry that food insecurity could worsen with climate change and water and energy crises.

But while the US\$8 trillion agro-food industry grows apace, so too does resistance to the increasing lack of control that most people have over this fundamental aspect of everyday life (Clapp, 2012).

Broad international movements with wide popular support are mobilizing around food sovereignty, peasant rights, and the right to food, while numerous consumer movements campaign on issues from food safety and food justice to ‘slow food’, localism and fair trade (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009). People across the globe seem willing and able to organize against growing inequality in the food system, as they have done throughout history (Bohstedt, 2014).

### **Acknowledgement**

This contribution is based on a larger research programme funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grants scheme. For more details see [www.ids.ac.uk/project/food-riots-and-food-rights](http://www.ids.ac.uk/project/food-riots-and-food-rights).

### **Bibliography**

- Bohstedt, J. 2014.** *Food Riots and the Politics of Provisions in World History*, Working Paper no. 444. Brighton, UK, IDS.
- Clapp, J. 2012.** *Food*. Cambridge UK, Polity.
- FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). 2012.** *State of Food Insecurity in the World: Economic Growth Is Necessary but Not Sufficient to Accelerate Reduction of Hunger and Malnutrition*. Rome, FAO.
- Holt-Giménez, E. and Patel, R. 2009.** *Food Rebellions: Crisis and the Hunger for Justice*. Oxford, Pambazuka Press.
- McMichael, P. 2009.** A food regime genealogy. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 139–69.

■ **Naomi Hossain** (Bangladesh) is a political sociologist at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), currently focusing on the political economy of subsistence crises. Recent projects include comparative research on adjustment to the food crisis ([www.ids.ac.uk/project/life-in-a-time-of-food-price-volatility](http://www.ids.ac.uk/project/life-in-a-time-of-food-price-volatility), funded by UK Aid and Irish Aid) and food riots ([www.ids.ac.uk/project/food-riots-and-food-rights](http://www.ids.ac.uk/project/food-riots-and-food-rights), funded by DFID/ESRC). Her book about the consequences of Bangladesh’s 1974 famine, *The Aid Lab: Explaining Bangladesh’s Surprising Success*, will be published by Oxford University Press in 2016.

**This article features in the World Social Science Report 2016, UNESCO and the ISSC, Paris.**

The *World Social Science Report 2016* was published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France and the International Social Science Council (ISSC), 1 rue Miollis, 75732 Paris Cedex 15, France.

© ISSC, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and UNESCO, 2016

Original title: *World Social Science Report 2016 –*

*Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World* – ISBN 978-92-3-100164-2



This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO, the ISSC or the IDS concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The *World Social Science Report 2016* editorial team is responsible for the choice of articles and the overall presentation. Each author is responsible for the facts contained in his/her article and the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO, the ISSC or the IDS and do not commit these Organizations.

The *World Social Science Report 2016* is a collaborative effort made possible by the support and contributions of many people. It was financed by generous contributions from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), UNESCO, as part of its Framework Agreement with the ISSC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), as well as the European Science Foundation (ESF), Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Research Council of Norway, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, and the Swedish Research Council.

Graphic and cover design: Corinne Hayworth

Typeset and printed by: UNESCO

*The World Social Science Report 2016 was prepared by the ISSC and the IDS and co-published with UNESCO*

The Report is available online at: [en.unesco.org/wssr2016](http://en.unesco.org/wssr2016)

Hard copies are available from UNESCO Publishing:

[http://publishing.unesco.org/details.aspx?&Code\\_Livre=5160&change=E](http://publishing.unesco.org/details.aspx?&Code_Livre=5160&change=E)

This report should be cited as follows: ISSC, IDS and UNESCO (2016), *World Social Science Report 2016, Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World*, UNESCO Publishing, Paris.



**SWEDEN**

The Report is supported by The Swedish International  
Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)