

Disability, Poverty and Food Sovereignty: Advancing the Human Security Agenda
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Abstract: This essay furthers the human security discourse using the lenses of disability and food studies. The human security agenda must embrace the principle of food sovereignty that counteracts neo-liberal notions on food security. Since poverty, food insecurity, and disability are manifestations of similar development processes, horizontal alliances are imperative for systemic change.

Key Words: human security, food sovereignty, poverty

Introduction

Food is one of the vital elements of human existence. Food consumption is the single most important determinant of good health (WHO, 1998). It is pivotal to human security, which has been defined as:

“Protect[ing] the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment. Human security...means protecting people from critical and pervasive threats and situations...It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity” (Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 4).

Human security is thus broadly understood as freedom from fear and want, and as protecting and empowering the world’s most vulnerable people – it encompasses safety from chronic threats, such as hunger, disease and political repression, and protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions, such as war and violence. Attaining food security is viewed as crucial for ensuring safety from both chronic threats and sudden disruptions (Stoett, 2000; Yoshikawa, 2007).

However, several decades of research and efforts to achieve food security have been unsuccessful in finding sustainable solutions to hunger around the globe. Despite the modernization of food production and distribution, the politics of food systems and economic restructuring have increased hunger and malnutrition that threaten the well-being of millions of people worldwide. Jean Ziegler, UN rapporteur for food, reported that in 1990, 20% of the world’s population suffered from extreme under-nutrition; by 1999, this had increased by 19% (Ziegler, 2004). In 2000-2002, the Food and Agricultural Organization estimated that 852 million people worldwide were undernourished (FAO, 2004a). This figure includes 815 million in “developing countries,” 28 million in countries in transition, and 9 million in “developed countries”.¹ The continuing reality of hunger, exacerbated by the rising food prices of 2008 (see Grebmer, Fritschel, Nestorova, Olofinbiyi, Pandya-Lorch, & Yohannes, 2008), is a grave threat to human security; yet this aspect has been overlooked in public policies of many countries.

Furthermore, most literature on food security has lacked a disability perspective. Extant studies on disability and food security have been limited to the fields of medicine and nutrition that largely view “disability” from a medical model as a deficit or a problem inherent in the individual. While this health science perspective is significant to understand the interrelations between chronic illness, impairment and malnutrition, it is inadequate to address the wider socio-economic disparities that affect the livelihoods, opportunities and self-determination of disabled persons.

The purpose of this essay is to further the agenda of human security using the lenses of disability rights and food studies. The notion of “food security” within the concept of human security will be further elaborated, followed by a brief review of the literature on the relationships between food security, disability and poverty. Using the social model of disability, the paper contends that since disability is a social construction, it is imperative to examine and address societal structures that cause disability in the first place. Similarly, it is argued that poverty does not exist as an *a priori* condition – rather, it signifies socio-political and economic processes in the development agenda, which emanate from the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology that believes in unfettered economic growth. Further, the essay makes a case for expanding the idea of human security to include the principle of food sovereignty, which provides a sound alternative to the neo-liberal idolatry that belies the discourse on food security. It is contended that food sovereignty is imperative to attain freedom from hunger and indignity, particularly from the perspective of disabled people,² the majority of whom reside in rural areas in “developing countries.” Finally, the paper suggests some ways ahead for the human security agenda making a case for the disability movement to ally with grassroots movements of other marginalized groups because poverty, disability, and various forms of social exclusion are symptoms of similar processes.

Food Security and Human Security

The most commonly used definition, first put forth by the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit, describes food security as “a situation in which all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 1996). The significance of food security is evident from the fact that malnutrition remains the world’s most serious health problem and the single biggest contributor to child and maternal mortality. Six million children under the age of five die each year because of hunger (FAO, 2000). Nearly one-third of children in the “developing world” are either underweight or stunted (World Bank, 2006). Many malnourished children suffer from lifelong physical and cognitive impairments.

The prevalence of hunger and malnutrition around the globe continues to foster discussions and research on food security and poverty. In recent years, poverty reduction work has been guided by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) published by the United Nations (2000). The first MDG is to reduce by half, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day. The second target is to halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. Clearly, the issue of food security remains central to the attainment of MDGs.

While food security studies have gathered momentum in recent decades (see Hiranandani, 2008), most research on disability and access to food is restricted to disease and impairment effects of undernourishment (e.g., Gordeuk & Boelaert, 2002; Kadiyala & Gillespie, 2004). Malnutrition is viewed as a major cause of disability. For instance, Helander (1993) underscores that one way to prevent disability is to ensure adequate nutrition. However, this contention does not address socio-economic inequalities that lead to malnutrition in the first place. Most studies assume that “disability” is a limitation within the individual and that food insecurity is a result of material hardships and income poverty due to the disabled person’s functional limitations that prevent or hinder their participation in the economy (see Armour & Pitts, 2006; Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003). This paper turns next to a discussion of the nexus between disability and poverty that has been the focus of much mainstream disability and development literature.

Disability, Poverty and Development Work

Disability and poverty are said to be inextricably linked. In developed and developing countries alike, people with disabilities are more likely to be poor than their non-disabled counterparts (FAO, 2004b). As Albert, McBride, & Seddon (2002) illustrate, poor people are much more likely to live in unhealthy conditions and to have inadequate access to clean water, sufficient nutrition and affordable health care. Conversely, impairment can lead to poverty and social exclusion and foster financial dependency on handouts, the state and the extended family. Thus, the relationship between poverty and disability has been posited as a vicious circle.

This poverty-disability axis adopted by most studies views food insecurity as a result of poverty, cutbacks to income assistance, inadequate wages, unemployment etc, but fails to address employment barriers, inaccessible services, social organization and attitudes that restrict opportunities and livelihoods of disabled persons. While it is true that “disability” is a major cause of global poverty on par with gender discrimination and the denial of human rights (Durham, 2002), societal factors such as prejudice and discrimination are more significant in eliminating poverty than a limited focus on the individual’s functional limitations and economic capabilities. In “developing countries,” people with physical and cognitive variations are often seen as most disadvantaged by others in their local communities. A survey of literature by Elwan (1999) shows that being “disabled” was ranked at the top of a list of fourteen “ill-being” criteria in Asia and Africa – becoming widowed and lacking land were ranked as second and third respectively. Individuals with disabilities are often the victims of negative attitudes and are subject to stigmatization, neglect, deterioration of physical condition or onset of secondary conditions, and even starvation (see Mander, 2008 for a poignant study). Exclusion and marginalization reduce their opportunities to contribute to the household and community thereby augmenting the risk of poverty.

Enhancing equity for people with disabilities and changing society’s attitudes is imperative to end the poverty-disability cycle and enhance food and human security. Disability studies and the social model of disability have major implications for poverty reduction work. As Yeo (2005) states, “[I]f the problem emanates from society itself then what is needed is to change society not the individual. If society were constructed in a more egalitarian, inclusive manner then both poverty and the exclusion of disabled people could be addressed” (p. 6). The

social model, thus, offers a powerful framework for comprehending and tackling the complex issues of disability and poverty. It posits disability as a crosscutting societal theme necessitating policy focus on reducing social exclusion.

The Need for Alternative Conceptions of Poverty

Just as disability is not simply a matter of bodily variations but is caused by social exclusion, poverty too is not merely a matter of incomes that are inadequate to meet basic needs. The Poverty Assessment Study Report (1995) mentions that:

“Poverty is above all a symptom of imbedded structural imbalances, which manifest themselves in all domains of human existence. As such, poverty is highly correlated with social exclusion, marginalization, vulnerability, powerlessness, isolation and other economic, political, social and cultural dimensions of deprivation...It results from limited or no access to basic infrastructure and services, and is further compounded by people’s lack of access to land, credit, technology and institutions and to other productive assets and resources needed to ensure sustainable livelihoods” (as cited in Dube & Charowa, 2005, p. 9).

It is clear, then, that poverty is not separate from the rest of society; it is an inevitable consequence of the way society is organized. However, hitherto most anti-poverty work has occurred within the framework of explaining poverty as a lack of something – this prevents altering socio-political and economic processes that produce and reproduce poverty. Green & Hulme (2005) observe that recommendations for reducing or eliminating poverty remain focused on the poor who must increase their incomes or be incorporated through inclusion policies. Poverty is conceptualized in terms of how “institutions” work or not to reduce poverty, rather than questioning their underlying ethos that cause poverty.

The larger issue, from the perspective of disabled people, is their exclusion from the development agenda and the paradigm of economic growth and free market economy that drive the development agenda. Yet, the world’s most powerful countries have routinely held that the complex problem of poverty can be solved only by *economic growth*. We are taught to believe that growth and development are virtually synonymous - that economic growth will “trickle down” and automatically lead to greater prosperity for all (Gershman & Irwin, 2000). Such consensus prevails although this assumption has been disproven even in the USA, where relatively robust economic growth until recently occurred alongside a flagrant erosion of the quality of life for many citizens.

The indicators of economic growth include Gross National Product (GNP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which are accounting procedures used to assess the value of goods and services produced in an economy (Gershman & Irwin, 2000). However, these measures tell us nothing about the distribution of wealth - that is, whether the benefits of growth are shared widely among the population or are restricted to a few elite. Furthermore, both the GNP and the GDP register products only if they are sold, not if they are distributed without charge (Yeo, 2005). For instance, privatization of water places a monetary value on water and therefore raises GNP, yet it renders water unaffordable to the poorest, including disabled people.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, a neoliberal orthodoxy asserted itself in policy circles that led to the identification of development with economic growth under free market conditions. Neo-liberalism believes that state intervention is an obstacle to economic growth because it creates inefficiency and market distortions. Therefore, government expenditures should be reduced, allowing provision of services through the private sector that is more efficient due to profit incentives (Gershman & Irwin, 2000). These principles have led to privatization of health and social services, education, transport and, increasingly, water and food provision in many parts of the world. Neo-liberalism undergirds most national and international development work around the world, particularly that espoused by the World Bank.

Neo-liberalism has major implications for disabled persons. For instance, Yeo (2005) cites the example of Chile that has been called the “social laboratory” of neo-liberal policies of free market economy and cutbacks to government expenditures. Disability rights occupy a backseat in Chile – indeed, Yeo (2005) informs us that for 25 years disabled children have been portrayed in pathetic ways to appeal for donations in annual telethon media shows. Multinational corporations, such as Nestle and McDonalds, sponsor the telethons that are viewed as the country’s most important effort for disabled children. While this boosts the image and sales of corporations, it reinforces the pity/charity model and does nothing to improve the rights of disabled people.

Even the Human Security Report does not question the paradigm of neo-liberalism: it views markets and economic growth as imperative for human security, while espousing safeguards to ensure more equitable distribution of the benefits of market economy (see Commission on Human Security, 2003). This perspective overlooks the irrefutable evidence that land, water and environmental degradation is caused by unbridled neo-liberalism (Gershman & Irwin, 2000) - the brunt of these costs is borne by poor people and disabled people in the “developing world.”

Neo-Liberalism and Food (In)security

The paradigm of market economy views food as a commodity, rather than a right. Millions of people are excluded from consuming this “commodity” simply because they lack the purchasing power to buy it. Recent worldwide hikes in prices of basic foods have spiraled hunger and malnutrition and led to food riots in several countries resulting in political instability (EPW, 2008). According to the Commission on Human Security (2003), people’s access to food is affected by inequitable distribution of food, environmental degradation, natural disasters and conflicts. However, the Commission’s report overlooks that food security is closely associated with the state of agriculture. The pivotal importance of agriculture in the fight against hunger and poverty lies in the fact that around 2.5 billion people around the globe rely on agriculture as their primary source of income (Egziabher, 2003; IATP, 2005). In India, roughly 700 million of the country’s one billion people depend on the agricultural sector for their livelihood (Coleman, 2003). Because agricultural resources play an indispensable role for the livelihoods of the majority in developing countries, any changes in agricultural policies can trigger an impact on rural livelihoods and food security.

In several countries that gained independence from colonialism, food security was a central objective of economic planning. However, in recent decades neo-liberal globalization in the form of international rules that encompass trade liberalization, privatization, and the use of genetically engineered seeds have transformed agricultural practices and rural livelihoods everywhere (Desmarais, 2002; Madeley, 2002; Rosset, 2006).³ Trade and seed patenting policies, such as the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) and the Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) have forced “developing countries” to open their agricultural sector to global agribusinesses and to replace traditional farm-saved seeds with genetically engineered seeds (which are non-renewable and thus require re-purchase for each growing season). Trade treaties have caused cheap and subsidized food to flood international markets, thereby devastating local small-scale farmers (IATP, 2006, Madeley, 2002; Rosset, 2006). In India, evidence suggests that tens of thousands of small-scale and subsistence farmers have been pushed off the land (Sharma, 2000). Besides, with the decline in rural credit by nationalized banks, farmers are forced to borrow loans at exorbitant interest rates from private moneylenders (Hardikar, 2006). Countries such as India have witnessed an epidemic of farmer suicides since 1997 (Jeromi, 2007; Sainath, 2007a, 2007b).

Furthermore, a handful of transnational companies have gained increasing control over global food and water supplies, yet there is no system to ensure their accountability (FAO, 2004a). Agri-food corporations Cargill and Pepsico now control 70 percent of the world food trade. Cargill itself accounts for 60 percent of the world trade in grains (Shiva, 2004a). Smallholders, including disabled farmers, who cannot compete with huge corporations fail to get access to the global marketplace and thereby face the risk of being excluded from the food system both as producers and consumers. FAO (2004b) notes that disabled farmers increasingly have inadequate access to means of production such as land, water, inputs and improved seeds, appropriate technologies and farm credit. Yet, the Commission on Human Security (2003, p. 78) promotes international trade as a crucial tool for development, although it acknowledges the inherent double standards of the global trade system that allows “developed countries” to maintain their subsidies for local producers while demanding that “developing countries” dismantle their protections.

Moving Beyond Neo-liberalism: Towards Food Sovereignty

The current concept of human security maintains that it is concerned with “safeguarding and expanding people’s vital freedoms” (Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. iv). Yet, people’s freedom to save seeds and grow their own food is being taken away through international trade treaties. The existing denotation of “food security” is indifferent to questions such as who produces food, how and under what conditions. As Patel, Balakrishnan, and Narayan (2007) argue, the most commonly used definition of food security put forth by the Rome Declaration on World Food Security (FAO, 1996) is compatible with an economy in which everyone eats McDonalds’ burgers, while the fast food chain extinguishes small-scale farmers and ravages the planet by its ecological footprint – and yet, is perceived to contribute to “economic growth.” Food security, perceived solely in terms of access to food, is congruent with neo-liberal policies that militate against basic human rights.

In 1996, Via Campesina, the largest international farmers' association, put forth the concept of *food sovereignty* in reaction to the increasing (mis)use of the term "food security." *Food sovereignty* is in stark contrast to the neo-liberal approach that argues the best way to achieve food security in "developing countries" is to import cheap food from "developed countries," rather than producing locally. Via Campesina argues that cross-border agricultural trade only contributes to more poverty, marginalization and hunger (Starr, 2005). Food sovereignty defies the neo-liberal approach and focuses on local autonomy, local markets and community action. Via Campesina insists family farmers in the global South and North do not need access to global markets; all they need is access to their *local* markets (Desmarais, 2002). To this end, the most important step to attain food sovereignty is to protect farmers against trade treaties that benefit only multinational corporations that control the World Trade Organization and trade agreements in its ambit. Food sovereignty advocates an alternative trade model where national policies enable farmers to access their local markets and to trade only the surplus food (that too bilaterally) rather than producing primarily for export. Via Campesina calls upon governments to protect the access of peasants and landless people to land, water, seeds, and credit. Food sovereignty, therefore, emphasizes the need for land reforms, removing restrictions on the use of farm-saved seeds, and safeguarding water as a public good to be sustainably distributed. Food sovereignty brings together farmers of "developing" and "developed" countries by linking social struggles of millions of rural people who have been driven off their land by corporate control of the food chain. It insists on agriculture whose central concern is human beings, rather than profit. Thus, food sovereignty is a solid alternative to mainstream thinking on food security.

However, disability issues have been overlooked even within the food sovereignty paradigm. Organizers of conferences on food studies rarely consider accessibility issues for disabled people. Via Campesina has instituted women's forums (Desmarais, 2002), but deliberations on disability are lacking. Nonetheless, disability and food sovereignty movements have the potential to inform each other. Both food sovereignty and disability studies/social model call for systemic change – both embody humanist principles of dignity, individual and community sovereignty, and self-determination.

Imagining Alternative Futures

Neo-liberalism, with its tenets of economic growth and market economy, has significant implications for disabled persons; however, this is a largely neglected area of investigation. To date, there are few studies on disability in rural areas where the vast majority of poor and disabled farmers reside. Thus, there is negligible information about the impact of recent food crises and increase in food prices on this subpopulation. Critiques of global and national food and agricultural policies have neglected the concerns of disabled people.

It is imperative to examine the global political economy of food from disability rights perspective because 85-90% of the global population of people with disabilities resides in "developing countries," where 70% of the total population depends on agro-food systems for their livelihoods. The World Food Summit of 1996 recognized the contributions to food security by disabled farmers in rural areas, noting that a large proportion of disabled people were farmers with responsibility of ensuring enough food for their households (FAO, 1996). In order to attain

human security for all, it is essential to overhaul the dominant anti-poverty perspective on food security and shift towards the combined approaches of food sovereignty and disability rights to understand the socio-economic implications of global agri-food systems for the entirety of humankind that embodies a range of physical and cognitive abilities.

People with physical and cognitive variations have been largely marginalized from the economic growth agenda for years. Instead of advocating alternatives, even the disability movement has rallied for inclusion in the dominant economic growth model (Yeo, 2005). Consequently, while many other grassroots movements are campaigning against international financial institutions and the World Bank's "poverty reduction" strategies on the grounds that the Bank's approach perpetuates poverty, disability activists are fighting for inclusion within the Bank's policies. Instead of sham inclusion in the idolatry of economic growth (with its concomitant environmental and human costs), meaningful change can be attained by building horizontal alliances with other social movements such as peasant mobilization, ecological movements, labor organizations, coalitions of racialized peoples and indigenous populations, progressive media as well as with larger endeavors for global peace and justice. It is true that other social movements may not be always inclusive of disability, and advocacy may be required in order to gain recognition within these groups. However, as Yeo (2005) surmises, disabled people can ally with other grassroots social movements that believe in transformative politics and systemic change or get co-opted by "half-hearted invitations for inclusion in the very agenda that causes poverty and disables people" (p. 26).

Concluding Remarks

This essay has brought together several arguments. While food security is one of the cornerstones of human security, this paper has contended that a limited focus on food security in terms of economic access to food is problematic. Expanding the notion of human security to include food sovereignty is both necessary and desirable. Food sovereignty interrogates the social and economic relations of food production, distribution and consumption – it resists processes of neo-liberal globalization that is transforming the diversity of localized food systems into a more homogenous world system controlled by a few large corporations and trade agreements.

Food security, poverty and disability are inherently political issues. While individual experiences of living with pain, illness or impairment cannot be discounted, disability is much more than a question of health or illness - it is primarily a social construction, where people with bodily variations live under certain social arrangements that are exclusionary in nature. Likewise, poverty cannot be abolished until the very system of economic growth and neo-liberalism that lavishes a few and impoverishes the masses is brought under scrutiny.

Furthermore, this essay has called for re-imagining disability activism by recognizing common ground with resistance movements of other disenfranchised peoples. The processes that affect disabled people are similar to those that marginalize many others. Alliances with other progressive movements are crucial for broad-based changes to address the underlying causes of food insecurity, poverty, and disability. Unless structural and societal causes of deprivation and discrimination are addressed, progress towards human security remains a pipedream.

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Endnotes

¹ Given the arguments advanced by several critical development theorists about the contested nature of 'development' (e.g., Escobar, 1995; Tucker, 1999), I prefer to use the terms *developing countries* and *developed countries* in quotes in order to rupture the essentialist nature of the terminology that not only presupposes a fixed and universal trajectory of development but also fails to account for geo-political power inequities and interests involved in defining countries as the "First World" or the "Third World."

² In this paper, the terms "disabled" and "disability" are used to underscore the social exclusion that "disabled persons" or "people with disabilities" face in a disabling society. Where bodily realities are alluded to, the term physical and cognitive variations or impairment is used.

³ The term "liberalization" refers to "reducing barriers to the free flow of trade and investment, as well as reducing or eliminating government subsidies that keeps the prices of certain essential goods low" (Gershman & Irwin, 2000, p. 23)