

30 YEARS
SUPPORTING

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE RIGHT TO FOOD & NUTRITION



The Right to Food and Nutrition

Beyond Food Security, towards Food Sovereignty

What is the right to food ...?

This human right may be defined as the right, alone or in community with others, to be free from hunger and malnutrition, to have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food – in quality and quantity – that is nutritious and culturally acceptable or means for its procurement in a sustainable and dignified manner, while ensuring the highest level of physical, emotional and intellectual development.

The interpretation and application of the right to food has evolved significantly, and continues to do so, since its inclusion in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. Yet, not enough to prevent 795 million people from facing hunger and to tackle the two billion cases of malnourishment due to imbalanced diets — another form of hunger, mostly affecting children and women of reproductive age.

Even in its most updated version, the current conceptualization of the right to food within national food security alone limits the understanding of this right to the dimensions of availability, access, utilization and stability of food, and the recognition of nutrition at maximum as a potential outcome. In doing so, it does not tackle the root causes of food and nutrition insecurity.

The right to food is part of the broader human rights framework, which is a social construction resulting from the struggles of individuals, social groups and peoples against oppression, exploitation, discrimination and abuses of power by governments and other powerful economic, political and religious actors.

...and nutrition?

Food is not a mere commodity or a “medicine”; it is the expression of a social process of eating and nourishment within which nutritional well-being not only is the ultimate goal, but is also a prerequisite. It is a primary capability that makes it possible for human beings to be healthy, give birth, breastfeed, be born, grow, develop, learn, work, make love, and be happy and socially active in their communities.

The interpretation of the right to food, or rather the human right to food and nutrition, must fully reincorporate the nutritional dimension. It must be re-conceptualized vis-a-vis peoples’ sovereignty and women’s rights in order to expose and tackle the main patterns of violations.

The full realization of women’s human rights is key to ensure the right to food and nutrition for all. Much of hunger and malnutrition happen because women continue to be treated as second-class citizens in most of the world, with limited control over their lives and sexual and reproductive rights; limited access to land, productive resources, education, jobs and equal pay; are subject to violence at home and in society; and, have limited guarantee of the right to breastfeed.



Current misconceptions

The market-led neo-liberal paradigm promoted by both the industrialized and emerging economies and closely linked to the interests of transnational corporations (TNCs) and other powerful enterprises asserts that hunger and malnutrition can be addressed through increased food production and the full liberalization of international trade. It attempts to reduce the right to food to the 'right to calories', particularly in the form of food assistance/aid or handouts.

At the same time, these same actors also promote access to food supplements and food fortification as the ways to deliver nutrition, disregarding access to productive resources and local markets by small scale food producers as well as the promotion of locally produced, diversified and healthy diets.

Women's systematic reduction to their role as mothers and main providers of food security and nutrition - rather than women who have the full range of human rights - in many public policy documents, contributes to rendering women and their rights invisible in food security and nutrition policies. With women's demands not adequately taken into account, policies and programs tend to overburden women even more with additional responsibilities.

There is a need to question the current conceptual frontiers, drawing on the struggles of different social movements such as those for food sovereignty, women's rights, and nutrition. The interpretation of the right to food has to shift further by firmly incorporating the vision and demands of these movements.

What comes next?

The next series will look into the struggle of indigenous peoples to meet their human right to food and nutrition .

A food sovereign people

The dimensions contained in the right to food and nutrition must be interpreted in the context of food and peoples' sovereignty. Food sovereignty brings to the center the dimension of power, identifying who should control the natural and productive resources and their use; who should define food and nutrition and related policies; and, who should regulate powerful economic and political actors, including those acting at the international level, particularly TNCs. It also highlights the need for the elimination of oppression and inequality at the individual and collective level, recognizing that the full realization of women's rights is central.

Social movements have and continue to resist global hegemonic forces and advocate for an alternative paradigm that sees the act of feeding oneself, one's family and community, as a social process of transforming nature and food into human well-being.

The human rights framework clearly provides a set of tools for social movements and communities to hold governments and international organizations to account on their human rights obligations and the need for these to be translated into a coherent set of public policies and programs. However, it is only through the continued demands and struggles by the people and their movements and organizations that this will happen.

Want to know more?

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