

The Impact of Globalization on Food Crises and Endemic Hunger

Ziang Qu

University of Alberta, 116 St & 85 Ave, Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3

Abstract. Globalization has brought about many benefits, from a rise in technological constructs to make life easier and more convenient to a degree of interconnectedness never experienced to this extent among human civilization at any other point in history. Yet, globalization and the commodification of numerous areas of society for the purpose of feeding the capitalist machine have also brought about more social, financial, environmental and cultural crises as well. With the onset of a global pandemic, the numbers of people struggling with hunger have increased significantly. Food crises and endemic hunger have persisted despite unprecedented economic growth in many areas of the world. The impact of globalization on hunger is not exemplified in food scarcity, but rather, is the product of globalized racial capitalism, political policies and the process of cheapening food.

Keywords: Food Crises; Endemic Hunger; Globalization.

1. Introduction

To understand how it is possible to live in a world so connected and advanced in so many ways, yet with such basic challenges, such as solving the problem of hunger, it helps to have an understanding of how globalization has unfolded. According to the World Bank (N.D.), globalization can be split into three basic compartments: the 50-year period prior to World War I, the 25 years after World War II and the present. The gap between World Wars I and II is marked by a reversal of sorts, in which the world retreated into nationalist policies and structures, slowing down the process of globalization significantly (World Bank, N.D.). In the information age, globalization seems to be operating on warp speed, with more ways for people to connect individually and through various systems. Yet, the industrialization and commodification of these systems has also led to shifts in power that have aggravated social issues, like hunger.

According to the World Hunger Educational Services, “efforts to address world hunger are not faring well. Progress since the World Food Conference in 1974 has been disappointing. Although the percentage of malnourished (underweight) children has declined, modestly, in most countries in the intervening 25 years, their numbers continue to rise.” Globalization has created an environment where it does not pay to be a small-scale producer in any industry, including food. Looking at the rise of major corporations like Amazon, it is clear to see what the desired result is for the food industry and the reason that food lobbies have become as powerful as they have. With a capitalist foundation, the food industry has advantaged the benefits of global marketplace, but not the benefit of the people that rely on access to quality food products. Rather, this is a purposeful transformation of the agricultural and production model that had served humans well for centuries before the third wave of globalization hit. In the information age, everything is about streamlining processes for efficiency to ensure that those at the top not only make more money, but also make more money. The difference in this wave of globalization is that this power can now go transnational.

2. Globalized Racial Capitalism

Globalized racial capitalism has played a role in the perpetuation of food crises and endemic hunger around the world. The food system such as it exists has privatized so many components and deregulated others that it becomes one rife with corporate capital from a global perspective (Holt-Gimenez, 2015). This means that global inequality has become more significant than ever and it is most often reflected among populations of color (Holt-Gimenez, 2015). From a globally regional

perspective, this has meant “record levels of hunger and massive migrations of impoverished farmers in the global South, and the appalling levels of food insecurity, diet-related diseases, unemployment, incarceration, and violence in underserved communities of color in the global North” (Holt-Gimenez, 2015, par. 1).

There is no way to get around the fact that the global food system is racialized (Holt-Gimenez, 2018). It is also gendered, and both factors contribute to the nuances of who has access to the land that produces food and which populations suffer most from food-related inequalities (Holt-Gimenez, 2018). Globalization has revealed that the existing food system is not a broken one; rather, it remains unjust towards people of color and the inequalities that plague the system are only becoming more prevalent as elements of the system are further commodified (Holt-Gimenez, 2018). The thing is that the food capitalist system is working as it was always meant to, which means concentrating power surrounding it in the hands of the few instead of the many (Holt-Gimenez, 2018). Moreover, it is a system that is defined by oppression of racially stigmatized groups (Holt-Gimenez, 2018). Given the fact that this third stage of globalization coincides with the information age, food crises and endemic hunger are more visible than they were in the past because there was no mass construct through which to share such information (Holt-Gimenez, 2018).

The statistics back up this assertion. In 1910, black Americans owned roughly 16 million acres of farmland in this country; by 1997, there were less than 20,000 black farmers who collectively own 2 million acres of land (Holt-Gimenez, 2018). The rate of land loss among black farmers has been twice that of the loss of white farmers (Holt-Gimenez, 2018). The racialization of the food and agricultural system has resulted in disparities that have transcended food-related issues and moved into other social, cultural, economic and environmental inequalities.

3. Political Policies and Hunger

From a political perspective, globalization policies that feed into food crises and endemic hunger issues are often centered on issues of conflict. While traditional forms of conflict play a role, so does class conflict. According to the Tricontinental Institute for Social Research (2020), unilateral sanctions imposed by countries like the United States account for food crises in more than 30 countries around the world. Sanctions and international conflict between countries that has resulted in a food crisis has played out in real time on social media in recent years as the people of Venezuela have struggled with major food and medical supply shortages. Many are shopping at flea markets for groceries, only to find their options are between animal hides and rotten dairy products (Otis, 2020). With a shortage of gasoline in the country, now what little food is being produced cannot get to markets, and shortages are beginning to extend to seeds and other agricultural products (Otis, 2020). This is just one example of the way that a political system marred by conflict – both internal and external – has resulted in a lasting food crisis that some say will lead to famine in Venezuela, one of the most oil-rich countries in the world.

The other issue with rising globalization policies and increased competition across almost every sector is that endemic hunger is not a visible enough issue (Field, 2002). It is characterized by food crises and issues of hunger specific to a region of the world and simply does not have the traction as other social ill. In fact, according to Field (2002, par. 16), “the hard fact of the matter is that hunger policies are seldom seen as a collective good. They tend to be divisible, even redistributive in their benefits, and hence contentious in nature, especially when it comes to actual resource allocation.” The political challenge is that agreement that hunger and food crises remain an issue does not correlate to a massive agreement on eradicating it. This issue has been further exacerbated in the face of a global pandemic, where resources that might normally be allocated to endemic hunger have been further diminished (Field, 2002).

Political policies have been largely guided by economic challenges regarding food-related industries in many areas of the world. For example, Ghana has staggering rates of endemic hunger, in part because of devaluation and trade liberalization policies (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network, 2002). Food insecurity among the most vulnerable of citizens has

resulted in a decline in the production of food as the country has created policies that have devoted much of the crop land to exports (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network, 2002).

Political challenges also govern the access that some populations have to food and water resources over others, which has perpetuated food crises and endemic hunger. One of the best examples of this is the Green Revolution, which was started in the late 1960s (Shiva, 2015). This revolution was characterized by national governments that subsidized agricultural yields with the intent of shoring up food security efforts (Shiva, 2015). While initially well-intentioned, there have been challenges that have manifested in worsening issues that have become political in nature.

Within the context of the political realities about food crises and endemic hunger is the idea that political uprising in response to these systems has created a desire for ruling political classes to stamp out those protests in the name of power retention. Combined with food lobbies that have grown as powerful as the governments they petition – if not more so – and food has become a source of power and control from a political perspective. People have little to no say in how their foods are produced, what means are taken to make them easier to mass produce and protests in even the freest of countries are met with staunch resistance from politicians that need lobbyist dollars to win elections. The result is a lower grade of food than people have had access to in the past and less of it distributed in ways that are fair and affordable. These same foods are contributing to what is known as the “cheapening” of food.

4. Cheap Food

Cheap food does not necessarily refer to the targeted strategy of creating less expensive food options. Rather, it refers to the cheapening of food systems and denigrating processes of food production that make it possible to create a capitalist structure around the food industry. According to Patel & Moore (2018), as capitalism has transformed agricultural systems supporting food production, crop patterns have changed to accommodate the desire for more money within these systems. As wages associated with food production have also increased, the industry has had to find ways to accommodate these rising costs. This is where the pointed measure of cheap food has become a strategy, because “cheap food enables that expensive system to yield riches” (Patel & Moore, 2018). The strategy was something like this: create cash crops using genetically modified components that made them resistant to meteorological conditions, resistant to pests and other natural conditions and threats. Then, with these revolutions, the food would be inherently cheaper because the crops themselves were hardier (Patel & Moore, 2018). The more that crops could yield, the more profitable the industry would be overall (Patel & Moore, 2018). Mexico’s Green Revolution provided a modern-day model for how political systems could then benefit from these shifts. By subsidizing these efforts and tying them to political policies, the system could function as a virtual cash cow for governments.

The characterization of the cheap food strategy is as such: “a meat-production system that can turn a fertile egg and a nine-pond (four kilogram) bag of feed into a five-pound (two-kilogram) chicken in five weeks” (Patel & Moore, 2018). It seems that no aspect of the food industry has been spared from the cheap food movement. However, even with increased efficiencies in the production process, more people cannot afford to eat meat or many of the whole food brought to the market today. As a result, the food industry has introduced processed plant-based alternatives meant to provide more access to food options because the whole foods either had the nutrients processed out of them or have become downright unaffordable to large contingents of the global population.

The cheapening strategy is more about the quality of the food than any other component. A cheapening or degradation of quality has happened to underscore the food industry’s desire for more profits. Now, food can be used as a resource against entire populations, especially with a continuous dwindling of natural resources. As climate change continues its assault on the planet, these resources will only continue to shrink, all but guaranteeing that people will remain reliant on an industrial food complex that has the power to feed them – or not (Patel & Moore, 2018). The more that food is cheapened as a power strategy, the more it can be used as a means of control and the more it can be

degraded to increase profit margins for corporate conglomerates taking advantage of the fact that this life-giving resource is part of the global capitalist system.

5. Conclusion

Even though the issues that feed into food crises and endemic hunger are clear, especially in the context of globalization, what is not clear is what represents the best approach to dealing with it. Making high-level policy decisions on hunger is much different than putting those initiatives in action. This is one of the areas that stops hunger from being resolved at the global level, despite so many policies and initiatives centered on it (Field, 2002). Competence is a challenge perhaps because the issue feels so massive and touches so many corners of the globe (Field, 2002). It overwhelms efforts to be effective in massive response effort (Field, 2002).

Ultimately, addressing the issue of endemic hunger and food crisis amid a growing global environment is not necessarily something that can be tackled from an upper-level perspective. No one global entity can resolve this issue or even implement a set of solutions that represent a one-size-fits-all approach to endemic hunger. Rather, it is an issue best tackled at the local, regional, state and national levels. Once there are working solutions at the lower levels, then these solutions can be conjoined to represent a global approach. This is the reason that groups like La Via Campesina have become integral to addressing the issue. The group offers that since globalized market conditions exclude small-scale producers, organizations like this one can act to help this disparaged group. A transnational social movement, La Via Campesina has worked to put forth a vision where the industrial food complex does not squeeze out those without power (La Via Campesina, 2020).

What has happened with the food industry is not a consequence of globalization, per se (La Via Campesina, 2020). The truth is that globalization can have myriad benefits where sharing resources and helping to eradicate hunger in areas of the world hit hardest by the issue are concerned. Therefore, eradicating hunger will only happen in the context of eradicating such a massive capitalist system that thrives on the conglomeration of corporate entities. It is a racialized system that feeds into the worst ideas humanity has about class, race, gender, socioeconomic status and freedom. Hunger will never be eradicated in such a system because food crises and endemic hunger allow for greater control over those considered to be lower in status. This is the reason that the creation of the industrial food complex and the commodification of those processes surrounding food production has created a bigger problem with hunger that cannot be easily solved with canned food collections or donation drives.

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