



Food security and the global agrifood system: Ethical issues in historical and sociological perspective



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ABSTRACT

The world food system was developed under the auspices of free trade. Very quickly though free trade was countered with protectionism in the form of policies favoring national and cultural food security. The traumas of World War led to the introduction of international commitments on individual rights with respect to labor and the right to freedom from hunger. From the seventies, the pendulum swung back in favor of free trade, this time provoking a response in the form of fair and ethical trade. The introduction of new food markets promoted by social movements as from the eighties where values were attached to the conditions and processes of production rather than the product itself led to agriculture and food markets becoming imbued with ethical attributes. At the same time, an increasingly holistic concept of food security became adopted in international forums pointing to the need for policies which were no longer reducible to food aid. While for a period, broader ethical values were identified only with alternative food networks, as from the turn of the new millennium, under the collective umbrella of economic, social and environmental sustainability, they became adopted by the global agri-food players as the triple bottom line for all agricultural and food markets. Although a new consensus has been achieved on the centrality of sustainability and food security a range of tensions and conflicts persist over the relation between food security and trade, investment, biofuels, producer and consumer rights, animal welfare, nature and the environment.

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1. Introduction

Debates on the future of the agrifood system have been accompanied by an increasing focus on ethical concerns which in the recent period have centered around the concept and the political goal of food security (Maye and Kirwan, 2013). The relation between these concerns and the markets constituting the agrifood system are understood in very different ways.

What might be considered the dominant view would argue that the market is the best guarantor of food security and that specific issues of food insecurity should be dealt with outside the market sphere either through private philanthropy or targeted policy measures. Food aid, food stamps and food banks are, therefore, seen to compensate the ethical externalities of agrifood markets, either as the response to specific market failures, (droughts, wars), or to those with chronic problems of access. The structural reforms which were imposed on developing countries in the 80s and 90s by the International Monetary Fund the World Bank were imbued with this vision.

A second line of argument is that agriculture and food should be understood as exceptional activities because of their vital relations to human physical and cultural reproduction. Such markets, therefore, must, on this view, be subject to permanent forms of protection or subsidies and subordinated to the goals of food security (Polanyi, 1944).

A third perspective would argue that ethical values should be embedded in all markets and not assigned to the category of externalities. The particular values focused on vary widely – redistributive justice within the agrifood chain, animal welfare, biodiversity (Jaffe et al., 2004; Mile et al., 2011). These values often begin their lives as social movements, advance as niche markets and may eventually be adopted in varying degrees by the mainstream. Sustainability, as we will see below, has now become a common baseline for the justification of markets (Lawrence et al., 2010).

A fourth approach focuses on the issue of rights and capacities, human, animal and those attributed to nature (Anderson, 2013; Nash 1989; Appleby, 2014). Ethical concerns in this light become the subject of political claims and regulatory demands. The extent of these rights and their implications for the organization of the agrifood system depend on an appreciation of the conditions under which such rights might be assured.

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Historically the world agrifood system took form under the precepts of free trade *à la* Ricardo promoted by Great Britain as from the middle of the nineteenth century. Although gunboats were very often its precondition, free trade was based on the assumption that international comparative advantage would best ensure food security. Alternative views and policies – the exceptionality of agriculture and food, the embeddedness of ethical values in markets, and the subordination of market dynamics to human, animal and natural rights and capacities – were articulated at different moments in response to the perceived threats of a free trade based agrifood system and provide the milestones for our historical overview.

This paper, therefore, begins with a brief historical sketch of the way in which free trade, under whose aegis the international agricultural commodity markets were created, retreated before assertions of national food security and the recognition of the rights of labor as producer and consumer. It then describes how, from the seventies, free trade once again imposed its principles on the world agrifood system but was met this time with the challenges of fair trade, the reaffirmation of the exceptional character of agriculture and food, the valuation of food in terms of its origins and conditions of production, and more comprehensive claims on the primacy of food security.

2. From free trade to food security

Given Britain's original combination of colonialism, control of the seas and free trade, the modern food system assumed the form of internationally integrated commodity markets on the basis of a high degree of country/region specialization. By the 1880s a world wheat market with unified prices had emerged which would be followed by other grains and meat products (Tracy, 1982). Free trade, therefore, provided temperate products from the new settler countries, while colonial arrangements (and Latin America) ensured the supply of tropical commodities, (Friedmann, 1982). In Britain, the “moral economy” (Thompson, 1971) associated with local wheat markets was swept aside in favor first of a national and then rapidly an international commodity market.²

Continental Europe on the other hand, flirted only temporarily with free trade and quickly resorted to protecting its agriculture and its food supplies from the uncertainties of dependence on trade, (Gerschenkron, 1989). France, in particular, invoked the cultural significance of what Mitterand would later describe as “a certain kind of rural civilization”, (The Times, 1987). Protectionism would be strengthened in the vicissitudes of World Wars and economic depression and would be transformed into the backbone of the postwar Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), (Ludlow, 2005). In 1968, Mansholt, the founder of the CAP, proposed a farm consolidation plan and the exclusion of five million hectares from production which would have provoked the large-scale exodus of small farmers. This proposal was based on the conviction that existing policies would lead to permanent agricultural surpluses. Strong opposition from farmers' organizations led to the adoption in 1972 of a program for the gradual modernization of Europe's

existing family farm structure (Reinalda, 2013 www.ru.nl/fm/iobio).

The modern food system, therefore, was from the outset divided between strategies which treated food as just another market and policies which subordinated food markets to considerations of national food security and cultural priorities regarding food production and consumption practices.

With the consolidation of a new international institutional framework in the post-war period, access to food as an individual right became added to the earlier geopolitical and cultural qualifications to the commodification of food. Already in 1941, Roosevelt's State of the Union “four freedoms” speech included the freedom from want which was incorporated in the United Nations Charter in 1945 and further confirmed in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Smith, 2007). The right to food assumed the status of international law through its inclusion in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1966 (De Schutter, 2008).

This international institutionalization of the right to food was very much in harmony with the predominance of food aid over trade in the post-war reconstruction first of Europe and Japan and then extended to a large number of developing countries. Agriculture was excluded from the rules of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) implemented within the framework of the United Nations in 1947 (FAO, 1995, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/w7814e/w7814e05.htm#1.1.3> the exclusion of agriculture from the gatt).

In the wake of the food price shocks of the seventies and major food calamities (the famine in Bangladesh) there was a further institutionalization of international commitments to food security. A World Food Conference was convened by the United Nations in 1974 which led to the Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition, and the affirmation that “every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop their physical and mental faculties”. The inclusion, here, of malnutrition marks an important extension of the meaning of the right to food which will subsequently be elaborated in successive formulations of the notion of food security.

At this meeting, a World Food Council was created but was never operative until it re-emerged as the Committee on World Food Security in 2009. There were subsequent World Food Conferences but after the turbulence created by the trade embargoes in the seventies, views on food and agriculture shifted decisively back from aid to trade. This was combined with pressures to put an end to the “exceptionality” of agriculture which was achieved in the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) approved during the Uruguay Round of the GATT negotiations (1986–1995), which led also to the latter's reformulation as the World Trade Organization (WTO). Agriculture should now be progressively treated as any other economic sector and the liberalization of trade was argued to be the best guarantee of food security (OECD, 2001).

In practice, political realities proved to be quite different. Liberalization was unilaterally imposed on the weaker or indebted developing countries, following the precepts of the Washington Consensus (Fischer, 2012). The US and Europe, for their parts, succeeded in maintaining agricultural and food protection via agreements on very gradual subsidy reductions. Paradoxically, the free trade mantle would be assumed by an amalgam of settler and larger developing countries, the Cairns Group (www.cairnsgroup.org).

In the US, the maintenance and even increase of agricultural subsidies was a classic response to farmer lobbying power. The EU, for its part, justified continuation of agricultural support systems invoking the exceptionality of agriculture in the form of multifunctionality, and the environmental and territorial role of

² The notion of “moral economy” associated with peasant risk aversion by Scott (1997) was earlier developed by the English historian E. P. Thompson, to explain food riots in 18th century England: “It is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking etc. This in turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage of these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action.” (1971).

agriculture and small farming. Even in the US, however, the Food Stamp program, initiated during the Second World War and then reintroduced in the sixties, since when it has been a permanent public policy, recognizes the priority of need for food over market conditioned access.

3. Labor is not a commodity. The rights of labor and agriculture

The rights of labor were confirmed even earlier in the aftermath of the First World War, and, while often justified in terms of contributions to the war effort (repeated again after the Second World War), they included as their basic premise that labor should not be treated as a commodity. This principle became part of the First World War Treaty of Versailles and at the end of the Second World War was incorporated into the Declaration of Philadelphia, the programmatic document of the UN International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1944.

In spite of this, in many countries basic labor rights were not extended to agriculture calling attention once again to the exceptionality of agriculture. Agricultural work typically falls into two categories – farm laborers and small family farmers. Only a small proportion of the former are permanently employed with the vast majority being contracted on a temporary basis in periods of peak demand, particularly for harvesting. Given this peculiarity, migrant and casual labor predominates, and informal contractual arrangements have been the rule, (Martin, 1988). Family farming is similarly an anomalous category where child labor assumes an ambiguous character, part apprenticeship, part forced labor, (HLPE, 2013a, 2013b). Social protection and retirement benefits have often not been extended to these rural sectors, (Maybury-Lewis, 1964–85), revealing the perverse consequences of agriculture's exceptionalism which has also been used to justify exemption from environmental controls.

Within the peasant and family farming sectors the primordial issue with regard to rights was that of adequate access to land. Historically agrarian reform was justified and promoted as a key measure in breaking the hold of feudalism and paving the way for modernization (Moore, 1966). From the perspective of peasant movements, access to land was defended as a right and as a question of redistributive justice in the light of land concentration and its non-productive appropriation. Perhaps surprisingly, there has been a resurgence of agrarian reform movements since the 90s where once again access to land as a basic right is combined with broader concerns, including the rejection of agribusiness farming models and globalized agriculture (Holt-Gimenez and Patel, 2012).

4. Free trade leads to fair trade and ethical trade initiatives

As from the middle seventies, trade was increasingly proposed as the dominant strategy to be pursued by developing country agriculture with aid relegated to a complementary role. This occurred in a context of declining prices for most traditional agricultural commodity exports. In response a new type of fair trade movement emerged in relation to global agricultural commodities, beginning with coffee, (Raynolds et al., 2007). Here the redistributive justice of the market logic of one of the most important global agricultural commodities, coffee, was called in question. The second and third principles enshrined in the rights of labor in the Treaty of Versailles declared that wages should be sufficient for the decent reproduction of life and that women should be awarded equal pay. The Fair Trade movement commits buyers to paying an agreed above market price to farmers for the raw material input. In addition it stipulates the payment of a premium for local

community investments, the advancement of funds to finance production and the engagement in long term contracts. In addition to pressure on the traditional economic actors, the final consumer is also actively engaged and encouraged to assume these fair trade conditions by purchasing at higher prices. The importance attached to approximating producer and consumer and the commitment to long term contracts are expressions of Fair Trade's goal of reintroducing an ethics of responsibility into market relations (Suranovic, 2015).

The Fair Trade movement encompasses different components often with conflicting strategies, but the need to subject trade to notions of justice has achieved a wide resonance. The Fair Trade Labeling Organization (FLO), the official Fair Trade organization, calculates that some 1.24 million small farmers and agricultural laborers worldwide currently benefit from Fair Trade arrangements. While the “mainstreaming” of Fair Trade has been a highly contentious process, provoking acrimonious debates, many leading agrifood firms (Cadbury, Nestlé, Starbucks, Sainsbury) have now adhered to the movement and promote some Fair Trade products, (Le Velly, 2015). It may well be argued that for such firms it is a question of benefitting from an emerging market niche and that it is the customer who pays the bill. The benefits of fair trade for small farmers and farm laborers have also been questioned, (Sylla, 2014). Nevertheless, adoption in itself involves an acceptance that “fairness” is a relevant criterion and provides markets with greater legitimacy.

That fairness has become a central consideration for market actors can be seen also in the formation of the Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI) in England in 1998, which includes leading supermarkets and a wide range of final products firms whose combined turnover comes to some 166 billion pounds sterling. The general goal is the implementation of ILO standards in global value chains (GVC). Here again, however, the results often fall far short of the stated aims and empirical research suggests that demands often go no further than the implementation of prevailing national standards (Barrientos and Smith, 2006).

5. Polanyi and food as a special commodity

The subjection of the factors of production to the principles of the “unfettered” market and free trade rapidly led as we have seen to measures to protect labor and the means of life from the effects of commodification. The classic treatment of this dilemma is to be found in Karl Polanyi's, *The Great Transformation* (1944). Polanyi argues that the free market demanded by industrial capitalism can only be fully implemented if everything is treated as a commodity, including land, labor and money. These three, he argues, are really fictitious commodities since none are produced by the capitalist production process. He further argues that if treated as commodities the reproduction of life and the environment would be progressively undermined. The issue is not limited to that of social class but implies the destruction of the fabric of life and nature which necessarily provokes broad-based counter-movements of protection.

Steiner (2007) develops Polanyi's thesis and extends the latter's arguments to those of food. The central issue, he argues, is the special nature of those markets involving products which “directly touch on life”. Wheat/corn as life's basic form of nourishment in the Europe under consideration was just such a special market. The moral economy surrounding bread, analyzed for the 18th century by Thompson (1971) but which goes back through to the Middle Ages (Fischer, 2002), is powerfully captured in Steiner's citation of Adam Smith:

“The laws concerning corn may everywhere be compared to the law concerning religion. The people feel themselves so much

Table 1
Food security milestones.

Year	Issue	Source/Authority
1919	Labor not a commodity	Treaty of Versailles
1941	Four Freedoms	Roosevelt State of the Union
1945	Freedom from Want	U. N. Charter
1946	Rights of Labor	UN ILO, Declaration of Philadelphia
1947	Exclusion of Agriculture from Trade Rules	GATT
1948	Freedom from Want	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
1966	Right to Food	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
1974	Freedom from Hunger and Malnutrition as Inalienable Right	World Food Conference Universal Declaration on Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition
1974	Agriculture now included in Trade Rules	Uruguay Round
1992	Food Security & Sustainability	Rio Summit
1992	Rights extended to Nature	Convention on Biological Diversity
1996	Right to Sufficient, Safe and Nutritious Food	World Food Summit
2000	Food Security & Eradication of Poverty	Millennium Goals
2005	Inter-generational Responsibility	Kyoto Protocol
2009	Food Security as Systemic Challenge	U.N. Committee on World Food Security

Elaboration: author.

interested in what relates either to their subsistence in this life, or to the happiness in a life to come that government must yield to their prejudices and in order to preserve the public tranquility, establish that system they approve of" (Smith, 1776 apud [Steiner, 2007](#)) (Table 1).

6. "Special quality" agricultural practices and food markets

Since the eighties we have seen a dual process whereby there has been a simultaneous advance in the subjection of agriculture/food to global markets and counter movements promoting the adoption of ethical criteria to discipline such markets. While agricultural trade liberalization was initially a US and EU project to be negotiated within the GATT/WTO, its limitations were exposed by the competitive agricultural economies of the emerging and settler country CAIRNS bloc. With the impasses at multilateral level, pressures for liberalizing agricultural markets have been reposed within the variety of bi and pluri-lateral Free Trade Agreements ([Schot, 2004](#)). (Table 2)

A countermovement emerging from within the agrifood sector can be identified with the progressive shift to "quality" foods as from the middle 70s. This "quality turn" has been widely studied and refers to a period noted for strategies of product differentiation and market segmentation in response to the stagnation in per capita consumption of basic foodstuffs in Europe and the US ([Allaire 1995](#), [Goodman, 2003](#), [Morgan et al., 2006](#)). In Europe, particularly, it was also identified with the emergence of a new category of product whose essential qualities were located in the

conditions and processes of production rather than exclusively in the contents and appearance of the final product. This contrasted sharply with the dominant agricultural commodity markets where the impersonality of universal global standards prevailed ([Harvey et al., 2004](#)).

These new values associated with production processes (organics, geographical indications, fair trade, bird-friendly, Halal, kosher, sustainable forestry products) are not visible in the final product and are related to values which contrast sharply with the industrial values of technical efficiency. Such markets are built out of cultural or social movement practices and are only acceptable as markets to the extent that market rules incorporate the cultural and social values being defended. That these values become markets introduces a fundamental tension into the food system and its dominant actors. In addition, their very success leads to a process of market mainstreaming whose price is the mainstreaming of social movement discourse.

Analysis of new quality markets stretched the resources of orthodox economics, ill-equipped to deal with other than transparent and homogeneous or readily categorized markets. A new micro-economics emerged to deal with information asymmetry, inaugurated in the famous analysis of second hand cars by [Akerlof \(1970\)](#). Contracts, insurance-schemes and guarantees, proposed by the new institutional economics went a long way to enabling these markets. Alternative solutions, however, were also proposed to address these same problems. Economic sociology argued that social networks could equally well generate and underpin the trust needed to sustain market transactions based on criteria of quality related to production processes and origin ([Granovetter, 1985](#)). In fact, the approach of social networks could be seen to provide a theoretical basis for the practices of the social movements which had given rise to these markets. Against the impersonal solutions of certificates and third party guarantees new types of markets were defended where trust could be sustained by proximity and the approximation of consumers and producers ([Hesterman, 2012](#); [Hinrichs and Lyson](#)) in. An ethics of responsibility was now counter-posed to the institutionalization of incentives and penalties ([Grasseni, 2013](#)).

French convention theory, which has been very influential in the analysis of these quality agricultural and food markets, first in Europe but increasingly also in the Anglo-Saxon world, has also served to weaken the justificatory hold of efficiency criteria for market legitimacy ([Boltanski and Thévenot, 1990](#)). Convention theory identifies the way in which Western civilization has validated a number of different worldviews for evaluating human activity. Each of these can be considered equally legitimate as the basis for organizing human transactions and none have a claim to pre-eminence. Industrial and market oriented economic activities have their justifications. So do, however, the very different values of artistic activity, or those based on an acquired reputation ([Ponte and Gibbon, 2005](#)). Of particular importance for agriculture and food markets are values associated with the defense or promotion of the common good and those which attribute special value to forms of traditional production, civic and domestic values respectively ([Allaire and Boyer, 1995](#)). Here the limitations of efforts

Table 2
Approaches to food security and implications.

Approach	Market	Policies	Private Initiative
Mainstream	Free Trade and Non-Regulated Markets	Compensatory: Food Stamps	Food Banks, Support for NGOs, Philanthropy
Exceptionality Thesis	Food and Food Needs not Commodities	Protection	Social Solidarity
Values Internal to Markets	Sustainability as bottom line	Public-Private Governance	Economic Social Movements
Food as a Matter of Rights	Markets and Trade at the Service of Rights	Public Intervention in Markets	Political Social Movements

Elaboration: author.

to compensate information opacity and asymmetry become clear. Values are not reducible to problems of information. Rather, different values may be legitimately attributed to the same information (Wilkinson, 1997).

7. The common agricultural policy defends agriculture as a special sector

While the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union continued to defend the large-scale agricultural commodity sector which had emerged from the reconstitution of European farming, it also gave support to the new quality markets. The successful reconstruction of agriculture in Europe of the CAP quickly became an embarrassment as self-sufficiency gave way to structural over-production. The then Soviet Union provided a temporary “non-market” outlet but the EU rapidly moved to subsidized exports to the developing world in cut throat competition with the US. The effects of these policies on food security in different developing countries have been widely criticized (Friedmann, 1982).

On the other hand, CAP reform proposals introduced non-productivist justifications for policy support, ranging from multi-functionalism to the social support of hill farming and the development of regulatory frameworks for organic and geographical indications products (Lowe et al., 2002). For its part Fair Trade received official support at all levels, with Europe sporting a proliferation of Fair Trade towns (www.fairtradetowns.org).

This shift in policy was also accompanied by the adoption of new practices for the deliberation, formulation and evaluation of policies. As a counterpart to the greater deregulation of market activity it was felt necessary to formalize consumer and civil society participation in the political process. Both consumer and social movements were already constituent components of the new quality markets and were now formally incorporated into policy deliberation (Burgess, 2001).

8. Global agrofood adopts sustainability

The major shift in the dynamics of the agrifood system, however, was the progressive internalization of the discourse and, more problematically, the principles of sustainability. The need to subject economic logic to the requirements of sustainability can be variously located historically. The Rio de Janeiro 1992 Earth Summit organized by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, however, was certainly a water mark in the process of establishing international conventions. These new forms of public global governance were also accompanied by private initiatives. In fact for many analysts market order in today's world is being achieved primarily through private or mixed public private networks of global governance (Busch, 2012; Cashore et al., 2004). Many of the same values previously associated only with special quality markets are now demanded of the major agricultural commodities (Wilkinson, 2011). This tendency has been accelerated with the development of large-scale markets whose only justification is their contribution to sustainability (biofuels, carbon sequestration).

As from the middle 90s, on the initiative of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), international NGOs and leading agrifood firms began to promote multi stakeholder forums, known as Sustainable Roundtables, for the principal agricultural commodities to establish new base-line economic, environmental and social criteria for their production (WWF, 2010). The frontier which previously protected agricultural commodity markets from the demands associated with special quality markets was now breached and a

new dynamic of market construction initiated with global firms and NGOs in direct negotiation (Ponte, 2013). Whatever the tensions, and in spite of the continued prevalence of neo-liberal discourses, agricultural and food markets are no longer seen as immune from the multiple constraints imposed by the evolving criteria of sustainability.

The notion of sustainability extends the ethics of responsibility from society to nature. An important component of the social movements promoting special quality markets has been directed to animal welfare. This has taken a variety of forms – vegetarianism, veganism, anti-vivisection, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), protection of wild life, and support for free-range products. Animal welfare concerns have also moved mainstream and are now having a major impact on the dominant agri-food chains, through campaigns against veal calves, battery poultry and pig production, and animal slaughter procedures. The animal protein diet and its global extension is increasingly being challenged as a threat to food security given the perceived health risks and cruelty of current dominant industrial practices together with the environmental effects of extensive cattle farming (Rifkin, 1992; Hayes and Hayes, 2015; Leonard, 2014).

The notion of inter-generational solidarity intrinsic to the principle of sustainability extends the ethics of responsibility to nature and further qualifies the extent of legitimate commodification. While the concern with sustainability presents itself primarily as being instrumentally motivated although premised now on the long term, the Convention on Biological Diversity (www.cbd.int/convention/), a multilateral treaty agreed on at the Rio de Janeiro, 1992 Earth Summit, recognizes the “intrinsic value” of biological diversity and the need for its conservation “for maintaining life sustaining systems of the biosphere” (<https://www.cbd.int/convention/articles/default.shtml?a=cbd-00>). The Kyoto Protocol/Convention (http://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol/items/3145.php), linked to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and itself a development from the 1992 Earth Summit, which was adopted in 1997 coming into force in 2005, introduced a carbon discipline on nations which affects all economic activities and every stage of those activities. In spite of the prevalence of neo-liberal discourse the “unfettered” market is no longer a legitimate goal and ethical responsibilities have now been extended to our relation with nature, in which agriculture and food production have a privileged position.

9. Food security concept takes on flesh

In this same period, mobilizations around food security accelerated and become greatly amplified. If the seventies and the eighties were primarily focused on the negative effects of low agricultural commodity prices on income generation and food security, a return to higher prices in the 90s exposed the urban face of food insecurity and the paradoxical reality that, as many agricultural developing countries were becoming increasingly net food importers, the small farmer in turn was also increasingly dependent on food purchases. In the framework of the Millennium goals food security was largely subsumed within the targets for eliminating dire poverty. The food prices hikes of 2008–9 replaced the focus squarely on the issue of food security whose concept over the previous decade had been subject to increasing refinement (HLPE, 2011).

The World Food Summit of 1996 defined food security as a situation in which “all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” (www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.HTM). The UN Committee on World Food Security was established in 2009 in the wake of the global agricultural commodity price hikes which provoked violent

responses in many developing countries, (www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-home/en/).

The definitions of food security have become increasing multi-layered and the conditions for its attainment more systematically specified. Food aid, seen as a panacea in the past, can, in this context, be no more than a punctual and emergency measure. This understanding of the systematic challenge posed by food security goes hand in hand with the increasing pressures imposed on food production by the effects of climate change, the restrictions presented by the premise of sustainability, a slowdown in agricultural productivity and the non-food demands on agriculture, most notably from biofuels. At the same time the planet daily welcomes forty thousand new mouths to feed, with the global population estimated to reach some nine billion by the middle of the century.

10. Conclusion

While free trade policies and tenets defined the creation of the modern world food system and had a strong revival as from the eighties, the legitimacy of “unfettered” food markets was quickly contested in each occasion. To geopolitical and cultural restraints, the notion of food as a right, already present in the moral economy associated with food, was added to the considerations which should regulate the market. Important principles of the quality markets emerging from social movements in the eighties were incorporated into the discourses of most agri-food corporations. The leading actors of the major agricultural and livestock commodities have accepted the need to define a new common base-line of sustainability involving the specification of social, economic and environmental values. While the discourse gap has narrowed, however, enormous tensions and polarizations exist on the ways in which food security can be sustainably achieved.

In spite of the modern international food system's initial association with free trade and the later efforts to reinsert agriculture and food within an exclusively market logic, the ethical priorities enshrined in the adoption of the principles of food security and sustainability have established a common normative base-line for agriculture and food market regulation. The recognition that values and ethics cannot be excluded as criteria for regulating these markets by the dominant actors of the agri-food system is a major advance in establishing the terms in which negotiations should be conducted.

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