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# FOOD RIGHTS FOR REAL

## Five ideas for more accountable action on hunger

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Does more talk of the right to food and more action on food security amount to more accountability and effectiveness in tackling hunger? Not according to new findings from the *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility* project. Research in 2013, published in the report 'Help Yourself! Food rights and responsibilities: Year 2 findings from *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility*' found that while the drivers of food insecurity are increasingly beyond their control, people cannot rely on help when, how and for whom it is needed. The research found that:

- Most societies have shared understandings of rights to, and responsibilities for, protection against hunger, particularly for the most vulnerable. These derive from natural, moral and social rights and imply personal, parental and community responsibilities.
- 'Folk' rights<sup>1</sup> and responsibilities, patchy and uneven at the best of times, are becoming less effective against the global drivers of food insecurity.
- These folk rights have not (yet) been replaced by a strong sense of a human right to food based on law and enforceable by public policy. Few people feel able to realize their rights, or hold public authorities to account for action on hunger.
- Policies and programmes on food security are commonly criticised as unpredictable, uneven and unfair. Good programmes crowd-in customary support mechanisms without creating burdens of stigma and reciprocity.



## Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility

Changes in food prices are major events in people's lives. So, in 2012, with funding from UK Aid and Irish Aid, research began to track the impacts of these changes on everyday life. Policy makers can be blinded to the social costs of managing change when food prices rise or are volatile. Often they neglect the non-economic costs of coping: more time and effort to feed people, stress and violence, lower quality of life, eating 'bad' food. These impacts rarely show up in statistics and impact assessments but they matter greatly to those affected. Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility studies how price changes affect the lives of people on low or precarious incomes over the period 2012–2015, looking at paid work, unpaid care work, social relationships, and formal and informal social protection. The collective of researchers works in 10 urban/peri-urban and 13 rural locations in 10 low- to middle-income countries, revisiting the same 1500 people each year. The approach is sociological, capturing local experiences and effects of global processes through a mix of longitudinal qualitative and national data analysis.

For more information visit [www.oxfam.org.uk/foodprices](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/foodprices)

Accountability is an important end in its own right. Public services can be accountable when they have i) a clear mandate for action, ii) standards for policies and programmes, iii) systems for monitoring the situation, and iv) sanctions for failures to act. What communities tell us about food security programmes is that responsibilities for action are unclear and monitoring systems rarely capture local realities. Standards are strikingly low judged against those of human rights, targeting efficiency, or protection. Food security programmes are often demeaning, divisive, unreliable, discriminatory and discretionary. So what can be done to make food security policies and programmes more accountable? In line with human rights approaches to realizing the right to food and social protection, and evidence on strengthening accountability to make services work for poor people, the research suggests five ideas for more accountable action on hunger:

1. **Governments that are committed to food security should publicly accept their mandate to realize the right to food.** Where people know they have such rights in principle they are encouraged to claim them in practice, as is happening in Kenya.
2. **Governments and donors need to accept that people facing food insecurity have a rightful role in policy-making, and actively promote that participation.** Standards for food security need to be set with the full involvement of people who actually face hunger, including shaping what international and national policies say about what, how much and how food assistance should be delivered. **Monitoring** systems should be based on local knowledge of hunger, including its seasonal and cultural expressions, as with the new Indonesian system.
3. **Accountability mechanisms will only work when they enforce sanctions for failure to take proper action against hunger.** Functioning grievance and feedback mechanisms in food and cash assistance schemes will help close the feedback loop and feed into monitoring systems. Without official systems in place, people may protest or even riot when faced with hunger, as happened in Bangladesh and Burkina Faso respectively in 2008.
4. Governments never give up power unless made to. Therefore, **human rights defenders, social movements and progressive NGOs need to create legal precedents, stimulate public debate about the right to food and increase popular pressures to accept the mandate for action on hunger.** Failures to act must be politically costly or governments have limited incentives. **The mass media** plays a crucial role in communicating ideas. In

Zambia, a radio campaign has got people talking about the right to food. The media also sheds light on failures. In Pakistan, it is seen as the strongest force for holding the government to account on food price rises.

5. **Donors and NGOs need to apply the accountability test to their own actions on food security as well as to those institutions they fund.** Branded programmes may intend to strengthen accountability to the citizens and donors of rich countries by showing results and raising visibility. But do the stand-alone initiatives they finance and support increase accountability to the hungry? Do programmes and supported institutions meet human rights principles and standards? Or merely deliver temporary relief that actually undermines human rights or government or customary action? Are the accountability principles that inform humanitarian action applied to non-emergency food security programmes?

<sup>1</sup> Customary ideas about rights derived from natural rights, moral and religious principles, and membership of society.

The research report 'Help Yourself! Food rights and responsibilities: Year 2 findings from *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility*' was commissioned to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy and practice. This summary of the report does not necessarily reflect Oxfam or IDS policy positions. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of Oxfam or IDS or those of the funding organizations.

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