



IDS WORKING PAPER

Volume **2015** No **458**

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Naomi Hossain, Dolf te Lintelo and Alexandra Wanjiku Kelbert

June 2015



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First published by the Institute of Development Studies in June 2015
IDS Working Paper 458
© Institute of Development Studies 2015
ISSN: 2040-0209 ISBN: 978-1-78118-244-4

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Naomi Hossain, Dolf te Lintelo and Alexandra Wanjiku Kelbert

Summary

Despite the growing activism and debate around the right to food in the past decade, there has been little exploration of what the right means in everyday life and in the routine encounters between states and citizens. This paper draws together original qualitative research in nine African, Asian and Latin American countries on how people talk about the right to food. It does so on the assumption that accountability for hunger depends on people being aware of that right. The paper explores what people at risk of hunger have to say about what the right to food means in their location; its source and origins; and responsibilities for upholding it. It concludes that while ideas of the right to food do not generally use international human rights language, an understanding of innate or natural rights to food is 'common sense': shared across contexts and groups, and part of how people negotiate their right to food in everyday life. Among other findings, the paper concludes that in a period of rapid economic and social development, the right to food of older people looks particularly fragile, and merits special attention.

Keywords: right to food; food price volatility; vernacular rights; human rights; hunger; food security; famine; ageing; food sovereignty; moral economy.

Naomi Hossain is a political sociologist and a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies. Her work focuses on the politics of poverty and public services, and her current interest is in the politics of hunger and food insecurity. She has recently led two large research projects - the DFID-ESRC funded *Food Riots and Food Rights* project, as well as the UK Aid- and Irish Aid-funded *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility*.

Dolf te Lintelo is a Fellow in the Cities Cluster at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. His research interests concern the politics of social policy and regulatory processes, the role of advocacy coalitions in these, and the ways in which policies structure vulnerabilities for the poor. He has a special interest in urban informal work, young people, food and nutrition security, and social protection. Dolf also leads the Hunger And Nutrition Commitment Index (www.hancindex.org).

Alexandra Wanjiku Kelbert is an independent researcher currently working on the UK Aid- and Irish Aid-funded *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility* project. She holds an MA from the Institute of Development Studies. Her interests include food, social change, gender and the 'Global North'. Alexandra is also a London-based activist and works with female asylum-seekers and refugees.

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Acknowledgements

This paper is based on research funded by UK Aid and Irish Aid, in a research partnership with Oxfam GB. The authors are very grateful to the communities and individuals involved in the research for the time they have given to make this research possible, and to the researchers in the ten countries for permission to use the data collected for this paper. This working paper benefited from extensive comments from Priscilla Claeys on earlier versions of the analysis, for which the authors are indebted. The authors are very grateful to Celestine Musembi for useful comments on the present version of this paper. Many thanks are due to Ferdous Jahan, Rosario Leon, Ludovic Kibora, Tassew Woldehanna, Alma Lucrecia Olivet López, Rachma Nurbani, Grace Nyonyintono Lubaale, Gatimu Carolyne Wanjiku, Mysbah Balagamwala, Nhat Nguyen Duc, Thang Tran Cong and Mwila Mulumbi for their permission to use the data they have collected, and to Richard King, Duncan Green and Nick Chisholm for inputs on the overall analysis. Thanks are also due to Patta Scott-Villiers for the idea for the title. All errors of fact and interpretation are those of the authors alone.

Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PUCL	People's Union for Civil Liberties
UN	United Nations

Introduction

We, the Heads of State and Government, or our representatives, gathered at the World Food Summit at the invitation of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, reaffirm the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.

Opening statement of the Rome Declaration on World Food Security, World Food Summit, 1996.

People need to know their rights in order to be able to demand change and accountability from the Government.

Former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter (2012: 12)

Q: Do hungry people have any rights to food here?

In unison, the participants said that the hungry in their community have a right to food.

MJ (28, motorbike rider) said, 'we have the rights. However, we know little about them because we have not read and there is also ignorance.'

Q: Where do these rights come from? How do you know about them?

The participants felt that the rights to food come from God and from the government.

PK (44, community organiser) said, 'the rights come from God. He gives us the knowledge of our rights. Our leaders are given the ability to give us the rights.'

NJ (24, unemployed) said, 'the rights come from God. The government oppresses the poor.'

NM (38, community mobiliser) said, 'the rights come from God but do not get to the intended people. The channel used by the government is bad.'

NJ: 'the government knows that everyone has to eat yet it sets high prices for goods. It has also put the rights to food in the constitution.'

Q: What does a right to food mean to you?

NM: 'it means that Kenya has enough food for its entire people.'

SM (45, counsellor): 'it means that it is everyone's right to eat well.'

Transcript from focus-group discussion with men in Lango Baya, Coast Province, Kenya, 12 October 2013, as part of the *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility* project

Reference to 'the right to food' has become a fixture of food security debates since the 1996 Rome Declaration on World Food Security. Legislation to enshrine the human right to food in law is increasingly prominent in efforts to address hunger and food insecurity. Yet to date there has been little attention to what such a right means to people at risk of hunger, or to how they articulate it. This paper responds to the idea that 'people need to know their rights in order to claim them', as former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, states above. It is motivated by the perception that little is known about how the right to food acquires meaning in people's everyday practices to secure food and nutrition. In helping to fill this gap, the paper highlights the dissonances and resonances between the right to food as an aspiration – an already always-existing legal right, albeit not necessarily realised through public policy – and 'vernacular rights talk', or the everyday norms and standards around which societies and families organise their efforts to meet their members' most basic needs. These dissonances and resonances are heard in the

arguments from the focus group above: the Government of Kenya is responsible for realising their rights to food, but it lacks the capacity or political will to do so. Though God-given, the 'right to eat well' is far from people's experiences in drought-stricken coastal Kenya.

The intellectual motivation of the paper is to explore popular conceptions of food rights as an entry point for the analysis of accountability for food security. Popular conceptions matter because they help make sense of the demands and claims citizens can reasonably be expected to make of their states. What people say about their rights provides insights into what people expect from or mandate their governments to do in relation to food security. Where enshrined in constitutional, statutory and subordinate laws or through established jurisprudence, the right to food expresses not just a desire to achieve people's freedom from hunger; it explicates the responsibility of governments to ensure such outcomes and makes them accountable for doing so.

A starting assumption is that effective accountability requires some level of common understanding between citizens (to whom accountability is owed) and the state (to be held accountable) about what the right to food entails substantively. It implies a shared set of justificatory principles that underpin this right. By comparing 'rights talk' across different political and economic contexts, we can uncover not only the variations in expectations, but also in the principles that underpin them. The paper assesses how and how well a variety of popular conceptions or 'common sense' rights to food speak to legal and constitutional conceptions.

A second assumption is that such conceptions are political ideas or ideologies, and not 'neutral' information, knowledge or awareness. This is an important distinction because discussion of rights knowledge or awareness is often at risk of assuming that the 'rights' to which they refer are already real and objectively knowable. In the view that 'rights' mean the universal human rights of international law, popular conceptions are only of interest in terms of their proximity or distance from international human rights law. Yet debates about 'vernacular rights talk' emphasise the crucial role of translation: how does international law become local norm and practice? How do language, culture and custom shape the contextualisation, communication and interpretation of global principles and standards? (Merry 2006; Goldstein 2013). To what extent does the vernacularisation of human rights principles empower the oppressed, the vulnerable and the hungry? (Hauser 2008). It is in light of these questions that we explore popular conceptions of the right to food.

The historical literature on the political economy of food crises past offers insights into how popular conceptions of rights to food might 'work' within the political economy of food security. The moral economy literature tells us that popular conceptions of rights are formed and forged partly through experience of how and whether and when they are honoured, through how they are lived and enacted in everyday life and in the breach entailed by food crises. A 'politics of provisions' that enables hungry subjects to hold their rulers to account requires not only that people have such ideas, but also that they have the political means and motives for organising. Vernacular rights talk can offer access to these ideas, means and motives. Our interest here is in 'the social processes of human rights implementation and resistance'; we do not debate the merits of universalism versus localism or whether human rights are a good idea; instead, we study 'what difference they make' (Merry 2006: 39). Specifically, vernacular rights are interesting not only to the extent they resemble or differ from international human rights law, but also as a political, ideological act by people at risk of food insecurity, and a crucial part of the translation from international human rights legal precepts into the political economy of food security at national and local levels.

It is important to study popular conceptions on their own terms because to focus only on their distance from or similarity to aspirational human rights risks underestimating their innate importance. This importance derives directly from the fact that how people conceive

of their rights to food – ideas they hold about what they should be able to eat, and how that ought to come about, or what Amartya Sen has termed ‘entitlements’ – are at the heart of the political economy of hunger (see Sen 1981a; Sen 1981b). What people think they are entitled to is the basis for what they claim – although what they claim is in turn shaped by what they have reason to expect. That the Kenyan Government has a mandate to realise food rights but fails to do so in the experience of the Kenyan men quoted above matters partly because it influences the strength of the idea of a right itself. It matters, therefore, to how and the extent to which Kenyans can and do act to claim it.

In everyday life, of course, people infrequently have opportunities to demand their public authorities honour their rights to food. They may have ample motivation for doing so, but unless they have good reason to expect action, or their situation has suddenly changed, there may be no purpose to making claims. Yet the right to food does feature in everyday life, as this paper shows.¹ By referring to the ‘common sense approach to the right to food’ we refer to two features of these everyday discourses. First, popular conceptions of food rights can be far from the aspirations of legal human rights framings. They reflect interpretations of their lived realities by people at risk of hunger. They are commonsensical in the idiomatic meaning: more realistic, or closer to reality, than the normative abstract theories and rhetorical moralities of global elites.

Second, we talk of ‘common’ sense because it is significant that these ideas are shared, or common. Ideas about the right to food are neither random nor idiosyncratic. They are not, beyond a minimalist understanding of food rights as rooted in the natural ‘right to be’, universal; however, they are ideas that pertain to and are possessed by the group, whether the group is the moral community of the family, village, clan, tribe or nation. It is from their collective or social quality that the ideas gain meaning and power. The ‘common’ nature of these vernacular conceptions is striking because the emphasis on human rights as pertaining to individuals is at odds with an emphasis on rights as derived from membership of a collective.²

That popular ideas about the right to food are shared may seem self-evident, but it is not a trivial observation. This is because counter-ideas – for instance, that there is no human right to food even when facing starvation – do exist, and have caught the attention of powerful elites in the recent past. Crude Malthusian ‘lifeboat’ or ‘triage’ theories of the 1960s and 1970s proposed that rich countries should not waste their resources on the hopeless starving millions of the Third World, but focus resources, triage-style, on the peoples and places likely to survive (or become self-reliant).³

This paper draws on the findings of qualitative research with people living on low and precarious incomes in 20 locations across nine countries in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South and South East Asia. The research focused on understanding how people conceptualise their right to food, where the idea comes from, and the responsibilities or actions it implies. Although undertaken with the open-ended aim of exploring popular ideas about the right to food, the research was motivated by thinking about how people view their rights (in a broad, not strictly legalistic, sense) to food, and how their relationships with the state and each other shape those rights.

¹ Moral economy arguments came to the fore at times when the agreements over food rights were breached. The research reported here took place soon after a period of rapid food price rises, but not during a food crisis (other than the routine crises of poverty). So the popular conceptions of food rights discussed here are ‘everyday’ conceptions, not those articulated in the heat of crisis (Thompson 1971).

² Sen’s entitlement approach to famine analysis has similarly been critiqued for its methodological individualism, and effective failure to explain why some groups lack or lose entitlements – a socio-political more than an economic matter (see Devereux 2001).

³ These ideas were popularised in the sensationalist *Famine 1975!* (Paddock and Paddock 1968) and Hardin (1974). It is hard now to imagine that such arguments influenced policy, but triage ‘theory’ held considerable sway on the policy elite imagination during this period (see Howe and Sewell 1975; Rothschild 1976).

The paper is organised into four sections. Section 1 sets out the rationale for the paper, situating it in the relevant debates. Section 2 sets out the conceptual framework, approach and research methodology. Section 3 sets out the main empirical findings, organised around: a) What the right to food means in popular discourse; b) the sources or origins and content of popular perceptions of the right to food; and c) the allocation of responsibilities for realising the right to food. Section 4 reflects on the findings of the paper and concludes with discussion of the implications of the research for advocacy, policy and further research.

1 Rationale: why popular conceptions of the right to food matter

1.1 The right to food and accountability for hunger

Global food price crises, the persistence of high levels of hunger (870 million people in 2011–2013 (FAO 2013) and under-nutrition (Black *et al.* 2013) are the backdrop against which the right to food has risen to prominence in international and national policy discourses on hunger in the 21st century. In many ways, this emergence involved the gradual breathing of life into slumbering international and national laws on social and economic human rights, which have been secondary to the political and civil rights privileged by neoliberal development theory and praxis (Englund 2006; Howard 1983). The right to adequate food is recognised under Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (G.A. Res. 217 A (III), U.N. Doc. A/810, at 71 (1948)); under Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted on 16 December 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXII), U.N. GAOR, 21st sess., Supp. No. 16, U.S. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 UNTS 3), as interpreted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (General Comment No. 12: The right to adequate food (1999), UN doc. E/C.12/1999/5) (De Schutter 2012). Additionally, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognise the right to food (Knuth and Vidar 2011).

The constitutions of many countries already explicitly or implicitly reference the right to food. Knuth and Vidar (2011) identify 23 countries that explicitly reference the right to food in their constitutions. Some constitutions explicitly reference the right, but it is justiciable only if enshrined in bills of rights or fundamental rights sections (e.g. Brazil, Kenya, South Africa), but not where set out in sections on directive principles of state policy (Bangladesh, India⁴, Malawi). Only in the former can citizens hold governments to account through the courts if they fail to deliver on the right. The right to food can be explicitly located within constitutional articles that reference another human right. For instance, in Brazil, Article 7 asserts a right to a minimum wage capable of satisfying, among others, people's food needs. Jurisprudence also plays a role. Famously, the Supreme Court of India ruled that Article 21 of the constitution, which sets out a right to life with dignity, embeds in it the right to food (Petition (Civil) No. 196/2001, *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India & Others* (PUCJ)). This judgement transformed the right to food, hitherto expressed as a directive principle of state policy, into a fundamental right.

Many constitutions guarantee broader human rights (for instance to development) within which 'according to their normal meaning in international law', the right to food is implicit (Knuth and Vidar 2011: 16). This is the case in Ethiopia. Finally, countries that have ratified international human rights laws and conventions that recognise the right to food such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (162 states parties)⁵ and CEDAW (188 states parties⁶) are legally bound to their provisions. In a few countries, such international law is automatically given legal status superior or equivalent to constitutional law (e.g. Argentina, Venezuela), whereas in most others its status is inferior to constitutional law, yet superior or equivalent to national statutory law (Knuth and Vidar 2011).

⁴ Article 47 of the Indian Constitution is an aspirational 'Directive Principle' that creates a non-enforceable 'duty of the state to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living and to improve public health.'

⁵ https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?chapter=4&lang=en&mtdsg_no=iv-3&src=treaty, (accessed 6 May 2015)

⁶ www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/states.htm, (accessed 6 May 2015)

Despite such anchoring in international law, it is only since the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome that the right to food has started to have policy traction. In 2004, the General Council of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) recommended 'Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security'. Top-level appointments in the FAO are indicative of the momentum: current Director General Dr Graziano Da Silva was the architect of the Zero Hunger policy which delivered the constitutional right to food in Brazil. Since 2000, a UN Special Rapporteur has been mandated with promoting the full realisation of the right to food through measures at national, regional and international levels. The Special Rapporteur reports to the UN General Assembly and exercises important global intellectual leadership. Olivier De Schutter, the recent-past Special Rapporteur posits the right to food as more than a legal instrument expressing an ambition to achieve citizens' freedom from hunger. Rather, it is to be understood as a 'compass to ensure that policies are geared towards alleviating hunger and malnutrition'⁷.

De Schutter explicitly argues for a view of the right to food as an accountability tool (De Schutter 2012). Where enshrined in constitutional, statutory and subordinate laws or through established jurisprudence, the right to food expresses not just a desire to achieve people's freedom from hunger; it also explicitly sets out the responsibilities of governments to ensure such outcomes. Under what conditions can governments be held accountable for ensuring the right to food? Effective accountability at a minimum⁸ requires some level of common understanding between people or citizens as account holders and the state (to be held accountable) about what this right to food entails substantively, as well as a shared set of justificatory principles underpinning this right. This paper hence explores popular conceptions, or a 'common sense' to the right to food and assesses how well these speak to legal/constitutional notions.

1.2 Rights to subsistence and the moral economy

Contemporary 'politics of provisions' (Bohstedt 2014) are part of wider social movements that bring together transnational networks with localised struggles. Three distinct yet linked movements are the food sovereignty movement, spearheaded by the international peasant network La Via Campesina; the Right to Food movement, with close connections to the United Nations system and the apparatus of international human rights law; and the food justice movement, which draws together localised food rights movements under broad banners of environmental and economic justice, and has a strong US presence – although 'food justice' has been taken up by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Oxfam since the food price crisis of 2008.

These movements share a 'moral economy' form, although their political and organisational differences can be substantial. That is, ideas about food rights work as activating principles for political action against the predations of market forces on food systems seen as just, desirable or essential for survival. The concept of the moral economy here is closer to that of Thompson (1991) than of Scott (1977) in that it is not only about the logics of peasant production, but specifically about the inherent paradoxes of markets in food (Edelman 2005; Hossain and Kalita 2014). Ideas of rights and responsibilities in relation to agricultural production and markets appear reasonably widespread:

⁷ www.srfood.org/en/national-implementation, (accessed 6 May 2015)

⁸ *Minimum*, because there are other dimensions of accountability that need to be in place for it to work: mandate, monitoring, enforcement.

Peasant conceptions of “justice,” as described by Scott for Southeast Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are not, in their general outlines, very much different for other times and places (say, late-20th-century Latin America) ... Also significant are the expectations, developed over long historical time, of what states and elites may claim and of what they must, in turn, provide in times of necessity. Finally, the issues of what values are commensurable, of what can be turned into a commodity, and of what natural or commonly held resources can be appropriated for private use and profit also loom large in the rural poor’s understanding of justice. (Edelman 2005: 332)

It is not surprising, then, that the food sovereignty, right to food and food justice movements share a strong idea of justice in relation to food. What varies is whether it is ‘fair prices’ for consumers, producers or both; the specifics of sufficiency with respect to quality and quantity; the extent to which environmental sustainability is considered in production; and how equality in distribution or access is understood. For instance, gender equality is specifically assured under the individualism of human rights law, but communitarian peasant movements do not necessarily make such commitments to women. A conception of justice implies action by those tasked with protecting rights. Each movement conceives those responsibilities differently, for instance, official action at global or national level to prevent land grabs, regulate commercial agricultural production or actively protect smallholder farmers against larger actors, regulate food marketing systems and deliver food assistance or social protection when subsistence crises strike. All three movements also reject the total commoditisation of foodstuffs, with all setting limits on the rightful profit from food marketing. They say that not only do food markets never work to achieve the just aims of a desirable food system in practice, but that they cannot in theory, either. The idea of a perfectly functioning market in food is always and inherently misconceived.⁹

The food sovereignty movement has developed rich conceptualisations of the right to food that include systematic transformation and structural change, arguing that people are poor and hungry not because they are excluded from markets but because of the adverse terms of their inclusion (McMichael and Schneider 2011). The principles of food sovereignty demand the right of nations to maintain agricultural capacities with due respect for cultural and dietary diversity, and principles of entitlement and redistribution, where resource-poor farmers (in particular historically disadvantaged groups) move beyond being ‘beneficiaries’ towards having control of the food system (Pimbert 2006). Food sovereignty explicitly addresses the power politics of the food system, rejecting the corporate food regime and agri-food monopoly power (McMichael 2009), focusing on land redistribution, family farming, regional food systems, community rights to water and seed; and opposing development-induced land displacement, land-grabbing and northern agricultural subsidies (La Via Campesina 2011). Moral economic principles regarding the just and equitable distribution of resources, locally and at a global geopolitical level, are foundational and it is argued that the right to food under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights encompasses not merely access to food, but an empowerment agenda for marginalised food producers (Mechlem 2004).

1.3 Vernacular rights talk

One question worth asking is, to what extent are the concepts that give motive and meaning to transnational movements like food sovereignty or right to food shared by the general population? How do people who are not (yet) actively engaged in politicised struggles around food understand the right to food? (see, for instance, Boyer 2010).

⁹ For an overview of food movements, see Patel (2012). On food sovereignty, see Beuchelt and Virchow (2012); Edelman (2005); Edelman (2003); Patel (2009); Sampson and Wills (2013); on the Right to food, see De Schutter (2014); Knuth and Vidar (2011); Mechlem (2004); and on food justice, see Alkon and Norgaard (2009); Bailey (2011); Gottlieb and Joshi (2013).

We know that many recent ‘food riots’ and other local struggles around food were not part of these global movements, even though they often expressed closely similar concerns (see Hossain *et al.* 2014; Hossain and Kalita 2014). This suggests that the family of concepts around justice, rights and sovereignty with respect to food resonates across contexts. We also know that the political work of mobilising groups has involved the creation of new rights (such as the rights of peasants and the rights of people to food sovereignty) within the family of the right to food (Claeys 2012). That people who have not been politicised into these struggles talk in similar language and that the rights themselves are transformed by popular mobilisation indicates that what Merry calls the ‘vernacularisation’ – the translation or indigenisation – of the human right to food may be especially productive and enriching of both meanings and their place in political practice.

In making sense of how people talk about the right to food, it has been useful to recognise that the universal normative appeal of human rights need not impose fixed content on either theoretical or empirical grounds. Tsing’s (2005) concept of ‘engaged universals’ argues that while universal human rights may appear absolute and monolithic on paper (in conventions and international discourses), they in practice perform an aspirational function, to which political action brings historically specific and situated content. Such ‘engaged universals’ are sufficiently porous to absorb changed meanings over time; they are always used contextually (Tsing 2005; Englund 2006; Butler 2000, in Englund 2006), as well as relationally (Brown 1995, in Madhok 2009).

Merry’s well-known term ‘vernacularization’ (2006) captures the process of translation into hybridised concepts that inspire or explain political action, through which

ideas from transnational sources travel to small communities [becoming] vernacularized, or adapted to local institutions and meanings... Human rights language is similarly extracted from the universal and adapted to national and local communities.
(Merry 2006: 39)

This is not just translation in a linguistic sense, but also ‘indigenisation’, in which ideas from the global gain symbolic associations and meanings in the local setting, or come to be framed as political concerns with local resonance. For Merry, a key actor in the process of vernacularisation is the intermediary or translator, the organiser or human rights activist (or organisation). This actor typically ‘faces both ways’, bilingual in the language of human rights and in local conceptualisations of rights, as well as alert to the possibilities of their local political framings. These actors translate both up and down; a particularly successful ‘upward’ translation of vernacular rights discourses may even create new human rights (see Claeys 2012). But the extent to which vernacularisation comes about ranges from perfect replication (a transfer or cloning of ideas from the global to the local), to hybrid forms of rights in which ‘imported institutions and symbols [merge] with local ones’ (Merry 2006: 44). Other possibilities are that they may be rejected as foreign imports, or subverted to alternative ends. In a good example, top-down translations of human rights into local languages in Malawi left no space for Malawians to make the concepts their own (Englund 2011).

Mobilisation around rights uses political, linguistic and normative strategies to stretch and dislodge the existing normative boundaries of the universal (Butler 1997, in Madhok 2009), changing the meaning and conceptual construct of rights itself. Paradoxically, such politics seek to particularise these rights using ideas of normative universalism. Thus, Nyamu-Musembi (2002: 1) argues that ‘rights are shaped through actual struggles informed by people’s own understandings of *what they are justly entitled to*’ (emphasis added). Tagliarina (2013: 5) states that ‘human rights often can be unintelligible to groups, and thus must be

remade in the group's vernacular before the group can fully employ human rights talk.' Consequently, looking at the meaning of rights from the perspective of those claiming them can 'transcend accepted normative parameters of human rights debates, question established conceptual categories and expand the range of claims that are validated as rights' (Nyamu-Musembi 2005: 31).

While vernacularisation is commonly seen as the process of indigenisation of transnational concepts within particular communities (Goldstein 2013: 111), Madhok notes that human rights translations not only draw on local vocabularies, but are also accommodated within existing 'norms governing entitlements, roles and identities' (Madhok 2009: 4). That is, the back-translation may be important for how the universal concept frames the political aspirations it gives rise to. For instance, in the South Asian context, human rights derived from Western Enlightenment thinking are translated with reference to ancient pre-existing notions of rights such as *haq* (Madhok 2009).¹⁰ The universal right to food, promoted by international organisations and occasionally inserted wholesale in national law through ratification of international conventions and human rights law (Knuth and Vidar 2011), is not inscribed on *tabulae rasae*.

As well as having 'pre-codified' precursors, the way human rights are practised is contextual and relational. Relationally, human rights are intrinsic to all persons irrespective of cultural and political affiliation, yet their realisation and protection depend on individuals' relations to the state and other groups. Thus human rights 'gain meaning within situational arguments about membership in political society, not through arguments that depend on the concept of abstract humanity' (Englund 2006: 28). In South Asia, despite 'the long intellectual and literary history of *Haq* within the vernacular, it is fair to say that individual rights do not regulate interpersonal relations in social life either in North India or Pakistan' (Madhok, 2009: 17). Indian and Pakistani grassroots' movements have mobilised rights discourses to claim social, political and economic entitlements and liberties from the state, but predominantly framed around religious, caste and regional markers of identity, and reference universal and individualist human rights to pursue group rights. Arguably, therefore, the translation of the right to food is mediated by existing moral economies of the right to subsistence, which rest on custom and tradition. Hossain and Kalita (2014: 3) ask '(i)f claims to food within the moral economy rest on custom or tradition, how might a legally enforceable human right to food change that?'

Our review of the Anglophone literature on the right to food suggests there has to date been relatively little attention to 'pre-translation' vernacular conceptions of the right to food, reflecting the relatively recent emphasis on the right to food in global activism, policy and scholarly discourse (see also Goodale 2009). The rich literature on the food sovereignty movement grants important insights into the content and meaning of the right to food in indigenous and peasant societies involved in activist networks, and also into the process of translation or vernacularisation (see, for instance, Shawki 2015). Other cases, such as the struggles over an agricultural modernisation project affecting the Merauke people in Indonesian Papua, highlight the process of vernacularisation of the right to food through workshops and meetings between civil society groups and indigenous community members (see Hadiprayitno 2015). But how – if at all – are these rights conceived before the translators and intermediaries get to work? What can we learn about the conceptualisation of the right to food if, instead of 'taking recognized human rights as a departure point, [we look] at human rights in their pre-codified form' (Claeys 2012: 845)? What does vernacular talk of the right to food tell us about popular political aspirations to secure accountability for hunger?

¹⁰ Madhok identifies five different justificatory premises underpinning the employment of the word *haq*: rights as marking citizenship, rights as justifying political participation, cosmological/ancestral justifications, moral/normative and religious (Islamic) justifications (Madhok 2009). She finds that the most ubiquitous use of the term *haq* is in relation to claiming what are seen as legitimate entitlements from the state (2010: 642).

2 Approach, conceptual framework and methodology

2.1 Assumptions, propositions and research questions

Despite much discussion of the right to food, there is little analysis of what this means in popular public discourse. Although we recognise that human rights talk is likely to influence everyday political discourse, we focus on the views of groups who are not actively or professionally involved in political mobilisation around the right to food or food sovereignty. We do not assume that their rights talk will be pristinely devoid of influences from international human rights discourse, and we aim also to understand how those ideas filter through to those who are not actively engaged in political mobilisation. But we do expect that these groups will be less directly influenced by human rights language and concepts, and more by the customary and the vernacular. We aim in this way to gain a sense of the settings in which Merry's intermediaries and translators get to work.

Another assumption here is that accountability depends on people being equipped to claim their rights, and that among the factors that contribute to accountability is a recognition that rights exist, even if that existence has, to date, been nominal only. That is, for people to be able to claim their right to food, they need to know they have them (De Schutter 2014).

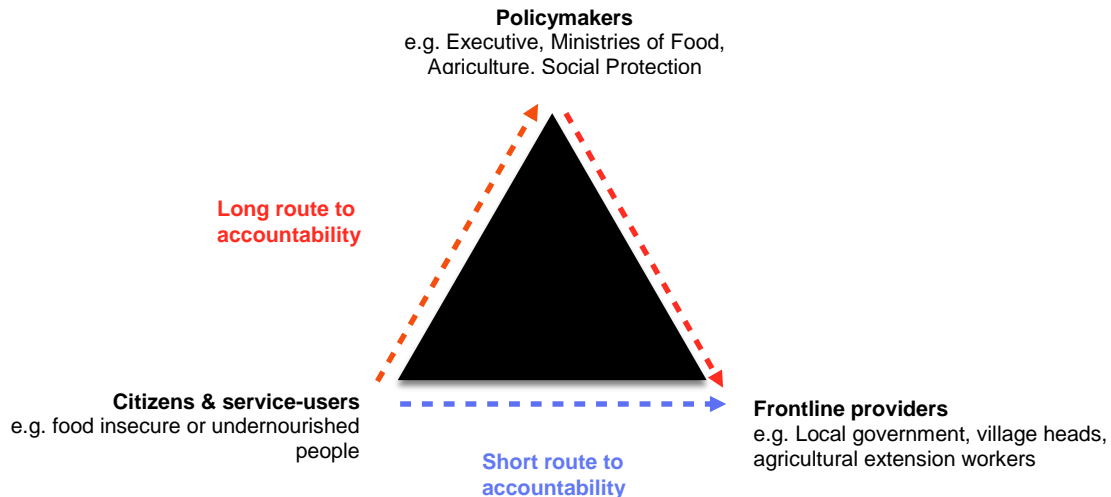
The research on which this paper is based was designed to explore relations of accountability through an examination of local systems for addressing hunger or food insecurity, drawing on the conceptual framework developed for the 2004 World Development Report *Making Services Work for Poor People*. This summarises the main relationships of accountability between three groups:

1. Citizens and politicians/policymakers: citizens mandate governments to protect food rights, set standards and monitor or create information, often via political parties, civil society action, donor influence, and even research like this;
2. Politicians/policymakers and frontline providers: policymakers set standards for performance, provide budgets and authority, set up information systems, monitor performance, and sanction failures;
3. Citizens and frontline providers: citizens make claims on providers, provide feedback about performance, and take direct action when services fail.

The field research focused on exploring the third relationship (see King *et al.* 2014), but recognised that the outcomes on the ground (an acknowledged, officially accepted right to food, resources to match, and monitoring and management systems for frontline service delivery), are all in turn influenced by the strength of the mandate governments to address hunger, their capacity and willingness to resource and enforce that mandate on the ground, and therefore on the relationships between citizens and politicians as well as between politicians, policymakers and frontline officials (see Goetz and Jenkins 2005; Levy and Walton 2013). This implies that popular ideas of a right to food should influence whether and how people are empowered to claim rights from frontline officials like agricultural extension workers, relief and social protection scheme managers, and political representatives like chiefs or local councillors. But at the same time, the content of those ideas, and the extent to which they are shared and agreed, should offer insights into the politics of hunger in that setting. This will include whether there is a live political debate about hunger, and competition between parties or public authorities to be seen to tackle it; what people expect of the authorities with respect to action on food security; and about the likely costs and

consequences of failures to tackle hunger, in terms of loss of authority or legitimacy, or more concretely, of elections or public office.

Figure 1 Conceptualising relationships of accountability for hunger



Source: King *et al.* (2014)

We expect that people's concepts of the content and implications of the right to food will be influenced by two broad factors. First, the nature of their own relationship to food, for instance, whether their food insecurity concerns are primarily matters of production or of consumption, is likely to influence how they conceive the content of the right. For smallholder farmers, the right to food may mean the right to control over the means of production (as in ideas about food sovereignty): to own or cultivate land, for stable access to agricultural inputs, regulation to prevent environmental degradation. For people whose relationship to food is as consumers, the right is likely to imply consumption protections. For people who face chronic hunger, that may mean sustainable livelihoods and/or long-term social protection (e.g. pensions or credit). In situations where food crises are frequent (seasonal or increasing because of geopolitical or climate events) it may mean emergency assistance to food or entitlements to food (cash, vouchers, work). People may prioritise their rights to safe or culturally appropriate food where these are under threat. Women and men may hold systematically different views depending on how they are situated with respect to food production, food marketing, and responsibilities for nourishing families.

The second broad influencing factor is the normative and actual role of their state in promoting or protecting food security. Here we suggest three possible distinctions. First, people are more likely to believe they have a realisable right to food where the state is visible in food policy (active in food marketing and regulation, agricultural extension work and input supply, hunger- and nutrition-related social protection) than if their state leaves food production and distribution largely to the invisible forces of the market. Second, where a major food crisis is collectively remembered and has created an 'anti-famine social contract', or a political culture in which people expect food crises to trigger public action (de Waal 1996), people are likely to hold reasonably robust ideas about the right to food as implying state action. Third, recent public debates about economic and social rights, perhaps through constitutional reforms, political mobilisation or civil society awareness-raising, would contribute to clear, strong ideas about the right to food means and its implications.

With these propositions about the major influences on the right to food in mind, this paper asks the following:

- What, if anything, does the right to food mean to people at risk of hunger?
- Where does a right to food originate?
- What actions does it imply? By whom?

2.2 Approach, research design and limitations

The field research was conducted as part of ongoing qualitative research in 23 rural, urban and peri-urban sites across ten countries, selected to enable an exploration of the well-being impacts of food price changes on everyday life among people living with or vulnerable to poverty and hunger. The research is part of a larger study exploring the social impacts of food price changes, following the commodity price spikes and rises starting in 2007. The project is sociological in that it aims to gain a global picture of the impacts of food price changes on patterns of everyday life, including reported effects on paid and unpaid work, consumption and nourishment, and family and community relations. The research takes global food price changes as its starting point, and drills down to individual experiences and effects.

The sites comprise a mix of people who may be comfortable or living with poverty at any given time, but who all live with a degree of precariousness because their work or reliance on food markets exposes them to global market volatilities (in which respect they resemble people on low and precarious incomes worldwide). In selecting a small number of sites from a relatively large sample of countries we aim for an illustrative sense of how national food policies and systems shape everyday lives. While the findings are not 'representative' of the countries in which the research was conducted, national context influences the findings, and it is in relation to national social, policy and political contexts that we make sense of them. In particular with respect to the exploration of ideas and meanings of rights, any effort to achieve representativeness would have to be at the cost of depth. So to the extent that place matters in how we have researched people's views on the right to food, it is because it helps to situate and make sense of people's views, and not because we take them as representative of their compatriots' attitudes and experiences.

A limitation of the work is that the results are sensitive to the approach taken in each socio-political setting and language. The study did not take an ethnographically open-ended or minutely context-sensitive approach, which might have yielded a more nuanced picture of varied local meanings. It specifically looked instead for the 'common sense' – shared understandings about what food rights mean. From the patterned differences and similarities across the contexts, an analysis was developed about why food rights are framed in the way they are in different contexts. This means that the findings are influenced by the line of questioning, which was similar in all the countries.

This partly reflects the scale of the comparative exercise (and is itself suggestive of the challenges faced by human rights activists in their work of 'vernacularisation'). As 15 languages are spoken across these sites, there must be a common set of concepts and tools with which to speak about the same matter in each country. Researchers interpret and adapt these concepts from 'international English' to terms that have relevance in each local context. This makes sense given that the discourse and practice of human rights, and of a right to food specifically, come from the international context. But it was clear from how the researchers approached the questions and from how answers are framed, that in the effort to make comparative sense, ideas and nuances are lost in translation, in both directions.

The sense that the research findings are partly conditional on what was asked and how, is not only methodological self-critique. It also reflects that a right to food is an abstract and

imprecise notion until given specific, local content through political struggle. The idea of a 'right' applies uncertainly to food, the act of eating, the organisation of food systems, and the experiences of hunger and food security. (It is not the only social and economic right for which this is true, of course.) With the caveats that our research approach forced the language of 'right to food' onto people who may conceptualise these issues differently, and that these are in themselves conceptually complex and empirically variable, we think that the findings from the comparative analysis of the meaning of the right to food are sufficiently rich and instructive to be worth exploring in depth.

2.3 Tools and analysis

Research participants were mainly drawn from low- and very low-income households, and in all sites they included some of the poorest as well as people who are vulnerable because they are elderly, disabled, orphaned, or woman-headed households. Tools included community background and context data collection; ten or more longitudinal qualitative household case studies in each location; focus-group discussions with occupation or social groups (e.g. agricultural wage workers, food traders, youth); and key informant interviews with local administrative officials, NGO staff, religious or community leaders, local business people, and politicians; and local price data collection.

The community case studies were developed to fit local contexts, capacities, and traditions of the researchers undertaking the research. While a set of guidelines was shared among all the teams, the researchers adapted them as they saw fit. All, however, addressed the same research questions, and much of the data generated can be analysed comparatively. Interviews with more than 400 household members and key informants were undertaken and 100 focus-group discussions mean that around 1,500 people participated in the research. The qualitative data were written up and translated in each country, and then coded and analysed using qualitative analysis software.

3 Popular conceptions of the right to food: research findings from 23 sites

3.1 What does the right to food mean here?

A sense of what (if anything) the right to food meant to people was explored by starting with questions about the empirical realities of food rights. The suggested sequence of questions was:

'Do hungry people have any right to food here?
Where do these rights come from?
How do you know about them?
What does a right to food mean to you?
Who is responsible for protecting those rights?'

The degree of success with which these questions generated discussion varied according to the understandings of the researchers themselves, the resonance of the ideas in the socio-political context, conceptual universe and language, and on whether the research participants themselves had factual knowledge of the issues and/or a conceptual grasp or experience of economic and social rights. In some places, most notably the otherwise starkly contrasting polities of Indonesia (Java and Kalimantan) and Viet Nam, the idea of a right to food was unfamiliar; in the six sites in these countries, it ranged from difficult to impossible to

have the more abstract and conceptual discussions about the content or meaning of the right at all.¹¹

Our propositions about the conditions that influence understandings of the right to food held up in several contexts; in others they needed refining or a rethink. For instance, the recent experience of a food crisis had had a significant impact on participants in Burkina Faso, where the 2008 food crisis had resulted in popular protests and public action in the form of efforts to stabilise prices and ensure affordable access to food (Engels 2014; Sneyd, Legwegoh and Fraser 2013). Across the rural and small-town respondents, whether personally at risk of hunger or key informants from professional groups, people were clear that the right to food was an innate or natural right, because it presupposed the right to live (and in some views, to work). Mr PK, 75, a retired nurse from the town of Kaya, explained: 'if I am not entitled to eat it means that I do not have the right to exist'. Young married women from rural Nessesmentenga agreed that the right to food was innate: 'we know quite simply that all human beings must eat to live – if not [they] will die'.

That the existence of public action to establish the right to food helped foster strong ideas of the right to food was partly supported by the views of Bolivians in the town of Kami. There, people rejected the idea of a right to food because they did not see it as a reality. Mrs E, a 78-year-old retired teacher, and her husband, did not only criticise the state for this failure, but also saw the increasing individualisation of society as the reason the right could not exist: 'No, no one cares about people who do not have enough resources to eat ... [there] no longer exists cooperation between people as there was before.' Her views were echoed by her neighbour Mrs C, at 65 retired from the mining industry, who said:

No, no right is recognised, especially for older people who are left to their fate, no one cares if they eat or do not. My neighbour is a grandmother alone, and nobody cares about her, she has no pension or any income, she is going through difficult times, sometimes she doesn't eat.

These views indicate a cynical view of the right to food, which neither public action nor community solidarity seemed capable of enforcing.

3.2 The substance and limits of the right

At the lower end of the income spectrum, where people have more personal experience of hunger, the right to food was an innate or a natural right because it presupposed the right to life or to survival. The right to food meant the right not to starve or to go hungry in Burkina Faso; in Bangladesh it meant the right to eat three times a day.

Some of the people with the most to gain from a realisable right to food, including vulnerable farmers and marginalised people in the poorest countries, were also those with the weakest sense of the right to food. In Ethiopia, the dominant discourse appeared to be that the right to food meant the right to feed oneself and one's family through the right to work, as we will see below, apparently reflecting a higher order political discourse about dependency. In other words, the right to food had transmuted into the responsibility to feed oneself. Not all views there lent themselves to blaming the hungry, but they were notably common. Mr AA, a 41-year-old farmer from the western Oromia region, appeared to hold older, less politically

¹¹ For Viet Nam, the research teams concluded that an exploration of the meanings of a right to food was redundant in a context in which the right was embedded within wider economic and social rights; they decided it was more valuable to explore the meaning of nutrition and knowledge of food security programmes and policies at the local level. Although it is regrettable that we lost the opportunity to explore how economic and social rights are framed within a Communist polity, the difficulties of undertaking comparative research on these issues forces us to recognise the greater challenges involved in attempting global conceptualisations and mobilisation. Vietnamese research participants did, however, address topics about the mechanics of local accountability for hunger, and so some of the research findings from those three sites are included here.

influenced views of the right to food: 'people have the right to food... Everyone has to eat food. No one should be starved.' The factual truth that everyone 'has to eat food' in order to be people at all seems to make it self-evidently true that people normatively have such a right – it is inherent to humanity. In relation to Ethiopia, in particular, it is worth raising the possibility that an emphasis on the right to food as originating in the right to work / feed oneself may reflect the latter-day reflections of popular responses to collectivisation policies under the Derg. For food farmers, ideas about the right to food are more than likely to reflect this history, and so it is possible that rather than a narrative of blaming the hungry, the emphasis on the right to work reflects a pushing back against or rejection of authoritarian collectivist agrarian policies in which public investment neglected smallholders in favour of unproductive collective farms (Belete, Dillon and Anderson 1991; Omiti *et al.* 2000).

In Guatemala, another of the lower-income countries, many participants could not conceive of 'a right to food' but nevertheless had some sense that their hunger could not go unaddressed – someone must be responsible for helping them. In this way, although the language of rights was unfamiliar in relation to food, there were, nonetheless, duty-bearers. Some of the poorest people in the highlands town of Santo Tomás Chichicastenango and in Chugüexá Primero in the mountainous rural west faced extreme hunger and chronic malnutrition. Older people like Mr and Mrs PC, 73 and 60 respectively, living in penury on what they could earn from a little portering and handicrafts, had no idea about 'the right to food', but they certainly knew what hunger was:

Sometimes we only boil some water and if we are thirsty or hungry we drink only water. We are starving most of the time because we do not have money. The food is there at the market but we cannot buy it because we do not have the money to pay for it, so we starve. We starve ourselves; we eat only two or three tamalitos per day.

When asked who was responsible for helping people tackle hunger they answered that it was 'the president', but they 'do not know how to ask for help'. That did not mean they were sitting idle: both continued to try to work, and to seek assistance. A month earlier, Mr PC had found out how to ask for help from local officials who promised to send a social worker, but they were still waiting.

For Mrs H, a 70-year-old widow living in Naogaon in north-western Bangladesh, with her divorced 35-year-old daughter and her two children, the right to food arose from her vulnerability, but her right depended also on her virtue:

If I can't work, I must ask for help from ten[?] members of the society. I'm old and feeble, they must help me. I beg but I don't steal. I will ask from people and they will give something to eat. This is my right.

The idea that the right to food incurs responsibilities to make the best effort possible to feed oneself was reasonably widespread: there was no assumption that such a right meant people could lead a life of ease. The possibility that a right might encourage laziness was particularly concerning for some Ethiopian participants, with their strong discourse against dependency on food assistance. A similar theme of self-blame was heard in the mountains in Chugüexá Primero, a community of K'iche' speaking indigenous people, where people blamed hunger partly on alcoholism among household heads.

The idea of moral hazard in relation to the right to food was turned on its head by Mr TS, 42, a Mayan judge and farmer in Chichicastenango:

Those who are hungry cannot work, cannot walk, and cannot think... they are like fainting, sick. If you are not hungry, you are happy, quiet... If we eat well we are quiet, we feel happy all the time, perform with all of our energy, otherwise we

are sleepy, lazy... It all gets complicated with illnesses, and then it gets more serious. It is specified by law, yes, we all have the right to food; but the problem is that we do not have the money to buy with. The law says that we have the right, but to buy with what? If there are no jobs? The high cost of life and the fact that there are no jobs, and then we do not eat well...

The circularity of chronic hunger breeding lethargy preventing people from working to feed themselves directly challenges the logic that 'lazy people have no right to food'. For those of us who have never experienced the effects of chronic hunger first-hand it is a struggle to imagine the lassitude and loss of energy it engenders (for a famous account, see Sorokin 1975). The innate and self-evident nature of the right to food in many views relates to this connection to the ability to flourish. As an agricultural cooperative member in rural Chikwanda, in Zambia's northern province, explained it: 'right to food means a right to health, a right to education and a right to life. Without food, you can't get an education, you can't have good health, you can't have life'.

For Mr R, a local political leader in Naogaon in north-western Bangladesh, the right to food did not mean the right to luxury items like meat or fish, but at least the right to eat 'enough to maintain health'. Mrs F, a 60-year-old washerwoman in the town of Kami in Bolivia, similarly thought that the right meant 'that people can eat what they need to be in good health'.

The content and meaning of the right to food is not static, because the stressors on societies' food needs change over time. In Dhaka city in Bangladesh, Mr H, the 50-year-old owner of a small restaurant, said:

Nobody here is hungry. Everybody has a job – domestic help, garment factory, rickshaw, day labour etc. Now people are fine everywhere, city or village, they have jobs. I don't see hungry people nowadays. Nobody is hungry, whatever you think, just write what I say...

For Mr H, the present situation of relative plenty is a great contrast to the past, but the fact of relative plenty does not negate the right to food:

There were so many people who used to live with empty stomachs for day after day about 70 or 80 years ago in our country... While I was [just] old enough to understand, 40 or 45 years ago, I saw so many people living hungry. They ate flour mush, rice with water lily to stave of hunger. I saw many after liberation...¹² Those who had up to 20 or 30 or 40 bigha¹³ of land lived with empty stomachs. Crops damaged due to flood, rainfall. They didn't cultivate any crop. Led life doing nothing. When they couldn't pay back the loans... they handed over their lands. Many left their lands fearing to pay tax. Those who don't have food, they have the right to food. Neighbours will provide them food for work. Those who are handicapped, their children will support them. If they don't have children, government will take the responsibility to support them. The union chairman, members will support them – they are public servants too.

At the Indonesian sites, participants found the concept of a right to food unfamiliar and difficult to grasp. This partly reflects the absence of a language of 'right to food' in a context in which stabilising the price of rice has been the priority in political discourses of food security.¹⁴ At the same time, although Indonesia faces severe problems of malnourishment,

¹² A reference to Bangladesh's war of liberation from Pakistan in 1971. The years after the war were years of great hunger, culminating in the 1974 famine in which 1.5 million people died.

¹³ One acre = 3 bighas; 1 bigha = 1,337m². By Bangladeshi standards, this implies a large landowner.

¹⁴ On the politics of rice prices, see (C.P. Timmer and Dawe 2007; P. Timmer 2004). Discussions with Oxfam GB's partners on their GROW campaign in Indonesia indicated that there had been little to no emphasis on 'the right to food'

hunger in the sense of calorie deficits is not widely recognised as a significant problem in this middle-income country. Indeed, compared to other Indonesian provinces, particularly the poor and drought-prone eastern province of Nusa Tenggara Timur, the three research sites in Western Java and in southern Kalimantan are customarily food surplus areas, and acute hunger is not seen as an important threat (although nutrition is another matter). In fact, the right to food was better understood in these settings as the 'right to be free from starvation', which echoed past episodes of famine. Researchers found that older respondents grasped the concept of the right to be free from starvation better than their younger counterparts, who had had no experience of food insecurity.¹⁵ In Indonesia, episodes of hunger are historically and politically associated with colonial rule; arguably, the combined effect on rice crops from the green revolution and transmigrant rice cultivation across the archipelago have meant that hunger is less prominent in public and political discourse than the nutrition crisis suggests is necessary.

The right to eat well is also a concern. Quality was notably a higher priority for urban populations, for whom higher prices raise concerns about safety, diversity and taste (see N. Hossain, King and Kelbert 2013). The issue of quality in the right to food clearly matters: in Guatemala, a schoolteacher commented that the 'secure bag' of essential foods distributed by the government as part of its commitment to food security contained goods that were suspiciously unfamiliar and probably of poor quality. Mr AC, 25, gave a clear idea of what the right to food meant: 'to have the opportunity to consume what is necessary to be healthy'. In his view, the official effort was unlikely to achieve that end.

In Chikwanda, in the farm belt of Zambia's Northern Province, subsistence farmers highlighted how understanding of their right to food was shaped by the challenges faced both as food producers and as consumers facing volatile prices. There, definitions of the right to food among focus-group participants ranged from a purely well-being focus ('having enough food to eat'; 'a life without hunger or worry about what to eat the following day') to access to adequate and nutritious food and the responsibilities of public authorities to distribute food among those who cannot feed themselves. Even more specifically, the right to food meant 'a right to affordable fertiliser' and 'access to land and cheap inputs [fertiliser and seeds] to help someone grow their own food.' Here, it is clear that the popular discourse of the right to food has become attached to a live and ongoing local debate about the politicisation of fertiliser (see Mason, Jayne and van de Walle 2013).

Not everyone thought a right to food was meaningful. Many Bolivian participants, like 45-year-old miner JCM, were dismissive: 'nobody is going to take away the right to eat, if so you are already dead', he commented. Some people in the town of Kami in Bolivia claimed to have not heard of the right, while others, including members of a group of women market traders (including food retailers) stated there was 'no such right in this country', referring not to its existence but to its lack of realisation. One man in rural Pirhuas commented sardonically that it was 'the right to feed myself', while another said that even the beggars had to find their own food, by rummaging through garbage cans. Discourse on the meaning of the right to food thus turned into a political commentary on its (apparently unimpressive) implementation.

to date, partly because the politics were not disposed towards such talk. See also (Hadiprayitno 2010) on the limitations of a human-rights basis for discussions of food security in Indonesia.

¹⁵ Famine was common during the colonial period, particularly the 1940s; regional episodes occurred in the postcolonial period (notably in poor, drought-prone Lombok; see Brennan, Heathcote and Lucas 1984). But information about mass hunger during the Sukarno period (1950s and 1960s) may have been suppressed (van der Eng 2012). For an interesting account of how political charges of famine are in Indonesia, see Anderson (2014).

3.3 Where does the right to food come from?

In asking people about the sources or origins of the right to food, we were hoping to access understandings of the legitimacy or justification for such a right, whether in law, political power, custom or tradition, or religion. Our questions elicited a range of responses that sometimes overlapped: the view of the right as

- innate or natural, based on the idea that the right originates from the state of being human because humans must eat to survive;
- God-given or granted by higher-order laws;
- social, or dependent on membership of a society or community or group (such as a family);
- legal, because the constitution declares the nation's citizens have such a right; and
- political, because political leaders are elected to take care of the country, and so they have a duty to protect people from hunger.

Where people had a strong sense of their right to food, God or Allah was frequently invoked to explain the origins of that right, and as the source of human equality in respect of basic rights. In Karachi, 41-year-old Mrs M, mother of five and foster carer of four nephews and nieces, explained that: 'Everyone has the right to food because Allah has created everyone equally so it does not matter if a person is rich or poor, man or woman, all have equal rights to eat food.'

In Burkina Faso, common notions about the right to food included agreement that although parents and families played the primary role, a right to food presupposed community solidarity, and the specific requirement to help its members in times of crisis, with the rich particularly enjoined to do so. As Mr K, 30, an agricultural extension worker, explained, 'these rights are the basis of African solidarity [although in practice hard to maintain]'. A right to food was also state responsibility, to (specifically) keep prices affordable. The clarity with which people spoke about the right to food as an innate right appeared to reflect the severity of the problem of hunger in that context, as well as the co-variate risk of mass hunger from the frequency of drought. In other words, hunger was a real and present danger, which Burkinabé people had recently experienced and expected to experience again.

In Dhaka in Bangladesh, a group of women spoke about their right to food under the constitution. Interestingly, older women in the group (mostly under 30) had clearer understandings of their right to food than younger (and better-educated) women. Whereas the younger women spoke about sharing the burden of earning in a time of rising food costs with their husbands, the older women spoke about their rights under the law. Mrs A, 60, said:

I didn't know that the constitution says that about the right to food. But I understood before that we the poor will work and [that way we will] have food. Government can provide us a place to live, that will help us. [Then] we could sleep without tension.

The oldest participant in the focus group, 70-year-old Mrs AJ, was also the first participant to mention constitutional rights. She explained to Mrs A that:

We learnt from DSK [a local NGO] office that we have the right to food. They said that human beings have five fundamental rights, namely:

1. *Right to vote*
2. *Right to education*
3. *Right to have food*
4. *Right to work*
5. *Right to healthcare.*

The 'five rights' were echoed by other Dhaka participants, in a clear case of the translation of upstream human rights to local discourse. This stronger sense of human rights (and the political means to claim and defend them) reflects the fact that women in their 60s and older experienced the 1974 famine first-hand; that event is not part of public discourse nor the national curriculum, so younger people will only know it from folk knowledge. However, the famine continues to inform public policy responses to food crises in Bangladesh, even as recently as 2008 (Hossain and Jahan 2014). Although the constitution mentions the right to food, it is not justiciable, so human rights activists consider it to be a weak right; despite this, a good range of policies and programmes are in place.¹⁶

But while the views of many Bangladeshi participants supported the idea that a major famine could result in a strong anti-famine contract (regardless of the law) that would trigger public action to protect the right to food, the views of Ethiopian participants offered contradictory evidence. The Ethiopian constitution makes indirect reference to the right to food as part of a broader set of social rights. Perhaps reflecting this indirectness, in both the rural and urban sites, Ethiopian people spoke uncertainly, where at all, about the right to food; some people thought it was too much to describe it as 'a right' beyond the rights that children have to be fed by parents. There was a sense from both communities that an enforceable right to food meant moral hazard: people needed to be encouraged to work, and the expectation of free food might make them lazy. A recently appointed district leader said:

I think hungry people have both the right and duty to get food. Hungry people have the right to get food through their participation in the job opportunities. The person can apply for a job as a right but can't ask for food as a right. He or she may ask food from the community not as a right, but just as a need to survive, as kind of requesting help.

In other words, people should work if they want to eat, and have 'the right' to earn a living. If that fails, they can ask for charity. But they do not have a right in any commonly agreed sense of the word. This meaning of 'the right to food' appeared to derive from official sources. In a focus group of farmers in their thirties it was explained that the government had

already declared that people should work hard to move out of poverty and hunger, and people have no right to request for food while they have hands to work and minds to think. The government educated the people not to seek or beg support in time of hunger or problems.

Even then, people felt that in times of disasters, when family, community and other channels had been exhausted, they would have to turn to the government. But it was clearly the last resort.

The family and particularly parents were the primary source of the right to food for children in all the sites. This was a fairly clear understanding: helpless infants had the right to food because their parents had brought them into the world. Interestingly, the view that older people were owed care by their grown children was rarely discussed, and in Viet Nam in the

¹⁶ According to a draft paper on the legal basis of the right to food in Bangladesh by the Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust (BLAST) on behalf of the Right to Food Campaign in Bangladesh.

2012 research, we learned that the flow of inter-generational care and support was more often than not from elder to younger (often reluctantly so). People have rights to help by virtue of their membership of extended families and communities, but they were expected to help only if they themselves could afford to do so. That is, the rights people have through their social relations are powerful impulses and important social rules, but also discretionary: if your sisters or relatives or neighbours are themselves at risk of going hungry, your rights to claim help are weakened, and justifiably so. The same cannot be said of children's rights, as parents will and should expect to go hungry if they need to feed their children.

In Pakistan, we heard strong statements about women's rights to food arising from their marital relationships. The view in these Sindh sites in Karachi and rural Dadu was that as providers of unpaid care, as mothers, but also on the whole, as socially sanctioned dependants, wives had rights to food. In Dadu, a group of teenaged boys discussed how everyone was entitled to food because without it they would fall sick and be unable to work, but for women their rights originated in their responsibilities for household work, mothering and feeding children as well as farming. Men's rights to food were a higher order matter, because as the household head, the entire household's well-being depends on their ability to earn. A group of teenaged girls explained the hierarchy of needs and responsibilities thus:

Allah has created us and he is our sustainer. Everyone is entitled to have adequate food. Muslims and non-Muslims, all by virtue of being human beings, have the right to a proper diet. The children have their parents to look up to and ask for food. The wife looks up to her husband: 'we are unsure [why] but the customs have always dictated it to be as it is'.

Mrs M, a 56-year-old Lady Health Worker from Dadu, similarly explained that women's rights were dependent on men, but men were responsible for ensuring their own right to food:

Everyone is entitled to have proper food. The provider of sustenance is our Creator. Men, women and kids everyone has the right for food. If we do not feed our child he or she will cry so they have to be fed on time. The responsibility for catering to the child lies squarely on the parents. The responsibility for the woman lies on the husband or the male head of the household. However, the man is for himself as he is the one who is usually earning the livelihood and he can feed himself.

Several respondents commented on what they knew of the right to food in other countries: one mentioned unemployment insurance; a Bangladeshi had heard that in Saudi Arabia, the government provides citizens with sacks of daily necessities. Dr A, a key informant from rural Dadu in Pakistan, knew that Norwegians received 'allowances and stipends for basic sustenance'. A 22-year-old quarry worker from Pirhuas in rural Bolivia contrasted the situation at home with what she had seen elsewhere: 'No, [they] do not do anything, the union leaders should serve the poor that suffer hunger. I lived two years in Argentina and have seen that there is different, there is aid for the poor...'

God featured less often in discussions of the origins or source of the right to food in Bolivia, but even though the state was not deemed to play an adequate role, nor did society. A handful of mentions about the constitution or having heard something on the radio aside, the idea of a right with strong foundations was absent. There was a sense of disappointed expectations that the incorporation of the right to food in the constitution had not yielded measurable change.

In Guatemala, the gap between reality and what the government had promised also appeared to be great, but there people seemed less disillusioned and cynical about the foundations of the right than in Bolivia. Anyone who had an idea of the right to food, and others for whom such language was unfamiliar, were all clear that under their constitution,

Guatemalans were supposed to have basic economic rights. A number of people had heard about this on the television, but it had come no nearer to affecting their lives than that.¹⁷ As 21-year-old family planning promoter, CL, said,

I think that over here, each person looks for a way to survive, there is nobody who comes here and tells us 'look, everybody has the right to food, come here everybody and have some of this'. I think that everybody struggles to survive.

To Mr TA, a 48-year-old caretaker in Chichicastenango in the highlands, the basis of the right to food was clear enough:

It is even written in our Constitution of the Republic that the government is responsible for satisfying all the necessities of the nation... The law is written there, the problem is that they hardly make it happen. Because help and aid programs do come here, but to reach the people who really need them does not happen. The constitution of the republic says that the government should watch over the feeding of the nation, but definitely they do not do it.

A critical factor, the entire family agreed, was that help was probably reaching the people who were easy to reach; their relative remoteness was one reason they and others like them were excluded from such help, even when they actively sought assistance with livelihoods or jobs. Our propositions about the impact of recent debates about the right to food as a result of constitutional or legal reforms are partially upheld in that these Guatemalan citizens knew the law made provision regarding food security, even if many did not know of 'the right to food' as such. The assessment by these research participants closely matches that by the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, on the implementation of Guatemala's pioneering national framework law:

Despite the above-mentioned plan being in place, and its excellent legal framework, the institutions set up to implement it appear to have been ineffective in practice. The limited powers of CONASAN [the governing body of the national food security system] are generally considered a constraint, while SESAN [the coordinating body] lacks political weight and has tended to focus on the nutritional aspects of food security rather than on issues of equity and sustainability. The creation of social programmes to promote food security outside the institutional framework has also raised issues of coordination and consistency (De Schutter 2010: 12).

Several people in Chugüexá Primero thought that just having the knowledge of their rights was worthwhile, even if they were not realised, because it provided at least the basis on which to make demands. The fact of the knowledge of rights mattered for others, too. IK, 35, a greengrocer in Coast Province in Kenya, said proudly: 'I have human rights because I am a human being and a citizen of Kenya. I know about them because I heard them when they were campaigning during the referendum.'

Elsewhere, particularly in Bolivia and among the Kenyan research participants in Nairobi, the sad irrelevance of such knowledge caused disillusionment and cynicism. Political and civil society campaigns may well have raised unrealistic hopes in settings where resources, administrative capacity and the political will to tackle official corruption and ensure nobody goes hungry were never going to be up to the task.

¹⁷ When Guatemalans talk about constitutional provisions, they may have in mind the 2005 Law on the National System for Food and Nutritional Security, as a result of which 'Guatemala stands out as one of the first countries to have adopted a framework law on the right to food, leading a movement that now reaches almost twenty countries worldwide, including a number of countries in Latin America.' (De Schutter 2010: 12).

3.4 Responsibilities for enacting the right to food

Even within countries there could be differences in the extent to which local authorities were thought to be accountable for hunger. This indicates that national commitments and policies are not the only factors in shaping how people view the responsibilities for addressing the right to food, and that what happens at the local level influences how people view their rights to food, regardless of constitutional and political regimes. Another finding was that people did not need to have the language or concept of 'the right to food' in order to consider some institution or person responsible for tackling hunger.

We saw that in Khulna, south-eastern Bangladesh, a region beset with the effects of climate change (cyclones, waterlogging), people seemed less confident and more critical about public responsibilities to deliver on the right to food than elsewhere in the country. Mr AMS, 45, makes his living from what he can gather or glean from the forest. His understanding of the responsibilities for the right to food involved a series of delegations of authority:

Food is needed for human subsistence. So food rights are to manage food for human subsistence. Allah is the only owner of managing such types of food. But Allah fills up these rights through someone. So the government is responsible to fill up this food right. But the government can't get the rural news by itself, so the responsibility goes to Chairman and Member [local government representatives] to manage food assistance for the poor.

That their remoteness was a factor diluting the political will to realise the right to food was echoed by Bolivian and Guatemalan participants. The closer to the centre, the more visible to those in power and the more accessible to those with resources, the stronger your rights are in reality.

Even people who lack a clear sense of their right to food may have ideas about who is responsible for acting in crises. Mr SB, a 40-year-old weaver and father of three from Kolfe sub-city near Addis Ababa said:

I don't know [who is accountable for local food security]. I feel that I am the responsible person for the food supply of myself and my household members. Besides, we don't know whom to ask and where to apply. Is it at wereda, kebele [administrative units] or community level? There is no information. So, I feel that the families are responsible for the situation. If I fall in trouble, my wife has to seek solutions and vice versa. But if the community is in severe hunger, the government has to respond. We are now asking the government officials why the cost of maize and other grains has increased; we raise these issues during the public meetings and discussions.

The theory and the practice of the right to food frequently diverged. Mrs M, a 48-year-old seamstress in Chichicastenango in the Guatemalan highlands said:

[The right to food comes from t]he government I would say... They make promises... but once they are in office they forget about them. They think only about themselves and do not think about the poor people any more... I think that the government should help the poor. There should be job opportunities so we are able to eat.

But when asked who was responsible for realising the right to food, she said unequivocally:

The Catholic Church... They provide and visit the poor people. With the money that people give at church, [the priest] puts it all together and then he sends the people from the church to visit the poor and to bring them something, because there are people suffering and they do not have anything to eat.

Apart from in Bolivia, where there was a strong sense that individualism had overtaken more solidaristic and collective norms, there was in general a clear schema about the responsibilities for action to make the right to food real. Individuals and families were primarily responsible, but communities and other local organisations bore responsibility when families were unable to fend for themselves or people lacked such support. In the Indonesian communities in central and western Java, people found the idea of a 'right to food' unfamiliar and although they thought the government was ultimately responsible, this was only theoretically so: in practice, these Javanese communities were very clear that most problems of hunger should be addressed by the local community, and that the first person to help someone in trouble was their neighbour. Sixty-year-old Mrs L from Bekasi in west Java said she had 'never heard' of anyone going hungry in that area, not because there was no risk but because the family and community system for helping people was so well-developed there.

Some people mentioned international organisations (NGOs or the Catholic Church) as among those that were responsible for tackling hunger (for instance World Vision was said to be an important help to people in Western Oromia in Ethiopia, and ActionAid had played an important role in Lango Baya in Kenya). Some people in Kenya and Burkina Faso thought that their governments had a responsibility to act in part because they had received foreign aid to do so. But references to global faith or international development organisations made an empirical point – they had a role because they were locally present and already active, not because there was any a priori responsibility for addressing hunger globally. It is likely that if the research strategy had been to probe on this point, people may have identified responsibilities in the international domain, in particular the United Nations, aid agencies and international NGOs. But it is reasonably clear that these were not among the most important or immediate sources of accountability for hunger within the conceptual universe of the people with whom we spoke. The situation would very likely have been different in areas where United Nations emergency relief or refugee camps were in place.

In justifying the role of the state, it could be likened to that of a parent. In contrast to the Ethiopian state's position against dependency, Mr AA, the farmer from Western Oromia in Ethiopia, saw a natural parallel: 'When the child becomes hungry, it cries to his/her mother. When the people are hungry, they report it to the government...'

But despite claims of African solidarity, community strength and paternal and maternal responsibilities, across the groups it was clear that the state had certain mandates for realising the right to food. A key area of strong consensus was that the right to food of older people (who were unable to work) had to be protected by the state. Adult children and communities had some responsibilities, but it was for older people above all that the state was expected to act, in contrast to the right to food of children, which was universally seen as the responsibility of parents. Older people were said to be looked after by the Church (Burkina Faso), through pension schemes (Bangladesh, Bolivia, Kenya, Zambia), and by communities (Ethiopia). The right to food of older people clearly merits further attention. Rapidly changing demographic structures mean that traditional social protection systems (extended family structures and norms of older people living with their children) can change rapidly (see Bloom, Jimenez and Rosenberg 2012). As only half of all older people worldwide have some kind of state pension (ILO 2014), the right to food for older people specifically is likely to be a matter of particular urgency, the realisation of which should enjoy widespread support.

A different angle on the right to food entailing the responsibility to work was the implied responsibility of governments to ensure agricultural production was possible. This involved the right to grow food and therefore the necessary supports to do so, usually inputs and land. For farmers as far apart as the western highlands of Guatemala and the Northern Province of Zambia, the politicised distribution of fertiliser was mentioned in relation to discussions about the right to food. A community leader in Lango Baya, in the dry Coast Province of Kenya said:

Government therefore has the responsibility to make food available and affordable, even if it means buying food from other countries. In addition, the government should make sure that the services offered by the Ministry of Agriculture reach all people on the ground. They should be very strict on the field extension officers who ought to support farmers through farming education and supervision.

In Lango Baya, the ongoing drought meant that local chiefs saw the prime responsibility to address the right to food as the provision of irrigation. The NGO ActionAid had been helpful to farmers in that area, but had left two years ago, underlining the fact that non-government action can be useful but it cannot be demanded as a right.

An emphasis on programmes of direct food or cash assistance was inevitable, partly because we tried to relate the concept of the right to food to experiences of trying to access help in times of hunger or distress. A common theme about governmental responsibilities was the need to stabilise prices and ensure affordable access to food, by stopping exports, keeping sufficient stocks, selling goods in fair price outlets, and providing food assistance. Here the right to food expressly treads on the toes of the market, demanding regulation and intervention. These ideas indicate show that despite the apparently neoliberal-friendly ideas of moral hazard and dependency, and an emphasis on the right to food as the right to work, there remains a strong reserve of expectation of state action in times of food crisis – but primarily if food crisis happens at scale, i.e. when entire communities suffer. As noted above, in cases such as Ethiopia, an emphasis on refusing dependence may speak of ideological resistance to authoritarian collectivisation strategies in food production; to the extent that they speak of local control and resistance to state intervention, ideas about the right to food are more closely attuned to a food sovereignty agenda than a resistance to the guarantee of rights. That is, the moral economy is alive and well in these views (see also Vanhaute 2011).

4 Conclusions and implications

This paper explores what it calls ‘common sense’ thinking about the right to food – ideas that are broadly shared across groups and populations, and which resonate with how the right to food is made sense of in everyday life. By collecting and exploring these ideas we hope to provide food for thought (forgive us) for human rights defenders, politicians, international aid bureaucrats and activists involved in food security, food sovereignty and food rights.

The results of this research, an unusually wide exploration of vernacular rights talk in relation to food,¹⁸ offer insights into shared understandings of the right to food, as well as of the lines along which and reasons why understandings may differ. We expect that this exercise may help provide insights into how the right to food may be translated or indigenised across

¹⁸ We are aware that we have more than likely missed unpublished efforts by grassroots organisations to bring local conceptions of the right to food, and are keen to hear from researchers/ activists who have more to say on what the right to food means in different contexts.

different social political and cultural contexts and food policy regimes, and the extent and form of popular aspirations for protection against hunger. We also hope that the findings may be used to support efforts to mobilise around the right to food, and to advocate for its realisation.

From the variety of knowledge and views in these 20 locations across Africa, Asia and Latin America, it is clear that the process of ‘vernacularising’ the right to food is far from complete, although there are instances where human and vernacular rights enjoy a productive tension (or friction, in Tsing’s 2005 term). This makes sense given that the right has relatively recently become the object of social movements and political campaigns. Where civil society or social movements have raised awareness about constitutional or political rights, translation has occurred, but transplanted ideas have not always taken root within local political discourse, or are resisted as meaningless, perhaps as official propaganda. This is not the same as Englund’s finding that human rights discourses are translated in ways that satisfy powerful groups in Malawi, but one instead about the use of rights talk in wider political agendas which fail because governments ‘talk the talk’ but fail to ‘walk the walk’.

These universal, or common, senses of the right to food have not travelled easily: in some places these ideas have no local resonance at all. But where they have travelled they have, as Tsing says of ‘engaged universals’, been ‘charged and changed by their travels’, rendered real – or rejected as concretely false – through their encounter with the practicalities of institutions of accountability for hunger (2005: 8). Even in countries that have taken steps to enshrine international law in national constitutions or laws, an understanding of the right to food as a claimable right enforceable by international law is (understandably) absent. On the other hand, these findings suggest a widespread – quite probably ‘universal’ at a basic level – understanding of rights to food as innate or natural, because the right to food means the right to be or to live at all. A pedantic response would be to argue that the right to food is no more innate in this respect than the right to water or air or the other elements of life; but in none of these communities have people had the experience of being denied air or water. By contrast, all know of situations in which people have been deprived of food and been unable to survive. To that extent, the right to food carries with it the political weight of lived experience that some other economic and social rights lack.

It is encouraging that in countries in which, within living memory, people had died from hunger and associated illnesses (e.g. Burkina Faso and Bangladesh), the idea of a right to food meant more than the right to basic survival. It meant the right to eat sufficiently well for good health and a good life – the right to thrive, in other words. That is, the right to food in popular conception is not the minimal vision of protection against the Hobbesian state of nature, but a richer, fuller vision of human flourishing and well-being.

It is also clear that political discourses of different roles in the management of nutrition and hunger influence how people understand rights and responsibilities for food. At times the official political discourse is at odds with people’s own more mundane ideas of natural rights to food (as appeared to be the case in Ethiopia). In other cases, the popular discourse rejected the official position, affirming a right to food as token or false or politically motivated but essentially unrealised (as in Kenya and Bolivia). But the variations across contexts suggest that it is possible to influence how people view the accountability for hunger through shaping the clarity with which they understand their rights to food, and the responsibilities for realising them. In other words, we think there remains a great deal of scope for political dialogue about rights and responsibilities in relation to food.

A note of caution is also sounded in the findings. We see, particularly in urban Kenya and in Bolivia, that ‘disengaged universals’ – talk of rights without the hope of effective action – can be frustrating and disillusioning. While the universal human right to food may remain a political aspiration, it is not always clear how best to mobilise popular support around a right on which governments are unwilling or unable to deliver. One possibility suggested by our research findings is to mobilise around the right as a frame for efforts to strengthen

accountability for hunger at local levels (or social accountability). However, the resources available to frontline officials to respond may be inadequate because of failures of accountability among policymakers at the apex of the triangle (see *Figure 1*). In such contexts, Merry's translators and intermediaries are tasked with an important but sensitive job of aggregating local concerns and framing them within the local politics of hunger.

On the other hand, in countries like Guatemala, which according to the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index 2013 (te Lintelo *et al.* 2014) displays the highest levels of political commitment to reduce hunger among 45 high-burden countries, budgets, policies and institutional mechanisms are in place to realise the right to food. In such contexts, there is clear potential for political mobilisation and for better holding governments to account. In such contexts, a pragmatic approach to translating human rights into local action may be to focus on those groups for whom the immediate action towards the progressive realisation of rights is both urgent and feasibly contained. It is clear, for instance, that while many people see the rights to infants and children as inscribed within parental roles, they do not similarly see older people as having strong rights through relationships to adult children. Across these communities we heard that older people fall out of the food safety net. This matter clearly merits further investigation but it is likely that economic and social development, and the demographic transition that comes with that, will mean less extended family support and so weaker food security for older people. This makes the right to food for older people an area of obvious and particular importance. While there is a great focus on early childhood nutrition for instrumental reasons that include its contribution to later development, similarly positive-sum arguments about the rights to food or nutrition security of older people are harder to make. These arguments need to be presented on rights-based grounds, because the well-being of older people appears to be under threat from a weakening of social rights to food within families and communities across these developing countries.¹⁹ And the clear and shared nature of the recognition that the right to food applies in particular to older people who may not be able to work or feed themselves makes this a clear starting point for global campaigns on the right to food.

While advocacy campaigns may influence understandings that strengthen accountability for hunger, ideas about the right to food are themselves vernacularised by intertwining with the deep roots of the politics of subsistence and the moral economy. The collective memory of the experience of episodes of mass acute food insecurity, the institutional responses that evolve to prevent or mitigate hunger over time, and the culture of political accountability can give rise to collective action on hunger. NGO advocacy campaigns to raise awareness of human rights are likely to benefit from working with the grain of those memories and institutions and cultures. There are instances in which efforts to raise awareness about the right to food have been detached from those deeper histories of the politics of subsistence, and from the moral economy language with which they are articulated. Activists, NGOs and human rights advocates can do more to turn food crises into opportunities to strengthen the right to food. They should ensure that societies do not forget episodes of mass hunger, and document such events in order to strengthen the case for public action when such events threaten. From the contrasts between how people view their right to food in Burkina Faso and Bangladesh on the one hand and Ethiopia and Kenya on the other, it seems that major food crises do not in themselves engender a strong sense of the right to food, or a popular political culture of accountability for hunger. What matters is how the state responds, whether it plays a credible role in addressing food shocks, and whether it can be relied on to do so again in the future.

¹⁹ Champions of food security interventions for older people try to make instrumental arguments: HelpAge International argues that most people over 60 remain economically active, so supporting their food security makes economic good sense – as well as a matter of human rights (Collodel and HelpAge International 2012). And it is not only in developing countries that the food and nutrition security of older people is a concern; see, for example, a recent study of food insecurity among older Americans (Ziliak and Gunderson 2011).

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