

Delivering Social Protection that Nourishes: Lessons from the Food Price Crisis

The global food crisis of 2007–11 brought about lasting changes to the relationship between the work people do and the food they eat. Real-time research conducted by IDS, Oxfam and research partners in ten focus countries has found the cost of these changes has gone uncounted. Higher food prices have led to more precarious work and changing diets, with variable developmental and nutritional impacts. Social protection policies and programmes should protect the social aspects of life – the unpaid care work of nourishing families that is mainly shouldered by women, and the non-monetary value of traditional crops and cuisines – against market uncertainties. They need to ensure a balance between the work people do and the subsistence it affords them. To help them do this, better data are needed on informal economies, changing food habits and how unpaid care work is being affected by women’s changing economic roles.

How did people adjust to higher food prices?

The *Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility* project was designed to track how people on low incomes in developing countries were living in the aftermath of the global food crisis. The project accompanied people in 23 research sites across Africa (Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya and Zambia), Asia (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Vietnam) and Latin America (Bolivia and Guatemala) on their journeys of economic change.

The years 2012–15 marked a period after food commodity prices had peaked worldwide, but when national and local food prices remained high and volatile (Figure 1).

Policy interest in the food crisis waned when international prices plateaued after 2011. Development policy research referred to people’s ‘resilience’ and calculated that, globally, poverty levels were improving, thanks to rising income-consumption. The medium-term effects were cast as benign in terms of attracting new agricultural investment and raising rural wages. It came to be

seen as a necessary market correction to artificially low agricultural prices.

An alternative view was that the food crisis was inevitable, and meant further loss of control or ‘food sovereignty’. The ‘food regime’ (or set of rules and policies shaping the contemporary world food system under rapid globalisation) was raising food costs – but not necessarily to the advantage of its smallholder producers.

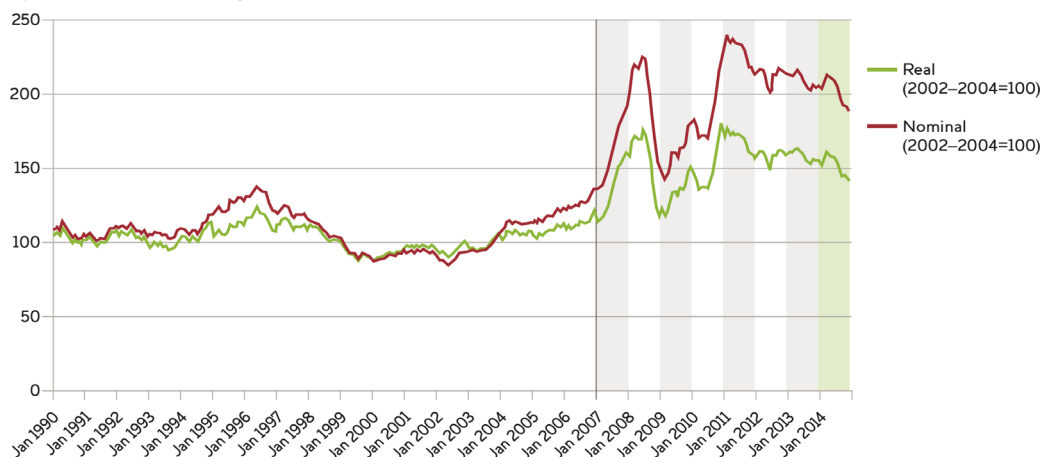
But research into how patterns of everyday life were affected found that the relationship between work and food changed to accommodate higher food costs. More needs to be done to ensure policymakers understand the hidden adjustments, and are equipped to count – and counter the hidden costs to people and societies.

Key findings: Precarious labour and purchased foods

Precariousness rather than resilience became the dominant condition of life for many in the post-food crisis period. The developing world had undergone a ‘Great Transformation’, a process of rapid

“Policy interest in the food crisis waned when international prices plateaued after 2011.”

Figure 1 World food prices 1990–2014



Source: Adapted from FAO Food Price Index, www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/ (accessed 15 March 2016).

commoditisation (or marketisation) of basic provisioning and the work involved in enabling societies to reproduce themselves. Food markets had always existed, but now aspects of life that had previously been insulated from market forces were drawn rapidly and thoroughly under their influence. People came to exchange a greater share of their work efforts for cash and to exchange a greater share of that cash for basic provisioning.

This resulted from two clear and universal mechanisms of change:

- an intense pressure to earn more cash incomes by whatever means necessary
- an equal pressure to maximise ‘value’ in the food being consumed.

Finding 1: Increased precarious labour

The sudden rise in food prices meant that many more people suddenly sought higher cash incomes, often by entering riskier, tougher or more demeaning kinds of work. This could mean travelling further, and working harder and longer. It could mean moving away from land, homes and families to travel to where work might be.

People reported more migration, and the predominant mood among youth was against agriculture and towards livelihoods with greater prospects for cash incomes. This increased precariousness involved physical and mental strain, unreliable earnings, and more effort simply to secure work. This was a period of intense strain on the processes of social reproduction that are so fundamental to human wellbeing. The unpaid work of care was particularly hard hit as more women spent more time and effort bringing in cash incomes.

Mrs H, a 37-year-old tailor and mother of three in Guatemala, said:

After coming back from work the body gives in and you don't feel like working, you feel like lying down and closing your eyes but you can't because of your responsibilities... Because of my job I cannot take a look if they [my children] are eating properly or not. Because of my work I cannot take care of my son like I used to.

Finding 2: Increased purchased foods

Despite working much harder, and even as many wages started to rise, people worried they were not feeding their families as well as in the past. Where food markets had been relatively under-developed, particularly in the rural African and South Asian communities, people reported sharp changes in food habits. People substituted less costly items, cut out more expensive items and replaced them with filling foods, sacrificing safety, taste and familiarity for volume and price.

A common view was that people were moving towards more processed, packaged and purchased foods. This was due to factors such as time and convenience, supply, the desirability of customary food cultures versus the draw of novelty, the addictive nature of the high fat-sugar-salt content of many industrialised foods, and status – food being among the most important elements of people’s cultural and social identities.

In Kaya, Burkina Faso one householder said:

I think that people eat these foods because of poverty; they do not care anymore about food [being of] good quality, they just need to feed themselves.

“The unpaid work of care was particularly hard hit as more women spent more time and effort bringing in cash incomes.”

As people faced changing relative prices for basic foods and experienced flux in their work lives, many started buying foods as they moved around for work. The ‘mobile eating’ phenomenon appeared most common among men in the faster-growing economies, rural and urban – some because they had no family to eat with, others because they could eat better out than at home; others sought community in public eateries and spaces. In most sites, women were doing more paid work than before, and felt pressed to speed up the work of feeding the family, often using bought condiments and quick-cook staples. Meanwhile, children and young people became early adopters of cheap, tasty, fun, trendy, and typically habit-forming processed foods.

Research conclusions: Changing economic, social and political norms

The adjustments people made in response to the food crisis accelerated processes of economic and social change that were already ongoing. This compressed process of integration into markets resulted in net effects of more than the sum of their individual parts. Changing patterns of work and diets influenced the economic, social and political institutions on which people depend to secure their basic provisions. People changed how they related to the rules and functions of those institutions, affecting social and political norms and perceptions about the right to food and how it should be safeguarded.

As their local and household economies and the social organisation of care changed, people’s views on their rights and responsibilities to work and food also shifted. As long as people earned enough to afford the foods they deemed acceptable, they had the pleasure of more choice. But new consumer power did not necessarily mean more control, or sovereignty, over what they ate, or how that food was created. This is why changing diets were associated with growing anxiety around food, as people worried about the nutritional content and safety of ‘foods from nowhere’ – over the production and preparation of which they had no hand in or control. This loss of sovereignty related to the fact that the precarious nature of work and the volatile nature of food markets meant the balance between incomes and prices – or work and food – was not guaranteed. People continued to worry about prices, recalling

Many people in Nessemtenge in Burkina Faso saw the food crises and food price rises as having accelerated the gold rush. Mme Z, a 40-year-old widow, reflected on the social changes:

The young think they can succeed in the gold mining... The reason is that young people are awake now, they have acquired more knowledge and they are hungry for the money more than their parents.

the recent period of rapid inflation, and they closely monitored continued rises, particularly in the price of staples. If food prices were to shoot up again it is not clear what scope people would have to adjust.

The move into more marketised occupations felt emancipatory for some, particularly for younger people. Many young rural people aspired to get off the farm, seeking the relative regularity of waged work in factories or offices, and the comparative physical ease and status of such labour. But women were particularly likely to worry that their waged work or self-employment cut into the unpaid work of care, including feeding families. Many people, particularly older people in rural communities, worried that the urge to secure cash incomes was pushing out other matters of value – social norms, agrarian lifestyles, family and kin relations.

Mrs JB, a domestic worker and landlady in Dhaka, said:

Those who have money hold power in the slum. Those who do not have money can hardly lead a life.

The right to food

The marketisation of basic provisions did not go without resistance. It was widely agreed that people who could not work, in particular the elderly, should be protected against hunger. Despite families and communities being the first port of call, there was a strong sense that governments were responsible for addressing food crises that affected everyone – whether droughts or shortages, bad or dangerous foods, or undue price rises fueled by unfair and speculative market practices.

People did not talk about a right to food in all countries – in Indonesia and Vietnam, for instance, the idea of a right to food proved difficult to articulate. The language of rights was strongest where political and civil discourse

“The ‘mobile eating’ phenomenon appeared most common among men.”

had raised awareness about the right to food, notably in Kenya, Bolivia, Guatemala and Bangladesh. There was also no sense in which people saw their right to food as a free gift: instead, everyone had a role and a duty to work for a living. But there was a strong and common sense of a

'natural' right to food: as human beings, food was the stuff of life, and therefore too important to be left entirely to the uncertainty of markets: there was a public responsibility to ensure that people were able to eat well.

Policy recommendations

Nourishing social protection must do more than boost basic incomes so that people can buy more expensive food. It must also protect the social or non-market aspects of nourishment.

Social protection policies should:

- **Insulate against food price shocks for a tough first outer layer of protection for society as a whole.** Broad-based national food security measures could include national grain reserves and storage facilities, agricultural production, and market development and price regulatory frameworks of the kind that made a significant difference after the 2008 spike.
- **Protect against precarious labour.** Social protection should protect people's capacity to secure basic provisions and design financial, communications and migration services to respond to subsistence crises.
- **Support the work of feeding families.** Reducing drudgery (e.g. improved access to portable water and fuel), redistributing the effort more evenly across society (e.g. school feeding) and recognising women's important contributions to their society's nutrition can help protect the vital work of feeding families in volatile times.
- **Protect access to good food.** There is a strong case for nutrition-sensitive social protection to address food safety regulation, and protection of vulnerable groups such as children from the obesogenic and industrialised foods that have accompanied the nutrition transition.
- **Be informed by better data.** Policymakers need to track the impacts on the crucial hidden dimensions of human wellbeing. Regular statistical data sources need to include modules on unpaid care work (time-use survey data); irregular, short-term, dangerous and illegal work; and on changing diets.

Further reading

Scott-Villiers, P., Chisholm, N.; Wanjiku Kelbert, A. and Hossain, N. (2016) *Precarious Lives: Food, Work and Care After the Global Food Crisis*, Brighton: IDS and Oxfam International

For a range of different views on the food crisis and its aftermath, see:

McMichael, P. (2009) 'A Food Regime Analysis of the "World Food Crisis"', *Agriculture and Human Values* 26.4: 281–95

Headey, D. (2014) *Food Prices and Poverty Reduction in the Long Run*, IFPRI Discussion Paper 01331, Washington DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2414036 (accessed 26 June 2016)

Fraser, N. (2013) 'A Triple Movement? Parsing the Politics of Crisis after Polanyi', *New Left Review* 81: 119–32

Credits

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