

5.18: UNIVERSAL FOOD ACCESS: ENACTING FOOD AS A PUBLIC GOOD.

Valuing food, not as a commodity, but as a public good and human right based on the absolute essentialness of food to every human every day. Applying the same rationality that we use with health and education to food.

What problem is the solution trying to address?

The dominant narrative of the Global Food System is that food is a commodity (a for-profit product) and thus the market is the most appropriate mechanism to allocate this essential resource. With this valuation (nothing but a social construct), those who have no money (or not enough) cannot get access to sufficient and nutritious food. Therefore, poverty in cash or means of production equals to food insecurity. Those who cannot afford will be covered by humanitarian assistance or food charities. But food is a vital resource for every human being, every day, regardless culture, age, sex or wealth conditions. As there is no scarcity of food (the world produces enough food to feed 10 billion people), the dominant market mechanism is failing to allocate adequately the food produced to all the needed people (the entire humanity).

In the XX century, two other essential human needs (health and education) were enacted (valued + governed) as public goods and entitlements. And in many countries, there are universal schemes for education (at least until 14 years) and health (to cover medical treatments, surgeries, emergency assistance or medicines), usually as specific institutional settings combining public support and infrastructures with private services and infrastructures. Regardless of the institutional setting, the primary goal of both schemes is to guarantee a minimum access to education and health to every citizen.

Why not applying the same rationality to food? Why not a Universal Food Access scheme that, combining public policies and infrastructures and private institutions and actors, can guarantee a minimum access to enough and adequate food to all, regardless of their purchasing power, every day.

What, in brief, is the solution?

Inspired by the “Universal Health Coverage” and “Education for All” schemes, the “Universal Food Access” is a policy innovation, grounded in a game-changing framing of food as a public good and a vital resource, whereby everybody would be entitled to get a minimum access to adequate food every day, regardless his/her purchasing power and guaranteed through different public, private and collective means. These schemes would take different shapes in different countries, to be anchored or not in legal provisions, and should be attained progressively. The political innovation could be applicable to every country, regardless its wealth or food security status, as is grounded on the universal and absolute need to eat. That scheme could accommodate any type of food security policy, both universal and targeted ones, for-profit or public, as long as there is no one left behind hungry. It would be an aspirational and inspirational conceptual framework that departs from the current “no money-no food” rationale and that could dismantle many “lock-ins” associated to the for-profit allocation mechanisms.

What was/ were the source(s) from which this solution emerged?

Food has been considered as a public good (subject to public policies, governmental support and tight control) for most part of human history. It was only during the last centuries that specific food crops started to be considered as commodities (only traded for profit maximisation) by the colonial powers (coffee, sugarcane, spices). Now, those crops have been replaced by corn, wheat, soybean, palm oil, coffee and sugarcane.

Commoditised food is often considered as a “strategic good”, allocated through market mechanisms but heavily subsidised in most countries. So, not exclusively left to market mechanisms. That can be considered as a tacit recognition of its public utility. Why not shifting from a tacit to an open recognition as a public good for the commonwealth of the entire humankind.

This Summit could become the starting point of a global debate to reframe food differently, from a pure commodity to a public good. Once the normative valuation changes, a whole array of new policies (innovative and so far unpermitted) could be designed and implemented.

What is the ‘theory of change’?

The first and main input is a political declaration, later on anchored in legal provisions, to value and enact food as a public good. This move could be based on previous national debates, a consensus-building dialogue, positioning documents and pre-negotiations. Framing food as a public good will take some time.

Then, this frame could accommodate many ongoing initiatives/policies (doing things differently) complemented with new policies and actions. For instance, expand/scale up the coverage of ongoing activities (i.e. home-grown school meals, food-based and cash-based safety nets, assets creation programmes to be reframed as Employment Generation Schemes that are undertaken at massive scale to increase landscape, community, household and individual resilience), thus enabling several ministries at country level, UN agencies and CSOs to become relevant actors in policy advocacy within “Country Capacity Strengthening” schemes.

Type of actions that could implement the Universal Food Access

1.- Universal Safety Nets (either cash-, voucher-or food-based), based not only on humanitarian needs but on entitlements as well. The cash-based safety nets would enable beneficiaries to source appropriate, diverse foods (or any other basic need) themselves from local markets. Conditional and Unconditional Cash Transfers

2.- Employment Generation Schemes (food- or cash-for-work schemes could be reframed from emergency assistance to employment generation schemes): we contribute to generate more employment for poor, food insecure. un-skilled people, either temporary or stable, with specific goals related circular economy, green economy, climate shocks resilience or infrastructure development (to reach last miles where the State cannot reach).

3.- Healthy and nutrient-rich diets could become accessible to all (not just through purchasing power), guaranteed by state mechanisms, with a (regulated and growing) private sector that is geared towards that goal. So far, most efforts in fragile states have been geared to increase the supply of calories. However, diets based primarily on staple cereals or tubers lack diversity, which contributes to micronutrient deficiencies. Thus, much greater effort on enabling access to Healthy diets is required. Moreover, cooperatives, customary indigenous systems and contemporary alternative food networks (i.e. community supported agriculture) would also be a fundamental part of this scheme. So, in a gradual approach, firstly everybody should be guaranteed access to an energy-sufficient diet, and as a second step, access to a dietary-adequate diet. So, the “Fill the Nutrient Gap” initiative would be extremely relevant here.

4.- Home-grown School Feeding would be transformed into a universal programme, as an additional entitlement every child has by attending school. If “eating” is as equally important as “learning”, both should be provided to all students in all schools. So, that would mean transforming school meals programmes based on voluntary humanitarian or developmental aid into universal school meal schemes to be supported by public budgets (with external support from WFP and other donors/UN agencies).

5.- Shock-responsive Social Protection (Forecast-based Early Action, Weather-related Insurance Schemes, Risk Sharing Initiatives)

6.- Nomadic Livestock Economies (for self-consumption and trade) that inhabit remote, sparsely populated fringe areas, usually moving in cross-border itineraries.

7.- Scaling up local food procurement to benefit smallholder farmers: Smallholders feed the world. Institutional demand for food and food system services can be a direct and indirect driving force towards building sustainable and inclusive food systems, contributing to inclusive agricultural growth and sustainable social and economic transformation. Local procurement, including pro-smallholder procurement, can significantly strengthen smallholders' livelihoods and the sustainability of food systems, particularly when it is associated with activities that support value chain actors. It also improves the availability, quality and safety of food for the community.

8.- Food reserves: Support national governments with the management of reserves and monitor countries' food reserves as an indicator of an upcoming food crisis.

9.- Food Banks to be part of the UFC as State-run institutions, based on entitlements, that could be complemented by not-for-profit private institutions such as charities, religious institutions or philanthropic foundations.

Why does this solution align to the definition and criteria for a 'game changing solution' developed by the Summit?

This policy innovation, that brings a new conceptual framework, can be a real game changer in the way food security and food systems are approached. At present, the dominant narrative about food systems and hunger eradication is articulated around "affordability". Affordability means that food, as a commodity, shall be affordable, because only through market mechanisms is food allocated. And to be affordable, (a) either you increase people's purchasing power (what has proven to be difficult, and it can be counterbalanced by incomes and prices rising in parallel thus keeping purchasing power equal), or (b) you cheapen food prices, with all the social and environmental consequences we already know: low farm gates prices, enslaved temporary workers, non-accountable environmental damages, forest clearances, wasted food because it doesn't fit cosmetic requirements, and huge subsidies to food corporations to maintain. When we refer to health and education in public policies, we do not use the term "affordability" because we all work under the value-based narrative of education and health as public goods, human rights and people's entitlements

What is the current and/or likely political support for this idea?

This is a disruptive shift, moving the core debate away from "affordability" to "entitlements", providing a narrative that could be understood by everybody (from an illiterate pastoralist to a prime minister).

Although implemented as such in no country to date, there are several countries that have already included the right to food in their Constitutions or legal frameworks (Guatemala, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Venezuela, Kenya, Nepal) and those countries are implementing policies and programmes that could be identified as "conducive towards a Universal Food Access". Moreover, big national food assistance programmes, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in USA or the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) in EU countries, are good examples in that direction. However, those programmes do not consider food as a public good and they are just targeted policies to provide access to food with strict criteria of poverty, subject to political games, poor accountability and non universality.

The key element of the Universal Food Access is to combine different measures (public and private) to secure that food daily needs are covered for every citizen. So, coverage, eligibility, complementarity or universality are key features of this scheme.

Are there certain contexts for which this solution is particularly well suited, or, conversely, contexts for which it is not well-suited at all?

As everybody needs to eat every day, wherever and whatever the circumstances, this solution perfectly fits every country. In some of them, the implementation will be faster (more means, less food insecurity situation, stronger state institutions) and in others it will take more years, but it can be implemented gradually: extending current programmes from specific groups or areas to universal coverage, complementing programmes to cover food needs by cash, in-kind, guaranteed employment, public premises to distribute food (food banks, public bakeries), public procurement, etc

What do you think are the key actions required to address this solution?

This policy innovation could accommodate several products and evidence-based practices proposed in the five Action Tracks and expand/scale up the coverage of ongoing activities (i.e. home-grown school meals, food-based and cash-based safety nets, assets creation programmes to be reframed as Employment Generation Schemes that are undertaken at massive scale to increase landscape, community, household and individual resilience), thus enabling several ministries at country level, UN agencies and CSOs to become relevant actors in policy advocacy within “Country Capacity Strengthening” schemes.

Key actions: It is important to enact this normative valuation of food as a public good in the legal framework of the countries that are willing to do it (either as a constitutional provision or lower-level laws).

Governments and civil society movements could also establish “complaint and redress mechanisms” to render accountability effective. Several actions undertaken so far by unaccountable voluntarism (i.e. Food Banks, humanitarian assistance during shocks) or covering just a minor share of the population (school meals, cash/food for work) would be supervised by the States, public policies and adequate subsidies would be diverted from food commodities and their coverage would be enlarged.

Corporate sectors and collective actions would have to be bound by stricter public policies that should protect the adequate food security of all. When private markets cannot satisfy food for all, the state and self-regulated collective actions should act to cover the gaps. For every person, every day. Moreover, through policies, regulations and refocusing subsidies, the private sector would be disincentivized to produce food commodities that are harmful for the environment, meant for livestock feeding or just empty calories, and they would be steered to produce nutritious food needed by human population.

This process will take time, so CSOs could be instrumental in advocating for this gradual transition towards this Universal Food Access scheme.