Food Security and Informal Institutions

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Behind the Briefs

New Perspectives on Informal Institutions & Intractable Problems

Informal institutions are often defined as the sets of informal rules that exist outside and alongside “formal” structures of government. Although “formal” rules such as laws and public policies are important, informal rules can have an equal or greater influence on human behavior. Of particular importance are norms, a specific type of informal rule dictating the “appropriate” behavior for certain situations. Increasingly, policy makers and advocates are taking note of the importance of these unwritten rules of behavior—both as new obstacles and as new opportunities for policy reform to address the many difficult problems facing society.

In April 2012, a diverse group of scholars and practitioners gathered for two days on the campus of Purdue University to discuss how more attention to informal institutions might offer new perspectives on several seemingly “intractable” global policy problems facing the world today: climate change, food security, and women’s human rights. This policy brief synthesizes a few primary recommendations from the workshop for policies related to the problem of food security. Additional briefs summarize how informal institutions affect policies in general, as well as the lessons for the problems of climate change and women’s human rights. All four policy briefs and the full proceedings of the workshop, including short biographies of the experts cited in this brief, are available at www.purdue.edu/discoverypark/intractableproblems.

Food Security as an “Intractable Problem”

In her presentation, Ellen Messer of Brandeis University defined food insecurity as “food shortage, lack of access to food, malnutrition, or some combination of the three.” Estimates of those suffering from chronic hunger range from 870 million to more than one billion people (FAO 2012; U.S. Department of State 2009). Indeed, hunger and malnutrition are responsible for more deaths than AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria combined (World Food Program 2012). Among those who manage to live without enough food, “adults struggle to work and children struggle to learn” (U.S. Department of State 2009), and malnutrition weakens immune systems. The fact that more than 15% of people in developing countries remain undernourished also undermines economic development and public health, and likely contributes to conflict and violence (Messer and Cohen 2006). Although the vast majority of food insecure people (98%) are in developing countries, there are also large numbers of hungry people (19 million) in developed countries (World Food Program 2013). In the United States alone, nearly 1 in 6 people (14.7%) is food insecure, and 6% are very food insecure (Nord, Jensen, Andrews, and Carlson 2010).
New Perspectives from Informal Institutions

Workshop speakers addressing food security touched on four ways that informal institutions can effect major social change:

1) Reinforcing existing norms that promote desired social change
2) Challenging existing norms that obstruct desired social change
3) Invoking alternative norms to create new policy opportunities
4) Creating new norms to facilitate social change.

Specific recommendations for applying these general principles to the problem of food security include the following.

Recommendation #1:
Recognize the Importance of Institutions in the Problem of Food Insecurity

Prevailing approaches to food security tend to focus on expanding production and assume that the problem is supply: we do not have enough food for all the hungry people. New advances in food science and technological innovation are seen as primary solutions, and increasing international trade to move food from one place (or nation) to another is also emphasized.

These solutions fail to recognize, however, the institutional underpinnings of problems of food security. In order to advance food security, it may be necessary to ask about who controls food production and how food is distributed. These questions may challenge the norms and institutions governing political and economic life more generally. Speakers Mark Cohen of Oxfam America and Ellen Messer of Brandeis University both emphasized that the problem of food insecurity is to a significant degree a problem of distribution and access to food, rather than merely one of production (see also Sen 1983). In this view, people sometimes become food insecure because they lose their entitlement to food, rather than due to a lack of food production. From this perspective, Cohen and Messer observed, empowering people and promoting democracy may be one avenue towards food security.

Recommendation #2:
Be Aware of How New Formal Institutions May Undermine Informal Institutions Promoting Food Security

Workshop speakers noted specific examples of how new formal institutional arrangements could undermine informal practices that formerly preserved food security. For example, Lauren Maclean of Indiana University illustrated how public policies favoring the labor-intensive production of tomatoes in Ghana had important, unintended consequences for food security compared to those promoting less labor-intensive production of cocoa in Cote D’Ivoire. In Ghana, the policy shift to a more labor-intensive cash crop threatened informal household practices ensuring that elderly people and children have food by shifting more household labor into tomato production. Better anticipating and understanding these potentially negative effects of changes in policy on informal institutions is therefore important.

In a similar vein, Cohen argued for the idea of “food sovereignty,” or the right of people “to define their own food and agriculture.” Cohen noted that many believe more decentralized, community-based control of the processes of production and allocation of food is a promising strategy for increasing food security. This argument connects food security to ensuring the right to democratic self-determination more generally, as well as to popular control of food production and allocation in particular.

Recommendation #3:
Look for Opportunities That Result from Changing Informal Institutions

Although it is important to be cautious about how new formal institutions may interfere with the informal institutions preserving food security, it is also important to recognize the positive opportunities that changes in informal institutions might bring. As Elinor Ostrom of Indiana University noted at the workshop, some informal institutions can be harmful to society, such as when existing norms governing access to food give an advantage to certain racial, ethnic, or gender groups, thereby exacerbating food insecurity problems. Weakening those particular norms may open up access to food, making it more equitable and reducing the number of hungry people in the process.

In addition, changes in informal institutions that create problems for food security in the short run may hold promise as the basis for more inclusive norms of food distribution in the future. For example, new norms created by the shifting practices of agricultural production MacLean described in Ghana have created new social groups that are more homogeneous in terms of age. As noted above, these new social groups and relationships cause problems for food security by weakening traditional intergenerational bonds. However, these new social groupings may also provide the basis for stronger democratic political institutions at a national level. If the institutions of democratic citizenship...
were to be strengthened, access to basic needs like food and safety could be guaranteed by the state, so that those elderly people whose families are not able or inclined to support them need not become indigent and hungry. In this respect, a shift in dominant informal norms can create opportunities for complementary formal policy reform.

Similarly, Messer showed that individuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and businesses can help to advance food security. For example, some NGOs try to empower citizens in food insecure places by negotiating partnerships with private businesses and agencies as well as governments, thereby changing business behaviors, government policies, and outcomes from the inside. Messer cited Global Exchange (based in the U.S.) and Oxfam International (based in the U.K., with many national nodes) as examples of development and human-rights organizations that work to improve the capacity of food insecure people and nations to negotiate with private sector and government actors to improve their potential to feed themselves.

These organizations also model alternative economic practices in the areas of food production, allocation, and consumption by being active in “fair trade” and sustainable-agriculture initiatives that help empower producers, marketers, and consumers all along the “alternative trade” food chain. Finally, these NGOs also try to educate and influence national governments and international organizations regarding government policies on food security. When these efforts to transform both formal state institutions and the more informal understandings and practices that govern businesses, communities, and families dovetail, more progress is likely to be made.

Recommendation #4: Create New Norms to Improve Access to Food

At the workshop, Messer argued for the political importance of an emerging new norm of a human right to food (HRF), asserting that “all individuals have a claim on basic nourishment by virtue of their humanity.” Here, a human right refers to the United Nations (UN) international human rights framework, which specifies that all national governments have obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to food for all inhabitants. More generally, human rights are seen as strong, powerful moral principles that all people are bound to respect as individuals and collectives through their governments.

In terms of formal declarations and international legal principles, there is plenty of fertile ground to establish or expand recognition of a human right to food. Messer and Cohen noted that many UN declarations (particularly those adopted since the mid-1990s) assert the right to avoid starvation and condemn the manipulation of food scarcity as a weapon. Despite these precedents, many diplomats and other technical experts still deny the existence of a legally enforceable right to freedom from hunger. For example, the U.S. State Department denies the HRF has any legal standing in U.S. law (Messer and Cohen 2007).

The main mechanism for promoting the HRF norm is “naming and shaming” norm violators, or what has sometimes been called “constructive embarrassment” (World Alliance on Nutrition and Human Rights 1994). Such efforts can make a difference, because being seen as being responsible for mismanaging food supplies or production to the point that people cannot feed themselves can trigger unwanted reactions ranging from outrage to uprisings and even regime change. So thinking of food security as a human rights norm, rather than as an enforceable law, may point to ways to change behavior of key governments and corporations.

The capabilities approach may be another possible way to reconceptualize the problem of food security in terms of new norms. Breena Holland of Lehigh University built on this framework of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which conceptualizes human wellbeing in terms of a set of “capabilities,” ranging from the ability to meet basic needs to sufficient education and personal autonomy required for a good human life. Holland suggested moving beyond “capability thresholds” that all people deserve to think about “capability ceilings,” defined as maximum levels of well being that merit protection by policymakers. Although Holland’s presentation applied this concept to the issue of climate change, her concept of a “capabilities ceiling” also provides a useful perspective for food security by suggesting a new norm that those who are above such a ceiling are the ones who should first bear the costs of adjustments necessary for ensuring that food security is extended to all.

This reconceptualization might be useful for getting at the way that “overdevelopment” in the first world is linked to food insecurity in the developing world. The capabilities approach makes clear that achieving fair outcomes for everyone means that everyone must change their behavior a little bit. And as Messer observed, a handful of effective NGOs may be showing the way to make these changes happen. Global Exchange, Oxfam International, and others are using normative arguments and appeals to try to change how people think about their own use of food and the sometimes unjust systems that produce that food. Similarly, anti-slavery and human rights organizations work to make sure that the coffee and chocolate that are important components of our daily food consumption are produced in ethically responsible and environmentally sustainable ways.

Messer also illustrated how NGOs can use these new norms to press for formal institutional changes to address food insecurity. Faith-based NGOs, including Bread for the World (BFW) and American Jewish World Service (AJWS), for example, are working to spread the norm of the right to food as they lobby for new agricultural policies, such as an end to agricultural subsidies in the EU and U.S. that harm small-farmers in developing countries.
**Summing Up**

This brief has described how informal institutions offer several important new perspectives on the persistent problem of food security.

- By highlighting the importance of both formal and informal institutions, we can move beyond the search for exclusively technical solutions to food insecurity. Hunger is not simply a technical problem; it is a problem of access to resources, substantially influenced by institutional arrangements.

- By paying more attention to how new formal institutions, including new economic arrangements, might threaten or undermine existing informal institutions that maintain food security in poor or subsistence communities, we can better avoid unintended negative consequences of formal institutional change on local food security.

- By identifying and challenging norms that impede food security, we can try to shift processes of food production and allocation in ways that better reflect our values. In addition, changes in norms governing food provision may offer new opportunities for reform of formal institutions to better provide for food security.

- By creating new norms that are more oriented towards a human right to food and towards alternative production, allocation, and consumption practices by people in the developed world, we can see new ways that citizens in developed countries can be part of the solution to food insecurity. These norms may be best created or promoted by civil society groups.

Although none of these perspectives is likely to solve the hunger problem by itself, all of them suggest the diverse ways that a focus on informal institutions and norms might advance policy discussions of this particular global challenge.

**For More Information…**


Visit www.purdue.edu/discoverypark/intractableproblems for:

- All four policy briefs in the Informal Institutions and Intractable Global Problems series, available both in PDF form and in an E-Pub format, allowing you to download and read the briefs on your tablets and smart phones.

- A video archive of the full proceedings of the Informal Institutions and Intractable Global Problems workshop.

- Short biographies of the speakers contributing to the workshop and cited in the policy briefs.

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