



**STARVED OF
POWER**

**THE POLITICS OF FOOD
ABUNDANCE IN THE
GLOBAL SOUTH**

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Starved of Power: Politics of Food Abundance in the Global South

Many nutrition scholars are warning of a double burden of malnutrition (DBM) affecting developing countries across the world, with dramatic rises in obesity and related health conditions like heart disease and diabetes, alongside chronic undernutrition (Friel & Lichacz, 2010). No longer just a symptom of affluence, the availability of processed, cheap, and calorie-dense food products, along with distribution systems defined by supermarkets and fast food chains, are driving overconsumption in the developing world too (Haddad, Cameron, & Barnett, 2010; Popkin, Corvalan, & Grummer-Strawn, 2020). How to solve this problem depends on how it is diagnosed. While many organizations are committed to addressing DBM and Global South malnutrition in general, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), this essay will focus on the perspectives and proposals advanced by the food sovereignty movement (FSM). Advocates for FSM argue that many existing policies and institutions, like the WTO, cannot solve DBM, because they exist within a neoliberal paradigm, which refers to the collection of policies, norms, and ideas that define how food is currently grown and consumed worldwide; instead, FSM defines the core cause of DBM as the neoliberal food paradigm itself (Claeys, 2015; Holt-Giménez, 2019; Wills, 2017). Proponents of FSM, like La Via Campesina, say that solving DBM requires an alternative to current patterns of food production, distribution, and consumption, by empowering peasants to control what they grow and consumers to decide what they eat (Claeys, 2015; Holt-Giménez, 2019). FSM, and LVC in particular, aim to build a global resistance to the dominance that neoliberal trade

relations, multinational corporations, and market-based institutions have on the world's food systems.

Historical context is crucial to understanding why DBM has become a problem in so many countries in the Global South United by the shared experience of colonization, colonial economic systems based around resource extraction took root across today's Global South, altering production and subsequently consumption patterns (Weis, 2007). Imperial relationships transformed vast agricultural regions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America into export-oriented producers of valuable commodity crops like sugar, cotton, and coffee (Weis, 2007). Land redistribution and control of ownership were vital to force peasants into an export model, requiring dispossession, coercive labour practices, and the promotion of unequal property rights (Weis, 2007). As a result, it rendered them vulnerable to global price fluctuations through undermining local, more self-sufficient markets (Weis, 2007).

Many colonies gained independence beginning in the 1950s, but two countermovements began at this same time which stifled the potential for new systems of distribution and production (Weis, 2007). First, the Green Revolution (GR) introduced a new "productivist" model for agriculture that relied on costly capital inputs along with narrowed crop diversity in the name of export-oriented specialization (Lawrence, 2017, p. 779). This model brought increased pesticide usage, genetic modification, monoculture farming, high-cost technology, and intensive irrigation, all of which sought to increase yields for a particular crop, with trade intended to fix distribution (Lawrence, 2017). But the GR did not challenge the inherited, colonial agricultural system—it instead represented a counter to further land

reform (Weis, 2007). With the GR, economic power and the benefits of trade remained in the Global North, with the Global South's export-oriented agriculture fuelling the Global North's wealthy corporate agribusinesses, as suppliers of industrial capital and consolidated farms continued to dispossess peasants (Lawrence, 2017). Second, the establishment of an international trading system that cemented existing inequalities, driven by the United States. After the Second World War, the agricultural surpluses of the Global North prefaced those governments zealously seeking new export markets (Weis, 2007). This new prospect of cheap imports of grain and other staples additionally enticed many Southern leaders to agree to trade liberalization agreements, weakening the power of smallholder peasants within global markets (Weis, 2007). Altogether, these early postwar decades replaced the prospect of land reform and peasant empowerment with the groundwork for the current neoliberal food paradigm.

The concept of the nutrition transition helps to explain the relationship between economic policy and diet, and it describes how economic development from low- to middle-income leads to the modernization and commercialization of national agricultural systems, with downstream effects on local nutrition (Pingali & Sunder, 2017). The GR represented a cornerstone of modernization schemes in many developing countries, but the nutrition transition that follows GR policies ultimately contributed to the current proliferation of DBM by favouring the overproduction of staple grains and making a diverse and nutritious diet more costly (Pingali & Sunder, 2017). Trade liberalization in the 1980s additionally introduced many new changes that persist as drivers of DBM. A limited range of staple goods got cheaper, imports of staples grew, and local farming became distorted to produce a diversity of

high-value products purely for export (Lawrence, 2017; Balie, 2020) Furthermore, farmers in the developing world increasingly had to compete with the expansion of multinational agribusiness corporations and supermarkets became the dominant distributor for consumers, replacing traditional food markets and their fresher, locally-grown options with cheap processed products (Lawrence, 2017; Balie, 2020). Falling staple prices disempowered Global South peasants and smallholders, who increasingly could not compete with consolidated, corporate farms—many became landless rural-to-urban migrants (Weis, 2007). These economic changes did not just alter diet directly, but aligned with larger changes like urbanization, sedentary lifestyles, and disruptions to traditional ways of life (Weis, 2007). Finally, in the 1990s, the inception of the WTO and similar agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) – now superseded by the U.S., Mexico, Canada Agreement (USMCA) – cemented the neoliberal agricultural consensus, consisting of liberalized trade networks alongside productivist policy agendas (Young, 2012). Furthermore, during this same period, the Global North enshrined its privileged position through the imposition of protectionist regulations that were “strictly off limits” for the Global South (Young, 2012, p. 106).

India offers a valuable case study for how the two overlapping trends of within-country GR policies and globally-oriented trade liberalization have played out in a major developing country that now experiences DBM. In the 1960s, India became the “archetype” of agricultural modernization within a GR model by prioritizing high-yield grain production to combat food shortages from its growing population (Weis, 2007, p. 112). By the 1990s, the country’s farmers relied on just a

dozen rice varieties, down from fifty thousand (Weis, 2007). On the other hand, the government also managed to build a grain reserve of fifty million tonnes, but starvation deaths and farmer suicides incited a rights-based protest movement in that decade nonetheless (Pritchard et al., 2016). Thus, in future WTO negotiations, India's government became more vocal in defending an interventionist role for states (Pritchard et al., 2016). This activism prefaced contemporary FSM's insistence that states must be more active in ensuring food security and nutrition, whereas the neoliberal paradigm sidelines governments in favour of free trade agreements and multinational corporations. Still, DBM continues to be a problem in India, as urbanization raises obesity in rural communities near cities by making diverse, fresh foods more expensive than unhealthy, processed options (Aiyar, Rahman, & Pingali, 2021).

Advertising remains a driving force of the DBM, and the relationship between food and health involves an important discursive element. For example, to sell baby formula in the postwar period, corporations like Nestle launched marketing campaigns to turn mothers into buyers, in India and elsewhere (Sasson, 2016). A key tactic was the message that formula was cleaner, safer, and healthier than breastfeeding—it is now known to be worse and a potential barrier to infant health (Sasson, 2016). Such sales campaigns are integral to the neoliberal model, and represent what Clapp & Scrinis (2017) call corporate 'nutritionism,' which argues that multinational corporations can solve malnutrition using scientific, production-driven methods. But nutritionism is fundamentally incapable of solving DBM. First, nutritionism generates a discourse of individual responsibility with a stigmatizing "moral panic" that

neglects the structural factors causing obesity (Lockie & Williams, 2010, p. 154). Despite the distortion to production that its policies create, the neoliberal paradigm, with its deregulatory bias, frames obesity as a problem for individuals to solve (Walls et al, 2021). Second, nutritionism centers market actors, like corporations, rather than the communities of peasants and consumers afflicted by DBM (Clapp & Scrinis, 2017). For example, the GR approach to ending undernutrition—the other side to DBM—is to simply produce more food, using more chemicals and machinery (Holt-Giménez, 2019). Less attention is paid to the quality of diets and the lifestyles associated with traditional food systems, and more to the economic opportunity that GR affords to corporations. Meanwhile, advertising continues to play a decisive role in promoting the unhealthy foods that are driving DBM (Caballero, 2005; Friel & Lichacz, 2010; Lawrence, 2017; Young, 2012).

Both the moral panic and the myopic view of nutrition are leading to failed approaches for remedying the DBM because they neglect an “embodied” view of nutritional wellbeing (Nichols, Kampman, & van den Bold, 2021). An embodied perspective is closely aligned with the tenets of FSM. It emphasizes that food and food traditions have cultural, psychological, and social value, not just nutrient content (Nichols, Kampman, & van den Bold, 2021). The embodied approach requires structural, holistic solutions to DBM, and does not rely on simple productivist fixes. When a market-driven consensus defines nutrition narrowly, DBM solutions lie with corporations, neglecting Global South peasants and consumers in the process, leading leads to ‘solutions’ like a genetically-modified rice variety developed for Northern India that locals, for cultural reasons, rejected (Nichols, Kampman, & van den Bold, 2021). An embodied perspective aligns with FSM to rebuff both

the root cause of DBM—the disempowerment of peasants due to neoliberal policies—and the ideas that uphold it.

Moving from discourse to policy, FSM argues that reform not only fails to address DBM, but that such failure is inevitable within the neoliberal food system. For instance, in Fiji, where DBM has become a severe problem, the hegemony of neoliberal ideas pushed government officials to soften its stance and create import exemptions for the very multinational corporations responsible for the abundance of unhealthy foods, while supporting moralistic blame towards overweight individuals (Phillips et al., 2021). Thus, FSM does not just entail alternative solutions to DBM—it goes further, by articulating why neoliberalism’s failure to solve the DBM is an inherent outcome of its discursive construction. That is why FSM, with its alternative set of norms and values based on peasant rights, must contest the neoliberal paradigm on a global and ideological scale (Wills, 2017). Given both the historical context and the modern paradigm that drives DBM, any solutions which occur through the corporations and institutions that espouse neoliberal policies are ultimately misguided.

The core tenet of FSM is protecting the right of peasants—including Indigenous communities—to live on their land and grow food with autonomy. In doing so, FSM protects nutrition and health in ways that a reformist approach could not. For example, FSM would produce fewer instances of a corporation poisoning the river that a community fishes from, which eliminates that food source from local diets and ends traditional practices (Vox, 2022). Such pollution is directly harmful to health and made possible by the disempowerment of peasants and the freedom of corporations to encroach on local

communities. That encroachment then creates the food dependency that drives DBM and its own health risks, as shown in many Indigenous and peasant communities, like Peru's Awajún people (Tallman, Valdes-Velasquez, & Sanchez-Samaniego, 2022). Further, FSM avoids the nutritionist pitfall by arguing for more than the 'right to food,' which is vulnerable to manipulation by the neoliberal argument that DBM arises from either insufficient production or bad choices. Instead, the chief proponent of FSM today, La Via Campesina (LVC), argues for a more specific right: the right to healthy, culturally-appropriate food as well as the right of peasants and consumers to self-determine their food systems (Nimmo, 2022, Lecture 11).

LVC (2022) explicitly rejects the argument that neoliberal institutions like the WTO can be part of the solution. In reality, the WTO's influence over global food production and trade is the centerpiece of the problem (La Via Campesina, 2022). Thus, LVC denounces efforts to reform an institution so obviously tailored to the Global North's agribusiness interests (La Via Campesina, 2022). In the WTO's place, LVC strives to give peasants "ownership" of land, seeds, and resources (Capire, 2022). LVC further argues that the role of states in facilitating peasant empowerment is to "protect domestic markets," meaning international free trade policies should no longer be adopted without question (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010, p. 160). Finally, LVC's activism centers on collective rights and collective ownership, on behalf of peoples, states, or regions, and not the defense of individuals' food rights, *per se* (Claeys, 2015). This difference prevents the disempowerment of those collectives due to a neoliberal response that merely protects the freedoms of consumers over the rights of communities as a whole. These demands, together, highlight how LVC's view of

food trade and rights is based on “peasant internationalism,” rather than a divisive North-versus-South confrontation (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010, p. 171).

While the dichotomy of Global South and Global North offers a way to frame the DBM problem and interrogate what appears, at first glance, to be a paradox in the underdeveloped world, the solution to DBM must be an alternative that is global in scale. By examining the way that the neoliberal food paradigm links the Global North to the Global South, it is clear that the DBM is not a paradox at all, but the global food system working as designed. The outcomes of this global system threaten the Global South’s health and nutrition through DBM. Thus, a solution must be equally global in scope, but above all, it must not perpetuate the very structures causing it—FSM meets both criteria.

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