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Implementing the Right to Food in Australia

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Abstract

The idea of universal human rights is a powerful one. It says that every person, wherever they are born and regardless of their background, income, race, gender or any other social status, is entitled to the enjoyment of certain inalienable and fundamental rights. In this paper we describe the international context that enshrines the human right to adequate food and then explore whether and how this is fulfilled in contemporary Australia, in light of ongoing food insecurity. A case study of an emerging non-government organisation called the Right to Food Coalition is provided to illustrate how members of civil society are attempting to use international law and human rights frameworks to improve accountability and action on food insecurity in Australia. We then discuss how teachers may wish to address some of the issues raised in this paper via the new Victorian Food Studies curriculum.

Introduction

Article 11 of the 1966 United Nation's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that every human on earth has the right to an "...adequate standard of living... including adequate food, clothing and housing" (ICESCR, 1966).

Human rights are more than a powerful concept; international declarations that delineate the substantive content of these rights have formed the basis of legislation, policy and practice across the globe since the 1970s. The formation of the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1945 allowed leaders from across the globe to meet and agree upon strategies to help establish the conditions for a stable global food supply by improving the economic and environmental sustainability of food systems and tackling hunger and inequality. However, only when the right to food for all is fulfilled in all its aspects can a population be considered food secure. The FAO (2009) states:

"Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."

Since 2002, the office of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has mapped out best practice for all countries on the legal and institutional steps to realise food security and fully implement the right to food (de Schutter, 2010). Read together with the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines (2004) the key steps are as follows:

- incorporating the right to food in national constitutions
- passing enabling domestic legislation: a 'national Right to Food framework law'
- identifying and targeting the hungry and the poor
- conducting a thorough assessment of existing policies, institutions and laws through a human rights lens
- developing participatory 'national strategies based upon the right to food' such as national agriculture, food security and nutrition strategies
- designing and resourcing appropriate institutions and implementing actions of a participatory nature
- monitoring the implementation of the national strategies

- enforcing the right to food through judicial means where necessary

As of 2011, 23 countries had explicitly incorporated the right to food in their Constitutions and another 33 recognised the right to food implicitly as part of broader human rights guarantees (Knuth & Vidar, 2011). A further 19 had adopted or were drafting a framework law to implement the Constitutional right to food; several had adopted national food and nutrition strategies, and established institutions charged with their oversight (Knuth & Vidar, 2011). In some countries the right to food has been legally enforced through the courts, providing citizens an opportunity to hold their governments to account. See the FAO website (2016) for a full list of relevant countries and their various levels of commitment.

The Right to Food in Australia

According to the FAO (2016):

“The Constitution of Australia does not explicitly guarantee the right to adequate food. Australia has become a State party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1975 by way of ratification.”

Australia, at the Federal level, does not have a Bill of Rights or a Human Rights Act. Australian governments take the view that economic and social rights should be satisfied by individuals selling their labour in the marketplace, and buying access to food and housing. This is typical of a neoliberal model of rights and obligations, whereby basic life necessities are regarded as commodities, and access to them is best achieved by participation in the economy.

In Australia, despite first world status and the apparent abundance of food, the right to food has not been fulfilled, as evidenced by the more than 800,000 households who are estimated to be food insecure (ABS, 2012). Food insecurity occurs when a person, household or whole community, cannot consistently access sufficient quantities of affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food.

Food insecurity has negative outcomes for physical, social and mental health and wellbeing. For example, children in food insecure households are more likely to have behavioral and developmental problems (Ramsey et al. 2011). Adults who are food insecure are at increased risk of developing diet-related chronic diseases, such as type two diabetes and cardiovascular diseases (Seligman, Laraia & Kushel, 2010). Food affordability is a major determinant of household food security. For example, in Victoria the cost of a basket of healthy food that is consistent with the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating is 40% of the budget of a welfare-dependent household and 17% of a middle-income household (Kettings & Sinclair, 2009). The issues of food access and equity in Australia are complex and in the ‘lucky country’, a growing number are not so lucky (Pollard, Begley, & Landrigan, 2016).

Fortunately, many civil society organisations are attempting to address food insecurity in Australia using a human rights approach. At the local government level, Councils are taking the lead through the participatory development and implementation of holistic food system policies. Non-government organisations have persistently raised awareness about welfare, social and health injustices and brokered partnerships for improved services for vulnerable Australians. Human rights principles, such as participation and non-discrimination, have influenced this work.

The Right to Food Coalition

The Right to Food (RTF) Coalition seeks to improve the health and wellbeing of all Australians, by working to ensure equitable access to nutritious food. It is a coalition of practitioners and researchers, united by a common vision: access to nutritious food for all,

regardless of income, age, postcode or race. The evolution of the RTF Coalition is described below.

A local collective

In late 2013, in response to reports of rising demand for emergency food relief and observation of increasing problems with food insecurity, a local collective of community, health and local government agencies working in south-western Sydney came together. The collective decided to hold a conference for practitioners, policy makers and communities to highlight the issue of food insecurity, discuss the underlying causes and to canvass solutions. In October 2014, the conference 'Putting Food on the Table' brought together over 200 delegates, many of whom travelled from interstate. The keynote speaker, Joel Berg from the New York Coalition against Hunger, also travelled to Melbourne, Canberra, Adelaide and Perth to speak at a series of related events.

Many conference participants were keen to know if the RTF Coalition would continue. Participants were sent a post-conference survey seeking feedback about priority action areas, preferred structure of an ongoing coalition, and ideas for national and local organising. There was broad support for the proposal to create a national RTF Coalition, with state and local chapters. Over 70% of respondents were willing to meet with others at a state level to work on local priorities and 61% were interested in advocacy.

A national coalition

During 2015, a national RTF Coalition comprising representatives from a number of state RTF Coalition 'chapters' was established. The RTF Coalition has four key action areas:

1. Collaborate across Australia to support collective advocacy efforts to address the key determinants of nutritious food access
2. Promote collaboration across Australia's food security workforce to maximise collective impact
3. Identify areas for policy-relevant research to enable evidence informed decision making and policy development; scrutinise public policy and identify areas for action
4. Equip partners to strengthen their advocacy in their own spheres

The national Right to Food Coalition was officially launched in April 2016.

The Food Studies Curriculum

In the discussion that follows, we include some suggestions as to how teachers can address the issues raised above via the Food Studies curriculum (2016) and make some links to the study units. The issue of rights not only considers the rights of Australian citizens, it also concerns Australia as a global citizen in terms of its contribution to global food security.

As technology advances, the world we live in appears smaller and we are realising that the way we live and behave has global consequences. Regarding food this requires us, as Australians from the rich 'global North', to behave as ethical and responsible global citizens with an awareness of how our behaviours impact on others, and to monitor how our governments and private companies conduct trade and diplomatic relations with the 'global South'. The Public Health Association of Australia's report 'A Future for Food' raised many of these issues and called for a "national integrated food policy for Australia, which would involve all the food sectors including the food industry" (PHAA, 2009). The report highlighted a number of dilemmas for Australia which included questions about:

- the appropriateness of setting limits and foods to avoid
- the balance between land to grow feed for animals and land to feed humans directly
- the role Australia should play in addressing concerns regarding world population growth and the impact on food security

Box 1

The issues food security and the right to food in Australia and the role of Australia as a global citizen could be addressed in *Unit 1: Food origins* under the two sub-headings of *Food around the world* [area of study 1] and *Food in Australia* [area of study 2]. There are specific outcomes of key knowledge in both these areas of study which relate to food security and human rights. Similarly, in *Unit 2: Food Makers* the role of agriculture and business could be used to explore these issues.

The Australian Government and the Australian food industry are planning expansion into the growing South East Asia food market. Australian governments and the food industry positions the country as the 'food bowl' of South East Asia in the Asian Century (Carey, Caraher, Lawrence & Friel, 2013), with the mining boom set to be replaced by the 'dining boom'. However, the vision is for the production of more meat, fat, salt and sugary products for export, thus exporting chronic diseases via dietary intake. Surely these are issues for Australia to consider as a global citizen.

Box 2

The issues of globalization and the right to adequate food could be addressed in all units, but *Unit 4: Food issues, challenges and futures* lends itself to a deeper exploration of the issues of who controls the food chain and who makes decisions about the food we eat. In Unit 4 under the two study areas of *Environment and ethics* and *Navigating food information* there are opportunities to explore the issues of corporate concentration and the associated control over key sectors of the global food system and the impact on the environment and health. Again, there are specific outcomes of key knowledge in both these areas of study which relate to food security and human rights.

Globally, 795 million people will go to bed hungry tonight (FAO, IFAD & WFP, 2015). In America 60 million people, mainly women, will go without a meal today, in the European Union this figure is 44 million with a further 80 million at severe risk. Food insecurity (often referred to as 'food poverty') in Europe is rising. In 2011, one quarter of Europeans (120 million) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion with 43 million in food poverty (Eurostat, 2013 cited in IFRC, 2013). The figures for Australia are less clear but all the indications are that food insecurity is growing and not just among marginalised groups (Pollard, Begley, & Landrigan, 2016).

Box 3

Food insecurity and inequality cuts across all the units of study but can be specifically applied in the following:

Unit 1: Food origins

Study areas: *Food around the world* and *Food in Australia*

Unit 2: Food makers

Study areas: *Food industries* and *Food in the home*

Unit 3: Food in daily life

Study areas: *Food choice, health and wellbeing*

Unit 4: Food issues, challenges and futures

Study areas: *Environment and ethics* and *Navigating food information*

Our individual dietary choices are heavily influenced by external factors that affect the supply of food available to us. Dominant factors include trade, economic trade liberalization and profit (Monteiro and Cannon, 2012; Carolan, 2013). As such, our current global food system is structured around a model of increasing food production for short-term profit, whilst sustainability, health and equity are relegated to lower-order priorities, if they appear at all (Caraher and Reynolds 2005).

Box 4		
The issues of food production, trade and economics could fit in nearly all units of study. The table below shows some of these possible links and opportunities for teaching.		
Unit	Area of study	Knowledge outcomes that relate to food production, trade and economics*
<i>Unit 1: Food origins</i>	<i>Food around the world</i> <i>Food in Australia</i>	5 of the 6 key knowledge outcomes. 6 of the 7 key knowledge outcomes.
<i>Unit 2: Food makers</i>	<i>Food industries</i> <i>Food in the home</i>	All 10 knowledge outcomes. At least 2 of the 6 knowledge outcomes.
<i>Unit 3: Food in daily life</i>	<i>The science of food</i> <i>Food choice, health and wellbeing</i>	At least 2 of the 8 knowledge outcomes. At least 6 of the 7 knowledge outcomes.
<i>Unit 4: Food issues, challenges and futures</i>	<i>Environment and ethics</i> <i>Navigating food information</i>	All 4 knowledge outcomes. All 6 knowledge outcomes.

*For space and brevity, we focus on the key knowledge outcomes not the key skills

Conclusion

Access to adequate food at all times is a basic human right. When consistent access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food is not supported, people's basic rights have been denied and their health and welfare will be compromised. Local governments and non-government organisations, including the Right to Food Coalition, are working to secure the full enjoyment of the right to adequate food in Australia for all people living in this country. A number of opportunities exist for teachers to discuss the issues of food security and the right to food with their students via the Food Studies curriculum.

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Further details

If you are interested in joining or learning more about the Right to Food Coalition, please contact righttofoodcoalition@gmail.com or visit www.righttofood.org.au

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