

# Strengthening resilience in response to COVID-19: A call to integrate social reproduction in sustainable food systems

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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has revealed new tensions and exacerbated old fragilities in global food systems, characterised by the systemic socio-economic reliance on invisible, unpaid and devalued work. We argue that, in the same way environmental concerns have become integral to the Sustainable Food Systems agenda, a social reproduction approach, informed by geographies of care, are essential for a critical analysis and the search for alternatives. By linking analytical concepts to examples from social movements, the commentary calls for a paradigm shift and a new research agenda involving these critical perspectives on resilient and sustainable food systems.

## RÉSUMÉ

La pandémie de COVID-19 a révélé de nouvelles tensions et exacerbé d'anciennes fragilités dans les systèmes alimentaires mondiaux. Celles-ci se caractérisent par une dépendance socio-économique systémique à un travail invisibilisé, non-payé, et dévalué. Des préoccupations environnementales sont devenues partie intégrale du programme de Systèmes Alimentaires Durables. Nous postulons que, similairement, une perspective de reproduction sociale, fondée sur des géographies de *care*, est essentielle à la formulation d'une analyse critique et à la recherche d'alternatives. En connectant des concepts analytiques aux exemples tirés des mouvements sociaux, ce commentaire appelle à l'adoption d'un changement de paradigme et d'un nouveau programme de recherche qui tiendrait compte de ces perspectives critiques sur des systèmes alimentaires robustes et durables.

**KEYWORDS:** Food systems; social reproduction; geographies of care; food activism; COVID-19

## Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has brought into focus the existing fragility of global food systems and exposed the reliance on invisible, unpaid, and devalued work within global food supply chains. With the origin of the pandemic partly residing within the food sector (Andersen et al. 2020; IPES-Food 2020), this crisis raises the need to interrogate how food is produced, distributed,

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consumed and disposed of. This is an opportunity to rethink food systems more broadly in relation to social reproduction and care ethics.

Social reproduction refers to the “fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life” (Katz 2001, 711) that constitutes “the daily and generational renewal of life that is essential to sustaining societies and their economies” (Cohen and Macgregor 2020, 8). A social reproduction approach explores and interrogates the complex social processes and human relations that underpin the reproduction of labour (Bhattacharya 2017). Similarly, the ethics of care can be understood “as a social practice that is essential to the maintenance and reproduction of society” (Streuning 2002, 87). In geographies of care, care ethics is understood as spatially and temporally specific, embedded in social connections as well as in our relationship with nature. Centering our understanding of food systems on social reproduction and care ethics enables a more holistic examination of the socio-economic hierarchies on which food systems depend and foster questions that challenge them.

Since the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, in both the Global South and the Global North, the “essential” functions of workers in the food system (e.g. migrant agricultural workers or food market retailers) conflicted with the barriers they faced to access vital social provision of basic care and support (The Guardian 2020). Furthermore, employers and authorities, imposed surveillance and control over personal freedom, at times leading to violent measures, in the name of contagion containment (Klassen and Murphy 2020; UBC 2020). Some of these practices are a mere continuation of unequal labour structures that predate the COVID-19 crisis, while other are new. Hence, global food systems during the COVID-19 crisis perpetuate and re-generate, in novel ways, workers’ vulnerabilities through racialised and unjust employment practices, substandard remuneration, and precariousness.

Unequal labour structures, entrenched in mechanisms of value generation, highlight the contradictions with the latest and currently dominant conceptualisation of the Sustainable Food Systems Approach for Improved Diets and Nutrition<sup>i</sup> (for simplicity the Food Systems Approach) (HLPE 2017). The *outcomes*<sup>ii</sup> of the Food System Approach include better access to healthier diets and improved nutrition *for the poorest and most vulnerable segments of the population*. However, labour relations and unequal power dynamics are considered in two ways: (i) in abstract terms and at the margins of the framework; (ii) instrumental to agricultural productivity. Consequently, the Food Systems Approach remains ambiguous about labour and power; this undermines a meaningful engagement with the dynamics of exploitation and oppression within the global food systems. Moreover, within the agri-nutrition literature, the care work associated with maternal and child nutrition, linked to *women and girl’s*

*empowerment*, are often situated in the *socio-cultural realm*; this separation from how global food systems generate value and operate, obfuscates women's broader roles in the generation of value in society. Importantly, some of the proposed solutions continue to be rooted in the same political and economic paradigms responsible for the current climate and socio-economic crises; again, continue to deepen existing gender, racial and global inequalities.

This commentary argues that, in the same way concerns about environmental sustainability have become an integral component of the Food System Approach agenda, social reproduction, linked to geographies of care, must become a central constituent in how we rethink and reorganise current global food systems and address the inequalities between and across its drivers, elements and outcomes. The commentary calls for a renewed focus on addressing inequitable labour relations, social connections, and collective agency in food systems research; a research agenda that fosters sustainable, just, and resilient food systems.

### **Connecting food systems thinking to social reproduction and care**

A food systems perspective centred on social reproduction reveals that social reproductive work, such as unpaid familial and communitarian activities as well as paid work in public services, has been systematically feminised, undervalued and delegitimised (Cohen and Macgregor 2020). A focus on social reproduction critiques and provides an integrative analysis of the interconnections between daily and generational reproductive and productive labour that sustains the drive for accumulation (Ferguson 2017). Moreover, it addresses the question of power, oppression, and inequality as “structurally relational to, and hence shaped by, capitalist production” (Bhattacharya 2017, 3). Therefore, a social reproduction lens views the capitalist mode of (food) production as perpetuating power relations and processes of exploitation along the lines of gender, class, race, and citizenship status.

Geographies of care, or “care ethics”, builds upon Tronto's (1993, 103) definition of caring “as a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (emphasis original)<sup>iii</sup>. The practice of care involves direct relationships between subjects and self-care that aims to respond to basic needs, nurture capacities, and avoid or relieve suffering and pain (Schwarzenbach 1996; Engster 2005). Grounded in the interdependence and social connectedness among citizens (Goodin 1995), care ethics, like a social reproduction approach, calls for a collective duty for social provisions of care based

on people's needs and the context in which their needs are embedded. Concurrently, the manner which these needs are met, attentiveness, responsiveness, and respect, underpin care ethics (Noddings 1984; Tronto 1993 2013; Walker 1998). Subsequently, care ethics research can help elucidate decision-making processes often found in multi-stakeholder food systems beyond rational risk-and-reward calculations.

This commentary proposes an integration of social reproduction and geographies of care in order to enrich food systems thinking, primarily through their methodological approaches, conceptual underpinnings, and policy impacts. First, both theories emphasize the value of multi-scalar methods. Care ethics, based in the disciplines of geography, is well positioned to understand and operationalize concepts of space, place, scale, mobility, landscape, and nature. Geographical field work and mapping of people and places enable a multi-scalar examination of separations between consumers, food and natural resources, and the workers involved under "corporate food regime" (Akram-Lodhi 2012). Geographies of care also facilitate a space within food systems thinking to connect the emotional, ecological, and symbolic dimensions of food and ethical foodscapes (Bedore 2018; Zara et al. 2020). Building on these aspects, a social reproduction approach enables linking local processes to global transformations, such as financialised capitalism, labour informatisation and migratory trends (Stevano 2018). These tools help analyse the vertical linkages and feedback mechanisms between and across the multiple activities and drivers of global food systems and, therefore, allow a meaningful engagement with mechanisms of exploitation and oppression.

Second, both theories highlight that the pandemic has magnified the values of reproductive labour and the growing concern of care within food systems. Both oppose the notion of reproductive work as the feminised and private work within the household. They also recognize that the systematic devaluation of care work is disproportionately burdening ethnic minorities, immigrants, and women (Hochschild 2003; Tronto 2013). However, they take different and complementary approaches. Care ethics asks questions about the social relations of care provisioning (i.e. Who provides care? What is the relationship between the carer and the recipient of care?). It also explores the connections of these social relations with the locations where care is provided. At a broader scale, a social reproduction approach challenges the imposed dualism between public and private spheres and between accumulation and social reproduction,. These combined tools allow us to understand the historically and geographically specific architecture through which care is provided and challenge the spatial and conceptual boundaries of work and care (Bakker 2007).

Third, both theories can contribute transformational policy and political changes in food systems. In negotiating for more resilient food systems, focusing on social reproduction allows for a broader understanding of the key processes necessary to extract labour surplus from the working poor (Mezzadri 2020). This is fundamental to question the current capitalist labour structure and to “understand and rethink labour policy and labour politics in the age of global labour informalisation, [that] spreads across the Global South, but also increasingly so in the Global North” (Mezzadri 2020, 159). Geographies of care enable a process for policies to meet the needs of all involved in the food system through contextually appropriate, attentive, responsive, and respectful dialogues and accountability that are closely linked with the cultural, social, historical, and ecological contexts (Lawson 2007). Together, the two approaches provide the analytical lens and tools that connect the personal, the social, and the political aspects of our inquiry in food system thinking.

### **From local actions to global transformations: Nigerian food markets**

COVID-19, like other crises before, has reaffirmed the importance of local action, where our theoretical arguments gain meaning. Using the case of Nigerian food markets during COVID-19 and historical examples of (food-related) social movements, this section: (i) employs methodological aspects of the integrated framework; (ii) expands on the blurred boundaries between work and care; (iii) looks at contextual social connections taking place between actors in food market spaces and how they shape social provisions of food, shelter, clothing, health care and other socio-cultural practices; and finally (iv) discusses the implications this integrated perspective brings on policy and measures during the crisis.

The multi-scalar dynamics of social reproduction and care within food production, processing, and sale are aptly represented when looking at food markets in Lagos city, where over 40% of the food sold in the country passes through, and feeds the majority of the 21 million people in the state (Abayomi 2020). Women play the leading role in the management of these markets and in the sale of food, as is common throughout west Africa. These highly dynamic spaces are severely disrupted by COVID-19, where rising food and transportation costs, restrictions on movement and market closures have had significant impact on the population and the already constrained food system (HRW 2020; Akpan 2020). Moreover, our partners<sup>iv</sup> have reported instances where police enforcement of policy, introduced to control the spread of the virus, has used force against traders and retailers at food markets, which was already the site of physical and sexual violence prior to the crisis (Iruoma 2019).

Applying the lens of social reproduction and care ethics to the example of food markets in Lagos, three important areas for research and action become evident. First, drawing on the authors' fieldwork experience in Lagos' food markets, it becomes clear that these markets not only provide space for the functions of sale and consumption, but also represent spaces where productive and reproductive labour are evidently intertwined; the provision of food, income generation, and care work (e.g. childcare, healthcare, advice and support) is all exchanged among traders, retailers, and consumers. The boundaries between work and care, public and private are blurred.

Second, our example of market spaces in Lagos underscores the importance of social connections used between traders, retailers, and consumers to meet vital care needs of each other and the population more broadly. For example, Forsythe et al. (2016, 2015) describe the important relations between Nigerian gari<sup>v</sup> processors and trading associations that enabled women to buy and sell food in bulk and on credit. Furthermore, these networks function through attentive, responsive, and respectful interactions, and provide financial and social support for funerals and healthcare needs. These networks are likely playing a significant role in the collective response and repair of the livelihoods and food systems during and after the pandemic.

Finally, the framework sheds light on the reasons for absence of care ethics in policy responses, both pre and during COVID-19. Stringent measures and policies in response to the pandemic impact people differentially. Reports of exacerbation of abuse and penalties experienced by market women reveal a state-sanctioned approach that is in opposition to care. On the one hand, the food sector is protected by the state during the crisis, on the other hand, the livelihoods of retailers and traders were, and are, threatened by stringent policies. This example highlights how policy decisions taken by viewing labour relations in abstract terms can produce contradictory and brutal outcomes.

The contested space within Lagos food markets is one of the many examples of everyday survival and resistance that women experience. In the rich history of women's social activism throughout the country, food production and trade has been an organising factor for protest against international and national actors. For example, during the 'Women's War' of 1929 women's food market networks were used to organise a revolt against a colonial tax on food staples and textile for women's clothing (Korieh 2010; Andrade 1990). More recently in the Nigeria Delta region, women tapioca retailers successfully organised widespread protests against international petroleum companies for their role in, and ambivalence towards, increasing poverty and high male unemployment in the region. Outside west Africa, notable

examples of impactful women grassroots movements include the land struggles of Dalit women in India and indigenous women in Guatemala (IDSN 2020; Srivastava 2005; Action Aid 2013; Forsythe and Wellard 2014). These examples demonstrate that a crisis, like COVID-19, can provide an impetus and an opportunity to build connections across grassroots movements, shape supportive and effective national policies, and build transnational solidarity for a resounding internationalist response.

### **Future opportunities and implications**

The persistent failings of capitalism, of which global food systems are a part of, have been generated and accelerated by unfettered accumulation, which tends to destabilise the very process of social reproduction on which it relies (Fraser 2017). The pandemic has hastened and heightened the effects. This commentary calls for broader food systems thinking that brings to the fore the connections between reproductive and productive work, the underlying oppressive socio-economic relations, and the ethics of care to counter such challenges. We see three main implications from this effort. First, an integrated approach of social reproduction and geographies of care can help bridge the, previously siloed, sociological literature on food, as a collective good, and the agricultural, health, and environmental nexus that is dominant in food systems research. Second, building knowledge capacity in methods and metrics that integrate the proposed critical lenses can further applications of multi-scalar approaches in food system research. In turn, this will provide a multi-disciplinary platform to build evidence for food policy reforms. Third, this approach presents local actors and workers who take part in the food system as global agents of change. Local activism and collective actions in food movements are the inspiration and foundation which inform the needs of the proposed paradigm shift. By centering food systems on social reproduction and geographies of care, we move beyond a focus on capitalist economic relationships towards a more nuanced critique and necessary actions to strengthen future food systems.

### **Acknowledgement**

The authors wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers who provided feedback on an earlier drafts of this article.

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<sup>i</sup> This commentary recognises the rich body of literature on food systems thinking that predates the current formulation of the Sustainable Food Systems Approach for Improved Diets and Nutrition (HLPE 2017) and that is centred on labour and livelihoods (i.e. Food Regimes (Friedman and McMichael 1989). However, our commentary is explicitly directed to the latest and currently dominant that is shaping development practices and policies aimed at addressing malnutrition. For a review of the main narratives of mainstream food system approaches see Béné et al. (2019).

<sup>ii</sup> We report in italic the Food Systems Approach terminology (HLPE 2017).

<sup>iii</sup> Resonating with the geographies of care approach (Lawson 2007), feminist ecological economics recognises the mutually reinforcing connections between the exploitation of workers and the exploitation of nature and other species (Di Chiro, 2008; Perkins, 2007). They argue for a commitment to a new ethics that is rooted in the *needs* of everyday life and criticize the commoditisation of such needs (Mies and Shiva 2014).

<sup>iv</sup> Confidential telephone conversations with colleagues based in Lagos as part of ongoing project work in southern and south west Nigeria.

<sup>v</sup> Processed cassava product and staple food in south west of Nigeria