

Bright Nkrumah, *Seeking the Right to Food: Food Activism in South Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781009011174 (paper); ISBN: 9781316519790 (cloth); ISBN: 9781009019002 (ebook)

Bright Nkrumah's *Seeking the Right to Food* is a timely and provocative study of food activism which suggests short-, medium-, and long-term measures for mobilising disempowered groups in South Africa, and beyond, to reclaim their inherent right to food. The fundamental question that animates the book centres on why South Africa is nationally food secured, and yet millions of South Africans are food insecure (p.21). The book is structured around nine chapters that include real-life historical and contemporary foundations, ethnographic case studies, and in-depth insight into the workings of food activism in South Africa. The author identifies a problem, namely that "the right to food paradigm is increasingly being eclipsed by other rights, as scholars and policymakers shift their attention towards the growth of dominant civil/political and social/economic rights" (p.xiii-xiv). He therefore "provides a wider discursive analysis into critical undernutrition issues, from the cause(s) of chronic hunger to planning and policy interventions" (p.21) and, indeed, activism.

Nkrumah makes an epistemological departure from approaches that citizens, scholars, and human rights practitioners typically envisage by not only "advocating for litigation and moral appeals as a means of improving the lot of the poor" but also "arguing for a rehabilitation of the notion 'right to food' as quintessential to human development and welfare" (p.xiv). At the heart of his study is the fundamental argument that "freedom from hunger, like other liberties [and rights], can only be achieved through coercive authority of political and social institutions to respond to the needs of the impoverished" (ibid.). Nkrumah claims that "states have (inter)national obligations to operationalise food programmes, monitor the prices of food or provide the poor with the means of generating income or land for own production" (p.7). Hence, he insists that prioritising the food needs of its citizens is not some sort of charity by the state but rather a mere fulfilment of the state's duty. As a result, when the state defaults on this duty, it becomes imperative for citizens to demand that their food needs be met. And because many citizens, even beyond South Africa, are simply unaware of their rights, the author takes a

scholar-activist approach in advocating food activism as a proactive way to help South Africans understand their rights and improve food security conditions in the country.

Seeking the Right to Food is thematically divided into four parts. The first part, Chapters 1-4, is foundational and establishes the philosophical and normative basis for how food activism is conceived. The introductory chapter offers broad conceptual and historical foundations of global food security. Here, Nkrumah introduces his audience to the right to food (RTF) which is “basically an inherent right of households and individuals to have access to the means ... to feed themselves, rather than the right to a basket of mere grains or a particular number of calories” (p.6). This chapter addresses the disconnection between policy grandiloquence and practical implementation in the human rights debate on South Africa’s food (in)security, especially within the context of the country’s racial history and transition to democracy. Chapter 2 presents a theoretical definition and wide-ranging survey of food activism, seeking to understand the conditions of its emergence and popularity. Nkrumah demonstrates that the denial of rights or entitlements often incites mass demonstration of discontent. In the third chapter, he surveys several food activism strategies. Specifically, he points to the effectiveness of India’s Right to Food Campaign (RFC) due to its blending of different forms of activism including petition writing, demonstration, “litigation, advocacy, collective action, and lobbying [to influence the adoption of the 2013 National Food Security Act in India] as a means of alleviating hunger” (p.57). Nkrumah concludes the chapter by prescribing the RFC as a blueprint for food activists in and beyond South Africa. Chapter 4 explores the role of non-state actors in coercing the South African government “to adopt proactive legislation and effective institutions to improve food insecurity” (p.22). The author draws from the experiences of three previous activist movements—#FeesMustFall (FMF), the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), and Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM)—“to understand why South Africa has not yet experienced large-scale mobilisation around food security” (p.22) despite the country’s “activist judiciary, rampant dissents, and several nongovernmental organisations purporting to have food security mandates” (ibid.).

The second part of the book investigates various policy and institutional setbacks to the right to food as well as possible solutions to these. This section, along with the remaining parts,

addresses the question of how citizens can instigate reform of food policy in South Africa. Chapter 5 discusses various legal impediments to the operationalisation of RTF into a justiciable right and argues that in order to secure RTF's enforcement, access to food must be connected to other socioeconomic rights like water, health, and education, among others. Chapter 6 situates food insecurity within the problematic contexts of colonial legacies, citizen neglect, the contemporary lack of political engagement with issues surrounding food security, and poor communication between the various government departments responsible for enacting policies that impact food security in South Africa. Chapter 7 situates the author's narrative within gender, race, and class in discussing land expropriation and reforms. Here, Nkrumah identifies the challenges that smallholders, especially women, face in accessing land for food production, while critiquing the prevalent notion that persistent hunger is endemic to rural communities: urban residents are not somehow "immune". The author interrogates the question of whether "transferring land without compensation from previously advantaged (white population) to previously disadvantaged black Africans is the panacea for alleviating poverty, inequality, and persistent hunger" (p.22). He concludes by discussing how land (re)distribution could serve as an exit strategy from the historic policies which dispossessed rural populations of land and forced them into migrant labour, food insecurity, and poverty.

The third part of the book, Chapter 8, makes a conscientious case for the food insecure populace within the contexts of ethics, inequality, social contract, and humanity. It addresses the question of whether "states and affluent members of society have a moral obligation to provide for the impoverished" (p.23). The author argues for a revision of how the state and wealthy individuals can play their part in providing for the underfed through taxation, corrective action, compensatory justice, charitable contributions, and policy shifts. The author also suggests the institution of a welfare system that encompasses quality education, skills development, job creation, and land (re)distribution to empower recipients and help them emerge from their plight. The book's final part, Chapter 9, examines the need for extra legislation to address food insecurity, despite the plethora of existing policies claiming to do the same. Nkrumah recommends the adoption of "an overarching policy instrument" to address the three-pronged problem of unemployment, poverty, and inequality at the heart of food insecurity in South

Africa. However, he anticipates the potential unwillingness of the state to take this step. The author proposes various proactive courses of action to be taken by the people and non-state actors towards the adoption of a “unified food security instrument and institution” (p.23) which he believes would coerce the state into responding.

This book has numerous strengths. The author is meticulous in the way he locates hunger and food activism from a human rights-based perspective—the emphasis that “the right to food and other rights (broadly construed) are inextricably linked, and not mutually exclusive imperatives” (p.xiv). Nkrumah persuades the reader to constantly think of the impoverished and the need to safeguard their access to sufficient food and advance their general human rights. Moreover, the author returns to important themes over the chapters as the reader’s understandings of food activism are layered up within different theoretical, comparative, historical, and (post)colonial contexts. The simplicity of the language in the book enriches its readability making it relatable to a non-professional audience. Importantly, Nkrumah globalises food activism in the way he draws from international norms and practices; for instance, he incorporates detailed case studies from India in his study. This comparative approach is valuable since hunger is a global phenomenon. The book’s practical lessons can be applied to other African countries, and indeed, to several regions in the Global North and South, as they seek to advance social justice, food security, and human dignity.

Seeking the Right to Food fills a gap in contemporary dialogues on food (in)security in Africa. Nonetheless, for a study primarily focused on food activism and “inspired by the daily struggles and deprivations in South Africa” (p.xiv), it comes as a surprise that voices of South Africans who speak to these struggles and engage in activism are not more directly represented or mentioned. Analysing South African people’s voices of protest in greater detail would have further enriched the book. Nonetheless, Nkrumah deserves high praise for his substantial contribution to the growing body of scholarship on food security, justice, and activism. Indeed, *Seeking the Right to Food* is informative, educative, and incites readers to action. It will greatly interest local and international food justice and security researchers, nutrition scholars, activists, and the general public.

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