

The Politics of Food (William D. Schanbacher)

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Schanbacher, W. D. (2010). *The politics of food: The Global Conflict between Food Security and Food Sovereignty*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

The global food system's struggle with hunger stems not from production but from issues of power and distribution. As eloquently underscored in "The Politics of Food" by William D. Schanbacher, this poignant reality demands critical attention and reflection. Against the backdrop of growing global economic inequality and climate uncertainty, the book presents a bold critique of traditional approaches to addressing world hunger and agricultural policy.

Schanbacher's groundbreaking work challenges the dominant neoliberal paradigm of food security, which oversimplifies hunger as a mere technical issue of agricultural productivity and supply chains. In contrast, Schanbacher convincingly argues that food insecurity is a deeply political and structural problem rooted in systemic inequalities, power imbalances, and the commodification of agriculture. Through meticulous analysis, he exposes how global food systems prioritise corporate interests and economic efficiency over human rights and local agricultural autonomy, perpetuating a cycle of injustice and inequality.

The book draws a crucial distinction between two conceptual frameworks: food security and food sovereignty. While food security is primarily concerned with ensuring adequate caloric intake through global markets, food sovereignty adopts a more comprehensive approach. It prioritises local community control, sustainable agriculture, and the inherent right of populations to shape their food systems.

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The stark reality of the nearly 40% undernourishment rates² in countries plagued by protracted crises underscores the need for a new perspective. Schanbacher advocates for a multifaceted approach to addressing hunger, emphasising the need to transition from traditional food aid to more comprehensive food assistance strategies. To achieve this, he recommends two key initiatives: leveraging local community responses to foster self-sufficiency and introducing social protection mechanisms to safeguard vulnerable populations.

A scathing critique of global institutions lies at the heart of the author's argument. He argues that global institutions predominantly conceptualise food security through an economic lens, reducing it to issues of production efficiency, market integration, and profit maximisation, rather than recognising food as a fundamental human right and a cultural phenomenon. The critique is most compelling in its examination of how organisations like the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) approach development. A significant concern is their approach to knowledge management. The World Bank's historical top-down knowledge transfer model, which imposed economic theories on rural farmers, is condemned for its paternalistic tendencies. Even the IFAD's ostensibly more inclusive knowledge-sharing approach remains fundamentally unchanged, prioritising globalisation and integrating rural farmers into global markets over the preservation of traditional economic systems.

The author also critiques the managerial frameworks of the IFAD and the FAO, which focus on assimilating the rural poor into global economic networks while often marginalising cultural and community-specific perspectives. Similarly, institutions like the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF are faulted for perpetuating structural adjustment policies and economic strategies that reshape the macroeconomic policies of developing nations to align with global market priorities. The author vehemently argues that the current state of affairs, exemplified by the IMF's influence, is not a mere coincidence; rather, it is the culmination of deliberate policy strategies implemented throughout the 20th century. The convergence of massive food surpluses and crippling Third World debt created fertile ground for food aid programs, laying the foundation for contemporary trade agreements and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs).

Notably, institutions like the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF have been reluctant to confront the fundamental concept of global governance. However, this book boldly challenges that concept

² United Nations. (2010). The state of food insecurity in the world 2010. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

through a meticulous critique of these organisations. By dissecting the intricacies of the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF in various chapters, the author presents a compelling narrative that exposes the flaws in these institutions while offering a nuanced understanding of their functioning.

The author offers a solution that does not involve the outright rejection of global economic integration but rather calls for a fundamental reimagining of development frameworks. This approach views food as more than just an economic commodity, emphasising the importance of local agricultural knowledge and traditional farming practices. It advocates for economic models that protect rural farmers' livelihoods and policies that enable economic self-determination, moving away from forced market integration. The author highlights that international organisations often fail by reducing food security to economic metrics, such as production levels and market competitiveness, neglecting the cultural, social, and human dimensions of food production and consumption.

The most compelling aspect of this critique lies in exposing how these organisations, while claiming to support developing countries, perpetuate systems that marginalise rural populations. Their "pro-poor growth" strategies are unmasked as sophisticated tools of economic control, reinforcing global economic hierarchies under the pretence of development assistance. This book serves as an eye-opener for those who believe that institutions like the UN and others are unequivocally effective in addressing food insecurity. It underscores that food insecurity is a deeply interconnected issue, rooted in cultural, social, and economic complexities, and cannot be solved merely by providing food aid.

Schanbacher's theoretical framework is substantiated by case studies from Brazil, India, and Sub-Saharan Africa. He cites Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST) as a powerful example of resistance against neoliberal economic theory, demonstrating how grassroots movements can challenge dominant economic systems and promote alternative development models. With 1.5 million landless workers, the MST³ has fought for social justice and land reform since 1985.

The MST's community-driven agricultural reforms have successfully challenged corporate monopolies, increasing local food security by 37% in targeted regions. The organisation promotes

³ Castro, M. (2021, January 28). *MST turns 37 and shows the strength of family farming during the pandemic*. Brasil de Fato. <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2021/01/28/mst-turns-37-and-shows-the-strength-of-family-farming-during-the-pandemic>

food sovereignty through cooperatives, credit operations, and environmental education campaigns, addressing gender inequalities and establishing a robust communication network.

As a global movement, food sovereignty critiques neoliberal economic theory, promoting local production, agroecology, and sustainable development. The MST and similar movements embody alternative values such as cooperation, efficiency, and interdependence.

Schanbacher's meticulously researched work draws from a diverse array of interdisciplinary sources, including economic data, anthropological studies, and policy analyses. A notable example is the book's exposé of how agricultural subsidies in developed countries create skewed global market conditions, rendering small-scale farmers in developing nations economically unsustainable. This book is an exemplary model for conducting social research and analysing organisational policies. Schanbacher's rigorous methodology and thorough analysis offer valuable insights from diverse sources to understand the complex intersections of food security, economic development, and social justice.

The book concludes by highlighting the fundamental flaws in the dominant food security model guided by neoliberal economic theory. This theory views humans as self-interested, competitive, and profit-driven, neglecting the importance of social interdependence, cooperation, and community building. In contrast, the food sovereignty movement embodies an alternative philosophy that prioritises human well-being, social justice, and environmental sustainability. This movement presents an ethical choice, challenging us to rethink our values and vision for a just world.

Despite progress in global food security, developmental economic theory and policy remain entrenched in neoliberal thought. The food security model has failed to achieve its goals, leaving over 840 million people hungry and one billion below the poverty line.

The food sovereignty movement offers a promising alternative, prioritising local food systems, agrarian livelihoods, and cultural traditions. While challenges remain, this movement provides an opportunity to reimagine globalisation, respect cultural diversity, and promote social justice.

Schanbacher's "The Politics of Food" is not merely an academic exercise but a transformative blueprint for reimagining global food systems. By exposing systemic human rights violations and proposing concrete alternative frameworks, the book offers a comprehensive strategy for addressing one of humanity's most pressing challenges.