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Hidden Hunger

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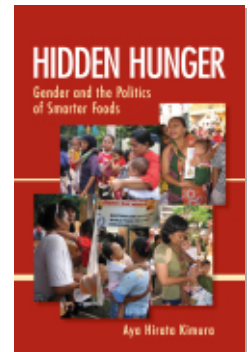
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Conclusion

The attention of the nutrition community and the resources of donors are more attracted by the glamour of micronutrients, a largely technical and often top-down solution, than by the politically sensitive business of poverty alleviation, people's empowerment, and equity.

—C. Schuftan, V. Ramalingaswami, and F. Levinson, *Lancet*, 1998

A mother of four children (eleven, six, three, and two) is talking to me in a Jakarta neighborhood. She tells me: “My husband is a clerk—works at a store. He gets 15,000 Rupiah a day. But we need at least 10,000 Rupiah for food. We eat *nasi uduk* [rice steamed with coconut] or noodles in the morning, *ken-tang kukus* [steamed potato] for lunch, and, for evening, sometimes we eat, sometimes we don't.” Although she looks healthy, and I note she is wearing pink lipstick, the two and three year olds are very thin and seem to have health problems. Her place is a two-story shack and very small, perhaps six by ten feet, but her parents and her three brothers stay there as well. They don't have a bathroom, and MCK (the public bathroom) tends to be full, so the family bathes in the river, which to me looked heavily polluted with greenish-brown water and floating garbage. I wonder about its impact on infections that could be related to micronutrient deficiencies. Besides her husband's meager wage, this mother complains about the cost of schooling. For elementary school, the monthly fee is about 15,000 Rupiah, but she also has to pay for transportation (kids take *mikrolet* bus) and books (“could be 100, 000 Rupiah—they need to be Xeroxed”). She also laments the high cost of rice. She also needs to buy water for cooking and drinking.

This mother, like many other mothers I interviewed, used Promina and Nestlé porridge for her children's meals. She also received the World Food Programme's fortified cookies. Obviously, these products added micronutrients to their diet. Many mothers liked the aid food because, after all, who does not like free stuff? On some level, it is easy to see how such programs have become popular in developing countries. However, such focus on “missing micronutrients” and the use of fortification and biofortification as the solution has important

consequences. Like other charismatic nutrients and nutritional fixes that came before them, micronutrients and fortified and biofortified products are often so simple, straightforward, and tangible that other possibilities become invisible or unattractive. By defining missing micronutrients as the problem, a world is created where issues such as poverty slip away from the policy discussion. By channeling resources into the delivery of micronutrients, the opportunity to address other issues as the underlying cause of hunger is lost. By defining poor women as the problem and the object of policy intervention, there is little incentive to include them as agents of policy with insights and valuable inputs. Various issues that the mother spoke of in the above interview—the rising price of food, school fees, low wages, costly drinking water, and the lack of hygienic living—are left unaddressed when fortified cookies and porridges dominate the conversation about food policy. These remain as the unfortunate, but remote, background to hidden hunger.

Nutritionism brings a subtle but profound change in how we talk about food and health, and consequently how food is made a target of particular kinds of interventions; it has thus changed the landscape of food politics in developing countries. I have attempted to show the operation of nutritionism in the fields of international policy (chapters 2 and 3), national policy (chapter 4), and in three commodity examples in Indonesia (chapters 5–7). These chapters highlighted the indispensable role of nutritionism in translating and acting on food insecurity in the developing world. By privileging nutritional science as the foremost authority to diagnose and control the Third World food problem, nutritionism has become a particular lens through which we see food insecurity in developing countries. It is an art of managing the representation of the “problem” of the Third World food and people.

What is striking about nutritionism is its influence in the powerful institutions of society, from the market to government to science. In each field, nutritionism has an important function. I have shown how nutritionism fits well with the logic of the market. That scientific reductionism translates well into economic reductionism is not new in food politics. Agrofood scholars such as Kathleen McAfee (2003) have pointed out the link between biotechnology’s reductionist tendency and its business potential, and historians of nutritional science such as Rima Apple (1996) have found that the development of nutritional science in the United States has been linked to the historical growth of the market for vitamin-based products. Scientific reductionism is also integral to the commodification of food (Friedmann 1999; Beardworth and Keil 1997). By erasing the “social life” (Appadurai 1988) of food, reductionism refashions food and agriculture into manipulable and tradable “things” amenable to the logic of

the market place (Goodman and Redclift 1991). Furthermore, we have seen how nutritionism particularly resonates with neoliberalism. The food industry is well positioned to argue their expert status in adding nutrients to food products and marketing them, and partnership with the private sector and market-based solutions to social problems have been increasingly seen as preferable in international development.

We have seen that the cultures of government and bureaucratic organizations have further provided a fertile field for nutritionism. Nutritionism, to borrow the title of James Scott's (1998) book, helps one to "see like a state." It makes a complex food problem legible, manageable, and controllable by simplifying it into a matrix of biomedical parameters. For instance, we have seen how bureaucrats, international organizations, and nonprofit organizations have found the advantages of being able to simplify the food problem into a nutritional problem, because it has meant that the problem could be operationalized as a matter of identifiable and quantifiable nutrients. Such "translations" have made designing and evaluating food policy programs more manageable and, importantly, have made the claims of these programs' success and effectiveness more convincing. In international development, furthermore, the motivation to streamline food policy programs also has come from the recent drive for "evidence-based" programs as a part of larger neoliberal accountability politics (Graham 2002). In this context, nutritionism has enabled development program officers to articulate how much nutrient-specific programs, such as WFP cookies and instant noodles for women and children, have delivered to the target population, if not how much the programs have actually improved their health. Governments have thus also been able to obtain "objective" measures of food projects that satisfy the requirements of international donors who worry about so-called development leakage and corruption.

Furthermore, from nutritional science's point of view, nutritionism is tremendously important for academic disciplinary "boundary making" (Gieryn 1983). That is, nutritionism confers the ability to define the problem as a "nutritional" one. Nutrients, such as iron and vitamin A, can be thought of as "actants"—things that help scientists build technoscientific networks—because they embody their unique object of study and social contribution (Latour 1987). By carving out a field of expertise that belongs solely to nutritional scientists, nutritionism has helped to elevate the prestige and relevance of their field. By formulating the food problem as a nutritional problem, nutritional scientists' prestige increased vis-à-vis other academic disciplines and in the international food community. And this is a particularly relevant issue because, as James Levinson (1999) points out, nutritional science has long striven to gain legitimacy and relevance in the business of development. In Indonesia, for instance, the

nutritional sector had struggled against the agriculture and population sectors and their neo-Malthusian paradigm. For experts within the development apparatus or in developing countries, their relevance to “development” has critically shaped their professional fates, and nutritionism helps to assert nutritional science’s contribution in the international development sector.

In contrast to the converging forces of these powerful institutions in society—the market, the state, and science—what is absent are the poor and the hungry themselves. One important consequence of nutritionism that I want to underscore is that it tends to create a space where only experts can define and prescribe for the Third World food problem. For instance, we saw how various charismatic nutrients in their time dominated food policy debates, foreclosing other possibilities to understanding the food problem. The absence of the poor themselves in telling their stories of hunger and malnutrition is hard to ignore in all the case studies that I examined in the context of Indonesia, although their well-being is discursively highlighted by the expert community and the food industry. Instead, the feeding and dietary practices of the poor and the hungry themselves, particularly women and mothers, come under scientific scrutiny. Women tend to be held accountable for not feeding children and their family properly while the food industry emerges as the savior of the hungry and the malnourished and as a suitable partner in food policymaking.

The power of such exclusive expert discourse derives not only from its institutional base in the market, government, or science, but critically from being taken for granted and naturalized. Yet experts do not have to be the only legitimate voices in defining the nature of the problem and in creating solutions. This book’s objective has been in part to describe the phenomenon, but also to point out its particularity and open-endedness. There are moments in which the blind spots of nutritionism surface, revealing the contradictions and tensions within, the destabilizing moments, and hinting at alternative spaces.

Contradictions of Nutritionism

Nutritionism has many blind spots, and I have highlighted their political and social implications. As an adjunct professor at Tulane School of Public Health and a founding member of the People’s Health Movement, Claudio Schuftan (1999) notes, “One can rightly wonder if this [micronutrient focus] represents an attempt to avoid the more difficult choices and challenges in the battle against malnutrition and—in the name of nutrition—focusing more on its more achievable areas of impact thus choosing the relatively easier path to staying involved in nutrition work.” But even when remaining within the dominant biomedical

model, there were many issues that I thought paradoxical, and in this section, I want to summarize four issues.

First, when malnutrition is addressed by focusing on the micronutrient makeup of food, what is often hidden from view is the general lack of food and calories. In fact, some experts have criticized the focus on micronutrients by suggesting that it has unjustifiably shifted crucial resources away from combating protein and calorie malnutrition. In the *Lancet*, Schuftan, Ramalingaswami, and Levinson (1998, 1812) criticized the current trend and pointed out that “it is clear that we have, all too often, neglected the over-riding issue of inadequate calorie intake and its determinants which continue to take such an enormous toll on vulnerable populations.” For them, the popularity of micronutrients is rooted in a quick-fix approach, while protein-energy malnutrition, which is more difficult to tackle, has been neglected. We saw this concern materialize in Indonesia. While the Indonesian government was spending much of its nutrition budget on fortified food, and nutritional experts were discussing the need to move to a “new paradigm” of micronutrients, local newspapers exposed various cases of the old type of hunger, with its visible signs of malnutrition (TEMPO 2005a, TEMPO 2005b, GATRA 2005). The lack of attention to the social causes of hunger and food insecurity under nutritionism can even be seen as leading to the persistent vulnerability of marginalized communities to protein-calorie malnutrition.

Second, because nutritionism narrows attention to a “lack” of nutrition as the problematic, the emerging issue of obesity—or overnutrition—is not adequately addressed. Obesity has become a global concern both in developing as well as developed nations, and many warn of the deleterious effects of the “nutrition transition” (Haddad 2003) in the global South. In Indonesia, too, obesity has also been on the rise since the 1990s (Soekirman et al. 2003; Atmarita 2005). With their focus on the issue of deficiency, nutritionism has difficulty dealing with the coexistence of malnutrition and overnutrition in a comprehensive and holistic manner.¹

Third, we have seen more specific cases of the paradoxical implications of nutritionism. For instance, evident in the case of fortified baby food promotion was how a nutritional fix might solve one problem while creating or exacerbating others. The promotion of fortified baby food might make sense as a micronutrient strategy, but it can undermine the message of breast-feeding promotion. That is highly paradoxical, as breast-feeding promotion is the professed goal of many international organizations and national governments, including Indonesia. Of course, in the minds of nutritional scientists, there is no conflict: an enlightened mother exclusively breast-feeds for six months *and then* adds commercial complementary food that is properly fortified. Therefore, the promotion of commercial

fortified baby food and the espousal of breast-feeding do not present any contradiction. However, this clear line between before and after six months of age has little realistic application. The breast-feeding statistics summarized in chapter 7 reveal that many mothers do not breast-feed at all or stop or reduce breast-feeding earlier than the recommended six months of age. When I interviewed mothers in the Jakarta slums, it was evident that the medically correct rule was not well understood. The experts' endorsement of fortified commercial baby food might be self-defeating, as what actually lingers in the consumers' consciousness might be the message that commercial food is more nutritious and optimal.

Similarly, the distinction that experts have made between "properly fortified" and "junk" food was not so self-evident in the eyes of the mothers whom I interviewed. Technically, nutritional science only recommends properly fortified products according to the daily requirement of each age group and the prevalence of micronutrient deficiency in the country. For instance, a lot of thought went into the formulation and amount of nutrients to be added to the World Food Programme's fortified cookies and instant noodles so as to meet the nutrition requirements of Indonesian children. Although science may draw a clear line between products with proper fortification and products without, it is unclear how that distinction plays out in consumers' minds. While consumers are very sensitive to the overall nutrition appeals in advertisements, understanding of nutrition information is actually very limited. Therefore, when I asked interviewees who received the WFP's fortified aid food what they would do after the end of the program, they simply said, "Oh, we can buy at *warungs* [small vendors]" or "It's sold at *warungs*" or "Like Marie and Roma [types of cookies]." That is to say, in the minds of consumers, the WFP cookies that are "scientifically" properly fortified are no different than regular cookies without proper fortification. Officially, nutrition education was to accompany the WFP's food distribution, but it was not frequent (many of my informants did not recall it), and it did not emphasize the difference between fortified food and regular cookies and instant noodles. Regular cookies like Marie and Roma also have confusing claims such as "high in calcium" and "vitamins" on their packages. This kind of food aid, then, can be seen as creating the *habit of eating cookies* rather than the habit of eating properly fortified cookies. This was exactly what manufacturers expected. Such concern about habituation is even more justified when the majority of parents let children decide what kind of snacks to buy, which was suggested in the interviews. Therefore, to expect that this kind of food aid instills the habit of eating properly-fortified food seems far from realistic. This is also alarming based on the fact that a growing number of studies are now finding that children with *malnutrition* already eat a lot of snacks, such as fried chips, cookies, and cold drinks (Sudjasmin et al. 1993).

Fourth, nutritionism's celebration of fortification and the partnership with the private sector might not reflect the reality of the volatile global market and the behavior of private corporations in it. As I have mentioned, the food crisis in 2007–8 significantly increased the prices of commodities that are used for fortification such as wheat, oilseed, and sugar. It is ironic that when people's access to nutritious food was acutely strained, the very food products that were supposed to carry nutrients became too expensive for the poor in many countries. Furthermore, the private sector might not prove a reliable partner in fortification projects, particularly when their primary mission—profits—is jeopardized. In Indonesia, the milling industry betrayed their earlier commitment and lobbied for the suspension of fortification when it started to see it as unfavorable for business. This illustrates how the sustainability of the market-based solution needs to be scrutinized and assessed in a way that considers the increasing volatility of the global food market.

Nutritionism is seductive because it offers a technical and seemingly straightforward framing of the food problem and quick nutritional fixes for it. Because of this and its analytic limits one is blinded to the totality and complexity of the problem. As many agrofood studies scholars have pointed out, food problems in the developing (and developed) world are related to various factors including the structure of global capitalism, the system of economic and political control, and the culture of food marketing and consumption. Furthermore, nutritionism's strong belief in the power of modern science in shaping people's conduct often turns out to be naive. Policies based solely on nutritional calculations ignore the basic facts that people eat and feed for many reasons, including, but not limited to, nutrition and health. Nutritionism might be productive for short-term policy planning, but the long-term consequences of resorting to nutritionism need to be seriously considered. The global food problem is not the simple sum of several nutritional deficiencies.

A Space to Imagine the Alternatives

By dislodging the naturalized correspondence between the “reality” and any problem definition, Foucault's concept of problematization is helpful in imagining other possibilities for defining the problem and solutions. My argument in this book, that nutritionism has constrained the food problem definition and given rise to nutritional fixes, must be seen as a critical intervention to open up a space for imagining an alternative problematization in food politics.

In the introduction, I pointed out how the micronutrient turn in the 1990s did not depart from the productivist paradigm in a profound manner, despite

the seeming differences on the surface. As much as it looked like a radical break from productivist policies, the micronutrient turn failed to mount a thorough criticism of the mainstream discourse on food insecurity.

Where then do we find a truly radical praxis, an alternative to the scientized views? We can find a radically different apparatus of the contemporary food problem in grassroots social movements. “Alternative agrofood movements” (Allen 2004) in many countries have created various programs to improve the food system (Allen et al. 2003; Henderson 2000). Many peasants in developing nations are organizing themselves with concepts such as “food sovereignty” (Patel 2007) and the “right to food” (Rocha 2001). Movements to fight corporate control of plant germplasm (Shiva 1997) and land monopoly (Lappé and Lappé 2002) have also been active in many parts of the world.

These grassroots movements’ conceptualizations of the food problem and its solutions tend to differ from the reductionist ones described in this book. From the point of view of the grassroots movements, the food problem is not simply a nutrition gap or a productivity gap. Instead, they have critiqued the growing power of transnational agribusinesses, modern agriculture’s environmental pollution, and agribusiness’s harsh treatment of workers and animals. They have argued for the value of local food and the abolition of the international trade agreements that have assisted agricultural trade liberalization. They have advocated for the rights of small farmers and the importance of their control over land and other productive resources. From their point of view, technical fixes such as the Green Revolution package, fortified food, and Golden Rice, fall far short of addressing the problem of hunger and malnutrition.

I refer to these social movements, not only because they point to the possibility of different solutions, but because they are putting Foucault’s problematization concept into real action in their own praxis. While they might not use academic jargon, activists have figured out that the space to define the problem itself has enormous implications. Among various food movements, the most radical conceptual counterpart to nutritionism can be drawn from the “food sovereignty movement.”² First used by the peasant-based Via Campesina movement in the 1990s, food sovereignty refers to the “right of peoples to define their agricultural and food policy” (Desmarais 2007, 34). The movement has spread globally, and in Indonesia, too, there is a growing movement using the concept, now translated as “*kedaulatan pangan*” or food sovereignty (Winarto 2005). Pointing out that hunger was often used as a justification to push for trade liberalization, agricultural modernization, and privatization, the movement has forcefully asserted the central importance of agriculture and small-scale farmers for combating hunger and malnutrition.

The food sovereignty movement seemingly shares the same goal of the eradication of hunger and malnutrition with mainstream food insecurity discourses. Yet it profoundly differs in its approach. The movement argues that at the core of the world food problem is not the lack of food but the lack of “self-defined ways to seek solutions to local problems” by local communities (Windfuhr and Jonsén 2005, 15; Patel 2007). The Via Campesina’s definition of food sovereignty, the “right of peoples to define their agricultural and food policy,” encapsulates their insistence that the food problem is about people’s self-determination and power, which starts at the level of diagnosis of people’s own situation and of problem definition. As Patel (2007) observes, it is “a call for a mass re-politicization of food politics, through a call for people to figure out for themselves what they want the right to food to mean in their communities” (91). These activists have argued that it is the lack of autonomy and participation in defining the problem (and the solution) that ought to be considered the core of the food problem.

With the emphasis on participation and self-determination, the marginalized and the poor are no longer pigeonholed as victims. As we have seen, nutritionism has frequently marked women as victims (remember the concept of *biological victimhood*) and as recipients of food policies. In contrast, the food sovereignty movement has been able to address the importance of female participants in improving the food system rather than their victimhood. Many women have participated in decision making, helping to articulate the movement’s goals and to include gender equity as an important aspect of the food sovereignty concept (Desmarais 2004). Listen to the women in the food sovereignty movement, who forcefully declared in 2002: “We women, from various continents, representing countries of the South and the North, demand the right to be free from hunger for every woman, man, and child. We ask for the right to govern our livelihoods, and to have access and maintain control over our lands, waters, seeds, and all resources which are basic to our and our communities needs.”³ Defying nutritionism’s characterization of them as passive, biologically determined victims of malnutrition, these “victims” demand “the right to govern our livelihoods.”

This issue of participation and representation leads us back to my most profound criticism of the scientized view of food insecurity: its depoliticizing effect. For instance, nutritionism’s reductionist, technocratic, and ahistorical tendency is seductive because it can avoid more structural and hence politically sticky issues. Once within the worldview of nutritionism, it is easier to evade a social view of hunger and malnutrition that would necessarily include macroeconomic and political issues of poverty, inequality, and marginality. The poor are advised to eat better—read “more nutritious”—food rather than blaming the government, the world order, and capitalism. Nutritionism’s individual level of analysis

implies individualized responsibility, too. Locating the cause of micronutrient deficiencies, malnutrition, and hunger with the individual, rather than at the social level, nutritionism tends to shift blame onto people for making bad choices. Recall, for instance, how infant micronutrient malnutrition is typically seen as the mother's mismanagement of feeding practices, rather than the outcome of structural constraints that have limited mothers' feeding choices and living conditions. This is not to say structural factors such as poverty and inequality are not acknowledged. Rather, they are not considered the primary causes of the food problem. Cast as distant factors whose relevance to policy is not immediate, structural factors are often viewed as hindrances to getting things done. The food problem became a problem *of* food, rather than a problem *around* food. In other words, the nutritional makeup, rather than the political economy, of food defined the parameters of the possible conversations.

Paradoxically, we are, then, in critical need of languages to talk about a *food problem beyond food*. Yet this is difficult within a scientized view of food insecurity, as it tends to close, rather than open up, a space for broad-based social participation in food policy talks. For instance, nutritionism simplifies the policymaking process, not only by reducing it to biochemical aspects, but also by reducing the range of actors who are considered relevant. Scientific and technological representation replaces political representation, giving science and policy experts a wide space to represent the food problem, while leaving little room for citizens. Yet as women activists in the food sovereignty movement proclaim, the food problem is about livelihood, including, but not limited to, nutrition and food. It is only when we limit the discussion to the technical aspects of food that food reform becomes the *de facto* territory of experts.

Experts have triumphantly claimed to have uncovered hidden hunger (micronutrient malnutrition). Yet the growing demand for self-determination and democratic participation from people in food movements powerfully shows what is hidden and marginalized by such scientific triumphalism. The food problem is not only about the lack of science and modern technology, it is about livelihood and sustainability. It is not only a scientific question, it is a political question. We can truly "uncover" hunger and malnutrition, not by the national food balance sheet, dietary surveys, or biochemical experiments, but only by listening to people's—and particularly women's—voices.

