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Commentary

Global Food Inequality and Systemic Risks to Development, Human Security, and Political Stability

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This commentary reflects on the persistent global food inequality and its cascading impacts on sustainable development as part of ongoing discourses on food security and the SDGs highlighted in recent issues. Rather than restating statistical summaries, this piece provides a systems-level perspective on how structural food injustice—both globally and in Indonesia—requires transformative policy responses.

The globe makes enough food every day to feed 8 billion people. More than 700 million people go to bed hungry, which is ironic. Not because there isn't enough food being made, but because the global distribution system is dysfunctional and access is very unfair (FAO, 2023). This global food disparity has become a major concern for international organizations such as FAO and WFP, given its implications for global development and stability" (FAO, 2021; WFP, 2023). On one hand, rich countries are producing excessive amounts of food and discarding millions of tons of it, while on the other hand, poor countries continue to struggle with hunger. Not only is this a moral issue, but it is also important for the social and economic stability of the whole world.

The global food crisis is caused by more than just problems with distribution. It is also affected by systemic factors, including climate change, geopolitical conflicts, and unfair trade policies between countries (FAO, 2022). Climate change causes floods and droughts that hurt agriculture in many places in the world. War in places like Ukraine and Sudan is making problems with the global food supply system worse. At the same time, wealthier countries often provide their farmers with big subsidies to preserve their interests (UNCTAD, 2022). This makes it hard for developing countries to compete in the global market. All of this makes the framework of inequality in the world's food system even stronger.

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Food inequality's effect on society

Food imbalances around the world have big effects on society. One is the cycle of poverty that keeps going. In many developing countries, poor households can spend 60–80% of their income on food alone. In rich countries, they can spend less than 10% of their income on food (FAO, 2023). These people are the most affected when food prices go up due to problems with the global supply chain or unfair trade policies, such as export bans or huge subsidies from rich countries. For example, the global food crisis of 2008 caused rice prices to rise by more than 200%, which led to social unrest in more than 30 nations. The poorest families in Bangladesh have to cut back on food from three meals a day to two and only eat rice and salt instead of meat (World Bank, 2009).

The same thing happened during the COVID-19 epidemic. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) says that the costs of basic staples like wheat and vegetable oils went up by 30% to 50% in developing countries. This made life even harder for impoverished families (IFPRI, 2021). The World Bank surveyed in Kenya and found that more than 80% of poor urban households consumed less nutritious food in the first three months of the pandemic (World Bank, 2020).

Food shortages have driven individuals in many countries to eat less healthy foods, which will have long-term effects on their health. In low-income nations, it is becoming more common for people to consume more foods that are heavy in carbohydrates, such as white rice, cassava, or wheat flour, and low in protein and micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). About 35–40% of the calories that impoverished households in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia eat come from simple carbs. They don't eat much animal protein (FAO, 2022).

India and Bangladesh are two places where nutrition surveys show that more than 50% of women of childbearing age have anemia because they don't get enough iron and vitamin B12, which are usually found in animal foods (Global Nutrition Report, 2022). This practice gets worse because of societal conventions that say women should be the last to eat, especially when there isn't much food. A UNICEF (2022) research study in Nepal found that in 70% of homes, women eat after everyone else has done so, and in many cases, they get the smallest piece or leftovers.

Long-term effects include higher rates of stunting in children, a higher risk of pregnancy problems, a lower ability to study, and a higher risk of getting non-communicable diseases, including type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, later in life. These bad diets aren't just a matter of choice; they're a way of adapting to limited access and unfair structures in the food system.

Long-lasting Economic Losses

Food imbalances have big economic effects that people often don't perceive, in addition to social ones. Changes in food prices make it harder for farmers to plan their production, break up supply chains, and make it harder for individuals to buy things. For instance, the conflict in Ukraine caused a food crisis in 2022 that sent global wheat prices up by 50% in just a few months, which messed up the international food market (FAO, 2022).

Developing countries face a double burden: they consume a large amount of food (for example, Indonesia imports over 2 million tons of wheat annually), and they must also pay for the diseases that result from inadequate food access. According to an FAO analysis, malnutrition costs the world economy more than USD 3.5 trillion a year in lost productivity and health care expenses (FAO, 2021).

Smallholder farmers, who produce a large share of food in developing countries and play a vital role in sustaining rural livelihoods, should be the backbone of food security. However, they remain trapped in a cycle of poverty due to limited access to markets, modern technology, and price protection mechanisms (FAO, 2021; World Bank, 2020). More than 70% of farmers in sub-Saharan Africa are smallholders with less than 2 hectares of land. Yet, they only contribute around 30% of the overall agricultural output due to limited access to quality inputs, capital, and infrastructure (World Bank, 2020). This production gap does not diminish their importance; instead, it highlights the structural disadvantages they face despite their critical role in local food security.

These differences are made worse by the corporatization of farming. Four huge companies—Cargill, ADM, Bunge, and Louis Dreyfus—control more than 70% of the world's commerce in grains and staple

commodities, such as seeds and fertilizers. This supremacy enables them to control global prices and supplies, making it more challenging for importing countries and local farmers to obtain their desired products (ETC Group, 2021).

Food inequality also affects growth and investment in agriculture. Farmers, especially smallholders, are hesitant to invest in new technology or methods to increase crop productivity due to unstable crop prices. According to research by the World Bank, fluctuating commodity prices can cut agricultural investment by as much as 30% in low-income countries (World Bank, 2020).

On the other hand, large firms can predict future food prices, as seen with wheat and maize prices in 2021 and 2022. During this time, speculative investment led to food prices worldwide increasing by as much as 40%, even if the amount of food available in some areas remained relatively unchanged (UNCTAD, 2022).

Because of these changes, the agricultural sector in emerging countries is becoming less and less important. For example, in Indonesia, the share of national investment that goes to the agricultural sector has been going down since 2010, when it was about 3.4%, to just 2.1% in 2020. This is even though this industry still employs more than 27% of the country's workers (BPS, 2021).

This unfairness also exacerbates the differences between rural and urban areas. According to data from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), poverty is three times higher in rural areas than in urban ones. This is mostly because rural areas have less infrastructure, fewer ways to get to markets, and fewer reasons to invest in agriculture (IFAD, 2021).

Risks to Global Politics and Security

Food crises don't just put people's lives at risk; they also threaten stability in the world. History shows that between 2007 and 2008, food prices rose sharply, causing social upheaval in more than 40 nations, including Haiti, Cameroon, and Egypt (Lagi & Bar-Yam, 2011). A dramatic rise in the price of bread and other basic commodities in 2010 led to the Arab Spring. At the time, these foods made up more than 35% of household spending in Tunisia and Egypt. The French Revolution also had its roots in the wheat famine of 1788–1789, which caused bread prices to more than triple and led to widespread dissatisfaction.

Today, when more than half of the calories in more than 50 countries come from food imports, the political turmoil created by food shortages is becoming more and more clear. In Sri Lanka, a severe economic crisis and food shortages in 2022 led to protests across the country and the toppling of the government. This is one of the most recent examples of how food instability can challenge the stability of a state.

Climate change is making food insecurity worse in South Asia and the small island states of the Pacific. The World Food Programme (WFP) says that more than 80% of the people living on tiny islands are at risk of starvation because of increasing sea levels and damage to food infrastructure (WFP, 2022). The IPCC report also says that climate change could compel 200 million people to move by 2050, many of them because of food and water shortages.

Food security is often seen as a vital sign of political stability around the world. The Fragile States Index 2023 says that "food security shock" is one of the top reasons why 10 countries are most likely to have violence and government collapse (Peace Fund, 2023).

The World Food Programme (WFP) says that food shortages are one of the first signs of political instability and military conflict. According to WFP data, 60% of the 828 million people in the world who are chronically hungry live in countries that are at war (WFP, 2023). Countries like Yemen, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have food systems that are very weak and rely heavily on outside help.

But food aid from other countries is often used for political purposes. The UN Security Council stopped humanitarian deliveries across the border in Syria, for example, because of political vetoes. This left millions of people in combat regions without emergency food. (UN OCHA, 2022). Sanctions, embargoes, or logistical blockades have also hurt food delivery networks in Gaza and Tigray (Ethiopia), even when food is available at the national or regional level.

Being dependent on aid for a long time can lead to a cycle of dependency. According to an IFPRI study, nations where more than 25% of the population relied on food aid for more than five years saw big drops in their ability to produce goods and provide them to people (IFPRI, 2020).

Investing in local agriculture, food storage, and community-based distribution to improve food security within the country is a kind of strategic national defense. Rwanda and Vietnam are examples of countries that have gone from being assistance receivers to food exporters in less than twenty years by using self-reliance techniques and investing in their own economies.

Indonesia's Problems and Opportunities

Indonesia occupies a unique position in the global food inequality landscape. While it is classified as a lower-middle-income country, Indonesia shares structural vulnerabilities with many low-income nations—such as regional disparities in food access, high dependency on imports for key staples, and exposure to external price shocks. At the same time, it possesses the institutional capacity, fiscal space, and agricultural resources more typical of emerging middle-income economies (World Bank, 2009).

With a population of over 275 million, Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country and aspires to become a global economic power. However, it still faces complex challenges to food security. Although Indonesia produces sufficient rice overall, interregional disparities persist. According to the National Food Agency (2023), rice prices in eastern provinces such as Maluku and Papua can be 25–40% higher than in Java due to high logistical costs and inadequate infrastructure (BPS, 2023; National Food Agency, 2023).

Indonesia also relies heavily on imports for important goods. In 2023, Indonesia imported more than 2.5 million tons of soybeans and almost 250,000 tons of beef, making it one of the major importers in ASEAN (BPS, 2023). Because of this dependence, food costs in the U.S. are particularly sensitive to changes in the world market. For example, during the COVID-19 outbreak and the war in Ukraine, soybean prices went up by more than 50% in just a few months.

The global food crisis of 2008 also had a genuine effect: rice prices went up a lot, which made Indonesia's poverty rate rise to 15.4%. After that, the rate progressively went down again thanks to food stability policy actions (World Bank, 2009). But Indonesia has a lot of money to build its own food system. There are more than 7 million hectares of rice fields, a lot of tropical agroecosystems, and over 17 million households that farm and fish. If these resources are handled in a way that takes all of them into account, they might be very useful (Ministry of Agriculture, 2022).

If the government's proposed Free Nutritional Meal Program is combined with local food production, it could help bring about change. For instance, if local village goods satisfied 30% of the program's demands, it could take in more than 2 million tons of food each year and help the village economy grow.

One of Indonesia's biggest problems is turning farmland into residential and commercial areas. According to the Ministry of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning/National Land Agency (ATR/BPN), about 96,000 hectares of rice fields are lost every year, mostly in urban buffer areas such as West Java, Banten, and North Sumatra (Ministry of ATR, 2022). This event directly lowers the amount of fertile rice fields in the country, which is now about 7.4 million hectares, down from more than 8 million hectares ten years ago. Also, farmer regeneration is a very important issue. According to the 2021 BPS survey, the average age of farmers in Indonesia is 47 years old. Only 12% of young people want to engage in agriculture since they don't make enough money and don't have access to contemporary technologies (BPS, 2021).

On the other hand, big cities are starting to see new ideas based on urban farming and vertical farming. For example, the Urban Farming initiative (Urban Farming DKI) in Jakarta has reached more than 300 RW (community clusters) and communities that use hydroponic and aquaponic methods to cultivate local fish and vegetables for food (DKPKP DKI Jakarta, 2022). According to a study by Universitas Gadjah Mada, community gardens in places with a lot of people can grow up to 1 ton of organic vegetables every month. This is enough to cover the demands of hundreds of households for green food in a sustainable way (Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2021).

With the correct policy support, such as yard incentives, technological training, and simple access to markets, these kinds of models can be a big help in making cities food secure in a way that can withstand global crises.

Toward a Fair and Lasting Food System

Increasing output alone won't solve the problem of food disparity. We need to take a whole-system strategy, which includes improving distribution channels, boosting farmer cooperatives, providing small farmers with microcredit, and investing in precision agriculture technology. To improve efficiency, governments and stakeholders should consider digitizing the supply chain and using spatial data for distribution planning. The government should also support food policies that shield local businesses from global pressures, such as price protection and targeted subsidies. Indonesia can be a leader in food diplomacy on the world stage and work for a fairer trade system. Food is more than simply a business; it is the basis of human rights. There needs to be cooperation between different sectors, such as between central and regional governments, between academics and businesspeople, and between local communities and international organizations. Access to information, technology, money, and land rights are all parts of food justice that need to be realized. Subsidy programs should not only help with production but also with efficient processing, storage, and distribution. A healthy and competitive food system needs to have clear prices and safeguard consumers.

Conclusion

The fact that there is unequal access to food around the world is a sign that we all failed to protect basic human rights. It's not just a number; it's a harsh truth for millions of individuals. Indonesia needs to take a brave step towards reforming its national food system, ensuring it is fair despite its numerous problems and opportunities. Making sure that everyone has access to good food is not simply a goal for development but also a duty for all people and the future of the country. The world can create a global food system that is not only sustainable but also humanizing by prioritizing justice, sustainability, and solidarity. "Food is life" is a famous saying. Indonesia possesses essential social, cultural, and ecological assets—such as its rich agroecosystems, strong community-based practices, and large agricultural workforce—that could be further leveraged to support more sustainable food systems. However, realizing this potential will require addressing critical structural challenges, including land conversion, aging farmers, and regional inequalities.

Thus, political will and institutional coherence are essential—but not the only requirements—for building a fair and resilient national food system that may eventually serve as a model for others.

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