Title: Review of “Food Security Governance: Empowering Communities, Regulating Corporations” by Nora McKeon
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BOOK REVIEW | SARAH HUANG

Food Security Governance: Empowering Communities, Regulating Corporations
Nora McKeon


Understanding the food system is difficult due to its structural complexity. It involves numerous actors within various scales of power who engage at different junctures of food production, distribution, and consumption. Nora McKeon’s Food Security Governance: Empowering Communities, Regulating Corporations provides a food system analysis to understand the history of food issues from World War II to present time. This book reveals how the world of global food governance has addressed food security from local food systems to global commodity chains. She also identifies areas where a democratic and rights-based approach may better support the autonomy of sustainable peasant food production and local food systems. Lastly, she advocates that by understanding the structures of the dominant food system, we can better identify opportunities where the structural failures between market systems and food governance limit solutions and alternatives for creating a future food system.

McKeon examines the structures of global food governance through a careful historical analysis of how food security is framed, starting from the World War II and post-World War II period. Chapter 1 identifies three food regimes, defined by how food is situated within evolving global power systems, to reveal how rule setting and food governance are interconnected within institutions for decision making, paradigms that shape actions, and actors and ideologies who play a major role in governance. The United States makes up one such food regime by providing global food aid that simultaneously creates international alliances and global markets and facilitates further development of the agro-industrial model. Alternatives to the dominant agro-industrial model were built on ideologies of agricultural productivism and by civil society actors, including rural social movements advocating for the rights of people to healthy food produced through ecologically sound methods. Chapter 2 examines more closely how actors such as producers, farmers, distributors, and retailers are connected within the global corporate food chain. She specifically highlights how the global food chain is connected within industrialized agricultural production paradigms that have marginalized alternative production schemes such as the agro-ecological food system models of La Via Campesina.

McKeon shifts her analysis to an inclusive policy process, which requires understanding how various paradigms, such as food security, accommodate trade liberalization and Green Revolution technological solutions. She compares this to food sovereignty, which emphasizes agro-ecological approaches and control of natural resources by local producers. The analysis in Chapter 3 examines how food insecurity was defined through evidence based on food productivity, resulting in policy supporting the boosting of food productivity potential. These issues highlight how knowledge is connected to power, specifically whose evidence is listened to and how, and also who analyzes this information and feeds it to policy decision-makers.

Chapter 4 further elaborates on international food policy decision making through multi-actor governance in the Committee on Food Security (CFS), UN Global Summits, and the establishment of the High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis. These are examples of the intergovernmental processes of participation by actors to represent populations that are most affected by food insecurity. The CFS final session report in 2010 adopted an inclusive and decentralized approach specifically engaging with civil society and social movements as full participants. The CFS reform addresses four deficiencies of global food governance: fragmentation of actors, lack of inclusion for those most affected, insufficient human rights based mandates, and the dominance of productivist and free market paradigms. CFS recognizes that equity and justice requires empowerment of the vulnerable and accountability of actions. McKeon is hopeful of forums like CFS, and in Chapters 5-7, she assesses whether these claims for inclusivity and equity create an opportunity for better global food governance. Inclusivity and equity are defined as local and indigenous access, control, and development of resources and agro-ecological models within local food systems.

McKeon advocates for a bottom-up approach to reconstitute a food system that reinforces public policy, accountability, and inclusion, and that utilizes the food sovereignty movement to uproot the global hegemony and “reconstitute a territorially rooted and governed approach to food provision” (198). McKeon notes that now is the time for this type of action because the global food system is at a point of crisis and the weaknesses of the capitalist system can be reshaped. Citizen action at the global level is possible through local level action and the links between local and global food systems. The food sovereignty movement is an example of a localized movement that impacted policy choices and eventually extended to regional and national
scales. While McKeon does not explicitly state weaknesses within the capitalist system itself, she recognizes the strength of actors within alternative paradigms of agro-ecology, accountability, and defense of citizens’ collective rights. She ends on a hopeful note that in order for systemic change to occur, it requires an understanding of how dominant systems function, and where opportunities for change and action lie.

While McKeon intermittently speaks to the topics of human rights, distributive and procedural justice, and food sovereignty, she recognizes that these ideologies are marginalized within hegemonic pro-market paradigms. In order for these ideologies to gain more traction, McKeon advocates for a creation of spaces where alternatives can be developed rather than limited through capitalist production. Much like other scholars who have identified the role of food sovereignty movements and agro-ecology in fostering a more food secure system, McKeon builds on a global history of institution building and paradigm shaping that resulted in the current food governance structure today. This book will add to conversations about understanding global food systems, diverse actors, food regimes, and paradigms in order to further identify opportunities for increased local actor inclusion and participation in food governance. Readers interested in the social justice component of global food systems will enjoy McKeon’s analysis of the historical development of the current food system that is built on inequality and exploitation of labor, production, and consumption as well as her recommendations for how localized contexts and systems can be scaled up. She discusses this scaling up through gradual changes in the food system through the incorporation of values such as solidarity, peace, and relation as they build from the food sovereignty movement. These perspectives and interests are meant to echo that of social justice and solidarity principles.

Overall, McKeon’s work on the history and current state of the food system and her suggestions for the future of global food governance are a fresh take on what the future of food looks like. She identifies existing institutions and paradigms of food governance, that is, who has power to establish how we understand ‘food systems’, ‘food security’, and ‘food governance’, who decides in cases of a conflict of interest, and finally, how we address the imbalances of power for sustaining future generations. This book will help readers better understand issues within food governance as well as the evidence utilized to support these issues. It acts as a good starting point for broader conversations about the future of our food system. It will be most helpful to undergraduate and graduate students who are interested in global food studies and want a brief overview of food systems, food regimes, and various scales and actors within food governance. It is useful as a sounding board for broader conversations about how best to imagine and create a just food system. This book will also be helpful as a reference point on the complexities of global food governance as McKeon attaches a historical, scalar, temporal, and case-specific analysis of the contemporary food system. McKeon’s challenge to civil society and alternative movements leaves readers with a pang of hope and empowerment that change can be developed through shifts that take advantage of the weaknesses at the core of the capitalist-driven food system.

biography  |  Sarah Huang is a PhD student in anthropology at Purdue University. She completed an MS in cultural anthropology at Purdue University in 2016. Her MS thesis explored strategies of food security with immigrant and refugee communities in Anchorage, Alaska, to better understand diverse types of participation in a [trans]local food system. Her dissertation research will examine the effects of climate change on rural farmers’ food security with rice producers in northern and southern Vietnam. Her research interests include gender and agriculture, global food security, and sustainable livelihoods.