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Multiple meanings of "equitable food systems": food systems and discursive politics of change

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Calls to change or transform food systems have come to be widespread in recent years. With the recognition that current food systems are not only unsustainable but widely inequitable, these calls are increasingly articulated in terms of the need to craft "equitable food systems." The purpose of this study is to question how "equitable food systems" are given meaning in ongoing discourses that shape the direction of food systems change. Finding the best strategies for food systems change is a subject of intense debate, making it an inherently political affair. In this study, our strategy for knowing about these politics is the analysis of discourses through which they are expressed. Through a literature review, this article identifies four discourses driving food systems change: (a) productionism, (b) redistributionism, (c) anti-capitalism, and (d) AID: donor rescue. Drawing on insights from existing literature, the study explores these discourses in relation to equity concerns. The analysis reveals that multiple meanings of "equitable food systems" exist, hinging on varied ideas about inequity, change, and the essence of human wellbeing. Materializing into practical strategies to progress food systems change, the multiplicity of meanings implies inevitable trade-offs when one is prioritized over the other. As such, through our analysis, we contend the need for more democracy when negotiating policy directions forward. All four discourses might have some merit that could become advantageous in finding contextually appropriate pathways toward more equitable food systems. However, corporate voices and perspectives tend to be louder than those of producers, workers, and consumers, reflecting and reproducing power imbalance within policy negotiations and the global society more broadly. Bridging such a power divide is thus essential to balance out food systems change discourses to allow for conductive combinations of elements from each to be created to anchor pursuits in food systems change that truly foster more equitable ways going forward.

KEYWORDS

food systems, equity, change, discursive politics, democracy

1. Introduction

Furthering societal wellbeing commonly articulated through Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is increasingly recognized as a matter of food systems change (FAO, 2018). This is so, as multifaceted societal and environmental challenges—from hunger, poor nutrition and health, poverty, and inequality, to climate change and environmental degradation—are traceable to the way we produce, distribute, and consume food (Béné et al., 2019; Fanzo et al., 2021; UN, 2022a). However, while food systems change is becoming a mainstream development strategy, considering how to change food systems comes with multiple and diverse answers. This diversity can be attributed to varied understandings of the nature of food systems failure, be it the inability to feed the global population despite

sufficient food availability at the global level, the inability to deliver a healthy diet to all, the inability to produce equitable benefits, or concerns over environmental unsustainability associated with food production (Béné et al., 2019; UN, 2022b). According to scholars attentive to the currently asymmetrical distribution of food security and socio-economic risks and benefits, it is imperative to ensure that pathways to change align with equity concerns to avoid the production of new and reproduction of existent inequities, and thereby advance a flourishing future for all (Béné et al., 2019; Leach et al., 2020; Whitfield et al., 2021).

Equity is increasingly attached to the terminology of different food systems actors through calls to craft "equitable food systems" (UN, 2022c), essentializing inequity as a collective food systems problem. However, the idea of "equitable food systems," as much as other ideas about change, hinge on available discourses of and about food systems change that give it context and sense (Dryzek, 2013). In other words, food systems change can be understood as a struggle over meaning (Motta et al., 2018). From here, concerned with trade-offs associated with varied inclusion of equity in pursuits to change, the present study questions how "equitable food systems" are given meaning in ongoing discourses that shape directions of food systems change.

With this article, we aim to assess the embeddedness of equity concerns in food systems change pursuits. In doing so, we aim to advance the understanding of food systems change affairs as hinging on the relationship between inequity in food systems and discourses of food systems change. In the following sections, we start by presenting the background knowledge around food systems, equity, and food systems change, which leads us to the logic of this study, which we call discursive politics of change. We further provide an overview of our approach and criteria which are used to carry out the analysis of different discourses driving food systems change. Subsequently, we unpack the discourses before moving into discussing our findings, where we draw particular attention to multiple meanings of "equitable food systems," the potential trade-offs these meanings materializing into practical strategies may create, and the political implications of discursively bound food systems change.

2. Food systems, equity, and food systems change

While multiple definitions exist, most conceive of food systems to "encompass the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food products [...] that originate from crop and livestock production, forestry, fisheries, and aquaculture, as well as the broader economic, societal, and natural environments in which these diverse production systems are embedded" (FAO et al., 2022, p. 190). The interaction among actors, external drivers, and internal components of food systems leads to intended and unintended outcomes defined by environmental and socio-economic dimensions of sustainability, food security, and health (HLPE, 2017). In recent years, food systems have come to be viewed as an entry point for crafting a future that fosters human and planetary flourishing with widening recognition that unsatisfactory dynamics observed, such as persisting hunger and environmental degradation, are products of food systems functioning (Béné et al., 2019). As such, transforming food systems—inducing "profound and intentional departure from business as usual" (UN, 2019, p. xx; von Braun et al., 2021a)—is now advocated by many food systems actors and is expressed in a growing number of global agendas (HLPE, 2017, 2020; Willett et al., 2019; Food IPES ETC Group, 2021; UN, 2022b).

The desired state of food systems change is where they can deliver "food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised" (HLPE, 2017, p. 23). Currently, food systems across the globe fall short of doing so. Between 702 and 828 million people in the world face hunger, 2 billion lack access to adequate food, and 3 billion are unable to afford a healthy diet (FAO et al., 2022). Hunger, malnutrition, and diet-associated health effects are closely related to poverty, as seen in the sharp rise of food insecurity trends in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, triggering a risk of global recession and leading to a wide loss of income and livelihood (Clapp and Moseley, 2020; FAO et al., 2020, 2022; van der Ploeg, 2020). COVID-19 pushed 97 million people into poverty, rounding up the total amount of people living in poverty to more than half a billion, which is expected to further rise with Russia–Ukraine conflict supercharging the already high food prices (Oxfam, 2022; World Bank, 2022a). Within mainstream development, women and girls are typically presented as facing increased moderate and severe food insecurity than their male counterparts on the count of their overrepresentation among the world's poorest people (FAO et al., 2022). Often intersecting with gender inequity, food insecurity is also disproportionately experienced by racial minorities, indigenous communities, and those with lower or no formal and social status, such as migrant and immigrant groups and undocumented people, many of whom source their livelihoods from food systems (Klassen and Murphy, 2020; FAO et al., 2021).

Food systems workers, while essential to society as performing a vital service for human survival (Elver and Shapiro, 2021), are often characterized by precarity, informal contracts, and inadequate remuneration, which, by extension, may make them vulnerable to food insecurity (Clapp and Moseley, 2020; FAO et al., 2020; Elver and Shapiro, 2021). This is true from agricultural fields and factories to restaurants and grocery shops across the globe (Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Mardones et al., 2020). Migrant workers comprise a large part of the total food systems labor force, particularly in high-income countries, and are further vulnerable to decent work deficits and exploitation, as, on par with non-citizenship, they face several challenges, including, but not limited to, the lack of legal protections, language barriers, facing strict border regimes, reliance on the employer for working and living conditions, inability to switch workplaces if tied to a temporary worker scheme and/or intermediaries, and informal employment (FAO et al., 2020; ILO, 2020; Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Palumbo and Corrado, 2020; Elver and Shapiro, 2021). Additionally, vulnerability to decent work deficits and exploitation in food systems is further intersecting with status, gender, and racial dimensions of difference, as undocumented migrant workers, women migrant workers, and migrant and non-migrant

racial minorities tend to be overrepresented in labor abuse and exploitation situations (Palumbo and Sciurba, 2018; FAO et al., 2020; Corrado and Palumbo, 2022). At the other extreme, along all sectors of the food value chain, few transnational corporations dominate the market, increasingly accumulating wealth (Clapp, 2020). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the collective wealth of food and agribusiness industries rose by 45%, amplifying poverty and marginalization of producers, workers, and consumers (Hossain, 2017; Oxfam, 2022).

Responsive to the above trends, one of the objectives attached to the calls for food systems change is "advancing equitable livelihoods" or, referred to further in this study as "crafting equitable food systems" (Neufeld et al., 2021; UN, 2022c). In this study, we conceive equity to align closely to notions of justice and fairness as rooted in social, economic, and political power required for individuals, groups, and populations to gain access to resources such as food and socio-economic benefits (Hossain, 2017; Leach et al., 2018). This contrast with equality is understood as an observable difference related to the way resources are distributed and accessed (Béné et al., 2019). From here, the above trends are not accidental but are locked-in outcomes of food systems organized around longstanding asymmetrical power relations regarding gender, ethnicity, race, and wealth, stemming from conflict, legacies of colonization and slavery, market liberalization, and globalization (Anderson and Leach, 2019; Fanzo et al., 2021). In other words, food systems are infused with power, the dynamics of which affect their activities and outcomes (Anderson and Leach, 2019). As such, for pursuits of "equitable food systems" to be meaningful, challenging social, political, and economic structures that condition asymmetrical power relations between food systems actors are needed (Food IPES, 2015; Hossain, 2017; Anderson and Leach, 2019). From this reasoning, systems change, as much as food production and consumption, is inherently political (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015; Mushita and Thompson, 2019; Wise, 2019).

As elaborated abundantly in global environmental change literature (O'Brien, 2012; Scoones et al., 2015, 2018; Leichenko and O'Brien, 2019), the politics of change can be articulated around the distinction of borders between transition and transformation. Transition, according to Leichenko and O'Brien (2019), refers to the "linear incremental shifts from one state or condition to another" (p. 180) within societal subsystems such as food systems. Alternatively, transformation means "significant changes in form, structure, and/or meaning making" (Leichenko and O'Brien, 2019, p. 180) of the society as a whole, where how humans interact with each other, with the environment, and with food are shifted. For any change to be transformational, it ought to not only problematize but also fundamentally challenge the status quo, as well as its transitional patterns, as these might be promoted under the same banner (Meadowcroft, 2011; O'Brien, 2012; Scoones et al., 2015; Leichenko and O'Brien, 2019). This came to be particularly visible in disputes erupting over the claims of transformational approaches to food systems change in the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) held in 2021.

The UNFSS 2021 gathered the global society committed to the Sustainable Development Goals of 2030 under a "food systems transformation" banner, thereby centralizing the importance of food systems in development processes (von Braun et al., 2021a). However, it was met with criticism from civil society, comprised of agrarian producers and worker movements, progressive NGOs, and academics, who boycotted the event citing corporate domination in agenda framing (Canfield et al., 2021a; Lakhani, 2021). Since the late 1980's, corporatization and consolidation of globalized supply chains have been growing, which not only reflect a power imbalance in food systems but also affect the governances of food systems change, as corporate actors are able to promote their interests through lobbying, shaping public discourse through marketing strategies and public relations campaigns, as well as structural means (Clapp, 2021). Promoted as an inclusive "people's summit" (UN, 2022c), scholars argue that the UNFSS 2021, through a multi-stakeholder-based governance structure, denied inherent differences between participating actors and thus promoted a faulty interpretation of inclusivity, whereby corporate interests, namely techno-centric and production intensification-based approaches, were able to dominate (Canfield et al., 2021a; Chandrasekaran et al., 2021; Clapp et al., 2021). This contested inclusivity silenced alternative visions of change, namely the food sovereignty movement promoting practices and principles such as indigenous knowledge, human rights (gender and peasant), worker justice, and structural injustice, among others (Chandrasekaran et al., 2021). This consequentially denied the prospect of a middle ground to be found. As such, scholars increasingly question the legitimacy of corporate claims over "transformation" (Canfield et al., 2021a,b; Clapp et al., 2021); however, efforts to make sense of disputes themselves are few (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Béné et al., 2019; Leach et al., 2020).

2.1. Discursive politics of change

Complex issues inevitably yield an array of plausible perspectives on them (Dryzek, 2013). Food systems change, as no exception, is linked to multiple different practices and future strategies, which results in disputes among food systems actors, as discussed above. It is not our intention to assess which sides of the dispute are "right." Instead, our interest lies in where these perspectives originate and what this tells us about potential consequences disputes may bring, conceiving food systems change to be an inherently political affair. Dissecting the politics of food systems change, studies looking at pathways (Leach et al., 2020), "fixes" (Béné et al., 2019), and approaches (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011), have showcased multiple ways in which these politics are grounded—in various theories of power (Leach et al., 2020), disciplinary paradigms (Béné et al., 2019), and political trends of regime fronts (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). Insufficient diversity of pathways or "fixes," or domination of one over the other, may result in a transitional, rather than transformational, change. Building on this body of work, in this study, we conceive food systems change to be engaged in discursive politics hinging on different ideas about why and how food systems change is needed to be furthered.

Borrowing from Dryzek and Pickering (2018), by discourse we mean "a shared way of looking at the world with some common understandings" (p. 38) and potential internal disagreements (Dryzek, 2013). As discussed, corporate actors and their interests are increasingly accused of controlling the narrative on food

systems change—ideas about how it ought to be progressed. Ideas about change, however, do not exist outside of the discourses within which they are constituted. Ideas are given meaning to and legitimated in discourses that condition particular ways in which issues are defined, interpreted, and consequentially addressed (Dryzek, 2013). The notion of a discursive production of meaning was pioneered by Michel Foucault. Here, attention is given to the relationship between power and language enabling and constraining communication and action (Epstein, 2008). Discourses may themselves embody the power to condition particular perspectives and/or be bound up with material political realities to set boundaries for action (Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 2013). The Foucauldian portrayal of discourses is often hegemonic, meaning that one discourse is seen as a dominant, powerful discourse in a particular time and place, warranting its deconstruction to understand how power is exerted (Epstein, 2008). Alternatively, as this study is concerned with the embeddedness of equity in food systems change pursuits, rather than uncovering power relations between actors embedded in such pursuits, we propose the importance of multiple dominating discourses to understand food systems change affairs more broadly, thereby conceiving of food systems change to be engaged in discursive politics.

3. Approach

Our strategy for knowing about the politics of food systems change is the analysis of discourses through which they are expressed. As such, our first order of inquiry is identifying the main discourses of food systems change. To do so, we went through a process of reviewing the literature (documents, reports, journal articles, books, websites, etc.) related to sustainable food systems and equity. To identify relevant literature, we searched Google Scholar using themes emerging from a review of classic development theories on food security and hunger (Malthus, 1872; Sen, 1981) and an overview of ongoing global debates and their outcomes. The latter includes advocacy for technology and innovation-based solutions to food insecurity in the face of changing food demands and climate change (von Braun et al., 2021b; UN, 2022b), rise of discussions about wealth inequality and tax on the super-rich and big corporations, e.g., in influential academic contributions such as Thomas Piketty's "*Capital in the twenty-first century*" (Piketty, 2014) and "*Capital and ideology*" (Piketty, 2020), and Oxfam's "Survival of the richest" report presented in connection with the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in January 2023 (Council of the EU, 2022; Christensen et al., 2023), wide-spread support for the critique of the relationship between capitalism and food systems in the alternative People's Summit boycotting UNFSS 2021 (Autonomous People's Response to the UNFSS, 2021; Chandrasekaran et al., 2021), and rising private and public interests for evidence on what aid donors should focus on, as seen in the Ceres2030 report funded by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and Germany's Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ; Laborde et al., 2020). Furthermore, locating different understandings of why and how food systems change ought to be furthered in relation to equity concerns in the selected relevant literature, we identified four discourses and named them in relation to their main focus; however, we acknowledge that there is considerable overlap among them. The four discourses are named as follows: (a) *productionism* (Malthus, 1872; Borlaug, 2000; Godfray et al., 2010; Grafton et al., 2015; UN, 2022d), (b) *redistributionism* (Sen, 1981; Clapp, 2020; FAO, 2020, 2021; FAO et al., 2022), (c) *anti-capitalism* (Patel, 2009; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Holt-Giménez, 2019; Patel and Moore, 2020), and (d) *AID: donor rescue* (Sachs, 2006; Laborde and Smaller, 2020; Laborde et al., 2020). We recognize that our categorization is highly subjective and that we could have landed on several alternative ways of presenting various food systems connected discourses relating to inequity.

Furthermore, focusing on the four identified discourses, we set out to analyze how equity concerns are embedded in food systems change pursuits by operationalizing insights from existent literature. Namely, drawing from Béné et al. (2019), Fanzo et al. (2021), and Leach et al. (2020), the criteria for assessment are created in relation to *direction*, *poverty and income*, *social protection*, *employment*, *rights,* and *democracy/agency to express voice*. In the following, we explain why and how these six concepts are used in our analysis of the four discourses that lead to our findings.

Leach et al. (2020) argue that food systems change discourses have particular *directions* hinging on underlying goals and values. These are important to account for if disputes between different food systems actors are to be made sense of Leach et al. (2020). Furthermore, differently approached food systems change might distribute gains and losses in a way that reproduces existent or creates new inequities (Leach et al., 2020; Whitfield et al., 2021). As food systems change is to be advanced through crafting "equitable food systems," to redress existent and safeguard against consequential inequities, Fanzo et al. (2021) argue for pursuits to change to employ policies related to *poverty and income*, *social protection*, *employment*, and *rights*. As discussed earlier, those earning their livelihoods from food systems are often experiencing insecure and insufficient wages, making them disproportionately vulnerable to poverty (Fanzo et al., 2021). As such, attention to income and poverty levels and the welfare of food systems workers and farmers is necessary to ensure "equitable food systems." Social protection, such as ensuring access to healthcare, pensions, income, and food for low-income citizens, according to scholars (Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Fanzo et al., 2021), is important to safeguard those from poverty who earn their livelihood from food systems. Furthermore, as exploitation and inadequate working conditions are characteristic of food work, attention to the quality of employment in food systems is needed (Fanzo et al., 2021). More than that, strengthening workers' rights and extension of rights and employment benefits to migrant and undocumented workers is needed, the lack of which often plays a hand in the inadequate, and sometimes exploitative, employment conditions these workers tend to be subjected to Fanzo et al. (2021) and Klassen and Murphy (2020). Furthermore, the implementation of rights-based approaches to food security and nutrition is needed, which includes ensuring the human right to food, as well as to water, land, and property, unionization and collective action, and participation in public affairs (Fanzo et al., 2021). Doing so, according to scholars, would vest greater power in the hands of consumers, small-scale farmers, and workers regarding control

over food systems (Béné et al., 2019; Leach et al., 2020; Fanzo et al., 2021). Finally, closely related to improved rights, opportunities, and capacities of marginalized food systems actors, food systems change must be anchored in *democratic values* of inclusiveness and expression of voice (Leach et al., 2018; Béné et al., 2019). From here, in the following section, we use the above insights when analyzing the four discourses—considering what goals and values (direction) underpin each discourse, as well as in what ways and how food systems change—as understood from the perspective of each discourse include factors related to poverty and income levels, social protection, employment quality, rights and social justice, and democratic values of inclusiveness and agency to express voice.

4. Discourses driving food systems change

In the following, four discourses of food systems change based on their main foci are presented and assessed in relation to equity concerns built on the approach described earlier.

4.1. Productionism

"*Productionism*" can be understood as a "philosophy that emerges when production is taken to be the sole norm for ethically evaluating agriculture" (Fouilleux et al., 2017, p. 1,659). As a discourse of food systems change, it reduces the matter to the sole purpose of increased production through productivist means, e.g., through greater use of chemical agricultural inputs, hybrid seeds, mechanization, and increasing digitalization to support large-scale food production (Fouilleux et al., 2017).

The *productionism* discourse can be traced back to Malthusian ideas about hunger. Thomas Malthus, in 1798 with "An Essay on the Principle of Population," theorized that the growth in food production is inevitably exceeded by the growth in population, asserting that, at some point in time, the planet will no longer be able to produce enough food for all (Evans and Thomas, 2017), thereby regarding hunger as a resource problem yielded by overpopulation. Malthusian and post-Malthusian ideas have dominated international development from colonial to post-war strategies that include structured policies surrounding agriculture, environmental management, population control, trade, and others (Leach et al., 2020). Forging an orthodox development approach to hunger reduction, Malthusian logic was consolidated with the creation of FAO, WFO, and IFAD, and lingers in the pursuits of food systems change to this day (Evans and Thomas, 2017; Leach et al., 2020). Translating into practice, the Malthusian logic ushered in what is known as the Green Revolution in 1960–1970 (Patel, 2013). The Green Revolution was based on the adoption of new technologies, high-yielding varieties of cereals, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation, all of which improved agricultural efficiency and productivity (Borlaug, 2000).

Critics have argued, however, that the Green Revolution was a perfect example of a technocratic approach to development echoing ideas of modernization theory—mobilizing technology for more efficient use of resources that led to industrialization and agricultural mechanization (Willis, 2011; Wise, 2019). While the Green Revolution yielded positive results, e.g., improved availability of certain cereals (maize, wheat, and rice) positively impacting food security in some places (Borlaug, 2000), it also yielded negative social, economic, and environmental consequences (Canfield et al., 2021a). It is argued that the Green Revolution resulted in a reduction in genetic diversity due to monoculture farming, agrochemical pollution, increased chronic malnourishment and loss of livelihood associated with rural inequality, and contributed to the growing dominance of large agrochemical companies (Willis, 2011; Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2012; Patel, 2013; Clapp, 2020). The core ideas of the Green Revolution are currently promoted by prominent food systems actors such as the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and its main donors—the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation (of whom the latter was heavily involved in the first Green Revolution), which purportedly adopt a new commitment to environmental protection and crop diversity through ideas and practices of, e.g., sustainable intensification, digital farming, and genome editing (Wise, 2019; Clapp, 2020; Canfield et al., 2021a). Drawing on the lessons from Green Revolution, critics remain concerned about the potential social and economic consequences such practices may yield (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2012; Patel, 2013; Wise, 2019; Clapp, 2020; Canfield et al., 2021a).

A recurrent question in relation to analyzing food systems, however, is what the link between increased production and improved food security is. Proponents of *productionism* claim that increased production will contribute to improved availability of food in accordance with the six food security pillars (HLPE, 2020; Clapp et al., 2022; FAO et al., 2022), as it did so during the Green Revolution (Borlaug, 2000), but how to move from availability to access for all people at all times? Within the *productionism* discourse, there are multiple strategies for kinds of production increase, e.g., in relation to principles of sustainable intensification, as mentioned earlier, or agroecology, and in relation to the role of gendered small-scale contra commercial farming. In SDG2.3, doubling agricultural productivity and income targets small-scale food producers defined as the bottom 40% with regard to land size, livestock number, and economic revenue from agriculture (UN, 2022d). Hence, *productionism* can be more of a general goal or oriented toward specific groups that form a considerable proportion of people going hungry as is the case in SDG2.3. In this way, the goals and values, or direction, embedded in the *productionism* thinking need to be understood, e.g., is it about modernization pathways toward Western-style industrial agriculture or more of a way of supporting the livelihoods of small-scale farmers in the global South?

SDG2.3 does not only focus on productivity but also on income for the bottom 40% (UN, 2022d), which is aligned with the need to understand poverty and income factors in order to assess their effect on societal inequities in efforts toward food system change. However, in general, *productionism* is often not concerned with whose productivity gains nor what will be the income gain. Regarding the employment factors, *productionism* may miss out on what is often called the "missing middle," e.g., the conditions for gendered land and food workers in the various value chains of the food systems regarding decent salary levels or job security (HLPE, 2017, 2020; Clapp, 2020). For those who

fall outside of a *productionist* focus for reasons such as lack of access to resources such as land, seed, tools, credit, labor, time, and markets, or facing different kinds of structural discriminations that hinder productivity gains, social protection could be the solution. However, social protection is not easily available for those in need, as indicated by the access to social protection around the world (ILO, 2021). Social justice, such as rights and opportunities and democracy exemplified by voice in society, are the last two factors included for understanding to what degree equity is embedded in the *productionism* discourse of food systems change (Leach et al., 2020; Fanzo et al., 2021), and these are factors that the *productionism* discourse is not commonly attentive to.

4.2. Redistributionism

Redistributionism can be understood as a political and economic philosophy of the transfer of income and wealth from some individuals and groups to others through social spending and tax (Barry, 2004). In food systems, *redistributionism* discourse stems from concerns over the distribution of food and food systems gains, considering that, while enough food is produced on the planet, high levels of food waste, food used for non-human-food related activities such as the production of animal feed and biofuel (HLPE, 2020), and having 3 billion people not being able to afford a healthy diet (FAO et al., 2022), abounds persistent hunger and food insecurity. As such, even with science and technology generating improvements in production, the distribution of food in a way that grants access to all at all times, as well as equitable food systems benefits, is not guaranteed (Neufeld et al., 2021). As such, *redistributionists* claim the need for an economy-wide redistribution (Barry, 2004). What that means, however, varies, based on different center goals and values—the direction of redistribution. For some, this may mean decentering economic growth as the sole prerequisite for development and placing more emphasis on other goals that define wellbeing, including the human right to food (Raworth, 2017), and for others—replacing economic growth with its direct opposite—degrowth, as the former is breeding ecologically and socially destructive productivist and consumerist values (Jackson, 2009; Hickel, 2020; Kallis et al., 2020).

In relation to food, *redistributionism* discourse can be traced back to the Malthusian–Senian conflict over the root causes of hunger. Since the 1970's, ideas about access, stability, and utility with regard to rising concerns over inequality, socio-economic conditions shaping food demands, and nutritional concerns, respectively, facilitated a reconceptualization of hunger and food security away from, dominant at the time, the sole concerns over food supply (Clapp et al., 2022). Of particular influence here was the thesis posed by Amartya Sen on the relationship between "Poverty and Famines" (Sen, 1981), noting that inequality is inbuilt into food distribution, making hunger a problem of sufficient access to food rather than its availability. This is so, as people have differentiated entitlements to vital resources such as food, influenced, as synthesized by Clapp et al. (2022), by factors such as "endowments to productive land, their employment status, their ownership of and ability to trade assets, and their rights within society" (p. 2). As such, even in situations where sufficient food is produced, people's access to that food may vary and thus should not be presupposed, as price fluctuation, conflict, unemployment, climatic events, and other may sway one's accessibility to the available food (Sen, 1981). From here, this line of reasoning argues for the need for distributive, rather than productivist, food systems based on contextual needs and capacities.

As discussed, contending no direct link between productivity and food security and socio-economic benefits, *redistributionists* ponder questions around access in which poverty and income are central elements. Poverty and income are tightly tied to food insecurity (FAO et al., 2021), and as poverty and income inequality rise (UN, 2022e; World Bank, 2022b), affordability of healthy food will be out of reach for more and more people (FAO et al., 2021). As such, poverty reduction and increased income floors are both the desired end goal and, most importantly, a prerequisite for satisfactory food systems change from a redistributionist perspective (FAO et al., 2021; Neufeld et al., 2021). Social protection measures are also seen as essential, particularly in the face of shocks to livelihoods, to safeguard against widening societal inequities (FAO et al., 2022). These should be targeting the most vulnerable under a contextual basis to create more opportunities (Neufeld et al., 2021). In *redistributionism* discourse, social protection measures such as health insurance, paid leave and employment benefits, and social security are particularly important to ensure that food systems workers redress their vulnerability to exploitation and labor abuse and thus ensure a better quality of employment (Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Elver and Shapiro, 2021). Strengthening the rights of migrant and undocumented workers is another strategy to counter decent work deficits of the most vulnerable in food systems (Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Elver and Shapiro, 2021). According to Elver and Shapiro (2021), there is a weak tendency to monitor compliance with the Convention of Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), particularly in the West where civil and political rights tend to be favored. As ICESCR pertains to the right to food, shelter, health, social security, and decent work, a stronger disposition by governments toward the protection of economic, social, and cultural rights is needed (Elver and Shapiro, 2021). Finally, democracy, or the ability to exert a voice in society, is an important aspect of *redistributionism* and can be echoed in the recent reconceptualization of food security to, in addition to the existing pillars of availability, access, stability, and utility, further include sustainability and agency (HLPE, 2020; FAO et al., 2022). Agency here refers to the capacity to make and voice decisions about what food to consume and produce, how, and under what conditions. It speaks closely to the idea of building agency understood as freedom by Amartya Sen: "what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important" (Sen, 1985, p. 203; Clapp et al., 2022).

4.3. Anti-capitalism

With concern over the negative relationship between corporate concentration in the market and inequitable distribution of food and socio-economic food systems gains, the above discourse calls for redistribution of wealth and corporate power. Alternatively, proponents of *anti-capitalism* discourse argue that redistribution is not enough without dismantling capitalism in which food systems, and their consequential failures to ensure wellbeing of

all, are rooted (Holt-Giménez, 2019; Patel and Moore, 2020). *Anti-capitalism* can be understood as a set of ideas that directly oppose capitalism as a desired and inevitable socio-economic system and promote replacing capitalism with other ways of organizing societies and economies (Harman, 2000).

Following the *anti-capitalism* discourse, capitalist food systems are set up to make a profit rather than feed people, as capitalism functions on the basic principle of wealth seeking more wealth (Holt-Giménez, 2019). The issue here is that wealth is often derived from the exploitation of people and environments (Holt-Giménez, 2019; Patel and Moore, 2020). This is so, as capitalism is premised on prioritizing market and private sector interests and does not account for environmental, social, health, and economic externalities (Hendriks et al., 2023) associated with such promotion (Holt-Giménez, 2019; Patel and Moore, 2020; Chandrasekaran et al., 2021). Indigenous peoples, women, and classed and racialized workers, while not exclusive categories, most often reap the burdens of inherently exploitative food systems, as, according to this perspective, capitalism functions through systems of patriarchy and imperialism (Patel and Moore, 2020). From here, *anti-capitalism* propagates a shift in values away from profit and toward feeding the world, and poises the goal of food justice to be attained through food sovereignty as its direction.

Food justice refers to a distinguishment between the industrial food system and an alternative—more equitable and ecologically viable—most notably expressed through grassroots organizations and initiatives (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Cadieux and Slocum, 2015). Food justice, as a discourse, finds its roots in racial, class, and environmental justice movements in North America, and, as a scholarly field and a radical movement, calls for attention to how inequities related to race, class, and gender are produced, reproduced, and contested within food systems (Glennie and Alkon, 2018). Food sovereignty, additionally, refers to the upholding of the rights of people to determine their foodways (Vía Campesina, 2007). Food sovereignty first emerged in the 1990's as a social movement organized around the rights of peasants and small-holder farmers, who promoted food sovereignty principles for curbing world hunger as an alternative to food security (Wittman, 2011). However, while often considered in the juxtaposition of one another, within the *anti-capitalism* discourse, food sovereignty is not the opposite of food security in itself, but a necessary precondition for it (Patel, 2009; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Wittman, 2011). Together, food justice and food sovereignty condemn marginal control over food production and consumption as a condition for food disparities and inequities more broadly across social and economic hierarchies in a given society (Cadieux and Slocum, 2015).

Emphasizing food sovereignty and the peasant knowledge with the leadership of La Vía Campesina peasant movement in feeding the world, who claim that 70% of food globally comes from small-scale farmers (Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, 2022), the *anti-capitalism* discourse is often equated to the demand to return to a peasant past. However, the most acute demand of the *anti-capitalism* discourse is that of democracy and the dismantlement of constraints on marginalized producers and consumers to imagine and define how food systems are organized, attributing this constraint sharply to capitalism itself. Furthermore, while sharing a concern with redistributive objectives around income and poverty, social protection, employment quality, and rights, the *anti-capitalism* discourse is concerned not only with who gets what, but with who pays what, thereby arguing for reparation and non-monetary redistribution (Patel and Moore, 2020). To do so, emphasis is put on social pressure from a strong and allied food movement front (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Holt-Giménez, 2019).

4.4. AID: donor rescue

With the focus on determining the cost behind ending hunger, the Ceres2030 report on "Sustainable solutions to end hunger" was issued in 2020 through a novel partnership between Cornell University, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), representing what we call the *AID: donor rescue* discourse (Laborde et al., 2020). As defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, aid refers to "financial flows, technical assistance, and commodities [...] provided as either grants or subsidized loans" (Radelet et al., 2006, p. 4). The main objective of aid is usually economic growth of the recipient country, but it can also be income growth for the poor, development of non-income related areas such as education, and trade benefits for donor countries (Miller, 2012).

The *AID: donor rescue* discourse can be traced back to the post-war period, where aid, as a development strategy, was seen to be the solution to facilitating economic growth in poor countries that based their economies on agriculture, as they were regarded to be "lagging behind" (Willis, 2011). Transfer of money, technology, and expertise from North to South was expected to fill the necessary gaps that will allow poorer nations to escape "underdevelopment." While becoming less popular during the market-oriented period between the 1980 and 1990's, the *AID: donor rescue* discourse has returned since, notably in relation to the Millennium Development Goals, whereby poverty is to be abolished through the Big Push supported by increased aid and investment in order for countries to be able to step into a self-sustained growth and prosperity (Easterly, 2006a; Sachs, 2006). Adopting a skeptical view on the impacts of aid, on the other hand, scholars have argued that despite its wide adoption over the years, aid has fallen short of delivering its desired goal, namely poverty reduction (Easterly, 2006b). More than that, critics have posed that aid may do more harm than good—it may stifle small businesses, encourage corruption, increase inequality, and promote poor governance by deteriorating state capacities (Chang, 2002; Moyo, 2009; McGoey, 2015). Rooted in arguments of dependency theory, some further critique aid as a vessel for creating dependencies that allow for the flourishing of some at the expense of others (Chang, 2002). While aid, as a tool of development, has received ample criticism over the years, it cannot be seen in homogenous terms. Easterly (2006b) argues that top-down approaches to aid intervention foster the lack of its success, or indeed promote a negative impact. However, if echoing contextual needs informed from the ground up, aid has the potential to foster positive effects (Easterly, 2006b). Nonetheless, too often donors tend to prefer quick fixes that offer fast and measurable impacts, whether or not these will support long-lasting positive change, as

showcased by Lie (2019) looking at increased privatization of global nutrition governance.

With regard to food systems change, Ceres2030 sees increased aid—an additional USD 33 billion to current spending—as the central element to achieving the desired objectives of food systems change and seeks to inform the donor community investments (Laborde et al., 2020). The direction presented by Ceres2030 (Laborde et al., 2020) is aligned with SDG2.3 discussed earlier, in line with *productionism*. Here, the goal behind the *AID: donor rescue* discourse is focused on investments in the production systems of small-scale producers in low- and middle-income countries to double their income and productivity (Laborde et al., 2020). From here, similar to *productionism*, to what extent the underlying goals and values behind the current *AID: donor rescue* discourse are anchored in SDG2.3 and improved small-scale farmers' equity or modernization, as its post-war roots may suggest, can be questioned. Regarding poverty and income, *AID: donor rescue* places emphasis on the productivity of small-scale farmers as a source of income doubling, as well as income support through food subsidies. Social protection features in the Ceres2030 report argue for the need to scale up social protection programs to enable "households living in poverty to find productive employment, removing the barriers they face in accessing markets, education, credit and other economic opportunities" (Laborde et al., 2020, p. 14). Employment conditions for workers and additional opportunities for small-scale farmers with limited access to land, similar to *productionism*, are not addressed by *AID: donor rescue* discourse. Furthermore, while AID: donor rescue only to a limited degree address rights, it does address opportunities, as Ceres2030 argues that increased funds will increase opportunities for men and women small-scale farmers (Laborde et al., 2020). However, the theory of change for this to happen is unclear, as risks for gains from increased funds to be accumulated by the "better offs" remain. Similarly, while Ceres2030 argues for the inclusion of the commonly marginalized populations in its proposed strategy, how the voice in society is to be ensured through increased funds is unclear. Here, Ceres 2030 focuses on small-scale producers and promotes agricultural extension, market analysis, and weather forecasting, as important services that support inclusion (Laborde et al., 2020). However, it fails to account for how these services themselves can become more inclusive.

5. Discussion

The above sections illustrated four discourses of food systems change in relation to the growing objective to craft "equitable food systems." In the following, we unpack the meanings of "equitable food systems" emerging from the different discourses, potential equity trade-offs associated with different discourses, and political implications associated with discursively bound food systems change.

5.1. Multiple meanings of "equitable food systems"

Crafting "equitable food systems," as a process to advancing food systems change, has multiple meanings, hinging on different discourses from which food systems change more broadly is imagined (Leach et al., 2020). Insufficiently recognized, these multiple meanings may result in hiding politics of inequity that lie in different directions and values embedded in each discourse. Taking productionism and AID: donor rescue discourses, neither increased production efficiency for particular groups nor redirecting monetary resources challenge their accumulation. In doing so, inequity in both of these discourses could be seen to be understood more as inequality—as an observable and regretful difference rather than a social, political, and economic issue. At the root of such interpretation of inequity in food systems is the centralization of economic growth in understanding societal wellbeing, as both discourses find their roots in post-Second World War modernization pursuits. Here, based on Rostow's "stages of economic growth," development was to be pursued through modernizing "traditional societies" that base their economies on barter trading and subsistence farming to industrialized "age of high mass-consumption" where self-sustained growth equates wellbeing (Rostow, 1990; Willis, 2011).

Economic growth is historically associated with justifying positive outcomes, such as longevity, literacy, political participation, and others (Deaton, 2013). However, scholars have argued that economic growth not only contributed to but also created inequality between and within countries (Walker, 2008; Deaton, 2013), as well as fostered and perpetuated destructive effects on human and planetary flourishing, such as elite accumulation, commodification of, e.g., food, and human labor and ecological exploitation (Hickel, 2020; Kallis et al., 2020). The redistributionism and anti-capitalism discourses align with such critiques. Centering equity concerns in line with all factors of "equitable food systems" (Fanzo et al., 2021), both redistributionism and anti-capitalism offer a challenge to social, political, and economic structures that bound inequity (Anderson and Leach, 2019). However, these discourses still differ in that they see the fault differently—as market concentration, unaffordability, and lack of welfare on the one hand, and as, often racialized and gendered, capitalist socio-economic and political order on the other. These variations speak to what constitutes, or should constitute, "the good life." For some, this is defined by decentering economic growth to focus on objectives such as human right to food, nourishment, and decent work, among others (Raworth, 2017; Clapp, 2020). For others, wellbeing is anchored in ideas around alternative ways to organize societies, stemming from small-holder farmer movements and indigenous groups resisting displacement such as La Vía Campesina, Zapatista, and Buen Vivir, as well as feminist, autonomist, and eco-anarchist movements, all calling for a fundamental, bottom-up reimagination of what defines "the good life" (Trainer, 2021).

5.2. "Equitable food systems" winners and losers

"Equitable food systems" as a way to transform food systems, albeit in overlapping ways, possess multiple meanings. Materializing in practice, different food systems change discourses pursue varied strategies to "equitable food systems," and insufficient diversity of strategies pursued risks creating winners and losers

(Leach et al., 2020). Productionism, attentive to criticism of the Green Revolution to include a great focus on small-scale farmers aligned with SDG2.3, misses out on important aspects "equitable food systems" ought to encompass (Fanzo et al., 2021). AID: donor rescue discourse, with its attention on social protection, fills some gaps in the productionist discourse, however, still holds a narrow understanding of "equitable food systems" as per its limited attention to social justice and democracy (Fanzo et al., 2021). As such, both productionism and AID: donor rescue could work well for small-scale farmers, as their focus lies in doubling the productivity and income of these groups. But it could also lead to accumulated gains for small-scale farmers that are already better off, thereby amplifying disadvantages and privileges on the count of divisions based on class, gender, race, and age, among others, which work together with inequalities facing small-scale farmers as a general group (Leach et al., 2018).

Similarly, land and food workers might benefit from increased production and income geared toward farmers if these gains are to be distributed up the value chain. However, such reasoning would imply the responsibility, and in effect, the fault of ensuring just and equitable livelihoods and working conditions for food laborers lie within the hands of the farmer and the employer's willingness to share their gains. Instead, scholars have long argued that the barriers to just and equitable livelihoods of land and food workers face roots in broader societal inequities that play out in food systems and thus cannot be redressed without a specific focus on their contextual situation (Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Fanzo et al., 2021). General devaluation of food work coupled with societal divisions on the count of class, gender, and race, condition inequitable livelihoods and working conditions land and food workers face (Klassen and Murphy, 2020). As such, redistributionist and anti-capitalist strategies, attentive to social protection for all vulnerable groups, as well as greatly emphasizing enhanced social justice and rights, all necessary policy directions for "equitable food systems" to be crafted (Fanzo et al., 2021), might be more relevant for this group of people, albeit with different sensitivities to their contextualized struggles.

5.3. Discursive politics of food systems change

Furthermore, more than just grounding different meanings and strategies to "equitable food systems" pursuits, discourses of food systems change ground politics of change. This is so, as not only the availability of a diversity of discourses that promote diverse strategies but also the balance between them matters in how change pursuits are directed (Dryzek, 2013). Backed by powerful actors, productionist strategies are known to be dominating pursuits to food systems change (Chandrasekaran et al., 2021), which, as per its narrow inclusion of equity concerns, risks falling short of the successful realization of "equitable food systems" (Leach et al., 2020). Often, the best counter to productionism is seen in redistributionism, which continuously struggles to do so as its ideas and language are coopted. This can be seen in the overlap between productionism and AID: donor rescue discourses, whereby the former advocates for inclusion and equity, however, also supports productionist goals and values, in so doing strengthening its hegemonic position. This struggle is often articulated in a need to radicalize redistributionism so that it can enforce a successful challenge (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). On the other hand, given that crafting "equitable food systems" is indeed a shared vision, but the interpretation of inequity and change embedded in it are not shared, more democracy and representation of diverse voices, and thus discourses, in policy negotiations might be needed (Leach et al., 2020). To do so, redressing power asymmetries between food systems actors in policy negotiations is essential, as those do not only reflect but foster inequities in food systems in terms of food security and socio-economic benefits (Leach et al., 2020; Fanzo et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

Calls to change or transform food systems have come to be widespread in recent years. With increasing recognition that current food systems are not only unsustainable but also widely inequitable, these calls are increasingly articulated in terms of the need to craft "equitable food systems." Indeed, societal inequities play out in food systems, hampering access to food security and socioeconomic gains for many across the globe. With the recent crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the food and fuel price rise consequential to the war in Ukraine, rising food insecurity sounded alarms of urgency to craft "equitable food systems" to advance a flourishing future for all. However, finding the best strategies to do so is a subject of intense debate. For some, food systems change toward greater equity is seen in increased production and monetary support to aid it, for others, redistribution of wealth and power, and yet others, dismantlement of capitalism as a socio-economic system that roots and fosters the asymmetries in wealth and power. In this study, we contend these differences to represent four discourses of food systems change: (a) productionism, (b) redistributionism, (c) anti-capitalism, and (d) AID: donor rescue. From here, with an interest to generate a greater understanding of debates and disputes around the future of food, this study sought to question how "equitable food systems" are given meaning in ongoing discourses that shape the direction of food systems change. The analysis revealed that multiple meanings of "equitable food systems" exist, hinging on varied ideas about inequity, change, and the essence of human wellbeing. Materializing into practical strategies to progress food systems change, the multiplicity of meanings implies inevitable trade-offs when one is prioritized over the other. As such, through our analysis, we contend the need for more democracy when negotiating policy directions forward. All four discourses might have some merit that could become advantageous in finding contextually appropriate pathways toward more equitable food systems. However, corporate voices and perspectives tend to be louder than those of producers, workers, and consumers, reflecting and reproducing the power imbalance within policy negotiations and the global society more broadly. Bridging such a power divide is thus essential to balance out food systems change discourses and allow for conductive combinations of elements from each to be

created to anchor pursuits of food systems change that truly foster more equitable ways forward.

Author contributions

GJ and RH: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, and writing—review and editing. GJ: writing—original draft preparation. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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