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Physical,
geographical
and social access:
the neglected
dimensions of food
security

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INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity is increasingly recognised as a social problem in industrialised countries, bearing severe social, economic and health costs for governments and individuals. Across European countries, the rise in food insecurity has been closely linked to rising unemployment and falling wages (Loopstra, Reeves and Stuckler 2015). Under Austerity, such effects have been amplified and become ubiquitous. There has also been a sharp increase in the number of individuals and families resorting to emergency food help (food banks and others) across Europe. And in several countries, there have been reports of an increase in the number of children arriving at school hungry. Additionally, there is growing concern about the long-term effects of food insecurity on the well-being of individuals and families and/or specific age-groups such as children or the elderly.

Over recent decades, the very concept of food (in)security has also evolved from a mainly productionist definition, which addressed the sustainability of food systems, to a broader definition, which includes the issues of access and consumption (Borch and Kjærnes 2016; Truninger and Díaz-Méndez 2017). Nonetheless, as a dimension of food insecurity, access is too often defined as merely reliant on income, when, in fact, food security entails sociability and social networks. Food is a key element of social participation; it has symbolic meaning as a marker of inclusion/exclusion from socially acceptable activities and common practices, such as eating in/out or being able to acquire food in a socially and culturally appropriate way from different sources (e.g. State, community, family and market). Be it involuntary or self-imposed, withdrawal from such activities can be conceived as limiting social participation and excluding individuals from active citizenship and collectively shared food practices that convey a sense of normality to everyday routines. Based on a critique of access as a merely economic issue, our aim is to contribute to broadening how access is framed when addressing food (in)security. To do so, we will discuss the physical/geographical and social dimensions of food security by engaging with the literature on food deserts and social exclusion.

The chapter is organised in four main sections. We start with an up-dated definition of food security/insecurity, which emphasises the multi-layered nature of these concepts. We then proceed with a brief historical account, highlighting the social, economic and political dynamics that shaped their currently accepted definitions. This is followed by a discussion of the main

features of *access* as a key dimension of food (in)security. To do so, we engage with two different bodies of scholarly work: food deserts and social exclusion. In the last section, we summarise the main arguments, offer pointers for future research, and reflect on the inherent difficulties of bringing together vastly different approaches to grasping the concept of food (in)security.

FOOD (IN)SECURITY: DEFINITION AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

DEFINITION AND MAIN DIMENSIONS

Food insecurity is usually defined in terms of its contrasting concept: food security. The latter has had a long history of conceptualisation and refinement over the last four decades, with a prominent contribution by the Food Agriculture Organisation (FAO). As we will see below, in this period the concept has suffered configurations apropos changes in agriculture and food policies. The current definitions of food insecurity and security according to FAO (2001) are the following:

Food insecurity: A situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active, healthy life. It may be caused by the unavailability of food, insufficient purchasing power or the inappropriate distribution or inadequate use of food at the household level. Food insecurity, poor conditions of health and sanitation and inappropriate care and feeding practices are the major causes of poor nutritional status. Food insecurity may be chronic, seasonal or transitory.

Food security: A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

(FAO, 2001)

The above definition of food security is one of the most popular and emerged after diplomatic negotiations at the 1996 World Food Summit. If the concept of food security represents a desire, ambition and expectation; the concept of food insecurity represents a problem, a threat or a risk (Midgley 2013, 25). Both the concept of security and insecurity can be understood

as being situated at the ends of a continuum, and the word (in)security is sometimes used to convey an idea of process.

As conceptualised by FAO, food security consists of four key dimensions (Table 21.1). Food availability is necessary but not sufficient to ensure food security (as there may be famine in societies where food abounds), and access is necessary but not sufficient to ensure use, since food can be prepared and cooked (Webb et al. 2006). Stability seems to be the criterion that is transversal to all dimensions. In some approaches, risk (which is also part of phytosanitary and hygiene issues – food safety) is seen as an additional factor in food safety as “a cross-cutting issue affecting all components of the food security structure” (Webb and Rogers 2003).

These definitions of food security and insecurity proposed by FAO reflect the reconfigurations and conceptual revisions implemented since the 1970s. The successive revisions of the concept of food security add to the pluralisation

Table 21.1 *The main dimensions of the food security concept*

MAIN DIMENSIONS	DEFINITION
Availability	Food availability addresses the “supply side” of food security and is determined by the level of food production, stock levels and net trade.
Access (physical, economic and social)	An adequate supply of food at the national or international level does not in itself guarantee household level food security. Concerns about insufficient, socially and culturally inadequate food access have resulted in a greater policy focus on incomes, expenditure, markets, prices, and social innovation initiatives to achieve ‘proper’ access to food.
Use and Utilisation	Utilisation is commonly understood as the way the body makes the most of various nutrients in the food. Sufficient energy and nutrient intake by individuals is the result of good care and feeding practices, food preparation, diversity of the diet and intra-household distribution of food. Combined with good biological utilisation of food consumed, this determines the nutritional status of individuals.
Stability	Even if your food intake is adequate today, you are still considered to be food insecure if you have inadequate access to food on a periodic basis, risking a deterioration of your nutritional status. Adverse weather conditions, the threat of climate change and forced displacement, political instability, or economic factors (unemployment, rising food prices) may have an impact on your food security status.

Source: Adapted from FAO, 2008.

of perspectives regarding the associated risk factors and the most appropriate intervention possible. At the same time, several methodological proposals have emerged, associated with different analytical conceptions of food security.

It is a complex concept and not always capable of generating global consensus. Since it takes different forms, it is affected by issues of scale (global-local) and, above all, it stems from different factors depending on the situated context for which it is mobilised. A brief genealogy of the concept is important to understand the evolution of such differences.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

In its inception, the main concern encompassing food security was to increase food production and make food available to feed the world population. It was a question centred on food “availability”. This view was galvanised especially in the post-World War II reconstruction, in the late 1940s and continued into the following three decades, wherein agriculture policies revolved around intensive food production for mass consumption, with the help of chemical inputs to increase crop yield (epitomised by the “Green Revolution”). This was the time when military technologies and scientific innovations were transferred and adapted to help the blooming of intensive agro-food industries (Truninger 2013). When it became clear that increasing crop yields were not necessarily solving the spread of hunger and famine in the world, the focus turned to access and markets and how to solve the vagaries of unbalanced food distribution between industrial and less developed countries (e.g. in Africa, Asia and Latin America). This was in the 1980s, when the work of Amartya Sen (1982) would lead to the concept of food security being revised, bringing the issue of food rights to the debate. Sen’s conceptual contribution stems from the assertion that food insecurity does not necessarily come from the unavailability of food in the market, but rather from the existence of constraints on people’s access to food (Truninger et al, forthcoming). However, with a market driven agenda tarred with the neo-liberal ideology of the 1990s access was practically restricted to an economic dimension. The productionist paradigm of increasing food output (to the detriment of the environmental and health impacts) was still discernible, this time with a concern for making food cheap and affordable for consumers. Thus, as Lang and Barling (2012, 7) claim: “The productionist old paradigm accepted a culture of choice shaped by price. Reducing prices was the goal”. For that to happen, the power geometry

of the food system shifted and big distribution companies started exercising pressure to squeeze production costs and pass value throughout the food chain onto consumers, while getting the lion's share. Such debates around the need to secure not only physical and economic access, but also social access intensified and leaked into the definition of food security. Despite such efforts to broaden the dimension of access beyond the market mechanisms, physical and especially social access are still the weakest links of the "access" dimension.

With the publication of the *World Bank Report on Poverty and Hunger* (World Bank 1986) the debates on food security reflected concerns about the temporal dimension and unexpected events that may affect the population to different degrees of food insecurity. Crises, wars, conflicts, forced displacement of people due to the scarcity of natural resources, income and employment fluctuations in people's lives may throw them suddenly into situations of food insecurity. It is important to distinguish between chronic food insecurity wherein the population is affected by long-lasting poverty, and episodes that are transitory, associated with events that have, nevertheless a strong impact on shifting food practices. Thus, securing stability in the supply and access to food is fundamental, it being an important dimension of the concept included in its 1980s' reformulations.

The use/utilisation dimension was the last to be included in the concept. In the 1990s, attention to an increasing population both in the Global North and South suffering either from malnutrition and hunger or overnutrition, excess weight and obesity brought in the need to guarantee everyone's access to nutritionally and culturally appropriate foods bearing in mind the importance of access to food quality as part of a healthy diet and lifestyle. Such concerns with diet, nutrition and health shaped the extension of the notion of food security to nutrition as well. In Brazil, these ideas became concrete through the approval of an innovative strategy on food security and nutrition. This innovative policy model is now being extended to other countries around the world, namely the CPLP countries (Portuguese Language Countries, e. g. Mozambique).

With the global crisis of 2007-2008, debate intensified on food security with the combined increase of fuel and food prices, revealing the vulnerabilities of the global food system. The agricultural commodity spikes triggered conflicts over food resources in developing countries, with the population clearly struggling to have access to affordable food. However, the aggravation of the financial and economic crises in Europe and other developed countries, due, to some extent, to the impact of measures for public debt control was a wakeup

call to the problems of food access and distribution among rich nation states. Suddenly, the problem of food insecurity was not far away and out of sight, but was very much visible in the streets of many European cities with its long queues of disadvantaged groups waiting for free hot meals on cold nights. The 21st century economic crisis brought the problem and reality of food insecurity to European shores and obliged the rethinking of adequate access to food, focusing the debate on consumption and not only on production (Truninger and Díaz-Méndez 2017; Borch and Kjaernes 2016).

Finally, the connection between food security and sustainability issues (regarding either natural resources depletion, climate change effects or gas emissions from the agro-food industry) has brought to the fore a new configuration of this concept encapsulated in the notion of “sustainable food security” (Sonnino, Moragues-Fau and Maggio 2014). Indeed, the combined effects of climate change and forced displacement (due to conflicts, wars, resource scarcity) imposes further pressure on European countries to open their borders and accommodate climate change refugees (or war refugees), putting greater stress on allocating and distributing food in a more socially just way. Some of the issues that will become more prominent with the dramatic scenarios of people circulating from the Global South to the North relate to social access and ensuring multi-culturally adequate diets to populations on the move.

ACCESS – AN OVERLOOKED DIMENSION OF FOOD SECURITY?

As already outlined, food insecurity is a multi-layered phenomenon, which can range widely in severity. When individuals and families are dependent on food aid, one can easily grasp that their livelihood is severely constrained: in such cases, individuals lack agency concerning mundane everyday activities, such as choosing what to eat/cook. But even in its less severe forms, food insecurity affects or restricts individuals from fully participating in several spheres of social life, e.g. consumption and sociability around food.

While access constitutes a key dimension of food (in)security, most accounts stress the economic features of access. In the Global North, food insecurity is often associated with relative poverty, defined as the inability/affordability of obtaining an adequate and nutritious diet (Dowler 1998). In this context, famines and severe food shortage due to wars, disasters or

drought, are mostly a distant memory. Availability of foodstuffs is not the key issue but rather possessing sufficient economic means to buy/procure food. Even in the Global South, as Sen (1982) brilliantly showed concerning the Great Famine that ravaged India in the 1940s, the problem was never shortage of food but rather the way it was distributed, both geographically and socially. The physical/geographical and social dimensions of food security are less often addressed, when framing the discussion concerning western industrialised societies. In the following sections, we propose to articulate food insecurity with two different literatures to contribute to the broadening of this issue, going crucially beyond the economic access dimension. Such bodies of work are encompassed by the food deserts and social exclusion concepts.

PHYSICAL/GEOGRAPHICAL ACCESS AND FOOD INSECURITY THROUGH THE FOOD DESERT LENS

A large amount of literature concerning physical/geographical access to food revolves around the concept of food deserts (Adams, Ulrich, and Coleman 2010). However, there is no consensus concerning how to characterise and measure what constitutes a food desert. Intuitively, the metaphor could easily refer to a “food provisioning sociotechnical infrastructure” approach, wherein “deserts” stand for areas lacking food stores (such as markets, supermarkets, restaurants, coffee-shops, etc.). In fact, for the most part, research on food deserts has taken this approach and limited analysis to specific geographical areas (e.g. cities, neighbourhoods, boroughs). Most studies rely heavily on quantitative measures like density and/or distance measures, such as the number of stores (per residents or census area) or shop distance (Block and Kouba 2006; Hendrickson, Smith and Eikenberry 2006; Larsen and Gilliland 2008). Other researchers have been stressing that geographical access to food cannot rely solely on physical/geographical analysis: area based approaches examine potential access and not actual usability, while ignoring individual or social factors that also hinder access to food (USDA 2009).

For instance, Laurence (1997 cit in Kennedy 2001) defined food deserts as “those areas in inner cities where cheap, nutritious food is virtually unobtainable; car-less residents, unable to reach out to supermarkets, depend on the corner shop where prices are high, products are processed and fresh fruit and vegetables are poor or non-existent”. As defined by this author, addressing

food deserts also involves a multi-layered analysis of issues such as health inequalities, social exclusion, availability and price of food, food consumption habits, transportation or food poverty (Wrigley 2002). Additionally, this theoretical proposal encourages qualitative analysis and assessment. Moreover, it opens the theoretical spectrum, encompassing broader perspectives, such as “foodways” or “foodscapes”, which conceptualise “the ever-changing, social, relational, and political nature of landscapes of urban food consumption and provision” (Miewald and McCann 2014, 539).

Although difficult to define and measure, food desert became a popular concept in both academic and policy-making circles, particularly after the 1990s (Wrigley 2002). Since then, a large body of evidence, mostly accumulated in the USA, has shown that healthier foods are more difficult to obtain and cost more in disadvantaged areas than in affluent areas (Hendrickson, Smith and Eikenberry 2006). Living in food deserts severely constrains the type and quality of food that individuals can obtain. As highlighted by Drewnowski and Specter (2004), areas where quality foods are lacking expose residents to more energy-dense foods (filled with empty calories), which are usually available at convenience stores and fast food restaurants. Unsurprisingly, research has shown that those living in areas with easier access to supermarkets have a higher household fruit intake (Rose and Richards 2004) and are less prone to health problems (Giang et al. 2008). Nevertheless, a strict and linear causal relation is hard to define.

Several authors that focus on the USA emphasise that food deserts are particularly worrying for those living with a low income. In fact, in the American context, the lowest income neighbourhoods had nearly 30% fewer supermarkets than the highest income neighbourhoods (Weinberg 1995 cit in Walker, Keane and Burke 2010, 878). Racial issues are also extremely relevant, since predominantly black neighbourhoods have four times fewer supermarkets and more prevalence of fast-food restaurants than predominantly white neighbourhoods (Morland et al. 2002; Block, Scribner and DeSalvo 2004). Moreover, within food deserts, prices tend to be higher and there are fewer food options in type, number and quality (Hendrickson, Smith and Eikenberry 2006). This could help explain why only 2 to 3% of the total food expenditures of low-incomers are made in convenience stores (USDA 2009). On the other hand, constraints of access among low-incomers are heightened by the cost of transportation, which make it difficult to reach supermarkets outside the immediate vicinity (Rose and Richards 2004). Others still, like

Whitley's (2013) qualitative study in rural Perry County, found that residents of food deserts with strong social networks were less likely to suffer food insecurity.

There have been fewer European studies and results have been more contradictory. For instance, one of the largest and most systematic studies conducted in the UK, compared areas with different socioeconomic deprivation levels within Glasgow, concluding that those living in the more deprived areas of the city were not substantially disadvantaged in terms of cost and availability of food (Cummins and Macintyre 2002). However, while less expensive food was available in deprived areas, it contained more sugar and fat, when compared with the cheaper products available in well off areas.

Another study used a pre-post intervention design to examine the impact of a large supermarket (Tesco) on a deprived area of Leeds (Wrigley, Warm and Margetts 2003). Most residents switched to the new store and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the residents with the poorest pre-intervention diet increased their fruit and vegetable intake. Also, a non-statistically significant relation was found between physical access to the new store (proximity) and dietary changes. However, Cummins and colleagues (2008) using the same pre-post design in Glasgow obtained conflicting results. These authors did not find a major fruit and vegetable consumption effect on switchers with the opening of a new supermarket. Nevertheless, there was improvement in their psychological health and on how they perceived impact on the community (more employment and community support).

In Northern Ireland, research showed 82% of the consumers assumed that corner shops were disappearing. Nevertheless, 70% of consumers shopped in the town centre closer to their homes. However, those that did their shopping outside the town were more satisfied with the price of products. Feelings of social exclusion were reported for 22% of the consumers, an effect of having insufficient local stores within an acceptable distance (Furey, Strugnell, and McIlveen 2001).

A recent study carried out in Amsterdam (The Netherlands) rejected the existence of food deserts within the city. Nonetheless, it was shown that areas with a lower share of native Dutch had lower supermarket density; although opposite results were obtained concerning proximity to supermarkets and variety (Helbich et al. 2017).

Food deserts remain an almost unexplored issue in Portugal. However, studies by Nogueira (2010) and Santana, Santos and Nogueira (2009) have made a lateral contribution to this debate. Nogueira (2010) investigated the

availability of resources in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA) in 2001-2005, including food retail, education, family support, health care, physical activity, recreation, diverse local resources and public transport. Results were aligned with the “deprivation amplification model” and showed that residents in more deprived areas lacked social and educational resources, facilities for physical and cultural activities and public transportation. Concerning food retail, results showed that the most deprived neighbourhoods had a lower density of supermarkets but a higher prevalence of small grocery stores and greengrocers. These results were consistent with those obtained by Santana, Santos and Nogueira (2009) a few years later: grocery shops are more prevalent in more deprived neighbourhoods of LMA and are negatively associated with a healthy diet. In contrast, less deprived neighbourhoods have more supermarkets and a greater fruit and vegetable intake.

Given the lack of consensus concerning what constitutes a food desert, researchers mention the importance of privileging mixed-methods (Walker, Keane and Burke 2010). Other authors appeal to increase the studies within a social science framework, particularly sociology (Adams, Ulrich and Coleman 2010).

In fact, the analysis of food environments of low income populations requires considering their unique social (e.g. social norms, violence), economic (e.g. purchasing power) and physical setting (e.g. stores, public transports) (Gittelsohn and Sharma 2009). Moreover, Macintyre, McDonald and Ellaway (2008) argue that the socio-spatial development of cities could also be informative and highlight a more context-based view of deprivation areas and residents’ relation with the existent resources. Also, Battersby (2012, 155) stresses that although research on food deserts could be a “useful starting point for considering a re-framing of urban food security” and provide input on weaknesses in retail food systems, it does not “focus enough on how people actually navigate their foodscapes”. For instance, by not recognising the existence of other forms of food provision beyond the market place (e.g. State, community, family and extant social networks).

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND FOOD INSECURITY

As a concept, social exclusion acquired a strong presence in political and intellectual discourses during the 1990s (Littlewood and Herkommer 1999).

With the increasing use of the concept in different contexts, there was a need to answer some questions, such as: what is social exclusion? What does it mean to be socially excluded? What are the dimensions of the phenomenon? What processes can lead to it?

Several social scientists have focused their attention on the analysis of social exclusion and its interconnectedness with other issues (e.g. poverty and social inequalities). In fact, one of the problems arising from a lack of conceptual clarity concerning social exclusion was the possible confusion with other concepts, such as poverty, inequality, marginalisation, segregation and stigmatisation (Rodrigues 2000). Additionally, the fact that these phenomena can coexist for the same individual or household make it difficult to establish a clear distinction (Diogo, Castro and Perista 2015).

Historically, the concept of social exclusion emerged in France during the mid-1970s (Lenoir 1974). It was associated with poverty and was used to characterise those who were excluded from benefiting from the progress achieved by modern societies. However, it was when the term was adopted by the European Union during the 1980s, that it became popular in Europe, giving rise to multiple definitions (Capucha 2005; Rawal 2008). Later, the concept would eventually gain worldwide visibility, especially after the First World Summit in 1995 (Rawal 2008; Diogo, Castro and Perista 2015).

In the scientific field, different theoretical approaches have assigned different meanings to social exclusion. One of these approaches originated in France and emphasises relational aspects, i.e. the analysis of issues related to the concepts of social solidarity and social bonds, a theoretical perspective based on Durkheim's (1977 [1993]) contributions (Capucha 2005; Rawal 2008). Authors such as Xiberras (1993), Castel (1996) and Paugam (1996) have made important contributions to the development of this approach, namely by framing social exclusion as a process associated with the disruption of social bonds connecting individuals to multiple social systems. In this approach, the concept of social exclusion is broader than the concept of poverty, since all the poor are excluded, but not all the excluded are necessarily poor.

Another approach focuses on issues related to the rights of individuals to participate in different spheres of social life (citizenship rights). From this point of view, poverty is related to the way resources are distributed among individuals, while social exclusion is related to the opportunities for social participation (Capucha 2005). Thus, authors such as Room (1988, 1989), Sen (1999) and Burchardt (2000) stress the material dimension of social exclusion,

concluding that the unequal distribution of economic resources is the main factor of exclusion in modern societies.

Therefore, social exclusion is defined, on the one hand, as a process leading to the dissolution of social bonds, or as a process associated with the disruption of the social contract (Capucha 2005). In the same line of thought, Room (1999) points to the existence of two theoretical traditions, the British and the French, where the former focuses on distributive aspects and the second on relational aspects.

At a certain level, the dissimilarities between these theoretical approaches reflect differences in how societies are organised in different countries (e.g. the role of the Social State, type of social benefits and political ideologies) (Haan and Maxwell 1998). Concerning this issue, Silver (1994) pointed out the existence of three paradigms: (i) a solidarity paradigm, originated in France, where the relationship between the concepts of exclusion and solidarity is analysed; (ii) a specialisation paradigm, with expression in the USA and UK, where the relationship between the concepts of exclusion and discrimination is analysed; and (iii) a monopoly paradigm, mostly Western European, where exclusion is related to group monopoly formation.

Authors such as Bruto da Costa (1998) preferred using “social exclusions”, in order to account for the complexity and heterogeneity of the concept. In fact, the phenomenon has multiple dimensions, namely: (i) economic, which concerns poverty, i.e. multiple deprivations due to lack of resources; (ii) social, related with the disruption of social bonds; (iii) cultural, based on social discrimination and labelling processes (e.g. minorities or former prisoners); (iv) pathological, where psychological or mental disorders can lead to family breakdown; (v) self-destructive behaviour, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution and other types of risk behaviour (Bruto da Costa 1998). Another conceptualisation, such as Babajanian and Hagen-Zanker’s (2012), mentions three types of exclusion: (i) exclusion from income, (ii) exclusion from services; and (iii) exclusion from participation. This conceptualisation is close to that formulated by Aasland and Flotten (2001), when they point to four types of exclusion: (i) exclusion from formal citizenship rights; (ii) exclusion from the labour market; (iii) exclusion from participation in civil society; and (iv) exclusion from social arenas.

In sum, the concept of social exclusion is complex and varies according to the context, which may limit its understanding. However, its multi-dimensional nature allows a one-dimensional vision of social reality to be overcome.

Although food-related issues are not often directly addressed by the social exclusion scholarship, the connection between food and social exclusion seems straightforward, and can be linked to the idea that those who suffer from involuntary starvation “can be seen as being excluded from access to food” (Sen 2000, 9). However, as pointed out by Sen (2000), this connection does not add anything new; we need to move beyond this approach and look at the relational aspects. In this sense, it is important to use the concept of social exclusion to understand the impact that the disruption of social bonds can have on food-related issues (and vice versa).

Food practices encompass social participation, whether through celebrations (e.g. Christmas and birthday parties), business meetings or just casual encounters between friends. It has a strong symbolic value that goes beyond the mere satisfaction of biological needs. In this regard, Dowler states:

those who cannot afford to eat in ways acceptable to society; who find food shopping a stressful or potentially humiliating experience because they might have insufficient money; whose children cannot have a packed lunch similar to their friends; who do not call on others to avoid having to accommodate return calls – these are people excluded from the ‘minimum acceptable way of life’. Food is an expression of who a person is and what they are worth, and of their ability to provide their family’s basic needs; it is also a focus for social exchange. Food is, of course, a major contributor to health and well-being. But it is not just health that is compromised in food-poor households: social behaviour is also at risk. (Dowler 1998, 58)

It is not just a matter of having access to food, but also of being able to participate actively in society, i.e. of leading what is collectively understood as a ‘normal’ life. One of the advantages of framing problems such as food insecurity in the context of social exclusion “is its simultaneous emphasis on multi-dimensional aspects of deprivation and their causes” (Babajanian and Hagen-Zanker 2012, 4). Likewise, individuals establish a complex and multi-dimensional connection with food, which entails multiple facets: biological, cultural, psychological and social. In this way, it is possible to avoid simplistic readings that only look at one side of the problem (e.g. the economic dimension).

In any case, food insecurity and social exclusion do not represent the same reality, as stated by Adhikary and Sarkar:

Both these problems are multifaceted and so we cannot define them in a single word. In some cases food insecurity gives birth to social exclusion and in some other cases social exclusion leads to food insecurity; also sometimes both food insecurity and social exclusion grow simultaneously. (Adhikary and Sarkar 2012, 766)

Thus if, on the one hand, a disruption of social bonds (social exclusion) can lead to significant changes in the way individuals interact through food and, therefore, in how it affects their social participation; on the other, changes in how individuals relate to others through food can lead to the disruption of social bonds.

This subject can also be related with commensality – the practice of eating together – which has long been a core topic in sociological and anthropological food scholarship. Cultural codes include provisions concerning how meals should be taken, shared, and eaten, the order of dishes, who should be served first, and so forth. Sharing a meal is a deeply charged social engagement, layered with signs (Goody 1982). It is widely accepted that commensality promotes communal solidarity and meals play a role in the regulation of social life and individual behaviour (Fischler 2011, 534). For example, family meals are “social interactions centred on food” entailing preparation and planning, in which food itself has different levels of centrality (Rotenberg 1981 cited by Yates and Warde 2017, 98). Insofar as social exclusion(s) relates with individuals’ and households’ access to specific or preferred types of food, it is plausible that such a limitation may severely impinge on their social participation around food. Impacts are likely to be felt not only during feasting and ceremonial commensality occasions (e.g. Christmas, Easter, and birthdays) but also in everyday meals. Despite the fact that increasing difficulties are visible regarding orchestrating family-work-children leisure activities around family meals, eating together is still a highly valuable feature of doing “family” and “motherhood/fatherhood”. Symbolically, many families still think it very important to make the extra effort of eating together, even if daily activities and schedule coordination becomes a challenge for that to happen in a systematic way. Thus, low income families also strive to maintain commensal practices, even if they struggle with the quality and quantity of food they have to provide to their families and the frequency they can afford a “proper” family meal.

Additionally, food is also central to individual identity, “in that any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by

the foods he/she chooses to incorporate” (Fischler 1988, 275). In fact, it is because food plays a central role in the construction of identities that food deprivation and changes to dietary routines and habits have a profound impact on people’s lives (and in everything they encompass).

CONCLUSION

The double term food (in)security has been gradually refined in its conceptualisation, especially in the 2nd half of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. Although the concept has gained more clarity in recent years, its access dimension tends to be overlooked, especially its physical/geographical and social aspects. In this chapter, we have suggested that these aspects have the potential for better empirical clarification with cross fertilisation with the literature on food deserts and social exclusion. Together with other scholars, we also agree that it is important to privilege mixed-methods and multi-layered approaches to capitalise on such conceptual refinement and empirical operationalisation. However, the connecting points between the various sub-dimensions of access (physical, economic and social) are almost unquantifiable, and are difficult to untangle. For instance, socioeconomic deprived neighbourhoods are frequently disadvantaged in terms of food cost and availability (at least in the USA), representing a challenge particularly for low income families, that see themselves excluded, not only from access to cheap and nutritious food, but also from the social sphere (shopping, eating out and social participation). In some social settings, both urban and rural, territorial organisation is engendered into highly segregated spaces, some of which lacking easy physical access to food. Living in a food desert doesn’t necessarily entail exclusion from food, consumption or social participation. But, for some families, difficulty in access can be a key dimension of exclusion. Thus, the analytical focus on the configuration of exclusion at different and multiple levels (e.g. income, services and participation) should be more explored in future studies to better understand the access dimension of food insecurity.

As to social exclusion, it is also possible to establish bridges with the concept of food insecurity. The disruption of social bonds can have an impact on people’s eating habits and on the social interactions that are established around food, in the same way as the phenomenon of food insecurity can lead

to the disruption of social bonds. Moreover, the relationship between the concepts of food insecurity and social exclusion goes beyond the idea that food insecure people are excluded from access to food. The way individuals relate to others through food has an impact not only on lifelong relationships, but also on how these relationships influence individuals and define them. Thus food represents a strong element of social inclusion and identity.

By focusing more on the physical and social aspects we enable the refinement of the concept of access that has been biased towards privileging the economic arena. More international and national studies are a welcome addition, especially if they further examine the dimension of physical and social access, and problematise more issues around food insecurity, consumption and social participation.

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