ACHIEVING FOOD SECURITY FROM A BOTTOM-UP AND INTERSECTIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH: PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS FROM THE BRAZILIAN CASE*

CONQUISTAR A SEGURANÇA ALIMENTAR A PARTIR DE UMA ABORDAGEM DE BAIXO PARA CIMA E INTERSECIONAL BASEADA EM DIREITOS HUMANOS: REFLEXÕES PRELIMINARES DO CASO BRASILEIRO

Valentina De Gregorio[1]

Abstract: Gender-based approaches to nutrition and development receive growing attention in the international academic debate, looking at the multiple hunger and malnutrition experiences faced by women because of gender. Even the critical scholarship has been looking at the issue through a uni-disciplinary lens. Little research has been conducted to develop a conceptual framework that overcomes such a silo-thinking. This paper addresses such a need, by suggesting and exploring the adoption of a complex and holistic approach to gender and beyond gender (intersectionality) when achieving food security. This article will contribute to the study of food and gender studies by critically discussing the specific policy case study in Brazil, aimed at reducing poverty at the national level through a bottom-up and intersectional human rights-based approach. Concluding remarks on the possibility to upscale and integrate this study with an intersectional approach to gender and law will lead the article to an end.

Keywords: Brazil; food security and nutrition; intersectionality; human rights-based approach; substantive equality.

Resumo: Abordagens baseadas em gênero em relação à nutrição e ao desenvolvimento recebem atenção crescente no debate acadêmico internacional, mirando experiências múltiplas de fome e desnutrição enfrentadas por mulheres em razão de gênero. Mesmo o campo acadêmico crítico tem olhado para a questão através de uma lente uni-disciplinar. Pouca pesquisa tem sido conduzida a um desenvolvimento de um quadro conceitual que supere tal repositório de pensamento. Este texto é endereçado a tal necessidade, ao sugerir e explorar a adoção de uma abordagem complexa e holística à questão do gênero e além do gênero (interseccionalidade) quando alcançada a segurança alimentar. Este artigo contribuirá para o estudo da questão da alimentação e os estudos de gênero ao discutir criticamente o específico estudo de caso de política pública no Brasil, observado em termos de redução da pobreza em nível nacional através de uma abordagem de baixo para cima e interseccional calcada nos direitos humanos. As observações finais sobre a possibilidade de sofisticar e integrar este estudo com uma abordagem interseccional de gênero e direito levarão este texto a um fim.

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[1] PhD Student in Human Rights and Global Politics at Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies (Pisa, Italy) E-mail: valentina.degregorio@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5377-8372.

Palavras-chave: Brasil; segurança alimentar e nutrição; interseccionalidade; abordagem baseada em direitos humanos; igualdade substancial.

Introduction

Preliminary remarks and methodology

This article examines the contribution the *intersectionality* perspective can provide to the theoretical and practical attempt of achieving food security (hereinafter FS) in the food-system (hereinafter F-S). In terms of academic positioning, the writing stems, in fact, from the preliminary reflections that shall be developed within a broader Ph.D. research project in the Human Rights and Global Politics Program at the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies (Pisa, Italy). This will focus on the adoption of the *intersectionality* as an innovative methodology to approach FS studies, considering the multiple and entrenched power relations in the food governance arena, likely to reproduce intersecting patterns of injustices for women and the people identifying and defining their own selves as being women.

The article builds on a solid conceptual framework, spanning from the concept of F-S, FS and its main components, and encompassing the key pillar of a human rights-based approach to food-related issues, specifically the human right to right to adequate food (hereinafter RtF), in the light of the principle of substantive equality (hereinafter SE) and non-discrimination. Ultimately, it unfolds through an interdisciplinary reflection, acknowledging the important engagement that intersectional policy outcomes can bring for allowing present and future generations of women living in a more equal and sustainable F-S.

This article is divided into five sections. After this brief and conceptual introduction to the article's framework and methodology (section 1), section 2 examines the critical role women play in F-S, being simultaneously key food providers and victims of hunger, poverty and marginalization. The section ends by mentioning the renewed commitment by the international community towards the full realization of women equality and empowerment as complementary goals to attain the ambitious zero hunger objective. More detailed data on the current state of poverty, hunger and food insecurity (hereinafter FI) in Brazil will be provided in section 3, addressing the bottom-up processes that have laid the foundations for the progressive policy measures introduced in Brazil between 1993 and 2011. The country has been chosen to be one of the most interesting and successful examples in reducing absolute poverty, hunger and FI – at least until 2011 - despite its still persisting contradictions in terms

of gender discriminations, structural violence and social inequalities. Section 4 will complement the picture by delving into the three key policy pillars implemented by the former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva with regard to food. Their intersectional features at the crossroad between gender, race, and space will be highlighted. Section 5 shares concluding and critical remarks on the findings, advancing the urgency for academic research and policy makers to take up this research line and apply it to the study of the F-S, in order to build "*a global culture of human rights from the grassroots to the global level*" (Symington 2004: 3).

From the methodological viewpoint, this paper draws on the desk collection of quantitative data, which arises from bibliographic research and critical literature review, along with academic articles and monographs enclosing data from institutional and civil society reports. Such methodology is meant to connect the main academic approaches to food, gender and development studies in an interdisciplinary way, engaging with elements of law and introducing relevant philosophical insights.

Why an intersectional approach to food is needed: a primal conceptual framework

Before delving into the details of the article, a preparatory vocabulary defining the food- related issues that will be covered, and how they meet with the *intersectionality* would be necessary. Definitions of FS, FI, malnutrition and hunger will be provided.

FS can be defined as the condition when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Engler-Stringer 2014). On the contrary, FI "*is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways*" (Wood & Felker-Kantor 2013: 3), which may cause vulnerability to malnutrition, hunger and poverty (Hart 2009). Malnutrition – described as an unbalanced state of nutrition where the needed nutrients are too few or too many (Soeters *et al*. 2017) - may lead to serious consequences, including FI and hunger (Hart 2009). As outlined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (hereinafter FAO), hunger is the uncomfortable or painful physical sensation caused by insufficient consumption of food, and thus dietary energy[2] (Tanumihardjo *et al*. 2007).

[2] https://www.fao.org/hunger/en/. Accessed 18 March 2022.

Being one of most basic of human needs, food has been recognized as a human right since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and precisely "*the right of everyone to* […] *adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger*" (FAO 1996[3], Mechlem 2004). Since then, it has been incorporated in several binding international treaties, most notably the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, art. 11), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). In particular, General Comment 12 on article 11 of the ICESCR specifies that States have the obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the RtF, thus introducing the principle of non-discrimination in accessing adequate food, "*in ways that are sustainable and that do not interfere with the enjoyment of other human rights*" (Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, CESCR, 1999).

The principle of non-discrimination, or SE, is legally embedded in the 1966 ICESCR, article 2, paragraph 2, that imposes upon the Member States the prohibition of any kind of discrimination, by setting a non-exhaustive list of possible drivers of prejudice, namely colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. The principle is more precisely defined in paragraph 7 of the General Comment 20 on ICESCR, article 2, paragraph 2, defining discrimination as any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference or other differential treatment which has the intention or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of ICESCR rights (CESCR 2009). Paragraph 8 continues by saying that merely addressing formal discrimination will not ensure SE. The effective enjoyment of rights is often influenced by whether a person is a member of a group characterized by the prohibited grounds of discrimination. Eliminating discrimination in practice requires paying sufficient attention to groups of individuals which suffer historical or persistent prejudice instead of merely comparing the formal treatment of individuals in similar situations. States must therefore adopt the necessary measures to prevent, diminish and eliminate the conditions and attitudes which cause or perpetuate substantive or *de facto* discrimination (CESCR 2009). To this end, being food a human right, States parties must ensure to all people access to adequate food and the resources to produce it, transform it and distribute it, including those most at risk

[3] https://www.fao.org/3/w9990e/w9990e02.htm. Accessed 19 March 2022.

of multiple daily constraints because of their gender and beyond their gender, including women.

The academic literature has widely demonstrated how most of the time structural situations of poverty, FI, hunger and malnutrition do not only depend on insufficient levels of food production but are, instead, the results of systemic discriminations and inequalities in accessing food (Ziegler *et al.* 2011, De Schutter 2012, Strakos & Sanches 2017). Main root causes identified are the lack of political willingness in addressing violence and discriminations leading factors, as well as corporate power concentration, global trade and financial systems, or investment agreements causing serious obstacles to the realization of RtF, especially for women living in both rural and urban areas. Moreover, being the RtF intertwined and inherently connected with all the other essential human rights and not limited to accessing and eating food, its violation goes hand in hand with the recognition of further essential components of food-related issues, including the right to life, health, adequate housing, work, education, social security, political participation, non-discrimination, and access to justice (Ferrando *et al*. 2018).

Addressing such a complex and entangled picture requires an equally complex and interdisciplinary approach which the only *intersectionality* methodology can offer. In the attempt to identify how interlocking systems of power simultaneously contribute to impacting those who are the most marginalized in the F-S on several and intersecting grounds, the *intersectionality* provides the opportunity to radically change the premises upon which the academic debate has framed gender issues and non-discriminatory access in FS studies. To detail what *intersectionality* means within the food-related issues, a picture of the main inequalities and discriminations in the global F-S will be provided in the following section.

1. Food (in)security: an intersectional issue

1.1 The F-S: a breeding ground for structural inequalities

For the purposes of this article, a definition of F-S is firstly needed. F-S[4] refers to the set of interconnected activities, procedures and actors' relations dealing with the food production, transformation, exchange, and access (Tendall *et al*. 2015), at different scales,

[4]Institutional and academic literature usually refer to the term food system without using dash (-). The choice of introducing it here comes from the author's willingness of stressing on the idea of deep interconnections embedded in such a system.

may they be at the local, national, regional, and global level. Being food one of the most essential of human and animal demands for living, the notion of F-S comprehends the products coming from different human practices, including agriculture and livestock, fisheries, forestry, and food industries (Godfray *et al*. 2010).

The key role women play in global and territorial F-Ss as producers, family providers and consumers has been largely recognized by the European and international academic literature (Raney 2011, Allen & Sachs 2012, Patel 2012, Doss *et al*. 2014, Elver 2016, De Schutter 2017). In rural areas, women actively contribute to saving seeds and protecting local agrobiodiversity[5] for their communities, being central actors in the crop, livestock, pastoralist and fish systems, throughout the food production and processing line (Doss *et al*. 2014, Elver 2016, De Schutter 2017, Brandão *et al*. 2020).

Data from FAO (FAOSTAT 2011) show that women represent around 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force in the Global South: from 20 per cent in Latin America to around 50 per cent in many parts of Africa and South and Southeast Asia, with these figures varying depending from region to region (Raney 2011). Moreover, the role of women's commitment and activism has progressively been acknowledged as a tool to ensure the progressive realization of RtF (Elver 2016) and ecosystems conservation (Federici 2004).

Despite women's full engagement in both the productive and care economies, academic literature has also underlined how women find themselves in time hunger and poverty, as unpaid caregivers, lacking access to decision-making processes, social protection services and essential resources to pursue decent living standards, including land, credit, information and technological inputs (Folbre 2006, 2018, De Schutter 2017). In Europe, women are 4.7 per cent more exposed than men to FI, with two additional percentage points when referring to South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Broussard 2019). Some historical times can, even more, exacerbate the difficulties faced by women: the Covid-19 pandemic has been a prime example of this, especially in terms of producing and accessing food (Swan 2020).

It has indeed been proven that gender may be an important cause of discrimination in accessing food (Allen & Sachs 2012). However, except for the latest and most progressive approaches to food and gender (Gioia, 2019, Smith 2019, Parker *et al*., 2019), even the critical

[5]Agrobiodiversity is understood as "the whole spectrum of crop and animal varieties that have been consciously selected and bred targeting a particular set of desirable traits. In addition, agrobiodiversity is also conserved and augmented by creating wild or semi-wild refuge areas" (Timmermann & Robaey 2016: 286).

scholarship has been focusing on gender as the only ground of bias in food-related injustices (Allen & Sachs 2012, Patel 2012, Quisumbing *et al*. 2014), excluding the complexity of gender as distinct from sexuality and overlooking the levels of violence, subordination and marginalization experienced by people not identifying themselves with the man/woman dichotomy.

A complex understanding of gender, as more than a mere focus on the biological distinction between men and women, should occupy a central role in the path towards the recognition of rights and empowerment in the food system (Gopaldas & Fischer 2012). Such reasoning suggests that gender should be taken into consideration as one of main causes of violence and subordination in society as well as in the F-S, together with a plethora of other personal attributes which may define a person, including class, ethnicity, indigeneity, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, etc. (Andrews *et al*. 2019, Smith 2019, Parker *et al*. 2019, Patterson *et al.* 2020). The intersection between two or ore more grounds, triggering one-of-a-kind experiences of discrimination, is what is called *intersectionality*.

Intersectionality refers to the legal methodology developed in 1989 by the Afro-American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw, to analyse and understand the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of prejudice experienced by the Afro-American women in the U.S. between the 1970s and 1980s (Crenshaw 1989). The stream of Black feminism has acted as backdrop for the *intersectionality*, rooted in the precious works of the Afro-American writers bell hooks, Audrey Lorde and Angela Davis (Smith 2013).

Of particular relevance for this article is the original core of the Crenshaw's analysis, meaning the role of power in structuring relationships in forms of systemic inequality. Otherwise said, the *intersectionality* is a lens for enlarging one's gaze on how different systems of power dynamically impact of individuals and communities of people, producing intersecting patterns of racism, sexism, patriarchalism and classism (Loretoni 2018, Bello 2020).

When it comes to food, "*multiple axes of power actively discriminate against women's right to food and nutrition*" (Andrews *et al*. 2019: 9): ethnicity, migratory background and belonging to a particular social group or class enormously contribute to affecting women's wages, employment opportunities and working conditions even in the Global North (Patterson *et al*. 2020), including Europe (Andrews *et al*. 2019). For this reason, a complex understanding of gender, as more than men and women, should occupy a central

role in the path towards the recognition of security, rights and empowerment, even in the F-S (Gopaldas & Fischer 2012).

1.2 The international endeavours towards gender equality and FS

According to FAO (SOFA 2010-2011), if women could access productive resources as much as men, it would lift 100,000 to 150,000 people out of hunger and farm yields would increase by 20-30 per cent. Closing the gender gap and addressing women's nutritional challenges would also have positive implications on children's nutritional status, given that when women have more influence over economic decisions, their families allocate more income to food, health, education, children's clothing and nutrition (Akter *et al*. 2017). Therefore, acknowledging the role of women in the F-S, providing them with equal access and control to resources, are effective ways of eliminating hunger and malnutrition at the local and national level, as well as enhancing inclusive economic development (De Schutter 2012, Elver 2016).

Since the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the promise to achieve the progressive realization of women's rights (1979), gender equality (hereinafter GE) has become an increasingly important topic within the academic debates on agricultural innovation to feed the growing global population (Bock & van der Burg 2017). Focussed attention has been raised on achieving both GE and women and girls' empowerment (Sustainable Development Goal, SDG 5), while eradicating hunger (SDG 1) and reducing inequalities (SDG10), as necessary goals for sustainable development (Sen 2019).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides an important tool to guide States towards the realization of such global and urgent sustainability objectives. It reflects the necessity to adopt an integrated and interconnected approach to face the most complex challenges of our times and shift towards a conscious model of development, bearing in mind both social and environmental components towards sustainability (Poto 2020).

Although ample evidence that this renewed focus on women's equality and empowerment to achieve FS and reduce poverty, malnutrition and hunger, is gaining ground exists in academic, political, legal and institutional frameworks (Koehler 2016, Mengesha 2016, Collins 2021), these key concepts are mostly contained in top-down and not legally

binding provisions, thus risking to remain "abstract" - as the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Hilal Elver, stated in a speech during the CFS Women Forum (FAO, Sept 25th, 2017) – and reflecting the dominant white and male privilege (Robeyns 2003, Borghi 2020). The importance of *intersectionality*, though, calls for questioning the foundations of a gender-only vision, shedding equally light on further complementary factors (e.g., class, race, body) in the construction of injustices, as well as the dynamics of power underlying intersectional discriminations.

2. The process towards the achievement of FS in Brazil

2.1 The state of food (in)security in Brazil: an overview

Providing exact evidence of the current state of FS and FI, malnutrition and hunger in Brazil may constitute a challenge. Information has been revised and updated on a continuous basis in the last years, also due to the pandemic. Nevertheless, significant figures can be highlighted.

A survey carried out in July 2020 by UNICEF and the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (IBOPE) has estimated that, during the pandemic, 33 million people aged around 18 years old had no money to buy food, while 9 million people stopped preparing meal, lacking food, and also money for buying it (UNICEF 2020[6]). A second study conducted in December 2020 by Action Aid Brazil, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Brazil, Oxfam Brazil and the Ibirapitanga Institute, has revealed that at the end of 2020 almost 116 million people faced situations of FI, 9 per cent of which experienced severe FI before the collection period. In sum, the researchers found that 19 million Brazilians seriously went food insecure during the pandemic - a number which has doubled over the last ten years and have returned to the levels observed in 2004 (VIGISAN 2021[7]).

In the wake of the downward trend initiated already after the Lula's administration, the pandemic situation has made more visible profound social inequalities in the whole country, specifically in accessing food (Freitas 2020). Among the social groups who are particularly susceptible to poverty and social exclusion, female householders and non-White

[6] https://www.unicef.org/media/100521/file/Brazil-2020-COAR.pdf. Accessed 18 March 2022.
[7] VIGISAN 2021. Inquérito Nacional sobre Insegurança Alimentar no Contexto da Pandemia da Covid-19 no Brasil. Pesquisa realizada pela Rede Brasileira em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional, disponível em: http://olheparaafome.com.br/. Accessed 8 March 2022.

individuals, indigenous and migrant people are the most exposed to FI and hunger (Wood & Felker-Kantor 2013, Salles-Costa *et al*. 2020, Manfrinato *et al*. 2021). Despite its important role in food production and global food trade (Ziegler 2003, Neves & Peduto 2010), Brazil has been historically characterized by strong social inequalities and disparities within its population in terms of access to basic services, because of extreme poverty, precariousness and lack of means to purchase adequate food for a healthy life. Such conditions are not part of a recent history; on the contrary, they are rooted in the complex legacy of the European colonization, and in the consequent division of people on the basis of race, gender and indigeneity, thus pushing many individuals and communities towards extreme poverty (Skidmore 1992, Leão & Maluf 2013).

Acute income inequalities have been further exacerbated by the process of dispossession of indigenous land and territories and the following concentration of rural lands in the hands of few agribusiness large actors. Only 24 per cent of agricultural lands in Brazil is currently devoted to family farming,[8] which "*corresponds to 84.4% of the Country farms, employing 74% of the rural work force, and providing 70% of the food consumed by Brazilians*" (Abreu & Alonzo 2016: 2). This would not be possible without the labour of rural women, mostly accountable for producing traditional and healthy food and taking care of family relationships (Elver 2016). However, evidence from the field of gender studies shows how women are much more liable to conditions of insecurity and violence in Brazil, not only for the fact of being women, but also rural peasants, indigenous and Afro-descendants, migrants or members of the the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (hereinafter LGBT) community (Felker-Kantor & Wood 2012). With regard to food, this involves geographical, gender, and ethno-racial inequalities resulting in difficult access to nutritious food, as well as malnutrition, severe FI and hunger, which have started being particularly pronounced from the period immediately after the election of President Jair Bolsonaro (Gioia 2019).

As this brief picture shows, hunger, thus, and generally access to food, is more than a simple and natural condition, but rather a political issue, implying relations of powers and requesting the transformative participation of each social constituency to be tackled and

[8] "Family farming is not just about the size of the farm, as when we talk about small scale farming; it is more about the way people farm and live. This is why family farming is a way of life" (van der Ploeg 2013: 8). For a more complete definition of family farming, or family agriculture, please see van der Ploeg, J. D. (2013). Ten qualities of family farming. Farming Matters, 29(4), 8-11.

solved. The next section will provide further details of this statement, taking a closer look at the historical process that has led to important milestones in this regard.

2.2 From the bottom to the top: historical milestones from the 1940s to 2003

In the Brazilian history, hunger as a matter of politics has been a concern for a long time. One of the first politicians who revealed this preoccupation was Josué de Castro, a popular Brazilian scientistic, geographer and activist fighting hunger, who focused his work in one of the poorest regions in the country, the North-east. He specifically dealt with the debate around "*hunger and poverty as a social and political issue*" (Leão & Maluf 2013: 14), as the result of political and economic models of development which contributed to make some regions (the North-east was one of those) less advanced in economic terms and therefore more dependent from others, thus remarking conditions of exclusion and poverty, "*high rates of malnutrition* […], *and the consequent lack of access to drinking water and adequate food that affected most of the Brazilian population*" (Leão & Maluf 2013: 14) at that time.

This understanding, jointly with the awareness that injustices and discriminations on the basis of gender were likely to have significant consequences on women's and households FS, was one the claims advanced by the Brazilian feminist social movements in the 1980s, when they started requesting for women's social rights in the Brazilian agricultural system, including better working conditions for women and the equal recognition of women's and men's role in agriculture and family farming (Lovell 2000). This resulted in the development of collaborative dialogue paths with institutions, government and regulatory bodies, and led to a key landmark: the 1988 Brazilian Constitution (Brandão *et al*. 2020). The participatory process of drafting gathered several constituencies, including representatives from civil society and public authorities, churches, indigenous communities, sex workers, private sector, government officials, human rights and environment defenders, rural and urban organizations and feminist movements (Leão & Maluf 2013, Alvarado 2018). In its specific provisions, the Constitution provided two important guarantees in this respect. Firstly, it made the State responsible for ensuring social, civil and political rights through *ad hoc* structures and model of governance, and specifically new forms of participation in public policies (e. g., councils).

Secondly, the inclusion of family farming as a professional category, plus the recognition of equal rights to women and men when benefitting from public policies.

In line with such a collective and plural mobilization of civil society in the political context aimed at the realization of a common set of fundamental rights, in 1993 the Movement for Ethics in Politics, headed up by the sociologist Herbert de Souza, promoted a national Campaign Against Hunger. The goal was to give greater momentum to the political question of hunger, by demonstrating its deep interconnection with poverty and the crucial role that civil society could have played in tackling it (Constantine & Santarelli 2017). The government of President Itamar Franco seriously welcomed the Campaign and decided to take important steps towards the eradication of hunger and poverty in the country (Chmielewska & Souza 2011).

The first of them was represented by the Hunger Map (*Mapa da Fome*). No legal provision could have been adopted without an official document reporting the number of people suffering from hunger in Brazil. To this extent, the Brazil's Institute of Applied Economic Research (hereinafter IPEA) was assigned to provide a clear picture of the state of poverty and FI: in 1993, almost 32 million people – around the 21 per cent of the population – were facing extreme poverty because they have no sufficient income to access food[9] (Chmielewska & Souza 2011, Constantine & Santarelli 2017).

Considering the picture supplied by the IPEA, the second lines of government direction consisted in the introduction of the 1993 National Plan to Combat Hunger and Poverty. The central plank of this policy was the establishment of the National Council for Food Security (*Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar* – CONSEA), an advisor governmental body where both civil society and government representatives were actively engaged in its organisation and functioning.

Complementing all of this was the third step, concerning in the National Conference on Food Security (CNSA) in 1994, that gathered almost 2,000 participants from all over Brazil to exchange about the state of hunger and poverty and define the government priorities in this regard (Chmielewska & Souza 2011).

[9]According to World Bank, being below the poverty line means living with less than $1.90 a day (World Bank 2020, Monitoring global poverty). For a more precise interpretation of what that meant in 1994, please see Medeiros Peliano A. M. et al. 1993. A nova experiência brasileira no combate à fome e à miséria. Revista Saúde em Debate, 40: 17–25.

While significant progress has been achieved, the history of this strategic measures in tackling both poverty and hunger has not always been linear. As underlined by the reference authors mentioned in this section in relations to such an important bottom-up policy process (Chmielewska & Souza 2011, Constantine & Santarelli 2017), President Fernando Henrique Cardoso closed the CONSEA in 1995, to formally prioritize a unidirectional political line to combat poverty and provide a decisive impulse to growth in Brazil. However, the discussion around food as a key component of the struggle towards economic prosperity was not left behind. In fact, President Cardoso committed to launch the agenda of the Council of *Comunidade Solidária*,[10] where the participation of Brazil at the 1996 World Food Summit was discussed.

The presence of representatives from social movements has been influential even at this stage, encouraging the founding of the 1998 Brazilian Forum on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty[11] and Security (*Fórum Brasileiro de Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional* – FBSSAN), that took a critical part in framing the CONSEA's agenda and creating a space of dialogue bridging with "*networks concerned with food and nutritional security*, [especially] *land reform, a "solidarity economy", agro-ecology, indigenous people, traditional populations*" (Chmielewska & Souza 2011: 2).

This brief analysis shows how, although issues related to food have not always been the priority in political agendas, the grassroot mobilization and the support received from the institutions have paved the way for important reforms in this regard. The next section will deal with the latter in more detail.

3. The unique contribution of an intersectional approach to policy to achieve FS

3.1 *Fome Zero*: an ambitious policy strategy for Brazil

The peak of interest in issues such as FI and poverty was reached with the elections of President Lula, who turned this prerogative into a system of structured policy measures

[10] Programa Comunidade Solidária was the set of programs earlier created by President Fernando Enrique Cardoso in 1995 (Wood & Felker-Kantor 2013).

[11] "*Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets; and to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production*" (Patel 2009: 666).

aimed at combating hunger and poverty jointly (Wood & Felker-Kantor 2013). From 2003 onwards, hunger has been once again considered as a complex issue, to be tackled considering the lack of economic resources and sufficient income that made people impossible to access adequate food (Leão & Maluf 2013). It was therefore not conceivable to pursue the efforts against hunger without pairing them with the fight against poverty. This section will list some of the main endeavours envisaged by the Brazilian Zero Hunger policy context.

In 2003, the alarming data concerning 44 million people suffering from poverty and hunger in Brazil, have prompted the FBSSAN, the Workers Party and civil society representatives to write a proposal, defined Zero Hunger (*Fome Zero*), calling for the adoption of a national comprehensive FS policy (DelGrossi *et al*. 2019). The document immediately became an integral part of the Brazilian government, that made it an absolute political priority from the beginning of President Lula's first term in 2003.

Within the Brazilian Fome Zero strategy, three key policy pillars can be outlined.

First, the reestablishment of CONSEA in 2003. After being dismantled after only two years of activity, CONSEA has been restored, becoming the political venue where members from the public administration and civil society gathered and reasoned around the most challenging FS and nutrition matters. Fifty-four representatives were involved in the CONSEA negotiations on a daily basis: two thirds of members coming from the from civil society side and one third from federal government (Rocha *et al*. 2012: 525). The participation of both constituencies has been particularly strengthened within two initiatives: the National School Feeding Program (*Programa Nacional de Alimentacão Escolar*, hereinafter PNAE) and the *Bolsa Família* Program (hereinafter BFP). PNAE aimed at providing 47 million free school meals every day, while BFP consisted in a direct cash transfer plan to monthly help 12.7 million families (nearly 50 million people) facing situation of extreme poverty.[12] Between 2007 and 2011, 90 per cent of Brazilian households could benefited from the BFP at rural level, and in 2012, 13 million families were benefitting of BFP at national level (Brandão *et al*. 2020).

As regards the second pillar, the Framework Law on Food and Nutrition Security (*Lei Orgânica de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*, hereinafter LOSAN), approved by the National Congress in 2006, was an important step towards achieving the goals proposed by

[12] "[…] *Families living in a situation of extreme poverty, with a monthly per capita income of up to R$70 (US$34.65) and in a situation of poverty with a monthly per capita income from R$70.01 (US$34.66) to R$140 (US$54.48)*" (Leão and Maluf 2013: 23).

the Lula's government. By fully recognizing the role of civil society as key player when discussing and implementing provisions aimed at attaining FS in Brazil, as well as providing the legal framework to ensure the RtF at national level (Rocha *et al*. 2012), LOSAN proposed a more articulated notion of FS, precisely Food and Nutrition Security (hereinafter FNS). LOSAN article 3 reads this way: "[FNS is the] *realization of the right of all to regular and permanent access to quality food in sufficient quantity, without compromising access to other essential needs, based on nutrition practices that promote health, respect cultural diversity and are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable*" (Leão & Maluf 2013: 46). Moreover, LOSAN created the conditions for the realization of the National Food and Nutrition Security System (*Sistema Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*, hereinafter SISAN) in 2006. SISAN served as an innovative model of participatory governance for the Federal government of Brazil, with the goal to regulate and harmonize the implementation of decentralised RtF public policies, following principles based on universal access, equity, autonomy, social participation and transparency in accessing to food (Rocha *et al*. 2012, Leão & Maluf 2013). Building on this commitment, the RtF has been officially introduced in the Brazilian Constitution in 2010 (Rocha, 2014).

In the RtF framework, LOSAN also encouraged the improvement of two initiatives in 2010, the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (*Política Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*, hereinafter PNSAN) and the National Food And Nutrition Security Plan (*Plano Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*, hereinafter PLANSAN). Both have been strongly supported by civil society actors, in partnership with the government and many other national institutions (Chmielewska & Souza 2011). The PNSAN proved to be respectful of diversity and attentive to interconnected issues when implementing the RtF, providing particular attention to the "*variety of social, cultural, environmental, ethnic-racial, equity of gender and sexual orientation, as well as provide tools for its accountability*" (Chmielewska & Souza 2011: 5). Moreover, a new focus on the promotion of agroecological[13] system, respectful of indigenous and traditional communities and culture emerged clearly from its general objective (Chmielewska & Souza 2011). On a practical level,

[13] "[…] *agroecology is presented as a perspective that is needed in the global debate about the future of food and agriculture. […] agroecology was coined by Wezel et al. (2009) as science, practice and social movement. […] this tripartite perspective was meant to explain the interdependencies of knowledge, politics and practice fundamental to a holistic ecological approach to food systems (Francis et al., 2003)"* (Loconto & Fouilleux 2019: 117, 118).

the PLANSAN defined the necessary tools to implement the PNSAN, addressing its goals, challenges and targets (Leão & Maluf 2013).

As a third pillar, also rural areas could benefit from public policies aimed at improving family farmers' living and working conditions (da Silva 2009). In 2010 two programs have been designed in this regard: the Technical Assistance and Rural Extension National program (*Assessoria Técnica e Extensão Rural*, hereinafter ATER) and the Program for the Productive Organization of Rural Women (*Programa de Organização Produtiva de Mulheres Rurais*, hereinafter POPMR). Specifically conceived to share technical knowledge to farmers, with a special focus on women, they had the dual objective of promoting their role within the local economy and the shift towards an agroecological production model (Brandão *et al*. 2020). Furthermore, specific programs to support local production were the Food Acquisition Program (*Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos da Agricultura Familiar*, hereinafter PAA) and the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (hereinafter PRONAF), developed to promote family farming products distribution among the most vulnerable categories of people. The last important instrument to be mentioned was the *Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar* (National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture, hereinafter PRONAF), designed to support family and small-scale agriculture from a quantity and quality viewpoint and increase both livelihood and income for rural farmers, especially if women. This program foresaw a package of measures including subsidized credits, training and technical assistance, as well as insurance for small-scale and family farmers (da Silva 2009).

3.2 Towards an intersectional equality: the results of the Zero Hunger strategy

Brazil's impressive endeavours towards the realization of the RtF for all and the successful achievement of national FNS has been widely recognized by international scholars and institutions (Leão & Maluf 2013, Paes-Sousa & Vaitsman 2014, da Silva 2019). An impressive analysis provided by five academics from the Federal University of Alagoas (Maceió, Brazil) observed an increase of 19 per cent in FS, from a level of approximately 64 per cent in 2004 to more than 77 per cent in 2013. They also noted a remarkable decrease in moderate FI (from 10 per cent in 2004 to 4.6 per cent in 2013) and severe FI (from 7 per cent in 2004 to 3.3 per cent in 2013), presenting more intensive trends specifically from 2004 to

2009 (Santos *et al*. 2018). The geographical distribution of data should also be mentioned: the reduction of the vulnerability level was more considerable in the Southeast, South and Midwest (- 58.3 per cent) when compared to the North and Northeast (-50.7 per cent) (Santos *et al*. 2018).

In addition, due to the deep interconnections between hunger and poverty measures, FAO reported an extreme poverty reduction of approximately 15 per cent, spanning from 35 per cent in 2003 to less than 20 per cent in 2010, with "*more than 28 million Brazilians ros*[ing] *out of poverty and 36 million Brazilians enter*[ing] *the middle class*" (da Silva 2019: 34). These figures entailed the removal of Brazil from the UN World Hunger Map in 2014 (Malta 2018).

The innovative nature of *Fome Zero* relied in the acknowledgement of deep interconnections among several hunger-related problems, including the attainment of FS, the support to small-scale and family agriculture and, most importantly, the reduction of absolute poverty at national level (Paes-Sousa & Vaitsman 2014). For this reason, the favourable outcomes of the Zero Hunger program were due to the adoption of a comprehensive and intersectional human rights-based approach to the policy context, that has succeeded in accommodating and endorsing the bottom-up needs and initiatives coming by decades of by civil society mobilazations within the Brazilian and global F-S (Chmielewska & Souza 2011, Leão & Maluf 2013). The underlying principles of the Zero Hunger strategy went beyond a merely production-oriented approach. Rather, they relied on a solid knowledge of the F-S as a set of multiple and interconnected relations between different players and sectors, that need to be regulated to prevent inequalities and discriminations in accessing food. The Brazilian government recognized how the combined FS and RtF-based approach were key part in the attempt towards social justice, together with other components, including "[the] *respect for and guarantee of the principles of ethno-development in the design and implementation of public food and nutrition security policies, whether universal or specific, for indigenous peoples, black populations, and traditional peoples and communities*", plus the "*design and implementation of affirmative action policies against racism and discrimination, especially those aimed at eliminating social, regional, ethnic, racial, and gender inequalities*" (Leão & Maluf 2013: 65). In this respect, Zero Hunger structure has been forward-looking and pioneer of an intersectional model of conceiving public policies, capable of a multi-directional approach to food as essential feature for the attainment of justice and equality.

The achievement of SE is indeed one worth serious consideration, to assess whether and how progress has been made on reducing the most entrenched and challenging disparities encountered by some of the most affected groups by hunger and food-related discriminations in Brazil, such as women (da Silva 2019). Among dozens of initiatives and programs foreseen to improve FNS for million people, GE has occupied an ever more important place in the Brazilian policy context in the early 2000s, being at the core of the CONSEA activities from 2003 and three national conferences on Food and Nutrition Security in 2004, 2007 and 2011 (Leão & Maluf 2013). During the latter, in particular, progressive points have been raised, including "*a criticism of the patriarchal values of the development model; coordination with the ethnic-development perspective; recognition of the role of women in food production, in conjunction with the adoption of the agro-ecological approach; demand for visibility for the role of women as critical political subjects in the design of the food and nutrition security policy; existence of inequality indicators and of monitoring instruments for the design of gender equality policies*" (Leão & Maluf 2013: 42, 43). The radical importance of these claims was so much recognized, that they have been included within the CONSEA workflow, that resulted in the creation of a specific Working Group on Gender and Food and Nutrition Security in 2011.

The government's efforts towards the transition to achieve SE in the Brazilian F-S cannot be denied. The dialogue opened-up among different actors and intersecting multiple disciplines to reach such an ambitious goal represents a *unicum* in the history of Brazil as well as that of many other countries committed in the fight against hunger. It is nevertheless also true that the road towards an intersectional equality cannot underestimate some important features that will be subject of the forthcoming and last section.

Concluding remarks

Critical considerations from the Zero Hunger strategy

In spite of positive results obtained since the launch of Zero Hunger until 2011 (end of President Lula's second mandate), this political strategy was not exempt from criticism. Data between urban and rural areas, men and women as well as between White and non-White communities shows certain divergences towards combating poverty and inequality.

The analyses conducted by the Brazilian Ministry of Health in 2009 and the Brazilian Institute of Geaography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*, hereinafter IBGE) in 2010 indicated that in North and Northeast regions more serious situations of FI remained, compared to urban areas: "*nearly 12.3 per cent in rural areas and 8.6 per cent in urban areas* […]. *These differences are also apparent in the 9 per cent difference in the share of people living on less than US$1.25 $ a day in rural and urban areas in 2008* […]. *The proportion of the population that self-identified as "white" living on less than US$1.25 a day in 2008 was 2.8 per cent, while among the "non-white" it was 6.6 per cent* […]" (Chmielewska & Souza 2011: 31).

Such differences were also striking in terms of gender and race. As mentioned above, women have been also targeted as the main recipients of BF and PRONAF, benefiting from substantial direct cash transfers, for the fact of being one of the most vulnerable groups to hunger and extreme poverty in Brazil (Paes-Sousa & Vaitsman 2014). Those provisions, however, did not hide the profound discrepancies of treatment still persisting between men and women, as well as within women as such, understood as broad category of individuals. A critical study provided by the academics Bohn, Veiga, Dalt, Brandão, and Gouvêa in 2014 revealed that considerable differences exist also between the BF beneficiaries. While acknowledging that a certain number of interviewed people experiencing FI in 2008 dropped consistently, however "*men are more likely* [to become food secure] *than women; non-blacks more likely* [to become food secure] *than blacks; and South and Centre-West residents more likely* [to become food secure] *than Brazilians from other regions* […] *while participating in BF*" (Bohn et al. 2014: 129). Even the work carried out by Wood and Felker-Kantor in 2013 showed similar results, suggesting to critically read the success of the Zero Hunger program keeping an eye on the systemic societal and racial inequalities that characterized the Brazilian F-S, even at the time of the Zero Hunger strategy, especially with regard for non-White, Afro-descendants and Brazilian indigenous people (Wood & Felker-Kantor 2013).

Furthermore, while particular attention has been paid to the treatment of food in terms of lack of access and scarcity, not equal focus has been raised by *Fome Zero* on the issue of over nutrition and its possible health implications (da Silva 2019). This might be the condition of many people who lift themselves out of poverty and hunger thanks to national subsidies, without receiving any support in such transition, nor a proper understanding of the nutritional value and quality of the available food they can choose and buy (Tanumihardjo *et*

al. 2007, Wiesebron 2014). Chmielewska and Souza reported, in fact, that "*the incidence of overweight increased from 6.4 per cent in 2003 to 9.7 per cent in 2009. As regards obesity, there is a higher incidence among youth and adults, regardless of income levels* […]" (Chmielewska & Souza 2011: 31).

As to the latter point, it should be noted that President Lula's government did not substantially manage the role of private sector in the battle against poverty and hunger. Due to the large financial support of the Federal State, agri-food corporations historically hold significant market share in Brazil, resulting in a progressive concentration of power and land, taken off from family farming, traditionally carried out by traditional communities and indigenous people (Wilkinson & Di Sabbato 2012, Kuhnen & Rosendo 2018). Even if family farming has been one of the target measures foreseen by the Zero Hunger program, there is also considerable evidence suggesting that funds allocation for family farming was not as high as that expected for the agribusiness. Precisely, "*the public budget for the 2009–2010 agricultural year, allocates over six times more resources to the agribusiness sector than to family farming*" (Chmielewska & Souza 2011: 15). This is impressive, in particular if account is taken of the fact the one of the main obstacles to the objective of SE in the F-S is represented by the consolidation of corporate control[14] over market, small-scale agriculture, and agrobiodiversity conservation (Clapp 2021). In general terms, structural inequalities and global power imbalances on the intersectional basis of race, space, gender, and class have been the greatest consequences of the F-S industrialization, reinforcing the hierarchies and differences between people and countries. A sort of *racial supremacy*, as the feminist academic bell hooks would say, where what is considered to be food, to be eaten, produced and exchanged results from the dominant white and male privilege, in purely development and progress terms (Borghi 2020). In a system of interlocking powers, little room if left for justice, understood as a relation, a balance, an equilibrium, a reciprocity among the parties, in the present and considerably less in the future (Noll & Murdock 2020). Hence, the quest for social justice in the F-S urgently requires both exploring the intersectional mechanisms that have framed the current F-S, and re-imagining and creating new ones.

While acknowledging the innovative attempts made by Zero Hunger, in light of the above-mentioned observations, it may therefore be said that this political strategy partially

[14] For a more precise analysis of corporate control in global and local F-S please see the excellent work done by the academic Nora McKeon in McKeon, N. (2014). Food security governance: Empowering communities, regulating corporations. Routledge.

reflected an intersectional approach to food challenges. Lula's food policy has been undoubtedly oriented towards the reduction of several joint factors of inequality, with the aim of pursuing no more single struggles, but rather transversal and interconnected ones. However, scepticism remains whether this national plan has been fully intersectional, in the original legal and philosophical sense given by the Black feminist studies. In other words, if *intersectionality* means shedding light on the multiple and entrenched power relations in the F-S, able to reproduce intersecting patterns of sexism, racism, classism and "*other unlamented -isms*" (Haraway 1987: 11), the author advances the hypothesis that, in the object of this study, the policy was unsuccessful in appropriately eradicating the root causes of social inequalities: first and foremost, countering the take-over of the large-scale private sector in the Brazilian F-S governance.

Up-scaling *intersectionality* as a tool to guarantee human rights in the F-S

This writing had the purpose of evaluating the 2003-2011 Brazilian policy framework by the lens of the feminist theory of *intersectionality*. Notwithstanding the full intersectional nature of the described political program, three elements that move in the direction of adopting an intersectional prospect may be underlined.

First, the importance of a pluri and interdimensional approach extending beyond food-related policies, to tackle even poverty as source of social disparity. Combining the attempts towards social justice and SE, Zero Hunger increased the comprehension that none of these endeavours can be achieved apart from the others and in competition with the others. Secondly, gender has not been longer considered as a self-standing issue, but rather one of the factors underlying discriminations, whose features are as complex as the context they are imbedded into. The third point - missing from the analysed political scenario – is precisely the spotlight on the entrenched oppression mechanisms and power imbalances underneath inequalities. However, this lack does not exclude the fact that it may become an integral part of a future policy, also thanks to the ongoing focus by academic research and public debate on *intersectionality* as "*a tool for building a global culture of human rights* [and SE] *from the grassroots to the global level*" (Symington 2004: 3).

Such a renewed attention demonstrates the urgent need for policy makers to up-scale this research line and apply it to the development and programming of more equitable and

accessible F-S, understood as one of the most breeding grounds for rooted inequalities and discriminations. In the attempt to identify how interlocking systems of power simultaneously impact (*oppress, depress, and repress,* Crenshaw 1989, Cooper 2016, Collins 2020) the most marginalized in the F-S - may they be producers, consumers and citizens –, *intersectionality* offers the opportunity to radically change the premises upon which the international academic and political debate has framed inequalities in FS studies and stimulate critical thinking on creative paths of change, where new forms of relations - other than control and power-based ones - can be embraced in the full and substantive realization of needs, rights and desires.

It is well known that the transformative and much-needed shift is now encountering the barrier posed by the current political situation in Brazil. The efforts made by Brazilian policy makers to be an inspiring model for combating hunger and advancing social rights have slowed down from 2014 and onwards, leaving the way for a dramatic recession with respect to building up progressive policies for the protection of democracy and human rights. This has implied the dismantle of the CONSEA in 2019, as well as the spread of a climate of intolerance towards gender and ethno-racial minorities (Gioia 2019). In trying times of crisis and political violence, defending the existing rights, rather than advocating for more forward-looking ones, constitutes a major triumph (Goldberg 2020). The author nevertheless observes that pushing for the above-mentioned *global culture of human rights and SE* requires a long-standing commitment, as well as courageous and constant work by all individuals and communities, to venture deep into and beyond appearances and undercover the places where privilege and dominance dynamics are located, mutually reinforcing and continuously and tacitly repeating themselves.

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