

2 | *A Tale of Food Activism*

Introduction

As the world grapples with a cure for the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), issues of food activism continue to remain relevant on the global agenda. Of great concern are the economic ramifications of the infection as high-risk countries impose stringent lockdown, thereby limiting the purchasing power of those in the informal sector. This is the case in South Africa where unemployed youth face the quandary of food price hikes caused by hiccups in supply chain and panic buying (Beltrami, 2020). To a great extent, the current dilemma starkly reminds one of the 2007/8 global economic crisis and food activism which swept across Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, North America and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region).

By its very nature, food activism is a communally based, apolitical and impulsive reaction to erosion of entitlement and structural deprivation (Friedmann, 1982). Common people resort to activism as a defensive act against a political economy of food insecurity and intolerable inflation by demonstrating their dissent in public spaces. Since its eruption marks a shift in politico-economic structures of a society, food activism could be assessed through the lens of (citizen-state) power struggles and endogenous political debates. This assumption brings to bear a key question: what is food activism and what conditions underpin this form of mobilisation? In unmasking the complex factors underpinning citizens' agitation for food, it will be insightful to survey instances of such mobilisation, the forms they assumed, the gendered nature of the constituents and the (a)political status of the organisers.

The chapter is divided into four sections, excluding the introduction and conclusion. First we consider a nuanced understanding of food activism, in particular, why a populace elects this strategy over formal

channels of deliberation. The second part takes the discussion forward by taking a closer look at the theoretical factors which underpin mass mobilisation. The third part examines the structural elements which incite ordinary people to act. In order to identify the similarities or differences in the approaches used by change agents, parts three and four will be infused with case studies. The final section draws lessons for future food activism in South Africa and beyond.

What Is (Food) Activism?

In (un)democratic regimes, there are two forms of spaces open for citizens' engagement in public decision-making: invited and invented arenas. The former implies conventional platforms for public dialogue on key socioeconomic and political decision-making. This platform is widespread in democratic states and includes legislative bodies such as the USA's Senate and House of Representatives, the UK's House of Lords and Commons and South Africa's National Assembly and National Council of Provinces. Actors in this arena contest for votes and are elected to represent the interests of their constituencies in a conventional and formal platform. In contrast, invented spaces, otherwise referred to as activism, are those unconventional strategies framed by groups to highlight a specific grievance or displeasure. With known examples including advocacy, petitions and basic demonstrations, these actions are often decried as illegitimate by conventional media and states (Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Weinstein, 2007) even though they are usually peaceful actions which transparently demonstrate discontent against the state.

Activism may be defined as the use of unconventional tactics to change government policy or make a political statement. It encompasses all contentious politics between the people and their politicians to reclaim previously established entitlement which is being denied. The phrases 'collective action', 'contentious politics', 'political contestation', 'dissent', 'demonstration' or 'protest' all fall within the framework of activism as they rely on informal channels to press their demands. Key features of activism are often ground-up or grassroots actions, with dominant actors being temperate or militant civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social movements and (dis)organised individuals with a common grievance. Players may be proactive or reactive in their approaches (Lynn and

Williams, 2018). In terms of the former, they may use court action, petitions or demonstration to forestall the state from adopting a particular policy or undertaking a specific action which they deem detrimental to their wellbeing. A case in point is the thousands of New Yorkers who walked from Colorado to California protesting the proposed mass roundup, detention and deportation of undocumented migrants (Bose, 2019; Youn, 2019). A graphic illustration of reactive response, on the other hand, is the deadly demonstration which rocked Sudan's capital, Khartoum, on 19 December 2018 and eventually brought down Omar al-Bashir's thirty-year dictatorial rule. Even though some demonstrations may turn violent, as in the case of dousing Bolivia's Vinto mayor, Patricia Arce, with red paint, or ongoing anti-government unrest in Hong Kong, it is imperative to draw a line between activism and other forms of collective action such as riots, revolutions and armed rebellion.

Whereas activism is an expression of grievances or discontent without a threat of regime change, other radical actions, such as riot, revolutions and armed rebellion, will not be recommended as a reformatory strategy in this discussion. The reason for their exclusion is informed by their undemocratic tenets: riots, for instance, involve violent acts even though the present no severe threat to the incumbent government. At the extreme level, revolutions may imply removal of the class structure or political regime (Tilly, 2003). It goes without saying that revolution encompasses the emergence of two forces – riots and demonstrations – as it attracts a section of the population to bring down a regime (Sen, 2008). Armed rebellion, which is somewhat related to insurgency, is theorised as an irregular force often directed at the overthrow of a regime (Chabernet *et al.*, 2019). With that being said, conditions which facilitate this uprising include citizens who provide safe havens for rebels, mountainous territories and weak political regimes unable to crack down and penalise insurgents.

Activism may be seen as an effective weapon for the poor to express their grievances, particularly in light of limited access to invited or conventional spaces (Schumilas and Scott, 2016; Stevens *et al.*, 2016). Besides, the relevance of the activism may be tied to the allegation that members of the invited space represent their own interests or that of their parties rather than their constituencies (Stevens *et al.*, 2018). Activism, especially demonstration, is thus perceived as an avenue for grassroots mobilisation or actions which act as coping strategies and

survival mechanisms for the marginalised to trigger socioeconomic reform, contest the intellectual and moral leadership of the ruling elites and improve their standard of living by holding the ruling class accountable (Opp, 2009; Schneider *et al.*, 2019).

As a significant groundswell for social transformation, food activism encompasses an array of political strategies used by grassroots actors to galvanise dissent against unregulated food markets and high commodity prices. It occurs along two lines, vertical and horizontal networks. On the one hand, horizontal networks may be classified as engagements at the grassroots level, particularly among individuals, their neighbours, family members, religious organisation and local market (Sneyd *et al.*, 2013). In a plethora of cases discussed in the following, horizontal networks could be found in the long-standing community of housewives and mothers. Vertical networks, on the other, serve as the interplay between the populace and their authorities. Yet, in light of the age-old hostility between suppliers and consumers, this notion may be ascribed to citizen–market interaction (Tilly, 1971). Before taking to the streets, activists carefully frame their grievance(s), assess the possible hindrances, and consider the feasibility of their demand, who to target and the political climate (Bush and Martiniello, 2017). Consideration of these elements is vital as demands are unlikely to be granted in a community with massive population explosion, loose networks *within* the horizontal lines and with the vertical axis. Breakdown of institutional, market and kinship bonds may cause the state to harshly quell demonstration and the populace might lack the required unified force to challenge its authority. Yet, the more organised and stable a society is, the more likely the state is to make concessions (Sutton *et al.*, 2013). In a stable society with dense networks, elites are more likely to be tolerant as existing relationships with the common people enhance reciprocal familiarity. This form of engagement may establish a tacit code of protest containing the rules of engagement, the conduct of each party and the expected outcome.

The phenomenon of mobilising against unacceptable inflation or scarcity dates back to antiquity. History tells us that in 57 BC, Clodius stirred up dissensus against Roman consul Marcus Cicero for his unwillingness to step down for Pompey who had promised to ship low-priced grain to Rome (Africa, 1971). This strained relationship between the poor and their betters continued well into AD 160 when grain reserves in city stores sharply depleted but army warehouses

overflowed with supplies. Unable to overpower security guards, the masses plunge into nobles' silos and looted grain. As no individual was held accountable for plunders, one could conclude that dearth and price hikes legitimised raiding of public stores and official residences in Republican Rome (Erdkamp, 2002: 7–8). Yet, the act of looting private homes became virtually obsolete from the eighteenth century. The partial disappearance of this practice may be linked to the fundamental transformation in the structure of power which disempowered local activists to directly influence policy as local policymakers had been stripped of their decision-making authority. The formation of robust, centralised state and unified national markets resulted in shifting of the loci of power from the community to the national level (Hassanein, 2003), ultimately disempowering local actors. It is worth recalling that the new era severed peasants' control over local economies, grain production, price setting and distribution. The shift further eroded *noblesse oblige* and different facets of paternalism as local elites had limited access to resources to assist peasants in times of crisis (Haydu, 2011). Indeed, extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. In response to the transition, a new form of galvanisation emerged from the eighteenth century until this day. In stark contrast to earlier, uncoordinated and reactive response, post-eighteenth century mobilisations have shifted their loci from local to national levels as improved transportation systems enhanced mobility. These contemporary forms of collective action are forged out of formal associations, grounded on solid ideologies and operate with specific agenda (Bellemare, 2015). These movements often mobilise mass campaigns and picket in public spaces as a way of winning public sympathy while catching the eye of targeted policymakers. In view of their effectiveness in overcoming food insecurity, well-coordinated food activism events have been used to influence price-setting and market regulation till this day (Wittman, 2015).

But why does food activism continue to draw popular attention? First, given that a disproportionate percentage of household income is spent on food, inflation, therefore, has a massive effect on poor and middle-income consumers. Although dearth or unjust prices may affect all households, its impact on the 'poors', as they have come to be branded in South Africa, routinely becomes a public concern as millions are affected. Second, the tendency for consumers to demonstrate against hikes is higher when some are unemployed and have the time to

join an action which seeks to protect their interest. One question comes to mind: What elements incite people to mobilise for food? At the primary level, a simple, but not simplistic, answer will be hunger. Yet, while one can simply respond to the question without equivocation, mass mobilisation may nevertheless be triggered by a chain of factors. In order to understand these factors, the next section maps different aspects of food activism, taking into account the era, geographic location and gendered nature of its participants. Although some of the factors may overlap, they could be grouped under two overarching headings, conceptual and structural.

Conceptual Factors

Theoretically, the behaviours, attitudes and conduct of people are shaped by the ethics, norms and values in a community. These concepts define the engagement between individuals and their families, community networks and government. In understanding the conditions which underpin citizens' mobilisation, five of such norms come to the fore: moral economy, relative deprivation, framing, politics of provision and political opportunity.

Moral Economy

The concept of moral economy is an intricate aspect of one's social life and not only relevant in moments of dissent (Reed and Keech, 2019). It may be defined as the pool of (pre)political thoughts which are dominant in a specific community and control the desirable, natural means of allocation of societal wealth. The notion implies that people have an inherent right to access sufficient food and that this form of entitlement is lodged in the gut where hunger intersects with justice (Hossain and Kalita, 2014). Moral economy imposes an ethical obligation on states to ensure that the haves are able to obtain food at a reasonable price, while the have-nots are provided with food or the means of accessing food (Sayer, 2000). For this reason, a government's moral legitimacy rests on its ability to provide for its populace, particularly by ensuring that they are fed. The concept may be seen as laying the groundwork for the 1789 French Revolution following King Louis XVI's economic mismanagement and the resultant rising starvation. In May 1793, when the monarch refused their demand for bread, women went on

a rampage, seizing grain and sacking shops (Hufton, 1971). The reaction reflects not just dearth of bread, but a conception of injustice and dynamics of moral economy as the eighteenth century era witnessed a transition from paternalism to laissez-faire economics that placed responsibility on women as breadwinners. This form of dissent continued well into the early 1900s. To be exact, women of northern France took to the streets to oppose price spikes in basic food supplies as foot and mouth disease broke out in 1911. Attracting thousands of mothers and housewives, the protesters engaged in scuffle with security agents as they rushed farmers' carts (Hanson, 1988). In stark contrast to these centuries, even though many local markets in the twenty-first century have regular supplies, a disproportionate percentage of people remain malnourished due to poverty. Quite strikingly, the definition of poverty has changed over the ages, as what was considered elites' luxury goods like butter, cheese, milk and eggs, have now become cheap commodities for wage earners. As the latter now perceive these commodities as staples, any setback that impacts their ability to purchase them is interpreted as undermining their dignity or a threat to their survival.

Relative Deprivation

The concept of relative deprivation underscores the economic, geographic and organisational opportunities which motivate individuals to galvanise. A distinctive feature of relative deprivation is its focus on the importance of discontent triggered by denial of material needs. A point made by Kurer and others (2019) in relation to deprivation and discontent is essential here: perceived denial may be informed by comparing one's social condition to others who may be seen as favoured or more privileged. O'Connell and others (2019) argue that there is a strong link between contentious politics and inequality. It specifically underscores the rationale which motivates individuals to dissent, with such reasons either being psychological or economic. Under this theme, individuals may engage in contentious politics in light of unfulfilled expectation or material benefit. Asingo (2018) specifically avers that countries with high levels of socioeconomic inequality are bound to experience high volumes of social tensions as opposed to those with high religious or ethnic differences. Eventually, such discontent, antipathy or rage manifests itself in mobilisation. Put

starkly, communities with high levels of joblessness, poverty and insufficient access to land are bound to be plagued with increasing activism or citizen unrest (Storch, 1982). Likewise, temporal transformation in the allocation of resources, including positive discrimination or unequal access to land, income or retrenchment of staff may also be a source of aversion as people tend to compare their current conditions to a certain standard of others'. This brings to bear the early twentieth-century notion of materialism which espouses how society is fashioned by resources and competition over scarce resources (Richins, 2017). This nuance corresponds with Malthus' (1798) assertion that a society is more likely to experience social tension in an era where population growth outstrips food production. To Malthus, this imbalance may be exacerbated by crop failures, drought, political instability or climate change. Yet, despite the natural or man-made causes of disaster, states have an obligation to ensure that there is adequate food in the market, either through national production or import, and that citizens have the means to access them (Glennie and Alkon, 2018). Nonetheless, as the pre-industrial understanding of sustenance was replaced with concepts of civil rights in the post-World War II, so did activism metamorphose into workers' agitation for increased wages to access food in institutionalised food markets. In this context, one cannot overlook the many instances where relative deprivation has incited the middle class, rural/urban poor in Western Asia to counter poverty and increasing food prices. At the peak of the 2007/8 global financial crisis, workers' uprisings over low wages and the rising cost of basic commodities were recorded in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Bahrain (Saif, 2008). In a striking resemblance to a 1984 mass mobilisation which forestalled the nullification of food subsidies, the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh used its security force to dispel hundreds of Yemeni food protesters in June 2008 (Gros *et al.*, 2015). The harsher response ultimately led to several casualties and the death of a civilian. Also, unemployed youth in Jordan took to the streets in February 2008 to demand reduction of fuel prices which had soared by 76 per cent (Schneider, 2008: 48). An increase in oil directly impacts food access as agricultural products are transported from harbours or rural areas to urban centres. For this reason, the price of staple food increased by 30–50 per cent (Schneider, 2008: 48). Faced with similar economic woes, the working class downed their tools and joined the demonstrators, as their salaries could not match the harsh economic conditions.

Framing

Another important notion in contentious food politics is framing (Ryan-Simkins, 2019). It provides the nexus between structural conditions and mobilisation of disgruntled individuals. Frames are a means of providing justification for citizens' discontent, creating collective identities for constituents and providing the basis for the successes or failures of a group action. Lynn and Williams (2018) observe that frames are key indicators in identifying social problems, which institution or individual has the mandate for addressing a particular problem and why people should mobilise against those in authority. The notion further underscores how actors at the grassroots level identify a social problem, its cause and possible remedies. Jointly, these elements are used to recruit participants for a common cause. In essence, it is the process of silencing opponents, appealing to authorities and mobilising adherents by incorporating some aspects of the actual reality into their agenda (Reed and Keech, 2019). Some of the issues which framers may invoke include urban poverty, hoarding, merchant stockpile, price inflation and unfair distribution. By way of illustration, Germany witnessed widespread dissent among women in the first quarter of 1942. Apart from declining living conditions, the women chanted slogans about the injustices of the rationing system and confiscation of supplies by Nazi forces (Taylor, 1996). With the support of their children, the women confronted administrators responsible for allocation who launched temporary soup kitchens with increased rations.

Politics of Provision

The underlying argument of the politics of provision is that dearth threatens social cohesion. In other words, people are conscious of the state's responsibility to safeguard their sustenance and there is the need to enforce these entitlements. The basic assertion is that scarcity leads to profiteering and decline in real living standards. For instance, after experiencing long-term decline and a bad harvest in the latter part of 1916, Britain registered several dissensus in early 1917 as a response to the increasing prices of staples (Coles, 1978). Racketeering by middlemen and/or vendors in the local markets did little to ameliorate hikes in butter, wheat, bread, milk and potato prices. To contain the situation, women in West Cumberland hit Maryport pitch market to enforce the

new commodity-price ceiling set by the government. Following a shopkeeper's non-compliance, the housewives dumped carts of food supplies (Hunt, 2000). With the support of their husbands and organisations such as the Miners Association, these women's activities inspired similar collective acts across Europe and beyond.

Political Opportunity

The concept of political opportunity emphasises the political landscape or the dynamics which determine the levels of success or otherwise of mobilisation (Koopmans, 1999). Such a political environment may be informed by two conditions: (i) what enhances grassroots mobilisation and (ii) what destabilises the state from containing activists. In terms of the former, people with common discontent are more likely to mobilise if they can overcome insufficient human/capital resources. As opined by rational-choice observers, the oppressed will respond to calls for galvanisation when they are able to solicit adequate logistical support for a common cause (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Opp, 1989; Oberschall, 1994; Finkel and Muller, 1998). By extension, the success of a mass mobilisation may be influenced by organisers' access to donor funding, contributions from members and influential actors who may decide to fund the campaign, recruit more members or enhance the visibility of the activism through media outlets. In the context of the latter, conditions which make the state susceptible to mass mobilisation are government ineffectiveness and abuse of power. It is against this backdrop that Sen (2008) observed that mass mobilisation for food is widespread in undemocratic regimes as democratic regimes are more inclined to adopt proactive and adequate response to food shortages or hikes. Here, mass mobilisation emerges outside the periphery of formal political space by citizens who have been alienated from central political decisions. While they may not be completely disenfranchised, not having access to parliamentary floors or key avenues compels people to voice their frustration in unrestricted open spaces (Maxwell, 1999). This form of contentious politics is often staged in common public spaces and takes the form of demonstration, picketing, signing petitions, looting, stowaways, burning of tyres, processions, mass meetings and toyi-toying. As shown in Egypt, after enduring nearly three decades of dictatorial rule under Hosni Mubarak, the African country became an epicentre of food demonstration in 2008 (Bohstedt, 2016). As

the second-largest global importer of wheat, provision of subsidies for bread is an essential intervention for a disproportionate percentage of its poor population.¹ Yet, as the size of the subsidised loaf was cut in half by a spike in wheat price between 2007/8, hundreds of white-collar staff, industrial workers and the Muslim Brotherhood took to the streets in April 2008 to demand reduction in food prices and better wages. Following intense political and social pressure, the prime minister provided additional food subsidies and workers' bonuses (Salevurakis and Abdel-Haleim, 2008).

Structural Factors

Structural factors imply those institutional measures which incite contentious food politics, including exploitation, neoliberalism and (under)development.

Exploitation

Naturally, individuals are more disposed to mobilise when they notice that food vendors and middlemen are overcharging through price fixing or hoarding. The actual cause of this form of contestation is not grounded on insufficiency or lack of availability, but the resultant exploitation. To a great extent, high prices may be perceived as social injustice reaching its tipping point. This discontent was expressed by a small group of Spanish women who demanded government cut back on sharp inflation in staples after the 1918 Rif War (Kaplan, 1982). When their demand was denied by King Alfonso XIII, they raided boats loaded with fish, coal wagons and bakeries in Barcelona. The demonstration was called off after prices dropped by a third and shops restocked. The reform came about after three weeks of mass demonstration where the women challenged the monarch. Civil guards dispatched to quell the agitation were whipped, stripped and chased away by demonstrators. Another important collective action was Jewish housewives who shut down New York City's (NYC) food markets in February 1917 (Frank, 1985). Starting with a two-week boycott of vegetable, chicken and fish consumption, the women took their

¹ It is estimated that about 80 million (almost 50 per cent) of Egyptians live on less than a dollar per day.

demonstration to the grocery stores, forcing their neighbours to refrain from purchasing commodities and closed shops known to be involved in profiteering (Hyman, 1980). Sixteen years later, this phenomenon resurfaced in Toronto where housewives launched consumer boycotts against sharp increases in the price of kosher meat. After two weeks of picketing, the butchers succumbed to demands and reduced their prices.

Neoliberalism

The adoption and operationalisation of neoliberal agendas has triggered extreme economic hardships in the Global South. As discussed in Chapter 6, implementation of the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Agriculture has displaced millions of local farmers and urban street vendors. By opening their markets to global supermarkets and the fast food industry, the agreement has pushed small peasant farmers out as imported goods continue to flood local markets (Leitch, 2003). Reliance on food import has arguably rendered wage earners susceptible to commodity hikes, as soaring prices impact heavily on their cash outlays. For illustrative purposes, after a decade of political stability, Senegalese people took to the streets in March 2008 as rising prices in cooking oil, rice and yellow maize pitted the populace against their government. With the support of civil society organisations, the populace brandished empty cans and wheat and rice bags, as an illustration of their food insecurity. With public/civil servants joining the protest, President Wade responded to their demand by launching the Grand Agricultural Offensive for Food and Abundance programme in April 2008 to boost rural development and food production (Berazneva and Lee, 2013). Akin to its West African counterpart, Burkina Faso was rocked by civil disorder as youth targeted security forces, state-owned shops and buildings to oppose high customs duty on food commodities. Even though some demonstrators were convicted, the state cut back on its tax collection from small traders, and established an emergency subsidy for farming equipment, seeds and fertilisers for small-scale producers.

(Under)development

This factor is tied to the setbacks of neoliberalism. In this context, food activism is widespread in regimes where governments lack the financial

capacity to subsidise food prices (Gordon and Hunt, 2019; Schneider *et al.*, 2019). In such regimes, the middle class who have been alienated from political decisions see racketeering as a window of opportunity to capture political power. Mildly put, the ambitious working class perceives insufficient wages, unstable food prices and high cost of living as a pretext to pursue their long-awaited political careers. By way of illustration, when Haiti's wheat and rice soared by 83 per cent in the first three months of 2008, the middle class looted trucks of grain in Les Cayes and forced the removal of Prime Minister Jacques-Édouard Alexis for failing to adopt emergency plans to reduce soaring prices (Aljazeera, 2008; BBC, 2008). To contain the unrest, President René Prével announced a reduction in the price per 23 kg of rice from \$51 to \$43. In the Global South, Mauritania was not spared the wrath of the populace when they galvanised in November 2007 against spiralling bread prices. Despite staging a ten-day protest, the price of maize skyrocketed by 60 per cent, with sorghum and millet doubling in price by the following month (Sneyd, 2013). After several failed attempts to contain the upsurge (including arrest of leading protest members), the state introduced string of interventions to mitigate the situation. Apart from an increase in public sector pay, it increased subsidies to large state enterprises (gas, electricity and water), provided tax exemptions for imported rice and price controls and emergency food supplies to vulnerable people. Still, perceiving these interventions as inadequate, the armed forces took over power in August 2008.

Reflections on Food Activism

Do the aforementioned case studies provide any lessons for future food activism? The cases demonstrate that mass mobilisation for food is an outcome of food insecurity – not to mention social injustice. This strategy is important as simple hunger, recall, is generally welcomed by the elite until the affected threaten to hit the streets, or do so, and that is when reform occurs. It is important to underscore that, by its very nature, dissent is not illegitimate as it provides a platform for the lower classes that continue to remain on the fringes of decision-making forums. From the catalogue of cases discussed, the expression of discontent transcended foot-dragging, infrapolitics and whispering, to citizens pouring into public spaces to voice out dissent. Three golden threads run through the cases:

Consciousness: The cases have shown that poverty itself is not a direct trigger of mobilisation, even though it results in food insecurity. It is often argued that urban residents are better supplied with resources than rural folk. If this observation holds true, then most of the contestations under discussion should have been in rural areas, but they were not. With virtually all protest playing out in urban centres, it somewhat provides an indication that food activism is not so much about poverty as one's awareness of a breach of entitlement and the need to reclaim such right. One may also argue that the notion of submissiveness entrenched in rural communities will curtail any attempt to galvanise against their respective elites.

Gendered approach: In many ways, the actions of change agents were spurred by shared experiences of community networks, particularly based on gender. In most cases, women formed the rank and file of activism. Three reasons account for this. *First*, the use of unconventional strategies was useful for women as they were alienated from conventional political institutions, such as parliaments and trade unions. In stark contrast to their female compatriots, men had little use for the streets as they could press their demands in the legislative assemblies through their unions or representatives. In retrospect, not all females were disenfranchised. As far back as 1915, some enjoyed the right to join political associations, with the right to vote.² Despite this leverage, they still remained at the fringes of traditional institutions as their domestic matters received little attention during policy considerations. With their influence in formal channels curtailed, the next available arena was the informal space, which they actively explored. Suffice to note that the natural assemblage had an added advantage: a fertile ground for mass mobilisation. By serving as the epicentre of economic activities, the local market, shops and spaces of distribution served as prime locations for the women to trade, gossip and interact with kinsmen. *Second*, the cause of dissent was generally seen as an outside threat to the household, an institution jealously guarded by mothers and housewives. Their maternal obligations provided the *raison d'être*, which was somewhat difficult to label as illegitimate (Hunt, 2010). Against this backdrop, it was not out of the ordinary

² Arguably, women's voting right was first entrenched in Canada in 1915, followed by America's 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, with different degrees of recognition at the subnational level.

for women to be up in arms when their duty of providing for their husbands and children was challenged by commercial farmers or shopkeepers. Instead of disjointed community members, crowds were drawn from (pre)existing horizontal networks which made spontaneous mobilisation feasible. In some instances, the women reined in elites to support their cause by relying on the spirit of shared solidarity. As demonstrated in West Cumberland and Haiti, the government responded to their grievances by setting prices on essential goods. *Third*, reason may be tied to society's division of labour along gender lines. Over the last four centuries, the primary obligations of men were provisioning of income, while women held the fort at home. Consequently, when prices of commodities increased, it was not so much a male issue, but a female one (Bohstedt, 1988). The involvement of men only occurred in cases where trade unions or political actors lent solidarity. Nonetheless, a reader could easily shoot down this argument as not all male participants belonged to a political organisation or trade union. To some men, involvement was informed by their diminishing economic and social status compared to the experiences of their female counterparts.

Apolitical nature: The involvement of men and political actors became apparent from the 20th century onwards as demands were shifted from local markets to much higher up, the national government. As demonstrated in Egypt, Mauritania and Haiti, pressing for demands beyond one's comfort zone or local market necessitates stronger coalition with formal institutions, particularly organised labour or opposition political organisations. Yet, even with the participation of political actors, demonstrators continued to safeguard their non-partisan agenda. Whereas, the inclusion of third parties marked an important shift in their penetration into formal political spheres, activists continue to be the main agitators, as organised labour merely served as mediators. By focusing on narrower, pragmatic objectives of hunger, activists merely drew inspiration from the strategies of political organisations without swaying into broader politicised agendas. As illustrated in Egypt, while protestors may have relied on some of the strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood, they still kept their objective intact. To underscore their apartisanship, they identified themselves as doctors, lawyers, students and factory workers with one primary objective: 'reduce the price of staples such as sugar, milk and bread' (Zimmerman, 2011). In that sense, one could conclude that they were

not drawn into the streets by their belief in a revolutionary political theory, but instead deep-seated and widespread discontent with inflation.

Conclusion

Due to the spread of COVID-19 and possible retrenchments, occurrence of food activism is expected to be frequent in the coming years as net food purchasers may embark on anti-government demonstrations calling for subsidised or lowered food prices. Even though food activists in historic and contemporary times bear the brunt of arrests, injuries and deaths, they remain resolute in their efforts until certain concessions are made by butchers, farmers, shopkeepers and the state. Although the slogans, strategies and support of political organisations are sometimes co-opted, the activists do not necessarily demonstrate any political interest or inclination. The festering ground of mass mobilisations is mainly in (semi)urban centres where the population depends on market supplies. With their alienation from formal political channels, food activists mobilise in places of natural assemblage. In times of inflation or dearth, activists use pre-existing horizontal networks which shape the nature of their activities, attract third-party actors and obtain expected concessions. To forestall an upsurge of discontent, an adjustment in wages may seem timely. Those not listed on payrolls may be placated by the state through (i) food parcels; (ii) financial transfers to desperate households; (iii) extra subsidies to affected food stocks; (iv) imposed price controls on staples; and (v) investment in seeds, irrigation systems or fertilisers for small-scale farmers. In the end, failure to adopt any of these measures might be seen as a recipe for discontent.

So, under what conditions do citizens resort to food activism? The lesson here is that two overarching factors enable or disable food activism. First, social consciousness of five key concepts: moral economy, relative deprivation, framing, politics of provision and political opportunity. And second, existence of three structural or institutional determinants: exploitation, neoliberalism and underdevelopment. A logical conclusion is that complete denial of certain rights or entitlements is what causes people to demonstrate discontent and not a relative absence of such entitlement. Yet, given that the factors were extracted from a myriad of cases, perhaps it will be useful to consider

how they played out in one particular movement. The organisation which comes to mind is India's Right to Food Campaign. On that account, the next chapter turns its attention to this campaign and assesses its contesting multiple spaces and what lessons could be drawn to shape a future food security movement in South Africa.