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FORUM

Post-growth agrifood systems: Towards an emancipatory politics

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Abstract

A world without hunger demands a post-growth rewiring of the global agrifood system predicated on emancipatory politics that enables reform of actors and institutions outside agriculture. This is necessary to shift out of the prevalent growth-hegemonic framing of agriculture and its contributions to economic growth, where the structural injustice of hunger is rendered invisible. Recent International Relations (IR) scholarship highlights the institutional arrangements underpinning global agrifood problems. This paper uses critical IR theory to understand the structural mechanisms and relations of power through which the growth-hegemonic theorisation of agriculture is produced and reproduced, sustaining hunger within an exceedingly financialised agro-industrial complex. The structural power of knowledge shaping the interlocking structures of finance, production, and security is evident in the extremely high multilevel concentration in modern agrifood systems. This structural power evident in local decentralised agroecological systems and in transnational agrarian movements reflects post-growth principles of sufficiency, shared prosperity, care, ecological and social justice. Together, they are the counter-hegemonic voices, cooperative social systems, and class interests championed by post-growth politics.

Keywords: agroecology; critical IR theory; growth hegemony; hunger; institutions; knowledge; post-growth

Introduction

Exploring the persistence of hunger and food crises in the 21st century, this paper argues for a deeper engagement of International Relations (IR) scholarship with post-growth thinking. We use critical IR theory to problematise hunger and unsustainable agrifood systems that are deeply embedded in growth-hegemonic thinking. We propose an emancipatory politics for a post-growth world order without the structural injustice of hunger.

Following the food crisis of 1973–4, there was international acknowledgement of how the global food regime, constituted by and working within a framework of a set of norms, exacerbated the agrifood crises.[1] The food crisis of 2005–8 was the result of a new normal carefully constructed in the 20th century.[2] This new normal included distorted food markets, resource-intensive agricultural practices, land-use competition, unaddressed food-waste issues, and reinforced fossil-fuel dependency reshaping what and how food was produced, distributed, and consumed globally. Like the current food crisis driven by Russia's war against Ukraine, the food crisis of 2005–8 had

[1]Raymond F. Hopkins and Donald J. Puchala, 'The global political economy of food', *International Organization*, 32:3 (1978), pp. 581–616.

[2]Tim Lang, 'Crisis? What crisis? The normality of the current food crisis', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 10:1 (2010), pp. 87–97.

drivers outside agriculture. These drivers – financial deregulation, biofuel policies, and trade policies – were part of the economic policies of wealthier nations.[3] In the global economy, elements such as trade, finance, and investment, as well as the growth-oriented norms and rules that govern their relationships 'set the international policy context and affect food security in complex and significant ways'.[4] National policymakers, multilateral forums, and international organisations seem to offer solutions within this growth-oriented framework that cause food insecurity.[5] This solutionism, we argue, is a legacy of the 20th century, which includes the meanings of economic development,[6] the theorisation of growth, contributions of agriculture to growth,[7] and the internationalisation of agriculture.[8]

The international creation and institutionalisation of structural power, the frameworks of national food security, international agricultural development, and the asymmetric rules of trade are analysed in IR scholarship as prevalent institutional arrangements that are drivers of food insecurity.[9] Such institutional arrangements are legitimised and perpetuated by focusing on the lack of reference to actors with agency and a framing that posits food insecurity as a solely economic challenge. As stated in the introduction to this Forum,[10] IR theories have been complicit in accepting economic growth as a fundamental feature of the global order. We argue that a politically informed dialogue between IR and post-growth thinking could potentially lead to a hunger-free world. But this ambition demands a historically conditioned awareness of the internationalisation of agriculture and the creation and evolution of structural power. Unlike problem-solving theory, critical theory questions the structural, institutional, and political roots of hunger that are embedded in growth-hegemonic thinking.[11]

This paper foregrounds the institutional arrangements that govern agrifood systems, calling for an engagement with critical IR theory. This helps assess the interlocking structures of power and question the knowledge claims and theorisations of agriculture for economic growth, making the political nature and prior connections of institutions explicit.[12] Our current agrifood systems crises, rooted in the economic policies of wealthy nations and fault lines that have continued from the 20th century, need this critical IR theory lens to go beyond positivist problem-solving.[13] Critical IR theory helps explore how theories arise within normative frameworks and reveal interests,

[3]Jennifer Clapp, *Food* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Jennifer Clapp, 'World hunger and the global economy: Strong linkages, weak action', *Journal of International Affairs*, 67:2 (2014), pp. 1–17.

[4]Clapp, 'World hunger', p. 2.

[5]There is at best an attempt to tweak the dominant framework of industrial agrifood systems. National Academy of Science and The Royal Society. *The Challenge of Feeding the World Sustainably: Summary of the US–UK Scientific Forum on Sustainable Agriculture* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2021).

[6]Heinz W. Arndt, 'Economic development: A semantic history', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 29:3 (1981), pp. 457–66.

[7]Lawrence W. Witt, 'Role of agriculture in economic development: A review', *Journal of Farm Economics*, 47:1 (1965), pp. 120–31; Carl K. Eicher and John M. Staatz (eds), *International Agricultural Development* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

[8]Clapp, *Food*; David Barkin, 'Internationalization of capital: An alternative approach', *Latin American Perspectives*, 8:3–4 (1981), pp. 156–61.

[9]Clapp, 'World hunger'; Benjamin Shepherd, 'Thinking critically about food security', *Security Dialogue*, 43:3 (2012), pp. 195–212; Jennifer Clapp, 'Concentration and crises: Exploring the deep roots of vulnerability in the global industrial food system', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 50:1 (2023), pp. 1–25; Miriam Lang, 'Degrowth, global asymmetries, and ecosocial justice: Decolonial perspectives from Latin America', *Review of International Studies* (2024), pp. 1–11, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052400014}.

[10]Jacob Hasselbalch and Matthias Kranke, 'Dealing with dangerous abundance: Towards post-growth International Relations', *Review of International Studies* (2024), forthcoming.

[11]Robert W. Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond International Relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126–55.

[12]Richard Devetak, 'Critical theory', in Scott Burchill, Andrew Linklater, Richard Devetak, et al. (eds), *Theories of International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 137–60.

[13]Clapp, 'World hunger'.

commitments, and values.[14] This lens helps us to move away from accepted priors and modes of thinking towards ones that do not take the foundational assumptions for granted. Such a framing has the potential to herald transformative change and build post-growth options.[15]

Post-growth agrifood systems are located in normative frameworks of justice, sustainability, and diversity. There are multiple structural mechanisms and relations of power through which such alternative social imaginaries are produced and reproduced at global, national, and local scales.[16] The structural injustices[17] that maintain hunger in a highly financialised agro-industrial complex with adequate food availability[18] are avoided in post-growth agroecology, as practised in hundreds of local agrifood systems.[19] These agrifood systems are decentralised, led by local communities, and designed for collective provisioning, sufficiency, conviviality, and dignified work within given material and institutional models.[20] Marked by diversity and seasonal and local food cultures, post-growth agrifood systems are proactively about food sovereignty, exploration of alternatives, organic intelligence, and investment in ecological democracy.[21]

The second section here explores the growth-centric knowledge politics of agriculture, and the theory building based on selective evidence that agriculture has been subjected to. The drivers of multiple crises in agriculture and food are evident in the interlocking structures of agricultural production, knowledge, and finance.[22] In the third section, we analyse how the structural power of knowledge reinforces the interlocking structures of production and finance to uphold the growth-centric unsustainable agro-industrial complex. The fourth section presents post-growth principles and agrifood systems, where the structural power of knowledge supports counter-hegemonic local agroecological alternatives and transnational movements. Post-growth principles offer opportunities to understand and foster the social forces that sustain such agrifood systems, dovetailing with critical IR theory in opening opportunities for emancipatory politics.

Theorising agricultural development and hunger

The internationalisation of agriculture, the creation of uniform (post-industrial revolution) social metabolism, and the modernisation of agrifood systems involved several institutional changes over two centuries, ranging from insurance for merchant ships to vertical integration of agribusiness and development aid. We present a brief overview of the normative growth-centric framing of agricultural development and hunger, revealing how theorisation emerging in the 1950s reorganised the social forces of capital and labour involved in production, qualified and empowered different forms of state, and reconfigured the world order of agriculture and food.[23]

As theorised in development economics, agriculture, by shrinking in its contribution to national gross domestic product (GDP) and in its share of the national workforce, should enable a structural

[14] Devetak, 'Critical theory', p. 142.

[15] Robyn Eckersley, 'Greening states and societies: From transitions to great transformations', *Environmental Politics*, 30:2 (2021), pp. 245–65.

[16] Anitra Nelson and Ferne Edwards (eds), *Food for Degrowth* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Leonie Guerrero Lara, Laura van Oers, Jacob Smessaert, et al., 'Degrowth and agri-food systems: A research agenda for the critical social sciences', *Sustainability Science*, 18 (2023), pp. 1579–94.

[17] Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[18] Clapp, 'Concentration and crises'.

[19] Miguel A. Altieri and Victor M. Toledo, 'The agroecological revolution in Latin America: Rescuing nature, ensuring food sovereignty and empowering peasants', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38:3 (2011), pp. 587–612; Bhoomi Ka and National Coalition for Natural Farming (NCNF), *Spreading Roots* (Bhoomi Ka and NCNF, 2022); Julien-Francois Gerber and Rajeswari S. Raina, 'Post-growth in the Global South? Some Reflections from India and Bhutan', *Ecological Economics*, 150:6 (2018), pp. 353–58.

[20] Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta (eds), *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (New Delhi: Tulika Books and Authors Upfront, 2019).

[21] Ibid.; Lara et al., 'Degrowth and agri-food systems'.

[22] Susan Strange, *States and Markets* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988).

[23] Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders', p. 138 gives these three levels of historical structures as a heuristic device to explain complex processes that preserve a particular hegemonic order that sustains problematic situations.

transformation of the economy. It is expected to make product, market, and factor contributions to maintain national economic growth.[24] Product contributions are made through the sheer increase in volume of production and enhanced productive capacities. Market contributions from catering to domestic and international markets and trade, and factor contributions from the release of surplus labour and capital (factors of production) to industry, are considered necessary, since industrial growth is, theoretically, the fundamental contributor to economic growth.

In developing countries like India, the 1950s mental model of 'agriculture as the basis of all development' shaped massive public investments in irrigation and chemical industry for agricultural production. The theorisation of agriculture in the 1950s drew on the *ex-post* analysis of industrial and agricultural productivity and consequent economic growth in select developed countries. It came from scholars who had little knowledge about tropical agriculture and no fieldwork experience,[25] especially not in the newly independent developing countries. Influenced by this theorisation of agriculture, the mental model for planning and administration shifted to that of 'modernisation of agriculture for development' by the early 1960s.[26] This involved two shifts. First, the understanding of agriculture was subject to a 'movement from *a priori* theorising towards empirical research' by development economists in the West who saw economic development through the lens of their own historical experiences.[27] Second, in the newly independent countries, particularly the tropics, economic growth was at the core of development expectations. There was an eagerness in these developing countries to accept this theorisation without adequate evidence and also to generate evidence validating the theoretically foreordained role of agriculture in economic growth and development.

By the 1960s, it was known that (i) agriculture's contribution to economic growth would be hastened by its contribution to employment generation and redistribution of rural incomes and focus on small farmers, and employment of surplus labour would yield more rapid growth rates; (ii) rapid economic growth in most newly independent countries in the mid-20th century brought with it disastrous political problems such as the loss of civil and human rights; and (iii) in countries where economic growth had happened, there was little evidence of trickle-down gains to the poor as income inequality increased.[28] Despite this evidence, several developing countries welcomed the green revolution and created new investments and subsidies for the adoption of capital intensive and labour-saving production technologies. Technologies generated by the newly reorganised centralised national agricultural research systems were increasingly led by new international agricultural research institutes.

By the 1970s, there was evidence that the desired structural transformation was not happening as theoretically expected.[29] There was chronic hunger even after a successful green revolution. Yet economic growth remained central to the theorisation of agricultural development.[30] The normative growth-centric framework continued with shifts in theory-building in relation to employment and the 'basic needs approach' in the 1970s.[31] Hunger as the problem and modern agrifood systems as the solution gained international acceptance even in societies that subscribed to a

[24]Witt, 'Role of agriculture in economic development'; Eicher and Staatz (eds), *International Agricultural Development*.

[25]Eicher and Staatz (eds), *International Agricultural Development*, quote I. M. D. Little raising this concern about 'leading development economists of the 1950s who knew little about tropical agriculture or rural life' and had 'no considerable body of empirical grassroots literature on which they could draw' (p. 11).

[26]Rajeswari S. Raina, 'Agriculture and the development burden', in K. A. Jacobsen (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary India*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 107–27.

[27]Eicher and Staatz (eds), *International Agricultural Development*, p. 11.

[28]Ibid., pp. 15–17.

[29]Ibid., p. 16.

[30]John W. Mellor, *Agricultural Development and Economic Transformation: Promoting Growth with Poverty Reduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[31]Frances Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins, *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

post-growth theorisation of basic needs in the village-centric economy, guaranteeing work and incomes, sustainable ecosystems, and well-being.[32]

As the political support for the basic needs approach grew in the domestic plans and policies in the Third World (India's 'roti, kapada aur makaan' slogan, translated as 'bread, clothing, and housing'), there were two major discursive shifts that reinforced the international agricultural development agenda. The first was the 'high-payoff input model', where 'the key to transforming the traditional agricultural sector into a productive source of economic growth was investment designed to make modern, high-payoff inputs available to farmers in poor countries'.[33] The second was 'international food policy' and expert-led global policy instruments (such as subsidies) and pricing mechanisms that would maintain agriculture's (product, market, and factor) contributions to the economy.[34] This de-nationalisation of agricultural policy, with theories of agricultural development converging with the internationalisation of capital, marks the knowledge politics of hunger in a new world order. The knowledge about, and the theorisation of, agriculture and food is necessary to understand the new normality of narrow and technical discourse about hunger, and the environmental costs of industrial agriculture.[35]

In this new world order, as many as 828 million people are reported undernourished.[36] This is alarming, given that more than half of the cereals produced in the world is used for animal feed and fuel, as shown in Figure 1. The product contribution of agriculture to the production of high-value animal protein, encouraged by appropriate policies, ensures higher value-added and economic growth. That there are competitive uses of cereals, where human requirements (bare-minimum staples) compete with high-quality feeds for livestock and biofuels/ethanol for automobiles, is not surprising. In development economics, it is theoretically foreordained that capital should move to sectors (livestock or transport) that yield higher value added, thereby bringing more returns to investment. Much of this feed and fodder produced in the tropics but consumed in the industrial meat and dairy facilities in the wealthier developed countries is extremely wasteful, energy-intensive, and environmentally damaging. There are new questions about punitive action or taxes to prevent the wastage and industrial use of food grains. But theoretically, the increase in value added from the competitive uses of cereals will enhance economic growth rates. This makes states subsidise and support unsustainable industrial livestock production. With service sector (transport, storage, and international trade) accounting for these uses of cereals, the contribution to gross value added is even greater.

The structural power that pushes discursive shifts and forges mental models of knowledge and finance in international regimes demands investigation.[37] It is not just that hunger and the responsibility of the nation-state to ensure safe and healthy food to its population is rendered inconsequential by the theorisation and growth-hegemonic framing of agriculture and hunger. Those wielding the power to theorise and create new norms or institutional arrangements have now positioned the international state system as the one responsible for eradicating hunger. Evidence of this knowledge politics presented above leads us to explore the processes by which national decision-making and international capital join hands to 'internationalise' the domestic economy even as they define hunger as a domestic problem.[38] This internationalisation also reveals a plausible emancipatory politics that is being mobilised and oriented to achieve a post-growth world without hunger by those empowered with moral capital.[39]

[32]See J. C. Kumarappa, *Why the Village Movement? A Plea for a Village Centered Economic Order in India* (Kashi: Akhil Bharat Sarva Seva Sangh, 1960) (reprint).

[33]Vernon W. Ruttan, 'Models of agricultural development', in Carl K. Eicher and John M. Staatz (eds), *International Agricultural Development* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 152–62 (p. 159).

[34]Eicher and Staatz (eds), *International Agricultural Development*.

[35]Lang, 'Crisis? What crisis?'.

[36]Klaus von Grebmer, Jill Bernstein, Miriam Wiemers et al., *Global Hunger Index: Food Systems Transformation and Local Governance* (Berlin: Welthungerhilfe and Dublin: Concern Worldwide, 2022), p. 5.

[37]Strange, *States and Markets*.

[38]Barkin, 'Internationalization of capital', p. 160.

[39]Devetak, 'Critical theory', p. 154–5.

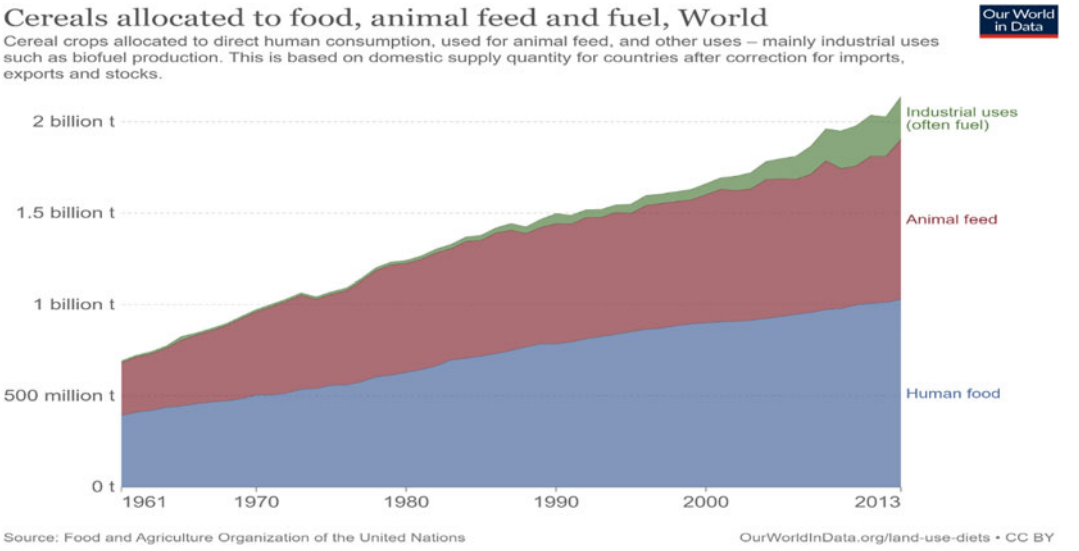

Figure 1. Use of food in the global agrifood system.
Source: FAO (Accessed 28 December 2022)

Hunger and the interlocking structures of power

Structural power, as discussed above and as proposed by Susan Strange, is to be found in the four interlocking domains of production, security, finance, and knowledge.[40] We show how the construction of knowledge, mainly the formal public and private sector agricultural research system, is both causal and constitutive of the other three. While the internationalisation of the state and production is reinforced by international capital, all three are subject to the knowledge of or belief in the contributions of agriculture to the coveted goal of higher growth rates as framed in a growth-hegemonic world order. Critical IR theory identifies the social forces that subscribe to and are invested in knowledge, problem-solving technologies in particular, at the field level, in national and global agrifood markets.[41]

Starting in the 1960s, international agricultural research was carefully constructed as a source and groundswell of solutions. Norman Borlaug's missionary zeal as the leader of the green revolution, his normative faith in the philosophy of productionism, and shared causal beliefs about production problems and the solutions to be delivered were specifically sought and cultivated.[42] In the science of the high-payoff input model, the peasant, especially in poor countries with tropical agriculture, needed investments designed to make modern high-payoff inputs available.[43] While the diffusion model and the urban-industrial impact model prior to that also involved investment in irrigation and chemicals, the high-payoff input model was built on the theorisation of 'peasants in traditional agricultural systems as rational, efficient resource allocators', who were only lacking in 'technological and economic opportunities to which they could respond'.[44] This was enthusiastically accepted and translated into economic doctrine, and nation-states put together public and private agricultural research organisations, industrial units to develop, produce, and market technical inputs, and more capacity development for farmers to use the new technologies.[45]

[40]Strange, *States and Markets*.
[41]Clapp, 'Concentration and crises', points to transformative changes needed at these three levels.
[42]Rajeswari S. Raina, 'Questioning temperaments in agricultural science', *Seminar*, 579 (2009), pp. 50–4; Rockefeller Archives Centre (RAC), *Oral Histories: Eric C. Stakman* (RAC, RG 13, Box 6, Folder Vol.5) (1970), pp. 986–8.
[43]Ruttan, 'Models of agricultural development', p. 159.
[44]Ibid.
[45]Ibid.

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The power of this discourse, showing high rates of return for every dollar invested, brought more investments in two kinds of human capital: one that generates technologies (agricultural scientists) and the other that responds to incentives and subsidies (farmers and industrial input producers). This was very different from the colonial crop-improvement investments which accorded due importance to the diversity of tropical ecosystems, farmers' knowledge, and multiple meanings and norms of agriculture. Colonial plant-breeding and crop-improvement research was built on locally adapted Indigenous varieties and not on high-yielding variety (HYV) crops responsive to irrigation and industrial (chemical and mechanical) inputs across regions.[46]

The establishment of two international agricultural research institutes focusing on the HYVs of rice and wheat/corn in 1960 and 1966, respectively, by the private philanthropies of Rockefeller and Ford, marked a definitive step in the internationalisation of agricultural knowledge.[47] These international research organisations functioned within the growth-hegemonic framing of agriculture and knowledge to ensure enhancement of productivity and rates of return to investments.

The new normality – the discourse on the financial and economic drivers of hunger and malnutrition, without acknowledgement of the structural injustice, complexity, and socio-ecological consequences of industrial agriculture – is no act of subterfuge.[48] The acceptance of an overarching paradigm of development economics is ubiquitous. It is taken for granted that the investigation of and reporting on food crises have to be primarily about what went wrong within this accepted paradigm.

The investments in the internationalisation of production as part of global economic growth hide the structural injustice that keeps 3.1 billion people from accessing a healthy diet.[49] Agriculture uses more than 2 million tonnes of pesticides annually.[50] The evidence of consolidation of global agribusiness, GM technologies, vested interests, and a US-hegemonic food regime are symptoms of major structural power that govern global agrifood systems. They result from the internationalisation of the state and the powerful habit of policy harmonisation across nation-states.[51] This policy harmonisation reinforces the institutionalisation of policy instruments such as price incentives and subsidies, credit, speculative commodity markets, and other financial instruments, including tariffs and free-trade agreements. The theorisation of agricultural development and its contributions to economic growth, specifying new norms of production and factor productivity, are evident in related elements underpinning the global agrifood system. Transnational production systems where feed/fodder inputs and final livestock products are produced in different countries are governed by global private capital and state structures redesigned to enhance economic growth.

The internationalisation of agricultural policy-making, new norms governing global financial markets, commodity speculation, and price volatility, eroding access to and affordability of food for millions, reveal different roles and forms of state and a new world order.[52] National policy capacities to create anti-hunger norms seem curtailed by the location of agriculture in the growth-hegemonic framework, limited political will, and weak capacities within nation-states to penalise the creation of food insecurity.

[46]Jonathan Harwood, 'Coming to terms with tropical ecology: Technology transfer during the early green revolution', *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability*, 19:3–4 (2021), pp. 305–18.

[47]Ibid., p. 306.

[48]Lang, 'Crisis? What crisis?'.

[49]Von Grebmer et al., *Global Hunger Index*, p. 18.

[50]Arthur Neslen, 'Pesticide use around world almost doubles since 1990, report finds', *The Guardian* (18 October 2022), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/18/pesticide-use-around-world-almost-doubles-since-1990-report-finds#:~:text=Global%20pesticide%20use%20has%20soared,every%20year%2C%20the%20report%20finds}. Increasing value added through trade is allowed with pesticides banned in Europe; these are exported to and used in the Third World, and the crops/commodities imported back to Europe, with the evidence that over 385 million people suffer from pesticide poisoning every year, the majority in Asia. Heinrich Boll Stiftung, *Pesticide Atlas: Facts and Figures about Toxic Chemicals in Agriculture* (Berlin: Heinrich Boll Stiftung, Friends of the Earth Europe, BUND, and Brussels: Pesticide Action Network-Europe, 2022).

[51]Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders', p. 145.

[52]Ibid.

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Policy harmonisation with certain accepted norms of international economic thought was also evident in the liberalisation of international agricultural trade and the financialisation of the entire agrifood system into products bought and sold by investors.[53] These were theorised and preached as a manifesto for economic growth and revival.[54] The Washington Consensus, the World Trade Organization's (WTO) agreement on agriculture, and the new Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) regulations limiting state support or subsidies for agricultural production were designed to enhance agriculture's market and factor contributions to economic growth through the internationalisation of the domestic economy. In the highly financialised global food regime, food from nowhere became the international solution within a corporate-environmental world order marked by new forms of accumulation based on fair trade, animal welfare, biodiversity, and consumer health.[55]

Located in diverse tropical agroecological systems, the exporters of livestock feed and fodder, cocoa, coffee, and other primary produce are among the most highly indebted countries with often chronically hungry populations. The structural power that maintains this dependence of poor countries on international trade is not mentioned in the global analyses and estimates of hunger. Instead, climate change, violent conflict, and economic downturns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are reported as the three key drivers of hunger.[56] The focus on drivers like economic downturns is a facade that masks the fault lines of theorisation of agriculture's contributions to the economy.

Going beyond the global division of labour in agrifood systems, rich, developed countries that export bulk commodities like beef, dairy products, wheat, soya, and corn while importing high-value foods like vegetables and fruits, spices, cocoa, coffee, and sugar from developing countries, became universal knowledge providers and regulators. The dominant and centrally controlled research agenda and international food policy acknowledge and valorise the persistence of hunger and maintain dependence on massive, informal, unskilled labour in international production systems and trade.[57]

The global discourse on food sovereignty emerges in the context of these norms of the global economy, with the bulk of this informal workforce located in agrifood systems and evidently lacking capacity for self-determination.[58] In a world order built on social justice, the social forces and options for strategic action at these levels ought to be universally institutionalised, and material inequality, especially in access to food, should be significantly reduced.[59] With food sovereignty and the redefinition and practice of food security shifting from national to local and household level, with additional dimensions of agency and sustainability, critical IR theory points to the emergence of new discourse ethics.[60] This emergence questions prevalent institutional arrangements and enables new principles and norms that are inclusive, democratic, and imbued with moral authority against the structural injustice of hunger. It justifies a post-growth world order and an emancipatory politics that leads to this order.

Post-growth agriculture: Enabling a new knowledge politics

Strengthening social justice and the right to self-determination that ensures a good life for all is central to post-growth thinking and the emancipatory politics endorsed by critical IR theory.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ruttan, 'Models of agricultural development'; Clapp, *Food*.

[55] Henry Bernstein, 'Agrarian political economy and modern world capitalism: The contributions of food regime analysis', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 43:3 (2016), pp. 611–47.

[56] Von Grebmer et al., *Global Hunger Index*, p. 5.

[57] Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders'; see also Figure 1 above.

[58] Bernstein, 'Agrarian political economy'.

[59] Robert W. Cox and Timothy J. Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Devetak, 'Critical theory'.

[60] Devetak, 'Critical theory', pp. 156–7.

Variations like 'degrowth', 'steady state economics', 'post-extractivism', 'agrowth', a 'good life' (*Buen Vivir*) and Gross National Happiness, which are historically and institutionally appropriate to different regions and production-consumption cultures, are all part of post-growth thinking.[61] Contradicting the universal theorisation of agriculture's role in economic growth, there is a pluriverse of values, functions, roles, and meanings of agriculture as it produces and interacts with the elements of finance, trade, and food security within a post-growth framing.[62] Here, we discuss local agroecological systems and their pluriversal ontology, highlighting the structural power of knowledge and options for critical IR theory to strengthen sustainable, equitable, and just post-growth agrifood systems.

Local agroecological alternatives in India and Latin America, sustainable local food markets in North America, home gardens and shared food in Japan, and food networks in China[63] are founded in a normative framing of agricultural production, investments (in time, energy, land, water, seeds), knowledge, and governance of food security and sovereignty that is focused on social and ecological justice. This discourse ethics is built on knowledge of social-ecological interactions and principles of sufficiency, fair distribution, and communal ownership and stewardship. In India, traditional agrifood systems such as *Akkadi Salu* (Karnataka), *Olya* (Madhya Pradesh), *Rammol* (Gujarat) and *Misa Chasa/Gudiya Chasa* (Odisha) share the underlying structure or post-growth principles of sufficiency, communal care, eco-restoration, and distribution.[64] For instance, sufficiency addresses limits to production without externalising social and environmental costs, and the amounts and nature of foods that are important for a healthy and culturally defined good life. This knowledge, vested with several local communities and transnational agrarian movements,[65] is also mobilising investments and drawing attention to policies for transition to sustainable food systems.[66] Local agrarian movements invest in farmer-empowering, ecologically nested and cultural identity-based agrifood knowledge systems.[67] These local knowledge-based agroecological alternatives do not need the framing and ideational validation of economic growth and are able to feed local populations and enact genuinely transformative change.[68] Embodying diverse meanings and purposes of agriculture, they make their own norms of eco-restoration, allocation of production resources and food, management of commons, and care-giving responsibilities.

Two concerns raised against agroecological alternatives are about their ability to feed the global population and their capacities to integrate modern scientific knowledge and state support at scale, nationally and globally. The first has been addressed, with proof that agroecological alternatives can feed the global population, if the prevalent unsustainable agrifood system is weaned off state support.[69] We address the second through the post-growth principle of ecological justice

[61] Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2018); Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan, *The Future Is Degrowth: A Guide to a World beyond Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2022); Julien-Francois Gerber and Rajeswari S. Raina (eds), *Post-Growth Thinking in India: Towards Sustainable Egalitarian Alternatives* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2018).

[62] Kothari et al., *Pluriverse*.

[63] Lara et al., 'Degrowth and agri-food systems'; Chiho Kamiyama, Shizuka Hashimoto, Ryo Kohsaka, et al., 'Non-market food provisioning services via homegardens and communal sharing in *satoyama* socio-ecological production landscapes on Japan's Noto peninsula', *Ecosystem Services*, 17 (2016), pp. 185–96.

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[66] Les Levidow, Michel Pimbert, and Gaëtan Vanloqueren, 'Agroecological research: Conforming- or transforming the dominant agro-food regime?', *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 38:10 (2014), pp. 1127–55.

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[69] IPES-Food, *From Uniformity to Diversity: A Paradigm Shift from Industrial Agriculture to Diversified Agroecological Systems* (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2016).

that informs the choices made by these communities in the production and distribution of food and in building composite ecological value. They carry a structural and functional pluralism not amenable to centralised scientific knowledge production and control and policy harmonisation for one goal across nations and production systems. Because of the variety of historical contexts and institutional evolution through which they have come, they are also fundamentally incompatible with one centralised theory and control by uniform instruments. The knowledge-policy battles that they need to win are about decentralised, just, and democratic knowledge politics.[70]

Support for local organic/agroecological transitions from international donors, bilateral agreements, and programmes focus on existing knowledge and policy systems. While investments in better production practices and upscaling lessons from field-level agroecological systems are necessary and welcome, they are inadequate to address the non-agricultural drivers of food crisis.[71] Investments are needed in knowledge production on the non-agricultural drivers or heterogeneity of social forces influencing these alternatives and in learning systems that build on the pluralistic social-ecological knowledge in the field.

Knowledge carries different values as it is borne by the corporate-environmental financiers and investors promoting organic systems, and as inhabited, nurtured, and sustained by communities in agroecological systems, local production, and value networks. In the latter, the structural power of knowledge is evident in decentralised post-growth agroecological networks as it alters domains of decision-making, production, resource access and use, work, and technology choice.[72] This power, changing decisions and practices whether in niche agrarian alternatives, declarations of food sovereignty, or the global voice of transnational agrarian movements,[73] is analysed in critical IR theory as 'emancipatory counter-hegemonic' forces.[74] The emancipatory politics that they present, their normative goals of sustainability and diversity, which are world-systemic, just, and class-sensitive, dovetail with the post-growth agenda.[75]

Once the actors working to replace the unsustainable and unjust global agrifood system are identified, critical IR theory shows pathways of political engagements for these actors to establish cosmopolitan structures of global governance that are empowered with a new moral capital.[76] Post-growth thinking that emphasises the good life and justice is an ally of politically and ethically informed IR. It presents a new world order that battles the historically conditioned understanding of and legitimisation of hunger in the prevalent growth-obsessed world order. Peasants and farm workers are poor and hungry because of the structures driving decisions and actions in the global economy.

The dialogical intervention promoting local agroecological systems brings forth the agency of actors involved in local agrifood systems as opposed to the agency of those driving highly financialised agro-industrial complex and food crises. Such an approach would not only respect their agency but also make them key stakeholders who acknowledge the political nature of different knowledge paradigms. This is very much within the ambit of IR theory[77] and post-growth thinking, foregrounding care, sharing, and ecological and democratic values and privileging the epistemological and ontological concerns previously under-examined. In IR, the larger argument about the shifting of gaze from purely geopolitical concerns to one based on a sustainable, just, and equitable future necessitates the use of

[70]Levidow et al., 'Agroecological research'.
[71]Clapp, 'World hunger'.
[72]Levidow et al., 'Agroecological research'.
[73]Borras, 'The politics of transnational agrarian movements'.
[74]Devetak, 'Critical theory', p. 153.
[75]Kallis, *Degrowth*.
[76]Devetak, 'Critical theory', p. 154.
[77]Ibid., p. 142.

critical theory. Actions thus formulated for a hunger-free world order will be world-systemic and built on a new normal of robust post-growth relations between production systems, social forces, and the state. The framework of post-growth mental models, material conditions, and human institutions[78] to enable these relations and transitions to long-term food sovereignty and the right to and capacities for self-determination can come from critical IR theory.

Conclusion

This paper explored how IR scholarship could problematise and resolve the structural injustice of hunger in a post-growth world order. Acknowledging the growth-hegemonic framing and economic policies of wealthier nations as key drivers of global agrifood crises, and highlighting the mutually reinforcing elements such as trade, finance, and investment, the paper used critical IR theory to map the internationalisation of agricultural decision-making in the 20th century. It questioned the theorisation of agriculture for economic growth. We conclude by emphasising that the knowledge that critical IR theory generates is not neutral; it is politically and ethically charged by an interest in social and political transformation.[79] This is what makes it a natural ally of post-growth thinking and a new world order.

A post-growth world order that guards against social and environmental disruptions confronts lopsided power equations where knowledge shapes the other interlocking structures of production, security, and finance. It also confronts social processes and class interests oriented towards increase, acceleration, and escalation of economic growth that precede the hegemony of growth.[80] Given the increasing popularity of agroecological experiments across the world, the analysis of power relations can be extended to agrifood systems and societies where class interests and social processes oriented towards acceleration and escalation are not yet in place. The tenacity of these agroecological systems and their shared understanding of prosperity and social justice present opportunities for emancipatory politics. Possibilities for self-determination are enhanced by including and appreciating the knowledge and experiential learning of farmers and informal workers in knowledge production. This will help radical reform of the global agrifood system.

An agreement over the nature and extent of the structural injustices of chronic hunger and malnutrition has the potential to bring nations together. However, such cooperative arrangements that ought to work towards justice need an emancipatory politics within a new post-growth political order where some countries and sectors have to stop or change the contents of and pace of production and consumption. The actors are usually hindered by the limited liability because structures that create injustice are produced and reproduced by large numbers of people who work within normally accepted frameworks, institutions, rules, and norms.[81] This normative aspect of critical theory, we argue, offers IR a post-structuralist deliverance that brings together the interlocking structures that govern local agroecological systems and modern internationalised agrifood systems with the respective knowledge systems that produce and sustain them. The forward-looking creative options to undo the prevalent structural injustices are immense.

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[78] Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders'.
[79] Devetak, 'Critical theory', p. 166.
[80] Schmelzer et al., *The Future Is Degrowth*.
[81] Young, *Responsibility for Justice*.

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