

Food, Development and Conflict: Thailand and the Philippines

Edited by Peter Wallensteen

Contributions by Peter Wallensteen

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**A book from the United Nations University
project on food supply and the emergence of
conflict in Southeast Asia**

**Department of Peace and Conflict Research
Uppsala University
Report No. 29**

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The project was made possible by a grant from the United Nations University which is gratefully acknowledged.

ISBN: 91-506-0713-8

ISSN: 91-0566-8808

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and Conflict Research

Repro-C, HSC, Uppsala 1988
Uppsala University

Distributed by:

Department of Peace and
Conflict Research
Östra Ågatan 53
S-753 22 Uppsala
Sweden

PREFACE

Food is a basic need for human existence. That is, however, not the only way food may be seen. It is also an economic good exposed to the rule(s) of market forces. In addition, history teaches that food can also be used for narrow political purposes, to maintain, create or expand dependence and exert influence. The links between food economics and social conflict, thus, are many and should be of central concern to peace research and social sciences. This study is an attempt to analyse some of these linkages. It does so by developing theoretical concepts as well as by providing empirical material to illuminate the problematique. There is more to be done in this field, but it is hoped that this work can be one contribution to make these linkages more apparent and thus more researchable.

The study was financed by the UN University and its program for Peace and Global Transformation. This support has been crucial and is gratefully acknowledged. It made it possible to draw together researchers from two regions far apart: Southeast Asia and Northern Europe. The project, thus, developed new international contacts and created a basis for further research into the field. As a consequence research now continues and also educational exchanges take place.

The project was largely finished by 1986. Many events in the regions have taken place since then, changing perceptions as well as realities. Only some limited updating has taken place. The project incorporated a diversity of methodological approaches, which enriched it. For instance, collection of new data took place. In order to ensure their availability to researchers in the region as well as elsewhere, this statistical material is reproduced here.

This volume has been produced by the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, with the help in particular of Göran Lindgren, the computer manager of the department. Also the assistance of other staff and associates of the department is gratefully acknowledged.

Uppsala, August 1988

Peter Wallensteen
Professor

Introduction

1. Food Scarcity and Human Conflict: Theoretical Considerations and Southeast Asian Experiences

Peter Wallensteen

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1. FOOD SCARCITY AND HUMAN CONFLICT: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN EXPERIENCES

Peter Wallenstein

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Food is basic to human survival. Could there be conflict around such a basic right? The theory of conflict, as developed in the study of war and revolution, has little to say about this. The analysis of food production sometimes notes the presence of conflict but seldom goes into its deeper origins. The question of food and conflict, in other words, has hardly been addressed as such. Here, an attempt is made to formulate some of pertinent questions, as a beginning of the systematic study of this relationship.

Thailand and the Philippines have been selected as examples. These countries are both situated in Southeast Asia, a region where the basic food supply has been fairly secure for large parts of the population. Still, food calamities have faced some countries in recent times, notably Cambodia in 1979. Rice is the important commodity for all countries, providing a framework for comparison. But the historical experiences vary considerably, as do political, social and geographical conditions of food production. In

an international perspective, the ASEAN countries have received attention because of their economic growth. Indochina has been watched due to wars and military alliances. Thus, this is a region placed in-between the extremes of the global society. There is no abundance and no starvation, but economic growth. Neither are the countries of the region socially homogeneous, nor are they torn by ethnic conflict. There are military regimes, but the style is often different from regimes in South America. In sum, Southeast Asia is a region where the linkages between food and conflict could be studied.

The linkage between food and conflict is of primary interest from the point of view of food production. The chain of food economy, the *food chain*, has a number of in-built tensions. These we will here scrutinize. The arguments will be followed up in the studies of throughout this book and are then returned to in Chapter 10.

1.2 FOOD SCARCITY AND CONFLICT

Scarcity of food can be related to conflict in two distinct ways. *First*, food can be used as a *means* of conflict, that is, be a type of conflict behaviour. In this sense, food is comparable to other instruments of conflict (weapons or non-violent means such as diplomacy, verbal warfare, etc.). It is, however, an economic measure and it can be used for rewards or punishments. With increasing food deliveries (food aid, for instance) one actor can reward another for "good conduct" or try to increase its influence over the other by creating a dependency. By reducing food deliveries (such as food embargos) food becomes a punishment of other countries or a means to activate potential influence found in a dependency relation. The successes and failures of such policies have been analysed, and can be seen as part of the general problem of economic sanctions (Wallensteen 1976, Nincic-Wallensteen 1982).

A *second*, and here a most pertinent problem, is the relationship between food scarcity and the *emergence* of conflict. In this case the focus is on the role of food in *creating* conflicts in a society where no conflicts existed before or in *escalating* conflicts that might have been visible, but largely were perceived as "tensions" or "relations between social categories". This process seems largely unexplored. This is all the more remarkable, as the notion that scarcity of resources will lead to conflict is a most common one.

Thus, it is time to look at the entire question of scarcity, particularly food scarcity, and its links to the emergence of conflict. However, the interest should not only be geared to conflict developments but we should also keep an eye on the reversed process, namely conflict resolution. Let us then proceed by analysing the general incompatibilities found in the food chain, the ways conflict can escalate and then suggest some measures of conflict resolution.

1.3 SCARCITY AND CONFLICT: WHAT IS THE GENERAL RELATIONSHIP?

When scarcity is thought to *lead to conflict*, it is simply assumed that in conditions of abundance conflict can be handled smoothly. By increasing resources conflict can be reduced or become invisible. They might be there, but are never turned into manifest, open conflict. Consequently, when the resources are no longer increasing there will be more open conflict in society. The underlying notion is one of societies ridden by latent or manifest conflicts which only can be handled through proper "management", where abundance is the foremost resource available to the decision-makers. Economic growth becomes the necessary requirement for conflict resolution, economic stagnation or depression suggests that levels of conflict and violence will increase. However, most decision-makers seem to agree that there is always a scarcity of resources and that all

demands can never be met. To make sense, this leads to the conclusion that the *level* of scarcity is important. When scarcity passes a *minimum threshold of subsistence*, conflicts become manifest, more intense. As demands grow stronger at a time of reduced resources, they also become more difficult to meet. A crisis results.

However, scarcity can also be viewed the other way around. Scarcity might *induce cooperation*, rather than conflict. This is most obvious in cases where scarcity is (seen to be) inflicted from the outside. One case is the international boycott uniting a population. The "hardship" inflicted becomes a sacrifice to be paid for a common "good". The requirement is, of course, that the "hardship" is somewhat equally shared within the relevant group.

However, it has also been argued that scarcity leads to cooperation in a more fundamental respect. Scarcity of water resources in a rice-farming community might result in a common interest in dividing the use of this resource between all farmers in the area. Thus, a joint system might be developed. A well-known theory suggests that this is the way entire states have emerged, examples being the Babylonian and Chinese civilizations. The state becomes the ultimate protector of common management, and, if scrupulously operated, it will receive the continued support of the community against attempts to exploit the system for individual advantage.

Thus, the links between scarcity and emergence of conflict might not be linear or straight-forward. It is also a most complicated scientific undertaking to develop a research design that actually and in relevant ways answers the question whether, in general, scarcity results in conflict or cooperation.

1.4 FOOD SCARCITY AND SOCIETAL INCOMPATIBILITIES

So far, we have used the concept of conflict in a rather general manner. Let us, however, increase precision by making a distinction between *incompatibility* and *conflict behaviour*. Incompatibility refers to the existence of social categories with incompatible goals. Conflict behaviour refers to actions taken by actors to achieve goals at the expense of the well-being of other actors. In the first instance, we are brought into an analysis of social categories of a given society, and, to some extent, the formation of actors out of these categories. The second concept leads us to a look at the actions taken by these actors.

Food can become involved in societal incompatibilities in several ways. *First*, there are incompatibilities arising from food production itself, having to do with the way production is arranged in a given society. *Secondly*, there are incompatibilities arising from the trade with food commodities. *Thirdly*, there are incompatibilities arising from the (lack of) balance between production and consumption of food products. These three sets of incompatibilities all relate to the food economy, or, what we here call the food chain. However, there is also a fourth set of incompatibilities namely the links between the food chain and other cleavages in society. The food chain might be part of such cleavages, reinforce them or work against them.

This means that there are a large number of incompatibilities relating to the food chain. Our objective is not only to describe these relations but also to ask what happens to them when food becomes scarce. This requires models of how food scarcity, in general, translates into conflict behaviour. Let us begin by describing the incompatibilities relating to the food chain, and then turn to models of conflict generation.

SOCIETAL INCOMPATIBILITIES ARISING FROM FOOD PRODUCTION

I HUMAN PRODUCTION VS NATURE

Although Nature is not a social category by itself it has a number of representatives that makes this an appropriate incompatibility. Nature can "strike back" in various ways (ecological disasters), but it can also "voice" itself by means of animal movements or population movements. The rise of the ecological movement globally suggests that this is a social category of increasing significance. Largely, the focus in the ecological debate has been on the consequences of industrialization and only recently have the impact of modern agriculture gained attention. A recent publication pointing to links between ecology and conflict is *Earthscan 1984*. Scarcity of land, as well as new technology are phenomena that bring this incompatibility forth.

II LAND FOR FOOD VS LAND FOR OTHER USES

This is a well-known dichotomy in literature on food, normally referred to as questions of "land use". In this context, there is a particular social clash between sedentary and nomadic populations, visible, for instance, in the drought in Africa (Wallenstein 1981). Also, the use of land for non-agricultural purposes such as creating commercial "free zones" or military bases are examples of this dichotomy.

III FOOD PRODUCTION FOR SUBSISTENCE VS FOR MARKETS

The distinction between "commercial" agriculture and subsistence agriculture is important in agricultural economics. This is not only a matter of capital, technology and marketing. It also concerns lifestyles and links to a particular locality. A capitalist mode of

production faces a feudal one, as well as traditional forms of agriculture.

IV LAND OWNERS VS NON-LAND OWNERS

This dichotomy has received considerable attention, particularly for those situations where the land owners have a more powerful position than tenants. Discussions on land reform frequently emphasize ways of improving the lot of tenants, or converting tenants into private or collective land owners. However, in some parts of the world, it has been observed that the relationship might be the reverse. White tenants, with access to capital and technology, might prove to be stronger than the Indian land owners in Indian territory in the United States. A particular incompatibility is the one between farmers and farm hands, where agricultural workers have very particular conditions, due to seasonal variation in demand for their services.

V BIG FARMERS VS SMALL FARMERS

Depending on the type of agriculture, an important distinction might arise from the size of the unit. In grain production, there might be considerable profits vested in large-scale production. In other instances, notably rice, technology might favour smallscale cultivation. When technology emerges favouring large-scale production, the distinction might result in serious conflicts, changing the structure of production in entire areas, away from self-employment to wage-employment. Obviously, topography, marketing, etc. will have great effect.

These five incompatibilities relate to land and control over land. Obviously, such questions will always be important in an agricultural economy. Thus, different forms of land ownership have developed, ranging from collective ownership, rotation of land among community members, etc. to the capitalist pattern typical of the Western world, where land is a commodity like any other. In

fact, the land tenure patterns are linked to other values in a society and entire social orders have been constructed around this particular aspect.

This means, furthermore, that clashes occur when different conceptions of land control intersect. In the Southeast Asian context, this has resulted in a series of anthropological investigations, showing primarily how different ethnic groups arrange themselves with respect to land, at the same time illustrating clashes between different "philosophies" of land control.

Land questions are often related to the first dichotomy, the one between Humans and Nature. Population growth, changing techniques as well as economic requirements may increase the pressure on land. This reinforces existing divisions with respect to land tenure and give urgency to demands for land reform. The countries of Southeast Asia have also had to face these questions, although the more heated debate in the Third World concerns feudal systems of Africa and Latin America. This book provides illustration of the dynamics involved with respect to the Philippines. The issue certainly deserves further attention.

SOCIETAL INCOMPATIBILITIES ARISING FROM FOOD DISTRIBUTION

VI FOOD PRODUCERS VS "MIDDLEMEN"

In many societies there is a clear distinction between food producers (the farmers) and "middlemen" (who do not need to be men, necessarily). The latter often takes on several functions. They perform not only commercial task but financial (credits for fertilizers and other inputs) as well as informational ones (access to market prices and other news). Thus, tension can arise between the producer and the "middlemen" on many scores. Often the "middlemen" are inferior in sheer numbers (sometimes only one family in a village) and they have to walk a very thin line. A modern

development is the Capitalist corporations that in fact transcend this incompatibility, by providing funding, marketing and information for their own production. This incompatibility becomes less visible, but can still be found *inside* such conglomerates, as a conflict between departments or between priorities.

VII "MIDDLEMEN" VS CONSUMERS

Again this is a conflict, well documented and giving rise to many actors (consumer cooperatives, trade unions) to safeguard the interests of the weaker side. The "middlemen" have an advantage in access to information but is weak in the sense of being numerically inferior. Thus, hoarding by merchants is always feared in scarcity situations, whereas hoarding by consumer might be as prevalent (consumers in fact trying to play the game of merchants themselves). Functionally speaking, "middlemen" are required in any economy. Thus, this incompatibility will not disappear. The consumer cooperatives, for instance, can reduce the profitability of the "middlemen", but might themselves experience situations in which profit-seeking becomes tempting.

VIII PRODUCERS VS CONSUMERS

In all societies, the distinction between production and consumption appears as a potent one. There are always some needs that cannot be met by a particular unit itself. Translated into modern industrial society this corresponds to a dichotomy between labour and farmers. For the former, as low food prices as possible are demanded, for the latter, as high prices as possible are beneficial. This obvious conflict of interest has to be handled by any society, and the forms of doing this differ considerably. Also, regimes vary with respect to vulnerability to the demands of either side.

IX URBAN VS RURAL

The dichotomy of labour vs farmer can be translated into one between town and countryside. However, this is not the entire truth, as more mixed patterns are possible. On the whole, however, the urban areas constitute the most obvious and significant market for agricultural produce, whereas the food production by necessity is limited in the urban areas (allowing only vegetables or some animals). Politically important is the food supply in the capital of any country, especially in large countries with limited resources and bad communications. Most governments will be sensitive to food riots in the capital, and it is a plausible hypothesis that the food supply of the capital will be given priority. This, in turn might intensify the dichotomy, as it leads to increased migration into the metropolis.

To a great extent these issues have to do with to price questions. Farmers will demand prices that safeguard their production cost, including a margin for investment. The consumers, particularly wage-earners, will be vulnerable to changes in basic food supply. Their levels of income provide less reserve for price increases, and their chances of alternative supplies are lesser than any other group. Thus, spontaneous actions as well as organized union activity will be frequent. In Western Europe, food riots in urban areas were frequent in the 18th and 19th century (L. Tilly and others). In many countries it led to governmental price controls.

In this book, the sensitivity of these issues will be substantially documented with respect to both Thailand and the Philippines. As government control over prices has become a common feature, it means, at the same time, that price questions are more political than ever. Different parties will demand governmental acts for different purposes. Perhaps, governmental control has channelled the issues into particular forms of action more than the elimination of the issues as such. This is to testify to our point that they are built

into society, and, no matter what form society takes, will not easily disappear.

SOCIETAL INCOMPATIBILITIES ARISING FROM IMBALANCE BETWEEN FOOD PRODUCTION AND FOOD CONSUMPTION

X EXPORTS VS INTERNAL CONSUMPTION

A difficult relationship is the one between food exports from a region or a nation to other areas or nations. On the one hand trade is a way of earning foreign currency which the economy at large can benefit from, given that the gains are invested properly. On the other hand trade can be a way of withdrawing resources that are badly needed locally. It has been observed that in many cases of famine, agricultural export has nevertheless taken place. This is a problem for countries with great internal variation in production, where surplus areas are expected to cover for deficit areas, although price relations might not easily give this result. It is also a problem for countries with great variations over seasons, and where storing does not easily cover the deficits.

XI IMPORTS VS INTERNAL PRODUCTION

This dichotomy poses the reverse problem of incompatibility X: should cheaper imports be encouraged although it might lead to the elimination of a considerable section of the internal production capacity? The question has arisen, for instance, in the context of food aid.

XII EXPORT VS EXPORT, IMPORT VS IMPORT

Any involvement in external trade, of course, means entering an arena with considerable competition. This might put neighbours against one another, jeopardizing existing relations or agreements. Again, we have to consider dependency problems: are there