

Food Security as Foreign Policy: Framing a Perspective from BRICS

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Hunger entails unfreedom. A commonsensical reading of hunger might situate it as an unavailability or absence of food. However a broader view encompasses economic or physical inaccessibility to nutrition, misutilization of the extant resources and an unstable or sporadic intake of food. Such a holistic view of hunger equally pushes one to rethink its standing from a nutritional keyword to a (geo)political referent, given how some of its primary drivers (and multipliers) include global conflicts (Gaza, Yemen or even the Russia-Ukraine crisis) and economic shocks (in the aftermath of the pandemic), and also how it remains spatially skewed towards some of the most underdeveloped regions and marginalized identities entrapped in under-resourced food environments.

The category of hunger theoretically enriches the understanding of security in contemporary international relations as well. Narrowly understood as the protection of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states from external military threats, hunger brings about both a horizontal and a vertical expansion of security, by keeping human vulnerability at the centre of its analysis. Moreover, food insecurity remains particularly potent in its multiplier effects - diminishing productivity, reducing financial wherewithal and eventually engendering more structural issues such as inequality and poverty. Thus, given cascading implications and transnational scope of the problem presupposes that singular state-driven efforts - notwithstanding their sincerity or ambition - might fall short, calling onto an examination of how inter-governmental organizations might tackle hunger and contribute to food security.

Notwithstanding a multitude of inter-governmental organizations around the globe, the present research will take up BRICS as its unit of analysis - a choice informed by some of its unique compositional characteristics. Coined way back in 2001 as an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India and China and eventually crystallizing in a summit in 2009 (South Africa joined the following year), BRICS has been gaining considerable geopolitical and geoeconomic wherewithal in shaping the financial, technological and security agendas of the world order towards more egalitarian ends. Not only is it a collaborative and open space for some of the emerging powers of the Global South (often but not always with similar historical experiences), but its member countries are also responsible for about 42% of the global food production, share ownership of about 33% of the agricultural land and 39% of the planet's water resources. This vindicates the immense potential of the organization in alleviating food insecurity, and the affirmative role that might be played by its member countries in agricultural modernization and development prospects in other low and middle-income countries through trade support or foreign direct investment.

This is coupled by the fact that some of the member countries have significant historical experience in formulating efficacious policies and mechanisms to address food security challenges. Some of these flagship schemes include, the School Feeding and Zero Hunger Programme in Brazil, the Unified Grain Procurement and National Soybean Action Plan in China, the Food Security Doctrine in Russia, Public Distribution System and National Food Security Act in India or even the Integrated Food Security Strategy in South Africa.

Such state interventions merit much closer analysis as some of these countries have gone on to eventually become some of the leading producers of important food grains - like wheat and rice in the case of India and maize in the case of Brazil. Such an exercise can flesh out the significant policy lessons and technological knowhow emanating from the member countries, that can be shared not only with each other but also with the rest of the world.

The agenda towards food security in BRICS, is equally rich in potential at the organizational level. The charting of the Agricultural Cooperation Action Plan, the Agricultural Working Group meetings, and the crystallization of the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty (of which the New Development Bank is one of the founding members) betokens a more coordinated and collective vision of a hunger-free world. This warrants an exploration of some of these emerging areas of cooperation like agricultural value chains, family farming, soil conservation projects, and digital agricultural innovations amongst others.

Collating the aforementioned pointers together, the present paper will be thematically structured into three main sections. The first part will theoretically examine the conception of food security and understand how it sophisticates the category of security in international relations. This will be followed by a review of the extant level of food security in the individual member countries within BRICS. Herein, given the positionality of the researcher coupled with his access to certain policy practitioners and academics, greater attention will be accorded to India and Brazil. The third section will survey the interventions that have been and can be made at the organizational level of BRICS, with some policy recommendations to conclude the paper.

The paper will primarily employ a qualitative analysis to glean broader theoretical arguments and policy prescriptions. The sources will include the ministerial websites of the respective governments, the notable food security legislations brought out by the agricultural ministries of India and Brazil, the performance and policy reports of such legislations, structured and unstructured interviews with some of the leading policy practitioners and academics of the field from these two countries. At the organizational level, the sources will include the Agricultural Cooperation Action Plans, the Joint Declarations and Resolutions passed by the member countries, the Agricultural Working Group meeting reports, so as to comprehensively discern the potential impact of BRICS on food security.