



Food Peacebuilding: A Peace Agenda Beyond Food Security

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Abstract

This working paper presents a literature review that investigates ways in which people transform conflict positively through food. While a dominant theme in food, peace, and conflict research is the relationship between conflict and food insecurity, food studies highlight other conflicts arising from our food relations. Examining these food-related conflicts, this paper pays particular attention to how food intersects with power and conflict, whether as a source of material power, social power, or discursive power. Approaching food as a form of power offers insights into how everyday food relations and food practices might be strategically mobilised for personal and context-specific societal transformation. Food affects different types and scales of relating, underscoring the extraordinary potential of peacebuilding through food and the value of a food peace agenda beyond food security.

Introduction

Everyone must eat as a matter of life and death. Without food and water, our other basic needs seem less pressing. Perhaps this is why food is a central concern during war and conflict: whoever controls food production and distribution also controls the people who seek to survive. However, food's critical role in our lives is more than a matter of sustenance. Food – whether foodways, foodstuffs or the practices and spaces connected to food – is embedded in many other aspects of life, from family life to commerce, faith, and our relationships with nature. Relevant to peacebuilders, food is also a powerful tool for influencing attitudes, behaviours, and social structures towards social change. This capacity to affect different types and scales of human relating is why food has significant potential as a strategic instrument for peace promotion (Pratley, 2023).

This paper considers how food intersects with peace and conflict through a power lens. Peace scholars have examined the relations between power, peace, and conflict, distinguishing between its destructive, productive, and integrative qualities (Boulding, 1989) and how those deemed powerless also exert power beyond control and dominance (Carroll, 1972). In international relations, power primarily refers to top-down, state-centric forms of influencing change. On the other hand, anthropologists and sociologists prefer the term 'agency' to describe power in its local, structural, and bottom-up forms (Richmond et al., 2021: 243-257). Both dimensions of relating are relevant here, revealing the different ways people influence social change.

By applying this multi-dimensional perspective on power, it becomes clear how food serves as a potent tool for facilitating conflict transformation towards peace. Food is conceptualised here as a source of power beyond just its material, physical dimensions of sustenance, to include its social and discursive aspects. It is intimately entangled with different dimensions of life; it can also easily tap into people's deeply held ideas and visceral experiences of peace and conflict, which is why peacebuilding through food offers significant opportunities for fostering 'cultures of peace' (Boulding, 2000). Pratley defines food peacebuilding as the 'practices of peacebuilding through food' (2023: 7) and the 'ways that food is an instrument or agent of becoming-peace (whether corporeally, socially, globally, or through multi-species relations)' (2023: xi). This intentionally wide definition recognises food's multifaceted role in corporeal, ecological, political, social and global relations. It also inclusively accounts for different forms of conflict transformation through food beyond just food security. Crucially, it underscores how ordinary food practices and relations are valuable sources of power that serve global peace.

This paper invites peace scholars and practitioners to take a more expansive view of the emergent food peace agenda beyond resolving food insecurity as a conflict

concern. Rather, food peacebuilding can be a strategic intervention in all sectors of society, enhancing peace-centred structures where all may flourish. To appreciate food's capacity for peace, this paper considers three dimensions of food power – material power, social power, and discursive power – and looks at how each one elicits unique forms of conflict transformation.

Material Power: Food Insecurity and Conflict

Food wields material power when it enables human survival or constrains life choices. Just as states and non-state actors amass money and missiles to consolidate their military strength, political influence and 'hard power' (Nye, 2004), human actors may monopolise food stocks and farming machinery to ensure their own survival and to control others.

In food and conflict research, material power is a dominant theme when scholars examine the relationships between food insecurity and large-scale violence. Food insecurity refers to the limited availability and access to food that meets an individual's nutritional and energy requirements (FAO et al., 2021: 190). In armed conflict, food insecurity is not always caused by food scarcity; it can also arise in regions with abundant food when armed groups destroy crops and food-producing infrastructure (Koren & Bagozzi, 2017). Conflict scholarship reveals how human actors and institutions instrumentalise food insecurity for material power, whether for strategic gain during armed violence, to influence regional geopolitics through humanitarian aid, or to promote global capitalist interests (Delgado, Murugani & Tschunkert, 2021; Giles, 2021). Applying a zero-sum game to food security, armed groups improve their material power and ability to coerce others into action by improving their own food security and creating food insecurity for others.

However, food insecurity is an issue that goes beyond the context of war and civil conflict, also affecting those in seemingly peaceful countries. In 2018, France's 'yellow vest' protests were triggered by rising food prices that escalated into violent riots around the country (BBC, 2019). Rising food prices do not always result in widescale violence, but it is a cross-cutting issue that lays bare systemic inequalities that privilege some at the expense of others. France's example demonstrates how food security sustains social cohesion while food insecurity can trigger violent social change, even in peaceful, wealthy democracies.

Interestingly, while peace and conflict studies (PCS) have largely framed food's material power from state-centric perspectives, food studies prefer a systems approach (see Patel, 2012). State-centric frameworks are less instructive when weather events and pollinating bees ignore man-made boundaries, and food systems feed beneficiaries across national borders. A systems approach understands material

power as diffused through the food chain and into the realm of the ecological, where healthy food systems benefit both humans and non-humans, whether animals, plants, or oceans. The power to enact peace and violence, therefore, is also not just confined to human actors but rests with non-human phenomena like climate extremities. In this sense, material power to enable human survival and livelihoods resides not just with states and human agents but also with ecological actants and global food systems.

Social Power: Food's Social Relations

A second form of food power stems from food's social relations and how people instrumentalise everyday food practices to promote trust and connection across societal divides. Food is a source of social power when it transforms interpersonal dynamics, from personal relationships to large-scale conflicts between groups and across borders. Moving beyond material power that exerts control through force, food enables a gustatory 'soft power' (Nye, 2004) by creating an emotional affinity and attracting others to one's cause.

While food scholarship in PCS primarily attends to food's material power, anecdotal and ethnographic accounts exist of communities using everyday food practices to promote connection with adversaries and 'others' (Lederach, 2005; Pratley, 2024a; Schirch, 2005). Feminist peace researchers emphasise how food production and preparation are not typically framed as peacebuilding but are nevertheless essential peacebuilding practices that meet basic human needs, reducing the conditions that feed social unrest (Vaitinen et al., 2019). Other seemingly insignificant gestures like sharing food and offering hospitality encourage care between conflicting groups, promoting goodwill and enabling everyday peace despite ongoing violence (Fatema & Kibriya, 2017). Food sharing is an important step towards reconciliation because it encourages vulnerability, creates a shared experience, and shifts the tone of conflict from competition to cooperation.

Food's social power also works across national borders. 'Culinary diplomacy' is a long-standing form of diplomacy where foreign cuisine establishes cross-cultural understanding and cooperation (Chapple-Sokol, 2013), from State dinners between foreign officials to foreign peacekeepers and local communities, or government-funded food festivals promoting their cuisine overseas (Benbow, 2018; The Economist, 2002). Culinary diplomacy is an effective diplomatic strategy as 'you do not win hearts and minds through rational information, but rather through indirect emotional connections' (Rockower, 2014: 13).

Even so, food encounters can also deepen social tensions by entrenching prejudices and perceived group differences. For instance, the perceived rejection of local food by peacekeepers in Bougainville unintentionally communicated a lack of interest in local

people (Boege & Rinck, 2019). Food can also be weaponised for conflict, with contested food heritages and nationalism undermining diplomatic efforts (Ariel, 2012; Hussein, 2017). Paradoxically, food's social power makes it both an effective instrument of peace and for violence.

Discursive Food: Transforming Identity and Culture

In addition to its material and social dimensions, food is also a potent instrument of discursive power, legitimising ideas, values, and identities to preserve or dismantle power structures. PCS scholarship on this is emergent but suggests that food rituals are especially effective at transforming worldviews and power dynamics, enabling reconciliation (Schirch, 2005; Soble, 2017). Because food enables a multi-sensorial experience beyond words, food encounters facilitate perspectival shifts of 'others' in ways conventional truth-telling and dialogue-based interventions may not achieve (Ketterer, 2014).

Fields of inquiry outside PCS – like food and gender studies – alert us to other ways food discourses sustain structural and 'cultural violence' (Galtung, 1969; 1990), but these ideas have received limited consideration in the food insecurity literature. Gender studies have long described how food practices can entrench patriarchal structures that dominate women (Avakian & Haber, 2005). Similarly, a class perspective to nutrition considers how food discourses sustain prejudices and systemic poverty. For example, food literacy programmes promoting the myth that low-income households eat unhealthily imply that the overweight working class are morally irresponsible for depending on welfare when they get sick (Warin & Zivkovic, 2019). Moving from an analysis of food consumption to food production, critical agriculture studies problematise food policies that prioritise crop productivity over sustainable food systems. Despite initial public resistance to the introduction of genetically-modified seeds into the food chain, Monsanto successfully reshaped debates around their seeds by presenting improved crop productivity as the solution to feeding an insatiable world population (Reynolds, 2012). Yet, relative to heirloom seeds, these agricultural practices create nutrient-deficient crops that are environmentally unsustainable and financially unviable for smallholding farmers, promoting an environmental violence that compromises the needs of future eaters (Cribb, 2010, 2021). Clearly, food systems governance is a highly contested field that engages with divergent ideas on how to feed the world sustainably (Lang & Heasman, 2015).

Even so, food discourses are dynamic, often challenged by competing discourses, and can enable social justice. Feminist scholars recount how women have used food spaces, like informal markets, to challenge violent narratives and gender stereotypes, restoring peace between conflicting groups (Abdi & Mason, 2019). The global food sovereignty movement also continues to resist corporate control over the seed market,

advocating for equitable and ecologically sustainable food systems produced through self-determined methods (Patel, 2012). This tension alerts us to how food narratives and ideas possess significant power to legitimise some knowledges about food production and consumption while silencing others. This is not an inconsequential issue. Food's discursive power is not just a matter of what we wish to eat but which lives and livelihoods we seek to protect.

Conclusion

When we examine food power's material, social, and discursive dimensions, it quickly becomes apparent that food is not an apolitical thing superfluous to peace and conflict. Instead, it is a strategic resource that is still largely untapped by peacebuilders for positive social transformation. For instance, existing food rituals – such as those during Lunar New Year – could be more intentionally mobilised to foster dialogue and mutual understanding across difference and divides (Pratley, 2024b). The extension to and reception of hospitality from host communities could also be better prioritised rather than seen as ancillary to peacekeeping operations. Appreciating food power makes abundantly clear how seemingly mundane, ordinary food practices possess extraordinary potential for societal change, elevating the everyday person at the bottom of the 'bottom-up' political ladder to the front and centre of our conflict models. There is a growing awareness about the links between peace and food security (FAO et al., 2021; Tschunkert & Delgado, 2022). Even so, food scholarship draws attention to many more forms of everyday conflicts than food insecurity. By examining conflict through a food power framework, it is difficult to ignore the extraordinary potential of food peacebuilding and the value of a food peace agenda that goes further than food security.

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