



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 39  
Issue 3 September

Article 16

---

2012

**Review of *Accounting for Hunger: The Right to Food in the Era of Globalisation*. Olivier De Schutter & Caitlin Y. Cordes, (Eds.).  
Reviewed by Christina Schiavoni.**

Christina Schiavoni  
*WhyHunger*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Schiavoni, Christina (2012) "Review of *Accounting for Hunger: The Right to Food in the Era of Globalisation*. Olivier De Schutter & Caitlin Y. Cordes, (Eds.). Reviewed by Christina Schiavoni.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 39: Iss. 3, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3695>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol39/iss3/16>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

In addition to reviewing the disturbing events related to war and foreign policy, Greenwald investigates the ways in which the telecommunications industry has been manipulated to invade, unlawfully, telephone and internet communications; the roles that lobbying and financial contributions have played in influencing the behavior of members of Congress from both political parties; the passivity—even the collusion—of the press in investigating official wrong-doing; and, more familiarly, the 2008 financial disaster that has harshly affected so many middle and working class families who have lost jobs and homes, but which has barely affected those who were responsible for it.

In a last chapter (5), “American Justice’s Second Tier,” Greenwald details how—in contrast to how the rich and powerful have evaded justice—those at the bottom of our society have been treated increasingly harshly, in many cases imprisoned for long terms for relatively low-level crimes. And he reports that the defense bar is so under-financed and inadequate that the poor are unable to get justice.

*With Liberty and Justice for Some* is, on the one hand, an easy read; that is, its style is journalistic yet filled with details. Its impact is disturbing and, while not at all a sociological text, its information provides a basis for understanding why so many in our society feel alienated from politics and civic engagement more generally.

*Marguerite Rosenthal, Prof. Emerita, School of Social Work,  
Salem State University*

Olivier De Schutter and Caitlin Y. Cordes (Eds.). *Accounting for Hunger: The Right to Food in the Era of Globalisation* (2011). Hart Publishing. \$100.00 (hardcover).

With increasingly volatile food prices and ever-rising rates of hunger, there is growing international consensus that our food system is in crisis—and that to address the crisis, we must invest in agriculture. The best way forward, however, is subject to intense debate between radically divergent viewpoints. In *Accounting for Hunger: The Right to Food in the Era of Globalisation*, Olivier De Schutter, Caitlin Cordes, and the other contributors take on some of the most contentious issues in

these debates—free trade, biofuels, food aid, and others—from a refreshing, rarely-heard perspective: that of the right to food.

The authors emphasize that if we are serious about ending hunger, we must start from the reality of the hungry. Of the approximately one billion people who are hungry, 50% are smallholder farmers living off two hectares of cropland or less; 20% are landless laborers; 10% are pastoralists, fisherfolk, and forest users, and 20% are the urban poor. That means that roughly 80% of the hungry have livelihoods connected to food production. This paradox is explained by the fact that most are growing crops not for their own consumption but to be sold into markets that are largely outside of their control. They are, therefore, net food purchasers, but without fair prices for their crops or fair wages for their labor, they cannot purchase adequate food. They are not hungry because of a lack of food; they are hungry because they are poor.

Analyzing policies from the realities of this 80%—the world's most vulnerable food producers who are living in poverty—helps explain why so many measures to end hunger have failed, despite decades of effort. A right-to-food approach, the authors emphasize, looks beyond aggregate measures such as gross domestic product and average annual income to whether current policies are actually benefiting the most vulnerable and food insecure. Increasing the amount of food a country produces, for instance, will not help those who lack purchasing power to buy that food. The authors point out that focusing on supply and demand detracts attention from the power imbalances that actually drive hunger. Efforts to increase yields as a way to boost farmer incomes, for example, distract from the fact that transnational corporations set global prices, while smallholders continue to have little or no power over the market.

The authors also put a right-to-food lens on the issue of trade liberalization, an oft-proposed antidote to the hunger crisis. A landless farmworker or indebted peasant who has already been pushed outside the margins of the economy in his or her own country is not going to benefit from trade barriers being lifted between countries. As the authors explain,

...the expansion of volumes of traded goods is not an answer to hunger if it leads, not to poverty reduction

and decreasing inequalities, but to the further marginalization of those who are not benefiting from trade and may instead be more vulnerable by trade liberalization. (p. 24)

While avoiding ideological discussion of trade liberalization, the authors emphasize that without accompanying national and international policies to support and protect those most vulnerable, trade liberalization is not a solution to hunger.

What is most impressive and instructive about this book is that by employing a right-to-food framework, the authors are able to move critical issues beyond polarizing debates by focusing on the needs of the hungry and asking what can be done to advance their right to food. In addition to trade liberalization, the authors approach agribusiness transnational corporations (TNCs) in such a manner. They highlight ways in which TNCs are undermining the right to food across the food chain, while also citing the tremendous potential for TNCs to shift their practices in ways which could support the right to food, from paying their workers livable wages to supporting the rights of farmers to save seeds.

It should be noted that the book is an edited volume with three chapters by the editors, De Schutter and Cordes, and five by other contributors. Most of the work referenced here is from the chapters written by the editors, by far the strongest in terms of their right-to-food analysis and framing. Some of the other chapters, most notably the chapter on biofuels, cover important subject matter but fail to adequately address the fundamental issue of how the most vulnerable populations are impacted. Also, the chapter on "How to Phase Out Rich Country Agricultural Subsidies without Increasing Hunger in the Developing World" fails to address the fact that small-scale farmers in the U.S. and Europe are facing many of the same challenges as small-scale farmers in the Global South and that subsidies are simply one component of entirely misguided agricultural commodity policies. These weaker sections of the book, however, provide an opportunity for the reader to make use of the right-to-food framework so effectively laid out in other chapters.

*Christina Schiavoni, Director, Global Movements Program,  
WhyHunger*