

The SNAP Challenge: Communicating food security capabilities through anti-hunger advocacy

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Abstract

This research brief reports preliminary findings related to the SNAP Challenge (SC), an anti-hunger initiative in which participants purchase their household groceries using the average food stamp budget benefit for one week. By simulating a SNAP budget, SC participants encounter food insecurity directly, recognizing how the food they are able to consume connects to income, nutrition needs, and other factors that contribute to quality of life, all of which can be considered capabilities of food security. Linking the experience of food hardship to conditions of poverty can address not only immediate food needs but also the interconnected material opportunities and disparities that constitute food (in)security. In this way, I suggest, a capability approach to food

security can better align anti-hunger advocacy and food system policy. This initial study supports ongoing research related to anti-hunger advocacy communication, food security discourse, and capability-based approaches to food system reform.

Keywords

Food Security; SNAP Challenge; SNAP; Capability Approach; Anti-Hunger Advocacy; Food Stamps

Introduction

Threats of cuts to federal nutrition programs such as SNAP¹ foment debates about the function of the social safety net and the role of public policy in household food security. Although individual SNAP benefits average US\$132 per month, they allow “families to maintain food as a spending

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¹ The food assistance program formerly known as food stamps was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in 2008.

priority...while not falling as far behind in meeting their other obligations—rent, utilities, transportation, and educational or medical debt—as they otherwise might” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service [USDA FNS], 2013, p. 15). In other words, SNAP benefits fulfill a critical need that extends beyond supply-side hunger relief. The SNAP Challenge (SC) is an anti-hunger advocacy initiative aimed at illustrating the “the important role SNAP plays in mitigating hunger *and* poverty” (emphasis added, Food Research & Action Center [FRAC], n.d.-a, para. 2). Participation in this week-long campaign requires purchasing one’s household groceries based on the average SNAP benefit, an experience that may provide “a new perspective and greater understanding” of not only what food hardship looks like, but also the structural conditions that constitute food (in)security (FRAC, n.d.-a, para. 1). Although the SC has garnered attention in media reports (Doran, 2013; Livingston, n.d.) and academic investigations (Robb, 2016; Schoettler, Lee, Ireland, & Lenders, 2015), the focus has largely tended to emphasize the former; this primary study takes up the latter.

While seeking to reduce hunger, anti-hunger advocacy often also articulates the amelioration of poverty, underemployment and low wages, and health disparities as interconnected facets of food (in)security (Bellows & Hamm, 2002). However, the prevailing commodity-based approach to food security relies on supply-side criteria for assessing food provisioning, which narrowly focuses on redistributing resources to those in need. Instead, initiatives like the SC can reveal how food access and consumption are contextualized within a web of “cultural, social, and economic...practices, habits and desires” (Alkon, Block, Moore, Gillis, DiNuccio, & Chavez, 2013, p. 126). Linking the experience of hunger to conditions of poverty can thus address not only immediate food needs but also the interconnected material opportunities and disparities that constitute food (in)security.

The current study explores how the SC connects the experience of food hardship to what may be considered *capabilities* that produce or inhibit the achievement of food security (Sen, 1999, 2003). These capabilities are indicated by a variety of factors, such as income, nutrition needs, and

health, which contribute to quality of life. I argue that by simulating SNAP usage, SC participants confront their typical consumption choices and habits and in doing so can reflect on how the food they are able to consume connects to economic and physiological capabilities.

The following research brief reports on preliminary findings from an SC campaign facilitated in Salt Lake City, Utah. This initial study supports ongoing research related to anti-hunger advocacy communication, food security discourse, and capability-based approaches to food system reform.

The SNAP Challenge

Popularized by celebrities like Chef Mario Batali and Gwyneth Paltrow (Bever, 2015; Italie, 2012) and elected representatives such as former Newark Mayor Cory Booker (Memmott, 2012), the SC is structured strategically to highlight “how difficult it is for families living on SNAP to simultaneously avoid hunger, afford nutritious foods, and stay healthy with limited resources” (FRAC, 2016, p. 1). The SNAP Challenge Toolkit, a downloadable resource packet provided by FRAC (2016), outlines the parameters for participation: use only a food budget equivalent to the average weekly food stamp benefit; all food consumed during the Challenge week is purchased from the simulated SNAP budget; no food (including condiments and spices) already owned or obtained for free can be consumed during the Challenge week; spending and items purchased should be logged. Thus to complete the SC, participants must meet their dietary needs—not only what they can purchase and how much they can eat, but also where they shop, and how often they eat—with significantly decreased spending ability.

A sustainability collaborative at the University of Utah, in partnership with Utahns Against Hunger (UAH, a local anti-hunger advocacy group), coordinated an SC campaign in Salt Lake City. Participants included university students, faculty, and staff, as well as community members. All were encouraged to post comments and reflections on a public blog hosted on the UAH website. The Challenge week culminated in a public event focused on food access and the farm

bill, where participants discussed their experience with the SC and their thoughts about food security and public policy.

Data consist of field notes from observations at the public event as well as comments posted by Challenge participants to the public blog. In addition, semistructured interviews were conducted with key informants, including FRAC staff and UAH's executive director, who have coordinated previous SCs, and an official from the Salt Lake City Workfare Office who has previously participated in SCs. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions regarding the potential of the SC for achieving anti-hunger and poverty-related objectives, as well as their experience participating in this and/or previous campaigns. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed. These preliminary textual data were analyzed for emerging patterns related to capabilities of food security.

Commodity and Capability Approaches to Food Security

Economic development and social welfare policy evaluates food security using four commodity-based criteria related to the provision of an adequate food supply: availability, proximity, utilization, and stability (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2008). Food security is thus said to exist when there is adequate and accessible material food production, when food is affordable, and when it can be appropriately procured and utilized to provide adequate nutrition. Operationalization has primarily emphasized measurements of access to and distribution of commodities, aiming interventions toward the re-allocation of food resources at various scales. Indeed, although food security is now favored over the outmoded paradigm of hunger (Bellows & Hamm, 2002), a commodity-deficit framework may not fully account for the structural conditions and entangled practices that contribute to (or constrain) food security (Alkon et al., 2013).

In contrast, a capability approach (Sen, 1999, 2003) brings greater focus to the complex interrelationships among the conditions of (in)food security. Drawing from Amartya Sen's (2003) work in welfare economics and sustainable development,

capabilities refer to the "constitutive elements of living," or "what [a person] manages to do or to be" (p. 5). These include, among other things, education and literacy, political freedom, and health and nutrition, which are disparately afforded across social groups. As such, these activities represent "functionings" that differentially contribute to quality of life (Sen, 1999, 2003). Unlike a supply-side framework that only accounts for and reinstates the resources that undergird such activities, a capability approach instead assesses "a person's freedom to achieve various functioning combinations" (Sen, 2003, p. 8) within political-economic systems. By addressing both the "valued activities and the *capability* to achieve these activities" (emphasis added, Sen, 2003, p. 4), a capability approach centralizes the "substantive choices [individuals] have" (Sen, 1997, p. 1959) as well as opportunities for policy reform, in this case vis-à-vis the food system.

As noted, the SNAP Challenge has gained some attention in academic literatures (Robb, 2016; Schoettler et al., 2015) emphasizing how the experience of hunger can raise awareness of food hardship. This preliminary study extends this area scholarship through consideration of the material opportunities and disparities that constitute food (in)security as revealed through the SC. The remainder of this research brief explicates initial findings from analysis of the Salt Lake City SNAP Challenge.

SC and Capabilities of Food Security

Challenge participants frequently described their experience completing the SC as "eye opening," using economic and physiological impacts to articulate deviations from their typical eating and shopping practices. Through their SC reflections, participants can recognize how the food they are able to consume connects to their income, nutrition needs, and other factors that contribute to quality of life. In other words, participants articulate food (in)security in systemic terms related to their opportunities (or capabilities) for food access.

Economic Capabilities

The tight budget and strict rules prescribed by the SC forces participants to acknowledge their regular

spending and food consumption habits. For example, Susan reflected, “I am spoiled by the variety and convenience of food available to me.” Students also recounted how they typically “just throw whatever we want into the [grocery] cart...” and that “I barely worried about what to eat for dinner, or [had to] eat less in order to save money.” Not only is the SC their first experience shopping on a budget, it also illuminated what participants’ economic capability regularly affords them.

Participants also described missing out on items they would ordinarily purchase. Daniel reported that his family “let go” of items like chips and brand-name Oreo cookies, “things that you would typically buy when we go to the grocery store.” One participant’s blog post put this bluntly: “No frozen pizza’s [sic]. No deli foods. No name-brand foods (unless on sale w/coupon) and cheaper than store-brand [sic]. No drive-thru fast food or restaurant.” Indeed, snacks and convenience foods were routinely described by participants as “junk food.”

Because SC guidelines bar the use of food already owned, including spices, cooking oils, and condiments, most participants went without these common accoutrements. For example, Rachel reports that she “boiled some broccoli for dinner without any sauce or any seasoning,” noting that it “tasted really terrible.” Similarly, Daniel reflected that “when you’re gonna have a burger for dinner and you forgot that you didn’t have ketchup on your [shopping] list...[you’re] having to go with a burger without a condiment.” Though usually taken for granted because they normally can be afforded, the meager SC budget renders these snack foods and staple seasonings “extras” that are sacrificed for more essential items.

Physiological Capabilities

Even while spending all of the week’s food budget, most participants did not have enough to eat throughout the SC. Many reported having “hunger pangs” between meals or even feeling “hunger pains” by the end of the Challenge week. Participants’ expressions of hunger illustrate their recognition of how food choices contribute to their daily mental and physical well-being. For example, Michael shares that “my energy levels were

lacking” during the last few days of the Challenge. Karen similarly recalls that “before the week was over I was suffering from massive headaches.”

Participants shared additional physical and emotional responses to the SC. Many participants explained how they struggled to get through their work and school days because they felt tired; others noted increased irritability. A student-athlete chose not to finish the SNAP Challenge, explaining that the lack of sufficient calories negatively affected his performance in practice. Another participant reflected on feeling “stressed and anxious all week,” easily getting into arguments with friends and family over minor annoyances. Participants readily attributed these sensations to their SC diet, be it from forgoing entire meals, having to ration snacks, or their increased consumption of “overly processed foods.”

To summarize, SC participants articulated the challenges of living on SNAP, not only due to the strict budget, but also having to forfeit favorite foods and endure head and stomach aches. The analysis of participants’ reflections on their experience completing the Challenge indicates recognition of “functionings” (Sen, 1999, 2003) like income and nutrition as dimensions of food (in)security. In other words, their reflections articulate how food (in)security occurs alongside other capabilities, such as physical health and mental stress, food preferences, and even social relationships.

Conclusion

This research brief reports on the SNAP Challenge (SC), an anti-hunger advocacy initiative aimed at providing “a new perspective and greater understanding” of food (in)security (FRAC, 2016, p. 1). Indeed, participation in an anti-hunger advocacy campaign such as the SC may aid in “learn[ing] first-hand what it is like to try to make ends meet on the average SNAP benefit” (FRAC, 2016, p. 1) by connecting daily food-related activities with income, health needs, and even relationships as entangled practices of food security. This is made possible, I argue, because initiatives like the SC connect the experience of food hardship to the structural conditions that produce or inhibit the achievement of food security.

Anti-hunger advocacy seeks to reduce hunger as part of a web of interconnected facets of food (in)security (Bellows & Hamm, 2002). Yet this objective is arguably at odds with the commodity-deficit framework that predominates approaches to ameliorating food insecurity (FAO, 2008). Incongruity between grassroots reform efforts and prevailing policy conceptualizations may hinder broader food system change. That initiatives like the SC can reveal the complex interrelationships among the conditions of food (in)security suggests the utility of a capability-based approach (Sen, 1999, 2003). In this way, I suggest that a capability approach to food security can better align anti-hunger advocacy and food system policy.

It is important to note that the SC's ability to expose the "functionings" (Sen, 1999, 2003) of food security should not belie the complex nature of anti-hunger advocacy. Mobilizing hunger to

advocate for food system reform may potentially reify the social and political stigma endured by those living in poverty (Gordon & Hunt, 2018; Hunt, 2015). Food reform initiatives like the SC—that can communicate the economic, social, environmental, and physiological capabilities of SNAP recipients as well as campaign participants—may foster identification between these disparate social groups. Future research on the SC will explore these dynamics as well as investigate the degree to which participation in anti-hunger initiatives leads to action or further engagement with food system reform. This preliminary study also supports ongoing research investigating the capabilities of food (in)security in relation to the procurement and utilization of fresh produce donated to local food pantries (Hunt & McAndrews, 2018).



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