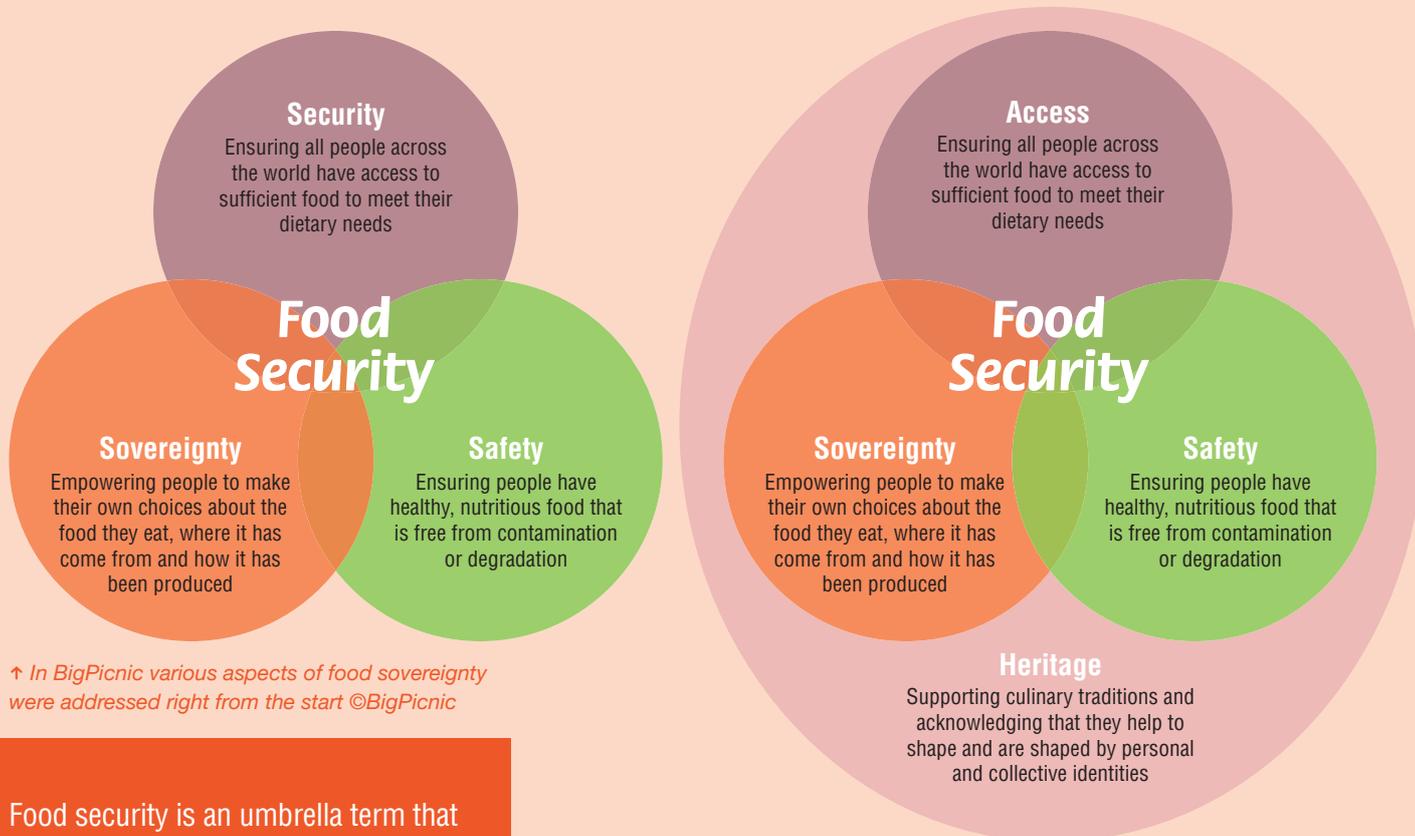


WHAT IS FOOD SECURITY?



↑ In BigPicnic various aspects of food sovereignty were addressed right from the start ©BigPicnic

↑ While BigPicnic proceeded cultural aspect of food sovereignty became increasingly important ©BigPicnic

Food security is an umbrella term that has evolved and expanded overtime and its meaning has been adapted to fit the context within which it is used. In collaboration with different communities and stakeholders, BigPicnic’s botanic garden partners chose to develop educational activities that address themes mainly related to an idea under this larger issue, which can be described as food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

Food security can be defined as existing “when all people, at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FOA, 1996). Although this definition appears quite straightforward the meaning and operationalisation of the concept of food security remains elusive. The concept has evolved and expanded overtime and its meaning has been adapted to fit the context within which it is used. Indeed, its meaning varies across different communities and cultures. The lack of a consistent understanding of the concept is closely associated to the multiple translations and circulations of the term food security across the globe. An Anglophone term, food security, cannot often be directly translated not even in other European languages leading to a lack of shared understanding of the concept. The various meanings attached to the concept mirror the different ways research and public policy have been used to conceptualise and address issues related to food security. Beyond the definition issue, what most of the discussion around food security actually focuses on is food insecurity and how to combat it. Breaking down the component parts of the phenomenon and understanding how they interact to promote or hinder food security requires the concentrated effort of a myriad of local, national and international organisations, policy makers, grass roots community organisations, and experts from disparate fields. It can be seen that food security is a complex and multifaceted concept that is culturally and context specific and is constantly shaped by societal discourse.

From this short introduction to food security, it can be seen that engaging different publics in a discussion about such a complex concept is not a small feat. The BigPicnic project aims to tackle that. “Big Picnic: Big Questions - engaging the public with Responsible Research and Innovation on Food Security” is an EU-funded project that brings together the public, scientists, policy-makers and industry to generate dialogue and build greater understanding of food security. Botanic gardens play a key role in engaging new and existing audiences in this dialogue, through co-created outreach exhibitions, science cafés and other tailored engagement events. At the same time, the co-creation approach together with action evaluation processes (namely, the Team-Based Inquiry (TBI) approach) enables practitioners and botanic gardens as organisations to reflect on and improve their practices.

At the beginning of the project the BigPicnic partners identified three dimensions of food security:

- Access: ensuring people have access to sufficient food;
- Safety: ensuring that the food people have access to is healthy, nutritious and free from contamination; and
- Sovereignty: empowering people to make their own choices about what they eat, where it comes from and how it is produced.

In collaboration with different communities and stakeholders, the botanic garden partners chose to develop activities that addressed themes mainly related to the dimension of food sovereignty above. Under food sovereignty, every country and people is deemed to have the right to establish their own policies concerning their food and agriculture system, as long as those policies do not impinge on the policies of third countries (Rosset, 2006). According to the Declaration of Nyéléni, the first global forum on food sovereignty (Nyéléni, 2007), “food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.” Furthermore, owing to a renewed understanding of global sustainable development, the United Nations member states agreed on joining forces to reach 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030. Indeed, food sovereignty seems to address the vast majority of the SDGs (Röckström & Sukhdev, 2016).

The emphasis on culturally appropriate food as highlighted by the Declaration of Nyéléni was echoed in the TBI findings across all the studies carried out by BigPicnic’s botanic garden partners. The cultural value of food as well as the notion of food as a form of cultural heritage emerged distinctively. This led us to a re-evaluation of the key dimensions of food security and the inclusion of food heritage in our definition. Outcomes associated with seeing food as cultural heritage, the role of the social context of eating and the power of food in expressing individual and collective identities make a strong case for the cultural and social values attributed to food that impact both directly and indirectly issues of food access and safety.

The new definition encourages us to view food - from its cultivation to its preparation and shared consumption – as a form of intangible cultural heritage. Food can bring people together and create a sense of shared identity, but at the same time, it can mark off cultural difference. It can also work on an individual level as it can evoke very powerful personal memories linked to a sense of identity. It may be the key to understanding how people make food choices and what role botanic gardens can play in connecting the knowledge they have about plants to people’s culture and life experiences.

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AUTHORS

Suzanne Kapelari,
University of Innsbruck,
Suzanne.Kapelari@uibk.ac.at

Theano Moussouri,
University College London
t.moussouri@ucl.ac.uk