

Book Review: Narratives of Hunger in International Law: Feeding the World in Times of Climate Change by Anne Saab

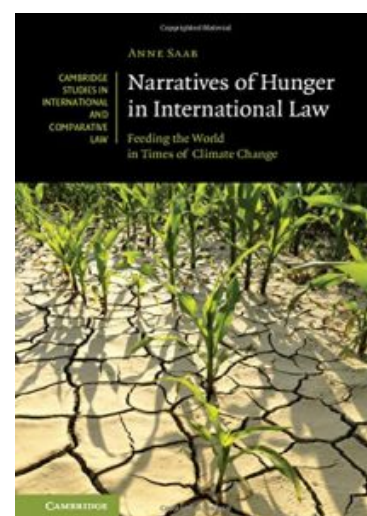
In Narratives of Hunger in International Law: Feeding the World in Times of Climate Change, Anne Saab examines the role that the language of international law plays in constructing narratives of hunger, focusing on the case of climate-ready seeds. This consistently well-researched book reveals how international law influences the making of food (in)security, writes [Ayse Didem Sezgin](#).

Narratives of Hunger in International Law: Feeding the World in Times of Climate Change. Anne Saab. Cambridge University Press. 2019.

Dealing with hunger in a globalised world that faces immense climate challenges calls for an international lawyer's perspective. Anne Saab's book, [Narratives of Hunger in International Law](#), is one of the most recent contributions in this area that proves the case. Indeed, many social scientists will applaud her analysis of climate-ready seeds in light of food regime theory, which brings a critical lens to the function of agriculture throughout the history of global governance. However, lawyers may not appreciate the broader questions this raises concerning the relationship between international law and hunger. This reviewer would consider herself amongst the minority in welcoming the questions posed regarding the role of international law in the making of food (in)security.

Drawing attention to the function of international law as a language, Saab brings forward narratives that are related to hunger and endorsed through the discourse of international law. The book delves into the global conversation on hunger that is carried out through the neoliberal narrative supporting food security on the one side, and the food sovereignty narrative on the other side of the debate. The innovative approach of Saab's book is that it reads international legal instruments created to solve global hunger without neglecting their organic connections to the global neoliberal regime. In light of these narratives of hunger, she turns to analyse three areas of international law that she deems relevant for the discussion of climate-ready seeds: international climate change law; intellectual property law; and human rights law, with a specific focus on the right to food.

Before delving into the details of the book, it is useful to give a brief background to the current narratives of hunger that are endorsed through international law. The main argument under the notion of food security is that world food production will need to be increased ([Malthusian theory](#)). Moreover, under the current circumstances of climate change, it has been argued that traditional production methods, such as polycultures (where certain varieties of crops are grown together with the benefits of higher species biodiversity), would not be able to adapt within the necessary timeframe. Therefore, although the long-term impacts of intensive high-tech agriculture (known as monoculture and applied by major industrial food producers) are not easy to assess in terms of their consequences for soil degradation, water and biodiversity resources, [it is argued](#) that this strategy is the only one that has bought time for the world's food security. Climate-ready seeds were introduced following [the same logic of 'buying time' as a potential adaptation strategy](#). To promulgate this narrative, patent rights and other forms of intellectual property rights on food crops were introduced.





Climate-ready seeds are seeds that have been genetically modified to be more resistant to severe climatic conditions (8). They are also seen as the fruits of many years of investment in agricultural biotechnologies considered vital for tackling hunger. Deeming technology and innovation relevant and moreover necessary to feed the growing world population is the main justification behind establishing proprietary rights on plant genetic resources. For Saab, the example of climate-ready seeds is the perfect lens to see how global actors take positions that shape the global governance of food production systems. What is obvious for both food regime theorists and critical intellectual property law scholars is that intellectual property rights are designed to advance technology and increase food production. Naturally, their function is very much in line with the dominant explanation of climate change and hunger provided by the neoliberal regime. This regime is built upon the purpose of producing more, whereas it is clear that increasing production alone will not solve the hunger issue.

Indeed, the steady rates of global hunger and rising levels of biodiversity loss tell a different story that is brought forward by an alternative narrative. This narrative is grounded in an economic analysis of hunger that emphasises the problem of access to food as the main limitation (see [Amartya Sen, 1983](#)). This part of the story is also told by small-scale farmers who have aligned to form a powerful counter-movement, [La Via Campesina: International Peasant's Movement](#). Their initiatives regarding farmers' rights to land and access to seeds and other natural resources necessary for small-scale agriculture forms the backbone of the counter-narrative of food sovereignty and also the [2019 UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas](#). Throughout her book, Saab defines the food sovereignty narrative by its opposition to climate-ready seeds, whereas the civil society forming the movement behind the narrative would find such framing a bit narrow.

Saab develops a pyramid of assumptions that inform the dominant neoliberal understanding of hunger that prevails in international responses to feeding the world in times of climate change. The five assumptions of this pyramid are: 1) climate change causes hunger; 2) food production must increase to feed the world in times of climate change; 3) agricultural biotechnologies are necessary to increase food production; 4) private sector investments are necessary to develop agricultural biotechnologies; and 5) intellectual property rights on seeds are necessary to incentivise these investments (13).

Saab argues that the contemporary debates on climate-ready seeds can help in understanding the bigger conflicts between different narratives of hunger (7). Interestingly, she takes two opposing narratives, food security and food sovereignty, to argue that a single pyramid of neoliberal assumptions represents both of their underlying viewpoints on global hunger. This raises the question: if both narratives share the same fundamental assumptions in the first place, why interrogate the potential of food sovereignty to present an alternative? Saab's main focus on climate-ready seeds does not help in clarifying this confusion. Nevertheless, what she shows is that most of the debates about the global intellectual property system and how they have created a monopoly on climate-ready seeds only covers part of the fifth assumption in the pyramid. There is much more to be covered and questioned to find solutions to hunger in times of climate change.

Chapter Two is specifically committed to international climate change law and how its relationship with narratives of hunger is shaped. Saab draws attention to the scientific basis of this branch of international law and how the legal framework is often influenced and complemented by the accumulation of scientific evidence on climate change. This creates a loophole in the international legal framework in which very limited space is left to test the policy implications of the common assumptions on hunger derived from scientific research on climate change. Two main observations are therefore made by Saab in light of the international legal framework, the scientific background and other supporting documents in the form of assessments and reports. First, international climate change law, being influenced by the neoliberal mode of governance, serves the neoliberal narrative of hunger. Second, international climate change law supports the pyramid of assumptions identified by Saab.

In the next chapter focusing on patent rights on seeds, Saab explains why intellectual property rights on plants for food production are regarded as necessary both for mitigation of and adaptation to climate change and for food security by the neoliberal narrative of hunger. She looks at a wide array of theories on property after giving a short history of the application of property rights to living organisms to set the background (95). Throughout the chapter, she reads the alternative legal forms of approaching plant genetic resources as another display of property rights, coming to the conclusion that neither sovereign rights nor farmers' rights were meant to stand against intellectual property rights in the first place. Instead, all of these concepts aim to set a new balance between stakeholders rather than questioning the necessity of property rights.

However, the stance against corporate patent rights and the search for alternatives does not necessarily mean the global intellectual property regime is regarded as necessary by the advocates of food sovereignty. Moreover, what Saab and food regime theorists bring forward regarding the future food regime certainly carries features from the food sovereignty narrative structured around an ecologically informed paradigm. Rather than exploring this potential, Saab concludes by drawing attention to the function of international law as a part of global food relations and reflective of a mode of governance. According to Saab, without realising the role of international law in shaping the world's food systems, it is not feasible to talk about a new food regime.

In this consistently well-researched book, Saab analyses a wide range of contemporary literature across different areas of international law that contributes to constructing narratives of hunger. *Narratives of Hunger in International Law* will be useful to anyone interested in adaptation mechanisms to climate change in the context of food security. It will also be interesting to those exploring how the making of international law is influencing our understanding of food security.

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