

## Human rights in food and nutrition: George Kent's contributions

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The sad news of George Kent's recent passing caused me to reflect on the wealth of work he produced on a topic that has greatly influenced my own research: his contributions to human rights in food and nutrition. George is perhaps best known for his work on child and infant feeding and breastfeeding, or, in some circles, his work on fisheries for nutrition. But throughout his long career, he consistently drew on the ethical, legal, and practical ideas that human rights have brought to our field. George's writing combines intellectual framing (for instance, how the right to adequate food fits into international law), programmatic analysis (such as looking at policies in different countries), contributions on different human rights topics (including food and nutrition), and applied case-studies looking at implications for different populations. Below, I briefly review his contributions to human rights to pay my respects to George and his foundational ideas.

Looking across George's academic output over time, one can see a pattern of intellectual development: Work deeply embedded in fishing communities in Asia-Pacific in the 1980s is punctuated with books on food politics (Kent 1982) and the political economy of hunger (Kent 1984), and by the end of the 1980s works explicitly linking to the field of nutrition (Kent 1985), setting the stage for a career focused on the structural and political determinants of (and solutions to) malnutrition, particularly for children.

The 1990s have been described as a 'heyday' for human rights, marked by increased international cooperation following the end of the Cold War, the 1993 World Conference of Human Rights in Vienna, and the integration of human rights language into high-level UN Security Council deliberations. The right to food also rode this wave, building on global commitments made in the 1966 International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR: UN, 1966). Academics and their writings were central to framing the right to food in this period, and George wrote with and alongside other notable food and nutrition scholars, including Wenche Barth-Eide, Maria Villarreal, Michael Latham, Urban Jonsson, Ted Greiner, and Claudio Schuftan, among many others.

Notably, George and several of his contemporaries wrote explicitly on a right to *nutrition*, arguing that although Article 11 of the ICESCR contained a right to adequate food (and explicitly freedom from hunger) and suggested

disseminating knowledge of the principles of nutrition, the issue of *nutritious* food was not strong enough. George's earliest publications specifically on human rights and nutrition addressed a child's right to adequate nutrition (Kent, 1993; 1995a; 1995b). They laid out the international law and political tools underpinning the proposed right and argued that this right might be more acceptable if it focused on children. His work on the nutrition rights of infants, focusing on breastfeeding and its complications in the context of women's rights and the HIV epidemic, brought his ideas to bear on a complex set of contemporary topics, including how we make choices within rights frameworks (Kent, 1997). By 1999, ICESCR General Comment 12 on the Right to Adequate Food had been adopted (UN, 1999), drawing together many of the ideas in the work of George and his colleagues, and going as far as defining adequate food to be nutritionally adequate food (Article 14), though not codifying a right to nutrition as a separate right.

George and others continued to write on the right to food and nutrition through the 2000s and these topics are evident in George's most contemporary work. In particular, he elaborated ideas in support of these rights for different populations beyond children, including women, particularly as mothers. He argued for treating mothers both as rights-holders (maternity protection, information, informed choice) and as agents whose working conditions and social support affect child nutrition. He also argued for strengthening the right to nutrition for food-insecure populations and the poor with his major book on the human right to adequate food focusing on people facing chronic hunger and the structural causes (poverty, access, governance); and for cross-border or remote populations and refugees, via his work on obligations toward people beyond a single state's citizens (extraterritorial responsibilities) (Kent, 2000; 2002a; 2005).

George also analyzed different levels and spaces where the right to food takes effect. His work on global contexts and international law and institutions contains detailed discussion of international human-rights instruments, and international humanitarian and trade law as they relate to food and nutrition (Kent, 2002b; 2003; 2005a). At national or program level, his case studies contain critiques of national programmes and national law and policy (Kent 2006; 2002c; Villarreal and Kent, 1996). And in field and

emergency contexts, he has produced chapters on nutrition in emergencies, HIV/AIDS and infant feeding, and how rights frameworks apply in humanitarian settings (Kent, 2005b; 2014). Through this body of work, he has emphasized over decades that realization of economic and social rights (like food) depends on political participation and accountability, not only technical fixes, with democracy and participation repeatedly framed as necessary conditions for rights to be realized.

George's most highly cited work, his book *Freedom from Want* (Kent, 2005a), brought together these topics, populations, and places in a novel way, with a foreword by the very first UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Zeigler. One of his very last publications (Kent, 2022), in this journal, brought his ideas up to date, calling for what George himself worked towards for an entire career: developing a clear and widely shared understanding of what a right to adequate food means, in order to make it a reality.

I did not manage to meet George in person, though I interviewed him more than once for different projects aiming to understand the history of action on rights to food and nutrition, and he was always generous with his time and ideas. The wonderful thing about being an academic is that our writings will outlast us, and George's ethically and intellectually rigorous ideas indeed live on, in my work and that of many others, in the pursuit of the right to food and nutrition for everyone, everywhere.

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As the sole author JH was solely responsible for all aspect of the work, including the conception, drafting, and final approval of the editorial content for publication

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