

The World Needs its Small Farmers

By Laura Carlsen | October 25, 2006



World Food Day, commemorated on October 16, has become more of an exercise in expiation of sins than a renewal of a serious commitment to end hunger.

Throughout the world, the press decries the latest Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) statistics: 852 million people lack adequate food, 13% of the world's population is "food insecure." Hunger and famine exist on every continent.

Forums are held to discuss the problem. Experts opine on proposals that have been debated for decades. But it's unlikely that much real progress will result from the day's soul-searching. The proposals fill pages of print but have been consistently ineffective in actually filling bellies.

The war on hunger declared after World War II has largely been abandoned. With the advent of the "market fixes all" philosophy of recent decades, the structural causes of hunger have been ignored in favor of free market philosophy, technological fixes, and charity-based interventions.

Global trade liberalization separates the food we eat from the land we inhabit, and the communities we live in. While international trade in food products is both inevitable and to some degree desirable, the drastic deregulation of a distorted market has led to a breakdown in communities, productive chains, and ecosystems.

In many countries, the guarantors of food supplies—small farmers—are being driven out of production by agricultural imports from the United States and other developed countries under free trade agreements.

Promotion of high-yield crops has increased the volume of food production in some regions, but has also created greater vulnerability and eroded agricultural biodiversity by supplanting native varieties that are often better adapted to local dietary needs and ecosystems.

In the midst of this crisis, the FAO's slogan this year: "Investing in agriculture for food security—the whole world will profit" is off the mark.

No doubt the countryside requires more investment to produce food and feed its own inhabitants. The FAO points out that foreign aid to agriculture has fallen from \$9 billion per year in the early 1980s to less than \$5 billion in the late 1990s. Except in countries like Argentina, where large-scale

soy production has exploded, most countries are seeing a decrease in investment, employment, and income generation in their rural sectors. The irony that 70% of the world's hungry live in rural areas is proof that the world's farmers need help—and fast.

But investment in agriculture, not surprisingly, tends to flow to sectors that generate profit. In developing countries, public funding for the rural sector has been decimated by structural adjustment programs, and both private and public investment is overwhelmingly oriented toward agri-business for export.

The profit motive will not solve hunger because that is not its purpose. In fact, it has done much to skew both production and distribution of the world's food supply. Its capacity to provide a long-term solution is even more doubtful, since the high-yield models promoted by transnational seed, biotech, and agricultural trading companies (often the same conglomerates) decrease the ability of the soil to produce the food we need in the future. Monocropping, chemical use, and intensive natural resource use and contamination, produce food and profits while generating costs passed on to the next generation.

The profit ends up benefiting not "the whole world" but a very narrow group of large producers and traders. In both developed and developing countries, the model has led to a sharp divide between a small group of industrial farmers and millions of small farmers on the verge of economic collapse.

As they collapse, their land either goes out of food production or is gobbled up by large landowners. The rate of land reconcentration is turning the clock back on hard-won struggles for social justice throughout Latin America.

The threat posed by a free trade agricultural model can be seen in Mexico, the classic example of a developing nation plunged head-first into a market economy. There the price of corn paid the nearly 3 million corn farmers fell 50% between 1999 and 2004, as massive U.S. imports flooded



the Mexican market. This in turn led to a massive conversion of farmers to migrants.

Did economic integration in agriculture enable the nation to import cheap food and solve hunger? Let's look at the statistics. The price of tortillas to consumers rose 380% since NAFTA went into effect. Mexico recently reported that more than one million children under five, or 12.7%, are chronically malnourished. In the countryside, where food is grown, the percentage is nearly double.

At the same time, and often in the same regions, obesity has risen at a rate unparalleled anywhere else in the world. The percentage of obese or overweight adults increased from 35.5% in 1988 to 70% in 2006. Changes in diet due to importation of processed foods and immigration's cultural impact are among the prime culprits.

The world as a whole now faces this dual crisis of malnutrition and obesity, which has resulted from economic polarization, cultural changes, and a decline in the quality of our food supply.

A concept of "food security" that posits that it doesn't matter if food is imported or grown at home is highly compatible with globalization but it ignores both the plight and potential of small farmers. Without protecting their livelihoods, they will remain in poverty and constitute the ranks of the hungry. Without recognizing the contributions they make to society—not only in food production but also in ecosystem conservation, social cohesion, traditional knowledge, and cultural diversity—we stand to lose irredeemable public goods.

In contrast to the food security paradigm, many grassroots farmers' organizations have adopted the term "food sovereignty" to describe the right of a people or nation to

produce and consume its own food. They call for government and global policies that enable small farmers to continue to farm.

The FAO is not proposing that small farmers be driven from agriculture or that investment flow only to large competitive interests. However, its unfortunate slogan not only does nothing to correct this situation, it reinforces the concepts at the heart of the current crisis. An increase in investment without a serious critique of the current model of agriculture could actually exacerbate rather than resolve the problem. The results of the market-based, large-scale, hi-tech approach have not only been inadequate; they have been downright counterproductive in rural areas throughout the world.

There can be no solution to hunger that doesn't have small farmers at its center. Peasant and indigenous farmers in developing countries cannot peacefully coexist with industrialized, monopolized agriculture without regulations and policies in their favor. Even though they sell for consumption in local markets they are forced to compete with imports while saddled with disadvantages that include their small scale, lack of capital, and U.S. farm subsidies.

Hunger is a disease whose "cure" is in prevention. Up to now, few proposals that would support small-scale agriculture have made headway with policymakers. It's time for the FAO, other international agencies, and national governments to restore the emphasis where it should be—on the small farmers.

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Recommended citation:

Laura Carlsen, "The World Needs its Small Farmers," Americas Program (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, October 25, 2006).

Web location:

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3641>

Production Information:

Writer: Laura Carlsen, IRC

Editor: Laura Carlsen, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC