Just Comment – Famine a man-made tragedy

‘Every five seconds, a child under 10 dies of hunger. – Thirty-five million people die each year from hunger or its immediate aftermath. – One billion people are permanently and severely malnourished and the situation is becoming increasingly catastrophic.’

Hunger is not a natural but a man-made tragedy. People do not go hungry because there is not enough food to eat, but because the system that delivers food from the fields to our plates is broken. Governments must take much of the blame because their policies and practices prop up a system where the powerful companies and interested parties benefit at the expense of the many.

Getting rich off hunger has been called ‘tantamount to murder’. For Jean Ziegler3 the state of the world and neoliberal politics of starvation of the poor is calculated murder – a weapon of mass destruction. It is due to human greed and mismanagement for profit. Speculation has caused wild fluctuations and price inflation,4 rather than determined by fate such as drought. The structure of society can determine who is affected and how much.5 Australia has endured severe droughts but has not become victim to famine. And financial institutions, recipients of bail outs, deny a correlation between the billions of dollars flooding food markets and children under five dying of malnutrition.

Food can be provided for almost the double the world’s population of 7 billion, but killer treaties6 have been created exclusively for rich nations to take over the natural resources in the southern hemisphere - but countries are also fighting back as in Brazil where government, companies and communities collaborate to reduce the number of hungry people by a half in 15 years.7 Latin American countries have created their own trade treaties.8 The United States began by taking over valuable commodities in Latin America, Africa and now in India. Positively, leftist liberation movements south of the USA are challenging deeply rooted feelings of superiority and self-righteousness.

Food Prices

The developing world is under severe stress. Since 2008, riots have occurred in Bangladesh, Argentina, Egypt, Mozambique, Indonesia, Mexico, Dubai, Haiti, Nepal, Philippines, India, Pakistan, Jamaica, Yemen, Burkina Faso and Sub-Saharan Africa. Record world prices for most staple foods led to food price inflation in China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Latin America, Russia and India.9 Conscience-free financial speculators speculate on the value of a harvest, on land value, on currencies. The commodity market has been opened up to ‘sharks’ who care only for a quick ‘buck’. They do not deal – buy or sell - in real products but speculate on the fate of these commodities, land, currencies.10

With the recent Arab uprisings, the role of food inflation in triggering these protests has been overlooked. A deep rooted food crisis triggered the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2008, 37 countries faced food riots.11 Rising global food prices and increasing food insecurity, which affect the poor disproportionately, is seen as a business opportunity by the agribusiness industry. Production shortfalls are seen as business opportunities to sell patented seeds (and terminator seeds), fertiliser and equipment. Hunger and poverty offers great business opportunities. It is another form of ‘disaster capitalism’. Price volatility is usually attributed to rising demand or production shortfalls, but the real reason is ‘speculation’. Food is branded as a commodity and the futures market is exploiting the gullible masses.12 Whether in a Sydney suburb or an Indian or Latin American slum, price volatility matters. The popular view is the rising demand in China and India. Jayati Ghosh rejects the widely held popular view that the current food price spike is entirely the result of increased demand from developing countries like China and India.13 14 We should look at greedy speculators. Market fundamentalists believe that it is about supply and demand whereas others argue that the
key factor in greater price volatility is due to the large-scale intervention in commodity markets by speculators.  

Food has to be imported – all for the profit of the big corporations. Poor people can not afford buying imported food at artificially high prices. Children go hungry, pregnant mothers are undernourished and so their babies are born with birth defects. Very importantly, their brains are insufficiently developed and this deficiency can never be recovered. A large number of the infants die before the age of two.

Bio-Fuels

The FAO suggests that this crisis is due to: increased use of Bio-fuels, as cereals are diverted to produce ethanol; increased meat consumption as cereals feed cattle and poultry; and, destruction of huge quantities of crops due to the impact of climate change - severe droughts, floods and untimely rains. An exception is India which does not produce biofuels and has low per capita meat consumption. Despite food sufficiency, millions starve as price rises force many millions to cut food consumption. India imports US wheat at almost double the price paid to Indian farmers. The use of food for fuel is a highly important factor in the catastrophic problem of world hunger.

‘Billions of dollars have been spent on biofuel companies and northern farmers to the neglect of 500 million small-scale farms that together feed one-third of humanity. They have spent more than a decade debating climate change but pledged emissions reductions that put us on course for catastrophic warming. They have let the food markets get out of control and have denied women, who produce much of the world’s food, the right to land, resources and opportunities enjoyed by their male counterparts.’

Clearly, growing sugar cane, wheat, corn or other food crops in huge plantations for the use of making ethanol for energy, first of all takes land away from small farmers and, secondly, ruins useful food to put fuel into vehicles especially those we do not need. There is also the crucial fact that making ethanol uses more energy than it produces.

More needs to be done to help people facing food shortages. The rich nations have a moral obligation to assist. Whilst drought is largely a natural phenomenon, famine is political and avoidable.

Governments must invest in poor producers and provide them the support they need to adapt to a changing climate. They must regulate volatile commodity markets and put an end to the policies that reward companies for turning food into engine fuel. And they must deliver a global climate deal to keep climate change in check.

Conclusion:

A move from industrial farming towards local food projects is our healthiest, most sustainable choice. The key to alleviating world hunger, poverty and combating climate change may lie in fresh, small-scale approaches to agriculture (according to Worldwatch Institute report.) Small is key ... school nutrition programmes and indigenous livestock preservation are excellent ways to encourage food security. The institute calls for a move away from industrial agriculture and discusses small-scale initiatives in places such as sub-Saharan Africa that work towards poverty and hunger relief in an environmentally sustainable way. Instead of producing more food to meet the world’s growing population needs, a more effective way to address food security issues and climate change would be to encourage self-sufficiency and waste reduction in wealthier and poorer nations alike. The report suggests a move away from production to consumption issues and reducing food waste.
People are increasingly growing their own food even in urban areas. Gardens are becoming not only places to grow food but also places to ‘hang out’. As well as the community and environmental benefits, hopefully more people will see these community gardens as a second source for food other than the grocery store. 24

‘Organic farming systems benefit biodiversity, are resilient in the face of climate change, and have been shown to improve yields and the ability of poor communities in the global south to feed themselves,’ she said. 25

Poor people have been rendered invisible and voiceless so that they can be totally disregarded, but they are fighting back. As Desmond Tutu says, ‘world hunger is man-made and only we can end it’.

Endnotes

1 Jean Ziegler, Mass Destruction – the Geopolitics of Hunger (Destruction massive – Géopolitique de la faim published in October 2011; Éditions du Seuil
2 Desmond Tutu, World hunger is man-made and only we can end it, Sydney Morning Herald, June 1, 2011
3 Ziegler, op. cit.
4 Hazel Healy, The food rush, New Internationalist, November 2011
5 William G. Moseley, Behind Africa’s famine, more than just drought Famine isn’t inevitable, Washington Post, July 29, 2011.
6 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)
7 Desmond Tutu, World hunger is man-made and only we can end it Sydney Morning Herald, June 1, 2011.
8 MERCOSUR and ALBA
11 O’Neall, op. cit.
12 Devinder Sharma, Worsening Food Crisis Is Leading To Political Upheavals, Ground Reality January 28, 2011
13 Ibid.
15 ‘It is likely that a combination of panic buying and speculative financial activity is playing a role in driving world food prices up well beyond anything that is warranted by real quantity movements. ... [W]e are seeing contagion in these commodity markets, with futures prices higher than spot prices. This is all a repeat of 2007 and the first half of 2008, when prices of these commodities nearly tripled.’ Ghosh, op. cit.
17 O’Neall, op. cit.
18 Ray, op. cit.
20 Tutu, op. cit
21 O’Neall, op. cit.
22 Tutu, op. cit.
25 Prakash, op. cit.

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