

Food Crisis Is It Really About Food?

Camelia Nicoleta Tigau*

When people are hungry but do not have enough money to buy food, they start reducing the number of meals; they limit portion sizes at meal-times, eating less preferred but less expensive foods; they prioritize certain members of the household (mostly children) and they borrow food. These are the five most likely forms of behavior in the case of food shortage, according to a study by Daniel Maxwell, et al.¹ Alternative ways out, such as stealing food, starving or death are also likely and even probable in certain parts of our big world.

As a matter of fact, 37 countries are in severe need of food according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). While periodic food crises are nothing new to the world, the current one is something special: causes may vary according to who explains the problem, but food scarcity is almost never mentioned. Large amounts of edible groceries fill the garbage dumps of big cities daily, while no leftovers go to swollen-bellied children in Africa.

Some of the causes of this global fear of famine extensively broadcasted by the media are bad distribution of resources; high transportation costs; bad agricultural management in poor countries vs. subsidized agriculture in developed ones; speculators in grain prices; the increased demand for bio-fuels in Europe and the U.S.; and the boost of meat consumption in over-populated countries like India and China, to mention just a few of the most widely broadcast ones. Nevertheless, a brief overview of scientific opinion on the problem offers different reasons for the current food crisis, such as excessive cereal imports, destruction of farm lands, and high instability in domestic food consumption.

What the media and scientists agree on is that food problems and their corresponding solutions always end up on a



Cheryl Ravelo/Reuters

local level. Most recently, the food movements have transcended frontiers and moved from the poor South to the rich North. Some consequences of this sudden urgency of keeping our tanks full on an empty stomach have been widely announced: insane price hikes for lager at the Munich Beer Festival; pasta protests in Southern Italy; butter famines in Japan; panic buying of cooking oil before the religious feasts in Malaysia, just to mention a few.²

*Post-doctoral fellow at CISAN.

A quick look at the Worldometrics homepage offers an even more dramatic view of the situation: one can actually observe the change in deaths caused by hunger, with numbers increasing each minute. One can compare the number of overweight people, which is 1.3 times bigger than the undernourished. Figures in dollars spent on dieting in the U.S. are also available, along with the tons of food produced during the year.³

THE FOOD SCARCITY STRATEGEM

With no aim of feeding the food scarcity panic, this article takes a quick look at some causes and interested actors in the food crisis business. The end result is a review of solutions, rather than a critical piece on food policies.

The food scarcity fear may be a tragedy to some, but also a win-game for others. Apart from the profits made on the market, several communication media have been used to strengthen the idea that huge amounts of grain should be produced to make biofuel and to feed people.

A quick look at conspiracy theories, understood as the intervention of one or more groups acting in secret in order to promote fear, distrust and irrational behavior, may offer a different view on food production. The food crisis may be considered a conspiracy to achieve the acceptance of genetically modified (GM) grain and promote biofuels. Behind the true story of famine in poor countries may hide the big interests of biofuel and GM production.

Information broadcasted internationally to create the global panic of famine also recalls the terrorism scare. It reminds us of a classic work about propaganda methods, published by Durandin in 1982. The author showed that when people lose the criteria to judge the truth, they are unable to defend themselves.⁴ That is the case with the global fear of hunger and rising food prices, largely induced in order to achieve acceptance of GM grains and favor subsidized economies.

POLITICAL SYMPTOMS OF HUNGER

“If you go to the market in Senegal you can buy European produce for a third of local prices. So the Senegalese peasant farmer no longer has any chance of earning a living,” said Jean Ziegler, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to

The food crisis may be considered a conspiracy to achieve the acceptance of genetically modified (GM) grain and promote biofuels. Behind the true story of famine in poor countries may hide the big interests of biofuel and GM production.

Food. He points to a new type of colonialism also singled out by the president of Zimbabwe at the food crisis summit in May 2008. It is about how products from subsidized agricultures have made their way into the underdeveloped markets, which import most of their basics at prices lower than local production costs. Logically enough, peasants from poor countries find it harder to sell products and tend to abandon agriculture.

Transportation costs are another inconvenient aspect of food imports. Food circulates in a strange way, an interesting issue in international commerce. Even produce that could be domestically cultivated tends to come from abroad. For instance, around 350,000 hectares of agricultural land, above all in Latin America, are dedicated to the cultivation of soybeans to feed European livestock, while one quarter of the local population starves.⁵ Additionally, the road from field to table is becoming ever longer. In the last 30 years the transport link of the chain as a whole has risen by 125 percent. More transportation requires more fuel and that is how the vicious circle between biofuels and grain production goes round and round.

BIOFUELS AND ECOLOGICAL BLUNDERING

The farmers’ decision in the U.S. and elsewhere to start growing crops designed for fuel tanks—a decision helped enormously by hefty subsidies—has crazily skewed dozens of markets around the world, as Lewis shows. The double meaning of the European biofuel-favorable policy has also been revealed.

The EU has already planned for biofuels to constitute up to 10 percent of transport fuels by 2020 and is now trying to push biofuels in order to resolve global warming, an idea that has already proved inefficient ecologically and politically, with social unrest caused by the sudden rise in food prices. A study by Doppelt shows biofuels to be the

The argument is that there is no way to feed the entire planet's population on organic and traditional farming. Genetic engineering would allow farmers to grow more crops on the same acreage, using fewer insecticides.

greatest failure of human thinking in history. Bio-ethanol must also be grown, collected, dried, fermented and burned.⁶ These steps require resources, infrastructure and transportation that often produce as much pollution as ethanol saves, shows Doppelt. As side effects, bio-ethanol has already caused the destruction of farm lands and impacts on small farmers communities in East Africa and Brazil, which may be even greater than the energy balance and pollution problems. Even the shift to non-food-based biofuels, such as algae, food waste and other celluloid-based biofuels run the risk of unintended ecological, economic and social consequences, concludes the author.

GMOS, OR THE MERCANTILE SOLUTION

Genetic engineering has invaded the food market either directly through imports and cultivation, or indirectly in the form of animal feed. Biotech companies try to sell the idea that the granaries are empty and the world will not extricate itself from the food crisis without genetic engineering. The argument is that there is no way to feed the entire planet's population on organic and traditional farming. Genetic engineering would allow farmers to grow more crops on the same acreage, using less insecticides, fungicides or weed killers.

The world leader in genetically modified seeds is Monsanto, a company founded in 1901 but which started producing GM plant cells in 1982. Since 2002, Monsanto declared itself an agricultural company whose primary goal is helping farmers around the world in their mission to feed, clothe and fuel a growing planet.

So far, the company has produced GM seeds for soybeans, corn, canola and cotton. Many more products have been developed or are in the pipeline, including seeds for sugar beets and alfalfa. It is also seeking to extend its reach into milk production by marketing an artificial growth hormone for cows that increases their output. Farmers who buy Monsanto's patented Roundup ready seeds are required to sign

an agreement promising not to save the seed produced after each harvest for re-planting, or to sell the seed to other farmers.⁷ This means that farmers must buy new seed every year.

Whoever provides the world's seeds controls the world's food supply, note Barlett and Steele. Profits have also been considerable. Monsanto reported in April 2008 that its net income for the three months up to the end of February 2008 was more than double that of the same period in 2007, from US\$543 million to US\$1.12 billion. Its profits increased from US\$1.44 billion to US\$2.22 billion. The operating profit of its grain merchandising and handling operations jumped 16-fold, from US\$21 million to US\$341 million.⁸ Similarly, the Mosaic Company, one of the world's largest fertilizer companies, saw its income rise more than 12-fold, from US\$42.2 million to US\$520.8 million, on the back of a fertilizer shortage, between December 2007 and February 2008. The prices of some kinds of fertilizers have more than tripled over the past year as demand has outstripped supply. As a result, plans to increase harvests in developing countries have been hit hard.

SOME WAYS OUT

These are the facts. Now the question is: is there a solution for the food crisis? Is there any chance of permanent food security in poor countries?⁹ Can we speak of sustainable thinking related to agriculture?

In 1981, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) created the Compensatory Financing Facility (CFF) to assist cereal imports. "The cereal import excess should be temporary and be the result of circumstances beyond the control of the country, such as a decline in domestic production caused by a crop failure, or a sharp rise in cereal import prices."¹⁰ Consequently, a food facility was proposed to separate cereal import compensation from export earnings. The IMF cereal facility was designed to provide balance-of-payments assistance to developing countries for excessive cereal imports arising out of poor harvests or high world prices.¹¹ However, even at its best, it does not seem to work; 20 years after the CFF was implemented, we find ourselves in a new food crisis, probably more dangerous than the previous ones.

At the last food crisis summit in May 2008, Ban Ki-moon said nearly one billion people were short of food and called on the countries gathered there to act with a sense of purpose and mission. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer

promoted the benefits of biofuels and how genetically modified crops could reduce world hunger. President Luiz Inácio *Lula* da Silva of Brazil explained how Brazilian biofuels, made from sugar cane, had many advantages compared to the U.S. use of corn. The U.S., Brazil and some European countries defended their pro-biofuel policies, while developing countries such as Venezuela have criticized them sharply. France promised one billion euros, Spain 500 million and the Islamic Development Bank, US\$1.5 billion for food aid and agricultural development over the next five years.

Even though short-term solutions such as food aid are welcome, they offer no guarantees of food abundance in the future. The key lies, as always, in a return to the time when agriculture used to be the basis of national economies. To put it simply, we must take a step back to the time when farming used to be a respectable job, not a section in history museums. **NM**

NOTES

¹ Daniel Maxwell et al., "Measuring Food Insecurity: Can an Indicator Based on Localized Coping Behaviors Be Used to Compare Across Contexts?" *Food Policy*, www.elsevier.com/locate/foodpol, accessed June 16, 2008.

² Leo Lewis, "Biofuels make useful villain for food crisis," *The Times*, www.timesonline.uk, June 4, 2008.

³ www.worldometrics.com.

⁴ Guy Durandin, *Les Mensonges en propagande et en publicité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), p. 21.

⁵ <http://www.we-feed-the-world.at/en>.

⁶ Bob Doppelt, "Biofuels vs. Food Crisis Underscores Need for New Climate Change Strategy," published May 21 2008, retrieved June 15, from www.innovations-report.de.

⁷ Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele, "Monsanto's Harvest of Fear," *Vanity Fair* (May 2008), www.vanityfair.com.

⁸ Geoffrey Lean, "Multinationals Make Billions in Profit out of Growing Global Food Crisis," May 4, 2008, www.independent.co.uk.

⁹ Food security is interpreted as the short-term (year-to-year) variability of average per capita cereal consumption for a country as a whole. Dimitris Diakosavvas, "On the Causes of Food Insecurity in Less Developed Countries: An Empirical Evaluation," *World Development*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1989), pp. 223-225.

¹⁰ Colin Kirkpatrick, "The IMF's Food Financing Facility. Much Ado about Nothing," *Food Policy* (November 1985), p. 303.

¹¹ Richard H. Adams, Jr., "The Role of Research in Policy Development. The Creation of the IMF Cereal Import Facility," *World Development*, vol. 11, no. 7 (1983), p. 549.