

Food justice: Access to sufficient food

LATIN AMERICA/THE CARIBBEAN

Alejo Álvarez in Buenos Aires

Millions suffer from hunger and malnutrition

FAO recommends returning to ancestral eating habits to face the food crisis in the region.

Despite being one of the largest food producers in the world, the Latin American and Caribbean region has 209 million people living in poverty—35 percent of its 595 million inhabitants—, of which 81 million suffer from hunger and undernourishment. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, or FAO, in the coming years the food crisis, fueled by inflation and a drop in production, will hit even harder.

“Inflation negatively impacts the nutrition rate, primarily for the poorest [people], not only because it decreases access to food but also because it means a change in diet, in which cheaper food replaces quality,” FAO regional representative Alan Bojanic explained in a March newsletter from the organization. For that reason, he demanded urgent government support for the most vulnerable sectors to reinforce social safety nets, food programs in schools, and the pension system.

In the report “The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2011,” the FAO and other two United Nations organizations, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Food Program, or WFP, said Oct. 10 that the present crisis “is hindering efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals to reduce by half the number of people suffering from hunger in the world [by 2015].”

The three organizations suggest reducing the food wasted in developed country as well as food losses in developing countries. They also warn that without taking necessary actions the crisis will lead to decreased food intake that may

diminish the essential nutrients children ingest during their first 1,000 days of life.

Experts say that the greatest problem the region faces is its dependency on importing food and the volatility of prices for those foods that require imported products. They cite Venezuela and Peru as examples, and as a solution to that dependency, they point to the importance of restructuring food production. To this end, the FAO is promoting a return to “ancestral eating habits,” which is in line with the idea of “Living well” in indigenous communities.

Local production

Bolivia took the lead in the struggle for “food security with sovereignty,” as described by President Evo Morales, with the Law of Productive, Communal and Agricultural Revolution enacted in late June. It includes lending and crop insurance for farmers, and aims to increase production, supply the domestic market and generate higher export volumes.

In that context, and under the motto “Eat our own [products], healthy and sovereign,” Bolivia pushed for the consumption of food made by small-scale producers, “natural foods high in nutritional value, good for the land and free from chemicals and transgenics.” The initiative urges the practice of a traditional farming system based on equality and reciprocity using shared seeds, which are “common heritage, the support for agriculture and food sovereignty.”

In Argentina, which can supply food for up to three times its population, there are some efforts headed in that direction.

The Meeting on Food Sovereignty and Biodiversity took place from Sept. 14-16, in the central city of Rosario, organized by social organizations that reject “the production paradigm of industrial farming that is based on the extraction of natural resources and monoculture of the soybean, and is favored by the use of transgenic seeds, large amounts of pesticides and



To ensure food sovereignty, it is necessary to develop small-scale farming, increase production of native foods, and sufficiently supply the domestic market.

CECILIA REBON

expansion of the agricultural frontier through deforestation and the destruction of native forests.”

Days before, in the northern city of Resistencia, capital of Chaco province, the Native Seed Fair saw the same tendencies. Under the slogan “the seed in the ground is life, and in the hands of the families that sow it, freedom,” it set forth to “benefit families and the defense of land and water from the perspective of food sovereignty.”

According to the World Bank, the increase in food prices in 2010-2011 sent 70 million people around the world into extreme poverty. It does not indicate how many of those people are in Latin America and the Caribbean, but said “the region is growing, reaping the fruits of the boom in raw materials prices.” The organization added: “In contrast, non-exporting economies face the dual threat of a food crisis and rising prices.”

Action to eradicate malnutrition

According to the WFP, Latin America and the Caribbean have the basic infrastructure, the political will and the social

capital to combat hunger and extreme poverty. The WFP leaves the manner of doing so up to each country, and in exchange offers technical and economic assistance.

WFP said that the region is the world’s most unequal one, “despite the political and economic progress that has created an incredible prosperity for some sectors of the [region’s] 33 countries,” yet 35 percent of its inhabitants still live in poverty.

According to WFP, “though the region produces food to meet 30 percent above the needs of its own population, in many areas access to them is difficult and is threatened by the increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters.”

WFP cites the production of biofuels as another threat to food security as it unexpectedly opposes the solution that other international organizations have found to face, at the expense of humans, the crisis that will result from the depletion of non-renewable resources (oil). Producing biofuels requires large quantities of grains and seeds that had, until now, been used exclusively to feed humans and animals. □

LATIN AMERICA

Interview with Chilean agronomist Camila Montecinos

“Those without money eat poorly or don’t eat at all”

The destruction of small-scale agriculture and deteriorating nutrition in Chile has sparked campesino movements around the world. Grain, a non-profit organization based in Barcelona, that for years has fought for more just and sustainable food systems for the peasant farmers, won the Right Livelihood Award 2011 — often called the Alternative Nobel Prize — for its working protecting campesino rights.

Latinamerica Press correspondent **Rocío Alorda** spoke with Chilean agronomist **Camila Montecinos**, a member of Grain who coordinates with the organization’s Latin American counterparts to help implement its programs in the region.

How does Grain view the food situation in Latin America?

What stands out in Latin America today is the adoption of this nearly unrestricted adoption of the agro-export system in which we’re exporting a very significant part of our agricultural products that are not even for consumption. There are signs that the nutrition of the Latin American people has been deteriorating as a result of this agro-export model. For example, the fact that the legume production, such as beans, lentils, chick peas, has been steady declining. Chile has seen one of the most abrupt declines. Today, it produces one-third of the beans it did 30 years ago.

There are clear signs that the quality of people’s diets has deteriorated. Social differences reflect more clearly than ever in people’s diets. What rich people eat is probably nothing like what the majority of the people eat.

So there is a food model based on exports that endangers the diets of people living in food-producing nations?

Indeed, and Chile is an extreme case. Chile exports around 80 percent of the value of its farm products and has to import more and more. In fact, if we compare Chile’s balance sheet compared with the rest of the Southern Cone, it is an absolute deficit because from Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil, [Chile] is importing meat, wheat, corn, soy and many vegetables. We stopped producing fresh meat. We’re eating a much less balanced diet than we used to. Since our production is down, we are eating worse food, and that is what the big food processors and supermarket chains can control.



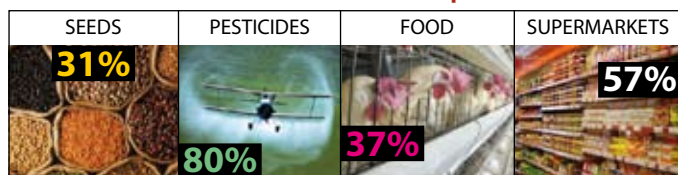
Camila Montecinos

Is it fair to say that the right to food is under threat in Latin America?

I think that nowhere in Latin America, except for Cuba, is the right to food respected. Today, food is managed strictly by the market and the person who doesn’t have any money eats poorly or doesn’t eat at all. That’s a general rule. Now what’s happening is that we are increasingly dependent on companies. For example, 30 or 40 years ago, the open-air markets were much more powerful. What is known today as informal commerce was more prevalent and all of the processes of modernization of the supposed rights of the consumer such as the meat classification, prohibition of selling raw milk in markets, the only thing that does is to push the food business into the hands of big markets. Before, if you didn’t have access to something, you could find

people who sold food in baskets along the road. Those sources of fresh food almost don't exist anymore. So to find alternative food sources is more difficult because the control of the big food industry is enormous.

Global market share held by Monsanto, Syngenta, DuPont and seven other multinational corporations



Source: www.espaciocomerciojusto.org

Where do the concepts of food sovereignty and security fit in here?

The concept of food security is what rules from an official policy standpoint, which is what the FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] put forth in 1996. The concept existed in the FAO from the 1970s, but at that moment they defined it as “the right to food.” The problem with that concept is that it considered there was optimal food for the whole world and it didn't matter how it was accessed. In 1996, under the influence of neoliberal policies, the FAO defined it as the right to obtain food through markets. That was when the CLOC [Latin American Rural Organizations' Coordinating Group] and the international organization Via Campesina said that there couldn't be that a right to food can be guaranteed by the market, so they introduced the concept of “food sovereignty,” and they say that the issue is not only the right to food, but that it is about the process: the farming methods, the way it is distributed and sold, regulated, eaten, prepared.

Additionally, each people define what is the proper food from their experience and perspective. One of the most significant things about food sovereignty is that the CLOC and Via Campesina say that ‘this is the concept of the people.’ The development of the concept of food sovereignty was one of the first steps in breaking away from the single line of thought that there was at that time, and allowed many people to start fresh outside of neoliberal ideology.

What are the principal changes that are necessary to achieve more just and sustainable food models?

There are certain things that have to be present no matter what, but how they will rank in importance depends on each people and each community. One thing is that how food is produced, sold and distributed needs to be decentralized. When you have one party controlling an important and crucial part of the food system, sovereignty is lost and it weakens the system. When people talk about food sovereignty, that it is in the hands of the people — not the government, not the market — is a point of emphasis.

The second element is that it has to be diverse because we need a diverse diet. If you produce that way, the chances of production failure are much less and it allows for greater health control, making agrottoxins unnecessary.

But food is a not a biological issue. It's more cultural. Now, you can't speak about food without thinking about seeds. So today, defending seeds is a fundamental part of food sovereignty. I think ... there should be a food justice system.

There is some resistance against the current system from the campesino movements. How would you describe this?

It's important to say that this resistance is important and not to underestimate it. If looked at it globally, campesinos hold 20 percent to 25 percent of the land and everything has shown that it is poor land. But, there are many forms of resistance. Via Campesina launched a seed preservation program, which has become a generalized issue. There are many people working now to preserve seeds. The second element is that peasant farmers keep planting, above all vegetables. Then there are some small-scale farmers who continue to maintain production of wheat, potatoes. The situation in Chile is more precarious because of our history, compared with other countries.

For example, in Ecuador the actions are much more articulated. There, the government's food policy gives preference to peasant farmer production to supply all of the social services, which was the result of strong, grassroots pressure. Many campesino organizations know they have to get the word out quickly because if not, there will be little advancement in [food] sovereignty and people will end up continuing to go to the supermarket.

Is it possible that we could have another food crisis like we had in 2007 and 2008, globally?

We have enough figures to say that crisis was caused by speculation. These companies had speculated on the prices causing the rise. It's no coincidence that the big grain companies had record profits in 2007 and 2008. That business is in so few hands that what you see is a permanent increase in grains prices and the reason they do is again speculation. There is no real reason for prices to be going up. It's a way of increasing profits and in doing so you leave 200 million people hungry.

The principle of food sovereignty is fundamental in fighting this. What you can't forget is that these food companies are not producers. Even though they control part of the crops, they are basically purchasing and commercialization powers and essentially speculative.

The most unjust issue of the system is that even though there is still plenty of food, prices keep going up.

It's because [the companies] say that we have to have genetically-modified food, and fertilizers and agrottoxins to produce more. We have plenty of food today, but the control of the market is in the hands of very few and those are speculators. Someone who produces effectively, if they produce a lot and for some reason save on costs, can lower prices because he or she is still making a significant amount. But if you are speculating, you can't. Those processes don't allow prices to go down because it would be a loss of profits. What we see, according to the data we have, is that we are going to have bigger and more intense food crises.

Making the food crisis worse is that the competition for farmland will become more pronounced because of the push for biofuels. One third of the arable land is part of large-scale farms and it looks like they're expanding. Another issue is that the food industry is a very good business. That's why you see this interest in buying large quantities of land to produce large quantities of grains like rice, wheat and corn.

You have companies with government support, trying to take over hundreds of thousands of hectares to produce, above all, rice at the moment, but also sugarcane. Some 10 companies control the international food trade, so we are seeing more control of the land, with the most dramatic result being the displacement of peasant farmers, many of whom are directly and even violently evicted from their lands.

These injustices will only come undone through resistance and sovereignty. □

In support of food justice

For organized civil society, it's about changing current food and agricultural systems.

//The food basket — corn, wheat — are in the hands of powerful countries. The management of land, production, and food marketing systems is not right, there is food injustice”.

That is how Rosario Romero, researcher for the non-governmental organization Forum Solidaridad Perú, defines the current food crisis, adding that “in the globalized system, the market defines everything — whether people eat or not”.

The current food crisis poses a grave threat to the poorest sectors in Latin America, the region with the greatest inequality in the world and where more than 52.5 million people suffer from hunger.

During the first months of the year, international food prices for staples like wheat and corn topped the peak of the 2008 food crisis when there was an increase of nearly 50% over the previous year. The surge in food prices worldwide worsens hunger and malnutrition for almost 10% of the region's population.

To face the food crisis, the *Food and Agriculture Organization* of the United Nations (FAO) suggests that food security must be attained, meaning that people must have secure access at all times to enough food for a healthy living.

This goal seems almost impossible for the nearly 30% of Latin America's rural population that lives in extreme poverty; they don't have money to buy enough food and the price of food is on the rise.

“Women are most affected because they are the ones who have to deal with this every day at the market”, Romero said.

In response to the problem, explained Romero, governments resort to anti-poverty or food security programs, and the responsibility falls again on the shoulders of women.

In the 1980s, Peru saw the emergence of “comedores populares”, or soup kitchens in which organized groups of women, in solidarity, prepared meals that were financially accessible to each other. In the 1990s, the state began subsidizing the comedores, which still exist but have come to be a source of political clientelism by successive governments.

But the primary criticism of programs like the *comedores populares*, or of food security, is that they “create dependency on the part of the beneficiaries, which in the long term goes against their ability to get out of that situation,” said Eduardo Zegarra, lead researcher for Peruvian non-governmental organization Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE).

Another system is possible

For the international movement *Vía Campesina*, it's not enough for food to be available, accessible, adequate and safe; it's about achieving food sovereignty, that is, giving priority to the local production and consumption of food. This requires “the development of a sustainable farm

Food sovereignty model compared to intensive farming

Component	Food Sovereignty	Export-intensive model
Food	A basic human right.	Another element of the monetized economy.
Production models	Based on sustainable campesino farming. Agro-ecological base, diverse products, local, tailored to the needs and characteristics of each area. Models optimized for healthy, nutritious, culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and variety.	Based on farming from the Green Revolution, intensive in capital, non-renewable resources and chemical products. Models optimized to obtain homogeneous products and standardized for easy marketing, harvesting and international transport.
Food trade	Based on empowering local circuits of production, trade.	Based on searching the international circuit for markets with purchasing power.
Research	Participatory. Promotes the recovery of local seeds.	Under the rule of the corporations that control the food industry. Promotes the development of new technologies for the food system, such as transgenics.

Source: Information from Espacio Comercio Justo and the call document for the European Forum for Food Sovereignty.

production model that favors the communities and their environment.”

In that sense, *Vía Campesina* raises its voice against the production of biofuels — which uses land where food could be grown to produce plants for the generation of fuels — which, except in certain cases, produce fewer greenhouse gases than fossil fuels.

“The current expansion of biofuels production is contributing to the massive concentration of capital for landowners, large companies, and multinationals, which in turn instigates an agrarian counter-reform worldwide. What's more, it contributes to speculation on foodstuffs and land prices,” according to *Vía Campesina*.

The call document for the European Forum for Food Sovereignty, held in Austria in August, read: “The food and agricultural system is now dominated by the logic of competitiveness and increased commodification which allows for benefits for agro-industry and big retailers that seek to maintain these benefits. Increased pressure on prices (low-farm gate prices, high prices to consumers, publicity for unhealthy transformed junk food) and working conditions (precarious contracts, flexibility, heavy work load) are an inherent part of this system.”

“What happened was that the states gave up their role of seeking well-being for citizens, and left the market to resolve everything. Those issues of inequality, marginalization, food injustice — the market is not going to resolve them because the market caused them,” said Romero.

States should regain some of their dignity and care what happens to citizens by implementing agricultural policies that seek food sovereignty and justice, while building sustainable rural infrastructures.

As the organization *Amigos de la Tierra* highlights, this “requires a positive reconversion of the land, from intensive, large-scale farming agriculture, to ecologically sound and diverse systems”. □

Thematic dossier

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