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Famine in the Horn of Africa

The whys of hunger

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We live in a world of plenty. Today food is produced for 12,000 million people, according to the Organization of the United Nations Food and Agriculture (FAO), when the planet is inhabited by 7,000 people. There is food. So why is one of every seven people in the world going hungry?

The food emergency that affects over 10 million people in the Horn of Africa brings to light a disaster that has nothing natural about it. Droughts, floods, wars ... serve to exacerbate a situation of extreme food vulnerability, but they are not the only factors that explain it.

The famine in the Horn of Africa is not new. Somalia has been experiencing a situation of food insecurity for 20 years. And, periodically, the media moves us from our comfortable sofas and reminds us of the dramatic impact of world hunger. In 1984, nearly one million people died in Ethiopia; in 1992, 300,000 Somalis died of hunger; in 2005, almost five million people were on the brink of death in Malawi, just to name a few examples.

Hunger is not inevitable, nor is it inevitable that it affects certain countries.

The causes of hunger are political. Who controls the natural resources (land, water, seeds) that enable the production of food? Who benefits from agricultural and food policies? Today, food has become a commodity and its main function, to feed people has started to take second place.

One can point to the drought, with consequent loss of crops and livestock as a major trigger of famine in the Horn of Africa, but how is it that countries like the U.S. and Australia, which periodically suffered severe droughts, are not suffering from extreme hunger? Obviously, the weather can exacerbate food problems, but not enough to explain the causes of hunger. In regard to food production, control of natural resources is key to understanding why and for whom things are produced.

In many countries of the Horn of Africa, access to land is a scarce commodity. The purchase of large amounts of fertile land by foreign investors (agro-industry, governments, hedge funds...) has led to the expulsion of thousands of peasants from their lands, decreasing the ability of these countries to feed themselves. Thus, while the World Food Programme tries to feed millions of refugees in Sudan it is a paradox that foreign governments (Kuwait, UAE, Korea...) are buying land to produce and export food for their own populations.

We should also remember that Somalia, despite recurrent drought, was a self-sufficient in food production until the late seventies. Its food sovereignty was undermined in later decades. Since the eighties, the policies imposed by the IMF and World Bank, so that the country will pay its debt to the Paris Club, have forced the implementation of a set of structural adjustment measures. With regard to agriculture, this implied a policy of trade liberalization and opening up of markets, allowing the massive influx of subsidised products like rice and wheat from North American and European multinational agribusinesses, who began to sell their products below their cost price "àEuros" creating unfair competition for local producers. Periodic devaluations of the Somali currency also generated rising input prices and encouraging the production of monoculture for export, steadily forcing peasants to abandon the land. There are similar tales not only in Africa, but also in Latin America and Asia.

The rising price of staple cereals is one of the elements identified as a trigger for famine in the Horn of Africa. In Somalia, the price of corn and red sorghum increased by 106% and 180% respectively in just one year. In Ethiopia, the cost of wheat rose by 85% over the previous year. In Kenya, maize reached a value 55% higher than 2010. These increases have made these basic staples inaccessible. But what are the reasons for the escalation of prices? Several signs point to financial speculation over food commodities as a major cause.

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The price of food is determined by the stock exchanges, the most important of which, worldwide, is Chicago, while in Europe the food is sold in the futures exchanges in London, Paris, Amsterdam and Frankfurt.

But today, most of the purchase and sale of these goods does not correspond to actual trade flows. In the words of Mike Masters, head of hedge funds at Masters Capital Management, 75% of financial investment in the agricultural sector is speculative. We buy and sell commodities in order to speculate with them and make profit which is eventually reflected in higher prices for the consumer. The same banks, hedge funds, insurance companies, which caused the subprime mortgage crisis, are those who speculate with food today, taking advantage of a deep global market which is deregulated and highly profitable.

The global food crisis, and famine in the Horn of Africa in particular, are the result of food globalization in the service of private interests. The chain of production, distribution and consumption of food is in the hands of a few multinationals who put their individual interests before collective needs and over recent decades have eroded, with the support of international financial institutions, the ability the countries of the Global South to determine their agricultural and food policies.

Returning to the beginning, why is there hunger in a world of abundance? Food production has tripled since the sixties, while the global population has only doubled since then. We are facing not a problem of food production, but above all a problem of access to food. The UN reporter for the right to food, Olivier de Schutter, told El País: "Hunger is a political problem. It is a matter of social justice and redistribution policies."

If we want to end hunger in the world it is urgent to implement different policies for food and for agriculture which put at their centre the need of people, those who work the land and the ecosystem. This is to achieve what the international movement Via Campesina calls "food sovereignty" and regain the ability to decide what we eat. Borrowing one of the most popular slogans of the Movement 15-M, what is necessary is a "real democracy, and" in agriculture and nutrition.

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