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Environment

Alternatives to the dominant agricultural model

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Neoliberal globalization's mission to privatise all areas of life including agriculture and natural resources threatens to condemn a vast part of the world's population to hunger and poverty. Today it is estimated by the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation that worldwide there are 925 million hungry people at a time when, paradoxically, we produce more food than ever before.

According to the international organisation GRAIN, food production has tripled since the 1960's while the world population has only doubled. However, the mechanisms of the production, distribution and consumption of food serve private interests, preventing the poorest from obtaining essential sustenance.

The access of the local peasantry to access to land, water and seeds is not a guaranteed right. Consumers do not know where the food that we eat comes from, which makes it impossible to choose to consume GM-free products. The process of food production has been increasingly alienated from consumption and the increasing industrialisation and concentration of each stage of the agribusiness food chain in the hands of enormous agroindustrial concerns has led to a loss of autonomy for both farmers and consumers.

Opposed to this dominant model of agribusiness, in which the search for profits has been put before the food needs of people and respect for the environment, is the alternative paradigm of food sovereignty. This affirms the right of local peoples to define their own agricultural and food policies, control their own domestic food markets and promote local agriculture by preventing the dumping of surplus products. It encourages diverse and sustainable farming methods that respect the land, and sees international trade as only a complement to local production. Food sovereignty means returning control of natural assets such as land, water and seeds to local communities and fighting against the privatisation of all life.

Beyond food security

This is a concept that goes beyond the food security proposals advocated by the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in the 1970's, which had the objective of ensuring the right of access to food for all people. Food security has not served as an alternative paradigm in that it does not question the current model of production, distribution and consumption and has been stripped of its original meaning. Food sovereignty includes this principle that everyone must eat, while also opposing the dominant agro-industrial system and the policies of international institutions that give it support.

Achieving this goal demands a strategy of breaking with the neoliberal agricultural policies imposed by the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These organisations' imposition of free trade agreements, structural adjustment, external debt and so on have served to erode people's food sovereignty.

However, the demand for food sovereignty does not imply a romantic return to the past, but rather a regaining of awareness of traditional practices in order to combine them with new technologies and new knowledge. Neither should it consist of a parochial approach or a romantic idealisation of small producers but rather an entire rethinking of the global food system in order to encourage democratic forms of food production and distribution.

A feminist perspective

Promoting the construction of alternatives to the current agricultural and food model also involves an awareness of the role of gender, recognising the role women play in the cultivation and marketing of what we eat. Between 60% and 80% of the burden of food production in the South, according to FAO data, falls on women. They are the main producers of staple crops like rice, wheat and maize, which feed the poorest populations in the global South. But despite their key role in agriculture and food, they are, along with children, those most affected by hunger.

Women in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America face enormous difficulties in accessing land, getting credit, etc. But these problems do not only exist in the South. In Europe many farmers have little or no legal status, since most of them work on family farms where administrative rights are the exclusive property of the owner of the farm and women, despite working on it, are not entitled to aid, land for cultivation, milk quotas, etc.

Food sovereignty has to break not only with a capitalist model of agriculture but also with a patriarchal system that is deeply rooted in a society that oppresses and subordinates women. Any notion of food sovereignty which does not include a feminist perspective is doomed to failure.

Via Campesina

The concept of food sovereignty was first proposed in 1996 by the international movement La Via Campesina, which represents about 150 farmers' organizations from 56 countries, in order to coincide with the World Food Summit of the FAO in Rome.

Via Campesina was formed in 1993, at the dawn of the antiglobalization movement, and gradually became one of the key organisations in the critique of neoliberal globalisation. Its rise is an expression of peasant resistance to the collapse of the countryside economy, caused by neoliberal policies and their intensification with the creation of the World Trade Organization.

Membership of Via Campesina is very heterogeneous in terms of the ideological origin of the sectors represented (landless, small farmers), but all belong to the rural sectors hardest hit by the advance of neoliberal globalisation. One of its achievements has been to overcome, with a considerable degree of success, the gap between the rural North and South, articulating joint resistance to the current model of economic liberalisation.

Since its inception, Via has created a politicised "peasant" identity, linked to land and food production, built in opposition to the current model of agribusiness and based on the defense of food sovereignty. It embodies a new kind of "peasant internationalism" that we can regard as "the peasant component" of the new internationalism represented by the global justice movement.

A viable option

One of the arguments used by opponents of food sovereignty is that organic farming is unable to feed the world. However, this claim has been demonstrated to be false by the results of an extensive international consultation led by the World Bank in partnership with the FAO, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) UNESCO, representatives of governments, private institutions, scientists, social interest groups, etc. This project was designed

as a hybrid consulting model, involving over 400 scientists and experts in food and rural development over four years.

It is interesting to note that, although the report was supported by these institutions, it concluded that agroecological production provided food and income to the poorest, while also generating surpluses for the market, and was a better guarantor of food security than transgenic production.

The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology (IAASTD) report, published in early 2009, argued for local, peasant and family production of food and the redistribution of land to rural communities. The report was rejected by agribusiness and filed away by the World Bank, while 61 governments approved it quietly, except for the U.S., Canada and Australia, among others.

In the same vein, a study by the University of Michigan, published in June 2007 by the journal *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, compared conventional agricultural production to organic. The report concluded that agro-ecological farms were more highly productive and more capable of ensuring food security throughout the world, than systems of industrialised farming and free trade. It estimated that, even according to the most conservative estimates, organic agriculture could provide at least as much food as it produced today, although the researchers considered as a more realistic estimate that organic farming could increase global production food up to 50%.

A number of other studies have demonstrated how small-scale peasant production can have a high performance while using less fossil fuel, especially if food is traded locally or regionally. Consequently, investment in family farm production and ensuring access to natural resources is the best option in terms of combating climate change and ending poverty and hunger, especially given that three-quarters of the world's poorest people are small peasants.

In the field of trade it has proved crucial to break the monopoly of large retailers, and to avoid large-scale distribution circuits (through the use of local markets, direct sales, consumer groups, Community supported agriculture and so on), thereby avoiding intermediaries and establishing close relationships between producer and consumer.

Alternatives to the dominant agricultural model, which generates poverty, hunger, inequality and climate change, do exist. They necessitate a break with the capitalist logic imposed on the agricultural system and an insistence on the right of the peoples of the world to food sovereignty.

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