

November column
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Photo courtesy of Cully Pillman

Geneva. Here I am (or was, recently) in beautiful Geneva, with its serene lake shown above, home to the World Health Organization. Yes, I was working, and that's what the first part of this column is about. Then I ask you a whole lot of questions.

**On the human right to nutrition
and people-driven justice and equity**



Geneva. Flavio Valente of FIAN and Huguette Akplogan-Dossa from Benin, with others, addressed the launch of 2012 Right to Food and Nutrition Watch

Representing the People's Health Movement, at the end of September, I attended a meeting in Geneva called by the global Food Information Action Network (FIAN). It was held at the relaxing John Knox Centre. The meeting brought together 23 social movements and civil society organisations working on right to nutrition issues

Schuftan C. On the human right to nutrition, and other stories
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from all over the world. The purpose was to formalise a network among us that will coordinate and potentiate our actions, from local to global, that will advocate for the respect, protection and fulfilment of this right. Four documents on the principles and organisation of the network were worked on during the meeting. These are a charter, a network call for action, criteria for membership, and working procedures. They will be posted on a new website in late November. Please, will all readers linked with organisations engaged in right to nutrition work, join the network. You can get advance copies of the documents from Martin Wolpold-Bosien.

Also in Geneva, a day after the meeting was over, three of the organisations present launched the 2012 *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* at a well attended media conference. It is entitled 'Who decides about global food and nutrition?: Strategies to regain control'. Many media picked up on the news.

Box 1

The Guardian on the right to food and nutrition

An extract from The Guardian report on 26 September.

Human rights are the most powerful tool to ensure efforts against hunger and malnutrition tackle structural causes and are not reduced to short-term strategies, civil society groups said in a report published on Tuesday. *Who Decides About Global Food and Nutrition? – Strategies to Regain Control* argues that it is impossible to combat the causes of hunger while keeping existing power relations untouched. 'Food and power are related. It is almost impossible to find one person among the powerful in society and politics worldwide who does not have enough to eat,' said Huguette Akplogan-Dossa, regional co-ordinator of the African Network on the Right to Food. 'The tendency is for exclusion from economic and political decision-making to go hand in hand with incidences of hunger and malnutrition.'

The report expresses particular concern about the increasing influence and control of agribusinesses and financial companies over food and nutrition. The report points to a faultline in how to deal with food security and with access to safe and nutritious food. There is the 'mainstream approach' favoured by governments and

international organisations, such as AGRA, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, and backed by the Gates Foundation, which focuses on technocratic approaches...However, the civil society groups behind the fifth annual report on the right to food and nutrition put the emphasis on a rights-based approach. They say an agricultural system that features large US and EU farm subsidies, along with a concentration of power among a few grain giants, such as ADM, Cargill and Bunge (the main corporations benefiting from US food aid), contribute to food insecurity in poor countries.

'Allowing decision-making to be in the hands of a powerful, but reduced group has led to a centralised model of food supply which in many cases results in famines,

political abuse or infringement on the state's basic obligations when it comes to human rights: to respect, protect and fulfil them,' the report says.

The report sees corporate influences at work in the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) initiative, involving a \$2.9 billion plan to promote good nutritional practices with \$6.2 billion going to preventing and treating malnutrition with special foods. Backed by the UN, the scheme has the support of GAIN, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition. GAIN's partners include food giants such as PepsiCo, Kraft and Danone.

The UN special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier de Schutter, while welcoming progress on SUN, has pointed out how the private sector tries to use technical solutions for what are fundamentally social problems. De Schutter has called on countries committed to scaling up nutrition to begin by regulating the marketing of commercial infant formula and other breastmilk substitutes. He has also noted the tension between a strategy that promotes processed foods, enriched with nutrients to the point that diets become 'medicalised', and one that promotes local and regional food systems, as well as a shift towards less heavily processed and more nutritious food.

A chapter in the report, written by Marcos Arana Cedeño and Xaviera Cabada, cites the vigorous promotion of soft drinks on school premises in Mexico by companies – endorsed by many school authorities which provide space for sales and advertising in exchange for school supplies or financial benefits. They note the serious problems in Mexico's regions with large indigenous populations, where obesity rates are growing faster within the poorest quintile. 'It is precisely in these indigenous regions where the most aggressive and unregulated marketing practices of sweetened soft drinks take place,' the authors write. These practices include a 35% price cut, promotion in Spanish and indigenous languages, and numerous sales outlets within and around schools.

Civil society groups are making themselves heard on the issues surrounding food security and hunger. The UN Committee on World Food Security now endorses voluntary guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of national food security.

The guidelines promote secure tenure rights and equitable access to land, fisheries and forests as a means of eradicating hunger and poverty, supporting sustainable development and enhancing the environment. They contain provisions to protect local communities, indigenous peoples and vulnerable groups from land speculation and land concentration. 'With the reform of the Committee on World Food Security, an innovative way of inclusive governance has been established. It has been a breakthrough for those civil society groups that traditionally have been excluded from decision-making processes on all levels,' said Flavio Valente, secretary general of advocacy group FIAN International.

Up to the end of this year, over 20 formal launches of the Watch are planned in cities the world over. These Watches have come to complement the now older People's Health Movement Global Health Watch. People around the world are indeed paying attention to what civil society coalitions --as different from multilateral agencies-- have to say about the 'bruised' state of the world's nutrition and health, and the participatory and more democratic measures that are now needed.

Associated with the two events I am bringing to your attention is the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Committee on World Food Security, mentioned in Box 1. Its work in progress includes a global strategic framework for food security and nutrition being negotiated with full, formal representation of civil society, FAO and member states. In no other UN agency does civil society have such an active and formal involvement in the preparation of policy.

The first draft, of a framework to be adapted as time goes by, is almost finished. Participating civil society organisations have prepared a draft note that identifies the most important achievements for civil society organisations in the first version of the framework. The note also identifies challenges not included in the framework's first version due to the lack of international consensus which are nevertheless central to civil society participants. So far, very good.

Everything you need to know, but may not have asked, about food and nutrition security and food sovereignty

Following the three news items above, let me share with you some thoughts about food security. Some of you may think you know all about food security, but do you really? To elucidate this, let me try a novel approach. Here below is a mix of facts and (perhaps sometime rhetorical) questions you may not actually have asked yourself. I thus classify the rest of this column as an eye opener cum informal quiz, about the myriad connections food security has to many 'macro' considerations. If some of the questions I ask leave you without a clear answer, use the response facility under the column. I could then pool some responses and post them.

First thought. Food security cannot be separated from food sovereignty, from the right to nutrition, and from nutrition itself.

The concept of food security should actually be replaced by that of food sovereignty which includes food security, together with the social determinants of population nutrition status plus other factors (1, 2). The concept of food sovereignty has come to displace the concept of food security. Why? Because it is more people-centred, as

it refers to the right of people to define their own food, agriculture, livestock and fisheries systems --in contrast to having food treated as a commodity often subject to international market forces.

The right to nutrition (3) and women's rights are central elements to food sovereignty; as you know, both are legally binding by international human rights law. Key here is the assertion 'legally binding' for governments/nation states. Because of this, we at the People's Health Movement have, from early on, been critical of the report on *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Food*, issued by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in 2008. Voluntary guidelines do not work. You are all aware of the situation with the marketing of breastmilk substitutes. As another example, the European Union heavily subsidises sugar, and this is responsible for violating the subsistence rights of sugar farmers in impoverished countries – and no action is in sight of being taken (not even voluntary). The question then is: Why is it that politicians, high level decision makers – and businesses with related interests – feel they can do abroad what they must not do at home?

A state violates the right to nutrition not only when it destroys people's access to food in a foreign country, but also when it avoids preventing others, on whom it has influence, from doing so. Take, for instance, the aggressive overseas activity of transnational agro-businesses and the land grabbing going on in poor countries by corporations operating from their base countries in the global North.

As a corollary of what I said above, women's empowerment is crucial for food sovereignty. Food security thus needs to be engendered since women are crucial food producers, but often have no land ownership rights, no access to resources and no opportunities for receiving agricultural extension training or to apply for loans, and have poor access to health for them and their children.

Let me quickly check your knowledge about some relevant questions in the context of food security. What do you think is meant in the literature by:

- Country ownership of food security policies?
- Population and income growth challenging the food security of poor people?
- The role of unstable oil prices for food security?
- The special case of food security in instances of periodic, recurring food crises?
- Climate change increasing food insecurity? (Through what mechanisms?)
- Regulating the transnationals in their dealings around the world?
- Food and nutrition safety nets?
- Security of land tenure and its relationship to food security?

And what about these further questions? Do you think they are important?

Why is public and private national investment in the food sector of agriculture (as opposed to investing in cash crops) in decline? Do we see this changing in the last ten years and even today?

Are most big investments in agriculture environmentally sustainable? Do we need safeguards against such investments especially those associated with land grabbing? Are you familiar with what 'land grabbing' is?

Small farmers, agricultural workers, pastoralists and fisherfolks, need to be the focus of food security policies since they have un-postponable special and additional needs. Why are these needs not being addressed?, we have to ask. These groups are particularly affected by the price volatility of the agricultural inputs and the transport they need. They are subjected to insecure land tenure and restricted access to land and fishing grounds, as well as to other related production resources. They are discriminated against and are not properly linked to markets. They have no access to alternative employment and are pushed to marginal lands by land grabbing and then migrate to the cities where they change their patterns of food consumption. To diets made up of what? Moreover, their women abandon breastfeeding. Why?

More and more, big farming is into cash crops, into genetically modified crops (with a loss of genetic diversity); into biofuels, into agrochemicals and into mono-cropping. What is bad about this? What has been called 'vertical integration' in agriculture? What do you know about Monsanto, Dupont, and other agricultural transnational corporations?

How seriously do you think the following problems affect food security?

- Post harvest food losses
- Soil degradation
- Water scarcity or its unfair distribution
- Loss of biodiversity and of forests
- Urbanisation encroaching on agricultural land
- Restricted access to market for small producers.

If serious, what are we doing about these? What should we? Moreover...

- Who controls the international grain markets? Do they operate transparently? What do you know about the London bourse? What do you know about Cargill, Bunge and Dreyfus?
- Where are international prices for agricultural commodities set? Are prices set

following the law of supply and demand? If not, what mechanisms are at play in this setting of prices?

- Why and how do agricultural subsidies in countries in the global North result in dumping commodities on the South? What consequence does this have for small farmers in importing countries?
- What is the difference between free trade agreements and fair trade? Do free trade agreements impinge on the food security of vulnerable groups? If yes, how?
- What is meant by unequal trade relations? Are these inequalities also important for food security?
- What is the relationship between poverty, unemployment, purchasing power, hunger and food security? Are these relationships sufficiently prominent in policy-making circles?
- Civil society participation in agricultural decision-making is recognised as legitimate and necessary, but do governments act accordingly?
- Global governance of the agricultural sector needs to hear the voices of small farmers, agricultural workers, pastoralists, fisherfolks and especially women; these groups need to be mobilised to defend their rights. Are we doing this?

Given all these implications, civil society organisations cannot but increase the level of empowerment and mobilisation of its members; they cannot but increase the pressure on governments and on transnational corporations to stop violations of the right to nutrition and, at the same time, hold them accountable, by being de-facto watchdogs.

As such...

- If civil society is to be a watchdog, what are the indicators of food sovereignty and of nutrition they should be looking at?
- Why do we need to monitor both outcomes and processes? What is 'progressive realisation' of the right to nutrition and how do we set yearly benchmarks for it?
- How familiar are you with Millennium Development Goal 1 on the reduction of hunger? How much progress will it have made by 2015? Is what is presented in this column for food security relevant for MDG1? Is it relevant for the budding post-2015 debate gaining momentum?

If you agree with much of what is said and what is implied through the key questions above, let me share with you some of the options I see will be needed to reach food security. As elsewhere, in the food security debate, it is not only about having good policies, but about their actual implementation. When weighing policy options and the actions they prompt, there are vital differences between 'may', 'can', 'should', and 'will'.

I see the urgency to pursue the switch from food security to food sovereignty as part of what we actually pursue. Also, those who produce, distribute and need food must become key participants in policy making. It is the changes that are needed for this that ultimately matter the most. So as well-meaning and well-informed professionals, we should:

- Openly criticise current models of food production and consumption.
- Oppose skewed land ownership patterns.
- Seek to reverse the current decrease in the productivity of small farmers.
- Seek to slow down further land subdivision due to inheritance.
- Identify alternative rural jobs, seasonal if possible.
- Strengthen small producers' resilience to economic and natural shocks.
- Secure small food producers' access and control over productive resources.
- Identify and protect these resources, including land, seeds, water.
- Promote agro-ecological methods.
- Promote better infrastructure for food storage and preservation.

All this, among other, implies actively supporting agrarian reform processes. (To you, what does this mean and involve?)

Furthermore, we should do what we can to achieve the following (and in reading, check that you are sure what terms like 'dumping' and 'enabling environments' and 'safety nets' really mean):

- Strengthen local and domestic food markets.
- Protect these markets against dumping.
- Promote investments in agriculture from farmers themselves.
- Press governments to create an enabling environment for this.
- Strengthen the fair trade of agricultural commodities.
- Reduce trade barriers and eliminate trade-distorting supports.
- Denounce current 'free trade' agreements.
- See that fair trade assures benefits to small producers.
- Achieve increases in research and development in agriculture.
- Increase funding and support for food crops.
- Make sure that agricultural research be more farmers-led.
- Continue promoting dietary diversity.
- Provide basic public services such as health, education, sanitation.
- Demand social protection mechanisms for the poorest (not just 'safety nets').
- Foster local food production schemes for the urban poor.
- Establish direct links with producers through farmers markets.

- Create jobs for the impoverished to generate food purchasing power.
- Focus action on women and children.
- Integrate nutrition in agriculture policies.
- Oppose any form of gender discrimination.
- Promote breastfeeding while recognising women's labour rights.

All these actions and needs require human rights learning and social mobilisation so that claims can be effectively made and placed in front of relevant duty bearers to achieve the right to nutrition.

Finally, the unavoidable question:

What do we do about international food aid? In acute cases, we need to increase the resilience of its recipients to help them in the transition from food aid, to food self-sufficiency, to the production of food surpluses for the market. What to do in chronic food aid cases is a tough question. Local contexts should dictate what needs to be done, always provided that the recipients are actively involved in the decision-making process.

Notes

- 1 It was *La Via Campesina* that started advocating for food sovereignty in the mid-1990s, through which communities have the right to define their own food and agriculture policy. Food sovereignty gives back to land its social function as a producer of foods that sustain life. It avoids the degradation of the soil, puts food production and local processing at the centre, puts an end to mono-cultures and provides a fair source of occupation and employment. It gives human beings another way to relate to nature, based on an agro-ecological approach to agricultural production.
- 2 Food insecurity is only one of the underlying causes of malnutrition with health, sanitation and care being inseparable from it; the three of them are necessary but not sufficient.
- 3 As I point out in an earlier column, I choose to speak of the 'right to nutrition', not 'the right to food and adequate nutrition', which is like saying 'apples and fruits'. The right to nutrition includes the right to food, the right to health and sanitation, and the care of mothers and children.

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