



**SIXTY YEARS  
FIGHTING  
GLOBAL POVERTY**

# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

## Taking back control of our food system

**A War on Want position paper**

**August 2011**

In 2009, for the first time in human history, over a billion people were officially classified as living in hunger. As the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) confirmed, this record total was not a consequence of poor global harvests or natural disasters.<sup>1</sup> Hunger on this scale is the result of a global economy in which hundreds of millions of small farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists and indigenous people have faced ruin through the hijacking of the global food system by large agribusiness and food retailers.

The global food system is in crisis. Decisions about what is produced, what is consumed and who has access to food are defined by multinational corporations that control the entire food chain. These companies have continued to make billions in profits even as record numbers of people go hungry. Food giant Cargill reported earnings of \$2.7bn in the year to May 2011, up 35% from the previous year,<sup>2</sup> while Unilever increased its 2010 pre-tax profits by 25% to €6.1bn (\$8.4bn).<sup>3</sup> The global supermarket chain Tesco reported record pre-tax profits of £3.5bn (\$5.8bn) in the year to February 2011.<sup>4</sup>

While multinational food and retail companies have taken control of the food chain, countries of the global South that used to produce the food they consume have become dependent on food aid and imports from the USA and EU. In the early 1960s, Southern countries enjoyed an agricultural trade surplus approaching \$7bn per year. By the end of the 1980s, this surplus had completely disappeared.<sup>5</sup>

### **Who is behind hunger?**

Hunger does not exist due to an absence of food. It is widely acknowledged that the world has enough food to feed everyone, and that hunger and malnutrition are due to unequal levels of income and access to food.<sup>6</sup> The problem lies in the production and distribution of food and, more importantly, who is in control of the food chain.

The production of food was transformed in the 1960s by the so-called Green Revolution, which saw the widespread replacement of sustainable farming by large-scale industrialised

agriculture through the introduction of chemical pesticides and fertilisers, high-tech farming methods, new seed varieties and extensive irrigation systems. Rather than cultivating a wide variety of crops, as smallholders had done for centuries, the Green Revolution promoted the spread of monoculture farming. This, in turn, exacerbated the concentration of land in the hands of fewer and fewer landowners.

As farmers started to use the new, 'improved' seeds and raise new breeds of livestock, many traditional varieties were lost. At the same time, large agribusiness companies began to make huge profits by selling the new seeds, pesticides and fertilisers and taking ownership of traditional seeds by patenting them. Farmers fell into the trap set for them by agribusiness multinationals: they now had to buy seeds that had been part of their heritage for generations.

Advocates of the Green Revolution argued that by increasing food production through technology and economies of scale, there would be sufficient food to eradicate – or at least reduce – hunger. Yet while the Green Revolution led to increased food production, hunger levels actually rose. Per capita food production increased by 8% in South America and 9% in South Asia between 1970 and 1990, but the number of hungry people rose by 19% and 9% respectively in those regions, both key targets of the new technologies. And while global figures show an overall drop in the total number of hungry people during that period, that decrease was due to the achievements of China, which had not pursued Green Revolution policies. Taking China out of the equation, the number of hungry people in the world increased by 11%.<sup>7</sup>

Structural problems caused by the Green Revolution came to the world's attention only later, especially as a result of the crisis facing farmers in India. As debts taken on to buy expensive fertilisers and other chemicals became unpayable, Indian farmers were compelled to sell their kidneys to meet their payments, or worse. From 1997 to 2005, debts incurred by the Green Revolution drove 150,000 Indian farmers to commit suicide – many of them by drinking the very fertiliser that had brought them to the point of despair.<sup>8</sup>

The Green Revolution not only destroyed the livelihoods of small farmers. It also increased the debt owed by Southern countries to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and other financial institutions. Governments in the global South took out loans with these institutions in order to improve the infrastructure that would allow the Green Revolution be implemented, on the grounds that investment would initially favour wealthier farmers but that benefits would soon trickle down to the entire population. The trickle-down effect did not materialise, and instead the polarisation between rich and poor farmers widened even further.

As a condition of debt rescheduling, the international financial institutions imposed structural adjustment programmes on developing and transitional economies that forced governments to liberalise trade, financial and investment flows, to deregulate internal food markets, to eliminate food and oil subsidies, and to institute mass privatisation programmes. These processes, in turn, led to the weakening of the state and its ability to protect national food systems or to guarantee the right to food of all citizens.

In Africa, the World Bank and IMF took control over the implementation of structural adjustment programmes, even making decisions over how fast subsidies would be phased out, how many civil servants would be fired or, as in the case of Malawi, how much of the country's grain reserve should be sold and to whom.<sup>9</sup> In Ghana, the IMF forced the government to overturn a parliamentary decision to protect domestic poultry farmers by raising tariffs on imported chicken – even though, as the IMF itself admitted, its own staff lacked the necessary understanding of the situation and failed to appreciate the merits of the case.<sup>10</sup> In Latin America, land became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of landowners, and production largely devoted to monoculture crops for export such as sugar, soya, cotton, bananas and coffee, rather than to the food needs of the domestic population.

At the same time, countries have come under increased pressure to open up their domestic food markets to imports as a result of new rules on agricultural trade introduced at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). As a result of the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture, all countries except the least developed are obliged to cut subsidies to their farmers and to reduce tariffs on food imports. However, in practice the implementation of the agreement has revealed a double standard, as the USA and EU have continued to subsidise their farmers while Southern countries have been required to open their markets to imported food.

With this liberalisation of trade, millions of small-scale farmers who cannot compete with the dumping of products at below cost have been put out of business. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, has warned that the lowering of trade barriers to agricultural imports will limit the capacity of governments to protect their citizen's right to food – firstly as the livelihoods of agricultural producers are threatened by cheap imports from other nations, and secondly as a large part of their populations lose the purchasing power required to buy enough food.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the urgent need for investment in the agricultural sector, much of the emphasis has been directed towards the production of export crops such as flowers, tea, vegetables and crops used to produce biofuels. While this has been intended to attract foreign investment and balance developing countries' external payments, it has destroyed their ability to produce food. The export-oriented model of global food production has also been promoted as a way to secure employment in countries of the global South. Yet millions of rural workers have lost their jobs as they have been brought into direct competition with industrialised agriculture, while wages and job security have worsened as a result of pressure from powerful retailers keen to increase their own profits at the expense of workers in their supply chains.<sup>12</sup>

### **From price spikes to permanent crisis**

Persistent high food prices and falling incomes as a result of the global economic crisis have taken the cost of basic foodstuffs out of the reach of millions more people. In 2008 alone, a further 130-155 million people were driven into poverty as a result of food price spikes.<sup>13</sup> Mass protests and food riots erupted across Africa, the Middle East and Latin American and the Caribbean. In Haiti, where 80% of the population live in poverty, thousands of people

took to the streets while local leaders demanded the government end free market policies and create community shops with subsidised prices.

Further spikes in food prices hit the urban and rural poor during 2010, rendering them unable to buy imported food. In Mozambique, hundreds of people were injured and 13 killed in riots over a 30% hike in the price of bread. In January 2011 the FAO announced that food prices had reached their highest levels since 1990, and projected that record prices are likely to continue into the future.<sup>14</sup> In the same month, rioting broke out across Algeria after the price of flour and cooking oil doubled.

The consequences of decades of marginalisation of rural economies and local food production have become plain to see. In addition, many communities in the global South are facing new threats from land grabbing, in which vast areas of land and water have been appropriated by multinational companies for biofuel and food production for export. In a new 'scramble for Africa' mirroring the colonial takeover of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hundreds of thousands of hectares of land have already been appropriated by multinational companies in countries such as Tanzania, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Mozambique.

In Ethiopia, the National Biodiesel Corporation (which is 80% owned by the UK's Sun Biofuels) has taken over 80,000 hectares for the production of biofuels.<sup>15</sup> Sun Biofuels has also established several large jatropha plantations for biofuel production in Mozambique, claiming they are crucial to creating jobs in the impoverished country.<sup>16</sup> These initiatives have in turn been encouraged by World Bank policy – policy designed to create favourable conditions for foreign investors at the expense of local people and communities.

In addition, speculation on commodities has contributed significantly to the rising price of food. UN Special Rapporteur Olivier De Schutter has affirmed that the 2008 food price crisis arose due to deep flaws in the global financial system, including the emergence of a speculative bubble in food commodity prices which, in turn, was created through the entry of institutional investors such as hedge funds, pension funds and investment banks into derivatives markets on food commodities. These unregulated instruments have only compounded problems of supply and demand in the global food system.<sup>17</sup>

### **Food security: a failed model**

The dominant model for dealing with the food crisis at the international level is to address the 'food security' needs of countries and peoples. This model is based on market solutions to the problems of world hunger, with food treated as just another commodity to be traded on global markets. Food security focuses primarily on the interests of those corporations that control the global food chain, with no consideration for the rights of farmers or local communities and no care for the long-term sustainability of farming systems. It is a model based on free trade in agricultural commodities, on corporate-owned technology and on greater private sector control of food production and distribution.

As such, the food security model creates further dependency on technologies that are not affordable by many poorer nations, let alone by small local producers. It forces countries to rely on international markets, food aid and imported food. Furthermore, food security

removes the responsibility of the state to protect and invest in sustainable ways to produce food, as states can no longer be held accountable for hunger or malnutrition among their peoples.<sup>18</sup>

International support for the model of food security has remained strong, despite its manifest failure to deal with the problems of global hunger. Meeting in the shadow of food price crisis in July 2008, G8 leaders responded with a statement on global food security that called for the removal of export restrictions on food and the strengthening of the role of free markets in the food system – precisely what had led to the problem of high food prices in the first place.<sup>19</sup> The UK government's Department for International Development has consistently promoted the food security model, including through its partnership with the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, which would deepen African farmers' reliance on seed and agrochemicals controlled by a few powerful corporations.<sup>20</sup>

### **Food sovereignty: the positive alternative**

Millions of small farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, indigenous people and consumers have taken up the struggle to protect their livelihoods, their right to food and their right to determine their own food systems. People have taken to the streets to demand not only that food prices be reduced but, more importantly, for a change to the current industrialised, environmentally unsustainable and unfair food system.

A total of 150 organisations from 70 countries from across the globe have joined forces under the umbrella of La Via Campesina to promote the alternative framework of food sovereignty as a way to transform a global food system that has left hundreds of millions hungry and many more with health problems. As stated in the Declaration of Nyéléni, adopted by the Forum for Food Sovereignty held in Nyéléni, Mali, in February 2007:

**“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems... Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition... Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.”<sup>21</sup>**

The food sovereignty framework goes far beyond the failed model of food security. In addition to demanding the right of all peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food, food sovereignty sets out the imperative of a set of legally binding obligations on states that can be used by people to defend their right to food.

Food sovereignty is a comprehensive framework for a new global food system that deals with production, distribution, access to and control of food. The principles underpinning the concept of food sovereignty were introduced by La Via Campesina at the World Food Summit organised by the FAO in 1996, and take into account not only the technical aspects of food production but also socio-political issues that need to be considered in order to

develop a sustainable and democratic food system. The seven principles of food sovereignty as outlined by La Via Campesina are as follows:

1. **Food: A Basic Human Right.** Everyone must have access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity. Each nation should declare that access to food is a constitutional right and guarantee the development of the primary sector to ensure the concrete realisation of this fundamental right.
2. **Agrarian Reform.** A genuine agrarian reform is necessary which gives landless and farming people – especially women – ownership and control of the land they work and returns territories to indigenous peoples. The right to land must be free of discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, race, social class or ideology; the land belongs to those who work it.
3. **Protecting Natural Resources.** Food sovereignty entails the sustainable care and use of natural resources, especially land, water, seeds and livestock breeds. The people who work the land must have the right to practise sustainable management of natural resources and to conserve biodiversity free of restrictive intellectual property rights. This can only be done from a sound economic basis with security of tenure, healthy soils and reduced use of agro-chemicals.
4. **Reorganising Food Trade.** Food is first and foremost a source of nutrition and only secondarily an item of trade. National agricultural policies must prioritise production for domestic consumption and food self-sufficiency. Food imports must not displace local production nor depress prices.
5. **Ending the Globalisation of Hunger.** Food sovereignty is undermined by multilateral institutions and by speculative capital. The growing control of multinational corporations over agricultural policies has been facilitated by the economic policies of multilateral organisations such as the WTO, World Bank and the IMF. Regulation and taxation of speculative capital and a strictly enforced code of conduct for multinational corporations is therefore needed.
6. **Social Peace.** Everyone has the right to be free from violence. Food must not be used as a weapon. Increasing levels of poverty and marginalisation in the countryside, along with the growing oppression of ethnic minorities and indigenous populations, aggravate situations of injustice and hopelessness. The ongoing displacement, forced urbanisation, oppression of smallholder farmers and increasing incidence of racism against them cannot be tolerated.
7. **Democratic control.** Smallholder farmers must have direct input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels. The United Nations and related organisations will have to undergo a process of democratisation to enable this to become a reality. Everyone has the right to honest, accurate information and open and democratic decision making. These rights form the basis of good governance, accountability and equal participation in economic, political and social life, free from all forms of

discrimination. Rural women, in particular, must be granted direct and active decision making on food and rural issues.

### **A growing movement**

The global movement for food sovereignty is growing and is supported by communities, grassroots organisations, food producers and consumers from all continents. War on Want partners – and La Via Campesina members – from Brazil (MST: The Landless Workers' Movement), Sri Lanka (MONLAR: The Movement for National Land and Agrarian Reform) and Mozambique (UNAC: The Peasants' Union of Mozambique) have all proved that it is possible to build a food system that is sustainable, equitable and democratic.

War on Want is committed to building the global movement for food sovereignty. Together with our partner organisations and other allies within La Via Campesina, we call on all people to join the millions of small farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, indigenous peoples and consumers across the globe who are demanding adoption of the food sovereignty framework. We call on all national governments and international institutions to endorse and implement the framework. We urgently need a new global system for how we produce, distribute and consume food.

### **Written by:**

**Graciela Romero Vasquez**  
**War on Want**  
**44-48 Shepherdess Walk**  
**London N1 7JP, UK**  
**gromero@waronwant.org**  
**+44 20 7324 5050**

**[www.waronwant.org/foodsovereignty](http://www.waronwant.org/foodsovereignty)**

---

### **REFERENCES**

- <sup>1</sup> 'More people than ever are victims of hunger', FAO briefing, June 2009
- <sup>2</sup> 'Cargill reports fourth-quarter and fiscal 2011 earnings', Cargill press release, 9 August 2011
- <sup>3</sup> *Creating a Better Future Every Day: Annual Report and Accounts 2010*, Unilever, February 2011
- <sup>4</sup> *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2011*, Tesco, April 2011
- <sup>5</sup> *The State of Agricultural Commodity Markets 2004*, FAO, 2004
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Agriculture at a Crossroads: Synthesis Report*, International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), 2009
- <sup>7</sup> Peter Rosset, 'Lessons from the Green Revolution', Institute for Food & Development Policy, 8 April 2000
- <sup>8</sup> Ritambhara Hebbar, 'Framing the Development Debate: The Case of Farmers' Suicide in India', in Chandan Sengupta and Stuart Corbridge (eds), *Democracy, Development and Decentralisation in India: Continuing Debates*, Routledge, 2010
- <sup>9</sup> Eric Holt-Giménez and Raj Patel, *Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice*, Food First Books, 2009
- <sup>10</sup> *IMF Involvement in International Trade Policy Issues*, IMF Independent Evaluation Office, 2009; also background document 4 to the above: *IMF Involvement in Trade Policy Issues in Low-Income Countries: Seven Case Studies*
- <sup>11</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, 21 October 2008; UN document A/63/278

---

<sup>12</sup> *Trading Away Our Jobs: How free trade threatens employment around the world*, War on Want, March 2009; *A Bitter Cup: The exploitation of tea workers in India and Kenya supplying British supermarkets*, War on Want, July 2010; *Growing Pains: The human cost of cut flowers in British supermarkets*, War on Want, March 2007

<sup>13</sup> *The Global Social Crisis: Report on the World Social Situation 2011*, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, June 2011

<sup>14</sup> 'World food prices reach a historic peak', FAO press release, 3 February 2011

<sup>15</sup> *Africa: up for grabs – The scale and impact of land grabbing for agrofuels*, Friends of the Earth, June 2010

<sup>16</sup> *Jatropha! A socio-economic pitfall for Mozambique*, Justiça Ambiental and União Nacional de Camponeses, August 2009

<sup>17</sup> 'Food Commodities Speculation and Food Price Crises: Regulation to reduce the risks of price volatility', Briefing Note 02, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, September 2010

<sup>18</sup> Michael Windfuhr and Jennie Jonsen, *Food Sovereignty: Towards Democracy in Localised Food Systems*, ITDG Publishing, 2005

<sup>19</sup> 'G8 Leaders' Statement on Global Food Security', Toyako, 8 July 2008

<sup>20</sup> See *Eliminating World Poverty: Building Our Common Future*, Department for International Development, July 2009; Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa website: [www.agra-alliance.org](http://www.agra-alliance.org)

<sup>21</sup> The full Declaration of Nyéléni is available at [www.nyeleni.org](http://www.nyeleni.org)