

Fundamentals of the MISEREOR Lenten Campaign 2014

How do we wish to live, and how will we live?

Setting an agenda for a world without hunger

by Dr. Uwe Hoering

In Germany, a well-known fast food chain advertises its burgers on huge posters with the slogan ‘If you hate hunger’¹. How nice it would be if things were so simple. Yet while hunger has largely lost its shock value for us, and has become an empty phrase, millions of people in the world still lack access to the most necessary foods. In a world of plenty this is a scandal – though not one that can be eradicated by spending EUR 3.50. It demands fundamental change in the way our food system works. And the burger is a symbol of this fact.

Half measures in the eradication of hunger

First of all the good news: In December 2012 the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) set itself a goal, namely ‘the eradication of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition’, as FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva put it.² Up until then, the international community had been content with far less. Millennium Development Goal 1, which the United Nations set in 1990, aims only to halve the proportion of people going hungry by 2015.

Now for the bad news: Even this goal is unlikely to be met. Using a new method, the FAO has calculated that the proportion of people experiencing hunger did fall from 19 per cent in the early 1990s to 12 per cent (842 million) in 2012.³ Nevertheless, this is not really a global success story:

- No less than eighty per cent of this reduction was accounted for by just two countries, namely China and Viet Nam. By contrast, in the world’s 45 poorest countries the number of hungry people grew by 25 per cent.⁴
- If – unlike the FAO – we were to base our calculations on a realistic calorific requirement, the figure would be 50 per cent higher, i.e. almost 1.3 billion people.
- And there is a further problem. This calculation includes only people who go hungry all year round. Yet many people go hungry for certain periods, because their crop fails, or is not sufficient for the whole year, or because they only have seasonal work. Nor does the figure include people with an unbalanced diet. In Uganda, for instance, the proportion of people going hungry did fall by more than 10 per cent to 18.6 per cent in 2005. However, over half of all households are considered ‘food insecure’, one in three children shows signs of undernourishment and malnutrition such as reduced growth, and many go blind. Moreover, over the last few years the proportion has risen

¹The slogan is based on a pun which is only possible in the German language. “Wenn Du Hunger hast” means ‘If you are hungry’; “Wenn Du Hunger hasst” means ‘If you hate hunger’. The translators.

²FAO press release of December 7, 2012, <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/166157/icode/>.

³FAO, The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2013. Rome, October 2012, <http://www.fao.org/publications/SOFI/en/>. For more detailed figures on the relevant trends, see also: Global Hunger Index 2013, published by Welthungerhilfe et al., October 2013.

⁴Zahlenzauber: Wirklich weniger Hunger in der Welt? Hintergrundpapier zur Pressekonferenz von Brot für die Welt und FIAN Deutschland zum Welternährungstag 2013 [*Magic by numbers. Is there really less hunger in the world? A room document for the press conference held by Bread for the World and FIAN Germany on World Food Day 2013* – currently only available in German]. See also: Framing Hunger. A Response to ‘The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012’.

<http://www.foodfirst.org/en/Response+to+FAO's+State+of+Food+Insecurity+2012>.

again.

In other words, if we were to consider only the statistics on hunger, this would distort our understanding of the very much greater challenge. Not only do we need to eliminate hunger at its worst; we also need to establish food security.

The human right to food has long been generally recognised. A number of countries have incorporated it into their constitutions. And globally there is enough to eat. Consequently, no human being need go hungry or suffer malnutrition. Yet any attempt to distribute this food that is not merely humanitarian will come up against the barrier of persistent poverty. Small farmers, casual labourers in urban and rural areas, the elderly and the sick do not have the means to become properly self-sufficient. Their small plot of land does not produce enough to get them through the months of hunger, or they lack a regular sufficient income. Even though large surpluses in the industrialised countries meant that staple foods were extremely inexpensive until the dramatic price increases of five years ago, millions of people were nevertheless unable to afford sufficient food as a result.

The most recent price increases for wheat, maize and rice have now at least alarmed the global public. Particularly hard hit by these increases are people who have only little money in the first place, and often have to spend the major part of their income on food. Moreover, forecasts indicate that the days of cheap food have gone, and that we will see high and fluctuating prices in the future. This is compounded by problems in the food system itself. A large proportion of agricultural produce is lost between the field and the plate. Post-harvest losses (e.g. caused by poor-quality storage facilities or a complete lack of facilities) reduce the quantities that are available for consumption as food. Wastage and the destruction of food in supermarkets and households are becoming the scandal of a system that is unable to realise the human right to food, even after impressive growth in production.

Hunger has many causes

Hunger and food insecurity have many causes. These include the neglect of small-scale agriculture and rural regions, land grabbing, industrial agriculture, climate change, the global market and speculation, over-consumption and waste.⁵

It is becoming increasingly evident that many of these causes are closely linked to the way in which food today is produced, processed, distributed and sold. The modern agriculture and food industry has long since developed into a ramified, global and complex network of producers, distributors, processors and supermarkets that are closely interlinked, and that influence and affect each other to a significant degree.

At one end of this system, as the bottom as it were, are millions of small farmers with little land and few other resources. According to estimates they continue to produce at least half of all food worldwide, chiefly for their own consumption, and sell any surpluses quickly on local markets at low prices. Often these are foods such as millet or cassava, which are appropriate to local climatic conditions, needs and dietary habits. Yet most of these family farms lack the means to improve their farming and marketing practices, or to keep pace with the flood of imported agricultural products that have conquered the urban markets. So far, governments, industry and international policymakers have shown little interest in promoting this form of agriculture, which is considered unproductive and outdated, even though potential does exist.

⁵ See the article on the fundamentals of the Lenten Campaign 2013.

The other pole is industrial agriculture. This involves cultivating monocultures on large areas of land using highly sophisticated technical means. These crops are often destined for export. In the industrialised countries and a number of emerging economies such as Brazil, industrial agriculture is producing surpluses that are dictating world market prices and crowding out domestic produce.

Over the last few years the global agriculture and food industry has undergone a process of horizontal and vertical integration. This means that a smaller and smaller number of large farms, distributors, processors and supermarkets are controlling a larger and larger proportion of the entire supply chain from the field to the plate – and in so doing are securing the largest share of the ‘value created’ for themselves.⁶ Large shares of the land, distribution channels, seed and other inputs are in their hands. And they wield major influence over the development strategies of governments and international development institutions in the agricultural sector.

For a number of years they have been expanding further and further in countries of the South, for instance in Africa, where they are securing larger and larger areas of land for themselves. In Uganda hundreds of families have had to give up their land for a new plantation established by a German coffee corporation. This land grabbing, which takes place on all continents, is increasing the risk that small farmers, who have no chance against the collective power of investors and the state, will be further marginalised or forced to abandon this kind of farming altogether.

Hunger is an ugly symptom of this food system. Although the system has succeeded in generating an unprecedented abundance, it has also cemented hunger and food insecurity. Its constituent elements include inadequate self-sufficiency of family farms, but also of entire countries, price increases driven by speculation or the use of wheat and maize as feed or biofuel, a lack of purchasing power for poor families, and competition caused by dumping imports. Hunger is intertwined with undernourishment and malnutrition, precarious incomes and livelihoods, and the powerlessness of rural populations to influence agricultural policy decisions.

Take the meat for our hamburger, for instance, which is supposed to satisfy our ‘hunger’. In its country of origin it causes poverty, land loss and structural hunger. In South America, for example, forests have been cleared and small farmers evicted in order to make way for cattle farming and feed cropping, and soya has been cultivated instead of food. Huge plantations offer only few jobs, which are often poorly paid, and agrochemicals cause damage to health and the environment.

Misplaced hopes

Agricultural development does not mean less hunger

Not only the FAO, but also many governments and international development organisations have declared the fight against hunger a priority of their policy. They believe one way of achieving this is to redouble their efforts to promote agriculture in countries of the South. New

⁶Agropoly. A handful of corporations control world food production. September 2013, <http://www.evb.ch/p21747.html>.

programmes such CAADP⁷, AGRA⁸ and the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition of the major industrialised nations (G8), for instance, now plan to deliver progress in Africa – in the name of the fight against hunger. One central element of this agricultural policy involves agribusinesses, distribution companies and supermarket chains doing more to integrate small farmers (who in many countries of Africa still account for 70 to 80 per cent of farms) into the ‘value chains’ by supplying them with inputs such as seed and fertiliser, and enabling them to access new markets. Yet only very few of these farmers have sufficient land or capital to be able to profit from this ‘Green Revolution’. For most of them, the poorest farmers, this changes nothing. In the worst case, so it is feared, they will lose their land to new investors, and thus lose the foundation on which they might otherwise build their food security.

Taking things to the limit

Agricultural resources such as fertile soils, water, suitable climatic conditions, plant yields and storage facilities for phosphate fertilisers are limited – and highly unevenly distributed across the globe. In many regions they are already exhausted.⁹ At the same time, these resources must be used not only to produce more and more staple foods, but also – as affluence grows – more and more ‘high-value foods’ such as dairy products, meat or fish. In this context, the term ‘high-value’ does not necessarily imply higher nutritional value; it also means higher profits. In addition, there is growing demand for biofuels, animal feed and industrial raw materials such as cotton and rubber.

One way out of this is continuous investment and increased efficiency: more fertiliser, larger and larger farms and plantations, genetic engineering, and transport over longer and longer distances to fill the supermarket shelves with goods from all corners of the world. Although measures of this kind can push the limits of growth further, the price that societies, people and the environment pay is getting higher all the time.

Across large swathes of land soils are becoming infertile as a result of overexploitation and the use of chemical fertilisers. Groundwater levels are sinking dramatically. Rivers are drying up, and forests, savannas and wetlands are disappearing. The price war being waged by food corporations and supermarket chains is reducing farmers’ income, and forcing farmers to either keep pace in the competition for growth and efficiency, or abandon farming altogether. In some cases wastage and destruction are built into this system, for instance as a result of excessive quality standards or requirements concerning the appearance of fruit and vegetables on shelves. Advertising encourages consumer behaviour that reinforces such trends. And yet, despite enormous expense and big promises of efficiency, this system is not succeeding in securing adequate food for all.

Numerous studies have warned that ‘business as usual’ or a ‘Keep it up!’ type of approach is no longer a viable option. One example is the pioneering study conducted by hundreds of agricultural, food and development experts, the so-called ‘World Agriculture Report’. This report calls for radical change – and at the same time shows what form that process of change might take.¹⁰

With regard to *one* particular solution, virtually everyone is in agreement. Distributing

⁷The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme, an agreement under which governments have for instance pledged to increase funding for agriculture – which only few of them have done so far.

⁸The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, which is strongly supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

⁹http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/docs/Issues_papers/HLEF2050_Global_Agriculture.pdf.

¹⁰<http://www.globalagriculture.org/original-reports.html#c28655>.

surpluses, whether it be via the market or through food aid and emergency assistance, will not be sufficient to achieve the goal of eradicating hunger and poverty. Approaches are needed that engage with small-scale agriculture, in rural regions, where one of the main causes of persistent poverty and food insecurity is found. Like the World Agriculture Report, many studies have identified potential for increasing production in ways that will enable farmers to become more self-sufficient, while supplying regional markets with food and generating income. In turn this would trigger an upward spiral in rural regions that might put a stop to environmental destruction and rural exodus to the urban slums.

In the agricultural programme of the Archdiocese of Kampala, people are convinced that sustainable eco-farming is the best method for African small farmers. This is because in Uganda, as in many countries in Africa, farmers' fields are often barely any larger than one or two football fields. Under these conditions, only intensive, well-planned management will generate yield sufficient to prevent farmers and their families from having to go hungry. And costs must be kept low, because families have barely any money with which to buy fertiliser or seed. At the same time, the food produced will be healthier, more varied and more nutritious.

Food is therefore a priority. Farmers are being encouraged to cultivate what they can also eat themselves, after which they can sell any surpluses. Cattle, goats, sheep and chickens also help improve nutrition and income. One exception is coffee. This functions as a kind of cash dispenser, as the beans can be quickly sold to small merchants if need be. Farmers are also receiving advice on how to improve quality. This is important, because organic or Fair Trade coffee can be exported and generate higher income.¹¹

As part of the 'Zero Hunger' programme in Brazil, for instance, to support such initiatives and promote small-scale agriculture government agencies are purchasing agricultural products from family farms and distributing them to schools and poorer families. In India a National Food Security Act was passed in September 2013 which guarantees that 70 per cent of the population will receive a basic supply of foodgrains purchased from small farmers at guaranteed prices.

Food security – Food sovereignty

When organisations such as the FAO speak of 'food security', which also means eradicating hunger and malnutrition, this implies a focus on creating access to adequate supplies of healthy food, guaranteed for instance through a sufficient income in conjunction with the availability of affordable food. By contrast, the call for 'food sovereignty', which has been shaping the debate increasingly for a number of years, focuses on how food is produced. The underlying aim here is to achieve food security in a much broader sense, for individual families, for regions, for countries – and to be precise, globally. For food security will only be achieved globally if and when everyone is properly supplied. This approach, which was developed by the global farmers' movement La Via Campesina, does not rely solely on increased production and improved distribution. Its advocates believe that priority should instead be attached to maintaining and developing the 'multifunctionality' of small-scale agriculture. This kind of farming not only supplies agricultural products, but also creates jobs, protects the environment, and makes people less dependent on imports – and therefore less dependent on price fluctuations driven by speculation and on agricultural corporations that control the world market. To achieve this, farmers, who in many cases make up the majority of the population, must also be empowered to play a greater political role.

¹¹Uganda is the focus country of the MISEREOR Lenten Campaign 2014. The campaign materials describe in detail the success stories and the hopes people are placing in sustainable small-scale agriculture.

Creating scope

Such alternative approaches can only work, however, if there is also fundamental change here in Europe. For one thing we need to reduce the agricultural surpluses that are making life difficult for farmers in the South. To a large extent the production of these surpluses is being promoted by European agricultural policy. The needed changes also include putting a stop to the expansion of agribusiness, which after having conquered the world markets for food is now reaching out for agriculture in the countries of the South itself. Agribusiness is grabbing land, water and local markets for agricultural products, seed and fertiliser. The idea that problems can be solved through the continuous growth of agribusiness has long since proved illusory. In both the North and the South it is becoming increasingly clear that instead of continuing to promote industrial agriculture, we must systematically expand support for small-scale sustainable farming. This type of agriculture has the potential not only to eradicate poverty and hunger, but also to prove industry wrong in its claim to be the only way to feed the world.

Arguably the most current and controversial example of this is the meat industry. In Germany and Europe numerous new poultry farms are currently being built or planned, with a capacity for slaughtering hundreds of thousands of animals a day. Since the domestic demand in Germany and Europe is largely covered, most of this meat will be destined for export. In the importing countries this will lead to a situation in which national poultry breeders, small processing operations and local distributors are crowded out. At the same time feed exports from these countries to Germany and Europe will increase. This will continue to drive the process of conversion from farming that produces food, to a system of large-scale farms owned by the few corporations operating globally. Both in Germany and in the countries supplying the feed, all this will be compounded by manifold environmental problems.

Sustainable lifestyles

The problems associated with the meat industry have led to the emergence of a new, broad-based movement. In addition to protests such as those seen in the municipality of Wietze (near the town of Celle) in the German state of Lower Saxony, where thousands of demonstrators turned up to blockade a new large-scale farm in August 2013, many consumers are now taking steps as individuals: eating less meat, becoming vegetarians, or even vegans. In other words, industry is being shown a red card, and consumer behaviour turned into a political statement. Furthermore, studies show that excessive meat consumption also damages health, to say nothing of the scandals concerning rotten meat, or antibiotics and hormones in sausages.

As this example shows, the problems of the food system can be a huge force for the emergence of consumer movement and protests, and the quest for alternatives. Given the central importance of food for people's lifestyles, well-being and health, and the negative impacts of the food system that have long since become impossible to miss, it is no wonder that many people seeking a 'different life' take this as their starting point. Food is also an area where it is relatively easy for people to actually change their behaviour as individuals.

The campaign against the meat cravings of industry and consumers followed the rise of organic products, which also offer consumers the prospect of improvements in taste, health and environmental protection, and have since conquered the supermarkets. A parallel development has been the Fair Trade movement, which is based on criticism of the world

trading system, and the notion of international justice and solidarity. This movement too is now booming. The idea of 'slow food' – a deliberate contrast to the 'fast food' we see everywhere – emphasises quality, a conscious approach to food and eating, regional and traditional products, and produce that comes from farmers. This too is gaining ground, and has even reached the world of celebrity chefs.

While it is true that consumers are at the end of the production chain and that their influence is limited, their behaviour does send a signal. And it can support change. In 'community-supported agriculture' consumers give farmers incentives and security by providing them with a guarantee of purchase and in some cases even a funding contribution.¹² Cooperatives of consumers, producers, farm shops and farmers' markets can also support regional small-scale agriculture in similar ways. In Brazil and Ecuador, large networks of cooperatives have sprung up that are supplying entire regions with farm produce.

New models of prosperity

Given the trends such as those demonstrated by the example of the meat industry, it comes as no surprise that a critical review of the food system is playing a central role in the quest for ways out of the various crises. The 'World in Transition' report, published by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), identifies land use – along with energy and urbanisation – as having a key role to play in a 'Great Transformation'.¹³ The energy crisis, climate change, the persistent food crisis and the power of banks, stock exchanges and multinational corporations, are causing people to call into question the existing model for growth. New approaches such as 'de-growth' have been proposed, as have paths to the 'Green Economy'.

Clearly, a transformation will impact on the kind of lifestyle that can only be maintained at the cost of exploitation (including hunger and poverty) in the South, which the scholar Ulrich Brand terms the 'imperial lifestyle'. Alongside gross domestic product as a (misleading) indicator of growth and prosperity, other standards such as the 'happiness indicator' have now also appeared. The Enquete Commission of the German Bundestag, which published its final report in May 2013, proposed a new model of prosperity and progress whose indicators would reflect the status of prosperity and quality of life in Germany.¹⁴ A vigorous debate is under way on *buen vivir*, the notion of the 'good life' that originated in Latin America, and which stresses harmony with nature and other human beings.

Nowadays, people no longer share just their cars – they also share electric drills or lawn mowers. Couch surfing, local exchange trading systems, for-free shops and local currencies are just some of the many incentives that encourage people to live alternative lifestyles. The publications, events and cover stories of magazines describing the possible positive impacts of such lifestyle changes are now legion. The message is: A lower, but more aware consumption can deliver greater satisfaction, more time and a higher quality of life, as well as promoting social cohesion and improving environmental protection.

¹²www.solidarische-landwirtschaft.org.

¹³WBGU, World in Transition. A Social Contract for Sustainability, Berlin 2011.

¹⁴Schlussbericht der Enquete-Kommission „Wachstum, Wohlstand, Lebensqualität – Wege zu nachhaltigem Wirtschaften und gesellschaftlichem Fortschritt in der Sozialen Marktwirtschaft“. Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 17/13300, 03.05.2013 [*Final report of the Enquete Commission on 'Growth, prosperity and quality of life – Paths to economic sustainability and social progress in the social market economy'*]. Published by the German Bundestag – Currently only available in German].

The 'My agriculture – Our choice' campaign

'How many farmers will there be left in 10 years in Germany and Europe? What will they grow? How will our landscape look? What prices will we pay at the store? What will be the costs of our agriculture and methods of nutrition to our society, health, and environment?'

'European agricultural policy is a challenge for all taxpayers, consumers and voters. Policy issues include not only subsidies, but also environmental protection, biodiversity, water and soil quality, regional development and animal protection, and a vote on prospective technology that will not impair the quality of our food and health. This vote has major implications for the fight against world hunger and for global justice.'

'Through the campaign "My agriculture – Our choice", organisations from different domains in society are asking questions and searching for answers: on farms, in communities in cities and countrysides, and on the Internet. We intend to create a dialogue between farmers and consumers, both in Germany and beyond its borders. We wish to develop sustainable prospects, strengthen our networks, and enjoy our food and landscape. One thing we know already: Business as usual is not an option.'

'Therefore, we strive for more democracy, in the food and agricultural sector. We take responsibility and where necessary put the common good before short-term individual interests. The food and agriculture policy in Europe is our business. Change is needed in the following areas: policy directives and regulation, subsidies, research, investment, rules of trade, consumer protection – there are many ways of leveraging change, and ultimately transformation.'

Excerpt from the declaration of the 'My agriculture – Our choice' campaign¹⁵

Complex transformation: less and more

Given the way we feed ourselves, many people have been calling the system itself into question for quite some time. They are doing so because the system entails hunger and poverty, climate change, energy crises, a loss of natural resources, environmental problems, health risks and many other problems, of which wastage and recurrent food scandals are just the unappetising tip of the iceberg. The entire supply chain, including farming, processing, distribution and marketing, built-in wastage, and seductive advertising, must be restructured. It must be turned on its head, as it were, by taking control away from agribusiness and the food industry, with its pressure for growth and prioritisation of market power and profit, and rebuilding the system on the foundations of small-scale agriculture and its needs.

To put things simply, the proposals take us in two directions: First of all, we need less here in Europe and Germany: less meat, less superfluous consumption, less wastage. The impacts of this would be fewer imports, and better management of resources such as land, water and energy which are currently being squandered. This would not only help many people in the countries of the South who are currently paying the price for our lifestyle. It would also create scope for more local production and the development of proven alternative approaches.

This is important because, secondly, more needs to be produced in the countries of the South – though for people's own consumption and not primarily for export, i.e. not for the

¹⁵ <http://www.meine-landwirtschaft.de/english.html>. MISEREOR is also involved in the campaign.

corporate 'value chains'. To achieve this it is not sufficient just to recognise a right to food. What is needed is 'food sovereignty', the freedom for countries and populations to decide what kind of agriculture they want. More food should be produced where it is needed, so that it can satisfy needs and stimulate economic development. By practising sustainable eco-farming, farmers in Uganda for instance have succeeded in producing more, which has enabled them to achieve food security, education for their children and modest prosperity. Millions of farming families like them have the potential to do likewise.

The common denominator of 'Less in the North' and 'More in the South' is a different global food system. As individuals, each one of us can right away test whether this makes us happier, and improves our quality of life and satisfaction. As a society, and globally, it will no doubt take some time to overcome the manifold and powerful sources of resistance to such a transformation.

Translation from the German
by Dr J D Cochrane, Frankfurt/Main,
and MISEREOR Language Services,
Aachen, Germany, February 2014