

Do 800 million rural poor count?

The threat of a new and this time global food crisis first hit the headlines when people took to the streets in African and Asian cities to protest against soaring food prices. But even under normal circumstances hunger and poverty still plague the world. The approximately 800 million rural poor, however, have no voice; they have no lobby group to represent their interests.



Dr. Renée Ernst

Photos of starvation in the Third World no longer have the power to shock. We are unmoved by images of droughts or floods, children with swollen bellies, or desperate farmers in India, scores of whom have committed suicide. They believed what the agricultural lobbyists told them and put their faith in expensive genetically modified seed, fell into debt and could see no way out but to take their own lives. We've seen it all before, we've heard it all before. Cynical as it may sound – we have become apathetic.

Then suddenly, in spring this year, different photos started to appear on the front pages of the papers and the TV news – photos such as we've never seen before. Crowds of people were storming the shops in the major cities, and stealing the goods which they could no longer afford to buy: basic foodstuffs such as maize, rice, sugar and oil. The people in the developing countries already spend an average of 70 percent of their income on food – in Germany the figure is just 11 percent. Higher prices for these people mean making further reductions to their already meagre diet – they simply have no other option. The people are raising their voice against government pricing policies.

Hunger riots are making the headlines, again prompting the question of how it is possible for people to die of starvation in a world where the number of billionaires is constantly rising. Even before food prices skyrocketed, huge numbers of people starved to death in countries such as Angola, Sierra Leone or Niger – where one in four children does not live to see its 5th birthday. But the rest of the world was largely oblivious to the “silent tsunami” in the remote rural areas, away from the eyes of the media. Malnutrition, malaria, even simple diarrhoeal diseases are responsible for this disastrous situation. The 800 million rural poor have no voice, because they live far from the cities. They are not organised, and therefore have no lobby group to represent their interests.

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Only when the urban population takes to the streets do governments sit up and take notice. At this year's World Bank spring meeting, the food crisis topped the agenda and World Bank chief Zoellick warned of instability in at least 33 countries, including some regional powers such as Egypt, Indonesia and Pakistan. German Finance Minister Steinbrück went so far as to speak of a “monster entering the world stage”. Food riots claimed 110 lives in Cameroon, and there was more violent protest in Mauritania, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire. The uprising of the poor has news value.

No end to hunger without sustainable agriculture

The good thing is that the politicians are now giving more serious thought to how we can support the developing countries. In doing so they are recalling the old adage that if you want to combat hunger you have to invest in agriculture and infrastructure. Only in this way will the developing countries become self-sufficient in food and independent of imports.

The World Agriculture Report published in mid-April (http://www.millenniumkampagne.de/fileadmin/downloads/news/Internationaler_Bericht_zur_landwirtschaftlichen_Forschung_und_Technologie_fuer_Entwicklung_englisch_.pdf) reached the conclusion that the old paradigm of an industrialised agriculture heavily dependent on energy and pesticide use is no longer appropriate. Apart from the land reforms which have long been called for, an agricultural system capable of leading the way out of the current crisis must fully embrace local and indigenous knowledge, and the empowerment of women – who bear the major burden of agricultural labour in the developing countries. Also, small-scale farming and agro-ecological cultivation methods should be set as research priority areas. The report does not hold back from pointing out the co-perpetrators of the failed agricultural policy. It names first and foremost the IMF and the World Bank, whose rigid structural adjustment programmes turned formerly self-sufficient nations into food importers. For instance, following pressure from the IMF in 1995, Haiti was forced to slash its import duties for rice from 35 to 3 percent, resulting in a 150 percent rise in rice imports over the following nine

While the number of billionaires is constantly rising, huge numbers of people – above all children – are starving.

years. Three quarters of the rice sold in Haiti today comes from the USA and is subject to price fluctuations on the world market. Local rice farmers, however, are either poverty-stricken or have given up completely.

The World Food Programme describes the “devastating” impact of high food prices on those forced to live on less than a dollar a day. The Millennium Development Goal of cutting poverty in half by 2015 is under threat. At the launch of the “Africa Progress Panel” report which monitors progress in the fight against hunger, Kofi Annan warned that the current food crisis could push another 100 million Africans alone into abject poverty, unless the Millennium Goals are addressed more forcefully.



Photo: dpa/picture-alliance

Now is the time to lay the groundwork

We know what strategies are needed to solve the problem. Now it is up to us to put in the groundwork for a sustainable agriculture, so that the rural poor cannot only feed themselves, but also the ever-growing number of city dwellers. Neither donors nor the developing countries themselves have shown enough interest in rural development. To the contrary, the industrialised nations have worsened the crisis by exporting their subsidised surpluses to the devel-

oping countries and destroying local markets. In July the World Trade Organisation in Geneva continued negotiations over new trade rules for agriculture, industrial goods and services. After seven years, it is high time that a resolution was reached on these issues. Damaging agricultural export subsidies could be abolished with immediate effect, but for that to happen Germany’s Minister of Agriculture Seehofer, for instance, must be sure that his support earns him more votes in the 2009 election than he loses from the agricultural lobby.

Zusammenfassung

Die Gefahr einer neuen und dieses Mal globalen Ernährungs-krise gelangte erst wieder in die Schlagzeilen, als in afrikanischen und asiatischen Großstädten die Menschen auf die Straße gingen, um gegen die horrend gestiegenen Preise für Nahrungsmittel zu protestieren. Aber Hunger und Armut gibt es auch ohne Nahrungsmittelkrise, nur dass die rund 800 Millionen auf dem Lande lebenden Armen auf dieser Welt kein Gehör finden. Die Hungerrevolten haben mit Beginn dieses Jahres auch IWF und Weltbank aufhören lassen. Sie sehen in einer verstärkten Förderung der Landwirtschaft die Lösung. Erinnern sich die Agrarpolitiker, dass, wenn der Hunger bekämpft werden soll, Landwirtschaft und Infrastruktur ausgebaut werden müssen? Die Weichen für eine nachhaltige Landwirtschaft müssen jetzt gestellt werden, damit die Armen auf dem Lande nicht nur endlich sich selbst, sondern auch die ständig wachsende Zahl von Stadtbewohnern ernähren können.

Resumen

El peligro de una nueva crisis alimentaria – esta vez de alcance mundial – únicamente fue mencionado en los titulares cuando la gente de las grandes ciudades de África y Asia salió a las calles a protestar contra los enormes aumentos en los precios de los alimentos. Pero el hambre y la pobreza existen también incluso sin crisis alimentaria, sólo que nadie presta atención a los alrededor de 800 millones de pobres que viven en las zonas rurales de este mundo. Las revueltas causadas por el hambre también han atraído la atención del Banco Mundial y del FMI a principios de este año. Ambas instituciones abogan por una solución basada en un mayor fomento de la agricultura. ¿Acaso los políticos agrarios tienen en cuenta que la lucha contra el hambre requiere una expansión de la agricultura y la infraestructura respectiva? Es necesario establecer ahora las bases y las pautas para una agricultura sostenible, de modo que los pobres de las zonas rurales puedan por fin no sólo alimentarse a sí mismos, sino también a la población urbana en constante crecimiento.