

Food Policies Leave People Hungry

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Last week the U.N. convened world leaders in Rome to hammer out solutions to the food crisis.

Once again policy leaders are forgetting that food is about people. Over the past few months, 30 countries have been wracked by food riots. The government of Haiti has been toppled. Rice reserves in the Philippines are now under armed guard.

And U.S. corporate agribusinesses have a starring role in this disaster. Farmers in poor countries have gone broke by the millions because they can't compete with the artificially low prices of U.S. food imports.

Take Mexico, for example. Under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the U.S. demanded that Mexico open up its markets to cheap U.S. corn. Since NAFTA took effect, U.S. corn exports to Mexico have tripled, flooding the Mexican market and causing domestic corn prices to drop by more than 70 percent. As a result, most of the country's 15 million corn farmers have gone from being poor — but getting by — to watching their children go hungry. Mexican President Felipe Calderon explains the food crisis in his country as a direct outcome of U.S. food policy.

The same story is repeated in nearly every country where the food crisis is raging. Millions of rural families from Colombia to Cameroon have been forced to go from growing their own food to buying imported staple items, putting them at the mercy of global markets. In the past year, the cost of basics like corn, rice and wheat has doubled and tripled. Farming families whose livelihoods were destroyed by U.S. agribusiness can no longer afford to buy food from these same companies.

That injustice — not any absolute “food shortage” — is at the heart of today's crisis.

Meanwhile, U.S. agribusiness is making a killing. Last month Cargill announced that its third-quarter profits were up 86 percent. They've already raked in over \$1 billion this year, in about the same amount of time that another 100 million people were pushed into extreme poverty (surviving on less than \$1 a day) because of rising food costs.

Clearly, our global food system is broken. So what would fix it?

It seems that small-holder, sustainable agriculture — precisely the type of farming that's been devastated by agribusiness — has the best potential to resolve the global food crisis. That, in a nutshell, is the conclusion of a four-year United Nations study by 400 experts on agriculture and development released in April.

But if local, sustainable agriculture is the way to go, there's another, overlooked dimension to solving the food crisis: The majority of the world's small-scale farmers are women. In the poorest countries, where the food crisis is at its worst, women grow and produce 80 percent of all food.

That means that policies aiming to resolve the food crisis need to also weed out the widespread discrimination that bars women farmers from owning land and from accessing credit, seeds, tools and training. Agricultural subsidies were originally conceived to protect small-scale farmers from poverty. We still need to do that — and on a global scale. Today, subsidies can play a positive role in building the capacity of women farmers to grow food sustainably.

It's high time to put the human rights and productive capacity of small farmers at the center of agriculture policy. The Rome summit presented us with an opportunity to rethink food policy. Unfortunately the outcome continues the same misguided policies of free trade instead of investing in local food production. It's time to realize that the world's small farmers and especially women — are our best hope for feeding people and protecting the planet.

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