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The New Hunger

Current debates about the food crisis and the role of agriculture in the countries of the South offer a great chance for asserting a social and environmentally sustainable agricultural policy. However, there is also a great danger that the agricultural industry, which is capitalist, export-oriented, industrial and controlled by just a few large corporations, will succeed in extensively transforming and subjugating agriculture under its control and that of capitalist terms of exploitation. The revival of the “Green Revolution”, which failed in Africa in the 1990s, is also a great danger. One of the primary reasons for its failure at that time was the decline in public funds and development aid for the agricultural sector, which was no longer considered recipient of a poverty oriented growth strategy. Agricultural aid concentrated on export products such as coffee and cocoa, and later cut flowers and fruit and other products with supposed “location advantage”. Food imports from the USA and the EU reduced by subsidies and forced tariff reductions on import products drove many local agricultural businesses into bankruptcy and seemed to make them superfluous. Thus many African countries quickly ended up in a vicious circle: aid for the agricultural sector and the cultivation of foodstuffs for the local population decreased rapidly and sinking world market prices, also due to many international agreements such as the International Coffee Agreements expiring, reduced income. The example of Kenya illustrates this undesirable trend: Until the 1980s, Kenya, as many other countries, was able to provide for itself with staple foods; now Kenya imports 80 % of its food.

In July 2004, former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan appealed to the international community to create an African Green Revolution, “a revolution that is long overdue, a revolution that will help the continent in its quest for dignity and peace “. In September, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, together with the Rockefeller Foundation, founded an “Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa” and Jacques Diouf, head of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, also called for their

support. Focus of this “Revolution” is PASS, the “Program for Africa’s Seed Systems”, a programme for national and international agricultural research centres to breed at least 200 new seed varieties within the next five years. “The promising possibilities of biotechnology” are to be used in cooperation with agricultural multinational corporations such as Monsanto.

The appeal of the UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon in April 2008 shows how great is the danger that the present food crisis will again be used to distribute genetically modified seeds and food (GMOs). As did his predecessor, Ban Ki Moon propagates the use of genetically modified seeds as it allegedly produces higher yields. In this way the UN is acting an agent of agricultural corporations pursuing the goal of the widest possible distribution of GMOs.

The introduction of GMOs was already controversial during the food crisis of 2002 in southern Africa. At the time the USA wanted to deliver 500 000 tons of maize to Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The governments refused to accept the gift as it also included genetically modified maize. The pressure from the World Bank and the IWF on Malawi to sell its large reserves of maize in order to settle its debts was absolutely insidious. When the crisis was already emerging in 2001, Malawi had built up the maize stocks to cushion the food crisis. As they do today, speculators bought up supplies cheaply and later sold them at high prices. The former director of the IMF and current President of the Federal Republic, Horst Köhler, and the World Bank at the time blamed each other for the compulsory auctions in Malawi¹. During the crisis, the IWF and the World Bank demanded that the Malawian government cut all subsidies for food and agriculture as a condition for

1 Hoering, U. Agrar-Kolonialismus, eine andere Landwirtschaft ist möglich. (Hamburg, VSA, 2007) p.76: „US food aid is used to assert the adoption of biotech plants worldwide, broaden market access and the control by transnationals and weaken small farmers’ production, meaning that the food insecurity on the continent is weakened.”

development and relief programmes. The argument being that the market should determine the price of food. What would be the reaction in Germany today, were the president to demand that all subsidies were cut?

The success of the “genetic crusade” in Africa is illustrated by the example of cotton: after Burkina Faso, Mali is the largest cotton producer in Africa and began a five year programme to introduce GMOs. Monsanto, Syngenta, and USAID are in charge. “Transgenic crops are becoming acceptable in Africa. I think the battle has been won.”², said Pedro Sanchez, former chairperson of the UN Hunger Task Force and GMO lobbyist.

Gene lobbyists have also been very successful in South Africa. Importers of genetically modified wheat no longer need a special license for transgenic products that have been approved in the USA. “In country after country, we see laws and policies being put in place to facilitate the entry of GM crops, even as governments proclaim their concern for biosafety and adherence to the Protocol. People in Latin America call these laws ‘Monsanto Laws’.” (Johnson Ekpere, Professor for Biotechnology)³

The arguments for the alleged advantages of genetically-modified agricultural products are easy to refute. GM food is not cheaper; on the contrary, genetically modified maize is one third more expensive than conventional maize in the USA. For some GM plants, the use of agricultural chemicals has to be increased because pests are resistant. The yield is often not higher either. Researchers at the Office of Technology Assessment of the German Parliament (TAB) concluded that a benefit of GMOs cannot be proven. The use of GMOs is therefore primarily about dominating the food market; a former employee at Monsanto once disclosed: “Monsanto wants world domination over all food”. Back in the 1970s Henry Kissinger had already declared: “Control oil and you control nations; control food and you control people.”

Today only 5 corporations control 90 percent of the world grain market. The two market leaders, Cargill and ADM, alone control 65 percent of worldwide trade. Now global supermarket chains such as Carrefour, Metro, Wal-Mart, Aldi and Tesco are likewise rushing onto the food market, and are eliminating ever more small middlemen and retailers and thus also putting

pressure on producers to receive less and less for their products. In India there is already a great wave of protest against this market dominance, because 10 million retailers and middlemen could lose their jobs due to the supermarket chains.

The remake of the so-called Green Revolution is a real threat for the informal seed sector of small farmers who until now covered 80-90 percent of worldwide demand. They exchange seeds or purchase it cheaply at informal seed markets. This seed distribution system, which is cheap and accessible to all, is to be replaced by a formal seed distribution system that is controlled by multinational corporations. The farmers are thus made dependent on industrial seeds, which also helps spread genetically modified seeds.

The call for a “Green Revolution in Africa” is an attempt to incorporate into the terms of exploitation of the capitalist world market those parts of Africa’s agriculture that have not yet been totally integrated in the global value added chain.

Food for the tank – a crime against humanity

Biofuels are now also denounced in connection with the current food crisis. They may not be responsible alone for the rate of inflation, but it is estimated that 30 to 70 percent of the price increases of food can be attributed to their intensified cultivation and the use of plants in the production of fuel.

Despite growing criticism of the promotion of biofuels on behalf of the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Energy Agencies and in particular numerous development aid organisations as well as many from civilian society in the South, the EU is still sticking to its strategy of further developing biofuels. However, the subsidies are to expire and the environment ministers will in future only permit agricultural fuels for which no rainforest is cleared. In the future biofuel is to be won from sewage sludge or other organic waste instead of maize or beet in order to prevent food shortage and ensuing higher food prices. The EU Commission also wants to allow only those fuels that emit at least 35 % less CO₂ than fossil fuels from production to consumption.

Whether these requirements can be effectively monitored and implemented is very doubtful. In February 2008, in their joint statement to a parliamentary hearing about the pros and cons of biomass, the three church relief organisations, Brot für die Welt, EED and Misericordia, emphasised that in many countries there is no effective, controllable and enforceable land use policy which could guarantee the observance of social and environmental standards. For the church relief agencies mixed

2 Ibid. p75. Pedro Sanchez, P. Norman E. Borlaug/World Food Prize International Symposium. The Green Revolution Redux: Can We Replicate the Single Greatest Period of Food Production in All Human History? The African Green Revolution Takes Off: A Progress Report. October 19-20, 2006 – Des Moines, Iowa <http://www.worldfoodprize.org/assets/symposium/2006/transcripts/Sanchez.pdf> (14.08.08)

3 Whither Biosafety? In these days of Monsanto Laws, hope for real biosafety lies at the grassroots <http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=9>, October 2005 (14.08.08)

cultivation, diversity and adapted landraces, not monocultures and genetically manipulated energy plants, have the greatest potential in the fight against poverty and hunger.

Massive resistance to cultivating biofuels comes in particular from representatives of civilian society in the countries of the South. They emphasise that the increased deforestation of rainforests, a structurally weak and intensively managed monoculture and growing water shortage are not the only consequences of a mounting export of biofuels, but that it above all entails the violent expulsion of small farmers and indigenous peoples from their land, which was once used for the cultivation of sugar cane and palm oil and is then instead used to produce biofuels. For these people the often violent expulsion represents an immense violation of human rights, which is committed particularly for one reason: the use of food for cars in other countries. This is why they demand an immediate end to the production of biofuels in their countries.

Biofuel is not environmental

So-called biofuel is not only criticised due to the shortage and rising prices of agricultural produce, but also for environmental reasons. Scientific studies have shown that alone as a result of the cultivation of maize, rapeseed or palm oil more greenhouse gases are emitted than are saved in the biofuel won from these plants. The production of biofuels can in fact drastically accelerate global warming. 400 times more carbon dioxide is produced due to clearance by fire in Indonesia than could be saved with the help of palm oil in the same area per year. Brazilian rainforest sacrificed to soy plantations sets free 300 times more CO₂ than can be saved by biofuel per year. And the production of ethanol by maize doubles the emission of greenhouse gases for 30 years. Experts are unanimous in saying that it is pointless sacrificing land for biofuel in order to slow down global warming. When taking into account the industrial cultivation of plants, fertilisation, production and transport, the environmental balance is all in all negative, says Greenpeace. Greenpeace demands not only a freeze in the biofuel quota, but above all measures which force the automobile industry to develop petrol saving, light and low-emission models.

The focus of development cooperation must be to secure and promote a socially and ecologically sustainable agriculture. In particular, this must include strengthening customary rights to land and water. In the course of privatisation and liberalisation, land was privatised that was traditionally community owned and the use of which was regulated between farmers on the one hand and nomads or livestock breeders on the other.

Weak social groups such as women, young people and livestock breeders were displaced from the land as a result of the increasing commercialisation of land ownership for industrial food production and bioenergy, for private game parks and other tourist facilities or as accumulation strategies for national elites. Some non-governmental development aid agencies rely on traditional customary law to restore legally protected access to land and other resources to these people. This could also prevent land robbery or the expulsion of people from their land by national elites and/or foreign corporations. In addition, growing speculation on land ownership would be stopped.

Speculation and hunger

The food crisis illustrates the connection between hunger, financial markets and speculation on the stock market. It is especially US and European pension funds that invest in raw materials. Besides oil, these include foodstuffs such as soy, wheat and maize. They may not directly buy these products, but purchase futures contracts that are sold shortly before the due date in order to buy new contracts with new terms.

In this way "they act like virtual hoarders," so Jeffrey Korzenik, chief investment strategist of Boston property manager Vitale Caturano & Co. on this stock exchange-hunger madness. Korzenik estimates that the virtual hoarding of large investors inflates prices on the raw materials markets. This price spiral could increase further, as can be seen from the constantly rising oil prices. According to estimates, only 120 billion dollars are needed to buy up the entire US grain harvest – a small sum for the speculators on the currency market where 3 trillion dollars are moved every day.

The global distribution of food by the world should no longer be permitted. Speculation on food is a crime and should be prohibited. The Indian government has recognised this and prohibited all future contracts on wheat, rice, a widely distributed variety of bean and herbs. This prohibition was recently further extended to include soybean oil, potatoes and (Indian) rubber. This should set an example worldwide. Whoever profits from hunger is partly responsible for the deaths of thousands of people.

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Ulrich Brand

Between Protection, Rights and Commercialisation

The Convention on Biological Diversity in the Process of Globalisation and the Opportunities for a Democratic Politics of Biodiversity

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The accelerated disappearance of species worldwide and the rise in the technological possibilities for the economic valorisation of plants and animals, particularly through gene and information technology, has led to resistance against these developments in the last two decades. A variety of different actors are engaged in this field, including non-state environmental organisations, organisations critical of globalisation, national, including state-level actors, and organisations operating internationally. Following the end of the Cold War the international diplomatic sphere has opened up to problems connected to the conservation of biodiversity. In this context the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) emerged.

From the 19th to 30th May 2008 the Ninth Member State Conference of the CBD will take place in Germany. Many actors from the education, environmental and development sectors, as well as academia, are most likely to accompany this event, making information on the many-faceted issues of this topic available in the public domain. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation aims to influence the debates through its educational work. The political handling of the problems of biodiversity has and continues to be an important element of the Foundation's commitments to political education and its work in other countries. In shaping opinions, many factors and connections have to be both recognised and considered, especially with respect to global processes.

Problems with gene technology are discussed time and again. The issues revolve around patent protection and other legal questions, as well as whether economic advantages should override people's quality of life. There is still too little discussion on the fundamental questions regarding the politics of technological developments and democratic decision-making regarding what technologies should be developed and how they should be used. The strategic aims of leading scientific-technological research institutes and corporations determine the political dynamics of research, for example in the area of gene or nanotechnology where it is not yet possible to foresee the effects on biotechnology. Decisions are not discussed publicly and it is merely the consequences of technology developments and how to deal with them that can currently be negotiated in the public domain.

For this reason this contribution by Dr Ulrich Brand is particularly important for our educational work, as he analyses the process of the CBD to date and considers options for more democratic biodiversity policy-making. He provides insights into the international negotiation processes, showing how the rules are made and what their goals are, and discusses whether and how these goals can be realised. If at all, democratic biodiversity policies play a very marginal role, as does the actual conservation of biological diversity. Ulrich Brand also draws attention to the considerable imbalances of power, for example in the role of the WTO.

This text provides background information on the complexities of this issue in order to enable a political engagement with the problems of biodiversity. The author stresses the options for democratic biodiversity policy-making, for example through transparency in the development of science and technology, through the disclosure of biopiracy practices and its responsible actors and through the identification of weaker actors and their interests.

(Foreword Evelin Wittich, Director Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation Berlin/Germany)