

Thought for food

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Food The News

Food production and its equitable distribution is the prime responsibility of the state and, thus, it should be dealt with locally. There cannot be a global solution to it

By Tahir Hasnain

Five years after the World Food Summit (1996), seven years after the agricultural agreements of the GATT (now WTO) Uruguay Round, and following two decades of the application of neoliberal policies by majority of the governments, the promises and commitments made to satisfy the food and nutritional needs of all are far from being fulfilled. On the contrary, the economic, agricultural and trade policies imposed by the World Bank, IMF and WTO, promoted by the transnational corporations, have widened the gap between the wealthy and poor countries and accentuated the unequal distribution of earnings within countries. They have worsened the conditions of food production and access to healthy and sufficient nutrition for the majority of the world's peoples, even in the so-called developed countries.

As a consequence, the most basic human right of all, the right to food and nutritional well-being, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is not guaranteed to the majority of the world's peoples.

In the era of commercial globalisation and trade liberalisation, it is now being widely argued that multilateral means towards food sovereignty are not feasible. The way we are moving from smaller, national economies, to larger, regional or global economies, this poses the gravest threat to the food

security and livelihoods of ordinary people in every country. Surprisingly, under the World Trade Organization (WTO) regime, market is going to ensure food security despite the fact that market itself runs on the concept of insecurity due to supply and demand rule.

Moreover, though, proponents of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the WTO promise that free trade means cheaper foods and food security, but unfortunately, the reality of trade liberalisation is quite the opposite. This is because the international trade has been based on comparative advantage which means a nation can enhance its efficiency in resource use, by producing and exporting commodities in which it is relatively efficient, and importing commodities in which it is relatively not so. In the area of food and agriculture, this search for comparative advantage is often at the cost of local food security and farmers' survival. The economic base of poor farmers in poor regions could be destroyed if grains which they are producing locally are imported from other countries. That will undermine local investment in agriculture and deprive rural people of their livelihood and will create the conditions for food dependency.

The other dilemma with trade liberalisation policies is that they make a preference for cash crops for export purposes. It poses diverse problems. Firstly, this means good agriculture land becomes diverted

from food crops to large-scale monocultures of cash crops. That is what is happening in Pakistan. Cash crops eliminated so many traditional crops as well as livestock due to intense farm mechanization — for example, replacement of local varieties due to hybrid maize, high yielding varieties of wheat and rice; and expansion of cotton, tobacco and sugarcane, etc. etc. Cash cropping has also resulted into massive use of agrochemicals (fertilizers, insecticides, weedicides, etc.) and has depleted natural resources such as water and soil. These chemical inputs are not only costly for poor farmers but the use of chemicals poisons humans and the environment.

Besides, the traditional use of uncultivated food plants has vanished due to monocropping — viewing unplanted plants as weeds — and extensive use of agrochemicals. Secondly, due to export oriented approach, food storage and distribution have become problematic for the poor states due to less dumping capacities and faulty governing systems. Now there is a debate that people are dying of hunger not due to food shortages but due to poor food distribution and export-oriented agricultural policies. It is believed that the food consumed by the rats and other pests in godowns every year is sometimes greater than the food actually needed by the deprived communities and it seems that this approach has actually benefited rats and other pests at the cost of deprived



Food sovereignty: Can it be defended?

peoples. Food is stored basically to control nations' food distribution and then export the surplus food to earn foreign exchange. However, in Pakistan, due to prevailing trade trend, the government, sometimes, exports good quality local produce to earn foreign exchange and then, at other point of time, imports inferior quality food to fulfill local requirements. Practically, this approach has resulted into inequitable food distribution, tremendous increase in food prices and restricted access to good quality and sufficient food. As always, the real beneficiaries are the centralised government,



of TNCs and end of sovereignty of the states.

Under the WTO agreement on Trade related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) the signatory countries are bound to give patenting rights (in the form of patents or under the sui generis system) on plant varieties, micro-organisms and biological processes. This means, for example, the plant breeders can acquire patent rights on crop varieties they produce in their laboratories and the farmers, instead of saving and growing own seed, will have to purchase seed on patentee's price every season. The defaulter will then be punished by the law.

In a country like Pakistan, it will pose two serious problems. Firstly the 'free access and exchange of seed,' the very foundation of biodiversity and farmers' livelihood, is threatened under this agreement. Farmers have this tradition to store and exchange seed and that is how small and medium farmers survive. With the introduction of patent rights, farmers will not be able to do so and may become dependent on patent holders. Secondly, it can be visualized that TNCs will only be the patent holders and will control all our natural resources including food. TNC's control over food will then lead to threaten country's food sovereignty and food security of its majority population. TNCs will develop remote-control GM seed technologies, such as terminator and traitor seeds, and food will then be used as a political weapon to further their vested interests.

Some suggestions

• Food sovereignty can only be achieved, defended and exercised through the democratic strengthening of states and the self-organisation, initiative and mobilization of society. It requires long-term pro-public state policies, an effective democratization of public poli-

cies, and the development of a solidarity-based social setting.

• As said earlier, food production and its equitable distribution is the prime responsibility of the state and, thus, it should be dealt locally. There cannot be a global solution to it.

• And, hence, food and agriculture should be kept out of WTO. Agriculture provides basic needs i.e. food, fiber and shelter, and it should primarily be for the subsistence of local communities. As a consequence, it should not be dealt as an export oriented sector.

• Pakistan is capable of producing its own food and could be capable of doing so in the future if we put together and follow our own:

1. policies made through wider consultations and really in the national interest without adversely affecting basic rights of the masses.

2. researched and improved technologies supporting our traditional and sustainable food production systems.

• Majority should not be left at the mercy of market forces. They should, in fact, be equitably involved in food production, distribution, marketing, pricing, etc.

• It is now a recognized fact that small farms yield better produce both in terms of quantity and quality. It is thus suggested that, for a sustainable food production and availability, land reforms are inevitable to encourage small farmers.

• Instead of dumping and destroying food, everyone should be encouraged to store required food for the family. This can provide equitable access of communities to food-stuffs across the country. We should also go against dumping practice elsewhere in the world.

• There should be no direct or indirect subsidies, or favored status for TNCs in the country's policies. Plus, TNCs should not be allowed to take part or influence our law making processes.

• The idea of corporate agri-

culture in Pakistan is in fact the conspiracy of an alliance among IMF/World Bank, TNCs, our elite class and feudal lords for their vested interests at the cost of food security and livelihoods of the ordinary people in the country. Corporate agriculture policies will lead to an economic colonisation of Pakistan by the outsiders. Feudal lords are very active behind this idea because it will not only save them from land reforms but will further strengthen their grip on rest of the land of small and medium farmers. The suggestion is that instead of corporate farming, which is unsustainable and has already failed in other parts of the world, we should carry out land reforms and through strengthening our genuine farmers we can achieve self sufficiency in food, better livelihood and prosperity in the communities, and competitiveness in the world market on a sustainable basis.

• The attempt to impose food model of the TNCs as the only viable, appropriate and correct model in a global world will not work. This is in fact food imperialism, which threatens the diversity of the peoples' food cultures and their national, cultural and ethnic identities.

• As demanded by the civil society organisations around the globe, the October 16th should be declared as World Food Sovereignty Day, known until now as World Food Day.

• In the World Food Summit: Five Years Later (WFS:5yL), as planned from June 10 to 13 of this year, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) should fully assume its mandate and responsibility. It is time to rethink about the impact of world trade on food and evolve a new agenda for food security that promotes strong local food economies that are based on sustainability and self reliance. It must ensure stronger democratic decision-making at local levels involving marginalised groups.

ded under the WTO?

elite class including feudal lords, middleman and companies who constitute a tiny fraction of the society.

Besides, the food that we eventually get is nutritionally of poor quality due to the use of high yielding crop varieties and ever more agrochemicals. Moreover, it has encouraged transnational companies (TNCs) to do their immoral business. Now, the way these companies are creating room for genetically modified (GM) food all over the world, it seems that besides quality issue, peoples will be forced to eat culturally unaccepted food. This will perhaps be the beginning of supremacy