
Forests, agrofuels and policies of hunger

World hunger is a source of ever greater concern for those who have yet to suffer from it, and ever greater suffering for those who already do – and who are growing in numbers year after year. Yet the policies being formulated in the global power centres not only do little to solve the problem of hunger, but actually tend to even further exacerbate it.

A clear example of this point is the promotion of agrofuels. Under the guise of environmental protection (through the replacement of climate change-provoking fossil fuels) and the green label of “bio” fuels, millions of hectares of land are being turned over to the production of food... for automobiles.

This policy has severe impacts on the South. On the one hand, basic food crops like corn are no longer being raised to feed humans, but instead to produce ethanol. On the other hand, lands that once produced food have been taken over by sugarcane or soybean monocultures to produce agrofuels. In both cases, the result is a dwindling supply of foodstuffs, leading to market speculation and soaring prices.

Of course, agrofuels are not exclusively (nor primarily) responsible for rising food prices. But they are clearly one more factor that contributes to the worsening of an already serious situation, that of growing hunger and malnutrition in the countries of the South.

Rising food prices have already led to public protests and rioting – triggered by despair – in many parts of the world, and have also spurred the organization of powerful movements working to promote food sovereignty.

However, there is another process linked to food production that remains relatively ignored, and needs to be incorporated into this struggle: the destruction of forests.

The expansion of agrofuel crops is taking place in two different settings: on agricultural lands and on forested lands. In the first case, food crops are being replaced by agrofuel crops. In the second, forests are being destroyed so that the land they once occupied can be used to grow crops for fuel production (oil palm, soybeans, sugarcane).

The second case – the destruction of forests – is rarely perceived as an impact on food security and food sovereignty, for the simple reason that few people are aware of the food-producing capacity of forests. Those who are aware of this capacity are the millions of human beings who live in the forests, and for whom the forests provide most of their means of survival, the chief of which is food. Thus every hectare of forest that disappears means taking the food from the mouths of these peoples, whether the land is being taken over to produce agrofuel crops or for any other activity that causes the destruction of forests (tree plantations for pulp production, commercial logging, hydroelectric dams, shrimp farming, etc.). The result: hunger and malnutrition in communities that were once well nourished by the food provided by the forests.

Hunger – whether in the forests, the countryside or the city – is not an inevitable phenomenon. Rather, it is the result of the same policies and economic interests that are at the root of other crises, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, the disappearance and contamination of water supplies, the destruction of soils, and many others. At the same time, all of these crises further exacerbate the problem of the lack of access to food among the poorest and most vulnerable.

The misnomered “development” policies promoted for decades by international institutions like the World Bank, IMF, FAO, WTO and others have more than amply proven to be socially and environmentally disastrous. The only thing that they have succeeded in “developing” are the profits of large transnational corporations, at the expense of human hunger and environmental destruction. The model they have imposed on us is crumbling. It is time for them to admit it, and to make room for the proposals of social movements.