
MANIFESTO

Introduction: A new coalition

The World Food Assembly is a coalition of independent groups of people from all parts of the world, united in the conviction that radical changes are needed if we are to meet our human responsibility of ensuring food for all.

This coalition presently spans more than 200 organizations in 60 countries and represents a wide spectrum of people's movements. We are small farmers, rural women, development workers, peasants, environmentalists, trade unionists, researchers, priests, journalists, nutritionists, and people working in the fields of appropriate technology, human rights and alternative lifestyles. In coming together to make common cause on what we regard as the fundamental moral issues of food and justice, we believe our coalition can be an important force for change. Indeed, the WFA network can be said to represent directly the interests of more people in more countries than any other organization in the fields of food and agriculture.

The World Food Assembly has arisen as a challenge to the hunger and distress which our government institutions and commercial systems continue to inflict on countless millions of people. It is a challenge made urgent by the weight of evidence that present policies are actually undermining the capacity of people and the land to produce food in the future. In response to worsening famines in Africa in 1984, public opinion in many countries demonstrated its sense of outrage that such extremes of human suffering should recur 10 years after the governments of the world pledged all their efforts to eradicate hunger from the world.

Our governments and the international aid establishment have had their chance. Yet today more people are hungry, more rural families continue to be forced off their land, and every day more food-growing land is being destroyed or expropriated for other uses. The time has come for us to insist on the more just and sustainable alternatives which are by now well-known and in many cases proven.

Our primary task, therefore, is to mobilize mutual support among all like-minded people and groups, firstly to strengthen the hundreds of initiatives already being pursued to help people gain control of their own lives, and then to extend our influence beyond the local level of action. In this way we shall demonstrate that more equitable, human-scale paths of development are not only viable, but, more than that, a necessary precondition for any future worth having.

Between us, we have all the moral, intellectual and material resources needed to pursue a sane alternative path — and at the same time to challenge the power structures and conventional models of development which deny people their right of access to food. We are committed to the basic principle of development from within — that is to say, self-motivated growth by people and communities in accordance with their own and others' needs and with a sustainable use of the earth's resources. It is our collective intent to overcome any obstacles that block this path.

The real roots of hunger

One person out of every seven or eight in the world today is condemned to a half-life of hunger or chronic malnutrition. That means at least 600 million people pushed out to the very margins of survival: many more than 10 years ago, despite the disappearance from the statistics of all those who have died from hunger-related causes in that time. Every day some 20,000 children die in this way, and every day another 20,000 or more come forward to take their place in the ranks of the hungry.

For the victims it means nothing that the world currently produces more than enough food to sustain the entire population of our planet. It means nothing, because most of that hypothetical sufficiency is swallowed up by misuse, waste or over-consumption in the rich countries. And all our farm systems, both in the North and the South, are increasingly plugged into a global food auction where the poor can never hope to compete.

The rising toll of hunger over the past decade is variously attributed to the effects of climate, over-population, natural disasters, insufficient foreign aid and many other factors, according to the standpoint of those making the analysis. Whatever validity they have, most of these arguments are deployed in a way that effectively masks the real issues. Hunger, in fact, is not confined to poor countries; it is also recognized in some rich nations, where the factors cited above are hardly an issue. So the root causes must lie elsewhere.

Invariably, hunger strikes in the shadow of poverty, wherever people are excluded from access to the resources of their environment, from other essential means of livelihood or from an adequate say in the decisions that affect their lives. And invariably, too, it is women, children and old people who suffer most. Hunger, therefore, is rooted in political decisions which constitute a violation of the most basic human right: the right to feed oneself.

For most countries of the South, it is not that their land or other natural resources are too meager to feed the people; it is, rather, that their governments choose (or are constrained) to pursue only those development strategies which ensure a continued monopoly of wealth and power by the elite, at the expense of the majority.

Debt, Dependency and Aid

In pursuit of the mirage of high-speed economic development, Third World governments have been encouraged, especially by the Northern banking system and government agencies, to take land away from the subsistence sector in order to promote agricultural exports. Originally this was intended to finance their industrial growth, but now, increasingly, exports do little more than pay the interest on their foreign

debts. Land for food becomes land for "growing" hard currency, which in turn quickly filters back to the treasuries of the North. By chasing a rate of growth they could not sustain, developing countries have been driven deeper into debt and dependency. Their economies have been distorted by attempts to integrate them in global markets governed by the industrial nations of the North. The expropriation of their resources and the destruction of their natural environments proceed apace.

Dependency creates a vicious circle. Control of the land — already held by a small minority in most countries of the South — becomes still more concentrated as the large-scale production of export crops gains momentum. Faced with a rising tide of cheap food imports, domestic production stagnates. More and more peasants find themselves unable to make a living and are forced off their land to swell the ranks of the urban poor. The consequent failure to increase food production, combined with swelling demand in the cities, is then taken by governments to justify more imports — and more debt.

Some donors, recognizing the failure of past policies, as evidenced by the continuing crisis in Africa, have recently begun to give more attention to peasant farmers and programmes for local food production. There is a danger, however, that production incentives may benefit middlemen more than the farmers and may also help agribusiness to extend its hold in the small-farm sector, while food price rises are frequently disastrous for low-income city-dwellers. These new aid initiatives therefore need to be carefully monitored to ensure that they work for the benefit of the people as a whole.

In the meantime, much so-called development aid remains inappropriate, inequitable and environmentally-damaging. And because of the huge interest charges on outstanding loans, we have now reached the monstrous illogicality of wealth being transferred from the poor to the rich. For the privilege of keeping our morally bankrupt system afloat, the Third World in 1983 had to pay back to the rich countries more than they received in loans and grants combined.

People who receive aid are commonly termed beneficiaries. The system does not admit that many are, in fact, victims of aid. Women are perhaps the most glaring example of this. In many parts of the South, women are the principal food producers — yet the UN World Food Council reports that in the period 1974-82, only one-thousandth part of all UN resources were allocated to programmes for rural women. And as in the case of women, aid programmes have contributed to victimizing indigenous peoples, uprooting them by force from their land and destroying their livelihood and culture in the name of economic development. Protection of the rights of indigenous groups and other minorities must be given much higher priority by donors in order to counteract this negative effect.

The Rural Exodus

Pressures resulting from the rapid, unplanned growth of Third World cities — which are expected to swell by an extra 1,000 million people in the next fifteen years — make the food problems of many countries more intractable year by year. And a large proportion of these additional city-dwellers will be refugees from the countryside. In many rural areas, as much as one-third of the population is already landless. Appropriate policies for land redistribution and rural employment could therefore appreciably reduce the rate of urban

migration. Some of the measures required are: development of small rural industries providing inputs or processing for the farm sector; a pricing policy and market organization for basic foods; access to credit for peasant producers; the development of appropriate technology; and access to goods and services enabling rural people to improve their living conditions.

At the same time a range of measures is required — varying according to the circumstances in each country — to meet the needs of the urban poor. Among other things, Third World governments must strive to reduce their excessive dependence on food imports for feeding the cities — a dependence which cannot be sustainable. For while the urban infrastructure may offer some protection against mass famine on the scale seen in rural areas, hunger in the cities will become ever more acute if the exodus from the countryside continues unabated.

In Asia and Latin America, the record shows that where farm modernisation has advanced farthest, landlessness, rural poverty and hunger have increased hand in hand with spectacular gains in overall agricultural output. Parts of Africa, now in the first throes of the Green Revolution, may be destined to follow suit.

Distortions in the North

In the affluent societies of the Northern hemisphere, meanwhile, hunger and poverty have once again been recognized as a significant problem. Underdevelopment remains endemic in several countries of the European periphery, while in the United States the chairman of a President's Task Force acknowledged in 1984 that hunger was "a real and significant problem throughout the nation". Current trends also show that a large proportion of family farmers in the US will be forced out of business within the next decade.

Agricultural and food systems in the North pay scant regard to the nutritional needs of their own people and even less to conservation of the agricultural resource base or the legitimate food interests of people in other countries. The Common Agricultural Policy of the European Community, for example, has resulted in massive overproduction of certain food crops, burdening the world market with surpluses which have severely disrupted the production and trade of Third World countries, and in some cases, their consumption patterns. The Community's surplus production of sugar alone takes up an area of land equivalent to the whole of Trinidad and Tobago.

Powerful agribusiness lobbies exert heavy pressure on governments to swing farm policies in their favour — and oppose moves to give the public more accurate information on which to base their choice of diet. Together with commercial landowners and large-scale farmers, it is these corporations — controlling a major slice of the world's food trade — that are winning most of the battles. The losers are the small farmers, agricultural laborers and people buying food for their families, who have little choice but to take on trust the highly-processed products they find in the shops.

Northern agriculture is increasingly operated as the centre of a global food system, in some cases to ensure its import requirements but most importantly to permit the disposal of its surpluses as exports (grain, sugar, dairy products). Arriving in the Third World at subsidized prices, or even free in the form of food aid, these surpluses damage the recipient countries' prospects for food self-reliance, increase their dependency and undermine traditional systems of supply and demand. Moreover, such food exports are not infrequently used as a political or commercial weapon to further the strategic interests of Northern governments.

Biotechnology: threat or promise?

Food systems everywhere are on the verge of being transformed by dramatic advances in the field of biotechnology. Tissue culture and other forms of genetic engineering with plants and animals have already demonstrated their potential for enormous gains in productivity within the next few years.

While reserving judgment on the ethical issues involved, it is clear that the biotech revolution could contribute enormously to the eradication of hunger — but only if it is pursued with the object of meeting human needs and with proper accountability. At present, in the absence of action by governments to enforce any adequate controls, the dangers greatly outweigh the opportunities. Biotechnology will rapidly devalue the role of agriculture in food production and could ultimately make it redundant for many crops. Using bacteria to produce an identical chemical equivalent of crops such as cacao, sugarcane and tobacco, production could suddenly be switched from plantations in the South to factories in the North. If not regulated, research and development in biotechnology will be dictated mainly by profitability, i.e., the requirements of the best-paying customers. If this is the way it goes, the biotech revolution will successfully enrich a few, and impoverish many.

With few exceptions, hunger today is the consequence of policy choices by those who control resources at the local, national and international levels. And the concentration of power in the hands of small, interconnected elites makes it ever more logical and attractive, as well as easier, to adopt policies which have hunger as an inevitable but politically affordable by-product.

Putting down the people — and the people's response

Protests by those unable to feed themselves are met, in the North, with handouts and homilies; in the South, as often as not, by violent repression. In the North, demands by citizens' groups for change in the structure of farm and food systems evoke a smile, a nod and maybe an occasional committee to report on food labelling or the cruel practices of intensive husbandry. In the South, those who organize resistance and fight for land reform, political rights and social justice meet with imprisonment, torture, disappearance and death.

But the hungry are no longer remaining passive in the midst of oppression. In many parts of the South people are organizing themselves; they are working together against the repressive forces of landlords, corporations and/or governments, which would condemn them to an endless prospect of poverty.

Faced with institutionalized violence, many oppressed peoples in the South now despair of peaceful solutions to their problems. Within the national security model that prevails in these countries (often sustained and manipulated by the dominant powers of the North), military and police repression has bred a new form of slavery. And if violence from below breaks out anywhere, the entire population is victimized in order to stifle opposition.

The growth of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes in the South, and the economic and military support given to them by governments of the North, must be emphatically denounced. In their struggle for survival, peasants, rural workers and others seeking greater control over their own food resources must choose whatever form of resistance is appropriate to their case. Where popular movements have overthrown repressive regimes, distributed land to the poor and introduced "food first" policies, in countries such as Nicaragua,

international support is needed to defend these policies against internal or foreign subversion.

At the United Nations, governments talk blandly of the need for "political will" to overcome the scourge of hunger. Few are prepared to take their own medicine. In any case, almost by definition, where hunger exists that will is absent. The appeal to political will is a deception which encourages us to believe that the powers-that-be could wipe hunger off the map if they tried just a bit harder. The truth of the matter is that the powers-that-be, precisely because of their irresistible centralizing force, are themselves a very large part of the problem.

The more that power is amassed in any centre, the more those outside become disempowered and marginalized by it. For this very reason the key centres of the global agri-food system are incapable of responding to the real needs of the majority — indeed the rationale of the system has nothing at all to do with needs. If this dangerous obesity of government and international agencies and agribusiness corporations cannot be cured by decentralization and effective controls, the only hope lies in development of a countervailing social model of collective self-reliance among autonomous communities.

In recent times there has been an upsurge of social creativity among independent people's organizations, especially in the developing countries. It is clear from this that nearly all the components of such an alternative model are already available. One element lacking up to now has been a mechanism to take the process forward and to link these myriad micro-initiatives together into an effective, non-hierarchical network. The World Food Assembly is committed to providing a framework of this kind, within which our actions can be concentrated and directed into building sustainable futures for all.

The shape of essential reforms

From the foregoing analysis there emerge a number of clear priorities which would have to be recognized and adopted by the international community as the basis of any serious effort to meet the world's food needs. A few of the more far-sighted official agencies may endorse them, and that is to be welcomed, but in general these are not the priorities that governments choose to see; hence it is unlikely that they can provide the key to major reforms in the near or middle future. We nevertheless consider it important to address these areas of official policy, partly to encourage those moving in directions compatible with our own, and partly because — whether good or bad — official policies largely determine the context for all other initiatives.

Food policies in the South

Developing country governments need to adopt national policies of food autonomy, in full consultation with peasant associations and other groups representing the urban and rural poor. These policies must provide for a reorientation of farm finance, prices and other incentives to revitalize rural communities and encourage domestic foodcrop production. While it is true that the vested interests of many Third World governments may make them deaf to such proposals, some can be expected to respond more positively. In certain cases, disinterested help from international agencies and their Northern partners may have a valuable role. Many countries of the South still desperately need agrarian reforms to achieve a just and more efficient distribution of land and food production assets. More generally, the majority of governments need to

reshape their development priorities in order to discriminate positively in favour of the poor.

Food policies in the North

Governments must evolve new agricultural strategies geared to their peoples' real nutritional needs, a healthy rural economy keeping small and family farmers on the land, and sustainable farm practices to protect the environment. This calls for the introduction of appropriate incentives for working farmers; improvement of the quality, variety and genetic diversity of foods produced, rather than simply the quantity; limits on the size of individual landholdings, as part of a more general agrarian reform; regulation of agri-food corporations, which can manipulate market demand without any liability for consequent social costs; better agricultural terms of trade for indigenous Third World producers, where income from export crops is used to benefit the rural population as a whole; credit to help establish alternative farming methods; and the provision of appropriate education and training for those who work the land.

The debt trap

Third World governments trapped by heavy chains of debt and unable or unwilling to break free must insist upon loan and repayment conditions which protect the basic rights of the poor majority of their people. They should concert their resistance to austerity programmes, such as those imposed by the International Monetary Fund, which blatantly contravene these rights. Northern governments and financial institutions must agree to write off debts which can only realistically be repaid at the expense of human lives.

Development aid

Official development assistance channelled through Third World governments has been shown usually to entrench, rather than redress, the existing disparities of wealth in recipient countries. To overcome this, donor governments and international agencies must seek ways (a) to concentrate their resources as far as possible in those countries showing a real will to tackle the structural causes of poverty, and (b) to channel a higher proportion of their funds directly to projects or to people's organizations working at first hand with the intended beneficiaries. Local knowledge, traditions and experience — and especially those of rural women — must be fundamental factors in any policies for food and agricultural development. Food aid donors must also give greater attention to new and more effective ways of using food aid funds.

Research & Technology

Governments must act to dismantle the near-monopoly of food technologies and research by transnational corporations and some international agencies. Choices in research and technological development are now mostly determined by considerations of short-term profit and/or production, regardless of the fact that many of these interventions actually jeopardise the longer-term food supply. As part of this process, resources and knowledge which should be in the public domain are being privatized, patented and sold for profit. Governments separately and collectively must take decisive action to direct future research towards appropriate and sustainable farming methods.

Transnational Agribusiness

To curb the exploitation of Third World resources, markets

and people, stringent measures must be introduced to regulate international agri-business, which now wields enormous power through its control of genetic resources, farm inputs, trade in raw materials, food processing and marketing. Without such action, many poorer countries will be forced into selling more of their birthright for a bowl of soup.



Shosuke Takeuchi

bananas for export: a clear case of profit before people

Every one of these actions is vital, if the established international system is to show itself capable of attacking the real roots of hunger. Members of the World Food Assembly intend to exert sustained pressure on these and related matters, to challenge the power structures that stand in the way of change, and to raise public awareness of the issues at stake. For the reasons set out at the beginning of this chapter, however, our first objective will be the development of alternative systems which have in common their commitment to autocentric development, sustainable farming methods, human-scale institutions and the people's right to feed themselves.

Our Programme

We, the participants in the World Food Assembly, commit ourselves to building a strong international coalition of people's movements in order to reinforce our own efforts and to exert pressure for change in world food policies. In particular, we undertake:

in all countries to support peasants and small farmers, women's groups, food industry workers, consumers' associations and other people's groups in their struggle to obtain full participation in all the decisions that affect food policy and their right to food — this being dependent upon their access to land, technology, employment and civil and political liberties;

in the South to work wherever appropriate for the adoption of "food first" policies, giving precedence to the needs of the poor rather than the large-scale production of crops for export;

in the North to campaign for reform of agricultural and food systems, and development assistance policies, one primary aim being to end the exploitation of Third World people and resources and thus to promote the right of people in the South to feed themselves;

in the North and South to press for an equitable distribution of land and rural resources, along with other measures to generate investment and employment in the countryside, so that those without land have an alternative to migration to the cities;

internationally to campaign for changes in the policies of

development agencies, in order to harmonize their interventions (or minimize their conflict) with grassroots initiatives against hunger and poverty.

With these ends in view, member agencies of the WFA network are already engaged in numerous cooperative projects and campaigns. The following examples illustrate the range of these initiatives, on which the WFA will aim to build. They include: exchange visits between peasants and artisans from different countries of Asia and Africa, permitting an interchange of techniques and know-how among equals and creating new bonds of trust and solidarity; campaigns for food aid reform and "for people's right to feed themselves", conducted by a consortium of European non-governmental development agencies; programmes in Europe and North America to engage farmers in a continuing dialogue on non-exploitative patterns of agricultural development for themselves, their own communities and their counterparts in the South; new efforts by human rights and development workers to find practical ways of enforcing the universal right to food; action by global networks of concerned citizens' groups demanding regulation of the use and marketing of baby foods, medicines, pesticides and genetic resources; and interventions by development groups in the South to defend peasants' land and legal rights, along with technical and organizational support for small farmers.

A Manifold Path

The alternative path towards sustainable development which we propose is not a one-track strategy, nor is it an economic or social "model", implying a fixed framework of behaviour. The alternative path rejoices in human diversity and does not attempt to subsume it in aggregates or averages — the fatal error of so much macro-economic development planning. This path is each person's and each community's course towards a socially just and sustainable future. All share the same vision and purpose, but since each one begins from a different starting point, they must follow, in reality, a thousand different paths.

To give substance to the alternatives which our network stands for, and to strengthen the bonds of solidarity between us, the World Food Assembly has adopted the following proposals for action. As resources permit, these proposals will form the basis of our future work programme.

It is thus resolved:

1. THAT an international food action network be organized to investigate violations of the right to food, to draw such violations to the attention of world opinion and to sue for redress; and that this network should build up an alternative information base, bearing in mind that while the right to food is established in international law it has not been backed by an effective non-governmental platform for information and action;

2. THAT WFA member groups join in a united campaign to expose the gaps between the rhetoric and the reality of "aid", including food aid, in order to demand greater accountability and to highlight the adverse social effects of much so-called foreign assistance; at the same time, however, to stress the positive efforts and achievements of some agencies, whether independent or at the official level;

3. THAT a specific campaign be mounted worldwide to oppose the austerity programmes imposed on Third World governments by the International Monetary Fund, which inflict added hardship on the poor while leaving military and other non-essential budgets largely intact;

4. THAT the WFA will exert sustained pressure for agrarian and food reforms in the North, which are essential if agriculture in the advanced countries is to respond to the

social objectives of sustainability;

5. THAT local and regional levels of information-exchange be established between grassroots organizations (producer and consumer groups, peasant and indigenous communities, women's groups, etc.) and supporting non-government development agencies; that encouragement also be given to the exchange of practical techniques and food products in the South, both within countries and between neighboring states, and to the strengthening of relations between grassroots groups of North and South; and furthermore that Northern development groups working in the South should operate wherever possible through local organizations genuinely representative of the people;

6. THAT non-governmental agencies active on food and development questions will actively seek to extend their alliances with environmental, peace and women's groups, and others — including, where appropriate, like-minded governments and international agencies — in order to forge a united front on important issues;

7. THAT an index be compiled of independent organizations, North and South, active in the food field, to be made available to network members needing information on appropriate partners — a basic tool for developing closer cooperation and trust;

8. THAT the special needs of women and children must be addressed explicitly in any alternative food strategies, in order to enable women to assert their rights and to begin to overcome the appalling scourge of hunger and death among children;

9. THAT an international biotechnology network be established by grassroots workers, non-government groups and like-minded workers in the industry for the purposes of monitoring and information-exchange, in order to break down the information monopoly of corporations in the biotech field through independent research, legislative action and educational campaigns;

10. THAT independent groups engaged in food research use their influence to demand a reorientation of research priorities towards sustainable alternatives and to persuade governments to resist the privatization of the results of publicly-funded research;

11. THAT encouragement be given to food research and development based on (i) dialogue with small-scale producers, (ii) "environment-friendly" techniques, and (iii) minimal use of non-local agro-industrial products; and that steps be taken to strengthen documentation centers concerned with alternative food production systems;

12. THAT detailed consideration be given to publishing an annual Alternative World Food report, evaluating the world food situation and prospects as seen from the perspective of the poor.

This document was adopted as the WORLD FOOD ASSEMBLY MANIFESTO by those attending the Assembly in Rome. We declare our readiness to collaborate with other interested organizations, local, national or international, on the basis of the ideas and proposals for action set out above, and we call upon people's organizations throughout the world to join us in the struggle to shape our future so that all may eat.

(This manifesto was signed by 115 participants: 37 from Europe, 16 from North America, 26 from Latin America, 16 from Asia and the Pacific, 11 from Africa, and 9 from other countries. Signing for the Philippines were Eduardo C. Tadem of the UP Third World Studies Center and Mari Luz Tiongson of the Philippine Peasant Institute. About 48 observers also participated in the Assembly.)