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Volume 2, Number 6, June 2011

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association
Published monthly at www.wphna.org

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Editorial

The shape of wars to come



The French Revolution (left, and above) began with food riots. Violence in Ireland remained fuelled by memories of the 19th century famines (right)

Cite as: Anon. The shape of wars to come [Editorial]
World Nutrition June 2011, 2, 6, 247-253

This editorial touches on two of the commentaries we publish this month. The first, by Claudio Schuftan (1), shows that ‘market forces’ continue to create sudden and chaotic fluctuations in the cost and availability of food, and so are increasing food insecurity and undernutrition, most of all among children living in impoverished parts of the world. The second, a continuation of the ‘ultra-processing’ series by Carlos Monteiro (2), says that with nutrition we should think not just food but meals.

Lessons of history

Could food – or to be more precise, need or lack of food – be a cause of war? Such a question could only be asked by people whose own lives are securely comfortable, and who are unaware of history. It’s probably fair to say that most of us, as citizens and consumers as well as professionals, have become accustomed to thinking of food and nutrition in rather narrow ways. We generally see extreme forms of undernutrition – regular or constant hunger and starvation – as the suffering mostly of helpless as well as vulnerable and impoverished children. But adults suffer too, and some of the events arising from the sharply rising prices of staple foods in many parts of the world, in 2007-2008 and again last and this year, should remind us that hungry people are angry people, and may fight for their rights and their lives.

Those ignorant of history are condemned to repeat it. Every schoolchild taught recent European history knows that the French Revolution (see the pictures at left, above) was sparked by bread riots. Hence the legendary remark of the queen, Marie Antoinette: ‘Let them eat cake’. Bad harvests meant rising prices. These rose higher because of a *laissez-faire* national policy, much the same as what is now called ‘market forces’, that enabled speculators and profiteers to hoard grain and sell bread at ‘famine prices’. Thus ‘the country poor were desperate and restless with riot and banditry; the urban poor were doubly desperate as work ceased at the very moment that the cost of living soared’(3). The intellectuals and other revolutionaries gained an infuriated ragged army, without which any uprising would surely have been crushed.

The Irish famine of 1845-1852 did not cause a revolution, but it did cause implacable hatred among the Irish against their English rulers, and bloody revolts and guerrilla warfare in Ireland from then until recently (see the picture at right, above). The immediate cause of the famine was a catastrophic fungal disease of the one type of potato on which the impoverished population subsisted, in which over a million people died and over another million emigrated. The cause of the hatred, which also shaped anti-British politics within the US, was much the same as in France just over half a century previously. The English policy was to give no relief. This was because ‘most of the politicians and civil servants were in the grip of a set of moral convictions that allowed them to think that whatever they did would always somehow be overridden by the inscrutable will of the great Political Economist in

the sky'. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with 'the "natural" and commercial operation of the ... market' (4).

Sounds familiar? There are common factors in both examples. The ruling classes, first in France, then in England, believed that 'market forces', which in practice meant – and means – the controllers of manufacture, distribution and sale – in a word, capital – should and must not be checked or regulated. They regarded food as a commodity like any other. The political and economic policies of dominant nations are not now as red in tooth and claw as once they were (5), although since the 1980s systems of social protection, including public health capacity (6), have been ripped out of many countries, particularly those that are most vulnerable and impoverished. But with the second factor, we are back with the 18th and 19th century. Food is seen as a commodity, as is money, no different from clothes, cars or cosmetics.

History repeats itself



Map showing countries in which substantial food riots have occurred between 2008 and 2010. In 2011 rioting spread across most North African countries

But there is a difference. One difference is that when people have no money for goods, they can do without for some time, and maybe a long time. However, people cannot do without food for long. When they do, they starve, and when they are aware of the basic reasons for their hunger, they become enraged. In 2007 and 2008, the time of the first recent spikes in the price of staple foods, and then later, there were substantial riots in over 20 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as shown in the map above. These continue. Earlier this year, food riots in North Africa, in part a reaction against commodity speculators, were a feature of the uprisings against tyranny and corruption that led to the overthrow of the Egyptian and Tunisian governments, at the time of writing the probable overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, and severe disturbance in Algeria. Good riddance, we may think. But speculation in food is a global phenomenon, inevitable when food is

deracinated and treated as something with no life or significant context or origin, as nothing more than a commodity (7).

Another reason why food is not merely a commodity is that for primary producers who live on the land, and in particular family farmers, food is central to their ways of life. In the case of Vietnamese farmers, this has been movingly affirmed by the photographer Philip Jones Griffiths, who spent years covering the impact of the invasion of US and allied armies in the 1960s from the point of view of the Vietnamese people, including farmers. 'Rites and rituals gave meaning to their work far beyond simply providing food to eat. In the fields were buried one's ancestors whose spirit passed through the soil into the rice, so that eating it became the ritual by which one inherited one's ancestors' souls'. He added 'Nowadays, American rice has to be sent to Vietnam to feed those driven from the land. The people hate it, they try to sell it for pig food to get enough money to buy what Vietnamese rice is available' (8).

It is often said that when 'market forces' mean that farmers can no longer make a living, they and their families can choose to get other jobs. That's as maybe. But the impact of family farmers leaving or in effect being forced off their land, is very different from the impact of shifts from one type of urban job to another.

This has been forcefully explained by somebody in a position to know: James Goldsmith, who in mid-career was owner of a large food manufacturing company, and later in his life became a billionaire. He said: 'When as a result of change, jobs are lost in industry the fundamental balance of society is not altered... But loss of rural employment and migration from the countryside to the towns causes a fundamental and irreversible shift, to the destabilisation of rural society and to the growth of vast urban concentrations. In the urban slums congregate uprooted individuals whose families have been splintered, whose cultural traditions have been extinguished, and who have been reduced to dependence on welfare from the state. They form an alienated underclass... Throughout the world social breakdown in the mega-cities threatens the existence of free societies' (9). There is no going back. Further, when farms built on mountainous land, such as rice farms in Japan, are abandoned, the soil is quite soon washed away, leaving barren slopes. Currently one billion people live in slums and shantytowns. The number projected by UN Habitat for 2030 is two billion.

This gives a background to the commentary by Claudio Schuftan that we publish this month (1), in which he identifies food as a public good whose price and supply should not be controlled by 'the money markets'. It is certain that unless food – and also water – supplies are controlled in the public interest, subjected to regulation, and uncoupled from the 'boom and bust' of rampant capitalism, inequity and hunger will increase, and with these anger, riots – and worse. What are the prospects?

There is no serious doubt that we are in the midst of a global food price and availability crisis which is increasing inequity and poverty and which is likely to get worse. World Bank president Robert Zoellick reported in April that the price of maize (corn) rocketed by 74 per cent and of wheat by 69 per cent last year (a year in which rice prices remained stable), and that 44 million more people fell into poverty in the second half of last year because of rising food prices. World Bank officials said that a clampdown on commodity speculators was needed (10). Food prices reached a new historic peak in January this year. In May Jacques Diouf, director-general of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, stated that biofuels now consume over 100 million tonnes of grain a year that would otherwise have been used for food or feed (9). FAO stated that ‘efforts now need to be ramped up at all levels to strengthen the ability of poor farmers to withstand future shocks – natural disasters, market volatility, financial crises – and to boost agricultural productivity so that it contributes to long-term food and nutrition security (11). A new report by Oxfam predicts an overall doubling of food prices by 2030 (12).

Seeing what is in front of us

As long as the political and economic policies of the dominant nations, and the international organisations that they control, continue to identify food as a commodity and no more, bad is bound to become worse. The issue is not only price rises, it is also prices that rise and fall often precipitately, just as share prices and the value of currencies do, and for the same reasons.

It is ‘the market’ that is destroying the livelihoods and the lives of more and more hundreds of millions of people, and pushing as many and more closer to the edge of occasional or constant intolerable poverty. The events in North Africa earlier this year, which continue, are a warning that food riots are liable to become food rebellions, and then wars that are liable to erode and even sometimes destroy the fabric of many societies, and not necessarily only in the South.

Why don’t we see what is happening and what will happen? This is a question asked in similar contexts by two distinguished scientists. In his book *Collapse* (13), Jared Diamond tells the story of the Easter Islanders. It is known now that their colossal stone statues or *moai* weighing between 10 and 90 tonnes, began to be built when the island was wooded and fertile. When the last trees on the island, needed to provide rollers and ropes for the completed statues, were cut down, work ceased, leaving *moai* in various states of incompleteness in the central quarries. With no trees the island became semi-desert, there was no wood for strong boats, and the dwindling people degenerated into constant warfare and frequent cannibalism. ‘I have often asked myself’, says Jared Diamond: ‘What did the Easter Islander who cut down the last palm tree say while he was doing it? Like modern loggers, did he shout “Jobs, not trees”? Or: “Technology will solve our problems, never fear, we’ll find a substitute

for wood”? Or: “We don’t have proof that there aren’t palms somewhere else on Easter, we need more research”?”

In his book *The Future Eaters* (14), Tim Flannery tells a parallel story. When the Maori people first arrived around 1,000 years ago, New Zealand swarmed with *moa*, big and often vast flightless birds weighing between 20 and 250 kilograms. Within 400 years all *moa* species were extinct. Hundreds of cooking sites containing bones and remains of hundreds of thousands of *moa* have been found. The human population soared on cheap and abundant food. Once the *moa* were all devoured, a reduced population survived on smaller animals, root crops, and bracken fern, communities built fortresses commanded by ferocious warlords, and cannibalism was endemic, human flesh having become an essential source of protein. So the same question: Why didn’t the Maori conserve the *moa*? And perhaps there were similar responses. Something will turn up. We’ll always find good other sources of food. We could move to another land. The community is hungry now.

There is a difference between Easter Island and New Zealand in centuries gone by, and France and Ireland in more recent history, on the one hand, and on the other hand the current linked population, finance, climate, fuel, pollution, food and water crises. What we are confronted with now, is global. We have nowhere else to go.

What is to be done

Some light shines in, as shown in this month’s ‘ultra-processing’ commentary by Carlos Monteiro (2). Early this month, the US government abandoned its abstract Food Guide Pyramid in favour of a return to the symbol of a plate, mostly indicating food in the form of a meal. This change for the better, a reminder of meals as social and cultural realities, follows campaigning work by Association founder member Walter Willett, as well as that of Carlos. This may feel like a small thing in the face of food wars, but it’s a step in the right direction.

Changing what is wrong and preserving what is right, begins with a process of raised consciousness. There is a limit to what any professional group can do. There is also a limit to what any politicians and other policy-makers can do, unless pressed by informed, active and persistent professional and other civil society groups. Public health nutritionists, as a profession, can make a new start by insisting collectively that food is more than a commodity, with all this implies, and that nutrition security is a basic human right. In times gone by, wise rulers regulated and protected the food systems of their people, as a first duty, and also for enlightened self interest. To avoid food – and water – wars that could devastate the lives of many of our grandchildren and even children, the time to unite and act as professionals and citizens is now.

The editors

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Acknowledgement and request

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