Book Review:

Not Our Menu: False solutions to hunger and malnutrition (Right to Food and Nutrition Watch, issue 13)

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This article aims to summarize the 2021 Right to Food and Nutrition Watch report - Not Our Menu: False solutions to hunger and malnutrition. Covid-19 has clearly highlighted how fragile the current food systems are and how fast they can collapse when challenged. The book is split into four distinct chapters.

In the first one, Recine et al. (2021) critically look at the current discourse on food systems and how its direction is being hijacked by the private sector. The private sector is shifting the paradigm from what should be a natural right to nutrition to emphasis on the trade relationship between large economic entities, with individuals reduced to mere consumers. This financialised concept of the food system is being maintained via means such as public private partnerships championed as a part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With food sovereignty no longer a human right, and food being simply a commodity, food systems are no longer viewed as a public good or even an issue of public interest. The fact that the United Nations have now accepted this market-based narrative was also apparent during the preparations for the UN Food Systems Summit earlier this year. An example of the increasingly corporate-led malnutrition solutions promoted in the Summit are food fortification campaigns, which offer immense business opportunities to the private sector but leave consumers dependent on manufacturers' processed foods.

Apart from the financialization aspect, there are other issues with this approach. For example, there has recently been an ostensible focus on a more holistic approach encompassing sustainable nutrition as opposed to a previous reductionist focus on food security. However, the new paradigm effectively normalizes and legitimizes the market-based system and ignores the structural determinants of malnutrition, which have perpetuated the food injustices, and enabled the rich to become richer while the poor are getting poorer. This market-based agro-industrial food system is grounded in patriarchy and neo-colonialism, and ignores traditional knowledge, while being maintained by a professed scientific consensus, often relying on information provided by powerful institutions and people tainted by conflicts of interest. Its focus on technology and digitalization further excludes the already excluded poorest populations.

Recine et al. (2021) mention grass-roots solutions, which are emerging from the ranks of small-scale farmers and producers. These in their view need to be supported by the strengthening of national policies and institutions so that hunger and malnutrition are no longer seen as problems of individuals but rather as a consequence of policies and structural determinants. Another challenge is the corporate sector effectively hijacking the language

usually associated with social movements by misusing words such as: “human rights”, “agroecology”, or “gender equality”.

It is essential to rely on hard scientific evidence not tainted by conflict of interest. However, we must not ignore traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples and the voices of local communities. Diversity of knowledge and a balance of expertise is paramount. This was disregarded recently when the Science Group was created at the UN Food Systems Summit with the team consisting predominantly of white male researchers coming from or working in the Global North. Marginalised peasants’ and indigenous peoples’ right to food must be respected and protected. A holistic approach encompassing respect for human rights, food sovereignty, equity, social justice, and sustainability must be the new way forward (Recine et al., 2021).

The second chapter, titled “Aquaculture, financialization, and impacts on small-scale fishing communities,” is written by Carsten Pedersen and Yifang Tang (2021). After a brief walk through history, the authors demonstrate how the reach of aquaculture sped up intensely in the 1990’s. According to a FAO report (1998, cited in Pedersen and Tang), aquaculture production increased from 16.5 million tons in 1989 to 114.5 million tons around 19 years later, and by 2014 most of the fish supply for human intake was coming from aquaculture. The authors associate this growth with technological development, capital investment, and governmental and intergovernmental policy support, demonstrating the magnitude of interest for this activity among NGOs, academia, and the private sector.

The FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) maintain that aquaculture as the future of human food is causing no harm to the planet. Pedersen and Tang (2021) critically analyse three case studies to illustrate the current impact of aquaculture in India, Thailand, and Ecuador. They reveal that aquaculture is not as harmless as it has been portrayed and is, indeed, causing problems for poor communities, especially women and those whose income depends on wild-caught fish. According to the authors, India has seen a rise of economic and social inequality between local fisheries and non-fishers since the government put in place a policy allowing and supporting non-fishers and corporations to invest in shrimp farming. This policy has led to takeovers carried out by big corporations, leaving no land for the locals. Women have been suffering the most, as they had already been affected by malnutrition more than men. Thailand, boasting one of the biggest sites for breeding marine shellfish, is negatively impacted by problems such as ecosystem degradation and social and gender inequality. Ecuador - through its “legalization” of shrimp aquaculture offering tax free environment for investors – has effectively generated further social inequality and sped up the ecosystem degradation. As this kind of farming expands, local fishermen are gradually pushed out of the territory. To make matters worse, the authorities have allowed the shrimp farmers to carry guns, which has led to an increase in violence. Using these three examples, the authors demonstrate how aquaculture, as a very attractive business opportunity, has become increasingly centralized, harmful to the planet, and is aggravating the poverty of those who do not have power (Pedersen and Tang, 2021).

The third chapter is titled “Food Banks and Charity as a False Response to Hunger in the Wealthy but Unequal Countries.” Alison Cohen and her team (2021) have critically looked at the way that the Global North countries (such as the USA, Canada, and the UK) have dealt with the rising rates of food insecurity, mostly affecting marginalised communities, in the wake of the global COVID pandemic. In the UK for example, 83 non-affiliated food banks

saw an unprecedented 190% rise in need in between May 2020 and May 2021 (IFAN, 2020, cited in Cohen et al., 2021). In the USA, at least 80% of food banks supported more people during the pandemic than they did before (Himmelgreen and Heuer, 2021, cited in Cohen et al., 2021). Canada saw its food banks struggling to meet unprecedented demand (Harvey, 2020, cited in Cohen et al., 2021). The governments of the Global North have become increasingly reliant on this kind of food aid, which helps to alleviate only the immediate issue. However, the true causes that underlie food insecurity are not being addressed. The impact of the pandemic has further marginalised the already disadvantaged indigenous people, people of colour, the disabled, and the poor, rendering them even more vulnerable. According to Cohen et al. (2021): "We cannot continue to talk about food insecurity without talking about colonialism, poverty, racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and ableism." Underlying inequality, ignored in our capitalist society, becomes exacerbated and harder to ignore in times of crisis. In the USA, Canada, and the UK, food aid has also been increasingly tied to the corporate sector. Corporations benefit from a PR boost and tax breaks when providing food for the food banks. At the same time, they continue to overpay their executives and to exploit their workers – which again affects the indigenous people and people of colour in a disproportionate measure. Corporations therefore help to continue and preserve the flawed system, which leads to food insecurity. It is time to stop concentrating on band-aid charity solutions and instead start focusing on how to bring an end to the corporate culture of exploitation (Cohen et al., 2021).

In the fourth chapter "An Imperceptible growth: Healthy food and Transformative Solidarity", Macias Yela et al. (2021) ponder innovative solutions for food insecurity in Latin America, exacerbated by the pandemic. The entire world has been impacted by this global disaster, leading to an unprecedented exposure of the flaws and weaknesses of the capitalist system that we rely on when it comes to solutions for food security, healthcare, education, and income. Latin America, with high numbers of people living in poverty, has been especially affected. Yet, in the face of an ugly pandemic, food insecurity is still not seen as deserving more attention in countries such as Ecuador, whose oil exports form 50% of the GDP.

Macias Yela et al. (2021) describe several grassroots initiatives, which have been offering solutions improving food security even before Covid-19 appeared. Some of the most interesting ones have been based on food bartering and solidarity. These original initiatives have been creative, innovative, and they have helped people put food on the table. In addition, they have enhanced connections between the urban and the rural parts of the society. Communities have been participating in bartering to address people's food needs. Activities, however, have also been expanding into other areas such as re–introducing rural cooking, medicinal plants, and peasant pharmacies that all form a part of the local tradition and culture. These community projects promote eating a more natural healthy diet based on foods grown locally without reliance on agrochemicals and as such promote a healthier ecosystem, too. Produce from farms is transported to a centralized location; it is then collected and distributed with the assistance of local municipalities to other communities. This adds value in the form of enhanced nutrition and better economics for the communities and local farms (Macias Yela et al., 2021).

Another important factor, which has stood out during the pandemic, is the solidarity of the people. Led by social movements, people organized at the grassroots level believe in giving back to the community: "It is not about charity, it is about solidarity" (Macias Yela et al., 2021, pp.29). Solidarity has motivated people to help feed the homeless, the unemployed, the

disadvantaged and the most vulnerable through food baskets, soup kitchens, and access to food banks (Macias Yela et al., 2021). Healthy food became available to those most in need, and an enhanced emphasis on food provenance has helped build better urban – rural relations. Thanks to the pandemic, some people in Latin America have thus been able to find new solutions to food insecurity.

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