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Food Crisis

Who decides what we eat?

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The increasing conversion of agriculture into a commodity industry is an undeniable reality today. The privatisation of natural resources, the policies of structural adjustment, the gradual disappearance of the peasantry and the industrialisation of the food systems have driven us to the current food crisis situation.

In this context, who is deciding what we eat? The answer is clear: a handful of multinationals of the agro-food industry, with the blessing of governments and international institutions, end up imposing its private interest above the collective needs. Due to this situation, our food security is seriously threatened.

The supposed worry of governments and institutions as the G8, the G20, the World Trade Organization, etc., regarding the rise of the basic food's price and its impact in the more disadvantaged peoples, as they showed in the course of 2008 in international summits, has only shown its deep hypocrisy. They take significant economic profits of the current food and agricultural model, using it as an imperialist instrument for political, economic and social control, towards the countries of the global South.

As pointed out by the international movement of La VÃ-a Campesina, at the end of the FAO meeting in Rome in November 2009: "The absence of the heads of state of the G8 countries has been one of the key causes of the dismal failure of this summit. Concrete measures were not taken to eradicate hunger, to stop the speculation on food or to hold back the expansion of agrofuels". Likewise, commitments as those of the Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food Security and the Food Security Trust Fund of the World Bank, which have the explicit support of the G8 and the G20, also point this out, leaving our food supply, once again, at the hands of the market.

Yet, the reform of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) of the FAO is, according to La VÃ-a Campesina, a step forward to democratize the decision-making processes over agriculture and environment: "At least this workspace respects the basic rule of the democracy, which is the principle of "one country, one vote", and it gives a new opportunity to the civil society". However, we will still have to check the real impact of the CFS.

Monopolies

The agro-food chain is subjected, in its whole route, to a high business concentration. Starting with the first stretch, the seeds, we can observe that ten of biggest companies (as Monsanto, Dupont, Syngenta, Bayer...), according to data from the Group ETC, control one half of its sales. Copyright laws, which give exclusive rights on seeds to these companies, have stimulated even more the business concentration of the sector and have eroded the peasant right to the maintenance of the indigenous seeds and the biodiversity.

The industry of seeds is intimately linked to that of pesticides. The biggest seed companies dominate also this other sector and very frequently the development and marketing of both products are made together. Besides, in the industry of pesticides the monopoly is still superior and the ten biggest multinationals control 84% of the global market. This same dynamic is observed in the sector of the distribution of food and in that of the processing of drinks and foods. It is all about strategy, and it is bond to increase.

Big-scale retailing, just as other sectors, registers a great business concentration. In Europe, between 1987 and 2005, the market share of the ten biggest multinationals of big-scale retailing was 45% of the total and the chances

are that they reach 75% in the next 10-15 years. In countries such as a Sweden, three supermarket chains control around 95.1% of the market share; and in countries such as a Denmark, Belgium, Spanish State, France, Netherlands, Great Britain and Argentina, a handful of companies control between 60% and 45% of the market. Mega fusions are the usual dynamic. This monopoly and concentration enables a strong power to determine what we buy, the price of products, its origin, and how they have been elaborated.

Making a profit from hunger

In the middle of the food crisis, the main multinational companies of the agro-food industry announced record figures of profit. Monsanto and Dupont, the main seed companies, declared a rise of its profits up to 44% and to 19% respectively in 2007 regarding the previous year. The data of fertilizers companies pointed out the same: Potash Corp, Yara and Sinochem, saw their profits rise up to 72%, 44% and 95% respectively between 2007 and 2006. Food processors as Nestlé also experienced a rise of its economic gains, as well as supermarkets such as Tesco, Carrefour and Wal-Mart, while millions of people in the world did not have access to food.

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