

NOW



NEWS

Peak food is near

OUR FOOD SUPPLY NOW RANKS WITH OIL AND GLOBAL DEBT AS A WORRY OF G20 ELITES

BY WAYNE ROBERTS

JUNE 30, 2011

If freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose, then revolution could be just another word for nothing left to eat.

A bad case of the jitters explains the spike and scope of food and agriculture proclamations from high officialdom, including the World Bank, over the past two months as food prices continue their record-breaking climb – up 15 per cent in one year.

Hunger and poverty have long rivalled climate change as subjects requiring solemn statements of concern from corporate and governmental powers that be. But food now ranks with oil, currency

and debt as a topic requiring tracking and control by the elite bodies that manage geopolitics. Food policy has arrived.

On June 22, the G20, the club of economic powerhouses, held its first meeting of agriculture ministers. Their job was to do something about prices that are out of control, or, as diplomats prefer, “volatile.”

The ministers had a policy paper before them identifying two of the relatively new factors destabilizing food prices.

One is a major product shift from food to fuel by many of the world’s most productive farm enterprises, caused by subsidies for crops – corn, wheat, sugar and palm oil – that can be turned into energy. (Forty per cent of corn production in Canada is now for fuel, for example.)

The second relates to what’s euphemistically called “financialization of food commodity futures markets” – what uncouth analysts call speculation. An example here would be Cargill, the world’s leading grain trader, which announced a profit increase of 23 per cent in its quarterly earnings statement this year, according to food industry newsletter Food Navigator.

Like the other three global grain conglomerates that monopolize the trade, Cargill treats information about grain stocks and quality as a proprietary matter, which makes data crucial for government or public oversight inaccessible.

I must report that the first issue will be the subject of further G20 study, surely a worthy endeavour, while the second never got much action. Big Food has clout that few other industries enjoy. Everyone debates energy, military or fiscal policy. Food has the power to suppress debate.

G20 ministers did not get a briefing on the third factor affecting food production: the ascendancy of the World Trade Organization, which pushes free trade and ends the right of countries to protect their own food security. Under this system, rich countries dump heavily subsidized farm products on poor nations, undermining local farming.

This was the elephant in the room no one chose to discuss. But a number of recent reports and campaigns did highlight the importance of boosting small-scale sustainable farms as the only way to provide the globe’s expected 9 billion people with adequate and nutritious food.

Worldwatch, Oxfam, the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization and others all weighed in on what the FAO dubs in its new report, *Save And Grow*, “a new paradigm.” With its tin ear for plain speaking, the org calls this “sustainable crop production intensification.”

Translation: Grow more food using less land, water, fertilizer and pesticides, and more labour, care and intelligence, which are abundant.

At a time when 12 super-crops – corn, wheat, rice, soy, potatoes, bananas, plantain, sorghum, cassava, millet, sunflowers and canola – supply 80 per cent of human calories, crop diversity has many pluses. It is the only way to meet human nutrition needs, supply the variety necessary for the natural world and break the power of monopolies driven by quantity rather than quality.

Worldwatch's State Of The World, 2011, profiles the victories of just such strategies throughout Africa, so seldom seen as a land of opportunity. On the eve of the G20 meet, the UN's special reporter on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, called on G20 leaders to support regional food systems. Oxfam launched its campaign at the same time.

Recovering from the errors of Big Food and deregulated ("free") trade have now moved to the top of the list of food measures that will increasingly dominate debate.

OXFAM'S REPORT CARD ON THE G20 SUMMIT OF AGRICULTURE MINISTERS

Oxfam examines how the meeting's final report deals with the issues of:

BIOFUEL AGRI

Verdict – Poor

The G20 only agreed to look at the links between biofuels production and rising food prices, adopting no active measures. Canada is one of the countries suspected of blocking progress.

SPECULATION IN FOOD

Verdict – Inconclusive

The agri ministers agreed to explore the links between speculation in commodity markets and food price volatility and to look at mechanisms for improved regulation.

TRANSPARENCY ON FOOD SUPPLIES

Verdict – Pass

The ministers agreed to set up a system to provide info on agricultural production and food stocks. They stopped short of requiring agribusinesses to disclose info on the supplies they hold.

INVESTMENT IN FARMING

Verdict – Fail

The meeting agreed that more investment is needed in agriculture. But it adopted no concrete measures to support poor producers in developing countries.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Verdict - Fail

The ministers failed to acknowledge that global warming is a major cause of food price rises.

news@nowtoronto.com