



## TO OVERCOME THE PLIGHT OF HUNGER: A REGIONAL INTEGRATION BASED ON FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

*PARA SUPERAR O FLAGELO DA FOME: UMA INTEGRAÇÃO REGIONAL BASEADA NA SOBERANIA ALIMENTAR*

*PARA SUPERAR EL FLAGELO DEL HAMBRE: UNA INTEGRACIÓN REGIONAL BASADA EN LA SOBERANÍA ALIMENTARIA*

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**Abstract:** The article addresses the issue of hunger in the world, one of the most perverse phenomena experienced by humanity in this new decade. Starting in 2014, an upward trend in food insecurity began to manifest itself, reaching serious levels in 2019-2020. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, concern grew about the effects it could have on the food crisis worldwide and, especially, in Latin America and the Caribbean. The latter, because it is the region where commercial access to food is among the most expensive in the world. By the way, Latin America does not face a shortage of food, but on the contrary it has an abundance of them. These contradictions make it necessary to question whether market liberalization has been a solution to solve the problem of hunger at the world level. As well as reviewing the relevance of "official" food security policies and their driving institutions. One of the solutions is to achieve coordinated and permanent action by the States to guarantee the provision of food to the population and prevent the advance of hunger. Our conclusion is that the strengthening of regional integration projects based on food sovereignty is required.

**Keywords:** Latin America and the Caribbean. Food sovereignty. Regional integration. Hunger.

**Resumo:** O artigo aborda o problema da fome no mundo, um dos fenômenos mais aberrantes com que a humanidade começou a nova década. A partir de 2014, começou a se manifestar uma tendência crescente na insegurança alimentar, alcançando graves níveis em 2019-2020. Com o início da pandemia de COVID-19, se acentuou a preocupação a respeito dos efeitos que esta poderia provocar na crise alimentícia a nível mundial e especialmente na América Latina e no Caribe, onde o acesso mercantil à alimentação é um dos mais caros do mundo. No entanto, a região não enfrenta escassez de alimentos, pelo contrário, possui uma grande abundância. Considerando estas contradições, faz-se necessário questionar se a liberação do mercado tem sido uma solução para resolver o problema da fome a nível mundial. Assim como revisar a pertinência das políticas "oficiais" de segurança alimentar e de suas instituições impulsionadoras. Uma das soluções seria obter a ação coordenada e permanente dos Estados a fim de garantir o fornecimento de alimentos à população e evitar o avanço da fome. Hoje, mais do que nunca, é preciso o fortalecimento de projetos de integração regional baseados na soberania alimentar.

**Palavras-chave:** América Latina e Caribe. Soberania alimentar. Integração regional. Fome.

**Resumen:** El artículo aborda el problema del hambre en el mundo, uno de los fenómenos más aberrantes con que la humanidad inició la nueva década. A partir del año 2014 comenzó a manifestarse una tendencia ascendente en la inseguridad alimentaria hasta alcanzar niveles graves en 2019-2020. Con el inicio de la pandemia de COVID-19, se ha acentuado la preocupación respecto a los efectos que ésta podría provocar en la crisis alimentaria a nivel mundial y, especialmente, en América Latina y el Caribe, debido a que es el continente donde el acceso



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mercantil a la alimentación se sitúa entre las más costosas del mundo. Por cierto, la región no enfrenta escasez de alimentos, sino que al contrario hay abundancia de ellos. Estas contradicciones hacen necesario cuestionarse si la liberalización del mercado ha sido una solución para resolver el problema del hambre a nivel mundial. Así como también, revisar la pertinencia de las políticas "oficiales" de seguridad alimentaria y de sus instituciones impulsoras. Una de las vías de solución es lograr la acción coordinada y permanente de los Estados para garantizar la provisión de alimentos a la población y evitar el avance del hambre. Hoy más que nunca se requiere el fortalecimiento de proyectos de integración regional basados en la soberanía alimentaria.

**Palabras-clave:** América Latina y el Caribe. Soberanía alimentaria. Integración regional. Hambre.

### Background information on hunger around the world

Global hunger is one of the most perverse phenomena experienced by humanity in this new decade. According to the latest estimates provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), there were almost 690 million people stricken by hunger in 2019-2020, thus confirming a trend that had been perceived since 2014. At the same time, the number of people affected by serious food insecurity<sup>2</sup> also shows a similar upward trend. In 2019, approximately 750 million people (nearly 1 out of 10 people around the globe) became exposed to serious food insecurity.

During that same period, the world has been experiencing a "global grain surplus", with a surplus of agricultural products, which are piled up outside grain silos and left to rot due to lack of buyers. Obviously, growing more grains does not decrease world hunger<sup>3</sup>. Contradictorily, we face a serious plight in terms of hunger that is on the rise, while "the world already produces more than enough food to feed 10 billion people, which is almost 3 billion more people than we currently have"<sup>4</sup>

Hunger is not a new issue. Ever since its emergence, our species has been successively affected by this serious issue. This is pointed out by English researcher Ancel Keys in *Biology of*

*Human Starvation*, published in 1950, in which he recaps the 400 largest documented famines in the history of mankind. However, this plight that has occurred throughout history does not result from the same causes nor does it manifest itself in the same way. The main difference between contemporary and historical famines is, first of all, the larger or smaller role played by humans in their emergence and unfolding. Currently, economic models and policies, as well as wars, have a much bigger impact than natural disasters or the decline in agricultural production due to soil erosion. Even these latter phenomena are increasingly explained nowadays by the irresponsible behavior displayed by people and companies.

Another major difference is that in the current capitalist scenario the access to everyday sustenance is mediated by money (the market), and such relationship acquires more and more importance each day.

An important distinction is the universalization of hunger encompassing all corners of the globe, something which appears directly associated with the poverty of large segments of the world's population, whether rural or urban. Therefore, hunger has ended up crossing the horizon of global society and has now become a danger to our species itself.<sup>5</sup>

Human responsibility in this dramatic scenario all around the globe has not only changed people's perception regarding hunger, but has also brought to the center stage several ethical issues deemed important for food security or insecurity.

However, people's greatest ethical concern with regard to hunger cannot consist of non-value-relevant ethical discourses, as if "no one" was the "originator" of this plight that ails millions of human beings. Hunger cannot be perceived as a phenomenon that emerges spontaneously, as if there were no originators, no mediate causes, or historical subjects. Reflecting upon food security issues from an ethical standpoint necessarily

<sup>2</sup> This is another indicator that can roughly assess hunger.

<sup>3</sup> WISE, Timothy (2019). World hunger is on the rise. Let's face it: The U.S. is not feeding the world. Jul, 22. <https://www.heated.medium.com/world-hunger-is-on-rise-bd2ae8fc96c4>

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>5</sup> VALLESPÍN, Fernando (1985). *Nuevas teorías del Contrato Social*: John Rawls, Robert Nozick y James Buchanan. España: Alianza Editorial.

requires identifying such "no one" and assess the efficiency and the way (market liberalization) how humans have addressed hunger so far; all of which from a victim-centered perspective, people affected by hunger who are an evident indication, through their bodily pains and ails, of a very damaging and unfair phenomenon.

The persistence of hunger means that a significant share of human beings is not being included in all the possibilities envisioned for an ordinary reproduction of life since they are affected by some form of malnutrition. Contrary to what some people have argued, hunger is not an economic issue (with a simple boost to consumption) as the vast majority of economists believe, but rather a vital issue: there is no possibility of reproducing life. For men, women and children, starving means that they can hardly develop their physical and intellectual abilities and skills; on the other hand, many of them can die due to lack of access to food. Some studies point out that hunger has a toxic effect and "that children and youths who have suffered from multiple famines are more likely to die from non-communicable diseases when compared to people who have never suffered from lack of food"<sup>6</sup>. This is one of the most important issues associated with food and nutrition which the whole world has to address and face<sup>7</sup>.

The issue of hunger is directly associated with poverty, but it is not a phenomenon found exclusively in less developed countries. Additionally, we cannot say that this plight is mainly found in certain areas (rural areas) in the hinterlands of the world's countries. In fact, poverty in our own continent has increased much more significantly in urban areas than in rural areas in the last few years. Poverty and hunger are not defined in terms of exclusion but are the most evident result of people's precarious and poor participation in economic, social and

political life and activities. Poor people dealing with hunger, deprived of the benefits resulting from food production growth, live in precarious situations. Hunger is a social and comprehensive phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to food scarcity or insufficient income. As it does not acknowledge national and regional borders, hunger has become a universal issue.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, several theories (the Chicago School, a significant share of development theories and some orthodox Marxists) seek to explain hunger and poverty from a dualist conception, as if these phenomena were found solely in "backward", "traditional" or "pre-capitalist" segments of the globe which are "outside" the formal economy of a given society. For instance, this is approach of the Chicago School that led to the well-known theories of "marginality"<sup>8</sup> and "informality"<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, the strategies devised by current governments shall consist of bringing modernization (the free market) to these backward segments (agriculture) by way of structural reforms. Thus, the formal market and current power dynamics are not being called into question but are being reaffirmed and legitimized through their expansion towards informal segments.

This is very attractive in political terms to governments and international / regional institutions. They can sign all agreements as may be deemed necessary in order to eradicate hunger and poverty in the world without questioning anything.

Furthermore, these agree do not pose significant difficulties for governments, since most of them - which follow a neo-liberal logic - have attributed to the (free) market the "responsibility" for decreasing hunger around the globe. As outside agents that must not interfere with the economic and private circumstances of economic agents, the role of States is restricted to fulfilling a series of specific "public" duties that do not include the implementation of deliberate

<sup>6</sup> BBC (2019). Por qué el hambre es una bomba de tiempo para la salud (también en los países ricos), published on June 8. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/vert-fut-48373452> (in Spanish)

<sup>7</sup> KWAME SUNDARAM, Jomo (2020). Address Malnutrition with Food Insecurity, August 5, 2020. Available at <https://www.networkideas.org/jomo-blog-visited-on-august-15-2020>.

<sup>8</sup> MIRE, Fernando (1993). El discurso de la miseria o la crisis de la Sociología en América Latina. Venezuela: Nueva Sociedad.

<sup>9</sup> HART, Keith (1973). Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana. *Journal of Modern African Studies*.

economic policies. Therefore, food security, which is perceived as an economic issue, becomes a privatized and commercialized matter.

### Latin America is not safe from this plight

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, concern has grown with regard to the effects that it could have on the global food crisis, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean.

After the publication of a report titled "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World", drawn up by FAO, these concerns have been transformed into a strong call for governments to urgently address the issue of hunger, since all estimates calculated for this year have all been exceeded, and we have now entered a very serious stage in terms of hunger. This issue has been addressed and discussed not only by UN agencies, but also by some regional organizations such as CELAC, CARICOM and SICA<sup>10</sup>.

It all indicates that there will be an increase in undernourishment. Latin America and the Caribbean are not immune to this issue, as in 2019 a prevalence of 7.4% was observed; this is below the global average, but this translates into almost 48 million undernourished people. In the last few years, the region has been seeing a worrying increase in terms of hunger, and the number of undernourished people increased by 9 million between 2015 and 2019.

The expansion of the COVID-19 pandemic presupposes a serious menace to food security, and estimates indicate an increase of 83 million people at risk of hunger in 2020. Nonetheless, as part of the seminar titled "Multilateral Action To Prevent The Health Crisis From Becoming A Food Crisis"<sup>11</sup>, the FAO representative for Latin America and the Caribbean alerted us once again to the seriousness of the scenario in the region, highlighting that these estimates could be outdated and that these number could be widely exceeded as

the pandemic advances in the remainder of the year.

Regarding the number of people suffering from food insecurity (either serious or moderate insecurity)<sup>12</sup>, 205 million affected individuals are in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is important to highlight that hunger manifests itself unevenly according to age and prevalence is more expressive in women when compared to men. In 2019, approximately 55 million men suffered from food insecurity, compared to 69 million women<sup>13</sup>. "The gender gap in accessing food increased from 2018 to 2019, particularly at the moderate or severe level" (FAO, 2020: 16).

The panorama in the region does not improve when we take into account the fact that for each person suffering from hunger, six others are overweight or obese. The increase in the number of overweight people is seen in all age groups, especially adults and school-age children. In 2019, we observed that approximately one quarter of the adult population is obese, with higher prevalence among women (28%) when compared to men (20%). Meanwhile, the increase in the number of overweight children under five years old reached 7.5%, above the global average (5.9%)<sup>14</sup>. In summary, malnutrition due to excessive weight in the region is one of the highest in the world, and it continues to increase (FAO, 2019: 2).

There are some areas in the region where the issue of hunger is more severely prevalent, the Caribbean and Central America being the most affected areas. The Caribbean heavily depends on food imports from the United States and the European Union. South America is not as affected. This represents a major paradox when we analyze the fact that "less than 4 percent of the Caribbean's exports go to other countries in the subregion" and that "over 93 percent go to markets outside Latin America and the Caribbean". In turn, Central America exports food totaling over USD 40 billion annually; it "allocates about 9 percent to the

<sup>10</sup> Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC); Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and Central American Integration System (SICA).

<sup>11</sup> Activity promoted by FAO and CELAC. July 23, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Understood as the partial or total interruption in access to food.

<sup>13</sup> FAO, OPS, WFP and UNICEF (2019). Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean 2019. Santiago. 135. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

<sup>14</sup> *Idem*.

subregion, 1.5 percent to South America and almost 90 percent to countries outside the region"<sup>15</sup>.

Another relevant aspect of the commodification of food is nutrition costs, which gradually increase as food quality improves. "The cost of a healthy diet is<sup>16</sup> 60 percent higher than the cost of the nutrient adequate diet, and almost 5 times the cost of the energy sufficient diet. This pattern holds across all regions and country income groups" (FAO, 2020: 30).

It is important to highlight that a FAO report titled "Transforming food systems to deliver affordable healthy diets for all" acknowledged the fundamental importance of "hidden hunger", of micronutrient deficiencies as well as diet-related non-communicable diseases. However, most fruits, vegetables, and other nutrient-rich foods are out of reach for low-income households<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, the challenge of advancing in terms of improving and enhancing diets is made more difficult due to poor food consumption habits and poor dietary behavior as a result of various influences such as advertising, markets, convenience and changes in lifestyles. According to Kwame (2020), it is clear that policies to reduce costs and improve access to healthy diets for all require urgent attention<sup>18</sup>.

It is important to mention that Latin America and the Caribbean are the continent where commercial access to food is among the most expensive in the world. Not only are healthy diets above the global average, but so are diets deemed sufficient in terms of energy and proper diets in terms of nutrient intake. More specifically, "In Brazil, fresh or minimally processed foods have a higher cost per calorie than moderately processed ones, and low and middle-income families report the highest consumption of sugary drinks". On the other hand, "households with

higher incomes buy better-quality meat, more fish, fruits and vegetables and more ready-to-eat food". Another example is found in Mexico, "where the prices of sugary drinks have decreased over time". In Chile, "it was estimated that a quality food basket, based on the recommendations of the dietary guidelines, would be 36.1% more expensive than the basic food basket, which would mean that up to 27% of the population could not access it" (FAO, 2019: 65).

This is an enormous contradiction, as the region is not plagued by food scarcity; on the contrary, there is an abundance of it. In fact, most of the countries in the region export important commodities to international markets. Indeed, "eighty-seven percent of the value of food exports is destined for countries outside the region". Meanwhile, "intraregional trade is minimal"<sup>19</sup>. However, the impulse given to these export policies has caused a constant increase in food prices in domestic markets, well above the consumer price index. Unfortunately, in the region there is no significant development of the food processing industry; therefore, a lot of food products are imported at very high prices.

Some analysts highlight that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are already visible in regional food systems, which is mainly explained by the strong increase in unemployment rates and the decrease in workers' incomes, as well as by the increase in domestic food prices. Although part of this argument is true, it is worth posing the following question: what explains the absence of national and regional mechanisms that guarantee people's access to food? Wouldn't the persistence of the hunger plight be conclusive evidence that the market is incapable of solving this issue? Would there be any conditions to promote food sovereignty policies in the region?

<sup>15</sup> FAO (2020). Food systems and COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: Trade performance during the crisis. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/vert-fut-48373452> (in Spanish).

<sup>16</sup> Healthy diets include food groups that have higher costs, but are the most nutritional ones, such as dairy products, fruit, vegetables and foods rich in protein (either animal or vegetable origin).

<sup>17</sup> KWAME SUNDARAM, Jomo (2020). Address Malnutrition with Food Insecurity. Wednesday, August 5, 2020. Available at <https://www.networkideas.org/jomo-blog/Visited-on-August-15,-2020>.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>19</sup> FAO (2020). Food systems and COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: Trade performance during the crisis. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/vert-fut-48373452> (in Spanish).

## Market liberalization as a solution?

The persistence of hunger around the world implies serious ethical responsibilities regarding the ability of current governments and multilateral institutions to direct and guide the development of countries in a manner that is consistent with the basic approaches towards food security. By the way, there is not a single path to take in order to achieve this, as shown by Latin American history in the last few decades. In effect, countries in the region have tried various approaches ranging from those whose main goal was "food self-sufficiency" (domestic production) in the 1970s and 1980s to those who were focused on promoting "security in terms of food provisioning" (domestic production + imports) as their fundamental goal.

This last concept, prevailing nowadays, generally promotes both the withdrawal of States from the economy sphere (minimum State participation and involvement) and the free operation of the market as an efficient allocator of access to food, not only in the formal segment but also, and above all, in the so-called backward segment (agriculture). In turn, this implies the propagation of market relations (supply and demand) to this segment, with the particularity that the greater supply would gradually generate its own demand. In other terms, we have "Say's law" applied to agriculture and the food segment. By putting market efficiency first, it is assumed that equality will come automatically at a subsequent stage. The ideological expression of this focus is neo-liberalism.

In this sense, "the government's role should be restricted to strengthening the rule of law and ensuring open trade and investment policies. In such a business-friendly environment, the private sector will thrive. Accordingly, proactive government interventions or agricultural development policy would be a mistake, preventing markets from functioning properly". This point of view denies the possibility of market

failure. Social disruption just cannot occur<sup>20</sup>.

Since the mid-1980s, most governments in that region - regardless of their political orientations - began to put this approach into practice, which implied a strong process of structural reforms and the unilateral, unconditional and very rapid openness of agriculture and the economy in general. The *World Trade Organization Agriculture Agreement* only furthered this process. Furthermore, this liberalization process has been accompanied by drastic changes in the food consumption habits and patterns in the region in the last three decades.

In our region, a clear expression of the above is the case of Mexico, a country that implemented trade liberalization following the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), an agreement which, in turn, "opened the floodgates to cheap, subsidized U.S. corn, wheat, soybeans, and other crops, inundating rural Mexico. Corn imports jumped fivefold, driving local corn prices down by two-thirds. Some 5 million able-bodied workers fled rural Mexico, and they did not find waiting for them any of the jobs NAFTA's economists had assumed would materialize"<sup>21</sup>. Worse still, these trends are perpetuated with the ratification of the treaty between Mexico, the United States and Canada (T-MEC). Currently, "an embarrassing 57 percent of Mexico's able-bodied workers are in the informal sector, [...] That is a higher share than before NAFTA"<sup>22</sup>.

Another bad example is Haiti: "in the wake of Haiti's devastating earthquake in 2010, former US President Bill Clinton apologized for destroying its rice production by forcing the island republic to import subsidized American rice, exacerbating greater poverty and food insecurity in Haiti"<sup>23</sup>. It worth remembering that Haiti was self-sufficient in rice until the early 1980s, when the influence of US companies began to grow. "From being self-sufficient in rice, sugar, poultry and pork, impoverished Haiti became the world's fourth-

<sup>20</sup> KWAME SUNDARAM, Jomo & Chowdury, Anis (2018). Agricultural trade liberalization undermined food security. Available on line at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/agricultural-trade-liberalization-undermined-food-security>.

<sup>21</sup> WISE, Timothy (2019). Farming first: A recipe to feed a crowded world. If this approach sounds familiar, it should. April 30. Available on line at <https://heated.medium.com/farming-first-a-recipe-to-feed-a-crowded-world-c76be995cc9c>.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>23</sup> KWAME SUNDARAM, Jomo & Chowdury, Anis (2018). Agricultural trade liberalization undermined food security. Available on line at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/agricultural-trade-liberalization-undermined-food-security>.

largest importer of US rice and the largest Caribbean importer of US produced food"<sup>24</sup>. These trends have not changed in the last few years.

With this scenario in mind, it is worth highlighting that "while developing countries have been urged to dismantle food security and agricultural support policies, the developed world increased subsidies for its own agriculture, including food production"<sup>25</sup>.

In the most extreme doctrine of local *criollo* neo-liberalism, food security does not exist as a public policy; only in certain instances the possibility of minimal state intervention is admitted. In any case, it has always been believed that, as a result economic growth, surplus resources would reach poor and hungry people, thus decreasing their numbers. This logic of "spillover", or "leakage", creates a dichotomy between economic policy (monetary) and social policy (food security), where the latter is subordinated to the former.

This approach does not question the "core", the economic model, nor does it explain why poor and undernourished people are not integrated. It is only hoped that, in the long run, economic expansion will "naturally" bring about the integration of marginalized people and render support policies for these people unnecessary.

In that same direction, many governments sign many agreements - endorsed by regional and multilateral organizations - with the purpose of increasing food transactions (imports and exports). However, these agreements have but reinforced the primary food export structure of our economies by favoring commodities, thus failing in their alleged goal of contributing to food security.

FAO itself warns that "negative consequences could be generated for countries that are net exporters when there is an increase in international prices, since part of the domestic supply will be used for exports" (FAO, 2016: 1).

An important step implies a paradigm shift. In order to make advances in the fight against hunger in the region, countries would have to implement food sovereignty policies that

prioritize the appropriate use of raw materials and therefore leading to an increase in food production levels, with the purpose of meeting the domestic demands of each country and ensure food security from an availability standpoint.

Our region has become the main epicenter of the latest health crisis, which has profound impacts in terms of employment, people's income, poverty and ultimately in terms of access to markets and, especially, to food. Therefore, it is necessary to resort to joint efforts aimed at preventing the emergence of a food crisis of unprecedented proportions in Latin America. In view of the foregoing, we must take into account the relevance of permanent coordinated actions carried out by States in order to guarantee food supply to populations and prevent hunger from advancing.

Most certainly, the continent has a great capacity to supply food at different levels of production and is characterized by differences and complementarities between its countries. This opens up possibilities to increase intraregional agricultural-food trade in terms of food security, which shall arise as a result of measures aimed at facilitating countries' availability and access to food. It would also be necessary to have new trade and cooperation mechanisms so that small (family) agricultural producers and the most vulnerable segments may effectively benefit from increased trade and regional integration.

Consequently, the strengthening of solid, democratic and comprehensive regional integration projects is needed now more than ever so that the food sovereignty agenda of our countries may be developed. How to make governments and integration agreements acknowledge food sovereignty as a necessary strategy in the fight against hunger?

### Beyond food security

Since the 1970s there has been a strong predominance of the food security perspective in the strategies aimed at addressing the issue of hunger around the world. This view has been

<sup>24</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>25</sup> *Idem.*

promoted by multi-lateral organizations associated with agriculture, such as FAO. Periodic events that urge governments to discuss and advance such policies have played an important role in this sense.

Starting with the World Food Summit held in November 1996, a comprehensive approach to food systems has been promoted. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, food security exists "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life"<sup>26</sup>. Despite this, after many decades, it is still unclear how to achieve food security and with whom. It all seems to indicate that multi-lateral organizations still do not understand the urgency of engaging in the fight against this plight.

In late 2019, the UN Secretary-General announced that he would host a Food Systems Summit by 2021. To the surprise of many, "the principal partner appears to be the World Economic Forum, with the UN's Rome-based agencies serving as a pliant secretariat"<sup>27</sup>. Unlike previous summits, "which had a unifying concept of food security, and built consensus among stakeholders on food systems for nutrition, the 2021 summit seems to eschew inter-governmental collaboration"<sup>28</sup>. Now it seems that the major food traffickers represented in this Forum want to directly decide the fate of food around the world.

An alternative response to the issue of hunger is food sovereignty. This concept is relatively more recent and arises within the scope of Via Campesina, an international network of small farmers and peasants. This concept was introduced in 1996 the framework of the World Food Summit organized by FAO. Subsequently, its concept and policies have been refined and expanded in various Global Forums on Food Sovereignty.

Food sovereignty is generally understood as "the right of peoples and nations to obtain healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecological and sustainable methods, as well as the right to define their own food and agricultural systems". This approach has been adopted by numerous social movements but has also been included in some Constitutions and in national and local laws of various countries. In our region, both Ecuador and Venezuela has incorporated food sovereignty into their constitutions.

We must recognize that since the 1990s both concepts (food security and food sovereignty) have been main highlights in the political debate on how to face the issue of hunger and development in the face of neo-liberal policies.

Along the way, the profound undermining of "official" food security policies and their driving institutions has been evidenced. Numerous elements support this argument. Firstly, we can observe the crisis of multilateralism, expressed in the ultimate failure of the Doha Development Round launched in 2001, the current paralysis of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the effects caused by the 2007-2008 global crisis. We must remember that in the Doha Development Round the main mission was to negotiate regulations aimed at improving the "development" level of participating members, especially in terms of agriculture; it was an event where reductions were sought in export subsidies, aiming at its gradual removal, and in domestic backup which resulted in trade distortions. Such mission was not embraced by the United States and its allies, thus converting the Round into a negotiation for opening approximately 20 spheres of the nations' internal and external "trade"<sup>29</sup>.

The 2007-2008 global crisis changed the position of many developing countries, which suffered serious damage and went from supporting liberalization to protectionists, in

<sup>26</sup> World Food Summit, 1996.

<sup>27</sup> KWAME SUNDARAM, Jomo (2020). Green Counter Revolution in Africa. April 8. Interpress Service. Available on line at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2020/04/green-counter-revolution-africa/>.

<sup>28</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>29</sup> LARA CORTÉS, Claudio & SILVA FLORES, Consuelo (2017). Crisis del multilateralismo: la emergencia de China y la contracción de América Latina. In *América Latina: Una integración regional fragmentada y sin rumbo*. Silva, Consuelo; Noyola, Ariel & Kan, Julián (coordinators). MEGA II-CLACSO-IADE. Available on line at [http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/clacso/gt/20190207040512/America\\_Latina\\_Integracion\\_Regional\\_Fragmentada.pdf](http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/clacso/gt/20190207040512/America_Latina_Integracion_Regional_Fragmentada.pdf).

order to defend their agriculture and food self-sufficiency. Some participating members asked to incorporate into the agrarian measures package provisions on export restrictions, an issue that many countries rejected, which has prevented the negotiations from developing. Not only was the Doha Round buried, but WTO actions are also hindered by the nationalist and protectionist policies implemented by some countries, led by the US president Donald Trump<sup>30</sup>.

A second element which is worth mentioning is the increase in the number of free trade agreements on a regional level, partly motivated by the failure of the Doha Round. Most of these agreements provide for the liberalization of agriculture, which resulted in investments made to large companies so that they could export subsidized grains, undermining small agricultural producers and contributing little or nothing to solve the plight of hunger. In this sense, the United States has played an important role in terms of grain production and the displacement of local crops. This "illusion that 'we' feed 'the world' has its home in places like Iowa, planted fencerow to fencerow in corn and soybeans in a system designed to coax every last bushel from the incomparably fertile soil"<sup>31</sup>.

It is difficult to find evidence that this production is aimed at feeding hungry people in the developing world. The production of "Iowa mainly feeds pigs, chickens, the junk food industry, and cars; half of [their] corn goes to ethanol, and 30 percent of soybean oil is now used for biodiesel fuel". Unfortunately, "the world's poor can't afford meat and they don't drive cars; junk food is the last thing they need"<sup>32</sup>. Consequently, "it's a dangerous illusion that we can solve global hunger by expanding global production with industrial-scale agriculture. Dangerous because the way we are growing that food, on chemical-intensive,

monoculture farms, is quite literally destroying the resource base — soil, water, climate — on which future food production depends"<sup>33</sup>.

A third aspect that is must highlighted is the similar situation found in Latin America, because there is a direct relationship between the advance of industrial crops (and exports) and the decline in food production destined for local populations. Representatives and spokespeople for multinational agricultural companies argue that "they produce food for millions of people". They have even pointed to the 184 million tons of soybeans harvested in 2019 in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. However, "soy is far from being food"<sup>34</sup>, as we have already mentioned. Nonetheless, in the 5 aforementioned countries, soybeans are not directly consumed by human beings. There, people consume traditional foods such as fruits, vegetables, dairy and meat products, many of which experienced a decrease in terms of areas or an increased in prices, thus becoming less and less accessible to the popular segments of society.

In 1996, the Argentinian government imposed on the country an agro-industrial model based on the extractive production of transgenic monocultures, which caused a significant impact on the diet of national, regional and world populations. These crops are mainly destined for export, while in terms of domestic consumption, "there is the prevalence of the relocation and seasonal adjustment of diets and the growing displacement of natural or minimally processed foods by ultra-processed unidentified edible objects (UEOs)"<sup>35</sup>.

### Added to this is the growing contamination of soil, air, water and food

A fourth element that must be highlighted is the complex political debate that took place within the context of the 2007-2008 global crisis,

<sup>30</sup> SUMPSI VIÑAS, José María (2019). Una nueva gobernanza global para eliminar el hambre en el mundo. In El futuro de la alimentación en el mundo. Dossieres EsF N° 33, Primavera. Economistas sin fronteras.

<sup>31</sup> WISE, Timothy (2019). World hunger is on the rise. Let's face it: The U.S. is not feeding the world. July 22. Available on line at <https://www.heated.medium.com/world-hunger-is-on-rise-bd2ae8fc96c4>.

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>34</sup> Biodiversidad LA (2020). Atlas del agronegocio transgénico en el Cono Sur. Available on line at <http://www.biodiversidadla.org/Coberturas-especiales/Atlas>.

<sup>35</sup> FILARDI, Marcis Ezequiel (2020). Para salir de las pandemias, soberanía alimentaria. Biodiversidad LA. Available on line at <http://www.biodiversidadla.org/Recomendamos/Para-salir-de-las-pandemias-soberania-alimentaria>

in the midst of a sharp increase in food prices and the food crisis, when the need to promote a new global governance for agriculture and food was acknowledged. What was revealed was that there were two opposing stances on who should lead this process: one that proposed that this initiative should be led by the United Nations, a stance advocated by developing countries and headed by the FAO Director General at the time, and other that promoted the leadership of the G-8, a stance advocated by more developed countries; thus, the classic confrontation between developed and developing countries emerged once again<sup>36</sup>.

In the end, this "new governance" was headed by the United Nations and not by the G-8. Obviously, this was not exempt from disputes, debates and proposals, especially with regard to the financial mechanisms aimed at supporting agricultural development and food security in poor countries. Unsurprisingly, due to immoral blockade imposed by G-8 governments, there has been little progress in terms of funding and even less progress in terms of the consolidation of a new global governance. Therefore, these countries have effectively closed the path of multilateralism for solving the issue of hunger.

Although the food security approach, such as the approach of food sovereignty, presents "historical overlaps" in its use and respective general definitions<sup>37</sup>, both approached have different views on agri-food systems. Hence, food sovereignty promotes an interdisciplinary approach in the study of agricultural systems. This view is complemented by the valuation of the local element in food complexes, including knowledge, cultivation methods, peasant production systems, agricultural histories, habits and food preferences. Likewise, it proposes "subsequent transformations in consumption, transportation, food processing and recycling patterns, all of which being centered around the need to relocate agricultural processes"<sup>38</sup>.

It should be noted that the food sovereignty

paradigm takes into account the promotion and defense of small and medium-sized agriculture (peasant) as the main agent in agricultural and food policies. It also aims to establish spaces for dialog and negotiations between States and peasant producer organizations in order to adjust agricultural and food policies to local needs. It also incorporates local decision-making in terms of what, who, how and how much to grow, exchange and trade.

All these food sovereignty policies should aim to promptly guarantee the right to food for entire populations through sufficiency, accessibility and quality of food. In summary, such policies should give rise to regional integration agreements that ought to put food sovereignty, which more necessary and urgent today than ever, at the forefront.

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