



**THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND THE FUTURE:
HUNGER WITH A HUMAN FACE**
Los Angeles Sentinel, 06-05-08, p. A-7

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The recent revelation that there is a food crisis due to higher prices hides the human suffering in the crisis and its fundamental source in the savage impositions and effects of globalization and its destruction of the lives, economies and ecosystems of its victims. Thus, it is important to note that the conversation focused on the food crisis in the world was raised by oppressed and struggling people who rose up in revolt in Burkino Faso, Cameroon, Egypt, Haiti, Indonesia, Mauritania, Mexico, Morocco, Senegal and elsewhere, to protest and resist not only increased prices and shameless profiteering, but also in a larger sense, the globalized control of the world's food systems and the structured impoverishment and suffering which form the background and basis of this current crisis.

Indeed, nowhere is the catastrophic consequences of globalization clearer than in its effect, not just on the current problem of higher prices, but more important in its fostering increasing food insecurity and structured dependence of the peoples of the world. It has aided in leaving over a billion people hungry, even more suffering malnutrition and a great number threatened with famine and starvation and transforming formerly food sufficient countries into debt ridden importers of foods, in spite of its promise of progress.

The World Food Summit is meeting this week in Rome to address this serious problem, first by reaffirming the right to food and food security as human rights rooted in the nature and undeniable needs of the human person and then by engaging the question of how to operationalize this commitment in the most effective and person-and-people respecting ways. Clearly, this is an indispensable point of departure, for in spite of the obvious economic and political dimensions to the issues, it is at its heart a moral issue of monumental

importance which speaks not only to the right to food and food security, but also to the right to life itself.

Indeed, the right to food as a companion concept and condition of the right to life was recognized early in the Maatian moral and spiritual teachings of our ancestors in the *Husia*, the sacred text of ancient Egypt. In the *Book of Vindication* in the *Husia*, the Four Good Deeds of Ra, the Creator, begin with the blessings and gifts of the breath of life and the sustenance of life. In modern Maatian moral discourse, these gifts carry with them related rights, i.e., the right to life and the right to the sustenance of life, and these are given, the *Husia* says, "so that everyone might breathe (live) in his or her time and place". And "so that the humble might benefit from it like the great".

It is no accident that the ancient African ethical imperative to care for the poor and vulnerable, i.e., to give "food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked and a boat to cross over for those who have none" begins with the compelling obligation to provide food and water for those who need it. This logically evolves from respect for human life and the correlative requirements to sustain it and support its development and flourishing. Indeed, this teaching has its roots in the foundational granting of life and the right to life. Thus, in the *Book of the Declarations of Virtues*, there is a consistent affirmation of the fulfillment of this obligation in the moral self-presentation of the authors. Antef offers us a model, affirming that he is "generous, a possessor of food who doesn't hide his face (from those in need); a friend of the poor, kindhearted to the indigent; a nourisher of the hungry and the have-nots and open-handed to the needy".

Moreover, the right to food has been recognized in modern times since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in

1948 which declared that “Everyone has a right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food. . . .” This was reaffirmed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1966 in similar language. And the Rome Declaration on World Food Security 1996 stated “We the Heads of State and Government . . . reaffirm the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger”.

This establishment and reaffirming of this larger moral foundation and framework introduces the concept of food security which, according to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization’s generally accepted definition, “means that food is available at all times; that all persons have means of access to it; that it is nutritionally adequate in terms of quantity, quality and variety; and that it is acceptable within the given culture”. Availability speaks to the existence of sufficient food; accessibility to physical and economic access (i.e., affordability); adequacy to sufficient food which is safe, nutritious and varied; and acceptability requires food which is produced or obtained in ways that respect the dignity, self-determination, cultural values and human rights of the people. But as others have pointed out, food security also requires agency of the people and country involved. Here I want to join the Kawaida concept of agency, the knowledge, capacity, will and right to act, with that of the concept of “food sovereignty” introduced by the peasants’ organization “Via Campesina”.

Food sovereignty is the right of a country to determine the grounds, guidelines and goals of its production and consumption of food in the interests of its people. This requires, at a minimum, the right to establish rules of fair trade, agricultural support policies and land reform policies which protect and aid the local farmers and national economies in environmentally sustainable production; enhance the productive capacity of women who produce much, if not most, of the food in Third World countries; and policies which protect vulnerable countries from international lending institutions, impositions, and corporate practices of patenting seeds and other genetic resources, genetic engineering and other means of privatizing, deforming and profiting from a shared heritage and common resources of particular countries and the peoples of the world.

So the solution is not simply to lower prices, but to change global practices; to define an ethical and procedural framework which insures food security and sovereignty and maintains the dignity, self-determination and self-sufficiency of the people as primary principles and practices, thus aiding them in becoming self-conscious agents of their own life and liberation and capable producers of solutions to their own problems.

The awesome task of forging a future with food security and sovereignty for the peoples of the world is a collective responsibility rooted in an ethics of respect for life, human solidarity, self-determination and social justice. And as always, this ultimately and unavoidably can only be achieved in and thru self-conscious and sustained struggle.