

Sacher torte and the food crisis

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If a dietologist recommended massive doses of Sacher torte to remedy a severe chocolate intoxication it wouldn't take you long to decide to seek another medical opinion. Yet that's exactly what the doctors of the global economy have been prescribing to the governments of the most seriously affected countries since the food crisis hit the headlines some months ago. Partnering up with outrageously wealthy foundations born from corporate profits and echoing, as always, the interests of agribusiness, the Bretton Woods institutions and the governments that command them are doing their best to pull off a truly big one. They are trying to convince the world that they should lead the pack in seeking solutions to a crisis engendered by the very policies that they have been imposing on indebted countries for the past three decades.

The introduction of structural adjustment programmes from the mid '80s foisted free market dictates on Africa, along with severe slashes in government support for agriculture. Together they have transformed the continent from a net food exporter to a net food importer in just 10 years (FAO data). Africa has been obliged to open its frontiers to artificially cheap, subsidized foodstuffs from abroad, with the result that its local producers are no longer able to compete on their own national and regional markets. "Don't worry", the priests of neoliberalism assured the governments, "your comparative advantage is to produce export commodities like cocoa and coffee for the world market. With what you earn you can always import cheap food to keep your urban populations quiet." The soaring food prices and the capital city uprisings of the past months have amply demonstrated the folly of this strategy. Not surprising if you consider that "serious" economies like the EU and the USA have supported and protected their agricultures for years, and continue to do so despite WTO-inspired cosmetic surgery. It's no mystery to them that the very foundation of sovereignty is the capacity to feed one's own population. Our medical metaphor attains the perverse paradox of a band of deceitful dietologists who prescribe chocolate cake to others while surreptitiously munching carrots and celery in their own boudoirs. How else to interpret the passage of the Declaration of the High Level Conference hosted by FAO last June to address the food crisis in which the very governments who stalled the Doha round with their unwillingness to adopt measures which would have "made markets work for the poor" but reduced the competitiveness of their own agricultures "reaffirm their commitment to the rapid and successful conclusion of the WTO Doha Development Agenda and reiterate their willingness to reach comprehensive and ambitious results that would be conducive to improving food security in developing countries." (FAO 2008, www.fao.org/foodclimate/conference/declaration)

But it's not just where food is marketed that counts. How it is produced is an integral part of the equation. The cheap food that has been dumped on the world markets over the past years is the product of subsidized industrial agriculture, strong on chemical inputs and weak on just about everything that matters: protection of the environment, production of quality food, creation of employment, defense of biodiversity.... This model of food production is the first ring in the corporative agribusiness chain that transforms food into a commodity, wrenching it from any identification with a specific territory and the skills of particular producers and whirling it around the world (at increasingly unsustainable energy costs) before it ends up in standardized (and often nutritionally doubtful) formats on the shelves of mammoth supermarkets. The alternative production approach is that of sustainable family-based farming. This model is already feeding the vast majority of the world's population despite the fact that it has benefited from practically no support, and could meet the rising demand for food while conserving energy and helping to combat climate change if it were given half a chance. This is not the view of a bunch of quirky, anachronistic dreamers. It is the conclusion of authoritative studies such as the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development published in April 2008 (www.agassessment.org). Yet the "New Green Revolution" which the deceitful dietologists are touting as the answer to Africa's agricultural problems prescribes "modernization" via chemical inputs, intensification, economies of scale. If implemented it would usurp the

autonomy of the millions of small producers of today while offering them a doubtful future as contract farmers for corporate enterprises over whose production and market strategies they would have zero control.

Is anyone out there making more sense? The answer is a resounding yes: the family farmers themselves for a start. Perhaps the only positive effect of the disastrous policies of the past years has been the stimulus they have given to the growth of structured small farmer movements with sound alternative proposals to sell and the necessary political clout to defend them. While the Declaration of last June's FAO High Level Conference and the UN High Level Task Force on the Food Crisis created by Ban Ki-moon last April waffle their way through a recital of conjunctural causes, the global peasant movement Via Campesina goes straight to the long-term origins:

The structural adjustment programs combined with the World Trade Organization's trade agreements meant that agriculture and food policies are now controlled only by a faceless international market. National policies, such as price controls, tariffs, and marketing boards, designed to ensure the viability of small-scale farmers and an adequate supply of culturally appropriate food through support for domestic agriculture have been replaced by the voracious demands of the 'market' (press release, 25 July 2008. www.viacampesina.org).

While our Establishment dietologists recommend more liberalization and Green Revolution technology the Network of Peasant and Agricultural Producers' Organizations of West Africa (ROPPA) which federates 45 million family farmers has no doubt about remedies:

It is necessary to reform policies and to change the prevailing paradigm. We will need to:

- Put agriculture back at the center of economic policies and give it the means to develop;
- Acknowledge the prime role of smallholder family farmers and the need to support them in their triple role aim of increasing supply of agricultural production, creating jobs and revenues, and taking care of vulnerable groups such as women and youth;
- Reduce the inequalities in competitiveness and competition. This requires recognizing our right to protect our markets as long as it is needed for the development of our agriculture.... (presentation to the UN High-Level Meeting on the MDGs, 25 September 2008, www.roppa.info)

And, increasingly, their voices are being heard. The principle of food sovereignty first launched by Via Campesina in 1996 is in construction from the local level up as an alternative paradigm to neoliberalism (see www.nyeleni2007.org). ROPPA's advocacy and mobilization was a major determinant in the Economic Community of West African States's (ECOWAS) decision to refuse to meet the EU's 31 December 2007 deadline for signing the free trade-inspired Economic Partnership Agreement and to negotiate, instead, a treaty that would defend the interests of the region's producers and consumers. At a congress on the food crisis organized in Rome earlier this month African and European small farmer organizations dialogued with regional and international intergovernmental institutions and reached a large measure of consensus (www.europafrika.info).

The real changes are likely to come from the South, as popular movements forge alliances with like-minded governments and oblige the others to accept their accountability to their citizens. But we in the North can make an important contribution to unmasking the hypocrisy of the deceitful dietologists and calling for a paradigm change in global food and agriculture systems. For a start, add your voice to a denunciation of Europe's negative impact on African agriculture despite the EU's rhetoric of solidarity and partnership! (www.europafrika.info).