

Foreword

By Walden Bello

The world is now plunged into a deep recession—indeed, into what many are beginning to call a depression. In the North, the current crisis initially took the form of a financial collapse that then brought down the real economy. The financial crisis in the North, however, was preceded by the food price crisis which rolled through the South beginning in 2006.

In 2006–08, food shortages became a global reality, with the prices of commodities spiraling beyond the reach of vast numbers of people. International agencies were caught flatfooted, with the World Food Program warning that its rapidly diminishing food stocks might not be able to deal with the emergency.

Owing to surging prices of rice, wheat and vegetable oils, the food import bills of the least developed countries (LDCs) climbed by 37% in 2008, from \$17.9 million in 2007 to \$24.6 million in 2008, after having risen by 30% in 2006. By the end of 2008, the United Nations reported, “the annual food import basket in LDCs cost more than three times that of 2000, not because of the increased volume of food imports, but as the result of rising food prices.” These tumultuous developments added 75 million people to the ranks of the hungry and drove an estimated 125 million people in developing countries into extreme poverty.

For some countries, the food crisis was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. Some 30 countries experienced violent popular actions against rising prices in 2007 and 2008, among them Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Egypt, Guinea, India, Indonesia, Mauritania, Mexico, Morocco, Mozambique, Senegal, Somalia, Uzbekistan, and Yemen. Across the continents, people came out in their thousands against the uncontrolled rises in the price of staple goods, which their countries had to import because of insufficient domestic production. Scores of people died in these demonstrations of popular anger.

The most dramatic events transpired in Haiti. With 80% of the

population subsisting on less than two dollars a day, the doubling of the price of rice in the first four months of 2008 led to “hunger so tortuous that it felt like [people’s] stomachs were being eaten away by bleach or battery acid,” according to one account. Widespread rioting broke out that only ended when the Senate fired the prime minister. In their intensity, the Haiti riots reminded observers of the anti-International Monetary Fund (IMF) riots in Venezuela—the so-called Caracazo—almost two decades ago, which reshaped the contours of that country’s politics.

In this very timely book, two of the world’s most prominent critics of the global food system, Eric Holt-Giménez and Raj Patel, dissect the causes of hunger and the food price crisis, locating them in a political economy of capitalist industrial production dominated by corporations and driven by the search for profits for the few instead of the welfare of the many. Here, greed has played just as destructive a role as in the financial sector.

Holt-Giménez and Patel discuss the contributions of, among other factors, the Green Revolution, export-oriented agriculture, structural adjustment, genetically modified seeds, speculation, and biofuel production. The picture that emerges is a political economy of global production that is failing badly in terms of feeding the world and is itself contributing to the spread of inequalities that promote hunger.

This is not, however, simply a critique of capitalist industrial agriculture. Drawing on the rich experiences of small farmers, peasant communities, indigenous nations, and cooperatives, Holt-Giménez and Patel show that even as the old system unravels, alternative modes of agricultural production are alive and offer the prospect of sufficient food for people along with equity and ecological sustainability. The many people’s organizations at the forefront of the struggle for more effective ways of organizing the production and distribution of food, such as Via Campesina, the Landless Movement (MST) in Brazil, and small-scale urban agriculture in the North, are showcased. And an important lesson they are learning—and which this book stresses—is the inseparability of economic organization, technology, equity, sustainability, and democracy.

The aim of the organization of food production, Holt-Giménez and Patel remind us, is to enable people not simply to exist but to live and enjoy the flourishing of the spirit—to eat so they may live in the fullest sense. This is where the capitalist organization of food production has failed so miserably; it has condemned hundreds of millions

of people to purely subsisting and millions of others to below subsistence. This is why people throughout the world are, in a multitude of ways, actively organizing to supplant it.

Walden Bello is the recipient of the Right Livelihood Award in 2003, president of the Freedom from Debt Coalition, senior analyst at the Bangkok-based research and advocacy institute Focus on the Global South, and professor of sociology at the University of the Philippines.