

Introduction to the Global Food Crisis

A “Silent Tsunami”?

The World Food Program’s description of the global food crisis raises the specter of a natural disaster surging over an unaware populace that is helpless in the face of massive destruction. With half of the world’s population at risk of hunger, the current food crisis is certainly massive and destructive. But the reasons so many people have limited access to food are anything but natural. On the contrary, decades of skewed agricultural policies, inequitable trade, and unsustainable development have thrown the world’s food systems into a state of chronic malaise, in which crises are all the more severe. Though hunger comes in waves, not everyone will “drown” in famine. In fact, the planet’s food crises are making a handful of investors and multinational corporations very rich—even as they devastate the livelihoods of the poor and put the rest of the world at severe environmental and economic risk. The surge of food “riots” not only in poor countries like Haiti, but in resource-rich countries like Brazil—and even in the industrialized nations of Europe and in the United States—reflects the fact that people are not just hungry, they are rebelling against an unjust global food system.

The food crisis is anything but silent—and as long as we are aware of its true causes, we are not helpless.

The World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the US Department of Agriculture all carefully avoid addressing the root causes of the food crisis. Accepting the paradigm of the dominant industrial food system, the “solutions” they prescribe are simply more of the same approaches that brought about the crisis in the first place: increased food aid, de-regulated global trade in agricultural commodities, and more technological and genetic fixes. These measures do nothing to challenge the *status quo* of corporate control

over the world's food, and there has been little effective leadership in the face of the crisis. Nor has there been any informed public debate about the real reasons the numbers of hungry people are growing, or what we can do about it. The future of our food systems is being decided *de facto* by unregulated global markets, speculators, and global monopolies.

For decades, family farmers, rural women, and communities around the world have resisted the destruction of their native seeds and worked hard to diversify their crops, protect their soil, conserve their water and forests, and establish local gardens, markets, businesses and community-based food systems. There are many highly productive, equitable and sustainable alternatives to the present industrial practices and corporate monopolies holding the world's food hostage, and literally millions of people working to advance these productive methods now. What is missing is the political will on the part of governments, industry and finance to support these solutions.

In 1996 Via Campesina, a world-wide peasant, pastoralist, and fishers federation, launched a global call for *food sovereignty*—the human right of all people to healthy, culturally appropriate, sustainably grown food, and the right of communities to determine their own food systems. The call both echoed and amplified the voices of social movements everywhere that are struggling for land reform, control over local resources, fair markets, neighborhood food systems and sustainable agriculture.

In Europe, smallholder movements, organic farmers, and campaigners from GMO-free (free of genetically modified organisms), anti-hypermarket, and fair trade movements have been fighting to counter the dominance of monocultures and monopolies with local, agroecologically produced and fairly traded food. In the United States, family farmers, students, and neighborhood activists, along with many professionals and socially conscious entrepreneurs have been advocating for fresh and healthy food, and higher incomes to afford it. From the growing food justice movement in underserved communities in the industrial North, to the long-standing agroecological alternatives in Latin America, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, people are organizing to establish productive, equitable food systems. These movements combine livelihood struggles with activism, and agroecological practice with food advocacy.

The spectrum of activities of these movements runs from the

informed engagement of local citizens in food policy councils and the direct advocacy of civil society in international institutions, to the constructive resistance of community supported agriculture, GMO-free territories, and peasant land invasions. A convergence of wide-ranging and often surprising alliances between farmers, businesses, community organizations, local health departments, food workers, farm laborers, agroecologists, environmentalists, human rights advocates, and indigenous movements are steadily building these sustainable and equitable practices and political will for the democratization of our food systems.

They are racing against time. Agriculture—primarily industrial, petroleum-guzzling, chemical-heavy agriculture—contributes 13%–18% of the world’s greenhouse gases (Steinfeld et al. 2006; FAO 2008a) and uses 60%–70% of the planet’s diminishing fresh water supplies (FAO 2008b; Pacific Institute 2008). As a sector, agriculture both induces and suffers the most from climate-related hazards. One-sixth of the world’s population is desperately hungry—just as many people suffer from obesity (Patel 2007). Cheap, bad food (highly processed and brimming with salt, sugar, fat and high-fructose corn syrup) has become a public health blight on poor and middle-income people alike. Increases in obesity, hypertension, type-2 diabetes and other diet-related diseases—primarily in lower-income sectors—account for 12% of the increase in health spending in the United States alone (Thorpe et al. 2004). This pattern is taking hold in Europe and is increasingly appearing in the emerging economies of the global South.

After decades of policies designed to replace family farms with agribusiness, the flight of farmers from the countryside is massive. In the United States, there are more people in prison than on the land. In addition, huge, for-profit detention centers hold thousands of undocumented immigrants—many of whom left economically devastated farming communities in Mexico and Central America in desperate search of work. As a result of recent food price inflation, many producing countries placed export bans on basic grains—an unsurprising reaction to an unreliable global market, but a disaster for importing countries that have lost the capacity to produce their own food. The industrial agrifoods system has become the bane of the poor and the pork barrel of multinational corporations. A financial cornucopia producing over \$6 trillion a year in wealth, industrial agrifood is tragically one of the planet’s major drivers of global poverty and environmental destruction.

The global financial crisis, following on the heels of the food crisis, is its decidedly less-silent “tsunami twin,” a child of the same deregulated expansion of global capital. The financial crisis deepens the food crisis by restricting production credit and consolidating even more power in the hands of those few corporations influential enough to obtain taxpayer-funded bailouts for their reckless investments. The tsunami twins are reshaping our food and financial systems, and provoking a flurry of high-level agreements between governments and financial houses, even as both farmers and consumers suffer under the squeeze of market volatility and disappearing credit.

This book is an analytical resource for anyone interested in understanding the food crisis. It is also an informational manual for those who wish to do something about it. In Part One, we give a succinct and straightforward analysis of both the proximate and root causes of the food crisis. We provide specific examples of how the people of the global South and underserved communities of the industrial North lost control over their food systems and how this led to the systemic vulnerability that underlies today’s crisis. In Part Two, the solutions advanced by the world’s main financial, aid, and development institutions are analyzed and critiqued, and the unexamined assumptions and unstated agendas behind these initiatives are exposed. We follow with examples of the “struggle for spaces and places” between these projects and the grassroots efforts advancing equitable, agro-ecological and locally controlled food production and distribution from around the world. The conclusion of *Food Rebellions!* sets out concrete steps, policies and actions to solve the food crisis and put the world’s food systems on the road to food sovereignty.