

Global food crisis and the effects of neoliberal trade policies on third world food production

A reflection of the discussion held at the WIDE annual conference from Central American perspective

Introduction

According to recent FAO estimates, the number of undernourished people in the world has risen to more than a billion. While people in the north are increasingly going obese, population in the Southern hemisphere is struggling to feed themselves as well as their families. Due to neoliberal strategies and transnational food empires invasions, it is getting increasingly difficult for the third world countries to compete in the current global food market. As stated in Swiss sociologist Tina Goethe's presentation at the WIDE annual conference, many of the former exporters now import. Those very same people that produce food are now among the hungriest ones. The new food importers are often poor countries that have been hit by free trade agreements that were supposed to open them new markets. This is also the case in Nicaragua where food sovereignty has been seriously undermined by the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Despite of great promises and expectations, the agreement has not enabled Nicaragua to access the large US market. This is largely due to lack of resources needed to improve the infrastructure in order to increase country's competitiveness. As an example, only 10% of roads in Nicaragua are currently paved and the electricity supply suffering from frequent shortages only covers 50% of the country. The already wealthy transnational corporations have been ones benefitting from CAFTA furthering Nicaragua's dependency on the United States.

As transnational food empires continue to increase their space on the grocery store food shelves, food safety is being compromised. Commercial production and genetically modified grains are pushing aside small-scale production both in North and in South. This undermines biological seed breeding and conservation of agro biodiversity as well as the use of different plants for nutrition and health enhancement, a silent knowledge which is often preserved by peasant women.

As stated in the Friday morning's panel discussion at the WIDE annual conference, the current food crisis is not a result of lack of food but rather a lack of policies and distribution. A great amount of land is used for production that can be considered as unnecessary or excessive. Such products include tobacco, biofuels and beef. On the other hand, around 80% of world's total production is consumed by the wealthiest 20% of population suggesting an inequality in distribution of social, economic and political resources.

Women produce around half of the food in the first world and 60 to 80 % of the food in the third world. Nevertheless, they tend not to be considered as producers but rather like a helping hand of the male farmers. Women are often excluded from formal technical assistance or limited to women's projects with lesser emphasis on adopting new agricultural technologies. According to the World Bank estimates, some 75% of world's poor live in the countryside. Given that 70% of world's poor are women, disregarding female farmers means ignoring them as main food producers and as the most hungry individuals in the world.

Non gender biased technical assistance – A Case example from Nicaragua

Since 2005 United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization FAO has been facilitating rural community promoter formations through its Special Program for Food Security (SPFS) in Nicaragua. These formations conducted with the help of the Nicaraguan Institute of Agricultural Technology INTA are held in the most precarious and poorest parts of the Pacific side of the country. The first such training was held in 2005 in Villanueva, one of the poorest municipalities in Nicaragua. In this northeastern municipality, rainfall is scarce and technical assistance insufficient, which had resulted in deteriorated natural resources adding up to the climatic risks caused by drought.

Prior to the promoter formation, the local farmers did not have resources or capital to increase or diversify their production. With the help of local government, representatives of SPFS made a careful selection of participants based on their previous experience with other organizations and their leadership potential. No preference was made to male producers and in case of Villanueva, 40% of the selected participants were women. A SWOT analysis was made together with participants in order to visualize the key challenges of the area as well as the nutritional deficiencies and lack of knowledge in agricultural technologies. The formation was conducted by INTA's technicians through farmer field school using the method "learning by doing". Each participant was assigned a special role and was trusted to pass the technical knowledge to other farmers not involved in the process. The attendees learned that it was not expected from them to replace the technicians but rather to share responsibilities in order to elevate the amount of production and offer quality technical assistance to a greater number of beneficiaries. Participants were offered a comprehensive package of technical knowledge to increase and diversify the production of their plots and problem solving skills to serve as advisors for other farmers. In case of Villanueva, also goats were introduced in order to respond to the shortage of protein in the local diet. The land preserving farming techniques such not burning the land after harvest and learning to make and use organic fertilizers has resulted in 350% increase in corn production in the area. Measurements have shown that introduction of goat milk has significantly lowered the number of underweight children in Villanueva.

With the help of local community promoters, technicians may now extend the periods between visits as the promoters attend the more common assistance needs. Those estates requesting a more refined support will still be attended by a technician. The community promoters have a crucial role in defining the assistance need of each family and communicating this to the technician. This role of a community promoter has put women on the same line with male producers offering them not only the technical agricultural knowledge but also the organizational capabilities to plan the production.

Conclusions

This example visualizes how in a third world setting equal representation of both male and female farmers may optimize the level of production and improve food security. Obviously, rural technical assistance is only one pillar in attaining food security and farmer's rights to produce locally. Much political will is requested to carefully re-analyze the neoliberal strategies pushed by the World Bank and IMF that have already resulted in impoverishment of third world agro production fragile in the first place. This micro scale example however shows how rethinking the prefixed gender-biased idea of who has the access and control of the productive resources and who is considered the producer may result in winning more bread for the whole community. Given that 85% of world's farms produce less than a hectare, turning attention to the smallholder farmers could be an efficient strategy in fighting back the ever increasing numbers of undernourished people in the world. Empowering women and giving quality technical assistance to them as producers of 70% of the food in the third world, is crucial in raising agricultural productivity, fighting back increasing food prices and providing alternatives to imported mass production and food dumping. As stated by the Peruvian sociologist Ana Tallada in the annual conference panel discussion, "we have to stop thinking about food as merchandise and start to consider it as a basic human right".