

The political dimension of hunger

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The High Level Meeting on Food Security has highlighted some of the ills which the aid system suffers from in general; more specifically, it has laid bare concerns regarding the commitment to meet the number one millennium development objective.

These problems include non-complementarity between donors and especially United Nations agencies and, even worse, competition for resources and positioning (particularly between the FAO and the PMA).

Another might be an essentially agro-productive driven approach which demotes such grave matters as the life-threatening malnutrition of 20 million under 5's each year, the extreme food insecurity of 55 million people, and the complementary approaches meant to curtail these problems (social assistance programmes in the form of food aid, nutritional treatment by public health programmes, among others).

The tenuous relation between the quantity and profile of aid demanded of donors and the commitments they and partner countries adopted in the Paris Declaration, the latter suffering precisely from more severe food insecurity, could also be added to the list. Principles like accountability and agenda ownership by partner states, but also by groups in civil society at large, have been included in the end, since they were largely absent from the original agenda.

Nonetheless, several challenges and a number of other possibilities are raised when things are considered in a more positive light, and this is important to remember.

The declaration reaffirming the right to food as one of the fundamental pillars of the political and legal protection of the 960 million people suffering hunger paves the way for this right to be strengthened, tying it to the responsibilities of good governance (only politically required of all states at present) rather than basing it on necessities. The concept of good governance applies not only to the aid policies of donor states, but also to local development policies, public health and food security and the agriculture of partner states. It may be necessary to promote the dimension of good governance both between states (donors and aid recipients) and between recipient states and their citizens. The Republic of Chad provides a good case in point here: the design of aid policies by different DAC member states and even between different agencies of the United Nations system lacks complementarity and policies are almost always drawn up without proper consensus with the Chad State. This only adds to an already highly unfair dynamic in which the design of rural development policy, public health or social action

prioritises certain ethnic groups favourable to the regime (Kanembous or Zagawa), strategically important regions, groups which could jeopardise access to mineral resources (oil producing area of Logone Oriental), or might cause political instability (demobilised ex-combatants), not to mention the powerful interest groups able to exert influence on the highest echelons of the state (cereal crop business men). This dynamic means there is no transparency or accountability in the management of these programmes between the Chad State and its citizens.

If we want to preserve the original objective of the Paris Declaration and the Accra Action Agenda, ownership, accountability and management for results must be required both in the settling of aid by OECD-DAC donors and partner countries, and in the identification of priorities, definition of food security policies and the implementation of budgets between member states and their citizens.

The commitment to maintain the coordination of the High Level Task Force (HTLF) and consequently to stress the need for complementarity and coordination within the system is a good sign in the face of those voices which advocate the creation of parallel funds, undermining UN legitimacy and usefulness in such matters (something vehemently defended by Jeffrey Sachs).

The process set underway in Madrid offers a chance (another one?) to rationalise the United Nations system and, to that end, the generous contributions and those likely to come (the donation of one billion euros by both the European Union and the Spanish government are examples to follow) must be accompanied by a rigorous follow up process, not without tension, between donor States and the HTLF. These outlays should be accompanied by criteria for an appropriate and balanced identification of priorities (offering the greatest protection possible from the influences of agencies or donor country interests), accountability mechanisms and the participation of different interest groups related to food security. Within this dynamic, Spain has the opportunity and the responsibility (in accordance with the political commitment and will expressed at this conference) to accompany and encourage this process with its own criteria and profile, providing an added value still to be consolidated in its overall aid policy.

Something else an opportunity like this provides is the express demands of groups in civil society, heard by the organisation and finally reflected in the Declaration of Madrid, recognising that the global food crisis is complex by nature (all crises are) and affects spheres such as agro-productivity, public health, trade, environment and, above all, political issues. The effort and commitment of one and all is required to tackle the problem effectively, and this includes civil society in a fundamental way and must include representation amongst others of small farm holders, though it should not be restricted to this important collective. Women and other especially vulnerable groups (children under the age of 5) are the victims most exposed to hunger and must be given a voice; ethnic, political and religious groups marginalised by policies which use food insecurity as a weapon should form part of the information gathering panels, sometimes at the global level, but above all the national level. Most probably, it is in the implementation of the process at the national level where we will be able to include vital interest groups not only to put food security policies into practice, but with a view to designing their profile and reach, tailoring them to their own requirements.

A new kind of actor has been called on to form part of the Global Alliance for Agriculture, Food Security & Nutrition, namely the private corporation. Perhaps the time has come to recognise and encourage once and for all their presence; such an inclusive intention is to be welcomed. The contribution of private corporations is necessary both actively (investment in technological

development, improvements in production, trading and commercialisation networks, amongst others) but also in a more passive sense (respect for good practices, pro-development approach and the use of a participative, multistakeholder approach). These are areas they know all too well thanks to their faultless Corporate Social Responsibility policies in their home countries (basically the United States and the European Union).

Basic food stuffs are inaccessible to almost one billion people in the world today, above all due to current production processes suffering from trading distortions, including, on occasions, speculative practices. It is not only multinational corporations that concentrate technological, commercial and financial capacities in exclusive oligopolies in order to supply - or withhold supplies from - markets according to profitability; local and regional trade and food production oligopolies also prevent proper access to food in populations in The Sahel, Horn of Africa or Latin America, year after year. Perhaps with the notion of good governance it is time for a declaration of basic foods and their categorisation as goods of public interest, thus widening protection by regulating the production, financing and trade required.

To summarise, the opportunity has arisen to strengthen one of the most fundamental, obvious and essential human rights of all, and by doing so to help 960 millions subjects become citizens.

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