

16 October—World Food Day —World Citizen Action

Rene Wadlow*

Since the hungry billion in the world community believe that we can all eat if we set our common house in order, they believe also that it is unjust that some men die because it is too much trouble to arrange for them to live.

Stringfellow Barr *Citizens of the World* (1952)

A central theme which citizens of the world have long stressed is that there needs to be a *world* food policy and that a world food policy is more than the sum of *national* food security programs. Food security has too often been treated as a collection of national food security initiatives. While the adoption of a national strategy to ensure food and nutrition security for all is essential, a focus on the formulation of national plans is clearly inadequate. There is a need for a world plan of action with focused attention to the role which the United Nations system must play if hunger is to be sharply reduced.

World Citizens Lord John Boyd Orr as the first Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization and Josué de Castro, who served as the Independent Chairman of the FAO Council, were both leaders in calling attention to world hunger and the need for strong governmental action to provide food security. In 1946, Boyd Orr presented a proposal for a World Food Board which would be endowed with sufficient authority and funds to stabilize the world market in food and deal with food emergencies. He pointed out that several countries were already doing this for the domestic market but that the world market was subject to violent fluctuations. The plan for a world food board was rejected following the lead of the US delegate who said “*Governments are unlikely to place large funds needed for financing such a plan in the hands of an international agency over whose operations and price policy they would have little direct control.*” When the proposal was turned down by governments, Boyd Orr resigned from the FAO to devote himself to the world citizens’ movement and to work against the start of the East-West arms race that was literally “*taking food from the mouths of the poor.*” (1)

The FAO did encourage governments to develop national food security policies, but the lack of policies at the world level has led to the increasing control of agricultural processes by a small number of private firms driven by the desire to make money. Thus today, three firms —Monsanto, DuPont, and Syngenta — control about half of the commercial seed market worldwide. Power over soil, seeds and food sales is ever more tightly held.

There needs to be detailed analysis of the role of speculation in the rise of commodity prices. There has been a merger of the former Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the Chicago Board of Trade to become the CME Group Market which deals in some 25 agricultural commodities. Banks and hedge funds, having lost money in the real estate mortgage packages of 2008 are now looking for ways to get money back. For the moment, there is little US government and no international regulation of this speculation. There needs to be an analysis of these financial flows and their impact on the price of grains. The world needs a market shaped by shared human values structured to ensure fairness and co-responsibility.

There is likewise a need for a serious analysis of the growing practice of buying or renting potential farm land, especially in Africa and South America, by foreign countries, especially China and the Arab Gulf states. While putting new land under cultivation is not a bad policy in itself, we need to look at the impact of this policy on local farmers as well as on world food prices.

There is a need to keep in mind local issues of food production, distribution, and food security. Attention needs to be given to cultural factors, the division of labour between women and men in agriculture and rural development, in marketing local food products, to the role of small farmers, to the role of landless agricultural labour and to land-holding patterns.

Fortunately, there is a growing awareness that an integrated, wholistic approach is needed. The 2008 report *The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD)* stressed that solutions to poverty, hunger and climate change crisis require agriculture that promotes producers' livelihoods, knowledge, resiliency, health and equitable gender relations, while enriching the natural environment and helping balance the carbon cycle. (2). Such an integrated approach is a fundamental aspect of the world citizen philosophy.

Notes

- 1) For an analysis of Boyd Orr's proposal see Ross Tabot *The Four World Food Agencies in Rome* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990, 188pp.) and the memoirs of a later FAO Director General B.R. Sen *Towards a Newer World* (Dublin: Tycooly Publishing, 1982, 342pp.)
- 2) For the IAASTD see *Agriculture at a Crossroads* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2009) in four volumes.